



National approaches to curriculum forum

FEBRUARY 2006

FORUM REPORT

THE NATIONAL APPROACHES TO CURRICULUM FORUM 2006 WAS HELD AT THE MELBOURNE BUSINESS SCHOOL ON TUESDAY, 7 FEBRUARY 2006.

THE FORUM WAS ORGANISED AND MANAGED AS AN INITIATIVE OF THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM STUDIES ASSOCIATION (ACSA).

THIS REPORT WAS PREPARED BY VIC ZBAR, FROM ZBAR CONSULTING PTY LTD ON BEHALF OF THE FORUM ORGANISERS.

PUBLISHED BY THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM STUDIES ASSOCIATION
ISBN 1-875864-53-9

Background to the Forum

Curriculum has taken a high profile in the media recently, particularly in relation to a number of national Ministerial initiatives.

The Australian Curriculum Studies Association (ACSA) believes that current action around national approaches to curriculum, and the evidence and assumptions on which it is based, should be the subject of detailed analysis and debate.

This *National Approaches to Curriculum Forum, 2006* was arranged to explore a range of issues relating to national approaches to curriculum and, in particular, generate much needed informed discussion and debate about this rapidly evolving agenda.

The forum also provided an important opportunity for key national and state-based curriculum decision makers to share perspectives and consider responses to an agenda that is changing rapidly across Australia as a whole.

The purpose of this report

The purpose of this report is to provide forum participants and other interested parties with a synthesis of the outcomes of the forum, drawn from input provided and the facilitated discussion which ensued.

The report takes the form of a short summary of the main input and the range of participant views expressed, along with points of agreement noted for action beyond the forum itself.

Forum program

The forum program, including details on each presenter, is included as Appendix 1 to this report. The full list of forum participants is provided as Appendix 2.

Major outcomes of the Forum

Exploring current developments

After brief introductory comments from the joint chairs of the forum, Tony Mackay (President of ACSA) and Professor Alan Reid (Executive Member of ACSA), participant stakeholders were invited to provide their perspectives on current developments in national approaches to curriculum and the key issues associated with these.

Mackay and Reid

The forum is, Mackay explained, an opportunity ‘to reflect on recent government activity in some depth as opposed to the quick conversations we usually have and which limit what we can manage in response’. ACSA has sought in this context to bring together three major stakeholders — the Australasian Curriculum, Assessment and Certification Authorities (ACACA), system and sector representatives, and professional associations and key agencies — with the intention of ‘finding a moment and devoting some time in positive ways to the national debate’.

As an organisation that seeks to actively involve itself in significant issues at the national level ACSA is ‘not unaware that we are in interesting, contested and political territory’, and hence we come together as a professional activity to consider how best to move forward as we engage in this highly important debate.

The forum, he emphasised, is not seeking to define national approaches to curriculum in terms of the reports listed in the agenda, but rather using them to enter the discussion about national issues ‘which interest us all and ultimately require national agreement to proceed’. He acknowledged in this context the ‘huge state and territory reform agendas underway’ and indicated a desire to join these to the national debate. ‘So it’s not just a focused consideration and critique of particular reports, though that is part of the purpose, but also a means of moving forward in a balanced, national way’.

Participant numbers for the forum, Mackay explained, deliberately were limited so ‘a genuine conversation’ can occur, ‘with the full range of views expressed’. And ACSA hopes it will be one of a number of activities it will host, including forums at the state and territory level and a possible national conference along the lines of its quality teaching forum conducted in 2005.

Whilst this smaller forum is the opportunity for key stakeholder representatives to reflect and discuss in a substantial way, the activity does have other purposes in mind. More specifically, it is intended that participants will seek to identify some commonly agreed areas for further joint activity as the year proceeds, and this report not only informs stakeholders of the forum outcomes, but also will be used to construct the agenda for the conference later this year.

ACSA, Mackay concluded, ‘is not seeking to claim any particular legitimacy or position itself in any special way, but rather to host and engage in a national conversation we really need to have’.

According to Reid, national approaches to curriculum are taken to mean national curriculum policies, plans and projects being pursued through some form of collaboration between the states, territories and the Commonwealth government. We have, he argued, 'entered a new stage of curriculum collaboration' which he referred to as Stage 4. More specifically, the series of separate, though also permeable stages he identified were:

1. A period of 'indirect Commonwealth influence on curriculum' from 1968 to 1988 through projects, the work of the Curriculum Development Council and the like.
2. 'Direct attempts to have a single, official, national curriculum' from 1988 to 1993, based around Statements and Profiles, using the 'old railway gauge argument to push it through'.
3. The period from the collapse of Statements and Profiles in 1993 to 2003 when we saw a 'return to more indirect approaches, albeit altered by the previous five years, with major curriculum projects like Discovering Democracy and professional development such as the Quality Teaching Program'.
4. From the appointment of Minister Nelson in 2003 'we have seen a return to more direct attempts at Commonwealth intervention, with the new tactic of conditions being attached to funding' for a range of requirements that have to be met. In addition, there has been MCEETYA work around common statements of learning, the Australian Certificate of Education and more.

There has, in Reid's view, been no systematic discussion of the new stage we are in, which is one of the motives for this forum being held.

He then advanced four observations about the current state of national debate about the curriculum which reflect concerns he has within the context of supporting a national approach, and which were designed to help frame the remainder of the day.

First we have till now, he argued, failed to develop a rigorous rationale for national curriculum collaboration. Such rationale must 'be more than just duplication and the hoary old argument of the military and the fact that their children are mobile'. It needs to consider curriculum, national approaches, diversity, globalisation and the international economy and what they all mean for our curriculum work. It also needs to address why we want to work together nationally and what we seek to achieve.

Second, we have failed to articulate a coherent view of curriculum as we proceed. 'It is difficult to conduct a national conversation unless we know what we mean by curriculum.' Unless we do this, national approaches will simply be a series of separate and unconnected projects.

Third, we need to consider whether some of our developing policies and strategies are based on research and, if so, the quality of that research. Reid's own view is that much of the commentary is 'overly negative', and predicated on a view of 'crisis', to the exclusion of the successes that exist in Australian education. Some of the analysis is based on 'clear misconceptions and a negation of the facts', which he illustrated with reference to outcomes based education which he doesn't necessarily even personally support.

Finally, we have failed to develop or articulate a view of curriculum change. There is, he noted, 'lots of excellent work that has been undertaken over the last 20 years which has revealed a range of important insights we often ignore'. The most obvious example is the need to engage teachers, that is those who will enact any national approach, in the process of conceptualisation, and not just treat teachers as implementers of other people's ideas. Only then will change occur. 'How', he concluded, 'do we build these understandings into our national curriculum approach?'

Some stakeholder views

Noting that Reid's third and fourth concerns arguably are dealt with by the rest of the forum day, Mackay invited initial reactions to the opening two.

The political situation and our federal arrangements cannot, according to Roy Martin (Australian Education Union, AEU) be ignored. We are in a situation where 'the Commonwealth does not have to deliver, but can act as the auditor/critiquer of the practices of others'. Thus we have 'a debate led by people who are not immersed in the culture of curriculum development, often conducted through the media first'.

Noting and appreciating Reid's input, Ken Rowe (Australian Council for Educational Research, ACER) suggested that 'when it comes to curriculum, we all tend to assume it is independent of the people who deliver it'. His concern was, more than anything, about the 'need to penetrate the classroom door' and tackle the lack of awareness of evidence based research amongst teachers, with the consequent need for significant professional learning to occur. 'Teachers are our most valuable resource in schools and everything we provide must be directed towards building the capacity of this resource. Let's not separate curriculum and its development from building the capacity of those who have to deliver it.'

Dennis Gunning (Victorian Qualifications Authority, VQA) could not 'remember in my lifetime any major change decided at the political level that was built on evidence based research'. National policy, he pointed out, will always be the outcome of a political process and political timelines.

Supporting Rowe's view about the importance of the capacity of teachers, Janet Keightley (Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia, SSABSA) suggested we 'underestimate the importance of involving teachers, but even more importantly, the difficulties of translating evidence based research into practice'. Our model of curriculum design and development and its interaction with practice 'is where we have short-changed the profession and the community'. We lack what she referred to as 'a whole view of how to bring this about, and this could be the area where we collectively could make our biggest contribution'.

Di Kerr (Curriculum Corporation, CC) took this further still by pointing out it 'transcends the level at which the change occurs' (i.e. state/territory, sector, national). Reid's call for a rationale is 'very important in this context, and the current one is very limited indeed'. We do need, she acknowledged, to do something for mobile students, 'but this only can be addressed if everyone is teaching the same thing at the same time in all schools'. Her own son, she explained, moved schools within a suburb only to find he had 'missed fractions ... over one weekend'. This simply is 'not an adequate rationale and we ought work one up which is based on the things that all Australian learners need to know'.

Part of the rationale for a national approach in Sue Willis' view (Australian Council of Deans of Education, ACDE) are 'the very differences that exist'. It is not, she explained, simply a question of national or local, but the states and territories are not the logical units of differentiation for any but constitutional/historical reasons. There arguably are, for example, more differences between rural and urban students as a group than between students in the different states and territories in Australia. The question is, 'how we accommodate the differences within a broad, similar framework'.

For Reg Allen (Tasmanian Qualifications Authority, TQA), it's 'time to question the model that assumes we develop the curriculum and then it automatically happens; because that is not what occurs'. There is a well-known lack of a match between what is supposed to happen and what does happen, so we need a model that 'takes into account this difference and works more strongly and directly on pedagogy so what is desired can actually happen in practice'.

A national curriculum and assessment for Gabrielle Matters (ACER) 'does not necessarily lead to all doing the same thing at the same time and can, in fact, support diversity'. Even when you've got a national curriculum different jurisdictions use their energy in different ways and teachers and principals explore their own ways of creatively delivering it.

Noting that 'we can't mount an argument against a rationale for a common curriculum approach which recognises diversity because it already exists within the states and territories', Rob Randall (NSW Department of Education and Training) acknowledged the fact 'we then argue we will only be happy if you choose ours'. The question, he argued, 'is why we all believe ours is better rather than any problems with a national approach per se'. We need, in this context, to figure out the problem we are trying to solve, whilst accepting there is perhaps more commonality in what students are learning in our schools than difference.

That said, Reid responded, there are real national strategies, policies and projects impacting on states and territories and the problem perhaps is that 'we haven't articulated the rationale in the face of these'. There hasn't been 'a coherent, philosophical statement that transcends the political contest'.

Harking back to Reid's 'second stage', Sue Mann (Curriculum Corporation) did note that 'Dawkins' push did have the support of the states and territories and at least approached a rationale'. Getting to a rationale, she noted from the experiences of that time, will require the states and territories coming together to develop it, because otherwise, 'it will keep confronting the sort of ours is best view' that Randall described.

Knowing what students need to know, according to Terry Woolley (SA Department of Education and Children's Services) 'is only half the question ... The other question to consider is who's business it is to know what they are learning, because the results of the assessment of that learning carry political weight'. This in turn means 'we can't divorce national curriculum from national assessment'.

For Sue Willis the concern is that 'the rhetoric now is all about quality assurance rather than enhancement, whereas the rhetoric in the 90s was more focused on the sum of the parts being greater than the parts on their own'. It then was, she felt, 'more collaborative and focused on improvement'.

There is, Tony Mackay observed, 'no question we need to be more articulate about the rationale for what we do and how things ultimately cohere. That is relatively uncontested. If', he asked, 'we got this, and were more evidence based and smarter in our implementation, what would be the result?' Would we, he sought to discover, 'get better learning outcomes and overcome the lack of confidence that exists at the political level?'

A lot of what happens in education in Australia and internationally, Geoff Masters (ACER) responded, 'is not sufficiently grounded in evidence of what works, as opposed to what we believe will work'. If, by contrast, we develop in ways that are grounded in research, 'then you would expect to improve learning and standards which, in a sense, is the basis of our rationale'.

'Everything', Alan Reid stated in concluding the session, 'revolves around the one central thing — helping kids to learn. And what we do, our rationale which we continually will need to revisit and update, must spring from that'. In the absence of it, however, 'we will continue to be all over the shop rather than speaking with one, consistent voice'.

Recent national reports

A panel of commentators and two respondents then discussed recent national curriculum reports including:

- *Benchmarking Australian Primary Curricula;*
- *Comparison of Year 12 Pre-Tertiary Mathematics Subjects in Australia 2004–05;* and
- *Teaching Reading — National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy.*

The panel comprised:

- Dr Beverly Derewianka, Associate Professor and Director of The Centre for Research in Language and Literacy, University of Wollongong;
- Barry Kissane, Dean, School of Education, Murdoch University and Immediate Past President, The Australian Association of Mathematics Teachers; and
- Dr Jan Turbill, President, Australian Literacy Educators' Association who presented together with Paul Sommer, President, Australian Association of English Teachers.

The two respondents to the panel were:

- Professor Geoff Masters, Chief Executive Officer, Australian Council for Educational Research; and
- Professor Sue Willis, Chair, Australian Council of Deans of Education.

The Benchmarking Report

Acknowledging her own difficulty 'being positive' about the *Benchmarking* report, Derewianka passed over its 'ideological agenda' to focus on its 'methodological efficacy and analytical robustness' instead. Her particular interest in this context was the section on benchmarking English, since this is representative of the report as a whole, and also her own area of expertise.

An area of concern from the outset, she argued, is the selection of curricula/syllabuses as 'world's best equivalent documents' without any solid rationale for each. Having done this, the report then looks at literature and early reading which are, in her view, simply rated in 'mysterious ways', which she illustrated with reference to New South Wales where she personally has been involved in the development of the English curriculum.

Derewianka pointed in particular to the existence of support documents in that state which the *Benchmarking* report ignored, but which add significant detail to the curriculum and address areas nominated in the report as curriculum gaps. When one looks at this additional documentation, she observed, NSW has in fact an 'equal amount of technicality to California, and somewhat more than New Zealand and the UK, which the report uses as its points of comparison'.

In the case of Reading, for instance, the report suggests that phonic awareness is neglected, but her own analysis of the full range of NSW documentation reveals substantial detail about phonics, though often using a range of more publicly accessible synonyms such as 'hears and articulates sound systems' and the like.

Broadly speaking, Derewianka agreed with an assessment Alan Reid made in 2005 that 'the report fails to meet basic research standards, such as failing to relate the evidence to the results. Many of the recommendations in the report bear no relationship to the analysis of the documents under review'.

Concluding her overview by considering ‘where to from here’, Derewianka suggested that:

*Yes, our syllabuses can be improved.
Yes, there is scope for greater rigour.
Yes, we can benefit from international comparisons.
Yes, there is a case for a national agenda.*

But, we need to resist framing the agenda in simplistic, ideologically-driven and divisive terms, and instead reframe the discussion in inclusive and forward-looking ways.

Year 12 Maths

The Maths report published in October last year by the Australian Mathematical Sciences Institute and the International Centre for Excellence for Education in Mathematics was, Kissane explained, ‘primarily to inform teachers of first year tertiary mathematics about the differences in senior secondary school mathematics in the various states and territories’ and thereby overcome any risk of mismatches negatively affecting students who move interstate. That said, he pointed out, there is only limited evidence of the actual number of students affected and Kissane did have difficulty with some of the methodology involved including:

- ▶ the lack of contact with local people to flesh out the limited picture that can be gained from using websites alone to analyse curricula, with the result the analysis is ‘superficial’ and ‘doesn’t really help us to understand the systemic differences that exist’;
- ▶ the fact that, despite the stated intention of focusing on the ‘content exposure of students, the subsequent discussion really is of subjects and topics with students described purely in terms of the subjects they take; and
- ▶ the model adopted for a mathematics curriculum and the decision to limit the focus to Year 12, without consideration of Year 11 which in many jurisdictions is linked to Year 12.

Having critiqued aspects of the analysis undertaken Kissane did, however, identify some important lessons which emerged. More specifically the lessons, which he felt should inform the Department of Education, Science and Training’s recently announced *RFT: Comparative Study of Selected Subjects for the Year 12 Certificate*, are that:

- ▶ comparisons are harder to make than at first may be realised;
- ▶ local expertise is needed;
- ▶ an exclusive focus on ‘topics’ or ‘exams’ risks misinterpretations and distortions;
- ▶ what students learn seems more important than what is taught, but this is harder to access and describe;
- ▶ limiting the focus to Year 12 is problematic (though Giancarlo Savaris from DEST did indicate that the reference to ‘subjects for the Year 12 certificate’ is precisely to address this point); and
- ▶ so too is a focus purely on stronger students.

With these lessons in mind the report is, he concluded

a useful first start to exploring similarities and differences though it arguably seems to have generated more heat than light on the issues raised with insufficient attention paid to its own stated purposes.

Teaching Reading

Setting out ALEA's hopes for the inquiry, Turbill welcomed 'its call for an integrated approach, pre-service literacy education to be a priority, and ongoing professional development in literacy for all teachers'. And she particularly was 'thrilled with its support for parents and carers to focus on the importance of early literacy practices'.

Her major concerns in this context related to:

- The focus on 'evidence based approaches' in the absence of agreement on what they are and, in particular, 'mandating the explicit, direct instruction of phonics for all children to the same degree'. She is not, she noted, opposed to phonics, but the question is, 'how it is done, since such mandating could limit teachers' capacity to act on their own professional judgment'.
- The separation of reading and writing, which she considers 'inappropriate in a literacy inquiry', given reading and writing are 'highly connected' and ought be 'taught together rather than viewed separately'.
- National testing of children in the first year of school. Teachers, she argued, 'would say they do this three to four times a year, not once. It could be a really good thing, but limiting it to objective testing of decoding, word reading accuracy and reporting without looking at meaning', sends the wrong message to teachers, parents and children about what constitutes reading.

Finally, Turbill noted, ALEA does question the 'validity' of the research methodology used in the inquiry, with specific reference to what it sees as inadequate involvement, feedback and transparency along the way. Turbill was particularly concerned about the lack of any explicit explanation about the analysis of the many types of data that were collected. She noted that there was a lack of an audit trail as to how these findings emerged from these data therefore one must question the validity of the findings and the recommendations made from those findings.

Perhaps the key comment Sommer sought to make in adding to what Turbill had said is that he does not 'see my own and my colleagues' practice reflected in the report'. This matters, he argued, because 'seeing ourselves in the report is the prelude to changing practice in positive ways'. His major concerns in this context can be summarised in the following seven points.

1. There is a sense of crisis in the report which 'is never explained'. Whilst there certainly may be a crisis about Indigenous literacy, and specific groups in need of extra attention, a general literacy crisis does not exist.
2. Only 12 schools were visited, without sufficient explanation of why they were selected, though it has to be acknowledged that the depiction of what is happening in those schools is 'generally positive'.
3. Secondary school English teachers 'are hardly visible in the report', though the recommendation concerning professional development in literacy and literacy specialists in secondary schools is definitely to be welcomed.

4. 'Part of the problem with literacy seems to be that we are never very clear on what we mean when we use the term', but the inquiry missed the opportunity to fill this gap, limiting itself instead to learning to read.
5. Some significant existing research was overlooked — most notably the federal government-funded STELLA project which developed a set of standards for English/literacy teachers and *MyRead* which supported middle school teachers to systematically teach literacy skills.
6. The notion of a debate amongst literacy teachers about phonics vs whole language is overblown, with most accepting that both are essential.
7. 'Constructivism is demonised ... (and) like the phonics/whole language representation, the discussion of constructivism is caricatured and does not attempt to describe practice.'

The challenge is, Sommer concluded, to gain 'some real understanding of what is actually happening in classrooms (but) I don't get a clear picture of this from the report'.



Opening a brief discussion from the floor of these inputs before the respondents spoke, Alan Reid suggested it shows the need for reports such as these 'to be critically analysed before they contribute directly to policy making'. And that, he added, is part of the point of seeking to develop 'proactive strategies on how reports like this can be addressed' in the forum session to follow that afternoon.

Ken Rowe 'appreciated the contributions to the debate', but also sought to put them in context by reminding participants of 'the impact of the terms of reference of the (Literacy) inquiry', which arguably constrained it to focus on reading, and the very short timeline that applied. In terms of the evidence base, he explained, 'we had to work in the context of Hattie and Fraser's gold standard' to be taken seriously, compared with the qualitative research many would like to have seen but which is not necessarily 'generalisable' to a policy framework later on.

Noting the continual calls for more time which Rowe effectively had just echoed, Gabrielle Matters asked whether 'we allow ourselves to undertake very important research projects where there are completely inadequate resources and insufficient time. We should be more honest with those to whom we submit proposals about how long it takes to do more sophisticated work'. Perhaps, Roy Martin added, 'we are missing the sort of detailed work, and the independence and professional legitimacy' provided by a body such as the Schools Council in the past.

The 'moral and ethical dimension' that David Hanlon (Department of Education, Tasmania) felt needed to be considered, 'is not to undermine the credibility of evidence based research in the field at a time when we are seeking to leverage off and build professional commitment to this'.

This, in Reg Allen's view, foreshadows an important debate we need about 'evidence based research and what it does and should mean'. This, he argued could be the basis of 'a reform movement both in practice and in academia which could lead us towards genuine improvement in what we do'.



Responding more formally to the panel input, Sue Willis observed that, having spent her life as a researcher/curriculum and PD developer, 'who is research driven in my decision making', she is 'disappointed' by the reports and their evidence base. That said, she acknowledged her own feeling that 'research only occasionally tells us what to do'.

Describing her own involvement in writing the Statements and Profiles referred to by Reid earlier in the day, and developing an Algebra text, she indicated how she 'continually was criticised for not following the research'. So she rang every critic concerned to gain more detail on the research she should read and in all cases found she already had considered it. At the same time, she came across a major international study which concluded that in real terms, ultimately 'nothing works'.

That did not stop her proceeding with her writing work, however, because the real point is that 'nothing works all the time and everything works some of the time ... (and) it is the task of the teacher to know when'. Research is critical in this context 'not in telling us what to do, but in helping us determine what questions to ask so we can decide what to do, when'.

The 'simple point' for Geoff Masters, in his response, was the need 'as a profession, to ensure our voice is heard in relation to curriculum issues; because at the moment it is not'. The result is that expertise in curriculum and pedagogy 'are currently seriously undervalued in Australia and our voice is not heard above those who seek to manufacture a feeling of crisis in education'.

This results, he argued, in 'a sense of frustration in the profession, reflected in the presentations we have heard, but we should not forget that it's actually our fault ... Because of our relative silence, what we stand for is being misinterpreted and misunderstood, whether deliberately or not'. It often is said, Masters explained to illustrate his point, that 'we are more interested in participation and relevance than in rigour, or concerned with political correctness rather than facts', and so on. Yet when professionals read this, they wonder what is being talked about. 'What I simply am saying is that we need to speak up, because too often those sorts of representations are being accepted by people with influence'.

We have, he concluded, 'to get better at explaining ourselves and engaging in the battle of ideas, using a terminology that works for us in the public domain, based on solid evidence of what does work and the fact we do often know what that is. We undermine the profession when we say everything works and everything is equally good, instead of committing to excellence and to what we know works whilst acknowledging that some of the things we have attempted have not worked as we would have liked'.

And that, Tony Mackay noted in concluding the session, 'is part of the key purpose of the groups in the afternoon'.

The progress of key initiatives

Having discussed the major reports delivered in 2005, forum participants were briefed on where we are up to on each of:

- The Australian Certificate of Education (ACE);
- Statements of learning;
- Employability skills for the future; and
- The comparative study of selected subjects for the Year 12 Certificate.

The Statements of Learning, Di Kerr (CC) explained, were initiated by MCEETYA in response to Ministers' collective interest in 'what we are, should and could be consistent about'. After an initial research report was prepared and consultation conducted, projects were instituted in the five curriculum domains of English, Mathematics, Science, Civics and Citizenship, and ICT. English already is finished and approved by Ministers, and the others are scheduled to conclude by the end of February after six months of 'intensive collaborative work' between jurisdictions and the project team.

The aim of the exercise is 'to further collaboration, with the support of all Ministers, and to identify what states and territories are prepared to be consistent about within their respective curriculum documents'. Consistency, therefore, is achieved 'through state and territory documentation, and this is what differentiates it from the earlier 1990s approach'.

The focus on outcomes in this context, Kerr added, 'is not on achieved outcomes or standards, but rather on opportunity to learn which will be operationalised through the state and territory curriculum documentation'.

Writers from all jurisdictions are involved in the project and there is conscious recognition of both 'the different location of the states and territories in the curriculum cycle and the different forms that curriculum documentation takes'. The point is, to seek agreement on 'what is common and essential for students to have the opportunity to learn'. This is a 'very demanding exercise which takes time to work through if state and territory sign off is to be gained'. The key, she concluded, then becomes 'how the statements are implemented by jurisdictions in their next phase, which extends through to 2008'.

Whilst he acknowledged the excellent work of CC, Terry Woolley did express concern about the 'motivation for this'. Given it was done as 'a means of setting up the national testing agenda' there are, in his view, some key questions to address. For example, 'can eight months work take us where we need to go? Have we sufficiently captured the opportunity this provides to get on the front foot and gather the best of the curriculum design and implementation that exists, rather than having a sort of lowest common denominator?'

What we have, in Rob Randall's view, 'are some agreed things within our documents which represent what we think kids should learn. The debates we have had to get there could now form the basis for getting on with the next phase of extending what curriculum ought mean and be about'.

But 'being consistent and agreeing', Sue Willis cautioned, 'is not necessarily being right, and we ought not elevate this. It's only important being consistent if what we are consistent about is also right'. We may, by contrast, merely be getting agreement about 'what is comfortable and perhaps right in part, but not sufficiently right'. Alan Reid expressed sympathy for this view because of the four concerns he outlined at the start of the day. 'What is the connection to other initiatives like the ACE? Where is the consistency? What do we know about the organisers for these opportunities to learn in terms of research? To what extent are teachers genuinely involved beyond consultation? ... Running that sort of ruler over it, there definitely are concerns.'

In moving to consider the ACE, Geoff Masters noted he was 'at this time, somewhat limited in what I can say'. There now is a final report which is with DEST and the Minister, which contains a thorough analysis of issues being addressed by the ACACA agencies and the 'most comprehensive picture we have of what is going on in the senior secondary years'. In preparing the report, its authors looked at the options given for the introduction of an ACE, the International Baccalaureate and its implications, and aptitude testing, and sought views on these. They also developed a half a dozen recommendations which will have to await the release of the report.

What he was able to say is that 'we were surprised by the openness to exploring the idea of an Australian Certificate of Education and the belief it is a good idea'. There was, in this context, not a lot of support for yet another senior secondary certificate, and rather more support for it being something national we work towards over time, building on what exists. There also was a strongly held view that there must be some things in the senior secondary curriculum which all students ought have access to within a subject, irrespective of geography — 'not a national curriculum, but the identification of essentials in different subjects'.

There also is, he explained, substantial support for the notion comparisons ought be able to be made across the country, which currently isn't the case. And there was 'quite a lot of interest, especially among employers, in generic/cross curriculum capacities along the lines of employability skills with greater consistency of assessment'.

Commenting on the development of employability skills Dennis Gunning (VQA) noted 'we are now being consulted about assessment and reporting when there are no employability skills standards against which to conduct that assessment and reporting'. If such standards were available, they could also be the basis for the employability skills e-portfolio, which would then have 'some reality rather than being largely a self-reference document'. Standards don't have to be units of competence — they could be broad descriptors of behaviours or outcomes for each employability skill at different levels. Descriptors like this could then also form the basis of a common approach to the embedding of employability skills in training packages.

This for Masters does, however, raise the prior question of whether you can seriously talk about standards for some of the employability skills such as communication which encompasses written and oral communication as well as numeracy. That said, Giancarlo Savaris pointed out, the work commissioned by DEST on selected Year 12 subjects is designed to inform work on Year 12 standards, and the tenders for this currently are being assessed for decision relatively soon.

The discussion of assessment in these terms then led Kerr to explain, in relation the Statements of Learning, that a consultation paper is in place which seeks to identify the relationship between the domains selected for national consistency work and national assessment; given, for example, that English does not equate exactly to literacy nor maths to numeracy. The paper basically puts it in terms of an 'informing relationship' since Ministers are clear that the purposes of the two pieces of work are different.

For Sue Mann (CC), this merely dramatises 'the tensions of working at this level, particularly given funding requirements that have been set and the reaction this has induced'. But, she advised, 'we have to rise above this to ensure that very important work is not simply wasted'.

This all comes back, in David Hanlon's view, to 'Reid's point about the lack of rationale at the national level, despite state and territory efforts to specify the type of students we seek to produce. And we bunker down because things of value are being done at home, but not at the national level. If we had the debate', he argued, 'it wouldn't be that hard for an agreement to be forged'. This might, he suggested, 'be an opportunity for ACSA since otherwise we all just go home and do what we always have done'.

At this point in the forum, having done a bit of an overview of what is happening, Tony Mackay suggested a pause to do exactly what Hanlon had proposed. More specifically, he advanced the following three questions for groups to consider when they met.

- Not so much what is the rationale in a half hour, but rather, what is the basis on which we do want to operate nationally, or even internationally?
- If we could nominate a couple of key issues with which we need to engage at the national/international level, what would they be?
- What strategies could advance these issues in ways that, to use Masters' terminology from earlier in the day, give the profession a real voice?

The third of these questions raised for John Firth (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, VCAA) the issue of the partnerships we forge. There is, he noted, 'a potential conflict for organisations like ACSA in how they position themselves in relation to the bureaucracy on the one hand and the profession on the other. It is neither uncritical support for government/department activities and being a mouthpiece of official positions, nor uncritical proponents of all that classroom teachers do irrespective of its merit or effectiveness. We need to get the balance right'.



This in turn led Reg Allen (TQA) to observe that, ‘if we say our ultimate purpose is to get young people achieving a lot more learning, then we need to look at what helps and hinders this. So part of any rationale we develop involves looking at the implicit mechanisms involved to see if they can in fact have the impact we seek and we ought to explicitly articulate plausible mechanisms at the same time as we propose any particular action: we ought to say how taking this particular action will lead to more students learning more’. In this view, we should evaluate any proposed reform in education and training against the prime criterion of the extent to which it causes students to learn more or more students to learn. ‘We can look at any proposed change and ask if, in this key responsibility, it helps us, hinders us or is irrelevant. If it helps, let’s do it. If it hinders, let’s avoid it. If it is irrelevant than let’s see if it has enough other benefits such as lower costs, higher efficiency etc.’

Strategies for national dialogue and collaboration

Three small groups were established comprising representatives of the Australasian Curriculum and Assessment Certification Authorities, system and sector representatives, and participants from professional associations and key agencies to develop strategies for strengthening a national dialogue and collaboration in relation to the emerging national agenda in curriculum

More specifically, each group was asked to discuss the three questions Tony Mackay had posed before he facilitated a reporting back session to help determine where next.



Looking at the ‘intersection between politics and educational change and reform as the environment in which we work’, the ACACA group felt a need to ensure that any rationale is accompanied by an ‘articulation of the mechanism that will translate into better student learning’. Then, as agencies responsible for curriculum and assessment, ‘we need to put it into practice, and that would be a big step forward’.

Much the same point was made by the system and sectors group which identified a need to ‘look at ways to transcend the political agenda overwhelming the educational one, and provide opportunities for jurisdictions to get together to determine and promote the messages we seek’. ACSA, this group felt, has an opportunity to fill this role, facilitating the coming together that is sought, but then ‘we have to find ways of filtering it down to the classroom and engaging the entire profession in promoting the rationale’.

And the professional associations/agencies group could only agree. The mood amongst educators and the community in this group’s view, is being shaped by a ‘somewhat black media debate’. Our response to this has been ‘disparate and disorganised’ and we need to be much more ‘systematic about our key messages and then more organised about the network we establish to get these messages out’. Again, it was felt that ACSA could be ‘a catalyst for acting collectively in this way’.



Four things, Tony Mackay noted in concluding the forum, appear to stand out in terms of how we ought proceed.

First, we need to understand the political and public environment in which we work, and seek to engage with it.

Second, getting the language and rationale right for different audiences is 'a serious piece of work'. The language, he suggested, is different for different audiences and 'we need to use language appropriate to audience if we are to both influence policy and shape the debate'.

Third, we need to define the areas where key national messages are required if we are to inform or influence multiple audiences. A quick brainstorm on what those messages might be elicited from participants (with no vote to indicate their relative support):


- value the expertise of the teacher;
- more successful learning for more kids;
- Australia's high ranking on PISA and TIMSS;
- recognise and support professional development for teachers;
- the most effective investment is in teachers;
- we need practice informed by research;
- moving schools is the issue, not moving interstate;
- we need to adapt to the student of this era;
- Australian curriculum is amongst the best in the world;
- Australia's teachers are amongst the best in the world;
- funding and supporting pre-service teacher education is a priority; and
- teachers are curriculum thinkers, not just curriculum doers.

Finally, 'we had better work collectively on this, or it isn't going to happen'. This is not just a matter of working on messages and ensuring they are spread, but also working together on projects that pre-figure and anticipate the next stage of debate. Networking in all its various forms clearly is a key strategy in this regard and ought be fostered whenever it can.

The question however is, Mackay noted in quoting Pamela Macklin (ACER) from one of the working groups, 'how to ensure we don't leave here as we commonly have in the past for nothing then to happen?'

ACSA is prepared in response to commit to supporting and promoting a rationale, the kind of key messages we determine based on what was discussed, working collectively, and thinking seriously about how we invest in further work. Having checked to ensure this did not constitute ACSA 'overreaching itself in anyone's view', he ended the forum by indicating that, ACSA would seek to construct a two day working conference around the rationale and strategies that would contribute to the process of taking this dialogue forward.





2006

National approaches to curriculum forum

MELBOURNE BUSINESS SCHOOL
200 LEICESTER STREET,
CARLTON VICTORIA

TUESDAY
7 FEBRUARY 2006

Tony Mackay and Professor Alan Reid (Co-Chairs)

10.00–10.05 am	Welcome: <i>Tony Mackay</i>
SESSION 1	
<i>Rio Tinto Theatre</i> 10.05–11.00 am	Introductory comments: <i>Tony Mackay and Professor Alan Reid</i> Exploring current developments in national approaches to curriculum ▶ What are the key issues? <i>Perspectives from participant stakeholders will be sought during this session</i>
11.00–11.15 am	Morning tea
SESSION 2	
<i>Rio Tinto Theatre</i> 11.15 am–12.30 pm	Exploring recent national curriculum reports including: ▶ <i>Benchmarking Australian primary curricula</i> ▶ Comparison of Year 12 pre-tertiary mathematics subjects in Australia 2004–05 ▶ <i>Teaching reading — National inquiry into the teaching of literacy</i>
	Comments: ▶ Dr Beverly Derewianka, Director of Research in Language and Literacy, University of Wollongong ▶ Mr Barry Kissane, President, Australian Association of Maths Teachers ▶ Mr Paul Sommer, President, Australian Association of English Teachers ▶ Dr Jan Turbill, President, Australian Literacy Educators Association
	Respondents: ▶ Professor Geoff Masters, Australian Council for Educational Research ▶ Professor Sue Willis, Australian Council of Deans of Education
12.30–1.15 pm	Lunch

SESSION 3

Rio Tinto Theatre
1.15–2.00 pm

Where are we up to on the:

- ▶ Australian Certificate of Education,
- ▶ Statements of learning,
- ▶ Employability skills for the future,
- ▶ Comparative study of selected subjects for the Year 12 Certificate?

Briefings where possible and relevant from the Australian Council for Educational Research, Curriculum Corporation and Australasian Curriculum Assessment Certification Authorities

SESSION 4

Breakout Rooms
2.00–2.50 pm

Breakout groups:

- Group 1: Australasian Curriculum Assessment Certification Authorities
- Group 2: Systems and sector representatives
- Group 3: Professional associations and key agencies

Developing strategies for strengthening a national dialogue and collaboration in relation to the emerging national agenda in curriculum
Questions to be considered:

- ▶ What is this groups view on the most critical issues in relation to the national agenda?
- ▶ What are we currently doing in relation to the national agenda and what might we do that we are not doing?
- ▶ Do we need to liaise with other stakeholder (beyond those attending this forum)? Who? How?

2.50–3.05 pm

Afternoon tea

SESSION 5

Rio Tinto Theatre
3.05–3.35 pm

Report back — discussion of strategies:

- ▶ strategies currently being pursued or proposed around the national agenda
- ▶ any emerging collective strategies from this forum

SESSION 6

Rio Tinto Theatre
3.35–3.45 pm

Forum outcomes — next steps:

- ▶ key messages arising from the forum
- ▶ further steps to continue to analyse, debate and inform national approaches to curriculum
- ▶ ACSA Curriculum Forum report including paper presentations
- ▶ Proposed follow up ACSA Symposium



Appendix 2: List of forum participants

Reg Allen	Chief Executive Officer	Tasmanian Qualifications Authority
Jan Andrews	Acting Chief Executive	Department of Education and Children's Services, SA
Mark Brown	Director of Curriculum	Western Australian Curriculum Council
Pat Byrne	President	Australian Education Union
Robyn Cations	Treasurer	National Education Forum
Janet Davy	Director, Curriculum Renewal	ACT Department of Education and Training
Beverly Derewianka	Acting Associate Professor, Associate Dean (Research)	University of Wollongong
Debbie Efthymiades	General Manager, Curriculum Services Division	Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education & Training
John Firth	Chief Executive Officer	Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority
Lucy Fisher	Executive Member	Australian Curriculum Studies Association
Dennis Gunning	Director	Victorian Qualifications Authority
David Hanlon	Acting Deputy Secretary	Department of Education Tasmania
Janet Keightley	Chief Executive	Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia
Di Kerr		Curriculum Corporation
Kathe Kirby	Executive Director	Asia Education Foundation
Barry Kissane	President	Australian Association of Mathematics Teachers
Helen Lambert	Targeted Programs Co-ordinator	Association of Independent Schools of South Australia
Peter Luxton	Deputy Director, Curriculum	Queensland Studies Authority
Tony Mackay	President	Australian Curriculum Studies Association
Pamela Macklin	Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Professional Resources	Australian Council for Education Research
Susan Mann	Chief Executive Officer	Curriculum Corporation
Roy Martin	Federal Research Officer	Australian Education Union
Geoff Masters	Chief Executive Officer	Australian Council for Education Research
Gabrielle Matters	Principal Research Fellow	Australian Council for Education Research
Lesley McFarlane	Secretary/Treasurer	Australian Curriculum Studies Association
Garry McLean	Vice President	Australian Curriculum Studies Association

Gordon Murdoch	Director, Standards and Moderation, Curriculum Division	Western Australian Department of Education and Training
Jenny Naylor	Executive Member	Australian Curriculum Studies Association
John O'Brien	Director, Curriculum	NSW Board of Studies
Thelma Perso	Director, Curriculum	Queensland Department of Education and the Arts
Robert Randall	Director Curriculum	NSW Department of Education and Training
Alan Reid	Executive Member	Australian Curriculum Studies Association
Christine Reid	Executive Member	Australian Curriculum Studies Association
Ken Rowe	Research Director, Learning Processes and Contexts	Australian Council for Education Research
Giancarlo Savaris	Director, Quality Outcomes Section — School Outcomes Group	Department of Education, Science and Training
Katherine Schoo	Executive Director	Australian Curriculum Studies Association
Paul Sommer	President	Australian Association for the Teaching of English
Helen Strauch	Director, Curriculum and Assessment	ACT Department of Education and Training
Jan Turbill	President	Australian Literacy Educators Association
Joan Warhurst	Chief Executive Officer	National Catholic Education Commission
Sue Willis	President	Australian Council of Deans of Education
Terry Woolley	Executive Director, Primary, Middle & Senior Secondary Services	South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services
Vic Zbar	Report Writer	Zbar Consulting

