



National History Curriculum Framing Paper 2009

Submission to The National Curriculum Board

**Prepared by Professional Historians Association (NSW)
Incorporated**

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National History Curriculum

About the Professional Historians Association, NSW

The Professional Historians Association of New South Wales (PHA (NSW)) was formed in 1985 as an association for practising, qualified historians.

The organisation is a member of the national body, The Australian Council of Professional Historians Associations Inc. (ACPHA).

Broadly, the objectives of PHA (NSW) is to:

- set and maintain standards of professional practice, and to and ensure observance of all requirements of the national body
- promote the practice of professional history and the status of professional historians in the community
- provide guidance and advice to members in contractual and employment matters
- formulate acceptable standards of employment and inform members and prospective employers of these standards
- encourage members to pursue continuing professional development
- collect and disseminate information of interest to professional historians
- pursue common objectives and maintain links with other Australian professional historians' associations through membership of the ACPHA
- maintain links with other similar organisations.

About our submission

We welcome the establishment of the National Curriculum Board, especially its goal of strengthening the teaching of history in Australian schools.

Many of our members are experienced, published authors, academics, and former teachers who have made – and continue to make – significant contributions in the fields of teaching and learning in primary, secondary, and tertiary education.

Some of us have written extensively on curriculum and the history syllabus (with particular reference to Australian history), developed by the NSW Department of Education and the NSW Board of Studies.

Thus, we believe that our organisation is well placed to make practical suggestions on ways to strengthen the place and teaching of History in the school curriculum. Accordingly, our submission provides feedback on the issues identified in *Appendix 3: Feedback Questions*.

Appendix 3: Feedback

Please comment on the Introduction.

12. A national history curriculum provides an invaluable opportunity to ensure that all Australian students learn history.

By teaching history systematically and sequentially across the years of schooling we will enrich educational outcomes.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree **Strongly Agree**

Comment

A national approach to the teaching of history in school education provides every Australian child of school age with an equal opportunity to learn about how people and events have shaped our nation's story and that of the wider world.

13. History provides the means whereby individual and collective identities are formed and sustained.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree **Strongly Agree**

Comment

We recognise the notion of history, both for individuals and at the broader level of nationhood. Individual narratives form part of the wider narrative(s) that inform our understanding of the Australian region and its place in the world.

14 History is a distinctive and indispensable form of understanding practised across many generations.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree **Strongly Agree**

Comment

The study of history has long been recognised as an area of enquiry with its own particular methodologies. The practice of history is ancient and deeply connected with advancement in learning, teaching and cultural understanding. From cuneiform writing in early Sumeria, through Egyptian and Middle Eastern cultures, writing became the instrument by which the state was able to extend its influence over the lives of people. Written records, oral tradition and material objects provide bountiful evidence of how societies have changed over the millennia. Australia and Australians form a small yet important part of this continuum.

15 History sits across the social sciences and the humanities.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree **Strongly Agree**

Comment

History interweaves with both the social sciences and humanities and provides a useful and broad context for these areas of enquiry. At its simplest level, the historical context provides navigation points and milestones, helping us to make sense of the world around us. This is why history is an essential part of a broad based curriculum.

16 History draws on and contributes to other bodies of knowledge, but it is a discipline with its own methods and procedures.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree **Strongly Agree**

Comment

The practice of History as a discipline is distinctive. We believe that the skills of the historian can be taught. Likewise, a sense of historical imagination can be developed. In fact it is integral to thought processes that are necessary for us to use the skills of the historian to understand the past and present.

17 Historical inquiry involves interpretation and judgment, guided by principles that are intrinsic to the discipline.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree **Strongly Agree**

Comment

By the close of the 19th century the view that history consists of the compilation of a maximum number of irrefutable and objective facts was being questioned, especially by eminent leaders in the field, including Lord Acton. Equally, the hallowed practice of taking documents at face value was under threat.

Of necessity, the historian is selective. To quote E.H. Carr: 'The belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy, but one which it is very hard to eradicate.' (*What is History?* p. 12, Pelican edition, 1961.

Today, there is general agreement that certain areas of historical inquiry can be deeply problematic. Interpretation and judgement is a vigorously contested area. Again, to quote E.H. Carr. 'When we attempt to answer the question 'What is history?' our answer, reflects our own position in time and forms part of our answer to the broader question what we take of the society in which we live.' (op.cit p. 8)

Having regard to this, PHA (NSW) believes strongly in teaching methods of historical inquiry in our schools. The ability to examine evidence, weigh up disparate points of view, and form an opinion based on empirical study and enquiry has benefits that go far beyond the schoolroom, to all aspects of life.

18 History stretches from the distant past to the present, and provides a deeper understanding of present-day events as well as the enduring significance of earlier ones.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree **Strongly Agree**

Comment

See our comments under 14.

Aims

To what extent do you agree with the aims of the proposed national history curriculum?

20 To provide students with knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the past in order to appreciate their and other's culture, to understand better the present and to contribute to debate about planning for the future.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree **Strongly Agree**

Comment

The study of history can broaden our understanding of the world in which we live and thereby contribute to informed decision-making. For example, it may be the case that a more profound understanding of the built environment as it has developed in Australian towns and cities would provide insight at a time when decisions are made to erase evidence of the past.

21 Understand and respond to challenges and opportunities that confront young Australians — globalisation, the rise of the knowledge economy, the rich diversity of the Australian people and their distinctive position within the Asia-Pacific region

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree **Strongly Agree**

Comment

It would be difficult to disagree with any of these motherhood statements. Like any other key discipline history forms part of the contextual backdrop to how we live, work and form communities. A sense of belonging and place in the wider world challenges insular views within, as well as their projection on the outside world. A greater appreciation and understanding of history can help to counter bigotry and ignorance about our neighbours at a local and global level.

22 Young Australians come to school from different backgrounds that are shaped by different family and community narratives. The school is thus but one agency that shapes historical consciousness.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree **Strongly Agree**

Comment

If we do not teach young people to learn and reflect about the past and its impact on the present, then they lack even the most basic the skills that help them to understand history. Schools have a vital part to play in awakening curiosity and encouraging reflection, scholarship and engagement with what makes us Australian in a global and historical context.

23 To foster the capacity to respond to these influences in an intelligent and informed manner so that their full potential for enriching experience is realised.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree **Strongly Agree**

Comment

24 *To encourage development of a critical perspective on received versions of the past, and learn how to compare different accounts so that the conflicts and ambiguities are appreciated.*

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree **Strongly Agree**

Comment

For many young people received versions of the past are not derived through careful study, books and discourse within a framework of enquiry, but rather through TV, parents and the home, or friendship groups. Or not at all, as may be the case.

Across the board the teaching of history is patchy, and in some cases devoid of any understanding that history is a method of enquiry and platform for interpretation. Pockets of excellence do exist, but in general it is reasonable to suppose that the health of history and the teaching of history is not at all good. It would be to everyone's advantage to have a generally agreed scaffold to construct a national curriculum.

Differences of opinion about 'critical perspectives' are far less relevant to classroom teachers than having teaching materials and strategies that can provide a pedagogically sound teaching strategy and a stimulating learning environment.

25 *To teach methods of historical inquiry through an understanding of factual knowledge, a knowledge of chronology, geography, environment institutional arrangements, material circumstances and belief systems.*

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree **7 Strongly Agree**

Comment

Agree strongly. These are stock-in-trade for learners and teachers alike. They form the basic building blocks. Without knowledge it is not possible to have an informed opinion. Indeed, many teachers would welcome the guidance that a national curriculum could provide.

26 *In broad terms, students should be introduced to world history from the time of the earliest human communities: they should have sufficient familiarity with the course of human history to the present to be able to grasp the major phases of that history and the transformations that determined them.*

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree **Strongly Agree**

Comment

A broad outline would be highly beneficial provided it is taught in way that brings major developments alive, rather than reduce them to markers on a timeline.

27 *Encourage an appreciation of the major civilisations of Europe, Asia, Africa, America and Australia.*

Strongly Disagree Disagree **Agree** Strongly Agree

Comment

Yes, we encourage an approach that would accommodate the need to learn about our own narrative(s) with those of other peoples. Having said that it is a matter of finding the right balance.

28 *To promote the teaching of skills and their application by students and use of skills to enhance the capacity to acquire new knowledge and a continuing desire to do so.*

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree **Strongly Agree**

Comment

The teaching of history presents students with a wide range of exciting and interesting challenges. This can include the examination of artefacts, photographs, documents, interviews, sound and film recordings, documentary films, debate and discussion. Written skills are considerably enhanced through the learning process and can be applied across other disciplines. Verbalisation and the ability to mount a coherent argument or critique is also an important classroom tool that can build confidence and critical thinking. The teaching and learning of history encourages imaginative and thoughtful consideration of the world, past and present.

Terms used

This section of the paper proposes three components to incorporate into the national history curriculum.

Overview, Bridging and Study in depth

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree **Strongly Agree**

Comment

This provides focus for curriculum developers and a very sound framework in which to develop the course.

The progression from the general to the particular is intellectually valid, since it draws students into the historical theme/subject matter by establishing the 'big picture'. This allows us to float the bridge across the many rivers that comprise historical cause and effect. Finally, a series of depth studies is consistent with the approach taken by the NSW Board of Studies in its HSC preliminary Modern History strand.

There is every reason to apply this scheme starting in the primary school years.

Considerations

To what extent do you agree with the proposals for incorporating a futures orientation?

Strongly Disagree **Disagree** Agree Strongly Agree

Comment

Do we need to move with caution in this regard? The teaching and learning of history should not be allowed to become captive to national exigencies and imperatives. There is a view that various interest groups with particular ideologies may come to regard curriculum as giving sanction to their views and notions about Australia's future. Is it reasonable to ask the question: should curriculum in general, and the history curriculum in particular be permitted to reflect a bias imposed by these groups?

To what extent do you agree with the proposed components of historical understanding?

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree **Strongly Agree**

Comment

To what extent do you agree with the proposed cross-curriculum implications for national history curriculum?

Strongly Disagree Disagree **Agree** Strongly Agree

Comment

It does have highly beneficial implications for study across the curriculum, but we should be arguing the case for history to enjoy its own place and not be subsumed into an amorphous collection of subject offerings under the umbrella of 'social studies'.

Structure of the curriculum

This section of the paper proposes some guidelines for the structure of the national history curriculum.

To what extent do you agree with the proposals?

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree **Strongly Agree**

Comment

Strongly agree that we should develop a curriculum that provides a learning sequence via a consistent approach, and thereby avoid the repetition which is a continuing feature of curricula across and within Australian States.

To what extent do you agree with the proposed national history curriculum for Stage 1 of schooling?

Strongly Disagree Disagree **Agree** Strongly Agree

Comment

Having children engage with artefacts, etc makes sense in view of the fact that they need to learn how to recognise and apply primary and secondary sources to their developing understanding of the touch points germane to their own personal history and the wider world.

To what extent do you agree with the proposed national history curriculum for Stage 2 of schooling?

Strongly Disagree Disagree **Agree** Strongly Agree

Comment

An interesting blend and balance. These are critical years in which existing curricula tend to dissipate the enthusiasm generated at primary school level, often through repetition.

To what extent do you agree with the proposed national history curriculum for Stage 3 of schooling?

Strongly Disagree Disagree **Agree** Strongly Agree

Comment

See above.

To what extent do you agree with the proposed national history curriculum for Stage 4 of schooling?

Strongly Disagree Disagree **Agree** Strongly Agree

Comment

Agree, although we recommend inclusion of the Early Modern period, commencing in the early 16th century through to the late 18th century and the outbreak of the French Revolution. This period encompasses the emergence of capitalism, the impact of the Reformation and the beginnings of modernity through the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment. This core topic would seem to have more linkage with modern times, although we do not discount the importance of medieval studies.

Other comments

Issues of repetition

The introduction of a national curriculum should avoid students having to revisit studies and content matter that were explored in Stage 3.

We believe that work also needs to be done to identify overlap and repetition in the senior high school curricula offered by the various boards of studies across the States.

Assessment

Does the Task Force have a uniform assessment regime in mind? At upper senior school level assessment tasks tend to dictate what is taught, sometimes to the detriment of teaching itself. For example, continuous assessments invite the question from students during the course of classroom teaching: "is this relevant?" Thus, we have a situation whereby the teacher feels disinclined to include extension material or spend additional time on topics that have profound meaning, but which may not be prescribed by the assessment.

Most State education authorities have extended HSC-type assessment programs into the lower secondary school years. This is something for Task Force to consider in view of the above and also because it has implications for textbook publishers.

Textbooks

Publishers have an enormous influence on content but they, in turn, are influenced by the various syllabuses promulgated by education authorities cross Australia.

Publishers of secondary textbook usually appoint practising – and former – teachers to develop texts for a particular market. Authors are paid by royalty or assign copyright to the publishers for a flat fee.

Textbook authoring reflects the need for publishers to walk in step with market forces and ensure the return on their investment to bring a work to the customer. Thus,

textbooks tend to mirror the outline provided by the syllabus. Layout and design reflect not only the syllabus, but also changing trends in classroom teaching and the availability of suitably qualified staff.

The Task Force may consider setting up a working group with publishers of history textbooks to examine current problems and issues in the writing of texts. Also the provision of online material.

Staffing and timetabling of history classes

As with any other subject currently being taught in primary and secondary schools, the teaching of Australian history is, in part, dictated by available staff resources. Few primary teachers receive specific training in the teaching of history. There is anecdotal evidence that many teachers of history in our primary and secondary schools lack similar training.

In the case of the latter, this is often due to the need for school curriculum planners to ensure that teachers are allocated an appropriate teaching load. Where teachers find themselves short of their allocation, they may be asked to take on a period loading outside their area of competence. More often than not, they may be allocated a junior secondary class where the textbook usually becomes the lesson guide.

The importance of local history

The study of local history makes a vital contribution to the teaching of our national story. From time to time local history topics have been introduced into the junior high school syllabus and offer important advantages. Primarily, they enable students to understand changes that took place in their local community over a period of time. Furthermore, local knowledge and understanding provides a springboard into a student being able to relate to the wider state and national picture. For example, local manifestations of the 1930s depression illustrate national events.

Local history is a rich vein that invites further exploration as to how we might better integrate local events, people and place, into our curricula. In addition, there is a strong community of people who have advanced skills in, and knowledge of, family history. This a growing field for students but some areas are better provided than others with good source material

There is an assumption in this statement that local and community histories, and histories of local figures are readily available across Australia. There are many quality local and community histories and histories of local figures in many localities, yet there are many localities where these histories are of poor or dubious quality or do not exist at all. When these histories are not available generalist primary teachers rarely have the expertise, time or resources to undertake research and writing of quality resources at a local level. Given the state of local studies in Australia there is little prospect of this situation being rectified in the short term.

PHA (NSW) recommends that:

quality local histories of indigenous communities, commemorative days, and icons and symbols need to be readily available for teachers. Where they do not exist commission members of organisations, such as PHA (NSW), to write quality local history.

and:

quality historical material is made available on the social and economic aspects of daily life in all local areas. Ensure that local primary sources and quality published secondary sources are readily available for teachers. Ensure that there are local

archives, databases or libraries established which have extensive local primary sources available for teachers. Where they do not exist commission members of organisations, like the PHA (NSW), to establish these archives or to write secondary sources on localities across Australia.

Teaching of history in TAFE institutions

There is an assumption by the curriculum writers that the only place that Australian students are exposed to history is within the school environment. There are a number of educational institutions where young Australians experience history outside the school environment. For example TAFE institutions teach history to young Australians as well as schools. We assume that Task Force would see this initiative being taken up in TAFE colleges.

We also recommend that a representative of the TAFE sector be appointed to the advisory group.