



## **Australian Curriculum Review, Years K-10**

### **Australian Historical Association Submission**

The Australian Historical Association (AHA) is the peak national body of historians and students that includes academic, professional and other historians working in all fields of History. The AHA has some members who are teachers of history in schools, while its university-based members are involved in educating the next generation of history teachers. The AHA has engaged over many decades with school history, and some of its members were centrally involved in the formulation of the Australian Curriculum in History over a decade ago.

### **Response to the Australian Curriculum Review**

The AHA welcomes this Consultation Curriculum Review as an opportunity to reflect on the critical role of a history education for Australian students. We applaud the notion that the humanities and social sciences should develop in students ‘a sense of wonder, curiosity and respect about places, people, cultures and systems throughout the world, past and present, and an interest in and enjoyment of the study of these phenomena’.

Nonetheless, we are not convinced that this gets to the central purpose of a humanities and social sciences education. Nor do we agree, in relation specifically to History, that terms such as ‘curiosity’, ‘imagination’ and ‘awareness’ – as important as they are – capture the reasons why high-quality learning and teaching in History is needed in Australian schools. Indeed, the consultation document seems to admit as much when it offers phrases that reflect History discipline-specific terms and conventions such as: *pose questions, collect data, explore a point of view, examine primary and secondary sources, interpret, represent, reflect, evaluate, distinguish between fact and opinion, use criteria, make judgements and draw conclusions.*

A History education – and its basic goal, the achievement of historical literacy – needs to be treated with the same seriousness of purpose as Maths, Science, English and other core subjects. Unlike the STEM disciplines, which had over 90% of similar content across the States and Territories in the Australian Curriculum from the beginning, History was given a less systematic and uniform treatment. That is reasonable, up to a point, where jurisdictions emphasise content most relevant to local circumstances. But it also suggests the limitations of the pedagogical vision for History, reflecting a sense that it remains an add-on to more important disciplines rather than integral to a well-rounded education from K-10.

The sections throughout the consultation document describe what students will do in the History strand. But where is the classroom teacher in this scenario? These are laudable expectations for students, but none of them will be possible without the guidance and

involvement of a well-prepared classroom teacher, each year, to model, demonstrate, scaffold and construct the pedagogical ‘ecology’ of a classroom in which such high-level discourse can take place. The chief advocates of ‘Inquiry’ learning (Piaget, Bruner, Vygotsky, Taba and others) make it clear that the guidance of a knowledgeable, expert adult is an essential prerequisite for ‘inquiry’ learning to be successful. The gradual erosion of pre-service courses for teachers at our universities over recent decades needs to be addressed to enable the History and Education faculties across the nation to provide initial pre-service teacher courses that will produce classroom teachers with the range of expertise that this syllabus revision demands.

Humanity now faces existential challenges – such as threats to democracy, environment, social cohesion and global health – that demand the knowledge and skills taught as part of a History education. All of these challenges – which the students of today will face as future citizens and leaders – require the capacity to think across disciplinary domains. The point was made very well in a recent article by Sir Keith Burnett, chair of the Nuffield Foundation in the United Kingdom, a former head of mathematics and physical sciences at the University of Oxford and vice-chancellor of the University of Sheffield. Burnett expressed his regret that at the age of sixteen, the British education system forced him to abandon subjects he loved and in which he thrived – History and French – in order to pursue the sciences. ‘I set my course in the sciences’, he explains, ‘but the knowledge remained that this was only a partial view of our lives’. He continues: ‘Historians are the fact-checkers of our accounts of civilisations and power. They ask how we know what we know, what we can trust and who we should believe’.<sup>1</sup>

Like any definition of History, this one is contestable, but it has the virtue of recognising the need for integrated knowledge. People without a proper grounding in the fundamental humanities and social sciences are likely to be attracted to the dead ends of the technocratic fix at one end of the spectrum, and to conspiracy theories at the other. Our students in the future will need the capacity to integrate understandings derived from different disciplines and knowledges, for this will be integral to their capacity to act in and on the world. Without History, they will be feeling their way in a darkened room full of dangerous obstacles and sharp objects.

We respond here to each of the Review’s terms of reference, followed by some brief remarks on curriculum content:

- a. refine and reduce the amount of content across all eight learning areas of the Australian Curriculum F-10, with a priority on the primary years, to focus on essential content or core concepts*

We support the review’s goal of improving ‘the Australian Curriculum F-10 by refining, realigning and decluttering the content of the curriculum’, and we appreciate that this is only likely to be achieved with some refinement and reduction of ‘the amount of content ... to focus on essential content or core concepts’. But we would not wish to see this achieved if it means compromising the History content. Historical concepts need to be treated as essential to a school education and as a core component of the Australian curriculum, much as one might treat calculus, reading and an understanding of the periodic table. In quantity, not enough History is

---

<sup>1</sup> Keith Burnett, ‘Universities’ humanities provision should never become history’, *Times Higher Education*, 12 May, 2021.

being taught in schools, and the habit of collapsing History into a social studies or ‘SOSE’ framework deprecates its importance and blurs its distinctive methods and truth claims. To ‘reduce and refine’ should not involve further dilution.

- b. improve the quality of content descriptions and achievement standards by removing ambiguity and unnecessary duplication, and ensuring consistency and clarity of language and cognitive demand*

This must not be a proxy for diluting concepts or devaluing the skill set that History training provides. The ‘quality’ of content descriptions must aim to improve them and strengthen aspects such as interpretations and understanding the contested nature of History. In general, we welcome the effort to set out the skills that will be taught in school history, and well as the kinds of understandings that it can develop.

Nonetheless, we warn against the idea that coverage of many topics constitutes effective History education. Public debate is often simplistic in turning on whether there is enough Anzac, or enough Indigenous history, in a curriculum. But a balance is needed between ‘content’ and the teaching of historical thinking. Students clearly need both, and every teacher knows that if the pendulum swings too far one way rather than other, the quality of learning declines. We share, to some extent, concerns about the heaviness of the content in the consultation document, especially if there is an insufficient amount of face-to-face classroom time by teachers with discipline-specific training to support student learning in History.

- c. rationalise and improve content elaborations, ensuring they are fit for purpose and they suggest to teachers the most authentic ways to treat general capabilities and cross curriculum priorities when teaching the learning area content*

The specificity of the importance of History, and the skills it imparts of comprehension, analysis, interpretation of evidence, and critical and creative thinking, should not be lost in any rationalisation or emphasis on ‘general capabilities’ or ‘cross curriculum priorities’. When the National Curriculum was first formulated, it was noted that there was a severe shortage of teachers who were suitably qualified to teach the new History curriculum – at any level. If this was not addressed, as a matter of urgency, in consultation with universities, it was unclear how the National Curriculum was to be taught. Where was the ‘army of well-trained, informed, confident, energetic, and engaging classroom practitioners’ going to come from?<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, they never quite came forward after 2010, with the result that much History is taught in schools by teachers without the disciplinary grounding, especially in Years 7-12, that is expected of teachers in the STEM fields.

The increasing demands on K-6 teachers and the idea that they do not need any specialist History training or pedagogy (unlike STEM areas) is highly problematic. Again, the marginalising and further watering down of some knowledge of History reinforces the problematic nature of this vital discipline in the Australian Curriculum.

---

<sup>2</sup> Tony Joel, ‘Australia’s New National Curriculum and the Future of History’, 13 November 2017, <https://aph.org.au/2017/11/australias-new-national-curriculum-and-the-future-of-history/>

We also note that the recently adopted fee structure for Australian university courses provides a disincentive to tertiary students to take up History because they will be landed with a larger debt than students in other fields when they graduate. All disciplines that are part of the National Curriculum should be in the lower fee band, including History. There is a need for a real commitment on the part of the Federal and State jurisdictions to provide the means to enable significant grounding in the discipline of History and Professional Learning for current classroom teachers to bridge the gap between current practices and the demands of any new or revised curriculum.

- d. improve the digital presentation of the Australian Curriculum in line with agreed content changes and user experience requirements.*

The AHA endorses any measures that can make the curriculum more easily comprehensible and accessible in a digital form. While essential to teachers, this is also helpful to academics considering their own curriculum, in light of their role in preparing future teachers. A clear and accessible format also provides a common currency for conversation between university-based historians and educators, and teachers in schools, when they are involved in developing resources and activities to support classroom teaching.

## **Content**

In a spirited media debate, the revised draft Australian Curriculum Years 7-10 History has been criticised both for what it includes and what it excludes. The AHA supports the world history framework of the Australian Curriculum. The teaching of Australian history – which should certainly be a major priority in Australian classrooms – is usefully placed within such a framework, especially for high school students. This approach largely reflects the wider academic direction of the discipline and of Australian history as a field: to place it in the wider context of transnational, international and global histories so as to better appreciate what is distinctive as well as what is shared with others. A nation's history can always appear to be exceptional if one knows little about the histories of other countries.

We welcome the emphasis on family stories, images and objects in teaching History in the earliest years of schooling. This is in keeping with the growing emphasis in historical studies more generally, including in teaching right through to tertiary level, of moving beyond the written document. It has the potential to allow students to contextualise their own experience in relation to others, and to begin to explore cultural diversity, including the shared and different experience of First Australians and others. We admire the way the emphasis on family develops into a wider engagement with other sources and communities beyond the family, including the 'imagined community' of the nation itself. The study of national days and symbols has long been recognised as both a fruitful field of research and a useful way of opening up wider themes for history students. It is entirely appropriate that even younger students are encouraged to understand how and why different groups in society see symbols, commemorations and celebrations in different ways, observe different customs, and even disagree about the meaning or significance of an occasion such as Australia Day (26 January). The study of Australian history needs, as proposed, to take account of both Indigenous and Settler histories, and their complex entanglements: considering both cooperation and conflict is integral to historical understanding.

No less than the critically important but more established exploration, political, social and economic histories, the field of environmental history is now sufficiently developed, and its insights important enough, to figure prominently in the teaching of Australian history.

Public controversies about the teaching of History in schools often climax in the question of whether there is enough 'Anzac'. Our view is that Anzac needs to be there, but that Australian students also need to understand the history of war as a global phenomenon with complex as well as tragic causes and consequences. Western history – with Herodotus and Thucydides – had its origins in the investigation of war and the discipline is well designed to investigate it. Such teaching should never be the occasion for celebrating 'national identity' or advancing the obsessions of propagandists.

We also strongly endorse the teaching of topics such as Australia's experience of the two world wars, and the history of campaigns for rights and freedoms, within an international frame, especially in 7-10. A complex topic such as Federation, which is proposed for the Year 6 curriculum, can be challenging to teach to a diverse group of students today, however imaginative and capable their teacher. But if it is set in the wider global context of nation-making and the development of democratic institutions and practices in other times and places it can be viewed in a new light.

The AHA endorses the idea of a curriculum that responds to both the most pressing issues of the era and the concerns of students. A curriculum that looked just like the one from 2010 or, worse still, one that reflected the understandings of a more distant past, cannot be justified. The questions that historians pose, the answers they offer, the approaches they apply, the sources they use, and the scales of time and place with which they work, all shift across time and in response to changes in the wider world.

While we do not see this submission as a commentary on the specific topics and issues, we acknowledge the concerns that have centred on a new topic in Year 7 History called *Deep Time History of Australia*. The topic itself is valuable and important, and it reflects significant developments in the discipline, including the challenge to a chronology that treats History as a story of the last 10,000 or so years with origins in Mesopotamia, agriculture and the domestication of animals. It is obvious that this is not an appropriate approach for the students of a country with an Indigenous history that likely stretches back some 50,000 years or more.

Nonetheless, this proposal also represents a substantial change in how we think about History as a discipline and a practice; for instance, it must involve the use of evidence other than written forms, and it deals in scales that can be daunting to teachers and students alike. It is understandable that some teachers might feel they are not fully prepared to teach it to students who have just entered secondary school, especially considering the breadth and depth of the new content.

The AHA supports the incorporation of the concept of Deep Time in the curriculum but urges that it be calibrated with reasonable expectations of classroom learning and teaching. We also urge that it be accompanied by funding for teacher training, as well as the development of resources for both teachers and students. We see this as an opportunity to be grasped – indeed, a necessary development of the curriculum – but one that will require the support of government

in terms of resourcing. More generally, while the detail of what to include or exclude in a National Curriculum is a proper subject of public debate, we celebrate the increase in First Nations history in our school curricula. With climate change, there are new global challenges to be faced, which can also be informed by reflection on the Deep Time when humans previously faced a warming world.

## **Conclusion**

History plays a powerful role in promoting an appreciation for and empathy between diverse communities. It engages the imagination. It promotes wonder. But it also teaches skills and fosters understandings that students will need in their future day-to-day lives as citizens and workers. Recognising as much imparts considerable ethical significance to History, but also insists on its practical necessity in the complex world we now face. In times of crises such as a pandemic, History provides us with precedents that provide the most valuable guidance to the present; not clear lessons so much as an understanding of the underlying structures of any given situation, the constraints on and opportunities for action, and the possible consequences of acting – or of doing nothing.

History also promotes constructive criticism and understanding, civil dialogue, a respect for evidence, and an open and enquiring mind. It is no criticism to describe someone as ‘rewriting history’. Historians rightly modify their arguments in the course of debate with other historians, in the light of new evidence, and in response to changes in the world with the capacity to alter our understanding of the past as well. History can optimise students’ capacity to counter the profusion of emotionally charged propaganda generated by specific groups, as well as the thoroughly dangerous and even deadly resort to baseless conspiracy theory and scapegoating.

Anyone well educated in History knows we have been there before. They will understand the consequences of that journey, and – most importantly – they will have the ability to apply such precedents in a manner that takes due account of changing circumstances and contexts. Dark influences are proliferating in our increasingly polarised and often very confusing contemporary world. History is the field of study best equipped to teach students both how to deal with those challenges and to create something better for themselves and their descendants.

The Executive Committee of the AHA

6 July 2021