



## ISCA submission

### Senate Inquiry into Academic Standards of School Education

#### About ISCA

*The Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA) is the peak national body representing the independent school sector. It comprises the State and Territory Associations of Independent Schools. Through these Associations it represents a sector with almost 1,100 schools and 500,000 students, accounting for 14 per cent of Australian school enrolments.*

*Independent schools serve a range of different communities. Many provide a religious or values-based education, while others promote a particular educational philosophy or interpretation of mainstream education. Independent schools include:*

- *Schools affiliated with Christian denominations, such as Anglican, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Seventh Day Adventist and Uniting Church schools*
- *Non-denominational Christian schools*
- *Islamic schools*
- *Jewish schools*
- *Montessori schools*
- *Rudolf Steiner schools*
- *Schools constituted under specific Acts of Parliament, such as Grammar schools in some states*
- *Community schools*
- *Indigenous community schools*
- *Schools that specialise in meeting the needs of students with disabilities.*

*Some independent schools with common aims and educational philosophies are governed and administered as systems, for example the Lutheran systems. Systemic schools account for 18 per cent of schools in the independent sector.*

*Independent Catholic schools are a significant part of the sector, accounting for 10 per cent of the independent sector's enrolments. Although ABS data does not categorise them as independent, these schools have been included in ISCA's figures. However the charts and tables in this submission are based on ABS figures.*



## ISCA's submission

1. This submission seeks to address the Inquiry's terms of reference in broad terms. ISCA functions in a representative capacity for the independent sector as a whole, and it is not its role to comment in detail on academic and pedagogical issues which are the domain of individual schools.
2. ISCA believes that academic standards in the independent sector are high, and that this can be demonstrated in terms of a range of key indicators. This submission argues that the independent sector performs well in equipping its students with the required knowledge and skills to progress successfully to the next stage; and that independent schools provide their students with the core knowledge and skills they need to participate in further education and training and as members of the community.
3. In its submission ISCA has focused on the characteristics and strengths of the independent sector which enable it to provide a high quality education service to the Australian community. ISCA contends that the continued growth of the independent sector – especially given the necessity for families to make a substantial private contribution to their children's education in independent schools – is a strong indicator of its success in meeting the needs of Australian families.

## The independent school sector

4. Independent schools are not-for-profit institutions that are set up and governed independently on an individual-school basis. Boards of governors or committees of management are the key decision-making bodies for most independent schools and are responsible for issues such as the school's educational provision, current and future development, and staffing. While most independent schools are managed by their own board of governors or management committee, some independent schools with common aims and educational philosophies are governed within small approved systems.
5. There are almost 1,100 independent schools in Australia, including schools affiliated with Christian or other religious denominations; schools with a particular educational philosophy; indigenous community schools; and schools that specialise in meeting the needs of students with disability. There are small and large day schools, metropolitan and regional boarding schools, co-educational and single-sex schools. The independent sector serves the full spectrum of the Australian community, and plays an important role in providing the diversity in schooling options that families want.

### *Number of independent schools, 2006<sup>1</sup>*

School Type	Number	Percentage
Primary	285	28%
Secondary	90	9%
Combined	590	59%
Special schools	42	4%
Total	1,007	100%

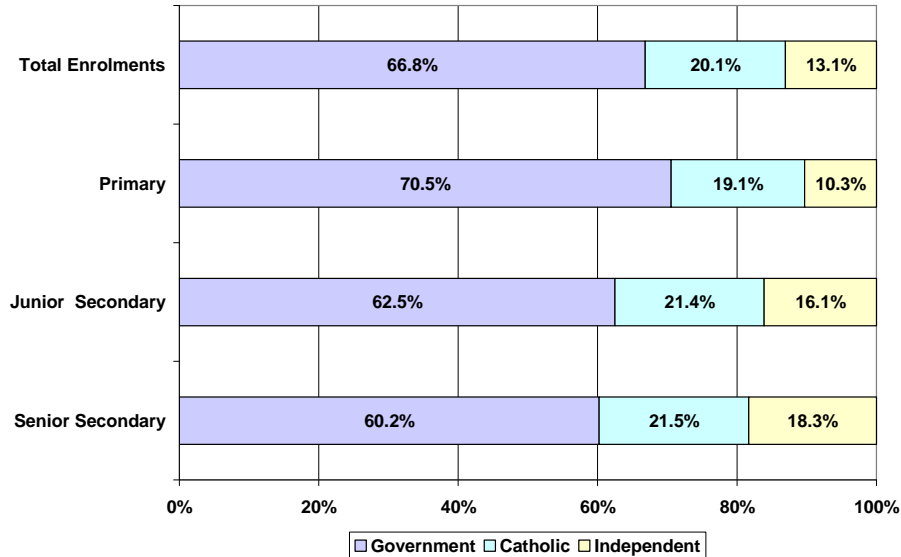
6. Close to 500,000 students were enrolled in independent schools in 2006. Enrolments in independent schools have grown steadily over the last three decades, and the independent

---

<sup>1</sup> This table is based on ABS data and does not include independent Catholic schools.

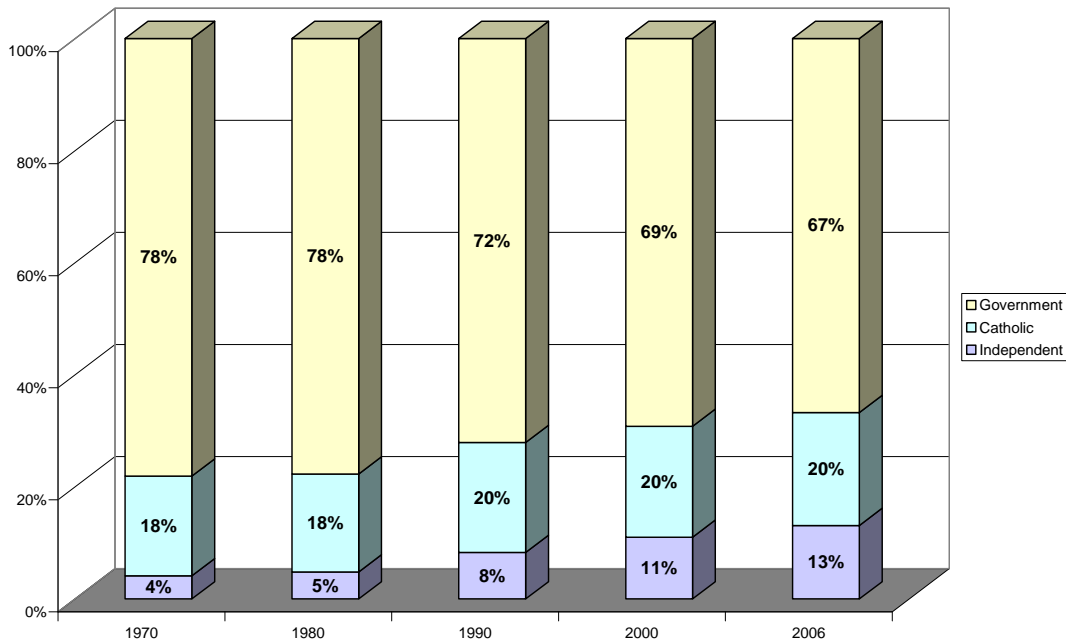
schools sector now accounts for 14 per cent of total student enrolments, compared with just 4 per cent in 1970. The sector's contribution to senior secondary schooling is now very significant: more than 18 per cent of all senior students in Australia attend independent schools. Sixteen per cent of all junior secondary students and 10 per cent of all primary students are in independent schools.

***Student enrolments by sector and level, 2006***



- The continuing enrolment growth in independent schools over the past 35 years has been irrespective of the political persuasions of governments over the period, and is consistent with widespread indications of a demand by members of the Australian community for increased choice in the way they expend their income and resources.

***Enrolment change by sector, 1970 – 2006***



- The independent sector is the smallest of the three school education sectors, but it is the fastest growing sector, and the most diverse. The sector provides for individual choice of schooling, offering educational opportunities to meet a wide range of needs of students and

families. The key point of difference between independent schools and other schools in Australia is their independence and autonomy. Independent schools are accountable to their stakeholders, including students, parents, governments and the wider community.

## **Accountability**

9. Independent schools must meet the criteria established by their state or territory government for registration as a school and for their accreditation for credentialing of students. School registration is reviewed on an ongoing basis, which ensures that a school complies with state or territory government criteria in relation to curriculum and other requirements.
10. State and territory governments provide some funding support for independent schools, and schools must comply with any related conditions of funding as well as reporting and accountability requirements.
11. The Australian Government is the source of most public funding available to independent schools. Comprehensive conditions and accountability requirements apply to this funding. Independent schools must demonstrate that the funds received under each funding programme have been expended appropriately, and must provide extensive data for the Annual National Report on Schooling in Australia and the annual Financial Questionnaire for Non-Government Schools.
12. The Australian Government requires as a condition of funding that schools must commit to the National Goals for Schooling for the Twenty-first Century. In addition schools must commit to a range of performance measures as determined by the government, including assessment and reporting against literacy and numeracy benchmarks.
13. A unique feature of independent schools is their direct accountability to their stakeholders, including students, parents, governments and the wider community. Independent schools have a commitment to meeting the expectations of their communities and are highly conscious that the success of the school will be measured in these terms. Independent schools thrive or fail on their merits, and if independent schools are not successful in meeting the needs of their communities, families will exercise their right of exit.

## **Characteristics of independent schools**

14. Arrangements for the delivery and funding of school education in Australia give parents considerable freedom to choose for their children the education that they believe best suits their individual needs and supports the values taught at home. Independent schools have unique characteristics and particular strengths which enable them to meet high academic standards and provide their students with the core knowledge and skills needed for further education and as members of the community. That these characteristics and strengths are widely recognised and valued by the Australian community is amply demonstrated by the sector's steady growth over recent decades.
15. The independent sector's share of total school enrolments in Australia is 13.1 per cent. This jumps to 18.3 per cent at senior secondary level. Recent research into school choice undertaken by Independent Schools Queensland found that of those parents surveyed, the majority (61 per cent) only considered independent schools for their children's education. [‘What Parents Want – Key findings’, published by Independent Schools Queensland, March 2007]

## Diversity in size and structure

16. The independent schools sector is very diverse, providing Australian parents with the choice they are seeking. The diversity of the sector is reflected in a number of ways.
17. School size in the sector varies widely. Some independent schools are among Australia's largest schools – eleven independent schools have more than 2,000 students – while at the other extreme, 16 per cent of independent schools have fewer than 50 students. The average size of an independent school is about 455 students, compared to an average enrolment of 327 at government schools.
18. About sixty per cent of all independent schools offer combined provision of primary and secondary schooling. Sometimes called K to 12 schools, these schools offer both primary and secondary level schooling. Most independent schools are coeducational, though single-gender schools are also a feature of the sector. Twelve per cent of boys are enrolled in boys-only schools and 15 per cent of girls are in girls-only schools.
19. Increasingly, independent schools are meeting the growing community demand for access to education in the early years, that is, in the years prior to the legal school starting age. The establishment of early learning centres within schools to cater for these children has become a feature of independent schooling.
20. A number of independent schools offer middle school programmes which aim to meet the specific developmental needs of early adolescence. Independent schools have adopted diverse approaches to middle schooling, for example by creating a 'school within a school', with a dedicated building or buildings for middle year students and specially trained staff. Other schools have adopted middle schooling practices such as a differentiated curriculum or rich task approach for Years 7 and 8. One independent school in Queensland has been operating a middle school for more than 20 years, and many independent schools are considered 'showcase' schools for middle schooling.
21. The majority of independent schools – some 85 per cent – have a religious affiliation, and the range of affiliations is very diverse. Many independent schools reflect the unique vision of an educator or community groups seeking to meet particular needs. Examples include the independent community schools for Indigenous students in remote areas and boarding schools. There are also schools that seek to reflect the religious values of a particular community or that practice an internationally recognised educational philosophy such as Rudolf Steiner or Montessori schools.

## Responsiveness to students and families with particular needs

22. Independent schools aim to extend and enrich the education of all their students but many have a commitment to students and families with particular needs.
  - **Students with disability:** The trend in recent times to integrate students with disability into mainstream classrooms, in recognition of the social and educational benefits for all involved, is reflected in the steadily increasing numbers of such students enrolling in independent schools. In 2006 there were 9,300 students with disability enrolled in independent schools. Most were enrolled in mainstream schools, and about a quarter were enrolled in special schools. Total enrolments of students with disability in the sector have increased by 180 per cent over the past decade. The proportion of these students with higher level needs is also increasing.

- **Special schools:** provide alternative educational settings for students with high-level needs. These schools may cater for students with disabilities or disorders such as autism, as well as students who are at risk, do not ‘fit’ into mainstream schools, have behavioural difficulties, or are school ‘refusers’.
- **Students from rural and remote areas:** The independent schools sector makes a significant contribution to educating students from Australia’s rural and remote areas. Many of the students from these areas attend boarding schools in capital cities or larger regional towns. Alternatively, they may board elsewhere, but attend school as a day student. Others attend independent schools in their local areas, and some take up the option of distance education. Approaching one third of all independent schools are in non-metropolitan areas and 3 per cent are in remote areas, creating schooling choice for families in these areas. In some extremely remote areas, independent schools provide the only available schooling for Indigenous children.
- **Students in boarding schools:** The independent sector dominates boarding school provision in Australia, with 156 boarding schools and 17,000 students. Boarders in independent schools are a diverse group of students from a range of backgrounds, and often from other countries.
- **Indigenous students:** Nearly 8,000 Indigenous students are educated in independent schools, many in rural or remote areas. There are 31 independent schools with Indigenous enrolments of more than 50 per cent. Some Indigenous students attend local independent schools, that in some cases provide special programmes for Indigenous students. Others attend Indigenous schools or community schools that cater exclusively for Indigenous students. Some Indigenous students attend boarding schools, and there are independent schools that offer boarding scholarships for them.
- **Gifted and talented students:** Many independent schools have scholarship programmes for students who are gifted academically, musically, in sport, or in the performing arts. Independent schools adopt a number of strategies including acceleration extension programmes and participation in university courses.
- **Full fee-paying overseas students:** Nearly 10,000 overseas students are enrolled in independent schools, which represents around half the total number of full fee paying overseas students in Australian schools. Most overseas students in independent schools are in secondary schooling, and 10 per cent are in primary. The families of these students choose independent schooling in Australia for the quality of education and the diversity of educational and cultural experiences which the sector offers, as well as for the boarding facilities in many schools.

### Curriculum choice and diversity

23. It is a characteristic and strength of independent schools that their curriculum offerings reflect the expectations and values of the school community. Within the bounds of the curriculum prescribed by relevant state or territory curriculum authorities, independent schools have the flexibility to offer subject choices which reflect the school’s particular ethos and focus.
24. A number of independent schools excel in programmes for particular aspects of schooling and in so doing, demonstrate leadership and innovation within the schools sector. For example, independent schools have continued to show leadership in boys’ education through participation in Australian Government initiatives and other projects, through information

networks and professional development for teachers in boys' education, and through pastoral care and mentoring programmes.

25. More than half of all independent schools offer Vocational and Technical Education (VTE) courses to their secondary students in over 40 industry areas. The most common areas offered were tourism and hospitality, information technology, and business services. More unusual courses included aquaculture, real estate, aviation studies and electro-technology. As in other sectors, VTE programmes are delivered through school-based new apprenticeships, TAFE courses and work placements.
26. A particular strength of the sector is that because of their autonomy and flexibility, independent schools are able to develop cocurricular programs that are suited to their communities and to the school's local environment, and to include cocurricula involvement as part of staff responsibilities.

### **Autonomy in independent schools**

27. International research has linked school autonomy to student academic achievement. In Australia, self-management is a key to the success of independent schools.
28. Independent schools are so called because they are self-managing entities, not governed by a centralised authority. Independent school governors are individually and collectively responsible for compliance with the legislation, regulation and mandatory reporting requirements that apply to schools. Independent schools are accountable to national and state educational authorities, but also have high levels of accountability to fee-paying parents and students, and often to affiliated organisations and founders.
29. Independent schools are able to appoint their own staff. Typically, a school principal, often with the input of board members and senior staff, has the authority to advertise for and select staff, and negotiate employment conditions. This autonomy ensures that the principal can make decisions about staff appointments, and know that prospective staff are freely choosing a school and are motivated to work successfully within it.
30. Autonomy over curriculum and the matriculation assessments offered within independent schools allows them to choose the best from around the world, such as internationally recognised matriculation programs developed by the International Baccalaureate organisation and Cambridge University, as well as Australian state and territory curricula. Independent schools use their considerable expertise to develop curricula and teaching styles that best suit the needs of their students.

### **Commitment to high standards and academic rigour**

31. Almost all independent schools are academically non-selective, and their focus is on ensuring all students meet their full potential. The independent sector as a whole does however have a strong commitment to high academic standards, and many schools have an outstanding record in equipping students to meet high standards at senior secondary level.
32. The ways in which Year 12 results are publicly reported varies from state to state, and no official data is available which makes direct sector comparisons. Media reporting on results suggests that in general selective state schools and independent schools (particularly independent girls' schools) are likely to have more students achieving higher results.

33. Research on school completion rates undertaken by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), using data collected for the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) has confirmed school sector as having a significant influence on participating in Year 12. In 2001 a student in an independent school was 1.4 times more likely to remain to Year 12 than a student in a government school. This school effect was net of parents' occupation and education and achievement test scores. LSAY research has shown that of the students who were in Year 9 in independent schools in 1995, the majority (59 per cent) completed Year 12 and entered higher education. In the Catholic sector 48 per cent of students and in the government sector 31 per cent of students completed Year 12 and entered higher education.
34. ACER in its latest available research found that school sector exerted a significant effect on school non-completion in the late 1990s. This research found that while the effect of school sector could be partially explained by the socioeconomic and academic mix of students, there was a particularly strong effect of sector on the completion rates of boys. After controlling for socioeconomic status and literacy and numeracy achievement, boys who attended government schools were still 2.1 times more likely to become early school leavers than those who attended independent schools.
35. ACER research consistently shows the most significant indicator of Year 12 performance is literacy and numeracy achievement in Year 9. An LSAY research report investigating students' tertiary entrance score against their Year 9 literacy and numeracy results by school sector shows that students in independent schools with lower levels of Year 9 achievement gain significantly higher tertiary entrance scores than students in other sectors, even after discounting for socio-economic factors. In other words, independent schools are successful in 'value-adding' or helping all students achieve to the best of their ability.
36. Independent schools play a key role in encouraging young Australians to study high-order subjects. ACER research released in 2000 on *Subject Choice by Students in Year 12 in Australian Secondary Schools* found a higher rate of enrolment in mathematics and the physical sciences for students from independent schools than for students in other school sectors. The research showed that in the physical sciences, students from independent schools were about 1.5 times more likely to study these subjects than students in other schools. Students from independent schools were also more likely to study in the area of humanities and the social sciences, and were also more likely to study languages other than English. These findings are supported by a 2005 LSAY report which found that students in independent schools were enrolled in physical sciences courses at a rate of about one-and-a-half that of government school students.

### **Valuing the individual student, pastoral care, civic engagement**

37. For independent schools values education is an important part of school life and culture, and is often linked to the ethos and religious affiliation of the school. Research on school choice has shown that values are important factors in the continued growth of the independent schools sector in Australia. Families are attracted to the strong communities and supportive environments they find in independent schools.
38. In independent schools civic and religious values may be specifically encouraged and developed in students through social justice and community service programmes. These include fundraising to meet community, national and international need; volunteering in community services such as soup kitchens and opportunity shops, and in earth stewardship projects such as environmental clean ups and heritage protection; helping out at camps for young people with disabilities; assisting with aged and frail people; participation in school inter-faith projects; and linking with community organisations such as Amnesty International.

39. Research suggests that independent schools are successful in building community and encouraging students to engage with the wider community. ACER studies have shown high levels of commitment to volunteering and school engagement by independent school students. As strong, compassionate communities that engage with society through local, national and international networks of service, independent schools make a significant contribution to Australia's social capital. They also contribute through the development of publicly-spirited individuals who continue to volunteer and positively engage in society in their adult life.

### Standards of teaching in the sector

40. The independent sector is committed to high levels of teacher quality. The quality of teaching within a school affects student learning and results, and the school's reputation. Teachers in independent schools must meet the same registration and employment criteria as apply in other school sectors. Arrangements vary among states and territories but requirements include registration with the relevant authority, being a 'fit and proper' person, agreeing to abide by a Code of Ethics, and proficiency in the English language. Most states and territories conduct criminal background checks before registering a teacher and some have, or are developing, professional standards which all teachers working within the jurisdiction need to meet.

#### *Teachers in independent schools, 2006*

	<b>Total</b>
Total Number (full-time and part-time)	42,712
FTE (full-time equivalent)	36,575

41. Many independent schools have a particular ethos and set of values which teachers are expected to share. Each independent school or system is an employer, and has staffing policies and guidelines that reflect the school's particular focus and mission. This often means that schools are able to reinforce their school ethos by employing teachers who share the same philosophy, while at the same time bringing in new skills and fresh approaches. In most states and territories schools may employ teachers without formal teaching qualifications for certain subjects such as trades, music, art and chaplaincy.
42. The expectation is that teachers will not only concentrate on teaching their subject but also on the development of individual students. Teachers are encouraged to contribute to the broader life of the school through pastoral care programmes, sporting commitments, tutor groups, cultural activities, outdoor education and many other co curricular activities.
43. As an employing authority, schools have a vested interest in choosing wisely and looking after their staff. Schools place strong emphasis on the value of induction programmes for new teachers and ongoing professional development (PD). Schools invest considerable time and resources in providing, and releasing teachers for, ongoing PD. They also cover the cost of providing teacher relief.
44. It appears that the sector's emphasis on teacher quality is well placed. Research by consultants Irving Saulwick in 1998 revealed that quality of teaching was one of the main reasons parents chose independent schools. Subsequent research, including a 2003 Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) study into parent and community member attitudes to schooling, has supported this finding. The emphasis on teacher quality is reflected in the number of awards made to teachers from independent schools at national and state and territory levels.

## **Conclusions**

45. ISCA has taken the opportunity provided by this Inquiry to highlight the unique characteristics of the independent sector in providing a high quality education service to the Australian community. As a conclusion to this submission we would like to draw the attention of members of the Inquiry to the conditions and government support the sector needs to continue to deliver education which meets high academic standards, and equips its students to participate successfully in further education and training and in the community.

### **Committed partnerships between schools, parents and governments**

46. Non-government schooling is supported and sustained through a partnership comprising the Australian Government, state and territory governments, and parents. With one-third of Australian students now educated in non-government schools it is vital that this partnership is reliable, stable and sustainable if the overall quality of schooling in Australia is to be maintained.
47. Stability and predictability in funding is critical for quality school provision. ISCA strongly endorses the Australian Government's established policy of providing legislated quadrennial funding for government and non-government schools, adjusted annually to meet cost increases. This facilitates financial planning and management within schools, enhancing their capacity to provide the best quality education with the resources available to them.
48. Stable and predictable funding arrangements also support families in planning for the private funds that they commit to their children's schooling.

### **Commitment to choice and diversity**

49. Community attitudes to education are changing rapidly and there is a demand by parents for choice not only between government and non-government schools but among government schools. Enrolment trends over the past fifteen years demonstrate that parents want choice and that increasingly they are prepared to pay for it.
50. At the same time, the community is seeking government funding support that focuses more on access to education services rather than on institutional ownership. ISCA's view is that funding models will be assessed on the extent to which they recognise supplier diversity in schooling and support school choice.

### **School autonomy and accountability**

51. New independent schools continue to be established because many parents and community groups find that self-governing schools are more accountable to their immediate communities than is possible for schools that are part of large centralised systems.
52. To respond effectively and creatively to the needs of the students and communities they serve, independent schools need a liberal degree of autonomy. With comprehensive regulatory mandates and effective self-regulatory mechanisms already in place, the independent schools sector would argue that any demand for further formalisation of accountability requirements must be balanced by a commitment to the innovation and diversity that characterises independent education.

53. All schools must be accountable for their use of public funds, but it is vital that government accountability requirements do not limit the ability of schools to be innovative and provide diversity and choice in school education.
54. The sector is broadly supportive of many of the curriculum and assessment measures introduced by the Australian Government aimed at improving the standard of Australian education. Most independent schools already have long-established practices that meet government objectives such as principal autonomy and reporting to parents and the school community.
55. As an example independent schools and teachers are committed to communicating with parents through detailed reports, parent-teacher interviews, meeting with parents at other times, and phone and email contact. The sector supports the Australian Government's measures to ensure plain English reports are provided that are relevant to the stage of education of the student and meaningful to parents by clearly stating progress made. It is important however that schools should be free within broad parameters to select the form of reporting that reflects the educational philosophy of the school.
56. Government regulatory and educational accountability requirements should relate clearly and demonstrably to the fundamental goals of schooling. Schools need to operate in a regulatory environment which supports the pursuit of academic excellence, and it is important that government accountability requirements can be justified in educational terms. It is essential that governments ensure that schools do not have to divert resources from their core business of teaching and learning.
57. It is ISCA's view that high academic standards in independent schools can best be supported by government policies which ensure the sector's highly valued independence and autonomy is nurtured and protected.

Canberra  
May 2007