Overview

Introduction

Auslan (Australian Sign Language) is the language of the Deaf[1] community of Australia and is descended from British Sign Language (BSL). Auslan and other signed languages around the world are fully-fledged languages that are visual-gestural in nature. They have a complete set of linguistic structures and are complex and highly nuanced.

Signed languages evolve naturally in Deaf communities in which signers use mutually agreed signs and ways of ordering them to communicate with each other. Signed languages have their own grammar and lexicon which are not based on the spoken language of the country or region although they are influenced by them.

Signed languages fulfil the same functions as spoken languages in meeting the communicative, cognitive and social needs of a group of human beings. However, the modalities of a visual-gestural language like Auslan and those of an aural-oral language like English are markedly different. Although signed and spoken languages share many linguistic principles, the visual-gestural modality results in some unique features of signed languages not found in spoken languages.

There are many different signed languages around the world, some of which can be grouped into 'language families'. Auslan belongs to the BSL family, which includes the contemporary British, Australian and New Zealand sign languages, which all share a similar lexicon and grammar. Auslan can be traced back to the arrival of Europeans in Australia in the late 1700s, with BSL users arriving in Australia as convicts and as free settlers. Although now considered a relatively young language in its own right, the ancestral link Auslan shares with BSL gives it historical context as a member of one of the longest continuing signed language families in the world.

The signed languages of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures vary greatly from one another and are quite different from Auslan in that they are largely used as gestural-visual representations, or substitutions, of the associated spoken languages. However, in some contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, deaf people have developed signed languages for independent use – for example, Yolngu Sign Language from the Northern Territory – but there has been limited research on these. In other communities, Auslan may co-exist alongside local signed languages.

Recognition of Auslan

The Deaf community has a rich history and culture; however, the signed languages of deaf people have not always been recognised as legitimate languages. Due in part to the modality of signed languages, they have often been inaccurately viewed as a form of pantomime or as a manual representation of 'broken English', incapable of the same kind of sophistication as spoken languages.

A language is considered legitimate by many when it has a widely accepted or standardised orthographic writing system. Although there are recently developed 'sign writing' or 'gloss' systems that sign linguists, teachers and researchers have developed to record and document signs, Auslan has no written form in the traditionally understood sense. Auslan was first officially recognised as a legitimate language by the Australian Government in 1987 in a white paper on the languages of Australia (Lo Bianco, J, 1987).

Recent developments in digital recording and software for time-aligned multimedia annotations have allowed for improved documentation and analysis of much larger data sets of signed languages. These tools allow Auslan data, and the rich culture of Australian deaf people, to be captured and recorded in various ways. As a result, linguists, in consultation with the Deaf community, are increasingly conducting research on signed languages and encouraging the documentation of Auslan and other signed languages.

Societal attitudes have changed towards Auslan and towards deaf people. As usage has been documented, scholarly research published and dictionaries developed, policies now legitimise the use of Auslan, and interest has grown in teaching and learning the language in formal educational settings.

The place of Auslan in Australian education

The use of Auslan for deaf children in Australian schools has been varied and inconsistent.

However, the recognition and improved status of the language in recent years has changed the educational landscape for deaf children. The move from segregated school settings for deaf children to mainstream school environments has influenced community and education sector interest in Auslan in recent years due to increased visibility of Auslan in school communities. Auslan has been increasingly embraced in many more mainstream school settings where deaf students may be placed.

The availability and increased profile of Auslan as a language of formal study in primary and secondary schools for second language learners has, however, been less rapid or less well supported systemically in most states/territories of Australia. Historically, schools that have provided some form of teaching and learning in Auslan have offered informal lunchtime or hobby/interest classes rather than formal courses of study included in a school timetable alongside spoken languages and other subjects.

This dual-pathway national curriculum for Auslan systematises provision in Australian schools, serving both deaf and hearing student populations and rightfully acknowledging the place of Auslan and the culture of the Deaf community in Australian society. It offers access to the formal study of Auslan to deaf children through a first language learner pathway and to students interested in learning it as an additional language through a second language learner pathway.

Rationale

The formal study of Auslan contributes to the overall intellectual and social enrichment of both first language (L1) and second language (L2) learners by providing:

- opportunities for engagement with the Deaf community and insight into its rich cultural heritage

- opportunities to develop intercultural capabilities, understanding and respect for others, appreciation of diversity and openness to different perspectives and experiences.

Rationale for first language learners

This curriculum meets the need of young deaf people to formally learn their own language, and it recognises the significance of Auslan in the linguistic landscape of Australia. It provides deaf children, and potentially hearing children of deaf parents, with access to education in and about their first language, playing an important part in the development of a strong sense of self-esteem and identity and contributing in crucial ways to overall learning and achievements. It enables learners to develop a wider recognition and understanding of their language, culture and identity, thus contributing to their psychological wellbeing as well as to their academic development.

Rationale for second language learners

Many deaf children today are educated in inclusive school settings, thus raising the profile of Auslan in the wider community. The presence of deaf students and interpreting practitioners in schools creates a need and offers opportunities for a wider range of peer-group communication partners, and not all interactions can or should be mediated by an interpreting practitioner. One of the key reasons for introducing Auslan in schools, therefore, is for humanistic purposes: to increase opportunities for interaction between deaf children and their hearing or hard of hearing peers, and to reduce barriers to communication. Through learning Auslan, L2 learners gain access to additional knowledge and understanding of the nature and purpose of human languages and of the use of a different language modality. In addition, from a vocational perspective, greater participation of deaf people in society in a diverse range of occupations and breadth of community spheres creates possibilities for future career options and personal fulfilment for L2 learners. In general educational terms, learning Auslan as a second language enables students to engage meaningfully with a different language and culture and to enhance understanding of their own language and culture. Such intercultural learning is essential in the increasingly diverse and changing contexts in which they live and will work.

For all learners

Learning Auslan:

- broadens students' understanding that each language is an integrated, evolving system for the framing and communication of meaning; and encourages understanding of the role of language as an expression of cultural and personal identity and a shaper of perspectives

- contributes to the overall curriculum intent by providing distinctive real-life and intellectual opportunities for students to expand their engagement with the wider world and to reflect on the cultural and social assumptions that underpin their own world view and language use. Such awareness of different perspectives is an integral part of effective communication

- contributes to the development of critical thinking and the ability to adapt to change and equips students with learning strategies and study habits that are the foundation not only for lifelong learning but also for any subsequent language learning.

The opportunity to learn Auslan formally is becoming available in an increasing number of Australian schools, and the aim of this national curriculum is to make this learning opportunity accessible in a systematic manner to students around Australia. Language learning is life enhancing. This national curriculum offers all Australian students the opportunity to benefit from the social, cultural, intellectual and emotional development that will result from learning the unique and sophisticated visual-gestural language of the Australian Deaf community.

Aims

The Australian Curriculum: Languages – Auslan aims to develop the knowledge, understanding and skills to enable students to:

- communicate in Auslan

- understand language, culture and learning and their relationship, and thereby develop an intercultural capability in communication

- understand themselves as communicators

- develop a knowledge and an understanding of the diversity of Deaf experience and the nature of identity.

These aims are interrelated and provide the basis for two organising strands for learning Auslan: Communicating and Understanding.

Learning Auslan

Some linguistic features of Auslan are similar to properties found in spoken languages and others are not. For example, the 26 fingerspelled letters of the Auslan alphabet are based on the 26 letters of English. The occasional contact Auslan has with English, such as in relation to mouthing (the use of lip patterns when signing) or fingerspelling, may support the early stages of learning Auslan for some L2 students, as might the apparent visual motivation of some signs. Although indigenous to the Australian Deaf community, Auslan shares some properties with other signed languages, which may make additional signed languages relatively easy to acquire once learners are fluent in Auslan.

Benefits

Benefits of learning Auslan include:

- development of neural pathways and cognitive processes unique to using a visual language

- greater access to the curriculum using increasingly sophisticated Auslan for L1 learners

- capacity to communicate with peers, friends and family members who use Auslan

Deaf students located in schools that offer a L2 Auslan program have increased opportunity to expand their peer networks, potentially increasing their social circle, their resilience and inclusion in the school community. L2 learners learning in a school attended by deaf students have a unique opportunity to use their new language on a daily basis in an authentic context, impacting on accessibility and respect for linguistic and cultural difference.

Learner diversity and learner pathways

Pathways

There is diversity in the background of learners of Auslan. Learners may be deaf, hard of hearing or hearing, and may be learning Auslan as a first language or as a second language. To cater for distinct learner backgrounds, the Auslan curriculum has two pathways:

- First Language (L1) Learner Pathway

- Second Language (L2) Learner Pathway.

Learner diversity

The rationale for providing a L1 pathway is that native signers do not usually have an opportunity to formally study their natural first language in a classroom context. Such exploration and development of their L1 affords these students a more sophisticated understanding of their L1, and scaffolds their acquisition of English as their second/additional language. Formally studying Auslan at school provides L1 learners with powerful recognition of the value and status of their language and helps strengthen their sense of identity. The impact of this is healthier self-esteem, greater resilience, better mental health, an improved concept of self and a greater engagement with language, community and culture. In addition, formal learning of their L1 may give students increased opportunity to develop understanding, knowledge and valuable life skills across the curriculum.

The L1 pathway typically caters for deaf students whose native language is Auslan (that is, deaf children of deaf adults, or deaf children from hearing families who use Auslan at home); hearing children with signing deaf parents; and deaf students who are introduced to Auslan at school, for whom it is a highly accessible language and likely to be their future preferred or primary language. This latter group of deaf children might not have access to Auslan at home. Developing a strong L1 via this pathway from Foundation to Year 10 will particularly increase the educational capabilities of deaf children, encourage functional bilingualism in Auslan and English, and will improve learning and future employment opportunities.

The L2 pathway typically caters for students who are not members of the Deaf community; most often, hearing students learning Auslan as a second or additional language. It may also include deaf or hard of hearing children already fluent in another language, such as a different signed language in the case of a recent immigrant, or spoken English for some deaf and hard of hearing children who have residual hearing or access to speech. These children are being introduced to Auslan for the first time as an additional language to add to their existing linguistic repertoire.

Due to a range of complex factors, it is recognised that these two pathways may not be able to meet the complete learning needs of all students. For example, native signers of Auslan who are hearing (such as hearing children from deaf families) may not be adequately accounted for in an L1 pathway, due to the teaching and learning emphasis on the primary target group, deaf children. In addition, a deaf migrant already fluent in a native signed language from another country, such as American Sign Language, may not be entirely suited to an L2 learning pathway for Auslan as so many age-appropriate L1 features and linguistic competencies will already be present in his/her use of another signed language, making a second signed language easier to learn compared to other L2 learners being exposed to learning a signed language for the first time. Congenitally deafblind children, or other students with disability, may also present unique challenges with regard to determining language learning pathways.

Ultimately, this dual-pathway approach recognises that the key variable in the language learning experience is the diversity of the learners. It acknowledges that students bring specific backgrounds, diverse linguistic and cultural experience, individual knowledge and skills to their learning of Auslan, and that the programming and implementation in schools by teaching teams will need to reflect this, differentiating for learner diversity accordingly and drawing on the L1 or the L2 pathway and accommodating for individual learners as appropriate.

First Language Learner Pathway (L1): F–10 sequence

The first language learner pathway is pitched at two of the many types of potential learners in the Auslan cohort:

- native signing children from Deaf families who have fluent language models to interact with at home and have been exposed to the language since birth

- deaf children from hearing families with parents or older relatives who have learnt to sign and exposed their children early to rich signing models, such as in bilingual preschools.

There is another significant group of children in the L1 pathway: deaf children who arrive in a signing program in their first few years of schooling. These students begin learning Auslan with limited prior experience of any language, and may have additional disabilities that are hidden because of their language delay. The L1 pathway is appropriate for them since they will be using the language for more hours a week than just in the subject, thus making faster progress with language acquisition; and they have little experience of other language to make reference to, as in the L2 pathway. Teachers working with students with delayed access to Auslan will need to adapt and differentiate the curriculum extensively to scaffold their learning, particularly in their first years of study. Additionally, hearing children from deaf families who have Auslan as a first language may also benefit from the L1 pathway of learning.

The population of children who will follow the L1 pathway therefore has great variation in Auslan proficiency. Some will have had extensive access to a range of mature language users in early learning programs, in school and at home. Others will have limited quantity and quality of input in Auslan at home and sometimes even in school, and may not have attended an early intervention signing program prior to school. This pathway is primarily pitched at those students with exposure to Auslan prior to Foundation level; delayed language learners will require extra support to participate in the learning experiences outlined in this pathway.

Typically, L1 programs occur with constant involvement from a variety of fluent signers drawn from the Deaf community. A key expectation in the L1 pathway is that students will have opportunities to interact with elders and the Deaf community to consolidate and enhance their learning of the language and culture, ideally face to face, although accommodations via technology may need to be made in regional and remote areas.

First Language Learner Pathway (L1): 7–10 sequence

The nature of education of deaf students is such that some learners arrive at high school with a very limited knowledge of English, and little, if any, Auslan. These learners may have come from other countries where they have had no access to schooling for deaf children, or from educational programs overseas or in Australia from which they have learnt only rudimentary speech and language and have not had access to quality signed language models. This group of learners, therefore, comprises students who are learning their first language well beyond the age of typical language development.

As a result, this group of learners is very different from the similarly aged cohort from the F–10 sequence, who have had exposure to quality language since birth or early in life, and who approach high school learning with established fluency in Auslan, which enables them to focus much of their Auslan class time on the development of higher-order skills such as analysis and evaluation. Learners in the L1 pathway, 7–10 sequence begin learning Auslan with limited prior experience of any language. They may have additional disabilities, sometimes hidden, often caused by their language delay. Auslan is nonetheless considered their first or primary language, due to their lack of fluency in any other language. Learners require intensive support and extensive input from rich language models, especially at the initial stages. These learners are unlikely to reach native-like levels of fluency in any language, but will benefit greatly from the explicit teaching of Auslan as a subject to support their language acquisition and development.

Second Language Learner Pathway (L2): F–10 and 7–10 sequences

The second language learner pathway caters for students learning Auslan as a second or additional language. This will typically be hearing children, but may include hard of hearing or deaf children who already have an established first language. These children are being introduced to Auslan for the first time as an additional language. The teaching team will use the curriculum to cater for L2 learners of different backgrounds by making appropriate adjustments to differentiate learning experiences for these students.

The first language of most L2 students will be a spoken language, and this pathway provides them with an opportunity to study a language that is very different from a spoken language. If L2 learners are learning in a school attended by deaf students, they will have a unique opportunity to use their new language on a daily basis in an authentic context. Deaf students located in schools that offer an L2 Auslan program have increased opportunity to expand their peer networks, potentially supporting transition between schools (from primary to secondary school, for example), and increasing their resilience and social networks, decreasing their risk of isolation, and increasing their sense of inclusion.

Typically, L2 programs occur with constant involvement from a variety of fluent signers drawn from the community. A key expectation of the L2 pathway of learning is that students will have opportunities to interact with elders and members of the Deaf community. This provides learners with the chance to develop a deeper appreciation of the nature and diversity of languages and cultures, and requires the acquisition of specific knowledge and skills necessary to learn and understand Auslan in its cultural context.
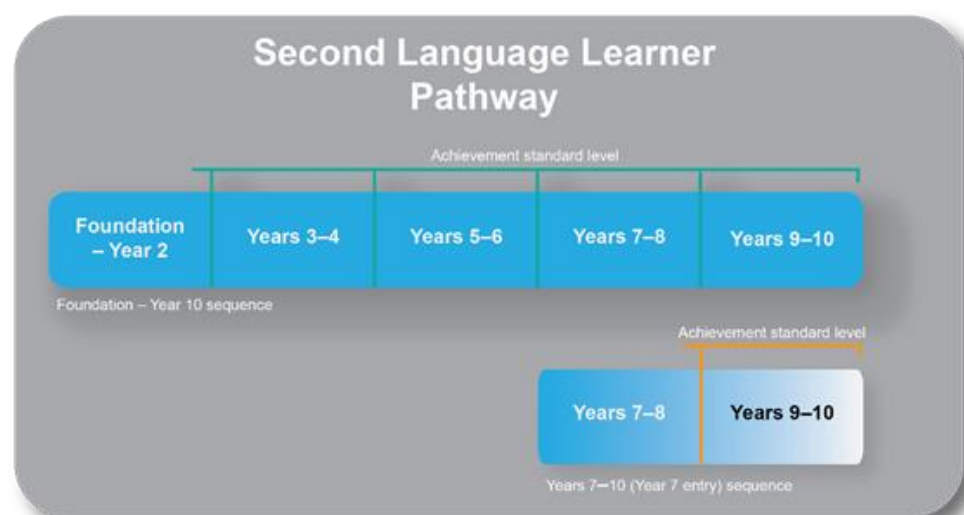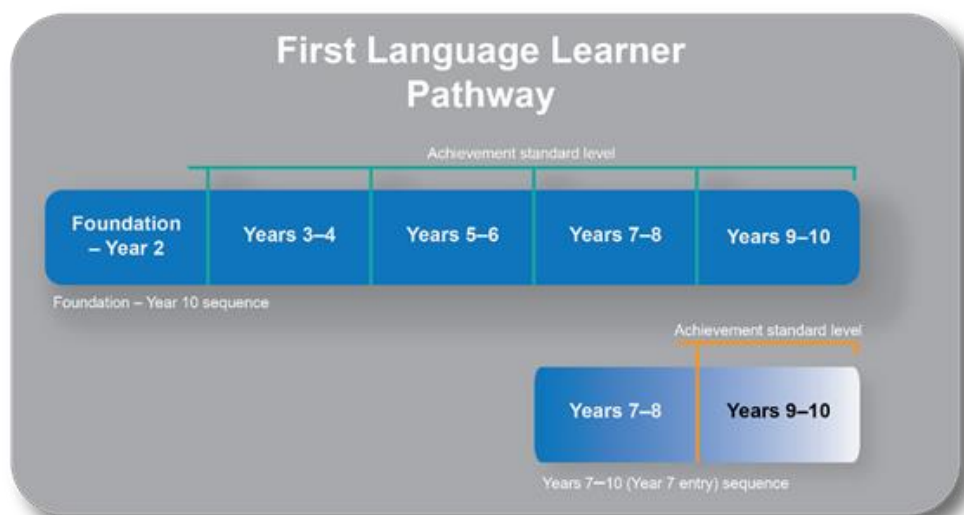
Developing teaching and learning

Sequences of learning

The Australian Curriculum: Languages – Auslan has two learning sequences: one from Foundation to Year 10, and another from Year 7 to Year 10 (Year 7 Entry). The curriculum is written in a series of bands, as follows: Foundation – Year 2, Years 3–4, Years 5–6, Years 7–8 and Years 9–10. Given the limited but growing research and pedagogical support for the teaching and learning of Auslan, there may be local flexibility in curriculum implementation, depending on suitability of learner pathway and entry point in the sequence.

Strands and sub-strands

The content of the Australian Curriculum: Languages is organised through two interrelated strands, which realise the four aims of learning Auslan. The two strands are:

- *Communicating*: using language for communicative purposes in interpreting, creating and exchanging meaning

- *Understanding*: analysing language and culture as resources for interpreting and creating meaning.

The strands reflect three important aspects of language learning:

- communication

- analysis of aspects of language and culture

- reflection, which involves

  o reflection on the experience of communicating

  o reflection on comparative dimensions of the languages available in students' repertoires, for example, the first language in relation to the second language, and the self in relation to others.

A set of sub-strands has been identified within each strand to reflect dimensions of language use and the related content to be taught and learnt. The strands and sub-strands do not operate in isolation but are integrated in relation to language use for different purposes in different contexts. The relative contribution of each sub-strand differs for described languages, pathways and bands of learning.

Table 1 gives a brief description of each of the strands and sub-strands for Auslan.

Table 1: A brief description of each of the strands and sub-strands for Auslan

Strand	Sub-strand	Description
Communicating *Using language for communicative purposes in interpreting, creating and exchanging meaning*	1.1 Socialising	Interacting to exchange ideas, opinions, experiences, thoughts and feelings; and participating in planning, negotiating, deciding and taking action
	1.2 Informing	Obtaining, processing, interpreting and conveying information through a range of Auslan texts; developing and applying knowledge
	1.3 Creating	Engaging with imaginative experience by participating in, responding to and creating a range of texts, such as stories, poetry, art and performance
	1.4 Translating	Moving between languages and cultures, understanding that words and signs do not always have direct equivalence and recognising different interpretations and explaining these to others
	1.5 Identity	Exploring and expressing their sense of identity as individuals and as members of the Deaf community and culture and as deaf, hard of hearing or hearing people
	1.6 Reflecting	Participating in intercultural exchange, questioning reactions and assumptions; and considering how interaction shapes communication and identity
Understanding *Analysing and understanding language and culture as resources for interpreting and shaping meaning in intercultural exchange*	2.1 Systems of language	Understanding the language system, including visual-gestural language parameters, conventions and grammar
	2.2 Language variation and change	Understanding how language use varies according to individual difference and context and across time and place
	2.3 Language awareness	Analysing and understanding language and culture over time, including language attitudes, language policy, language rights, international contexts and language vitality
	2.4 The role of language and culture	Analysing and understanding the role of language and culture in the exchange of meaning

The sub-strands are further differentiated according to a set of 'threads' that support the internal organisation of content in each sub-strand. These threads (shown in Table 2) are designed to capture: range and variety in the scope of learning; and a means for expressing the progression of content across the learning sequences.

Table 2: Strands, sub-strands and threads for Auslan across the learner pathways

Strand	Sub-strand	First Language Learner Pathway	Second Language Learner Pathway
Communicating *Using language for communicative purposes in interpreting, creating and exchanging meaning*	1.1 Socialising	Socialising and interacting	Socialising and interacting
		Taking action	Taking action
		Developing classroom language and protocols associated with Auslan learning	Developing classroom language and protocols associated with Auslan learning
	1.2 Informing	Obtaining and using information	Obtaining and using information
		Conveying and presenting information	Conveying and presenting information
	1.3 Creating	Participating in and responding to imaginative experience	Participating in and responding to imaginative experience
		Creating and expressing imaginative experience	Creating and expressing imaginative experience
	1.4 Translating	Translating/interpreting and explaining	Translating/interpreting and explaining
		Creating and using bilingual resources	Creating and using bilingual resources
	1.5 Identity	Exploring and expressing their sense of identity, relationship and community	Exploring and expressing their sense of identity, relationship and community
	1.6 Reflecting	Reflecting on the experience of intercultural communication	Reflecting on the experience of intercultural communication
Understanding *Analysing and understanding language and culture as resources for interpreting and shaping meaning in intercultural exchange*	2.1 Systems of language	Formational elements of signs	Formational elements of signs
		Sign modifications	Sign modifications
		Sign classes and clause structures	Sign classes and clause structures
		Text organisation	Text organisation
	2.2 Language variation and change	Variation in language use	Variation in language use
	2.3 Language awareness	Linguistic landscapes and the nature, context and status of Auslan	Linguistic landscapes and the nature, context and status of Auslan
	2.4 The role of language and culture	The relationship between language and culture	The relationship between language and culture

Text types

Text types include signed or spoken texts, written texts (in English), digital texts and multimodal texts. They are central to curriculum development, as all work in language learning can be seen as textual work. The selection of quality Auslan texts produced by native or native-like proficient signers is important: texts define and reflect past and present and linguistic and cultural identity, making the people and experiences of a particular culture distinctive; they also provide the opportunity for developing intercultural understanding.

Band descriptions

The band descriptions give a general description of language learning that is typical at particular year levels along the F–10 continuum. They have been developed to correspond to learning in the following bands: Foundation – Year 2, Years 3–4, Years 5–6, Years 7–8 and Years 9–10. Each band description includes discussion of:

- nature of the learner

- Auslan learning and use

- contexts of interaction

- texts and resources

- features of Auslan use

- level of support

- the role of English.

Developing teaching and learning programs

In developing teaching and learning programs, the two strands – Communicating and Understanding – are integrated to ensure holistic learning in order to attend to active language use and the development of related knowledge, understandings and reflective capabilities. The set of strands and sub-strands capture a range of dimensions of language use. As such, they are designed to capture the range and variety of content to be experienced and learnt by students. The teaching team will design teaching and learning programs by drawing on the content descriptions from a number of sub-strands and integrating these to create meaningful learning experiences for their particular learners. The emphases across the strands and sub-strands may vary for different bands and pathways and for different contexts. Since the content descriptions indicate the nature and scope of the learning over several year spans, the teaching team will make decisions about what aspects of the content descriptions will be taught in what year of their program. Programs can then be used to inform the development of short-term programs year by year (for example, one term/several weeks). Taken together, band descriptions, content descriptions, content elaborations and achievement standards provide an overall sense of 'level' or expectations about language teaching and learning at a given moment in time and over time. In the development of programs, they give a sense of the level of complexity at which student learning can be pitched. In relation to assessment, they provide a reference point for making judgements about students' progress in learning. The teaching team will make decisions about pedagogies that best meet the learning needs of their particular students and the context of their particular program.