

## **NAPLAN Online in 2016 – Everyone Ready?**

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The Australian Government is planning to conduct NAPLAN online from 2016 (<http://www.nap.edu.au/online-assessment/naplan-online/naplan-online.html>).

While the Government is to be commended on the move to take advantage of the efficiencies and the opportunities opened by going digital and online, will all parties critical to the success of conducting NAPLAN online be ready for a 2016 test? Will all Australia's 9,500 schools, 40 plus education systems and ACARA itself be ready to implement the test in a manner where no child is excluded?

Taking the test online is a high-risk strategy. Indeed on any risk assessment scale the conduct of the first national test online is a very high risk strategy which if not approached astutely has to the potential to traumatise children, anger parents, alienate teachers, embarrass principals and educational administrators and politically damage the Federal and state and territory ministers of education.

This is where the rubber hits the road. One is no longer talking hype and rhetoric. Probably unwittingly, the conduct of NAPLAN online in 2016 will be a test of the digital capability of every Australian school, education authority, state, territory and of the Federal Government. It obliges every one of those parties to have the requisite capability by that date and ensure every student entitled to do so is able to sit the test.

It is easy to envision the media outcry should one school or school cohort be excluded.

Ironically the vast majority of the nation's students could readily sit the test at home or anywhere in networked world outside the school walls with their own ever-evolving suite of digital technology.

The concern is the network readiness of Australia's 9,500 schools, 40 plus education systems and ACARA.

While the young, their parents and society in general have normalised the 24/7/365 use of digital technology, Australia's schools lag well behind. In 2014 there are only a few schools nationwide that have or nearly have normalised the whole school use of the student's choice of digital technology (BYOT). While there is an increasing number of schools moving to that position there are also a very sizeable – as yet unspecified – number of schools making scant use of digital technology who are currently ill equipped to have all their students sit NAPLAN online in 24 months.

The important point to grasp with Australia's schools is the immense and increasing variability in the actual use of digital technology in teaching, with schools ranging from the few that have fully integrated and normalised use to the vast majority where the use in everyday teaching is peripheral.

Bear in mind that two thirds of Australia's schools are primary schools, and they received none of the Rudd monies.

The scarcity of resources has been compounded by many school principals' unwillingness and/or inability to use the resources at their disposal to make the best educational use of the technology. My research (Lee, 2014) and that of colleagues in the UK, US and NZ underscores that it is the principal who in a positive or negative sense is primarily responsible for the level of digital technology usage in the school. As the CEO of increasingly autonomous schools he/she, as the chief educational architect and financial controller, has ultimate responsibility for their school's requisite digital eco-system and capability.

How quickly one can redress the problem of an inadequate school principal, and ready the school for NAPLAN is a moot point; the research underscores that the task of creating the desired eco-system is very challenging and takes significant time.

How many of Australia's near 9,500 principals can provide that leadership?

***The author would strongly suggest that, in the near future, the authorities responsible for every one of Australia's schools check their schools' ability for their children to sit NAPLAN online from 2016, and take the appropriate remedial action.***

While the testing of NAPLAN online does oblige all schools to be prepared, it also requires the 40 plus education systems to ensure their networks are up to the task and that ACARA can cater for the array of technology and operating systems being used by the children on the day of the test in 2016.

If, as surmised all Year 3, 5, 7 and 9 children are to sit NAPLAN at the same time in 2016 it will place considerable extra pressure and responsibility on Australia's 40 plus education system networks. Assuming that their school networks will still be used by all the other students in the school, one is talking about placing approximately an additional 20% load on often unreliable networks.

Will every one of those networks be able to deliver on the day?

In readying the online version of NAPLAN ACARA needs to appreciate that it is not merely setting a test for 2016 but is positioning the test to be conducted online for each year thereafter, and will in 2016 and every subsequent year need to accommodate the clients' current technology. In a post PC world Australia is well past the stage where the users have to fit in with the technology rather the technology having to accommodate the clients' ever-evolving situation.

The kind of variability of technology readiness found in the nation's schools is also be evidenced in the array of technology that the children will be looking to use on the day of test in 2016. Tablet technologies will continue their rise, and the use of desktop PCs continue their decline. New technologies and operating systems will emerge, children, who increasingly view the computer mouse as archaic will join the global move to BYOD and BYOT (Lee and Levins, 2012) and make use of a suite of technology and apps of their choosing.

From this, it is easily seen that the Government has an imperative to employ an on-going online testing approach that can cater, at no extra cost, for all the major technologies used by the children at the time of each test.

It is thus disappointing, to say the least, to note in the survey sent to school principals over Robert Randall's name that specified in point 11 "doing the tests on tablets will require external keyboards..."

That requirement will oblige every child/school using a tablet in 2016 to outlay approximately \$100 each simply for a one-off test that most would prefer not to sit. Those parents, schools and states that have readied themselves for the sustained use of current technology will be financially punished.

One can already see the headline

***FEDERAL GOVERNMENT EXPECTS PARENTS AND SCHOOLS TO PAY \$100 FOR EACH CHILD TO COMPULSORILY SIT NAPLAN!***

That seemingly simple little technical 'requirement' entails the outlay of many thousand dollars, puts the Federal, state and territory ministers under immense unwitting political pressure, provides a rallying call for all opposing NAPLAN and places the test itself in jeopardy.

It is imperative these kind of unnecessary impediments are avoided

I'd suggest it is also imperative to conduct full-scale rehearsals that stress test the readiness of all schools, system networks and ACARA. While it is appreciated ACARA is surveying the schools in 2014 it, like you and I has no firm idea of what will be the main technologies and operating systems used in schools in May 2016. The history of major public sector online deployments is festooned by disasters that were not adequately pre-tested. It is vital that pre-testing needs to occur far enough ahead for all parties to take any remedial action, yet close enough to mirror the actual technologies to be used.

Closely allied is the importance of ACARA having and clearly promoting the alternate plans should key parts of the exercise fail. The running of the test assumes 100% network uptime, and as such 100% electrical supply throughout. A Darwin like, 9 hour electrical shutdown will render all the other preparations meaningless.

## **Conclusion**

Unintentionally the Government in seeking to conduct NAPLAN online in 2016 is as much, if not indeed more so testing the digital capability of Australia's 9,500 schools and its external school support agencies as it is testing the young of Australia.

It is vital that all parties understand this.

It is laudable to conduct NAPLAN online but it is a very high-risk initiative that requires literally millions of variables to be identified and dealt with astutely if it is to succeed.

If the risk is too great and too many elements cannot be readied in time it might be wise to hold back a year or two.

### **Bibliography**

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