

Opening Statement – ACARA CEO, David de Carvalho

Senate Estimates, 4 June 2021

In June 2020, all education ministers agreed to terms of reference for a review of the Australian Curriculum. All eight learning areas from Foundation to Year 10 will be reviewed by the end of this year and, subject to ministers' approval, the updated version of the Australian Curriculum will be published on a new website in early 2022.

This is the first six-year cyclical review undertaken by ACARA, which ministers charged us with undertaking, following a 2015 Review of ACARA's governance and operations. The last formal review of the Australian Curriculum was undertaken in 2014.

In preparing for the 2021 Review, ACARA has undertaken a program of research benchmarking the Australian Curriculum against the curricula of Singapore, Finland, British Columbia and New Zealand, and has reviewed the latest national and international developments and research in each learning area.

We have also sought feedback from states and territories on the effectiveness of the Australian Curriculum, engaged with national teacher and principal professional associations and other subject matter experts, and spoken directly with staff and principals at 24 primary schools – one from each sector in each jurisdiction – about what they hoped the Review would achieve.

Since July 2020, ACARA has undertaken extensive consultations with curriculum experts and teachers from all states and territories and the non-government sector through 18 new reference groups established for the Review – 360 nominated representatives in total. There is a curriculum and teacher reference group for each of the eight learning areas and a curriculum and teacher reference group with a focus on the primary years.

Despite some of the media coverage, this is not a major rethinking of the curriculum with significant changes to its approach. The terms of reference were to refine, reduce and declutter the current curriculum, and that has very much been the focus of this Review.

Neither the development of the initial Australian Curriculum nor the 2014 Review involved public consultation on the full set of curriculum materials. This is the first time this has been done, and ACARA always hoped and anticipated that it would give rise to considerable public engagement and discussion.

The former Chair of the ACARA Board, Barry McGaw, speaking at the time of 2014 Review of the Australian Curriculum, noted that a curriculum is always a work in progress and one that 'stirs the passions' – as all important things should. He said:

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.

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That is very much what this process has been about. We are currently in the consultation phase and it is a reminder that Version 9 of the Australian Curriculum is a living document that is being shaped by feedback: some of it positive, some of it critical, we hope all of it constructive.

We have created a bespoke consultation page to facilitate feedback and so far we have had:

- around 1,500 completed surveys
- more than 60,000 page views to our landing page.

The national curriculum is one of the most important levers we have to set up our young people not only for their future but for our country's future as a prosperous, democratic, free, fair and tolerant society that is home to people of many different backgrounds and beliefs.

ACARA will be listening carefully to the feedback received through the consultation process and making changes before submitting.

I would also like to note that just a few weeks ago NAPLAN was successfully undertaken in schools across the country.

More than 1.2 million students took part across more than 9,000 schools. Of those, approximately 70 per cent of schools did NAPLAN Online, submitting more than 2.9 million online tests from 870,000 students.

This is a large-scale multifaceted IT project involving multiple organisations across all jurisdictions working together. Overall, the NAPLAN Online test event proceeded smoothly thanks to the hard work of all involved, including education authorities and schools.