



Australian College of Educators  
Submission to the draft K-10 National Curriculum  
28 May 2010

Membership of the Australian College of Educators is drawn from both the public and private sectors of schooling and across all sectors of education. It has within its membership a significant group of prominent educators and practitioners with specific expertise in the field of curriculum. In this sense ACE is well placed to work with ACARA in a constructive engagement to further develop some of the elements of the draft national curriculum as outlined below.

ACE has long been a supporter of the concept of a national curriculum framework for Australian schools – a curriculum that reflects who we are, our visions for the future and our best attempts to predict and plan for what young people will need to be active and successful participants in Australian and global political, economic social and cultural life. However, we are under no illusions as to the complexity of this undertaking.

These comments are put forward by ACE as a constructive contribution to the ongoing thinking and reflection that needs to inform this ambitious undertaking.

Our overarching concern is that the pace at which the process is being driven is simply too fast for the complexity of the task. While we understand that short political cycles drive the desire for outcomes within unrealistic timeframes, we fear that in the long run this haste may well prove to be self defeating.

Our comments are on the whole package rather than on the specific discipline areas. In relation to the draft national curriculum, ACE considers that there are prior, generic and high-level questions that need to be the subject of consultation, ahead of consultation that focuses only on the specific discipline areas. We also consider that there is a need for the outcomes of the current round of consultation to be publicly available, providing further opportunity for review and feedback before the implementation phase begins. Such a process is necessary to give teachers time to consider and understand the provisions of the curriculum, prior to having to turn their full attention to working out how they will deliver it. In short, the speed of the development process is contrary to accepted knowledge, understanding and experience about sound professional development practices and educational change.

This is the third attempt to put in place a National Curriculum Framework for Australia. This time, the new funding arrangements, the new powers invested in COAG and new National Education Agreement have increased the degree to which states and the Commonwealth are locked into this agreement in ways that might withstand electoral changes at either level. It still behoves us to ensure that the conceptual underpinnings of this new draft framework are well developed and will withstand critical scrutiny from many directions. Our overall assessment is that this draft needs more conceptual work in a number of areas.

## Key issues

### 1. Conceptual gaps or areas that require more explanation and development

#### 1.1 Educational purpose – rationale for this national curriculum

The draft lacks a well articulated rationale beyond meeting the needs of mobile students. What are the issues that a national curriculum is designed to address? And how does a national curriculum further one or more of education purposes as outlined in the Melbourne Declaration? These matters require clarification.

#### 1.2 The definition of curriculum that inform this draft are not clear

Is this a core curriculum or is it the whole curriculum? This is a fundamental issue that requires clarification. Official curriculum documents should set out the high level features - such as the broad scope and sequence, the amount of time devoted to different areas, the approach to assessment and so on.

The document appears to define curriculum primarily in terms of syllabus coverage, although the addition of capabilities and cross curricula themes make it clear that it is intended to be about more than content coverage. A clearer and more coherent definition of curriculum is needed to bring these three elements together in a meaningful way.

#### 1.3 Research base informing the draft is either not communicated or not well developed

The research base that has informed the development of the document needs to be made accessible to the reader. What information was provided to the writers to ensure that the research base was consistently applied? This would help the reader to contextualise what are currently little more than content bullet points. Internationally, for example, some of the more notable high equity- high quality schooling systems take the position that 'less is more'. They have deliberately designed a curriculum with less emphasis on breadth and greater emphasis on depth-to enable learners to focus on higher order thinking, inquiry and innovation. It is not clear whether this approach has informed this document, or what other influences have informed its development.

#### 1.4 What understandings about equity have informed the design of these frameworks?

What are the understandings about equity that inform this draft national curriculum? These need to be made explicit and to reflect all that has been learned about equity and the curriculum over the past several decades. There is a need to move beyond simply naming 'disadvantaged' or marginalised groups in curriculum documents and to recognise the need to deal with such complex phenomena as the social and cultural dimensions of knowledge and the ways in which the very structures of the curriculum can have the effect of marginalising or excluding certain groups of students from opportunities for effective learning.

The principle that all students have an entitlement to the same challenging curriculum content is an important one. It is essential, however, that curriculum development is informed by an understanding of how this principle can work in practice - in all contexts. For example, how does this curriculum support teachers in remote Indigenous schools with a classroom of students who are all at beginning stage of ESL and are also struggling literacy users? What supports such teachers to engage their students with high level concepts of the science curriculum?

We are also unclear about how the year level A to E grading system will work in practice in classrooms with students whose learning progress is significantly below their relevant age-grade level. Do they receive a year level equivalent grade of E every year? And does this E grade discriminate between those students who are behind but are within the year level range and those who are much further behind – sometimes by many year levels? How meaningfully can teachers track student progress using such a system or will they need to track progress outside the curriculum grading framework? These are challenges well worth working through.

There is also no clear explanation about how the education needs of special education students are to be treated in the new national curriculum. Students with a range of learning disabilities have the same entitlement as all other students to attend our schools and to engage in a curriculum that enables them to achieve their personal best, and to have their progress assessed. Their teachers are entitled to a curriculum framework that supports them in assisting these students to learn and in tracking and reporting on their progress.

#### 1.5 The concept of student learning capabilities is potentially very exciting and needs much more conceptual thinking and development

The concept of learning capabilities is potentially very important and should be developed further. They signal that the framework is about more than content coverage but have been given much less emphasis in the documents. Little is revealed about their provenance, how they compare with similar concepts in other schooling systems, their research base, how they are defined, how they have been taken up and applied by the discipline area writers, how they are sequenced and assessed or what standards should apply. Making explicit the information provided to the discipline- based curriculum writers about the concept of capabilities would be a first step in assisting professional understanding of how effectively the concept has been expressed and incorporated in the draft national curriculum.

The current list appears to conflate quite different forms of 'capability'. For example, the skills of literacy and numeracy and using ICT are in the mix with what appear to be values, learning strategies or characteristics of successful learners. There is not enough information to demonstrate what distinguishes capabilities from, say, competencies, or why the designers settled on this particular subset and not others such as resilience, self reflection, or problem solving.

1.6 The draft document does little to support teachers to use the curriculum frameworks to develop cross-disciplinary approaches

ACE believes that this is a lost opportunity to undertake some very important work to showcase high quality cross disciplinary approaches. In the present draft, the assumption appears to be that this can be left to states and territories, individual schools or teachers.

As Alan Reid argues "one of the features of the contemporary world is that the approach to issues, problems and challenges demands crossing established disciplinary boundaries, not remaining trapped within them. The four subject drafts adopt a particularly emaciated version of 'cross disciplinary learning', understanding it simply to be the appearance of aspects of one learning area inside another. That is, far from organising the curriculum in ways that require students to explore problems and issues by using knowledge and skills across a range of disciplines, cross-disciplinary work is simply a means to enhance the learning of students within a discipline. This could have been addressed in the four drafts if the designers had developed a mechanism to facilitate cross disciplinary study – even cross referenced some key concepts – but the subjects stand as separate and isolated areas of study."<sup>i</sup>

1.7 Assessment – an opportunity to turn what is now an undeveloped area into a strength that could have long term consequences

How assessment is to be treated within the national curriculum is fundamental. More attention is needed to making clear what understandings are entailed in the curriculum about assessments for, to and about learning.

The draft outlines the approach to grading, but the question about the criteria or standards against which these grades are to be assigned is not well addressed. The achievement standards appear to be more a summary of the content in each year level for each subject. They do not appear to refer to the quality of learning or to the capabilities. It is difficult to know how teachers will use them.

This weakness in the area of assessment is doubly disappointing because the introduction of a National Curriculum framework for Australia and a strong conceptual framework around student assessment could open the way for updating our approach to student testing and schools reporting.

The existence of a National Curriculum framework for all Australian schools provides an opportunity to rethink our approach to the national reporting of student and school achievement which should be seized. Australia now has the potential to develop a state-of-the-art, nationally benchmarked set of classroom based assessment activities that are aligned to the curriculum content and the student capabilities.

To support this a data bank of student responses to these assessment activities - in various forms (videos of performances, written work) could be developed over time. This meta-data base would support high quality teacher moderation and a comprehensive and shared understanding of student performance expectations at each level of the curriculum. This would also support using assessments to support focused lesson planning and student feedback.

## 1.8 Design and development issues

For the last attempt at a national curriculum, in the 1990's, the development of all the key learning areas was completed before they were released for implementation. This would have meant a more challenging implementation pathway (for those systems that were still supporting it) but it did provide a clear high level design where it was understood how all the discipline areas were meant to be seen from a holistic perspective.

There now appears to be a lack of clarity about the relationship between the states and territories and national authorities responsible for curriculum - especially in light of the circumstances where only four curriculum discipline areas have been developed at a national level. States and territories will still have differently packaged elements that cover the remaining disciplines that will continue to be state based in the interim. For some this fit will be quite difficult (e.g for jurisdictions that have a developmentally sequenced curriculum).

Each system will need to develop its own transition plan to deal with these circumstances. In the transition period, before all the learning areas are ready for implementation, there will be a perception by some that there is a hierarchy of knowledge and that those not yet developed will be less important. Furthermore it is inevitable that the discipline areas chosen first will define to some extent the high level architecture of the framework. This hierarchy will now define the architecture for the ones not yet developed in terms of ways in which the curriculum will be presented and assessed. This issue should be addressed in the communication documents, which should make clear, in particular, the degree to which the high level architecture is still open to finetuning in phase two and how these issues will be identified for consideration.

The other concerns about this discipline-by-discipline approach is that more focus and attention has been given to these four discipline areas, with little focus to date on what is the relative emphasis between discipline areas. How many hours are to be devoted to what areas? Indeed, until they are all developed, practitioners will not know this high level picture. The concerns that the final products when delivered will result in a very busy and crowded curriculum – one I am sure ACARA has wanted to avoid – may require some consideration now, rather than waiting until all areas are developed.

## 2. Implementation / responsibility and accountability issues

### 2.1 Commonwealth and state/territory arrangements are in a state of flux.

The Australian system of federalism and the roles and responsibilities of the Commonwealth, states and territories for education have no direct overseas counterparts. Holding this national vision together will

take more than signatures in national agreements with related funding conditions. However, the lack of clarity and the changing shape of constitutional and political realities of federalism make it difficult to understand how authority and accountability over curriculum implementation and quality issues will be managed when States still have constitutional authority. For example, given that commitment to implementing a national curriculum is a fundamental element of the COAG endorsed National Education Agreement, will the quality of the implementation process come under the ambit of review of the COAG Review Council? If so what are the criteria to be used for assessing progress and quality? ACARA should give some thought as to how the quality, coherence and comprehensiveness of implementation can be reviewed and tracked.

There needs to be greater clarity about the role of ACARA and or other bodies at the national level in relation to the role and responsibility of the States and Territories in the curriculum development and implementation processes. It is all too easy to see the problems inherent in a situation where the responsibility for development and that for implementation are split, and where it appears that States will be required to bear responsibility for all those aspects of the process that are problematic and require resources and, therefore, the blame for shortcomings.

Comments already made by the Commonwealth about the implementation phase seem to imply an understanding that states and territories have already been funded for this work. This is a highly optimistic reading of state/territory understandings, given that the National Educational Agreement funding was made up, in the main, by pooling the Schools Assistance and Targeted Program funds<sup>ii</sup>. While the National Partnerships provide significant and mostly new funding, this is already tied to very specific deliverables and targets under State Implementation Plans.

The implementation challenge has in our view been significantly under-estimated. And the straitened timeframe compounds the risks. To shore up commitment to an effective implementation, the very least that is needed is for ACARA to invest effort in building stakeholder ownership and buy in from the professional associations, which are a potentially valuable resource to support implementation.

## 2.2 Evaluation

Ideally the design of the evaluation of a major new policy initiative should be developed as part and parcel of the design phase. Doing this can often result in the identification of areas of weakness, in the design itself, that can then be strengthened. If this had been done for this draft curriculum, the lack of explicitness about educational purposes, and how this initiative contributes to the furthering of such purposes, would have become immediately apparent.

## Conclusion

Creating the first national curriculum for Australia is hard work. ACE considers that, given the gains that can be made, it is worth investing the time and effort necessary to the high quality curriculum that can only be achieved with cooperation and buy in from the education profession. It is important to acknowledge and to build on existing strengths. Most states have made significant investment in

curriculum, including in processes that have engaged teachers and principals in the development and implementation processes and gained their understanding, confidence and support. The challenge facing ACARA is to achieve the benefits of bringing together curriculum leaders from across the country, while retaining the strengths and benefits of these existing processes and networks

It is our view that the arguments for a national curriculum in Australia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are powerful and timely. This is an important step to take as a nation and we need to get it right.

ACE Recommendations:

- a) ACARA to reschedule the development and implementation so that more time be allocated to each of the next stages – piloting, refining, and implementing phase 1.
- b) ACARA to make explicit the view of curriculum upon which the national curriculum is based, and what this means for implementation.
- c) Significant additional planning and funding for professional learning to be provided to support teachers and pre-service teachers to effectively implement the National Curriculum.
- d) Under-developed areas of the national curriculum framework - namely those associated with educational purpose, equity, student learning capabilities, cross-disciplinary approaches, and pedagogy to be addressed as a matter of urgency. This could be through the commissioning of papers that do the research and conceptual work needed, with a parallel strategy to engage teachers in discussion. We believe that ACE is well placed to assist ACARA with some of this work and would be happy to discuss this further.
- e) ACARA to work with states and territories to develop transition plans for the period when only a proportion of the curriculum will be national.
- f) Roles, responsibilities, accountabilities and resourcing for all elements of implementation to be made clear by MCEECDYA and possibly also by COAG.
- g) A paper to be produced on future options for the approach to assessment and reporting in the context of the national curriculum to be commenced so that, in the long term, we can downgrade the emphasis that is given to single point in time multiple choice type national assessments in a narrow band of learning areas. This work should be commenced now.
- h) An evaluation plan to be commenced now.
- i) ACARA to commence formal and comprehensive engagement with the educational profession and establish formal working groups that involve the profession in a considered way to provide the Board with advice on implications of its work for schools as a means of avoiding risks of disjunction between curriculum development and implementation in schools.
- j) Consistent with the principle of transparency, responses to this consultation, including responses that cover the framework as a whole, rather than discipline specific feedback, should be made publicly available so that further feedback can be provided prior to implementation.

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<sup>i</sup> forthcoming article in Professional Educator

<sup>ii</sup> apart from an increase in the AGSRC rate for the Government primary school sector