

Submission to the NSW Curriculum Review from the School of International Studies and Education

University of Technology Sydney

Dear Professor Masters

We write on behalf of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) academics at the School of International Studies and Education at the University of Technology Sydney who have collaborated to assemble this response. We believe this Review to be a significant moment in NSW education history equal to other watershed ‘moments’ such as the Wyndham Scheme, the Carrick and Eltis Reviews, the McGaw Reforms and the introduction of the Australian Curriculum. As such, we argue the following, that:

- the Review must attend more closely to the major question of articulating the *purposes* of education;
- the Review needs to be more than a ‘decluttering’ exercise (based on the perception that syllabuses are ‘content-heavy’ and are ‘weighed down’);
- NSW teachers are equally ‘weighed down’ by a number of factors including a repressive accreditation/accountability regime;
- the current role of NAPLAN and the HSC cannot be ignored with regard to curriculum implementation in schools;
- the HSC ‘Reforms’ of 2017 diluted and diminished specific areas of the curriculum;
- a mechanism to ensure an appropriately balanced curriculum K-12 needs to be implemented.

Introduction

The past 20 years have seen significant changes in NSW education. Teachers, schools and school systems have been required to manage, for example, the McGaw senior school reforms; the introduction of the Australian Curriculum and the integration of its content into new NSW K-10 Syllabuses; an increase in the school leaving age and associated challenges; the HSC reforms of 2017; and increasing pressure to improve student performance in NAPLAN test results. These pressures on teacher perceptions of workload and motivation are evident in research (Carter, Manuel & Dutton, 2018; Manuel, Carter & Dutton, 2019) and signal issues and challenges pertinent to the current Review with regard to managing the scope, nature and timeline for implementation of any changes to the curriculum. Any changes resulting from the Review will also require resourcing, requiring the education sectors to devote funding in the form of release time and in the provision of quality professional learning experiences for teachers.

In addition, teachers are also currently under pressure from accountability and accreditation regimes from the New South Wales Standards Authority (NESA) and AITSL. The centralisation of control by these organisations has led to an increase in teacher workload – merely to maintain a job. While the Review is publicly presenting its task as one of ‘decluttering’ the curriculum, such an exercise will not alleviate stress for teachers unless this accountability regime is itself reviewed and reformed. We stress that we are not advocating for less a qualified workforce: we are arguing that the current regime is burdensome and for some teachers, debilitating; and is also symptomatic of a campaign which unfairly targets teachers, their training and work practices.

Another feature of education in NSW is the constant imposition of external programs, particularly in the primary school. Programs such as road safety, sun safety, healthy eating and the like, soak up time and resources. A recent example is a call from a NSW coroner for secondary schools to focus on “the effects of high doses of MDMA; the contribution of other factors, such as temperature, existing medication and poly-drug use” (Thompson & Singhai, 2019, p. 3) following the deaths of young festival goers. While not downplaying the seriousness of this issue, these calls are emblematic of how the wider community views the role of schools: the site where pressing social issues are addressed in a didactic and paternalistic manner.

The Review needs to attend to this dimension of education simply because a so-called ‘crowded curriculum’ is but one of a number of issues, including the rate of curriculum change and

accountability regimes as specified above that impose time and resource demands on teachers and schools.

The purposes of education

The identification and articulation of the purposes of education are essential in any curriculum development or reform process (Biesta, 2013, 2010; Cranston et al. 2010; Reid, et al. 2010; Seddon, 2015; Winch, 1996) and the explicit expression of such purposes emphasises its importance to the individual and wider community because “how people learn has effects on the terms and conditions for life and the ways of being human that realise life.” (Seddon, 2015, p. 1) Further, Winch (1996) argues that “setting out, clearly articulating or changing the aims of education are three of the most fundamental changes” (p. 34) that a society might face. Therefore, the Review must attend to highlighting the purposes of education in NSW and anchor structural and content changes within the underlying philosophies of these purposes.

Ensuring an appropriate balance across the curriculum K-12

Currently, the NSW curriculum suffers from the absence of a clearly articulated statement on the aims and sequence of learning in school-based education. Exacerbated by online syllabus documents which provide the impression of disaggregated syllabus statements and components, the only coherent document is the *K-10 Curriculum Framework* which was developed in 2002 and amended in 2012. However, this document requires revision to encompass a K-12 perspective, clearly specifying a gradation of skills and knowledge across these years of schooling.

To assist with this revision and to ensure a suitably balanced curriculum from Kindergarten to Year 12, we propose the use of Biesta’s (2009) three purposes of education - “qualification”, “socialisation” and “subjectification” (p. 33) - as an interpretive framework. The application of these purposes will provide insight into the “multidimensionality of educational purpose” (Biesta 2013, p. 128) and assist in identifying the underlying purposes of the curriculum throughout the drafting process and the final product. In short, the three purposes are as follows: ‘qualification’ requires the individual to “do things”, develop skills, knowledge and dispositions, usually for the workplace; ‘socialisation’ allows the individual entry into existing social orders; while ‘subjectification’ involves the individual developing a sense of self-identity, allowing the student to “come into presence” (Carter, 2019, p. 135).

This means that curriculum writers will be able to identify if one or more of the purposes is too heavily or too lightly emphasised. The use of this interpretive framework will also allow writers to accentuate a specific purpose at specific points of the curriculum. For example, in the early years of schooling, the ‘socialisation’ purpose could be expected to figure prominently as students learn interpersonal skills and how to collaborate. In the later years of schooling, it could be expected that the ‘qualification’ purpose be more heavily accentuated as students look to future employment. At all stages of learning, however, it would be expected that ‘subjectification’ would be present to different degrees. For a fuller explanation of how this interpretive lens was used to analyse the *Melbourne Declaration*, please see Carter (2019) in the reference list.

Reforming syllabus content

The notion that the NSW curriculum is overcrowded is not new. Previous attempts to address syllabus implementation challenges include the Eltis Report of 1995 which highlighted (among a series of issues), the number of outcomes in the primary English syllabus (DET, Recommendation 6, dot point number 3, 1995, p. 3) and a follow-up report in 2003 which investigated the “demands created for teachers as a result of the introduction of outcomes assessment and reporting” (Eltis, 2003, p. 3). These reviews aimed at reducing demands on teachers in the implementation of syllabuses, with the 2003 review resulting in the development of the Foundation Statements which collapsed and amalgamated syllabus outcomes to make assessing and reporting for teachers more manageable.

In promoting the aims of the current Review, a key message has been that the NSW curriculum requires ‘decluttering’ in order to make syllabus content manageable for classroom delivery and assessment of student learning. While this notion may well resonate with many in the community due to its semblance to ‘common sense’, we need to be mindful that ‘common sense’ is a:

form of popular, easily-available knowledge which contains no complicated ideas, requires no sophisticated argument and does not depend on deep thought or wide reading. It works intuitively, without forethought or reflection.

(Hall & O’Shea, 2013, p. 8)

Thus, while it might appear obvious that removing content from the syllabuses is the first step, it is imperative that a ‘decluttering’ of the curriculum does not degenerate into a ‘content-stripping’ exercise which potentially threatens the substance, rigour and integrity of learning areas. Accordingly, the Review must attend to key questions with regard to ‘essential’ and ‘non-

essential' syllabus content including: "who decides what knowledge is privileged and why?"; "who stands to benefit from the knowledge?"; and "who 'owns' the knowledge?". Deleting syllabus content is neither simple nor straightforward: it must attend to questions of who is approved to identify what remains and what stays based on transparent and explicit rationale.

A recent example of reducing curriculum content and damaging the integrity and rigour of a subject is evident in the 2017 HSC 'Reforms' which saw a reduction in the number of prescribed texts in the English Standard (4 to 3) and in the English Advanced course (5 to 4). These 'reforms' reduced the study of poetry – for the first time in NSW curriculum history – from compulsory to optional in these courses diminishing, its status and presence in the curriculum, denying students the opportunity in their final year to analyse, evaluate and appreciate important literary works. In addition, this 'reform' on senior English deleted the English Extension 1 elective "Romanticism", removing the historically contextualised study of significant figures such as Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats. While these poets remain on the current text list, their works are grouped a-historically amongst contemporary authors.

Furthermore, the ITE team at UTS believes that a mere 'decluttering' exercise will not be sufficient in that the current content of the NSW syllabuses needs not only reviewing but *reforming*, where key considerations such as identifying: the *role* of syllabus content (using Biesta's three purposes); opportunities to *apply* the content; and how teachers *assess* content are at the forefront of curriculum writing. Young people must leave school as knowledgeable, skilful and resourceful citizens ready to embrace further education, work and being able to live well. This is happening in pockets across NSW, but crucial welfare, health and well-being indicators suggest this is the experience of fewer and fewer adolescents especially those aged 14-18 years old.

The General Capabilities, syllabus content & assessment

The interim report should consider the ACARA General Capabilities (referred to in this submission as Capabilities) as vital bedrock on which the curriculum can build its core content. The seven Capabilities – which include literacy and numeracy – are strategically embedded in current NSW K-10 syllabuses, allowing teachers to select content that strengthens students' knowledge and skills in these areas. In particular, the Capabilities of Intercultural Understanding, Personal and Social Capability and Ethical Understanding are crucial to students' development as citizens within a society that is technology-driven and fraught with increasing dilemmas and challenges.

Across the curriculum, with the retention of the six key learning areas in primary school (with more focus on early childhood education beyond literacy and numeracy to include creative arts, play, dance, outdoor education and HPE) and eight areas of learning in secondary school education, the Capabilities are well-placed to lead conceptions of discipline integration and genuine models of transdisciplinarity, these initiatives hold increasing potential, for example, through project-based learning pedagogies for critical and creative thinking (MacDonald et al, 2019). At every turn there is a necessity to guard against ‘back-to-basics’ reactions and catch cries.

Furthermore, essential knowledges or reforming current syllabus content in order to develop those critical, problem solving and creative thinkers to take the world forward, are vital as global issues and current affairs prove more intractable. The ITE team at UTS whose classroom experience is both recent and past felt that often a reduction in syllabus content, for example, with 15-20% less in subjects can have minimal impact. The case for Science in secondary schools was presented as an example, where experience demonstrated that even when content was mandated, it was rarely successful, as teachers need well-resourced and ongoing professional learning to use this content collectively with their colleagues and outside discipline experts.

One question that could be asked is whether less content in subjects or reduced subject offerings will allow for greater focus on the Capabilities, when often teachers in secondary schools see themselves as ‘content specialists’. Current curriculum reforms focused on the seven Capabilities at Liverpool Boys High School was cited as an excellent local example of how it is possible to focus on capabilities in learning and also assess ‘soft skills’ in powerful ways so as to better prepare democratic, participatory young people.

Often a ‘pedagogical fragility’ among some teachers means the ‘crutch of content’ is the default position even when they are directed to teach fewer outcomes. Here, being able to decipher the core concepts and work across disciplines away from “the silos” and in interdisciplinary teams will support such moves (Hunter, 2015). Planning and teaching for deeper learning must be the focus of teachers’ professional practice and in recent times compliance activities have dominated teachers’ work in schools. To enable teachers to focus on their core business i.e. teaching and learning, increased resources must be prioritised to employ paraprofessionals to do onerous administrative and regulatory work. In universities, ITE is proving to be a less popular study pathway and career choice as conditions of employment in the profession with its relentless

compliance activity is increasingly cited as a central impact on morale and decreasing enrolments (Reid, 2019).

Evidence showing the damage that NAPLAN is doing to Australian education is mounting, including impacts on learning and student wellbeing (Carter, Manuel & Dutton, 2018; Cumming, Wyatt-Smith & Colbert, 2016; Rice et al., 2016; Wyn, Turnbull & Grimshaw, 2014). Stokes (2018) spoke about being “anaesthetised by the data around us – and hypnotised by the neo-liberal fixation with quantification – we place inordinate emphasis on tests such as PISA and NAPLAN that reduce a student’s educational journey to a number and a school system to a line in a league table”. ITE promotes the use of progressive pedagogies which preservice teachers are less likely to have opportunities to rehearse and gain confidence in when heavy content and standardised test orientations in schools are prioritised in their professional experience placements. The case of mathematics was explored in more detail by the ITE team at UTS with some satisfaction expressed with the amount of content in primary syllabus content, while on the other hand in secondary mathematics problems solving, higher order thinking skills and reasoning was seen as holding greater hegemonic importance than content.

In addition to reducing the focus on discipline-led learning in NSW K-12 education more interdisciplinary/transdisciplinary opportunities led by the Capabilities provide real opportunities to reform the dominance of content. These components alongside considerations of meta-learning i.e. “learning to learn” require further examination. Such processes are present in the Australian Curriculum, for example, but in a diluted form – together these mechanisms could provide a pathway to content reform (Reid, 2019). The tools all exist, and NSW teachers at all levels of school education can draw upon them readily. However, the question that needs to be asked now is what is holding such changes back – this is an important concern - there is not room here to dive further into the blockages and challenges other than remark that they are not insurmountable.

Project-based pedagogies, design challenges and inquiry using ‘big questions’ are pedagogical processes where increasing numbers of teachers in schools are seeking to drive change in young people’s experience of secondary schooling in powerful ways. For example, Marist at Parramatta, Manly Selective Campus and Kurri Kurri High School – these schools, and there are increasing numbers of others, are leading bottom-up reforms including successful programs like “Big

Picture” because under content-led, test driven regimes students are not engaging, not thriving and not attending. It is time to replicate what is working at these kinds of exemplar sites.

At UTS, we also advocate the investigation of ipsative assessment, where a student’s performance is ‘measured’ against her last attempt – rather than against her peers, or even externally-imposed benchmarks. Research has identified the benefits of such an approach including “constructive dialogue ... between peers” (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006); “learner engagement and persistence” (Hughes, 2011, p. 353). This approach also provides an opportunity to remove the competitive attitude (between peers) that so often accompanies in-school assessment tasks and provides scope for students to progress at a rate more suitable to individual ability.

Reforming the Structure of the Curriculum

The proposed restructuring of the curriculum articulates a vision for school education that demonstrates benefits for both teaching and learning. The shift from a year-level structure to a learning trajectory that is experienced at an appropriate pace for each student shifts the focus away from comparisons between students and foregrounds the need to consider each student’s improvement relative to their previous level of attainment. It is, however, unclear how the proposed changes can translate into practice, given that:

“...in each Key Learning Area, establish a standard that every student should meet by the completion of their schooling.”

(NESA, 2019, p. 13)

The existence of this “minimum” standard raise’s questions regarding the ways in which such a standard might be assessed, and indeed the effect of non-attainment by the end of Year 12.

It is notable that the proposed restructuring does not prescribe any implementation plan, with schools apparently free to group students by age or ability or indeed any other criterion they choose. Such an open-ended specification demonstrates faith in the ability of education professionals to consider information that is unique to their local situation, and to use their judgement to formulate an appropriate response.

At UTS, we recognise that teachers must, and already do, handle situations that cannot be resolved by departmental directive, and we are in agreement with the proposed syllabus structural reforms insofar as they rely on teachers to exercise their professional judgement regarding appropriate ways to structure schooling. Teachers must be acknowledged as experts in their field, who are better able to make appropriate decisions in this regard than any third party.

Such a perspective regarding teacher professionalism would be consistent with a reduction in the oversight of teaching practice, or alternatively an increase in the number of paraprofessional staff to whom teachers may outsource administrative duties. It would signal a move away from having our professional educators meet the demands of frequent, regular and diverse assessment regimes, and towards a collegial understanding that teachers, as experts in education, are responsible for assessing students' attainments, and using these judgements to implement appropriate learning opportunities.

Reforming the Senior School Curriculum

The task of 'reforming' the NSW senior school curriculum is a large and complex mission. Such an initiative will inevitably be constrained by the current Higher School Certificate (HSC) structures that reputedly place a great deal of stress on students, teachers and parents (North, Gross, & Smith 2015; Manning, 2018). In addition, the current HSC has spawned an 'HSC Industry' which feeds on the anxiety of stakeholders. Unless the NSW Curriculum Review identifies and recommends significant reform to this behemoth, pedagogies, anxieties and commercial profits will continue to be at the centre of this credential.

Senior school assessment

Assessment in the senior school has become increasingly problematic over recent decades. The highly competitive and high-stakes nature of the HSC and the increasing digitalisation of information has meant easier access for students to this information and for some, the temptation to plagiarise. We recognise this to be a substantial challenge which must be addressed and for schools, is an ongoing problem.

Thus, the ITE academics at UTS support the idea of a single cross-disciplinary major project as a key assessment in a reformed HSC. This initiative stands to provide scope for learning across disciplines in a more integrated way than is currently possible. However, we wish to caution in light of the 2007 Independent Commission Against Corruption's *Report on an investigation and*

systems review of corruption risks associated with HSC take-home assessment tasks which investigated allegations of cheating in take-home tasks such as the Major Project in HSC English Extension 2. This report recommended 20 actions be undertaken by the then Board of Studies and the Department of Education and stands as a cautionary tale for any plans to introduce a major work as outlined in the Interim Report.

We also recognise the marking load of teachers – particularly those in humanities subjects such as English and History – and recommend that any changes to assessment need to be cognisant of this issue with careful management of assessment requirements, both internal (school-based) and external (formal examinations). In addition, it is important that the scope and nature of the current HSC examinations are investigated. For example, do these examinations and their requirements reflect and reinforce the integrity of subjects? One example that springs to mind is the HSC English (Standard, Advanced and EAL/D) which traditionally required candidates to write an imaginative piece in 40 minutes, under examination conditions. This practice contradicts the reality of writing processes and contradicts the efforts of English teachers who ask students to consider writing not as a ‘one-off’ act, but a process of drafting, redrafting and eventual refinement.

Curriculum continuity with the junior years of schooling

The NSW Curriculum Review must be cognisant that any recommendations for the senior curriculum need to align structurally and philosophically with reforms/revisions to the primary and junior secondary curriculum. This is essential to ensure that the structure, content, skills knowledge of the senior school curriculum guarantees continuity and the gradation of knowledge and skills in each of the earlier stage of learning. As such, it is imperative that this continuity is articulated in a ‘high-level’ mapping document to ensure that skills, knowledge and content are sequential and build appropriately in complexity and to provide all stakeholders with a ‘map’ of how the curriculum is structured and gradated. At the moment, the *K-10 Curriculum Framework* is in need of revision and in fact, should be extended to encompass K-12. This revised document could constitute the high-level mapping document as mentioned above.

Conclusion

The ITE academics at UTS believe that Australia needs active and engaged citizens who have sharply honed skills of analysis and criticality. And as stated above, we need to be wary of those whose simplistic calls for a ‘back-to-basics’ approach is focused solely on future employment and

little else related to the development of the whole individual, as a member of local and wider communities. Goodson and Gill (2014) argue that when learning is reduced to the acquisition of employability skills, “people are treated as economic objects” (p. 42), reducing their capacity for positive social interaction and fulfilling relationships. Further, what would be the ensuing status of qualities such as compassion, contemplative capacities, perseverance, open-mindedness and the ability to act with dignity - the qualities which make us human and allow us to live harmoniously amongst each other, should a simplistic ‘back-to-basics’ campaign be the centrepiece of the curriculum? Thus, the authorised curriculum must avoid a ‘reductionist’, ‘content-stripping’ approach that diminishes the richness of learning in subjects and an opportunity to engage with knowledge, ideas and concepts that furnish a rewarding life within and beyond their years of schooling. In that spirit we offer seven recommendations.

Recommendations

1. That a ‘high-level’ document which articulates the continuities and gradation in the structure and content of the curriculum K-12 is developed and published.
2. That a detailed written statement specifying the aims of the ‘reformed’ NSW curriculum is developed to articulate the philosophical underpinnings of the curriculum.
3. That any deletion/relocating/enhancement of syllabus content is accompanied by a detailed rationale specifying why and on what basis decisions were undertaken.
4. That Biesta’s three purposes of education are applied as an interpretive lens during the drafting of the curriculum and at its conclusion.
5. That the ACARA General Capabilities be reviewed with the intention of the basis of the curriculum, upon which content is developed.
6. That an approach to assessment based on an ipsative approach be investigated.
7. That the ACARA General Capabilities be repositioned as the basis of each syllabus upon which content is developed (within an articulated philosophical framework).

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