A Report from the
National Curriculum Symposium

12 December, 2008
The national curriculum: principles and specifications for development
— National Curriculum Board, 2008

The National Curriculum Board’s work will be guided by the following principles and specifications for development.

a) The curriculum should make clear to teachers what has to be taught and to students what they should learn and what achievement standards are expected of them. This means that curriculum documents will be explicit about knowledge, understanding and skills and will provide a clear foundation for the development of a teaching program.

b) The curriculum should be based on the assumptions that all students can learn and that every child matters. It should set high standards and ensure that they apply to all young Australians while acknowledging the markedly different rates at which students develop.

c) The curriculum should connect with and build on the early years learning framework being developed for the pre-K phase.

d) The curriculum should build firm foundational skills and a basis for the development of expertise by those who move to specialised advanced studies in academic disciplines, professions and technical trades. It 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 and the proportion who continue to further study.

e) The curriculum should provide students with an understanding of the past that has shaped the society and culture in which they are growing and developing, and with knowledge, understandings and skills that will help them in their future lives.

f) The curriculum should be feasible, taking account of the time and resources available to teachers and students and the time it takes to learn complex concepts and ideas. In particular, the curriculum documents should take account of the fact that many primary teachers are responsible for several learning areas and should limit the volume of material which they must read in order to develop teaching programs.

g) The primary audience for national curriculum documents should be classroom teachers. Documents should be concise and expressed in plain language which, nevertheless, preserves a complexity in ideas appropriate for professional practitioners. Documents should be recognisably similar across learning areas in language, structure and length.

h) Time demands on students must leave room for learning areas that will not be part of the national curriculum.

i) The curriculum should allow jurisdictions, systems and schools to implement it in a way that values teachers’ professional knowledge and reflects local contexts.

j) The curriculum should be established on a strong evidence base on learning, pedagogy and what works in professional practice and should encourage teachers to experiment systematically with and evaluate their practices.
The Symposium

This is a report from the National Curriculum Symposium conducted at the University of Sydney, 12 December 2008.

The Symposium was instituted in response to the request from the National Curriculum Board for reaction to its four ‘Framing Papers’. These papers — for English, mathematics, science and history — ‘propose broad directions for what teachers should teach and young people should learn from Kindergarten to Year 12. The purpose of the papers is to generate broad-ranging discussions in the community about the proposed directions and provide opportunities to comment.’ Comment was sought ‘from teachers and school administrators; partners from the training sector, industry and universities; parents, students, young people and the wider community’.*

Professional and community engagement will be essential for success in developing and implementing a new and national curriculum, and it was believed that the University of Sydney was well placed to host a wide-ranging but intensive discussion among suitably qualified people to provide timely advice to the Board.

The specific purposes of this Symposium were:

• to offer a stimulating program that includes keynote speakers with expertise and well-developed positions on national curriculum, and
• to provide a forum for discussion of key issues including the form and function of a national curriculum and describing ‘what counts’ in benefiting all Australian students from Kindergarten to Year 12.

Some of the cross-cutting issues to be addressed included:

• the desirability of refreshing education in Australia versus reconciliation of variations in state and territory curriculum
• transposition of perceived solutions in one curriculum area to another
• consideration of crucial transition points in student learning
• differentiation for the learning needs, interests and aspirations of the whole range of Australian students, and
• the impact on assessment regimes.

The Symposium was designed to enable all participants to contribute to the discussion. The program which follows indicates the result of that planning.

Invitations were extended to key groups and individuals to ensure the dialectic was robust and informed. Thus the audience had representatives from peak professional associations, government and non-government education agencies, parent organizations, the Australian Education Union and its affiliates, and the Australian Government’s Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations as well as staff from University of Sydney’s Faculty of Education and Social Work. The full list of participants is included at the end of this document.

Finally, a crucial part of the purpose and nature of the Symposium was to record, summarise and disseminate the views that were expressed there, not least to the four authors of the Framing Papers and to members of the National Curriculum Board. That is the purpose of this document.

* The quoted material comes from the National Curriculum Board’s website http://www.ncb.org.au/default.asp, where the Framing Papers can also be found.
# A Report from the National Curriculum Symposium 12 December, 2008

The Program

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<th>Time</th>
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<td>8:45</td>
<td>Acknowledgement of land. Welcome and opening address</td>
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<td><strong>Professor Derrick Armstrong</strong></td>
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<td>9:00</td>
<td>Keynote address</td>
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<td>**A National Curriculum for the Twenty First Century: What do Susan</td>
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<td>Ryan, John Dawkins and Julia Gillard have in common?**</td>
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<td><strong>Professor Kerry K Kennedy, Hong Kong Institute of Education</strong></td>
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<td>particularly a national curriculum, can be seen as a proximal rather</td>
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<td>forward questions and engage in discussion with Professor Kennedy</td>
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<td>11:00</td>
<td>First plenary session</td>
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<td><strong>Professor Peter Freebody</strong> – English</td>
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<td><strong>Professor Stuart Macintyre</strong> – History</td>
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<td><strong>Professor Peter Sullivan</strong> – Mathematics</td>
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<td><strong>Professor Denis Goodrum</strong> – Science</td>
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<td>This session provides all participants with the opportunity to hear</td>
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<td>from all authors of the framing papers currently being circulated by</td>
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<td>• Challenging aspects of the writing process</td>
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<td><strong>Mathematics</strong></td>
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<td>3:45</td>
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<td><strong>Overall directions and key curriculum areas – ways forward</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Chair: Professor Robyn Ewing</strong></td>
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<td>Following a report back from each key curriculum area group, presenters</td>
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<td>will be joined by Robert Randall, General Manager, Office of the</td>
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<td>National Curriculum Board, to react to the issues arising from the</td>
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<td>Questions from the floor and discussion to follow.</td>
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<td>5:00</td>
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The Introduction

It was an occasion marked by outstanding contributions from the five main speakers. Some of the key points they made are recorded below. But one of the major purposes of the event was to secure reaction and ideas from their audience of 260 people with a strong interest in school education. The ‘robust and fervent debate’ encouraged by Professor Derrick Armstrong in his welcoming address and fostered by Professor Robyn Ewing in her role as Chair did in fact occur. Professor Kerry Kennedy set the scene.

A National Curriculum for the 21st Century: What do Susan Ryan, John Dawkins and Julia Gillard have in common?

Professor Kennedy, currently Head of the Department Curriculum and Instruction at Hong Kong’s Institute of Education, provided an historical perspective and commentary on Australian efforts to develop a national curriculum — ‘a significant social and political arena, developing a nation’s concept of itself’ — during the past four decades.

He cast his memory back over the various motives of past initiatives and their implicit visions, Susan Ryan’s concern for educational standards, John Dawkins’ interest in economic needs and the changing nature of the labour market, and his suspicion that Julia Gillard may have begun from a position closer to that of Dawkins than Ryan. He stressed that a national curriculum cannot be just about economics. It must also be about social and moral issues with concerns for social justice, equity and, especially, culture and its meanings. It must embody a vision for the future.

He warned, with appropriate examples, of the uncertain tides of political will, and suggested that what emerges finally must reflect the community’s wishes. ‘It is one thing to produce a national curriculum. It is another, neither technicist nor managerial in character, to capture the soul of a nation.’ The nation’s curriculum, a term he preferred to national curriculum, must be a collective enterprise, recognising the multi-layered nature of its constituencies. ‘Hard’ regulatory procedures for implementation (with the prospect of legal contestation!) were unlikely to yield a satisfactory result. It will inevitably be a process of mutual adaptation. A fundamental concern in this process is how teachers, in accord with their customary ambitions, can be supported to do the best they possibly can for each of their students.

He concluded by noting that in similar work in Hong Kong over 15 years a very un-Chinese conclusion had been reached: one size does not fit all. Questions of managing common purpose and pluralism, commonality and diversity are central to the evolution of a curriculum which must be for the whole community.
The Four Curriculum Areas
Frame Up, with Reaction

It might be noted that this was the first occasion where all four authors of the National Curriculum Framing Papers have spoken together — one of the several things which made this a special event. Each reflected on the process of preparing the paper, the particular challenges entailed and some of the distinguishing features of the result.

The notes below, arranged by discipline area, provide summary key points from their presentations. Generally, far more extended discussions of those points can be found in the Papers which are readily available at the addresses below along with an invitation and framework for providing a response.

Each short summary is followed by notes from the relevant subsets of participants: three groups focused on English, two groups for each of the other three curriculum areas.

Trying to capture what 260 people have had to say during 90 minutes is not a rewarding task. The chances of providing offence are high. Even though the notes from each group gave a good sense of the trajectory of these discussions, my apologies in advance to those whose views cannot be found or which have been rendered inadequately.

I note in passing that some of what the speakers had to say on big ideas, crucial issues, explicitly, and with heavy black underlining, was missed. Peter Freebody’s commentary on the desirable degree of specification, ‘necessarily a work in progress’, was one; Stuart McIntyre’s thoughts on time requirements for the idea of history study he was advancing was another. Peter Sullivan didn’t spend a lot of time on desirable format but there are some paragraphs in the Paper with which spell out his ambitions very clearly. The Papers could be re-read, or read, with profit. I note also that the five topic areas used to circumscribe and give direction to the discussion were in some cases ahead of the state of current developmental progress, generating unsatisfying speculation and argument about material which has not yet materialised.

But people came to say what they wanted to say and they said it. This is what happens, and what should happen, at consultations. What was said is probably a reasonably representative sample of school educator opinion and a fair reflection of their concerns.

In the last couple of decades teachers in some jurisdictions have been burnt badly by political intervention in curricular matters. Most of the participants in this symposium would have been teaching during the last effort to mount a national curriculum which, after three years of work and much gathering of momentum, collapsed on the very brink of implementation.

Their obvious wishes to get the very best for their students and their disciplines through this new process are tempered by concerns about being left out, of being rushed, of being pushed down unfamiliar and poorly lit paths, and of being asked to move a mountain without tools, time or resources. They don’t want assessment procedures screwing things up; and they know much more about day-to-day issues of delivery than people who work behind desks, in lecture theatres or in houses of parliament. They want that knowledge recognised and its implications observed.

— David McRae
The Paper

The presentation was by Professor Peter Freebody (from the University of Sydney) who reminded us of how consistent contestation related to English had been. What is it that should be taught? Why should we bother studying it? How might it change to reflect current and future needs?

He nominated three durable preoccupations: learning about language, exploring and appreciating literature, and developing literacy skills. He noted that the nature of each of these was qualitatively different and that they had histories of differing pedagogies and assessment practices. That acknowledged, they also have strong interrelationships, both conceptually and in practice.

The challenges: linguistic diversity and consequent issues related to equity; and the need to build a more explicit cumulative curriculum story with shared concepts about improvement and what it means, K-12. We need to deal with and then forget the false dichotomy between explication (‘transmission’ was the term used in some group discussions) and exploration (‘inquiry’). We know that good teachers encourage and move continually and fluently between both modes of teaching and learning.

Do teachers have the knowledge about grammar to pull off the requirements suggested in the Paper? It is not rocket science to build up a powerful supportive tool kit.

One matter in the Paper little commented on to date has been the desire to push literacy pedagogy up into the secondary school and further studies of literature study down into the primary years. The former has been well rehearsed. It’s the latter which will be of interest.

What happens next? Probably the major issue will be the level of central prescription and the level of local control. This will always be an on-going project. There needs to be an adequate level of protection and support for beginning teachers and perhaps especially for those in more remote locations with high teacher turnover. But there must be room for the curriculum to be responsive to local circumstances and to evolve in a changing world.

The headline items? Dealing with English as a body of knowledge and the interfaces that idea introduces; and, what does a good teacher of English know, especially in pedagogical terms, and how to incorporate that effectively in the final product.

The Discussion

• Political: Best, or most common? Is the primary task to secure political agreement?
What, if any, advances can be made in curricular design and teaching and learning practice through this process?

The interaction between political and educational agendas was discussed by each group as a major issue. ‘After all it was politicians from WA and NSW who pulled the plug last time!’ ‘This is Howard’s agenda isn’t it? Except pursued more aggressively.’ ‘Joe Klein? An example to follow?!’ ‘Teachers need to stop being the road that others drive on.’

Several contributors wanted the first question asked (best, or most common?) and asked often, wanted the best, but suspected the worst and expressed their concern about the
political underpinnings of the proposed new curriculum. For example: ‘Is English crippled by the whole literacy debate? The document feels very conservative by my observations of children learning today.’

A number of participants expressed their satisfaction with the three defining elements of the study. ‘They define English simply and cut through all the other terminology.’ One person offered the view that ‘the discipline of English is missing … no genuine disciplinary perspective is foregrounded in the document. A series of three elements don’t make a discipline.’ This view was disputed.

Questions were asked about the degree of specification (the broader the specification the higher likelihood of agreement, … and the less likely to be meaningful); and management of differing terminology. (Are there significant jurisdictional differences? We thought so but weren’t sure.)

Grammar, of course, provided a focus. Traditional or functional? Was it pushed to the top of the agenda because of political pressure? Several participants were pleased to see the status it had been accorded.

A degree of reform fatigue, especially in some jurisdictions, was noted. The experience of the English K-6 syllabus in NSW still rankles. What happened with Queensland’s New Basics, and more recently events in WA, Tasmania? The consequences of curriculum change were noted: new work, extra work, different work, a lobbying point, a change of focus and practice. Teachers need to be convinced, and where they are convinced said a participant from her recent experience, they need to be supported consistently over time to do what has been decided. Cynicism may derail the national curriculum.

The need to manage or at least influence media discussion was alluded to.

• Educational: What additional value will be provided for students and their learning? How will the extraordinary diversity of Australia’s student population be catered for?

To what extent will English be compulsory? How many courses will there be? At differentiated levels? were questions asked with relation to this topic. (‘I hope the national curriculum will encourage and enable students to stay on at school.’)

Concerns were expressed about how students with English as an additional language, students from low SES backgrounds, Indigenous students, and students with disabilities would be catered for, and the necessity of doing so. The early childhood sector was represented by a view that it may be overwhelmed by content. Early childhood teachers know, it was asserted, how children learn and develop, and are concerned.

This topic also led to further discussion of the nature of the documentation and, especially, the resources — time, human and documentation — which would accompany the process. A wide consensus supported the need for effective professional development built on the current skills and knowledge of teachers.

• Professional: What role will there be for teachers? How are they positioned by the process? What degree of detail in the specification of what is to be taught should there be?

Perhaps this discussion could be summarised by one comment: If we leave it to teachers to teach what they want then nothing will happen (in terms of a national curriculum); but as soon as you prescribe something then teachers become fearful.

The notes from this discussion indicate that without examples of the level of curriculum specification to look at and discuss, opinions are untethered.
General views went to and fro: we value teachers’ knowledge, we should draw on and codify that; how do we do that?; isn’t that the job of the document?; support materials will be crucial; protection and support for beginning teachers is a very good idea; but what about the rest of us? Death by 1000 dot points?! At a point like this in two groups a number of people said let’s go back to the documents we have, not all of them necessarily, but their terminology and sections which we like. Re-naming and new terminology appeared as a common concern.

One group built up a head of steam about the absence of practising teachers in the process to date, suggesting a need for representation from the wide variety of teaching contexts and experience levels which exist.

- **Organisational: What is the potential to deliver genuine cross-disciplinary learning opportunities?**

One person suggested that there was some irony in this question given that the only progress to date had been to set up four discrete discipline areas. And yet … ‘Untold opportunities for literacy across the curriculum are there if the model is rich enough to support them.’ That was one view. Another set of people expressed concern that this would become the sole responsibility of English teachers rather than being shared more broadly. This led to lively debate, with the way teachers of ESL being offered as an example of what should happen. Another view: literacy across the disciplines is an example of something that is difficult to achieve without an overarching framework (of pedagogy) which wasn’t available at present. ‘It shouldn’t just be in English.’

There was an active constituency for depth before breadth. In the same group one person noted the absence of reference to factual texts in the paper suggesting that if that was considered it might help to make more of cross-disciplinary focus.

Some nervousness was expressed, from a primary perspective, about thinking about English without knowing what else was going to be in the curriculum. ‘I need to see where everything is going to fit.’ There were other comments about time allocations and other practical issues to do with subject relationships expressed mostly as queries.

It seemed obvious that more clarification was required before effective comment could be made.

- **Structural: What will the relationship be between the content of the national curriculum and assessment and reporting processes? What should it be?**

A list of concerns common across all groups was expressed.

- Do we test content knowledge or skills? Or both? But where will the emphasis be?
- How do we test creativity or ‘the aesthetic’?
- Assessment is not just testing (NAPLAN tests go against what the Paper’s idea and our idea of English is; we should educate politicians about assessment; what is the relationship of the teaching of this subject with testing regimes?; there is no serious public agenda for genuine assessment for learning)
- We must have assessment which supports learning. How will this be achieved?

One group spent quite some time talking about the current HSC and its assessment and marking practices, and what would, or could, remain of that process.

Statements from the speakers which had some support referred to the value of sample testing, looking for richer sources of evidence, and the resources needed to provide adequate assessment processes.
History

The Paper

The paper can be found at:

The Presentation

Professor Stuart McIntyre (University of Melbourne) indicated his gratitude that English operated as the primary lightning rod for cultural anxieties, but noted that History attracts its share.

With Maths and Science it shares the problem of teachers teaching it who are working outside their background area of training. The big issue for the ambitions of this Paper is that History is starting from such a low base. Take up of History in Year 12 has declined. Only perhaps half of students overall are studying it in any systematic way. These issues have serious implications for pre-and in-service teacher education. The requisite degree of attention must be paid to resources and support structures.

Why should it be studied? History study is more complex than common usage of the term ‘history’ suggests. It is as least as much about processes of investigation as the nature of the past itself. It is bound by principles of interpretation and the operation of cognitive processes and memory. Anxieties about History are amplified by the ‘sacred legacy’ issue. Will we be betraying innocent young Australians?

The processes of historical understanding (‘the methods, procedures and tools that constitute the discipline of history’) are essential to the study. He noted the seven core components which the paper spells out (p. 5) in this regard.

It was decided to focus on World History for many reasons. Some were about investigating cultural difference and the stimulating, and confronting, impact of being taken somewhere you don’t know about. Australian History can be understood much better by being placed in this larger context.

The concerns raised in the consultative forums to date have included the National Curriculum Board’s emphasis on opportunities for cross-curricular study. There are marked possibilities, requirements even, for relating History study as it has been constructed in the Paper to, for example, LOTEs, literacy and literacy, geography, civics and citizenship and the use of ICTs. The current integrated approach in the primary years will still be possible, although some unease has been expressed about teaching time and its capacity to skew curricular offerings. These concerns should not displace the importance of teaching the fundamentals of the discipline of History.

Is the suggested content coverage practicable? This is the reason for the inclusion of three sorts of studies: overview, bridging and depth. We need a futures orientation, not to disregard the present, but to think about future needs in circumstances of cultural diversity, global citizenship, relations with Asia and its diverse countries, the impact of ICTs and the growing knowledge economy.

The big issues: effectively trained staff and timetabling. It is on those things that the future of History rests.

The Discussion
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- Political: Best, or most common? Is the primary task to secure political agreement? What, if any, advances can be made in curricular design and teaching and learning practice through this process?

As is perhaps appropriate for history educators, various ideas were expressed about the source and causal connections of this initiative. (The ‘Melbourne Declaration’? Meaning, quality, source, influence?) Lots of questions were asked. Who agreed that this should happen? COAG (the Council of Australian Governments, in effect the Premiers and their Departments), or the Ministers of Education and their Departments? If it’s the former, (and it is) what support will be forthcoming from either group, but especially the latter, both in sentiment and in kind? Federal interference in what we teach, a centralist takeover in fact? Or something quite different, not centralist, not representative of the federal government, not political but educational at its base, in fact part of the idea of what we are as nation? How much is known about where this is going to go? What are dimensions of this process?

The planned consultation process was too short and too difficult (‘too unfacilitated’, shocking timing) from a classroom teacher’s perspective. With relation to the place accorded to Indigenous histories in the Framing Paper, it was felt that not enough talking may have been done with the owners of those histories.

The emphasis on world history was supported but there was some concern for the amount of time and resources which would make this teaching effective and how it would translate into practice. There might be too much content in some Stages.

- Educational: What additional value will be provided for students and their learning? How will the extraordinary diversity of Australia’s student population be catered for?

A wide range of views were expressed on these issues. ‘The breadth of the content has been improved markedly. It covers the history of the world in large conceptual and thematic leaps.’ ‘The focus on Indigenous perspectives is useful.’ ‘It’s a great chance to grab back historical thinking, to explore its dimensions and to press forward on how people make sense of the past in contemporary ways.’ But nonetheless, there was a view that the result could be a ‘hodge podge’, a ‘potted stew’. And in a flurry of emphatic negatives: ‘It is important not to have no narrative.’ In response: ‘This could be overcome by the overview, the big picture.’

The place of Australian History was discussed. The emphasis on Australia in the world was well liked by some participants. But how will it be framed? Will social engineering rear its ugly head, or will the presentation of a range of viewpoints be assured? What will the impact on senior studies be?

The question of the suggested number of hours to be devoted to History study arose. How full will the curriculum be? What choices will still be available to students in, for example, the middle years?

- Professional: What role will there be for teachers? How are they positioned by the process? What degree of detail in the specification of what is to be taught should there be?

There was agreement that the current paper is well supported by research and that this was a most positive aspect of the work to date. There was also strong agreement that teachers’ professional pedagogical knowledge will be essential for effective implementation. The document doesn’t address this at present. How will this resource be tapped? How will it be provided for beginning teachers and teachers required to teach History who have little background in the discipline?

How can we support deep learning? The depth studies suggested go some way to resolving this issue. We might need good choices in this regard perhaps with well worked-out examples.
A similar discussion occurred as in the other groups about the desirable degree of prescription, with the same caveats about the influence of assessment practices on this. The very good ideas in the document, it was thought, might disappear through this process.

- **Organisational: What is the potential to deliver genuine cross-disciplinary learning opportunities?**

There was some dispute about how well this was being done at present. Some felt that it was difficult to implement well. Others felt that it was already being done well currently in the primary and middle years and in some circumstances in senior studies. There was a constituency for ensuring that History remained a separate discipline, with the additional qualification that cross-disciplinary work relied on a strong discipline base; but skills could be cross-disciplinary, assessment could be cross-disciplinary.

Participants wanted to know just what was meant by cross-disciplinary learning. It was felt that until more detail was available it was hard to comment effectively. But, regardless, curriculum documentation should be informed by what is currently happening in the classroom.

- **Structural: What will the relationship be between the content of the national curriculum and assessment and reporting processes? What should it be?**

We don’t like tick-a-box assessment. We don’t like assessment that distorts the intentions of our teaching or that limits what and how we can teach. We don’t like the strictures imposed by universal testing. We don’t like ‘league tables’ and are suspicious about the uses to which assessment could be put. We need to measure what we are actually teaching, and want to know how historical reasoning fits into this process.

What does an 21st century credential look like? What should it look like?
Mathematics

The Paper

The paper can be found at:

The Presentation

In his preparation of this Paper, Professor Peter Sullivan (Monash University) noted the important contributions from critical friends, teacher forums and relevant subject associations.

What do we want from the study of Mathematics in a national curriculum? We expect that it will change and develop, and that a wider range of students than at present will benefit from and enjoy mathematics. It is understood that we need to provide for expert users in the professions, the more general requirements of the workforce and to make sure that citizens are able to use the maths they need.

The big challenge is to make Mathematics inclusive for all to the end of Year 9 and to accommodate compulsory study in Year 10. This is a major, and long-standing, challenge.

One matter with relation to the futures orientation of the study concerns the use of technologies, a contentious issue. Do students need to demonstrate their mathematical proficiency unaided, or should they learn to use the rapidly expanding range of devices to support their learning? The Paper says: They’re in!

The eventual curriculum document needs to be clear and succinct, not to illustrate death by 1000 dot points, and not to set low expectations. It must be about pedagogy and enable the right sort of interactivity between specification and teacher knowledge. Demands for additional detail must be resisted.

He was conscious of current demands to rush from topic to topic and would like to see the studying of combined topics in more depth. With no embarrassment whatever, we should be able to say that some topics are more important than others. He was emphatic that all students could be challenged within basic topics. This was important in catering for the most capable. It has been the practice to move to new topics rather than exploring the same topic in more depth. The paper says that we will do the latter.

The new curriculum will be constructed and driven from the bottom up (ie the early years) rather than the top down.

Views on numeracy range widely. Some people deem it to be separate subject; some say it has no distinct identity. Under the new dispensation numeracy will be taught within Maths and include reference to numeracy in other areas of the curriculum.

There will be three content strands designed to maximise their interconnection.

He concluded with some comments on the other related big challenge for Mathematics: assessment. It is cheaper to assess mathematical fluency than mathematical reasoning, and that’s where we find ourselves too often at present. This is more likely to lead to curricular distortion than most other factors. All aspects of the study must be included in assessment procedures.

The Discussion
• Political: Best, or most common? Is the primary task to secure political agreement? What, if any, advances can be made in curricular design and teaching and learning practice through this process?

‘We have learnt from previous experience that we want something aspirational, and mustn’t settle for basic.’ A strong start to this discussion. There was some talk about what ‘best’ might mean, and how it might be interpreted by, for example, a director of finance or a politician as well as by a curriculum writer or a teacher.

We do need to build from the bottom up. There was some vocal support from this idea. We need to ensure that the foundations are well laid. The journey is as important as the end product. Etc. And then some uncertainty. ‘Has there been any identification of or agreement on the big ideas in mathematics?’ Do we know what the big ideas in maths are? Ideas about this may differ from person to person. Should we try to develop some consensus on this?

One group made various estimates of the degree of current crisis in the teaching of Mathematics. As a counter, or perhaps an addendum, the program ‘Count Me in Too’ was spoken of in glowing terms.

The other group spent some time enumerating structural problems: linkage with the early years, variations in school starting age and primary to secondary transition points — a discussion which moved easily to past failures in state and territory interactions.

Non-negotiables appeared to be, that:
— the products of this work must focus on children and their needs, not structural or administrative arrangements
— proper time must be allowed for consultation and implementation and for bringing teachers’ interest, enthusiasm and knowledge into the process, (‘Is this the consultation? Is this really it?!’ ‘No, this is something set up separately by The University of Sydney. You’re supposed to go the website and …’)
— if we want ‘best’, then we must resource it properly.

• Educational: What additional value will be provided for students and their learning? How will the extraordinary diversity of Australia’s student population be catered for?

The central issue: the sieve effect; the construction of the study of Mathematics as a way of weeding out rather than supporting those who do not demonstrate relevant capabilities. The sub-topics were: streaming (anti, but with some sense of its inevitability); the enormous diversity of student capabilities, just who is it, which groups, which do poorly at Maths; and the influence of curricular and assessment arrangements at senior levels. In the recorded comments there is the underlying sense that this is well-trodden ground. ‘It’s all great in theory. But what does it look like in practice?’

• Professional: What role will there be for teachers? How are they positioned by the process? What degree of detail in the specification of what is to be taught should there be?

This discussion returned to the non-negotiables referred to above, especially with relation to the provision of professional learning support and opportunities, and especially in a context where teachers of Mathematics have little or no background in the discipline.

The level of detail and specification was a matter of interest. There were reasons provided for having a lot or a little, with an emergent consensus for not indulging in ‘mindless recipes’. One group had an interesting discussion on text books (‘an ancient paradigm’), their history, place and correct target (‘teachers’ was one view, not students) and what a suitable text book for the national curriculum might look like.
Some participants wanted assurance that the new curriculum would be useable by all teachers, particularly first-year out teachers who may be operating in a school where little support or guidance is available. There was also mention that older teachers needed to see the relevance of ‘new’ maths curriculum, not just viewing it as another passing fad.

This might be summarised, perhaps, as: Have and express faith in the capacity of teachers (as long as they are suitably trained and supported).

- **Organisational: What is the potential to deliver genuine cross-disciplinary learning opportunities?**

‘These always sound fantastic. But I’m not sure that we’re clear how to do it, or whether there are genuine opportunities.’ That comment seems to summarise one line of thinking. The other was concern for the integrity of Maths. ‘If you frame Maths as interdisciplinary it loses its identity.’ ‘We need to get our own house in order before we start wandering round outside.’ ‘We often don’t know yet how to make connections for kids to mathematical ideas. We should get better at that first.’

There were a number of observations.

‘The use of “nouns” and “verbs” is very helpful in promoting a cross-disciplinary perspective.’ ‘The very preliminary division of the curriculum into four subjects is not a good signal.’ ‘The curriculums will be prepared by experts within the subject areas and separately. Is that a lost opportunity?’ ‘It’s unusual to find people with genuine cross-disciplinary skills.’

And a lot of questions which worked their way towards the fundamental.

‘Where does this fit with numeracy?’ ‘Which disciplines? How about art and music?’ ‘I’m still thinking about the 100 hours. How much time would you give to …?’ ‘What are we talking about?’ ‘Are we confusing “inter-disciplinary” with “cross-curricular” or “integrated”?’ ‘We need to have proper definitions.’

- **Structural: What will the relationship be between the content of the national curriculum and assessment and reporting processes? What should it be?**

The same sorts of questions were raised in these groups as they were across the board. Is the current national testing the sort of thing we might see? If so we don’t want it. We don’t want the assessment tail wagging the curriculum dog. We must have a range of assessments that assess what we are trying to teach, and which support and enhance the best features of what we are trying to achieve through the new curriculum.
A Report from the
National Curriculum Symposium

Science

The Paper

The paper can be found at:

The Presentation

Professor Denis Goodrum (Australian National University, Canberra) began by comparing ‘a curriculum of one voice’, a conservative voice, with a curriculum that tackles declining student interest and plateau-ing levels of achievement.

Teacher expertise is crucial for success in this process. We all know, he said, that the key to change, innovation and learning is the teacher and his or her work. We also know that, as in other areas, we have teacher shortages leading to teaching out of field at the very time we need new skill sets based on substantial discipline knowledge.

He also noted the impact of problems generated by differing primary-secondary transition points. In terms of variation across the country, he made the telling point that there are far more substantial differences within than between jurisdictions.

These strands don’t appear in the new study: energy and change, life and living, natural and processed materials, and the earth and beyond. The reason? They line up too obviously with traditional disciplines. This is not the way to encourage new thinking about the study and to revitalize its delivery.

What is science for? As in other areas we need to accommodate a wide range of needs: those of people whose careers will be based in the sciences and technology, a work force with scientific capabilities, and for people in general with an everyday need for scientific knowledge and skills. Denis noted the gentleman in the corner who, during an arcane discussion of the purposes of science said: ‘Look! It’s to guard against cruddy goods and superstition!’

We have ample evidence of the significance of inquiry to scientific learning. The new curriculum must not only de-crowd what is currently specified for study, but focus on and amplify the relevant skills of inquiry.

He indicated that he was passionate not just about the new curriculum and its prospects but the additional need to resource its implementation adequately. He finished with a plea to members of the audience and beyond that suggestions for every big idea/major concept to be added to the curriculum, should also nominate the one for exclusion.

The Discussion

- Political: Best, or most common? Is the primary task to secure political agreement? What, if any, advances can be made in curricular design and teaching and learning practice through this process?

Both groups began sceptically. ‘We’ve been involved in curriculum development since 1964 and what we get is same old same old.’ ‘The states and territories have already done this.’ ‘Tensions between state and territory jurisdictions are the biggest problem.’ ‘Best practice is context dependent. We know that in the end it’s about teachers teaching. It’s what happens in the classroom rather than on paper during the curriculum writing process that matters.’

As a corollary, it was asserted that the success of this process will stand or fall with regard to the support from teachers; and thus the time available for consultation, the need for a period
of stability to enable effective resourcing and upskilling, and the resources which might be
made available for teacher professional learning were all central matters requiring attention.

The possibilities and practicalities of ‘bottom up’ design and development were also a matter
of interest. While discussing issues related to this topic it was suggested that change to the
current models of external assessment would be required for the desired changes to be
feasible.

One passage of discussion worked over content/process, transmission/facilitation issues.
‘Teachers must be facilitators of learning.’ ‘However important skills of inquiry are, there
must also be the acquisition of a body of knowledge and skills to inform inquiry.’

• Educational: What additional value will be provided for students and their learning?
How will the extraordinary diversity of Australia’s student population be catered for?

Content was the first focus for this discussion. One voice: It might be possible to provide a
limited core plus a series of electives to provide the requisite degree of choice, inquiry and
exploration. Another: The acquisition of skills applicable to multiple career paths had to be
considered. Another: There must be provision for student differentiation ranging from gifted
and talented students to students with learning difficulties. How do you manage this?

There was a concern expressed that the way the ‘big ideas’ (energy, sustainability,
equilibrium and interdependence, form and function, evidence, models and theories) are
currently described on page 10 of the Framing Paper are more directed at being ideas for
society, rather than being big ideas which will capture the essence and essential nature of
science.

One passage of discussion related to the need to find effective processes for engaging
students with science. This was the biggest issue, it was proposed, for the national
curriculum. This moved into exchanges which recurred in both groups throughout the
session about the comparative roles of teachers and curriculum documents and, as elsewhere,
it was asserted with vigour that it is teachers who make change.

• Professional: What role will there be for teachers? How are they positioned by the
process? What degree of detail in the specification of what is to be taught should there be?

Taking up a theme from the speakers’ contributions it was suggested that the new curriculum
should provide an effective guide for new teachers, and be inspirational and not limiting for
more experienced teachers. The importance of pedagogy was reiterated, along with the value
of the expressed intention of ‘bottom up’ design and implementation. ‘Can science be made
fun?’ ‘How do we communicate a love for Science? How can this be inculcated in our
students?’

Concern was expressed about the level of science knowledge of some teachers required to
teach the subject, especially in the primary years. How can this be enhanced? It was
suggested that the ‘readability’ of the document may provide some help in this regard.

Taking a different tack, another patch of discussion focused on the amount of content
suggested in the Framing paper. Has anything been left out? If not, depth studies may be
hard to include. If so, should there be some reconsideration? No detail is to hand from the
discussion with answers to these questions.

• Organisational: What is the potential to deliver genuine cross-disciplinary learning
opportunities?

A series of points were made in response to this question. The strong implications for school
organisation were noted along with the complex demands on teachers that this might entail.
It was also suggested that it could be dependent on the establishment of a common language across curriculums, and that cross-disciplinary learning should be related to ‘authentic’ assessment. ‘Rich tasks’ was the example used.

Someone suggested that cross-disciplinary learning should not be mandatory. However, support was expressed for linkages, for example, to Mathematics and Human Society and Its Environment [presumably, its replacement], while noting the need for some explicit guidance as to how this might occur. Differences between the primary and secondary sectors in this regard were alluded to. It was thought that the need to unclutter the curriculum could be considered when thinking about implementation of these ideas.

- **Structural: What will the relationship be between the content of the national curriculum and assessment and reporting processes? What should it be?**

Some concern was evident about the impact of the nature of the intended assessment and, again, there was support for the need of an intimate and mutually supportive linkage between teaching and assessment. ‘We need to assess the full range of knowledge and skills.’ The challenge of assessing some of the desired outcomes (creativity, innovation) was noted. Concerns about the influence of current assessment procedures at upper secondary levels reappeared.

Participants in these groups also did not want students performance/assessment procedures linked to teacher accreditation/accountability agendas.
The Conclusion

Following a report back from each key curriculum area group, presenters were joined by Robert Randall, General Manager, Office of the National Curriculum Board, who provided an update on current progress and future directions.

He noted that the consultative process to date had included state/territory and national forums along with focus groups, meetings with representatives of key organizations and individual experts.

He referred to the Board’s principles and specifications for development which appear earlier in this document with a particular emphasis on the role which teachers and their professional knowledge and capacities will play.

He drew out and reiterated the most challenging of the ideas that the Framing Papers contain, using the issue of the current crowding of the curriculum as a binding idea. ‘Less is more’ will be one of the important thematic principles of the Board’s work. ‘The curriculum must be decluttered’, he asserted, and he anticipates that this will be one of the results of the implementation of a national curriculum.

The Board’s current view of general capabilities was described. Those referred to as foundational include literacy, numeracy and ICT, noting that ICT stands for Information, Communication and Technologies. Continua will be developed for these areas to guide the curriculum development process and future NAPLAN processes. It is expected that Problem solving and Creativity will be partly domain-specific, but it should be assumed that they will receive widespread attention. Working with others and the capacity to Manage one’s own learning will be included across the board. Studies will be infused with a range of perspectives including those of Indigenous peoples, living in a multicultural society, engaged citizens, and requirements for economic and environmental sustainability.

The materials the Board will produce will clearly specify the knowledge, understanding and skills it is intended students should learn, along with anticipated standards of achievement. During the development process efforts will be made to ensure that a wide range of cross-referenced and consistent support materials are linked to the national curriculum, with and special attention being given to electronic links to teacher and student resources and student work samples.

Drafting of the new curriculum documents will commence in 2009. Extensive consultation will occur over drafts, and a panel of schools will be invited to trial the materials during the development phase. Full implementation will occur from 2011 and planning has already begun for this. Ongoing evaluation will focus on the fidelity of implementation in practice and the impact on student learning.

He concluded by thanking participants for their interest and inviting them to continue to participate actively. An email alert list has been set up via the Board’s website which will aid this process. Go to: www.ncb.org.au/consultation/subscribe/get_involved.html
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Tasmanian Qualifications Authority
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Emanuel School
The University of Sydney
Moriah College
The Presbyterian Ladies College Sydney
Roseville College
The University of Sydney
NSW Department of Education and Training - EMSAD
Catholic Schools Office Broken Bay
Ignite Innovation Pty Ltd
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Macarthur Anglican School
The University of Sydney
NSW Teachers Federation
NSW Department of Education and Training
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Association of Catholic School Principals
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Division of Professional Learning, Faculty of Education and Social Work, The University of Sydney
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