

National Curriculum in the Senior Secondary Years

Position Paper

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This position paper is subject to feedback through to the end of September 2009. Comments should be sent to positionpaper@acara.edu.au.

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Purpose

1. This paper:
 - a) presents a position on senior secondary curriculum that will guide the development of national curriculum (curriculum content and achievement standards) for the senior years of schooling, and the development of English, mathematics, history and science curriculum in particular
 - b) outlines the relationships between the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and state and territory curriculum, assessment and certification authorities that are relevant to the development of senior secondary curriculum.
2. This version of the position paper is subject to comment and feedback through to the end of September, 2009. At the end of this time it will be revised and updated on the ACARA website.

Related documents

3. This paper should be read in conjunction with:
 - the *Shape of the Australian Curriculum*
 - the *Curriculum Design paper* which provides detailed advice and direction for writers K–10 and for senior years curriculum
 - the *Curriculum Development* process

These documents can be found on the ACARA website – www.acara.edu.au

Background

4. This paper was developed in consultation with representatives from each of the state and territory curriculum, assessment and certification authorities.
5. The state and territory curriculum, assessment and certification authorities have particular responsibilities for curriculum development and/or certification of student learning and achievement in their state or territory that, in many cases, is established by legislation and/or regulation. This paper acknowledges those responsibilities and outlines the basis for an ongoing relationship between ACARA and the state and territory curriculum, assessment and certification authorities.
6. Further, the development of curriculum content and achievement standards in the senior secondary years will need to take account of factors such as:
 - a) the different purposes and structures that apply to senior secondary curriculum (which do not apply to K–10)
 - b) the relationship between the senior secondary curriculum and the certification of student learning, including eligibility and study requirements set by state and territory curriculum authorities
 - c) processes for internal and external assessment and verification of student learning
 - d) the range of pathways from which students can choose to follow in their post-school years and/or in conjunction with school-based learning
 - e) the partnerships that exist with other education and training providers, employers and communities for the delivery of education and training in the senior years
 - f) the relationship between senior secondary completion and further education/tertiary selection processes

7. The Australian national curriculum in the senior secondary years of schooling will complement other learning opportunities which include learning based on national training packages and personal learning pathways.

Structure of the paper

8. This paper addresses the following matters:
- the purpose of learning and the nature of the senior secondary learner
 - assumptions about the development of national curriculum for the senior secondary years
 - the design of the senior secondary curriculum and structure of national curriculum courses
 - the nature of achievement standards in the senior secondary curriculum
 - general implementation considerations for state and territory curriculum, assessment and certification authorities
 - governance arrangements between ACARA and curriculum, assessment and certification authorities in states and territories and between ACARA and the Ministerial Council and the Ministerial Council Senior Officials Committee.

Purpose of learning and the nature of the learner in the senior years

9. The *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (MCEETYA, 2008) states that the senior years of schooling ‘... should provide all students with the high quality education necessary to complete their secondary school education and make the transition to further education, training or employment’(p. 12).
10. According to the Melbourne Declaration, students entering the senior secondary years of schooling will have had opportunities to develop ‘a solid foundation in knowledge, understanding, skills and values on which further learning and adult life can be built’ with a strong focus on literacy and numeracy skills. They will have ‘practical knowledge and skills in areas such as ICT and design and technology which are central to Australia’s skilled economy and provide crucial pathways to post-school success’ (*Melbourne Declaration*, p. 13).
11. One of the principles for development of the national curriculum refers to ‘academic disciplines, professions and the technical trades’, stating that the curriculum should anticipate and provide for an increase in ‘the proportion of students who remain in education and training to complete Year 12 or equivalent vocational education and training ...’ (*The Shape of the Australian Curriculum*, p. 8).
12. In developing the senior secondary national curriculum it is recognised that students may undertake their studies in schools, in the workplace, in colleges of TAFE and in other places of learning.
13. Given this background the design of national curriculum for the senior years of schooling will seek to further develop students as successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens by:
- broadening options for students and enabling their successful transition to further education, training or employment
 - 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.

Assumptions

14. The following assumptions underpin the development of the national curriculum for the senior secondary years of schooling.

- a) The senior secondary national curriculum will deliver curriculum content and achievement standards in subjects listed in the Charter for ACARA. The first phase of development (from the Charter covering 1 April 2009 to 30 June 2010) will occur in English, mathematics, history and science. Development of courses in other subject areas will follow the first phase of development, including the development of national curriculum in geography, languages and the arts.
- b) States and territories, through the relevant curriculum, assessment and certification authority, will continue to be responsible for assessment, certification and the attendant quality assurance mechanisms of senior secondary learning including maintaining eligibility requirements for their senior certificate.
- c) The national curriculum will be designed with the needs of the full range of students in mind, although the decisions about individual courses or suites of courses in a subject area will take account of the nature of individual subjects along with the desire to increase pathway options for students.
- d) For each subject area ACARA will determine the number and nature of courses and develop these courses, in consultation with states and territories. The number of courses in a subject area may change over time. The need for any change in course provision will be identified by ACARA and/or state and territory agencies.
- e) Where a course is developed nationally that covers the scope of learning in existing state or territory courses, states and territories will cease to offer the existing courses. States and territories will continue to offer other courses that complement the nationally developed courses.
- f) The extent of differentiation of the national curriculum in the senior secondary years should take account of the capacity of providers to deliver a range of courses.
- g) Once senior secondary national curriculum content and achievement standards are developed, state and territory certifying authorities will need to provide specifications and advice to school authorities, schools and teachers to meet local assessment and certification requirements. (ACARA's curriculum development process provides for briefing of authorities so that they are well prepared to commence this work.)
- h) State and territory curriculum, assessment and certification authorities have implementation policies and practices which will determine start dates for commencement of national curriculum. The application of these policies will take account of decisions on implementation by the Ministerial Council.

Design of the senior secondary curriculum and structure of courses

15. The national senior secondary curriculum will be designed around 'subjects' (for example, history) and 'courses' within each subject (for example, ancient history). The courses in each subject, with their curriculum content and achievement standards, will be designed to contribute to the purposes of senior secondary schooling and respond to student interests and needs.
16. Key considerations in the design and structure of the curriculum include:
 - assumptions about prior learning
 - course provision, specialisation and differentiation
 - course structure and time allocation for senior secondary courses
 - core content and the extent of electives
 - general capabilities in the senior secondary curriculum.

Assumptions about prior learning

17. The curriculum needs of students in the senior secondary years are defined as much by workforce and training needs and further learning ambitions as they are by previous learning experiences. Students will begin the senior secondary years of schooling having experienced, across the learning areas, a number of pathways to the end of Year 10, and with a wide range of levels of literacy and numeracy.
18. While there will be a variety of learning pathways before Year 11, some assumptions about prior learning are necessary. For example, it is assumed that students who choose to undertake a senior secondary course have the prior knowledge and skills developed up to Year 10. These prior learning assumptions need to be explicit in the course description. The decision on whether a student should enrol in a subject in the senior years, taking into account assumptions about prior learning, is a matter between students and their schools."
19. Each course in the national senior curriculum will indicate the assumptions about prior learning of students who may wish to undertake study of the course.

Course provision

20. The first phase of senior secondary national curriculum development will deliver a set of courses in each of English, mathematics, science and history.
21. Consideration of the need for further national courses in these areas will take account of factors such as: student need and interest; learning pathways that build on learning in K–10 and connect to post-school options; and curriculum priorities. ACARA will develop principles and guidelines to inform such matters. These will reflect the position that state and territory curriculum provision will complement and extend the provision of national curriculum. For example, states and territories currently have courses beyond those proposed for the first round of national curriculum development for the senior years of schooling. These include a linguistics course in English, a human biology, medical science, engineering science, psychology, and/or multi-disciplinary courses in science.
22. Until such time as the need for additional national senior secondary courses in given subjects is determined, states and territories will continue to offer other courses that complement the nationally developed courses, provided that the scope of learning in these courses is distinct from the scope of learning in the nationally developed courses. Where a course is developed nationally that covers the scope of learning in existing courses, states and territories will cease to offer the existing courses.

23. In the first phase of the national curriculum, English and mathematics will have four *differentiated* courses, each focused on providing a pathway that will meet the learning needs of a particular group of senior secondary students. Science will have four, and history two, *specialised* courses each based on a distinct discipline or particular content.
24. Given the commonality in approach that currently exists across states and territories, the courses described below provide a useful starting point in developing a senior secondary national curriculum.
- English
 - a. There will be a course which focuses on further development of literacy and language skills that enable effective participation in workplace, education and training settings, and social, community and civic life. This course will develop students' abilities to listen, speak, read, write and create a range of texts for a variety of contexts and purposes.
 - b. A second course will be developed for students from diverse backgrounds with English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) including Indigenous students. This course will provide a variety of language, literature and literacy experiences to accommodate the range of student ability. Student eligibility requirements may need to be taken into consideration for certification purposes.
 - c. The third course will extend students in use of language and transfer of language skills to a variety of disciplines and purposes. It will involve understanding, analysing, appreciating, constructing and evaluating a range of print, spoken and multimodal texts for different purposes and audiences. This course will enable students to use English to meet the demands of further study and the workplace, and to participate effectively in a complex society.
 - d. The fourth course will be designed for students who choose to study literature at a more intensive level and will support students who intend to undertake further and extended study in English. This course will enhance the breadth and depth of students' understanding of literary texts.
 - Mathematics
 - a. The first type of course is an applied study of mathematics with a focus on the analysis of everyday work and life problems to enable students to view these problems mathematically and develop greater confidence in deriving solutions through the application of mathematical strategies.
 - b. The second type of course is a study of mathematics which provides a suitable pathway to post-school studies with a moderate demand in mathematics. This course could include content such as business or financial mathematics, probability, statistics, applied geometry and measurement, and in some places possibly include topics like navigation, applied geometry and networks.
 - c. The third type of course could enable a substantial development of mathematical knowledge suitable for many students, including those intending to study higher level mathematics, and include graphs and relationships, calculus, and statistics focusing on distributions.
 - d. The fourth type of course could contain content intended for students with a strong interest in mathematics, including those expecting to study mathematics and engineering at university. It could include complex numbers, mechanics, vectors with related trigonometry and kinematics, and build on the calculus and statistics from the course c.

- For science it is proposed to develop four courses, each designed to build on extend the general science education of previous years, while recognising that students will have a wide range of abilities, interests and future intentions for study and work:
 - a. Biology, which involves knowledge and understanding of living things and their environments. Students learn about the molecular, cellular and higher levels of organisation of life which exhibit evolution as a common source of unity and diversity.
 - b. Chemistry, which involves understanding of matter and its interactions. Students will investigate the physical and chemical properties of substances, reactions and processes, and the interaction of energy and matter.
 - c. Physics, which involves understanding energy, matter and their interrelationships. Students will investigate the principles, theories and laws governing physical behaviour, understand systems and learn to search for the simplicity underlying the complexity of the universe.
 - d. Earth and environmental science, which involves the study of the earth's systems and processes in aquatic and terrestrial environments. Students will study changes in and interactions between land, air, water, ice and living things, learn that humans have a greater influence on the environment than any other species, and recognise the importance of evidence in evaluating opinions and actions related to the earth and its environment.
 - In history it is proposed to develop two courses for students with a wide range of achievement in previous years of schooling, interests and future intentions for study and work. Each course will designed based on a topic approach with a range of optional contexts for learning about the topics and, where appropriate, comparative studies.
 - a. Modern history, which will draw on themes or topics which could include international conflicts, imperialism, nationalism, revolution and reform, and economic and social movements. Contexts for learning may include the Asia-Pacific region, Europe, the Middle East, Australia and the USA.
 - b. Ancient history, which will draw on themes or topics which could include investigating the past, people and events, site studies of ancient societies, and beliefs and practices (social, cultural, spiritual/religious). Contexts for learning may include Indigenous Australia, the Near East, Asia and the Mediterranean world.
25. In most states and territories students may undertake extension studies or additional courses in certain subjects. These may be courses developed by curriculum agencies or courses accredited by curriculum agencies that are developed by universities, school systems or individual schools. There is no intention in the first phase of the national curriculum to develop extension courses, and it is intended that states and territories could continue to offer these courses alongside courses developed nationally.
26. It is recognised that states and territories have developed and implemented courses or curriculum options specifically designed to provide meaningful learning to a range of students, including students with moderate to high learning support needs. ACARA will consult with appropriate authorities to determine whether and when national curriculum courses will be developed for students with intellectual disabilities.
27. State and territory curriculum, assessment and certification authorities have established relationships with both national and state industry bodies individually and

through the vocational education subgroup of ACACA Chief Executives. State and territory bodies have arrangements in place to recognise and provide credit for vocational education and training in the senior secondary certificates.

28. It is expected that each authority will continue to provide arrangements for vocational education and training.
29. ACARA will not seek to embed or cross reference to units of competence in its curriculum. However, as the scope of national curriculum in the senior secondary years builds beyond the phase 1 subjects ACARA will engage and consult with appropriate education, industry and training authorities to ensure that provision for learning in the senior secondary years is as broad and comprehensive as possible and that the general education and training opportunities available to students are complementary.

Course structure and time allocation for senior secondary courses

30. It is proposed that senior secondary curriculum will be developed as four sequential semester units. Units 1 and 2 will be developed to follow on from learning in Year 10. . Units 3 and 4 will be developmentally more challenging and assume prior knowledge of learning contained in Units 1 and 2. Development of senior secondary curriculum in this way will provide schools and curriculum authorities with some flexibility to meet student needs and interests (by, for example, allowing students to complete one unit in a subject and then transfer to another subject). It is acknowledged, however, that schools and curriculum authorities may decide to offer pairs of units eg Units 1 and 2 as a year-long course, with Units 3 and 4 as the following year-long course.
31. To assist writers to develop curriculum content, each semester unit will be developed to be feasibly taught in about half a 'school year' (approximately 50–60 hours duration including assessment and examinations).
32. While the national senior secondary curriculum will not pre-determine or specify pathway alternatives for students, implicit in the development of course units is the understanding that states and territory education authorities and/or schools will consider and advise students on a range of potential pathways that may be available.
33. The national courses will not contain examination specifications but it is important in the development process to ensure that an iterative cycle is built in whereby state authorities provide feedback on the curriculum documents for the senior years and consider and prepare suitable assessment and examination materials.
34. The national curriculum development process needs to be mindful of any state/territory certification requirements and expectations in relation to literacy and numeracy.
35. Senior school courses will be linked to a qualifications framework to assist writers to be clear about the level of complexity of the course and to assist with the comparison of course complexity and expectation.¹

Core content and the extent of electives

36. In terms of the course content, there is an imperative to provide sufficient detail for teachers and the certification authorities to know clearly the focus for teaching, learning and assessment, whether internal and/or external to schools. The course content will make clear the extent to which it is possible for teachers to choose local, relevant contexts to develop knowledge and understanding described in the curriculum content.

¹ For example, the Victorian credit matrix, which helps teachers, students, parents and the community understand how learning outcomes have been arranged in levels of increased complexity.

37. Each senior secondary course will specify core content. In some subjects, courses will include elective topics, studies or contexts that enhance the delivery of the content and provide students and schools with choices that can best address the needs of students in a range of school contexts. These electives are to be kept to a minimum.

General capabilities in the senior secondary curriculum

38. The *National Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* sees important general capabilities that schools should help students develop, in addition to content of particular learning areas. These general capabilities include 'planning and organising, the ability to think flexibly, to communicate well and to work in teams ... the capacity to think creatively, innovate, solve problems and engage with new disciplines'.
39. The *Shape of the Australian Curriculum* and *Curriculum Design* describe how the national curriculum will deal explicitly with general capabilities. The curriculum documents will indicate how learning in a particular subject and course will contribute to the goals in the national declaration, how the general capabilities are to be addressed in each learning area and how links can be made between learning areas.

Curriculum content, assessment and achievement standards

40. Curriculum content will specify what students are to learn and achievement standards will provide an expectation of the quality of learning that students should typically demonstrate. While the national curriculum will not detail assessment requirements and processes it is appropriate that curriculum documents highlight the connection between what is to be taught and the expected quality of learning, by outlining what should be assessed. However, this advice will not detail assessment requirements or how assessment will occur, although these issues should remain on the agenda for discussion between ACARA and state and territory authorities.

Achievement standards

41. Achievement standards will provide an expectation of the quality of learning (drawing from the knowledge, skills and understanding described in the specification of curriculum content) that students should typically demonstrate by a particular point in their schooling (that is, the depth of their understanding, the extent of their knowledge and the sophistication of their skills).
42. The purpose, nature and functions of achievement standards, K–10, are described in the *Curriculum Design* paper.

Achievement standards, senior secondary years

43. For the senior years, the achievement standards will describe the quality of student learning as they do for K-10. For the senior years the achievement standards will be course specific, describing five levels of achievement with these levels labelled as A – E.
44. While ACARA will develop the achievement standards as part of its curriculum development program further discussion will need to take place with assessment and certification authorities who will need to determine whether, and in what timeframe, they will use the achievement standards to report on student achievement. State and territory authorities will also determine whether they will identify a satisfactory level of achievement, in the context of state or territory certification requirements.
45. For the senior secondary years, achievement standards will be developed, for each pair of semester units – that is, for Units 1 and 2 and for Units 3 and 4. The achievement standards will be designed to support reporting to students and parents, and to contribute to greater consistency of assessment and reporting across states and territories.

46. Standards will be represented by:
 - a set of grade descriptors that describe, across five levels, what may be achieved by students for that year
 - a set of work samples that will illustrate typical learning in relation to the descriptors.
47. Together the grade descriptors and work samples will assist teachers to determine and communicate 'how well' students have achieved what they were expected to learn.
48. Packages of student work samples will provide illustrations of student achievement at each of the levels of achievement. Each package will include assessment task/s and students' responses, with annotations setting out the basis for the assessment.
49. Achievement standards will be developed and published in conjunction with curriculum content with the intention that they will be reviewed and, where necessary, refined over the first few years of use. The process for this review will be detailed in the Authority's curriculum development process as part of Stage 4 of that process.
50. It is anticipated that state and territory curriculum authorities will determine whether measures are needed to support or monitor the consistency of grading between states and territories (noting the work that has been done by ACACA agencies that demonstrates standards are comparable regardless of mode of assessment).

Implementation matters

51. For continuity of learning it is necessary for students to know, by mid-Year 10, the nature of the courses from which they will select. Schools prepare 'subject-selection' materials for students and parents to consider. These materials are typically produced in May/June for selection choices to be finalised by July/August.
52. Students wishing to select a national course in the senior secondary years may need to have been prepared by studying, at least in Year 10, the national K–10 curriculum in the learning area.
53. When new courses are introduced, certification authorities produce policies and support materials (such as assessment requirements and techniques, folio requirements, specimen examination papers etc) to assist teachers who are developing teaching/learning programs to understand the assessment requirements that will be applied.
54. When new courses are introduced, schools and systems generally develop resources to help teachers understand the nature of the course. Depending on the extent to which a new course is different, systems may conduct professional development sessions for teachers. Teachers will need to develop teaching/learning and assessment programs.
55. Most states and territories have arrangements with the tertiary sector for articulation and credit transfer from senior secondary school courses into tertiary courses. Most universities have set, for some tertiary courses, pre-requisite senior secondary study requirements. It is expected that each state and territory will continue to make arrangements with universities for articulation from national curriculum courses into university courses.
56. Each state and territory will develop an implementation plan for national curriculum from 2011, taking account of the position on implementation adopted by the Ministerial Council and factors such as current review and redevelopment activities. ACARA will provide information to support development of individual and bi-lateral communication strategies that take account of different state and territory contexts.

Governance arrangements

Context

57. Australian Ministers for Education have committed to a K–12 national curriculum. To fulfil this commitment, a number of specific matters relating to curriculum for the senior secondary years require attention. These issues include, but are not limited to, the following:
- the existence of specific legislation in the states, territories and commonwealth that provides varying and overlapping functions and defined authorities for Ministers, the curriculum, assessment and certification authorities of states and territories, and the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
 - the different senior secondary certification requirements across states and territories and the possible effect of these requirements on the definition of some senior secondary courses/subjects
 - the inclusion in the learning programs of senior secondary students of courses/subjects accredited by senior secondary curriculum authorities and of training packages approved by industry bodies and the different contributions each can make to certificate completion requirements.
58. The governance of curriculum in the senior secondary years therefore requires a governance partnership that recognises, defines and connects the respective levels of authority and decision making of Ministers, curriculum, assessment and certification authorities of states and territories, and Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority for the strategic directions and content of senior secondary curriculum.

Key parameters for senior secondary curriculum governance

59. The governance of national curriculum in the senior secondary years operates within the following key parameters.
- The Charter of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority as approved by MCEECDYA
 - The Strategic Directions for the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority as determined by MCEECDYA in conjunction with MCSOC
 - The responsibility of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority for determining the curriculum content and achievement standards of national senior secondary curriculum courses/subjects
 - The responsibility of curriculum, assessment and certification authorities of states and territories for senior secondary assessment, certification and the attendant quality assurance of student results.
 - The responsibility of curriculum, assessment and certification authorities of states and territories for determining the curriculum content and achievement standards of senior secondary curriculum courses/subjects in those areas of the curriculum where an ACARA-developed course/subject does not exist.

Protocols for senior secondary curriculum

60. The governance of national curriculum in the senior secondary years will operate through the following protocols.
- On matters relating to the strategic directions and policy for senior secondary curriculum, the curriculum, assessment and certification authorities of states and territories and the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority

will consider such matters concurrently and in partnership, and where appropriate with MCSOC .

- In its development and approval of national senior secondary curriculum courses/subjects, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority will consult with the curriculum, assessment and certification authorities of states and territories with a responsibility for senior secondary certification.
- In the development and accreditation of a senior secondary curriculum course/subject where an ACARA course/subject does not exist, the respective curriculum, assessment and certification authority in a state or territory will consult with the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority