

A national curriculum – what is expected of tomorrow’s citizens?

The Future of Australian Education is taking shape



Stuart Macintyre



Peter Sullivan



Kerry Kennedy

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Peter Sullivan, Professor of Science, Mathematics and Technology Education, Monash University.

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Kerry Kennedy, Chair Professor of Curriculum Studies at the Hong Kong Institute of Education

The future of education in Australia is beginning to take shape with framing papers for a national curriculum online for public discussion following a series of forums and a symposium held recently in Sydney.

Preliminary discussions on the nature of a national curriculum in the disciplines of Science, Mathematics, History and English were each attended by between 150 and 200 people last term.

This was followed by a symposium in December bringing educators, academics and representatives of peak groups together to discuss key issues and outcomes for the national curriculum, hosted by the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney.

Workshops to discuss primary and secondary elements of the curriculum were well attended and brought about positive discussion and a

valuable exchange of ideas, according to Prof Stuart Macintyre who presented the framing paper for the history curriculum.

Prof Macintyre’s paper called for schools to make a “substantial commitment to teaching history”, pointing out that there is currently “little guidance for the allocation of time to history” in the current curriculum.

The history framing paper proposes that at least 10 per cent of teaching time over the primary school years, and 100 hours per year in Years 7–10 be dedicated to the teaching of history.

It goes on to highlight the need for adequately prepared teachers if the delivery of history is to reach its potential.

“We have been fortunate to have skilled and dedicated history teachers, and must draw on their expertise,” Prof Macintyre said.

“There are not enough of them, and history has been neglected in teacher training, so it will be important to recruit a younger generation of teachers to take the baton from my generation.”

Prof Macintyre and his colleagues agree that successful implementation of a national curriculum adequately delivering the study of history will require teachers who have “undertaken a rich major in history as part of their first degree”.

It calls for the provision of professional development that allows history teachers to “keep abreast of developments in the discipline, and to enrich their teaching through familiarity

with current research”.

He said playing such a crucial role in the development of Australia’s new national history curriculum was “both daunting and exciting”.

“There is wide interest and support for history, and concern about the way it was pushed to the side as reformers in the 1980s put such an emphasis on vocational training.

“The opportunity to make good lost ground is all the more welcome,” he said.

Prof Macintyre believes, for the recommendations to be effective, resources must be made available in the classroom to support the history curriculum.

“Awareness of history is an essential characteristic of any civilised society,” his paper states.

“By teaching history systematically and sequentially across the years of schooling we will enrich educational outcomes.”

The commonwealth, state and territory governments have already agreed to the development of the national curriculum.

“After it has been prepared there will be a pressing need for the development of materials and substantial professional development programs and after that, staffing and time tabling will be crucial. It is here that the governments can do most to realise the goals of the framing papers,” Prof Macintyre said.

Professor of Science, Mathematics and Technology Education, Monash University, Peter Sullivan, lent his expertise to driving the

mathematics framing paper at the symposium.

The main task for the curriculum, he says, is for the writers to follow the principles set out.

“There is one implied challenge for governments and administrators,” Prof Sullivan said. “Currently if students fall behind they are put into lower level groups. It is essential that governments provide the resources to support those students and allow them to catch up.”

Prof Sullivan said he strongly endorsed the consultation process being undertaken to develop the national curriculum.

“The level of consultation is unparalleled to my knowledge, and it will result in great support from teachers and greater applicability of the curriculum principles,” he said. “It is an honour to be able to contribute to this process.”

While the paper recommends a mathematics curriculum inclusive of all students to the end of Year 10, it also highlights the need for meaningful and relevant content to engage students.

It argues that mathematics is important for all, however, some students are currently excluded from effective mathematics study.

“The curriculum and school structure should seek to overcome this,” the maths framing paper states.

Prof Sullivan said the new curriculum should help teachers to plan and teach engaging and relevant sequences of lessons.

“It should help them to assess the learning of students, so as to maximise the opportunities of those students.”

He said the new national mathematics curriculum should be streamlined with complementary concepts delivered together in the K-8 grades to reduce “crowding” with many fragmented topics and it should enable teachers to identify key topics and extend students in these areas.

Meanwhile, Prof Kerry Kennedy, who has lived in Hong Kong for the past seven years, spoke on the national curriculum as both “an insider and an outsider”.

“As a curriculum scholar, and currently Chair Professor of Curriculum

Studies at the Hong Kong Institute of Education, I naturally take an academic interest in issues to do with the school curriculum,” he said.

“Yet I am outside the system, the politics and the national conversation that has led to a renewed focus on national curriculum. In the past seven years I have experienced curriculum reform and renewal Hong Kong-style.”

He said addressing curriculum was more than “just tampering with what happens in schools from 9.00 am to 3.30 pm, Monday to Friday”.

“Rather, we are engaging a significant social and political arena in a nation’s concept of itself and what it expects future generations to know, value and do,” Prof Kennedy said.

“Failure to recognise these broader purposes of the curriculum can lead the uninitiated into fruitless debates about the technicalities of a curriculum as distinct from its deeper cultural meaning in the life of the nation.”

He said in developing a nation’s curriculum it was necessary to determine what we expected of tomorrow’s citizens.”

Prof Kennedy said we should expect future citizens to: possess broad interdisciplinary understandings that cross traditional knowledge boundaries; have a commitment to environmental sustainability and protection; be aware of their role in the global community even though they may be firmly located here in Sydney; be innovative, creative and ethical and solve problems.

(They should) think critically; participate in and contribute to a vibrant civil society; be politically active and aware; possess well developed interpersonal skills and the capacity to work collaboratively; and continue their learning journey in both formal and non-formal contexts throughout their life span.

“How best to achieve these outcomes is the great challenge for any school curriculum,” Prof Kennedy said.

The framing papers for English, Mathematics, Science and History propose broad directions for what teachers should teach and young people should learn from Kindergarten to Year 12. They were compiled to generate “broad-ranging discussions” in the community about the proposed direction of the national curriculum.



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