

Australian Catholic University

Submission to the NSW Curriculum Review Taskforce

NSW Curriculum Review

November 2018

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Executive Summary

Australian Catholic University (ACU) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the New South Wales (NSW) Curriculum Review Taskforce (the Taskforce).

The Taskforce has an opportunity to recommend broad and innovative reform to the NSW curriculum. ACU welcomes this broad review and believes a new approach is needed that is more focused on the individual student.

The Australian Government's "Through Growth to Achievement" report (the Gonski 2.0 report) offers important insights for reforming the NSW curriculum, in particular that:

- students should move from an industrialised to a personalised model so that each student achieves a year's increase in learning rather than moving in lock-step with each year level;
- there should be more low-stakes, low-key, and regular assessment to measure how students are progressing;
- there should be a renewed focus on individual achievement and maximising growth for every student; and,
- all students should have the opportunity within schools to be partners in their own learning.

Drawing on the Gonski 2.0 report, ACU makes the following recommendations to ensure the NSW curriculum is more student-centred:

- (i) The purpose of education should be that all students achieve their full potential. (Term of Reference (TOR) 1)
- (ii) The NSW curriculum, particularly the core areas of literacy, numeracy/mathematics and science, should be structured according to learning progressions rather than year levels. Students should only move to the next learning stage once they have achieved a sound understanding of core concepts. (TOR 1)
- (iii) The NSW curriculum's new learning progressions could usefully be structured using a framework of basic, essential, and enrichment learnings. (TOR 1)
- (iv) Moving from a year-based curriculum to one expressed as learning progressions independent of year or age should be accompanied by relevant changes to assessment and teaching practices. (TOR 1)

- (v) Greater use should be made of assessment that occurs against the individual's prior performance (known in the literature as ipsative assessment), rather than criterion-referenced or norm-referenced assessment. (TOR 4 a)
- (vi) Any approach to curriculum design should seek, interpret and act on students' views. (TOR 4 b)
- (vii) Teachers may require additional time, support and work structures in order to establish appropriate, personalised learning goals for each child. The introduction of learning progressions involves a reconceptualisation of, rather than an add-on to, teacher's work. (TOR 4 b)
- (viii) In initial teacher education (ITE), there should be a stronger focus on assessment, diagnosis and intervention, which will require revisions to the professional standards governing accreditation of ITE programs. (TOR 4 c)
- (ix) There should be explicit provision of time for literacy and numeracy in all curriculum areas and a rationalisation of the assessment standards teachers use to judge literacy and numeracy. (TOR 4 d)

ACU is the largest educator of new teachers in Australia, and is committed strongly to the quality of both ITE and the classroom experiences of teachers and students. Through our Institute for Learning Sciences and Teacher Education, we conduct leading research and design on education and classroom practices. ACU would be pleased to contribute this expertise to ongoing discussions with NESAs about improvement to the NSW curriculum and the experiences and outcomes of students and teachers.

Responses to the Review's Terms of Reference

1. Articulate the purposes of the school curriculum, including underpinning philosophies and principles.

Purpose

Preparing students for the world of work is a reasonable expectation of any school curriculum but it cannot be the only philosophical purpose for schooling and education in the 21st century. The purpose of schooling is also about how we live well together, and not just work together. It is important that we focus on the knowledge and skills to: engage with democratic citizenship; live with ethnic and religious difference; support equality in society; and live sustainably with nature. The purpose of schooling in the 21st century therefore should be to support students to become autonomous, effective decision-makers, critical thinkers and problem-solvers.

Educational attainment refers to the highest level of education reached by an individual, while *educational achievement* relates to how well the individual performs at that level. There is no correlation between the two, and often a significant divergence between students with the same number of years of schooling and the results they achieve. Yet if we truly believe that all students should “achieve” to their full potential, we need to rethink the curriculum and how to assess that curriculum. If the purpose of school education is for every child to demonstrate growth over time in alignment with his or her developmental capacities, then we should aim for a curriculum that aligns with that purpose.

ACU recommendation:

The purpose of education should be that all students achieve their full potential.

Principles

If the purpose is to maximise student growth for every child, then the underlying principle must be to ensure that each student achieves a sound understanding of core concepts before moving onto the next stage of learning.

The Gonski 2.0 report recommended moving curriculum from year-level packages of content and achievement to “a structured roadmap of long-term learning progress.”¹ The practical impact of this idea is to change the organising principle of

¹ David Gonski et al, (March 2018), *Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*, p. 31.

schooling from a traditional year-based curriculum to a curriculum expressed as learning progressions independent of year or age. The logical consequence is that students are not taught according to chronological age but rather according to conceptual and developmental capacities.

As Professor Geoff Masters has observed, in any given class the most advanced 10 per cent of students are about five to six years ahead of the least advanced 10 per cent of students; “less advanced students often are presented with year-level material that is much too difficult. ... At the same time, more advanced students often are presented with year-level material that is much too easy.”² As Masters observes, “any single year-level standard, wherever it is set, will be inappropriately easy or unrealistically difficult for a large proportion of students.”³

If every child should demonstrate growth over time in alignment with his or her developmental capacities, then this personal growth should not be restrained by a grade-based content curriculum.

Having students move through a sequence of learning progressions not linked to ages or years of school means greater diagnosis of individual progression and establishing appropriate, personalised learning goals for each child. This requires regular understanding of engagement with the curriculum and learning. It requires school education to become far more personalised for individual students and it also requires a significant reconceptualisation of teachers’ work.

ACU recommendation:

The NSW curriculum, particularly the core areas of literacy, numeracy/mathematics and science, should be structured according to learning progressions rather than year levels. Students should only move to the next learning stage once they have achieved a sound understanding of core concepts.

In implementing learning progressions, the Gonski 2.0 report recommended that priority be given to literacy and numeracy during the early years of schooling to ensure core foundations are quickly established. ACU agrees with this proposal.

A framework of basic and essential learnings can inform the development of learning progressions. To this end, ACU provides the following schema as a guide:

- 1. Basic learnings** provide the necessary prerequisites for successful lifelong learning. This is the foundation platform on which all other learning is built (e.g.

² Geoff Masters, (Feb 2018), “A different way to organise the school curriculum,” *Teacher: Evidence + Insight + Action*, ACER, 05 February 2018.

³ *Ibid.*

literacy, numeracy, understanding key constructs of our natural, social and technological world).

- 2. Essential learnings** are the core learnings that provide breadth of understanding for effective cultural, economic, environmental, health, family, social and political engagement. Core learnings could include disciplinary studies (e.g. English, mathematics, science), interdisciplinary studies (e.g. environmental studies, arts), and dispositions (e.g. communication skills, valuing human health and wellbeing, etc.).
- 3. Enrichment learnings** supplement the prior learnings and bring depth and specialist understanding to key knowledge areas; e.g. extension studies to core disciplines, Languages other than English, vocational training etc. This enrichment curriculum will need to provide students with both broad and specialised knowledge, dependent on their needs and capacities, complemented by the development of higher-level thinking skills, metacognitive capacities, social and emotional skills, problem solving skills and practical and physical skills. The enriched curriculum is characterised by flexibility, choice, conceptual knowledge, higher level thinking and cross-curriculum competencies that will ensure students have the capacities to deal with the uncertainties and challenges of the future.

Under this proposal, the curriculum is reconceptualised beyond the traditional collection of subjects to a more complex learning framework that guarantees every student is provided with foundational knowledge and skills necessary for living and thriving as both a national and global citizen.

ACU recommendation:

The NSW curriculum’s new learning progressions could usefully be structured using a framework of basic, essential, and enrichment learnings.

The principle of learning progressions would also need to be supported by appropriate alignment of testing, assessment and teaching practices. Formative rather than summative assessment would become more prominent, as would tests for individual progression rather than placing the individual within a population. This would require assessment more like ACER’s Progressive Achievement Tests than NAPLAN, a broad standardised assessment.

Employers and teachers would also be required to rethink the nature of their work. Although teachers are already trained to teach diverse needs, this focus would become more intense. Teachers would need to embrace a model of “assess, diagnose, intervene, deliver and monitor” groups of students with diverse needs,

rather than focusing on grade-based content for students assumed to have similar needs. The pedagogical skills of focusing effectively on individual needs would become far more prominent, as would greater familiarity with the diagnostic tools used to assess this need. The implications for initial teacher education (ITE) are canvassed below in our response to 4 c.

ACU recommendation:

Moving from a year-based curriculum to one expressed as learning progressions independent of year or age should be accompanied by relevant changes to assessment and teaching practices.

4. Identify the implications of any new approach to curriculum design for:

a) Assessment and reporting

Education is about learning and the purpose of assessment is to ascertain what students know, understand and can do. The current education system, regardless of the rhetoric, assumes students learn at a common pace and in a common style. The result is that many of our brightest students do not work to their full potential, while students who initially struggle in school become labelled as failures and rarely regain the status of a successful learner until after they have left school. We can no longer tolerate an assessment system that ignores individual progression.

An assessment system such as NAPLAN that gives the same test to students at a given point in time has a particular purpose but essentially defies what is known from learning theory and educational research in relation to assessment *for* learning. Assessment must provide insight at the point of need, so that gaps are closed and students do not progress through their education with the same fundamental misconceptions uncorrected. We need to ensure that the student understands core concepts before progressing to more advanced learning.

ACU endorses the Gonski 2.0 report's recommendation that schools move from an industrialised to a personalised model so that each child receives a year's increase in learning rather than moving in lock-step with a curriculum based on year level. This involves a reconceptualisation of the curriculum so as to move from yearly targets to learning progressions, and more low-stakes, low-key, and regular assessment to see how children are progressing. As the Gonski 2.0 report noted,

Few assessment tools or tests currently exist in Australia to measure an individual student's learning growth over time. The available assessments do not provide teachers with real-time or detailed data on a student's growth, nor do they provide teachers with information or resources about suggested next steps to improve student outcomes. Teachers in Australia would benefit from a new online formative assessment tool—calibrated against the learning progressions—that measures student attainment and growth in attainment levels over time. The tool could also suggest, for consideration by the teacher, potential interventions to build further progress.⁴

ACU supports this initiative and suggests that consideration be given to a system of assessment where the only person a student is being compared with is

⁴ David Gonski et al, (March 2018), *Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*, pp. 62-63.

himself/herself and their own previous learning. In sports this is known as a “personal best” – athletes train together and compete against each other for places but ultimately work to improve their PB. This way of working has been already successfully implemented in other school systems.⁵

ACU recommendation:

Greater use should be made of assessment that occurs against the individual’s prior performance (known in the literature as ipsative assessment), rather than criterion-referenced or norm-referenced assessment.

⁵ See, for example, Bourke, R., O’Neill, J., & Loveridge, J. (2018). “What starts to happen to teachers’ assessment when they learn about their children’s informal learning?” *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 45 & Winthrop, R. & Barton, A. (2018). “Education innovations are taking root around the world. What do they have in common?” Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/education-plus-development/2018/05/17/education-innovations-are-taking-root-around-the-world-what-do-they-have-in-common/>

4. Identify the implications of any new approach to curriculum design for:

b) Pedagogical practices and teacher workload

Pedagogical practices

John Dewey's philosophy of education offers a pedagogical approach that meets the demands of a modern and democratic society. Works such as *Democracy and Education* (1916) and *Experience and Education* (1938) provide the central tenets of Dewey's work. In particular, Dewey identified the importance of the student as an active participant, not passive recipient, with a call for each student to be engaged in continual thought, inquiry, discovering and actions.

The passive positioning of students in curriculum and pedagogical designs is no longer tenable for several important reasons. First, students hold important knowledge about their own preferences, motivations, and orientations to learning that teachers and curriculum developers may not fully grasp and understand. Second, students have important localised knowledge and cultural experiences that they bring to school and classroom learning (including bias and inaccurate representations) that is relevant to school curriculum. Third, students have the right to express their views and opinions about their learning and decisions that affect their school life.⁶

Significant research has also confirmed the importance of student voice and students' active engagement in school reform, curriculum development and pedagogical decision-making.⁷ In the context of increased student diversity and student underachievement in many NSW schools, seeking, responding to and acting on students' voices plays an important role in empowering all students to actively participate in and contribute to learning.

ACU recommendation:

Any new approach to curriculum design should seek, interpret and act on students' views.

⁶ As expressed by UNICEF (1989). *Convention on the rights of the child*. Available at:

<http://www.unicef.org/crc/fulltext.htm>

⁷ See, for example: Fielding, M. (2004). "Transformative approaches to student voice: Theoretical underpinnings, recalcitrant realities." *British Educational Research Journal*, 30(2), 295-311; Mitra, D. L., & Serriere, S. C. (2012). "Student voice in elementary school reform: Examining youth development in fifth graders." *American Educational Research Journal*, 49(4), 743-774; Reeve, J. (2013). "How students create motivationally supportive learning environments for themselves: The concept of agentic engagement." *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 105(3), 579-595.

Teacher workload

Australian education systems have received strong criticism from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) for their overcrowded, content-heavy curriculum delivered by overworked teachers. Andreas Schleicher, the coordinator of the Programme for International Student Assessment and current director-general of the OECD's Directorate for Education, has stated that the challenge for the Australian education system is "to make teaching intellectually more attractive".⁸ Schleicher says that employers need to provide "intelligent pathways for teachers to grow in their careers"⁹, having previously observed that Australian teachers were not given the same opportunities to collaborate with colleagues, research literature on best practices, and reflect on their own practice and experience as exist in other high-performing countries.¹⁰ Australian teachers spend longer hours teaching than their international colleagues and less time in professional learning.

Moving from a year-based curriculum to one expressed as learning progressions independent of year or age requires a new level of personalised learning for students and a significant reconceptualisation of teachers' work. The reform will fail if these significant changes are seen as an add-on to teachers' current work. Without a reconceptualisation of teachers' work supported by employers and unions, increased professional development for teachers, and the allocation of necessary resources, these reforms will not be possible.

One way to free teachers from added burden is through the delegation of non-core tasks to para-professional staff and final-year teaching students working part of their final year as paid interns. These and other innovative approaches should be considered in promoting curriculum reform.

ACU recommendation:

Teachers may require additional time, support and work structures in order to establish appropriate, personalised learning goals for each child. The introduction of learning progressions involves a reconceptualisation of, rather than an add-on to, teacher's work.

⁸ Andreas Schleicher, "Lessons to be learned from the world's education leaders," *The Australian*, 27 September, 2017.

⁹ Schleicher, see above note 8.

¹⁰ Eryk Bagshaw and Alexandra Smith, 'Education policy not adding up: OECD asks what's wrong with Australia's schools?' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25th March 2016.

4. Identify the implications of any new approach to curriculum design for:

c) Teacher preparation and ongoing professional learning

Teacher preparation

A student-centred curriculum based on learning progressions rather than year levels demands changes to initial teacher education (ITE). Preservice students will need greater experience observing and working with students with diverse needs, with a consequent shift to study various models of team teaching. The notion of ipsative or “personal best” assessment also has important implications for ITE.

A focus on the development of a range of formative assessments that teachers can access on demand and provide to students when required implies the development of knowledge and skills to collect, interpret and use a wide range of data, including from standardised and class tests and on-the-spot quick check-ins that occur during teaching.

Recent literature has canvassed what this new data intensity means for teacher education.¹¹ In summary, teachers will require knowledge and professional capacities to design work programs and assessments that take account and provide evidence of different levels of performance and enable students to engage in learning at the level required to progress their learning. Teachers will require the knowledge and skills to recognise times when students require focussed teaching, beyond the planned work, if a core concept is not understood. Consistent with this more personalised approach, ITE will also need to assist teachers include students in dialogue about their learning, so that students come to understand quality within a discipline.

As a consequence, the professional standards for accreditation of ITE programs would need to be revised to reflect these changes.

ACU recommendation:

In initial teacher education (ITE), there should be a stronger focus on assessment, diagnosis and intervention, which will require revisions to the professional standards governing accreditation of ITE programs.

¹¹ See, for example, Andersson, C., & Palm, T. (2018, February 3). Reasons for teachers’ successful development of a formative assessment practice through professional development – a motivation perspective. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*, pp. 1–22. Routledge & Jimerson, J., Cho, V., Scroggins, K., Bialal, R., & Robinson, R. (2018). How and why teachers engage students with data. *Educational Studies*, 1-25.

4. Identify the implications of any new approach to curriculum design for:

d) School organisation and regulation

ACU supports the Gonski 2.0 recommendation that a curriculum based on learning progressions be established first in literacy and numeracy during the early years of schooling to ensure these core foundations are quickly established. But at a broader level, literacy and numeracy skills need to be better integrated in all curriculum areas and regulation should specify the assessment standards teachers are expected to use to judge the acquisition of these skills.

In the last decade, large-scale testing at national and international levels has made it possible to track performance trends in ways not possible in earlier eras. National testing in literacy education, for example, has shown declines in writing performance in every Australian State and Territory. It was in this context, amid growing concerns about declining performance in writing in particular, that ACU's Institute for Learning Sciences and Teacher Education (ILSTE) was commissioned to conduct an Australian Writing Survey (AWS) that was completed online by 4,306 teachers. This study showed there was a need to:

- i) embed literacy and numeracy as an essential aspect of learning in all curriculum areas; and
- ii) clarify the quality standards teachers are meant to be using to assess literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum.¹²

The ILSTE study revealed students do not routinely have time to develop writing skills in class and that time needs to be devoted to developing such foundational skills within specific contexts.

The study also revealed there are multiple standards competing for teachers' attention. A policy that establishes the standards to use would go some way to achieving consistency in both language and application across schools and sectors, and some consistency in expectations of quality within and across schools. A systematic audit should be undertaken of the policy, curriculum and assessment documents that teachers are expected to use to inform their teaching and assessment practices, including their use of standards.

At the very least, teachers would benefit from a rationalisation process that clearly establishes the standards or stated levels of quality they are to use. At the moment, teachers are confused as to what standards they should use to judge literacy and numeracy.

¹² Claire Wyatt-Smith and Christine Jackson, Report to the New South Wales Education Standards Authority (NESA) submitted March 2018. See also Wyatt-Smith, C., & Jackson, C. (2016). Australian Writing Survey (AWS). Institute for Learning Sciences and Teacher Education. Australian Catholic University.

ACU recommendations:

There should be explicit provision of time for literacy and numeracy in all curriculum areas and a rationalisation of the assessment standards teachers use to judge literacy and numeracy.

ATTACHMENT A: AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY PROFILE

Australian Catholic University (ACU) is a publicly-funded Catholic university, open to people of all faiths and of none and with teaching, learning and research inspired by 2,000 years of Catholic intellectual tradition.

ACU operates as a multi-jurisdictional university with seven campuses across four states and one territory. Campuses are located in North Sydney, Strathfield, Canberra, Melbourne, Ballarat, Brisbane and Adelaide. ACU also has a campus in Rome, Italy.

ACU is the largest Catholic university in the English-speaking world, and is ranked in the top 500 universities globally.¹³ Today, ACU has more than 33,000 students and 2,300 staff.¹⁴

ACU graduates demonstrate high standards of professional excellence and are also socially responsible, highly employable and committed to active and responsive learning. ACU graduates are highly sought-after by employers, with a 93 per cent employment rate.¹⁵

The University has four faculties: Health Sciences; Education and Arts; Law and Business; and Theology and Philosophy. ACU has built its reputation in the areas of Health and Education, educating the largest number of undergraduate nursing and teaching students in Australia¹⁶ and serving a significant workforce need in these areas. Under the demand driven system, ACU sought to focus and build on these strengths.

As part of its commitment to educational excellence, ACU is committed to targeted and quality research. ACU's strategic plan focuses on research areas that align with ACU's mission and reflect most of its learning and teaching: Education; Health and Wellbeing; Theology and Philosophy; and Social Justice and the Common Good.

In recent years, the public standing of ACU's research has improved dramatically. The 2015 Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) assessment awarded ACU particularly high ratings in the fields of research identified as strategic priorities and in which investment has been especially concentrated. These include selected areas of Health, as well as Education, Psychology, Theology, and Philosophy, in which ACU's research was rated as "above" or "well above" world standard.

¹³ Times Higher Education University Rankings 2019.

¹⁴ Student numbers refer to headcount figures while staff numbers refer to full-time equivalent (FTE).

¹⁵ Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, 2018.

¹⁶ Department of Education and Training, 2016 Higher Education Data Collection – Students, Special Courses. Section 8, table 8.3