Review of the Australian Curriculum

QCEC Submission, 2014

Introduction
The Queensland Catholic Education Commission (QCEC) makes the following submission on the review of the Australian Curriculum on behalf of 22 Catholic schooling authorities, representing 297 Catholic schools in Queensland.

The QCEC submission aligns with the Terms of Reference for the review of the Australian Curriculum.

The reviewers will consider the robustness, independence and balance of the Australian Curriculum, including:

- The process of curriculum shaping, development, monitoring, evaluation and review.
- The curriculum content from Foundation to Year 12 for subjects developed to date, with a particular focus on the curriculum for English, mathematics, science, history and geography.

QCEC’s submission focuses on Phase 1 learning areas: English, mathematics, science and history although some comments pertain to the dimensions of the Australian curriculum including Phase 2 and 3 subjects.

1. Curriculum shaping, development, monitoring, evaluation and review

1.1 Curriculum shaping

The Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians (Dec 2008) was the document that underpinned the shape of the Australian Curriculum. The writing of an Australian Curriculum by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) was directed by this document. The Melbourne Declaration sets out the clearly the educational goals for young Australians:

Goal 1: Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence
Goal 2: All young Australians become:
- successful learners
- confident and creative individuals
- active and informed citizens.

The Melbourne Declaration (p8-9) articulates the vision for young Australians – the descriptions for Goal 2 provide inspiring statements about what our nation would expect to see and hear from successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens. It is precisely these statements that needed to be more influential in ‘shaping’ the development on an Australian curriculum.

The Melbourne Declaration Goal 2 statements align with one dimension of the Australian curriculum - the seven General Capabilities. The General Capabilities of literacy; numeracy; ICT capability; critical and creative thinking; personal and social capability; ethical understanding; and intercultural understanding describe the capabilities that schools strive to develop in young citizens so they can take their place in the 21st century and face the future with confidence. The General Capabilities have the capacity to unite and connect all the elements of the curriculum as they describe the key attributes society desires for the next
generation of citizens. The learning continuum for each General Capability describes the expectations of P-10 students enabling teachers to use the organising elements as a guide for students’ development.

For an Australian curriculum to be visionary in seeking to educate the ‘whole’ person the General Capabilities need to be ‘front and centre’ so that the content in each learning areas curriculum is viewed as means to assist students to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to display the General Capabilities. In their planning teachers start with the Goal 2 statements, as expressed in the General Capabilities, and use the learning area content to go way beyond merely ‘knowing.’

1.2 Curriculum development

With respect to curriculum development, the process for consultation of Phase 1 learning areas instigated by ACARA, and adapted by QCEC, provided the opportunity to engage with individual learning areas. Throughout the development of the Australian curriculum, QCEC has been an involved and committed stakeholder at different levels. ACARA consultation processes have enabled educators in the Queensland Catholic sector to provide feedback on draft documents in a variety of ways:

- QCEC provided feedback to ACARA, either through submitting responses directly to ACARA or by providing Catholic sector feedback to feed into State submissions written by the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA). Feedback has been submitted on a range of documentation: Draft Shape of the Australian Curriculum, F-10 draft Australian Curriculum documents, General Capabilities, Cross Curriculum Priorities, draft Australian Curriculum for Students with Disability, and draft materials in English and mathematics for students with disability progressing to the Foundation level of achievement.
- QCEC called for nominations from Catholic schooling authorities to be part of QCEC Subject Reference Groups for each Phase 1 learning area. Participants provided feedback to QCEC Executive Officers via teleconferences and email. Draft responses were distributed for comment prior to being submitted to ACARA.
- Catholic schooling authorities established their own internal groups (curriculum officers, HODs, classroom teachers, specialist teachers) to provide feedback to QCEC. Some schools have been involved as trial schools in validation of achievement standards and specific learning areas, e.g. The Arts curriculum.
- A number of Catholic educators represented QCEC at national and panels and consultation forums (F-10 and senior secondary), curriculum development workshops and curriculum mapping groups.
- QCEC has been represented at the ACARA Curriculum Directors meetings and on the F-12 Curriculum Reference Group through NCEC representation. There has been Catholic representation in ACARA working groups: NAP-ICT Literacy Working Group, English Language Proficiency Working Group.
- In addition to the above consultation and feedback processes, individual teachers were encouraged to provide feedback using the ACARA online surveys.

Despite QCEC involvement in ACARA and QSA consultation processes from 2009 -2013, over the last couple of years the amount of feedback provided by Catholic educators has significantly decreased. QCEC has put this down to ‘response fatigue’ – as teachers are now getting on with the job of implementing the

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1 “On the cognitive level, schools develop the contents of the curriculum: areas of knowledge to be taught and skills to be promoted. On the relational – affective level, schools develop attitudes and ways of talking about others, teaching the students to respect diversity and take different viewpoints into account, cultivating empathy and collaboration.”

Congregation for Catholic Education. (Dec 2013). Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools, Living in Harmony for Civilization of Love
curriculum they are not making it a priority to provide responses on Phase 2 and 3 learning areas/subjects. The concern with this situation is that only the most enthusiastic teacher – more than likely a specialist teacher in a particular subject, e.g. Music, PE, Languages, is likely to provide feedback. This means that the voice of the general primary classroom teacher, who teaches all subjects, is not contributing as meaningfully to the consultation process for Phase 2 and 3 subjects as they did for Phase 1 learning areas.

In Queensland, Catholic schooling authorities, schools and teachers are ‘getting on with the job’ of implementing at the Australian Curriculum which is an indication that the vast majority of teachers are satisfied with the style, structure and content of the curriculum.

The ACARA consultation process across the nation acknowledged the professionalism of teachers and developed a collaborative approach of sharing views, resources and curriculum frameworks across States. However this does not mean that all feedback that QCEC or Queensland provided throughout the consultation process was incorporated by ACARA.

1.3 Curriculum monitoring, evaluation and review

QCEC acknowledges there needs to be ongoing monitoring, review and evaluation of curriculum to ensure it is meeting the needs of students and the wider community. The continuous improvement of curriculum is achieved through an iterative process. ACARA has agreed to a monitoring and evaluation timeline which provides a reasonable period of implementation before teachers can provide professional, constructive and substantive feedback.

The three education sectors in Queensland have all agreed to a State-wide implementation plan which sets out timelines for the implementation of learning areas. Queensland is ahead of some other Australian states in the implementation of the Australian Curriculum as it began implementing Phase 1 learning areas with a familiarisation year in 2011. From 2012 onwards teachers have fully implemented the Phase 1 subjects – which means these subjects have been – ‘taught, assessed and reported’ on for over two years by Catholic schools in Queensland.

2. Curriculum content

Queensland is implementing the Australian Curriculum directly from the source documentation on the ACARA website. Although resources and materials have been developed by QSA to support the implementation of the Phase 1 subjects, it has been agreed by the three education sectors that Queensland would not implement a ‘Queensland version’ of the Australian Curriculum.

The most significant concern currently being raised by a number educational authorities, including QCEC, is in relation to the overcrowding of the curriculum. The implementation of Phase 1 learning areas for Catholic schooling authorities created increased work in planning, teaching, assessing and reporting. However, overall schools have made good progress in the implementation of these subjects, which included English and mathematics, which are of fundamental importance in all years of schooling.

The overcrowding issue has become exacerbated as Phase 2 and 3 learning areas are being rolled out. Therefore, it may be timely and prudent for the review of the Australian Curriculum to include the impact of Phase 2 and 3 subjects on schools and teachers despite the Review’s focus being primarily on Phase 1 subjects. The concern of the overcrowded curriculum relates primarily to classroom teachers who teach across all subject areas, particularly, Years 5 and 6 teachers who will be expected to teach, assess and report on 16 different subjects.

Suggestions for improvement:

- examine the Content descriptions and Achievement standards in Phase 2 and 3 subjects for relevancy;
• develop key concepts or ‘big picture’ ideas that transfer across subjects and enable meaningful integration of the curriculum to occur particularly in the primary years. In many respects the integration of learning areas ensures the development of ‘wholeness’ as described above, where content is not seen to be held tightly within one specific subject area but is viewed more broadly in its relationship to all other knowledge and wisdom.²

Conclusion
QCEC is committed to the implementation of the Australian Curriculum and urges those undertaking the Review to be mindful of the hard work, dedication and commitment that has occurred thus far regarding the implementation of the Australian Curriculum – by classroom teachers, principals and leadership teams, Heads of Departments and curriculum support staff, central curriculum consultants and expert advisors through professional development programs and workshops, collaborative planning across and between year levels, resource development, and planning and assessing for differentiated learning.

To uphold the morale of all educators caution needs to be exercised about making recommendations for major change to the Australian Curriculum. Educators in the Catholic schooling authorities in Queensland strive for the high level aspirations for all young Australians as expressed in the Melbourne Declaration:

“In the 21st century Australia’s capacity to provide a high quality of life for all will depend on the ability to compete in the global economy on knowledge and innovation. Education equips young people with the knowledge, skills and values to take advantage of opportunity and to face the challenges of this era with confidence.”

Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians (Dec, 2008)

² “Each discipline is not an island inhabited by a form of knowledge that is distinct and ring-fenced; rather, it is a dynamic relationship with all other forms of knowledge. Each of which expresses something about the human person and touches upon some truth.”

Congregation for Catholic Education. (Dec, 2013) Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools, Living in Harmony for Civilization of Love