



Monitoring the Australian Curriculum

July 2019

Introduction

The Queensland Catholic Education Commission (QCEC) provides the 2019 Monitoring the Australian Curriculum submission to Australian Assessment, Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA) as part of the annual monitoring the Australian Curriculum process.

QCEC is the peak strategic body with state-wide responsibilities for Catholic schooling in Queensland. This submission is provided on behalf of the five Diocesan Catholic school authorities and 17 Religious Institutes and other incorporated bodies which, between them, operate a total of 306 Catholic schools that educate more than 149,000 students in Queensland. One Catholic School Authority provided collated feedback from a gathering held with approximately 100 teachers.

QCEC has contributed to ACARA's annual monitoring the F-10 Australian Curriculum process in previous years and again welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the implementation of the Australian Curriculum in 2019.

The following submission is based on feedback, themes and issues raised from Catholic School Authorities that align with the questions posed by ACARA in 2019.

1. Essential content

Is there room for improving the content of the Australian Curriculum to allow more depth and rigor over breadth?

This question raised issues about the purpose of schooling and the philosophy of learning underpinning the Australian Curriculum. Respondents considered the expectations society has of its schools - what knowledge, skills and dispositions do we want students to learn or acquire during their time at school? These bigger questions about the purpose of schooling are not addressed in this submission – they relate to the Goals of Schooling as described in the Melbourne Declaration which is currently being reviewed.

Catholic School Authorities felt there was a reasonably good balance in the rigor and depth in the content of the Australian Curriculum. When looking to improve the Australian curriculum, respondents expressed most concerns about the 'breadth' of the curriculum, that is, the amount of content to be taught. Teachers value depth and rigor in the curriculum over content coverage.

These concerns about an 'overcrowded' curriculum came from teachers working in the primary years (P-6) of schooling. Primary teachers who have all the learning areas to teach believed there was too

much content for them to teach and they are not able to plan, teach and assess a curriculum that was sufficiently engaging and demanding. One comment stated: 'The current curriculum crushes a love of learning for both students and teachers.'

The implications of having too much content in the curriculum included: skimming over content in a superficial way; not being able to differentiate learning; no time for deeper investigations; poor transfer of skills to other areas; and misalignment between English and Mathematics and NAPLAN testing.

To alleviate the issue of too much 'breadth' in the curriculum, respondents stated they wanted the most important and necessary knowledge and skills that Australian school students need to learn in Foundation to Year 10 to be clearly identified and articulated. They want the essential content to be reduced in scale and scope so that across the nation all students are taught the same set of core knowledge and skills.

One of the challenges highlighted was undertaking the task of reducing content and deciding what is 'essential.' In the past this process has been thwarted by the invested interests of some groups and individuals. Those with a stake in specific learning areas, for example teacher associations for various subjects, university academics and industry groups have made it challenging to engage in balanced discussions about what is essential learning for all Australian students. These specific interest groups/individuals tend to view content of their own subject/interest area as taking precedence over other areas. The future focus of learning needs to shift from viewing knowledge of content for its own sake to an application or transference of knowledge in the real world.

To support the workload of teachers, some schools are already prioritising learning areas to ensure quality learning time is devoted to areas of greatest need. Anecdotally it is reported that in the early years of schooling (F-2) the main focus is on the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills due to excessive content in some learning areas, e.g. Technologies, The Arts, HASS.

Catholic School Authorities identified the following ways the essential content in Australian curriculum can be improved:

- To enable learning to be experienced holistically and meaningfully move the focus and organisation of the curriculum from content knowledge to the development of capabilities and skills. By creating stronger alignment across the elements of the curriculum and identifying where there is an intersection of content of learning areas and capabilities a transdisciplinary approach can be implemented.
- Reframe the Australian curriculum to make it progressive and developmental in nature. An example would be to have phases of learning (e.g. F-2, 3-6 and 7-10) where content, capabilities and skills to be acquired in each learning area were identified. In the early phase (F-2) content descriptors can be taught in an integrated meaningful way and as students progress through the year levels the specific discipline skills for subjects can be explicitly taught.
- To support the development of capabilities and skills teachers can generate or select meaningful and authentic contexts for inquiry suited to their students. In this way, the use of concepts or big ideas would enable teachers, and more importantly students, to see a 'wholeness' in their learning.
- Improve the alignment between the achievement standards and content descriptions to ensure the expected student learning matches the assessment of the achievement standard. It is important teachers and students share a common understanding of the expected learning for each year level/phase.

- Include experienced primary teachers in the process of determining the content that is essential as they are the educators expected to teach all learning areas, (content descriptions and achievement standards) general capabilities, and cross curriculum priorities.

References to specific key learning areas/subjects:

- HASS: reduce content in the upper primary levels to enable time for teachers to teach and assess the required skills and inquiry processes.
- Science: Some teachers lack confidence with scientific concepts which resulted in loss of critical STEM capabilities. Although not the curriculum, the resource *Primary Connections* provides a valuable platform to build scientific literacies.
- Design and Technology: some teachers believed the balance between breadth and depth is appropriate, however, it was very easy to ‘swamp students with a lot of interesting stuff’ that does not transfer to other contexts.
- Visual Art: due to highly technical language used in the achievement standards, even experienced teachers do not share a common understanding about what learning was to be assessed and reported. For example, Year 9-10 excerpt from achievement standard: 'Analyse connections between visual conventions, practices and viewpoints that represent their own and others' ideas.'
- Mathematics: content could be structured around ‘big ideas’ or key concepts for each year level or across a phase (F-2, 3-6 and 7-10). Key developmental concepts such as additive thinking, multiplicative thinking, and proportional reasoning could be progressively developed through the content and proficiencies.

2. The place of the General Capabilities

Are there ways of embedding the general capabilities into the learning area content and achievement standards?

Catholic School Authorities stated the current embeddedness of the general capabilities in the Australian curriculum resulted in teachers not being able to consistently identify them. The place of the general capabilities required increased focus given the current worldwide need for students to leave school with high level competencies and capabilities. These vital attributes and dispositions of learners ready to take their place in the world need to be given greater prominence. One teacher stated: ‘the general capabilities should be the starting point for the development of the curriculum.’

The general capabilities should be the organisers of the curriculum – the key focus of learning and teaching - with learning area content presented as a range of options for teachers to select from to support the implementation of meaningful, relevant and flexible learning experiences. In this way, the general capabilities would be viewed as the overarching umbrella that encapsulates all elements of the curriculum. Any curriculum organisation or representation needs to make it clear that explicit teaching of learning areas must occur with the general capabilities and skills being situated as the drivers of the learning.

Teachers would be more likely to value the general capabilities if they were a central focus of learning across all year levels rather than the content. The quotes below reveal that the content in the Australian curriculum has impacted negatively on the development of the general capabilities:

“The curriculum is over-crowded, so the general capabilities get largely forgotten.”

“Too much emphasis is placed on covering content without even considering general capabilities.”

“We need to cull some of the content to give the general capabilities the time and space they deserve.”

“The general capabilities are generally ignored due to the excessive amount of content to cover.”

As the general capabilities are embedded into content and achievement standards, the risk is they are overlooked or glossed over. Teachers recognised the value of the general capabilities, but struggle to

connect them to the content in meaningful ways. Using the general capabilities to assess competencies over a range of subjects would enable teachers to focus more deeply on the application of skills and processes, rather than content alone. Embedding the assessment of the general capabilities in the achievement standards would provide a focus on the skills and processes teachers are expected to teach and what students are expected to learn.

Catholic School Authorities identified the following ways the place of the general capabilities in Australian curriculum can be improved:

- Move the focus of the curriculum from content to capabilities by representing the learning areas as a selection of content/contexts that teachers choose from to create learning experiences that focus on the development of the general capabilities.
- Provide example models/organisers to support teachers in commencing their planning with the general capabilities before moving to the selection of learning area content in order to develop rigorous learning experiences. Samples would provide illustrations of how the development of general capabilities can be achieved through authentic, real world learning contexts and experiences.
- Clearly articulate the purpose of the general capabilities and make explicit reference to the general capabilities in the achievement standards to support teachers intentionally fostering their development.
- Change the way the general capabilities were presented on the website to a similar format to the learning areas where explicit links to content descriptions and elaborations are made.

Please comment on specific general capabilities and their relationship to specific learning areas/subject if appropriate.

- The three general capabilities: personal and social capability, ethical understanding, and intercultural understanding are crucial determinants in influencing educational engagement and outcomes for Indigenous students.
- Teachers of early years believed more focus should be given to the general capabilities of literacy, numeracy and personal and social capability.
- Critical thinking and ICT capabilities are the two general capabilities used to connect with the learning areas of Technologies and Science. It is suggested the lower level thinking domains are replaced with higher order thinking.
- Project-based learning was an effective way of embedding the general capabilities in the content of the curriculum.

3. Recognition of First Peoples:

Is the place of Australia's First Peoples appropriately covered by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures cross curriculum priority?

There was mixed response to this question from Catholic School Authorities – some expressed the view that Australia's First Peoples were appropriately addressed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures cross curriculum priority. One educator stated: 'the content is appropriate and provides many opportunities for students to engage with the history and culture of Australia's first peoples.'

Others thought Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures were being given a very 'tokenistic' approach in their schools and the cross-curriculum priority had not achieved intended outcomes. In some learning areas consideration for Australia's First Peoples was appropriate and relevant, however in other learning areas, e.g. Design Technologies it appeared to be covered in a tokenistic way. Quote from a teacher: 'I think many teachers think that it isn't their responsibility.'

Concerns were raised about the very broad and generic aspect the cross-curriculum priority in terms of the content to be taught. It appeared schools and individual teachers decided what and how much they would include about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures across all learning areas.

A number of respondents believed that it needs a whole of community response and change of thinking. There was a need for community education to improve whole family understandings which would potentially have a positive effect on the enacted curriculum. One respondent commented: 'It doesn't matter what you write on a piece of paper if the classroom teacher espouses values that don't reflect it. Spend money and energy on improving attitudes and beliefs of the community.'

Catholic School Authorities stated that due to the 'embeddedness of the cross-curriculum priorities' they face the same issue and concerns as the general capabilities – that is, there is too much content taught to give them due attention. Like the general capabilities, if there are no explicit reference to the cross-curriculum priorities in the achievement standards then it is more than likely they will be ignored. One Catholic School Authority commented: 'There is no explicit mention of it in the achievement standards, meaning teachers don't always see it as one of their responsibilities. If the cross-curriculum priorities were explicitly referenced in the achievement standards they would be viewed as a priority in planning – being considered first not last in planning, teaching and assessment.'

Catholic School Authorities expressed the view that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures may not be adequately addressed due to teachers' lack of knowledge and confidence in this area. There is a need to build teacher capacity to an appropriate level of confidence and competence to effectively address the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures cross-curriculum priority.

All teachers need a base level of knowledge and understanding about Australia's First Peoples. Teacher feedback indicated a lack the confidence and/or capacity to speak knowledgeably or appropriately with due recognition of cultural considerations and sensitivities. Teachers expressed a strong desire and need to learn more about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, as this was an area lacking in their own educational journey. Having appropriate information available for teachers would enable teachers to teach confidently without being apprehensive about stepping into any sensitive areas.

Examples of ways to build teacher capability include:

- Develop Indigenous elaborations for other learning areas like the elaborations developed for Science
- Provide examples of how the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures cross curriculum priority link to content descriptors so they do not become an 'add on' but are meaningfully and effectively integrated into units
- Provide examples of units that illustrate authentic embedding of all the cross-curriculum priorities
- Improve teacher capability and confidence in the area of Aboriginal languages
- Provide background information on Australia's First People, how to be culturally aware, and about appropriate and respectful ways to engage with the local indigenous communities.
- Develop a bank of reference materials and illustrations of practice.
- Provide a series of online learning materials for teachers' own professional learning.

One consistent message communicated by Catholic School Authorities was the desire for more contemporary resources to meet the needs of teachers across all learning areas and year levels. Suggested support and resources included:

- Authentic and meaningful integration with explicit connections to content.
- Communicate ways schools can access resources held by museums, galleries, etc. where permission to use particular items had been granted.

- Share resources across jurisdictions and sectors, e.g. University of Melbourne Indigenous Knowledges Project, The Healing Foundation resources are well aligned with the cross-curriculum priority.
- The language of the Australian Curriculum glossary needs to be reviewed as it is important the terms Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, Indigenous and First Nations are clearly defined and explained on the Australian curriculum website.

It was suggested that ACARA seek information and advice globally to identify effective ways other countries have responded to the inclusion of cross-curriculum priorities, particularly those that have had significant and positive impact in relation to recognition of First Peoples histories and cultures.

Please comment on specific general capabilities and their relationship to specific learning areas/subject if appropriate.

Mathematics: teachers can address statistics in the learning area of mathematics through the lens of Indigenous life expectancy/illness/educational outcomes.

History: The areas of 'rights and freedom' is an important aspect of history however some students have expressed the view that by Year 12 they are 'over it' as there is so much Indigenous content.

Science: *Primary Connections* has documented strong links to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures for application in Science.

4. Support for implementation:

What should the focus of ACARA's future advice and activity to better support teachers to implement the curriculum?

Catholic School Authorities are ultimately responsible for the implementation of the Australian curriculum in the schools that fall under their authority. However, they do rely on resources, advice and guidance provided by ACARA and the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA).

The dot points below identify suggestions for future support for implementation of the Australian curriculum.

Work Samples:

- sample units of work with general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities being explicitly addressed across all learning areas.
- sample assessments that show how out-of-phase learning might look, e.g. Year 9 student who is working at Year 3 level.
- Integrated unit samples showing meaningful connections between learning areas.

Resources:

- video clips of teaching episodes for specific content descriptions.
- video clips suitable for viewing independently or as a whole staff on the key messages and elements of the Australian curriculum.
- factsheets that unpack the elements of the curriculum and its conceptual underpinnings.

Advice on:

- ways to integrate content descriptions into concepts or big ideas
- teaching text processing and comprehension strategies
- approaches in planning for student diversity and personalising learning to fulfil requirements of NCCD
- multi-age curriculum advice that provides real-life learning opportunities to students in rural and remote communities

- developing units using a ‘backward by design’ approach so teachers start with the general capabilities not with the content descriptions.
- ways to use technology meaningfully across learning areas.

General:

- refine the wording of content descriptions so they are less open to interpretation.
- the Australian curriculum has provided the ‘what’ - teachers need support and professional learning with the ‘how.’
- Any support must prioritise teacher professional development through professional reflection, dialogue and collaboration by focusing on teacher’s thinking rather than only providing work samples.
- Focus needs to be on building collaboration as a key capacity building strategy – creating professional learning communities is a key driver for teacher knowledge and skill development.

5. Please provide any additional feedback in relation to the Australian Curriculum

The following dot points were general comments/feedback provided in relation to the Australian Curriculum:

- Creating learning progressions for learning areas and general capabilities may move teachers further away from making connections that lead to depth and rigour and may potentially reinforce the treatment of the curriculum as isolated pieces of ‘content’ to cover.
- Provide more real-life opportunities for students to engage in community service.
- Students need more opportunities to learn outdoors and to learn in a variety of engaging ways
- There needs to be more flexibility in the subjects studied by Years 9-10 students. The decision to make some subjects compulsory needs to be reviewed, e.g. History and Geography.

Conclusion

QCEC appreciates the opportunity to provide ACARA with feedback and suggestions on the F-10 Australian Curriculum. The annual monitoring process provides Catholic School Authorities the opportunity to inform future directions in this most important endeavour – educating our nation’s next generation.

For further information or clarification, please contact Yvonne Ries, Director-Education, by email yvonner@qcec.catholic.edu.au or phone (07) 3316 5813.



Dr Lee-Anne Perry AM
Executive Director