

FEEDBACK ON THE Proposed Revisions to the Foundation: (F–10) Australian Curriculum by the Australian Association for Religious Education

The Australian Association for Religious Education is a voluntary, not-for-profit, non-denominational, professional association of primary, secondary and tertiary religious educators within the Government, Catholic and Independent school sectors. We seek to serve educators from an array of Christian denominations as well as other faith traditions, including Islamic and Jewish, and all in the field who work respectfully with each other for the benefit of Australian students. We seek to model to society the harmonious attainment of our objects by people with different world views.

INTRODUCTION

The revision of the Australian Curriculum is far more extensive than educators across the country were led to believe. It seems to be more than what teachers perceived would be just “creating efficiencies and decluttering of the curriculum”. This is an opportunity to do more to enhance the Australian Curriculum into something closer to what it could be. We appreciate that it is always “a work in progress” and there have been many very talented and hardworking educators contributing to it. Having said that, there are some glaring issues which we believe limit its capacity to provide the education our children deserve and the future world needs. As an educational professional association, we wish to contribute to this development by providing our feedback and offering our assistance.

We urge decision makers to pause and consider carefully some of the implications of changes proposed. This is an opportunity to make some valuable and positive improvements to what our children will be taught.

By way of countering some vocal pressure groups to remove religion from the Australian landscape and in justifying the input by this professional association, the following two points should be noted:

- (i) Despite the calls for inclusivity (which of course we support) it is somewhat ironic that the largest and most influential contributor to the growth, culture and wellbeing of Australia has been limited within the Australian Curriculum – those of religious faith; especially the Christian faith.

RELIGIOUS AFFILIATIONS, 2016

<https://www.abs.gov.au - Religious Affiliation>

Religious Affiliation		Population ('000)	Population (%)
Christian	Catholic	5 291.8	22.6
	Anglican	3 101.2	13.3
	Other Christian	3 808.6	16.3
	Total	12 201.6	52.1
Other Religions	Islam	604.2	2.6
	Buddhism	563.7	2.4
	Hinduism	440.3	1.9
	Sikhism	125.9	0.5
	Judaism	91.0	0.4
	Other	95.7	0.4
	Total	1 920.8	8.2
No Religion^a		7 040.7	30.1
Australia^b		23 401.9	100

a No religion includes secular and other spiritual beliefs.

b As religion was an optional question, the total for Australia will not equal the sum of the items above it.

- (ii) It is remarkable that despite the affluence experienced within Australia, the church scandals, overt and covert attacks on religion and the competition caused by a plethora of world views, there are still more than 60% of Australians proclaiming a religious affiliation; with 52% of Australians declaring themselves Christian and those counted in the “No Religion” category including those claiming, “other spiritual beliefs”. More than twice as many Australians claim to be religious than claim to be not. (2016 Census data reported by the Australian Bureau of Statistics)

We consider there are several important aspects within the Curriculum that need to be urgently addressed:

1. Australia’s debt to “Western civilisation and to religion; especially Christianity.
While it is included, there is the need to make more explicit the opportunities to deepen the understanding and appreciation of “western civilization” and the contributions of religion, particularly Christianity, which underpin contemporary Australian society. More needs to be done to address this.
2. A broader definition of the human person.
We seek the holistic well-being of our children; particularly obvious by its omission is the spiritual dimension of the human person. We speak of the Australian spirit and the ANZAC spirit but overwhelmingly, Australians recognise they have their own spirituality; this needs to be included. The dimensions of the human person include: physical, cognitive, emotional, social, volitional and spiritual. The Curriculum should address these; especially as this broader understanding of the human person is articulated in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration and its prior iterations.
3. A focus on community and nation-building traits.
There is currently a missed opportunity to emphasise improving the world and life in Australia by seeking:
 - a. Economic justice
 - b. Creativity and sustainability
 - c. The concepts of personhood
 - d. Individual and social justice, service and charity.
 - e. Skills of discernment – the range of skills and attitudes to perceive and judge what is best and right and good.
 - f. Ethics and ethical decision-making – this aspect of why and how we do things requires elevation above other competing factors if we are to become all we could and should be.With these, Australia can become the leading light to the world; to be a nation of noble pursuits.
4. Recognition and support for religion; a major influence.
While a secularly governed nation, most Australians affiliate themselves with a religion. We recognise that the Curriculum makes reference to Christianity making contribution to the creation of our culture and that we are a professed multi-faithed nation. Developing an understanding and appreciation of religion has the potential of being a great unifying force in developing a more harmonious society that brings together many cultures and religions.

The two learning areas on which we provide feedback are:

- (I) Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS)
- (II) Health and Physical Education

(I) HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES (HASS)

We endorse the increase of studies into Aboriginal culture and history to deepen understanding and appreciation but recommend that the Curriculum should be better balanced. The proposed curriculum is now skewed in the opposite direction and will end up being a counter-productive measure. This deeper focus seems to be at a cost of opportunities that deepen understanding and appreciation of broader world history, including, “western civilization” and the “Judeo-Christian” contributions which underpin Australian society.

Listed below are some specific curriculum points.

HASS YEARS (5-6)

In order to celebrate difference and diversity we must recognise them, understand how these exist and how individuals and different cultures and civilizations have contributed to the present. We question the negative impact the removal of / reducing the following eight content descriptions might have:

- i. celebrations
- ii. the roles of individuals
- iii. early migration
- iv. specific geographical diversity
- v. cultural diversity
- vi. demographic diversity
- vii. economic principles
- viii. and the reduction of contributions made by individuals and the experiences of migrants to elaborations

HISTORY YEARS (7–10)

- (1) Likewise, there has been a significant reduction in the study of the ancient Mediterranean world in secondary school.
- (2) While we applaud the introduction of the sub-strand of “deep time history of Australia” which also contextualises many of the content descriptions from the previous ones investigating the ancient past depth study, we strongly believe that it should not effectively replace, or relegate to a lesser degree, the study of the ancient Mediterranean world, from which much of our current Australian culture was born.

To underplay the rich contribution of ancient cultures underpinning the development of “western culture”, to Australia’s culture and history is to diminish the cultural understanding and background of a significant portion of our student population. We should learn from history ourselves and not create a new generation of culturally-displaced students by reducing this current acknowledgment of western and Christian culture to our nation. A balanced curriculum would develop knowledge and understanding of both these primary cultural contributors to our nation’s history, identity and culture.

- (3) Missing within the 7 to 10 History area are major factors that changed the world eg:
 - Conquest, Missionaries and Trade
 - The Reformation and Counter Reformation and its
 - Resulting sectarianism within Australia which significantly influenced our way of life.

CIVICS AND CITIZENSHIP (7–10)

- (1) Within CIVICS AND CITIZENSHIP (7–10), the Curriculum statements include, “recognises that Australia is a secular nation with a culturally diverse, **multi-faith society and a Christian heritage**, and promotes the development of inclusivity by developing students’ understanding of broader values, such as respect, civility, equity, justice and responsibility.”
- Yet there is little by way of direction in the study of this statement. Such a summary statement needs to be explored, elaborated upon and given due space in this (and other) curriculum areas.
 - The concepts of respect, civility, equity, justice and responsibility are derived from our Christian heritage are mentioned, yet this is not drawn out within the content elaborations.

- (2) Within the Year 7 Curriculum, the Inquiry questions suggested include:

- What principles of justice help to protect the individual’s rights to justice in Australia’s system of law?

While this might not be intended by the authors, what is omitted from the syllabus statements or elaborations is the study of the contribution Christianity had and has on informing this understanding of justice.

- (3) Likewise, within the strand, “Citizenship, Diversity and Identity”, the Content description that students learn about, “how values can promote cohesion within Australian society, including democracy, freedom, respect, inclusion, civility, responsibility, compassion, equality, justice and a ‘fair go’ (AC9HC7K06).” Again, these derive from the “Judeo-Christian” tradition. The Content description would be vastly different without this influence and should be made explicit. Students need to, at least, consider the rationale and source on which our values are based.
- (4) Within the same strand, there is an omission of **Christianity** in Elaboration (AC9HC7K06_E4), “identifying the values and beliefs of religions practised in contemporary Australia (for example, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism) (AC9HC7K06_E4).
- It should read, “identifying the values and beliefs of religions practised in contemporary Australia (for example, **Christianity**, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism) (AC9HC7K06_E4).
- (5) Missing within the 7 to 10 Civics and Citizenship area are the influences of some very important people in the development of Australia. For example, students should study the people displayed on our Australian Bank Notes, namely: Queen Elizabeth II, Banjo Paterson, Dame Mary Gilmore, Mary Reibey, Rev John Flynn, David Unaipon, Edith Cowan, Dame Nellie Melba, Sir John Monash
- (6) Judeo-Christian influence extends beyond Law & Legal Systems. The world would be vastly different without it. The influence of Christianity on Literature, Music, Art, Science, uprising of Democracy, Invention and Innovation are beyond measure. The face of society would be unrecognisable without Christianity’s influence on Social Change. For example: the end to slavery, the civil rights movement, trade union movement, charity & service, the establishment of universities from the 12th century onwards and the evolution of the scientific method. Understanding of such movements must include the motivators of those who engaged in such activity; it is disrespectful and reductionist to omit the role of the Christian faith in many facets of our current life and history.
- (7) There seems to be a lack of balance in considering early Australian European occupation. Of course, it is important to consider different experiences and perspectives and the Aboriginal Peoples’ histories have been woefully ignored; for example, the concepts of colonisation and invasion. It is important, however, that we strive for balance and do not swing too far the other way. For instance, the curriculum should also include the settlers’ perspective, the positive attempts by individuals and groups to protect and enhance the life and place of the Aboriginal peoples and efforts to transform the land.

PHYSICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL GEOGRAPHY (7 - 10)

Within the Year 10 Strand: Physical and environmental Geography in the:

(1) Content description - Students learn about:

“the factors influencing the cultural values and worldviews of people, particularly First Nations Australians, and their implications for the management of processes of change on environments, including to meet cultural custodial responsibilities (AC9HG10K02)”, there is a glaring omission of “**faith-centred**” and “**God-centred stewardship**” in the elaboration (AC9HG10K02_E1).

The **Elaboration** states that this may involve students:

- identifying the influence of people’s environmental worldviews (for example, human-centred and earth-centred) regarding environmental management (AC9HG10K02_E1)

For the sake of inclusivity, it should include “faith-centred” and “God-centred stewardship” as they are legitimate and mainstream world-views. The elaboration should read:

- identifying the influence of people’s environmental worldviews (for example: **faith-centred, God-centred stewardship**, human-centred and earth-centred) regarding environmental management (AC9HG10K02_E1)

(2) Content description - Students learn about:

“the interconnectedness of contemporary environmental, economic, political, social, and technological factors, particularly for First Nations Australians, and how this affects wellbeing and development (AC9HG10K06)”, there is a glaring omission in the elaboration (AC9HG10K06_E1).

The **Elaboration** states this may involve students:

- “explaining the environmental factors (for example, access to resources – fossil fuels, water, fertile soils), the social factors (for example, adequate food, health and education services), the economic factors (for example, employment, income) and the technological factors (for example, information and communications technology) that influence human wellbeing and development between and within countries (AC9HG10K06_E1)”

The concepts of emotional and spiritual well-being and the role of religious factors are omitted. Human beings are more than flesh and blood; the Australian Curriculum should reflect this understanding. The interconnectedness of humans to their natural and built environments universal; not bounded or limited to certain cultures or beliefs.

ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS (7 TO 10)

Missing within the 7 to 10 Economics and Business area are the noble pursuits of:

- Business ethics
- Issues of social justice
- Seeking a fair access to and distribution of the worlds’ resources.

If we seek to create a nation that holds the ideals of justice and fairness, these aspects need to be addressed within the curriculum.

(II) HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Within the Strand: **Personal, social and community health**, and the Strand: **Movement and physical activity**, we see several issues, that are evident across the year groups; some of which reflect a Post-modernist philosophy.

- (i) The concepts of personal qualities, strengths and achievements are being replaced with concepts of developing (individual) identities and group identity.
- (ii) The removal of any exploration of sexual anatomy and how students are growing and developing physically and socially.
- (iii) The removal of any reference to ethical behaviour, playing fair, co-operating with others, leadership and adherence to rules and applying them fairly.
- (iv) The removal of applying personal and social skills to establish and maintain respectful relationships and promote safety, fair-play and inclusivity.
- (v) The removal of reference to cultural and family influences.
- (vi) The removal of recognising and celebrating similarities and differences in individuals and groups.
- (vii) The removal of “(critiquing) behaviours and contextual factors that influence health and wellbeing of diverse communities” (ACPPS098) and replacing this with “proposing strategies and actions individuals and groups can implement to challenge biases, stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination” (AC9HP10P04).
- (viii) The removal of:
 - a. examining and interpreting health messages,
 - b. making informed decisions,
 - c. applying criteria to make judgements and the
 - d. critical analysis of:
 - i. contextual factors that influence identities, relationships, decisions and behaviours
 - ii. the impact attitudes and beliefs about diversity have on community, connection and wellbeing.
- (ix) The addition of teaching students to propose strategies to challenge disrespectful attitudes requires context; some of which has been removed as outlined above.

While also containing wonderful learning opportunities, the revision of the Health and Physical Education Curriculum contains some significant changes with potentially undesirable outcomes.

The notion of fairness and fair play is a core Australian value; it should not be removed from the Curriculum as proposed. Likewise, the value placed on, and recognition of, the relationships with one’s culture, family and significant role-models is important. While it is important to celebrate and strengthen students’ self-understanding, this needs to be balanced with the recognition and exploration of the critical role other individuals, groups, practices and values contribute to our sense of self, and to the healthy functioning of society.

The capacity to discern the truth of what is being presented (such as examining and interpreting, critical analysis, making judgements) is another factor that appears to be provided limited opportunity to develop; for example, a recognition and appreciation of the developing human body and complementary sexes is fundamental to understanding human personhood and healthy relationships.

GENERAL REMARKS

It has been our observation that to date, that many teachers have not embraced this Review for a number of reasons: the uncertain and ever-changing educational landscape due to Covid-19, a common understanding that there was little to be gained in being involved because no major changes would be undertaken in this review and that for the past few weeks, like ACARA, teachers have been busy; consumed with exam writing, marking and reporting. We have had to wait for the school holidays to engage in the task of producing this feedback. We wish to note that for many teachers, the end of the process seems rushed.

While the authors' intentions (as outlined in Mr David de Carvalho's Keynote address to the Christian Schools National Policy Forum, 24 May 2021) might be one thing, the Curriculum document itself must be clear and self-evident in what it purports. Our feedback indicates that in some areas this is not the case.

It is reassuring to read ACARA recognises that:

- highlighting the experience of Indigenous people should not come at the expense of highlighting the importance of our Western liberal traditions.
- within the Australian Curriculum there is the recognition that Australia is “a secular nation with a culturally diverse, multi-faith society and a Christian heritage” and that the Content elaborations in the proposed curriculum include:
 - “appreciating the cultural and historical foundations of Australia's Christian heritage”
 - “their impact on Australian political and legal systems” and
 - “identifying Christian traditions and values that have influenced the development of Australian society, democracy and law, including the positive and negative impacts upon First Nations Australian communities and other groups within Australian society.”
- Australia is one of the world's most successful, prosperous and peaceful democracies, and for that our nation owes much to its Christian heritage, with its respect for the inherent dignity of each individual, and that this respect for human dignity has in turn shaped Western civilization's traditions of freedom of speech, assembly and religion that are so necessary, but not sufficient, for a just society. (NB: We wonder what you consider is missing for a just society.)
- any suggestion that the draft revisions to the Australian Curriculum have air-brushed away reference to our Christian heritage is false.
- the Curriculum helps to set up our young people not only for their future but for our country's future as a democratic, equitable and just society that is prosperous, cohesive and culturally and religiously diverse.

Respectfully, the proof will be in whether or not these admirable ends are actually delivered by the Curriculum.

We wish to take the opportunity to make another comment. While not being privy to other critiques received, nor in a position to defend them, it is useful to understand that those articulating religious, particularly Christian views today, are experiencing significant marginalising pressures by smaller but more vocal pressure groups. We purport that within the realm of education, respectful discussion, due consideration and critical analysis of different viewpoints is essential. We note that many individuals who articulate traditional religious views, or challenge what they consider as misinformation, are increasingly experiencing ridicule, dismissal, abuse and vilification. This should not be permitted in Australian society and certainly not within the realm of education.

We contend that with education, there should be a healthy tension as we seek to address both the intentions of social and cultural continuity and social and cultural change. The Curriculum should:

- provide opportunities to learn about the mechanisms of both
- develop the skills of discernment to know, at any time, which should be the driving the force; if not both.

We note with great concern that several changes proposed within the Curriculum support damaging elements of a post-modernist philosophy; namely the promotion of identity and group alliance at the expense of personal responsibility and accountability, the diminution of traditional truths about human nature, and the removal of scrutiny and critical analysis skill development in some areas. We do not believe this to be in the best interests of our students nor the society we seek to build.

While it might be outside the scope of this review, we raise a significant matter that needs to be considered. That is the choice of resources with which teachers are provided to deliver the curriculum. We must be vigilant to ensure that resources that are promoted to schools, do what they say they do, are evidence-based, open to scrutiny, free from indoctrination or any hidden political or social engineering agenda.

CONCLUSION:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the proposed changes to the Australian Curriculum. This is a right and responsibility afforded to us that should not be taken for granted. Thank you also to the many who have contributed to this document.

We look forward to seeing a positive response to our contribution and continue to support your efforts to create a Curriculum that meets the needs of our students. We would be delighted to speak to our feedback should the opportunity be presented.

Yours sincerely

On behalf of the Australian Association for Religious Education



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