Council of Australian Governments’ Meeting
20 December 2007

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) held its 20th meeting in Melbourne in December 2007. In addition to the Prime Minister, Premiers, Chief Ministers and the President of the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA), Commonwealth and State and Territory Treasurers also attended.

The new Federal government is seeking to establish a new culture of cooperation between the Commonwealth and State governments.

COAG agreed to a new model of cooperation underpinned by more effective working arrangements. COAG has identified seven areas for its 2008 work agenda:

- health and ageing;
- the productivity agenda – including education, skills, training and early childhood;
- climate change and water;
- infrastructure;
- business regulation and competition;
- housing; and
- Indigenous reform.

COAG has established seven working groups each overseen by a Commonwealth Minister, with deputies who are nominated by the States and Territories at a senior departmental level. These groups will also include senior officials from all jurisdictions. COAG also agreed to the terms of reference for each of the groups. A nominee of ALGA will be included in the working groups on climate change, infrastructure and housing.

COAG has agreed to begin changing the nature of Commonwealth-State funding arrangements by agreeing to focus more on outputs and outcomes, underpinned by a commitment from the Commonwealth Government to provide incentive payments to drive reforms.

COAG agreed that it would meet four times in 2008.

At its March meeting next year, each of the working groups will provide COAG with its Commonwealth-State implementation plans for the major Commonwealth election commitments. Along with delivering on this agenda through the course of 2008, COAG agreed that decisions on directions for major policy initiatives for the longer term reform agenda will be taken during 2008.

Working Group on The Productivity Agenda Education, Skills, Training And Early Childhood Development

The objectives of this working party include:

- To pursue substantial reform in the areas of education, skills and early childhood development.
- To deliver significant improvements in human capital outcomes for all Australians.
- To strengthen Australia’s economic and social foundations through this reform workplan, including in relation to teacher quality.
These objectives involve additional effort, greater collaboration and sharper focus on improving outcomes – starting with the earliest years, and moving through school and into the training system. Reform will involve collaboration across the public and private sector, and a genuine partnership involving parents, children, students, employers and all levels of government.

The Commonwealth/State Implementation Plans to be delivered to March 2008 COAG Meeting include the following:

- Improving and expanding vocational and technical education by developing future management arrangements for the Australian Technical Colleges and creating an additional 450,000 training places over the next four years.
- Oversighting the work of implementation groups involving the State/Territory Independent and Catholic school systems for the Commonwealth’s Digital Education Revolution and trades training centres in secondary schools.
- Promoting the study of Asian languages in schools.
- Investing in early childhood education through universal access to early learning for all four year olds and increasing the quality and availability of child care.
- Nominating representatives to the National Curriculum Board and participating fully in the development and implementation of a national curriculum in key learning areas by 2010.
- Lifting the Year 12 or the equivalent retention rate to 90 per cent by 2020.

Indicative Forward Work Program for 2008 includes the following:

- Consideration of Commonwealth-State agreements on Schools, Vocational Education and Training and Indigenous Education.
- Reforms in the areas of early childhood, skills and work force development.
- Determine priorities for the contribution of the education, skills, training and early childhood development agenda to the overall challenge of labour supply.
- In addition determine priorities for the contribution of education, skills, training and early childhood development to broader objectives for social inclusion and Indigenous reform, given the critical importance of these areas in creating opportunity and tackling disadvantage.

Summary

It appears COAG will play a more prominent operational role in implementing the new Federal government agenda. It is unclear how COAG will relate to MCEETYA.

AISSA will need to monitor the outcomes of COAG meetings.