

Work in progress

Enthusiasm for the national curriculum is tempered by some concerns about how it is being developed.

by **Steve Packer**

Briefly

■ A coalition of education groups says the national curriculum's development lacks teacher consultation and an overlying blueprint.

■ It fears the curriculum is shaping up as merely a revamp of an outdated model.

■ Integration of the three cross-curriculum priorities is also being questioned.

The AEU and other education groups in the Australian Curriculum Coalition (ACC) strongly support the development of a national curriculum, but are unhappy about aspects of its development.

The AEU is particularly concerned about a lack of broad and direct engagement with teachers in the largely online consultations the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) has fostered.

Over the years, the states and territories have developed deep and robust, teacher-centred approaches to curriculum development, including working parties and school-based conversations. However, prior to convening a recent one-off forum, ACARA has replaced such consultation with much less thorough and

inclusive internet-based methods.

"The AEU believes that any curriculum, which is to reflect and be underpinned by effective teaching practice and optimise student outcomes, must be developed with the direct engagement of teachers," said AEU President Angelo Gavrielatos in a letter to ACARA chair Barry McGaw in March. "[It must] be subjected to widespread trialling, appropriate evaluation with extensive teacher input, and adequate resourcing, including an appropriate level of budgeted professional development, prior to any decision regarding implementation."

ACARA appears to be taking note. On June 21 and 22, it hosted a forum of 30 teachers to gather feedback on its draft of general capabilities material. Air travel arrangements were disrupted by ash cloud flight cancellations, but the forum included representation from all states and territories and education sectors.

In its online update on July 12, ACARA said the teachers' comments were positive overall and "also offered a range of constructive feedback on concerns and suggestions for improvement". ▶



“...[it must] be subjected to widespread trialling, appropriate evaluation with extensive teacher input...”

Angelo Gavrielatos
AEU Federal President

Integrating the big issues

While there is general agreement that the national curriculum’s three cross-curriculum priorities are important and well chosen, they raise their own questions about content, delivery and resourcing.

The priorities, as explained by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), are:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures – a deeper understanding and appreciation of them, and their significance for Australia and the impact they have had, and continue to have, on our world.
- Australia’s engagement with Asia – including an appreciation of the economic, political and cultural interconnections Australia has with the region.
- Sustainability – to allow all young Australians to develop an appreciation of the need for more sustainable patterns of living, and to build the capacities for thinking and acting that are necessary to create a more sustainable future.

They have no separate timelines for development by ACARA because they are embedded in the documents for each of the seven learning areas.

“They are the issues of the day we believe every Australian needs to know about right now,” says ACARA CEO Dr Peter Hill. “Once we’ve done our job with these priorities and they are fully embedded in the curriculum, others will emerge. But right now, these are the big three.”

The AEU, in conjunction with the other members of the Australian Curriculum Coalition, has expressed concern about the “limited and uneven emphasis” the priorities have been given in the draft documents, and about the support and resources that will be given to teachers for their delivery.

It is also concerned that their cross-curriculum integration is compromised by the separated, ‘silo’ nature of the way the seven learning areas are being developed.

ACARA says the three priorities are being embedded in all learning areas “as appropriate” and they have “a strong but varying presence” depending on their relevance to each learning area.

Each priority has had its own advisory panels and writers.

“The task they have done is to generate big organising ideas with a lot of detail behind them,” says Hill. “For example, there are nine that relate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. The group – all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators – worked for a long time on refining this set of quite powerful organising ideas.

“They then went to each of the learning areas’ teams of writers to discuss how we could embed each of these organising ideas into the curriculum.

“The important thing was to get them embedded naturally and powerfully. ‘Naturally’ means you don’t try to force it. They should come up where they should come up.

“I think we had a bit of a forced issue when we tried to put some of the spiritual beliefs of Aboriginal people into the science curriculum. That was an initial error of judgment. But where it comes up naturally, you can do it powerfully.” ●

Asian priority going backwards

At a time when Asian language and culture studies in Australian schools are scarce and in decline, the federal government has not renewed funding for the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP).

In 2007, the government committed \$62.4 million over four years to the program. However, it received no additional funding in May's federal budget.

The Asia Education Foundation (AEF), which advocates for and supports Asia literacy in Australian schools, is seeking to secure continued NALSSP funding in next year's budget.

"It has become self-evident that the future of young Australians is tied up with the future of Australia's engagement with the Asian region," says AEF executive director Kathe Kirby. "Young people require a mindset, plus knowledge and skills, that will equip them to harness the opportunities of what many call 'the Asian century'. We now have an evidence base indicating that we have a lot of work to do in this area."

Seventy-four per cent of Australian businesses are currently engaged with, or plan to be engaged with, the Asian region. Recent AEF studies have revealed the scope of the lack of progress in preparing young people for the transition.

"We are going backwards in regard to teaching Asian languages in our schools," says Kirby. "In 2005, 6.6 per cent of Year 12 students were undertaking an Asian language. In 2008 that had declined to 5.8 per cent.

"In Chinese, more than 90 per cent of Year 12 students have a Chinese background. That means only about 300



students with no Chinese background are studying Chinese in Year 12 across Australia.

"Our research indicates that 10,000 students a year have been dropping out of Indonesian for the last five years."

NALSSP's target is to have 12 per cent of Year 12s studying an Asian language by 2020.

Asian languages are, of course, only one part of Asia literacy, says Kirby.

"The other part is related to the national curriculum's cross-curriculum priority 'Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia'. The work ahead of us is to build the capacity of our teachers to deliver on that in all subjects.

"We need to invest in professional learning for our current teachers and focus on how pre-service education is going to adequately equip new teachers with the skills and knowledge to deliver on the priority.

"We require long-term, consistent investment by all governments – federal, state and territory – to achieve this." ●

United in criticism

The ACC is made up of 10 groups representing teachers, principals, school leaders, academics and researchers.

As well as the AEU, they include the Australian College of Educators, Secondary Principals Association, Australian Council for Educational Leaders and Australian Association for Research in Education.

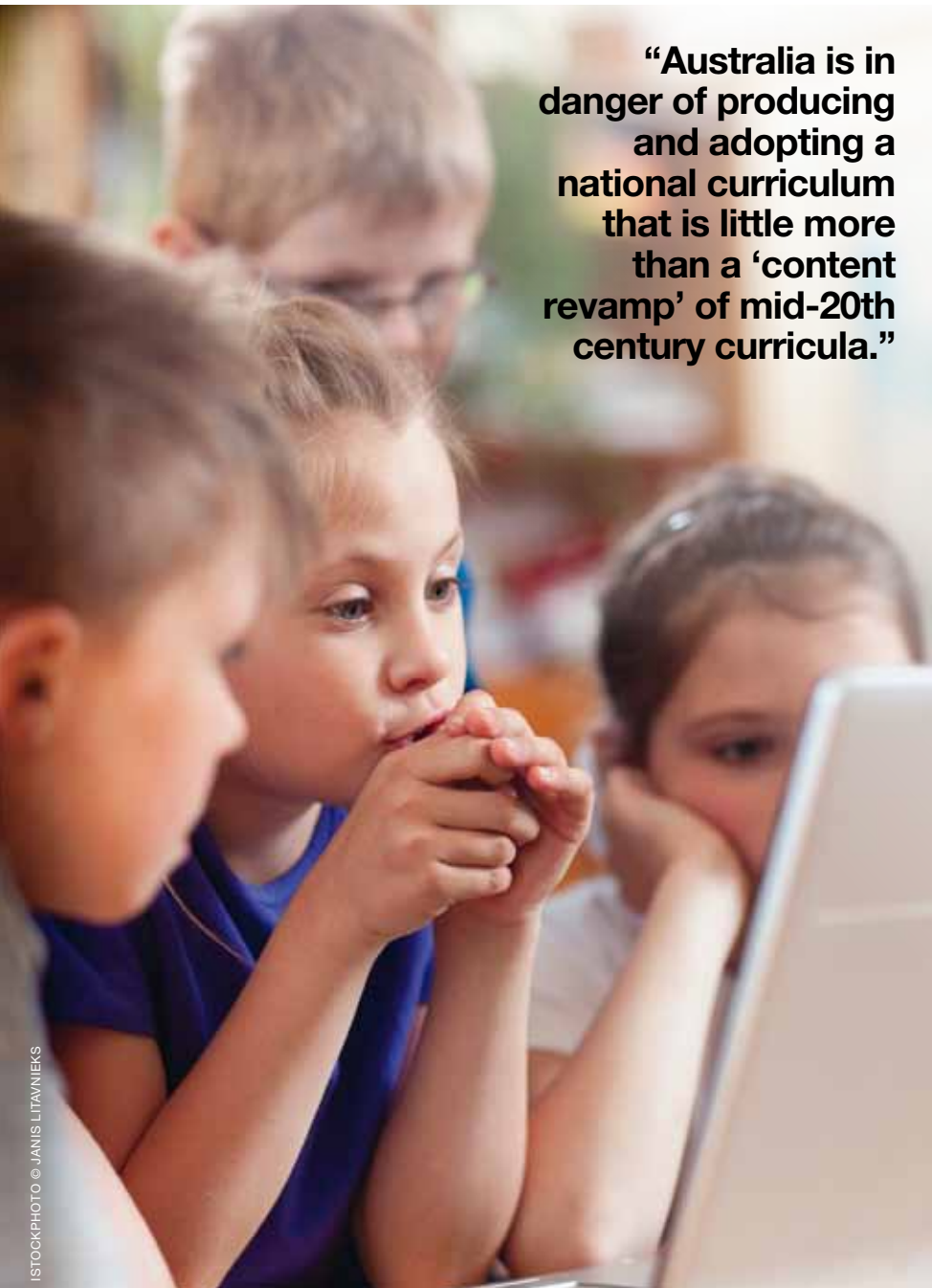
Midway through the curriculum's development, the ACC says the process lacks underpinning principles, sufficient means of consultation and many other considerations necessary to meet the federal government's stated objectives. It has expressed its concerns to ACARA, state and federal education ministers and shadow ministers.

"Federal, state and territory governments are on the verge of endorsing a curriculum that does not meet the objective of the Australian government of 'delivering a world class education system to ensure Australians are armed with the knowledge and skills to meet the demands of the 21st century'," says the ACC.

"The most serious concern is the failure to date of ACARA to deliver an explicit road-map or blueprint of the whole-curriculum picture.

"As a consequence, work continues to be undertaken in the traditional 'silo' model, without a coherent narrative and without serious integration and consideration of fundamental challenges and responsibilities with respect to equity, inclusion and national leadership around cross-curriculum perspectives."

The silo reference reflects the way the curriculum is being developed with a staggered approach, subject by subject. ACARA is hoping to finalise the first four subjects, or 'learning areas' –



“Australia is in danger of producing and adopting a national curriculum that is little more than a ‘content revamp’ of mid-20th century curricula.”

English, mathematics, science and history – by October. The other three areas – geography, the arts and languages – have finalisation dates in late 2012 and early 2013.

Consistent with the AEU and ACC concerns, a meeting of the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs in December produced a list of matters which it said still required a substantial body of work. They include:

- Establishing a national common approach to the achievement standards across all states and territories, and testing and validating that approach.
- States and territories developing additional material to support effective implementation of the curriculum to accommodate their different curriculum development, approval and implementation requirements.
- Developing the curriculum content and achievement standards as required to meet the needs of special needs students.

The ACC has called on the federal, state and territory education ministers to make an immediate priority of addressing the matters.

“Without this resolve,” it says, “Australia is in danger of producing and adopting a national curriculum that is little more than a ‘content revamp’ of mid-20th century curricula.” ●

Steve Packer is a freelance writer.



Resources

- <http://www.acara.edu.au>
- <http://www.asiaeducation.edu.au>