

Frequently asked questions

Comparability of paper and online NAPLAN tests

The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) helps parents, carers and teachers see if students are meeting important numeracy and literacy standards. It allows teachers to monitor students' progress over time and to identify areas of strength and areas for development. NAPLAN will move online from 2018, over a three-year period. During the transition period, some schools will conduct the test online, and some will continue to use paper.

ACARA has carried out studies between paper-based and online tests to ensure both modes of testing measure the same literacy and numeracy skills and offer comparable test results. Both test formats assess students on the same curriculum content and all results are placed on the same NAPLAN assessment scale.

Are questions the same in the online and the paper versions of NAPLAN?

Students will be presented with questions that assess a similar range of difficulty and test the same curriculum content, whether they undertake NAPLAN Online or on paper. The online tailored tests include a number of questions from the paper test, and in addition, include some more questions that target the higher and lower ends of the difficulty range.

A key difference, however, is that NAPLAN paper tests can only present the same set of questions to all students, whereas the online tests will provide different sets of questions to different students, based on their performance during the test. Tailored testing allows a better, more precise assessment and provides more detailed information on student performance to assist teachers to provide targeted learning support sooner.

Will students be disadvantaged by completing NAPLAN online or on paper?

Students will not be disadvantaged by undertaking either mode of testing. The paper and online tests assess the same skills in literacy and numeracy, which are developed over time through the school curriculum, and assess a similar range of difficulty. The tests have been developed to ensure there is no disadvantage and to ensure comparability of results both across the mode – paper or online – and across years.

NAPLAN Online has been specifically developed to ensure results are comparable, regardless of whether the test is completed online or on paper, while offering a better, more precise assessment. Each student's results will be mapped against the same NAPLAN assessment scale.

How do you ensure results can be compared?

Ensuring comparability of different tests is not an issue specific to NAPLAN Online, as no two tests can have exactly the same level of difficulty. Comparability of results between the online and paper-based tests is achieved by applying commonly used equating processes that ensure NAPLAN paper tests are comparable from one year to another, even though different test questions are used each year.

What is the equating process?

Equating processes are a common feature of standardised testing programs, including NAPLAN tests. An equating process is carried out each year so that the difficulty of a current year's NAPLAN tests can be adjusted to the same level of difficulty as all the previous years. The equating process looks at the difficulty of each test and compares it to the established NAPLAN assessment scale. In this way, the results from 2018 can be compared to the results from previous years, or between paper or online.

The equating process involves a sample of students from each year – and from all states/territories and school sectors – taking the secure equating tests as well as the current year’s tests. The equating tests and current year’s tests are placed on the same scales established in 2008.

Are results between paper and online NAPLAN comparable?

ACARA has undertaken an extensive research program to ensure results of paper and online NAPLAN tests can be reported on the same NAPLAN assessment scale and can be comparable across test modes and test cycles.

The equating and comparability process has been developed in consultation with educational measurement experts from the Measurement Advisory Group. These experts have also provided advice on technical methods and specifications for reporting, equating and standards.

ACARA consulted extensively with subject matter experts from school systems and jurisdictions to ensure that NAPLAN 2018 paper and online tests meet their expectations and current coverage of the Australian Curriculum in their schools.