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How State Cultures have Framed the Post-Compulsory Curriculum

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All school curricula inescapably have frameworks in the sense that they sit inside their own particular set of assumptions about reality. The assumptions about reality which matter most in a curriculum framework in this basic ‘world view’ sense of framework are, first, assumptions about the nature of young people and how they learn; second, assumptions about the nature of knowledge, the stuff from which the curriculum is made; and third, assumptions about what kind of knowledge it is important for young people to have by the time they leave school. This last set of assumptions about the aims, or desired outcomes, of the curriculum is heavily related to curriculum makers’ views about the relationship of the school as an institution to other ‘institutions’ — to families, to the local community, to a church or other religious institution, to employers and their spokespersons, to the formal political institutions of the State (at two levels in Australia), to ‘Australia’, as curriculum makers envisage it, and to the world beyond. Those of a more linguistic turn might describe the set of assumptions as a ‘discourse’ providing the concepts and rules of the language game inside which the curriculum and justifications for structures and practices must be created. The assumptions set boundaries to what can legitimately be accepted or even uttered as curriculum content, process, desired outcomes and assessment strategies.

Through the studies described in this paper we have come to the conclusion that paying attention in curriculum studies to this set of assumptions and beliefs is crucial. It is crucial, on the one hand, because it defines and explains much of what is expounded in curriculum documents. It is even more crucial, on the other, because it has, through the curriculum’s structure and practices, long-term effects on life chances. It affects students’ objective options, the certifications they carry with them, and, more deeply, it also affects the way they see themselves and their ‘right’ to life chances. The set of assumptions is, in a very fundamental sense, what students learn from studying the curriculum.
Because the assumptions are rarely defended but, rather, buried as foundational they are absorbed as truths about reality by the students themselves. All but the most thoughtful become converts to the mental set, the frame of reference, in which the curriculum is built. They see the nature of learning, the nature of young people, the nature of knowledge and the proper relationship of the school to the world as being that set of propositions which underlies and makes sense of their constructed experiences. Over time, the whole community which has experienced this curriculum (either directly or vicariously) reifies its assumptions so that what were once new and often contested propositions become so culturally embedded that they set the limits of what can be thought about educational reality. They become hegemonic.

The struggle over which concepts and statements will frame our view of what we are doing is a bedrock political struggle because it creates social reality, setting the rules by which that reality will be defined and realised in practice. We are currently (September 1999) in the middle of just such a struggle in the State politics of Victoria generally. Will the assumptions of the State be that whatever Jeff wants rules; that the ‘economy’ matters above all; that government is not there to run things but to provide a climate of favours for investors; that autocracy and secrecy are necessary for a strong ‘economy’…? Will they be assumptions that country towns matter; honest and open government matters; democracy matters; government is there to provide services for all, not favours for a few…? This political struggle is precisely a struggle over the world view, the assumptions, through which Victorians will have to conduct their public life.

To give a contemporary curriculum example of a struggle over the concepts and propositions which will frame reality, the National Curriculum Statements and Profiles were carefully crafted in just such a struggle. They were an attempt by Garth Boomer and a handful of fellow curriculum professionals, at the turn of the 90s, to finesse others who had a simplistic, out-of-date, plan for an outcomes-based curriculum for Australia built on Behaviorist assumptions. Boomer strove to replace that old and limiting view with another outcomes-based plan built on another set of assumptions, this time ‘developmental’ ones. All States are in the process of attempting to dig out older assumptions about curriculum and to embed developmental ‘Profile’ assumptions to the point where they become ‘naturalised’ in school curriculum practice to Year 10.

All we have said so far is by way of introduction to the proposition, fundamental to this paper, that every curriculum regime is framed by a justificatory mental set or cultural nest. This paper attempts to give a sense of two comparative historical studies of the upper secondary (post-compulsory) curriculum in a number of States of Australia from the sixties to 1990, one study completed and one still in process. These studies have led us to pay attention to the mental sets
underlying Australian upper secondary curricula. We conclude that it is important to notice, name and analyse these belief systems because they are extremely powerful. They have different real consequences for young people and their life chances.

The first of these studies was undertaken by Margaret Vickers\(^1\). It looked at differences in school retention patterns (or drop-out patterns) between Australian States, developing a statistical model to explore why rates of retention to Years 10, 11 and 12 were different State by State, particularly in the 80s. It showed that the differences in retention rates between States were not explicable in economic terms. The conclusion of this study was that the differences in retention (and therefore in life chances on a State by State basis) were largely due to matters which appear at first glance to be directly within the ambit of educational authorities. The differences are in the structures and practices of the senior secondary curriculum, and particularly in their assessment regimes, including ‘what counts’.

The second study\(^2\), which is not yet finished, is attempting to explore how these differences in curricula came into existence in the first place and why they persist. The answers have to do with the building and maintenance of sets of assumptions, world-views about the upper secondary curriculum which are expressed most publicly through the assessment regimes but are consistently foundational to the whole curriculum structure, content and strategies. The mental set in each State mightily limits what can legitimately be accepted or even uttered as relevant to the upper secondary curriculum.

We turn now to the findings and reasoning of the first project.

**Part I: Why are some Australian States more successful than others at dropout prevention?**

During the 1980s, every State system in Australia made great strides toward the goal of extending the benefits of a full secondary schooling to all. As Figure 1 indicates, between 1982 and 1992, high school retention rates more than doubled, increasing from 36% to 77% over this decade.

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\(^1\) The first study was undertaken at Harvard University, in the Graduate School of Education, as Margaret’s doctoral thesis: Margaret Helen Vickers (1995) Why State Policies Matter: The uneven rise of Australia’s high school completion rates. Harvard University, Ed D thesis.

\(^2\) A substantial part of this second study was undertaken while I was a Senior Research Fellow at Australian Council for Educational Research. ACER also generously supported Margaret in her part of this second study.
Figure 1: National Retention Rates to Year 12, from 1967 to 1992

Although the economists would have us believe that the increases achieved during the 1980s are entirely attributable to the collapse of the youth labour market, what happened across Australia is difficult to explain unless we also take account of the reforms put in place by the State authorities. One piece of evidence which suggests that curriculum policy made a difference is shown in this Figure:

Figure 2: Divergence of Retention rates, by State
(Mainland States only)

What this figure suggests is that the retention rates to Year 12 of the mainland States, which had risen and fallen in tandem from 1967 to 1981, diverged markedly during the 1980s. When the national data were disaggregated by State, it became obvious that the relative retention rates of the States started diverging after 1982.
During the 1980s, economists and media sources tended to attribute the overall increase in school retention to the dramatic fall in full-time job opportunities for teenagers over this period. The rapid decline in job opportunities for teenagers clearly contributed to the overall increase in retention rates across the nation, but it does not explain the divergence. In order to explain the divergence, one would need to show that the youth labour markets of the States declined at different rates. This did not happen; on the contrary, the rate of decline of youth labour markets was extraordinarily similar across the mainland States throughout the 1980s.

What makes this divergence remarkable is that the relative retention rates of the mainland States had been very similar for many years. Starting in 1967, when the ABS first started publishing retention rate statistics, the apparent retention rates of the five mainland States increased at a moderate rate until 1977. They then leveled off but continued to be tightly clustered from 1977 to 1981. Throughout this entire fifteen-year period, the overall difference between the 'best' and 'worst' of the mainland State never exceeded six percentage points.

Yet in the decade of rapid retention rate growth, substantial differences emerged between the 'top of the league' and the 'bottom'. By 1992, South Australia (which had been at the bottom in 1967) led with a retention rate of 93 percent, while New South Wales trailed 24 percentage points behind at 69 percent. Queensland and Victoria also achieved retention rates well above those achieved by New South Wales at that time. Since 1991, the gap between the 'best-performing' and 'worst performing' States has narrowed somewhat, but it has still not disappeared.

The issue here is not to foster a puerile contest among the States over a 'league table' of relative retention rates. Rather, the persistent trends in the retention rate data are worth examining because they serve as indicators. Other things being equal, they indicate what proportion of the students in each State were willing to pursue the upper secondary curricula offered to them, or were voting with their feet and leaving before Year 12.

We are aware of the complexities involved in using retention rate data for this purpose. Clearly, when students are deciding whether to stay at school or leave, there are many factors other than their school's curriculum and assessment policies that must come into the equation. Students will be influenced by what their parents do for a living and what their parents expect of them. Their decisions will also be influenced by their family's ability to support them, and by the availability of jobs in the local youth Labour market. This research treated the Labour market and socio-economic factors as control variables, and
focused on assessing the effects of the different curriculum and assessment policies adopted by the States.

The study covered the period from 1977 to 1990, spanning 14 cohorts of individual-level data from the Australian National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. Policy-related data were obtained from the curriculum and assessment authorities in each State, and the 15-19 year old employment to population ratios were also entered as a control. My goal was to develop a "survival function" from multi-wave data. Discrete-time survival analysis methods were the most appropriate method. This method allowed me to examine the conditional probabilities that students left school between one year level and the next, and to relate those probabilities to a range of predictor variables.

In the language of the survival analysis literature, the term survival probability refers to the proportion of an initial cohort that survives through each of several successive Years; the term survival function refers to plots depicting the patterns of survival probabilities over time. Survival probabilities can be estimated for each year level and are interpreted as the proportion of students in that year level who continue on to the next year level rather than dropping out. Hazard probabilities represent the likelihood that a student will drop out during or at the end of a particular year level.

The next two figures (Figs 3a and 3b) show the survival plot for the aggregated national data, and the corresponding hazard plot for the same data. These are easy to read: the first figure shows that, across the national sample between 1977 and 1990, approximately 98 percent of those in year 9 progressed to year 10; of those that were in year 10, approximately 70 percent proceeded to year 11, and of these, approximately 60 percent went on to year 12.

![Figure 3(a): Survival Plot for National Data](image-url)
The hazard plot (Figure 3b) suggests that the likelihood of dropping out at the end of year 9 is only 5 percent; this rises sharply so that the probability of leaving at the end of year 11 is 28 percent; in relation to the final transition, from year 11 to year 12, the probability of dropping out is 25 percent, or one in four.

The model presented in Figure 4 was created by starting with the national data, then "splitting" the initial plot by adding clusters of States. This clustering model was used because the mainland States’ patterns fell into three clusters. New South Wales (NSW) and Western Australia (WA) formed one cluster, while South Australia (SA) and Victoria (Vic) formed another. Queensland (Qld) formed another cluster, on its own. These plots indicate not only whether a particular proportion of students left before year 12, but when they left. That is,
they show you which end-of-year (end of Yr 9, Yr 10, or Yr 11) was the riskiest one for dropping out. It is clear from these slides that the year of highest risk was not the same in each State. (This clustering is mathematically justifiable: beyond a three-way split, there is no further improvement in model fit.)

Three distinct patterns of retention were found among Australia's five mainland States, and these correspond to the three hazard plots in Fig. 4. Between 1977 and 1990, in New South Wales and Western Australia, most of the students who left school before the end of Year 12 actually left school at the end of Year 10. The risk of leaving between Year 11 and Year 12 was relatively small. This was also true in Queensland (i.e., Year 10 was the riskiest year for dropping out) except that there, the overall risk of leaving anytime before Year 12 was very small in comparison with the other States. Victoria and South Australia showed a different pattern: the risk of leaving at the end of Year 11 was higher than the risk of leaving at the end of Year 10.

One advantage of hazard functions is that they lend themselves to very direct interpretation. The plots show that, on average, students from New South Wales and Western Australia were twice as likely to leave school at the end of Year 10 as were students from Victoria or South Australia. What makes sense of this result (i.e., the high hazard associated with Year 10) is that (at least until the mid-1980s) NSW and WA imposed formal, State-wide tests that all students were required to take at the end of Year 10. These States also issued a School Certificate at that point. The credential itself was not worth much. However, the test results apparently sent a signal to many students; if their results were "below average" on a State-wide scale, there was little point in attempting the more difficult courses that comprised the Year 11 and 12 program. While we do not have space to go into all the details here, the conclusion was drawn that the differences among the States in terms of what proportion of students left, and when they left, could be explained in terms of three factors:

• Whether there were formal assessments at both Year 10 and Year 12 levels, or only at Year 12;
• Certain characteristics of Year 12 assessment; and
• Which subjects "counted" for the purpose of admission to the universities.

These next two slides (Figures 5 and 6) show what happens when the student's socio-economic background and the employment-to-population ratio are added to the hazard functions. The results are predictable, in that they show that, within each particular state cluster, students from high SES backgrounds were less likely to drop out than students from low SES backgrounds, and that a weak youth labour market encouraged students to stay on at school. However, the interesting twist here is that regardless of the SES level or the vicissitudes of the
labour market, the negative effect of the Year 10 testing process is not masked by these background variables. For example, Figure 5 shows that the likelihood of dropping out at the end of year 10 was consistently greater in NSW and WA than in Vic and SA. This remains true, according to these models, even if the youth labour market in NSW and WA is 'set' at a weak level (EPOP = d1) and the youth labour market in Vic and SA is set at a very strong level (EPOP = d9).

Figure 5: Fitted hazards showing the effect of varying EPOP. (Note: the two inverted V-shaped plots represent the NSW/WA cluster, while the two upward-sloping plots represent the Vic/SA cluster)
Figure 6: Fitted hazards showing the effect of varying TSES while holding EPOP at it's median value

Figure 6 shows a somewhat different pattern, but again, it is evident that the inverted V profile associated with the high likelihood of dropping out at the end of year 10 in NSW and WA was not masked by the effects of family SES.

This study suggests (convincingly, we think) that it does matter how the curriculum is structured, what content is valued or even accessible and, particularly, it matters what kind of assessment regime a State uses because curriculum structure and content are forced to be congruent with this regime. These curriculum policies do have tangible effects, even after controlling for family SES and economic factors. So, for example, Queensland, by the end of the 90s, had a dropout rate of approximately 10 percent, while the NSW dropout rate was over 25 percent. New South Wales relied heavily on external examinations and a sustained clear distinction between university entrance and ‘lesser’ subjects at the end of Year 12. By way of contrast, in Queensland, assessment was continuous, internal and school-based. Victoria and South Australia never adopted an internal assessment system for all students like that of Queensland, but they did have respected, school-based assessment options and supported a broad curriculum. Both Victoria and South Australia abolished formal State-wide tests at the Year 10 level in the late 1960s, and this has resulted, over time, in a very low risk of attrition at the Year 10-11 transition in the two southern States.

We are at heart comparativists. What can we learn from this ‘natural experiment’ that compares the Australian States? How did they come to differ so much in their senior secondary curriculum structures? Given that one model was a relative failure in terms of retention, why did it continue? One really puzzling aspect of all this for a comparativist is the extent to which the makers of Australian post-compulsory policy avoid having serious conversations across State boundaries when there is so much to learn. For example, the Queensland system has been enormously successful in reducing its dropout rates, but this success has been met with profound silence from other States. When Queensland’s system is raised in other State’s educational circles, in our experience there is a surprising lack of knowledge, particularly in NSW and WA, and a quick return to more parochial topics of conversation. Why? These questions led to the second study.

Part 2: How have States developed their upper secondary curriculum systems? Why do they persist when more successful systems exist ‘next door’?
Margaret's study, together with some earlier qualitative work of Cherry's pointing to the three different kinds of upper secondary system in Australia\(^3\), led to our current study, a comparative historical study, from 1960 to 1990, of the upper secondary curriculum decisions taken, arguments made, and rationales and justifications given in three States — Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. These were chosen as representative examples of each cluster. We have called New South Wales ‘the Archetypal State’, Queensland ‘the Progressive State’ and Victoria the Pluralist/‘Contested’ State. Here, briefly is a summary of where our historical research has led.

**New South Wales**

We call NSW the ‘archetypal’ State because its leaders, and most of its inhabitants, still believe in a curriculum world-view which all States shared through the fifties and early sixties and most States settled into for a generation before that. The images and propositions of this curriculum mind set include the following: Students have varying intellectual ‘power’ from birth (the concept of hereditary ‘intelligence’ measured as IQ); a ‘fair’ school system is one in which schooling is seen as a competition and there is State-wide provision of teachers and thus an equal chance for all kids to win the competition: Grade 1 as the starting block; the prize for winning the race is university entrance (particularly entrance to a few elite professional faculties and, once upon a time, the Science Faculty); curriculum process is first about learning basic skills and later about memorising ‘facts’ important to academic disciplines; and the fair test for the prize is a set of solemn, three hour, common, unseen written examinations of academic prowess, taken solo without human or other resources beyond paper and pen, at the end of the matriculation year. The New South Wales system is based on a belief in intelligence as an entity and that this unseen factor is what was primarily being tested for. Thus New South Wales believed, at least until well beyond 1990, that it was OK to drop out of school at Year 10 if you did not come through as smart. This State was, during the years in which we have been studying it, and it largely still is, caught in a time-warp of Modernist binaries: bright and dumb kids, academic and practical streams, high and low standards, rigorous and soft subjects.

This view has been written about extensively. It is the world-view gently ridiculed by Freeman Butts, the Teachers' College Columbia evaluator who


and Collins Cherry (1992) "The changing nature of the academic curriculum". In Seddon, Terri and Deer, Christine (eds) A Curriculum for the Senior Secondary Years. Hawthorn, ACER.
visited Australia and wrote about its schooling in 1954. It is a combination of naïve, early twentieth century IQ theory, bolted onto mid-nineteenth century Chartist views on equality of opportunity, which in turn is attached to earlier nineteenth century Utilitarian affection for anonymous, written examinations as a protection against favouritism. There is a whiff of turn-of-the-century Social Darwinism in which high IQ students are defined as ‘the fittest’, a great chunk of late nineteenth century Positivism with its valorising of mathematics and physical science, and an academic political agenda aimed at protecting the symbolic capital of academic knowledge. New South Wales is indeed a mine of information about the sedimented layers of egalitarian, democratic ideology which underlay pre-multicultural Australia.

New South Wales adopted a State high school system in the 1880s, undermining existing private schools and pre-empting the founding of more. Until the Wyndham Report of 1960, attendance at New South Wales’ academic high schools was reserved for an elite group, those who passed a difficult testing hurdle in the schooling competition at the end of primary school. Consequently, the State selective academic high schools rapidly developed a reputation for occupying the elitist academic ‘position’ among schooling options, and thereby they attracted many children of the professional/managerial class away from fee paying, private options. While the public system, for more than fifty years after the First World War, also provided a hierarchy of other high schools — boys’ technical, boys’ agricultural, business (i.e. girls’ clerical), and girls’ domestic science — its pride was in the academic elite, the ‘cream’ who made it to the selective secondary schools. Graduates of the selective high schools of New South Wales have gone on to run the professions, the bureaucracies and the academic worlds of New South Wales and, of course, the teaching profession itself.

Thus by the 1980s the State system in New South Wales, in a duopoly with the single pre-sixties university in the State, the University of Sydney, had run the upper secondary curriculum system for four generations merely as a matriculation system. The assumptions which limited this system had become blinkeringly hegemonic. They were shared by almost everyone brought up in New South Wales and they were asserted particularly strongly by the NSW elite who had, of course, benefited both psychologically as the ‘cream’ and materially as prize winners in the game of schooling as an academic competition. By contrast, Victoria did not jump into high school building in the nineteenth century. Instead, private schools multiplied rapidly and joined forces with Victoria’s only pre-sixties university, the University of Melbourne. The late-developing State secondary school system of Victoria still tangles with this deeply-entrenched partnership between the Universities and the high-fee private
schools. The Victorian elite, by and large, have been graduates of exclusive private-sector schools.\(^4\)

A recent attempt in the 1990s to shake this set of NSW assumptions showed instead just how strong it was. Professor Barry McGaw, during his recent review of the senior secondary system, explored many alternatives to the current system in New South Wales with local communities, journalists, politicians and bureaucrats. Some of what he said was not taken seriously, or even able to be heard and understood, because it did not fit inside the New South Wales game. Almost all the counter-arguments put publicly against proposed changes were mindless repetitions of the old discourse. Indeed, Professor McGaw only managed minor changes to the system. Further, to defend these and get them politically accepted, he had to argue them inside the New South Wales mentality. For example, in insisting that universities in New South Wales report on and justify their selection of students, he did not waste his energy arguing against the positivist, IQ-based proposition that it is fair to gain university entrance by way of a high tertiary entrance ‘score’.\(^5\) Instead he simply argued, using the positivist numbers game, and inside the NSW version of what is fair. He asked the NSW community to consider who actually wins the competition, and showed that many students were admitted and others denied university entrance on the basis of statistical error.

In New South Wales, almost everyone still lives inside the same world-view of the upper secondary curriculum and almost everyone takes the language game, the concepts and propositions which sustain it, as natural, innocent truth. Thus these concepts and propositions set the limits of what can be thought and uttered. They even set the limits, as we have seen, to the legitimate politics of change. They delineate, indeed, a hegemonic, mutually confirming world-view (concepts and rules) and set of practices (game), a common habitus in the full sense of Bourdieu’s concept\(^6\)

Queensland

Queensland, the Progressive State, escaped from this NSW curriculum culture in the late 1960s in large part because its secondary system was so weak for so long that the New South Wales’ world-view never became hegemonic. Instead of developing a State high school system in the nineteenth century like NSW,


\(^{5}\) The TES, and now the UAI, is a number which purports to represent the student’s overall matriculation performance across a range of different subjects.

Queensland had focused upon providing universal primary education for a geographically scattered and thin population. On the margins it developed a scholarship system to send a small academic elite on to a secondary education. This was provided by a handful of ‘private’ grammar schools located in regional centres. The State had agreed in the 1850s to subsidise local communities in the setting up of grammar schools, and effectively continued heavy subsidies by providing tests at the end of primary school for all young Queenslanders and full scholarships to grammar school for the few who passed the test and wanted to continue their education. The same government subsidies were extended, in the first decade of this century, to some Catholic and Protestant private grammar schools. Those trickle of young people who graduated from these schools and went on to university imbibed the New South Wales’ system’s concepts and rationales if only because, until the founding of the University of Queensland in the second decade of this century, they had to go south to the University of Sydney. However, for the vast majority of Queenslanders, right up until 1955, schooling either meant attending a local, egalitarian State primary school which ended at Year 8, or alternatively, attending the local, equally egalitarian, Catholic parochial primary school which also ended at year 8.

Government responsibility for secondary education was largely off the agenda until the Labor Party split in the mid-fifties and the Gair government fell as a consequence. With the post-war baby boom at its heels, a new and energetic Liberal government addressed education as a major priority. By 1964 new State secondary schools had been built across Queensland’s suburbs and towns, a new schooling pattern of seven years of primary followed by five years of secondary schooling was inaugurated, and there was turmoil everywhere as Queensland attempted to catch up with the other States.

There are, perhaps, two keys to what happened next. The first key is that it was the powerful private grammar schools who were most dissatisfied with the quasi-New South Wales system which came into operation in 1964. They remained largely faithful to the cause of change for the next twenty years. Led by Max Howell, a Victorian who was positioned as leader of the private school lobby by the simple fact of being appointed head of Brisbane Grammar School in the mid-60s, the private school lobby attacked the idea that the only centrally endorsed curriculum available at senior secondary level should be a university matriculation curriculum. The sixties was a time of rapid economic expansion in what had been a sleepy State. Private schools were coping not only with their share of baby boomers from their traditional clientele but also with the children of those locals and interstate new arrivals doing well in the mining bonanza and tourism take-off. They had many students whose families wanted them to
complete Years 11 and 12 but who would not be going to a University’. Howell led the private ‘system’ to endorse change towards a broader and more suitable, upper secondary curriculum for all.

The second key is that the late 60s was also a period of a strong Progressive movement in education across the Western world. Victoria was the epicentre of this movement in Australia. In Victoria a backlash against bureaucratic control of State secondary schools was fueled by a new multicultural diversity among students, overcrowding, a young and better educated professional teaching force, and a wave of overseas literature on building curricula around the developmental needs and interests of students. All States were affected. In 1969 even the conservative State of Western Australia was faced with an embarrassing review committee which recommended that it abolish external examinations and restructure its secondary system.

The pressure of the private school lobby, with the backing of a campaign against the external examination matriculation system by the Brisbane Mail, resulted in a decision in Queensland in early 1969 to bring in an outside expert to chair a new committee of review of the upper secondary system. The expert chosen was a Victorian, Dr. Bill Radford, the Director of the Australian Council for Educational Research. He chaired a small Committee of Queensland stakeholders in upper secondary schooling and reported in 1970.

The Radford Committee proposed a new secondary school system consisting of school-based assessment and a broad range of subjects which could be counted for university entrance. Yet it used familiar concepts and familiar rhetoric and routines as far as possible. There were no changes of subject names, for example, nor any interference proposed into the ways in which schools taught these subjects. Most importantly, as far as was possible, the arguments put by the Committee for change were couched in terms of concepts with which Queenslanders were familiar.

The arguments took Queensland’s parochial, egalitarian rhetoric, slogans which had underpinned the primary system, and applied this rhetoric to the whole of schooling right through to Year 12. The basic principles pulled from the foundational world-view underpinning Queensland’s tradition of common primary schooling included valuing all young Queenslanders, having a system which was fair for all, and asserting the right of all Queensland youngsters to full schooling. These familiar and common principles were woven through a Progressive, individualist discourse: a good upper secondary system should

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7 The University of Queensland only catered to an intellectual elite (As did all Australian universities at that time).
cater for the needs of each individual; it should provide courses to suit all; and it
should be supportive of all young people, particularly in its assessment
structure. These foundational beliefs were soon called “the Spirit of Radford”.

From the moment the State government accepted the Radford Report’s
recommendations, Queensland’s upper secondary curriculum system embarked
on a long series of ‘adjustments’. The Radford system, which began in 1973,
introduced the idea of district level exchanges of student work between schools
and the development of common standards through professional discussion.
This system was already being evaluated by 1976. The resulting Scott Report,
endorsed school based assessment and mutual district level monitoring but
went further: it advocated moving from traditional norm-based to standards-
based assessment. It also advocated a district level panel process for the
approval, against State developed frameworks of aims and standards, of a
school’s planned curriculum in each subject. These recommendations were
slowly realised over the late 70s and early 80s. In the late 80s, other concerns
about the system were quelled by yet another enquiry in 1990, this one by
Professor Viviani. Her Report endorsed ‘the Spirit of Radford’ once again, but
moved another step into the unknown by abolishing the single tertiary entrance
score system and offering universities a ‘profile’ of information about each
student rather than a single number.

Over the first fifteen years post-Radford, the survival of the new system was a
matter of touch and go. The press turned against it and became nostalgic about
the Australian archetype. There was a period in the mid-seventies of religious
fundamentalist opposition by groups who had the Premier’s support. There
was a moment in the early eighties when the system was secretly diagnosed as
terminally ill and the standards-based assessment system was only rescued by
the endorsement of the Minister for Education and his quiet financial backing for
a major teacher professional development program. Even Queensland’s
spectacular success in raising retention rates from the lowest levels to the highest
in Australia backfired in the late 80s because there were not enough university
places for qualified school leavers.

Yet by the early 90s Queenslanders were fairly settled inside a different habitus.
They used a different discourse and simply lived out a different world-view
about the upper secondary curriculum. They were happy with a system which
served ‘the interests of young Queenslanders’. After years of immersion in the
practice of a school based system, they were much more sophisticated than their
New South Wales counterparts in their understanding of assessment. They
were even calmly accepting of the idea of permanent change, the idea that their
system would be revised periodically to serve the best interests of Queensland
young people as times moved on and circumstances altered.
Schooling in Victoria began in a liberal tradition of self-help, parental responsibility and private philanthropy rather than as a direct responsibility of the State. Solid, endowed, private, single-sex secondary schools were a strong presence in Melbourne culture by the 1880s. Alongside them were Schools of Mines, Mechanics Institutes and Institutes of Technology all endowed through private means and scattered through the suburbs, post-gold rush cities and towns across the State. The private schools were strongly opposed to the State entering the field of academic secondary education at all and lobbied vigorously to prevent a New South Wales system from developing. Their opposition continued well into the twentieth century and was heeded, if to varying degrees, by successive State governments. Thus, by the 1950s Victoria had developed a clearly inequalitarian (in the New South Wales competitive sense) secondary system where opportunity for young people depended both on their material circumstances and on the geographical area in which the family lived. Geography mattered because, right up until the late 1940s, there were almost no opportunities to gain a free, public secondary education in those parts of Melbourne where private, non-Catholic, fee-paying schools had an interest. The State ran, after a struggle early this century, a few leading, selective high schools in inner Melbourne and it had a system of well-supported high schools in country areas where there were no major non-Catholic private school rivals. Alongside these, a separate division of the Education Department ran a large system of secondary technical schools which posed no threat to private interests because they were intended for working class youngsters and did not hold out any possibility of university entrance. Multiple teachers' unions developed to suit this division of the secondary education field between private grammar schools (Catholic and Protestant), State high schools, and State technical schools. In sum, niche schooling directly related to gender, class and rural-urban location is the Victorian tradition and, for many, the main game has been about the recognition, expansion, contraction and abolition of niches. Proposals for overarching upper secondary curriculum systems were still being evaluated by players in the 1980s and 90s in the light of that main game. The advent of a Catholic secondary system after the introduction of Commonwealth subsidies to all schools in the early 70s simply added another player.

The multiplicity of players in the Victorian upper secondary game has been implicitly recognised for a long time by the State's tradition of appointing committees of stakeholders as the primary means of making decisions. This, however, has solved few problems. While in Queensland the stakeholders on any State Committee are seen as the spokespeople for their constituents, in Victoria life is much more complicated. There are discursive games and power
struggles within each stakeholder group. Notoriously in complex Victoria, those who go on Committees to represent an interest and construct an agreement with other interests cannot always get their own constituents to endorse the agreement they have made.

In the late 60s a Progressive, individualist, child-focused perspective inspired many teachers in both public and private secondary schools in Victoria. The Victorian State system responded by encouraging and supporting Progressive curriculum experimentation in individual schools. The fragmentation of the upper secondary system meant that no one was powerful enough to bring about whole system change. Change was necessarily enclosed within single schools or in partnerships of like-minded teachers across schools. Change was thus only possible in three areas: first, change to the structure of relationships within the school between members of staff; second, change to staff understanding of who students are and how they learn and thus to the practice of the teacher-student relationships; and third, change to a school’s understanding of and prioritising of knowledge, the substance of teaching and learning. Teachers in some State academic high schools were particularly enthusiastic, founding alternative schools within schools and, in places, transforming whole high schools. But there were similar enthusiasts in the private and technical high school systems too. Most of these reformers based their practices on the perceived needs of individual students, on community (or at least parental) involvement, and on their own particular enthusiasms and insights into the areas where change was possible. Examples of popular reforms of the period in Victorian schools include: more direct and egalitarian contact between teachers and students, discussing individual work contracts with students and giving them much more freedom in how and when the contracts were completed, the introduction of General Studies and other forms of integrated curricula as an alternative to boundaried academic disciplines, and forms of assessment more directly related to the breadth of curriculum aims than a traditional written examination.

Yet no one was in a position to turn any of these experimental practices into standard Victorian practice. The number of interest groups simply increased. As a direct result of all the experimenting and related teachers’ union politics, by the end of the 70s Victoria had five separate upper secondary systems of curriculum and certification: Group 1 Higher School Certificate (an archetypal option much favoured by traditional private schools and old selective high schools), Group 2 Higher School Certificate (an internally assessed alternative to HSC Group 1, offered by the academic high schools and private schools primarily to students not aiming for university), STC (the acronym for the certification offered by a group of break-away alternative schools, under the auspices of HSC Group 2 rules, and allowing back-door entry to some universities), T-12 (the acronym for a bridging course to matriculation offered in
Technical high schools beyond Year 10) and TOP (the acronym for an upper secondary up-grade offered through TAFE). Each major group kept its own discourse, had its own schools in which to practice, and lived inside its own concepts and priorities, its own mental set. Each group functioned in full knowledge that others lived inside different beliefs and practices but in the conviction that others were making a mess of the education of Victoria's young people.

A new State Labor government, elected in the early 80s, succumbed to pressures from within and beyond the Party to address the untidiness of such a system and its expense in terms of both negotiation time and money (Victoria had the highest schooling costs (public plus private) of any Australian State). Beginning with the Blackburn enquiry of 1983-4, this government Committeed and Policed and Planned and Campaigned in an attempt to build a unified, ‘common’ system. It was particularly influenced by some members of the Party who had been prominent in the Victorian Secondary Teachers’ Association in the seventies and leaders of the STC movement. Radical curriculum change in every ‘subject’ was proposed, change which elided the distinction between the academic and the practical and in which assessment was authentic to the aims of the subject rather than governed by the assumption that students would sit an external examination. Also proposed was the abolition of the technical high school system, abolition of the distinction between HSC Group 1 and Group 2, abolition of the STC as a separate form of certification, and the retirement of TAFE from the upper secondary schooling arena. Planning and design in relation to these proposals went ahead throughout the 80s. There was constant modification because of strong opposition from the University of Melbourne and others (notably in private schools) who lived inside the old HSC Group 1 system (the archetypal system), and because there was a genuine commitment to developing a system which was just to students, educationally ‘sound’, and satisfactory to all stakeholders. The impossible took much longer than expected. In fact it has not really happened.

1992 was a year in which retention rates crashed across Australia following a Commonwealth-planned economic recession in 1991. It also happened to be the year in which the VCE, much modified, was finally introduced into all Victorian secondary schools. Victorian retention rates in that year crashed alongside those of other States. Unlike some other States, however, retention rates in Victoria have not recovered. (This is also true of its ally in early 1990s reform, South Australia). In 1993 Labor lost power in Victoria and the weight of the new Kennett government swung behind those conservative (archetype mind-set) educational groups to whom much had been conceded in Committee negotiations and curriculum rewrites but who still opposed the infant VCE system.
It is still too hard, at this point, to disentangle the extent to which responsibility for Victoria's current low retention rate is the result of having its particular kind of unified, centralised, upper secondary curriculum system. Other possible factors responsible for low retention include increases in full-time employment opportunities (for young males particularly), large changes in the rules and spirit of the VCE under the Kennett Liberal government (in the direction of the archetypal system) and Kennett's massive withdrawal of funds from State schooling at all levels. The upper secondary system in Victoria is still contested and what a good system might look like is still unresolved. The 1999 Victorian elections will be very important in setting the next stage of negotiations.

Of particular interest to us, however, is the fact that, while the 'non-system' of many rival routes for students remained, Victoria vied with Queensland (and with South Australia, the other State which has paralleled Victoria's curriculum history) for the highest secondary school retention rate in Australia. The non-system, in fact, reigned into the early 90s. The non-system was very successful from a student retention perspective. We would argue that it provided opportunities, which any tidy system finds difficult to do, for young people to change their minds, to find a way of learning which suited them (or their families), to find support from sympathetic professionals, and to be offered back-door opportunities to finish schooling and enter forms of tertiary education. The non-system may have been a failure to the efficiency minded, but it was a success in effectiveness terms if retention is the measure.

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What have we learned from this analysis so far? What we have learned, of course, is related to our own values and assumptions. We both regard completing one's school education as important in its own right rather than just being a substitute for unavailable work. Thus we do regard retention as a major, important and fair measure of upper secondary curriculum success. The first study reported in this paper showed how economic and other socio-demographic factors can be bracketed out so that formal survival analysis can give a pretty clear indication of how States are performing in the retention stakes.

The second study is attempting to look more deeply at what underlay the differences in retention patterns across Australian States from the late 70s to 1990. Much can be learned from such a study about how to achieve high retention rates. Radical reforms in some Victorian schools, and particularly in the STC system, provide models of how to support students to learn and experimented with ways of breaking an academic discipline curriculum
structure which many students found irrelevant and alienating. The success of the Victorian non-system years suggests that it is crucial to recognise and cater to differences among students, providing ways to stand behind every young person’s awkward and unique attempts to learn about the world and to discover what they might have to contribute. Our second study suggests that having a tidy, centralised system with only one game and one recognised way of achieving extracts a high price in educational failure in terms of making a mess of young people in the present and precluding those young people’s potential social contributions in the future.

Queensland, by the early 90s, however, had showed how a single system could get around this. It had constructed a new system in which curriculum aims and standards were set centrally, teacher professional development was built in, and yet schools were free to cater to their own student interests and educational needs. It has slowly and thoughtfully created and sustained a retention-successful alternative to the Australian archetype. It is particularly worth studying, cherishing and emulating. Instead it tends to be alternately ignored or decried by other States.

If we are to realise on the potential value of the natural upper secondary curriculum experiment Australia conducted across the States in the 70s and 80s, State educational leaders (and Commonwealth educational leaders drawn from the two largest States) will need to be prepared to examine their comfortable cultural nests, their discursive assumptions about the upper secondary curriculum. Learning to take the Queensland system seriously and to acknowledge the fact of its success would be a good start. A necessary second move is for those who attempt to influence curriculum decisions to acknowledge the fallacy of treating the archetypal system as somehow ‘natural’. This truth offers the freedom to look at alternatives and consider curriculum practices on their merits. As it is always easier for a politician to appeal to established and comfortable ways of being than to lead towards more justifiable ones. Learning across State borders is going to require a genuine commitment to the best interests of young people and to the future of Australia rather than to immediate political interests. Unless those of us in Curriculum Studies can persuade political leaders to do this, the opportunity to improve the educational experiences of young Australians by learning from the fascinating divergence of upper secondary curriculum systems in Australia will simply pass us by.