

# National curriculum discussion paper

## School curriculum for the 21st century by Bruce Wilson

### Introduction

This paper addresses the issue of school curriculum for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The concept of a new curriculum for the relatively new century has been widely espoused, and a number of attempts have been made to suggest criteria, or to outline some of the principles on which such a curriculum might be based. The paper seeks to answer four questions:

- What has already been agreed that might form a foundation for the curriculum of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?
- What additional claims have been made on matters not yet agreed, but which significant bodies have proposed as a basis for future curriculum?
- What are the specific and new challenges presented by the idea?
- What are our options for building on our current foundation to meet the challenges?

It should be noted that the paper refers only to national responses to these questions.

### What is already agreed?

The basis for a curriculum of the current century will include those matters which have already been formally agreed as foundational for curriculum in Australia. Current agreements are found in those national statements about curriculum which have been developed with a view to the future.

The starting point must be *The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century*, which was agreed by Ministers in 1999. The Declaration refers to the need for every citizen to have:

...the necessary knowledge, understanding, skills and values for a productive and rewarding life in an educated, just and open society.

The document refers to the need for 'curriculum...that...[is] nationally recognized and valued' and 'explicit and defensible standards'. It reaffirms a commitment to a 'comprehensive and balanced curriculum' encompassing the eight learning areas and the interrelationships between them. It is explicit about 'the skills of literacy and numeracy', 'programs of vocational learning' and 'enterprise skills'. It also suggests that students should gain an understanding of Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander cultures, and of the value of cultural and linguistic diversity.<sup>1</sup>

From the base of the Declaration, a number of further agreed positions have been developed. The *National Statement for Engaging Young Australians with Asia in Australian Schools*<sup>2</sup> (agreed by MCEETYA in 2005) argues that 'Australians require new skills, knowledge and understanding related to the Asian region and Australia's engagement with Asia'. The document suggests that young Australians should gain a significant understanding of contemporary and traditional Asia, including such matters as history, geography, culture, arts, science, philosophy, technology, the economy and the diversity of its peoples and belief systems. They should also develop informed attitudes and values about Asia, and an understanding of Australia's relationships with Asia.

The Australian Government's *National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools* lists the following 'Values for Australian Schooling': care and compassion; doing your best; fair go; freedom; honesty and trustworthiness; integrity; respect; responsibility; and understanding, tolerance and inclusion.<sup>3</sup> The Framework suggests that values education should have clear outcomes, and should be applied by schools to 'their overall curriculum provision'<sup>4</sup>.

The *National Statement for Languages Education in Australian Schools* argues that 'All learners in Australian schools are entitled to participate in quality languages programs and to achieve high standards of knowledge, skills and understandings'.<sup>5</sup>

There have also been developed a number of agreed statements of curriculum in particular learning areas. Ministers completed the approval process for the *Statements of Learning* for English, mathematics, science, civics and citizenship and ICT in August 2006. These documents describe 'essential skills, knowledge, understandings and capacities that all young Australians should have the opportunity to learn by the end of Years 3, 5, 7 and 9'. They were developed to 'be used by State and Territory departments or curriculum authorities (their primary audience) to guide the future development of relevant curriculum documents'<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> MCEETYA (1999) *The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century*, [http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school\\_education/policy\\_initiatives\\_reviews/national\\_goals\\_for\\_schooling\\_in\\_the\\_twenty\\_first\\_century.htm#Goals](http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school_education/policy_initiatives_reviews/national_goals_for_schooling_in_the_twenty_first_century.htm#Goals)

<sup>2</sup> Asia Education Foundation (2006) *National Statement for Engaging Young Australians with Asia in Australian Schools*, Curriculum Corporation, Melbourne p. 2

<sup>3</sup> Department of Education, Science and Training (2005) *National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools*, Canberra, p. 4

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 6

<sup>5</sup> MCEETYA (2005), *National Statement for Languages Education in Australian Schools*. DECS Publishing, Adelaide, p. 12

<sup>6</sup> MCEETYA (2006) *Statements of Learning*, <http://www.mceetya.edu.au/mceetya/default.asp?id=11893>

Most of these documents are explicitly intended to underpin future curriculum. In this sense, they contribute to an understanding of the notion of curriculum for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **What additional claims have been made?**

For some commentators and participants, these documents do not go far enough. While they are clearly intended to shape the curriculum of the future, they are rarely seen as transformative. In the area of curriculum, many professional and industrial organizations and bodies with strong links to school education have made additional claims about the nature of future curriculum.

The notes of the CSCNEPA meeting held in February 2007 include references to the need 'to identify and articulate the curriculum challenges for educating young people for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century', and a suggestion that the Senate Inquiry into Academic Standards of School Education needs a wider set of Terms of Reference to address this set of challenges.<sup>7</sup>

In 2006, the Australian Curriculum Studies Association produced '*A Guide to Productive National Curriculum Work for the Twenty First Century*'. It seeks a curriculum which goes beyond basic skills 'to develop capabilities needed for individuals and communities to thrive in the twenty first century' and 'meet the demands of a globalising world'.<sup>8</sup> It argues that an adequate view of curriculum should 'reveal coherence between its various parts and across the stages and phases of learning, promoting:

- a depth of understanding and breadth of application; and
- high expectations and standards in learning outcomes for all young people'<sup>9</sup>

The Australian Education Union outlined, in its discussion paper *Educational Leadership and Teaching for the Twenty-First Century*, proposals to base the future curriculum on a set of ethical questions. The proposal is aimed at ensuring that the curriculum, while addressing the needs of the knowledge economy, also takes account of 'an information-based globalised society'. The paper argues that:

The boundaries between traditional subjects are becoming more and more blurred. Students will learn to relate what is learned in one area to another. Learning will be as much about skills and concepts as content.

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<sup>7</sup> CSCNEPA (2007) 'Notes arising from the meeting...', unpublished

<sup>8</sup> Australian Curriculum Studies Association (2006), *A Guide to Productive National Curriculum Work for the Twenty First Century*, in *Curriculum Perspectives* November 2006, Vol. 26, No. 4, p. 5

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 6

“Learning how to learn” and developing the skills for lifelong learning will be important.<sup>10</sup>

The paper canvasses the reconceptualisation of curriculum ‘in terms of the future needs of students’ which may be reflected in the trend to redefine outcomes as “capabilities” rather than ‘the knowledge obtained through studying particular subjects’. The paper also notes, however, that ‘current practices remain fairly content-oriented’ and suggests ‘there will remain a need for structure and for specialist knowledge’.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, some State and Territory education departments have argued for a more significant shift in curriculum to recognize the changed world. The Tasmanian *Essential Learnings Framework* argued that ‘Communities see the curriculum as a means for creating the sort of future they want’.<sup>12</sup> The Framework is structured around five domains: Thinking, Communicating, Personal Futures, Social Responsibility, and World Futures. The *South Australian Curriculum, Standards and Accountability Framework*, in addition to a structure built around the eight Key Learning Areas, identifies a similar set of Essential Learnings: Futures, Identity, Interdependence, Thinking and Communication. The Futures strand is described as developing ‘the flexibility to respond to change, recognise connections with the past and conceive solutions for preferred futures’.<sup>13</sup> It notes that ‘The SACS Framework does not represent a prescribed body of knowledge’, suggesting a significant shift from some former conceptions of curriculum.

### **What are the challenges?**

For virtually all commentators and participants in the debate, if there is to be a productive resolution around the idea of a curriculum for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it will have to take account of a range of issues which are taken to be powerful influences on the curriculum of the future, whether negative, positive or simply significant. These issues include

- increasing complexity in the world which students will inhabit in the future;
- a rapid and, according to some, increasing pace of change, especially social and technological change;
- the progress of the ‘knowledge economy’;

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<sup>10</sup> AEU (2006) *Educational Leadership and Teaching for the Twenty-First Century*, Australian Education Union, Melbourne, p. 49

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Department of Education Tasmania (2003), *Essential Learnings* <http://www.ltag.education.tas.gov.au/ELsresources/essentiallearnings1.pdf> p. 11

<sup>13</sup> Department of Education and Children’s Services, South Australia (2001), *South Australian Curriculum, Standards and Accountability Framework* DETE Publishing, Adelaide, p. 13

- significant environmental pressures;
- advances in information and communication technologies which bear directly on the conduct and delivery of schooling;
- increasing population diversity;
- a renewed focus on the values carried by the curriculum and schooling;
- concern about skills shortages in particular areas, notably mathematics and science;
- the progress and effects of globalisation;
- the increasing internationalisation of education, and of the economy and society; and
- Australia's changing place in the world, reflected in the focus on Asia, but also in Australia's role in a range of military and humanitarian actions in the region and more broadly.

These issues intersect and interact. There are differing views about the extent to which school education should, or can, respond effectively to each of them. There is a strong strain in the debate which argues that the curriculum of the future should deal with the weaknesses of present educational solutions in responding to these changes, but wide disagreement about how this should occur. One kind of response argues that the curriculum at present has failed to respond to the kinds of changes outlined above, and that what is required is a substantially new kind of education which goes beyond old solutions and deals in a thoroughly reformed way with a very different world. The other, at the opposite end of the spectrum, argues that the curriculum now in place is a weakened and diluted form of an education which seemed to work in the past. This strain seeks a reinforced commitment to standards, values, and particular curriculum content, as a means of ensuring a sound foundation for young people in a changing world.

### **What are the options?**

One of the difficulties faced by those seeking a way forward is that the debate is sharply divided, and not only in the kinds of arguments which are put by those supporting different positions. A key division is to do with the kinds of individuals and groups which line up on the different sides. To put it bluntly, the leaders of the education community largely support a radically reformed curriculum, while politicians, much of the media and many members of the public seek a return to the kind of education they remember from their own schooling.

This is the reason why attempts in some Australian jurisdictions at defining a new kind of curriculum for the new century have met fierce and ultimately successful political resistance. It is also the reason why many in the education community complain that the debate is narrow, flawed and negative about the profession. There is a sharp divide between the profession and many of its

employers and clients. For this reason, it is difficult to imagine that a resolution will consist of a victory for one side or the other. Politicians are unlikely to accept a new curriculum which bears little resemblance to traditional forms. The profession is unlikely to accept that reform means undoing what is seen as the progress of recent decades.

Proposals for a national curriculum provide a new kind of forum for the debate. It is being conducted at the highest levels, with everyone from the Prime Minister and Leader of the Federal Opposition vigorously involved. It is occurring in public, so the profession has to some extent lost control of the debate. And it is subject to dramatic shifts in Commonwealth-State relations, which mean that some of the old ways of doing business are no longer available. The stakes are now much higher.

For these reasons, of the three kinds of options available, only one deserves serious consideration. The options are:

#### *Option 1*

Set out a program for significant further reform in curriculum, drawing on the lessons of outcomes-based education, and of some of the more substantial reform programs attempted in Australia, but avoiding their mistakes. Seek to articulate a curriculum which responds directly and creatively to the kinds of changes outlined above, setting out new concepts of knowledge, skills, capabilities, understanding and values. A revised curriculum of this kind might look quite different from current arrangements. The domains of knowledge and relationships between them, forms of definition and degrees of specificity will all be substantially different from those with which many people are now familiar. The curriculum will explicitly seek integration between areas of learning. It will assume that much of the work of curriculum development would be undertaken at the school and in the classroom. The work will encompass curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, recognizing the critical links between these categories.

#### *Option 2*

Accept the traditional categories and the traditional forms of knowledge. Recognise that some current categories (eg Studies of Society and Environment and equivalents) are no longer useful, and base the curriculum instead their constituent parts which have widespread support. Noting the work which is now under way in, for example, history, and the Statements of Learning, define the curriculum more tightly and more explicitly and mandate specific elements of knowledge as a core entitlement for all young Australians. This model would see areas of learning as quite separate and distinct from each other. It would state the elements of the core curriculum in such a way as to define the responsibilities of teachers more clearly, leaving relatively little discretion at the

local level. It would confine the curriculum to explicitly defined knowledge and skills, and avoid commentary on pedagogy and assessment.

### *Option 3*

Work within the traditional categories, modified as for option 2, taking account of the national agreements outlined above. Be explicit about the kinds of knowledge and skills which are essential to all young Australians, but also about the sophistication and depth of understanding which is required if our children are to be effective citizens and contributors in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This means recognizing, for example, that history includes the traditional knowledge of names, dates, events and themes as well as skills in analysis of documents, but also the higher order capacity required to make judgments on the basis of incomplete information. Confine the formal curriculum to a proportion of the total, so a clear and explicit core can be expanded and enriched, but not ignored, locally. Outline a view within each domain that recognizes the power of specific knowledge and skills, but also articulates what students should be able to do with their knowledge and skills in complex environments and working on real-world problems. Note the critical links with pedagogy and assessment, but do not seek to articulate those relationships in any detail in curriculum documents.

It is the view of this paper that the third option (or some form of this) is the only one which is viable both educationally and politically. The first option will be marginalized politically and ignored in the debate. The recent experience of significant discontinuous reform in Australian education is so replete with political failures and rejection by ordinary members of the profession, that a further similar proposal will not be taken seriously. The second option is not viable educationally. It ignores the extended recent record of attempts in school education to meet the needs of a different mix of students and different social and economic circumstances. It fails to recognize that in the contemporary world young people need a richer and more sophisticated set of capacities within each domain if they are to be effective citizens and economic contributors.

If educators are to shape the debate and make a major contribution to the new circumstances, they must demonstrate two things:

- that they take seriously the views of their employers, politicians, the media, the public and many teachers; and
- that they can articulate a view about curriculum which recognizes strongly held views within the community, and extends those views in ways which are persuasive, comprehensible, challenging and engaging.

We risk being locked out of the debate unless we find a position which is both politically realistic and educationally powerful.