



Australian Government
Department of Education

Students*First*

Review of the Australian Curriculum

Initial Australian Government Response



October 2014

ISBN

978-1-74361-909-4 [PDF]

978-1-74361-910-0 [DOCX]



With the exception of the Commonwealth Coat of Arms, the Department's logo, any material protected by a trade mark and where otherwise noted all material presented in this document is provided under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Australia](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/au/) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/au/>) licence.

The details of the relevant licence conditions are available on the Creative Commons website (accessible using the links provided) as is the full legal code for the [CC BY 3.0 AU licence](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/au/legalcode) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/au/legalcode>).

The document must be attributed as the *Review of the Australian Curriculum – Initial Australian Government Response*.

Contents

The Australian Government’s Policy for Schools: <i>Students First</i>	4
The Australian Government’s Review of the Australian Curriculum	5
The Australian Government’s Initial Response to the Review’s Final Report	5
Resolving the overcrowded curriculum	6
Key Issues	6
Relevant Review recommendations	7
Australian Government response	7
Improving parental engagement around the curriculum	8
Key issues	8
Relevant Review recommendation	8
Australian Government response	9
Improving accessibility for all students	9
Key issues	9
Relevant Review recommendation	9
Australian Government response	9
Rebalancing the curriculum	10
Key issues	10
Relevant Review recommendations	10
Australian Government response	10
Reviewing ACARA governance	11
Key issues	11
Relevant Review recommendations	11
Australian Government response	12
Next Steps	12

The Australian Government's Policy for Schools: *Students First*

Students are firmly at the heart of this Government's vision for school education in Australia. Through its *Students First* policy for school education the Australian Government has a clear mandate from the Australian people for achieving the best possible educational outcomes for our students and our schools. We want students to have a quality education with access to the best teachers. We want a national curriculum that is up-to-date, balanced and relevant. And, importantly, we want the people who know our students best – their parents, teachers, principals and community – to be able to make informed decisions about their education.

Under the *Students First* approach, the Australian Government is working with the states and territories, non-government school authorities, principals, teachers and parents to focus on four key areas that will make a difference:

- teacher quality
- school autonomy
- engaging parents in education
- strengthening the curriculum

A strong curriculum is one of the foundations of any quality education system. Like the foundations of a building, it cannot ensure quality by itself. And like the foundations of a building, not getting it right makes it hard to achieve a high quality education.

Many countries, including most high performing ones, take a national approach to curriculum. Australia has moved towards a national curriculum over some time. The Howard Government started the process, and the previous government continued the work.

The Australian Government sees merit in a national curriculum. It can enable efficiency in development, and implementation, such as through the sharing of learning and teaching resources.

It recognises the entitlement of each student to knowledge, understanding and skills and makes clear to teachers what is to be taught across the years of schooling. It also makes clear what students should learn and the quality of learning expected of them as they progress through school.

In strengthening the curriculum, we know that curriculum of itself is not the only driver of educational quality – but it is an important one. It must help students to be the best they can be. It must be based on high standards and high expectations for all students. It is a key driver in our goal to improve genuine education quality results for all Australian students in our increasingly competitive and globalised world.

This Government has been consistent about the need for a curriculum review for several years. We promised to have a review before both the 2010 and 2013 elections to ensure that it teaches students the things they need, but remains flexible enough to cater for a diverse school community. Our mandate for the Review has always been clear.

The Australian Government's Review of the Australian Curriculum

In announcing the Review of the Australian Curriculum, the Australian Government was aware of concerns that the Australian Curriculum may not be the best that we as a nation can create.

We had concerns about how the Australian Curriculum had been developed, how much content it covered and whether it was sufficiently well integrated. Many of these issues came from parents and teachers, who have a strong interest in ensuring that children are receiving the best education possible.

It is also good policy to review new initiatives like the Australian Curriculum, sooner rather than later, to identify any necessary changes and to ensure future development of the national curriculum is on target. After all, the Australian Curriculum is something that touches the lives of so many people – in this case, potentially every student in Australian schools.

To this end, in January 2014, the Australian Government commissioned the Review of the Australian Curriculum and appointed expert independent reviewers to ensure that the Australian Curriculum engages students and meets their needs, meets parents' expectations and builds the educational capital that we need to excel in a competitive world.

The Australian Government asked the reviewers to evaluate the robustness, independence and balance of the development and content of the Australian Curriculum. We also asked them to identify opportunities for change to ensure that we have a world-class, 21st century curriculum that encourages and fosters choice, diversity and is what parents expect.

The Review was highly consultative. Almost 1 600 public submissions were received, consultations were held with representatives from 72 organisations and eight individuals, and 15 commissioned research papers from 16 subject matter specialists have informed the Review. These are now being made public with the release of the Review's Final Report.

The Australian Government thanks the reviewers for their time, effort and service in undertaking this Review. We would also like to thank all of those in the education community, as well as in the broader Australian community, who have so generously shared their thoughts, experiences and evidence with the reviewers. We also acknowledge and thank the subject matter specialists for their expertise and insights.

The Australian Government's Initial Response to the Review's Final Report

This Review has provided an opportunity to hear all of the issues that stakeholders have with the curriculum, recommend how to address many of these concerns and make improvements before all curriculum documents are fully implemented in Australian schools. The Review found that the

Australian Curriculum was supported and seen as a positive development in education and what has been achieved to date is significant.

The Review also heard that improvements are needed and has made 30 key recommendations to improve and further develop the curriculum used in Australian schools.

The Australian Government is keen to explore the most practical aspects that will result in tangible improvements in the quality of the Australian Curriculum and hence have the greatest positive impact on student learning.

The Australian Government's initial response to this Review encompasses five themes: (i) resolving the overcrowded curriculum, (ii) improving parental engagement around the curriculum, (iii) improving accessibility for all students (iv) rebalancing the curriculum and (v) reviewing the governance of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA).

By addressing all of these themes Australia will have a strong, robust curriculum that is the best possible for our nation – and therefore the greatest chance of ensuring improved outcomes for our students.

Resolving the overcrowded curriculum

Key Issues

Too much content

In announcing the Review of the Australian Curriculum, we already knew that many stakeholders had been critical of the overcrowding of the Australian Curriculum and the content being excessive, unduly rigid and prescriptive in many of the learning areas.

The findings of the Review of the Australian Curriculum have confirmed that this is a real concern, particularly in the primary school years. With implementation of the Australian Curriculum, this concern, if left unaddressed, will continue to have real and practical consequences for its delivery – far too much content than can be reasonably delivered by our schools and teachers, impacting on the quality of learning of our students.

The Review heard considerable evidence of overcrowding in the curriculum and it was the primary issue raised by principals, teachers and parents, and the broader education community. While overcrowding exists across much of the curriculum, it appears to be a particularly prevalent in the primary years.

Some stakeholders reported that there is too much focus on some subjects to the detriment of foundational skills, such as literacy and numeracy. Some stakeholders were concerned that the amount of time required to teach the Australian Curriculum did not leave enough time for the inclusion of local priorities. Some stakeholders saw tight timeframes during curriculum development and the isolated development of learning areas as contributing to a problem of an 'overcrowded' curriculum.

Cross-curriculum priorities and general capabilities add complexity

The Australian Curriculum has a three-dimensional shape design: discipline-based learning areas; general capabilities; and cross-curriculum priorities. There is considerable support for this organisational structure; however, some view the cross-curriculum priorities and general capabilities as adding to the complexity of the delivery of the Australian Curriculum. Concerns have been expressed in the evidence provided to the reviewers about this current structure and whether the current cross-curriculum priorities and general capabilities need to be better communicated and reconceptualised.

Relevant Review recommendations

The following four recommendations relate to this theme:

Recommendation 11: The Ministerial Council consider the two options we have advanced for reconceptualising the Australian Curriculum that are set out on pages 143-6 of this Report.

Recommendation 12: Subsequently, ACARA revise the structure of the Australian Curriculum to reduce the amount of content to a narrow core required to be taught, especially in the primary years. Foundation to Year 2 should focus on literacy and numeracy.

Recommendation 17: ACARA reconceptualise the cross-curriculum priorities and instead embed teaching and learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia, and sustainability explicitly, and only where educationally relevant, in the mandatory content of the curriculum.

Recommendation 18: With the exception of literacy, numeracy and ICT that continue as they currently are dealt with in the Australian Curriculum, the remaining four general capabilities are no longer treated in a cross-curricular fashion. Critical and creative thinking, personal and social capability, ethical understanding and intercultural understanding should be embedded only in those subjects and areas of learning where relevant and where they can be dealt with in a comprehensive and detailed fashion.

Australian Government response

The Australian Government supports the Review recommendations relating to overcrowding in the curriculum. We must deal with the overcrowding of the curriculum as a matter of priority. Overcrowding means that teachers are finding it difficult to implement the Australian Curriculum and cover all the content in each subject. It also means that students are not necessarily getting the right amount of time devoted to the content in each subject that they really need – for example, literacy and numeracy in the early years of primary schooling.

The structure of the Australian Curriculum should also be reconsidered. Two models have been presented by the reviewers for how to approach the Australian Curriculum in the early years of schooling (Foundation to Year 2).

Dealing with overcrowding will require us looking carefully and dispassionately at when and how certain subjects are introduced to children, such as literacy and numeracy for children in the early

years of primary school; or economics and business in later primary school. In some instances, there may be a need for a greater integration within, or across some subjects in the primary years.

The Australian Government supports the recommendation to reconceptualise the current cross-curriculum priorities and instead embed these only where educationally relevant in the mandatory context of the curriculum. The Review concluded that while the current cross-curriculum priorities are valid areas for consideration in the curriculum, this approach is not well communicated and may warrant reconceptualisation.

The Review found support for the inclusion of the seven general capabilities – literacy, numeracy, ICT (information and communications technology) capability, critical and creative thinking, personal and social capability, ethical understanding, and intercultural understanding – in the Australian Curriculum. The Australian Government will seek further input from education ministers and ACARA before determining a final position on the current embedded approach in general capabilities.

Improving parental engagement around the curriculum

Key issues

We know that parents and carers are one of the most important influences on a child's education.

Improved parent engagement means that parents have a better understanding of the teacher's job and school curriculum. When parents are aware of what their children are learning, they are more likely to engage with their children's learning activities at home. Parents' perceptions of the school are improved and there are stronger ties and commitment to the school. Parents are more aware of, and become more active regarding, policies and decisions that affect their children's education.

This is why engaging parents in their children's education is one of the four pillars of the Australian Government's students-first approach to school education. When parents are engaged in their children's education, children are more likely to attend school and to have better learning outcomes.

The Review heard evidence that the Australian Curriculum is viewed by parents as being more of a "teacher's document" and is not particularly parent-friendly. In some ways, this is a not a surprising finding as the primary audience for the Australian Curriculum is teachers. Both the language and broad structure is intended to support teachers in planning within and across learning areas.

There are many good ways which individual jurisdictions and schools are informing parents about the Australian Curriculum, but some are not doing as much as they could. This is concerning when we consider the crucial importance of a school having family support, trust and involvement in their children's progress through schooling.

Relevant Review recommendation

The following recommendation relates to this theme:

Recommendation 2: ACARA develop a smaller, parent-friendly version of the Australian Curriculum which clearly explains the intended curriculum a child will be learning in each year they are at school.

Australian Government response

The Australian Government supports actions to provide better information to parents about the Australian Curriculum. We should always be looking for better ways to facilitate parental engagement. A small, parent friendly version of the Australian Curriculum would be one way to help parents understand what their children will learn during each school year. This can lead to stronger and more engaged school communities, which we also know is positive for educational outcomes. For these reasons the Australian Government will be championing action in this important area.

Improving accessibility for all students

Key issues

Schooling across Australia is diverse, with students of varying capabilities, backgrounds and contexts. As the Final Report acknowledges, the concept of student diversity encompasses a wide range of aspects relating to disadvantage – whether it be in relation to disability, socioeconomic factors, cultural perspectives, or remoteness – all of which pose a challenge to ensuring every child can achieve their potential.

Most of the submissions to the Review have related to the need to better support teachers of students with disability in the delivery of the Australian Curriculum. In helping teachers, we help the students.

The Review heard evidence that the linear progression of the Australian Curriculum makes it difficult for children operating at below Foundation level and as a result the curriculum is not accessible for the students with additional needs. Parents of the students with additional needs are saying this was not what was promised and that the Australian Curriculum has lost credibility with them.

Relevant Review recommendation

The following recommendation relates to this theme:

Recommendation 10: ACARA, guided by special education experts, improve the inclusivity of the Australian Curriculum by more appropriately addressing the needs of students with disability, particularly those working towards the Foundation level.

Australian Government response

The Australian Government strongly supports the recommendation to develop further materials in the Australian Curriculum that better support the needs of students with disability and/or additional needs. Schools have a clear responsibility to address the learning needs of every one of their students. To better support schools in this endeavour, the Australian Curriculum needs more work to cater for student diversity. It is concerning that there is a significant group of students for whom there is no explicit curriculum as they are yet to achieve the Foundation level.

The Australian Government will actively support improvements to the Australian Curriculum to make it more inclusive of the learning and assessment of students with disability and/or additional needs. This will strengthen support for both teachers and parents of all students with additional needs and ultimately improve their learning outcomes.

Rebalancing the curriculum

Key issues

The degree to which the curriculum development process to date has led to balance within the content of the Australian Curriculum formed an explicit part of the Review's Terms of Reference.

The Review highlighted that, to varying degrees, learning areas placed a strong focus on some content whilst sometimes completely neglecting other content.

In addition to the 30 key recommendations, the Review's Final Report has also listed recommendations for changes in the content for each subject area – these are covered in Chapter 7 of the Final Report and cover English, mathematics, history, science, geography, civics and citizenship, technologies, economics and business and lastly, health and physical education.

In terms of the approach to developing the Australian Curriculum, some submissions argued that it would have been beneficial for the development of an Australian Curriculum to have been informed by an overarching framework that contained statements on vision and goals. It would appear that the lack of one has contributed to the concerns around overcrowding with a development process around each learning area. This fragmented approach was then exacerbated by some of the time constraints applied by the former Australian Government.

Relevant Review recommendations

The following two recommendations relate to this theme:

Recommendation 9: The Ministerial Council oversee ACARA's development of a comprehensive framework for the Australian Curriculum that includes the notional time allocation and core content for each learning area and subject that is practically implementable, especially in the primary years.

Recommendation 14: ACARA rebalance the core content in each learning area and subject in line with the findings of this Review outlined in Chapters Six and Seven, particularly in relation to the deficiencies in each subject.

Australian Government response

The Australian Government agrees with recommendations that rebalance the Australian Curriculum. We support changes that ensure there is a balanced curriculum in all learning areas. We can only consider the Australian Curriculum world class, and hence appropriate for Australian students, when we get the balance right.

For example, in the English curriculum, the Review suggests that there be a greater emphasis on phonics and phonemic awareness, particularly during the early years of reading.

In the primary science curriculum (Foundation to Year 2), the Review suggests that the existing content structure, which is based on the four scientific disciplines may not be particularly helpful and is leading to a primary science curriculum that is sacrificing depth for breadth. The Australian Government recognises the importance of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and strongly supports a greater balance in the Australian Curriculum to ensure sufficient focus on teaching the key concepts in these important areas of student learning.

In the geography curriculum, the Review suggests that we should strive to represent more strongly physical geography, the study of the natural environment, in comparison to human geography which has a much greater focus on studying human activities.

The Australian Government believes changes that rebalance the content of the Australian Curriculum should be referred to educational experts and worked through in a methodical and dispassionate way, guided by a clear framework of educational values that underpin the curriculum.

We will also support the development of an overarching framework to guide future curriculum development work. This will support the best possible selection of curriculum content and the most effective way of establishing and maintaining coherent and balanced provision. It is now timely to revisit whether we really do have a holistic curriculum design statement to guide future monitoring, evaluation and revisions to the Australian Curriculum.

Reviewing ACARA governance

Key issues

Some of the recommendations of this Review go to the role, function and governance of ACARA. Australian governments will need to consider these issues carefully in tandem and with other key stakeholders.

The Review identified concerns from some stakeholders that ACARA played the role of both developer and evaluator of the Australian Curriculum. There were also mixed views on the role ACARA should play in matters relating to the implementation of the Australian Curriculum. The Review highlights the need to ensure greater clarity of the explicit functions of ACARA.

The existing ACARA Board is primarily comprised of representatives of state and territory governments, many of whom are also employed in roles relating to advising their ministers on curriculum development. This may at times pose dilemmas for these Board members in making decisions in the interests of all Australian students as opposed to the interests of their own state/territory education authority.

The Review found that this aspect of ACARA's structure has contributed to issues such as overcrowding in the curriculum, whereby content has been included in an attempt to satisfy all states and territories, instead of being independently evaluated based on educational grounds for the greater good of the nation.

Relevant Review recommendations

The following two recommendations relate to this theme:

Recommendation 24: ACARA be restructured, and the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority Act 2008 and ACARA's Charter be revised, so its role is limited to:

- development and cyclical updates of the Australian Curriculum
- curriculum research
- international benchmarking of curriculum
- development and administration of the National Assessment Program.

Recommendation 26: ACARA’s Board not be representative of education authorities but comprise curriculum and assessment experts, independent of education authorities.

Australian Government response

The Australian Government supports these recommendations. As well as being balanced, a world-class curriculum must be robust, and have sound educational underpinnings. It is therefore of concern that the Review found that the often parochial political and policy positions of jurisdictions have compromised the overall quality of the Australian Curriculum.

We believe that to achieve a robust curriculum, those leading the development of the Australian Curriculum should possess high level curriculum expertise and an interest in supporting ACARA create a world class curriculum, uncompromised by the political and policy imperatives of various governments.

The Australian people have given us a mandate to refocus ACARA to ensure it is focused on developing the best possible Australian Curriculum. It is timely that there is an existing legislative requirement to review ACARA. The ACARA Act requires the Commonwealth Education Minister to carry out a review of ACARA commencing on 8 December 2014 and reporting within six months. This review is an opportunity to canvass the issues around ACARA’s role, function and governance with the states and territories, taking into account the Review’s recommendations.

Next Steps

Much has been achieved to date with regards to the Australian Curriculum. We need to maintain momentum if we are to develop the Australian Curriculum for the future.

Deciding how the findings of this Review translate into actions that will improve the learning experience of all students will be, like the development of the Australian Curriculum itself, a matter of national collaboration that requires the endorsement of all education ministers.

With this in mind, the Australian Government will be working through the recommendations, suggested actions and options for implementation with the states and territories through the Council of Australian Governments’ Education Council. We anticipate that the timeframe for implementing the findings of the Review of the Australian Curriculum will be addressed during those discussions.

This Review has been most timely and provides a sound basis for strengthening the Australian Curriculum. We look forward to working with the states and territories on practical proposals that will deliver a world class education for all our students.