

Submission to the NSW Curriculum Review by the Teachers' Christian Fellowship of New South Wales (TCFNSW).

TCFNSW has been supporting Christian teachers in government and non-government schools for over 70 years and supports a Christian philosophy of education that values the whole curriculum as a way of students knowing God and not just knowing about him. It has a huge interest in any review of the curriculum and would want to place on record the application of its philosophy of education to the areas to be reviewed.

1. Introduction - What are the problems we want to solve?

The NSW syllabuses have been under constant review as noted by the teacher protests about the amount of curriculum change. But, not since *Excellence and Equity* has the structure of the curriculum been up for review, despite some breaking down of the KLA structures within primary schools and in the HSC rules.

Even the Australian Curriculum has not satisfied the growing concerns amongst educators and the community that students are not getting the best education possible. These concerns have been fuelled by the declining performances of students in international tests, the equity issues of performance by postcode, the business and community questions about the readiness of school leavers for life and work and a declining confidence in national and state testing programs.

While the curriculum is by far the most controllable aspect of schooling, there are other areas of schooling that could have been the subject of direct review. For example - teacher pre-service training, teacher professional learning, the physical structure of schools and learning spaces, competing philosophies of learning, funding arrangements, community expectations and home-school liaison.

The curriculum has become the focus because it is perceived as the best way to reverse the international decline in student standards. This problem has been fully canvassed in [*Going backwards: 20+ years of a literacy and numeracy focus*](#), in which John Gore outlines the areas that would need to be addressed in a holistic review of education for these results to be improved. Curriculum is just one of the areas identified for review. The other areas being those listed in the previous paragraph. However, curriculum can set a basis for other changes to also improve learning.

Believing in an unchanging God, TCFNSW members recognise continuous change in our world and welcome any review of the

curriculum that will improve the education of Australian students and encourage a wider review of the areas directly associated with the curriculum.

2. Knowledge, skills and attitudes reflecting underlying philosophies

A lot of time could be spent on asking: What is the curriculum? Such discussions could include the hidden curriculum, how the curriculum might be conceived, what school related experiences can be included in the curriculum, what is the formal curriculum and whether outside learning can be included in the curriculum for individual students. Traditionally the curriculum has been defined as the total of learning and educational experiences provided by the school with some recognition and incorporation of learning outside the school. But defining these boundaries doesn't answer what is the curriculum, so the review is wise to look at underpinning philosophies. In this regard TCFNSW would offer from a Christian philosophy of education some principles that would benefit all students irrespective of their cultural and religious backgrounds:

1. Education, and therefore the chosen curriculum, is unashamedly about changing people and the review needs to articulate the qualities it seeks to produce in school graduates. In this regard, Australia's Christian heritage will assist in providing insight into what Australians value and the knowledge and skills that are expected to be consistent with these values.
2. Christians have a special interest in the poor and disadvantaged. Members believe that there is no place for streaming if equity of opportunity is to be claimed. Individual course pre-requisites are to be kept to a minimum and based on prior attainments available to all students. Accelerated progression may be appropriate for the occasional genius, but bright students need to learn with their cohort for reasons of self-esteem and the broader social outcomes of schooling.
3. Because all subjects can reveal something of the character of God, no one subject is necessarily more important than another, but not all subjects require the same time or continuous study. A broad selection of studies is to be respected and catered for. It is argued that in the existing system, a curriculum guarantee based on a study from all KLAs was important, but a focus on literacy and numeracy to the exclusion of the breadth of study weakened student learning, changing the outcomes of schooling. Subject specialisation and more time on particular subjects are important, but the foregoing of breadth of study should be postponed as long as possible.

4. Traditional philosophies, including Christian philosophies, based on seeking truth are to be respected and included if the curriculum is to have an integrity that is widely accepted across the community. One expression of Christian education is the seeking of truth because truth lies in the character of God. This Christian philosophy is not afraid of science and welcomes its contribution to truth.
5. TCFNSW members believe that education is more than an array of subjects. *It is a way of living, a way of thinking, feeling, doing, creating, reacting in social relationships, in response to a Person.* (Dr A Hogg, *Journal of Christian Education Vol. 5, No. 1, P. 18*) This expectation broadens the concept of curriculum and encourages the reviewers to first focus on what sort of people the community wants to see graduate from schooling? Articulating a philosophical base that has the capacity to capture these qualities is essential.

3. Breaking through the dominance of KLAs – What are the alternatives?

Excellence and Equity provided a useful and enduring conceptualisation of the curriculum. It helped to establish a curriculum guarantee within both primary and secondary schools. Students by the end of Year 10 would have mandatory studies in all the learning areas, although minimal in some like languages. The prescription of minimum times for these studies were to prove troublesome requirements for both government and nongovernment secondary schools. In NSW, the newly created Board of Studies (1990) embarked on a massive syllabus writing task that took near 10 years to complete. The level of prescription took away a lot of teacher discretion and required more time than was available in both primary and secondary schools. The reality of an overcrowded curriculum meant teachers were not teaching at the depth that might be expected. Covering content became the game and not the development of learning skills. Teachers were not trusted to make the right decisions about what students should know and be able to do nor was their assessment of learning trusted.

The KLA structure also came under criticism as compartmentalizing knowledge. In primary schools, teachers were assisted in this problem by a number of interdisciplinary units of work that drew on a number of KLA syllabuses with a primary focus on one. In secondary schools, there was little scope to cooperate with other faculties in cross KLA learning in either interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary studies.

Throughout the period of the Board of Studies (1990 – 2017) multidiscipline studies were seen as lower level attempts to

organize the curriculum and were unable to provide the depth of learning that a study of a discipline could achieve. Any new subject with the title “studies” was deemed second rate. This attitude reflected the strong influences the universities on the writing of curriculum and that of their prodigies within government and education bureaucracies holding similar views.

School systems have tried to influence the quality of teaching by focusing professional learning on pedagogy, but the KLA structure and content demands of syllabuses have limited any widespread effectiveness of these initiatives. Given the current problems being faced, a new approach to curriculum is needed if improved pedagogy is to deliver better results. Teachers will need to be trusted more in making decisions about the content and student achievement to achieve this quality.

There are three widely recognised curriculum designs: Subject-centred with a focus on content. Learner-centred with a focus on pedagogy. Problem-centred with a focus on quality tasks. NSW has had a predominantly subject-centred design with attempts to introduce some flexibility for student-centred design despite the responsibilities for pedagogy being with school systems and not the curriculum authority. In recommending how the curriculum might be implemented, task-oriented approaches have found some place, but not in curriculum design. It may be that the new curriculum design needs to take account of all three approaches which raises some of the following considerations.

Alternatives might include:

1. Competencies

In the early 1990s, Australia embarked on a Key Competencies project which, with the first attempt at a national curriculum (KLA statements and profiles), failed to pass the education ministers in their 1994 meeting, but further work occurred to embed these competencies within the curriculum. What were these work-related competencies? As the community criticizes the existing curriculum, they sound just like the areas they want students to be involved in. This work could be revisited because it is much to recommend the competencies and their power to underpin curriculum in a different way including driving pedagogical change. This investigation could also include the missing eighth Key Competency of *Cultural Understanding* which was dismissed as too difficult by the anti “studies” conservatives before it had been fully developed. Using competencies, or a similar structure, the curriculum question becomes what discipline knowledge, skills and attitudes including multidiscipline studies contribute to these competencies within the stages of learning and what pedagogy might be expected to achieve them.

2. Capabilities

Defining the curriculum through a set of capabilities may be a similar approach, but broader than the Key Competencies. Similarly, the capabilities need to be both overarching and then broken down into contributing capabilities for the stages of learning. The knowledge, skills and attitudes that form the disciplines, including multidiscipline studies, will inform the content.

3. Stage statements

Some NSW syllabuses have been improved by stage statements about what a student should know and be able to do by the end of a stage. These were often written after the syllabus had been detailed but could become a powerful director of curriculum if written first as an expression by stage of what students should know and be able to do. This structure would make clear the expectations and then identify the relevant discipline and multidiscipline content to help students meet these statements. This structure would also define assessment for each stage and give teachers considerable autonomy in choosing content to achieve the stage statements.

4. Essential learning

Identifying essential learning for each stage of schooling is very attractive but difficult to define. There are alternatives, but defining essential learning is most likely to be in terms of specific subject content and every subject lobby group will lobby for place. This format, while giving a curriculum guarantee, is the most likely to be contested by special interest groups and political lobbies.

5. Outcomes

From the early 1990s, business models and international initiatives in outcomes education became driving forces in curriculum design. While providing some guidance for curriculum and assessment, their lack of specificity and difficulty in assessing student achievement resulted in a curriculum overlay that teachers could do without. They complicated unnecessarily the teaching and the assessment work of teachers leading to copious documentation so that teachers felt excessive time was spent on administration at the expense of teaching. While the curriculum can be organized around outcomes, it's time to let this agenda go.

The worst result of the review would be to include all or most of these and other possibilities and have complex multilayered, excessive content curriculum documents like the current models. Teachers deserve the clarity from developing one model well.

4. A place for basics and a curriculum guarantee

In changing the structure of the curriculum, the designers will need to assure the community that "the basics" are comprehensively dealt with. This focus on "the basics" will need to be more than English and mathematics and in this regard a curriculum based on

essential learnings for each of the stages of schooling may have the advantage of making the curriculum easy to comprehend. The “real” basics of literacy and numeracy, which have featured in testing programs over the last 20+ years, have not been delivered by a narrowly focused curriculum. The embedding of these “competencies” must be across the whole curriculum and feature in all subject matter contexts.

One area of special interest is religious education and TCFNSW believes that the NSW Education Act 1990 has it right in outlining both general religious education (GRE) and special religious education (SRE). The latter is purely a matter for the approved providers, but general religious education is a curriculum matter. The NSW curriculum authority has never mapped GRE across the curriculum and with the Australian Curriculum Authority have faced a continuing battle with some educators and people of faith who want to see more explicit content about *the world’s major religions, what people believe and how that belief affects their lives*. (NSW Department of Education definition of GRE). GRE is teaching about religion not teaching in a religion. It is needed to understand the world we live in as well as Australia’s heritage. NSW education is not non-religious or anti religion, but secular, where the Act points out that “secular” includes GRE. This matter must also be addressed in any curriculum review.

4. Conceptualising standards and how they might be assessed

Irrespective of the chosen model of curriculum design, one eye will need to be kept on how student learning can be assessed. While the testing should not be the tail that wags the curriculum dog, developing a curriculum without a manageable assessment program will not serve the political needs of schools, school systems and politicians who want to know whether students are doing better today than yesterday. TCFNSW members believe in standards and accountability revealed by character of God. In education, students, teachers and school systems should have explicit learning standards which are measurable and inform accountability.

This matter has implications for how the curriculum will express standards which should be embedded into the curriculum and not an afterthought. There must be no disconnect in this matter.

There have been attempts to define standards and the use of work samples to illustrate student achievement. This has been helpful but not comprehensive enough to allow comparable teacher judgements resulting in a continuing focus on testing. In this regard, standards need to focus on the quality of the tasks both for teaching and learning and for assessing and reporting being

designed to meet the standards. Quality tasks with criteria for markers and work sample to illustrate the criteria remain the best, but not the cheapest, way to set and illustrate standards. The end purpose here should be teacher assessment and reporting that is comparable. This comparability depends on quality tasks, criteria and work samples.

This approach to assessment will also be assisted by establishing levels of achievement to align with a reporting system like A-E but where A-E represents performance not general descriptions of what the student can do. Parents and students want to know how they are going against explicit standards not a description of how they are progressing. This concept of A-E will provide the data schools, school systems and politicians want.

6. *The realities of pedagogy, professional learning and learning spaces.*

TCFNSW members believe in showing the love of God in their relationships with students and seek a more student-centred curriculum which will allow for individual difference within the framework of high expectations.

To date, the NSW curriculum, assessment and national testing program have driven pedagogy. Getting through the content has pushed teachers into traditional didactic teaching methods. When provided with professional learning focused on renewing pedagogy, teachers have responded with “we would never get through the syllabus content” or “we need to focus on improving NAPLAN results by concentrating on literacy and numeracy”. The thrust of professional learning funds has been at odds with the curriculum demands that teachers are expected to achieve. Teaching for examinations, practicing examination formats, prepared answers and excessive homework have often been the instruments of teaching. This situation cannot be changed without a totally different form of curriculum and assessment.

Improved pedagogy will need appropriate learning spaces. Our schools are basically constructed as factories, especially secondary schools. While improved learning spaces and smaller class size have combined to give primary teachers a better chance of implementing different and more student-centred pedagogy, secondary classrooms remain crowded, inflexible, lacking in storage space and are used by many different teachers throughout the week. Few secondary schools have home rooms for their teachers and, even where they do, the variety of classes taught does not facilitate imaginative classroom organization.

These matters will also need to be kept in minds by curriculum designers and represent inhibitors to any planned change, rather than drivers of change.

7. What's desirable vs what's possible.

Developing a different curriculum to meet the needs of students who will be graduating in the late 2030s is the challenge. Designers will need to let go of some of the sacred cows of the past and embrace multidiscipline studies as well as the disciplines and to allow skills, capabilities and competencies by whatever name to inform a framework. If the result is ambitious, a staged introduction may be needed to allow for the changes in professional learning and articulation of assessment and reporting. If conservative, it will act within the constraints of existing curriculum design, teacher pedagogy and classroom buildings and is unlikely to achieve its aims. Moving the curriculum away from a subject-centred design and towards student-centred with a focus on pedagogy and a problem solving (task oriented) design is encouraged and will be a move in the right direction to better prepare students for a future that remains uncertain.

TCFNSW members welcome such change.