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Let's not wait for curriculum change

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Principal Matters

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PHOTO: David Beckham provided a skills workshop for students attending The University High School, in Melbourne, Victoria.



Let's not wait for curriculum change

While the National Curriculum will bring change, some immediate reforms are necessary now, particularly in Western Australia, says KEITH McNAUGHT. Doing nothing but wait is not an ethical option, he argues.

A National Curriculum for Australian schools is a work in progress, with implementation dates debated and changed in intensely politically driven processes. While large geographically, Australia has a small population, centred predominantly around major capital cities, on the coastline of the nation. Currently, Australian States and Territories have very different curriculum expectations, as well as diverse starting and exit ages for students, and even having individual state-based teacher registration boards.

This fragmented system has led to marked inequities between locations. While decentralised systems may well allow for a local responsiveness to student needs and particular contexts, they also lead to potentially negative discrepancies that should not exist within a nation such as Australia. As a case in point, Western Australia's upper school programs warrant urgent review.

Urgent action required

There is ample data and evidence to show that Western Australia is completely off-track with upper school programs, and that urgent action is required; action that is being avoided and shunned. Year 12 ATAR performance in WA is causing serious alarm, and it's clear that the State is out-of-step. In 2010, 95% of Victorian students achieved an ATAR score, and yet, WA had less than 60% of year 12 students achieve the same.

Until the 1980s in Western Australia, all students undertook seven academic subjects through to year 11, or year 12 if they were aiming for a university pathway.

Alternatively, they were provided with an opportunity to complete worthwhile vocationally-based subjects. Though not a perfect system, this was an attempt to provide alternatives to match students' needs. Currently, students in year 11 and 12 in Western Australia study courses positioned around three stages: Stages 1, 2 and 3. This model is supposedly designed to meet the needs of a diverse range of students, by providing courses at different levels. Inherently, it is a good idea. However, the problem is that Stage 1 courses (the lowest level that students can take) are neither cognitively nor academically appropriate for students in years 11 and 12.

As an example, stage 1 mathematics courses fail to prepare students for TAFE or university courses. Nor do they provide meaningful mathematics for work-ready students. Stage 2 and 3 courses lead to external exams, and contribute to an ATAR score, while stage 1 courses do not.

Stage 1 courses, in particular in mathematics and English, contain content that is 'dumbed-down'. This generation of children coming through the Western Australian school system were victims of 'outcomes-based education' and endured an era without specific curriculum documents and syllabi for their teachers to use. Accordingly, many are presenting at the end of upper school with limited skills and knowledge. Simultaneously, we have endured an era where knowledge is seen as obsolete, and rote learning is demonised. One local education minister said that we just '*need to Google it*'. However, knowledge *is* of value, and is imperative in every trade and profession. The value of committing essential knowledge to a level of automatic recall still has merit. For example, the importance of having facility with mental mathematics is critical.

Low level mathematics

The content in the Stage 1 mathematics courses is parallel to that which was, until recently, taught in primary schools. To illustrate this, the 'number and algebra' strand of the 1B Mathematics course was plotted against the internationally well regarded

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Singapore Primary Curriculum. The result should shock every educator and parent. With only one exception, all of the content is positioned within the Singapore Curriculum between years 2 and 5. Accordingly, students in these stage 1 courses in Western Australia are studying primary level mathematics – but in years 11 and 12. Needless to say, the content level is therefore worthless for future work, training or university studies. It is no surprise that a number of pre-apprenticeship courses have completely excluded the use of stage 1 courses as preparatory, finding the content to be completely inadequate.

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The Western Australia Certificate of Education (WACE) manual describes Stage 2 and Stage 3 courses using the word 'academic' but does not use the same word to describe the Stage 1 courses. Indeed, the manual says that Stage 1 courses are designed as 'preparation' for the Stage 2 courses: '*Stage 1 units to provide bridging support and a practical and prior applied prior focus to develop skills required for students to be successful on leaving school or in the transition to Stage 2 units*'. What is happening in schools now is not what was envisioned. It was expected that 10% of year 12 students would complete Stage 1 courses. However, in 2010, 35% of year 12 students were in Stage 1 courses. Stage 1 courses were never designed to have large numbers of students undertake them, but this is exactly what has happened.

Encouragement to go backwards

Alarmingly, data shows that a significant numbers of students are passing Stage 2 courses in year 11, and then being steered towards completing Stage 1 courses in year 12. This completely defies the definition and scope of Stage 1 courses, as set out in the WACE manual. Why would a secondary schools encourage significant numbers of students to 'go backwards'? One plausible reason is that it removes these students from the external examinations, and therefore the publically available statistics on ATAR performance. The other strategy being used in many schools is course counselling at year 10, where artificial entry points are created for stage 2 and 3 courses. Various

schools will, for example, require that a student has an 'A' in year 10 Science in order to complete Physics or Chemistry in year 11. However, there is no evidence that this actually makes a difference to students' performance, even if it is well intentioned. A capable student, with an excellent teacher, may well find Physics or Chemistry engaging and perform well. Very often, year 10 students, boys in particular, fail to show their academic potential for a whole range of reasons relating to neurological and hormonal factors. Additionally, they are often streamed early into low level courses, placed with the least skilled teachers, and are therefore even less likely to show their potential, or break out of those imposed barriers. Worthless learning is demotivating and damaging for students. It appears that the School Curriculum and Standards Authority (Western Australia) is understandably reluctant to make significant changes to unravel the mess, with the National Curriculum on the horizon. However, this is a fundamentally flawed argument. A current cohort of students cannot be left to flounder in this system - it is immoral and unethical not to make changes for the sake of those students, and their futures. Credible alternatives to Stage 1 courses are desperately required. These are true vocational preparation programs that assist students to develop essential knowledge and skills, and will prepare them for trades, further training, and tailored university preparation programs.

While the National Curriculum will bring change, some immediate changes are necessary, in Western Australia, and perhaps other locations. 'Doing nothing' is not an option. It is corrupt to argue that '*other changes are on the horizon*', when the implementation is clearly some way off. It will take courageous leadership in Western Australia to make the necessary changes, and time is of the essence.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Professor Keith McNaught is the Director of the Fremantle Academic Support and Enabling Centre. He began his teaching career in primary schools in 1982, and over the years has taught at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Professor McNaught's background saw him work as a IT specialist and teacher-librarian, and he was in educational leadership positions for many years. In 2009, Keith took some time away from the university to return to the role of school principal, to renew his work at the 'chalk face'. For five years, he ran mathematics education programs with Notre Dame's School of Education. His doctorate is in mathematics education, with a particular focus on mathematics anxiety in adults. Professor McNaught can be contacted by email at: keith.mcnaught@nd.edu.au.

