

## **The Challenge for History in the National Curriculum**

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The inclusion of *History* as one of the first four subjects to be developed by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority presents some unusual features. English, mathematics and science are all enshrined as key learning areas in the various national statements on school education over the past two decades. All of them are taught, however adequately, across the years of schooling, and all are available to senior secondary students in the post-compulsory years.

The teaching of mathematics and science has been a subject of concern, partly for curricular reasons but more immediately because of the difficulty of recruiting and retaining qualified teachers. English enjoys the status of a compulsory subject, even if it has become a lightning-rod for anxieties fanned by conservative alarmists – though I'm glad to say that Kevin Donnelly's views now appear in Rupert Murdoch's national newspaper as letters to the editor rather than as expert commentary.

History attracts some of that attention, but it has a far more marginal status. It is offered in some schools but not others, during the compulsory years of schooling, where it is often subsumed into SOSE. The enrolments in Years 11 and

12 have declined to low levels, except in New South Wales where alone it is compulsory in the middle secondary years.

History shares the problem of maths and science in that it is often entrusted to teachers without training in the discipline. But unlike those subjects, there is no shortage of qualified graduates ready to fill the breach. The problem is rather that education faculties and schools outside NSW give limited attention to history teaching, and the hiring practices of educational systems place a low premium on expertise in history. It is commonly assumed that anyone can take a history class.

This is a problem of both demand and supply. The Commonwealth is responsible for teacher training, the states are the largest employer, and together they are in a position to ensure that history teachers are trained and employed. Nothing in the Bradley review of higher education, incidentally, much less the minister's response to it, suggests the dereliction of duty by the universities is likely to be arrested. The Bradley review noted that the previous government's capping of HECS for education did nothing to increase provision; on the contrary, it accentuated the impoverishment of education faculties, and increased the tendency for them to look to other sources of income at the expense of teacher training.

I am sure I am not alone in wondering about the heavy emphasis of the Education Revolution on bricks and mortar, and the urgent need to lift the status, rewards and capacity of the teaching profession. Hard hats and safety jackets have a remarkable appeal to government ministers, and we know that the construction industry is favoured because of its multiplier effect on economic activity and employment. But teachers hardly hoard their earnings. Rather than

insist on stimulus projects in education being shovel ready, it might be better to ask that that they be student ready.

One of the immediate challenges of establishing a national history curriculum is thus that we start from a very low base. At present only a minority of students have the advantage of learning history with a qualified history teacher. If the subject is to be taken up and taught systematically and sequentially, there are serious implications for both in-service and pre-service preparation of teachers. There are few signs that these implications are appreciated, and as a first step the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations might investigate just how many of our teacher trainers are responding to the new expectations.

The implications for the curriculum are also substantial. Since we start from a low base, we can assume little. As the curriculum is developed and implemented, it will clearly be necessary to pay substantial attention to the resources and support that will be needed. Again, we have very little information how this is to proceed. The challenge for history in the national curriculum, in short, is that a national curriculum is being prepared with a frustrating paucity of information about how it is to be implemented and sustained.

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For good reasons, the development of the national curriculum started from first principles. It was not to be a composite of existing curricula, nor was it to compromise on the goal that it should support all young Australians to become successful learners with a solid foundation in knowledge, understanding, skills and values, indeed a deep knowledge that will enable advanced learning.

The national curriculum had to be clear, comprehensive, intelligible and usable by all teachers. It also had to accommodate the needs of every level of student ability. It would be taught to students from diverse backgrounds: from the Indigenous Australian, to the fifth-generation descendant of immigrants from the British Isles, and the child of recently arrived refugees with no prior knowledge of the English language or Australian ways. It was required to provide a futures perspective, paying particular attention to the government's ambitions to improve educational outcomes and prepare students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Given all these imperatives, it was fortunate that first the NCB and then ACARA have been chaired by Barry McGaw, who went from directing the Australian Council for Educational Research to a long stint in Paris, where he established and directed the OECD's education division as it developed its procedures for measuring international student achievement. Barry is a man of rigour, robust judgement and a commitment to both excellence and equity. He has dealt with the political hazards of developing a national curriculum with impressive skill.

Considerable thought was given to a sequential process of curriculum development, one that would allow for extensive consultation and employ a substantial division of labour. It has been running now for over a year, and while it still has some way to run, I think that the experience so far allows some observations to be drawn. It will be a participant's perspective, not ACARA's.

My observations are drawn from the development of the history curriculum, and they are illustrative of history's distinctive nature as a discipline and a form of public knowledge. Like mathematics and science, history is a discipline: that is, it is a bounded form of knowledge with epistemological principles that govern its methods of inquiry, rules of evidence and forms of interpretation.

This decision to base the curriculum on disciplines was an important and sensible, but by no means an obvious one. In higher education and research, as well as school education, disciplines are on the back foot. They are seen as narrow and constrictive, inhibiting more practical and flexible taxonomies of learning and discovery. But if you scratch a multidisciplinary research project in the humanities and social sciences, you almost invariably find a disciplinary core and an unpersuasive penumbra of other disciplines.

The enthusiasm for inquiry-based and student-centred learning was a valuable corrective to arid scholasticism, but it was meant to integrate disciplines, not abolish them. The name Dewey is an illustrious one in more than field – philosophy, education and also music, for it is the middle name of Miles Davis – but I often wonder what John Dewey would make of the excesses committed in his name.

Disciplines are often described as silos, a lazy and ahistorical metaphor. Anyone familiar with rural history appreciates that silos were erected at considerable expense to stop rodents stealing the harvest. Disciplines are sometimes regarded as forms of restrictive practice, congeries of self-interest on the part of the professions that claim the authority to speak for them, and who train and accredit new entrants. On the contrary, they are powerfully durable ways of organising knowledge and advancing understanding. The question of how they should be mobilised, taught and used is another matter, but the very use of terms such as interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and even transdisciplinary teaching and research attests to their foundational significance.

So I rejoice in the restoration of a disciplinary curriculum. Unlike mathematics and science, however, history is both a discipline and something more. It takes

different forms, and does not command agreement, as sciences does, on methods of framing and testing hypotheses, replicating and verifying discoveries. It also encompasses popular uses. It allows a novelist such as Kate Grenville to claim that her treatment of colonial New South Wales is truer than that of the academic specialist, or prime ministers such as Paul Keating and John Howard to issue ex cathedra pronouncements on national traditions.

Such uses of history demonstrate that history matters — it is a formative aspect of human societies — and that it is open to contestation. If it did not matter, then it would not provoke such sharp disagreements as we have seen in this country over the past twenty years. This in turn makes history a subject of sensitivity in the school curriculum. When modern nations formed in the nineteenth century, they created histories that defined their origins, traditions, character and destiny. One of the first actions of the nation-state was to establish a system of public education in which the patriotism of future citizens would be inculcated through history lessons. The same impulse still operates: several state premiers intervened in the recent past to prohibit discussion of the term ‘invasion’ in the teaching of Australian history.

The orientation of the present national curriculum — equipping young Australians for a future marked by globalisation, rapid technological change, social and cultural diversity, the challenge of sustainability and the growing importance of our position in the Asia-Pacific region — make an informed historical understanding all the more important.

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To this end, the NCB began last year by commissioning a Framing Paper that would set out the aims, approach and structure for a history curriculum

consistent with the national objectives. I was asked to prepare a preliminary draft of the Framing Paper and discuss it with a small Advisory Group. These critical friends improved the draft and helped fill it out. That version was then taken to a Forum organised by the NCB in October last year, which had 150 or so participants. Their feedback was collated by a group of senior members of the History Teachers Association.

By this time I had managed to draw in Tony Taylor, who is now as fully involved as I am. Tony works in the Education Faculty at Monash, and conducted an inquiry into school history for the Federal Minister for Education nine years ago that led to the establishment of the National Centre for School History. He also played a key role in reviewing the curriculum for John Howard's ill-fated History Summit. Tony and I spent a frenetic fortnight undertaking a final revision, drawing on an extensive email conversation with the Advisory Group and the HTA representatives. The paper was then put out by the NCB for public consultation over the summer months.

In the light of feedback from that consultation there was further revision of the framing paper, and it was reorganised to provide a more consistent and user-friendly guide for the curriculum writers. By the middle of April it was no longer a Framing Paper but had acquired the title of 'Shape of the National Curriculum: History'. The curriculum writers were chosen, ten of them, as well as an advisory committee with more than twenty members. In both cases they were composed with an eye to broad coverage of the states and territories, and including a good number of practising teachers.

The writers have since worked to develop a statement of the Aims and Rationale, and a sequence of Knowledge, Understandings and Skills, with a content outline. Their work went out for further consultation, and was then discussed recently in

large workshops of 80 or so curriculum officers, teachers and other interested parties. It is now being revised, so that a full version of the curriculum with content elaboration, outcomes and assessment standards can be completed by the end of the year.

This lengthy, albeit incomplete process, has had a series of tight deadlines. It has been highly iterative. The NCB and ACARA have been meticulous in their attention to process. The precision of its sequence of curriculum development has been commendable, as has the concern to ensure wide involvement and provide frequent opportunities for feedback.

You might compare this way of doing things with that taken by the previous government: a handpicked History Summit in Canberra, the subsequent preparation of a curriculum by John Hirst, Tony Taylor and others, who had staff members from the federal minister's office breathing down their necks, followed by a brief consultation with a consultation group of very limited membership – to be more precise, just one member, the prime minister – who said he didn't like it and appointed his own group of writers to do it again.

Given a choice, who would not opt for the present process? It is transparent, responsible, free of interference. But with the benefit of hindsight, I think it is possible the current exercise has been over-engineered. We have progressed in a sequence of stages, but some of them have required us to redo work that was done before, and the very frequency of the stages has imposed very tight deadlines. I know that the HTA has experienced frustrations about repeatedly providing the same input.

The multiplicity of participants – writers, advisory groups, workshop attendants – has meant that some of them feel their influence is frustratingly

indeterminate. Their separate roles made it difficult for them to know what happened to their work. And in the very breadth of participation – necessary, no doubt, to establish the legitimacy of the process – there is a danger that we lower our sights, and end up with a bland composite. Much of the discussion in the recent workshops, for example, was weighed down by arguments over the respective merits of the present arrangements for history in different states.

I make these observations with a limited knowledge of the constraints under which ACARA is working. I do know that the exercise is fraught with hazards. Attempts to develop a national curriculum go back more than thirty years and the Australian educational landscape is littered with the wreckage of earlier models. I know also that the strains on the participants in this current exercise are as nothing to the load carried by ACARA's officers. Those responsible for history, first Julie Stephens and now Darren Taylor, have been working without weekends for most of the year.

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What sort of history curriculum is emerging? The starting-point of the Framing Paper was the need to avoid the recurrent and unproductive debate over the false dichotomy of inquiry-based learning in history and factual knowledge. You will be familiar with this, if only by following the strong views of the former prime minister on what very young Australian should know about Australian history, his insistence on narrative (which he assumed was a natural and unproblematic account of what happened) and his disparagement of what he described as the culinary incompetence of teachers who turned history into a messy stew of themes and issues.

A passage in the framing paper was meant to settle this furphy. It read:

Students need both to know history and practise it. Factual knowledge is essential to historical thinking. Without knowledge of chronology, geography, institutional arrangements, material circumstances and belief systems, no student project on a past period — however well intended — will afford understanding. Accordingly, a complementary objective of school history must be to provide students with this knowledge.

The framing paper spent some time in setting out the nature of historical understanding as a disciplined form of inquiry. Originally it used the term historical thinking, which I took from work done by Peter Seixas at the Centre for Historical Consciousness at the UBC. The critical friends and HTAA members welcomed this approach, though the final version also draws on some additional attributes, and we decided in the end to use the term Historical Understanding.

Historical understanding received strong support in the summer consultation. 302 of the total of 1100 submissions sent to the NCB were concerned with the History framing paper, and of those 93 per cent expressed agreement with the components of Historical Understanding, indeed 60 per cent expressed strong agreement. That's encouraging.

The other decision I made in preparing the framing paper was to adopt a world history perspective. There were several reasons. One is that history by its nature takes us outside our own experience to engage with people and circumstances that are unfamiliar. While nations and social movements construct their own versions of the past as a cultural resource that gives meaning and validity to their endeavours, it is in the nature of history as a disciplined form of knowledge that these accounts should be subjected to critical scrutiny. And if history is to be more than a form of solipsism it has to go beyond what is familiar and dear to us.

A second reason for the world history approach is that, as Anna Clark's work shows, many young Australians find Australian history boring. Some of you will have read the results of her research in the book *History's Teaching*, and I commend it to those who haven't. It is based on interviews with students and teachers, and they told her they don't like Australian history. That's partly because it is repetitive and unimaginative, and partly because they feel uncomfortable with the facile moralism that too often accompanies it. They want to discover an unfamiliar past and form their own response.

And the third reason for world history is that we will understand Australian history better if we appreciate the long history of other places and other peoples. We often hear talk of the Indigenous occupation of this continent as unique in its undisturbed longevity, and it was; but we will understand the distinctive characteristics far better if we know more about the peopling of other continents; equally, we will better appreciate Aboriginal ecology and culture if we know more about how and why sedentism, agriculture and writing developed in other places. And the same applies to the penal settlement of Australia as part of a much larger process of European expansion, to our migrant experience and much else.

There was general support in the consultation for world history, qualified by a concern among some correspondents that it needed to engage the interests of learners.

The challenge in primary school is compounded by the way that history is taught in an integrated curriculum and squeezed into a tiny fragment of class time to provide space for literacy and numeracy. Literacy and numeracy are undeniably important, but I have grave misgivings about separating them out as skills

divorced from disciplinary content: I suspect that this approach has contributed to the deterioration in Australian performance in the international student attainment measures conducted by the OECD, and especially the reduced performance of abler students.

There was worrying advice from the primary principals' association that the SOSE learning area occupies less than 5 per cent of the primary school timetable. The advice from ACARA that the history curriculum should be based on 20 hours of teaching per year in lower years, 40 in upper years of primary school, might seem very restricted, but it would be a substantial increase on current practice.

Stage 2, from Years 3 to 6, is where we think that history should be introduced as a distinctive form of knowledge, albeit within an integrated curriculum framework. We suggests that it should be structured around four key questions that will move between local, regional, national and global contexts, incorporate historical evidence as well as virtual experiences, and develop understanding. Life in past times and places will be explored through a range of perspectives and themes, providing opportunities to gain a broad understanding of how people organised, thought about and experienced their diverse lives.

In Years 7 to 10, the curriculum is based on an increase to 80 hours a year. That would be a considerable improvement on current practice in the majority of schools. The curriculum design is a sequence of units, first world history from the earliest times to c. 500 AD in Year 7; then world history from 500 to 1750 in Year 8, 1750 to 1900 in Year 9 and from 1900 to the present in Year 10. Australian history will be a component of Ancient history, make up a significant portion of Year 9 and slightly more than half of Year 10.

In Year 7, which stretches from the earliest times to circa 500 AD, we want to trace the emergence of agriculture, writing, cities and a division of labour, roles and authority. We want to acknowledge some of the great imperial civilizations of East Asia, South Asia and Meso-America, as well as the Near East and Europe. And we think that Greece and Rome have a necessary place because of the particular influence they exercised on the civilization that was planted here. Moreover, Year 7 will begin with a study entitled 'What is history?' It is here that students will be taught about the value of learning about the past, the ways that historians investigate the past, and the various forms of historical representation from museums and historic sites to commemoration and the media.

This is going to require considerable ingenuity. To make it possible, we shall employ a combination of overviews and depth studies. The overview provides a summary and background for the more intensive depth studies, which involve a closer study of a particular topic that allows time for more detailed treatment, investigation of sources, activities, and student inquiry. There will be four depth studies in each year in the four sequential units that run from Year 7 to 10.

Ancient history in Year 7 incorporates the Indigenous settlement and experience. Australian history enters into Years 9 and 10, indeed the instructions to the curriculum writers attached percentages for Australian history, 40 per cent and 60 per cent respectively. I would not have used such quantification, for it implies a cutting of the cake rather than the making of a cake that blends Australian and world history.

If you allocate 60 per cent of Year 10 to Australian history, and try to deal with minimal adequacy with some of the key events of world history in the twentieth century – the world wars, communism and fascism, decolonisation and

globalisation – you will have great difficulty in doing justice to Asian history, let alone the Pacific in the way that a futures perspective suggests. There is a danger that we will perpetuate the disjunction that sees students studying Gallipoli and the Great War as if they were two unrelated subjects.

The same is true, incidentally, for the recent lobbying by Asian studies enthusiasts for a designated history component. It takes several forms: sometimes they too want a percentage of the class hours, sometimes they insist that every European study should be accompanied by an Asian one. That way lies madness. You can't make geographical content the basis of organising world history, and if you did you would deservedly attract criticism from champions of American and African history. A far better approach is to formulate options for depth studies that span Australia and world history, links Australia to its region.

One of the best suggestions came from Tony Milner, a SE Asian historian, who suggested the merits of a sustained attention to Asia at two particular points. The first would come as the Europeans extended their presence in Asia and established a settlement in Australia, for at that point you could make a more systematic inventory of the Asian (and Pacific) region they were joining, its peoples and practices. This would allow students to confront the density and complexity of the Asian civilizations, and to ponder the circumstances that allowed an island off the west coast of Europe to intrude into the region.

A similar sort of sustained examination could occur in Year 10 at the end of WW2, after Japan had dislodged European colonisers and as national independence movements were about to remake Asia, with such significant implications for Australia as well as for the Cold War.

Our initial instructions were to say very little about the final years of schooling in Stage 4, principally for the practical reason that implementation in the compulsory years will be a lengthy and logistically challenging task. That caused some concern, for many teachers wanted to know what will be offered, especially since a national curriculum up to Year 10 is likely to result in more students taking history in Years 11 and 12. Furthermore, we need to guard against repetition, which is one of the bugbears of classroom experience.

ACARA therefore decided that units in Ancient and Modern History should be prepared. These would replace current subjects dealing with ancient and modern history, but leave states and territories to offer their other offerings; hence NSW would continue to operate its excellent option called History Extension. Senior secondary history would begin in Year 11 with another depth study of 'What is History', a more advanced exploration of the resources nature and forms of historical understanding, with an historiographical component, tailored to either ancient or modern history.

The senior secondary units present their own challenge. They are likely to cater for a larger cohort of students, with different levels of ability, and different educational destinations; some will go on to tertiary studies in the humanities and social sciences, others will have different intentions. Experienced history teachers have a major stake in their own senior secondary subjects; it is here that they invested much time and expertise in the development of lesson plans and materials, here again that they have insight how to attract students and maintain engagement. They will need to be persuaded that ACARA's curriculum meets their needs.

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There is one other point I should make before I conclude. As you know, ACARA is developing curriculum in four initial learning areas, and is soon to start with geography and LOTE as well as creative and performing arts. Other subjects are likely to follow. The status of all of them is uncertain. The States and Territories have all agreed on a national curriculum, though the agreement might well be strained when it comes to implementation. The agreement is that teaching in these subjects will use the curriculum, and that student outcomes will be assessed and reported, and as I have noted, there are indicative guidelines for the number of hours they will be taught at the primary and secondary level.

Many of my fellow enthusiasts probably rejoiced too soon when history was chosen as one of the four initial subjects, for in my meetings with State and Territory officials it became apparent that we cannot expect that the current arrangements in primary schools will necessarily change; and of course the jurisdictions retain control of staffing and timetabling. There is an expectation that states and territories will align the production of materials, training and support to the new curriculum, for one of the justifications of a national curriculum is the manifest advantage of pooling resources, but it remains to be seen how that will happen.

Throughout the process of curriculum development the NCB and ACARA have advised that we should concentrate our efforts on producing the best possible study design consistent with the National Declaration of Goals for Young Australians, and rightly so. The curriculum should come first, and the conditions for its implementation should follow. If we were to tailor a national history curriculum on the current resources we would be selling students short. The willingness of participants, especially the history teachers, to accept this assumption has been vital, and it has called on their good will. But we are fast approaching the point at which the question of provision needs to be answered.

History teachers have been short-changed so often that there is a natural tendency to hold the new currency to the light and look suspiciously to see if it is genuine. The opportunity to restore history to the school curriculum has aroused such enthusiasm that the enthusiasts have largely suspended their scepticism. I conclude with the hope that we can move quickly to reassure them that the curriculum can be realised.