Submission No 81

INQUIRY INTO REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Organisation: Visual Arts and Design Educators Association NSW

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VADEA Response to Review of the New South Wales School Curriculum

The Visual Arts and Design Educators Association (VADEA NSW) represents the largest membership of visual arts educators in Australia, with over 890 members. VADEA is committed to contributing in a positive and constructive way to the Review of the New South Wales School Curriculum in the interests of achieving a high quality Visual Arts K-12 curriculum for NSW that prepares students for the 21st Century, recognising it has its own body of knowledge as a discipline that is distinct from other arts subjects. In response to the Review of the New South Wales School Curriculum *Committee's Discussion Paper* and *Chair's Discussion Paper*, VADEA makes the following statements:

- **The overcrowded curriculum, Decluttering the curriculum 2.5-2.10:**
    - VADEA supports the Masters Review Recommendations to reduce the volume of mandated content where appropriate and prioritise the learning of core facts, concepts and principles for learning. Unlike many other subjects, which specify topics, themes, issues or events, Visual Arts identifies three areas of content as core concepts that operate across the learning continuum in an iterative and increasingly more complex and robust manner to support deep thinking and understanding:
        - Conceptual Framework - a theoretical model for understanding the agencies in the art world, and the relationships between artist, artwork, world and audience
        - Practice - which explores the motives, perceptions, procedures and strategies artists, art critics and art historians adopt to make and interpret art
        - Frames - philosophical/theoretical and interpretive frameworks for understanding the layering of meaning, significance, value and belief in and about the visual arts, which includes subjective, structural, cultural and postmodern orientations, in making and studying art

      The continuum of learning in Visual Arts is encapsulated by a total of twelve core concepts, which in addition to those identified above includes representation, conceptual strength and meaning, and resolution. The elegant and flexible nature of the Visual Arts syllabus has resulted in an enduring legacy which is strongly favoured by teachers and academics, both in Australia and internationally. At its core, students adopt the role of an artist, critic and art historian, to make artworks, develop critical interpretations and investigations in explaining artworld phenomena including artworks, practices and points of view. The theoretical constructs of the core content emboldens teachers to take up positions in which to enact content in meaningful and authentic ways wherein core knowledge and skills are applied in an integrated way to real world examples in the classroom.
    - Another strength of Visual Arts core content is that our Stage 6 syllabus the core concepts and principles for learning is represented discursively, rather than in dot points form. The discursive approach honours the alignment of conceptual knowledge with skills, an approach that supports praxis oriented learning which deepens students' understandings of art. This approach is consistent with the aspirations of the Masters Review which explicitly addresses the disconnect between factual knowledge and its application to real world examples that has emerged in the standards-based framework in the NSW curriculum. This model of curriculum in the Visual Arts has been in operation for over 20 years and is well supported by teachers. Students also value the intellectual demands of learning in Visual Arts. It is consistently the highest ranked Creative Arts subject in the HSC, typically the 9-11th most studied subject in NSW. This evidence, in

addition to widespread support from Visual Arts educators, demonstrates that three core content areas can work.

- VADEA warns against a target percentage for reduction for all syllabuses, as this would be too restrictive, particularly subjects such as Visual Arts, where the intrinsic design of the syllabus ensures the amount of content is not overly prescriptive and members have not expressed concerns regarding the provision of content in Visual Arts courses. VADEA suggests the Visual Arts curriculum is a benchmark of best practice in the identification of streamlined, core content that provides flexibility for teachers to address the diverse learning needs of students in different contexts. VADEA believes that the Visual Arts is a 'tried and tested' conceptually based syllabus model, with nearly 20 years of experience with a framework of flexible content delivery. It should be viewed as best practice in presenting a decluttered curriculum.
- VADEA asserts that the Review should take into consideration that it is widely acknowledged and explicitly taught to pre-service teachers, that it is the responsibility of all subject areas to address literacy and numeracy within discipline-specific contexts. There is a great deal of work going on in schools across sectors to target explicit discipline-specific literacy and numeracy skills across and within KLAs.

- **Relationship with the Australian Curriculum 2.14-2.16:**
  - VADEA supports the current approach by NESA to adapt and adopt the Australian Curriculum to NSW Syllabus. The Australian Curriculum: The Arts (ACARA, 2015) is a substandard curriculum which should not replace or inform current syllabus provisions in NSW. This position is supported by the majority of creative arts associations in NSW. VADEA has consistently advocated in opposition of this curriculum model, which proposes a generic structure for arts education, with 5 artforms combined in a single learning area. VADEA has been resolute in the rejection of this curriculum, which is at odds with the evidence-based Visual Arts syllabus in NSW. The ACARA Arts curriculum does not promote deep learning. This curriculum attempts to coalesce five disparate artforms under the guise of commonality and compromises the capacity for discipline specific knowledge and concepts in the arts. The artforms of visual arts, music, dance, drama and media arts have been organised into common Strands, which attempt to find similarities across the forms. The resulting curriculum presents a narrow and distorted vision for Visual Arts education, and reduces the scope and rigour currently available to students in NSW. The Arts curriculum privileges aesthetic knowledge and is inherently modernist in its positioning, with its preoccupation with the structural and formal elements of art and the expressed needs of students. The Arts curriculum is unable to sustain a logical structure of learning, and this is repeatedly demonstrated through the disjuncture between the curriculum components, which align with broad, generic threads across five art forms and the backgrounding of Viewpoints as a vague, quasi-theoretical framework. Lastly, The Arts curriculum does not represent a contemporary view of art education and this is evident in the provision of Responding as an inadequate representation of critical and historical practice, its inability to reflect nuanced, local contexts and the lack of contemporary or postmodern conceptions of practice. The curriculum undervalues the role of practical and conceptual reasoning and provides a limited scope within which students can interpret and make artworks.
  - The Australian Curriculum: The Arts (ACARA, 2015) is incongruous with what is known to be best practice in Visual Arts education. The implementation or incorporation of this curriculum has the real potential of undermining the high quality curriculum and continuum of learning established in Visual Arts in NSW. NESA announced in 2012 that The Arts 'was not equal to or better than what was currently in place' in Visual Arts in NSW. Although NESA's position has since shifted and is now based on the notion that the Australian Curriculum can be modified, re-ordered and supplemented for inclusion in NSW syllabuses, VADEA continues to have confidence in NESA to support the development of discrete, discipline specific syllabuses in K-12 across the art forms.

- VADEA has been reassured by the continued support of NESA, to maintain the provision of the NSW curriculum in order to avoid diluting the rigour of the curriculum in Visual Arts. The ACARA model was deemed 'not equal to or better than what is currently in place', and if implemented in NSW, would further confound issues of overcrowding.

- **Timeline for the design and implementation of the new curriculum 2.17-2.20:**

  - VADEA holds significant concerns relating to the timeline established by the NSW Government in their response to the Curriculum Review. VADEA are already seeing evidence of the issues playing out with consultation with NESA in relation to this, with no information released to the public by the end of October 2020 and the K-2 English and Maths syllabus due for release mid-2021. VADEA have been approached to provide a Status Report Update on the K-12 syllabuses with little time provided to do so.

  - VADEA notes that the Independent Education Union NSW is calling for Expressions of Interest for Literacy and Numeracy writers for K-6. The timeline presented in the EOI states: "The NSW Government is committed to releasing the new syllabuses for implementation in schools in 2022. To meet this timeframe, the syllabuses will be available from the middle of 2021. Accordingly, syllabus writing is planned to commence in November/December 2020. Support material writing will commence in December/January and will continue throughout 2021." This timeline is incredibly concerning, given no information has been released relating to the syllabus framework structure or syllabus development process. VADEA have been told the development would be iterative, as there are numerous moving parts being developed simultaneously. Again, this compressed timeline means that this process is subject to change and VADEA questions the validity of this process.

  - VADEA is concerned about the process for syllabus development and opportunities for proper consultation and the provision of appropropriate quality assurance measures within this process. VADEA understands from meetings with NESA that the current Syllabus Development Process will not be followed and Board Curriculum Committees will not be established, which means sector representatives, subject experts and academics will not have the opportunity to consult and feedback in an open forum as has previously occurred during syllabus development. The incredibly compressed timeline suggests meaningful, thorough and timely consultation will not be possible. In addition, as evidenced in the above EOI and in our discussions with NESA, VADEA understands the common practice of individuals applying to NESA to be curriculum writers will not be in place, and a move to a recommended curriculum writer process by sectors and representatives to develop a pool will be established, as evidences by this EOI from the IEU NSW. This means associations and sectors will need to do NESAs legwork in locating appropriate and capable writers.

  - The timeline is incredibly problematic given the Australian Curriculum is also currently under review.

- **Integrating knowledge and skills 2.21-2.28:**

  - VADEA is concerned with the notion of integration in relation to academic and vocational subjects within the Interim Report and there are significant implications in a move towards a more integrated curriculum in the senior school context. The integration of theory and practical application is already occurring in Visual Arts and since the current syllabus was introduced in 2000, this has been incredibly successful, exemplified in the annual ARTEXPRESS exhibition, held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and touring regional centres throughout NSW. It is imperative that in expecting every senior course to have a balance of theory and application, that this is a natural fit for the subject and reflects the discipline from which the subject is drawn from. We caution against inserting applications of knowledge drawn from workplaces or jobs that have little connection with the subject itself, as this will inevitably reduce the quality and depth of knowledge within these subjects. Specifically, this balance is already occurring in the

Visual Arts. Embodied within Practice, both Artmaking and Art Criticism and Art History utilise the specific discipline knowledge and conceptual understanding of the subject, to transfer and apply their knowledge, through making art and writing about art.

- The project has the potential to be envisaged as an opportunity for students to extend their application of knowledge, understanding and skills in Visual Arts and act as a surrogate extension course. VADEA have advocated for an extension course to be reinstated in Visual Arts for a number of years, as there are extremely capable students who would benefit from higher order learning beyond what is currently available in Stage 6. This section of the report is considerably under developed and raises a number of questions about the practical application of implementing this in all schools for all students. It is vital that high quality, discipline specific knowledge and application is central to the project if it is to become implemented.

  However, VADEA is also concerned that the introduction of the major project has the potential to interfere or contradict the already existing practices in subjects such as Visual Arts, Design and Technology, Music and Drama, which have a long history of a project component. We note none of these subjects were mentioned in the Discussion Paper. In particular, Visual Arts has established itself as the most highly selected subject with a 'major project' component over a significant number of years. We have sustained significantly high numbers and in 2019 were ranked 10th most popular subject in the state. There is little clarity in the report around how the introduction of a major project will impact these other subjects and whether students would be able to do multiple subjects with project components. Our members are concerned about how the introduction of the project will impact the candidature of Visual Arts and the Body of Work.

- **Availability and resourcing of vocational training 2.29-2.32:**
  - VADEA supports in principle the attempt to prioritise and emphasise the value of VET pathways for students. However, there are considerable issues relating to equity, access and availability of courses, particularly in rural and regional areas. For many students doing VET courses outside of school, they miss out on a significant number of days of schooling due to placements and having to travel to additional venues, which can impinge upon other subjects they are studying, particularly those which are project based and need to be completed during class time. We support comments which address the systemic failure in NSW over a considerable number of years to properly fund the sector and the calls for the vocational education sector to be re-energised and valued in NSW.

- **The potential for microcredentials in schools 2.33-2.34:**
  - VADEA requires more information relating to microcredentials to formulate a position on behalf of our members. Microcredentials are currently under developed in their conceptualisation and it is unclear how these will play out across the curriculum. VADEA holds concerns about modularising courses, particularly those which cannot be broken down into topics or areas and looks to NESA for further clarity on this issue. VADEA notes this approach to curriculum may be better suited to some subject areas then others.

- **Progress on attainment 2.40-2.51:**
  - VADEA holds significant concerns in relation to 'untimed' syllabuses and the research which underpins this form of curriculum design. VADEA notes that NESA has engaged *Learning First,* an education research and consulting group led by Dr Ben Jensen to conduct research into the possibilities surrounding learning progressions and determining levels of attainment. VADEA holds significant concerns that research is not being conducted by the university sector with a range of educational academics and specialists. VADEA understands that the research in this area is significantly under developed, with challenges relating to how to determine attainment. Teacher concerns relate to what it would look like in practice, how students would be evaluated and believe this would lead to over determination and over assessment in each subject, which

is problematic given attempts to reduce compliance and the current administrative load of teachers.

- **Postmodernism in curriculum: a response to the Chair's Discussion Paper:**
    - VADEA takes significant issue with the view and recommendation purported by the Committee Chair, the Hon Mark Latham MLC (Pauline Hanson's One Nation) to "Remove all post-modernist, identity-based and political content from syllabuses" (*Chair's Discussion Paper,* p.2). The Chair's perspective is misinformed and puts forward a personal ideological opposition to the philosophical construct of postmodernism, which is well informed by established research and approaches to theory from a broad range of disciplines. The views expressed by the Chair represent an antiquated conception of discipline specific knowledge and claims that postmodernism as a construct is anti-educational. This baseless stance disregards the significant body of poststructural research from a myriad of disciplines and assumes that all information and bodies of knowledge should be accepted as fact. In the age of 'fake news', there has never been a more important time for students to develop the capacity for critical and creative thinking, to interpret, judge, question and challenge the information presented to them. To associate post-modernism with identity politics is incoherent. In Visual Arts, the philosophy which underpins postmodernism has been articulated as one of four philosophical perspectives that are adopted by students in Years 7-12 for over 20 years. This range of perspectives assist students to express points of view and develop their understandings of historical and contemporary art consistent with traditions and conventions in the artworld itself.
    - The Visual Arts syllabus content is informed by empirical evidence and theoretical knowledge that situates artworks within a conceptual framework. Artworks are made and interpreted through four viewpoints, known as the frames, and this includes the postmodern frame. This is a post-structuralist lens with which to examine and balance the other three viewpoints. The inclusion of postmodern perspectives within this syllabus is done respectfully, as it considers that there are other ways to view art, rather than art being based upon predetermined meaning. The NSW Visual Arts syllabus situates artworks as ontologically neutral objects that are then open to interpretation. This allows students and teachers to bring their own meanings to a work of art and build interpretations based on a range of points of view. The NSW Visual Arts syllabus values the concept that meaning in art is co-constructed within the instructional exchanges between students and teachers wherein they bring to interpretation 'facts' about art in the form of inferences and claims for meaning that can be debated and justified according to differing viewpoints that can change over time. To argue that all meaning can be based on traditional conceptions of "facts" would obfuscate the inferential scope of learning in art interpretation that is consistent with practices in the artworld. As all art can be understood as human-made artefacts, rather than natural forms, they are imbued with mind-dependent qualities, which can be open to interpretation and discussion. To insist that all artistic production should be based on a narrow definition of "facts" is both naive and over-simplistic. Who determines what is "fact" about natural and artefactual kinds?

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