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The Australian Curriculum

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By Talina Drabsch

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The Australian Curriculum

by

Talina Drabsch

NSW PARLIAMENTARY RESEARCH SERVICE

Gareth Griffith (BSc (Econ) (Hons), LLB (Hons), PhD),
Manager, Politics & Government/Law (02) 9230 2356

Lenny Roth (BCom, LLB),
Senior Research Officer, Law..... (02) 9230 2768

Lynsey Blayden (BA, LLB (Hons)),
Research Officer, Law (02) 9230 3085

Talina Drabsch (BA, LLB (Hons)),
Research Officer, Social Issues/Law (02) 9230 2484

Daniel Montoya (BEnvSc (Hons), PhD),
Research Officer, Environment/Planning (02) 9230 2003

Edwina Schneller (BSc, LLB)
Research Officer, Law (02) 9230 2484

John Wilkinson (MA, PhD),
Research Officer, Economics (02) 9230 2006

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SUMMARY

Phase one of the Australian Curriculum (English, Mathematics, Science and History) will start to be implemented in years K to 10 in NSW schools in 2014. 2013 is a year for familiarisation, planning and training for NSW teachers in preparation for its introduction next year. This represents the culmination of attempts to introduce a common curriculum in Australia that began in earnest in the 1980s. A national curriculum has met with much resistance over the years, for many reasons, but over the last decade it has received bipartisan support at the Federal level. With the cooperation of the States and Territories, the National Education Agreement of January 2009 saw the various governments in Australia commit to the development and maintenance of a national curriculum. **Section two** of this paper provides a brief history of the development of a common curriculum in Australia.

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) has a central role in the development of the Australian Curriculum which is occurring in three phases. The Board of Studies NSW is then responsible for transferring that curriculum into the NSW syllabus. The Australian Curriculum is based around seven capabilities that are to be developed and applied across the curriculum: literacy; numeracy; information and communication technology competence; critical and creative thinking; ethical behaviour; and intercultural understanding. Three cross-curriculum priorities will also have an important role: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures; Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia; and sustainability. **Section three** of this paper outlines the role of ACARA and the Board of Studies NSW as it relates to the Australian Curriculum. It also provides a summary of the structure of the Australian Curriculum and the timetable for its implementation in NSW.

There has been much debate over the value of a national curriculum, with many arguments advanced for and against. **Section four** outlines some of the major reasons given for introducing a common curriculum, as well as the objections voiced by opponents.

Section five briefly looks at the performance of Australian students in recent international tests, especially in light of the Federal Government's announcement that Australia be one of the top five performing nations by 2025. Finland is often mentioned as an example of a nation whose education system is successfully doing things a little differently, and for this reason it is included as a case study in section five. Some attention is also given to the United Kingdom, which introduced a national curriculum in the late 1980s, but is currently conducting a review of that curriculum and looks set to alter its structure so that the teaching of the national curriculum no longer requires the majority of teaching time.

1 INTRODUCTION

The introduction of the first stages of the Australian Curriculum in NSW schools is scheduled to occur in 2014. It has a long history; in many ways dating back to the 1980s when the first direct attempts to develop a common curriculum for Australian schools were made. It is an exercise that has involved the cooperation of the various State governments within Australia. Whilst primary and secondary education is largely the constitutional responsibility of the States, the Commonwealth Government provides significant funding towards education making it an influential player in this policy area. The Commonwealth Government has had some influence over the direction of education policy for some time, but particularly since 2000. As Brennan highlights: 'Tying funding to the states to agreement on policy directions is not new but, in the post-GST tax reorganisation era, it is particularly significant, with states more dependent on Commonwealth funding and several states experiencing long-term downturn of their economy'.¹ The traditional dynamic between the levels of government was also altered by the establishment of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (and its predecessor, the National Curriculum Board).

The Commonwealth, State and Territory governments committed to the **National Education Agreement** in January 2009 in which they agreed to the implementation of a national curriculum.² Clause 17(h) specifies that 'The Commonwealth and the States and Territories are: responsible for the development and maintenance of a National Curriculum and for participating in the work of the national education authority that manages national curriculum, assessment and data management, analysis and reporting'. The States and Territories are responsible for implementing the National Curriculum.³

The objective of the **National Education Agreement** is that 'all Australian school students acquire the knowledge and skills to participate effectively in society and employment in a globalised economy' by achieving the following outcomes:

- (a) All children are engaged in, and benefit from schooling
- (b) Basic literacy and numeracy standards are met and levels of achievement are improving
- (c) Australian students excel by international standards
- (d) Schooling promotes the social inclusion and reduces the educational disadvantage of children, especially Indigenous children
- (e) Young people make a successful transition from school to work and further study.

¹ Marie Brennan, 'National curriculum: A political-educational tangle', *Australian Journal of Education*, 55(3) 2011, p ?.

² Clause 39(b).

³ Clause 19(e).

The shape, content and purpose of school curriculums can invoke much heated and heartfelt debate. Partly this is because what is taught in schools matters dearly to many as it can reflect what is valued by a culture and what is deemed as knowledge, ‘..what knowledge is selected, how it is taught and how it is evaluated in schools goes to the very heart of issues of individual and social identity’.⁴ It is also a debate in which, rightly or wrongly, a wide range of people feel they have something to contribute. As Yates, Collins and O’Connor highlight:

Curriculum does not appear to be so specialist that it should be decided in house, and just by experts, and many people have strong opinions about whether students need to study Shakespeare or learn the periodic table. On the other hand, non-specialists may under-estimate the gap between what they have experienced themselves, their commonsense, and what has been found in more systematic specialist research and expertise as to how learning is best built, or how certain fields of academic knowledge have moved on.⁵

The concept of a national curriculum in Australia is not new. Explicit attempts to introduce a common curriculum for all Australian schools were being made as early as the 1980s. However, until recently, none of these attempts were successful. Various obstacles succeeded in blocking the path towards a common curriculum; the root of many of these challenges can be found in the federal structure of government in Australia as well as because of what some have seen as a lack of clarity about the purposes and benefits of a national curriculum.⁶ However, some progress was made as Yates, Collins and O’Connor note:

While states-rights and state differences in relation to school curriculum have been historically well established, this does not mean either that there was not history of a Commonwealth role in curriculum making, nor an absence of national curriculum initiative. Since 1989, state, territory and Commonwealth Ministers of Education have met as AEC, MCEETYA or most recently as MCEECDYA and established some common agreements, including those declarations of goals for students in Australian schools. The Commonwealth government might constitutionally (prior to the NCB and ACARA) have had little direct authority over schooling systems, but it had the ability to influence curriculum by its control of specific-purpose funding grants, and by its own setting up of inquiries and funding bodies with particular agendas.⁷

Australia is somewhat unusual in its move towards a national curriculum as it will be the only OECD country with a federal structure of government to have one. There is not, for example, a national curriculum in the US. Other non-federal countries which have had national curriculums have moved away from them, or are in the process of doing so. Finland, which boasts one of the top-

⁴ Bill Atweh and Parlo Singh, ‘The Australian Curriculum: Continuing the national conversation’, *Australian Journal of Education*, 55(3), 2011, p 189.

⁵ Lyn Yates, Cherry Collins and Kate O’Connor (eds) *Australia’s Curriculum Dilemmas: State Cultures and the Big Issues*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2011, p 320.

⁶ See, for example, Piper, p 131; Keating J, *A New Federalism in Australian Education: A Proposal for a National Reform Agenda*, Education Foundation, 2009, p 46.

⁷ Lyn Yates, Cherry Collins and Kate O’Connor (eds) *Australia’s Curriculum Dilemmas: State Cultures and the Big Issues*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2011, p 10.

performing education systems worldwide, no longer has a national curriculum, having chosen instead to adopt a 'clear but flexible national framework for school-based curriculum planning'.⁸ The United Kingdom, which introduced a national curriculum in the late 1980s, is currently conducting a review of its national curriculum and looks set to replace it with a national curriculum that no longer requires the majority of teaching time, thereby leaving individual schools to determine the best way of engaging their students.

This paper provides a brief overview of the Australian Curriculum, the elements of which it is comprised and the timetable for implementation in NSW. There are many arguments for and against the introduction of a national curriculum and this paper canvasses some of them. The need to aid the transition of students who move interstate as well as to adequately prepare students for the global arena are commonly mentioned by supporters of the national curriculum. Many appear to agree about the benefits of a common curriculum in principle but disagree over the format and purposes of that curriculum. There has been debate over whether the overarching purpose of the national curriculum should be: to prepare students for the workforce; to prepare students for tertiary education; to maintain basic educational standards; or for the more general purpose of preparing students for adult life. Fear has been expressed in some quarters, notably in NSW and Victoria, that the effort to ensure that all children in Australia have access to the same quality of curriculum content may result in the curriculum in some States being downgraded. Some of the challenges likely to survive the introduction of a national curriculum are identified, particularly in the area of educational inequalities.

The recent performance of Australian students in international tests such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) has attracted much attention, particularly given that Australian students did not perform as well as anticipated. The Federal Government had also recently announced its aim that the Australian education system would improve to the point where the performance of its students is in the top five countries worldwide. This adds another aspect to the debate, namely, will the Australian curriculum aid or hinder attempts to achieve this goal?

⁸ Pasi Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?*, Teachers College Press, New York, 2011, p 103.

2 MOVING TOWARDS A NATIONAL CURRICULUM: A BRIEF HISTORY

Primary and secondary education is the constitutional responsibility of the States, and separate educational identities were largely maintained until the 1960s when the Commonwealth began funding school education.⁹ The last few decades have witnessed a number of attempts to introduce a national curriculum, most notably by the Commonwealth Education Minister, John Dawkins, in the late 1980s. Whilst that attempt was not successful it could be said that it helped pave the way (eventually) for a number of agreements that have provided a framework for national curriculum development. Reid has divided the history of national curriculum development prior to 2003 into three periods:¹⁰

- **Period One: 1968-1988** – The period of *indirect influence*. 'The approach to national curriculum development during this 20 year period was one that sought to influence the official curricula of the States without challenging their curriculum authority'.¹¹ Reid believes that attempts to introduce a national curriculum between 1968 and 1988 failed because:
 - i. the sensitivity to the curriculum autonomy of the States resulted in many of the projects being organised on a federal model where key aspects of projects were located in State-based teams. It diluted a national perspective and allowed the States to maintain their control of the official curriculum.
 - ii. The project-based focus of the national collaboration meant that curriculum change was piecemeal and open to shifting political whims.
- **Period Two: 1988-1993** – The Dawkins era¹², a time of '*full-on frontal assault*', saw 'the most ambitious attempt at national curriculum collaboration in Australia's history... founded on the old rock of State-Commonwealth suspicion'.¹³

⁹ Alan Reid, *Rethinking National Curriculum Collaboration: Towards an Australian Curriculum*, 2005.

¹⁰ Alan Reid, *Rethinking National Curriculum Collaboration: Towards an Australian Curriculum*, 2005

¹¹ Alan Reid, *Rethinking National Curriculum Collaboration: Towards an Australian Curriculum*, 2005, p 17.

¹² Whilst Reid labels this entire period as the Dawkins era, it should be noted that Kim Beazley was the Minister for Employment, Education and Training from 1991 to 1993, when Dawkins became the Federal Treasurer.

¹³ Alan Reid, *Rethinking National Curriculum Collaboration: Towards an Australian Curriculum*, 2005, p 18.

- Period Three: 1993-2003** – This period saw a return to more *indirect strategies* for national collaboration, with some cooperation around national curriculum occurring. A number of States adopted the eight learning areas (completely or in a modified form). The Curriculum Corporation (funded by the States and the Commonwealth) began to play an active role in common materials production. The National Goals of Schooling were frequently referred to in State curriculum documentation and were revamped at the 1999 Adelaide meeting of the Ministerial Council for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

Since 2003, the Commonwealth Government has been much more interventionist in its approach to its national curriculum agenda, albeit with the necessary cooperation of the States.

The timeline below provides an overview of some of the developments in education until 2013, which may assist in explaining why this latest effort to introduce a common curriculum has gained the cooperation of the States and looks set to succeed.¹⁴ It should be noted that the current Australian curriculum is only possible because the States have agreed to cooperate.

Pre-1870s	Education was provided by religious societies and private institutions with minimal State regulation.
1870s	The public education system was formed. Public schools were established, with a strict separation between Church and State, to cater for working class children who could not afford private education. Curriculum thus entered the domain of the States. However, according to Reid: 'compulsory public education was confined to basic or elementary schooling, the main aim of which was to "gentle the masses" for purposes of social control. Secondary education, for which one paid fees at private colleges, was primarily for the children of the upper and middle classes who were seen as the future leaders'. ¹⁵

¹⁴ Various sources have been used to compile the timetable including: ACARA, 'Australian Curriculum Implementation Survey (August 2012) <http://www.acara.edu.au>; Marie Brennan, 'National curriculum: A political-educational tangle', *Australian Journal of Education*, 55(3) 2011; Council for the Australian Federation, *Federalist Paper 2: The Future of Schooling in Australia*, September 2007; Curriculum Development Centre, *Core Curriculum for Australian Schools: What it is and why it is needed*, 1980; John Dawkins, *Strengthening Australia's Schools: A consideration of the focus and content of schooling*, 1988; Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*, December 2008; Kevin Piper, *Riders in the Chariot: Curriculum reform and the national interest 1965-95*, The Australian Council for Education Research, Melbourne, 1997; Alan Reid, 'Is this a revolution?: A critical analysis of the Rudd government's national education agenda', *Curriculum Perspectives*, 29(3) September 2009; and Alan Reid, *Rethinking National Curriculum Collaboration: Towards an Australian Curriculum*, 2005.

¹⁵ Alan Reid, *Rethinking National Curriculum Collaboration: Towards an Australian Curriculum*, 2005, p 42.

- 1960s** Until the 1960s, the States maintained separate identities in terms of curriculum, supplemented by occasional visits from key bureaucrats to exchange information and ideas. The student population became more diverse, and a tendency to remain at school for longer emerged, as the post-war baby boom and immigration began to take effect. The school curriculum started to adapt and change in response. As a result, the differences between the curriculum of the various States and Territories became more pronounced.
- 1963** The educational dynamic changed as the Commonwealth began to fund school education. Funding became linked to collaboration on projects in the perceived national interest. According to Reid, 'From that time, the tension between the nation-building aspirations of the Commonwealth government on the one hand and the constitutional responsibility of the States for education and thus for curriculum on the other, became a defining characteristic of Australian education'.¹⁶
- 1969** The inauguration of the Australian Science Education Project occurred in October, which Piper views as the advent of national curriculum development in Australia. Piper highlights two features of the project: (1) national curriculum development viewed as a partnership between the Commonwealth and the States and included the principle of shared funding; and (2) there was a recognition of the importance of involving teachers in the process of curriculum development.¹⁷
- 1970s** In the early 1970s, research into the persistent correlation between levels of school success and groups of students by gender, class and race generated a number of policy initiatives to address the inequalities.
- 1973** The Commonwealth Schools Commission was established. Reid believes this was the real impetus for national educational collaboration.
- 1975** The Curriculum Development Centre was established in 1975 as a statutory authority. Piper argues that this is of key importance as it institutionalised the Commonwealth's entry into the curriculum area. It raised the level of public debate and public awareness of curriculum issues in Australia and stimulated the dissemination of ideas across State borders. It created 'for the first time in any sustained sense a genuinely national presence in curriculum development and reform in Australian schools'.¹⁸ It also legitimated the concept of national curriculum development, and the principle of cooperative development was enshrined in the *Curriculum Development Centre Act 1975* (Cth).
- 1980** The idea of developing a national approach to curriculum emerged in *A core curriculum for Australian Schools: What it is and why we need*

¹⁶ Alan Reid, *Rethinking National Curriculum Collaboration: Towards an Australian Curriculum*, 2005, p 16.

¹⁷ Kevin Piper, *Riders in the Chariot: Curriculum reform and the national interest 1965-95*, The Australian Council for Education Research, Melbourne, 1997.

¹⁸ Kevin Piper, *Riders in the Chariot: Curriculum reform and the national interest 1965-95*, The Australian Council for Education Research, Melbourne, 1997, p 125.

one by the Curriculum Development Centre. It defined 'core curriculum' as 'that set of basic and essential learnings and experiences which can reasonably be expected of all students who pass through our schools'. Some discussion followed but the State authorities did not embrace the idea.

- 1981** The Curriculum Development Centre was rolled into the Commonwealth Department of Education.
- 1983** The Curriculum Development Centre was subsequently reconstituted by the Hawke Labor Government.
- 1984** The Curriculum Development Centre became a Division within the Schools Commission.
- 1986** The Australian Education Council, comprising Federal and State Education Ministers, agreed to map the curriculum across the States.
- 1987** The Curriculum Development Centre was abolished.

John Dawkins became the Federal Minister for Employment, Education and Training. Negotiations with the States to rationalise curriculum development commenced, with the aim of working towards greater national consistency. The role of education in contributing to economic productivity was emphasised.

- 1988** In May, John Dawkins released his policy statement, *Strengthening Australia's Schools: A consideration of the focus and content of schooling*. He stated:

..the Commonwealth recognises that for both constitutional and financial reasons, it is not the primary policy maker in the area of schools. But the Commonwealth will not ignore the very real responsibility it has to provide national leadership. This is especially the case because schools are so closely related to the other policy areas such as higher education, where it does have a clear financial responsibility. In addition, the Commonwealth is a major contributor to programs of industry training which rely for their success on quality schooling.

The rationale behind a national curriculum was noted:

What is required is the development of a common framework that sets out the major areas of knowledge and the most appropriate mix of skills and experience for students in all the years of schooling, but accommodate the different or specific curriculum needs of different parts of Australia.

This has become more pressing with the growing interstate mobility of the workforce which obliges more and more families to move through several education systems....

Such a common curriculum framework could, for example, emphasise the need for higher general levels of literacy, numeracy and analytical skills across the nation. The framework must also acknowledge Australia's increasing orientation towards the Asian and Pacific region. A major feature of a common curriculum framework should be criteria for determining content in major subject areas. Criteria for methods of assessing the achievement of curriculum objectives should be outlined. The framework should provide a guide to the best curriculum design and teaching practices.

Dawkins argued that a common curriculum framework should be complemented by a common national approach to assessment and that a common approach to benchmarks for measuring student achievement, assessing school performance and public reporting on school-level education must be a further objective of a national effort.

According to Piper:

While the overall focus of *Strengthening Australia's Schools* was on cooperation, consultation and negotiation as dictated by the federal structure of Australian schooling, the final paragraphs contained a sting in the tail with the tying of its proposals to funding arrangements and resource agreements. Whether this was intended to be a carrot or a stick is a matter of interpretation, but perhaps there was a little of both, linking the proposals for a national effort for schools to the economic rationalist concerns which characterised the Dawkins approach to the reform of higher education.¹⁹

1989 Dawkins' proposals in *Strengthening Australia's Schools* were considered by the Australian Education Council in a series of meetings which culminated in the April 1989 meeting in Hobart. The State, Territory and Commonwealth Ministers for Education (the Australian Education Council) committed to the **Hobart Declaration on Common and Agreed National Goals for Schooling**. This was the pivotal statement by which education authorities and schools understood the requirements for delivery of better educational outcomes and for differences across Australia to be reduced through the pursuit of explicit, common goals. It established a framework for much stronger cooperation between the States, Territories and the Commonwealth than had been achieved before. The Council reached agreement on: a set of national goals for schooling; the creation of a national curriculum agency; the initiation of a process of national collaborative curriculum development; and the introduction of an annual national report on schooling.

Piper notes that whilst some saw the Hobart Declaration as a milestone in Commonwealth-State relations, others viewed its success as likely due to the vague and general nature of the goals. He writes:

There is some dispute over the extent to which the national collaborative curriculum development process initiated by the Australian Education Council as part of the *Hobart Declaration on Schooling* was intended to develop a common curriculum framework of the kind called for in *Strengthening Australia's Schools* and presaged in the national goals for schooling'. However, Piper (writing in 1997) argues that, 'In many ways the national goals represent the most successful outcome of the national collaborative curriculum process, since they provide for the first time in our history a reasonably clear, concise and coherent formulation of the aims of

¹⁹ Kevin Piper, *Riders in the Chariot: Curriculum reform and the national interest 1965-95*, The Australian Council for Education Research, Melbourne, 1997, p 17.

Australian schooling, and in particular a sense of direction for curriculum reform in Australian schools.²⁰

1990 The *Education Reform Act 1990* (NSW) was passed, establishing the NSW Board of Studies. It enshrined into legislation the key learning areas that were to apply to curriculum in NSW, at both a primary and secondary level. It also represented a shift in curriculum leadership away from the Department of Education and its Director General, as any future amendments would require parliamentary debate. Education Minister, Dr Terry Metherell, stated in his Second Reading speech that ‘any change will be made by Parliament, in an open and democratic manner with full public accountability, not in backroom discussions between interest groups or bureaucrats’.²¹

The proper location of curriculum development and control was the subject of much debate at the time. According to Riordan: ‘The major focus of debate surrounding the establishment of an independent Board of Studies appeared to be whether it was appropriate to separate the responsibility for developing curriculum from the authority that administers the system and those that deliver the curriculum’.²² In many ways, the debate centred on whether curriculum should be the domain of those technically skilled in the area or whether it should be subject to greater public scrutiny by requiring parliamentary consideration.

1991 In April, the Australian Education Council agreed to eight key learning areas for national collaborative curriculum development – English, mathematics, science, languages other than English, the arts, technology, studies of society and the environment, and health. This was a shift from traditional subjects to learning areas and signified a significant commitment to national development. These learning areas served as common and agreed learning areas across all State and Territory systems. It formed the official basic framework for curriculum development and delivery in all Australian State and Territory systems and provided a degree of compatibility not previously seen in Australian education.²³

1993 The Australian Education Council at its meetings in June and December failed to endorse the national curriculum statements and assessment profiles. Their referral back to the States and Territories to

²⁰ Kevin Piper, *Riders in the Chariot: Curriculum reform and the national interest 1965-95*, The Australian Council for Education Research, Melbourne, 1997, p 46.

²¹ The Hon Dr T Metherell MP, Second Reading Speech, *NSWPD*, 29/3/90, p 1344.

²² Geoff Riordan, ‘Politics, personalities and the public interest: The establishment of the NSW Board of Studies and the determination of curriculum’, in Lyn Yates, Cherry Collins and Kate O’Connor (eds) *Australia’s Curriculum Dilemmas: State Cultures and the Big Issues*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2011, p 293.

²³ Kevin Piper, *Riders in the Chariot: Curriculum reform and the national interest 1965-95*, The Australian Council for Education Research, Melbourne, 1997, p 80.

proceed as they wished left the national collaborative curriculum process in limbo.²⁴

The Australian Education Council became the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs (MCEEYA).

The Curriculum Corporation published the national curriculum statements and assessment profiles but without the word 'national' in their titles.

1999 The **Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century** was signed by the Commonwealth, States and Territories. It reinforced and extended the commitment enshrined in the 1989 Hobart Declaration and saw the endorsement of a new set of goals and additional priority areas. It outlined agreement on eight common areas of learning, a socially just approach to schooling and a focus on the outcomes of the learning process in schools. The National Statements of Learning in English, mathematics, science, civics and citizenship and ICT were endorsed by all governments and outlined what every child should have the opportunity to learn. School authorities agreed to align their curricula with these statements by 2008. Curricula in all States and Territories up to the start of Year 11 broadly followed the Adelaide Declaration.

2003 In June, the Federal Minister for Education, Brendan Nelson, suggested moving to a national curriculum:

We have eight different educational jurisdictions, eight different commencement ages, eight different curricula. We would not be giving service to young Australians if we just accept that there are eight jurisdictions. I see it as our responsibility to prepare the next generation to be well-equipped as global citizens, to be proud and well-developed Australians as much as they are New South Welshmen or Queenslanders or Western Australians.²⁵

The Curriculum Corporation mapped curriculum across the jurisdictions. It found that despite considerable variation in the extent of content description, cross-curricular and essential organising principles, there was a common format in learning areas. As described by Brennan, 'there has been a de facto common or national curriculum for almost two decades, despite state-based authorities retaining control and some diversity of emphasis'.²⁶

The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs agreed to develop statements of learning for the English,

²⁴ Kevin Piper, *Riders in the Chariot: Curriculum reform and the national interest 1965-95*, The Australian Council for Education Research, Melbourne, 1997, p 128.

²⁵ Quoted in Alan Reid, *Rethinking National Curriculum Collaboration: Towards an Australian Curriculum*, 2005, p 19.

²⁶ Marie Brennan, 'National curriculum: A political-educational tangle', *Australian Journal of Education*, 55(3) 2011.

mathematics, science and civics and citizenship learning areas around essential knowledge, understanding, skills and capacities.

2004 The Federal Minister for Education, Brendan Nelson, introduced the Schools Assistance (Learning Together – Achievement through Choice and Opportunity) Bill. It aimed to provide federal funding for schools from 2005 to 2008 and significantly changed the Federal-State funding relationship with regard to education. The States were required to commit to, in return for funding: a plain English report card, a common starting age by 2012, national testing standards in key subject areas, public school performance information, more power to school principals, explicit teaching of Australian values, schools must fly the Australian flag, and there must be initiatives addressing school bullying and abuse.

2006 A Steering Committee was established by the Council for the Australian Federation to review the **Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century** (October 2006).

2007 Labor (in Opposition) issued a policy document supporting a national curriculum. There was subsequently bipartisan consensus at the federal level.

The Australian Federation, of which each State and Territory Premier or Chief Minister is a member, published an action plan for the future of schooling in Australia. The first proposed area of work related to working towards a national curricula:

The States and Territories commit to working together to share high-quality curriculum material. It is envisaged that this process would include relevant organisations, including representatives of the Catholic and Independent school sectors. It will result in the development of nationally consistent curricula that will:

- set core content and achievement standards that are expected of students at the end of their 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 the 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 Federal Labor Government included national curriculum as part of its 'education revolution'.

2008 The Rudd Government announced the formation of a National Curriculum Board.

The **Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians** acknowledged major world changes that are placing new demands on Australian education:

- Global integration and international mobility have increased rapidly in the past decade – heightens the need to nurture an appreciation of and respect for social, cultural and religious diversity, and a sense of global citizenship.
- India, China and other Asian nations are growing – Australians need to become 'Asia literate'.
- Globalisation and technological change are placing greater demands on education and skill development in Australia – the nature of jobs available to young Australians is changing faster than ever. Youth must be encouraged not only to complete secondary education but to proceed into further training or education.
- Complex environmental, social and economic pressures such as climate change that extend beyond national borders pose unprecedented challenges, requiring countries to work together in new ways.
- Rapid and continuing advances in information and communication technologies are changing the ways people share, use, develop and process information and technology.

Educational goals

Goal 1: Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence

Goal 2: All young Australians become: successful learners; confident and creative individuals; and active and informed citizens.

2009 The Commonwealth, State and Territory governments committed to the **National Education Agreement** as part of COAG in January 2009. As per clause 39(b), the various governments agreed to implement a national curriculum.

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority replaced the National Curriculum Board and Curriculum Corporation.

2011 Implementation of Phase One of the Australian Curriculum began in the ACT.

2012 The Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood, one of 12 Standing Councils established under the Council of Australian Governments arrangements, was launched on 18 January. It replaced the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs.

Implementation of Phase One of the Australian Curriculum continued in the ACT, and began in the Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania and Western Australia. However, the extent and pace of implementation varied between the jurisdictions.

2013 AusVELS is to be used in Victoria for curriculum planning and assessment purposes. AusVELS is a single curriculum portal that integrates Phase One of the Australian Curriculum with the remaining State-based areas of the curriculum.

NSW teachers and schools are using 2013 as a year for familiarisation and planning with the Australian Curriculum. Professional development will also occur. Teaching of the Australian Curriculum in NSW schools is to occur from 2014 onwards.

3 THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

3.1 Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) has a central role in the development of the Australian Curriculum. It is a statutory body that was established in 2008 under the *Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority Act 2008* (Cth). It is funded under a National Partnership Agreement between the Commonwealth and the States. Section 6 of the Act specifies the following as the functions of ACARA:

- (a) develop and administer a national school curriculum, including content of the curriculum and achievement standards, for school subjects specified in the Charter; and
- (b) develop and administer national assessments; and
- (c) collect, manage and analyse student assessment data and other data relating to schools and
- (d) facilitate information sharing arrangements between Australian government bodies in relation to the collection, management and analysis of school data; and
- (e) publish information relating to school education, including information relating to comparative school performance; and
- (f) provide school curriculum resource services, educational research services and other related services; and
- (g) provide information, resources, support and guidance to the teaching profession; and
- (h) perform such other functions that are conferred on it by, or under, this Act or any other Commonwealth Act; and
- (i) perform such other functions that are ancillary or incidental to the functions mentioned in the preceding paragraphs.

ACARA collaborates with a number of stakeholders to fulfil its role, including teachers, principals, governments, State and Territory education authorities, professional education associations, community groups and the general public.

According to ACARA, the reason the Australian Curriculum has been developed is because 'a quality education for all young Australians is critical to maintaining Australia's productivity and quality of life. The development of the Australian Curriculum represents a commitment by all Australian states and territories to work together to develop a world-class curriculum for all young Australians'. It is being developed in three phases:

Phase One: English, Mathematics, Science and History

Phase Two: Geography, Languages and the Arts

Phase Three: Health and Physical Education, Technologies (Information and Communication Technology and Design and Technology), Economics and Business, and Civics and Citizenship.

3.2 Structure of the Australian Curriculum

The structure of the Australian Curriculum embraces a number of approaches. It retains the use of learning areas as a means of organisation but also includes general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities which apply across the

learning areas. It is thought that this will add 'richness and depth to the learning areas and help students see the interconnectedness and relevance of their learning'.²⁷ It is guided by the **Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians** in the way it is designed and recognises that 'contemporary learning cannot be fully realised in a curriculum solely organised by learning area'.²⁸

The inclusion of general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities in the learning areas rather than as a separate part of the curriculum is viewed as a distinguishing feature of the Australian Curriculum and 'sets up relationships that are complex and varied, exciting and challenging'.²⁹ However, it is not without its critics. According to Rob Gilbert:

The greatest challenge lies in the schism between those who promote instrumental educational goals such as the capabilities, and those who see such goals as a corruption of or at least distraction from the real essence of an education, which is said to be socialisation into the forms of knowledge defined by traditional disciplines.³⁰

Elements

The Australian Curriculum is comprised of a number of elements:

- A **rationale** that explains the place and purpose of the learning area in the school curriculum.
- **Aims** that identify the major learning that students will be able to demonstrate as a result of learning from the curriculum.
- An **organisation** section that provides an overview of how the curriculum in the learning area will be organised from Foundation to Year 12.
- **Content descriptions** that specify what teachers are expected to teach. These are accompanied by **elaborations** that illustrate the content descriptions.
- **Achievement standards** that describe what students are typically able to understand and able to do, and which are accompanied by work samples that illustrate the achievement standards through annotated student work.
- **General capabilities** that describe a set of skills, behaviours and dispositions that apply across subject-based content (see below).
- **Cross-curriculum priorities** that ensure the Australian Curriculum is relevant to the lives of students and addresses the contemporary issues they face (see below).

²⁷ See ACARA website.

²⁸ Grette Toner, 'General capabilities in the Australian Curriculum: An ACARA perspective', *Curriculum Perspectives*, 32(1) 2012, p 52.

²⁹ Grette Toner, 'General capabilities in the Australian Curriculum: An ACARA perspective', *Curriculum Perspectives*, 32(1) 2012, pp 53 and 54.

³⁰ Rob Gilbert, 'Schisms, skills and schooling – the challenges of general capabilities', *Curriculum Perspectives*, 32(1) 2012, p 57.

General capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities

The Curriculum includes seven general capabilities, described as 'a set of knowledge, skills, behaviours and dispositions that can be developed and applied across the curriculum to help students become successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens; develop and use these capabilities across all learning areas and in co-curricula programs'. Three cross-curriculum priorities also have an important role.

Australian Curriculum: Capabilities and Cross-Curriculum Priorities

Capabilities	Cross-curriculum priorities
Literacy	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures
Numeracy	Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia
Information and communication technology competence	Sustainability
Critical and creative thinking	
Ethical behaviour	
Personal and social competence	
Intercultural understanding	

3.3 Implementation of the Australian Curriculum in NSW

The *Education Act 1990* (NSW) contains the legislative requirements for curriculum in NSW. One of the objects of the Act is: 'to set out aspects of the school curriculum, including the minimum curriculum for school registration and the curriculum for candidates for the Record of School Achievement and the Higher School Certificate'.³¹ Part 3 of the Act is specifically concerned with the school curriculum, with section 7 specifying that the key learning areas for primary education are to be: English; Mathematics; Science and Technology; Human Society and its Environment; Creative and Practical Arts; and Personal Development, Health and Physical Education. Section Nine lists the key learning areas for secondary education (from Year 7 to Year 10): English; Mathematics; Science; Human Society and its Environment; Languages other than English; Technological and Applied Studies; Creative Arts; and Personal Development, Health and Physical Education.

Part 9 of the *Education Act 1990* (NSW) establishes the Board of Studies, which is to have the function of developing or endorsing syllabuses and to prepare

³¹ Section 5(a).

and make available to schools curriculum support materials, amongst other things. The Board of Studies NSW is responsible for adopting the Australian curriculum content into syllabuses for NSW, and it has involved consultation with teachers, parent bodies, academics, teacher unions and professional associations across all education sectors.³² With regard to the Australian Curriculum, the Board of Studies NSW commences its syllabus development process once the Australian curriculum for a learning area has been endorsed by the State and Territory Education Ministers. It is responsible for advising the NSW Minister for Education on the appropriateness of the Australian Curriculum for NSW schools and the structure and process of its implementation. It has developed new K-10 syllabuses for English, Mathematics, Science (including Science and Technology K-6) and History incorporating the Australian curriculum.

The new English, Mathematics, History and Science syllabuses for students from Kindergarten to Year 10 in NSW were launched by the NSW Education Minister, Adrian Piccoli, on 16 October 2012. An additional School Development Day focused on the Australian Curriculum is to be provided for all teachers in NSW Government schools on 30 April 2013.

The timeline for implementation of the Australian Curriculum in NSW differs slightly to the other jurisdictions, with NSW the only jurisdiction to not have started to implement the Australian Curriculum by 2013. NSW schools will continue to use the existing Kindergarten to Year 12 syllabuses in 2013, with the new syllabuses to begin in a phased approach from 2014.

The implementation timetable for NSW is as follows:³³

Kindergarten – Year 6

2011-12	Syllabus and support material developed by December 2012 Sectors plan implementation support
2013	Familiarisation and planning
2014	English – start teaching Mathematics – optional to start teaching Science and Technology – optional to start teaching
2015	Mathematics – start teaching Science and Technology – start teaching History – optional to start teaching

³² The Hon Adrian Piccoli, 'Minister launches NSW K-10 online syllabuses', *Media Release*, 16/10/12

³³ Board of Studies NSW, *Memorandum to Principals: Update on the Implementation of Australian Curriculum in NSW*, 31 July 2012.

2016	History – start teaching
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Years 7-10

2011-12	Syllabus and support material developed by December 2012. Sectors plan implementation support
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2013	Familiarisation and planning
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2014	Years 7 and 9: English, Mathematics, Science and History – start teaching
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2015	Years 8 and 10: English, Mathematics, Science and History – start teaching
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Full details of how the Australian Curriculum is to be implemented in the other jurisdictions within Australia is available from the ACARA website:

http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/resources/Summary_of_implementation_plans_-_updated_August_2012.pdf#search=australian%20curriculum%20implementation%20survey

Senior Secondary:

The Board of Studies NSW consultation on the draft senior secondary Australian curriculum for English, Mathematics, Science and History concluded on 27 July 2012. There is currently no timeline for implementation of the senior secondary Australian curriculum in NSW.

4 WHY INTRODUCE A NATIONAL CURRICULUM?

Many reasons for introducing a national curriculum have been cited by commentators, the most common ones being equality of curriculum standards for all Australian students, avoiding unnecessary duplication of resources, and assisting those students who move interstate. The validity and relative worth of these arguments, however, is not a given among the commentators. It is an important debate as, 'Curriculum is arguably one of the more important forms through which the state (nationally or locally) makes a decision about the formation and opportunities of its citizens'.³⁴ This section notes some of the arguments for and against the introduction of a national curriculum.

4.1 Reasons for a national curriculum

- It avoids unnecessary duplication that occurs when each State develops its own curriculum and thus can be seen as a far more efficient use of resources.
- It has the potential to raise standards across Australia if the best of all the State curricula is selected and combined.
- It assists those families with school aged children who move interstate. Each year around 340,000 families, including 80,000 school age students, relocate across State and Territory borders. However, some commentators believe this should be a side benefit of the introduction of a national curriculum, not the reason for its introduction.³⁵
- It ensures fairness as no child studies in a State with an inferior curriculum.
- It may provide a solution to varying retention rates and student achievement between the States.³⁶
- Some have suggested that a national curriculum is more accountable to public opinion as the public is more likely to have a better understanding of it if there are not multiple versions throughout Australia.
- It prevents 'ideologues' from hijacking the curriculum.
- It may allow for more efficient teacher training and support.
- Kevin Rudd and Stephen Smith, whilst in Opposition, stressed the economic benefits of a national curriculum: 'For Australia to succeed in a highly competitive global economy our children need to have the best education possible. Better education outcomes deliver a real and tangible benefit to our nation's economy, lifting productivity and allowing people to get better jobs that pay more'.³⁷

³⁴ Lyn Yates, Cherry Collins and Kate O'Connor (eds) *Australia's Curriculum Dilemmas: State Cultures and the Big Issues*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2011, p 319.

³⁵ For example, Alan Reid, *Rethinking National Curriculum Collaboration: Towards an Australian Curriculum*, 2005.

³⁶ Alan Reid, 'Is this a revolution?: A critical analysis of the Rudd government's national education agenda', *Curriculum Perspectives*, 29(3) September 2009.

³⁷ Kevin Rudd and Stephen Smith, *New directions for our schools: Establishing a national*

4.2 Reasons against a national curriculum:

- Some believe that a national curriculum will remove scope for competition, comparison and diversity. They fear that standards will be lowered as the ability to compare what is working well is lost. A monoculture with a single solution will be imposed on every school.
- Only 2.4% of the school population move interstate each year. The curriculum is already very similar in many areas and the benefits to students who move interstate are overstated.
- There is nothing to prevent 'ideologues' from hijacking a national curriculum, with the impact no longer contained to a single State.
- No other federated system in the OECD has a national curriculum.³⁸
- Atweh and Singh have highlighted how inequality is one of the major issues when it comes to education in Australia and how we perform internationally. A national curriculum may not be the most effective means of addressing this issue as:

Research has clearly shown that issues of educational inequality are best tackled at the local level of the school and classroom by teachers actively engaged in diagnosing learning difficulties and adapting curriculum to suit the needs of specific cohorts of students. The question of how a national curriculum might add value in dealing with issues of educational inequality and student engagement remains unresolved.³⁹

The Council for the Australian Federation has also warned of the difficulties in using a common curriculum to resolve educational inequalities:

In moving towards national curricula it should be emphasised that... Australian school students, in general, perform at high standards by comparison with other countries. The major caveat to this relates to the tail of the distribution and the association between low-performing students and their socio-economic backgrounds. It is not the standards embodied in the curriculum that are the problem; rather it is the challenge of getting the lower performers to meet the standards. Reforms and investments that can enhance the quality of teaching and learning of students are the remedy here, rather than prescribing curriculum from one source.⁴⁰

- Brennan also believes that a national curriculum will not adequately cater for the diversity of students in Australia in order to reduce some of the educational inequalities that exist:

curriculum to improve our children's educational outcomes, February 2007.

³⁸ Marie Brennan, 'National curriculum: A political-educational tangle', *Australian Journal of Education*, 55(3) 2011, p 264.

³⁹ Bill Atweh and Parlo Singh, 'The Australian Curriculum: Continuing the national conversation', *Australian Journal of Education*, 55(3), 2011, p 189, p 190.

⁴⁰ Council for the Australian Federation, *Federalist Paper 2: The Future of Schooling in Australia*, September 2007, p 21.

The crucial curriculum problem in Australia is the widening gap between the achievement of those who meet and exceed benchmarks and those whose performance is falling well below benchmark in highly predictable social groups.... A document does not provide for diversity of resources, student body, family educational background and experiences or community location.⁴¹

- Drummond, Halsey and van Bredar note that the UK experienced problems in its rural and small schools during the implementation of its National Curriculum following the introduction of the *Education Reform Act* in 1988. They believe these difficulties may also arise in Australia, due to the vastness of the Australian continent and the distance from accessible professional training facilities for those teachers in rural, regional and remote areas.⁴²
- Brennan has been quite critical of the approach adopted in national curriculum development:

'This linear and predetermined characterisation of curriculum does not take into account the need for a futures-orientation, nor provide space for appropriate negotiation of knowledge among teachers and students in an information-rich and changing world. Neither does it allow for an appropriate role for teacher judgment, for student, parent and community input, nor for the identification of other emergent issues. There is no point in gaining good partnerships among state and Commonwealth governments if the substance of the joint work is incapable of delivering the goods'.⁴³

She then concludes:

'There are plenty of other curriculum precedents, which draw on different assumptions about knowledge, relationships, teachers, students and parents, that have more of a chance to bring out world-class and more equitable engagement and student outcomes than the current approach'.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Marie Brennan, 'National curriculum: A political-educational tangle', *Australian Journal of Education*, 55(3) 2011, p 276.

⁴² Drummond, Halsey and van Bredar, p 35.

⁴³ Marie Brennan, 'National curriculum: A political-educational tangle', *Australian Journal of Education*, 55(3) 2011, p 275.

⁴⁴ Marie Brennan, 'National curriculum: A political-educational tangle', *Australian Journal of Education*, 55(3) 2011, p 276.

5 HOW DO AUSTRALIAN STUDENTS COMPARE INTERNATIONALLY?

The recent performance of Australian students in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) resulted in much comment, especially given the Commonwealth Government's recently announced aim that Australia have one of the top five educational systems in the world by 2025. 48 countries participated in PIRLS and 52 countries in TIMSS, with South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong and Finland performing at the highest levels in each subject. This was the first time that Australia had participated in PIRLS.

Many were shocked at the reading achievement of Australia's Year 4 students, who finished 27th internationally when ranked by the percentage of students reaching the intermediate reading benchmark (the lowest of any of the English speaking nations). 24% of year four students in Australia achieved at the Low or Below Low international reading benchmarks. Students in the ACT, Victoria and NSW generally scored much higher on average than students in other states. 45% of students in NSW achieved at a High or Advanced benchmark with the remaining third reaching the intermediate level. However, 22% of students in NSW still achieved at the Below Low or Low reading benchmark. Debate was sparked in the press over issues of how reading is taught (phonics based teaching versus the current preference for a whole of language approach) and the quality of teacher training.⁴⁵

A number of commentators, including Alan Reid and Jennifer Buckingham, have warned of the dangers of using these results in a simplistic manner to compare Australia with 'small European nations and Asian city-states' and adapting educational policy accordingly.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, Thomson et al have highlighted the importance of the Year 4 reading results as 'Reading is probably the most important skill for children to develop in their early years, underpinning learning in all other areas. Year 4 is an important point in children's development as readers, as it is at this age that most students make the transition from learning to read to reading to learn'.⁴⁷

However, in other international tests, Australia has performed relatively well. The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) assesses the competencies of 15 year olds in reading, mathematics and science every three years. The 2009 Survey assessed the competencies of 15 year olds in

⁴⁵ Jennifer Buckingham, 'Far-reaching literacy plan called for', *Australian Financial Review*, 18/12/12, p 39; Noel Pearson, 'Policy failures make for poor reading across the nation', *The Australian*, 15/12/12, p 22; and Tim Dodd and Joanna Mather, 'Why we fail at education', *Australian Financial Review*, 15/12/12, p 21.

⁴⁶ Alan Reid, 'A dumbed down debate, but those tests still hold some lessons', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19/12/12, p 11; Jennifer Buckingham, 'Far-reaching literacy plan called for', *Australian Financial Review*, 18/12/12, p 39.

⁴⁷ Sue Thomson, Kylie Hillman, Nicole Wernert, Marina Schmid, Sarah Buckley and Ann Munene, *Highlights from TIMSS and PIRLS 2011 from Australia's perspective*, Australian Council for Educational Research, Melbourne, 2012.

reading, mathematics and science in 65 countries and economies. In the PISA 2009 results, Australia scored 515 on the overall reading scale, compared to an OECD average of 493. It ranked ninth after Shanghai-China, Korea, Finland, Hong Kong-China, Singapore, Canada, New Zealand and Japan. Its score on the mathematics scale was 514 compared to an OECD average of 496; and 527 on the science scale compared to an OECD average of 501.⁴⁸

It remains to be seen in future PIRLS, TIMSS and PISA results whether the introduction of a common curriculum in Australia will aid efforts to lift the performance of Australia.

5.1 Finland

Finland is a vastly different country to Australia, a Nordic nation of approximately 5.4 million people. It has a largely homogenous population in contrast to multicultural Australia. For just over the last decade, Finland has been a top performer in international tests that compare the performance of students. This has prompted much interest in the education system in Finland and discussion over some of the factors that may have contributed to such success. Because of the frequent reference to Finland in the education literature and amongst commentators, this paper considers its education system as a brief case study of what some other nations are doing in the education sphere.

Finland has moved from being a rather mediocre performer in the early 1990s to one of the top performing OECD countries in maths, science and reading literacy since 2001. Not only that, performance appears to be consistent throughout Finland, with socio-economic background not having a major bearing on educational outcomes. All education is provided by public institutions, with private schools having been abolished in the early 1970s. Another feature of the Finnish educational system is its inclusive special educational strategy – almost half of students receive some special education support before completing the first nine years of school.⁴⁹ As Hargreaves summarised:

Into all this policy mix has come the unlikeliest example of educational success – Finland. With its unexpectedly and consistently superlative performance on international tests of student achievement, its possession of the narrowest achievement gaps in the world, and its equally high rankings on ratings of economic competitiveness, corporate transparency, and general well-being and quality of life, this little Nordic country of barely 5.5 million people has illuminated a different path to educational and economic goals than those being forged by the Anglo-American groups of nations.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ See OECD, 'PISA 2009 Key Findings' <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/pisa2009keyfindings.htm>

⁴⁹ Pasi Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?*, Teachers College Press, New York, 2011, p xix.

⁵⁰ Hargreaves, 'Foreword', in Pasi Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?*, Teachers College Press, New York, 2011, p xviii.

Various reforms in Finland in the 1990s following the recession did away with the strict regulation of schools and resulted in uniform curriculum content being abandoned. Instead teaching and learning was to be based on rigorous curriculum standards combined with flexibility in terms of the content of curriculum used by schools.⁵¹ One characteristic of the Finnish education system, that receives frequent comment, is the level of trust placed in its schools and teachers as well as their autonomy in developing their work plan and curriculum, and many see this as key to the country's success.

Teaching is considered one of the most prestigious professions in Finland, along with law and medicine. There are many more applicants than positions in teaching degrees in Finnish universities, where students are required to obtain a Master's degree before they are able to teach. As noted by Sahlberg, Finnish teachers expect to experience professional autonomy, prestige, respect and trust in their work, and the requirement for teachers to obtain a master's degree he believes is key to attracting the top high school graduates as it is seen as sufficiently challenging for them.⁵² The Council for the Australian Federation believes that strong school leadership and an outstanding quality of teaching have delivered top student results in Finland.

Pasi Sahlberg, Director General of the Centre for International Mobility and Cooperation at the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, has warned that:

..schools in competition-driven education environments are stuck in a tough educational dilemma. The current culture of accountability in the public sector as it is employed in England, North America, and many other parts of the world often threatens school and community social capital; it damages trust rather than support it. As a consequence, teachers and school leaders are no longer trusted; there is a crisis of suspicion... Although the pursuit of transparency and accountability provides parents and politicians with more information, it also builds suspicion, low morale and professional cynicism.⁵³

5.2 The United Kingdom

Another interesting case is that of England where a national curriculum has operated since the late 1980s. The *Education Reform Act 1988* saw the introduction of a national curriculum into primary and secondary schools in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. It applies to students of compulsory school age in maintained schools, that is, private schools or academies are entitled to opt out. The National Curriculum subjects are set out in section 84 of the *Education Act 2002*. Programmes of study for each subject set out what pupils should be taught, and attainment targets are set to demonstrate the expected standard of performance.

⁵¹ Council for the Australian Federation, *Federalist Paper 2: The Future of Schooling in Australia*, September 2007, p 21.

⁵² Pasi Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?*, Teachers College Press, New York, 2011, p 77.

⁵³ Pasi Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?*, Teachers College Press, New York, 2011, p 127.

However, the Secretary of State for Education announced a review of the National Curriculum in England on 20 January 2011. It was argued that over time the National Curriculum ‘has come to cover more subjects, prescribe more outcomes and take up more school time than originally intended’.⁵⁴ The new curriculum is to set out only the essential knowledge for all children with the aim of giving schools and teachers more freedom to design a curriculum that meets the needs of their pupils and enables them to determine the most effective way of teaching it. One of the key principles to underlie the new national curriculum is that it is not to absorb the majority of teaching time in schools. There is thus to be a distinction between the National Curriculum and the school curriculum (of which the National Curriculum will form part).

The proposals for the new National Curriculum in England were released on 7 February 2013. It was noted that in developing the new curriculum, the curricula used in the top performing systems in Hong Kong, Singapore and Massachusetts were studied. The new curriculum will keep all of the current subjects but foreign languages are to be added to the list of subjects to be taught in Key Stage 2 (primary school aged children). The Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, noted in his address to the House of Commons that:

A key principle of our reforms is that the statutory national curriculum should form only part of the whole school curriculum, not its entirety. Each individual school should have the freedom to shape the whole curriculum to their particular pupils’ aspirations—a freedom already enjoyed by the growing numbers of academies and free schools, as well, of course, as schools in the independent sector. Programmes of study in almost all subjects—subjects other than primary English, mathematics and science—have been significantly slimmed down, and we have specifically stripped out unnecessary prescription about how to teach, and concentrated only on the essential knowledge and skills that every child should master.⁵⁵

For more information on the current status of the Review of the National Curriculum in England see:

<http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/curriculum/nationalcurriculum>

⁵⁴ Department for Education, ‘Review of the National Curriculum in England FAQs’, <https://www.education.gov.uk/a00201091/faqs-review-of-the-national-curriculum-in-england#faq2>

⁵⁵ M Gove, PD(HC), 7/2/13, column 443.

6 CONCLUSION

Implementation of phase one (English, Mathematics, Science and History) of the Australian Curriculum will commence in schools in NSW in 2014. The current year is to allow for familiarisation with and planning for the new curriculum and for the professional development of NSW teachers. The path to the introduction of the national curriculum has been long and difficult, and has at times ignited passionate debate. As Piper sums up:

The school curriculum has always been a contentious battleground for political ideology. That this should be so should be neither surprising nor reprehensible, embodying, as it does, the aspirations of the society for its youth, and hence for its future; and being required, as it is, to balance competing needs and interests: the needs and interests of the individual against the needs and interests of the society; the needs and interests of the local community against the needs and interests of the nation; the needs and interests of the workforce against the needs and interests of the culture; and so we could go on.⁵⁶

The cooperation of the States and Territories with the Federal Government has resulted in the development of an Australian Curriculum. The coming years will reveal the impact this curriculum will have. Will it result in a more efficient system as unnecessary duplication is removed? Will the Australian education system be fairer as no child will study in a State or Territory with an inferior curriculum? Will it help remove some of the gaps that exist in Australia between the achievement levels of top performing students and those at the other end of the scale? And will it aid or hinder the Federal Government's aim of the Australian education system being one of the top five performing systems in the world by 2025?

The broad rationale for a national curriculum is explained by Yates, Collins and O'Connor in these terms:

A national Australian curriculum meets the political and management desire for greater uniformity, for common measures, for easier transfer. It also reflects the fact that there has been more of a national curriculum discussion in recent times, including through formal meetings of state ministers and education advisers. Drives for an Australian curriculum also reflect the fact that this is a period of renewed focus on the nation itself, on who we want to be as we go forward, and how we relate to and compare with the rest of the world. If common frameworks are agreed by Ministers around the country and school sectors, they will certainly shape and constrain what schools do, especially via the assessment and reporting that are agreed on, but so too will the teachers and students and the beliefs and experiences they bring to their work and learning. And curriculum is not something that is settled once and for all. As Madeleine Grumet said, "curriculum is the collective story we tell our children about our past, our present and our future".⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Kevin Piper, *Riders in the Chariot: Curriculum reform and the national interest 1965-95*, The Australian Council for Education Research, Melbourne, 1997, p 73.

⁵⁷ Lyn Yates, Cherry Collins and Kate O'Connor (eds) *Australia's Curriculum Dilemmas: State Cultures and the Big Issues*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2011, p 324.