



Relationship between Australian senior secondary curriculum, senior secondary courses and curriculum

Adopted at ACAC meeting May 2014 as a basis for discussions

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to support ACACA members in identifying and describing some of the issues affecting the nature, timing and resource costs of 'implementation' of the Australian senior secondary curriculum.

The paper does not state or imply any view on the value of the Australian senior secondary curriculum or on the processes that have been used to develop this. Any such matters are outside the remit of this paper.

Background

One of the explicit functions of ACARA is to lead "national collaboration to produce the Foundation to Year 12 Australian Curriculum"¹. This includes the 'senior secondary curriculum'.

To date, Ministers have endorsed fifteen 'subjects' of the Australian senior secondary curriculum. Content statements in some other 'subjects' have been approved for consideration.

Once there is an Australian senior secondary curriculum, it may seem obvious that no further effort or expenditure² is needed by state and territory curriculum, assessment and certification agencies.

In fact, a subject in the Australian senior secondary curriculum does not of itself constitute a 'ready-to-use off the shelf' course by an assessment and certification agency. A process of 'course development' is required.

'Course development' can usefully be seen as having four distinct aspects: i. the development of the course document ('a syllabus', a 'course'); ii. Examination / assessment specifications and examples; iii. the development of implementation support materials; iv. material to explain the nature of the course to the community, parents and students:

- course documents specify outcomes, content, mandatory and optional requirements, assessment standards and certification requirements. This is part of the responsibilities (and costs) of an assessment and certification agency
- assessment and quality assurance requirements, including examination/assessment specifications and sample papers, are part of the responsibilities (and recurrent costs) of an assessment and certification agency.
- the development of 'implementation support materials' – teacher guides, resources, sample activities, exemplars – can be done along with or after the development of the course document. The development of implementation support materials, which can be an expensive and time-consuming task, may not be part of the current responsibilities

¹ <http://www.acara.edu.au/curriculum/curriculum.html>

² The assumption that the existence of the Australian senior secondary curriculum will bring (if not now, later) significant cost savings seems to depend on unspoken assumptions about where senior secondary assessment and certification agencies incur their major costs. In fact, assessment and certification cost, on a continuing (recurrent) basis, much more than 'curriculum development'.

(and therefore not a cost or a potential saving) of an assessment and certification agency

- materials explaining to parents and students the nature of the course and details about assessment and certification are part of the responsibilities (and costs) of an assessment and certification agency

Major issues

A description of the relationship between the Australian senior secondary curriculum, subjects³ within that curriculum, ACACA agency accredited courses⁴, the curriculum⁵ offered to students and the curriculum⁶ followed by a student requires that we take adequate account of five sets of issues

1. governance
2. state government policy and resourcing issues driving the number, nature and range of accredited senior secondary courses in a jurisdiction
3. essential elements in accredited course documents that are not present in an Australian senior secondary curriculum 'subject'
4. practical issues to do with the efficient and effective
 - management of change
 - definitions of the course content, work requirements, assessment and standards
 - necessary and convenient consistency across the full range of ACACA agency accredited courses
 - statements of content, assessment, standards that make sense to practitioners
 - identification of any rules relating to certification.
5. Terminology
 - the terminology used in this area is conceptually confused and potentially misleading
 - the terminology used within jurisdictions is internally reasonably clear and consistent but may differ across jurisdictions.

Each of these sets of issues is now discussed in more detail.

Governance

Matters to do with senior secondary education are, constitutionally, part of each state jurisdiction's reserved powers.

The state parliament determines the legislation under which each ACACA agency works, determining the authority for decisions about courses, assessment and certification.

³ See the terminology discussion below. ACARA uses the term 'subject' with a particular meaning – one of the sets of content statements and achievement standards it has developed. This is not the same as the meaning of the term 'subject' as it is used by some ACACA agencies or as it is often used by schools, students and parents.

⁴ See the discussion on terminology later. Agencies should replace the term 'accredited course' with the local term – approved syllabus, study specification etc.

⁵ This is not the same meaning of the term 'curriculum' as in the phrase 'the Australian senior secondary curriculum'.

⁶ This is not the same meaning of the term 'curriculum' as in the previous two instances.

The state government provides resources to its assessment and certification agency and sets priorities and standards for the agency.

Policy and resource issues driving the number, nature and range of accredited senior secondary courses in a jurisdiction

State government policy and resourcing governs the number, nature and range of accredited senior secondary courses in a jurisdiction and hence the pace and nature of implementation of the Australian senior secondary curriculum.

There are currently fifteen subjects in the Australian senior secondary curriculum. Most jurisdictions have available to senior secondary students nearly ten times as many courses.

Education ministers, who determine ACARA's work plan, have not committed to any further development of senior secondary subjects.

While the current patterns of number and coverage of courses continue, some course development and maintenance at the jurisdiction level appears inevitable.

The number, nature and coverage of current sets of courses in jurisdictions appear to reflect some combination of two or more of the following

- history and custom – for example, the set of ‘academic’ courses⁷
- responses to changing patterns of participation in senior secondary education
- explicit government priorities causing the introduction of particular courses that then take on a life of their own
- the interests of particular stakeholder groups
- the impact of the framework (eg key learning areas) used to categorise courses⁸.

Essential elements in accredited course documents that are not present in an Australian senior secondary curriculum ‘subject’

The essential elements in state/territory accredited course documents (or in a general framework that applies to two or more courses) that are not present in a ‘subject’ in the Australian senior secondary curriculum are

- a. any particular rules for selection of core and optional content
- b. any work requirements (‘a learner must complete the following tasks ... ’)
- c. assessment requirements
- d. a reporting framework covering how results are reported against some type of standards, whether through a standards-setting procedure, standards descriptors or numerical standards (for example, where scores in a subject are standardised each year to some pre-set parameters).

⁷ See RW Connell “Social Change and Curriculum Futures” in *Change: Transformations in Education*, vol 1, No. 1 May 1998 pp 84 -90

⁸ The choice of a framework helps to drive coverage – the perception of ‘gaps’ and superfluities is affected by the classification framework.

To implement a 'subject' in the Australian senior secondary curriculum a course document has to be written that includes these essential elements. This has a resource cost.

Practical issues

Implementing course documents

Course documents are only words. The implementation of a course document requires interpretation. This means that

- a. where there is a real change in a course, the use of terms and organising concepts that are already familiar to teachers increases the likelihood of take-up of the new material
- b. where there is no real change in a course, the use of unfamiliar terms and organising concepts is likely to increase unnecessarily the challenges of implementation of the new course document
- c. the words in a course document, especially those describing standards, represent not a self-sufficient definition but a tacitly agreed and negotiated shared understanding amongst practitioners. A new set of words requires the development over time and at a significant cost of a new shared understanding. Such costs are substantial and must therefore be proportionate to the gain
- d. the challenges of making changes in the ways that the content and standards in a course are expressed include the reactions of practitioners and the various ways these reactions can be expressed. In some cases, these challenges may be disproportionately greater than the substantive impact of the changes.
- e. Having different expressions in different course documents for essentially the same concepts (something that may be a consequence of having national consistency in a limited range of subjects) is inefficient and confusing at the individual state/territory level. Revising all the many local courses simply to change terminology to achieve national consistency across all courses in all jurisdictions may have longer-term gain but has high short-term costs.

Managing the changes involved has substantial resource costs and takes time. It is rarely if ever simply a matter of taking the statements from the senior secondary Australian curriculum and dropping them into a course document.

Reporting 'subject' results on a consistent scale with consistent labels

Some state/territories report a final result in a subject (course, syllabus, study) in terms of the same number of explicit standards as are found in the *achievement levels* in the senior secondary Australian curriculum, in some cases using the labels 'A' .. 'E'.

This situation does not present the same structural impediment (with resource costs) as where there are five standards but the labels are different. Changing the labels used for reporting subject results is much more than changing some computer code – for example, in a jurisdiction where 'A', 'B' etc is used for collecting intermediate data (information that is

used to determine an overall result) it is neither trivial nor cheap to change to using 'A', 'B' etc for the overall result and a different set of codes for the intermediate result⁹

There are more significant structural impediments to the use of a consistent standards-based scale where current processes report against more (or fewer) than five standards, in that having some subjects reporting on one scale and others on a different scale brings costs and complications.

There are further structural impediments where current processes do not report against explicit standards.

Terminology

Terminology used in the context of the relationship between the Australian senior secondary curriculum and the tasks of state/territory assessment and certification agencies

The terminology used in this area (for example, the term 'senior secondary Australian curriculum') creates (unhelpful) conceptual confusion. The same terms (eg 'curriculum') are used with very different meanings.

The key elements are

1. A '*subject*' in the Australian curriculum is essentially some statements of content and achievement standards, where the content statements have been endorsed by Ministers as the 'agreed and common basis for the development of courses by states and territories'.
2. A *course document* (variously 'course', 'syllabus', 'framework', 'study specification') accredited by a state/territory certification agency specifying
 - i. what a school must or may do in operationalising the learning it organises for its students in a particular course of learning it provides under the aegis of the course document when seeking a result certified by the state/territory agency
 - ii. the nature and extent of assessment in that particular course of learning
 - iii. any standards to be applied in determining students' results
3. The *formal curriculum* is the school/college's plans for delivery and assessment in the subject within the rules and options set by the course document.
4. The *curriculum offered* by the school/college: the set of formal curricula included in the school/college program, some or all of which operationalise a course document ('syllabus', 'framework', 'study specification') accredited (approved, endorsed, adopted) by the state/territory certification agency. The school/college's curriculum is a selection from what is usually a much wider range of possibilities. Individual students follow programs of learning that are selections from the curriculum offered by the school.
5. The *rules and requirements for the award of the senior secondary certificate of education* are set by the state/territory certification agency. These rules may or may not require a learner to complete a particular number of or particular courses accredited by

⁹ Using the same codes for both the intermediate or component elements and for the overall result adds confusion to complexity.

the state/territory agency and may or may not require a learner to meet standards for particular skills or work requirements.

6. The *actual or enacted curriculum* experienced by each student.
7. A *result reporting framework*
 - a. for the *overall result in a course (subject, study)*. The labels used for these results can differ across jurisdictions, the scales used may be different. In some jurisdictions overall results are reported as a number alone or with a set of standards
 - b. for *intermediate results* that contribute to a decision about the overall result.

Terminology used in each jurisdiction in relation to the tasks of state/territory assessment and certification agencies

Across jurisdictions, different terms may be used for essentially the same meaning. These differences are often historical in origin, sometimes driven by legislation and cannot be eliminated without significant resource and other change management implications.

Consistency *within* a jurisdiction has immediate and significant importance for efficiency and reduction of confusion.

Changing terminology for some courses (for example, ones forming part of the Australian senior secondary curriculum) and not others has immediate costs and the short-term benefits are not obvious.

Changing terminology for all courses has significant costs and brings some significant disruptions over several years. The cost-benefit to individual jurisdictions is not self-evident: it is a change in terminology without any substantial impact on efficiency and effectiveness.