

# An Enduring Partnership with Real Impact: Supporting the Learning of Students with Additional Needs

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## Keywords

21st century skills, general capabilities, students with additional needs, learning progression, assessment.

## Introduction

The Students with Additional Needs (SWANs)/Abilities Based Learning and Education Support (ABLES) program has developed a comprehensive suite of assessments, learning progressions and teaching materials focused on the learning of students with additional needs. It is the result of two Australian Research Council (ARC) linkage grants and a sustained partnership between the Assessment Research Centre (now Melbourne Metrics) at the University of Melbourne (UoM), and the Victorian Department of Education (DoE) since 2007. These materials are currently used in schools across Australia, with

over 1.2 million individual student assessments completed since the inception of the program.

When the program of work was initiated, although policy had established that education should be inclusive (Australian Government, 2005; UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability, 2008), practice had not yet fully met this aim because teachers lacked the appropriate resources to do so (Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment, 2016). This gap between policy and practice and the potential of assessments based on learning progressions to fill this gap was recognised by Professor Patrick Griffin at UoM and Karen Underwood from DoE. This initial shared vision has been the core unifying idea through the ongoing work from 2007 to now.

Historically, the focus on assessment and teaching of students with additional needs tended to be on areas of deficit with a focus on how they performed compared to other students (Garcia, 2015). SWANs took a radically different approach by applying a developmental model of learning, focusing on what students can do and where they need to go next to progress. The objective of SWANs was not to replace the curriculum but to extend it to describe the learning of all students regardless of their starting point or pace of learning, including students with significant cognitive impairments. These descriptions were developed through a process of co-design with hundreds of teachers of students with additional learning needs, ensuring that the resulting assessments were practical and useful

for teachers. Accompanying teaching materials were developed through the program so that students' performance on the assessments was linked to the materials, enabling teachers to understand student ability and teach to the point of need.

The ABLES program built on SWANs by linking the assessments of general capabilities to the relevant learning domains in the Victorian curriculum, and reporting student progress against these. The aim is to help Victorian teachers seamlessly integrate assessment, reporting, and curriculum information into their planning.

## Significance

The SWANs/ABLES assessments cover communication and emergent literacy (Woods, 2010), interpersonal development (Coles-Janess & Griffin, 2009), personal learning skills, understanding of emotions (Roberts, 2014), early numeracy (Strickland et al., 2016), digital literacy (White et al., 2017), movement (Gale, 2018), and thinking skills (Kamei & Pavlovic, 2021). These general capabilities or 21st century skills are increasingly seen as essential for thriving in the current global environment (Griffin et al., 2012; OECD, 2018; Rychen & Salganik, 2003).

The SWANs/ABLES program is cutting-edge in its application of

critterion-referenced frameworks as a basis for learning progressions of such general capabilities targeted for use by teachers of students with additional needs. This innovation has shifted teachers' thinking regarding the assessment and learning of students with additional needs from a dichotomous can/cannot perception of learning to a developmental model that focuses on what learning looks like for all students. The materials emphasise observing what students are doing and using this to inform judgements. This provides flexibility, facilitating a personalised, differentiated approach to assessment and instruction based on how and when students show competence.

Generally, assessments for students with additional needs have been designed to identify the type or severity of disability experienced, specifically targeted for use by specialists such as psychologists and paediatricians (e.g., Gioia et al., 2010; Roid & Barram, 2004; Wechsler, 2002). They have not been designed for teachers to inform instructional and planning decisions. The SWANs/ABLES assessments and teaching materials were developed for and by teachers and as such are eminently practical. They are currently used across Australia, and internationally, a strong testament to the need they are meeting.

The SWANs/ABLES suite of assessments and teaching materials provide a link between assessment, curriculum and practical teaching strategies. Alignment between these components is helpful (Kippers et al., 2018) as teachers can find it challenging to make the link between interpreting assessment results and their teaching (Griffin, 2020b). The consistent feedback from teachers has been that they highly value this component of the program, and that the materials improve teacher confidence in the classroom.

## The partnership

UoM and the DoE both have recognised the key role of assessment to shift practice from the beginning. This alignment in thinking was initiated in 2003, when Professor Patrick Griffin was evaluating a teacher candidate and observed that a student in the class with additional needs was not included in the classroom (Griffin, 2020a). Conversations with DoE staff revealed that many teachers lacked the skill, training, and resources to work effectively with students with additional needs. UoM and DoE saw an opportunity to develop and apply an approach to assessment using observational evidence linked to learning progressions in order to provide a flexible approach when assessing students who may not be



able to sit traditional tests.

UoM and the DoE have clear roles and complementary expertise that has been core to the quality and consistency of the work throughout the phases of development and expansion of SWANs/ABLES. The SWANs/ABLES work is underpinned with a strong focus on research in measurement which provides arguments for its validity and reliability. Melbourne Metrics (formerly the Assessment

Research Centre) at UoM, with its long history in measurement research, has led research and development. As an industry partner, the DoE has led implementation through policy and professional learning development. This collaboration has progressed understanding at UoM and DoE of the core importance of context and stakeholder needs to underpin validity arguments. Such framing of validity was most important when considering the sorts of assessment needed to

accurately and authentically assess students with additional needs, using a strength-based approach to learning and development. This has also progressed stronger use of measurement theory and principles to guide policy and implementation, with a focus on the social consequences of assessment outcome interpretation and use. Consistently, decisions have been made collaboratively to ensure the SWANs/ABLES tools are used as intended.

This combination of stakeholder trust built through robust research methods and policy support has meant that the SWANs/ABLES suite of tools has been highly successful in its development, implementation and continued relevance. The DoE has now worked in partnership with the UoM team on this body of research for over 16 years. Drawing on the Carnegie definition of community engagement (Engagement Australia, n.d.) the reciprocity of the partnership between UoM and DoE continues to make a clear contribution in early childhood and school education by building the capacity of teachers, researchers, policy makers and families to use developmental assessment tools to support the learning of all children and young people.

The quality and utility of the SWANs/ABLES assessments and teaching

**Table 1** | *Number of assessments completed by each state to 2023*

State	Number of assessments completed
Victoria	856,473
Western Australia	166,056
South Australia	117,597
Australian Capital Territory	16,699
Northern Territory	25,337
Queensland	6,706
New South Wales	61,247
Tasmania	10,598
International/Others	5,096
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,265,809</b>

materials were recognised by teachers and policymakers in other states, resulting in approaches to the DoE and UoM for permission to use the instruments. In 2016 and 2019 the UoM partnered with the Victorian, Western Australian and South Australian departments of education, to adapt SWANs/ABLES for use in schools in each of these states, including mapping to relevant curricula and teaching and learning materials.

Due to the recognised quality and evidence-base underlying SWANs/ABLES and feedback from teachers, subsequent approaches have come from the Australian Capital Territory Education Directorate, the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, the Northern Territory Department of Education, the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria and the New South Wales Department of Education. UoM has had agreements with each of these jurisdictions to provide access to the assessment tools, help-desk, reports to schools and systems, and continued quality assurance and development. UoM has also partnered with the DoE in delivering professional learning to different states and territories to support the dissemination of this work.

The numbers of assessment completed by state up to 2023 are shown in Table 1.

The materials have never been mandated in schools and teachers draw on the materials when they have students who may benefit for them. Across Australia 2,917 schools have used the tools. Moreover, teachers in 1,756 schools have elected to use SWANs/ABLES for 2 years or longer, underlining its usefulness for teachers. Victoria, Western Australia and South Australia have had particularly strong support from education departments and curriculum authorities, demonstrating the importance of such partnerships to implementation and ongoing use.

### Expansion and ongoing development

The SWANs/ABLES program has had direct impact on curriculum. For instance, it was instrumental in the Towards Foundation Victorian Curriculum development project (Underwood, 2020). The SWAN/ABLES work informed this project to extend the curriculum to include all learners. In addition, UoM was commissioned by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) to map the SWANs learning progressions to the National Literacy and Numeracy Learning Progressions as well as the Australian Curriculum general capabilities continua in 2020 (ACARA, 2021a, 2021b). This work has enabled

ACARA to better understand and support the learning of students with additional needs.

SWANs/ABLES has been expanded for use in early childhood settings for all children. The continuing partnership with the DoE has led to the development of an adapted version called Early ABLES that describes the learning of children aged two to five with diagnosed disabilities or developmental delay who are participating in early childhood programs. Building on Early ABLES, work commenced in 2020 to develop the Early Years Assessment and Learning Tool (EYALT) to adapt Early ABLES for use with all children in funded kindergarten programs in Victoria. In 2023, a three-year phased rollout of the EYALT began, with over 1000 Victorian kindergarten services accepted to take part so far. Other states have also reached out in order to trial EYALT in 2024 and NSW has begun a formal trial of EYALT in the Formative Assessment in the Year Before School Project 2024.

### Conclusion

Across the program, nine assessments were developed through seven PhD research projects supported by two ARC Linkage grants. The assessment tools are available online in all states and territories in Australia through UoM.



Research outputs from the SWANs/ABLES program of work has included a book edited by Professor Griffin and Dr Kerry Woods (Griffin & Woods, 2020), six PhD theses, journal articles, conference papers and presentations and industry papers and reports. Moreover, word of mouth through schools, teachers and parents has supported the dissemination of this work. This has resulted in national dissemination and use, direct impact on policy and national and state curricula, and expansion to use with teachers of other cohorts of students and children.

SWANs/ABLES has been pivotal in shifting understandings of inclusion, with students with additional needs increasingly being taught in mainstream classrooms. It has also developed awareness of what meaningful progress in learning of fundamental skills looks like for this cohort of students. Inclusive education policies depend on the skills and knowledge of classroom teachers and there has been a significant gap in this knowledge for most teachers in our schools. SWANs/ABLES scaffolds teachers with targeted teaching strategies and advice from experienced teachers of students with additional needs and in this way supports the teaching and learning of fundamental skills required to learn and access the general curriculum (Woods & Griffin, 2013). It has also provided teachers with professional language to

collaborate with other professionals and families about the learning of students with additional needs.

A broader outcome of this work has been its leading role in the assessment and reporting of general capabilities that are increasingly being seen as essential for all students to thrive and learn. There are challenges in defining and measuring these skills. The SWANs/ABLES program of work has shown that such complex constructs can be assessed and described with high validity and reliability. For instance, SWANs has been instrumental in informing the New Metrics program of work at Melbourne Metrics in terms of how assessments based on progressions can be used to describe complex competencies flexibly to account for diverse contexts, backgrounds and interests of students (UoM, 2022).

The work is ongoing and there is recognition of the need for continued development and innovation for the SWANs/ABLES work to remain relevant and have ongoing impact. Further research is being proposed to explore the development of personalised benchmarks to provide additional support to teachers using the SWANs/ABLES suite of tools, allowing them to develop learning goals and expectations that meet the needs and recognise the abilities of every learner.

In sum, the SWANs/ABLES work has had profound practical impact as the first set of assessment tools developed by and for teachers to support the teaching and learning of students with additional needs. This is evident in its widespread use across Australia and its expansion to other cohorts of students and children. The deep engagement with the sector resulting from the strong and enduring partnership between UoM and the Victorian DoE has been instrumental to its success.

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