

AEU RESPONSE TO THE VCAA CURRICULUM REFORM 2004 CONSULTATION PAPER: A FRAMEWORK OF 'ESSENTIAL LEARNING'

June 2004

Introduction

The AEU welcomes the general direction of the Consultation Paper towards more flexibility and curriculum control at the local level, more opportunities for local innovation, less prescription, a reduction in the mandatory CSF outcomes and the new emphasis on 'deeper learning'. Our reservations are about what the proposals will mean when they are translated from broad concepts into a new curriculum framework which teachers will be expected to implement, and about the implementation process itself. One of the problems with the paper is the lack of detail about its proposals, given that it appears to be the only consultation document which will be produced prior to the final implementation draft. The AEU recommendation is that a close-to-final consultation paper be produced in November rather than an implementation draft. Apart from providing valuable feedback about the detailed proposals, it would act as an education process for teachers, generate greater discussion prior to implementation and may foster a greater sense of ownership and engagement with the proposals. This paper could also be used as the basis for a controlled evaluation trial of the new framework. Its purpose would be to make sure it can work in all schools, iron out any bugs, allow for amendments based on practice and help to engender useful resources. The worst result for all concerned will be if the curriculum changes are seen by teachers as merely that – more centrally-driven curriculum change which they feel no ownership of – bringing with it disruption and a greater workload rather than the sense of a real improvement at the classroom level.

Overview

The AEU agrees that the 'reform challenge' outlined in the paper will be central to the success of any new curriculum framework.

"Our challenge is to provide the clarity and focus necessary to ensure that all students have access to essential learning, while at the same time allowing sufficient flexibility for schools to innovate and adopt different program and teaching styles to provide for local and individual student needs'. (p.2)

We believe that meeting this challenge should involve a re-balancing of the curriculum towards greater school-based decision-making. The introduction of the CSF in the 1990s, and its accompanying accountability regime, represented a new era in top-down centralised curriculum control over what went on in the classroom. The curriculum goalposts were decisively moved away from the teacher and the school towards direction from the centre. As a consequence, local innovation was stifled and the substantial efforts made by many schools to implement a curriculum which would meet the learning needs of their students, were discounted in favour of ticking off the CSF outcomes. There was a sense that the curriculum was being teacher-proofed and school-proofed by the 'experts' in the bureaucracy.

One of the key measures for evaluating any new curriculum framework will be the extent to which 'artificial' curriculum requirements are not elevated above the professional judgement of teachers in monitoring, evaluating and meeting the learning needs of their students. The new framework should be premised upon the high level capabilities of teachers and the professional nature of their work. It should not be designed to micro-manage the classroom. It should also limit accountability requirements to those which do not reduce student learning time, distort the curriculum or add to teacher work load. The paper's welcome emphasis on

'deep learning' and 'deep understanding' should be reflected in the nature of the framework and any accountability requirements.

One of the many definitional issues which arises in the paper is what is meant by 'deep learning'. The paper provides a very limited (and superficial) definition '...an ability to take their learning and apply it in new contexts'. (p.3) The paper also seems to be using deep learning as a sort of conceptual image to signpost the new direction (depth) in contrast to the weaknesses of the present approach (breadth). There is an extensive research literature which focuses on what can be described as 'deep learning' and how this relates to what has been called 'superficial learning'. This is further broken down into various conceptions of learning which underpin the use of terms like 'deep' and 'superficial'. As deep learning is made so pivotal in the justification for curriculum change, it is important that the VCAA provides a more comprehensive definition and discussion of the concept to clarify its meaning. It should also be noted that the successful implementation of concepts of deep learning are contextual ie they are dependent on such important facilitating conditions as smaller class sizes.

The AEU believes that the CSF should lose any prescriptive status but remain as an optional curriculum resource document which can be used by schools to structure and sequence the curriculum and as a source of ideas. Schools and teachers have a heavy investment in the CSF at present because of its prescriptive status. The resources, units of work, texts and other materials should not be made obsolete by the new framework. While additional support materials should be made available, the new framework should indicate its points of continuity with the CSF and ensure that change will be evolutionary over a reasonable period of time. The new framework should in no way be seen as an additional layer to the existing CSF, with all of the requirements and teacher workload implications that would go with this situation.

The structure of the new framework presented in the paper makes sense as a structure. The AEU supports a set of system-wide common values, the notion of fewer and more generic knowledge area/discipline concepts, an 'agreed' limited set of cross-curriculum skills, values and aptitudes and agreed and appropriate assessment and reporting guidelines. Our concerns are more about the result of turning the sketchy outline in the paper into a new prescriptive curriculum linked to DE&T accountability requirements, and the implementation issues around this. There is a concern in our membership, from previous bitter experience, that the devil will be in the detail.

Values

The AEU supports the development of a set of common values to underpin the curriculum, and schooling as a whole, in the Victorian public school system. Whether these values are able to be shared by all non-government schools is another matter. The AEU believes that the core values of the public school system should not be compromised or watered down by the need to gain consensus within the private school sector. The AEU position on the statement: 'Inclusion of a set of values in the framework can only proceed from a widely shared agreement amongst all stakeholders'. (p.4) should be seen in this light. It is also important to have a set of explicit public education system values to counter the political mischief-making and wedge politics of the Prime Minister with his statements about public schools being 'value-free'.

The national values education study makes a good starting point to identify a set of common values. Each of the ten values identified in the study is worthy, in a generic sense, of inclusion in the new framework. They would seem to represent the basis of a humane and civilised society. Some of them are particularly relevant in the Australia of John Howard eg tolerance and understanding, social justice, care, inclusion and trust, honesty. While the definitions of each value are fairly sketchy, they are generally satisfactory. The one value which does require further work is 'social justice'. The definition used in the paper is too passive to accord with the general use of this term. The sense that social justice is about righting existing social wrongs should be included in the definition. There should also be a value related directly to the core function of schools - teaching and learning.

Core Discipline Concepts and Skills

The AEU supports the contention that having a more focused set of core concepts and skills will 'give schools greater freedom to develop the experiences which best meet the needs of their students'. (p.6) It should also act as a necessary, but not sufficient, means of focusing on depth of learning. For this purpose, it will need to be accompanied by appropriate and accessible support materials, professional development and time.

The present plethora of CSF outcomes creates an impossible implementation task for teachers. There is no explicit indication in the CSF document that some concepts and skills are more 'essential' than others. The issue of 'essentialising' the curriculum comes down to a debate about what is meant by 'a small number' (p.7) of concepts and skills. The paper provides few clues about what the VCAA would classify as 'a small number' or the proposed criteria which will be used to determine the inclusion of core discipline concepts. Once again this raises doubts about the paper as a final consultation document.

The open-ended question at the bottom of page 7 asks 'Which disciplines should be represented in a framework of essential learning?' This implies that the compiling of the new framework will involve decisions about the inclusion or exclusion of whole 'disciplines'. It seems to be a move away from the notion of core concepts and skills which may be applicable to a range of disciplines. It also raises the question as to what constitutes a 'discipline', particularly once you move from the obvious ones to the grey areas at the edges of organised knowledge. The paper refers at times, in an interchangeable way with disciplines, to KLAs, which are a mixture of single discipline learning areas and convenient ways of bundling a number of disciplines together. Organising the curriculum into KLAs has a number of advantages but does mean different things at different developmental levels of schooling. The KLA organisers are particularly relevant in primary schools but become more open to challenge from discipline ("subject") knowledge organisers by Year 10 in secondary schools. A very good case would need to be made before excluding any existing 'discipline' embedded in the CSF KLAs which is presently taught in schools. The mandatory nature of a statewide curriculum framework means that any discipline area which is deliberately excluded would be in dire straits. At best it would have a second-class status and at worst fall into a limbo outside of the common school curriculum.

The illustrative example in the paper makes a useful distinction between core discipline concepts and core discipline skills applying across all concepts. While the skills example ('working scientifically') provides a good indicator of what the skills section might look like in other disciplines, the concept ('Life and Living Things') does not. The performance standard format is inadequate for this purpose. Performance standards should be the second-order outcomes of a clear description of each concept. There should be a description of the concept as a concept in sufficient generality to see how it may apply within a single discipline or across a range of disciplines. This is particularly important in an 'essential' learning framework which is justifying its selection of a 'small number' of concepts. The paper would also have been enhanced if there was a worked out example of what a cross-discipline concept might look like and how it would apply in each relevant discipline. We would reiterate our concerns about the sketchiness of the information, which makes the step from this paper to a fully developed not-for-consultation implementation paper far too large for considered input from the profession.

Generic Skills, Values and Attributes

The idea of making explicit the generic skills and values which stretch beneath the areas of knowledge, is a good one. It helps to clarify the goals of the curriculum – the lifelong practical relevance of general education. It provides the over-arching big picture of what students should develop as a result of learning through the curriculum in all disciplines/subjects/ learning areas rather than focusing solely on outcomes specific to each separate knowledge discipline. It has the potential to offer a broader perspective to teachers planning courses and

to students and parents questioning the relevance and purpose of the curriculum.

The set of generic skills, values and attributes outlined in the paper provides a first draft categorisation of what could be contained under this heading. What becomes evident from the list is the range and variety of 'qualities' which could fall within this category. The very different nature of the four sub-lists – communication, thinking, social and cultural values and (the left-over) organisational and employability skills – raises many questions about the next steps after an agreed set of generic skills and attributes has been identified. While the AEU supports the identification process for the reasons identified in the previous paragraph, it has many reservations about the notion in the paper that 'performance standards' and related assessment processes will be developed for them. Does this mean that there will be two separate sets of standards – one for the discipline concepts and skills and another for the generic skills, values and attributes? Is it also envisaged that teachers will conduct separate assessment processes to allocate students to the performance standards in generic skills etc areas?

The practical difficulties for teachers, including workload increases, which would arise from the creation of a two tier performance standard/assessment process – one for discipline skills and the other for generic skills - would be a major concern for the AEU. The generic skills in 'communication' for example would be specifically assessed in English, Maths, IT and Art. The cognitive and meta-cognitive skills would be assessed in most, if not all, learning areas as part of the curriculum. Apart from cultural understanding and civic understanding which may be assessed in an area like SOSE, the skills, values and attributes under 'social and cultural' do not lend themselves to formal assessment using performance standards. It would also be difficult to see how 'working with others and in teams' and 'developing independence and improving personal performance' could be separated out from the curriculum and have separate performance standards and assessment processes applied to them.

In those areas where generic skill assessment may be feasible from a technical point of view, a teacher may derive their assessment judgment from those tasks which are designed to assess the discipline concepts and skills. They would then have to align two different sets of standards. It is unclear however, whether meaningful cross-curriculum standards can be developed and practically implemented P-10 for generic skills. The integrated curriculum at primary schools becomes the subject-based timetable at secondary schools. At this level, there would need to be moderation processes to gain consistency in reporting the standards of students in cross-curriculum generic skills which are separately assessed and reported. Reports to parents would need to marry, for example, the judgment of the English teacher about reading and writing skills to that of the Science and Maths teachers who would need to have separately assessed each student in these skills.

The AEU position is that the process of identification of a set of agreed generic skills, values and attributes should proceed. Once this is done, work should be carried out by the VCAA to indicate how these skills and attributes can be incorporated into the various learning areas so that students are provided with structured opportunities within the curriculum to develop them. Until it is shown that our concerns about the practicality and workload of separately assessing these qualities against specific performance standards have been resolved, we believe that teachers should not be expected carry out this task. The argument that what is not assessed is not valued would be addressed if the curriculum framework was explicitly structured to ensure that teachers were encouraged to incorporate the generic cross-curriculum skills in their courses. Useful working examples should be made available to teachers and resources should be provided to trial integrating generic skills, values and attributes into the school curriculum at a range of levels. Because there are so many unresolved issues relating to the section on generic skills, it is incumbent on the VCAA to undertake further consultation before schools are expected to implement proposals in this area.

Performance Standards

The major thrust of the VCAA efforts in developing the Essential Learning Framework should not be devoted to performance standards. The new framework should be constructed as an effective, accessible, forward-looking and transparent curriculum guide, not as an accountability document. DE&T accountability demands should be accommodated as a second order concern rather than a determinant of the nature of the framework. We are opposed to the school curriculum resembling the failed concept of training packages in the VET sector. The danger always is that the assessment process will drive the curriculum. The framework should provide teachers with a guide to the development of students P-10 through its description of the core discipline concepts and skills. The guide to development should be comprehensible to teachers, students and parents. Any performance standards should be broad enough to meet the two key evaluation criteria for the framework – a capacity to promote more flexibility and curriculum control at the local level and a means to facilitate ‘deep learning/understanding’.

We have expressed our reservations in the previous section about the proposal to develop a separate set of performance standards for generic skills. The major effort of the VCAA should go into identifying an agreed set of generic skills and then relating them to the various learning areas, and discipline concepts and skills. The feasibility of constructing and then assessing separate generic skill performance standards should be part of a research-based trial, which would also include an evaluation of the best means of integrating the generic skills into the curriculum in each learning area at each stage of development P-10.

It is unclear from the paper what is meant by the statement: ‘Performance standards will also be set at a challenging level, not minimum competence’. (p.12) Does this mean the existing CSF levels rather than the national benchmark levels? If the standards are ‘challenging’ (and the paper says that they will be based on the existing level structure within the CSF) will only a minority of students at each level be able to achieve them? If this is the case, what educational (as opposed to political) purpose will they serve? If the standards are set at the existing CSF levels (ie Prep, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10) then the AEU believes they should be achievable by the vast majority students at those levels.

Assessment

The primary purpose of assessment is to evaluate and improve the learning progress of all students. To do this properly is a complex, professionally demanding and time-consuming task. There are no short-cuts or easy answers. Assessment must be integrated into the curriculum program which it is part of, it must be accurate and reliable and it must be able to recognise and foster the complex learning processes of each individual.

This purpose can only be achieved through the expertise of the classroom teacher. The role of the education authority is to support and encourage the development of that expertise. This includes providing a policy environment where there is significant flexibility and decision-making available at the school level. Teachers must be able to use their professional judgment to determine the particular learning needs of their own students and the appropriate means for facilitating, assessing and reporting their progress.

This will inevitably involve a wide range of assessment tasks over an extended period of time. Assessment of this type is continuous and diagnostic. It provides students (and their parents) with a clear idea of how they are performing in relationship to the goals set by the school’s curriculum at any given point in the course, and suggested directions for improvement. We would point out that comprehensive school-based assessment programs are seen by leading learning theorists as far more accurate and useful as a facilitation process for learning than standardised testing. Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences calls for a learning context which fosters the range of these capacities rather than privileging just some of them (as happens with standardised testing). He supports in-depth study in an open and broad curriculum, with complex assessment processes reflecting the complexity of the learning processes in each individual.

Gardner believes that understanding comes about “only when one has rounded, three-dimensional familiarity with a subject, so that one can probe it in many different ways.” Assessment should be in a comfortable setting with materials (and cultural roles) that are familiar to that individual; “not a de-contextualised exercise using materials that are unfamiliar by design.” Assessment should be based on the recognition that an individual has truly understood something when they can represent the knowledge in more than one way. Multiple intelligences, and other progressive learning theories, known variously as brain-based education, learning styles, etc, offer a way forward to those students who may be having difficulty in achieving standard learning outcomes, such as basic skills. While the learning outcomes are standard, the curriculum, assessment and pedagogy are not standardised. They recognise diversity through focusing on different rates of development and how each individual learns. A comprehensive knowledge of a student with a learning problem becomes the basis of a solution.

The paper’s assessment section attempts to balance an emphasis on performance standards and comparability with some more progressive ideas about school-based assessment processes. The goal of assessment policy seems to be to enable teachers ‘to place their assessments of students more precisely within each level’ (p.12). The whole notion of finding the means to place students ‘precisely’ in a performance standard is one of accountability rather than the assessment of learning progress. Students are not standardised and therefore will sit uncomfortably half in one standard and half out of another. The precise placing of students in performance standards certainly has little to do with ‘encouraging deep understanding’. Few would argue for example, that the AIM test is an indicator of ‘deep learning’. The AIM tests provide one-off snapshots designed to create a spread of achievement in relation to a set of test items. The AEU rejects any inference that AIM standardised testing outcomes should be the paradigm for school-based assessment. A concern about placing a student “as precisely as possible” within a standard has the potential to bias assessment towards certain assessment instruments, eg testing and the use of off-the-shelf calibrated tasks. P-10 teachers should not be placed in a situation where they find themselves concentrating on such common tasks, in much the same way, and for much the same purpose, as happens in the VCE.

The Essential Learning standards should be broad-based performance criteria representing a move away from statewide micro-management towards greater school-based flexibility. These standards should not be designed as precise measurement tools for a teacher to work out the fine gradations which separate one student from another in rank order terms. This may be seen as appropriate for ENTER scores at the end of Year 12, it is inappropriate for students in P-10. Such an exercise would be pointless and counter-productive in terms of the primary purpose of assessment – the evaluation and improvement of the learning progress of all students. The practicalities of the new Framework are that, like the CSF, it will have standards covering two school years, because the consensus among curriculum developers is that one year standards do not make educational sense. These broad-based standards will provide a sequence of guidelines which schools can then translate into learning programs to suit the needs of their own students.

The use of the Essential Learning Framework in all schools across Victoria will provide an appropriate measure of comparability for school, teacher, student and parental use. “The framework enables teachers to be confident that the curriculum they teach is comparable with that being taught elsewhere in the state and that the standards they expect of their students are similarly comparable”. (The Department commenting on the CSF in 2001, *Assessment and Reporting in Victorian Schools*). Time should be provided to teachers to encourage intra-school moderation as a means of arriving at common interpretations of the standards within the school, faculty group, Year level etc. Common interpretations of the standards between schools can be achieved through the provision of support materials and systematic professional development. Part of the professional development program could be planned around a consensus moderation exercise for the different KLAs in relation to the meaning of

the new standards. The key to success in this matter is the provision of time for teachers to undertake the various moderation processes and professional development programs. The necessary resourcing must be provided.

Finally, measuring performance is not the same as improving it. Scarce resources should be used strategically, on improvement strategies rather than accountability requirements. The core task must remain accommodating and addressing the needs of all students and facilitating their learning progress. The justification for any measurement strategy is the value of its contribution to this task. Once assessment management begins to overwhelm the classroom learning program, student learning time is reduced, learning outcomes are narrowed and teacher workload is increased.

Reporting

A school report should be a means of conveying meaningful and accessible information to parents and students and providing the basis for a constructive dialogue with the teacher. Comments should be in language that can be understood by the users, with clear explanations about the academic and social development of the student; emphasising progress rather than measurement. They should contain an early indication of any learning problems and professional advice about the next stage of the student's development.

Written reports should cover:

Achievements and progress in terms of the goals set at the school level – which would include those derived from the statewide standards.

Areas and suggestions for improvement

Room to comment on matters such as social and personal development, effort etc.

Schools should determine the way they report within these broad guidelines. This may mean, for example, differences between the way achievement in the early years at primary school is reported as compared to Years 9 and 10. A greater reliance may be placed on open descriptive reporting in some schools while a policy of reporting using agreed categories may be used in others. The priority for accurate and useful reporting must be informing parents what their children can do rather than where they lie on a hypothetical scale of standards.

The problems with the present reporting to parents against the CSF are the result of DE&T policies, not the failings of schools. The use of Beginning, Consolidating and Established in reports to parents has arisen out of school interpretations of DE&T policy. DE&T introduced these terms and required schools to use them for reporting in School Annual Reports. Their use in reporting to parents was seen to be in line with what DE&T wanted schools to do. We have said for a long time that such terminology is inappropriate in school reports to parents as it acts as a barrier to understanding.

Parents have indicated confusion about how the CSF Levels relate to Year Levels ('Why do you say she's only a 4 when she's in Grade 6?') and are generally perplexed by the 1-3 scaling ('Consolidating?'). Messages about student progress often seem negative rather than positive and exclude important things which parents want to know. Added to this, there has been virtually no community education program about the CSF from DE&T. Individual schools and teachers cannot be left to explain to the community a complex mandatory statewide curriculum system.

The general comment from parents about CSF reporting formats is that the technicalities of the new framework overwhelm the message. Parents are offered lots of coded information but gain little understanding of their child's learning progress. This is despite attempts by schools to communicate the meaning of CSF reporting and the different Levels. Teachers on the other hand, often find themselves carrying out double reporting, the CSF report and what

they really want to say. Double reporting equals increased teacher workload. The dilemma for teachers is how to carry out CSF assessment and reporting in an educationally sound way which balances student learning needs, parental understanding, teacher workload, classroom organisation, professional judgement, the potential for complaint and litigation, curriculum integrity, available resources and DE&T requirements!

Implementation

There are countless examples of good ideas and well-meaning policies which have foundered on the rocks of a poor implementation strategy. The AEU position is that all Departmental initiatives should incorporate an implementation strategy as part of their development. The more substantial the policy (ie the greater change to teacher work practice involved) the more substantial the implementation strategy needs to be. Unfortunately, the Department has not often recognised this and seems to believe that implementation is the simple part of the equation, to be treated as an afterthought once the policy has been finalised.

The Essential Learning Framework would seem to be a 'substantial change', the biggest curriculum change since the introduction of the CSF in 1996. Therefore there needs to be a substantial and effective implementation strategy. This should include:

Widespread and real teacher engagement in the development of the framework. If this slows up the process and upsets pre-set time-lines, it means that the time-lines were inappropriate for the proposed level of change. The AEU believes that the curriculum experts who should be shaping the new framework are teachers in the classroom. The present consultation paper is so sketchy that we presumed, until told otherwise, that it was merely the first step in the consultation process. The 'big ideas' stage. We do not support the movement from this level of generality to a detailed framework which schools will be expected to implement. The next step should be a consultation document which is detailed enough for teachers to comment on what the discipline concepts and skills will look like for each learning area and how many there will be, what generic skills are to be included, whether there will be performance standards and assessment processes for them, whether there will be other 'values and attributes' included in the framework and what their status will be, what approaches to assessment and reporting will be recommended and what effect this will all have on teacher workload. It's a long list.

We would also recommend that selected schools should trial parts or all of the framework in 2005 to turn the blueprint into something which can work in all schools, no matter what their size, location, age and background of their students or level of resourcing. There should not be any mandatory accountability and reporting in these trials. Teachers should have the opportunity 'to discuss and explore' without the burden of meeting accountability requirements. The slower consultation process would act as a professional development exercise as well as a means of increasing the level of teacher input into, and therefore ownership of, the outcome.

A realistic time-line which is driven by educational rather than political considerations. Mainstream implementation, with any new accountability

measures, should not occur before 2006.

Time for teachers to become familiar with the new framework, look at what impact it will have on their existing practice, develop school implementation strategies, work through support materials and gather or develop additional resources. The time should include additional pupil-free days specifically for the implementation of the Essential Learning Framework.

Comprehensive and well-resourced professional development programs focusing on matters such as the discipline concepts and skills, the generic skills, assessment and reporting, deep learning, values in the curriculum, school-based curriculum development and any new accountability measures.

Accessible and useful support materials which have been developed from school trials and input from teachers in a wide range of school settings.

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