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Australian curriculum review: what the submissions say

The Donnelly-Wiltshire Review of the Australian Curriculum is due at the end of the month. We know a bit about what the reviewers thought before they began, but what have submissions to the review told…

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Disclosure Statement

Bill Louden represented Western Australia on the Board of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority from 2008 to 2012.

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Most specialists say there was nothing wrong with the curriculum to begin with. AAP

The Donnelly-Wiltshire Review of the Australian Curriculum is due at the end of the month. We know a bit about what the reviewers thought before they began, but what have submissions to the review told them?

Before his appointment, Professor Ken Wiltshire described the curriculum as “poor and patchy” and “condemned by experts in just about every discipline”.

The other reviewer, Dr Kevin Donnelly, has argued that the Australian Curriculum is ideologically biased. He has said that the history curriculum is “hostile to Western civilisation” and that English is “nodding in the direction of phonics” but favours progressive reading teaching “where children are taught to look and guess”.

Submissions will not be published on the review website until the final report is released, but many of them are available on their organisations’ websites. What do they say?
Condemned by experts?

Everyone’s a curriculum critic – we’ve all been to school – but there is strong support for the Australian Curriculum from the subject experts: the national teachers’ associations.

The mathematics teachers’ association argues that the Australian Curriculum “provides a world-class vision for mathematics in schooling”. The science teachers’ association describes the curriculum as “truly comprehensive” and “academically rigorous”.

The history teachers’ association says that the development process had resulted in “a dynamic, engaging, flexible and balanced curriculum”. The national English teachers’ association describes the curriculum as “robust”, providing “a rich resource to guide teacher planning and professional development”.

There are legitimate differences of opinion among well-informed people about the ideal scope and sequences of learning in school subjects. But the art of curriculum development is to strike a balance among these sincerely held but conflicting views.

Poor and patchy?

School sector submissions say less about the individual subjects but - with the clear exception of New South Wales - are satisfied with the development and consultation processes. Western Australia, a state that has always been sceptical about the national curriculum project, describes the consultative process as “comprehensive and thorough”, involving “extensive checks and balances”.

One of the checks and balances was an independent comparison with the English, mathematics and science taught in high-performing systems (New Zealand, Ontario, Finland and Singapore). The review concluded that the differences between the Australian Curriculum and high-performing comparators are slight.

Content topics were common across the jurisdictions, but there were small differences in order and emphasis. In science, for example, evolution is studied earlier in Ontario, Canada, than in Australia. There was more emphasis on analysis and less emphasis on procedures than in Finland.

Biased in History?

Dr Donnelly has characterised the history curriculum as:

hostile towards the institutions, beliefs and grand narrative associated with Western civilisation that make this nation unique.

The Australian Christian Lobby and the Institute of Public Affairs were among the few organisations whose publicly available submissions supported this view.

In contrast, the national history teachers’ association has argued that the curriculum has been developed “with a high degree of independence and balance” and that:
the existing depth of studies provide all students with the opportunity to understand the emergence of Western civilisation and democratic principles as well as Australia’s rich history.

In addition, the influential Australian Primary Principals Association has explicitly ruled out bias in the history curriculum, arguing that:

current document provides a good account of the kind of historical understanding and practice that young Australians should learn.

**Nodding towards the basics?**

Dr Donnelly criticised the English curriculum for merely “nodding in the direction of teaching phonics and phonemic awareness”. I’ve written elsewhere about the importance of explicit teaching of reading and I am satisfied that the Australian Curriculum meets the requirements laid out by the Rowe Review of the teaching of reading in Australia.

This is confirmed by an external comparison of the national English curriculum with the state and territory curriculum documents. This review concluded there were quite high levels of agreement between state and national English syllabuses, with the exception of South Australia. Compared with the national curriculum, South Australia had:

very low relative ratings in: ‘Phonemic awareness’, ‘Phonics’, ‘Vocabulary’ and ‘Text and print features’ and to some extent in ‘Fluency’, all areas in which the South Australian materials were ‘not explicit’.

More recently, documents prepared to assist teachers to move from the Victorian Essential Learning Standards to the Australian Curriculum have noted that the latter “contains more detailed reference to specific reading strategies, including phonics”, “more specific reference to language features and functions” and “more specific references to literary and multi-modal texts, and to use of ICT” than the curriculum that preceded it.

**Overcrowded?**

One by one, more than a dozen subject associations have said that they are satisfied with the curriculum developed in their own subjects, but many other stakeholders think that the sum of these subjects has led to an overcrowded curriculum.

The Australian Primary Principals Association reminds the reviewers that it has been warning since 2008 that there’s too much content for children and teachers to cover.

Most of the school system and sector submissions agree. The Queensland Studies Authority submission, for example, is satisfied with consultation on each subject but argues that there has been “too little discussion about how it all fits together”. New South Wales has argued that overcrowding is a consequence of the original decision to develop a curriculum in four subjects, rather than designing from “an overall curriculum blueprint”.

**Timing?**
There are things to be fixed in the current version of the Australian Curriculum. At least in the primary years the most recently developed subjects – geography, civics and citizenship, economics and business, the arts – seem to be crowding out the space left over after English, mathematics, science and history.

This needs to be fixed, either by reducing content and time allocations in some subjects, beginning some subjects later in the primary years when the obligations of literacy and numeracy have been met, or adopting a core-plus-options strategy.

But if there is one thing that almost all of the submissions agree on, it is too soon for major rewriting of the curriculum. Stakeholders have spent too much time and effort negotiating the current version. As the South Australian independent schools” submission put it, the “overriding message” from their schools is “do not mess with too much too soon".