

FROM THE DIRECTOR OF STUDIES



UPDATE ON THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

Alan Harper | Director of Studies (July 2013)

It is some time since I provided an update on the progress of the Australian Curriculum. It is now timely to do so for a number of reasons, not the least of which being that, with a Federal election in prospect, Education is likely to be an issue.

The situation nationally

It is important to realise that, in NSW, we live in something of a parallel universe, very different from any other jurisdiction with respect to the Australian Curriculum. The development of the Australian Curriculum is in the hands of the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), which ironically is located in Sydney. ACARA has attracted an excellent staff of professionals who have worked very hard to do as they were commissioned to do, to write a national curriculum across a wide range of areas. They have engaged in widespread consultation, both with the professions involved in education and with the community and its various interest groups, and much of their work is either complete or is nearing completion.

ACARA divided its work into four stages. The first three involved curriculum for Years K-10, the last for Years 11 and 12. Stage 1 involved English, Mathematics, Science and History; Stage 2 was Geography, Languages and the Arts; and Stage 3 Health and Physical Education, ICT, Design & Technology, Economics, Business and Civics & Citizenship.

The mandate from Government was less comprehensive and less specific for Years 11 and 12, and the differences encountered between jurisdictions proved far greater than had been the case for what more-or-less amounted to the compulsory years of schooling, Years K-10. ACARA has developed four English courses, four Mathematics courses, four Science courses and two History courses. It has yet to determine how much further it will go in the senior years, if indeed it adds at all to what has now been developed.

A useful graphical representation of ACARA's progress across all these areas can be found at <http://www.acara.edu.au/curriculum/curriculum.html>.

Although each is different, the other seven educational jurisdictions outside of NSW have all moved far more quickly than we to adopt the new curriculum.

The situation in NSW

NSW's apparently slow progress has not been the result of lethargy; indeed, quite the opposite. The position of NSW Governments of both political complexions has been that this State already had a world-class curriculum, and that the Australian Curriculum would only be adopted if it was at least as good as what was already on offer. This has resulted in considerably more scrutiny and consultation in relation to ACARA's curriculum than in any other jurisdiction. Further, in NSW curriculum is far more thoroughly developed than elsewhere, and is always accompanied by comprehensive support materials. This takes time and resources to achieve; hence, once ACARA finalises its work in a particular learning area, our Board of Studies then sets to work. As a result, the only Australian Curriculum learning areas which are ready for adoption in NSW are those in Stage 1, Years K-10 English, Mathematics, Science and History. Schools have these documents now and are to use 2013 as a year of planning and preparation for a staged implementation commencing in 2014. The full implementation timetable can be found at http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/australian-curriculum/pdf_doc/120731-memo-to-principals-update-on-ac-implementation.pdf.

It is interesting that a number of other jurisdictions have been in contact with our Board of Studies, seeking to use the materials its officers have developed for the Australian Curriculum, because they are of a standard well beyond what is available elsewhere. Thus, while slow to be implemented, the Australian Curriculum will be of far higher quality, and far better supported, here in NSW. The nomenclature on which the Board insists is that so and so is a syllabus "incorporating the Australian Curriculum".

The Board is now working on the subjects in ACARA's Stages 2 and 3. The resources granted by Government to get Stage 1 implemented, however, are no longer so plentiful for the subsequent work, which will thus be slower to undertake. Further, some subjects have progressed more rapidly than others, meaning that what will actually be implemented in the second phase in NSW is not clear, but some subjects from both of ACARA's Stage 2 and Stage 3 could well get mixed up. No implementation timetable beyond the first phase has been promulgated.



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Senior Years Curriculum possibilities

I mentioned above that ACARA has now developed fourteen courses in the Stage 1 areas. It is now open to suggestions about what, if anything, should come next. The range of possibilities includes:

- > do nothing more;
- > go on to develop a comprehensive Senior Years curriculum, drawing on the varying experiences of the different jurisdictions;
- > act as a co-ordinating body, to make available nationally the best senior courses from the various jurisdictions. For example, NSW has an excellent Ancient History course which could be made available elsewhere through ACARA; Victoria has an excellent Psychology course which might be offered more widely through ACARA. (This option would be complicated in NSW; being an examination state, syllabuses must be very prescriptive so that teachers and candidates are completely clear about what can be examined.)

This will be an interesting area to watch over the next few months.

The International Baccalaureate Diploma

Initially, it was thought that the mandating of a national curriculum could mean that the IB Diploma programme could no longer be offered. Indeed, recently in NSW, the State Government has changed its requirement for years 11 and 12, so that NSW curriculum must be taught in all NSW schools. Where would this leave the IB Diploma?

Both nationally, through ACARA, and locally in NSW through the Board of Studies, it is agreed that teaching the IB Diploma programme is the equivalent of teaching the Australian (or NSW) curriculum. Specifically in NSW, the Board's approach is that the IB Diploma can be mapped to the same Outcomes as the local curriculum, and hence "ticks the box". The Board itself is undertaking this work at present, which should mean that IB schools will remain able to offer that alternative curriculum in the future.