



CATHOLIC EDUCATION COMMISSION
NEW SOUTH WALES

ABN 33 266 477 369
PO Box A169, Sydney South NSW 1235
Level 9, 133 Liverpool Street, Sydney NSW 2000
Telephone: (02) 9287 1555

Email: cecsw@cecsw.catholic.edu.au Website: <http://www.cecsw.catholic.edu.au>

Submission to the Review of the
Australian Curriculum

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A. Introduction

1. The Catholic Education Commission NSW (CEC) is the policy and funding coordination body for all Catholic schools in NSW. There are 583 Catholic schools in NSW, which employ 18,250 teachers and enrol 241,016 students K-12. CEC is charged by the NSW Catholic Bishops with coordinating the engagement of Catholic schools authorities, the Dioceses and Religious Congregations, with government-directed school curriculum. The Commission is also charged with the promotion of the enhancement of education generally and the Catholic purposes of Catholic schools specifically.
2. On behalf of NSW Catholic schools, CEC has facilitated and participated in extensive consultations on the Australian Curriculum, both at national and at state level between 2008 and 2013. Catholic schools and teachers have participated in all stages of the development of the Curriculum leading to implementation of the Australian Curriculum in NSW Catholic schools, which is beginning in 2014.
3. CEC participates in this Review of the Australian Curriculum in the context of the more detailed National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) submission which CEC endorses, but it also welcomes the opportunity to provide a high-level submission to the Review, noting that its Terms of Reference focus narrowly and specifically on:
 - *development and implementation of the Australian Curriculum, and*
 - *the robustness, independence and balance of the Australian Curriculum, especially English, Maths, Science and History.*
4. This CEC response requires an appreciation of both the Catholic and NSW contexts and is structured as follows:
 - Contextual Matters (section B)
 - Advice related to ‘development and implementation of the Australian Curriculum’ (Section C)
 - Advice related to ‘the robustness, independence and balance of the Australian Curriculum’ (Section D), and
 - Conclusions (Section E).

B. Contextual Matters

B.1 The Nature of Curriculum in Catholic Schools

1. Arising from the Catholic Church's long experience in school education, nearly two centuries in Australia, curriculum in Catholic schools has always been seen not as an aggregation of individual subjects but as the totality of the students' experience of schooling. For Catholic school teachers in all disciplines, the Catholic values and perspectives of the school always serve as an essential context in which syllabus content is taught.
2. In Catholic schools, the 'total' curriculum encompasses the developmental needs of the whole child, including the intellectual, physical, spiritual and emotional. As explained most recently,

The curriculum is how the school community makes explicit its goals and objectives, the content of its teaching and the means for communicating it effectively. In the curriculum, the school's cultural and pedagogical identity are made manifest. Developing the curriculum is one of the school's most demanding tasks, because here one makes explicit what are the school's reference values, subject priorities and practical choices.

(Congregation for Catholic Education (2013), *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools, Living in Harmony for a Civilization of Love*, #64).

3. Moreover, everything that a school programs and teaches recognises that for Catholic schools, parents are considered their children's first educators:

Parents have a particularly important part to play in the educating community, since it is to them that primary and natural responsibility for their children's education belongs.

(Congregation for Catholic Education (1997), *Catholic Schools on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, #20)

B.2 The Role of Curriculum in Student Learning Outcomes

1. Curriculum documents like those produced by ACARA play an important, but not an exclusive, role in school improvement. They provide a context in which a school can express its own priorities but it has to be recognised that, as a key predictor of the academic and other benefits students derive from their schooling, curriculum is not as significant as:
 - the socio-economic circumstances of students' parents,
 - the capacity and quality of their teachers,
 - whether they are first-generation migrants,
 - the cultures of their schools, and
 - school leadership.
2. When students arrive in classrooms they have been powerfully formed by factors quite external to the school. By the time a student studies a topic covered by an Australian curriculum, the teacher's instructional program has been already adapted to the needs of a particular class, in a

particular school. Local adaptation to suit local needs is typical of curriculum practices of leading nations, according to OECD analysis of results in its Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), and needs to be maintained in the Australian Curriculum.

B.3 The Meaning and Practice of Curriculum in NSW

1. As a term, 'curriculum' has a range of meanings across Australia. In NSW, prior to ACARA's use of the term to refer to content and outcomes for a particular subject, 'curriculum' referred more generally to all the learning opportunities children might have. Some were explicit (e.g. subjects, sporting programs) while others were implicit (e.g. values implicit in pastoral care or discipline practices). In NSW, however, the term 'syllabus' refers to a subject document that details content and outcomes for students in a particular discipline or area of studies for particular stages of schooling.
2. The NSW Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (BOSTES) is responsible under the *Education Act 1990* for the development and endorsement of syllabuses for NSW schools. Furthermore, the *NSW Education Act 1990* requires that all NSW schools fully implement BOSTES Syllabuses. BOSTES uses well-developed processes involving teachers, academics, Board officers and members of BOSTES. BOSTES makes recommendations to the Minister whose function under the Act is to approve or refuse to approve syllabuses.
3. Consequently, when an ACARA curriculum was approved by the State and Territory Ministers, a process of adaptation and modification of the ACARA document to comply with NSW statutory requirements, including time (fitting content to prescribed hours) and structure (from years to stages), was initiated. The NSW curriculum development processes led to implementation of new NSW K–10 syllabuses for the Australian curriculum in English, Mathematics, Science and History from 2014.
4. All NSW schools use the BOSTES syllabuses, assisted by BOSTES-developed Support Documents, to produce programs that map the instructional plan for each subject over time. Individual teachers then develop their own programs to address the particular needs of their students in each class for each year or semester. There is necessarily considerable mediation between an ACARA curriculum, as written, and a teacher's instructional program as experienced by students in NSW schools.
5. Associated strongly and critically with curriculum is pedagogy. The assumptions and practices that teachers bring to the classroom about how to promote students' learning are often evident in their instructional programs and are obvious in their classrooms. The practices that underlie sound and successful teaching methods have always been used by good teachers, including what is today labelled as 'constructivist'. Ideas like tailoring lessons to what students know and using examples from students' own experience share the common assumption that each student will come to a unique understanding from their own perspective. The teacher's task is to ensure that students' unique understanding is consistent with required BOSTES Syllabus Learning Outcomes.

B.4 Foundation of the Australian Curriculum

1. The Australian Curriculum, as we know it today, has its origins in the initiatives of the Commonwealth which led in part to the Ministerial Council's *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* in 2008. Subsequently, ACARA was established by the *Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority Act 2008* (the ACARA Act). ACARA is owned jointly by the Commonwealth and by the eight Australian States and Territories and its curriculum documents require the approval of the Ministerial Council before they can be used by State and Territory curriculum authorities for implementation by schools, consistent with the practice in each State and Territory.
2. While supporting the generality of the *Melbourne Declaration* and ACARA's Charter to develop curriculum, CEC has consistently held that both the *Declaration* and the Australian Curriculum it underpins should be amended to:
 - Acknowledge teacher capacity and quality as the key driver of student performance.
 - Accommodate the implications which will arise from the necessary introduction of new technologies to educational contexts.
 - Address a focus on personalised learning.
 - More fully reflect the role, both past and present, of faith traditions generally and Christianity specifically in the development of Australia.
 - More fully acknowledge parents as the primary educators of children.

C. Reflections on the Development and Implementation of the Australian Curriculum

1. NSW Catholic schools are required by the *Education Act 1990* to use BOSTES syllabuses for each of the areas in which ACARA develops, or is planning to develop, curricula. All NSW non-government schools are subject to BOSTES for their registration and accreditation and compliance with NSW curriculum requirements is part of that process. Catholic schools take the BOSTES syllabuses and develop programs in such a way that they comply with the syllabuses but also embed the Catholic tradition of the integration of knowledge, faith and life.
2. The Executive Director of CEC is currently a member of the Boards of both ACARA, on behalf of the National Catholic Education Commission), and BOSTES and this has assisted CEC's engagement with the development of a coherent set of National and State curriculum documents.
3. CEC has engaged extensively and in detail with both the ACARA curriculum development process and BOSTES syllabus development process. Its informed reflections below address both processes separately.

C.1 ACARA Processes

1. Officers from the various NSW Catholic School Authorities and teachers from Catholic schools have been involved in the development of the Australian Curriculum from the outset. ACARA made a deliberate effort to ensure that it consulted widely and comprehensively. It continues to do so.
2. The *Melbourne Declaration* sees schooling in terms of its value for the nation and for individuals in the nation. This essentially instrumental view does not describe the benefits of schooling in terms of the holistic growth of each individual student so it is not surprising that the *Declaration* does not articulate a view of Australian students in terms of their overall development. Curriculum in eight Learning Areas in the document is described in terms of:
 - *A solid foundation in knowledge, understanding, skills and value on which further learning and adult life can be built*
 - *Deep knowledge, understanding, skills and values which will enable advanced learning and an ability to create new ideas and translate them into practical applications*
 - *General capabilities that underpin flexible and analytical thinking, a capacity to work with others and an ability to move across subject disciplines to develop new expertise.*
3. For Catholic educators, this view of curriculum has always been seen, at best, as a partial description of the desirable outcomes of schooling and, at worst, as a depiction of a lack of understanding of human dignity. However ACARA had no alternative but to develop materials to support the *Melbourne Declaration* as it is currently written.
4. For individual ACARA subjects, the ‘Shape papers’ on each subject have been worthy attempts to capture national and international best practice and up to date perspectives on each subject. For BOSTES, such papers have been of partial utility since each new NSW subject syllabus arises from experience learned from the last and the intervening years of implementation. While ACARA has not had the benefit of such experience initially, it will in future. Each ACARA subject ‘Shape paper’ has been provided for consultation across the nation with involvement by all education sectors, professional associations and academics. In providing a basis for curriculum writers, the papers have been most valuable.
5. On reflection, however, from the perspective of NSW Catholic education, the ACARA process of curriculum development was hamstrung to the extent that it was by:
 - Fragmentation through its subject-specific approach in the absence of a holistic curriculum design statement;
 - Unrealistic timeframes;
 - Detachment from pre-existing and continuing NSW Education Act requirements.

6. Despite this, it is acknowledged that ACARA subject statements are generally well regarded by NSW Catholic educators as a valued resource which complements the mandatory NSW syllabuses.

C.2 BOSTES Processes

1. After the ACARA curricula in English, Maths, Science and History were accepted for implementation in States and Territories, NSW Catholic School Authorities and teachers from Catholic schools were involved in the well-established BOSTES syllabus development processes with which they are highly experienced. On reflection, however, the BOSTES process for developing the Phase 1 K-10 Syllabuses for the Australian Curriculum was limited to the extent that it was unduly protracted and focused on the NSW *Education Act* school registration requirements.
2. Despite these concerns the NSW syllabuses K-10 for English, Maths, Science and History which embed the Australian Curriculum:
 - do faithfully reflect detailed input for all NSW Schooling stakeholders;
 - do relate to a whole of curriculum framework;
 - are considered more manageable in terms of time and more flexible in terms of content specification and programming structure (stages rather than years);
 - are being supported by State Government funded Professional Development activities.
3. CEC and Catholic schools are confident that some of the major issues raised in other States about the implementation of the curriculum, namely its undue length and prescriptiveness, as well as its fragmentation especially for K-6, can be adequately addressed in NSW through the normal BOSTES processes.
4. The flexibility that Catholic schools in NSW are used to should also suffice to ensure that each new curriculum can be aligned properly with Catholic school values and context. For example, there has already been considerable thought given as to how Catholic schools will integrate any new Health and Physical Education curriculum (in NSW the curriculum area will be 'Personal Development, Health and Physical Education').

D. Robustness, Independence and Balance of the Australian Curriculum

1. Unlike the State and Territory Curriculum Authorities that have well-developed, long-standing processes for syllabus development, ACARA had to develop its structures and practices as it developed its curriculum in each subject area. It had no time to develop its processes before it had to begin to develop subject curricula. In this process ACARA attempted to avoid being seen to have been 'captured' by a particular State or Territory.

2. ACARA has developed 'Shape papers' for each subject, which in practice focused on F-10. Each paper has done a creditable job of outlining what the subject is and how it should be taught for the different year groups. These documents have proved valuable for the development of the subject statements but many of the difficulties that emerged for the Senior Secondary Subjects were the result of not having more extensive senior school 'Shape papers'. It remains that the Senior Secondary ACARA documents are the least satisfactory and the most contentious.
3. Key features of ACARA's process of curriculum development include 'Shape papers', Writing Briefs and Curriculum Drafts, all interspersed with consultations. The approach is clear but the execution has not always been successful. To ACARA's credit, it has attempted to address the following shortcomings:
 - The roles and responsibilities of ACARA officers, consultative committees, reference groups and experts have been too often unclear;
 - Feedback offered to ACARA during consultation appeared to be ignored in favour of other advice but it proved impossible to determine the origin of the advice or the locus of decision-making;
 - ACARA officers were sometimes reluctant to accept fundamental criticism of draft documents during consultation given timeline constraints.
4. ACARA has engaged with the cross-curriculum perspectives in response to the *Melbourne Declaration* but, given the widespread public misunderstanding of their purpose and nature, they need to be revisited. They are not the 'priority' elements of the curriculum or 'themes'. More thought needs to be given, including by ACARA, as to how they ought to be translated into school practice. The longstanding NSW approach to 'learning across the curriculum' is arguably superior because it incorporates these perspectives in each subject syllabus as part of the syllabus development process.
5. While ACARA adopted the concept of *Indicative Time* as a guide to their curriculum writers as to how many hours might be available for the teaching of each subject the problem that has emerged is that, particularly in secondary schools, each State and Territory applies timing guidelines differently. The end result in some subjects, for example F-10 History, is that there is too much content. NSW has had to address this by amalgamating some topics and deleting others. This is considered a rational and satisfactory solution to the time challenge.
6. A valuable aspect of the ACARA curriculum development has been the parallel work by *Education Services Australia* (ESA) in digital resource development to support learning. As schools use digital content increasingly, the development of the ACARA curricula and its association with ESA resources provides a potentially valuable resource for NSW schools, as these resources are aligned with the NSW syllabus documents.

7. Finally, looking ahead, the smooth transition of all Australian schools to a single coherent national curriculum will require attention to be paid to the various different Commonwealth and State bodies and instrumentalities involved in schooling, and their governing legislation. There have been similar exercises conducted in recent years for VET Regulation and Child Care, as well as the very recent requirement of States such as NSW to amend their local legislation in order to implement the new national school funding model. Harmonisation of relevant legislation across Australia would facilitate development and implementation of Australian curriculum over time.

E. CONCLUSIONS

1. CEC is of the view that there is a considerable degree of ownership among schools and teachers of BOSTES syllabus documents in which the Australian Curriculum is embedded in NSW.
2. CEC proposes, however, that the Australian Curriculum development process to date has demonstrated the need for:
 - (i) enhanced alignment between Australian Government, ACARA and State curriculum design and implementation processes; and
 - (ii) an agreed National Curriculum Framework Scope and Purpose Statement based on a reviewed and renewed *Melbourne Declaration*.
3. CEC is also of the view that the assumption that school effectiveness reform can be driven by curriculum change alone is misplaced. School effectiveness needs to be driven by a focus on teacher practice and school leadership. For this reason, CEC recommends enhanced alignment between Curriculum (ACARA) and Teacher Development (AITSL) reform goals and processes.
4. To address these CEC concerns, the Australian Government is encouraged to consider:
 - (i) combining the ACARA and AITSL entities on the new BOSTES model;
 - (ii) initiating a review of the *Melbourne Declaration* since it is the key driver of the Australian Curriculum project; and
 - (iii) commencing a national Education Acts harmonisation project under the direction of SCSEEC. This step is advised since one of the key NSW learnings is that without harmonised legislation across jurisdictions there can never be a single Australian Curriculum.
5. CEC would be happy to meet with the Reviewers to elaborate any issues arising from this advice. If this is desired please contact Dr Brian Croke, Executive Director, on 9287 1580 or brian.croke@cecsw.catholic.edu.au