



Australia's New National Curriculum and the Future of History

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Executive summary

- This article looks at Australia's new "world-leading" national curriculum, which is scheduled for implementation from next year, specifically from the point of view of how it will impact on the teaching and learning of History in our primary and secondary schools.
- History, along with English, Maths and Science, has been designated as one of the four original Key Learning Areas (KLAs) upon which the curriculum will be built. This article suggests that, for several reasons, of these four subjects History faces the sternest test in becoming consolidated as a bedrock KLA.
- While there are ongoing difficulties with setting the content of the History curriculum, arguably the greatest problem concerns the nation's chronic shortage of specialist History educators
- In the longer term, this shortfall can be rectified by increasing the annual number of graduate teachers who've completed a History method as part of their degree.
- This will take several years, however, by which time History's status as a stand-alone KLA may have collapsed.
- It is imperative that existing educators who don't currently have expertise in teaching History but henceforth will be expected to teach the subject, are provided with Professional Development (PD) opportunities to gain specialist training in the teaching and learning of History.
- This article's key argument, then, is that History departments and Education schools/faculties in universities across Australia need to join forces to develop and conduct short PD courses for existing primary and secondary educators to gain the necessary expertise.
- The article concludes by suggesting that such a scheme would require significant financial support from the federal government, but this certainly should be forthcoming considering that the introduction of the new national curriculum is being driven by Canberra's bold education reform.

Throughout the only televised Leaders' Debate in the current federal election campaign, Julia Gillard, whenever speaking about "moving forward", repeatedly described herself as an optimist. Yet, when it comes to positively reflecting on her past achievements during Labor's term in office, not even the caretaker prime minister could hold a candle to the sanguine columnist from *The Australian* reporting on the release of the draft K-10 National Curriculum earlier this year. "The Hawke, Keating and Howard governments had a proud record of reform in many areas", it was reported on 5 March 2010, "but, when it comes to the school curriculum, Julia Gillard has achieved more in two years than her predecessors managed in a quarter of a century". High praise indeed! What is most curious, though, is the use of past tense not only in the above statement but also the article's subheading that emphatically declares: "Gillard has prevailed where others failed for 25 years". Why "achieved" and "prevailed" rather than "achieving" or "succeeding", which capture a sense of ongoing (but yet to be fulfilled) accomplishment? For this latest attempt to introduce a national curriculum still is in its infancy, with guidelines and agreements yet to be finalised before its implementation from next year. Rolling out such a bold education reform promises to be a most challenging operation and some of the major problems—pedagogical, practical, and political—already widely identified have the potential to derail the entire project before it ever gathers any real momentum. There are categorically no guarantees that it will be a success. And, even if all key stakeholders involved (state and federal governments, education departments, Education schools/faculties in universities, principals and teachers, schools, students and parents etc.) fully embrace this new national curriculum, the sober reality is that it will take years before all serious pitfalls are overcome and any shortfalls ironed out. Surely, then, far too much still remains to be "achieved" before anyone can even remotely claim to have "prevailed" in reforming the nation's primary and secondary education sectors.

The ambitious new model, which will end the states' autonomous control over setting their own curriculum, will be implemented in several phases. The first stage has afforded privileged status to the four core subject areas of English, Mathematics, Science, and, perhaps most surprisingly and contentiously, History. As the designated four original Key Learning Areas (KLAs), it is projected that henceforth these subjects will effectively serve as the cornerstones of our national curriculum. (Other subject areas including Geography and LOTE are slated for introduction as additional KLAs in the near future.) The overall concept faces numerous challenges, and in their prominent roles as stand-alone KLAs English, Maths, and Science all are presented with their own unique set of issues to

address. Unquestionably, however, History, which has been treated so shabbily outside of New South Wales over the past few decades, has the single greatest challenge ahead if its favourable position as a bedrock KLA of the new national curriculum is to be reinforced—rather than revoked—over the next decade.

Why does History face the sternest test of the first four KLAs? The reasons are too many and varied to cover here, but even a cursory glance provides some indication of the monumental challenge ahead. Take, for instance, the complex issue of content. Whereas more than 90 percent of the content currently covered in Maths and Science is the same from state to state, this certainly cannot be said of History (and, to a lesser degree, English). In the case of History, the incredibly wide-reaching scope of the content to be covered attempts to locate Australian history within a broader context of world history stretching back thousands of years. Consequently, the curriculum drafted by the 23-member taskforce headed by one of Australia's preeminent historians, Professor Stuart Macintyre (former Dean of Arts at the University of Melbourne), has been criticised in some quarters as being far too broad. Chief Executive of the History Teachers' Association of Victoria (HTAV) Annabel Astbury, for example, has complained that trying to cover too much content "at a superficial level" potentially could result in "the death of history" as a school subject. And just three weeks after the draft's release, Peter Hill, the CEO of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), the body responsible for the new national curriculum, was quoted in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 25 March 2010 as suggesting that History was the subject that "might have to be pared back given the time restraints of teachers". This raises serious concerns precisely because the amount of time that will be allocated to teaching and learning History at the primary and secondary levels is yet to be confirmed – less than 6 months before the national curriculum is supposed to be implemented! Time allocation is crucial because ultimately it will determine whether History really is promoted and embraced as a stand-alone KLA on an equal footing with the other three or if it will be treated merely as a poor cousin.

Despite the ambitious scope of the draft curriculum, when it comes to those thorny issues of content and application it is, of course, impossibly difficult to please everyone. Some critics have pointed out the apparent lack of clarity concerning the combination approach referred to in the draft as "depth study and overview". In other words, it's unclear what topics will be studied in depth and which ones will be brushed over, and how it will all hang together in logical sequence. Professor Tony Milner, an expert on Asian History based at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra, labelled the draft "lame and impotent" due to its flawed

attempt to incorporate Australia's history into an Asian narrative. Coalition politicians, meanwhile, have been critical of a perceived over-emphasis on both Asian and indigenous history at the expense of celebrating our British heritage. Education spokesman for the federal opposition Christopher Pyne has even threatened that the curriculum may be subjected to a complete overhaul if there is a change of government. It's hard to imagine that Maths, Science, or even English ever would be politicised in such a manner.

Moreover, there are some rather alarming statistics that amplify the difficulties facing History's effective implementation. In Australia today there are approximately a quarter of a million teachers and 3.5 million students spread across roughly 10,000 schools (public and private, primary and secondary). Surveys conducted over the past decade indicate that around 50% of secondary school educators teach outside their own area of expertise. Nonetheless, as traditional stand-alone subjects English, Maths, and Science each boast a veritable army of specialised classroom practitioners who will be entrusted with the task of implementing their components of what Canberra promotes as our new "world-leading national curriculum". The same cannot be said of History, however, which has been at least badly neglected if not wholly ignored for the past quarter-century or more during which time amorphous multi-disciplinary "social studies" grab-bags such as SOSE (Studies of Society and Environment) have been in vogue instead. Notwithstanding Victoria's very recent decision to reinstate History, New South Wales had been the exception whereby it always remained a strongly-supported stand-alone subject. It should not be surprising, then, to hear that ten universities in NSW offer a History method as part of their Education degrees. But it is disturbing to learn that only six other universities across the rest of Australia have bothered to offer a History method. In crude economic terms, until now there hasn't been a demand for expert History teachers so there wasn't any need to supply a History method. It obviously means that we now have a dearth both of secondary school educators properly trained to specialise in teaching History and primary school teachers adequately equipped to introduce the subject in those crucial formative years. On the eve of when this KLA is supposed to play a leading role in helping to launch the new national curriculum, surely the severe lack of suitably qualified History educators is a most urgent issue to address. How will History's required army of well-trained, informed, confident, energetic, and engaging classroom practitioners materialise?

Monash University's Tony Taylor, an Education academic with a keen interest in the teaching and learning of History currently working as a consultant for ACARA, has been at the forefront of curriculum change discourse for more than a decade.

“It’s not the nature of a published curriculum that is likely to be the real problem”, warns Taylor, “it’s in the implementation that a curriculum stands or falls”. In discussing the question of implementation, Taylor recently argued that there are two main ways in which we can overcome the shortage of trained History teachers once the national curriculum is rolled out: first, we can rely on experienced and skilful educators to adapt to the altered landscape; second, Australian universities need to start placing “a good deal more emphasis” on training a new generation of “skilled, reflective and knowledgeable teachers of history”. Both suggestions certainly have merit, but they also contain limitations. The first point seems quite a passive approach, with the rest of us essentially sitting back and relying on existing teachers (most of whom aren’t specialists in the subject) to provide the impetus for driving History forward as a cornerstone KLA. This is where being a historian and having a daughter about to commence secondary schooling next year has provided some illuminating—albeit perturbing—insight. During meetings with numerous principals, assistant principals, and leading teachers from a handful of public and private secondary colleges in the local area over the past few months, I have repeatedly asked the same two-part question: how will the new national framework impact on your curriculum at this school and, more specifically, what are your intentions for the teaching of History as a KLA? Most of the responses concerning the general concept were lukewarm, and without fail everyone scoffed at the notion of teaching History as a stand-alone subject let alone lifting it up to the lofty status of being a core KLA. The consensus was that it most probably will not eventuate, but if it were somehow to happen then it would only be as a result of the state’s Education Department enforcing it upon schools (in order to receive federal government funding). After these recent conversations, to say that I’m currently not filled with confidence about the manner in which History will be implemented if it’s simply left to existing educators is an understatement!

Taylor’s second suggestion, regarding the improved and amplified training of Education students preparing to be our next generation of History teachers, is an excellent longer-term solution. But it will take several years not only to build up sufficient numbers of graduates, but also then to wait for them to gain the experience, competence, confidence, and respect required to win promotion to more senior roles charged with the responsibility of setting curriculum. The inevitable lag is being exacerbated by the fact that, despite several years of notice that the national curriculum is on its way, for some inexplicable reason Education schools/faculties in Australian universities generally haven’t bothered to reconfigure themselves in order to be better equipped to cater for the changing demands.

Meanwhile, what about the chronic lack of specialist History educators in the short term? It seems to me that there is a fairly simple solution, though it's one that would require considerable commitment from universities and schools plus significant support from policymakers in charge of implementing the national curriculum. History departments and Education schools/faculties in universities across Australia should join forces to develop and conduct new short courses specifically designed to train existing primary and secondary educators in their region how to teach History at their particular level of schooling. There must be a large cohort of SOSE educators whose specialism has suddenly become somewhat redundant, and surely many of them would be interested in some PD (professional development) that will help them adjust to the new national curriculum. Furthermore, given that the statistics reveal such a high percentage of secondary teachers are forced to teach outside their specialisms, surely there is a large market of educators who'd love the chance to become better prepared for teaching a subject they don't fully understand. Similarly, imagine how many primary school educators currently are petrified at the thought of having to teach History for the first time – especially given the impressive scope of the content to be covered up to Year 6. The day-long seminar approach won't be anywhere near comprehensive enough to make a positive difference, whereas a diploma-length commitment is overkill (and probably a major turn-off for many potential participants). But something in between, which would offer the chance to obtain some kind of nationally-recognised tertiary-level certificate, should be very appealing from a PD sense as well as making a nice addition to the CV.

If universities are willing make the commitment to create and conduct such a scheme, and schools are willing to make the commitment to support their staff in taking on such training as part of their PD, then that's where we need the federal government to get involved with the financial backing required to make sure it happens. After all, there's no point in Canberra committing to such an ambitious education reform only to then squib on injecting the funds necessary to ensure that our classroom practitioners are properly prepared to implement our new "world class" national curriculum at the coal-face. Maybe Julia Gillard has, indeed, achieved much in education reform during the past two years in comparison with her predecessors over the previous two decades. Ultimately, however, it will count for nothing if things aren't followed through in the next few crucial years. And, unfortunately, according Paul Kiem, the president of the History Teachers' Association of Australia (HTAA), the signs aren't good. On two separate occasions the HTAA wrote to Gillard when she was still Kevin Rudd's deputy (and Education Minister) in order to stress that teacher preparation would be vital to the History

curriculum's successful implementation. A lack of response left Kiem and the HTAA understandably disappointed and worried. Let's hope that, no matter who emerges victorious from the 21 August election, our next government does prevail when it comes to successfully implementing the national curriculum. Among other things, it's likely that the future of History will depend on it.

Highly relevant websites for documentation and further reading

Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)

available at: <<http://www.acara.edu.au/default.asp>>

(* provides PDF copies of framing papers, consultation reports, and other publications relating to the ongoing development of the national curriculum)

Australian Government, Department of Education, employment and Workplace

Relations (DEEWR) available at: <<http://www.deewr.gov.au/Pages/default.aspx>>

Australian Government, Department of Education, employment and Workplace

Relations (DEEWR): "Education Reform Agenda" available at: <

http://www.deewr.gov.au/schooling/Pages/Education_reform_agenda.aspx>

History Teachers' Association of Australia (HTAA) available at:

<<http://www.historyteacher.org.au/>> (* contains links to all state associations)

History Teachers' Association of Victoria (HTAV) available at:

<<http://www.htav.asn.au/home>> (last accessed July 2010).

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URL: <http://www.aph.org.au/files/articles/australiaNew.htm>