

The National History Curriculum: Tragedy or Triumph?

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Abstract

The National History Curriculum, due for release to schools in mid 2010, is currently being written. Not only is this a monumental task slated to occur in a relatively short period of time, it is one mired in debate and controversy. Broadly, debate has focused on the nature and value of school history – what is being taught, by whom, when, where and for what purpose. Attempts at defining what a National History Curriculum ‘might look like’ have similarly been shrouded in controversy.

How the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA] will navigate these debates and controversies remains to be seen. Will the forthcoming National History Curriculum reinvigorate the teaching and learning of history in Australian schools? Or, will it contribute to the demise of school history? The recently released *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: History* (National Curriculum Board; May, 2009) provides some insight into the forthcoming National History Curriculum. In this paper I analyse and critique the *Shape of Australian Curriculum: History* in view of the debates and controversies that currently surround the teaching of history in Australian schools.

Introduction

The teaching of history in Australian schools is a contentious and highly politicised issue. The contention surrounding the teaching of history is mired in debate about the nature and purpose of school history, when it should be taught, for how long and by whom. Such contention is not new and is nested within broader societal debates about globalisation, nationhood and civics and citizenship. Debate surrounding the future of Australian history teaching has in recent years however, come to the fore; partly in response to a perceived historical knowledge deficit and its impact on national identity, but also in response to international and national moves towards more rigorous educational accountability and national curriculum (Harris and Bateman, 2008, p25).

Indeed, since 2000 there has been a ‘National Inquiry into the Teaching of History’, the report of which is titled *The Future of the Past* (Taylor, 2000), a National History Summit to discuss two specific reports *An Overview of the Teaching and Learning of Australian History in Schools* (Taylor & Clark, 2006) and *The Teaching of Australian History in Australian Schools: A Normative View* (Melleuish, 2006) and an abandoned attempt to map a national history curriculum entitled *Guide to the Teaching of Australian History in Years 9-10* (Australian History Curriculum Reference Group, 2007). Most recently the work of the National Curriculum Board

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² This is a draft paper – comments welcome. If you wish to cite this paper please seek permission from the author.

[NCB] (now ACARA) has resulted in the publication of the *National History Curriculum: Framing Paper*³ (NCB; 2008) and the subsequent *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: History*⁴ (NCB; 2009a) paper. The Shape Paper, an updated version of the Framing Paper is now being used as a writing brief for the curriculum writing team. The National History Curriculum is due for release to schools in mid 2010 with implementation starting in 2011.

A major focus of all of these documents has been on the renewal of the teaching and learning of Australian History in schools. Indeed, the National History Summit (2006) was precipitated by former Prime Minister John Howard's call for a "root and branch renewal" of the teaching of Australian history in the nation's schools. Such calls were swathed in the rhetoric of standards and accountability and have, more recently, been immersed in the current federal government's calls for an 'education revolution'. This renewal faces significant challenges as Australian history has often been lauded as boring and hence a threat to the marketability of school history; "Australian history is crap. No-one wants to learn Australian history cause nothing happened" (NSW Year 10 student as cited in Melleuish, 2006, p4). It is worthy of noting that perceptions of Australian history are, according to Taylor, driven by the journalistic and editorial assumption that "Australian history is about famous dead people, as well as a celebration of military endeavour ... [and that] students today don't know enough about these famous dead people" (2009, p2). This, and the problem of topic repetition in the teaching of Australian history, overshadows the potential for Australian history to engage students in meaningful and relevant learning. Selling Australian history is however, only one of the challenges that the National History Curriculum must face. There are also numerous challenges associated with the concept of National Curricula as this paper will briefly address.

The introduction of a national mandatory study of Australian history (embedded within a broader study of 'world history') across the compulsory years of schooling offers school history a chance at what many see as revival (Allen, 2008). It is a chance for school history to emerge from the shadow of the Studies of Society and Environment [SOSE] Key Learning Area [KLA], to regain status as a stand alone subject, as a monolithic disciplinary entity (Goodson, 1983) and a chance for the return of specialist disciplinary teachers; but is this a good thing? Given that this 'resurrection' comes in the form of a national history curriculum, this is problematic. So too are claims of 'resurrection' as many schools, especially those in NSW, have continued to teach history as a separate subject.

This paper analyses the Shape Paper in an effort to highlight the potential impact of National Curriculum on the teaching and learning of history in Australian schools. To do so, this paper comprises several sections. In the first section, I briefly engage with the concept of national curriculum and issues of control as debate about National History Curriculum is immersed in broader concerns about the nature and purpose of national curriculum. In the second section I provide a brief critique of the Shape Paper, highlighting potential strengths and weaknesses. In the third section I discuss State/Territory history curriculum differentiation and how perceptions of, and responses to the Shape Paper are filtered through the local contexts of teachers work. In the final section, I return to the question on which this paper is based – National History Curriculum: tragedy or triumph?

³ The *National History Curriculum: Framing Paper* will subsequently be referred to as the 'Framing Paper'.

⁴ The *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: History* will subsequently be referred to as the 'Shape Paper'.

National Curriculum: providing context

Current moves to introduce National Curriculum in Australia are not new. As is well documented, previous attempts to exert federal influence over State/Territory curriculum, most notably National Statements and Profiles in the early 1990s, have failed (see for example Reid, 2005). Whilst it is not within the scope of this paper to analyse the nature and purpose of national curricula; it is worthy of noting that concerns about the political, educational, professional, structural and organisational bases of current moves towards National Curricula are keenly debated (see for example, McRae, 2008; Kennedy, 2009).

At the heart of this debate lie issues of control. Given that States and Territories have legislative control over education in Australia, the foundation of any national curriculum is problematic in that it will not have a direct articulation into all schools. Rather Government involvement in curriculum can only be achieved with the consent of the States. Not surprisingly therefore, national curriculum collaboration is largely a political process, involving the engineering of consent by the States/Territories (Reid, 2005, p10). To 'engineer consent' governments rely on 'hard' or 'soft' policy to achieve their ends (Kennedy, Chan and Fok, cited in Kennedy, 2009, p6). Kennedy argues that in relation to national curriculum, the movement has been from 'soft' policy (focused on inducements in the form of resources) to 'hard' policy (a more rigorous compliance mechanism) with the Schools Assistance Bill (2008), which ties private school funding to implementation of the National Curriculum, representing the most aggressive form of 'hard' policy in Australian curriculum history (Kennedy, 2009). In June 2009, the interim NCB became a statutory body, under a Federal Act of Parliament and the brief of the newly renamed ACARA was extended to include not only "curriculum" but also "assessment" and "reporting". For those concerned about growing federal curriculum control, this raises a red flag. Whilst the Commonwealth cannot make the implementation of the National Curriculum a legislative directive for public schools, there is certainly a sense that the compliance of States and Territories will be manipulated through the use of 'soft' policy.

State/Territory control is only one of the challenges that National Curriculum faces. Curriculum differentiation across States and Territories almost certainly means that enactment of national curriculum will be differential and adoption of national curricula will be mediated through a range of State/Territory contexts as this paper will later address. It is within these broad curricular contexts that the Shape Paper, a refinement of the earlier Framing Paper was produced.

Critiquing the Shape of the Australian Curriculum: History Paper

The ACARA History Advisory Group chaired by eminent Historian Professor Stuart McIntyre authored the Shape Paper. Published in May of this year this paper provides a strong indication of the nature and purpose, content and focus of the forthcoming National History Curriculum. The Shape Paper suggests a chronological study of history utilising a world history narrative as a frame for the teaching and learning of Australian history. The table on the following page provides a concise summary of the suggested curriculum structure and content.

Table 1: A summary of suggested curriculum

Year Group	Content	Hours of study per year ⁵
Years K-2: typically students from 5 to 8 years of age	Family history Time – continuity and change	25
Years 3-6: typically students from 8 to 12 years of age	What do we know about the past? How did Australians live in the past? How did people live in other places? How has the past influenced the present?	50
Years 7-10: typically students from 12 to 15 years of age	Year 7: 60,000 BC– 500 AD Year 8: 500AD–1750AD Year 9: 1750AD–1901AD Year 10: 1901AD–present	100
Years 11-12: typically students from 15 to 18 years of age	Modern History Ancient History	?

Given the broad content, the Shape Paper suggests that a study of history encompasses overview and depth studies. Further, the Shape paper outlines a range of considerations when developing a National Curriculum History. One consideration in particular – cross-curricular perspectives – was identified as a cause for concern (Framing Paper Consultation Report: History, NCB, 2009b) as I will later discuss.

The Shape Paper has been met with mixed responses. The HTAA (the peak body representing history teachers across Australia) has identified a range of issues and concerns. In an address to the HTAA Annual Conference in July of this year, Paul Kiem, the current HTAA President, presented the following table as a way of promoting discussion about the challenges of developing a National History Curriculum:

What the Learner Must Learn	What the Learner Wants to Learn	What we are Capable of Teaching
Australian H	Issues:	7-10 Expectation
Ancient H	Engagement	Time
Asia Literacy	Digital Natives	State Attitude
Holocaust	Diversity & Differentiation	School Attitude
World History	Conceptual Abilities	Assessment
European Heritage	Naughty Children	Teaching Training
Indigenous H		Professional Development
Sustainability		Resourcing
Archaeology		
Social & Cultural		
21 st C Skills		
Local History		

⁵ Whilst the Shape Paper does not clearly specify allocated hours of study, Professor McIntyre suggested these hours in a public address at the History Teacher Association of Australia Annual Conference, July 16, 2009.

The ensuing discussion started with a focus on the NCB (now ACARA) and its role and purpose. Of particular concern was ACARAs remit to develop a national curriculum without providing any support or funding for its implementation. Whilst this is the case with all National Curricula this is of particular concern to the HTAA because the changes that the National History Curriculum heralds, namely the return of stand alone history in all States and Territories, signifies enormous change for most States and Territories. In a public address earlier this year Professor McIntyre warned of the implications of National History Curriculum for teacher preparation. Of all the Faculties/Schools of Education in higher education institutions across the country only 16 offer a history method and 10 of these are in NSW (where history has remained a discrete subject). There is therefore a lack of qualified teachers to implement the National History Curriculum and in my experience, few universities are hurrying to redress this chasm.

The HTAA have stated that “in relation to Years K-10, the Shaping Paper is encouraging” (HTAA, 2009). Their encouragement stems from changes made as a result of the Framing Paper consultation. Indeed the HTAA President Paul Kiem noted a number of ‘positives’ about the shaping paper. These included avoidance of the ‘history wars’, the professionalism of all involved, the focus on historical understandings and skills development, the acceptance of engagement as vital and a commitment to avoiding content repetition.

History teachers have however expressed concern over a lack of clarity in regards to “what is actually meant by Depth Study & Overview” (HTAA, 2009). Similarly, earlier concerns about ‘cross curricular perspectives’ have been echoed. Such perspectives are identified as including “Indigenous education, sustainability and Australia’s links with Asia” (NCB, 2009a, p15). The identification of these as ‘perspectives’ and the lack of detail about how these “will be represented in learning areas in ways appropriate to that area” (NCB, 2009a, p15) continues to cause controversy and rightly so, given that the absence of these ‘perspectives’ within the outlined content suggests that these ‘perspectives’ are of less importance. One has to wonder if this is a case of tokenism. Certainly, the Shaping Papers commitment to “incorporating a futures orientation” seems trite given its definition of history as “a the study of the past” (2009a, p4).

Other concerns centre on the tension between the breadth of mandated content and available teaching time, the lack of discussion and transparency surrounding the senior (years 11-12) courses and the lack of implementation support and resourcing (Kiem, 2009). How States and Territories will enact the National History Curriculum is still unclear but one thing is clear, perceptions of and indeed responses to the Shaping Paper and the forthcoming National History Curriculum are shaped by one’s State/Territory curricular contexts and indeed “lower down the implementation totem pole” (Taylor, 2008, p5) by the local contexts of teachers work.

State/Territory Curriculum differentiation: Shaping perceptions of National History Curriculum

State/Territory curriculum differentiation is clearly highlighted when one considers the place of ‘history’ in varied State/Territory curricula. Having taught in two varied State contexts (New South Wales and Victoria) I believe the differences in where, when and how history is taught and by whom, are stark and have been well documented (see for example, Taylor, 2000; Harris, 2005, Allen, 2008). In NSW History exists as a stand alone, mandatory subject taught by history specialists whilst history in Victoria for much of the last 15 years has been subsumed within the SOSE KLA. Taylor (2007) has documented the impact of SOSE (which he refers to as the ‘social slops’) on the teaching of history in Victoria and is scathing about the impact of

non specialist teachers teaching history amidst a 'grab bag of disparate disciplines'. Similarly, Professor McIntyre acknowledges that teachers with no relevant disciplinary background are often allocated SOSE classes to fill their teaching allocation (Harrison, 2009). For subject specialists such as myself, I view the National History Curriculum through the lens of having (less happily) taught SOSE for years. Fore grounded in my response to the Shaping Paper is my delight in the knowledge that history specialists will once again teach history and that history will be allocated greater teaching time. I am sure my triumph here, is perceived by others (most notably NSW subject specialists and proponents of SOSE) in a different light. For my Victorian teacher education students, all of whom are currently being trained as 'SOSE/Humanities teachers' the Shaping Paper instils fear; fear of being less employable and the fear of having to teach history with little content knowledge (and indeed less pedagogical content knowledge) and no clearly articulated pathway for professional development once they are in schools. I share their fear and this is exacerbated by the break-neck speed at which the National Curriculum is being developed and federal expectations regarding the timeline for implementation. Kerry Kennedy (2009) provides an interesting comparison of curriculum change processes when he discusses the development of National Curriculum in Hong Kong. Consultation about the curriculum began in 1989 and the curriculum is slated for implementation in 2012. This is in sharp contrast to the current Australian experience.

Whilst much has been said about the impact of National History Curriculum on the teaching of secondary schools, less attention has been paid to the ramifications of mandating history in the primary school. Whilst it is well known that little time is allocated to the teaching of history (and indeed the broader SOSE KLA) in Victorian primary schools, the inclusion of history within the SOSE KLA has been more favourably received by some primary teachers who feel that SOSE offers Primary teachers the opportunity for interdisciplinary teaching and learning and that a National History Curriculum may threaten these opportunities (Bateman, 2009).

Summing up: A tragedy or triumph?

The Shaping paper and the forthcoming National History Curriculum represent different things to different people and hence present different opportunities (triumphs) and challenges (tragedies). Specifically, attitudes towards the Shaping Paper and National History curriculum are mediated through:

- State/Territory curriculum: Disciplinary history versus SOSE/Humanities
- Teacher training: Generalist (SOSE/Humanities method) training versus Disciplinary (History method)
- Teacher role: Primary OR middle school OR secondary
- Teacher career stage: many middle to late career teachers are sceptical of current national curriculum development in view of their experience of National Statements and Profiles and there exists a strong feeling of déjà vu amongst sceptics.

There are however certain immutable facts. That professional development and resourcing is 'beyond the remit' of ACARA is undoubtedly a tragedy, and one that research has proven, will seriously threaten the implementation of the National History Curriculum (Reid, 2005). Similarly, the federal governments move towards 'hard' policy inducements for States/Territories to comply, is also a potential tragedy and again, one that threatens to derail the implementation of National curricula. How students will be assessed and how student achievement will be reported is also a cause for concern and one that could easily and tragically result in the generation and dissemination of league tables. Less clearly a tragedy but certainly a potential tragedy is the general failure of some higher education institutions to

address issues of history teacher training. Whilst it might be argued that Faculties and Schools of Education have had little time to appropriately adapt teacher education programs to meet the needs of a National History Curriculum, in Victoria the demise of SOSE and the return of disciplinary teaching within the humanities has been clearly on the horizon for some years. Despite this, I dare say that some institutions have yet to articulate a plan to redress this problem.

How the History Advisory Group responds to continued consultation is critical to the success of the National History Curriculum. There is an inherent danger in bowing to political pressure and for example, claiming a particular orientation (futures) without really engaging with it. There is a similar danger in understating or overlooking an area of importance (see for example debate about the cross curricular perspectives). Both of these are potential tragedies.

Having said this, there have also been some triumphs. Most notably, ACARA have refocused attention on the teaching and learning of Australian history, and they have done so in a way that is far more palatable than the Howard governments draft National History syllabus⁶. The ACARA History Advisory Group has been lauded for their professionalism and generally speaking there has been extensive consultation with teachers. A noted exception here is the senior history curriculum which the HTAA claim has had little practitioner consultation (HTAA, 2009). A further triumph I believe is the Shaping Paper's commitment to promoting the development of historical knowledge, understanding and skills and engaging students through historical inquiry.

How these potential tragedies and triumphs will play out is unclear. One thing is clear however, the Shaping Paper and the forthcoming National History Curriculum have most certainly reinvigorated both debate about, and collaboration focused on, school history, and this is a triumph in itself.

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