

## **INQUIRY INTO REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM**

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**Submission to the  
Inquiry into the New South Wales School Curriculum  
Portfolio Committee No.3 - Education**

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According to the NSW Government's Response to the Masters Review of the NSW Curriculum, the 'ultimate aim' is to 'ensure every student leaves school well-prepared for a lifetime of on-going learning and informed and active citizenship and with knowledge, skills and attributes that will help equip them for meaningful work and satisfying careers.'

In proposing what it calls 'broad-brush features of a curriculum that could well require a decade to plan and establish', the Masters Review devolves the greatest responsibility and opportunity for change to as yet undetermined decision-makers to identify 'the key intentions, guiding principles and underpinning evidence base for the new curriculum.' This may explain why it does not achieve the first two items under the Terms of Reference:

- 1. Articulate the purposes of the school curriculum, including underpinning philosophies and principles*
- 2. Identify essential knowledge, skills and attributes as the common entitlement for all learners*

For more detailed discussion of these and other issues I refer the Committee to my original submission to the NSW Curriculum Review Interim Report (December 2019).

<https://www.cis.org.au/app/uploads/2020/01/Centre-for-Independent-Studies-Submission-to-NSW-Curriculum-Review.pdf?>

*p.4 ... the Report provides no evidence of a distinctive vision for Australian children. There is no obvious attempt to embrace the unique history and contemporary nature of this country; most disappointingly, the documents do not delineate the specific knowledge and understanding that school graduates should have in order to be able to 'contribute to Australian society in the 21st century'. The conclusion to be drawn from this philosophical deficit is that nothing distinguishes Australia or Australians from other countries and people; therefore, a generic vision is all that is required for education.*

*p 5 Basing an entire curriculum – and the associated pedagogy and assessment strategies – on the unsubstantiated and contestable view that 'for today's students, the world is less certain and less secure than it was for their parents' and grandparents' generations' (p.4) is risky. Given that members of current generations have lived through and/or with war and deprivation, international instability, financial disruption and massive technological change, it is difficult to see how the 'underpinning philosophies and principles' of education in the 21st century should be so very different.*

*Critically, the vision disappoints with its minimal focus on the academic rigour that must be a renewed curricular and pedagogical goal if Australian education is to improve. The word 'rigour' seems to be used only five times in 112 pages; only once is it mentioned as an aspiration (p. 74), and the remainder are references to feedback in submissions. Used only slightly more frequently, the word 'rigorous' was almost exclusively associated with the senior secondary curriculum.*

*Rather than setting up strong arguments for what students should learn, based on what it identifies as the major challenges, the Report focuses largely on how they should learn. In arguing for 'every student making excellent, ongoing progress toward high attainment', the Report claims*

*that the key is 'for the curriculum to provide sufficient flexibility, time and space for teachers to identify and understand individual learning needs and to tailor their teaching accordingly' (p.23).*

*Australian school education – including that delivered in New South Wales – does not have the luxury of time to introduce untested curricular and pedagogical strategies when the academic foundations are demonstrably weak and there is a lack of understanding about the reasons why a high proportion of students leaves school with inadequate knowledge and skills.*

*Unlike high-performing education systems whose philosophies and practices have been developed with great care over a long period and enable the cohesive, confident consideration of new approaches in response to new challenges, Australian education – at least in recent decades – has been characterised by inconsistency and uncertainty. The lack of vision manifests as a philosophical and practical deficit, compounding the policy complexity of each state setting its own academic standards in the senior secondary years, managing its own assessment and reporting protocols for Kindergarten to Year 10, and preparing its students for participation in a national testing regime (NAPLAN) that has demonstrably low minimum standards and has arguably become the default curriculum for English and Mathematics. This is not the time for experimentation at a state or federal level.*

Key points regarding the Final Review are:

1. **No clear profile of future school leavers.** The graduate profile is vague and does not make the case for the various recommendations, particularly in terms of articulating the purposes of the school curriculum in ways that will reassure parents, employers and tertiary providers. A clearly defined set of attributes would justify, for example, the proposed retention of 'mandated subjects' and the consequent identification of 'core' content within subjects intended to prepare students for 'informed and active citizenship' and 'meaningful work and satisfying careers'. It would also be a key step towards remedying the academic and pedagogical deficits that have been identified in dozens of reports over many years. In particular, this requires reconsideration of the nature and quality of subjects such as English, Mathematics, Science and History (including Australian History), the four subjects given priority in the development of the Australian Curriculum.
2. **Inadequate evidence for claims and recommendations.** Given the assertion that groundbreaking, urgent change is needed in New South Wales education, the quality and quantity of evidence provided in support of the recommendations are both found wanting. The case is not made for changes that claim to be able to 'prioritise depth rather than breadth of learning' or ensure that 'New syllabuses develop skills in applying knowledge (for example, critical and creative thinking) and provide opportunities for students to develop and demonstrate such skills.' Much of the language simply parrots the '21<sup>st</sup> century learning agenda' promoted by organisations such as the OECD and UNESCO and fails to address the specific deficits and challenges inherent in Australian schooling.
3. **Lack of contextual detail.** The Review does not adequately explain the reasons for the decline in school education outcomes in Australia generally and in New South Wales in particular. In the absence of an honest assessment of failure in both policy and practice, it is difficult to see how stakeholders can be confident that the proposed changes will deliver significant improvements, especially when successful implementation will depend on the same people who have influenced policy and practice over a long period of academic decline.
4. **Insufficient evidence of the capacity of the proposed curriculum (and the overarching education system) to raise academic expectations while encouraging students to progress at their own 'untimed' pace and with teachers using individualised**

**learning progressions and formative assessment strategies.** No high-performing system in the world has used this approach as the way to success.

An example of the Review's failure to make the case for change on the basis of sound research is seen in Recommendation 5 (The Middle Years).

*In addition, the new curriculum requires every student to commence learning a language during their primary years. The goal of language learning in the new curriculum is to provide every student with some knowledge of a second language and to lay the foundations for an increased number of students to pursue advanced levels of proficiency, particularly in languages of the region.*

Foreign language learning is arguably an area of the curriculum that has seen the most dramatic decline in enrolments (especially in Years 11 and 12), quality of provision and outcomes, and adherence to international best practice. The NSW Government Response is 'Noted', hardly surprising given the paucity of evidence provided in support of the recommendation.

As identified in ACARA's Program of Research, which was undertaken specifically to inform the 2020 review of the Australian Curriculum scheduled for 2020, top-performing education systems mandate the study of multiple languages throughout the compulsory years of schooling and for Year 12 certification. This learning – regardless of a student's intended pathway – has long been regarded as essential preparation for post-school life. These systems' philosophy of education and curriculum documents make unequivocal connections between high literacy standards, foreign language acquisition and intercultural communication skills. Yet the substantial body of work developed in this field is not cited by the Masters Review.

One sentence in the Masters Review gets to the heart of the problem facing Australian school education: standards.

*During the middle years of school every student studies a set of mandated subjects. These subjects are intended to build students' understandings of themselves, society and the wider world, and to provide exposure to important bodies of human knowledge. The subjects of this common curriculum provide essential foundations for learning in the later years of school and for life more generally. The new curriculum maintains this existing set of subjects.*

*However, many students during these middle years currently do not achieve intended levels of learning in mandated subjects. The OECD has identified minimally acceptable levels of attainment in reading, mathematics and science by 15 years of age. Between one in five and one in four students in NSW do not reach these levels, and these percentages have been increasing steadily over the past two decades. For these students, the common curriculum of the middle years does not build strong foundations for life or further learning at school.*

*The new curriculum is designed to address this challenge. **It does this by setting clear standards that every student is expected to achieve in mandated subjects by the completion of their schooling — something that does not exist currently** — and by providing teachers and parents/carers with an improved basis for monitoring students' long-term progress and for identifying students who are not on track to achieve these standards.*

The statement in bold is an indictment of past policy.

Given the repeated, well-publicised evidence of Australian students' declining performance in both national and international tests, as well as the concerns about school leavers' knowledge and skills expressed by parents, employer organisations and tertiary institutions, high academic standards should be the starting point for all proposals for change. The Review contains an unresolved tension between raising academic expectations and 'the school curriculum providing the flexibility teachers require to respond to the increasing diversity of student needs'.

Simply proposing to ‘declutter’ the existing curriculum with the intention of enabling ‘deep learning’ – especially if new syllabuses are destined to be ‘less prescriptive’ – is an appealing but risky approach to reform and does nothing to guarantee the implementation of high academic standards in both teaching and learning. Sophisticated discussion about **what** students should learn and **why** (to be informed at least in part by ACARA’s Program of Research which includes international curriculum comparisons) must underpin any proposals to maintain the existing set of subjects and any ‘core concepts’ and skills to be mastered. This is the work that was needed to *identify essential knowledge, skills and attributes as the common entitlement for all learners*, as per the Terms of Reference.

High expectations have a far-reaching, trickle-down effect, as is clear from the approaches taken by the world’s high-performing systems, but this requires a renewed, demonstrable commitment to intellectual rigour and professional consistency across the entire curriculum. Critically, the high expectations set for the senior secondary years must inform policy and practice for younger students and their teachers. It is to be hoped that this is reflected in the statement that ‘the concept of progressive attainment in a subject applies to the entire school curriculum, from Kindergarten to Year 12.’ While the Review claims that ‘the sequencing of content in new syllabuses should be informed by theoretical and empirical evidence of how learning in a subject occurs in practice’, any insertion of learning progressions and formative assessment in syllabus design cannot hinder the establishment of, and commitment to, demonstrably rigorous academic standards.

According to the Review, ‘there is clear evidence that many students are disengaging from school, slipping behind in their learning, and not making the progress or achieving the levels of which they are capable, with long-term costs to both individuals and NSW society.’ While these assertions may well be correct, the Review provides no analysis of precisely how New South Wales school education has reached this low point.

The concerns identified in the Review are far from new – particularly in relation to academic standards and practices. These concerns have much in common with those raised in other English-speaking nations, meaning that there is a wealth of material that could explain policy failures and ensure more effective, evidence-based decision-making. Australia’s adoption of educational trends and practices originating in the United Kingdom and United States – frequently leading to poor outcomes – make it logical to question the Review’s heavy reliance on research undertaken in those countries.

The Masters Review refers to ‘*An aligned learning ‘system’*’, stating that:

*The successful introduction of the new curriculum also will depend on changes to other aspects of schooling to bring them into alignment with the principles and intentions of the new curriculum. These other aspects include, but are not limited to, approaches to classroom teaching, assessment and reporting, as well as broader approaches to improvement, including professional development and networking, initial teacher education, performance monitoring and accountability. The new curriculum is envisaged as part of an integrated learning ‘system’ in which the components of the system are mutually supportive and aligned with the principles that underpin the new curriculum.*

The proposed changes to the NSW curriculum will not deliver improvements unless the NSW Government commits to raising standards across the board.

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