The Australian Baccalaurate: a preliminary study

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Abstract
During the 2010 Australian federal election campaign, the Gillard Government announced plans for a new, internationally recognised senior-school qualification termed the Australian Baccalaureate. This paper details a research project on the new Australian Baccalaureate which investigated its proposed aims, framework and timeline for planning and implementation. The intent of the project was to analyse both the practical and political implications of adding an elite level of secondary curriculum to the roll out of the K–12 Australian Curriculum; compare it to the longer standing International Baccalaureate; and examine the Australian Baccalaureate within the context of internationalising Australia’s curriculum qualifications.

The Australian Baccalaureate launched in 2010
The Australian Baccalaureate is an embryonic curriculum concept announced during the 2010 federal election campaign by then Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, in a televised political campaign announcement. On the same day, an Australian Labor Party (ALP) campaign fact sheet was posted onto the party’s website announcing the Australian Baccalaureate:

The Gillard Labor Government will develop a new senior qualification, the Australian Baccalaureate. Alongside existing state based qualifications, drawing on the National Curriculum…we will work to develop a certificate structure and achievement standards which are benchmarked against the world’s best systems and standards and which will become nationally consistent…providing a credential of international standing…The Baccalaureate will be voluntary, with students electing to be certified for the award, similar to the way students can currently elect to undertake the International Baccalaureate. (ALP Campaign Fact Sheet, August 2010, pp. 2–3)

The ALP brands the Australian Baccalaureate (ABacc) as a “world class qualification for a world class education” and the then Federal Minister for the Arts, Simon Crean, elaborated on a 10 August 2010 radio interview with Jon Faine on ABC 774 Melbourne that:
[The ABacc is] an alternative to the existing state systems Jon. And this is also really important...the fact that the existing accreditation in secondary school is really only a qualification to enter a university in Australia... We want to lift the Year 12 retention rate [and so they need to] have options as to what that qualification entitles them to... We also want [Year 12 students], because of the mobility of the Australian population, to have an accreditation if they choose that gets them in to an overseas university or workplace. That’s why we want an internationally accredited recognition for those who opt for it.

The creation of an ABacc and its introduction into the Australian education market in this decade will impact the sector in many ways, so this iterative project attempted to discover a deeper understanding beyond the political sell I have described earlier, of this new senior school qualification. In 2011 I undertook research on the policy to introduce the ABacc, and focused on the potential implications and ramifications of the proposed new ABacc for secondary schooling across the nation and regionally. The federal government argues that Australia lacks a world class, nationally consistent, credential for high performing Australian students when applying for tertiary studies in overseas universities. They also assert that the ABacc will address this gap. To test if the government’s logic is accurate, I took up a line of investigation starting at the ALP’s statements and policy announcements. At the same time, I took my research into the realm of the international education market. I learned that Australia is already selling a diverse range of curriculums off-shore to international schools. This led me to pursue questions around whether an ABacc may become a credential that will improve not only Australia’s standing in that market but maybe the ABacc will also boost our share of international schools using Australian curriculums.

During the research period, the ABacc attracted significant government funding and there has been no or little public accounting to this point of how that money is being spent. This paper then is a timely beginning for an academic conversation about the policy and how it might, or will, fit within current curriculum reforms in Australia. This led me to pursue questions around whether an ABacc may become a credential that will improve not only Australia’s standing in that market but maybe the ABacc will also boost our share of international schools using Australian curriculums.

Recent curriculum reform in Australia and internationally

The Australian K–12 education sectors have been implementing a continuing number of profound curriculum changes since at least the turn of the century. Curriculum changes have of course occurred prior to that date, but the pace of change seems to be speeding up. The graphic timeline overleaf summarises and conceptualises 20 years of curriculum change in Western Australia, which is a state that offers good examples of recent, rapid curriculum change. First, an outcome-based education curriculum framework for Grades 1–10 was legislated in 1999 and 11 years later, the upper secondary grades replaced the Tertiary Entrance Exams (TEE) with a Certificate of Education framework, the WACE. Two years later early childhood education became compulsory for younger ages and a curriculum framework was mandated, titled the Early Years Learning Framework. Then, in the following year, all Australian states and territories began implementing phase one of a new nationalised curriculum framework, the Australian Curriculum — also sometimes termed the National Curriculum. The pattern of rapid changes looks set to continue at least until the end of this decade, with the Australian Curriculum scheduled to be fully implemented by 2016 and then Grades 11 and 12 curriculum and assessment will start to be nationalised. The Australian Baccalaureate, as shown in Figure 1 on the following page, is supposed to be implemented after the Australian Curriculum has been embedded across the continent, which may be in 2016–18.

Above the state and federal level of curriculum reforms, another level of curriculum adoption and growth needs to be explained here so that the reader can also contextualise the purpose of an elite curriculum framework at a global level of curriculum reform. In arguing for an Australian Baccalaureate the Gillard Government announced that Australia wants to more formally join a small but prestigious fraternity of nations with elite curriculums that are already thus recognised: from the International Baccalaureate Organisation’s (IBO) senior school curriculum—the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IBDP); the French Baccalauréat (FBacc); the United States Advanced Placement (AP)
courses; and the United Kingdom’s A Levels and recently created English Baccalaureate (EBacc). As my experience as a principal of an international school revealed to me, this select fraternity use their curriculums in international schools around the world, disseminating their mainly nation-based content to wealthy students who can afford to pay for what is marketed as superior programs of study. For example, many South American and African international schools use the United States’ AP curriculum (e.g. the American International School of Bolivia and the American International School of Mozambique); while in Asia and the Middle East many international schools use British or French curriculums (e.g. the French International School of Hong Kong and the British International School in Istanbul).

There are Australian international schools already competing in this elite, global league of schools too. For example, we have in Indonesia, Bangladesh and Malaysia secondary schools that currently use Australian state and territory certificates of educations (STCEd) and curriculums, including the WACE, the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) and New South Wales’ Higher School Certificate (HSC). In 2012 several Australian international schools have been swapping to use the Australian Curriculum at the K–10 level (e.g. Indonesia’s Australian International School). Perhaps in the future, the ABacc will be the curriculum of choice in this expanding cohort of Australian international schools?

**An iterative approach to the research**

This research project began with me wanting to simply know more about the Australian Baccalaureate. I took an iterative approach to the research as the point of this approach is to let the research develop according to what is found. I started with a blank canvas and by the end of my one year of investigation, I can summarise what I examined into a few categories:

1. Do we know what the Australian Baccalaureate curriculum framework is or could be?
2. If we don’t know what the official framework of the ABacc is, are there clues available that suggest how the ABacc might be shaped?
3. Does Australia even need an Australian Baccalaureate?
4. Is the international education market the place where the ABacc curriculum will offer Australia competitive advantage?
5. Is it likely that the ABacc will ever reach the implementation stage?

The rest of this paper takes these questions and offers findings and discussion about each topic as it relates to the overall question:

**What is the ABacc?**

**Official channels**

My first focus of investigation was to try and uncover the fundamental details of the ABacc by developing a formal set of questions to put to government policy makers. I wanted to know what the holders of official channels of information were prepared to tell me about the ABacc. I hoped to get an idea of what preparation has been done before the ABacc announcements and what shape or framework was being developed. I developed basic, fact-finding questions to clarify the nature of the new Australian Baccalaureate and what is involved in developing the new senior school qualification in terms of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. I hoped to understand the details of this new national senior school qualification, including the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority’s (ACARA) and the Australasian Curriculum, Assessment and Certification Authorities’ (ACACA) timelines for planning and implementing the ABacc in schools across the nation.

To answer the questions I gathered information and collected data from:
a. Federal politicians, or their staff or staff of
government departments; and the response data
would be recorded electronically.
b. Collecting documentary sources of data;
including political party policy documents and
papers and institutional memoranda and reports
from ACARA and/or ACACA; in preparation for
textual analysis.
c. Submitting my set of research questions about
the ABacc to the Senate Estimates Committee
on Education, Employment and Workplace
Relations.

My eight questions were:
1. Does the government still intend to adopt an
ABacc senior school qualification, as announced
in the 2010 federal election campaign?
2. What is ACARA and ACACA’s timeline for
planning and implementing the ABacc in schools
across the nation?
3. In light of the existing IBO’s growth in education
market share in Australia, is it intended that the
ABacc compete directly with the IBDP?
4. If the answer is yes to question 3, how will the
ABacc be a competent rival to the IBDP in relation
to content and assessment?
5. If the answer is no to question 3, what mecha-
nisms will be put in place so that the ABacc and
the IBDP will complement each other?
6. The government has indicated their intention
that the ABacc will be a voluntary senior school
qualification. Given this, will individual students
or schools have to pay extra to attain this
credential?
7. Will there be a mandatory bilingual component
to the ABacc (as it is in the IBDP)?
8. Will teachers need special training or extra quali-
fications to teach the ABacc? If so, will univer-
sities provide this training/credentialing?

Half way through my year of research, I began to
realise that I would likely not achieve the level of
data collection I was hoping for because at every turn
I was coming up against brick walls. I attempted to
gather primary data from semi-structured interviews
with federal politicians, then their staff and eventually
staff of government departments; but I had little
success in eliciting much comment of any depth
about the ABacc.

The then federal Minister for School Education,
Early Childhood and Youth, Peter Garrett, responded
to my research inquiries with a bland letter that
explained:

It is intended that the first Australian Bacca-
laureate will leverage work off the senior
secondary Australian Curriculum currently being
developed by ACARA. Timeframes for imple-
mentation of the...Australian Baccalaureate are
yet to be determined by Ministers...The develop-
ment of the Australian Baccalaureate will be
led by the ACARA...in partnership with the
ACACA. (Personal communication, 3 March,
2011)

I submitted my set of eight questions about the
ABacc to the Senate Estimates Committee on
Education, Employment and Workplace Relations in
mid 2011 and I received written responses to each
question. Unfortunately, the political participants
did not stray from their aspirational press releases
and answered each question with the same response:

Implementation details of the Australian
Baccalaureate are under consideration. The
introduction of the Australian Baccalaureate
will follow the implementation of phase one of
the Australian Curriculum subjects in the senior
secondary years, commencing in 2015 or 2016.
(SSCEEWWR, 2011)

My communications with ACARA were monthly
and short most times. In e-mail correspondences
with ACARA between 19–23 November 2010, ACARA
confirmed that the ALP federal government intends
to introduce:

...a new Australian Baccalaureate as a voluntary
qualification that provides senior students in
Catholic, Independent and Government
schools with access to a credential of interna-
tional standing. (Personal correspondence)

With such a brief amount of information offered, I
continued to communicate throughout the first half
of 2011 with ACARA, but my e-mails were always
answered with the same phrasing:

At this point in time, ACARA has not yet been
advised how this project will be developed and
implemented into Australian schools. (Personal
correspondence)

Finally in August 2011 an ACARA Senior Manager
of Implementation Coordination was assigned the
ABacc brief. Unfortunately, even she was unable to
contribute much more to the research questions on
timelines and content because her e-mail communi-
cation with me indicated that in reality she was not
yet doing anything:
ACARA has been asked to scope the Australian Baccalaureate proposal at this stage. There is little more that we are able to provide you currently. ACARA has been asked to develop some proposals on the form of the Australian Baccalaureate, following the position outlined in the government’s election commitment. The timeline for implementation is in the election commitment. The reasons for the Australian Baccalaureate are outlined in the government’s election commitment. [Re. a bilingual component; who will pay and teacher training …] noting what is in the election commitment, such matters are yet to be resolved. (Personal correspondence)

By this chronological stage in my investigation, it was becoming evident that the ABacc was so far not much more than a statement of intention at both the political and planning levels. I decided to move on from trying to answer my first research question through official channels as it was prejudiced by an existing lack of development.

Comparing baccalaureate curriculums

So I kept at trying to uncover what an ABacc framework might include, but I moved on to documentary and other analysis to continue my research after the official dead-ends. I started with a semantic question and investigated some linguistic aspects.

My first question was: Why would the Australian government name a new elite curriculum a baccalaureate? The ABacc uses the French language term baccalaureate (ba-kələr-ə-t), rather than using an English synonym to name its new upper school qualification. To title the ABacc, a baccalaureate, can be seen as an attempt brand-wash the ABacc with the International Baccalaureate’s ‘world-class aura’ and place it in the same league as the FBacc and the relatively new British Baccalaureate, the EBacc. In other words, in using a conjunct in the title for the ABacc sets a tone that Australia intends, or continues, to be an equal player with our curriculum competitors in this prestigious school market that uses international level curriculums.

When I looked at the word baccalaureate I looked at its definitions first. The word baccalaureate has several meanings. A broad definition of baccalaureate is to matriculate or be certified and a narrower definition of the word baccalaureate is an examination (or series of examinations) intended to qualify successful candidates.¹ The naming of the ABacc could thus be construed as being intended to be developed as a curriculum framework underpinned by an exam-based assessment regime.

Then I looked the meaning of baccalaureate and I compared a possible ABacc framework to what other baccalaureate curriculums offer currently in the international education sector as well.

For instance, the ABacc’s competition, the IBDP, and the new EBacc are exam-based curriculums of breadth marketed to university bound students. The term baccalaureate and the modelling offered by the competitor curriculums further suggest that the ABacc could be exam based. If it is, it fits with one educational argument that exams offer better rigour and comparability as an assessment tool, especially when compared against assessment tools such as authentic assessments, such as, problem-based enquiries. Certainly in England and Wales, the very recent EBacc exam regime implementation was justified by politicians as a reform that would toughen up their senior secondary, tertiary bound graduates’ capabilities (Harris & Groves, 2012). If the ABacc is designed as an exam-based curriculum framework it might be because Australian politicians have been persuaded by the pro-exam theorists and also want to swing the assessment pendulum back to more reliance on exams. This would counter strongly against the outcome-based education theories of assessment which have previously been endorsed by state governments and which have influenced assessment policies in Australian high schools so many students in this generation no longer need to take exams to graduate with a high school diploma.

Breadth of curriculum is a third dictionary definition of the word baccalaureate and is the approach taken by the IBDP and EBacc. So to go with the rigour of exams, the ABacc might also include a breadth of study across a range of learning areas. By a breadth of curriculum, I mean developing a curriculum that examines learning areas of breadth — across the maths, sciences, humanities, languages, arts and other subjects. If the ABacc was this way, it would be in keeping with recommendations made for the EBacc, which includes: a program of study with breadth of subjects; breadth in assessment; academic and vocational dimensions; and admission to higher education (Thompson, Hayden & Cambridge, 2003, pp. 33–39).

A different iteration of the ABacc may be as a special addendum to the Australian Curriculum — perhaps as an offering of a ‘gold-standard version’ of...
an Australian Certificate of Education. This could happen if it was modelled on the new EBacc which is not a new curriculum, as far as I can interpret; it is a credential granted to students in England who have been studying the A-Level curriculum across a broad and mandatory set of learning areas (including History or Geography) and who achieve at least a C+ grade in all their exams (Department for Education, 2012). When the Commonwealth budget 2011/12 was handed down on Tuesday 10 May 2011 it allocated $7.3 million over two years for the development of an Australian Baccalaureate (Dailey & Newman, 2011, p. 2). With such a large sum of money allocated to its development I think that a curriculum addendum is not quite what the government has in mind when they announced the ABacc.

In the course of document analysis during this section of my research, I found a 2006 Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) and federal Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) report Australian Certificate of Education: Exploring a way forward, that emphasised to me that the government will very likely model their ABacc on the best aspects of competitor international curriculums. I was unable to get any political or department staff to confirm this supposition. I do not believe the ABacc will mirror exactly the IBDP because the above report noted that the IBO was “not keen to have the IB Diploma adopted as a senior secondary qualification by an entire national education system”. They did however accept that “provided that there were no infringement of intellectual property rights” such adoption may be acceptable (ACER & DEST, 2006, p. 46). Furthermore, as the then president of the Association of Australasian IBO Schools (e-mail 7 April 2011 confirmed, “certainly there was no contact with the IBO before (the ABacc) was announced”, it seems unlikely that there has been any collaboration by the government with any external curriculum agents to take their frameworks and adopt them completely. In fact, when I went back to Gillard’s original speech on the ABacc and focused in on the following section, I reached the view that the government very likely intends that the ABacc be developed as a stand-alone, uniquely Australian credential of international standing that will compete against the IBDP but which will, in all likelihood, do so by emulating many of the aspects of the IBDP, EBacc and other so-branded ‘world class’ international curriculums.

We will of course create a prestige qualification—the Australian Baccalaureate—so students in our country can get a qualification that can hold its own on the world stage while studying our curriculum, studying about this country, studying about Australia. (Gillard, 2010)

A final comment on the shape of a possible framework for an ABacc concerns one learning area—languages other than English (LOTE). No new evidence emerged from my research but I draw attention to the thinking that has come across in other government documents and pronouncements made at a similar time to when I have been writing, including most recently the release of Australia in the Asian Century: White Paper which was released on 28 October 2012 by then Prime Minister Gillard. The report argues that all Australian students should study one of four Asian languages; Mandarin, Indonesian, Hindi or Japanese (Henry, 2012, p. 170). They argue it is to counter what Carr and Pawells’ terms our “monolingual mindset” which explains the “traditional disinterest in other language learning which has always characterised—and continues to characterise—the major Anglophone countries” including Australia (2006, p. 43). Making a core component of the ABacc the study of LOTE seems possible especially when noting that the baccalaureate competition, the IBDP and the EBacc, have compulsory LOTE components. Furthermore, an ABacc that would be unique for Australians could specify Asian languages as the LOTEs of choice to be examined. This would link into the federal government’s narrative of deeper and broader engagement in the Asian region and could mean an ABacc would help academically elite Australian students fit into what the government’s White Paper argues we need our citizens to be—more “Asia literate” and future “Asian-capable leaders” (Henry, 2012, pp. 2–4).

In the last two sections, I have looked at what the official and unofficial channels of policy making uncovered regarding the ABacc. The summation is quite thin as rhetoric about intention and directions of the ABacc’s development is clearer now, but not much else has been uncovered to add to question one. From here, I moved onto a different focus in the research, this time asking whether we actually need an ABacc in Australia.
Do we need an Australian Baccalaureate?

In this section I analyse the question of whether Australia needs an Australian Baccalaureate and try and discern why the Gillard Government made this policy decision. I do this by looking at what is offered already in Australia at present for students of high academic ability who would like to study and work overseas. Then I try and get into the thinking of why the government might want to compete more in this school market.

The Australian government’s creation of an ABacc that is meant to be a world-class and internationally competitive curriculum might be seen as a strategy to help to reverse the trend of a drifting Australian middle-class which has supposedly been moving away from government schooling at the secondary level since the late 1970s. There a many researchers, education writers and journalists who support this thesis of middle-class drift and argue that a combination of neo-liberalism, neo-conservatism and the fracturing of curriculum coherence has led to a two-tier education system (e.g. Proctor, 2009; Campbell, Proctor & Sherington, 2009; Doherty, 2009; Connell et. al., 2010; Ford, 2012). While I too find these reasons for this drift quite convincing, I am not as persuaded that this trend is continuing since current Australian Bureau of Statics data does not quite bear this trend out:

In 2011, there were 9,435 Australian schools, comprising 6,705 government schools (71%), 1,710 Catholic schools (18%) and 1,020 Independent schools (11%). These figures are similar to the 2010 figures when there were 6,743 government schools (71%), 1,708 Catholic schools (18%) and 1,017 Independent schools (11%) with a total 9,468 schools. These proportions have remained consistent over the past 10 years. (ABS, 2011)

I am instead inclined to believe that non-government schools are attracting enrolments from all classes in society (Campbell, Proctor & Sherington, 2009, chapter 3) rather than just the middle-class. I think that this is occurring because many Australian parents:

...absorbed long ago the idea that a reliably good and rounded education must be paid for privately (as) no Australian government can be trusted to provide one. (Ford, 2012, n.d.)

Into this terrain of disdain for public schooling and its curricula offerings stepped the IBO in 1976. Since then, the IBO has marketed itself very well to Australian parents as a provider of better-quality educational products leading to superior international qualifications which are worth paying for. The corporate world has also been effusive regarding the International Baccalaureate’s curricula, as exemplified by a statement from Exfin, a web-based company that brands itself as ‘The Australian Expatriate’s Gateway’:

We regard the IB as an increasingly viable education alternative both for ‘domestic’ Australians who foresee [sic] their children studying overseas at some later stage, and for returning Australian expatriates who believe they may again be posted overseas and want to minimise disruptions in their children’s education. (Exfin, n.d)

The marketing has paid off with statistics on International Baccalaureate uptake in Australia showing that an increasing number of schools are opting to either replace or augment their state or territory curriculum offerings with this international curriculum. According to the IBO’s website, at mid-year 2012 there are now 144 Australian schools teaching at least one of the three academic programs that are offered by the IBO: with 78 schools offer the Primary Years Program (PYP), and 44 schools offer the Middle Years Program (MYP) and 62 offer the original IBDP. The breakdown of Australian schools registered with the IBO by states and territories in 2012, is shown in Table 1.

While these numbers are impressive when considered against the fact that there was only one school in Canberra that used the IBDP when it was first introduced in Australia in 1976, I do temper this impression with the reality check that even with 144 schools taking up IBO curricula that represents a very tiny 1.5% of all Australian schools!

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numbers in mind, does not it seem like over-kill for the Australian government to be launching an ABacc to counter the IB Diploma Program market-share in Australia?

Perhaps instead, the ABacc was launched to re-capture reputational damage that the IB Diploma Program may have inflicted on Australian government senior curricula offerings to counter education market-share loss. I suggest this because in 2006 ACER wrote a report commissioned by DEST which, in recommending a way to develop an Australian Certificate of Education (ACEd) that would enhance national consistency, develop higher standards for curriculum and achievement and be capable of being benchmarked against international best practice, looked at the option of creating an ACEd explicitly modelled on the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program. It cited four valuable components of the IB Diploma Program worthy of emulating: international standing; academic rigour; breadth of study; and non-academic core elements (ACER & DEST, 2006, p. 41) and went on to show how Australia’s STCEd have lesser reputations in all four components (pp. 44–46). The report was careful to qualify that while “an Australian Certificate of Education must encourage and recognise excellence in student achievement at the highest international standards” (p. 87) it was not intending to “imply that current senior curricula do not (already) provide world-class learning opportunities” (p. 63).

Despite that intention, I believe that the report did actually infer Australia lacked a world-class curriculum credential and in Doherty’s most recent paper she argues that the ACER Report’s “evaluation amount(ed) to a high-profile endorsement and validation of the IB’s curriculum reputation as the niche curriculum of choice for the academic elite, in the public discourse surrounding Australian educational policy” (2012, p. 80). Furthermore, while the numbers of Australian schools using the IB Diploma Program’s curriculum are relatively small, and even tinier is the proportion of Australian schools using the IB’s curriculum are relatively small concurrently—just five in total (Bunnell, 2012, p. 31)—perhaps the fact that “almost two-thirds of the schools in February 2012 were located in just four countries (USA, Canada, England and Australia)” (Bunnell, 2012, p. 26) may have the Gillard Government worried?

The relatively small infiltration of the IB Diploma Program into the Australian education market, combined with its superior reputation as an education brand may be of growing concern to the current federal government due to two recent factors that make the IB Diploma Program a growing threat. Firstly, the IB Diploma Program’s infiltration has recently shifted from being largely limited to high-fee, private schools in Australia to now being able to be taught in government schools as well—particularly in Victoria, South Australia and Queensland. This has happened because of legislative changes that now acknowledge alternative curricula as having official standing in these jurisdictions alongside their own STCEd. The rise of a ‘dual-diplomacy’ (Cunningham, 2011) option on the Australian mainland has not been researched extensively as yet, but given the rhetoric of a middle-class moving out of the government education sector it is possible to imagine that government school principals are choosing to take up the IB Diploma Program to entice parents who struggle to afford private school fees to stay in their local school and only pay the extra fees associated with the IB Diploma Program options.

The second factor is regarding the Australasian Conference of Tertiary Admissions Centres (ACTAC) successful negotiation of nation-wide agreements in 2011 for Australian Tertiary Admission Rankings (ATAR) equivalencies for the IB Diploma Program achievement score (http://www.vtac.edu.au/pdf/background-ibe.pdf). Previously, “a good number of university admission offices not only accept(ed), but privilege(d), applications from IB Diploma students” (Tarc, 2009, pp. 3–5) but this nation-wide agreement has now streamlined admission processes and therefore made it even easier for all Australian tertiary institutions to enrol students with IB qualifications. And by doing this, the ACTAC agreement has given even more legitimacy to the IB Diploma Program and placed it on (at least) equal status to all STCEd as well as the future ACEd, the Australian Curriculum.

So do we need an ABacc? This section has posed the question by taking into account the relatively small but increasing infiltration of the IB Diploma Program into the Australian mainland education market coupled with the possible reputational damage state and territory Certificates of Education have endured because of regulatory changes which have legitimated the IB Diploma Program in Australia. By the numbers, the answer would seem to be a no; since the development of the ABacc as an entirely new curriculum and/or credential targeted to the small, elite cohort of Australian students who have opted for the IB Diploma Program is neither cost-effective nor even guaranteed to entice these students to change from the international to the local baccalaureate. In fact, it could be argued that the creation of an ABacc is a “solution without a problem” (Marsh, 1994, p. 1).
If however, and it is a big and thus far unsubstantiated if, the ABacc is intended to reach a wider, less privileged cohort of gifted and talented Australian students who have not been able to afford to buy into the study of an IBDP but would like to study a curriculum and gain a credential that is considered of a gold standard, then perhaps the answer could become a yes. This would mean that the ABacc would have to live up to the politicians’ promise that an ABacc will have greater international standing than our current STCEds and as such will increase the outbound mobility of Australian students seeking tertiary study overseas. Yet the statistics again make me wonder if an ABacc is an excessive step given that in 2009 only 11,000 — a mere 1.3% — of Australian tertiary students studied overseas and most of them were enrolled as Australian university students undertaking small periods of overseas study in exchange programs, study tours and the like (OECD, 2011).

The Australian Baccalaureate and the international education market

The final aspect of my research on the ABacc consolidated some thoughts I had begun to frame about the ABacc and how it might fit within the international education market. I had thus far only examined how the ABacc might be used on the Australian mainland. To finish my research investigation, I wanted to explore the potential use of the ABacc outside of Australia and what might be the ramifications and implication that may result from Australia offering a new curriculum and credential at this level.

The term ‘international education market’ (IEM) is a deliberately neo-liberal term that I have used here to characterise one highly competitive area in the education sector that focuses on senior secondary education at the transnational level, but which is a sector that has not yet been much researched. Within my definition, the IEM services international schools located in nations-other-than-Australia which are already licensed to offer Australian curriculums and senior secondary certificates of education through the nine separate state and territory qualification authorising bodies.

As stated at the beginning of this paper, the international schools market is dominated by an education fraternity made up of English speaking nations who entice elite schools in developing nations to choose to purchase their curriculums and qualifications for the purpose of acquiring senior secondary education qualifications that are enrolment currency for quality universities around the globe. Australia is a member of this fraternity, as evidenced by the use of state and territory Certificates of Education (STCEd) in international school in the Asian region and beyond.

Until 2013 there has been little attempt to formally compare and benchmark this fraternity of elites’ curricula against any so-called ‘world class’ standards. In fact, Australian qualification authorising bodies have only had memorandums of understanding (MoU) with each individual international school they have established relationships with. For example, in my home state, the Government of Western Australia’s School Curriculum and Standards Authority (WASCSA) authorises the use of the Western Australian Certificate of Education (WACE) through MoUs with 16 schools in Zimbabwe, Bangladesh, Philippines, China, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam and Singapore (personal correspondence with WASCSA employee, 31 October 2012).

This situation is changing quite rapidly with the development of education qualification frameworks in Australia, the European Union and elsewhere and the Australian Qualifications Framework Council (AQFC) has a key objective of “international comparability of qualifications and alignment with other qualification frameworks...for strengthening the AQF” (AQFC, 2010). How the development of an ABacc fits into this new global qualification environment is yet to be determined.

What is timely to consider though is that the AQF is almost complete with 10 levels now formally in place recognising school, work and academic qualifications. It starts with level one equating to Certificate One in vocational education courses and finishing at level 10 for a PhD. Unfortunately, senior-secondary certificates of education have become politicised and even though the AQFC recommended that STCEd be placed in the framework at level three, a disagreement between the secondary and vocational sectors has currently placed high school diplomas, or STCEd, without a designated level (personal correspondence with AQFC employee, October 2012).

Without an official level designation for STCEd, the addition of an ABacc into the AQF muddies the water even further and a lot of questions arise. For example, if the ABacc is being introduced as a credential of higher standing than the STCEd will it be designated a level 3.5 or 4? If it is not designated within the levelling framework will this undermine the branding of an ABacc as a credential of superior
standing? And ultimately, when these questions are answered it becomes imperative to ask will international schools, currently paying for STCEds, adopt the ABacc instead? Obviously, in this paper I cannot answer these queries but there is no doubt that such concerns, having been raised, need to be clarified.

**Blank canvas**

This paper started with a question about the nature of the Australian Baccalaureate and has sought to find answers about the political, credentialing and pedagogic implications of the federal government’s $7.3 million visioning of a new international qualification for secondary students.

The rebuffs I received from politicians and bureaucrats during the data collection stage of my research reveal that the policy process itself is incomplete and the ABacc requires further development. Do we deride the skeleton-thin level of academic scrutiny under which the ABacc has thus far been shaped as a concept and the lack of progress that has been made on a framework since its announcement? Or do we embrace this idea of a new international qualification competition and start to push back at policy makers and suggest what the shape and character of a new international level curriculum emanating from within Australian should be like?

As of early 2013, the ABacc is still somewhat of a blank canvas. The creation of new curriculums is never a neutral exercise and what is being chosen to be included (and excluded) in an Australian Baccalaureate will mirror our society’s mainstream view of schooling at the time of its creation (e.g. Dewey, 1902; Counts, 1962; Giroux, 1994 & 1999, Apple, 2004). The dominant ideology in early 21st century Australian education is “market driven schooling, individual choice according to income and centrally controlled curriculum and testing” (Smith & Lovat, 2003, p. 224). The ABacc will have to fit into this regime and be benchmarked for success in those areas.

The lack of information around the development of the ABacc also fits within the dominant ideology as its announcement followed the familiar pattern of Australian curriculum reforms being undertaken as top-down government directives through the utilisation of power and coercion to initiate change processes (Smith & Lovat, 2003, 197). The Gillard Government announced and funded the ABacc and teachers are meant to get on and implement this change when its implementation is mandated; irrespective of the fact that they are working in an education environment soaked in changes and reforms already. The announcement of the ABacc fits neatly into a pattern repeated throughout my 20 year education career, where state and federal governments have manufactured education crisis rhetoric (Pusey, 1999) to argue for what has become an almost continual implementation of curriculum changes. The rhetoric has often “revolved around slogans” (Marsh, 1994, p. 3) and hyperbole. In this ABacc iteration of an educational ‘crisis’, government ministers have repeatedly employed phrases such as ‘international standing’ and ‘world’s best’ to convince their audience that Australian education needs yet another layer of curriculum reform to add to the already massive undertaking of implementing an Australian Curriculum in K–12 throughout all state and territory jurisdictions. Yet this preliminary study has shown that the rhetoric is not warranted—the competition at the baccalaureate level is not very large and the quality of Australian certificates of education currently being used is of a standard that is already competitive and able to be branded as ‘world’s best’ or any other superlative the government would like to use.

A final reason I am not optimistic that an ABacc will get beyond the preliminary planning stage is that the ABacc is being put forward in a time period where teachers “are tired of what seems to be constant and relentless change” (Andrich, 2009, p. 32). The lack of detail available to analyse the ABacc so far does not bode well for its implementation. This is because curriculum theorists have shown that imposing change using a command and control approach, often results in reforms that are not effective or lasting and which are often ignored or avoided by teachers (McLaughlin & Marsh, 1978; Klein, 1991; Fullan, 2007; Donnelly, 2013). Fullan (1993) noted that due to the complexity of schools as organisations, only 10% of attempted change in schools are successful and the beginning stages of this ABacc policy process does not suggest teachers know about nor have any buy-in to this new curriculum.

If the ABacc is one of the few reforms that do reach its completion in Australia, we have lessons to learn from other nations which have recently implemented a baccalaureate:

One of the most important principles underpinning the development of a new ... baccalaureate system is the need for an open, consensual
and carefully planned reform process. We use the term ‘strategic gradualism’ to describe such a process, in which there would be a clear future goal and stages of development towards its attainment. One of the major lessons to be learnt... (is) how complex it is to implement changes to the qualification system... and how important it is to involve teachers, learners and other key stakeholders actively in this process. (Hodgson & Spours, 2003, p. 177).

Former Prime Minister Gillard stated that the development of the ABacc will include a detailed consultation process with all education stakeholders. As the above quote advises, the sooner stakeholders have involvement in this new curriculum development the more likely the ABacc has of being a successful curriculum reform.

Endnote

These are my wording for the two definitions but I summarise from various online dictionaries, including dictionary.com

References


