The Shape of the Australian History Curriculum: A Comparative Evaluation

How does the Australian government’s proposed national curriculum for history compare with the systems introduced in England, South Africa, New Zealand and Michigan State?

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There is a shortage of international work on what makes a good history curriculum, as publications in this area tend to be embedded in national contexts. There have, however, been some trans-national studies. John Slater’s review of history teaching in the new Europe has been supplemented by the work of Joke Van Leeuw-Roord and other staff in the European Association of History Teachers (EUROCLIO) with regular insightful papers. Jörn Rüsen has written extensively about relationships between states in the perceptions of history. Both Rüsen and Van Leeuw-Roord stress the negative effects of different forms of exceptionalism, especially where nations are so self-obsessed that they miss opportunities to look for parallel developments and where they focus competitively on firsts or bests. On the other hand it might be argued that nations do have very different trajectories and to over-emphasise similarity might lead to a loss of sharpness in definition. It does not seem to have been exceptionalism that has blighted attempts to create a national history curriculum in Australia but a tension between camps identifying with sometimes polarised views of Australian history.

When John Slater was Staff Inspector (HMI) for History in a calm, almost liberal, period before the onset of national curriculum history, he authored the influential History in the Primary and Secondary Years (‘HIPSY’). HIPSY set out some criteria for selecting content within a school’s history curriculum:

- the periods studied should be long enough to illustrate the dimension of change;
- there should be coverage of ancient, medieval and modern periods;
- there should be a balance of local, national, regional and world history.

The paper also recognised, as indeed do the proposals for the new Australian curriculum, that history can – and indeed should – be controversial, or ‘contested’. The overview and depth structure developed by Denis Shemilt with the Schools History Project (SHP) in the 1970s has been influential in providing a template, especially for the secondary phase. Shemilt’s analysis of narratives is also helpful in the context of contested histories (he recommends that curriculum structures move through four phases: a chronologically ordered...
past; coherent historical narratives; multidimensional narratives; and polythetic narrative frameworks (showing shared characteristics). In the history provisions of the Shape of the Australian Curriculum series there is an acknowledged awareness of an international body of research into history pedagogy, as indeed there is in An Overview of the Teaching and Learning of Australian History in Schools by Associate Professor Tony Taylor and Dr Anna Clark. In this remarkable work of pan-Australian analysis and synthesis of existing practice in history teaching, Taylor and Clark refer specifically to the work of Denis Shemilt and Peter Lee, though Taylor has acknowledged elsewhere the structure and guidance given by Peter Seixas and Sam Wineburg. One feature of recent and on the whole successful history curricula is the involvement of academics who place curriculum in wider international context through conferences and published scholarly discourse. For example, Gail Weldon and Rob Siebörger in South Africa have long been associated with the History Teacher Education Network (HTEN) and History Educators International Research Network HEIRNET (which is behind the International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research, IJHLTR) and each made a significant contribution to the post-apartheid history curriculum.

Kindergarten–Grade 2 (typically 5–8 years of age)

DESCRIPTION
The Shape of the Australian Curriculum document states that:

In the early years of schooling the curriculum should enable students to explore their own and their family’s history. Through hearing the stories of other students’ lives and examining artefacts such as photos and objects, students also recognise that people have different histories.

Students will examine events in their lifetime and in the lifetimes of family members and place them in chronological order; they will use words and phrases that are associated with the passage of time (for example, yesterday and long ago). Students will distinguish between past and present ways of living, for example in means of transport, styles of clothing and housing and modes of communication. They may use fictional stories to provide a deeper understanding of changes over time.

The rationale behind this is clearly linked to the ‘expanding horizons’ curriculum which starts with the child, the child’s immediate surroundings and the child’s own past. There is some Piagetian thinking here which can be criticised for over-determination of what children can do at particular ages and stages, and which tends to downplay the importance of the teacher’s role in providing meaningful contexts. For eight-year-olds this proposed curriculum could lack challenge and many children younger than eight are ready for some episodes or stories related to real history (rather than just fictional stories), even history from the distant past.

COMPARISON
The Key Stage 1 curriculum for six- to seven-year-olds in England includes sections on biographies of significant people, such as Mary Seacole and Florence Nightingale, as well as the study of events like the (original) Olympic Games, the Gunpowder Plot (1605) and the Fire of London (1666) (using Pepys’s Diary). These continue to be popular alongside the more thematic developmental study such as Homes, Food through the Ages or Victorian Schools. Schools tend to use timelines (often with pictures and artefacts) and role-play to build up sequential and empathetic understanding. The South African curriculum for these early grades shares this focus on stories about significant people and thematic topics.

Grades 3–6 (typically 8–12 years of age)

DESCRIPTION
This is a synthesis of what seems to be in the proposed curriculum for Australia:

The history curriculum across Years 3–6 will be developed around four focus questions using local, state/territory, national and global contexts:

(Grades 1–2) Focusing on significant periods, events, personalities and places within and beyond Australia; family history, peoples of the local area and Australia, dreaming stories and myths and legends; using stories, oral histories, maps and real or virtual artefacts; daily life in Australian pre- and post-contact times, historical discoveries and early exploration; focusing on various aspects of the lives of individuals or groups.
1. What do we know about the past?
2. How did Australians live in the past?

These years will include the development of knowledge and understanding about Australian history, covering pre- and post-Indigenous/European contact. Students will learn about Australia’s national symbols and key historical events including colonisation, Federation and the world wars. Students will understand that Australia’s past pre-dates British colonisation and can recognise and value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander influences on our present-day society.

(Grades 3–4) Using a set of European and Asia-Pacific historical contexts and periods and examining key social, cultural, technological, political and work-related changes that have occurred, students will learn about pioneers and inventors, national identity, heritage and democratic traditions. The curriculum will include early exploration, the development of Australia’s system of government and key events and their commemoration including Anzac Day.

3. How did people live in other places?

(possible contexts: Japan, China and the European settlement of North America);
4. How has the past influenced the present?

COMMENT

The structure as presented is rather fragmented but full of good ideas with possibilities, and would probably benefit from restructuring with some core and optional units. There seem to be a number of elements here, some of which could be combined: local history; biographical studies; social and economic history at various stages; regional history (SE Asia); and world (or comparative) history (America). There is some indication that developmental and comparative studies might be appropriate. This might be rearranged to anticipate structures in the next curriculum age-phase.

Local history
1. Local history linking with 2/3 (below):
   • A depth study drawn from the locality.

Australian national
2. Life in Australia before European contact:
   • Depth studies of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander life, culture, art, myth, history.

3. (Link to 2 above) An Australian study: ‘the development of Australia’s system of government and key events and their commemoration including Anzac Day’;
   • Depth studies of key events and Anzac Day (to be resourced); local celebrations.

Global developmental study
4. Movement and settlement** (or exploration and encounters); from Henry the Navigator to James Cook (or could include earlier voyages like Pytheas or Ibn Batuta) (overview);
   • Depth studies of movement or exploration (using maps, pictures, video, diaries, journals etc.);
   • Focus could be on personalities or technology of shipping; optional depth study might include later use of penal colonies.

Global comparative
5. Comparative study of Wild Wests** (settlement and conflict in America/Canada and Australia) (overview);
   • Depth studies of lives of early settlers and stories of contact; related depth studies using local and national biographies and archives.

Global/regional
6. Living in Japan or China (state beginning and end dates) (overview):
Depth study of an aspect of a way of life: trade, farming, art, science and technology, exploration (related to Japan or China, but initiated from within those countries); use of archival, artefactual and visual material.

COMPARISON: ENGLAND

This phase of the school curriculum is known as Key Stage 2 in England and children will be aged between seven and eleven. There have been three versions so far of this curriculum and yet another one (under the Rose Review)\(^\text{12}\) has been proposed and has just reached the end of its consultation phase. There were originally nine units (1991–95), reduced to six after the Dearing Review of 1993–94, which cut back the whole of the national curriculum. The post-1995 version was not substantially changed in 1999, and the six units remain as:

1. a local history study;
2–4. British history: the Romans, Anglo-Saxons and Vikings (overview and one of these as a depth study); Britain and the wider world in Tudor times; and either Victorian Britain or Britain since 1930;
5. European history: Ancient Greece;
6. a world history study: one of Ancient Egypt, Ancient Sumer, the Assyrian Empire, the Indus Valley, the Maya, Benin, or the Aztecs.

The new proposed English primary history curriculum (for September 2011) (M indicates middle primary and L indicates later primary):

For 7–9 years of age:

M10. To explore the different ways we can find out about the past and how to understand the evidence (This includes primary and secondary sources, artefacts documents, photographs, film, accounts – not all sources of evidence are as reliable as others and the past has been represented and interpreted in different ways, including on-line sources.) [HISTORICAL METHOD]\(^\text{13}\)

M11. How significant events, developments or individuals and groups have influenced their locality, the UK and beyond in the recent and distant past (For example, the building of castles, the plague, industrialisation, or the work of a well-known local person and their effect on the local area and beyond.] [LINK BETWEEN LOCAL AND NATIONAL]

M12. About the movement and settlement of people in different periods of British history and the impact these have had (For example, the impact of the invasion and settlement of the Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Vikings, Normans or more recent immigration.) [NATIONAL AND REGIONAL – HISTORY OF SETTLEMENT FROM ROMANS TO NORMANS]

For 9–11 years of age:

L12. The characteristic features of and changes within two key periods of history that were significant to the locality and the UK (As well as British history, one of the periods studied could be taken from European or world history). [NATIONAL – TWO KEY PERIODS]

L13. The effects of economic, technological and scientific developments on the UK and the wider world over time (For example, the impact of changes in transport and technology in the last 200 years: the development and impact of roads, canals and railways in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; car manufacture and developments in aviation in the twentieth centuries; the impact of changes in transport on the local area.) [DEVELOPMENTAL STUDY]

L14. To understand the broad chronology of major events in the UK, and some key events in the wider world, from ancient civilisations to the present day, and to locate within this the periods, events and changes they have studied. [IMPLIES SETTING ALL OF ABOVE IN A CHRONOLOGICAL STRUCTURE]

\(^{12}\) The Rose Review Final Report can be found on http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/Primary_curriculum_Report.pdf. The political timetable surrounding this report is not altogether propitious as a general election has to be held by 6 June 2010 and if New Labour does not win that election these recommendations may be changed or abandoned.

\(^{13}\) My own comments in square brackets.
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**COMMENT**

Interestingly, and in a departure from the past, there does not seem to be any explicit ancient history in the English primary curriculum (not Ancient Greece or that list of seven that included Aztecs and Ancient Egypt) except as a contribution to overall chronology. As in Australia, right across the curriculum there is a debate about the inter-relationship between creativity, cross-curricularity and the individuality of subjects. The Rose Review addresses these issues as a central concern.

**Years 7–10  (typically 12–15 years of age)**

**Description**

The Australian curriculum has sequential history with named units covering the whole of human history in what seems to be four major historical periods across four school years.

The first two units look at world history before European/Indigenous contact. The second two units rather cleverly divide the 1750 to the present in two: The Modern World and Australia (1750–1901) and Australia in the Modern World (1901–present). The curriculum document promises more material to help in teaching of Year 7 History from the time of the earliest human communities to the end of the Ancient period (c. 60,000 BC–c. 500 AD). This will probably provide an opportunity to look at human movement and settlement through the evidence of archaeology for the first part and may well include aspects of indigenous life relevant to Australia.

The topic which seems destined for Year 8 is History from the end of the Ancient period to the beginning of the Modern period (c. 500–1750); it is ambitious as it could include the whole of the Dark Ages, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, Reformation and Counter-Reformation and the beginnings of the Enlightenment and aspects of Counter-Enlightenment. It might also include the Asian (or other non-European) equivalents or parallel developments.

There is an embedded implication that the teaching of history will be taken very seriously in Australian schools, as it will not only have to be given plenty of time if this Braudelian *longue durée* approach is to work, but the teachers will have been sufficiently educated themselves to be able to teach it. As an education for students in schools it is potentially rich. The range of possibilities within the topics for overview and depth studies is almost infinite, but a feasibility study into interest, resource availability and teachability will undoubtedly have to take place. It does state in the document that Australian history will comprise sixty per cent of this phase of the curriculum.

This is quite different to an earlier curriculum document ‘Guide to the Teaching of Australian History in Years 9 and 10’ which provided a framework for teaching the whole of Australian history. That was the brain-child of the previous prime minister, John Howard, and constructed by members of the Australian History external reference group (Professor Geoffrey Blainey, Dr Nicholas Brown, Dr Gerard Henderson and Mrs Elizabeth Ward). The periods of Australian history which would have been packed into the two years of Year 9 and Year 10 have now been spread out across four years and subjected to wider international contextualisation, in an approach that seems to be deliberately antithetical to a sense of national exceptionalism. The new document was drafted by Stuart Macintyre, with the assistance of a reference group. He was involved in the school curriculum in the 1990s and has written at length with Anna Clark on the debates about different interpretations of Australian history**14** and even describes how he has found himself caught up in the controversy. Macintyre began the process in mid-2008 at the request of the National Curriculum Board (which has now become the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Authority) and has worked particularly closely with Tony Taylor.

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Comment
The global dimensions of this part of the curriculum are clear and the position of Australian history in relation to world history avoids any appearance of promoting overt nationalism. The inclusion of prehistoric, ancient, medieval and early modern history is ambitious, especially since some states/territories may not traditionally have taught these early periods. Nevertheless, as an educational project with a revolutionary vision there are sound educational and even political reasons for pursuing such a model with enthusiasm, especially as the trajectory of the modern state of Australia, like the trailing tail of a comet, can bring with it a range of pasts of its citizens and of the structures of society. There is evidence here of maturity and historiographical sophistication. Furthermore, this framework could develop creatively over time, particularly through cooperation over resource production between teachers and academics in the (different but connected) fields of pure history and history education.

Comparison
1. England
This part of the Australian curriculum can be compared with Key Stage 3 in England but it is in so many ways better: it has a much wider vision (both horizontally in the potential of its geographical coverage and vertically in its chronological structure); and it has much higher expectations of teachers and students. England, of course, is arguably at a different stage of development, having been the hub of an empire but now experiencing (or resisting) a mix of decline and transformation in its problematic relationships with the USA and Europe. England has, like Australia, experienced the immigration or settlement of many sets of peoples across the years and especially since 1945. There is no history pre-1066 in the English Key Stage 3 curriculum (taught to students between Years 7 and Year 9).

In England there is an assumption that ancient, late ancient and early medieval history will be taught and learnt at Key Stage 2 (four school years when children are between the ages of seven and eleven). The two core units of Ancient Greece and what used to be known as ‘Invaders and Settlers’ (but which became, more blandly ‘Romans, Anglo-Saxons and Vikings in Britain’), are now the staple diet of ancient history experienced in the whole of the national curriculum, though there are seven options of non-European ‘world history study’ units. Schools can choose just one to study in the four years of KS2, the most popular of which are Ancient Egypt and the Aztecs. The point about the proposed Australian curriculum is that ancient history comes later in the overall programme and has the potential to be more structured, coherent and connected as a narrative that leads to the present. In England, the work history units can be taught in a very isolated way, despite attempts by the inspectorate (HMI)(Ofsted) and the Qualifications and Assessment Authority to encourage schools to build in links.

2. New Zealand
The Australian proposal is substantially different to the New Zealand Social Sciences15 curriculum for this age group because it specifies content structure. Detailed content is only delineated in New Zealand for the highest age-groups and after specialisation has already taken place. The founding document of New Zealand, the Treaty of Waitangi (1840) must be taught and is mentioned specifically at Level 5 (‘Understand how the Treaty of Waitangi is responded to differently by people in different times and places’). If New Zealand followed Australia’s example, however, and placed the Treaty in a ‘history for all’ programme in Year 9 (after a curriculum course leading up to the event), the Treaty would make much more sense; there would nothing to stop pre-contact Maori history from being taught in

15 http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/The-New-Zealand-Curriculum/Learning-areas/Social-sciences/Social-sciences-curriculum-


17 Quentin Skinner’s two-volume analysis of the development of modern political thinking, The Foundations of Modern Political Thought (Cambridge University Press, 1978 and 1997), examines how ‘...the State came to be conceptualised in distinctively modern terms – as the sole source of law and legitimate force within its own territory, and the sole appropriate object of its citizens’ allegiances’ (1997: 5). It is perhaps the State and not the nation that New Zealanders need to foreground in their curriculum.
Year 8 and a wider and earlier Pacific Rim history being studied in Year 7. The teaching of the Treaty has been criticised by Myra Kunowski for its lack of contextualisation.

The use of the term ‘tangata whenua’ (the ‘people of the land’ as original inhabitants) at Levels 2 and 3 gives recognition of and respect for the special position of Maori culture, heritage, history and rights in a curriculum that embeds bi-cultural perspectives. Finding some historical and civic mediation to fuse the horizons of Maori and non-Maori perspectives is an ongoing project – not without difficulties – and is being undertaken in the context of the Waitangi Tribunal with its legal-historical parameters. There are some differences here between Australian and New Zealand perceptions and a deep sense of reluctance in New Zealand to use school history to map out, in detail, guidelines towards a vision of a shared polity. It is as if two different sets of aspirations towards nationhood and sovereignty are operating almost at odds with each other in a curriculum. Certainly there is room for more dialogue.

History is mentioned specifically in the Social Sciences curriculum at levels 6, 7 and 8, but the guidance is very broad. At Level 6 it is ‘Understand how the causes and consequences of past events that are of significance to New Zealanders shape the lives of people and society. Understand how people’s perspectives on past events that are of significance to New Zealanders differ’. At Level 7 the strand of causes and consequences is made more complex, and the notion of interpretations replaces that of perspectives: ‘Understand how historical forces and movements have influenced the causes and consequences of events of significance to New Zealanders differ’. At Level 8 the notions of contestation and explanation are introduced: ‘Understand that the causes, consequences, and explanations of historical events that are of significance to New Zealanders are complex and how and why they are contested. Understand how trends over time reflect social, economic, and political forces’. How schools will achieve these achievement objectives is non-statutory and locally devolved. Australian teachers and academics may be interested in a recent study by Mark Sheehan from Victoria University in Wellington, in which the debates about senior subject history by historians writing a national curriculum in the 1980s favoured those areas that the academics chosen as the writing group favoured. This tended to promote Tudor and Stuart British (or English) history and sidelined nineteenth century New Zealand history and Maori history. Maori history was not represented strongly enough in the skill set of the group.

3. South Africa

The South African curriculum for a parallel age group cannot be compared directly with Australia as the years in South Africa are Grades 7–9, i.e. only three. There are, however, considerable similarities. The approach is chronological and sequential, broadly from earliest times to most recent. But there is more theming within periods, with a series of focuses such as movement of peoples, trade, colonisation, industrialisation, political upheaval (French and American revolutions) and colonisation. Students examine the slave trade and slavery; contact, conflict and dispossession (allowing for a comparison of frontier events on the Cape and across America); the two World Wars (including the role of women in WW1); civil rights in the USA (again, South African and American comparisons); and Apartheid. Interestingly, and perhaps unusually, the curriculum for Grade 7 includes (in the section ‘A broad overview of early trading systems’) West Africa and trans-Saharan trade: salt, gold, slaves and ancient trade routes, centres of learning, historical reporting – ninth to sixteenth centuries. This must refer to the significant centre of learning at Timbuktu (now in Mali).

4. USA – Michigan State

Another curriculum that can provide a unit for comparison is the Michigan State Social Studies programme. Like the Australian curriculum it embeds the principle of expanding horizons, takes seriously the development of temporal (or chronological) thinking, historical analysis and interpretation, historical
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inquiry, historical understanding, and the handling of historical issues through analysis and decision making. The curriculum takes nine US historical eras from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) National Standards website and embeds them alongside eight global analyses of world history eras from three perspectives (cross-temporal/global; interregional/comparative; and regional). The nine years from K to Year 8 progress along these lines: myself (K); families and schools (Year 1); the local community (Y2); Michigan studies (Y3); United States studies (Y4); integrated US history (Y5); Western hemisphere studies (including societies of MesoAmerica and South America) (Y6); Eastern hemisphere studies (including societies of India, China, the Mediterranean basin, Africa, and Southwest and Central Asia) (Y7); and Integrated US history (Y8).

The Michigan Year 5 integrated US history consists of:

- **Era 1 – Beginnings to 1620** (1.1 American Indian Life in the Americas; 1.2 European Exploration; 1.3 African Life Before the 16th Century; 1.4 Three World Interactions (Describe the convergence of Europeans, American Indians and Africans in North America after 1492 from the perspective of these three groups));
- **Era 2 – Colonization and Settlement** (1585–1763) (2.1 European Struggle for Control of North America; 2.2 European Slave Trade and Slavery in Colonial America; 2.3 Life in Colonial America);

This is very detailed for Year 5, but interestingly looks at interactions in the convergence between Europeans, American Indians (Native Americans) and Africans.

**Years 11–12** *(typically 15–18 years of age)*

Although undeveloped as yet, the curriculum for students at this level in Australia seems to offer a choice between ancient and modern history. In most countries these years fall outside the national curriculum and are usually characterised by specialised groups studying up to university-entrance level or for qualifications leading to further training. It would be worth asking whether a period bridging the two extreme points in history might be possible (e.g. Tudors and Stuarts is a popular choice in New Zealand during these years).

**CONCLUSION**

This is a very promising set of proposals for an Australian curriculum. It affords great opportunity for co-operation between teachers, teacher educators, academics, resource providers and government. It is a mature and judicious compromise, offering in its syntactic and substantive structures a fusing of the scholarly, the interesting and the practical, or, in teacher parlance, the ‘do-able’. Writing a national curriculum for all schools and all children inevitably places a nation’s history on an aspirational plane that is almost spiritual in its inclusiveness. In such a transformation, polarised, dualised history can have no place. This recontextualisation involves a revolutionary process of pluralisation and dedualisation.

21 In the words of J.G.A. Pocock, ‘Probably only a pluralisation – that is, a dedualisation – of ... history will rescue us ... ’ See “1660 And All That: Whig-Hunting, Ideology and Historiography in the Work of Jonathan Clark”, *The Cambridge Review* (October 1987): 125–8. Ironically, Pocock is a New Zealander.