



The
Geography Teachers' Association
of New South Wales

ABN: 59 246 850 128

**Feedback around the
draft K–10 Geography syllabus for BOSTES.
September 2014**

Submitted by:

Geography Teachers' Association of NSW

PO Box 577

Leichhardt NSW 2040

Tel: +61 2 97160378

Fax: +61 2 95642342

Email: gta.admin@ptc.nsw.edu.au

Draft K–10 Geography syllabus

Introduction

The Geography Teachers' Association of NSW (GTANSW) welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the Board of Studies Teaching and Educational Standards (BOSTES) draft K-10 Geography syllabus, incorporating Australian Curriculum content. The views expressed in this response encapsulate the considered, researched opinions from the GTANSW Council. The GTANSW Council is comprised of expert Geography teachers from across the Independent, Catholic and Government sectors; tertiary educators and academics; and Geography education consultants.

The response is framed around areas of perceived strengths and suggested areas for further consideration. An overview is provided initially. The overview is followed by deeper analysis of key syllabus areas; and concludes with a response about resources and the proposed timeline.

The GTANSW Council would like to commend the syllabus writing team, reference group and BOSTES officer(s) responsible for the development of this document for their work in producing a quality syllabus that retains the integrity of the original *Foundation to Year 10 Australian Curriculum: Geography* framework, moving NSW school Geography in to a contemporary, world class domain. The draft syllabus provides great potential for educators to develop rigorous, interesting and relevant teaching and learning programs that inspire students' curiosity, awe and wonder about the places that make up our world.

Areas of perceived strength in the draft K–10 Geography syllabus include:

- the clarity and prominence of an inquiry-based approach; and emphasis on the use and implementation of fieldwork (including virtual fieldwork), evidenced in the Rationale (particularly paragraph 3) and throughout the syllabus;
- the clear and consistent reference to the underpinning concepts (conceptual framework);
- the emphasis on the role of Geography contributing to the development of students becoming active and informed citizens;
- the explicit inclusion of spatial technologies as part of the Tools and Skills;
- the very close alignment to the ACARA document - *Foundation to Year 10 Australian Curriculum: Geography*;
- the continuum of learning from K–10 including an appropriate range of key terms and suitable content, and sequenced in a logical manner;
- the icons indicating where an integration between content and the use of tools and skills could and should occur; and
- the hours and status allocated towards the study of Geography across Years K–6 and Years 7–10.

Suggested areas for further consideration in the draft K–10 Geography syllabus include:

- **the need for greater flexibility in response to coverage of proposed content, particularly the dot points**

Whilst the GTANSW Council acknowledges greater specificity via the use of dot points may be required for non-specialist teachers in order for them to accurately interpret the content descriptions, the quantity and length of dot points appear to be excessive if they are all meant to be taught. The opportunity to chunk or select from the content descriptions or the dot points would be beneficial for teachers and provide a balance between the framework developed by ACARA and the traditional, more prescriptive and content driven approach typically adopted by NSW syllabuses.

The GTANSW Council would like to see firstly, a reduced length of individual dot points (perhaps this could be achieved by removing some references to specific places and including a statement at the end of the content description stating 'It is expected that specific examples will be chosen from a range of scales with particular reference to Asia'); and secondly, greater clarity about what is mandatory to teach and also greater frequency in the use of terms including 'such as', or 'could include' to indicate areas of flexibility for teachers, throughout the document. Alternatively, an overarching statement positioned earlier in the document clarifying that there is flexibility in the number of dot points to be covered providing all outcomes are assessed could also be an option for consideration.

- **the need for greater currency and relevance of tools and skills identified throughout the document**

Tools and skills should be more focused towards what is useful now and in the future for our students to become familiar with, use and apply, in order for them to better interpret and understand the world around them. It is our opinion that the list of tools would be considered 'old-school Geography' and therefore, the GTANSW Council question whether how many of the listed tools and skills are really necessary for an understanding of contemporary Geography. The scope for, and emphasis on the use of digital technologies; and the development of questioning, reasoning and higher order thinking skills needs greater prominence. Whilst the GTANSW Council do strongly support the explicit inclusion of spatial technologies already evident in the document, we would like to see the skills scaffolded from lower to higher order thinking throughout the document; and greater frequency in the variety and use of digital technologies, to either support or replace the more traditional and dated skills of items such as constructing climate graphs (the skill lies in their interpretation). We would also like to suggest the understanding of 'spatial technologies' is broadened to include more than hardware and software i.e. including web tools; and also rewrite 'pictures' as 'visual representations'.

- **the need for an improved alignment of the Geographical Concept statements to the glossary**

At times across Stages 4 and 5, the description of place and space in particular seem confused and not well aligned to the Glossary. The GTANSW Council note (and support) that the Glossary included in the draft syllabus is the one found in the *Foundation to Year 10 Australian Curriculum: Geography*. It would appear the syllabus writers have interpreted these concepts without recourse to their meaning in the glossary. The GTANSW Council would, therefore, like to recommend the Glossary is retained in its existing form, particularly for the underpinning concepts. However, we suggest that in order to ensure alignment between the expression of key terms and concepts (particularly place and space) throughout the syllabus content, and the meanings defined in the Glossary, syllabus writers undertake a audit of the Glossary and the manner in which terms are used within the content of the draft syllabus. The GTANSW Council would also like to remind the syllabus writers, reference group and BOSTES team that 'community' is subsumed in a sophisticated understanding of the underpinning concept of place.

- **the need for a more user-friendly layout of the document**

The amount of 'layers' associated with this document is complex and inhibits easy interpretation of the draft syllabus. The GTANSW Council would like to see a more accessible view of the syllabus for each topic, stage and year level in order to enhance the appearance of the document and enable ease of understanding and interpretation about content tools and skills. The return of a 'table' like approach to layout, such as in the current NSW 7–10 Geography Syllabus would provide a more accessible view of the key components in the syllabus of most relevance to teachers.

Key syllabus areas: perceived strengths with suggestions for further consideration:

Rationale and Aims

- **Rationale:** the first paragraph (starting: Geography is a rich and complex discipline...) encapsulates interconnections really well (same in the second paragraph) but the GTANSW Council would like to see wording to reflect 'curiosity about the places that make up our world' incorporated either in to the first or second paragraph. Words of this nature would reflect the rich concept of place (which is more than just location) and also provides a coherent and relevant lead in to the third paragraph. In order to develop an opening sentence with more inspiring words about Geography, something more relevant and meaningful on which to hang our hat as Geography educators, the GTANSW Council would like to propose the writers ask themselves 'what is Geography all about?' and 'why should students study Geography?' This might help to refine a more meaningful purpose to the study of Geography in addition to the opening sentence, although it is not in dispute that Geography is a rich and complex discipline that integrates knowledge from natural science, social science and humanities
- **Rationale:** the second paragraph states 'Geography emphasises the role of the environment in supporting human life form from local to global scales', the GTANSW Council would like to suggest that reference to how humans support and impact on the environment should also be considered for inclusion in this paragraph, or further expansion about interrelationships should occur for clarity about the duality of human-environment connections.
- **Rationale:** the third paragraph (starting: Through an inquiry approach...) is strongly supported by the GTANSW Council. It is an excellent statement that really provides an insight in to the uniqueness of Geography; and brings best practice geographical pedagogy to the fore. It will remind teachers about the key to bringing relevance to the teaching of Geography – which should therefore enhance student engagement with this subject. The GTANSW Council strongly support this paragraph being retained in its existing form.
- **Rationale:** the final paragraph (starting: The study of Geography enables...) is to be commended for its connection to active and informed citizenship, however, as a closing paragraph, the GTANSW Council wonder if the study of Geography is more than this? Without taking away from active and informed citizenship, the GTANSW Council suggests that Geography is also about developing an appreciation and understanding about the diversity of and interconnections between the people and places that make up our world. To that end, whilst we strongly support the intent and much of the wording in this paragraph, we believe the study of Geography enables more than citizenship and would like to see this reflected in the closing paragraph.

Draft K–10 Geography syllabus

Objective and Outcomes

- The GTANSW Council believes overall, the outcomes are appropriately distributed and sequenced across the syllabus, particularly for Stages 4 and 5. However, in the Stage Statements the Stage 4 statements seem to be dominated by higher order terms such as explain and examine. The GTANSW Council would like to propose an adjustment to the first sentence so that it reads 'describe geographical processes' and then build throughout the paragraphs towards the use of higher order terms.
- **Geographical Inquiry (p. 30):** The GTANSW Council strongly supports these statements and would like to see them retained. We believe these paragraphs demonstrate the stages of an inquiry and are both appropriate and manageable whilst retaining the integrity and detail of the inquiry process from the *F–10 Australian Curriculum: Geography* document. However, it is our opinion that through engagement with the inquiry process, students may be motivated to initiate or become involved in some form of action to benefit the world. The GTANSW Council would like to suggest that the inquiry statement could also include clear reference to students being able to do something with the acquired, processed and communicated geographical information, for example, 'Geographical Action'.
- **Fieldwork (p. 31):** The GTANSW Council strongly supports these statements and commends BOSTES for ensuring the emphasis placed upon fieldwork in Geography reflects its importance in maintaining the uniqueness, relevance and best practice pedagogy of Geography education. In the last paragraph (starting: Fieldwork can be undertaken locally...) we would like to suggest that 'site' is rewritten as 'place'; 'place' being more geographical and 'site' having more of a History syllabus connotation (re: site studies). Additionally, 'primary sources' should be rewritten as 'primary data and information'; 'data and information' being more geographical, and 'sources' having a History syllabus connotation, thus potentially leading to confusion.

Content

- The GTANSW Council believe four topics at each stage is manageable and there is suitable progression between Stage 4 to Stage 5. Whilst we acknowledge virtual fieldwork could be used as an argument by schools not to conduct fieldwork activities outside the school, the GTANSW are of the opinion that virtual fieldwork should be retained for reasons of choice, inclusivity and acquisition of technology skills as part of a field experience. Virtual fieldwork also makes it possible for students based in rural and remote NSW settings to more easily undertake urban investigations in cities such as Sydney, and vice-versa.
- The GTANSW Council believes there a small number of repetitions and inconsistencies in content between Years K–6 and 7–10, for example, bushfires and floods appear in both Stage 3 and Stage 4. The GTANSW Council would like to suggest an audit of content and examples at each in order to counteract unnecessary repetition.
- The GTANSW Council acknowledges appropriate and correct use of scale in the continuum from local to global. However, the omission of personal scale is of concern, particularly when international research about the development of Geography curricula emphasise the importance of students understanding their personal geographies ahead of and in the context of similarities and differences with other scalar levels, as well as in the context of civics and citizenship.

Water in the World (p. 63–68) – used as an example to demonstrate key points of feedback

- p. 63 and similar throughout the document – The GTANSW Council supports the content of this page, particularly the statement about fieldwork and prominence of concepts, although sometimes there is a lack of alignment between concept statements and the definitions in the Glossary.
- p. 64 and similar throughout the document – The GTANSW Council strongly supports the inquiry process and its identification as a skill set.
- p. 65 and similar throughout the document – The GTANSW Council questions whether they are only geographical tools? Would 'methods and tools' be a more accurate representation? We would like to see greater emphasis on the digital tools, methods and skills that students would be using (and already use) in their study of Geography to make meaning of the world around them.
- p. 66–68 and similar throughout the document – The GTANSW Council notes that each topic has 5–6 content descriptions, and believe this is manageable (could they be numbered to improve clarity of layout?) but the quantity of dot points underneath is unwieldy and yields a perception of overcrowding. The GTANSW Council would like to propose that consideration be given to including a statement to indicate flexibility either with the number of content descriptions selected (for example, out of the six content descriptions for this topic, teachers are expected to cover at least four content descriptions); or, if all content descriptions are expected learning, could there be a statement to indicate flexibility with the dot points (for example, Students 'could'; or somehow integrate a 'such as' ...ahead of the dot points). These indicators of flexibility rather than perceived prescriptiveness will reduce the perception of content overload and enhance the manageability of content, tools and skills thus enabling teachers to better cater for their local context, student interest and contemporary events. Alternatively, flexibility could also be linked to the notion that outcomes can be achieved by selecting a few dot points which are of most relevance and appropriateness to the learning needs of students.

Life Skills

- The GTANSW Council supports this area of the syllabus, understanding that close liaison was achieved with the SPO Special Education in developing the content statements. We do not feel as if we are in a position to comment further other than to commend the integrity of important geographical learning for having been retained.

Resources and proposed timeline

- **Resources:** the GTANSW Council would like to suggest several teaching and learning resources already available and in use around the country in response to implementation of the *F–10 Australian Curriculum: Geography*. It is the belief of the GTANSW Council that these resources will still be appropriate in supporting teachers to develop teaching and learning programs for what will become the NSW K–10 Geography syllabus incorporating Australian Curriculum content:
 - * *GeogSpace* website has been developed by AGTA representatives from around the country and is specifically tied to *F–10 Australian Curriculum: Geography content* – all of which (content descriptions) are retained in the current document for NSW <http://www.geogspace.edu.au/>. The ‘core’ units of *GeogSpace* are designed for use within the classroom; the ‘support’ units of *GeogSpace* are designed for teacher professional learning and upskilling although the support units could be adapted for classroom use.
 - * *ScoopIt sites (associated with the affiliate Geography Teacher Associations) and ABC Splash* have a range of relevant resources to support the *F–10 Australian Curriculum: Geography* content as well. These resources range from videos, articles and inquiry activities to scaffolded lesson plans.
 - * key publishers (for example, Pearson, Jacaranda, Cambridge, Oxford) have all produced texts specifically connected to the *F–10 Australian Curriculum: Geography* and are currently modifying these existing texts to suit the upcoming NSW syllabus.
 - * GTANSW Council is prepared and equipped to fulfil the role of leading teacher professional learning (particularly for primary teachers) around the correct interpretation, use and application of geographical concepts, tools and skills. We would support and welcome an opportunity to work collaboratively with BOSTES in developing and/or reviewing resources to support the NSW K–10 Geography syllabus incorporating Australian Curriculum content.
- **Timeline:** GTANSW Council believes that schools should have the option of trialling the new syllabus in 2016 (or prior to). We recommend this in addition to the usual familiarisation year prior to mandated implementation. By the time NSW teachers are implementing the final NSW K–10 Geography syllabus incorporating Australian Curriculum content, they will be between 12 months to three years behind colleagues in other states and territories (Queensland and Australian Capital Territory schools began implementation during 2013). To have an optional, additional trial timeframe for teachers (even a selected pool) to investigate, develop and deliver teaching and learning programs will provide the necessary critique for usefulness of resources, and could also establish and mentoring or professional learning network. The GTANSW Council would be supportive of any move to bring forward the timeline for trial and mandated implementation.

Conclusion

Overall, it is the view of the GTANSW Council that the draft K–10 Geography syllabus incorporating Australian Curriculum content brings NSW school Geography in to the 21st Century and enables best practice geographical pedagogy to be brought to the forefront of our teaching and learning for this subject. The content is interesting, relevant and provides a balance of breadth and depth. The extent to which this draft syllabus maintains the integrity of the ACARA document is to be commended; and the way in which those responsible for the development of this document have embraced the conceptual framework, inquiry approach and emphasis on fieldwork, together with indicating opportunities for the integration and application of tools and skills to content is also to be commended. As Geography educators and resource developers, the GTANSW Council look forward to the implementation of this syllabus and once again would like to congratulate the writing team, reference group and Senior Project Officer Geography for their work in developing a quality document.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback.

Susan Caldis
President GTANSW,
on behalf of the GTANSW Council.