



Comments on the recommendations relating to Geography in the review of the Australian Curriculum

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The Final Report by Professor Wiltshire and Dr Donnelly on the Australian curriculum has eight recommendations at the end of the section on geography (p. 193). These are reproduced below, followed by comments.

1. Geography should be introduced at Year 3 and in Years 3–6 as part of a combined humanities and social science subject, then should be a separate learning area from Years 7–10.

Comment: This recommendation, the most significant of the eight for geography as a school subject, appears to be an outcome of the belief that the primary school curriculum is overcrowded and that more focus is needed on literacy and numeracy. To achieve this focus the reviewers want to reduce the number of subjects in the primary school curriculum. However, they have different ideas on how to achieve this, and propose different models. In Dr Donnelly's model geography is an elective subject from Foundation onwards, but it is still a separate subject in all years, which is not what the recommendation above proposes. The recommendation only fits the curriculum model of Professor Wiltshire.

The first part of the recommendation is that geography not be taught in the first three years of primary school. In Professor's Wiltshire's model the first three years of schooling are focused

on the development of literacy and numeracy while embracing aspects of other curriculum areas in teaching and learning programs where relevant and incorporating important areas of child development such as play-based learning, socialisation and movement and coordination. In these early years, the curriculum would benefit from resource material which would continue to be produced, and teachers would use relevant content from disciplines as they develop literacy and numeracy content and skills.

The assumption seems to be that other subjects take time away from the teaching of literacy and

numeracy, yet there is considerable experience in how to use geography and other subjects to support the development of literacy and numeracy. These are capabilities, and they are not solely learned in English and mathematics. In the first three years of primary school geography also teaches students some essential knowledge of their own place and the wider world, and helps the development of a child's self-identity, and this should not be delayed until Year 3. This knowledge needs to be specified in the curriculum, or the resource materials that Professor Wiltshire refers to will not be produced, and teachers may not know what content from geography to use because almost none of them has any tertiary level training in the discipline.

The review uses international comparisons as benchmarks against which to test the Australian curriculum, yet these do not support the recommendation. For geography, the benchmark countries are Singapore, Finland and England, all of which teach geography from the beginning of primary school, either on its own or as part of a broader subject. Furthermore, none of these countries has a primary school curriculum as narrow as Professor Wiltshire's model. For example, in the first year of primary school in England the compulsory subjects are English, mathematics, science, art and design, computing, design and technology, geography, history, music and physical education. These subjects continue throughout the primary years, with a second language being added in Year 3. Are Australian teachers and students unable to cope with a similar breadth of subjects?

The second part of the recommendation is that in Years 3-6 geography be taught as part of a combined humanities and social science subject. This is at odds with the reviewers' support of a more rigorous curriculum based on discipline knowledge, as cogently argued in Chapter 1 of the Final Report. The reviewers comment favourably on the emphasis on knowledge in some of the curriculums used as international comparisons, and conclude that the Australian Curriculum 'undervalues introducing students to the conversation represented by "our best

validated knowledge and artistic achievements”’. This deficiency will be increased if subjects are merged into a single Humanities and Social Sciences course in primary school, and their disciplinary distinctiveness lost. Yet this is what is recommended, which means going back to teaching the discipline of geography as part of SOSE, a subject which gained a reputation for lack of rigour and depth and which the Australian curriculum consequently split into its constituent disciplines. I also note that the thoughtful and comprehensive submission from the Australian Primary Principals Association does not call for the return of social studies but instead recommends reducing the content of the geography curriculum, and delaying the teaching of history until Year 3 and the teaching of economics/business until Year 7. It is unclear who, other than Professor Wiltshire, wants the return of SOSE.

I also believe that it is unhelpful to teachers to combine geography with history and civics and citizenship in a single subject. Geography has important links with other subjects, especially science, mathematics and English, and a separate geography curriculum will make it easier for teachers to integrate their teaching of geography with these subjects when appropriate. Separate curriculums ensure that the distinctive ways of thinking in each discipline are not lost, but still allow teachers to combine the teaching of related topics in different disciplines.

2. It should form part of a composite humanities and social science learning area.

Comment: It is unclear what this means. Geography already is classified as part of this learning area, even though it has strong links with science. If the meaning is that this learning area should be taught as a single composite subject, then this was part of the first recommendation.

3. The curriculum should undergo a fundamental rebalancing to introduce much more content on physical geography, which will involve some reduction of content in human geography as well as linking of these two strands. This should be achieved by incorporating the recommendations of the subject matter specialist and with the assistance of a fresh cohort of geography teachers.

This is the second most significant recommendation. The reviewers state:

In terms of content there is also no doubt about the main issue – the need to achieve a balance between physical geography and human geography. Views differ on how well the Australian Curriculum meets this criteria but the weight of professional opinion is that although the curriculum draws from both natural and human sciences, it is quite unbalanced and favours human geography. It is also dominated by the theme of sustainable development.

Comment: The only professional opinions referred to in the report are the views of the subject specialist and a submission from the Australian Meteorological and Oceanographic Society, which states:

It is not clear how students are supposed to understand or appreciate the mechanisms that drive meteorological or oceanographic hazards (e.g. tropical cyclones) without having prior and scaffolded exposure to the geophysical variables (e.g. ocean heat content, wind shear, earth’s rotational effects) and the dynamical and thermodynamical principles which drive them.

I think this is asking high school students to study topics that are barely covered in university texts on physical geography, and are not included in the senior school earth science curriculum.

The relevant comments of the subject specialist relating to Recommendation 3 are reproduced below, with a comment after each paragraph:

Until the publication of this document, most respected geography courses were designed to expose students to learning from two core strands of the subject – physical and human (cultural) geography. It is noted, in a comparison of this curriculum with those of ‘two other relevant countries’ (i.e. the revised curricula for England and Singapore) that both have retained the traditional terminology and both strive for a balance of these units/topics, e.g. Singapore, upper secondary – three physical and three human topics (from the 8 listed, 4 options for each strand). As well, it would appear that this balance in content is reflected in the program of assessment. This is not the case in the new Australian Curriculum.

Comment: A comparison of the Australian and Singapore curriculums does not support this statement. The Australian geography curriculum in Years 7-10 has two units in each year. One starts with physical geography content and the other with human geography content, and both then link with content from the other

branch of the subject. In Singapore the lower secondary geography syllabus has three units on Environment and Resources and three on Urban Living, and they all combine physical and human content. In Years 11 and 12 the Australian curriculum has two physical geography units (Natural and Ecological Hazards, and Land Cover Transformations), and two human geography units (Sustainable Places, and Globalisation Transformations). I find it hard to see how the balance between physical and human geography in Australia differs from that in Singapore. What the Australian curriculum does not do is to describe geography as divided into physical and human geography, which I consider as out-dated and educationally unhelpful. Geography is presented as one subject, but with starting points in either environmental or human phenomena.

Physical geography makes an appearance in places but the physical processes of aggradation and degradation which create landforms/landscapes and wear them away/shape them appear to be ignored . . . until Year 8 with the unit on 'landforms and landscapes'. Students should be exposed to the forces of volcanism, plate tectonics, weathering, erosion, transportation and deposition during their primary years. For example, there are several references to 'natural features' (Years 1, 3), 'environmental characteristics' (Year 5), even the 'influence of the environment on the human characteristics of a place' (Year 5, content descriptions) but precious little space/time is given to the geomorphic/physical processes that create these environments. As a result, I express some concerns about the sequence of topics.

Comment: The geography curriculum has to be evaluated in conjunction with the science curriculum. The natural processes that change the earth's surface are introduced in Year 4 science, and in Year 6 science students learn about sudden geologic changes like earthquakes and volcanism. To add these to geography would indeed be to overcrowd the curriculum. Instead, the geography curriculum in primary school has more emphasis on weather, climate and vegetation, which are neglected in science.

A further example relates to the teaching of those geomorphic processes which operate in a catchment. Students are required in Year 7 to complete the unit 'Water in the world' or select a possible case study called 'Inland water' or 'Land' in Year 10 ('Environmental change and management') and investigate the 'environmental and economic' factors that 'influence crop yields in Australia',

presumably including the 40 per cent of our food produced in the Murray Darling Basin, without a foundational understanding of its physical geography.

In my opinion, we need to address the issue of balance in our curriculum and strive to better represent the physical strand of the subject. As well, I would strongly recommend that we retain/reinstate the traditional terminology and use them explicitly in the content descriptions and elaborations.

Comment: The subject specialist seems to be concerned about the lack of geomorphology in some years. Geomorphology is emphasised in the Year 8 unit on Landforms and Landscapes, but in other years more relevant aspects of physical geography are central. For example, the water unit in Year 7 includes studies of rainfall, runoff and evaporation, and of the movement of water through the environment, and these are more relevant to an understanding of water resources than geomorphology. In the study of the environmental, economic and technological factors that influence crop yields in Year 9 climate and soils are emphasised. In both years teachers would be expected to include geomorphological factors where relevant in any case study, but there is no requirement to make a specific study of the Murray-Darling Basin. In Years 7-10 the curriculum therefore introduces all the main branches of physical geography, with climate and hydrology in Year 7, geomorphology in Year 8, climate, vegetation and soils in Year 9, and their integration in the study of a type of environment in Year 10. I would describe this as a balanced study of physical geography at levels appropriate for these years.

To test the claim of imbalance between physical and human geography I have classified each content description in Years 7-10 as either physical geography, environmental geography (an integration of physical and human content) or human geography. Ten content descriptions are physical, ten are environmental and 20 are human (although some of these have some environmental content). This means that 20 content descriptions are wholly or significantly physical, and 20 are wholly or mostly human. This does not support the claim that the curriculum is "quite unbalanced", but I also reject the argument that it should give equal weight to physical and human geography, because much of contemporary geography can't be classified in this way.

Final comment: The reviewers state that the curriculum is dominated by the theme of sustainable development, yet this term is not

mentioned in the curriculum. If the reviewers mean 'sustainability', which is a different concept, the comment is still incorrect, and will be considered in the comments on Recommendation 8.

Recommendation 3 also calls for some reduction of content in human geography as well as linking of these two strands. However, neither the reviewers nor the subject specialist indicate what human geography content should be cut, and instead identify content that they think should be added, which is not particularly helpful. The call to link physical and human geography is puzzling, because I think this is precisely what the curriculum does well, and may explain why the subject specialist thinks that physical geography is neglected.

4. The use of simpler language is required and some rectification of sequencing as identified by the subject matter specialist.

Comments:

- There is nothing in the report of the reviewers or the subject specialist to support the recommendation for the use of simpler language. In fact, the subject specialist writes:

The reading level chosen for the documentation seems appropriate and the expression of content descriptions, geographical inquiry questions and achievement standards should be sufficiently clear, logical (in terms of sequence), coherent and meaningful for most audiences (students, parents, teachers).

- As noted in my comments on Recommendation 3 the gaps in sequencing identified by the subject specialist are covered in the science curriculum.

5. The omissions identified by the subject matter specialist should be rectified and his suggestion for a more contemporary overview in the last years should be adopted. Content also needs to be generally shifted to later years than at present, along the lines the subject matter specialist has indicated.

Comment: In relation to the last sentence, the subject specialist did not suggest that content needed to be shifted to later years. He used the presence of content that in his school is taught in Years 10, 11 and 12 but is in the primary school years in the Australian curriculum as a measure of its robustness. He wrote that:

When it comes to the content of the learning area, as specified in the subject's content descriptions and elaborations, I have few reservations about its robustness.

The reviewers change this to:

The subject matter specialist has some reservations as to robustness as specified in the content descriptions and elaborations.

They then recommend shifting content to later years, "along the lines the subject specialist has indicated", when he made no such indication, and the shift would reduce robustness.

The main omissions identified by the subject specialist are:

1. The other surprising omissions from the list of themes treated in Years 8-12, but especially from Years 10 to 12 are:

- (a) any substantial reference to geopolitics (e.g. global conflicts over territory, resources, religion, ethnicity) or the geography of warfare/peace*
- (b) food security and population pressure on resources – global, spatial inequalities in development*
- (c) geography of disease.*

Instead, the final unit in Year 12, entitled 'Global transformations' appears to adopt an unnecessarily narrow focus (i.e. economic geography) on various strands of globalisation (already covered as a unit in Year 9 . . . as indeed is food security). For mine, the final unit in the subject needs to adopt a much broader geopolitical view and offer students opportunities to explore several avenues of investigation. Studies of global conflict, spatial inequalities in development and food security or the pressures of population on resources also provide vehicles for students to revisit and improve their mastery of the world map . . . perhaps a fitting end to a course in geography?

Comments:

- A geopolitical topic would have been good, but a proposal for such a unit did not survive the consultations.
- Food security is in Year 9, and Years 11 and 12 deliberately do not repeat what students have already studied.

- Population pressure on resources is included in Year 9 in relation to its effects on food security in the future.
- Spatial inequalities in development are studied in Year 10 (Geographies of human wellbeing).
- A range of diseases are studied in Year 11 (Natural and ecological hazards).
- The Year 12 unit on Global transformations is equally divided between economic and cultural integration, and does not just focus on economic geography.

2. Studies of the traditional, nomadic, hunting and gathering lifestyle of our Aborigines needs to be compared with those who practise nomadic herding on savannahs, shifting cultivation in rainforests or subsistence farming in the rice paddies of Asia. Similarly, any socio-economic or demographic investigations of the nation's population should include the 2 per cent who are Indigenous among broader studies of the myriad of ethnic groups and cultures now existing in Australia.

Comment: There is scope to undertake the studies advocated in the first sentence in the Year 6 topic on indigenous peoples in the world. The second sentence does identify a significant gap in the curriculum.

3. Studies of Papua New Guinea (PNG) and the Pacific nations are almost excluded (a mention in Year 3, p. 31) and given the sheer numbers of Australians who travel to the Pacific, to Europe and to North America each year, there should be more opportunities in the secondary courses to investigate case studies from these areas as well. Our enduring interest in the geopolitics of Antarctica and the environmental threats to its fragile ecosystems go unnoticed.

Comment: Papua New Guinea and the Pacific Islands are included in Year 3 as part of a brief study of Australia's neighbours, and in Year 10 they are an option in a case study of development. It is difficult to fit more into a curriculum that the reviewers recommend reducing in size. Year 7 requires students to use case studies of liveability strategies from Europe, and Year 8 requires a case study of the United States of America. Antarctica is, however, missing, as it proved impossible to fit into the curriculum.

4. I do express surprise, indeed a little disappointment that students are not expected or encouraged to investigate the political considerations of issues; for example, in Year 7 (and in subsequent

years), students are asked to 'propose action in response to a geographical challenge taking account of environment, economic and social considerations' (p. 55).

Comment: People's environmental, economic and social interests and values can be expressed through politics, and the political process is how we manage conflicts between these interests and values. Politics is not another consideration, separate from them, and will clearly be involved in many discussions of geographical issues.

6. The prescriptive format of the document needs to be reviewed in three years' time to determine whether teachers have the capacity to allow for more professional discretion in delivering this subject.

Comment: Geography is no more prescriptive than other subjects (it follows the same format as other ACARA subjects), yet this recommendation is not made for other subjects. I also believe that the curriculum does allow teachers considerable choice, particularly in how they select case studies. The subject specialist in fact comments:

As well, I found that teachers have been given ample scope for choice (apart from the deficiencies in physical geography topics) and flexibility in the delivery of this curriculum.

7. More emphasis needs to be placed on teaching outside the classroom with provision for more excursions and field trips.

Comment: Agree, but this is not something the curriculum can prescribe. How the curriculum is taught is a matter for the states and territories, and individual schools, to decide.

8. The cross-curriculum priorities need to be reviewed to be sure they rest on educational and not political grounds, content needs to be included on the Pacific Islands, the current heavy emphasis on sustainability in this curriculum needs to be addressed to avoid its overuse as a concept. The three themes need to be integrated where appropriate.

Comments:

(a). No evidence is presented that the incorporation of the cross-curriculum priorities into the geography curriculum is not based on educational grounds.

(b). I have already commented on the Pacific Islands.

(c). The claim that there is a current heavy emphasis on sustainability in the geography curriculum is unsupported by any evidence, and is not a claim made by the subject specialist. Sustainability is the main theme in Year 4 and a significant one in Year 10. The terms 'sustainability', 'sustainably' and 'sustainable' are each mentioned only once in a content description in the curriculum from F-10, and it is content descriptions that prescribe what must be taught. Sustainability is also only one of seven concepts underlying the curriculum. This hardly constitutes a "heavy emphasis".

(d). The recommendation that the three themes need to be integrated where possible is puzzling, because they already are integrated into the content of each year. No evidence is provided in the report on where these themes are not integrated.

The reviewers have one other 'recommendation' that does not get repeated in the list at the end of the section. This is the one most likely to interest geographers, and is:

Be that as it may, the decision not to make geography mandatory to Year 10, appears to have been made not on educational grounds, but solely in terms of concern about a crowded curriculum. Given this unsatisfactory approach to

curriculum design, together with the increasing importance of geographical knowledge in the current and future world contexts, and considering that the vast majority of countries we have analysed have geography as a compulsory subject to at least the middle years of secondary schooling, we believe that geography should be a mandatory subject to Year 10.

However, while Professor Wiltshire's preferred model for the Australian curriculum makes geography a compulsory subject in Years 9 and 10 (p. 143), the model preferred by Dr Donnelly has geography as an elective from F-10 (p. 145), which is incompatible with the opinion expressed by the reviewers in the previous paragraph. Another puzzle in a somewhat puzzling report.

The recommendations and comments on geography in the Review of the Australian Curriculum are, on the whole, disappointing. The subject specialist is much more positive than the two reviewers, who seem to have tried hard to find fault, even to the extent making a couple of recommendations that are the opposite of what the specialist wrote. Other recommendations are contradicted by the curriculum model advocated by Dr Donnelly, several are unsupported by an analysis of the curriculum, two would reduce robustness rather than increase it, and several are statements unsupported by any evidence for the deficiency claimed.

In my opinion there are aspects of the geography curriculum that need to be improved, and in my submission to the Review I identified five areas of concern. My comments on one area are quoted by the reviewers, but none of these is followed up.