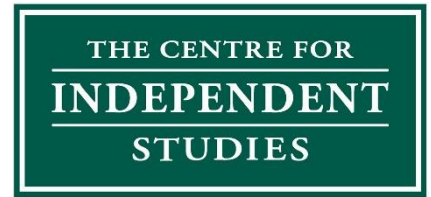


Submission
No 39

INQUIRY INTO REVIEW OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Organisation: The Centre for Independent Studies

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Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) Submission to the Inquiry into the Review of the New South Wales School Curriculum

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The Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the NSW Legislative Council Inquiry into the Review of the New South Wales School Curriculum.

The CIS made a detailed submission to the curriculum review based on the review's interim report in December 2019. This submission is attached as an appendix for your information.

The CIS is supportive of many of the recommendations of the final curriculum review, especially the development of a detailed and explicit curriculum for early reading that is evidence-based,¹ and the focus on rigorous early literacy and numeracy instruction.²

However, there are three key recommendations (3.1, 6.3, and 6.4) of the final curriculum review that particularly warrant further scrutiny.

We consider these to be very significant proposed changes that are not sufficiently supported by evidence. The NSW government's response to these recommendations has been "Support in principle" or "Noted", and "Further advice will be sought from NESA".³ We hope our contribution will help the government to further develop its response to these recommendations.

The CIS position is that Recommendations 3.1, 6.3, and 6.4 should be either rejected by the NSW government, or thoroughly scrutinised and revised before proceeding to implementation.

¹ NSW Curriculum Review, Recommendation 4.2.

² NSW Curriculum Review, Recommendation 4.1.

³ NSW Government response to the NSW Curriculum Review final report, pages 17 and 19.

Recommendation 3.1: Make new syllabuses untimed, with students progressing to the next syllabus once they have mastered the prior syllabus. Students who require more time should have it; students ready to advance should be able to do so.

This recommendation is the most significant of the review, as it would involve moving away from the normal year-level curriculum to an ‘untimed’ curriculum; so it will “not specify when every student must commence, or how long they have to learn, the content of each syllabus.”⁴

Despite the review’s proposal for an extensive overhaul of the curriculum, the review cannot point to any high-achieving school system, anywhere in the world, that has an ‘untimed’ curriculum. This would appear to indicate that the proposal may be impractical and is in fact an education experiment unsupported by evidence.

Teachers’ work in the classroom would be made harder because apparently they would need to deliver lessons to students working on different syllabi within the same class, depending on their progress. It is already a constant challenge to teach lessons to students with differing abilities and progress when covering the same syllabus.

It would be unreasonable to expect teachers to teach many different topics at the same time in one class and track each student’s progress against different standards. This has the potential to further increase ‘red tape’ for teachers, who already suffer from a heavy administrative burden.

The proposal would also remove any absolute standard for what all students should be expected to achieve by a given age. This lowering of expectations is concerning, because while progress is important, the absolute level of achievement is what ultimately matters for students.

Part of this recommendation is that teachers should no longer give A to E grades for each syllabus, but instead should judge subjectively when a student has achieved a syllabus and is ready to progress.⁵ This would hinder the ability of parents to know their child’s current level of ability and what standard their child is expected to achieve for their age. It is true that A to E grades are only approximations, but they are common and easy-to-interpret standards that parents can generally understand. To quote an old saying, it is better to know something imprecisely than to know precisely nothing.

Recommendation 6.3: Require every student to undertake a major investigative project in a subject of their choosing, with common assessment criteria, moderation of teacher assessments, and performances forming part of a student’s HSC results.

A key strength of exams is that they directly assess student knowledge and skills at a point in time. Take-home assignments like this proposed major investigative project are far less fair than exams in demonstrating proficiency of a subject. For example, students from disadvantaged backgrounds would have less access to parental help or tutors at home for their major projects.

⁴ NSW Curriculum Review, page 98.

⁵ NSW Curriculum Review, page 106.

Consequently, this proposal for exams to be worth relatively less in favour of a major take-home project would undermine the integrity of the HSC — which is arguably the most rigorous Year 12 certificate in Australia — and negatively impact disadvantaged students in particular.

The review itself acknowledges these potential equity problems, but simply says in response that they are “probably not insurmountable.”⁶ It is important that the concerns around equitable assessment are properly addressed in detail and taken into account by the NSW government.

Recommendation 6.4: Establish a taskforce comprising representatives of the higher education sector, the school sector and the Universities Admissions Centre, to investigate the feasibility of not calculating and reporting the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR).

While there is potentially a case for reviewing the ATAR, it is a national education issue and it does not make sense for the NSW government to have yet another time-consuming education review on a topic that clearly affects the entire nation.

In any case, it is important that the ATAR remains focussed on academic ability, rather than extra-curricular activities. Despite regular commentary to the contrary, the ATAR remains the main means of admission to undergraduate degrees — 80% of Year 12 student admissions use ATAR.⁷ And ATAR ranks are closely related to academic achievement and drop-out rates at university.⁸

The recent proposal to replace the ATAR with a “learner profile” — focussing on extra-curricular activities, rather than academic achievement — for university admission would be especially unfair for high-achieving disadvantaged students. Advantaged students tend to have more extra-curricular opportunities, so would gain an unfair benefit in competing for university places against disadvantaged students.

⁶ NSW Curriculum Review, page 105.

⁷ NSW Curriculum Review, page 38, footnote 27.

⁸ Norton, A., Cherastidham, I., & Mackey, W. 2018. *Dropping out: The benefits and costs of trying university*. Grattan Institute.