



Submission to The Australian Curriculum Review Consultation

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Introduction

This submission is on behalf of the Australian Institute for Progress. We are an Australian think tank based in Queensland.

Schools are the most important cultural institutions in a country. They exist not just to teach academic skills and to train students for work, but to produce good, productive citizens. The standard of living in a country is dependent on a properly educated workforce. So is its security.

International comparisons show that Australia has been slipping compared to other countries in the vicinity with maths students three years on average behind students in Singapore and three and a half years behind students in 3 Chinese provincesⁱ. This is unacceptable.

If Australia wants to maintain its standard of living and stay secure it needs to fix its education system. There is a number of systemic problems, and one of those is the curriculum, which has lost focus on excellence and the essentials, and diversified into areas it has no good reason to go.

Schools stand *in loco parentis* but this does not mean they supplant parents. They also have a duty to uphold objectivity, and not allow educators to impose their ideological preferences on children in contradiction of the legitimate views of parents.

The curriculum also suffers from the idea that children should be self-directed learners. While those who frame the curriculum undoubtedly were, most children aren't. If they were we wouldn't need schools in the first place. This philosophical approach results in a curriculum which may be suitable for the highest achieving children, who would do well under any system, but penalises the average to below average students. This reverses one of the historical purposes of compulsory education – to spread opportunity across the whole of the socio-demographic spectrum. It also damages the wider interest by lowering average achievement, and therefore national outcomes.

Core principles

The assumptions underlying our submission follow.

1. Business of schools is to:
 - a. produce good well-rounded citizens capable of fully engaging in, and defending, Australian society and culture;
 - b. educate children in skills and knowledge in specific subjects;
 - c. help children develop social and personal habits that help them gain skills and knowledge;
 - d. and provide children with cultural literacy.
2. Education should be secular. This doesn't just mean an absence of religious instruction, but of philosophical indoctrination.
3. Our education system should seek to produce graduates who have the intellectual skills to be adaptive as employment and culture changes.
4. The role of K-12 education is not to train children for specific economic roles, but to provide them with knowledge and skills that can be channelled and developed once they fill specific economic roles.
5. Families are the primary care-givers, and the role of schools is to support them, not supplant them.

Issues with the draft revised Australian National Curriculum

Cross-curriculum priorities

The curriculum lists Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Culture; Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia; and Sustainability as cross-curriculum priorities. These are arbitrary choices, and complicate the teaching of subjects that have nothing to do with them.

The first two are subsets of history, economics, geography, and social studies, and should be taught as units in those areas, if they are taught at all. Sustainability is poorly defined and seems to be a mish-mash of issues to do with

pollution and the environment. Some aspects of it might be subsets of physics and chemistry, but it has no place in English or Health and Physical Education, for example.

There is no good reason why any of them should be taught across all subjects, and the attempt to do so takes up time that could be better used teaching core principles specific to particular subjects. They also require teachers who are not specialists in those areas to teach them, despite the fact that they are specialist areas in themselves.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Culture

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Culture are of limited importance to contemporary Australian students. Australia is not an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nation, it is a European, settler nation, with a significant proportion of citizens of non-European origin. Of the total, 3.3% has Aboriginal heritage and of this 3.3% a significant proportion has non-indigenous heritage as well. In fact the 2016 census showed that 78.2% of Aboriginal Australians were in married (*de jure* and *de facto*) relationships with non-Aborigines, guaranteeing that for current and future generations, their heritage will be almost universally mixed.

The official statistics also show that most Aborigines live in urban areas, with 38% in major cities and 44% in inner and outer regional areas, leaving only 18% in remote and very remote areasⁱⁱ. They also come from at least 716 tribal groupsⁱⁱⁱ, some of whom have quite different traditions from others. To suggest that there is one Aboriginal way of looking at the world, or speaking (as is done in the English curriculum) is unacceptable stereotyping verging on racism.

As the first inhabitants of Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures have a special place, but it is perverse to concentrate on this culture across the course of all years, and all subjects. While studying them brings extra perspective to European settlement of Australia, they do not significantly add to most other subject areas. Aborigines were a hunter-gatherer society with an oral tradition, and they were supplanted by a modern industrial one. They offer a glimpse into the past, but not the future.

At 3.3% of the population they are a tiny minority compared to the 36.1% with English ancestry, 11% with Irish, 9.3% with Scottish, 5.6% with Chinese, 4.6% with Italian and 4.5% with Indian^{iv}. We used to pride ourselves on being a multi-cultural country, but that diversity of culture seems to be being eaten-up by indigenous culture, even though it is of marginal relevance to virtually all Australians.

If there were a case for privileging any culture and teaching it across all subjects it would be that of the United Kingdom which gave us the language we use, our system of government, and our philosophical and ethical concepts. While Australia has a pluralist culture, immigrants came, and come, here because of the Anglo-Saxon cultural values we have, and the standard of living these have produced. This is supported by the fact that of the top ten destinations for international migrants, four are the Anglophone countries of the USA, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia^v.

Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia

This is also unreasonably narrow and prescriptive. Australia's engagement with Asia is important, and with recent Chinese militarism and belligerence, timely. However, Australia engages with the world. North America is probably more important to us than Asia, as is Europe, and engaging with South America and Africa is also important. We are currently concluding a free trade agreement with Great Britain.

Again, how it is supposed to engage with STEM subjects, or practical subjects, like book-keeping, is not obvious. If it means that *A Passage to India*, or *Kim*, is in the English curriculum, that would be no bad thing. Of course it ought to be covered in History and Geography, along with all other aspects of our engagement with the world, but not otherwise

Sustainability

Sustainability appears to be about pollution and climate change. If the School Strike 4 Climate fairly reflects what is being taught, it is being taught poorly, by ideologically motivated teachers. Despite assertions of the strikers, there is no climate emergency, and no official scientific body recognises that there is. The presence of teachers at these

rallies was unprofessional and demonstrated a lack of understanding of the issues, coupled with ideological fervour, and undue influence on their students.

Climate science is a cross-disciplinary subject which has the most promise to be a cross-curriculum priority, but it has been captured by ideologues, and the course materials that are available appear generally not to be empirical.

Rather than teach climate science to students, it would be far preferable to teach them the maths and science skills to understand it. By coming at the issue through the particular prism of the subject itself, it allows teachers, only partially educated in the field, to slant what is being taught because they don't understand the concepts themselves.

Far better that qualified subject teachers teach about black box radiation, absorption bands, phase change of substances, logarithmic versus exponential etc, all of which will help students to understand what others say to them about climate change.

Alternative Cross-curriculum Priorities

Cross-curriculum priorities are a bad concept. They imply that there is something more important in the subject area than the subject actually being taught. However, raising a counterfactual of what might be an appropriate cross-curriculum priority emphasises why the current situation is unsatisfactory.

If one of the aims of a good Australian education system should be to produce well-rounded Australians who are culturally literate, Australian culture and citizenship would be a better cross-cultural priority. We're not all Aboriginal, but we are all Australian, and we have a culture and a history which spans the globe.

Alternatively critical thinking, in terms of teaching the analytical and philosophical skills necessary to subject mastery, would also be a better cross-curriculum priority. The strength of our culture is based on clear, open and fearless communication and debate, grounded in logical thinking, which must be backed by specific, concrete examples to demonstrate the logic works in practice, and this could be taught across all subjects.

Teaching methods

Language

English is the foundational subject for all studies, and is the only subject to actually be, of necessity, cross-curricular. There is nothing more essential than being able to read and write. It should be stipulated in the curriculum that a phonics approach be used for teaching the reading and writing of English. While mature readers read most texts by recognising whole words, understanding language through a modular approach is the key to being able to spell unfamiliar words that have only been heard, or to decipher the meaning of unfamiliar words.

The research on the value of using phonics is also quite clear.

Advanced grammar is also missing from the curriculum. For example, it aims to only make students aware of tense, rather than exploring it in detail. It appears to be the case that to properly understand grammar students will have to study a foreign language where it is still taken seriously.

As an editor the writer is aware of the poor standard of English prose, even from people who have advanced tertiary qualifications. Poor quality communication also contributes to poor thinking.

Mathematics and science

The curriculum puts too little emphasis on the internalisation of mathematical principles through rote learning and too much emphasis on problem solving. Mathematics has to be practiced before it is understood well-enough to be applied in problem solving. If the basic skills are not mastered, less able students will have trouble solving problems. The curriculum expresses the idea that different skills are needed for the 21st Century than earlier periods, and that critical thinking is somehow more necessary. In fact, earlier generations have been very successful in applying critical thinking, because they had strong mathematical skills which were learned at an earlier age than the present generation.

Subject matter

We comment on two areas here only so as to limit the size of this submission.

History

The curriculum marginalises all histories for Aboriginal history. This is absurd. Aboriginal history is not central to Australian or world history. While important to Aborigines, and for the understanding of modern Australian debates, it has little to contribute to most of the pressing issues we face. While we believe there is a place for study of Aboriginal history, spending too much time on it distracts from the task of training students for the modern world.

It also proposes the legally incorrect view that Australia was invaded. This has been debunked by many legal decisions, including the High Court decisions in *Mabo*^{vi} and *Wik*^{vii} which established native title and rebutted the doctrine of *Terra Nullius*.

It also ignores the period from 1492 through to 1750 which saw the discovery by Europeans of the New World, as well as the beginnings of the dominance of much of the whole world by European powers.

One consequence of this is that it totally ignores Tudor and Elizabethan England, which see the English Renaissance, and the consolidation of ideas about government and law, as well as an explosion in literature and science. It would also appear that one could finish this curriculum without any idea that the British ruled the largest empire the world has ever seen. This is crucial to understanding how Australians see themselves, as well as how the English-speaking peoples are viewed by the rest of the world. It is also crucial to putting concepts like postcolonialism into context.

Much of 20th Century history appears to be cultural history. There is not much study of the people and the policies that shaped the period and too much concentration on things like “Rock ‘n’ roll”! The social history approach also pervades all of the curriculum. While this may add interest to students who are not really engaged, history is a social science, not fashion. Historical events have a lot of similarities over time, irrespective of how people are dressed, or what type of houses they live in.

The history curriculum also perpetuates myths like the Stolen Generation, teaching them as facts, when they are not only disputed, but not true. Despite the claims by advocates, there has been not one proven case of a child being taken from its parents merely for being Aboriginal. (See for example the case of *Cubillo and Gunner v Commonwealth*^{viii}). This is but one example of the education system taking one side in an ideological argument rather than even-handedly allowing children to explore the arguments.

Fortunately the ideological hand appears to be lighter when dealing with older histories, so students may pick up a more universal set of understandings as a result.

English

Apart from the issues with how reading is taught we have a number of concerns with the English curriculum.

It tries to cover too many forms of literature. There are four main types of literature – novels and short stories; poetry; drama; expository writings. This is where the concentration of the curriculum should be. The curriculum spends too much time trying to cover ephemeral forms of literature. While it is understandable that educators might feel they need to spend time talking about forms of literature available on social media, it is only through studying higher-order forms that students will develop an ability to properly analyse content.

Alarm bells also ring when a curriculum pretends to help students to discover “fake news”. This is an ideologically contested term, and while teachers may feel compelled to condemn claims that the 2020 US election was rigged by voting machines, they may also feel compelled to support claims that the 2016 US election was rigged by Russian interference. Both claims lack support, but many academics appear to think the second is proven.

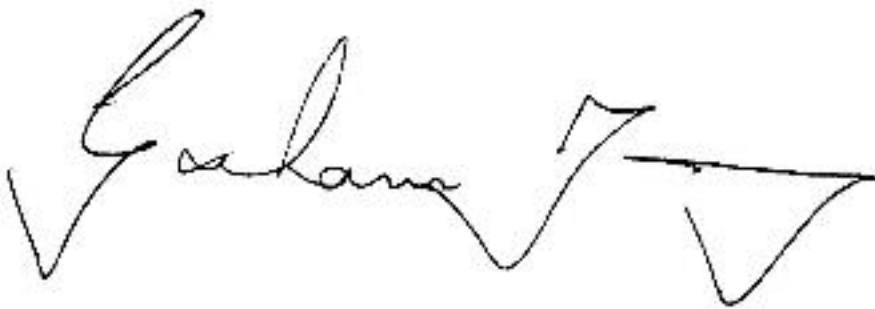
The curriculum also embodies a racist approach to “First Nations” authors. Aboriginal authors deserve to be appreciated on their own individual terms, just like any other author. They do not write in a particular way because they are Aboriginal, they write in many different ways. Like all writers they draw on their own experience in

formulating their ideas and how they express them. To deal with them on the basis of race is discriminatory. We don't analyse Shakespeare on the basis of how he writes as a white person.

It also appears you can get through to Grade 10 without reading any of the literary canon. This is a serious deficiency. If one of the aims of education is to produce students that are culturally literate, then some familiarity with the foundational imaginative texts of our culture should be mandatory. This cannot start too early.

Conclusion

Australian educational performance has been going in the wrong direction for too long. While there are a number of contributing factors, the curriculum is one. Doubling down on previous bad approaches, as the draft curriculum does, is no way to fix this problem.



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ⁱ <https://www.acer.org/au/pisa/key-findings-2018>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/profile-of-indigenous-australians>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.familytreedna.com/groups/aboriginal-tribes-australia-dna-project/about/results>

^{iv} [2071.0 - Census of Population and Housing: Reflecting Australia - Stories from the Census, 2016 \(abs.gov.au\)](https://www.abs.gov.au/2071.0-Census-of-Population-and-Housing-Reflecting-Australia-Stories-from-the-Census-2016)

^v <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/top-25-destinations-international-migrants>

^{vi} <http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi->

bin/viewdoc/au/cases/cth/HCA/1992/23.html?context=1;query=Mabo%20v%20Queensland;mask_path=

^{vii} <http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi->

[bin/viewdoc/au/cases/cth/HCA/1996/40.html?context=1;query=wik%20peoples;mask_path="+au/cases/cth/HCA](bin/viewdoc/au/cases/cth/HCA/1996/40.html?context=1;query=wik%20peoples;mask_path=)

^{viii} <http://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/IndigLawB/2000/57.html>