

October 2023

Inquiry into the state
education system in
Victoria

ENQUIRIES
Katie Phillis
Chief of Staff
Office of Vice Chancellor



A. INTRODUCTION AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

La Trobe University welcomes the opportunity to respond to this Inquiry. We are one of the major providers of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) across Victoria and, throughout the years, have built close-knit networks with schools and TAFEs across the state. Coupled with the expertise in our [Science of Language and Reading \(SOLAR\) Lab](#) and the [Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre \(OTARC\)](#), we have a unique perspective into the state education system in Victoria and concrete proposals as to how it can be improved.

One measure that is often cited when discussing education outcomes is the annual National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). We acknowledge that Victoria usually leads the nation in NAPLAN results – this however should not be interpreted as a sign that no changes to the state’s education system are warranted. NAPLAN is a relatively low bar and the reality is that there is a [widening gap between low and high achieving students in Victoria](#) as well as between [metropolitan and regional students](#). **Building on its existing education prowess, with the right policy decisions, Victoria has the potential to become a world-leading state for education outcomes.**

Our first and key recommendation to this Inquiry is for state-level prescription on evidence-based reading instruction in Victoria’s schools. Victoria continues to devolve responsibility to individual schools for how reading is taught – this creates high variability and therefore works against the achievement of consistently high-quality instruction at a system-level. **Through its SOLAR Lab, La Trobe has the expertise to work with the Department of Education to train and re-train teachers in evidence-based approaches to reading instruction.** Such approaches are already being applied in other jurisdictions with remarkable results. We view effective, consistent, and robust reading instruction as a public health imperative which would have positive ripple effects across other sectors of the Victorian economy, health and wellbeing and society.

An issue which is at the heart of La Trobe’s mission is addressing the disparity in education outcomes between regional and metropolitan students – disparities at primary and secondary school level translate into a lack of participation in post-secondary education. This is at a time when we know that over the next 10 years, more than [9 out of 10 jobs](#) will require post-secondary qualifications. For this reason, La Trobe has set up [Regional Higher Education Pathways programs](#) at its Albury-Wodonga and Shepparton campuses with plans to expand further in Mildura and Bendigo, depending on the availability of further funding. Currently supported through philanthropy, these interventions at Year 11 and Year 12, are having a remarkable impact on the prospect of further study for regional Victorian students. We therefore recommend that these pathway programs, currently reliant on philanthropic funding, are funded by the state through a dedicated program.

The other area where education outcomes are inequitable is for students with additional needs. We recognise that this is a broad remit – in this submission we focus on the area where we have the most expertise i.e., students who are on the autism spectrum disorder (which commonly co-occurs with other developmental challenges). Here, we make tangible recommendations to improve learning outcomes for such students.

Finally, we offer our perspective on the teaching profession in Victoria also showcasing our [NEXUS](#) programme - an innovative and first-of-its-kind pathway into teaching, that enables a transition to education from other careers, while gaining practical experience in a school setting.

This submission is structured as follows:

Section A: Introduction

Section B: Key Recommendations

Section C: La Trobe’s response to Select Terms of Reference

B. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Victorian Department of Education should:

Factors impacting student learning outcomes

1. **Adopt State-level prescription on evidence-based reading instruction in schools, moving away from 'balanced literacy' approaches in favour of the adoption of structured, explicit literacy instruction. Through its SOLAR Lab, La Trobe has the expertise and the means to work with the State Department of Education to train and re-train teachers in evidence-based approaches to reading instruction.**
2. **Consider [Nancy Young's Ladder of Reading and Writing](#) as a framework for conceptualising pedagogy and its impacts at a state-wide level.**

Disparities correlated with geography

3. **Provide government support to extend La Trobe's pathway programs with regional disadvantaged schools to improve participation in higher education.**

Students with special education needs (Autism)

4. **Ensure funds and resources to train early childhood education, health, and care professionals in the developmental monitoring of all children for Autism in addition to current training program for maternal and child health nurses.**
5. **Improve access to evidence-based, inclusive and supportive early education for Autistic children in both specialist and inclusive settings; for example a state rollout of the Alert Program® (currently only operational in two regional schools).**
6. **Set a target for all Victorian early childhood education and care settings and primary and secondary schools to have access to a multidisciplinary allied health team comprising a psychologist, speech therapist, occupational therapist and physiotherapist, working together with the centre/school educational team to support the student cohort utilising a transdisciplinary approach.**
7. **Strengthen timely transition supports for Autistic students into secondary school through comprehensive consultation with Autistic students, their families and education, health and care professionals.**

State of the teaching profession in Victoria

8. **Implement the state-level recommendations of the [Teacher Expert Advisory Panel](#) report**
9. **Aim for stronger alignment between refreshed initial teacher education and jurisdictional guidance on reading instruction**
10. **The Victorian Academy of Teaching and Learning should provide evidence-informed approaches in professional development to enhance teacher practices including structured and explicit literary instruction**

Examples of best practice in other jurisdictions

11. **Monitor examples of best practices in other jurisdictions (e.g. Canberra-Goulburn Catholic Archdiocese) and implement the lessons learnt in the Victorian setting.**

C. LA TROBE'S RESPONSE TO THE SELECT TERMS OF REFERENCE

Term of Reference (1)(a)

(1) trends in student learning outcomes from Prep to Year 12, including but not limited to –

(a) the factors, if any, that have contributed to decline;

General comments

The key measure that is frequently cited when discussing student learning outcomes is NAPLAN, where Victoria tends to do well relative to other states and territories. We argue however, that NAPLAN is a relatively low bar and that, unlike other states, Victoria has only two small areas that are classified as “geographically remote”; in other states and territories, remote areas tend to be the areas with the lowest NAPLAN scores. Victoria also has a smaller proportion of First Nations students than New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia, and the Northern Territory. On average, across all domains (reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation and numeracy) a higher proportion of First Nations students are in the ‘Needs additional support’ proficiency level than non-Indigenous students¹.

A further consideration is that an unknown number of schools in Victoria are moving away from ‘balanced literacy’ to ‘structured explicit literary teaching’ and this is likely to be positively influencing Victoria’s NAPLAN data in ways that are not easily measured. We argue that Victoria should not be using NAPLAN as the only means to measure its performance in education outcomes – and should instead focus on implementing the policy settings which could take the state to the next level. We recommend a number of policy interventions:

Reading instruction: Lack of state-level prescription on how reading is taught

- Victoria continues to devolve responsibility to individual schools for how reading is taught – this is leading to high variability and therefore lack of replicable high quality at system-level. Through its SOLAR Lab, La Trobe has the expertise and the means to work with the state Department of Education to train and re-train teachers in evidence-based approaches to reading instruction. Such approaches are already being applied in other jurisdictions with remarkable results. We consider effective reading instruction as a public health imperative which has the potential of positive ripple effects across other sectors of the Victorian economy. Since September 2000, over 10,000 teachers (mainly from Victoria) have completed our online language and literacy short courses, and their feedback overwhelmingly indicates a desire to move away from balanced literacy and adopt approaches aligned with scientifically-derived evidence about what the reading process is and how best to teach it.
- There is no robust body of research evidence of which our expert researchers are aware that supports ‘balanced literacy’ as a preferred approach to reading instruction. Yet as far as we can ascertain, the majority of Victorian primary schools continue to follow a ‘balanced literacy’ approach. While balanced literacy clearly “works” for a proportion of students, it equally also does not work for a significant proportion and these students experience complex academic and wellbeing consequences across their primary and secondary school years. We would

¹ The NAPLAN 2023 results show that on average, across all domains (reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation and numeracy) a higher proportion of First Nations students are in the Needs additional support proficiency level than non-Indigenous students. At each year level tested (3, 5, 7 and 9), over 30% of First Nations students fall into this category compared to less than 10% of non-Indigenous students (ACARA 2023b) - <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/indigenous-education-and-skills#Reading%20and%20numeracy>

recommend **Nancy Young's Ladder of Reading and Writing**, as a useful framework for conceptualising pedagogy and its impact at a state-wide level.

- Again, on the basis of our SOLAR Lab's interactions with hundreds of Victorian schools and thousands of teachers, we are aware that there are a number of Victorian schools who have moved away from balanced literacy but who continue to experience pressure from Education Improvement Leaders (EILs) and Senior Education Improvement Leaders (SEILs) to use the balanced literacy-aligned Fountas and Pinnell levelling assessments for progress monitoring (especially for so-called "comprehension assessment"). Fountas and Pinnell is not an evidence-based approach to reading instruction and support. According to an independent 2015 study², its placement of students is no more accurate than a coin toss. Once teachers are highly knowledgeable about the nature of the English writing system, they can make executive decisions about programs and approaches that align with contemporary reading science evidence. These decisions do not need to be identical in every school, but every school should be able to "sign off" on delivering instruction that aligns with contemporary scientific evidence.

Recommendations:

- 1. Adopt State-level prescription on evidence-based reading instruction in schools, moving away from 'balanced literacy' approaches in favour of the adoption of structured, explicit literacy instruction. Through its SOLAR Lab, La Trobe has the expertise and the means to work with the State Department of Education to train and re-train teachers in evidence-based approaches to reading instruction.**
- 2. Consider Nancy Young's Ladder of Reading and Writing as a framework for conceptualising pedagogy and its impacts at a state-wide level.**

Confusion around 'phonics' and the Literacy Learning Toolkit

- The term "phonics" is unfortunately used loosely and, at times, incorrectly. It is important to have a position at state departmental level on what is meant by "phonics". At the La Trobe SOLAR Lab, we prefer to speak of "a body of knowledge that children need to acquire about the English writing system". Phonics is not a pedagogy, but this distinction is not clear in the Literacy Learning Toolkit. While this may be intentional in that the Department prefers not to prescribe a particular teaching approach, greater clarity would be helpful with making extrapolations to different phonics teaching approaches and their relative merits. Further information about this can be accessed [here](#).
- The Phonics Screening Check (PSC) is recreated in part (10 of 40 items), in the English Online Interview (EOL): It is our strong view that 10 items is not an adequate sample of student learning. Such a small sample will generate too many false positives and false negatives for the for the data to be the valid and reliable early warning system that a screener should be. More importantly, the fact that there is a PSC test (even if it is expanded to a more comprehensive test) is not a stand-alone solution. The PSC in itself is not going to change student outcomes – student outcomes will change at scale only if there is evidence-based

² Parker, D. C., Zaslofsky, A. F., Burns, M. K., Kanive, R., Hodgson, J., Scholin, S. E., & Klingbeil, D. A. (2015). A brief report of the diagnostic accuracy of oral reading fluency and reading inventory levels for reading failure risk among second-and third-grade students. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 31(1), 56-67.

reading instruction (as we outline in the earlier recommendations) occurring systematically at all schools.

Terms of Reference (1) (b)

- (1) trends in student learning outcomes from Prep to Year 12, including but not limited to –**
(b) disparities correlated with geography and socio-economic disadvantage;

Disparities in education outcomes between regional and metropolitan students

- As a university with a large footprint in regional Victoria, La Trobe knows all too well the challenges of disparities between metropolitan and regional education outcomes. As a higher education provider, we experience this at the tail end – with thin markets and a persistent trend of a high proportion of students at our regional campuses being the first in their families to go to university and belonging to groups that are underrepresented in higher education. This is particularly troubling in view of the growing evidence that the majority of future jobs will require a post-secondary qualification. Participation in ongoing education requires a strong foundation in literacy skills, in order for students to keep up with the demands of increasingly complex curriculum content.
- While, as we have argued earlier, NAPLAN should not be the only means to measure performance in education outcomes, one thing that emerges clearly from NAPLAN scores is that in Victoria there is wide gap between outcomes for metropolitan and regional students. According to analysis by The Grattan Institute³, the 2022 NAPLAN results show a lower percentage of Victorian regional students meet minimum standards for literacy and numeracy. Metropolitan students in years 3, 5 and 7 outperform their regional peers in numeracy, reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation. While analysis on how the 2023 results compare with the 2022 results is ongoing, it is clear that the gap between students in metropolitan and regional schools is persisting.
- La Trobe University plays a significant role in supporting communities and individuals to understand the role of higher education in personal and professional transformation and to find the best pathways to courses that will enable the future they seek. A high proportion of students at our regional campuses are the first in their families to go to university and belong to groups that are underrepresented in higher education. There are many barriers to higher education for those living in rural and regional communities⁴, including unfamiliarity, logistics, personal and financial circumstance, and sometimes socioeconomic status. These factors often intersect with compounding impact. The university is committed to enable lifelong learning by providing accessible and inclusive paths to higher education that reduce the impact of these barriers and are tailored to the circumstances of school leavers, TAFE graduates, those in employment and those returning to education.
- The ongoing 'Australian Universities Accord' process has set ambitious targets for lifting higher education participation from equity groups (including regional, rural and remote students) – as La Trobe has outlined in its [response](#) to the Accord Interim Report, it is

³ <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/country-students-continue-to-lag-city-kids-in-naplan-results-20230301-p5cohn.html>

⁴ Approximately 28% of the Australian population live in regional or rural communities, many of which exhibit geographical dispersion and isolation (Dollinger e al 2023 p.42)

essential to identify disadvantage and the reasons for lower participation and attainment among equity groups at earlier stages than university, namely in the early learning and school settings. This is why La Trobe has set up its 'Regional Higher Education Pathway Programs' which help disadvantaged regional secondary school students achieve a university offer. We have had a proven positive impact on higher education participation rates⁵. We work with many disadvantaged schools, where students typically receive little contact from universities other than La Trobe. Our experience has been that these alternate pathways, such as La Trobe's Shepparton and Albury-Wodonga pathways work well, with program participants over four times more likely to attend post-secondary education than the average participation rate in each catchment. However, these pathways are currently reliant on funding from philanthropy and we therefore strongly recommend government support for pathway programs. Further information about our pathway programs can be accessed .

Recommendation:

- 3. Provide government support to extend La Trobe's pathway programs with regional disadvantaged schools to improve participation in higher education.**

Disparities in education outcomes for students with special educational needs (autism)

One area which we believe this Inquiry should address is the disparity in educational outcomes for students with special education needs. We recognise that this is a very broad area – for the purpose of this submission, we will focus on autism, which is an area where La Trobe has significant expertise.

Established in 2008, La Trobe University's Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre (OTARC) is the first dedicated Autism research centre in Australia and the 2022 beneficiary of a \$42 million philanthropic donation to ensure its work can continue in perpetuity.

OTARC's research encompasses four research program areas; educational and vocational engagement, identification and diagnosis, supports and practices for daily living, and health and wellbeing. The focus of this input is to provide evidence-based, community informed recommendations that will benefit young Autistic Australians attending school in Victoria. In making these recommendations we will be drawing on evidence from our research in the following areas:

Autism Prevalence: OTARC has conducted four studies relevant to the prevalence of Autism in Australia demonstrating variation in prevalence over time and across states, highlighting a likely lack of diagnostic services and expertise, particularly in rural, regional, and remote areas. While young children are more likely to be identified since the introduction of universal screening by maternal and child health nurses in 2018, there are still delays in diagnoses due to lengthy waiting times.

Development of effective and valid strategies and tools to facilitate identification and diagnosis of Autism in children under 3 years: Studies in this area led to the successful development of an early identification tool (SACS-R), the creation of a free early identification app (**ASDetect**) for parents and

⁵ Since 2019, 331 Albury-Wodonga students and 277 Shepparton students have completed the Regional Higher Education Pathway program.

- Data from the 2022 programs shows 71 per cent of Albury-Wodonga students in the program are on track to attend university, as were 66 percent of Shepparton participants.
- Census data shows that in 2021, 485 of 3791 (12.9 per cent) Albury-Wodonga catchment residents aged 19 to 21 attended university or other higher education, not including TAFE or private training providers.
- In the Shepparton catchment 633 of 4162 (15.2 per cent) of residents aged 19 to 21 attended university or other higher education, not including TAFE or private training providers.
- Comparable data sourced from the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows 50 percent of 19 to 21-year olds in 2021 in Greater Melbourne were attending university or other higher education.

an ambitious Department of Health and Human Services project to train all Victorian Maternal and Child Health nurses (1750) to monitor the early signs of Autism. While a lot of progress has been registered, only maternal health nurses have undertaken the training so far. There are many allied health professionals and early childhood education professionals who are still not trained. Moreover, older children will have been missed as they were not seen by trained maternal child health nurses.

Supports for improving school-age outcomes for Autistic students: The impacts of early identification and supports on school age outcomes are significant, including in-school supports for self-regulation and strategies to accommodate sensory difference in classrooms.

Recommendations:

- 4. Ensure funds and resources to train early childhood education, health, and care professionals in the developmental monitoring of all children for Autism in addition to current training program for maternal and child health nurses.**
- 5. Improve access to evidence-based, inclusive and supportive early education for Autistic children in both specialist and inclusive settings; for example a state rollout of the Alert Program® (currently only operational in two regional schools);**
- 6. Set a target for all Victorian early childhood education and care settings and primary and secondary schools to have access to a multidisciplinary allied health team comprising a psychologist, speech therapist, occupational therapist and physiotherapist, working together with the centre/school educational team to support the student cohort utilising a transdisciplinary approach.**
- 7. Strengthen timely transition supports for Autistic students into secondary school through comprehensive consultation with Autistic students, their families and education, health and care professionals targeting:**
 - accessibility and equitable access to transition supports for Autistic students; and**
 - acceptability and suitability of supports for Autistic students with an intellectual disability.**

Terms of Reference (2) and (4):

(2) the state of the teaching profession in Victoria, including but not limited to –

- (a) the adequacy of existing measures to recruit and retain teachers;**
- (b) training, accreditation and professional development, particularly for teaching students with special needs;**
- (c) the adequacy of the Department of Education's measures to support teachers;**

(4) the administrative burden on teachers and the availability of new technologies to alleviate the burden;

La Trobe recognises the challenge of the mixed competencies and responsibilities for the teaching profession at federal and state level.

La Trobe has a long history of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) provision. Our ITE courses are offered across all 5 La Trobe campuses in Melbourne and regional Victoria. Thousands of teachers have

graduated from La Trobe over the years. In regional Victoria, the majority of our graduates are employed in regional schools and have become a mainstay of the regional teaching workforce. La Trobe has undertaken a lot of internal work as an ITE provider to make innovative changes to its teacher education courses. For instance, La Trobe has successfully piloted a 'Cohort Professional Experience Model', an evidence-informed approach to improving the quality of pre-service teachers' (PSTs) professional experience. Our **Nexus** program, an alternate employment-based pathway program, is proving successful in building long-term relationships with hard-to-staff schools. We are also constantly monitoring developments in the research relating to optimal outcomes in ITE and look forward to working with Inquiry and the rest of the sector towards an even more evidence-informed ITE curriculum.

We also welcome the changes flagged in the recent **Teacher Expert Advisory Panel Report** with regard to Initial Teacher Education (ITE) - these have largely already been actioned at La Trobe and our graduates will be classroom-ready in ways that have not been the case previously, particularly as this pertains to early reading instruction and their understanding of how children learn and are best engaged in learning across the curriculum.

Our key recommendation to the State Government is therefore for stronger alignment between refreshed initial teacher education and jurisdictional guidance on reading instruction as outlined in our earlier recommendations. We are of the view that the latter would go a long way towards relieving the existing burden on teachers who are currently operating in an environment where there is too much variation and devolved responsibility. This in turn, creates unnecessary workload burden for teachers. More guidance at state level would also enable more sharing of resources, which would lead to less variation, and again, reduce the workload burden on teachers.

State-level levers

While some policy settings sit at federal level, states and territories hold the key to many elements influencing the teaching profession, including remuneration, working conditions and registration.

We also argue that more work is required for the Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership to achieve its potential. The latter should advocate for, as well as drive, structured and explicit literary instruction. Ongoing access to professional development for teachers is crucial especially in regional, rural and remote areas.

Recommendations:

- 8. Implement the state-level recommendations of the Teacher Expert Advisory Panel report**
- 9. Aim for stronger alignment between refreshed initial teacher education and jurisdictional guidance on reading instruction**
- 10. The Victorian Academy of Teaching and Learning should provide evidence-informed approaches in professional development to enhance teacher practices including structured and explicit literary instruction**

Term of Reference (5)

(5) examples of best practice in other jurisdictions and educational settings used to improve student learning outcomes and wellbeing;

La Trobe recommends the approach being adopted by the Catholic Archdiocese of Canberra-Goulbourn – further information can be obtained [here](#). The schools in this sector have all adopted a practical and evidence-based approach to teaching and learning. This teaching approach, known as High Impact Teaching Practice, guides the way in which every teacher across the Archdiocese plans, delivers and supports learning for every student. The approach has been developed and designed based on national and global research into how children learn, known as the science of learning while the teaching approach for literacy is backed by a comprehensive body of knowledge and research on how students learn to read, known as the science of reading. The science of reading is an evolving body of knowledge, not a pedagogy, and should be used as the guiding frame of reference in Victoria to guide schools and teachers in their work over time. More information about the science of reading can be found at [this link](#).

Recommendations:

- 11. Monitor examples of best practices in other jurisdictions (e.g. Canberra-Goulburn Catholic Archdiocese) and implement the lessons learnt in the Victorian setting.**