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The Australian Curriculum: In search of a knowledge-rich education

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The Australian Curriculum: In search of a knowledge-rich education

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FOREWORD

As a nation, Australia has failed, and continues to fail, generations of our children. Two decades ago, Australia ranked near the top of the world in international tests. We were 4th in reading, 8th in science and 11th in mathematics. Today, we have fallen to around 16th in reading, 17th in science and 29th in mathematics. Countries we once outperformed, such as the United Kingdom and Canada, have moved ahead of us. Others, including Singapore, are now years in front.

The decline is not marginal. Australia's scores have dropped by around 30 points in reading, 37 in mathematics and 20 in science. The OECD equates this to roughly a year of lost learning. In simple terms, a 15-year-old today is performing closer to where a 14-year-old was two decades ago.

At the same time standards are falling, funding has continued to rise. Over the decade to 2022-23, real government funding per student increased by more than 20 per cent. Total government expenditure on schools now exceeds \$90 billion a year. We spend more than the OECD average. Yet outcomes have declined and children are more anxious, uncertain and less resilient.

This should prompt a basic question: if more money is going in, but outcomes are going backwards, what needs to change inside the classroom?

One answer lies in the curriculum.

Even the curriculum authority's own review process recorded a "strong and consistent" message from schools and teachers that the Australian Curriculum is overcrowded, does not allow enough time for deep understanding of core knowledge and concepts, and is difficult to interpret, implement and assess. That is hardly surprising in a curriculum that is formally three-dimensional, built around learning areas, general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities. What sounds sophisticated on paper can become crowded, diffuse and hard to teach well in practice.

Too much of the curriculum is wrapped in vague, politically correct and superficial language. Official declarations speak of "excellence and equity", and of producing "confident and creative individuals" and "successful lifelong learners". The curriculum authority says the curriculum is designed to help all young Australians become "successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens". These are agreeable sentiments. But they are not a curriculum. They do not tell a teacher what knowledge should be taught, in what sequence, with what level of difficulty, and to what end. They are aspirations dressed up as design principles. Significantly, the Australian Curriculum fails to properly detail what constitutes the purpose of education.

A serious curriculum should do something much more concrete. It should clearly set out the knowledge students need in key subjects and areas of learning including English, mathematics, science, history, civics, geography and the arts. It should be succinct, coherent, teachable and rigorous. It should give teachers clarity, not clutter. It should treat knowledge not as an optional extra, but as the foundation on which understanding, judgement and creativity are built. When a curriculum becomes overcrowded and weighed down by feel-good priorities and abstractions, the core work of schooling is pushed aside.

That is why the current complacency is so striking. In October 2025, education ministers shifted the review cycle so that the next full version of the Australian Curriculum is not due until 2032. There may be a case for stability in some areas of schooling. But for a country that has slipped down the international ladder while spending more each year, 2032 is a remarkably relaxed timetable. A nation experiencing long-term decline should not be told to wait another cycle before asking basic questions about what is being taught and whether the curriculum is fit for purpose.

That is what makes Dr Kevin Donnelly's report timely and necessary. It asks a question that official debate has too often avoided: whether the curriculum itself has become part of the problem. If results are falling while funding keeps rising, it is entirely reasonable to examine whether the curriculum has become too crowded, too vague and too distracted from its central purpose. This report turns our attention back to first principles: what schools are for, what children should be taught, and whether we still have the courage to insist on a curriculum that is knowledge-rich, coherent and serious.

A curriculum that loses its focus on knowledge does more than weaken academic standards. It erodes the shared understanding that binds a country together. When we are not clear about what students should know, we should not be surprised when they are uncertain about the society they are part of.

At a time when social cohesion is under strain, it is becoming harder for students to answer questions that once required no explanation: what does it mean to be Australian and what is it that binds us as a nation?

David Hughes

Executive Director

Menzies Research Centre

1. BACKGROUND

Australia has a federal system of government where the states and territories have the constitutional authority to manage schools and determine what is taught and how it is assessed. However, since 1973, the federal government has significantly increased its involvement in school education, especially in relation to the curriculum.

Beginning with the commonwealth government establishing the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) and the publication of 'Core Curriculum for Australian Schools' in 1980 subsequent attempts to develop a national approach to the curriculum¹ include:

- National Statements and Profiles 1991-1993
- Statements of Learning 2004, and
- Australian Curriculum 2010-2015.

The various attempts to determine what should be taught in schools range from offering guidance and support of a general nature to detailed content descriptors, elaborations and expected outcomes for eight areas of learning from Foundation to Year 10.

In relation to the existing Australian Curriculum, developed and managed by the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority (ACARA), on 18 October 2025 the commonwealth, state and territory education ministers agreed to undertake a review of the first three years of the mathematics curriculum. The Ministers' Media Release states, "On the advice of ACARA², Education Ministers have initiated a targeted review of the maths curriculum in the first three years of school (F-2)."³ At the same meeting, education ministers also agreed to extend the Australian Curriculum review cycle from every six years⁴ to every 10 years. This means the current Australian Curriculum, approved in 2022, won't be reviewed until 2032.

Instead of waiting more than six years to finalise reviewing the Australian Curriculum, including whether such an approach to developing a curriculum can be justified, now is the time to act.

The failure to immediately undertake a forensic analysis of the Australian Curriculum, given its abject failure to raise standards and improve outcomes, commits future generations of students to an impoverished and substandard education.

History proves the various attempts to develop and implement a national curriculum have failed. The current version, first introduced to schools over the period 2010-2015, is no different to past attempts. As a result of failing to learn from past mistakes the Australian Curriculum developed and managed by ACARA:

- fails to address what best constitutes the purpose of education and a knowledge-rich curriculum;
- fails to recognise the vital importance of enculturation drawing on the on-going debt to Judaeo-Christianity and Western civilisation;
- is superficial and overcrowded making it impossible to implement;

1 **Note:** It is important to distinguish between the 3 stages of curriculum development – the intended curriculum, what actually is implemented in the classroom and what students achieve in terms of learning outcomes.

2 ACARA stands for the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority. ACARA was established by an act of federal parliament in 2008 and its mission is "to improve the learning of all young Australians through world-class school curriculum, assessment and reporting. Its functions include development of national curriculum, administration of national assessments and reporting on educational outcomes for young people in Australia". See ACARA's submission to the [Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools](#).

3 Ministers' Media Centre Ministers of the Education Portfolio. 18 October 2025. 'Next Steps in school education reform'.

4 See ACARA. 2015. [Terms Of Reference-Review Of The Australian Curriculum.](#)

- is overly politically correct instead of being objective and impartial;
- is the product of a flawed technocratic and bureaucratic process far removed from the realities of the classroom and the needs of teachers, students and broader society.

Such is the flawed, substandard and cumbersome nature of the Australian Curriculum this report makes the following recommendations.

Option One: Replace the existing Australian Curriculum with knowledge-rich syllabuses

Recommendation One

The Australian Curriculum as currently designed and structured should be replaced by a scaled back, concise and less cumbersome syllabus model detailing the essential knowledge, understanding and skills embodied in key subjects and areas of learning from Foundation to Year 10. Instead of including cross curricula priorities and general capabilities such syllabuses should be restricted to essential knowledge as intended with the Statements of Learning developed under the Howard Government. Instead of waiting until 2032 before the syllabuses are available, work should begin as soon as possible and be finalised within a two year period. The syllabuses should be ready for schools at the start of 2028.

Recommendation Two

That ACARA no longer be responsible for reviewing and developing a national curriculum. Instead, a new curriculum body should be established with the task of developing knowledge-rich syllabuses and periodically reviewing and benchmarking state and territory intended curriculum documents to ensure they include the essential content detailed in the national syllabuses.

Recommendation Three

In order to respect school autonomy and flexibility syllabuses should be structured so as to allow curriculum diversity and flexibility at the school level. Syllabuses should take up no more than 60% of the school week.

Recommendation Four

Before any new curriculum design process occurs the question of what constitutes the purpose of education must be addressed as well as what constitutes a knowledge-rich curriculum. The history of curriculum development in Australia has prioritised child-centred learning, 21st century learning, generic competencies and skills and cultural-left inspired critical theory and progressive ideology. Ignored is the need to ensure that each succeeding generation of students is introduced to and becomes familiar with Western civilisation's best validated knowledge and intellectual and creative achievements.

Option Two: Review and revise the existing national curriculum

Recommendation One

Instead of reviewing the Australian Curriculum one step at a time, beginning with the first three years of mathematics, and waiting until 2032 before the next major version is available, the review process should begin as soon as possible and be ready for schools at the start of 2028.

Recommendation Two

On the assumption there will be an Australian curriculum the first step should involve a forensic examination identifying why past attempts have failed and ensuring such mistakes are not repeated. Such an examination should include the role and impact of state, territory and commonwealth bureaucracies, subject associations and professional bodies including, but not limited to, the Australian Council for Educational Research, the Australian Curriculum Studies Association and teacher unions including the Australian Education Union.

Recommendation Three

Again, on the assumption there is a need for a national curriculum as currently designed, and before any new design process occurs, the question of what constitutes the purpose of education must be addressed as well as what constitutes a knowledge-rich curriculum. The history of curriculum development in Australia fails to acknowledge the critical importance of enculturation and ensuring students are introduced to and become familiar with Western civilisation's best validated knowledge and achievements.

Recommendation Four

To reduce the overcrowded curriculum and to prioritise the essential knowledge, understanding and skills associated with the subject disciplines and areas of learning any new curriculum should exclude the existing cross-curricula priorities and general capabilities.

Recommendation Five

To further reduce the overcrowded curriculum and its debilitating impact on students, teachers and schools any new Australian curriculum should take up no more than 60% of a school's weekly timetable. While essential content should be mandatory, schools should have the autonomy and flexibility to tailor their curriculum to suit local expectations and needs.

Recommendation Six

Instead of a curriculum divided into level descriptors, achievement standards, content descriptors and elaborations, any new curriculum should provide a succinct summary of the essential knowledge, understanding and skills in each of the key subjects and areas of learning for each year level that teachers are expected to teach and students are expected to learn.

2. HISTORY OF DEVELOPING A NATIONAL APPROACH TO CURRICULUM

It is important to realise that the Australian Curriculum made available to schools in 2014 is not the first time governments and curriculum organisations have attempted to introduce a centralised approach to influence what is taught in the nation's classrooms - to varying degrees and in different ways. Since the Karmel Report was delivered in 1973, the commonwealth government has significantly increased its influence and control over state and territory schools.

This paper contends that all the approaches to developing a national curriculum have failed and, as a result, generations of students have left and continue to leave school largely illiterate, innumerate, culturally impoverished and emotionally, morally and spiritually at risk. The parlous state of the current Australian Curriculum also fails the test of contributing to national pride, cohesion and stability at a time of increasing international and domestic tensions.

2.1. Curriculum Development Centre: 'Core Curriculum for Australian Schools'

After many years of schools-based curriculum development, introduced on the basis that decisions on what happens in the classroom should be made at the school level, the Commonwealth's Curriculum Development Centre in 1980 published a paper titled 'Core Curriculum For Australian Schools - What it is and why it is needed'.⁵ The paper's purpose was to offer "guidance and support" for schools and to act as a stimulus for further research and discussion about what might constitute a core curriculum for schools.

Given school-based control over the curriculum prevailed across state and territory schools the paper states, "It is not for the Centre to determine detailed curriculum content and teaching methods or to prescribe syllabuses and texts." The paper, written by then-CDC Director Malcolm Skilbeck, also argues for redefining what constitutes a core curriculum because "our traditional way of packaging knowledge into required subjects no longer satisfies either society or students" (p.7). Notwithstanding such a statement, later in the paper Skilbeck does accept the need to acknowledge what constitutes a "universal and permanently valid view of the educational process and the educated life" (p.9).

Instead of a lengthy and detailed curriculum document divided into year levels and subjects/learning areas, the paper details "nine areas of knowledge and experience". It would be fair to say the CDC paper had minimal, if any, effect on schools and in 1981 the CDC was disbanded. As noted by Ian Welch in his MEd thesis,⁶ "there were limited published reactions to the CDC paper" and "responses were disappointingly few and in many cases failed to address the questions raised by the CDC paper".

5 A copy is available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000167474>

6 Ian Welch. 1985. 'Reconstituting a Tradition Core Curriculum for Australian Schools: A Retrospect.' https://researchsystem.canberra.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/54849486/Welch_Ian_r.pdf

2.2. National Statements and Profiles

A second far more detailed and extensive attempt to develop a national curriculum were the National Statements and Profiles developed over the period 1991 - 1993.⁷ The origins of the Statements and Profiles can be traced to the 1989 Hobart Declaration⁸ where the state, territory and commonwealth education ministers (the Australian Education Council) agreed to “act jointly to assist Australian schools in meeting the challenges of our times”. The meeting endorsed 10 common and agreed national goals designed to “assist schools and systems to develop specific objectives and strategies, particularly in the areas of curriculum and assessment”. A number of the goals, while general in nature, related to the curriculum, including developing literacy and numeracy skills. Other goals included analysis and problem solving skills; and a knowledge and appreciation of Australia’s historical and geographical context, the creative arts, languages other than English and the cultural background of Aboriginal and ethnic groups.

At the 1991 meeting of the AEC the decision was made to formalise the approach to curriculum development by confirming there would be eight areas of learning. They were English, Science, Mathematics, Languages other than English, Technology, Studies of Society and the Environment, The Arts and Health (Physical Education and Personal Development). In addition to the eight learning areas the decision was made to include six cross-curricula areas, the environment, information technology, personal and interpersonal skills, career and work education, literacy and numeracy. As detailed by Australian curriculum scholar Colin Marsh (1994), the Australian Education Council established the Curriculum and Assessment Committee (CURASS) in September 1991 to begin to flesh out the details of what became known as the National Statements and Profiles.

In the same way that the CDC paper stated its purpose was not to proscribe syllabuses, Marsh concludes that according to the education ministers, “The eight learning areas with their corresponding national statements and profiles were never intended to be syllabuses and therefore not directly reacted to teaching practices...” (p. 25). Marsh makes the same point when he writes in April 1993, “The chairperson reaffirmed that State systems would provide the syllabuses which are the missing link between the national statements and profiles – without syllabuses to support the national statements and profiles, they can’t fly” (p. 154).

Beginning in 1992 and up until July 1993 CURASS embarked on an extensive process of collaboration involving a range of bureaucracies including state education departments, the Curriculum Corporation and assessment and accreditation agencies. In addition, a number of key individuals were involved including Ken Boston (then Director-General of Education New South Wales and the head of CURASS), Garth Boomer (then Associate Director-General of Education - Curriculum South Australia) and Bill Hannon (then Director of Curriculum Victoria).

While all of the above bodies and individuals were heavily committed to the Statements and Profiles at the July 1993 AEC meeting, such was the mounting public criticism over the politically correct nature of the curriculum as well as fears expressed by professional bodies about lack of academic rigour and balance,⁹ a motion was put by Victoria’s Liberal Education Minister Don Hayward to defer approval. The motion was passed 5/4 and was divided along party lines. A subsequent motion was passed stating that the Statements and Profiles be referred “back to the States and Territories for further review involving consultation with their own educational communities, so that each state and territory could determine if the initiatives should be proceeded with” (Marsh, p.159).

7 A comprehensive and detailed account of the origins and development of the National Statements and Profiles is Colin J. Marsh’s (1994) *Producing A National Curriculum: Plans and Paranoia*. Allen & Unwin. St Leonards. NSW.

8 The Hobart Declaration of Schooling. https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Environment_and_Communications/Completed_inquiries/pre1996/arts/report/~media/Committees/ecita_ctte/completed_inquiries/pre1996/arts/report/e04.pdf

9 See Marsh. Op.Cit. Chapter 5 National Statements and Chapter 7 as well as Kevin Donnelly Chapter 3.1 ‘The Failure of Outcomes-based Education’ in Donnelly (2004) *Why our schools are failing*. Duffy & Snellgrove. Sydney.

As detailed in 'Australia's adoption of outcomes-based education: A critique',¹⁰ criticisms of the National Statements and Profiles included:

- Lack of academic rigour and the fear that the National Statements and Profiles represented a fall in standards. Groups such as the Australian Institute of Physics, the Royal Australian Chemical Institute and Australian Mathematical Science Council argued the national curriculum represented a dumbed down approach to standards;
- Lack of a strong, clearly articulated educational justification for the approach to curriculum design adopted or research evidence proving the success or worth of the new approach to curriculum development (see Eltis 1995,¹¹ pp 11-22 and Blyth 2002¹²). In particular, there appeared little concrete evidence, either in Australia or the United States, demonstrating that the proposed new approach had been successfully implemented on such a large scale, and
- A concern that the development of the National Statements and Profiles had adopted a 'top-down' approach to curriculum development that marginalised the interests and needs of teachers and schools (see Collins 1994,¹³ Blyth 2002,¹⁴ Vinson 2002¹⁵ and Reid 2004¹⁶).

Such were the flaws and weaknesses in the National Statements and Profiles, Bruce Wilson, the past head of the Curriculum Corporation and someone involved in the developmental process argues:

*... the national statements and profiles have become the dominant model for curriculum specification. It seems to have been forgotten that those documents represented an unsatisfactory political and intellectual compromise ... What was an unsatisfactory intellectual compromise is now viewed as a robust framework, and a model of best practice. That framework is now part of the problem.*¹⁷

2.3. Statements of Learning

As noted in the *Review of the National Curriculum - Final Report*¹⁸ (p.54) a third attempt to develop a national approach to curriculum, when Brendan Nelson was the Commonwealth Education Minister, involved developing Statements of Learning. As detailed in the 'Schools Assistance (Learning Together - Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Bill 2004'¹⁹:

Education authorities must also commit to develop and implement Statements of Learning that describe the key knowledge, understandings, skills and capacities in English, mathematics, science, civics and citizenship education, and information and communications technology, that each child should acquire at school and to commit to implement before 1 January 2006.

10 <https://www.iier.org.au/iier17/donnelly.html>

11 Ken Eltis. 1995. *Focusing on learning: Report of the review of outcomes and profiles in NSW schooling*. NSW Department of Training and Education Co-ordination, Sydney.

12 Andrew Blyth. 2002. Outcomes, standards and benchmarks. *Curriculum Perspectives*, 22(3), pp.13-22.

13 Cherry Collins. 1994. *Curriculum and Pseudo-Science*. Occasional paper No. 2. ACSA, Canberra.

14 Andrew Blyth. Op.Cit.

15 Tony Vinson. 2002. *Inquiry into the provision of public education in NSW*. Pluto Press Australia, NSW.

16 Alan Reid. 2005. *Rethinking national curriculum collaboration: Towards an Australian curriculum*. DEST, Canberra.

17 Bruce Wilson. 2002. *Curriculum - is less more?* Paper delivered at the Curriculum Corporation Conference 2002, Canberra. Curriculum Corporation, Melbourne.

18 https://visualarts.net.au/media/uploads/files/review_of_the_national_curriculum_final_report.pdf

19 https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22legislation%2Fems%2Fr2186_ems_173f727b-8f3e-42d4-992e-af9853639627%22

From 2004 to 2008 and under the control of the Curriculum Corporation, Statements of Learning were published for English, Mathematics, Science, Civics and Citizenship and Information and Communication Technologies. As illustrated by the Statements Of Learning For English, the statements provided "... a description of the knowledge, skills, understandings and capacity that all students in Australia should have the opportunity to learn".²⁰ Unlike the existing Australian Curriculum that covers each year level from Foundation to Year 10 the Statements and Profiles only applied to years 3, 5, 7 and 9. Instead of replacing existing state and territory curriculum documents, "Jurisdictions will have to consider how they integrate these elements into their own curriculums in a manner that suits the diversity of students' needs and schools across the country."²¹

The 2006 'Statement for Learning for Civics and Citizenship', in addition to suggesting the statements should be integrated into existing curriculum documents, stated they were primarily intended for curriculum developers and were not to be "promoted directly with teachers or the general community" (p.1).²²

2.4. Australian Curriculum

The most recent and far more detailed and extensive attempt to develop a national curriculum is the Australian Curriculum made available to schools beginning in 2014 and developed by ACARA. What makes the current curriculum model unique compared to previous attempts is that it covers the years Foundation to Year 10. It is also three-dimensional, built around eight learning areas, seven general capabilities and three cross-curriculum priorities. In each of the eight learning areas teachers are presented with level and content descriptions as well as achievement standards. To add to the complexity teachers are also provided with elaborations that explain the content descriptions in more detail.

ACARA provides an outline of how the curriculum was developed²³ and, similar to the National Statements and Profiles there appears little, if any, educational justification for the curriculum design adopted. Instead, the decision to mandate what schools should teach is a political one made by the nation's education ministers. ACARA's October 2012 'Shape of the Australian Curriculum Version 4' document justifies adopting a three-dimensional shape to what was then the proposed Australian Curriculum when it states:²⁴

The curriculum development work of ACARA is guided by the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, adopted by the Ministerial Council in December 2008. The Melbourne Declaration emphasises the importance of knowledge, understanding and skills of learning areas, general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities as the basis for a curriculum designed to support 21st century learning.

Under the heading 'Promoting world-class curriculum and assessment', the Melbourne Declaration argues that "environmental sustainability" and "Indigenous content" should be "integrated across the curriculum", as well as stressing the importance of "general capabilities" and "generic and employability skills". Yet no educational justification is provided for such decisions. The "cross-curriculum priorities" to which ACARA refers are "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures", "Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia" and "Sustainability". Justifying the inclusion of the three cross-curricula priorities simply on the basis they are considered "contemporary issues about which young Australians should learn"²⁵ illustrates the superficial nature of the process involved in designing the curriculum.

20 [2005 Statements of Learning for English](#). P. ii. Curriculum Corporation. Carlton South, Victoria.

21 Ibid. p. ii.

22 [Statements of Learning for Civics and Citizenship](#). 2006. Curriculum Corporation. Carlton South, Victoria.

23 <https://www.acara.edu.au/curriculum/history-of-the-australian-curriculum/development-of-australian-curriculum>

24 Ibid. p 4.

25 Ibid. p. 23.

In 2020 ACARA was tasked by education ministers to undertake a review of the national curriculum “to ensure it is still meeting the needs of students and providing clear guidance for teachers” (p.1).²⁶ Whereas ACARA cites the Melbourne Declaration as underpinning and informing the design and development of the original national curriculum, the 2020 review’s Terms of Reference, under the heading ‘Aims’, cites the educational goals of the more recent ‘Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration December 2019’ as the document central to the review process.²⁷ The two goals are: (1) The Australian education system promotes excellence and equity’ and (2) All young Australians become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners and active and informed members of the community.

Once again, phrases like “excellence and equity”, “confident and creative individuals” and “successful, lifelong learners” are superficial and fail to adequately define the purpose of education and what constitutes a worthwhile curriculum. While the Terms of Reference for the 2020 review suggest the Australian Curriculum should be decluttered and made more manageable the fact it stipulates keeping the three dimensional design of the curriculum makes such a task impossible to achieve.

ACARA, in addition to detailing the curriculum’s origins, also provides an outline of the consultation process²⁸ over the years 2008-2013 leading up to schools beginning to adopt the curriculum in 2014. As previously mentioned, since being made available to schools in 2014 the national curriculum was reviewed in 2014 and 2020-21 as well as undergoing what ACARA terms a regular process of monitoring and evaluation.²⁹

3. The Australian Curriculum – flawed, substandard and politicised

Since the initial drafts of the Australian Curriculum were released in 2010 and up until the release of the most recent iteration, ACARA has claimed what students are expected to learn is based on sound research and intellectually rigorous. In 2015 ACARA stated it “is committed to a process of curriculum development and renewal that focuses on providing world-class curriculum to enhance educational outcomes for all young Australians” (p.4).³⁰ On the ACARA webpage under the heading ‘About Us - Who we are’ the organisation’s vision is as follows: “Inspire improvement in the learning of all young Australians through world-class curriculum, assessment and reporting.”³¹

If the Australian Curriculum is indeed “world-class” why has it been criticised since its inception as substandard, cumbersome, impossible to implement and unduly influenced by political considerations instead of sound educational practice and theory? Criticisms include: imposing cross-curriculum priorities without proper justification, assuming general capabilities can be taught devoid of essential content, being overly politically correct and exhausting teachers by imposing a top-down, cumbersome and bureaucratic form of curriculum.

26 ACARA. 2020. [Terms of Reference- Review of the Australian Curriculum F-10.](#)

27 Ibid.

28 <https://www.acara.edu.au/curriculum/history-of-the-australian-curriculum/consultation-process>

29 <https://www.acara.edu.au/curriculum/monitoring-reports>

30 https://www.acara.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/monitoring-report_2015727211404c94637ead88ff00003e0139.pdf?sfvrsn=0

31 <https://www.acara.edu.au/about-us>

3.1. Failure to define the purpose of education and what constitutes a worthwhile curriculum.³²

“... before entering upon any discussion of Education, the purpose of Education must be stated” (p.95).³³

“... discussion of curriculum must begin by asserting the primacy of essentially common and cultural purposes” (p.21).³⁴

As noted in chapter one of the Review of the Australian National Curriculum Final Report³⁵, any approach to developing a curriculum, either explicitly or implicitly, is underpinned and informed by particular beliefs and values about the purpose of education and preferred pedagogy. In that sense no curriculum is value free and whether those designing the curriculum recognise it or not their endeavours are always influenced to a greater or lesser extent by a particular, or range, of educational assumptions and philosophies. As Neil Postman argues:

... by definition, there can be no education philosophy that does not address what learning is for. Confucius, Plato, Quintilian, Cicero, Comenius, Erasmus, Locke, Rousseau, Jefferson, Russell, Montessori, Whithead, Dewey – each believed that there was some transcendent political, spiritual, or social idea that must be advanced through education (p.171).³⁶

On reading the various documents cited by ACARA as informing the basis of how the Australian Curriculum was developed, it's clear there was minimal, if any, attempt to properly articulate what constitutes the purpose of education and a worthwhile curriculum.

When detailing the curriculum's origins ACARA refers to 'The Shape of the Australian Curriculum v1.0 (2009)' as the document endorsed by ministers to guide the first phase of curriculum development (English, mathematics, science and history).³⁷ This document states:

The curriculum development work of ACARA is guided by the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, adopted by the Ministerial Council in December 2008. The Melbourne Declaration emphasises the importance of knowledge, understanding and skills of learning areas, general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities as the basis for a curriculum designed to support 21st century learning (p. 4).

The Melbourne Declaration states the curriculum:

- should support 21st century learning,
- promote equity and excellence,
- promote successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens,
- be world class,
- create a solid foundation in knowledge, understanding, skills and values and
- promote general capabilities related to the world of work.

Such statements are superficial, glib and fail to offer anything substantial or meaningful about what constitutes a beneficial and worthwhile curriculum or the underlying purpose of education.

³² **Note.** This section of this paper draws largely on analysis undertaken by the author as part of the 2014 national curriculum review. See pp 17-30 of Review of the Australian National Curriculum Final Report.

³³ T S Eliot. *Notes towards a definition of culture*.

³⁴ Victorian Government, Blackburn Report Volume 1. 1985.

³⁵ Australian Government. 2014. Review of the Australian National Curriculum Final Report. pp. 17-31. <https://apo.org.au/node/41699>

³⁶ Neil Postman. 1993. *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*. Vintage Books. New York.

³⁷ https://acaraweb.blob.core.windows.net/resources/The_Shape_of_the_Australian_Curriculum_v4.pdf

The argument that developing the Australian Curriculum was rushed and more influenced by political imperatives than educational ones is supported by a number of submissions to the 2014 review of the national curriculum. Under the heading 'The Missing Step' the argument is put:

There should have been a philosophical statement to underpin the curriculum but there was none ... Some (submissions) have observed that there was a poor debate about the rationale for a national curriculum, e.g. its 'basis on the nation's soul, values, and beliefs'. The consultation process was said to be 'more about items rather than educational approaches' (p. 97).³⁸

More specifically, while the Melbourne Declaration argues the curriculum should provide students with a "solid foundation in knowledge", the reality is Australia's history of curriculum development has failed in this regard. Lyn Yates and Cherry Collins describe the period of Australian curriculum development during the years 1975–2005 in the following way:

... there was a strong shift over the period we are examining from an emphasis on knowing things to being able to do things. In the interviews we conducted with senior curriculum actors we also noted how rarely 'knowledge' came into the frame of their talk about curriculum, compared with a focus on outcomes, politics and management of resources; or compared with a focus on the developing child (from a cognitive developmental perspective).³⁹

3.2. Failure to improve standards and overcome disadvantage

In relation to the national curriculum, under the heading 'Student diversity', the statement is made:

ACARA is committed to the development of a high-quality curriculum for all Australian students, which promotes excellence and equity in education. All students are entitled to rigorous, relevant and engaging learning programs drawn from a challenging curriculum that addresses their individual learning needs.⁴⁰

Additional evidence that the Australian Curriculum is flawed and substandard is the fact that since being made available to schools in 2014, and despite the above statement, educational standards have either flatlined or deteriorated and educational disadvantage still prevails.

In 2014 the average NAPLAN result for Year 9 reading was 580.4; in 2022 the figure was 577.6. For Year 9 numeracy the average score in 2014 was 587.8 while in 2022 it was 584.4.⁴¹ In 2023 ACARA introduced a new NAPLAN testing regime thus making it impossible to compare more recent results with those over the period 2008–2022. Notwithstanding such a caveat the 2024 NAPLAN results are also disturbing with 1 in 3 students not meeting basic literacy and numeracy expectations.⁴²

Despite billions of dollars in additional funding and the introduction of the national curriculum in 2014, testing conducted by the Program in International Student Assessment (PISA) shows declining outcomes for Australian students over the last 20 years.

38 Australian Government. 2014. Ibid. p. 97.

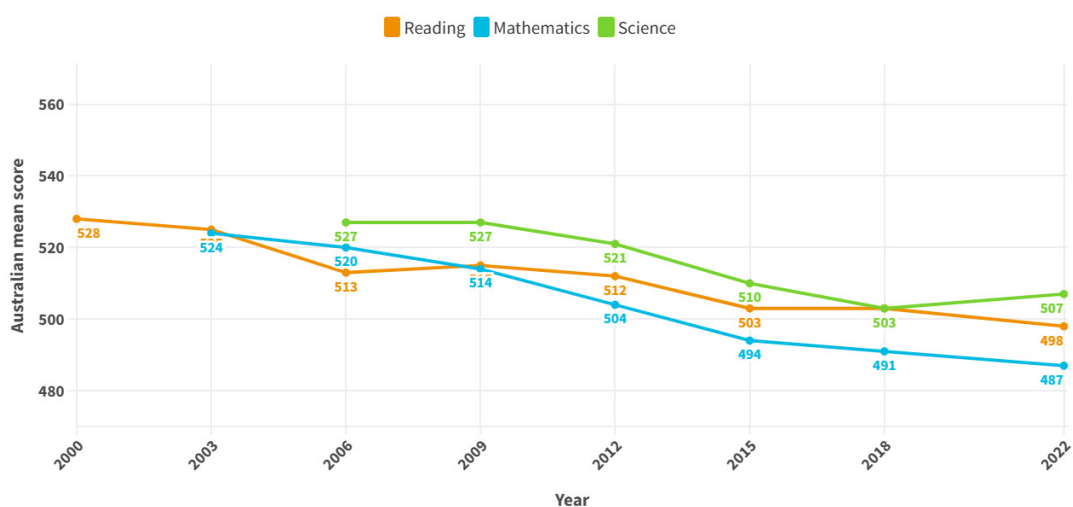
39 Lyn Yates & Cherry Collins. 2010. 'The Absence of Knowledge in Australian Curriculum Reforms.' CIS European Journal of Education, vol. 45, issue 1, pp. 89–102.

40 <https://acara.edu.au/curriculum/student-diversity>

41 <https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/naplan-national-report-archive>

42 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-08-14/naplan-results-2024-revealed/104205514>

Achievement trends



Source: ACER PISA in Brief Key Findings. <https://www.acer.org/au/pisa/key-findings>

The results for the 2022 PISA test in mathematical, reading and scientific literacy for 15 year old students provide further evidence that the introduction of the Australian Curriculum fails to promote excellence. As noted in a report by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), “Just over half of Australian students achieved the National Proficient Standard – 51% in maths, 58% in science and 57% in reading – so a significant number of students are failing to demonstrate they have more than basic skills in those areas.”⁴³

Civics and Citizenship is one of the learning areas detailed in the Australian Curriculum. In addition to the NAPLAN tests ACARA also periodically carries out a sample assessment of Year 6 and Year 10 students. The results of the 2024 survey show, similar to the literacy and numeracy results, there is little cause for celebration. The ‘Civics and Citizenship 2024 Public Report’ notes: “The national average score for Year 6 students in 2024 was 385 scale points, representing a significant decline from the 2019 average of 408” (p.18).⁴⁴ The results are equally disturbing for Year 10 students, with only 28% meeting the proficient standard, “the lowest percentage observed since the assessment’s inception” (p.19).

In relation to improving equity in education the situation is equally disturbing. The Government’s 2023 summary report of an Expert Panel’s review into the education system notes:

Australian schools have some of the highest levels of social segregation among OECD countries, which can affect student learning outcomes and aspirations. This trend has worsened over time. The Panel heard that the nature of the Australian education system leads to limited socio-educational diversity in some schools and entrenches disadvantage for many students⁴⁵ (p.10).

43 <https://www.acer.org/au/discover/article/pisa-2022-australian-student-performance-stabilises-while-oecd-average-falls>

44 <https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1087&context=civics>

45 <https://www.education.gov.au/recurrent-funding-schools/resources/review-inform-better-and-fairer-education-system-summary-report>

3.3. Overcrowded and a mile wide and an inch deep

Since its inception one of the constant criticisms of the Australian Curriculum is that it is so detailed, extensive and voluminous that teachers have argued the curriculum is impossible to implement in the classroom. It's significant that very early in the development of the curriculum there was recognition that care must be taken to ensure whatever was developed did not overwhelm teachers. 'The Shape of the National Curriculum: A Proposal for Discussion' published in 2008 states:

f) The curriculum should be feasible, taking account of the time and resources available to teachers and students and the time it takes to learn complex concepts and ideas. In particular, the curriculum documents should take account of the fact that many primary teachers are responsible for several learning areas and should limit the volume of material which they must read in order to develop teaching programs (p.4).⁴⁶

A second warning concerning the then draft curriculum being overcrowded and impossible to implement in the classroom was made in a letter to the then Education Minister Peter Garrett by a consortium of leading education professional bodies and organisations. In part the letter argued the curriculum was "too large to be realistically implemented" and that "there is a need to reduce the volume of material evident in the current drafts".⁴⁷

Clearly, this advice was not followed. The review of the curriculum carried out in 2014 noted a number of submissions complained about what was seen as an overcrowded and, consequently, superficial curriculum. The review concluded: "The excessive amount of content in the curriculum has been one of the main issues raised with this Review" (p.139).⁴⁸

ACARA's 2019 monitoring report admits overcrowding was still a problem when it concluded: "All stakeholders support the privileging of depth and rigour over breadth, with evidence provided from teachers and schools about breadth creating perceptions of overcrowding and a focus on superficial engagement with curriculum content" (p.17).⁴⁹ The 2019 ACARA monitoring report also includes a submission from the Queensland Catholic Education Commission making the same criticism:

Concerns about an 'overcrowded curriculum' came from teachers working in the primary years (P-6) of schooling. Primary teachers who have all the learning areas to teach believed there was too much content for them to teach and they are not able to plan, teach and assess a curriculum that was sufficiently engaging and demanding ... Implications of having too much content in the curriculum included: skimming over content ... not being able to differentiate learning, no time for deeper investigations, poor transfer of skills to other areas, and misalignment between English and Mathematics and NAPLAN testing (p.18).⁵⁰

46 https://docs.acara.edu.au/resources/The_Shape_of_the_National_Curriculum_paper.pdf

47 Australian Government. 2014. Ibid. PP. 60-62. 2010. 'Australian Curriculum Coalition Common View on the Australian Curricula.'

48 Australian Government. 2014. Ibid.

49 <https://www.acara.edu.au/docs/default-source/curriculum/monitoring-the-effectiveness-of-the-foundation---year-10-australian-curriculum-report-2019.pdf?sfvrsn=2>

50 <https://www.acara.edu.au/docs/default-source/curriculum/monitoring-the-effectiveness-of-the-foundation---year-10-australian-curriculum-report-2019.pdf?sfvrsn=2>

Primary teachers, in particular, complain about the overcrowded curriculum. Unlike secondary teachers who, generally speaking, are subject experts and teach one or two subjects primary school teachers are generalists responsible for teaching a range of subjects and learning areas. As argued by the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) in December 2019:

... despite the repeated advice of APPA since 2008 – we ended up with a cluttered primary curriculum overlaid with programming complexities. Primary teachers, attempting to plan and cover the sheer volume of content with some depth, have found the task both impossible and stressful.⁵¹

As recently as February 2025 the APPA's President Angela Falkenberg repeated the claim primary school teachers found the curriculum overwhelming when she argued it "prescribes too much" and "part of the elephant in the room is that you can't actually cover it all".⁵² As well as being overcrowded the national curriculum has also been criticised for compromising the ability to engage students and for de-skilling teachers. As argued by Professor Lyn Yates:

In the recent past there has been a tendency to move towards an over-detailed and bureaucratic management of the curriculum that takes too little account of the need for time to engage students; and an over-emphasis on the 'pinning down' of what is learned and standards at the expense of the work schools should also do to inspire and engage and attend to different students (pp.4-5).⁵³

3.4. Politically correct

Given the history of curriculum development in Australia, where the cultural Left has been able to dominate the field, it should not surprise if the new curriculum embodies a politically correct and ideologically-driven viewpoint on such matters. That such an outcome will eventuate is more than likely, given that control of developing a national curriculum has been handed to individuals and organisations representative of Australia's education establishment.⁵⁴

The Australian Curriculum, since its inception, has been criticised for being overly politically correct and unduly influenced by cultural-left ideology.⁵⁵ The way subjects and areas of learning are viewed through an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective provides one example illustrating how the curriculum lacks objectivity. The document 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures Version 9.0' suggests the colonisation of Australia by the British was an invasion, that European colonisation has only had a negative impact and that "First Nations Australians have sophisticated political, economic and social organisation systems, which include family and kinship structures, laws, traditions, customs, land tenure systems and protocols for strong governance and authority".⁵⁶

There is a need, for all its faults, to acknowledge the strengths and benefits of Western civilisation, as noted by Australia's eminent historian Geoffrey Blainey.⁵⁷ Yet the current curriculum enables students to complete 10 years of schooling while remaining ignorant of those ancient civilisations that underpin Western civilisation and Australia's mainstream cultural heritage.⁵⁸

51 <https://appa.asn.au/general-news/changes-to-curriculum-and-teaching-need-a-primary-edge/>

52 <https://educationhq.com/news/too-complex-and-infused-with-ideology-critics-sharpen-knives-for-curriculum-190094/>

53 Lyn Yates. 2014, Submission to the Review of the Australian National Curriculum.

54 Kevin Donnelly. 2008. 'The Dubious Quest for a National Curriculum.' Quadrant, September 2008. <https://quadrant.org.au/magazine/uncategorized/the-dubious-quest-for-a-national-curriculum/>

55 See Chris Berg (Ed). 2010. *The National Curriculum: A Critique*. Monographs On Western Civilisation 1. IPA. Melbourne. Bella d'Abrera and Colleen Harkin. 2023. De-educating Australia: How The National Curriculum Is Failing Australian Children. March 2023. IPA. Melbourne. <https://ipa.org.au/ipa-today/de-educating-australia-how-the-national-curriculum-is-failing-australian-children>

56 ACARA. Australian Curriculum. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures. https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/cross-curriculum-priorities/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-histories-and-cultures?organising-idea=A_TSICP%2CA_TSIC%2CA_TSIP

57 Geoffrey Blainey. 2021. "Curriculum swings the pendulum too far." *The Australian*. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/commentary/curriculum-swings-the-pendulum-too-far/news-story/5b130e28b44fd471eee1a3eab8c5e724>

58 Recommendation 15 of the 2014 National Curriculum Review stated there should be a greater focus on Western Civilisation and Judaeo-

Even science and mathematics are not immune with ACARA claiming:

*The elaborations acknowledge that Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have worked scientifically for millennia and continue to contribute to contemporary science. They are scientifically rigorous, demonstrating how Indigenous history, culture, knowledge and understanding can be incorporated into teaching core scientific concepts.*⁵⁹

Such a statement, in addition to ignoring the major contribution of Western science that can be traced back to the ancient Greeks and that includes the Enlightenment, also ignores the reality that science is science and not a cultural artefact. As noted by Professor Igor Bray, "Science knows nothing about the nationality or ethnicity of its participants, and this is its great unifying strength."⁶⁰ The paean to Indigenous culture extends to mathematics where teachers are told "students can engage with and value the histories and cultures of Australian First Nations Peoples in relation to mathematics" and that "many First Nations Australians are adept at pattern recognition and algebraic thinking".⁶¹

The question is not whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and culture should or should not be included in the curriculum (yes, it should) but rather that by overemphasising it students fail to receive a substantial and detailed account of Western civilisation and Western culture. Another concern is that while there are literally hundreds of references to Indigenous culture, history and spirituality there are minimal references to Judaeo-Christianity, the two religions that underpin and enrich Australia's institutions, language and way of life.⁶² As noted by the 2014 review of the national curriculum:

*The Review received a significant number of submissions arguing that the Australian Curriculum did not pay enough attention to the impact of Western civilisation and Judeo-Christianity on Australia's development, institutions and broader society and culture. Indeed, in the context of the Melbourne Declaration's aspiration that the national curriculum would enable students to understand the 'spiritual and moral' dimensions of life, there appears to be a distinct imbalance in the Australian Curriculum as these key aspects have been neglected (p.5).*⁶³

3.5. Bureaucratic and redundant

*... what has been achieved to date has simply melded state and territory bureaucracies into a single-framework of decision-making that may ultimately have no impact on how students learn. Australia may end up with one of the most centralised and bureaucratically organised systems of education in the world.*⁶⁴

Brian Caldwell's critique of Australia's education system, while published in 2009, highlights one of the central challenges facing school education in Australia. Unlike the majority of OECD countries that have a unitary system of government, Australia is a federation made up of state, territory and commonwealth governments, each with their own distinct education bureaucracies responsible for managing curriculum and assessment.

Christianity.

59 <https://v8.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/cross-curriculum-priorities/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-histories-and-cultures/>

60 Igor Bray, 2014. 'Subject matter specialist report on the Australian Curriculum: Science (Foundation to Year 6 and Senior Secondary Physics)', prepared for the 2014 National Curriculum Review.

61 <https://v9.australiancurriculum.edu.au/curriculum-information/understand-this-cross-curriculum-priority/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-histories-and-cultures#accordion-7447f09868-item-9f1d041e62>

62 See Kevin Donnelly (Ed). 2022. *Christianity Matters In These Troubled Times*. Wilkinson Publishing, Melbourne.

63 Australian Government. 2014. Op. Cit.

64 Caldwell, B. 2009a. 'A Failing Grade for the Education Revolution—Strategic Commentary on Policy' in Education. Educational Transformations, p.1.

The situation is made more complicated by the fact that even though the states and territories are responsible for managing and staffing schools the commonwealth government has significantly increased its control over schools since the release of the Karmel Report in 1973. In part, the increase in commonwealth involvement can be explained by the fact it is the Australian government that has the lion's responsibility of raising and distributing personal and corporate taxes and revenues. As the saying suggests, 'he who pays the piper, calls the tune'.

Such are the concerns about the efficacy of Australia's federal system of government that in 2014 the then Prime Minister Tony Abbott commissioned a review to investigate how best to reduce waste and duplication, ensure a more efficient and effective system of government and ensure greater public transparency and accountability.⁶⁵

The Reform of the Federation issues paper dealing with early childhood and schools mirrors Caldwell's criticism when it suggests the current educational architecture is contributing to a "system that is less efficient, effective and equitable than it could be in terms of delivering outcomes for all Australians".⁶⁶ The issues paper goes on to conclude:

*The current fragmented and disjointed mix, and the often times competitive pursuit of different policy solutions between the Commonwealth and the States and Territories, has not helped the pursuit of better educational outcomes.*⁶⁷

After investigating the national architecture for schooling the reviewer Simone Webbe also argues the existing situation is unacceptable. The review investigated ACARA, the body responsible for the national curriculum, as well as the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) and Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO). Webbe concludes the existing structure informing and shaping educational policy and implementation is "not fit for purpose".⁶⁸ Webb writes:

*The contributions of the national bodies in achieving major reforms such as the development of national curriculum and assessment programs and national standards for teaching quality were recognised in the consultations. However, stakeholders expressed a clear and unanimous intent for a step change in the focus, capacity, governance and accountability of the national architecture to serve current needs and those emerging in the next tranche of education reforms.*⁶⁹

3.6. Failure to be implemented

One of the conclusions reached by the 2014 review of the Australian Curriculum is that it is impossible to judge whether the national curriculum is being implemented in schools across the nation. Based on multiple submissions and interviews with key state, territory and commonwealth officials the review's report concludes, "If the definition of a national curriculum includes that it must be implemented comprehensively, with certainty, and consistently, then Australia does not currently have a national school curriculum."⁷⁰ Difficulties in identifying whether schools are implementing the Australian Curriculum include ACARA failing to effectively monitor whether the Australian Curriculum is being implemented, the unique history and nature of curriculum development at the state and territory level working against adopting a one-size-fits all model and the lack of a content-based national testing regime to assess student learning outcomes.

65 [Federation White paper – Release of first issues paper. Media Release. 12/09/2014.](#)

66 Reform of the Federation White Paper. Roles and responsibilities in education Part A: Early Childhood and Schools. Issues Paper 4 December 2014. p. 2. <https://apo.org.au/node/56125>

67 Ibid. p. 26.

68 Simone Webbe. 2019. ['Review Of The National Architecture For Schooling In Australia.'](#) P1.

69 Ibid. p. 2.

70 Australian Government. 2014. Op.Cit. p. 105.

In addition to the above problem, it's also the case that not all states and territories have endorsed the Australian Curriculum as published. As reported in *The Australian*,⁷¹ after NSW completed its curriculum review undertaken by Geoff Masters the state government began to release its revised and updated curriculum documents, described as syllabuses.⁷² The Australian's education reporter Natasha Bitá writes: "NSW has offered to share its back-to-basics school syllabus with other states and territories, after education experts criticised the 'bizarre' national curriculum for its complexity."⁷³ Education Minister Prue Car, after praising her state's approach as favouring explicit teaching, being detailed and clear and focusing on knowledge suggests: "I would be happy to share the NSW curriculum with other states and territories."

Victoria, while not as extensive as NSW, also admits its approach to designing a curriculum is different to that proposed by ACARA. The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority states: "The Victorian Curriculum F-10 incorporates and reflects much of the Australian Curriculum F-10, but differs in some important respects, most notably the representation of the curriculum as a continuum of learning and the structural design."⁷⁴

Similarly, WA has not fully implemented the Australian Curriculum. That state's Department of Education qualifies its listing of the eight national curriculum learning areas on its website by stating: "These learning areas remain broadly consistent with the Australian curriculum but have been modified to suit Western Australian teachers and the children they teach."⁷⁵

4. Options and recommendations

History proves the various attempts to develop and implement a national curriculum have failed and the current version, first introduced to schools over the period 2010-2012, is no different to past attempts. The Australian Curriculum:

- fails to address what best constitutes the purpose of education;
- fails to recognise the vital importance of enculturation drawing on the on-going debt to Judaeo-Christianity and Western civilisation;
- is superficial and overcrowded making it impossible to implement;
- is overly politically correct instead of being objective and impartial;
- is the product of a flawed technocratic and bureaucratic process far removed from the realities of the classroom and the needs of teachers, students and broader society.

At a time when education ministers have decided to embark on yet another review process to supposedly strengthen and improve the Australian Curriculum it is critical the same mistakes bedeviling past attempts are not repeated.

71 <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/education/nsw-offers-other-states-its-slimmeddown-school-syllabus/news-story/187c58ab6dd50aabdd5fa44cf4a0eea4>

72 **Note:** While described as syllabuses the NSW curriculum documents are not syllabuses as such as they still include the Australian Curriculum's capabilities and priorities.

73 <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/education/nsw-offers-other-states-its-slimmeddown-school-syllabus/news-story/187c58ab6dd50aabdd5fa44cf4a0eea4>

74 <https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/overview/about>

75 [Western Australia Department of Education. 'Western Australian Curriculum.'](#)

Option One: Replace the existing national curriculum with knowledge-rich syllabuses

Recommendation One

The Australian Curriculum as currently designed and structured should be replaced by a scaled back, concise and less cumbersome syllabus model detailing the essential knowledge, understanding and skills embodied in key subjects and areas of learning from Foundation to Year 10. Instead of including cross curricula priorities and general capabilities, such syllabuses should be restricted to essential knowledge as intended with the Statements of Learning developed under the Howard Government. Instead of waiting until 2032 before the syllabuses are available, work should begin as soon as possible. The syllabuses should be finalised within a two year period and be ready for schools at the start of 2028.

Recommendation Two

That ACARA should no longer be responsible for reviewing and developing a national curriculum. Instead, a new curriculum body should be established with the task of developing knowledge-rich syllabuses and periodically reviewing and benchmarking state and territory intended curriculum documents to ensure they include the essential content detailed in the national syllabuses.

Recommendation Three

In order to respect school autonomy and flexibility syllabuses should be structured so as to allow curriculum diversity and flexibility at the school level. Syllabuses should take up no more than 60% of the school week.

Recommendation Four

Before any new curriculum design process occurs the question of what constitutes the purpose of education must be addressed as well as what constitutes a knowledge-rich curriculum. The history of curriculum development in Australia has prioritised child-centred learning, 21st century learning, generic competencies and skills and cultural-left inspired critical theory and progressive ideology. Ignored is the need to ensure that each succeeding generation of students is introduced to and becomes familiar with Western civilisation's best validated knowledge and intellectual and creative achievements.

Option Two: Review and revise the existing national curriculum

Recommendation One

Instead of reviewing the Australian Curriculum one step at a time, beginning with the first three years of mathematics, and waiting until 2032 before the next major version is available, the review process should begin soon as possible and be finalised within a two year period and be ready for schools at the start of 2028.

Recommendation Two

On the assumption there will be a national curriculum the first step should involve a forensic examination identifying why past attempts have failed and ensuring such mistakes are not repeated. Such an examination should include the role and impact of state, territory and commonwealth bureaucracies, subject associations and professional bodies including, but not limited to, the Australian Council for Educational Research, the Australian Curriculum Studies Association and teacher unions including the Australian Education Union.

Recommendation Three

Again, on the assumption there is a need for a national curriculum, and before any new design process occurs, the question of what constitutes the purpose of education must be addressed as well as what constitutes a knowledge-rich curriculum. The history of curriculum development in Australia has prioritised child-centred learning, 21st century learning, generic competencies and skills and cultural-left inspired critical theory and progressive ideology. Ignored is the critical importance of enculturation and ensuring students are introduced to and become familiar with our best validated knowledge and achievements.

Recommendation Four

To reduce the overcrowded curriculum and to prioritise the essential knowledge, understanding and skills associated with the subject disciplines and areas of learning, any new curriculum should exclude the existing cross-curricula priorities and general capabilities.

Recommendation Five

To further reduce the overcrowded curriculum and its debilitating impact on students, teachers and schools, any new national curriculum should take up no more than 60% of a school's weekly timetable. While what is essential content should be mandatory, schools should have the autonomy and flexibility to tailor their curriculum to suit local expectations and needs.

Recommendation Six

Instead of a curriculum divided into level descriptors, achievement standards, content descriptors and elaborations any new curriculum should adopt a knowledge-rich syllabus approach. This approach should provide a succinct summary of the essential knowledge, understanding and skills in each of the key subjects and areas of learning for each year level that teachers are expected to teach and students are expected to learn.

POSTSCRIPT: WHY SCHOOLS NEED A KNOWLEDGE-RICH CURRICULUM

*“The philosophy of the school room in one generation will be the philosophy of the government in the next.” – **President Abraham Lincoln***

Arguments in favour of a knowledge-rich curricula include:

- While ensuring students are literate and numerate is vital, especially in the early years of schooling, equally as important is what the American E. D. Hirsch Jr terms cultural literacy. Hirsch argues cultural literacy involves an essential body of knowledge that each student has to be familiar with in order to lead fulfilling lives and be knowledgeable, productive citizens able to contribute positively to society.
- Hirsch also argues that to be effective readers, in addition to the decoding skills associated with a phonics and phonemic awareness model of reading, students need to be familiar with a wide body of knowledge. In his book *The Knowledge Deficit* Hirsch argues: “Cognitive scientists agree that reading comprehension requires prior ‘domain specific’ knowledge about the things that a text refers to...” (p.17).
- Competencies like problem solving and being creative do not arise in a vacuum. As argued in *How People Learn Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*, “Research on expertise in areas such as chess, history, science, and mathematics demonstrate that experts’ abilities to think and solve problems depend strongly on a rich body of knowledge about subject matter” (p.9).
- The American academic Jerome Bruner also argues in *The Process of Education* that teaching what he terms the structure of the discipline is essential for cognitive development. He writes it is important that schools devise “a curriculum whereby we transmit an organised body of knowledge and skill to a new generation to amplify the power of the mind” (p. 56).
- In *A Desolation Of Learning* Chris Woodhead, who was the UK’s Chief Inspector of Schools (1996-2000), argues in favour of a knowledge-rich curriculum against the prevailing orthodoxy involving student-centred learning, and making the curriculum immediately current and relevant and politically correct. After referring to what he terms the forms of understanding associated with subjects like history, mathematics and literature, Woodhead states “I believe that our potential as human beings depends on our struggle to engage with and understand these forms (p.96).”
- The English philosopher Michael Oakeshott in ‘The Voice of poetry in the conversation of mankind’ uses the metaphor of a ‘conversation’ when suggesting the purpose of education is to introduce students to and become familiar with a conversation that began in the mists of time and that is ongoing. Oakeshott argues: “Education, properly speaking, is an initiation into the skill and partnership of this conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices, to distinguish the proper occasion of utterance, and in which we acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to the conversation” (p.490).
- The American Neil Postman in *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* also uses the metaphor of a conversation when he writes “to be educated means to become aware of the origins and growth of knowledge and knowledge systems; to be familiar with the best that has thought and said” (p.188). The phrase ‘the best that has been thought and said’ is taken from Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy*.
- Brian Crittenden, one time Professor of Education at La Trobe University, in ‘Liberal Education and the Role of Schools’ also makes the case for education dealing with essential knowledge. In relation to what he describes as a liberal education, Crittenden writes such an education “provides a broad introduction to those major aspects of literate culture in which human beings have most significantly expressed their intellectual, imaginative and emotional capacities” (p.7).
- A liberal education, as detailed by Brian Crittenden, is one of the defining characteristics of Western civilisation. An education that can be traced to the ancient Greeks and Romans and that is intellectually rigorous, morally grounded and spiritually and emotionally enriching. A liberal education, similar to a classical education, is also committed to beauty, truth, wisdom, rationality and reason.



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