

Review of the Australian Curriculum

Queensland response

February 2014

Context

Queensland is committed to the development of an Australian Curriculum that will provide consistent and explicit curriculum expectations across the nation. The Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) — in partnership with Education Queensland (EQ), Queensland Catholic Education Commission (QCEC) and Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ)¹ — has been proactive in providing considered feedback and advice to inform each phase of the development and then in faithfully implementing the curriculum without delay.

Queensland's implementation of the F–10 Australian Curriculum began in 2011. By the end of 2013, all Queensland schools had commenced substantial implementation of the Phase 1 learning areas: English, Mathematics, Science and History. Schools will be implementing Geography in 2014.

Extensive professional development and resource development has been undertaken to support teachers with curriculum planning, assessment and reporting.

Preliminary work on how Queensland syllabuses will use the senior secondary Australian Curriculum content and achievement standards as the agreed and common base has also been undertaken.

Curriculum shaping and development processes

Queensland stakeholders have welcomed the opportunities to provide feedback on the development of the Australian Curriculum. Queensland education leaders, teachers and curriculum officers from across school sectors and the QSA have been directly involved in ACARA's consultation processes through:

- national panels and forums
- achievement standards validation groups
- curriculum writing and advisory groups
- Curriculum Directors Group and F–12 Curriculum Reference Group.

Additionally, the development of Queensland positions on draft shape papers and curriculum has involved many stakeholders at forums organised by the school sectors and the QSA. Through this process, issues such as balance, student choice and diversity have been addressed. The Queensland consultation reports are available on the QSA website at:

<http://www.qsa.qld.edu.au/13635.html>

It should also be acknowledged that the consultation process has encouraged and developed a more collaborative national approach to curriculum development and resource sharing.

¹ Education Queensland (EQ) represents and advocates for 1400 EQ schools, Queensland Catholic Education Commission represents and advocates for 297 Catholic schools, and Independent Schools Queensland represents and advocates for 188 Independent schools.

Issues

A common framework

Queensland has consistently recommended the development of an overarching framework for the Australian Curriculum. Although the development of the Australian Curriculum has involved extensive consultation for each discrete aspect of the curriculum, there has been little discussion of how it all fits together. Consequently, the F–10 Australian Curriculum appears to be three distinct elements: discipline-specific content descriptions and achievement standards for 16 learning areas/subjects, a learning continuum for seven general capabilities and organising ideas for three cross-curriculum priorities. While there are some relationships to each other, each is written in different ways using different structures. This has resulted in what many believe is a crowded and complex curriculum and a view that the curriculum structure negates theories about middle schooling (Years 3–6).

Queensland has consistently advised that a clear, overarching F–12 framework is required to guide the development of the different learning areas, build a common nomenclature and support teachers to make connections, see commonalities, differences and progressions and focus on key messages.

Some examples of the inconsistencies in the F–12 curriculum noted by Queensland stakeholders include:

- The organisational constructs within the curriculum documents for the different learning areas/subjects are inconsistent. ACARA has argued that the differences are necessary to reflect the discipline-specific approach taken in the Australian Curriculum. However, the discipline or subject specificity should be evident in the content not the way the curriculum is constructed. The inconsistencies in curriculum organisation, grain size, terminology and style do little to assist schools and teachers, especially primary teachers to implement the curriculum. Appendix 1, Table 1 summarises the headings used in the organisation sections of the Phase 1 learning areas and illustrates the differences.
- There is content and skill overlap. For example, the development of knowledge and understanding of text types, language use, audience and purpose in the content of English overlaps with several key concepts in Media, especially P–6. The conceptualisation of inquiry skills is different in Science, History, Geography, Civics and Citizenship and Economics and Business. Appendix 1, Table 2 illustrates the differences. Across F–10, the development of inquiry skills should be a focus. Using a common construct for inquiry would help reinforce the skill through different content.
- The achievement standards are written using a common structure — understandings and skills — but there are differences in the level of detail in each learning area/subject, even across the same year levels, e.g. the Science achievement standards contain specific content topics, whereas the History achievement standards describe concepts.
- The currently available learning areas/subjects have been developed for a single year, whereas the next group of learning areas/subjects have been developed as bands for F–2 and then each two years, 3–4, 5–6, 7–8, and 9–10.
- The general capabilities have been developed as “levels” 1–6 across F–10 and are structured using “organising elements” for a “learning continuum”.
- The cross-curriculum priorities are structured using “organising ideas”.

The senior secondary subjects have been developed using an entirely different construct — content is “packaged” as units, strands established in F–10 are not continued, the general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities are not obvious and it is unclear how an F–12 learning progression is achieved.

The way forward:

The development of an overarching framework to inform any revision of the Australian Curriculum would be an important first step to ensuring balance and rigour in the curriculum.

F–10 Australian Curriculum: a crowded curriculum

Queensland consultation on every draft curriculum document has identified that there is too much content within and across year levels. This feedback has not led to a significant reduction in the published curriculum. However, once the curriculum was endorsed, Queensland has adhered to the agreement to implement the Australian Curriculum without modification. Having implemented four learning areas and beginning implementation of a fifth, it is now very clear that the curriculum is overcrowded.

When complete, the F–12 Australian Curriculum will include curriculum content and achievement standards for the following learning areas and subjects:

- English
- Mathematics
- Science
- Humanities and Social Sciences developed as four subjects — History, Geography, Civics and Citizenship, and Economics and Business
- The Arts developed as five subjects — Visual Arts, Media, Dance, Music and Drama
- Technologies developed as two subjects — Digital Technologies and Design and Technologies
- Health and Physical Education developed with two distinct strands which schools have reported are often taught by different teachers
- Languages.

In addition, the Australian Curriculum also includes:

- learning continua for each of the seven general capabilities: Literacy, Numeracy, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Critical and Creative Thinking, Personal and Social Capability, Ethical Behaviour and Intercultural Understanding
- sequence of learning text for each of the three cross curriculum priorities: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and culture, Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia, and Sustainability.

The combined impact of the content and assessment requirements in the learning areas and the discrete subjects within learning areas is impacting on all phases of schooling in different ways. For example:

- In the Early Years and in Years 3–4, the indicative 72% of curriculum time for the Australian Curriculum discipline-specific learning areas/subjects leaves little time for schools to focus on literacy and numeracy development, which is the focus of the formative years of schooling.
- In Years 5 to 8, teachers will be teaching, assessing and reporting against 16 different curriculum documents using an estimated 79% of curriculum time. For some subjects, the indicative curriculum time is as little as 20 hours a year.
- In Years 9 to 10, there are timetabling issues particularly in relation to the subjects with smaller time allocations, e.g. Civics and Citizenship about 4 hours a term, and Economics and Business about 12 hours a term.
- For schools with large numbers of Indigenous and/or ESL students, there is little capacity for differentiation.

- For smaller schools and in multiple-age classrooms, the delivery of the curriculum is very complex. This is a significant issue in Queensland where approximately 25% of state schools are one- and two-teacher schools.
- In Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, the impact of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests which are not aligned to Australian Curriculum learning areas or the capabilities for literacy and numeracy is a further complication.
- The achievement standards with different constructs for different learning areas creates difficulties for teachers planning assessments across learning areas especially in primary schools. The level of detail provided with multiple cognitions can make managing assessment challenging.

The establishment of the ACARA Primary Perspectives Working Group in 2013 to address concerns raised about the overcrowded curriculum has resulted in some worthwhile strategies that improve the website. However, none of the actions address, in a realistic way, the issue of the crowded curriculum and put in place practical strategies that will assist primary teachers to manage the curriculum. The key issues raised by participants in that working group include:

- time allocations that do not realistically reflect the time required to develop mastery and depth, to do revision and to include local priorities
- the lack of consistency within and across learning areas and subjects that make planning difficult
- the need for advice about the key concepts, big ideas or what is “core” and what is “optional”.

The way forward:

The “decluttering” of the curriculum can be achieved through the development of an overarching framework to ensure balance and rigour as mentioned above. The framework should:

- build greater consistency in the constructs within and across learning areas
- focus on the key concepts to be developed
- establish realistic time allocations.

Years 11–12 Australian Curriculum

Issues that have been raised consistently in Queensland’s feedback on the senior secondary curriculum highlighted two key issues:

- the unitised structure:

Queensland has consistently argued against the inclusion of “units” which artificially divide the subject. Units that organise the content in a defined way are incompatible with the ACARA definition of a “subject” and ACARA’s charter to develop content and achievement standards to be included in all senior courses. Course development, a state responsibility, would include the development of units.

The level of prescription about when content must be taught will impact on schools’ capacity to rotate large cohorts through their available resources and to organise programs that contextualise learning. For example, in northern Queensland the weather plays a significant role in when best to deliver aspects of a course notably prac/excursion/field work.

Significantly, the unitised approach will have a negative impact on the capacity of schools to offer composite classes which are common in small, often remote Queensland schools and in bigger metropolitan schools with small cohorts in particular subjects. Developing programs of learning for composite classes will be a major issue, if not an impossibility, with the unitised structure of the senior secondary curriculum.

- alignment of curriculum, achievement standards, assessment and reporting

The construct of the achievement standards are not aligned to the aims, learning outcomes and content which makes it less clear about what must be taught and assessed.

The way forward:

- revise the curriculum to focus on the “core” content to be covered during Year 11 and Year 12 using feedback from states and territories, including the removal of the specified units
- revise the key elements of the curriculum — aims, learning objectives, content and standards — to ensure there is obvious alignment between what is expected to be taught and what is expected to be assessed and reported
- undertake further work on the useability of the achievement standards.

Responsiveness

During the development processes, many Queensland stakeholders felt that ACARA could be more responsive, that their feedback has not been adequately addressed and that there has been a lack of tangible outcomes from consultation meetings.

During 2013, concerns were expressed about the hasty timeframes for the development of the remaining Phase 2 and 3 learning areas. This resulted in reduced opportunities for consultation on some significant issues that had been raised about the construct of the Languages curriculum and the Economics and Business curriculum.

The way forward:

- revise consultation timeframes to ensure there is time to provide considered feedback.
 - the 12 week public consultation period usually used for the draft curriculum should be extended to factor in the cycles of school life that make realistic participation in consultation difficult, for example school holidays, beginning and end-of-term processes such as reporting
 - at a minimum, one working week should be provided for consultation on revised draft curriculum documents
 - at least one working week should be provided for consideration of meeting papers
- provide specific feedback to the state or territory on key issues raised in their feedback which are not being progressed.

Curriculum content

The learning described by the full suite of the F–10 Australian Curriculum documents is similar to previous curriculum and practice in Queensland that was based on the eight Key Learning Areas (KLAs). However the quantity of content and, in some aspects, the complexity of the organisation of the Australian Curriculum represents a significant change. The development of an overarching framework as suggested above would help to resolve this issue.

The content in the senior secondary subjects generally represents what is typically expected in senior secondary.

General Capabilities

The seven general capabilities identify a set of skills that support student learning and develop ways of behaving and living with others. As such, they are a familiar feature of curriculum documents and are aligned to the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (2009).

Initially, the curriculum writers were to embed the general capabilities in the content descriptions. However, this has been complicated with the addition of a separate “learning continuum” organised as elements for “levels” 1–6. The levels do not align with year levels or bands. Further work is being undertaken to develop assessment of the general capabilities and portfolios to demonstrate achievement. As stated above, this has complicated the curriculum and added another layer to an already crowded curriculum.

Cross Curriculum Priorities

The three cross curriculum priorities provide a local, regional and global context for learning. In the main, these are embedded in content descriptions if appropriate or as suggestions in the elaborations. As with the general capabilities, the role of the cross curriculum priorities has been complicated by the development of “organising ideas” that reflect the essential knowledge, understandings and skills for the priority. This appears to be additional content. There is also some duplication with the general capability, Intercultural Understanding.

The way forward:

- develop an overarching framework that clearly shows the relationship between the constructs of the three dimensions of the curriculum
- use the general capabilities continua and the cross curriculum priorities organising ideas to inform curriculum revision and development to ensure they are embedded in a consistent and explicit way that supports learning between and within learning areas/subjects and year levels
- review the cross curriculum priorities organising ideas and the general capability, Intercultural Understanding for duplication
- identify where the general capabilities and the organising ideas of the cross curriculum priorities are explicit in the content descriptions
- as a matter of urgency, make clear the relationship of NAPLAN to the curriculum content and the general capabilities for literacy and numeracy.

Monitoring, evaluation and review

Queensland supported the process for monitoring and evaluation put in place by ACARA in late 2013. In consultation on the process, it was suggested that the strategy should:

- ensure that sources of information focus on the Australian Curriculum and not local implementation issues
- develop strategic, common questions to inform feedback mechanisms used by states and territories
- identify aspects of the curriculum that are achieving the broader goals of a national curriculum as articulated in *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum v4*.

Implementation

Across F–10, Queensland schools access curriculum content and achievement standards directly from the Australian Curriculum website; they access advice and guidelines about implementation, assessment and reporting from the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) or their school sector.

Other states have incorporated the Australian Curriculum content using familiar constructs, such as syllabuses, to make clear what teachers in those states must teach. In some cases, this has meant adjusting the Australian Curriculum to suit the local context. The achievement standards are being used in a range of ways.

In senior secondary, each state and territory will use the Australian Curriculum content and achievement standards as the agreed and common base for locally developed courses.

If a truly rigorous national curriculum is to be achieved, there needs to be a clearly articulated minimum expectation for inclusion in all state and territory curriculum documents.

Appendix 1

Table 1 Organisation sections

This table illustrates the lack of consistency in the construct of the curriculum documents. Each document includes an organisation section. However, the section is presented in quite different ways in each document. This does not set up a familiar scaffold that supports teachers to understand the curriculum, for example, achievement standards are only included in the organisation section in the Geography curriculum.

English	Mathematics	Science	History	Geography
Strands and sub-strands	Content strands	Science Understanding	Historical knowledge and understanding	Geographical knowledge and understanding
	Proficiency strands	Science as a Human Endeavour		
		Science Inquiry Skills	Historical skills	Geographical inquiry and skills
		Relationship between the strands	Relationship between the strands	Relationship between the strands
Texts	Content descriptions		Inquiry questions	Inquiry questions
Language modes	Sub-strands		Overviews	
			Depth studies	
			Relationship between overviews and depth studies	
			Concepts for developing historical understanding	
Year level descriptions	Year level descriptions	Year level descriptions	Year level descriptions	Year level descriptions
				Key inquiry questions
Content descriptions		Content descriptions	Content descriptions	Content descriptions
Content elaborations	Content elaborations	Content elaborations	Content elaborations	Content elaborations
				Achievement standards

Table 2 Inquiry skills

This table illustrates the lack of a consistent approach to inquiry in F–10 in Science and the subjects that make up the Humanities and Social Sciences learning area. This does not provide teachers, especially primary teachers, with a practical approach to this skill development.

Science	Humanities and social sciences			
	History	Geography	Civics and citizenship (draft)	Business and economics (draft)
	Chronology, terms and concepts			
Questioning and predicting	Historical questions and research	Observing, questioning and planning	Questioning and research	Economic and business questions and research
Planning and conducting		Collecting, recording, evaluating and representing		
Processing and analysing data and information	Analysis and use of sources	Interpreting, analysing and concluding	Analysis, synthesis and interpretation	Reasoning, interpretation and analysis
Evaluating	Perspectives and interpretations		Problem-solving and decision-making	Application
				Decision-making
	Explanation and communication	Communicating	Communication and reflection	Reflection and communication
		Reflecting and responding		