



Australian Geography Teachers' Association

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Submission to the Review of the Australian Curriculum

Submitted by: The Australian Geography Teachers Association Inc.

The Australian Geography Teachers Association (AGTA), which has seven members, being the geography professional associations in each State and Territory, is fully supportive of the *Australian Curriculum: Geography*. AGTA acts as a coordinating body with each state and territory association independently working to support school Geography.

We believe that the study of Geography is a core component of a good education; one that presents young people with real issues, globally and locally. Geography is directly relevant to people's lives and the world of work, including practice in geospatial technology skills, integral to work in government departments, utilities, business enterprises, agriculture, and bush fire and disaster management. The study of Geography promotes global citizenship, engages students with their surroundings and develops a wide range of perspectives on people and environment.

Minister for Education, the Hon. Christopher Pyne MP, stated that the Australian Curriculum had been heavily criticised over a "lengthy period of time" <http://www.pyneonline.com.au/media/transcripts/review-of-national-curriculum>. AGTA, speaking on behalf of its state and territory affiliates, is unaware of these criticisms with regard to the *Australian Curriculum: Geography*. Furthermore, AGTA supports the Asia Education Foundation's submission to the review [\[http://www.asiaeducation.edu.au/policy_and_research/australian_curriculum_review.html\]](http://www.asiaeducation.edu.au/policy_and_research/australian_curriculum_review.html).

The Association has had a long engagement with the curriculum development process (refer to the appendix below).

While the long drawn out curriculum development process (2009–13) was very reliant on the expertise of the lead writer, Associate Professor Alaric Maude, AGTA continually filtered through suggestions and offered advice. During the ACARA process of refining the *Australian Curriculum: Geography* AGTA was very proactive in commenting on successive drafts of the curriculum in public or via restricted consultations managed by ACARA. All these were conducted through face-to-face meetings, teleconferences and surveys, emailed exchanges and written submissions. AGTA also had several members in the ACARA Geography Advisory Group.

The detailed process by which ACARA responded to critical suggestions about curriculum content and possible improvements to the structure, scope and sequence and inquiry and skills sections of the document impressed these AGTA members on the advisory group. At each stage of the development process AGTA was cognisant of ways that ACARA responded to suggestions concerning the Shape Paper, Position Paper and various drafts of the Curriculum.

Early concerns about the curriculum included:

- role of Geography in the school curriculum, especially its status in the middle school years and whether it would receive parity with History;
- an endeavour to address the overlaps with Maths and Science curriculums;

- a need to develop landscape frameworks where physical and human Geography could be expressed in a spatial context and tied to specific places; and
- a desire to slow the curriculum implementation process to allow the development of support materials and professional development opportunities (this was subsequently not regarded as being as relevant given the protracted curriculum development process).

The role of pedagogy in the Australian Curriculum: Geography

In the initial stages of the curriculum development process AGTA was made aware at a Teaching Australia National Curriculum and Assessment Roundtable that the curriculum was to be framed in terms of: "What teachers are expected to teach" and "what students will learn". We were reassured that "Pedagogy is the responsibility of the classroom teacher but some curriculum documents will inevitably give direction". AGTA believes that Geography teachers must adapt their teaching methods to the ever-changing dynamics of each Australian classroom.

Given that the Australian Curriculum sets out what young people should learn, but does not specify how students should be taught, AGTA increased efforts to support to teachers in their endeavours to teach Geography in the classroom. AGTA considers that the Review of the Australian Curriculum is diverting attention away from the need to support teachers in implementing the curriculums we have, and this support is what is needed to improve educational standards.

AGTA supported the research project *The Professional Standards for Accomplished Teaching of School Geography*, which was an attempt to document and clarify the nature of exemplary Geography teaching in our schools and which culminated in the release of *Professional Standards for Accomplished Teaching of School Geography*. The standards posted at [http:// www.geogstandards.edu.au](http://www.geogstandards.edu.au) were developed with the *Australian Curriculum: Geography* in mind and with considerable reliance on the extensive research into pedagogy that had preceded and provided impetus for the inclusion of Geography into the national curriculum, i.e. the papers published under *Towards a National Geography Curriculum for Australia*.

The standards were developed from:

- video footage of ten accomplished Geography teachers in government and non-government schools in three states;
- project website online survey which gathered responses to questions concerning the lesson videotapes of the teachers;
- 17 panel meetings in five states; and
- a summary of responses from the meetings, the online survey and written responses.

AGTA also supported the enrichment of the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers*. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) funded AGTA to develop the following Illustrations of Practice: Mapping the Pacific:

[\[http://www.teacherstandards.aitsl.edu.au/Illustrations/Details/IOP00291\]](http://www.teacherstandards.aitsl.edu.au/Illustrations/Details/IOP00291)

and Sustainable cities: [\[http://www.teacherstandards.aitsl.edu.au/Illustrations/Details/IOP00134\]](http://www.teacherstandards.aitsl.edu.au/Illustrations/Details/IOP00134)

Another initiative, now referred to as *Geogspace*, was developed in conjunction with Education Services Australia (ESA). Referred to initially as *Supporting Australian Curriculum Online (SACOL) Geography Project* it aimed at developing the knowledge, skills and pedagogical capacity of teachers to teach Geography. The project has been completed and resides on the website <http://www.geogspace.edu.au>. It has been well received and has accolades from Geography educators in the UK.

AGTA has written two books that support the teaching of Geography: *Keys to Geography: Essential skills and tools* and *Keys to Fieldwork: Essential skills and tools*. The former is being rewritten to conform to the *Australian Curriculum: Geography*. AGTA endorses a new text *Teaching Primary Geography for Australian Schools*.

A recently published DVD *Thinking Geographically* is linked to *Australian Curriculum: Geography* resources materials, contains presentations of professional learning and suggestions for curriculum planning.

Social constructivism and cultural relativism and the Australian Curriculum: Geography

Dr Donnelly has argued that: "Education has, for some years now, been blighted by the plague of postmodernism and deconstruction – theories that argue there is no such thing as objective knowledge and that each individual, and different cultures, create their own sense of truth".

The Geography [draft shape] paper adopts what it terms a cultural/social constructivist approach, one in which it is impossible to argue that some ways of dealing with and understanding the physical environment are closer to the truth than others. <http://newsweekly.com.au/article.php?id=4460>. AGTA would argue that this approach could indeed be used in the Geography classroom. But, it is only one of many.

Geography educators list a number of geographical viewpoints that have developed chronologically but which tend to leave behind important continuities. Prominent among these are: scientific viewpoints that prioritise empirical knowledge and spatial associations; behavioural viewpoints that meld psychology with Geography looking at aggregate behaviour and people –environment relationships; humanistic viewpoints that examine people and places, authenticity and belonging; social welfare viewpoints that examine place and society and the role of power groups, postmodern viewpoints involving reflection and interpretation looking, for example, at landscapes as text; and, neoliberal viewpoints that examine an ever more connected world of communication, production, consumption and ways of seeing.

It can be argued that postmodernism and deconstruction now are very much passé in the geographical academy and that scholars have moved on into many more fruitful areas of inquiry. However, this is a school Geography curriculum that is at issue.

We absolutely accept that Geography is based on an agreed body of knowledge that students need to learn. Professor David Lambert, Professor of Geography Education, University of London, refers to this, as the vocabulary rather than the grammar of Geography. He argues that the subject's 'core knowledge' can be thought of as Geography's vocabulary – the extensive, factual basis of the 'world subject'. If core knowledge is Geography's vocabulary, Geography's conceptual framework forms its grammar (D. Lambert, 2011, Reviewing the case for geography and the 'knowledge turn' in the English national curriculum, *The Curriculum Journal*, 22, 3, pp. 243–264).

AGTA is fully supportive of the notion of 'core knowledge' as it is of the concepts that are used in the *Australian Curriculum: Geography* – place, space, environment, interconnection, sustainability, scale and change. Such 'core knowledge' also includes systematic coverage, over Years F–10, about all continents and countries, particularly those that are Australia's major trading partners.

We see Geography as drawing from, and contributing to, the Sciences, Social Sciences and Humanities and submit that, in all these arenas, knowledge can be interpreted and explained in different ways. Phenomena such as beach cusps, micro crescents on Australian beaches, have undergone a succession of scientific explanations; town planners from different corners of the world bring in new skill sets and perspectives and apply them to Australian cities, and, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, Maori and Native Americans might interpret wilderness areas in different ways from those following Judeo-Christian traditions, many of the latter having little scientific basis.

The Cross curriculum priorities

AGTA supports the view that students will be better equipped to make sense of the world in which they live through special attention to the three cross curriculum priorities:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures;
- Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia; and
- Sustainability.

Indeed, it could be argued that Geography is perhaps the best vehicle to examine these priorities. An anecdote, from Professor of Environment and Geography Richie Howitt sees him explaining Geography

to Indigenous Australians, mining companies and local government groups: "Geography is interested in what places are like and the relationships between people and places so we look at landscapes and environments and regional policies and things like that."

There has been a long struggle, over the last thirty years, to incorporate an Indigenous perspective in Australia curriculum documents.

AGTA supports the Asia Education Foundation statement: "The *Australian Curriculum: Geography* enables students learn about the ways in which Australia and Asia are interconnected, both environmentally and socially, and how transnational collaboration supports the notion of shared and sustainable futures within the Asia region."

Geography teaching has had a prolonged and deep engagement with sustainability. Reference could be made to the Geospace illustration 'Sustainability in focus' http://www.geospace.edu.au/verve/resources/2.4.1.2_1sustainability_in_focus.pdf and Maude's recent work on sustainability (A. Maude, 2014, *A sustainable view of sustainability*, Geography Vol. 99.1 Spring, pp. 47–50).

Australian Curriculum: Geography represents an unprecedented opportunity for the holistic education of Australian students in environments, people and culture. Through this study students will develop a deeper sense of commitment to global citizenship and a commitment to a more just, tolerant and accepting society.

A curriculum firmly based on disciplines

It is noted that Dr Donnelly criticised the rise of a subject called *Studies of Society and the Environment*. "This new study embraces traditional subjects like history, geography and politics and gives them a new-age, PC bent. The focus is very much on 'isms' like multiculturalism, feminism, environmentalism and students get a very jaundiced view of such matters. Instead of students being taught to think independently they are often indoctrinated with a PC interpretation." http://itsacademictutoring.com/content/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1009.

The *Australian Curriculum: Geography* is firmly based on the discipline of Geography rather than the melange of subjects delivered under the umbrella *Studies of Societies and Environments*. We believe that the *Australian Curriculum: Geography* is a robust curriculum, which allows schools sufficient flexibility over how it is taught.

It should be recalled that in the initial phase of the curriculum development process AGTA funded a research paper reviewing different Geography curricula from around the world and running state-based consultation sessions to gather feedback from teachers. ACARA also engaged some AGTA executive members to match the *Australian Curriculum: Geography* against curricula in the UK, Ontario, Finland and Singapore. The *Australian Curriculum: Geography* was reviewed by 'critical friends' Professors David Lambert and Simon Catling, leading Geography educators from the UK who recently presented at an AGTA conference in Perth. University Geographers have served on the earlier advisory bodies; provided additional support based on their special interests and have been interested to follow the curriculum development process.

We endorse the inclusion of fieldwork and incisive and critical, geographical skills in the curriculum. We believe that an adherence to the conceptual framework strengthens the curriculum structure; that the inquiry approach, with its particular geographical intent, will best engage students in the vocabulary of Geography. We believe that the inclusion of geospatial technologies in the curriculum, in Years 4–10, adds vocational relevance and offers opportunities for students that are not developed in other disciplines.

The strengths of the curriculum

The *Australian Curriculum: Geography* has been greeted with enthusiasm throughout the Geography teaching community. Its structure is sound.

Geographical knowledge refers to the facts, generalisations, principles, theories, models and explanatory frameworks developed in Geography to explain the spatial distribution of and the

relationships between the characteristics of places. Geographical understanding emphasises explanation and a particular take on viewing the world through the development of the means to think geographically. Geographical inquiry involves the big ideas of Geography that enable students to use geographical methodologies to seek out new knowledge about the world. Geographical proficiencies, the techniques and tools of making sense of the world involve interpreting data in print, graphic or digital form and developing the proficiencies to be critical of the methods used to obtain and portray data.

Robustness, independence and balance

We believe that the *Australian Curriculum: Geography* is a robust and independent program. We advocate that ACARA should endorse Geography as a compulsory study in Years 9 and 10 in an effort to achieve balance in the curriculum. Students need to study the contemporary world. If Geography is not compulsory in Years 9 and 10 then students may undertake no study of the contemporary world in those years. This is hardly a 'balanced' curriculum. Further, in the interest of a balanced curriculum, we believe that Geography should have equivalent status to History as mandated study in Years 9 and 10. We believe that a Geography curriculum that emphasises the perspectives from both human and physical geography is more balanced than the study earth and environmental studies in the *Australian Curriculum: Science*, which tends to minimise the importance people in the environment.

Conclusion

AGTA is proud of, and fully supportive of, the *Australian Curriculum: Geography*. AGTA argues that *Australian Curriculum: Geography* plays its part in the development world-class curriculum: one that inspires and challenges all learners and prepares them for the future in the 21st century.

To quote AGTA in *Geospace*: "There has never been a more exciting time to study Geography, with it being a subject vital to the education of every young Australian in the 21st century".

Yours sincerely



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President (Chairperson)
Australian Geography Teachers Association Inc.
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Submission developed for AGTA by Mr Nick Hutchinson in collaboration with AGTA's state/territory-based affiliates.

Members

• Geographical Association of Western Australia • Geography Teachers' Association of New South Wales • Geography Teachers' Association of Queensland • Geography Teachers' Association of South Australia • Geography Teachers' Association of Victoria • Tasmanian Geography Teachers' Association •

Appendix: A long engagement with the curriculum making process

The Association has had a long engagement with the curriculum development process, having successfully lobbied for a national Geography curriculum during the time of the Howard Government. As long ago as 2006 a delegation from AGTA, the Institute of Australian Geographers (IAG) and the Royal Geographical Society of Queensland (RGSQ) met with the Federal Minister for Education, Science and Training. The Minister, the Hon. Julie Bishop MP, subsequently commissioned a study into the teaching of Geography in Schools 3–10, from Erebus International. This study investigated a range of issues raised by the lobby group.

In 2007, a similar deputation, from the three organisations, appeared before the Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Inquiry into the Quality of School Education and answered questions about the state of Geography teaching and learning in Australian classrooms.

AGTA, the IAG and RGSQ developed a short paper that was widely circulated through the geographical and wider community. The paper, titled *Australia Needs Geography*, <http://www.agta.asn.au/files/Resources/2007/AustNeedGeog.pdf> had its content approved by a number of academic and Geography teaching societies and associations, including The Australian Academy of Science's National Committee for Geography.

Subsequently, AGTA and RGSQ funded a research paper reviewing different Geography curricula from around the world and running state-based consultation sessions throughout 2008–9 to gather feedback from teachers. The results were published in a background report that included the views of Geography teachers at the forums, online submissions, examinations of Australian and selected overseas syllabuses and the synthesis of an extensive literary review. A steering committee incorporated further feedback and their own extensive reading to write a paper, *Towards a National Geography Curriculum for Australia*. A website has been posted to record these developments <http://www.ngc.org.au>.