

National curriculum

— a note to AAMT members from the Council and Executive



Background

At the April 2007 meeting of the Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) it was decided to move towards “greater national consistency in school curriculum, testing and reporting”. This is the latest in a series of decisions along these lines over the last decade or more. The AAMT has actively sought to represent the views of members on the various developments over that time, and will continue to do so. This paper identifies the key aspects of the AAMT Council and Executive views on these matters.

The quality of teaching is the most important issue

High quality teaching and learning of mathematics in our schools is a matter of urgent national need. Discussions about mathematics curriculum can contribute to this, but there are much more pressing needs. In order to achieve internationally recognised standards of excellence in teaching practice and student outcomes, Australia must make a concerted and sustained effort and commitment of resources to:

- attract and retain well-prepared teachers;
- provide for the ongoing professional development of all teachers of mathematics in the face of profound changes in the discipline and substantial development in our knowledge of how mathematics is learned;
- actively and significantly reduce the differential performance of students that is based on factors other than their interest and potential in mathematics (e.g., city/ country, Indigenous/ non-Indigenous, high/low socio-economic status);
- develop and provide access to high quality teaching and learning resources and technologies; and
- ensure there is adequate time in the school week for students to learn the mathematics necessary for them as citizens and workers in the 21st century.

The AAMT will continue to argue that these are the most important areas to address. The discussions about national curriculum — by which is meant *documents* to specify a national curriculum, not what actually happens in classrooms — should not deflect governments and the profession from focussing on what is really important.

About national curriculum

The most recent decision still falls short of proposing a “national curriculum” — it represents a continuing emphasis on “greater consistency”. The arguments in favour of a national curriculum include a reduction of duplication of effort and a suggestion that it is just “common sense” in a country this size. It is true that there is much more that is alike in the mathematics curriculums around the country than there is that is radically different.

Another argument that has currency is that a national curriculum is needed for the students who change *states*. Teachers, parents and students know, however, that it can be just as problematic for continuity in students’ learning when they change *suburbs*, or move from primary to secondary school. A national curriculum will not solve this problem — it is teachers with the skills, approaches and support that enable them to genuinely meet students’ needs who will make the difference.

There are strengths in the current arrangements that need to be considered as well. Each state and territory looks carefully at other curriculums to draw on best practice from other Australian jurisdictions and internationally when revising their own. It is a dynamic process of continuing evaluation and development. Also, curriculum development at the state and

territory level invariably involves extensive consultation with, and involvement of, stakeholders from the community. This engenders a sense of ownership of a curriculum designed to meet local needs and aspirations. A national mathematics curriculum should not result in the loss of these important positive features.

AAMT and national curriculum

The AAMT does not have a position for or against the development and implementation of a national mathematics curriculum *per se*. As is often the case, it depends on what and how it is done.

Mathematics curriculum documents at whatever level (national, state or territory, school) should help teachers to teach well, and help students to learn. The AAMT believes that a mathematics curriculum should:

- focus on deep learning of the key mathematical ideas, processes and thinking appropriate for preparing students for their lives as citizens in the 21st century, and promote relevant and effective teaching practices (*rigorous* and *forward-looking*);
- provide pathways that enable all students to fulfil their mathematical potential (*equitable*);
- be realistic in terms of expectations on teachers and students (*feasible*);
- assist teachers to meet the diverse learning needs and aspirations of their students (*flexible*);
- provide a sense of scope and sequence so that teachers can see clearly where they are heading, and at the same time determine the foundations their students need for further learning (*provide direction*);
- draw on relevant research, and be developed through extensive consultation with and involvement of practising teachers that respects and responds to their expertise (*well-grounded*);
- be clear and easily understood in order to ensure some comparability between classrooms and to provide sufficient direction for teachers so that they can determine what must be taught (*articulate*).

In line with these principles, the AAMT has recently analysed the process and outcomes of the National Consistency in Curriculum Outcomes (NCCO) project to develop the Statements of Learning — Mathematics (for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9) and the project conducted for DEST by the ACER to compare curriculum and standards in some subjects, including mathematics, at Year 12 level. Both projects were based on the process of identifying what is currently *common* in the mathematics curriculums of the jurisdictions and using this as the *core* of what should be taught and learned. This is not a sensible basis for developing a curriculum that is appropriate for students into the 21st century; what is needed is a process that is guided by the principles above.

The Commonwealth Minister Julie Bishop said after the recent meeting that the MCEETYA decisions “will ensure that we can achieve high quality curriculum in every classroom across the country and is a major step forward in raising standards in every school.” It might be a step, but only if the work proceeds according to the principles above.

It is not the only step. It is certainly not the most important step — the only way to get high quality learning and raised standards is through sustained and concerted efforts to improve the quality of the teaching of mathematics. Without national support for such efforts, mathematics learning outcomes across Australia are destined to remain at their current levels.

Comments on this paper or any of the issues it raises are welcome. Please contact the AAMT Office (office@aamt.edu.au).

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