ACSA Response to the Review of the Australian Curriculum
October 2014

In January 2014, the Australian Government commissioned an independent review of the Australian Curriculum as part of its broader *Students First* policy for school education. Professor Ken Wiltshire AO and Dr Kevin Donnelly were appointed to conduct the review (Terms of Reference available at - [http://www.studentsfirst.gov.au/terms-reference-review-australian-curriculum](http://www.studentsfirst.gov.au/terms-reference-review-australian-curriculum))


The Australian Curriculum Studies Association of Australia (ACSA) is committed to curriculum reform informed by the principles of social justice and equity and respect for the democratic rights of all. The purpose of any curriculum review should be to provide all students with the best possible learning opportunities and outcomes. It was in this spirit that ACSA contributed a submission to the Australian Government Review of the Australian Curriculum; and it is in this context that ACSA highlight our concerns about *The Review* below:

**The Reviewers**

- The Commonwealth Minister for Education, Hon. Christopher Pyne MP chose not to call for tender for *The Review*. In doing so, notable professional organisations and curriculum experts were excluded from tendering, and this by definition has lessened the authority and weight of *The Review*.

- Over 1600 submissions were tendered by educational authorities and curriculum associations. *The Review* however, relies heavily on the recommendations of 15 selected ‘subject specialists’. The basis for the selection of these individuals remains unclear and ACSA queries the representativeness of their views.

- The review’s lack of engagement with empirical research is of concern. Apart from government reports and curriculum documents, there are few references to research literature.

- The writers of the invited position papers are not all cognisant of pedagogy and practice in schools. The Civics & Citizenship Education (CCE) Curriculum, for example, has been critiqued not by an educator or someone expert in the development of CCE but a professor of constitutional law. This is of particular concern given the extensive and wide consultation process undertaken by ACARA in developing the Australian Curriculum.
ACSA’S comments on The Review and recommendations

(1) **Reduction of focus on Cross Curricular Priorities**: The recommendation *(Recommendation 17)* to relegate the Cross Curriculum Priorities to certain subject areas rather than have them embedded across the curriculum’s learning areas, signals a reduction in focus on these areas within the curriculum and this is of great concern. The innovation and priority placed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders’ histories and cultures, Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia, and Sustainability, within the Cross Curricular Priorities was a proactive step within the initial Australian Curriculum design, challenging teachers, teacher educators, researchers and school communities to explicitly expand their knowledge and understanding. Young Australians need to engage with a range of cultural knowledges and perspectives. To limit such knowledge to the realm of a particular subject area can result in a lack of knowledge and understanding which undermines a commitment to inclusion and the Government’s *Students First* education rhetoric.

(2) **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders**: The reduction of focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders’ histories and cultures across curriculum learning areas, and possible relegation to the subject of History for example, has historically privileged a monolithic Anglo-centric/Eurocentric view. A curriculum that denies or silences the contributions of others is divisive and unbalanced. This is basis for ignorance which, at its worst, leads to stereotyping and racism.

(3) **Sustainability**: Australia’s environment, and the health of its people, is facing challenges, no matter where in the debate on Climate Change one stands. To downplay this essential and confronting issue is to limit students understanding of and ability to address the major global sustainability challenges they will face in the future.

(4) **Asia Literacy**: Australia’s engagement with Asia is a priority for regional context and should reflect Australia’s extensive engagement with Asia across social, cultural, political and economic spheres. To downplay this single biggest opportunity facing Australia is short sighted. The Asian languages of Indonesian, Chinese, Japanese and Korean require at least equal if not greater emphasis in any languages curriculum in Australia than the four dominant European languages, namely Spanish, French, German and Italian.

(5) **Limited focus within General Capabilities (Recommendation 18)**: With the rhetoric of *Students First* and the increasing evidence that student achievement is linked with their wellbeing, caution needs to be taken with the recommendation to focus primarily on literacy, numeracy and ICT capabilities across the curriculum and reducing the emphasis on personal and social capability, critical and creative thinking, ethical understanding and intercultural understanding. Wellbeing does not purely emerge from academic achievement, rather is foundational in advancing achievement. The Australian Curriculum offers the opportunity to be proactive in advocating a curriculum that promotes well students, teaching them to be positive, resilient, critical and creative thinkers, rather than purely being reactive in dealing with mental health.

(6) **Endorsement of a Judeo-Christian view**: Recommendation 15 that ACARA revise the Australian Curriculum to ‘better recognise the contribution of Western civilisation, our Judeo-Christian heritage’ is concerning. Questions about ‘appropriateness’ are value laden. Many Australians do not have a Western, so termed ‘Judeo-Christian heritage’. Such a recommendation ignores the multicultural, multi-faith composition of contemporary
Australia, and recommends privileging one over another, when any pluralist would recognise that one interpretation of civilization and its heritage should stand equally and alongside any other.

(7) Insufficiently evidenced claims: There is an underlying tone in the review that suggests that the curriculum is insufficient or inadequate to meet 21st century working and living requirements. The flaw in this assumption is to presume that past learning styles, such as thinking clearly, creatively, systematically, methodically, analytically to problem solve, to be ethical and socially responsible, never were requirements in centuries prior to the 21st. The reviewers did not compare and contrast 21st skills from previous centuries and therefore are disenfranchised from making claims without a basis.

(8) All students’ needs should be the foundational basis of any curriculum design, rather than a focus on the mainstream majority. ACSA values the review for acknowledging the need for further progress in the area of students with disabilities, however caution needs to be taken in its recommendation to revert ‘back to the basics’ and further refine the mandated curriculum, which potentially may exclude students (especially students with disabilities) from accessing the curriculum due to its lack of flexibility to meet diverse needs. All students need to be supported in achieving and accessing a curriculum that enables this.

Where to from here?

The Review consciously leaves it to Government to deal with the recommendations. The initial response clearly suggests that the Education Department will grapple with:-

- Simplifying, reducing or altering the overcrowded curriculum in the primary years, and to a lesser extent in the secondary years
- Will leave the question of an Australian Curriculum in years 11 and 12 to local jurisdictions to develop at their pace, or not
- Improve parental engagement (is this where Students First comes in, and what will this look like?)
- Re-balance the curriculum by reframing its shape in a less mandated way, leaving schools with options and room for interpretations to meet local needs.
- A restructured governance model for ACARA, one in which specialists replace jurisdictional education representatives. This is an ungrounded recommendation, undeveloped and lacks in argumentative weight. Had some of the submissions been more carefully included in the review, this recommendation would not have been articulated.

What did the Review not say?

There are still several unspoken questions relating to the Australian Curriculum and ACARA.

- Is the governance structure of ACARA to be reframed to reduce operating costs?
- Will there be funding for lifting teacher capacity? If so, who will provide it?
- What timeline is envisaged?
What are the implications for greater school based incremental leadership autonomy in the years under Gonsky?

Does the review argue for greater fragmentation or centralisation of curriculum?

Where does Commonwealth authority end and local jurisdiction begin, and how is education to be funded?

What is the place of education in today’s knowledge economy? Surely more is needed, not less?

Conclusion

ACSA requests a meeting with representatives of the Australian Government Department of Education at the earliest opportunity to elaborate on this response so that a more balanced perception of the Australian Curriculum, its achievements and future can be planned and implemented. Indeed, implementing the current online Australian curriculum might be a more helpful way ahead for schools than the uncertainty this review creates for teachers.