National Curriculum Update

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1. Introduction

This update describes some key features of the Australian national curriculum that will be of interest to teachers of SOSE and related subjects/fields. It identifies the location of these features in two key documents – the National Curriculum Development Paper (July 2008) and the Shape of the Australian Curriculum (May 2009; October 2010). The update then evaluates the extent to which the national History curriculum, published in December 2010, reflects the promise and potential of those two documents.

2. The current situation

Since 2008, a national curriculum development process has been under way in Australia, coordinated initially by the National Curriculum Board (NCB) and, since 2009, by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA).

In December 2010, the federal and state ministers for education approved the ‘Phase 1’ national curriculum documents for English, Mathematics, Science and History – with the proviso that they be reviewed in late 2011. Implementation of the four subjects is in the hands of the state and territory jurisdictions, who have announced varying timetables for implementation in their school systems.

Development work is continuing on the three Phase 2 subjects – Geography, LOTE and The Arts.

Phase 3 will follow, to include those areas endorsed in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young People but not included in Phases 1 and 2 – including Design and Technology, Health and Physical Education, ICT, Economics, Business and Civics and Citizenship.

In a subject-specific sense, the subjects of most interest to teachers of SOSE and related subjects are History (Phase 1), Geography (Phase 2) and Civics and Citizenship (signalled for Phase 3).

However, teachers of SOSE will be very interested in two of the over-arching national curriculum documents, which signalled particular aspirations for the national curriculum overall. Those documents set the scene for the entire national curriculum process. The following sections describe those aspirations.
3. The national curriculum – an initial vision for teaching ‘society and environment’

The first significant document produced by ACARA was the National Curriculum Development Paper (July 2008). For teachers of SOSE and related subjects, the aims expressed in the paper had a familiar ring.

The paper stated that ‘school education lays important foundations for futures that are distant and seen only dimly’. It went on to declare that schooling ‘should help develop a sense of themselves and Australian society, a capacity and predisposition to contribute effectively to society, and the knowledge, understanding and skills with which to work productively and creatively’. Schooling, it claimed, should ‘help develop a cohesive society, with individual members aware of the rich diversity of histories and cultures that have shaped it, and committed to its continuing development’. For the nation, it should ‘build strong foundations for future national prosperity, helping to make Australia productive and internationally competitive in the global economy’.

These aims would not be out of place in a SOSE curriculum statement, and their prominence in the NCB’s early paper held out great promise to teachers of SOSE, History, Geography and Economics.

In similarly familiar language, the paper asserted that a national curriculum ‘needs to provide students with an understanding of the past that has shaped the society and culture in which they are growing and developing, and with knowledge, understandings and skills that will help them in their future lives’.

Even more specifically, the paper recommended that a national curriculum should foster ‘cultural sensitivity and respect, engaged citizenship and a commitment to sustainable patterns of living’, thus drawing clear connections with the existing work of SOSE teachers around the country.

4. The Shape paper – maintaining the vision

Perhaps the key document in the national curriculum process has been the Shape of the Australian Curriculum. It was first published May 2009 when important work was being done on the Phase 1 subjects, and was revised and republished in October 2010, just prior to the ministerial endorsement of the four Phase 1 curricula.

It should be noted that both versions of the Shape paper embraced key ideas from the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians published in December 2008 by the federal and state education ministers.
The *Shape of the Australian Curriculum* paper included the following elements, all of which are of interest to teachers of ‘society and environment’.

**i. A vision for the national curriculum**
Young Australians need ‘a wide and adaptive set of knowledge, understanding and skills to meet the changing expectations of society and to contribute to the creation of a more productive, sustainable and just society’ (2010:6).

**ii. The globalising context of life and learning**
Acknowledgment that ‘global integration and international mobility’ and ‘globalisation and technological change’ are key factors influencing the design and practice of schooling (2010:5).

**iii. The environment**
Acknowledgment of ‘complex environmental, social and economic pressures, such as climate change’ (2010:5) – leading to the inclusion in the national curriculum of ‘sustainability’ as one of three cross-curriculum priorities (p.20).

**iv. Cultural knowledge and understanding**
Through the national curriculum students should ‘learn to respect and appreciate their own cultures and beliefs and those of others, and to engage with people of diverse cultures’ (2005:20) – leading to the inclusion in the national curriculum of ‘Personal and social competence’ and ‘Intercultural understanding’ and two of seven ‘General capabilities’ (p.20).

**v. Indigenous Australians**
Students should ‘understand and acknowledge the value of Indigenous cultures and possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians’ (2010:8).

**vi. Engagement with Asia**
Recognition that ‘India, China and other Asian nations are growing and their influence on the world is increasing’ (2010:5) – leading to the inclusion in the national curriculum of ‘Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia’ as one of three cross-curriculum priorities (p.20).

**vii. Values and ethics**
The national curriculum aims to have students ‘committed to national values of democracy, equity and justice’ (2010:8). One of the seven ‘General capabilities’ is ‘Ethical behaviour’ whereby students ‘develop ethical behaviour as they learn to understand and act in accordance with ethical principles’ and develop ‘a desire and capacity to work for the common good’ (p.19).

**viii. Self and society**
‘The curriculum will support students to relate well to others and foster an understanding of Australian society, citizenship and national values.’ (2010:16)
ix. Citizenship
The national curriculum envisages students becoming ‘active and informed ... local and global citizens’ (2010:8) partly through ‘the study of civics and citizenship’ (p.16). Civics and citizenship will be included in Phase 3 of the national curriculum development.

x. Critical inquiry
Students should become ‘able to think deeply and logically, and obtain and evaluate evidence in a disciplined way as the result of studying fundamental disciplines’ (2010:7). One of the seven ‘General capabilities’ is ‘Critical and creative thinking’ (p.19).

xi. Cross-disciplinary learning
‘Rather than being self-contained or fixed, disciplines are interconnected, dynamic and growing. A discipline-based curriculum should allow for cross-disciplinary learning that broadens and enriches each student’s learning.’ (2010:17)

xii. ICTs
Recognition of the significance of ‘rapid and continuing advances in information and communication technologies (ICT) (2010:5) - leading to the inclusion in the national curriculum of ‘Information and communication technology (ICT) competence’ as one of seven ‘General capabilities’ (p.19)

5. The strengths of the national curriculum in History (December 2010)
As of early 2011, the national curriculum in History is the most pertinent published document for teachers of SOSE and related subjects. The strengths of that curriculum, particularly in relation to SOSE interests, are as follows:

i. The emphasis on conceptual learning
The national History curriculum is structured in two ‘strands’. One strand is ‘Historical knowledge and understanding’. It combines the ‘understanding and use of historical concepts, such as evidence, continuity and change, cause and effect, perspectives, empathy, significance and contestability’ with the ‘study of societies, events, movements and developments’. (In earlier national curriculum papers, these concepts were called ‘Historical understandings’.)

ii. The emphasis on inquiry learning
The second ‘strand’ of the national History curriculum is termed ‘Historical skills’, described as the ‘capacity to undertake historical inquiry, including skills in the analysis and use of sources, and in explanation and communication’. The potential for inquiry learning has been enhanced by the mandating of ‘depth studies’ in Years 7–10, whereby students will pursue a specific inquiry question for a protracted period of perhaps ten weeks. A set of ‘Key inquiry questions’ is provided for each year level in the national History curriculum.
iii. The focus on personal and social learning in Years Foundation - 6
In the years ‘Foundation – Year 2’, students ‘learn about their own social context of family, friends and school, and the significance of the past’.

In Years 3–6, students ‘draw on their growing experience of family, school and the wider community to develop their understanding of the world and their relationship to others past and present’.

iv. The focus on society and culture in studies of the past
Generally, the curriculum has avoided an overemphasis on political, military and diplomatic histories and has highlighted social and cultural phenomena. Years Foundation – 3 focus strongly on personal, family and local contexts, including ‘the role that people of diverse backgrounds have played in the development and character of the local community’ (Year 3); in Year 4 there is a study of the experiences after arrival of those on the First Fleet, while in Year 5 there is a focus on ‘what life was like for different groups of people in the colonial period’; Year 6 includes study of ‘Stories of groups of people who migrated to Australia’ and ‘the development of Australian society, for example in areas such as the economy, education, science, the arts, sport’.

In Year 7, students focus on the ‘defining characteristics’ and ‘legacies’ of ancient societies; Year 8 focuses on the ‘way of life (social, cultural, economic and political features) and the roles and relationships of different groups’ in a selected society; an emphasis on social and cultural phenomena continues in Years 9 and 10, although in those years the political/military/diplomatic context of those phenomena is developed more fully.

v. The inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content
In almost all year levels, there is specific inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content.

This includes ‘the importance of Country and Place to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples who belong to a local area’ (Year 3); ‘What was life like for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Peoples before the arrival of the Europeans?’ (Year 4); ‘The role that a significant individual or group played in shaping a colony; for example ... Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples’ (Year 5); ‘The contribution of individuals and groups, including Aboriginal people and/or Torres Strait Islanders ... to the development of Australian society’ (Year 6); ‘The nature of the sources for ancient Australia and what they reveal about Australia’s past’ (Year 7); ‘the struggle of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for rights and freedoms’ (Year 10).

vi. A focus on Asia
Reflecting the cross-curriculum priority of ‘Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia’, there is substantial Asian content across the curriculum, although the provision of depth study options means that school decisions will affect how much of that content is included in the taught curriculum.
In Foundation – 3, there is scope for Asian emphasis in studies of the local community where applicable, and in specific comparative studies (for example, of celebrations such as Chinese New Year and Diwali). The Year 4 study of ‘one world navigator’ may have Asian elements; Year 5 includes study of the ‘experiences and contributions’ of people ‘who migrated from Europe and Asia’.

In Year 6, the key inquiry question ‘How did Australian society change throughout the twentieth century?’ has an inescapably Asian perspective.

One of the three Year 7 depth studies of ancient societies is drawn from ‘The Asian World’; in Year 8, there is a choice of three options in the study of the Asia-Pacific World in the pre-modern period, as well as two Asia-Pacific electives in the ‘Expanding contacts’ depth study; Year 9 includes a depth study on ‘Asia and Australia’; in Year 10, Asian content is not signalled very specifically or strongly in any of the three depth studies although, depending on choice, an Asian element or emphasis would be possible and worthwhile.

6. Some weaknesses of the national curriculum in History (December 2010)

Despite the promise and potential suggested in the section above, there are some significant problems with the national History curriculum when viewed from the perspective of teachers of SOSE. Here are four major examples.

**Focus on environment and sustainability**

Despite ‘Sustainability’ being one of the three ‘cross-curriculum priorities’ of the national curriculum, the treatment of ‘environment’ and sustainability’ in the national History curriculum is piecemeal and lightweight. The term ‘environment’ appears only thirteen times in the document, with nine of those references in Year 10, two in Year 8 and two in Year 4. ‘Sustainability’ fares even worse, with just two references in total, both of them in Year 10.

In Year 10, the relevant depth study option is titled ‘The environment movement’, itself a limited focus, and the suggested case studies are hardly representative – the Gordon Dam issue; Chernobyl; Jabiluka.

What is lacking is a systematic study of ‘human use of the environment and its consequences’, with examples drawn from across the historical time scale from, for example, ancient Mesopotamia to Easter Island, the Murray-Darling and modern-day global climate change.

**Focus on Asia**

As described above, there is substantial opportunity to study Asia in the curriculum. However, there are glaring omissions in Years 9 and 10. In the Year 9 depth study of ‘Asia and Australia’, the study of ‘ONE Asian society’ is available, but only as an option alongside ‘the history of Australia’. Even if selected, the study of the one Asian society ends in 1918. Thus, for example, a study of India would end before the
first substantial moves towards independence, while a study of China would end before the Communist experience. In both cases, there would be no opportunity to study the ways in which India and China have become the two independent nations likely to dominate the 21st century. Such studies would logically be located in Year 10, but the Year 10 curriculum makes no provision for these studies.

Overall, the curriculum does not reflect strongly enough the intention of the cross-curriculum priority of ‘Asia and Australia’s relations with Asia’ – that ‘students develop an understanding of the diversity of the peoples of Asia and their contributions to the region and the world, and an appreciation of the importance of the region for Australia and the world’.

Focus on Globalisation
Right from the start of the national curriculum process, globalisation was identified as one the most significant phenomena that young Australians needed to understand and respond to. The national History curriculum has not responded effectively to that imperative.

The cultural sphere is one of the most significant in which the processes of globalisation are evident. Waves of technological innovation, including the most recent phenomenon of ‘new social media’ have had dramatic effects on the ways in which people live, communicate, work and enjoy leisure. Technological change, among other influences, has affected dramatically the way goods and services are produced, made available and consumed around the globe. And yet, in the Year 10 depth study ‘The globalising world’ – where ‘Popular culture’ is one of three options – the study of globalising culture is restricted largely to ‘music, film and television’.

The limitations of chronological structure
In the national history curriculum, the years Foundation – 3 focus largely on the personal, familial and local. There is scope to study both the present and its historical antecedents.

From Year 4 onwards, the curriculum is structured chronologically. While this provides a logical, easy-to-understand and manageable structure, it also produces limitations. Most importantly, what it precludes are studies that span historical periods covered in different years of schooling. For example, the structure would not support a comparative study of ‘children’s leisure activities’ in Australian towns in the 1880s, the 1930s and the 1990s; or a comparative study of river-based environmental problems and responses in ancient Mesopotamia and the 20th Century Murray-Darling basin.