

Professor Ken Wiltshire AO,
Dr Kevin Donnelly
Australian Curriculum Review Panel
C/O Department of Education
GPO Box 9880 Canberra ACT 2601

21 March 2014

Our ref: D14/5696

Dear Professor Wiltshire and Dr Donnelly,

LETTER FROM THE ACARA BOARD CHAIR – REVIEW OF THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

The school curriculum expresses a nation's aspirations for its next generations. The curriculum must strike a balance between developing young people's understanding of their national history and culture and preparing them for a future that is increasingly global and largely unpredictable.

What constitutes essential school learning will always be contested because behind it is a debate about what knowledge is of most worth. Curriculum stirs the passions – and that is a good thing. Curriculum is never completed. It is never perfect and should always be a work in progress. As responsible citizens, we are obliged to provide our future generations with the best possible learning opportunities and outcomes.

ACARA is mandated to set high expectations for what is taught to students in schools throughout the country. I am convinced the vigorous processes we have adopted, drawing on our country's best expertise and talent, have allowed us to establish a curriculum that is high-quality.

In developing the Australian Curriculum, ACARA consulted widely, including with organisations and individuals beyond the field of education. The advice ACARA received was extensive and varied greatly. To make our decisions clear, we commissioned independent analysis and published reports on the consultation together with accounts of what we would do with the advice we received.

We started with a blank page for each learning area. We did not seek to put together a national curriculum from existing state and territory curricula. For each area we began with a broad outline of what should be provided and how it should be sequenced from Foundation to Year 12. Those outlines enabled us to have real discussions about the big picture before getting down to the detail.

The curriculum detail is expressed in content descriptions and achievement standards, and in them we set high expectations for all students, among other things, by comparing our drafts with the curricula in high-performing countries. At the same time, we were mindful of leaving space and flexibility for jurisdictions, schools and teachers to tailor the curriculum to meet the needs of their students.

The overall structure of the curriculum was determined by the council of Commonwealth, state and territory ministers of education and the successive remits they gave us. We began with a request to develop English, mathematics, science and history, but the ministers soon added geography, the arts and languages other than English. Ministers then asked us to propose how the whole curriculum could be developed. We took the shape of

the whole from the ministerial council's 2008 *Melbourne Declaration on the Educational Goals for Young Australians*, which provides clear directions about the priorities that need to be addressed in a national curriculum.

In their *Melbourne Declaration*, ministers also proposed that a national curriculum provide for students' development of general capabilities of the kind that business and industry leaders have called on the education system to deliver. Ministers also wanted more attention to be given to three issues that have become the cross-curriculum priorities in the Australian curriculum.

We did not want to create new subjects to deal with the general capabilities and the cross-curriculum priorities. We judged that all could be dealt with, where relevant, through the discipline-based subjects. There have been some suggestions that we have proposed it be done the other way around, with the subjects being taught through the capabilities and the priorities. We certainly have not.

Currently, F–10 English, mathematics, science and history are being implemented by schools in Australia. As more learning areas and subjects are introduced, ACARA and state and territory authorities will monitor issues around teacher and student workload.

Curriculum is only one part of the story of school learning. The curriculum comes alive in the hands of teachers who make expert decisions about the learning experiences each student needs to succeed. In Australia, the curriculum is also facilitated by state and territory curriculum and school authorities.

An Australian Curriculum means that no matter where students live they now have access to the same content and their achievements will be judged against the same standards. It gives teachers stability to focus on the quality of their teaching, while being a living document that can evolve and change.

ACARA has made the Australian Curriculum a web-based document so it is accessible to teachers and the public, and provides multiple ways of viewing the curriculum and the flexibility to adjust it in ways that are not so readily available in printed documents.

We have been invited to present our work on the Australian Curriculum to colleagues around the world and we know that it is generating much interest. Australia is recognised as one of the leaders in education and a worthy partner in international collaborations. We also know that we have not accomplished this alone. We recognise the generous and often passionate contributions of countless stakeholders in shaping the curriculum, reaching settlements that do not compromise on quality and now supporting each other to implement new curriculum for our young people.

We have not yet seen the true benefits of a national curriculum but we are confident that young people and the nation will be better off as a result of the work done by tens of thousands during the last few years. We can be rest assured that quality education is not a distant dream for our children.



Professor Barry McGaw AO
Chair