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13 December 2019

Professor Geoff Masters AO
Independent Review Lead
NSW Curriculum Review
By email: nswcurriculumreview@nesa.nsw.edu.au and online submission

Dear Professor Masters,

The Interim Report of the NSW Curriculum Review

The University of Sydney welcomes your comprehensive Interim Report and is grateful for the opportunity to engage with the review of the NSW school curriculum. We agree with the Review's assessment that the NSW school curriculum has served generations of students well but requires substantial reform if it is to continue to prepare our young people well for meaningful and fulfilling lives.

We trust our brief feedback below – including in response to some of the Interim Report's criticisms of the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) – is helpful and look forward to continuing the discussion about future directions for school education in NSW.

Support for the Report's vision and its proposed directions for reform

Producing and delivering a curriculum that prepares 70,000 Year 12 students state-wide each year for diverse outcomes is a massive undertaking and achievement for which our schools and the NSW Government should be proud. However, the NSW school system has been challenged in recent decades to include not only all (and more) of the technical content that has always been taught, but an increasing number of quite valid life skills.

We therefore agree it is most appropriate to review a curriculum that has become overcrowded and strongly endorse the Review's articulation of a new long-term vision for a future NSW school curriculum that ***“supports teachers to nurture wonder, ignite passion and provide every young person with knowledge, skills and attributes that will help prepare them for a lifetime of learning, meaningful adult employment and effective future citizenship.”***

The broad directions for reform proposed in the Interim Report are also strongly supported. We agree especially that it is critical that all NSW students leave our senior secondary school system with the strong foundational knowledge, skills and the personal attributes they will need to succeed in further studies, training, employment and life. NSW school students and their families also need access to high-quality, accurate and more personalised advice – well before the final two years of secondary school – about their senior secondary school subject choices, the ATAR, tertiary education and training options and key trends and likely directions for the future of work during their lifetimes.

The changing nature of society and work

The NSW economy and labour market have undergone profound change over the last three decades. The transformation in the make-up of the economy and the nature of work seems only likely to gather pace over the next decade due to the dual forces of globalisation and advances in technology. With 90 per cent of employment growth in Australia over the next decade expected to be in roles that require a tertiary-level qualification, and millions of traditional lower-skilled jobs to be made obsolete, our most urgent challenge is to minimise the numbers of NSW students who do not make the transition successfully from senior secondary school to further study and secure employment.

As the Review notes and various studies have confirmed, the economic and social cost of our young people leaving school early or failing to make the transition from school to work are enormous.¹ A renewed focus on well-designed and resourced, evidence-based strategies, is required to target the complex needs of this group of students who are most at risk of marginalisation due to technological and other disruptions.

Learning how to learn

We need to prepare NSW school students to tackle the challenges of tomorrow, rather than replicate the knowledge of today; even though a sound grounding in today's knowledge is a key (but not exclusive) requirement for tackling tomorrow's issues. **To this end, the most important concepts to be embedded across the NSW school curriculum are 'learning how to learn' and 'preparing for a life of learning'**. The detail of the actual content in individual school subjects is less important. The volume of knowledge in every area is many orders of magnitude larger than could ever be taught at school. So long as the fundamentals and key concepts that form the basis of further learning in the field are covered, we agree that content need not be dictated by the curriculum. There are clearly basic competencies in communication, numeracy, human understanding and information technology literacy. However, we believe there should be options of different levels of learning and achievement to ensure the system serves, challenges and engages all students. A renewed focus on 'learning how to learn' would serve to enhance the relevance of the curriculum for students and their communities. We agree also with the proposed structural reform in terms of 'attainment levels' in each area of learning. This should, with time, improve levels of student engagement and attainment – particularly amongst cohorts of students who are generally not well served by formal academic education.

Learnings from recent reforms to our undergraduate curriculum

We have recently implemented major reforms to our undergraduate curriculum to ensure we are preparing our graduates to thrive professionally and as members of the community.² Based on the comprehensive research we completed when developing our new curriculum, we predict that to contribute effectively in a rapidly changing world, our graduates will not only need deep disciplinary knowledge, but well-developed skills for critical thinking, problem solving, communication and teamwork. They will also need the capabilities for independent research and lifelong learning to update their knowledge, and skills for information literacy. Moreover, they will benefit from foreign language acquisition, and from developing the flexibility and breadth of perspective necessary to interact productively and creatively across cultural, disciplinary and professional boundaries. They will need, also, the personal resilience to deal with uncertainty and failure, and the sureness of personal values and clarity of social purpose to make ethical responses to whatever challenges confront them in their workplaces and communities.

Our approach to building these capabilities through the undergraduate curriculum has a number of threads in common with the proposed changes to the NSW curriculum - for example, a focus on application of learning, skills for application of knowledge, and the educational value of authentic problems and the challenge of major projects. We have been engaging with many schools and businesses about our approach to curriculum reform since 2016. Our learnings from this process may be of interest to the Review, the Department of Education and school principals, especially once the work begins to implement the Review's final recommendations. We would be very happy to share our learnings.

Second language learning in NSW schools

We also strongly endorse the Review's finding that NSW should set a long-term objective to increase second language learning in NSW schools dramatically over the next decade. As the Interim Report notes, Australia lags most competitor countries in the number and proportion of our students who study a second language at school.

¹ The Mitchell Institute, [Counting the costs of lost opportunity in Australian education](#), Report No. 02/2017

² The University of Sydney (June 2015), *Towards a distinctive Sydney education: a discussion paper*, October 2014 and University of Sydney, *Developing a distinctive undergraduate education, Strategic Planning for 2016-20*, Discussion Paper No. 1

We agree that in an increasingly globalised world, the attainment of language and intercultural skills will be essential to international engagement and understanding and will deliver great social, political and economic benefits for NSW. We agree also that there is strong evidence that language learning increases students' understandings of their first language, improves literacy levels, and promotes a range of other cognitive skills. Research is clear on the benefits of students learning a second language from a young age and before starting school if possible.

We acknowledge it may be challenging to find the numbers of quality languages teachers that would be required to make a substantial difference in second language acquisition in NSW schools. Nevertheless, we are committed to working with the Government and sector to help deliver the required language teaching workforce and endorse the more detailed feedback we understand our School of Languages and Cultures will make to the Review.

Criticisms of the ATAR

We note the ATAR is the target of significant comment and criticism in the Interim Report, which recommends that it is replaced with transparent information about the basis of constructing course-by-course selection ranks. We think it is important to acknowledge that the ATAR was never intended to be anything other than a fair and transparent measure of academic achievement for university entry. The ATAR rewards effort as well as aptitude and our analysis shows consistently that – so long as we include adjustment factors for students who have experienced genuine academic disadvantage – the ATAR predicts very reasonably the success rates and subject performance of our students.

We also note that much of the criticism of the ATAR comes from those who seek to use it outside the bounds of university entry. Unfortunately, the ATAR's simplicity as a single number makes it very easy to be misused and misrepresented. The HSC results and the ATAR were separated as two distinct measures nearly 30 years ago and we see a need for universities, the NSW Department of Education and schools to be working together to challenge both the media and the non-university sector to focus on the full set of subject results and their bands in the HSC as a measure of a student's high school performance and possible suitability for non-university pathways rather than the ATAR, which is designed for university admission.

We acknowledge that there is much (often not supported by evidence) commentary on 'gaming the system' or changing subjects to 'maximise your ATAR'. If this is indeed occurring, it is not necessarily a shortcoming of the ATAR itself. Rather, it is a symptom of the competitive entry for university places. If university admission rules were to change to use different criteria such as those suggested in the Interim Report, we would inevitably see similar systems and processes designed to gain a competitive edge for whatever that entry criterion might be. For example, many medical schools (including ours) already apply a combination of some type of ATAR, or GAMSAT plus an interview to assess suitability and motivation. As a result, we now see just as many websites or training centres aimed at helping applicants perform well in the interviews, as there are tutoring colleges for the exams.

Notwithstanding these points in defence of the ATAR – which incidentally was developed originally by the University of Sydney as an admissions tool – we are more than happy to be part of a constructive review of the ATAR as recommended in the Interim Report.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Review's Interim Report. We are very keen to continue working with the Review, the NSW Government, employers and other stakeholders to help ensure that the NSW school curriculum remains fit for its core purpose of preparing our young people well for success beyond the school gate. Please do not hesitate to contact me directly should you wish to discuss any aspect of the Review further with the University of Sydney.

Yours sincerely,

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Professor Pip Pattison AO
Deputy Vice-Chancellor Education