



A 2021 education resolution: keep an eye on the Australian Curriculum

Fiona Mueller

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Level 1, 131 Macquarie Street, Sydney NSW 2000
Email: cis@cis.org.au
Website: cis.org.au

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Introduction

As the historians of the free world get to work on the tumultuous events of 2020, an accurate, objective analysis of the past is critical — if lessons are to be learned and good policy decisions are to be made.

Already, there is heightened debate about the relationship between the governed and their leaders — both elected and appointed — in democratic countries. In Australia, the world's tenth-oldest continuous democracy, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought an unanticipated but positive opportunity for a nation-building refocus on the principles and aspirations that underpinned the 1901 agreement 'to unite in one indissoluble Federal Commonwealth'.¹ That agreement reflects an enduring belief that informed political participation is central to an accountable democracy; and, moreover, that it is a unique mechanism for developing an individual's sense of self-worth and commitment to a better society.

The pandemic has stimulated questions about the rights and responsibilities of citizens as federal and state governments impose restrictions never before seen in most people's lives. Policy decisions regarding domestic and international travel, public gatherings, the return of expatriate Australians, arrangements for major sporting events, and taxpayer support for individuals and businesses have all attracted controversy. Disharmony among state and territory leaders increased during the course of 2020. National issues such as recovery from bushfire, drought and flood disasters, the Indigenous Voice to Parliament and energy policy all continue to demand attention.

Appealing to Australians’ ‘spirit of unity’, Prime Minister Scott Morrison modified the second line of the national anthem in early 2021, replacing “*for we are young and free*” with “*for we are one and free*”. That this was achieved without recourse to a referendum — or even widespread public debate — prompts questions about the extent to which Australians see themselves as active participants in the governance of their own country, and what examples are set in this regard to the nation’s youngest citizens.

Many children will be part of discussions about disruptions to schooling, and some of these will overlap with their lessons in civics and citizenship. One might speculate about whether this year’s studies will include reference to Switzerland — a country that influenced the creation of the Australian Constitution — where the collection of over 80,000 voters’ signatures has guaranteed a 2021 referendum on the power of government to mandate lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the future of its children in mind, a clever country would shine a probing spotlight on a national education project that is currently flying well under the public radar. The nation-building potential of the Australian Curriculum is without parallel, yet there is a risk that the latest review² — particularly as it pertains to the formation of literate and motivated school leavers via the Civics and Citizenship curriculum — may be a missed opportunity.

As a matter of urgency, Australia’s best minds are needed to interpret recent chapters in the life of their federation. In particular, there must be sustained consideration of the ways in which the nation’s intellectual and cultural heritage — Western and Indigenous — can enable it to recuperate and flourish once again. Young learners depend on it.

This paper contends that as the strengths and weaknesses of federation are tested, there can be few more powerful avenues leading to national unity and prosperity than a genuinely world-class Australian Curriculum.

To bring improvements to the education of all young Australians, that document should be based on a sophisticated, overarching academic framework that includes a renewed commitment to nation-building through an enhanced Civics and Citizenship curriculum.

Australian Curriculum priorities

Current and future generations of young learners deserve a thorough analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the impact of government policy decisions on schooling and the longer-term implications for their lives and communities. High levels of socio-economic and political disruption and disquiet will not quickly recede. However, there can be no doubt that students whose education is enhanced by an intelligent examination of the human condition — with the emphasis on developing a thorough understanding of Australia’s national heritage and, ideally, a concomitant sense of belonging and purpose — will be better positioned to enter adulthood with confidence.

This tumultuous pandemic period is coinciding with a review of the Australian Curriculum, scheduled for completion at the end of 2021.

Although every Australian has a stake in this work, its value is barely noted, much less agreed. There was no widespread public consultation prior to publishing the terms of reference or commencing the review, and the schedule provides only a brief opportunity for comment on the proposals for change.

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), which led the development of the original Australian Curriculum, is responsible for publishing national academic expectations that live up to the official goals of “promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians.”³

A decade ago, ACARA presented Australian teachers and students with a national curriculum purporting to be ‘world-class’.⁴ Education ministers agreed to a ‘dynamic’, web-based publication, ostensibly written for teachers, which “is first and foremost an explicit statement of the priorities and aspirations we hold for our young people, and about what the Australian community values as the knowledge, understanding and skills that our young people should attain while at school.”⁵ According to the original rationale, the Australian Curriculum “contributes to improving the quality, equity and transparency of Australia’s education system.”⁶

In 2021, the Education Goals for Young Australians remain:

Goal 1: The Australian education system promotes excellence and equity

Goal 2: All young Australians become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and active and informed members of the community⁷

In operational terms, Australia’s federal model means the Commonwealth government channels taxpayer funds to systems and schools, collects data and carries out other administrative tasks; but all state and territory education authorities are explicitly responsible for ‘implementation’ — otherwise known as teaching and learning.

The quality of the school curriculum is critical, arguably surpassed only by the quality of the teacher. There can be few more important debates in any nation than what and how its children are to learn. In Australia, however, there is a profound contradiction — a quintessential element of federalism — in the design and delivery of the Australian Curriculum. Even after signing off on the national expectations, the state and territory governments, and the education systems within them, are free to interpret the ‘overcrowded’⁸ national document, as well as teach, assess and report on students, in ways deemed appropriate to their particular school population.

Crucially, the Australian Curriculum applies only to students in Foundation to Year 10; each state and territory makes separate

arrangements for curriculum, teaching, assessment and credentialling applicable to students in Years 11 and 12.

There is no national mechanism for measuring and comparing student achievement in the eight discrete learning areas, particularly in relation to transparency for parents, employers and other stakeholders.⁹ The result is enormous variation in standards and practices across the country.

This lack of academic congruence, highlighted by the discontinuity experienced by students moving across school levels, sectors and jurisdictions, is federation at its most complex and possibly least effective, seen most clearly in declining academic achievement and public confidence in education.

Yet the Australian Curriculum's rationale makes powerful claims:

Working nationally makes it possible to harness collective expertise and effort to produce a quality curriculum, as well as offering the potential for economies of scale and reduction in the duplication of time and resources.¹⁰

In a vast country with a small, dispersed population — and particularly at times of unprecedented social and economic disruption — such reasoning should give all Australians food for thought. Taxpayers are increasingly aware that support for school education has now passed \$60 billion per annum.

While the pandemic has shown that state and territory independence is assured, Australia's federal model also makes it a formidable — and expensive — task to pursue consensus on academic expectations, allow maximum jurisdictional and school-based flexibility to achieve the agreed standards, and ensure accountability by and for all.

Nevertheless, according to the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration, “Australian governments have committed to ensuring that all education sectors deliver world-class curriculum and assessment in Australian schools.”¹¹

The latest review undertakes “to ensure it [Australian Curriculum] is still meeting the needs of students and providing clear guidance for teachers.”¹²

In light of the well-documented decline in Australian students' performance in domestic and international assessments, together with ongoing parental, employer and tertiary institution concerns about the knowledge and skills of school leavers, the review of the Australian Curriculum demands heavy scrutiny for its capacity to improve teaching and learning.¹³ Notwithstanding the disparate approaches to schooling across the federation, it is the education instrument with the broadest reach and the greatest potential to unite schools and teachers in achieving better academic outcomes for Australian children.

It must be acknowledged, of course, that no curriculum can do this alone; teacher expertise, engagement with parents and communities and efficient use of resources all play their part. These are state and territory responsibilities.

Australia's post-2020 education challenges make it essential that the Australian Curriculum review consider the impact on schools and teachers of travel restrictions, school closures, online delivery, professional readiness and myriad other factors that require smart solutions within the federal model.

Yet there is no evidence of a purposeful pause in this national project in order to consider input from principals, teachers, parents and students who have experienced schooling during what may be just the first of a series of health crises.

ACARA's Terms of Reference appear limited in scope, largely a utilitarian attempt to pacify longstanding critics.

The review will aim to improve the Australian Curriculum F-10 by refining, realigning and decluttering the content of the curriculum within its existing structure and underpinned by the education goals of the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (2019).¹⁴

In the absence of a sophisticated, overarching framework to set the academic tone, it is unclear how it is to achieve much beyond more shrinkage (since an earlier 2014 review) from what the Australian Primary Principals Association once concluded was "about the same length as the Standard English edition of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*".¹⁵

Australian taxpayers are being asked to take the ‘decluttering’ work on trust, without comprehensive information about how decisions to “refine and reduce the amount of content ... to focus on essential content or core concepts”, with all of the associated intellectual and pedagogical implications, will be made. Retrospective publication of this critical material, perhaps only during the brief window of consultation, is a manifestly inadequate approach.

As an example, the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration (2019) is listed as the pre-eminent guide for the proposed ‘refinement’ of the Australian Curriculum. There is no shortage of worthy goals about promoting educational ‘excellence and equity’, but the Declaration does not clarify precisely how the national curriculum can ensure that “As reflective, active and informed decision-makers, students will be well placed to contribute to an evolving and healthy democracy that fosters the wellbeing of Australia as a democratic nation.”

In contrast, the national curriculum of the world’s most consistently successful education system (Singapore) has a distinctive nation-building flavour that underpins teaching and learning from the earliest years through to graduation. In that country, “The primary school curriculum is designed to give your child a strong foundation by Nurturing sound values; Loving Singapore; and Developing literacy and numeracy.”¹⁶ At secondary school level, the aim is to develop each student as “A Concerned Citizen who is rooted in Singapore, has a strong sense of civic responsibility, is informed about Singapore and the world, and plays an active part in bettering the lives of others around him.”¹⁷ From 2021, a refreshed Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) curriculum includes support for students’ mental health, cyber wellness and development of values and identity. Significantly, this is designated as a whole-school approach; every teacher is expected to be competent in CCE, and professional learning is recognised as an essential element of these national goals.

Love of country, a specific aim of the Singaporean curriculum, has far more in common with the attitudes of Australia’s Indigenous people than with the approach taken by the key documents guiding the review of the Australian Curriculum.

The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration points to the need to “teach young Australians the value of our nation’s rich history”, and expresses this in the context of “Welcoming and valuing the local, regional and national cultural knowledge and the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.”

Emma McCaul, the 2019 Thawley Essay prize winner and author of *As history fades into history*, identifies the great irony that “Indigenous Australians know that history and culture must be fought for and proudly expressed if it is to be preserved and passed on to their children, but other Australians seem to have lost the will to take this path”.¹⁸

Despite stated aims of instilling “an understanding of Australia’s system of government, its histories, religions and culture”, the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration never formally acknowledges the richness and complexity of thousands of years of Western civilisation.

The other major document guiding the review, known as The Shape of the Australian Curriculum (Version 5.0), mirrors this failure, with the rationale’s second last item (*italics added for emphasis*) giving every appearance of an afterthought:

The Australian Curriculum must ensure young people have a good understanding of the nature of Australian society within which they will be living and working as adults. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives are an important part of the development of our nation, *as are the traditions and values of what is often referred to as ‘Western society’*.¹⁹

The Declaration’s silence on “the traditions and values of what is often referred to as Western society” may help to explain the unintegrated and inconsistent nature of the Australian Curriculum, seen particularly clearly in the Civics and Citizenship material. Without the necessary intellectual gravitas and cultural balance, there are no strong academic ties that bind; thus, the Declaration is incapable of acting as a catalyst for improvement as educators set about ‘refining, realigning and decluttering’ the curriculum. Nor, for

the same reasons, is any other ‘shape paper’ or other official curriculum publication produced before 2020 up to the task.

If curriculum authorities across the country remain unwilling or unable to develop definitive, cohesive national statements and support materials about Australia’s non-Indigenous heritage to guide teaching and learning, it is most unlikely that Australian students’ competence in English literacy and numeracy will improve. As with federation, the key aspects are indissolubly linked. They have stood the test of time in developing students’ academic knowledge and skills, and they offer a reliable gateway to excellence and equity in their emphasis on what 19th century poet and inspector of schools Matthew Arnold referred to as “the best that has been thought and said.”²⁰ Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy*, an essay written in 1869 to “recommend culture as the great help out of our present difficulties”, does not appear on contemporary reading lists for Australian students.

21st century essayist Emma McCaul suggests that many people know that something isn’t right:

... we don’t want to be the adults in the room and address the cause of our unease. Being useful idiots isn’t what we want, but we have been betrayed and our ignorance of so much of what should be our heritage and legacy leaves us unable to make constructive criticism, or to give thanks.²¹

A national curriculum is the primary vehicle for reinforcing the foundations of citizenship, yet state and territory flexibility to determine both the content and delivery of the curriculum mean that federation hinders students’ shared and consistent acquisition of this knowledge.

None of these objections, however, should be interpreted as denying the responsibility and freedom of states and territories to design curriculum materials that reflect local contexts and meet local academic needs. Rather, as this paper suggests, consideration of these complex issues as part of the review of the Australian Curriculum is timely.

One and free

The birth of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901 after years of tough negotiation across six states and thousands of kilometres gave then Prime Minister Edmund Barton the right to say “For the first time in history, we have a nation for a continent and a continent for a nation.”²² No Australian should underestimate the challenge of getting far-flung colonies with disparate goals and worldviews to agree to federate.

However, state and territory responses to the pandemic reveal some fracturing of the federal model, at times perhaps approaching the ‘acute strain’ of Western Australia’s 1933 threat to secede.²³ With leaders like Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk announcing that “Queensland hospitals are for Queenslanders” and Premier Mark McGowan (WA) accusing Gladys Berejiklian of preferring to let New South Wales “tick along with the virus” at the expense of the rest of Australia, students in schools across the nation may need convincing that unity prevails.

While voting in federal elections is compulsory, Australians tend towards political complacency, neither fixated on their Constitution nor especially interested in who leads them at any tier of government.

However, in 2021 even the most disengaged voter has a stronger relationship with local, state and federal authorities because of COVID-19. Regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, location, occupation or any other demographic characteristic, every Australian has had to comply with unanticipated — and frequently intrusive — expectations of movement and behaviour.

Like students who agree to cooperate for the greater good, they have generally obeyed. They have trusted their governments to make sound decisions based on the advice of unelected health experts and accepted questionable restrictions on travel, especially across state lines. As evidenced by the incumbents' electoral victories in several states, many citizens have noted but apparently forgiven Premiers for any bureaucratic overreach in the interests of keeping people safe.

No doubt some historians will examine the rules, fines and restrictions introduced during 2020, particularly as these pertain to federalism and may or may not satisfy legal thresholds or human rights legislation. If they are true to their profession, these analysts will muster and model every ounce of intellectual curiosity and freedom of expression to weigh civic rights and responsibilities against decisions made by governments in 2020 and beyond.

In a liberal democracy such as Australia, such work provides invaluable support for students as they learn to be active and informed members of the community. It is imperative, therefore, that the next iteration of the Australian Curriculum address questions such as:

- How will any revision of the content in the Civics and Citizenship curriculum reflect this third decade of the millennium?
- What is needed to support constructive debate about what it means to be 'one' Australia ?

If a revised national curriculum is to contribute to national prosperity and wellbeing, students must be able to debate the issues freely and thoughtfully. In this regard, the events of Australia Day 2020 warrant revisiting.

Debate, not abuse

Few Australians would be able to make sense of the abuse attracted by Tanya Plibersek MP after she delivered her Australia Day speech on 26 January, 2020. Claiming that “As citizens, as patriots, as Australians, we should all dedicate ourselves to strengthening the ties that bind us together”, the Shadow Minister for Education and Training proposed that every Australian student memorise and think carefully about the official promise:

From this time forward, I pledge my loyalty to
Australia and its people,
whose democratic beliefs I share,
whose rights and liberties I respect,
and whose laws I will uphold and obey

Those who mocked Ms Plibersek (some of whom claim to speak for children and schooling) had little regard for the Australian Curriculum’s Civics and Citizenship courses, which require students to

Appreciate multiple perspectives and use strategies to mediate difference; Present evidence-based civics and citizenship arguments using subject-specific language; and Reflect on their role as a citizen in Australia’s democracy.

These offer some of the clearest arguments for a recalibration of the broader aims of Australian school education. Evidence of the Australian Curriculum's unifying role lies in the fact that it "exemplifies a shared commitment to high expectations of achievement across the country, to respectful and rational discussion of different perspectives, values and beliefs, and to democratic processes as the means of promoting the common good of all."²⁴

Enhancing the curriculum to prioritise students' understanding of civic rights and responsibilities mandates raising intellectual and academic expectations. If school leavers are to contribute to national prosperity, they must be highly literate and numerate as well as confident of their capacity to undertake post-school study and employment. They need a sense of purpose and belonging as motivation to excel. The acquisition of deep knowledge leads to a greater ability to distinguish between intelligent debate and uninformed activism.

Wartime Prime Minister Robert Menzies made such distinctions in a 1942 speech, reminding Australians that:

...the greatest element in a strong people is a fierce independence of spirit. This is the only real freedom, and it has as its corollary a brave acceptance of unclouded individual responsibility. The moment a man seeks moral and intellectual refuge in the emotions of a crowd, he ceases to be a human being and becomes a cipher.²⁵

Demonstration of a willingness to 'appreciate multiple perspectives' is at odds with the emergence of intellectual and philosophical no-go zones occupied by identitarians, social justice warriors and virtue signallers who appear unconcerned about the impact of their words and actions on young learners. Furthermore, social media influencers are obvious counters to traditional methods of research and long-form oral and written debate. Technology brings unprecedented challenges to education as students are asked to reconcile 'deep thinking' about their academic subjects with the unregulated commentary and reduced attention span characteristic of the online world.

Active, informed citizens

Australian students receive very varied exposure to the profound socio-political foundations of the country in which they are growing up.

In 2015, the author of the Australian Curriculum's Civics and Citizenship courses was concerned about the 'superficial understanding' of democracy among Australian youth and the enormous variation in teaching across the nation. Murray Print contended that "if we want a successful, sustained democracy based on active, informed citizens then learning about democracy in an unbiased and accurate manner is essential."²⁶

The poor knowledge and skills demonstrated by Year 6 and Year 10 students in the 2019 (triennial) National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship (NAP-CC) tests are a powerful argument for resetting the expectations in those courses and in the Australian Curriculum more broadly.²⁷

The tests measure "students' skills, knowledge and understandings of Australian democracy and its system of government, the rights and legal obligations of Australian citizens and the shared values which underpin Australia's diverse multicultural and multi-faith society." The decline in Year 10 results since 2010, to the point where only 38% of students achieved at or above the proficient standard, is particularly worrying, given that there is no Civics and Citizenship curriculum in Years 11 and 12 and these young people are close to taking on adult responsibilities such as voting.

There are concerns that students not only lack content knowledge but also struggle with the English language demands of the questions. In practical terms, quite apart from any deficiencies in test design, the results indicate multiple problems with the quality of the curriculum, allocation of class time, teacher preparedness and student engagement.

At the national level, Australian education has some challenges in common with the United States. Two Senior Fellows at Stanford University's Hoover Institute have pleaded for a greater commitment to the study of citizenship, especially by restoring "character, virtue, and morality to the head of the education table where they belong" and by building an education system that develops an "informed love of country."²⁸

Michael J. Petrilli and Chester E. Finn, advocates of school choice and editors of *How to Educate an American: The Conservative Vision for Tomorrow's Schools*, argue that:

We can see—around the planet, not just at home—the harm done by political leaders who lack character, by business leaders who lack virtue, by celebrity figures who lack morality—and by a citizenry that too often doesn't seem to care all that much, or perhaps can't tell the difference.

One could posit that a citizenry that does not care about its political leadership or see itself at the heart of national prosperity will care little about what its children learn at school. In this country, the low profile of the review of the Australian Curriculum could be attributed to an historic lack of interest in school education, relative to that seen in many Asian countries, for example. Despite disquiet about Australian students' falling achievement in national and international testing, there are no parental protests outside government offices or riots among school leavers who cannot get jobs due to poor literacy and numeracy.

The failure to prioritise the national intellectual and literary legacy is already seen in declining interest in the study of History and traditional (Western) institutions and values as students respond to international calls for activism on climate change, racism and other 'global' issues.

Self-evidently, loss of interest in the language, ideas and events of the past means students will have far less capacity to become "successful lifelong learners [who can] make sense of their world and think about how things have become the way they are."²⁹

Rethinking the curriculum

The current review of the Australian Curriculum means critical decisions are now (again) being made about what and how children should learn. Education ministers want to see improvements in literacy, numeracy and subject knowledge in the sciences, history and languages, as well as communication and digital technology, critical thinking and all of the other ‘21st century skills’ that will allegedly prepare Australian students for post-school life.

Such curriculum decisions presuppose at least some agreement on what Australia is, how it came to be, and what it aspires to be. However, that level of sophistication and detail is not evident in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration or any of its three predecessors..

As Singapore and other high performing systems show, however, effective education policies are based on carefully defined, consistent and workable national goals. It follows that a self-confident, successful education system is also far better placed to benefit from participation in international education projects such as the OECD’s *Future of Education and Skills 2030*.³⁰ According to the OECD, many countries recognise “the urgent need to open a global discussion about education” and are part of the international education project that advocates “redesigning and implementing curricula to meet the challenges of the 21st century.”³¹

Likewise, the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration encourages students to “understand their responsibilities as global citizens and know how to affect positive change”.

Australia has often looked overseas for guidance on education policy and practice, and collaboration and problem-solving are designated 21st century skills. However, the domestic, regional and international challenges confronting this country necessitate robust, civil discussions about what it is to be Australian, led by those who can demonstrate consistent commitment to agreed national goals. Close scrutiny of reviewers as they determine the education expectations for Australian children is key to an appropriately balanced curriculum.

Civics and Citizenship

The Australian Curriculum's Civics and Citizenship courses are designed to develop students' "lifelong sense of belonging to and engagement with civic life as an active and informed citizen in the context of Australia as a secular democratic nation with a dynamic, multicultural, multi-faith society and a Christian heritage".³²

Leaving aside the goal's anodyne wording, its intent surely goes to the heart of Australian school education as it describes the nation with which every person who lives here holds a contract.

However, the statement's weak positioning within the wider curriculum and its demonstrable failure to act as an integrating force in the design of the whole curriculum mean lost opportunities to inspire generations of young learners. Rather than being hidden within the aims of one subject within a broader learning area, this aim should be foundational to all subjects in all learning areas at all year levels.

A truly powerful national curriculum would begin with a distinctively Australian vision for schooling, with high academic expectations flowing coherently and succinctly throughout the document and national values reinforced through all relevant subject areas. It would present a highly integrated approach to the key subject areas, offering age-appropriate, long term study of the origins of modern, liberal democracies and free-market philosophies, contrasted with alternative systems of government and economic management. If this were the starting point, it would be far easier to set clear and high standards for reading and writing — including the integration of teaching practices and resources across multiple learning areas — giving teachers sound professional guidance and the confidence to weave local stories and students' experiences into their work.

However, this means that all schools and systems would need to provide teachers with the training, time and resources — perhaps for the first time in this area of the curriculum - to ensure this would become a priority in programming and lesson delivery.

One consequence of the low profile of Civics and Citizenship is that only the well-established expressions of civic pride and citizenship activity — such as ANZAC Day and Australia Day — tend to get any traction. Even then, students have few chances to explore the multiple meanings and experiences of Australia Day within context as it always falls at the end of the school holidays and before the academic year commences.

Progressives can take comfort in the reality that the vapid tone and content of the Australian Curriculum's Civics and Citizenship material are unlikely to produce generations of flag-waving pledge reciters. This only compounds the essential problem that no one seems to see it as a subject of significance.

Furthermore, the focus of the Australian Curriculum is on the federal government and federal institutions, yet implementation of the curriculum is by state governments; each with its own executive, legislative and other arrangements.

The Australian Curriculum says that high school students should learn about “How values, including freedom, respect, inclusion, civility, responsibility, compassion, equality and a ‘fair go’, can promote cohesion within Australian society.”

Listening to political leaders and social commentators, young learners could be forgiven for concluding that these are just words on paper, to be picked up and dropped by their elders as convenient. Their curriculum will need to explain the process for agreeing on the values that make Australians ‘one’, especially now that the wording of the national anthem has changed.

A strength of the Civics and Citizenship curriculum is the three themes that run through it from Year 3 onwards: *Government and Democracy, Laws and Citizens; Citizenship, Diversity and Identity*. It is vital that teachers have the confidence and competence to teach all of these, but there is little evidence of consistency in teacher training courses.

As a subject in schools, Civics and Citizenship is a perfect example – and victim – of the ‘federalism’ of the Commonwealth it is designed to educate students about.

No two Australian jurisdictions teach Civics and Citizenship the same way. For example, New South Wales curriculum authorities decided to adapt the Australian Curriculum content for use across numerous syllabuses for Kindergarten to Year 10.

In Victoria and Western Australia, it is a compulsory subject to Year 10 but the skills component has been removed in the former and an entire theme (Citizenship, Diversity and Identity) has gone in the latter jurisdiction's version. The other states and territories generally make the subject mandatory to Year 8 only, with further study in Years 9 and 10 (as students learn to drive, take on employment and approach voting age) offered as an elective, if at all. It is ironic that the more engaged they become with Australia's legal and political systems, the less exposure young citizens have to formal education in these areas.

Another significant impediment is the lack of close alignment with other subjects — particularly History and English — that would give students the context they need to understand the issues associated with becoming active and informed citizens, with all of the implications of those words.

By its very nature, Civics and Citizenship demands a thorough understanding of the past and methodical exposure to Western literature in order to analyse research material, debate and explain the present, and position for the future.

The current Australian Curriculum (English) advice to teachers is of little help, stating simply that:

...the range of literary texts for Foundation to Year 10 comprises Australian literature, including the oral narrative traditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, as well as the contemporary literature of these two cultural groups, and classic and contemporary world literature, including texts from and about Asia.³³

The Australian Curriculum's English literature content for Years 7 and 8 highlights the lack of alignment across learning areas and makes no reference to the Western literary legacy that informs citizenship in a liberal democracy:

Literary texts that support and extend students in Years 7 and 8 as independent readers are drawn from a range of realistic, fantasy, speculative fiction and historical genres and involve some challenging and unpredictable plot sequences and a range of non-stereotypical characters. These texts explore themes of interpersonal relationships and ethical dilemmas within real-world and fictional settings and represent a variety of perspectives.³⁴

No mention is made of the ideas and writings drawn from the nations that contributed significantly to the creation of the Australian Constitution (for example, France, Canada, Switzerland or the United States) which would reinforce young learners' understanding of key principles underpinning liberal democratic societies and improve their intercultural understanding. There is no sense of how the key skills of reading and textual interpretation and production might contribute to their appreciation of what it has meant and now means to be an Australian.

In the current Australian Curriculum, Civics and Citizenship appears only as a sub-strand of the Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS) curriculum for Years 3-6, and it is not until Year 5 that students "are introduced to the key values of Australia's liberal democratic system of government, such as freedom, equality, fairness and justice (government and democracy)." However, the suggestions presented within the Australian Curriculum for possible classroom use with Years 5 and 6 are so disparate in nature and type that the programming burden on schools and the variation in delivery must both be enormous, and may well result in only limited engagement by students and teachers.

The History curriculum studied alongside this puts no emphasis on Australian values or the foundations of a liberal democracy. Instead, students learn about the establishment of British colonies in the southern hemisphere in the 1800s, aspects of daily life for convicts, settlers and Indigenous people, and human impact on the environment. Federation, and the nation's founding document (The Australian Constitution) appear in Year 6, but the approach and level

of depth or detail will vary widely across the country and even within school systems.

By the end of Year 7, students are supposed to be able to

...explain features of Australia's Constitution, including the process for constitutional change. They explain how Australia's legal system is based on the principle of justice. Students explain the diverse nature of Australian society and identify the importance of shared values in promoting a cohesive society.

A streamlined, high-quality curriculum would ensure the exploration of the 'principle of justice' through language(s) and literature, history, economics, the arts and perhaps other subjects. Although highly educated, passionate teachers may well bring all of these elements to life in their classrooms, there is no evidence of curricular integration or innovative programming and well-aligned resources to assist them.

Without superior teacher training in Civics and Citizenship, there is no guarantee that effective links will be made with relevant literary and philosophical developments, even when, for example, the focus of Year 7 History is the ancient world. Given that so few Australians study Latin or Greek, and with little or no expectation that teachers be familiar with the works of the great philosophers, it is hard to imagine many students developing deep knowledge of the ideas and stories of past millennia. Nor can they easily make connections with their own circumstances or experiences.

The Year 8 curriculum says that students

...analyse features of Australian democracy, and explain features of Australia's democracy that enable active participation. They recognise different types of law in Australia and explain how laws are made. They identify the diverse belief systems in Australia and analyse issues about national identity and the factors that contribute to people's sense of belonging.

The nature and scope of this achievement standard are extremely ambitious and demand contextual nuance. It can only be hoped that teachers have both the expertise and the time to encourage deep thinking, as well as access to resources that can make this content engaging and enable it to resonate as a key contribution to all students' education.

Buried at the end of the last of three curriculum content descriptions is one of the most important topics for discussion among young citizens, yet it looks like another afterthought as it is currently presented: *Different perspectives about Australia's national identity, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, and what it means to be Australian.*

This, in fact, goes directly to the problem. There is no broad — let alone specific — agreement on what it means to be Australian, or who or what the 'one' in the national anthem might represent. The current iteration of the Australian Curriculum does not provide any answer to these questions, yet expects teachers and students to be able to lead such study.

Teachers delivering the Civics and Citizenship curriculum are advised to design their lessons around:

- investigating representations of Australian identity evident in national day events (such as Anzac Day), and in the media and popular culture, to analyse different perspectives on the interpretation of national identity
- examining contemporary influences on the shaping of Australian national identity, such as the natural environment, immigration, attitudes to Asia and Reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and other Australians

Only the most skilled and knowledgeable practitioners will feel confident about delivering classes based on the 'interpretation' and 'shaping' of national identity. How can students be expected to develop a love of country when teachers are hampered in this way?

Year 7 and 8 students are expected to *Reflect on their role as a citizen in Australia's democracy*" and in Years 9 and 10 they "*Reflect on their role as a citizen in Australian, regional and global contexts.*"

These are ambitious goals, especially given that it is not until Year 9 that students really learn about the ideas (from Magna Carta onwards) that were the foundation of the Australian Constitution and Federation. Even then, the topic is an optional depth study in the Australian Curriculum and dependent upon state, regional or even individual school or teacher priorities rather than the student's experience of a nationally agreed and expressed aspiration.

Students in their fourth year of high school would see no obvious connection between the requirement to reflect on their role as a citizen and the Year 10 English Achievement Standard that expects students to

...evaluate how text structures can be used in innovative ways by different authors [and] ... explain how the choice of language features, images and vocabulary contributes to the development of individual style ... develop and justify their own interpretations of texts ... evaluate other interpretations, analysing the evidence used to support them ... listen for ways features within texts can be manipulated to achieve particular effects.³⁵

Similarly, without the support of skilled teachers, Year 10 students enrolled in Economics are unlikely to make connections between their citizenship obligations and a curriculum that focuses on how governments manage economic performance to improve living standards, although they are challenged to “give explanations for variations in economic performance and standards of living within and between economies.”³⁶

The differing actions, policies and responses of the various state and territory governments during the past twelve months of the COVID-19 pandemic provide an interesting case in point, and at the same time reveal, perhaps, the extent to which Australians really are or are not ‘one’.

Perhaps most importantly, Civics and Citizenship is not part of the senior secondary curriculum. Very few Year 11 and 12 students currently have the opportunity to develop a mature appreciation of the critical issues affecting the nation and the institutions that make

us ‘one’. Again, this is totally dependent upon the whims and capacity of schools and teachers, and helps to explain the significant variation in the knowledge and skills of Australian school leavers.

Finally, a key skill in the Civics and Citizenship curriculum is to “use democratic processes to reach consensus on a course of action relating to a civics and citizenship issue and plan for that action.” Some teachers have interpreted this as promoting activism — particularly in light of student-led climate protests and the rise of the Black Lives Matter and other movements — rather than considering the full range of decision-making and problem-solving capacities that can be developed through that skill.

Unless the Civics and Citizenship curriculum — and all that it represents for young Australians — is prioritised in the Australian Curriculum, the onus remains on Australia’s political, educational, economic and community leaders to demonstrate how these democratic processes actually work for the good of the majority (if not for all).

The Hoover Institution’s Petrilli and Finn suggest that young people need “Not just civic activism, not just protest, not just the odd community-service project, but the totality of informed citizenship for a democratic republic that values its *pluribus* but also needs a lot of *unum*.”³⁷

Recurring indications from the NAP-CC surveys of Year 6 and Year 10 students across the country are that the majority want to know more about Australia’s history, all of its people, its past, and its possible future.³⁸ They appear optimistic and open to taking on the challenges and inherent contradictions of what it means to be “one” for Australians.

They are now owed a world-class Australian Curriculum that prioritises nation-building knowledge and skills and integrates the learning areas on the basis of a sophisticated framework of national academic objectives.

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A 2021 education resolution: keep an eye on the Australian Curriculum

The COVID-19 pandemic is stimulating debate about the relationship between the governed and their leaders, both elected and appointed. In Australia, the world's tenth-oldest continuous democracy, there is an unanticipated but positive opportunity for a nation-building refocus on the principles and aspirations that underpinned the 1901 agreement 'to unite in one indissoluble Federal Commonwealth'. That agreement reflects an enduring belief that informed political participation is central to an accountable democracy, and that it is a unique mechanism for developing an individual's sense of self-worth and commitment to a better society.

High levels of socio-economic and political disruption and disquiet will not quickly recede. However, there can be no doubt that students whose education is enhanced by an intelligent examination of the human condition — with the emphasis on developing a thorough understanding of Australia's national heritage and, ideally, a concomitant sense of belonging and purpose — will be better positioned to enter adulthood with confidence.

This period coincides with a review of the Australian Curriculum, scheduled for completion at the end of 2021. As the strengths and weaknesses of federation are tested, there can be few more powerful avenues leading to national unity and prosperity than a genuinely world-class Australian Curriculum.

To bring improvements to the education of all young Australians, that document should be based on a sophisticated, overarching academic framework that includes a renewed commitment to nation building through an enhanced Civics and Citizenship curriculum.



Fiona Mueller is an Adjunct Scholar at the Centre for Independent Studies. Her comprehensive background as a high school teacher of English and foreign languages in Australia and overseas was the impetus for doctoral studies and involvement in education policy at state and federal levels. Fiona taught at two universities and held the role of Head of ANU College at the Australian National University. In 2016-17, following the publication of the revised national curriculum, she returned to school education policy as Director of Curriculum at the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). In 2019, she co-authored a policy paper on school education for the Page Research Centre, with a particular emphasis on nation-building, academic standards and access for rural, regional and remote students.

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