Trends in National Curriculum and the Implications for Member Schools

Discussion Paper

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1.0 OVERVIEW

The debate about national curriculum is receiving increasing public and policy attention. The topic is often linked to the debate about academic standards and the need to enhance standards across schools in Australia. In more recent times both major political parties have indicated support for the development of a national curriculum and appear to have acknowledged that the Commonwealth has a legitimate role in school education.

This paper has been prepared to facilitate discussion within the Independent school sector in South Australia and assist member schools and the AISSA to develop a position in relation to a national curriculum. Whilst there has been a focus on the post compulsory years of schooling, in reality the impact will have implications for all years of schooling and children’s services.

The paper:

- outlines some of the historical background and approaches to the development of national curriculum
- identifies recent national curriculum trends
- analyses the political and pedagogical issues linked to the call for a national curriculum
- outlines the current rationale for national curriculum in Australia
- discusses the proposals for national curriculum, particularly in the senior secondary years
- identifies the possible implications of national curriculum for Independent schools.

The paper focuses on the debate in Australia and makes no reference to international trends.

One of the key points for clarification in the debate is what constitutes a ‘national curriculum’ and what theory will underpin this curriculum? Is the debate for example about national consistency in curriculum content or consistency in outcomes? Does national curriculum imply national standards or standardization? How will it be developed, assessed, reported and accredited?

It should be noted that a national perspective on curriculum does not necessarily mean there is a national curriculum.

Historically and constitutionally school education in Australia has been primarily the responsibility of the States. This means that the curriculum of schools is essentially State based, or in the case of SA Independent schools, school based, within the parameters determined by the Non-Government Schools Registration Board.

In recent years a national perspective on many curriculum policy matters has been focused through the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) which consists of all relevant State/Territory and Australian Government ministers.

This national perspective is also supported by the work of the Curriculum Corporation, an independent education support organization owned by all Australian education ministers. It is a major provider and publisher of print and digital curriculum products, educational project management services, assessment and testing services to education systems. The projects are undertaken in collaboration with education authorities within agreed national directions.
2.0 BACKGROUND

2.1 Historical Perspective

Over the past twenty five years there have been various attempts at national curriculum collaboration in Australia which have had an impact on current debates and policy initiatives. To a large extent these developments have been restricted by the strong stand by States/Territories to protect their constitutional powers in relation to school education.

The recent drive for a national curriculum in Australia is not new. Evidence of a move toward national consistency can be seen in national policies and initiatives such as the Hobart Declaration of Schooling (1989) which encompassed the Common and Agreed National Goals for Schooling and subsequently the Adelaide Declaration on the National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty First Century (1999), the National Statements and Profiles, the development of the Key Competencies and a range of significant projects in the VET sector.

States/Territories have agreed to cooperate in the development of national curriculum projects; however they have never endorsed a uniform implementation of the outcomes across the nation.

In part this position was both a reflection of the constitutional powers of the State governments in relation to school education and the associated suspicion of a centralist-Canberra driven approach to school education. Each State/Territory also has a well established centralized infrastructure to support the development and accreditation of curriculum.

2.2 National Statements and Profiles

Probably the most ambitious attempt at national curriculum occurred during the early 1990’s with the organization of the curriculum into eight broad areas of learning and the development of the National Statements and Profiles. By 1993 the National Statements and Profiles were complete. However, they were not endorsed by the Australian Education Council (earlier version of MCEETYA). In South Australia the National Statements and Profiles have been used extensively by schools across the three sectors. The Non-Government Schools Registration Board refers to the above Statements in determining its requirements for school curriculum for non-government schools. The SA government sector’s current curriculum The South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework (SACSA) was informed by the National Statement and Profiles.

2.3 National Goals of Schooling

The National Goals of Schooling is arguably the most significant national curriculum policy that still guides curriculum development and delivery in all Australian States and Territories. It is an agreement between the State, Territory and Commonwealth Ministers of Education about the goals of schooling in the compulsory years. The initial document (Hobart Declaration) provided for the first time a framework for cooperation between schools, States, Territories and the Commonwealth to address areas of common interest in curriculum.

Both statements (Adelaide and Hobart declarations) about the goals of schooling have generated broad educational goals which cover all years of compulsory schooling. In this
sense they operate at a ‘policy guidelines level’ rather than an actual national curriculum prescribing content assessment and reporting.

2.4 Other National Initiatives

There are also examples of smaller scale targeted national curriculum development projects and collaboration. These developments include the National Languages Program, and VET in Schools curriculum initiatives.

The Vocational Education and Training sector has also undertaken significant national training projects which have emerged from initiatives driven by influential industry bodies representing both employer and employee organizations.

In January 1995 the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) was introduced. This Framework initially comprised 12 national qualification levels in the secondary, VET and higher education sectors.

Other major Federal programs such as the National Equity Program for Schools and more recently the Australian Government Targeted Programmes have also influenced curriculum across schools.

This national perspectives on curriculum since the 1990’s is probably a reflection of greater acceptance by the community, industry and State Governments to some of the advantages of a national approach to education and training.

3.0 RECENT APPROACHES: TOWARD A NATIONAL CURRICULUM

A range of more recent policy initiatives and legislation can be seen as moving Australian schools towards national curriculum approach. These initiatives include: the development of the Statements of Learning; the introduction of the Schools Assistance (Learning Together – Achievement through Choice and Opportunity) Act 2004 and a range of projects and policy decisions with implications for early childhood, and primary and secondary education.

3.1 Statements of Learning

Further debate about national curriculum consistency occurred at the July 2003 meeting of MCEETYA where Ministers requested that Statements of Learning be developed in English, mathematics, science and civics and citizenship as a means of achieving greater national consistency in curriculum outcomes across the eight States and Territories. This direction was particularly driven by the increased mobility of families across State/Territory boundaries. It was agreed that Statements of Learning would describe the 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. This project was managed by the Curriculum Corporation.

The above project followed a request from State/Territory Education Ministers via MCEETYA that a project be undertaken to determine strategies that would lead to more consistent curriculum outcomes across Australia.

The first stage of the above project involved a mapping of the use of the National Statement and Profiles across the school sectors. This exercise indicated considerable divergence in the
inclusion of the eight key learning areas across the curriculum frameworks that have been
developed by States/Territories. This was further complicated by the emergence of a new set
of terminology and curriculum across the States/Territories. The report tended to focus on
differences and gave little consideration to the common elements across the different
frameworks.

Discussion at the Steering Committee meetings for the above project illustrated the tensions
and varying views about ‘national curriculum’. There was considerable diversity of opinion as
to what constituted ‘nationally consistent curriculum outcomes’ with some representatives on
the above Committee supporting further development of national standards and learning
outcomes across the eight key learning areas and a smaller number wanting to identify more
detailed outlined of the knowledge that students should have at phases or Year levels.

How the Statements of Learning were to be employed was again left to the individual
States/Territories. It was proposed that, once completed, the Statements of Learning should
be used by State and Territory departments or curriculum authorities to guide the future
development of relevant curriculum documents.

Significantly no reference was made at the time to consistency in assessment and reporting
from a national perspective.

At the May 2005 meeting of MCEETYA, Ministers re-confirmed the original purpose of
Statements of Learning and agreed to proceed with the development of the additional areas
as outlined above, and to add Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) as a
further area in light of the Australian Government’s quadrennium funding legislation, Schools

As a consequence of the conditions outlined in this new legislation, MCEETYA also requested
Australian Education Systems Officials Committee (AESOC) to provide advice on the
relationship between the Statements of Learning and national standards and testing. While
requesting this additional work MCEETYA did, however, endorse a position that testing would
not be developed to match each of the junctures of the new Statements of Learning, and
confirmed that the existing testing program would satisfy the relevant conditions of the new
legislation.

Ministers approved the Statements of Learning for mathematics, science, civics and
citizenship and ICT in August 2006.

3.2 School Assistance Act 2004

The Schools Assistance (Learning Together – Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity)
Act 2004 has signalled a stronger national intervention in school education. This legislation
and associated regulations requires schools and school authorities to make a commitment to
participating in a wide range of nationally driven initiatives including the National Goals for
Schooling, development and implementation of the national Statements of Learning,
participation in the national literacy and numeracy benchmarks, science, ICT and civics and
citizenship testing program, implementation of a prescribed student reporting arrangements
(A-E or equivalents), publication of school performance information, at least two hours of
physical activity in each school week and implementation of the National Safe Schools
Framework. Implementing these requirements was a condition of receiving Commonwealth
funds.
All of these requirements have either direct or indirect impact on school curriculum. In addition they also signal a greater commitment from the Commonwealth to link accountability requirements to the receipt of Commonwealth funding.

### 3.3 Senior Secondary Education Proposals

#### 3.3.1 Australian Certificate of Education proposal

In June 2005 the Australian Government Commissioned the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER) to investigate and report on models for an Australian Certificate of Education. The report Australian Certificate of Education: exploring a way forward (released in 2006) examined current practice in senior secondary education across Australia, developed an argument to support the introduction of a national senior secondary certificate, and proposed a particular model, the Australian Certificate of Education.

This proposal is among the most comprehensive approaches to national curriculum and hence is outlined in detail.

The ACER Report indicated that there are significant inconsistencies in senior secondary approaches across Australia in such areas as terminology relating to curricula, assessment and reporting; requirements for the award of the senior certificate; what is taught in particular subjects; how vocational learning is incorporated; how student achievement is assessed; and how student results are reported. Some of the differences the authors argued are difficult to explain or justify and are considered to be not in the best interest of students. Significant duplication of effort across bodies responsible for senior curricula and assessment was also identified. The conclusion is that the most desirable long-term outcome would be the establishment of a single Australian Certificate of Education awarded by each of the Australian States and Territories in place of the existing nine certificates. According to the ACER Report such a strategy would take some time to implement and may have to be implemented in stages.

The report placed considerable importance on school curricula being of the highest calibre internationally. There was a strong emphasis on benchmarking student levels of achievement across States and Territories in Australia and internationally.

The model proposed for an Australian Certificate of Education (ACE) includes nationally consistent high standards, a national standards body to set minimum requirements for the award and to identify curriculum essentials, achievement standards, a national test, employability standards (key capabilities) and an ACE Award of Excellence.

The national standards body would set minimum requirements for the award of the ACE and identify curriculum essentials (core of curriculum content – fundamental knowledge, principles and skills) for key subject areas. It was recommended the development process include some international benchmarking to ensure that curriculum content is consistent with international best practice in the senior years of schooling.

National subject panels would be responsible for the development of the curriculum essentials and accompanying achievement standards. Achievement standards would provide nationally consistent framework of levels of achievement. Five levels were recommended (A-
E) to provide a common method of reporting achievement in a subject across all States and Territories.

A national test in a small number of general/employability skills such as reading literacy/verbal reasoning, mathematical literacy/quantitative reasoning, written English and ICT literacy would be developed. These skills are referred to as the Key Capabilities. This assessment could be used by universities and employers in selection decisions.

It was proposed that excellence be recognized within the ACE through the introduction of an ACE Award of Excellence.

At the July 2006 MCEETYA meeting the Ministers of Education rejected the above recommendations. In South Australia, the release of the ACE proposal in May 2006 coincided with intense consultations relating to the review the SACE (perhaps serving to highlight one of the criticisms of our current arrangements, duplication of effort).

3.3.2 Year 12 Curriculum and Achievement Standards project

In the latter half of 2006 two further national curriculum projects, the Year 12 Curriculum and Achievement Standards Project and the Australian Education Systems Officials Committee (AESOC) Working Party on Senior Secondary Education emanated from the Australian Certificate of Education report (outlined above). The outcomes of these complementary projects have been drawn into the most recent debate about the need for a national curriculum and the associated debate about curriculum, assessment and standards.

The Year 12 Curriculum and Achievement Standards Project was commissioned by the Australian Government and carried out by the Australian Council of Education Research. It investigated what is being taught in senior school English, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and Australian History and considered the standards of achievement expected of students in each State/Territory. The project also sought opinions on what should be taught in the above subjects. Essentially this project is focusing on the identification of common curriculum content – curriculum essentials.

The project demonstrated that the degree of curriculum consistency varies from subject to subject across Australia. For instance in subjects called Physics and Chemistry there was an 85 to 95 per cent commonality in content and intended skills/understandings.

The review of Mathematics also revealed a high degree (90%) of consistency across the eight jurisdictions. By contrast in History it was not possible to identify specific topics that all students were required to study. There was a moderate degree of commonality in the topics that teachers can choose as contexts for an in-depth study of issues. There appeared to be considerable inconsistency across TER English courses although there was some commonality in text types and the skills and understandings that senior English courses were intended to develop.

In Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics there was a high degree of consistency across States and Territories on what topics were ‘essential’. There was also a high degree of commonality in the English skills/understandings that were essential and seven text types were also considered essential across the States/Territories.
Across Australia in all five subjects there is a degree of consistency in what is looked for when assessing students' achievements. In any given subject, States and Territories tend to pay attention to the same kinds of achievements and features of student work.

The study was not able to compare standards of achievement expected of students in the different States and Territories. The report states “... while the study established significant consistency in what is assessed... differences in terminology and the lack of access to students examination responses and work made it impossible to compare the standards required to achieve the highest available grade in each State and Territory”.

The report concluded that it would be desirable to:

- Identify for each of some nominated senior school subjects a curriculum ‘core’ that clearly specifies what all students in Australia taking that subject are expected to learn, regardless of where they live in Australia; and
- Develop a set of achievement standards as a nationally consistent description of how well students are expected to learn the core in each subject.

It recommended that curriculum documents should identify core content and standards in clear and precise language and terminology for describing subject matter of the core curriculum and codifying results on certificates should be consistent across Australia.

### 3.3.3 AESOC Working Party on Senior Secondary Reporting

Another secondary level national curriculum project has been initiated by MCEETYA and focuses on the identification of curriculum standards. In July 2006 MCEETYA agreed to Victoria chairing a working party of the Australian Education Systems Officials Committee (AESOC) to examine the feasibility of a common five point scale for reporting all senior secondary subject results, and a quality assurance mechanism to ensure consistency of results of senior secondary certificates across Australia. The Working Party is investigating, and will report on the methods used by States and Territories to report results of senior secondary subjects. It intends to develop options for jurisdictions to agree on a common scale. The AESOC Working Party on Senior Secondary Reporting carried out its work from February 2007 – April 2007 and included the trial of a common scale for senior secondary reporting, development of common nomenclature, and investigation of additional quality assurance mechanisms.

In terms of this project it is important to note that AESOC consists of the Chief Executive Officers (CEO’s) for education and training from Government school jurisdictions; there is no non-government representation on AESOC. The absence of representation on this and some other national bodies is a serious deficiency in the current consultation and development process. The AISSA has made several representations to the State Education Minister and The Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA) has also made representations to the Federal government.

### 3.4 Primary Years of Schooling

The more recent debates about the need for a national curriculum have been inclusive of primary years of schooling, although the emphasis still appears to be on the upper secondary years of schooling and higher education entrance.
National testing in the key areas of literacy and numeracy have focussed on the primary years of schooling and the Statements of Learning also cover Years 3, 5, 7 and 9.

The Minister for Education, Science and Training, the Hon Julie Bishop MP has recently announced Australian Government support to create a new charter to redefine the role of primary schools in the community. The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) will receive $60,000 for a national forum to develop a draft charter. The new charter is important as it will provide a framework to ensure primary school students receive a high quality education. APPA has argued that primary schools have been asked to provide a huge range of services that go far beyond what was traditionally the role of schools, and this has the potential to have a negative impact on their ability to teach students and allow them to develop the fundamental skills in areas such as reading, writing and mathematics.

3.5 National Perspective on Early Childhood Education

Early childhood education is a rapidly expanding part of the education sector; however until recently it has generated limited debate in relation to education policy. Therefore whilst there has been a strong commitment to early childhood development and education from the major political parties there has been little effort to create a national perspective to the education programs associated with this area. A recent report prepared by the Australian Council for Educational Research (Early Childhood Education – Pathways to quality and equity for all children, 2006) describes the provision of education and care services for early childhood as a “... confusing mix of types of provision, regulatory regimes and policy contexts....” The report emphasizes the positive impact of high quality childcare and preschool education can make to children’s language and cognitive development. Currently there is little consistency and continuity between learning programs from one centre to another. The authors recommend the development of a national agenda for early childhood and the implementation of a universally available quality early childhood provision that accommodates both care and education needs.

There have been some recent attempts to establish a national perspective to early childhood education. In May 2005 MCEETYA has established an Early Childhood Reference Group to examine opportunities that will enhance the development of a coordinated national approach to improving the learning, development, health and wellbeing of children from birth to eight. The terms of reference refer to a National Agenda for Early Childhood. This was developed in 2003 and stressed the importance of addressing the needs of young children across government portfolios (community services, education and health) and building partnerships with families, communities and business. However the document gives little guidance beyond the level of a set of goals and principles about the type of education programs that should be associated with early childhood education and the importance of early learning and care from birth in order to lay the foundation for a smooth transition to school and better life chances. The national framework document also refers to access to an early learning program for all children, particularly disadvantaged children for a minimum of one year prior to school entry.

The Federal ALP announced in March 2007 that it would establish a universal right to access early play based learning and development programs delivered by degree-qualified teachers. (New Directions for Early Childhood Education: Universal Access to Early Learning for Four Year Olds). This would be achieved through a Commonwealth Early Childhood Education Act.
The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed in April 2007 to develop by 2008 an intergovernmental agreement on a national approach to quality assurance and regulations for early childhood education and care. This is designed to remove duplication between State and Commonwealth regulations.

At this stage there is no more detailed development associated with curriculum in this area.

### 3.6 Other National Projects With Curriculum Implications

There are a vast array of other national policy initiatives that also have a curriculum component such as values education, mental health (Mind Matters), drug education, primary science education, boys education, Australian Government Quality Teacher Program, VET in Schools (including the New Apprenticeship scheme) and the Teaching Le@rning Federation on-line curriculum resources.

In addition the Commonwealth is entering into related areas that impact on standards of school education through debates on teacher professional standards and performance pay for teachers.

Interest groups have indicated that schools are under increasing pressure to meet a wider range of expectations from governments, further education and training, the community and industry. This raises the question: Will a national curriculum provide a more integrated and more coherent approach to the development and delivery of curriculum in schools across Australia?

### 4.0 RECENT DEBATE

#### 4.1 Federal

In late 2006 and 2007 the debate about national curriculum became further entwined in national politics as the Federal Coalition Government and Australian Labour Party attempted to seek the support of the community for a national curriculum.

In October 2006 the Commonwealth Education Minister, Julie Bishop, called for a ‘national curriculum’ at the Conference of the History Teachers Association of Australian in Fremantle and proposed that a ‘National Board of Studies’ comprised of educators from the “…sensible centre…” should take over curriculum development from the States and Territories. The above arguments can be summarized in the following quote from the current Federal Minister:

The community is demanding an end to fads and wants a return to a commonsense curriculum, with agreed core subjects, like Australian History and a renewed focus on literacy and numeracy. The curriculum must be challenging, aiming for high standards and not accepting the lowest common denominator… We need to take school curriculum out of the hands of ideologues in the State and Territory education bureaucracies and give it to say a national board of studies, comprising the sensible centre of educators – with representatives of our States and Territories, bringing to the table the very best examples of all the States have to offer.

The Federal Minister has indicated compliance to a national curriculum will be a condition of receiving funding from the Federal Government.
In February 2007 the ALP also announced its support for a national curriculum (New Directions for Our schools – Establishing a National Curriculum to improve our children’s educational outcomes) in a number of core areas (maths, English, sciences and history) from Kindergarten to Year 12. The policy statement also proposed a National Curriculum Board consisting of educational experts. The national curriculum would be developed in consultation with States and Territories with flexibility for local, regional and State variations.

Both major political parties have emphasized the need for rigor, national consistency and high standards to support a national integrated economy and mobile workforce. Both appear to be supporting a more traditional subject/discipline based approach to curriculum design and assessment and overall improvements in the quality of teaching.

The debate has become a significant policy issue for the Coalition Government and Federal ALP in the lead up to the Federal election to be held later in 2007. Paul Kelly the Editor at Large at The Australian has stated (3-4 March 2007) that the release by Kevin Rudd and Stephen Smith of the above policy document has a wider political objective to capture and influence significant policy issues and to link education to the economic growth of the nation.

Both major parties have also proposed a national infrastructure to develop national curriculum. As such the question of national curriculum is now as much a political question as an educational question as the major political parties jostle for votes at the next Federal election and various interest groups enter the debate with different views about what underpins a national curriculum.

At the April 2007 meeting of MCEETYA Ministers agreed to work together to share curriculum materials and to work with the Catholic and Independent sectors to develop nationally consistent curriculum starting with English, mathematics and science. This will include the setting of core standards for national testing to measure student progress and the identification of a consistent scale for reporting student results. They also agreed to explore the establishment of a national collaborative body to implement the above.

The 2007/08 Federal budget contained the following allocations for the development of a national perspective on school curriculum and related areas:

**Year 12 aptitude tests**
$14.5 million over three years for a new pilot programme to trial the use of aptitude tests by universities as an alternative or supplementary method for assessing Year 12 students seeking tertiary entrance each year;

**National teacher training and registration standards**
$5 million over two years to work with stakeholders to develop national teacher training and registration standards;

**National curriculum**
$13 million over two years to work with States and Territories to develop core curricula standards in English, Maths, Physics, Chemistry, Biology and Australian History for Years 11 and 12; and English, Maths, Science and Australian History for Year 10, to assist in raising standards in schools. Adopting the resulting standards will be a condition of Australian Government funding from 2009 onwards.
Additional accountability requirements were also announced for the 2009-2012 funding period. They included the requirement to meet the core national standards from 1 January 2009; however school authorities will be able to develop their own syllabus and materials.

These accountability requirements strengthen the link between compliance and receipt of Federal funding and the more likely emergence of national curriculum.

This national perspective to curriculum now impacts on education policy, curriculum content, assessment, accreditation, certification, and most recently delivery. The establishment of the Australian Technical Colleges is the most recent intrusion of the Federal level of government into the delivery of post-compulsory education and training.

4.2 State and Territory

The Council for the Australian Federation (meeting of all State/Territory premiers and chief ministers, separate from COAG) has committed to working together to share curriculum material and the development of a national curriculum that has the following characteristics:

- A set core content and achievement standards that are expected of students at the end of schooling and at key junctures during their schooling, starting with English, mathematics and science
- Provide flexibility for jurisdictions, systems and schools to implement a curriculum for students to achieve these standards
- Establish standards as the basis for the national testing and measurement program already agreed by governments to measure student progress
- Broaden options for students considering different futures, preparing students for further study in all areas of future employment across the trades and technical and professional fields and in new and emerging areas of knowledge
- Ensure that student achievement is reported on the same scale and in a similar way nationally.

The above Council has also announced the division of Society and the Environment into the core subjects of history, geography and economics. (See The Future of Schooling in Australia, April 2007).

4.3 Other Interest Groups

In addition the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Skills for a Nation – A Blueprint for Improving Education and Training 2007-2017) has also indicated its support for nationally consistent standards that are comparable to international standards and the development of an Australian National Curriculum and an Australian Certificate of Education.
5.0 THE RATIONALE FOR NATIONAL CURRICULUM

In relation to school education the tyranny of distance mentality and States right has limited the extent of agreement to implement major national curriculum initiatives. While States/Territories agreed to cooperate in the development of national curriculum initiatives the extent of implementation remained the prerogative of each State/Territory government.

More recent national initiatives related to curriculum have been part of a wider national policy perspective on education and training in Australia. The Federal Government has presented itself as the change agent and has also invested heavily in school funding ($33 billion, 2006/07). As a consequence, the MCEETYA agenda is now dominated by a national perspective on many aspects on school curriculum. Other key peak political and policy bodies have also entered the debate.

Public accountability, improving standards in Australian education, greater national consistency in learning outcomes, comparability of student and school results, improved education standards, enhanced international competitiveness and improved workforce productivity, and the need to operate in a global economy are the key arguments presented in support of a national curriculum.

Greater accountability for the use of Commonwealth government funds provided to State and Territory education systems and schools, and public accountability to students, parents and the Australian community for education standards is also central to the current Commonwealth Government’s drive to increase their control over curriculum.

Some advocates supporting a national curriculum argue it should focus on the traditional subject disciplines and be prescriptive about what should constitute the curriculum.

It is claimed that national curriculum in Australia will raise the international standing of Australian education in the global economy and increase the international competitiveness of Australian education in the overseas student market.

Critics of the latest version of a national curriculum continue to be cautious about a national-centralist approach to the development, certification and assessment of curriculum and the possible loss of flexibility in the curriculum to meet State/Territory and regional needs. Teacher unions have also indicated their opposition to the latest proposals because of the possible loss of teacher involvement in the curriculum development process. This is also embedded in the possible loss of teacher and union involvement in the decision making structures, (e.g. a national curriculum council). Political differences between Federal and State governments also complicate the debate.

Critics also question whether a highly centralized national curriculum approach will lead to increased efficiency in the use of resources and less duplication of effort.

In a further twist to the debate some commentators who support a national curriculum are opposed to the development of curriculum through the existing structures (such as the Curriculum Corporation and Australian Council for Educational Research) because they suggest it will simply perpetuate what are perceived as significant mistakes made by State/Territory school authorities – leading to a second rate government mandated curriculum (See The Australian 7 April 2007 Labor using old maps to chart new territory, Dr
Kevin Donnelly). The commentators support concise syllabi in key academic disciplines, internationally benchmarked across all Year levels.

Interestingly the discussion on national curriculum rarely recognizes that the retention of young people in schools has trebled since the late '60s. The increased retention rate has meant that States/Territories have had to make substantial changes to the senior secondary curriculum to provide for the broad range of aspirations and pathways of students. This is in contrast to the curriculum offerings of the late 60s and early 70s when only a small proportion of students remained to complete their senior secondary schooling. Moreover, most of these students were focused on a single pathway, i.e. higher education and thus were engaged in narrower and more traditional academic disciplines. The increase in the school leaving age in most States/Territories continues to impact on the need for provision of a diverse curriculum at senior secondary.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS OF A NATIONAL CURRICULUM FOR INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

The autonomy of Independent schools in developing and implementing their curriculum is a fundamental distinguishing characteristic of this school sector. This relative autonomy is increasingly compromised by the regulatory environment in which schools now operate. The enhanced role of the Australian Government in curriculum policy and associated curriculum initiatives has impacted on most Year levels within each school.

The Independent school sector performs extremely well against any of the recognized publicly available data including the national literacy and numeracy benchmark assessments, Year 12 results and Tertiary Education Rank scores, results in international tests such PISA and TIMMS, high retention rates, destinations into further education and training.

What then would be the gains for Independent schools through the development of national curriculum? This will very much depend on what will constitute national curriculum? Further questions for consideration are:

- What curriculum theory will underpin the national curriculum?
- How will the curriculum be structured – by overarching capabilities and/or along more traditional subject disciplines?
- How different will the new versions (2006/07) of national curriculum differ from the National Statements and Profiles or Statements of Learning?
- Will national curriculum generate greater consistency in curriculum content, assessment and reporting and facilitate student mobility across Australia?
- Will the community have greater confidence in the TER as an entry requirement for Universities across Australia?
- Will a national curriculum, particularly at a senior secondary level cater for the variety of pathways that students now access (e.g. VET)
- Will the national curriculum specify consistent approaches to assessment reporting of student results?
- Will the national curriculum give greater clarity to the rigor required to achieve high academic standards?
Will it lead to enhanced international recognition of Australia’s post-compulsory school education?

How will it encompass some of the social and health policy initiatives now seen to be the responsibility of schools as educational institutions?

How will the national curriculum align with the Non-Government Schools Registration Board requirements?

Can centralized curriculum development provide all States and Territories with an equitable voice, and with flexible arrangements that will include the range of students across Australia?

What are the consequences for schools accredited to offer programs such as the International Baccalaureate and schools underpinned by particular internationally recognised educational philosophies such as Montessori and Waldorf Steiner?

How will the push for standards not lead to a highly standardized curriculum?

The proposal to establish a National Curriculum Board/Council goes beyond the earlier attempts to develop national curriculum. Claims of improved quality of curriculum through sharing of expertise would need to be substantiated. A highly centralized curriculum development infrastructure does not necessarily guarantee higher quality or flexibility.

The risks or weakness associated with the introduction of national curriculum and associated centralized infrastructure include erosion of State based curriculum autonomy; the possibility of increasingly complex curriculum arrangements; additional centralized compliance requirements; unnecessary additional demands on students, teachers and schools; centralization of curriculum development at the expense of local flexibility; loss of ability to contextualize learning; implications for a national R – 10 curriculum and further politicization of the curriculum agenda.

The possible loss of significant teacher input across Australia into a national curriculum and hence a possible widening of the gap between curriculum design and delivery should be considered.

There is also the potential for larger States to exert control over national curriculum arrangements due to greater access to resources and possibly a stronger voice. There is no guarantee that the critics of State based curriculum will be satisfied with national curriculum if it continues to be developed and documented along similar lines.

The development and implementation of the International Baccalaureate (IB) appears to have overcome many of the significant concerns outlined above. The IB is an international curriculum framework characterized by centralized curriculum decision making yet meets the needs of students in a wide range of settings.

The Australian Curriculum Studies Association (ACSA) has recently launched “A guide to Productive National Curriculum Work for the Twenty-First Century” which establishes principles to support national curriculum development that result from collaboration between Federal, State and Territory governments. The Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA) has also recently identified some principles that ought to guide the development of national curriculum. They include:

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Trends in National Curriculum

- Curriculum that provides young people with the skills and knowledge for the 21st century and also meets the expectations of further education and training institutions, employers, parents, the wider public and governments
- High standards and national consistency in core/essential skills and knowledge across the eight key learning areas
- Choice and diversity in school curriculum – hence sufficient flexibility incorporated into national curriculum to provide a variety of study pathways for students
- Autonomy of each Independent school and school system in designing their curriculum
- Cooperation with national authorities and involvement in the development of national curriculum initiatives
- Efficient and educationally effective approaches to reporting student results and school performance data
- Engagement of the teaching profession in the development of national curriculum
- Effective and efficient compliance requirements associated with implementation of national curriculum.

7.0 CONCLUSION

Curriculum autonomy lies at the heart of Independent schooling. Government school authorities also continue to argue their role and responsibilities in the development of school curriculum. State based curriculum autonomy is now under serious challenge from the Australian Government.

The call for national curriculum, (including national standards) is now inclusive of all key Year levels, although the attention has been focused on the senior secondary years of schooling.

The debate about national curriculum is complex because it has many threads including:

- State v Commonwealth roles in school education
- The debate about the quality of education in Australia
- Ideological differences about what underpins the purpose of school curriculum and the overall design of the curriculum
- The role and performance of teachers
- Accountability of schools to governments, parents and the wider community
- Politicization of education.

This paper is intended to assist the SA Independent school educators to consider the issues and trends raised in the text and to formulate positions that could be presented in the debate. Some key questions to consider include:

- What is it that Independent schools hold most dear in terms of curriculum, and would want to preserve at all costs?
- Are there any possible losses from a national curriculum that are insurmountable and justification not to proceed?
- Do the possible gains outweigh the losses or vice versa?
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