

# The Australian Curriculum Review – the good, the bad and the messy

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According to Oxford Dictionaries a review is, “A formal assessment of something with the intention of instituting change if necessary” (Oxforddictionaries.com, 2014). In this context, it was unsurprising in many ways that the new Abbott Government initiated a review of the Labor-developed and negotiated Australian Curriculum (AC) almost as soon as it was elected, with the intention of reassessing, “the robustness, independence and balance in the curriculum’s development and content” (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2014).

In Opposition, Tony Abbott was a vocal opponent of aspects of the new curriculum, responding to a question put to him on the topic at a pre-election Press Club address, “I think we’re entitled to say, [we] could do better. I think

we’re entitled to say maybe you ought to have a re-think about this...” (Australianpolitics.com, 2014). The fact that we have a national curriculum, especially one that was developed through large-scale consultation and trialling, is an achievement in itself. However, it was always going to be patently impossible to formulate a curriculum that would please everyone, as evidenced by the different implementation approaches followed by the states and territories, and so it was not unexpected that the Review came up with a number of key criticisms.

## The good

The overall thrust of the Review is that we should build on and refine our Australian Curriculum. The reviewers do, albeit reluctantly, acknowledge that the development of the AC was an accomplishment noting, “Australia now

has a rudimentary national curriculum, which is widely considered to be a significant achievement, and one characterised by a concerted effort to consult and engage a variety of stakeholders. This makes Australia the first federal country in the world to have a comprehensive national curriculum which includes knowledge as content, as well as standards and capabilities” (ibid p.239).

At a recent Australian Curriculum Review Q & A session organised by the Victorian branch of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL), Prof Brian Caldwell, Professor Emeritus at the University of Melbourne and Deputy Chair of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) remarked that one of the most unexpected things about the populist response to the Review was that “the general broad brush media comment was positive and I think that many people were

surprised that notwithstanding some pretty solid criticism... it had some very useful things to say,” and he makes a good point. Although it is easy to disparage the methodology and indeed some of the conclusions made in the Review, it does draw together, summarise and represent a range of viewpoints from over 1600 submissions.

The first of the 30 final recommendations from the Review places student welfare firmly at the centre of any changes to the curriculum:

#### Recommendation 1

*“The Ministerial Council oversee a redesign of the Australian Curriculum and associated assessment regimes that has as its prime focus, students’ wellbeing and the monitoring of their progression through the stages of learning.”*

(Australian Government, 2014, p.242)

Although the wording of this recommendation is curious, in that it emphasises the *monitoring* of learning, rather than the learning itself, wellbeing and learning are certainly two elements that any educator would hope to be at the centre of any discussions about students and is certainly a sound place to start.

#### The bad

The timing of the review, so soon after the government was elected, is certainly interesting given that the majority of jurisdictions have only substantially implemented the content for one year. One of the most striking missing pieces in the Review is evaluating the impact the Australian Curriculum has had on schools, not merely in terms of the volume of content (which I’ll get to later) but in terms of how schools are enacting the curriculum, and more importantly, what effect it has had on students. The body of the Review was quiet on issues such as student engagement, student learning and student outcomes, possibly because it is too early to tell how the AC is influencing these elements, and instead relied on expert opinion in preference to impartial data. As the University of Southern Queensland’s Stewart Riddle observed in an article analysing the Review, “...reading through this ‘balanced’ and ‘fair’ review, the first thing that struck me was the staggering lack of engagement with empirical research. Apart from government reports and curriculum documents, there are only a handful of references to research literature. Given the scope and scale of this review, such a limited engagement with evidence is troubling” (The Conversation, 2014).

The oversight was perhaps exacerbated by the choice of experts contributing to the Review. Meredith Peace, President of the Australian Education Union – Victoria noted at the Victorian ACEL Q & A event, “...the proof for us was in the pudding in terms of who actually did the Review... if you actually have a look at the variety of people, like Barry Spurr, who were signed up if you like by the two reviewers... there are only five from schools which I think

#### Curriculum design principles

- 1 The prime focus is on students, their wellbeing and their personal development.
- 2 The curriculum must be underpinned by, and anchored in, aims, values, and principles. The values will be universal ones but often also incorporate values relevant to the culture of that nation.
- 3 Knowledge is the educational foundation. Disciplines are the pillars of learning.
- 4 Competencies, standards, assessment and reporting must be related to content knowledge.
- 5 There will be a core content which is mandatory. The breadth and depth of the core varies but it comprises the essential knowledge.
- 6 The content of all learning areas is based on educational foundations and is rigorous and balanced.
- 7 The overall design of the curriculum is outlined in a framework document to show clearly the structure of learning areas, phasing of content and notional time and space allocations within core content and between core and non-core content.
- 8 The inclusion of organising concepts within the curriculum is valuable, and careful sequencing of dependent subjects is critical. However, the evidence does not suggest that learning areas should be forced into a ‘one size fits all’ common curriculum framework.
- 9 The shape of the whole curriculum is not monolithic but is tailored to the learning capacity of students at each level, age or year, and to modes of learning which are appropriate for each learning area.
- 10 The core content is usually designed in a syllabus format, but whatever the style used, it is written in a way that facilitates pedagogical approaches and formative assessment; it is teacher-friendly, and is supplemented by additional resource material and aids to teaching, including indicative lists of reading matter appropriate for each level, such as books for English, key events for history, or key concepts for science.
- 11 Content is parent friendly and so should be written in a way that parents and families can understand what their children are being taught.
- 12 Independent quality assurance is undertaken through assessment, inspection, and comparisons, both to ensure effective curriculum delivery, and to provide accountability and assurance to parents.
- 13 Pedagogy in relation to the core content is usually a matter for schools, along with some flexibility in the phasing of that content into year levels where local circumstances require this. Schools and their teachers bring the core content to life.
- 14 Even in countries which take a centralised approach, curriculum is never exclusively centralised – there is always some element of local or school-based decision-making about curriculum.
- 15 In addition to the core content there is a rich and stimulating school-based curriculum, which may extend the core content, and will also contain additional content which will incorporate local knowledge, programs or topics important for that school, including encouragement for low achievers and gifted and talented students

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is a big negative, and only one of those five from schools was from a government school.” Although the Review was also open to public submissions, this lack of direct practitioner consultation is certainly perplexing.

#### The messy

The one area of the Review that does explicitly acknowledge student needs is ironically that of catering more effectively for students with disabilities. I say ironically because at the same time \$100 million is being cut from the education budget for students with disability and the government has also failed to introduce a promised extra loading for students with a disability due to start in 2015 (Ellis, 2014). Yet the Review document acknowledges that, “The special circumstances of students with disability needs better attention than it has received in the past” and Recommendation 10 is that, “ACARA,

*guided by special education experts, improve the inclusivity of the Australian Curriculum by more appropriately addressing the needs of students with disability, particularly those working towards the Foundation level.”* (Australian Government, op cit., p.244). The challenge therefore will be to promote and enact meaningful changes that will adequately support students with special needs through an update to the Australian Curriculum that potentially does not have corresponding funding support.

Possibly the biggest issue identified by the Review, and one that educators were certainly aware of without the expense of a formal investigation, is that of the crowded curriculum. Recently when the leadership team at my school tried to formulate an ‘ideal’ timetable as a guide for teachers which gave due precedence to literacy and numeracy while satisfactorily incorporating other curriculum areas that

come under the inquiry umbrella, as well as giving time to sport (to fight the obesity crisis), wellbeing (to combat bullying, behavioural, social and mental health issues), and in our case religion, AND allowing time for important school and community building activities such as Christmas carols and our school walkathon, we found it couldn't be done without making conscious compromises.

This conclusion was supported by Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority Executive Manager Chris Wardlaw in his response to the Review at the Q & A session, who spoke of the four pieces that make up curriculum: core curriculum (contemporary, general capabilities, big issues of the day, etc); formal curriculum (disciplinary rules, understandings, methods, etc.); chosen curriculum (decided by schools, teachers, school leaders, etc), and meta-curriculum (activities, events, traditions to promote personal development, character and a community of learners). Wardlaw asserted that, "When we talk about the crowded curriculum, what we're trying to say is how do we get the core and formal to be sufficiently small to allow the chosen and the meta to work its magic?"

The Australian Primary Principals Association in its submission to the Review also echoed this sentiment, contending that, "It is unrealistic to provide a mandatory outline of content that would demonstrably be impossible to deliver in many schools (especially those with a student population many of whom experience multiple factors of disadvantage) and probably impossible in any school" (ibid, p.184).

These assertions did not go unnoticed, with the Review noting, "Steps should be taken immediately to reduce the overcrowding of the Australian Curriculum, especially in the primary years" (ibid, p.245). There was also agreement that in the early years particularly, "there should be greater flexibility in relation to the current rigid framework of key learning areas, and [the focus should] be concerned primarily with literacy and numeracy".

The messy part comes in that Prof Kenneth Wiltshire and Dr Kevin Donnelly, the two main reviewers, were unable to agree on a solution

## **...ACARA revise the structure of the Australian Curriculum to reduce the amount of content to a narrow core required to be taught, especially in the primary years**

to this problem, although both presented their preferred model. Prof Wiltshire's model removes all content requirements except literacy and numeracy from Foundation to Year 2. While that would certainly focus attention on these core areas against which we are measured internationally, one wonders how contracting the experience of our youngest students to such a degree would lay the foundation for curiosity, innovation and lifelong learning. Prof Caldwell specifically highlighted the absence of the arts in the early years as a concern in his address at the Victorian ACEL session, observing, "Any school that offers just literacy and numeracy is not going to provide a very exciting and educationally rewarding experience for its students."

Dr Donnelly's model, on the other hand, identifies literacy, numeracy, history and science as mandated curriculum from Foundation to Year 10, with most other disciplines, including geography, the arts, languages and health and physical education to be "revised and reduced", but "jurisdictions [would not be] required to implement [them] unless they wish to, and instead may rely on their own, or another state- or territory-developed curriculum" (Australian Government, ibid, p.146). This proposal seems to erode the national approach to our curriculum, undermining the ideal of student entitlement for learning in many key areas.

While Recommendation 11 of the Review urges the Ministerial Council to consider the options presented by the two main reviewers, Recommendation 12 has a more general focus: "Subsequently, ACARA revise the structure of the Australian Curriculum to reduce the amount of content to a narrow core required to be taught, especially in the primary years. Foundation to Year 2 should focus on literacy

and numeracy" (Australian Government, ibid, p.245). Few teachers would argue with this aim, however its execution will play a large role in how enthusiastically the revised curriculum is adopted and how effective it will be in making a difference not just to literacy and numeracy outcomes but to nurturing well-rounded students who are lifelong learners capable of effectively functioning in society.

A likely stumbling block to achieving clarity in terms of the content requirements of the Australian Curriculum is the contradiction evident within the recommendations extracted from the opinions of the subject specialists asked to comment. While a desire to reduce the over-crowding was evident, the review also notes, for example, "...there were significant calls for greater recognition to be made in the Australian Curriculum of the contribution and influence of Western civilisation, recognition of the cultural and historical foundations of the nation's Judeo-Christian heritage, the positive contribution of economic development and industry to raising standards of living, and the democratic underpinnings of the British system of government in our political executive and legal institutions and processes" (ibid, p.246).

In addition to this, several of the consultant subject experts argued that content was missing from their particular disciplines. Alan Hill, the geography subject specialist, for instance believes, "that there is an issue of balance in the Australian Curriculum where there needs to be a better representation of the physical strand in the subject and a return to traditional terminology." These perceived omissions have resulted in Recommendation 14: "ACARA rebalance the core content in each learning area and subject in line with the findings of this Review outlined in Chapters Six and Seven, particularly in relation to the deficiencies in each subject" (ibid, p.246). It is difficult to see how this can be achieved while tackling the overcrowding problem, especially if Prof Wiltshire's model is adopted, which would postpone the introduction of humanities, science, the arts and health and physical education until Year 3, making the content requirements from this level up even more onerous.

Of the 30 final recommendations, which encapsulate the numerous recommendations made in each section throughout the document, five relate to restructuring ACARA. These proposals largely revolve around, "Reforming the governance structure of ACARA by establishing it in a company format to ensure that the Board members are not acting as representatives, but whose duty is to the organisation and its task, are chosen primarily for their curriculum expertise, and include educational experts from outside the various government systems" (ibid, p.251). This is an interesting position to advocate, given that earlier on the reviewers state, "...that the Australian Constitution gives responsibility for school education to the states, and not the Australian Government..." (ibid., p.52).

### **Suggestions**

A number of submissions have suggested that the Melbourne Declaration and the ACARA Charter should be amended before ACARA continues the development of the Australian Curriculum – most notably the Catholic Education Commission of New South Wales, whose specific proposals for amendment include:

- Acknowledge teacher capacity and quality as the key driver of student performance accommodate the implication that will arise from the necessary introduction of new technologies to educational contexts
- Address and focus on personal learning
- More fully reflect the role, both past and present, of faith traditions generally, and Christianity specifically, in the development of Australia
- More fully acknowledge parents as the primary educators of children

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The ongoing buy-in of the various jurisdictions to the Australian Curriculum is potentially at stake if the restructure goes ahead. Recommendation 25, that “ACARA be reconstituted, possibly as a company that is at arm’s length from education ministers and the education departments that serve them” (ibid, p.253) certainly causes pause for consideration about the nature of the relationship between ACARA and the states and territories going forward.

The fact remains, however, that even though the Review report notes, “Many of those who responded to this Review’s terms of reference argue that politics should be taken out of education, on the belief that what students learn should be justified on educational grounds and that the curriculum should not be politicised as a result of a particular ideological stance,” (ibid, p. 27) the very impetus for the review was political rather than educational in its bias.

The Australian Science Teachers Association in its response “warns against changes at a time when ‘teachers of science across Australia need more time to become familiar with the current national curriculum...’” (ibid, p.182) and this criticism can be levelled at the curriculum, whose implementation is only in its infancy, as a whole. At a time where ‘teacher quality’ is high on the agenda, we should perhaps be focusing more on how we make system-wide, evidence-based improvements to pedagogy than on quibbling over subject specific and largely subjective details that ultimately make little difference to students and how they learn.

### Conclusion – A new model needs to be introduced for the next phase of development of the Australian Curriculum

The ACARA governance needs to be reformed to address the major defects which are:

- Lack of evidence of educational criteria driving the decision-making, including insufficient curriculum expertise throughout the governance structure
- Overemphasis on compromise based mainly on political and policy considerations, rather than on educational ones
- Too much influence of political timelines
- Lack of adherence to sound principles of curriculum development assessment and reporting, and no comprehensive linkage to international benchmarking
- Potential for politicisation of the process, especially through a lack of transparency of decision-making in both ministerial council and the acara board
- Significant lack of external and internal transparency and accountability
- Failure of the model to deliver quality assurance and consistent delivery and implementation
- Fixation on monolithic template driven curriculum design and delivery with an inadequate educational and value-based foundation

*From Review of the Australian Curriculum*

### Further reading

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