



Reconciliation
A U S T R A L I A

28 February 2014

**Submission to the Department of
Education**

*2014 Review of the Australian
Curriculum*

1. Introduction

Reconciliation Australia is the national organisation building and promoting reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other Australians. Our vision is to build an Australia that is reconciled, just, and equitable for all. To do so, we are dedicated to building relationships, respect and trust between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other Australians. We believe a reconciled Australia is one where:

- Relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians are strong;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, culture and rights are a proud part of our everyday life;
- Our national wellbeing is enhanced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander strength and prosperity;
- The collective rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are recognised and respected.

The current national curriculum, designed after years of consultation with Government, Independent and Catholic educators, provides schools with consistent terminology and focus for use across all education sectors. We believe the curriculum design process was thorough, and enabled all stakeholders the chance to provide input and feedback. Equipped with a curriculum and tools to encourage cultural awareness, teachers will be better able to create an environment of strong relationships and mutual respect.

Reconciliation Australia believes that knowledge and understanding are at the heart of reconciliation. An education system that fosters respectful understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories throughout schooling is crucial if we are to move forward as a reconciled nation. With such an education system, we believe equality can be achieved, and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will enjoy the same quality of life, education, and employment levels as non-Indigenous Australians.

Reconciliation Australia makes this submission with regard to the following terms of reference:

1. The process of curriculum shaping, development, monitoring, evaluation and review.
2. The curriculum content from Foundation to Year 12 for subjects developed to date, with a particular focus on the curriculum for English, Mathematics, Science, History and Geography.

2. Summary of Recommendations

- 1. The current curriculum continues to be implemented as planned and that monitoring and evaluation processes are embedded throughout the implementation process to consistently strengthen the curriculum over time.**
- 2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures remain a cross-curriculum priority.**

3. The process of curriculum development

Reconciliation Australia believes policies and programs should be developed with ongoing consultation and collaboration. We know that policies developed in such a manner have a greater likelihood of successful implementation and sustainability.

The current national curriculum was developed after a rigorous process, which involved years of collaboration between representatives of all national and state and territory education sectors. As part of this process, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) considered almost 20,000 responses regarding the development of the national curriculum, which were received through forums, meetings, surveys and submissions¹. Each learning area that has been developed is the result of two to three years' work from subject matter experts across Australia². The process was also guided by the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*, to which all Australian Governments committed in 2008. The *Declaration* states two overarching goals for education in Australia. These are that Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence, and that all young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens. Reconciliation Australia believes the collaborative process and guiding principles used, along with the involvement of subject matter experts, ensured that all stakeholders were represented in the development process of the current curriculum.

These years of collaboration between representatives from Government, Catholic and Independent education sectors have resulted in a national curriculum which is balanced, inclusive and robust. The consistency of terminology and subject matter allows all students, regardless of education sector, to be assured of similar content during their education. The importance of this for Australia cannot be overstated. Reconciliation Australia considers the curriculum as the medium through which citizens are formed and having consistent content across all sectors and state and territories creates shared understanding and a common national identity.

Reconciliation Australia is a strong advocate for program evaluation and continuous improvement and we believe the current review can play an important role in strengthening future processes for curriculum development. In the case of the development of the national curriculum we believe the process used to shape, develop, monitor and evaluate the current curriculum was comprehensive, collaborative and nationally representative. As such, we strongly advocate for continued implementation of the curriculum in its current form and recommend that the review focus on how monitoring and evaluation can be used throughout the implementation process to consistently strengthen the curriculum over time.

Recommendation 1: The current curriculum continues to be implemented as planned and that monitoring and evaluation processes are embedded throughout the implementation process to consistently strengthen the curriculum over time.

¹ <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/>

² http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/_resources/ACARA_Chair_-_Australian_Curriculum_review.pdf

4. The curriculum content

Reconciliation Australia approaches the content of the current curriculum with a particular focus on the cross-curriculum priority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content, titled *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures*. Including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in the Australian curriculum is essential if Australia is to become a reconciled nation, where all citizens can expect the same respect and quality of life.

We believe the current content, along with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures cross-curriculum priority, will allow all Australian students to gain knowledge of, and take pride in, very different but equally important aspects of Australian life. Introducing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content as a cross-curriculum priority ensures students across all schools and subjects will have greater understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, crucial in celebrating the uniqueness of Australia and creating a reconciled nation.

Reconciliation Australia's experience with the Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) program indicates that higher levels of exposure to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures creates greater trust and more positive attitudes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and non-Indigenous Australians. Our research shows that 77 per cent of employees in a business with a Reconciliation Action Plan are proud of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, compared to only 51 per cent of the general population³. The levels of trust are also higher in organisations with a RAP. Seventy-one (71) per cent of RAP employees believe levels of trust between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous Australians is high in their organisation, compared to only 13 per cent of people who believe it is high in the general community⁴. These differences in pride and trust show how crucial it is to educate all Australians on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and culture, in order to achieve a reconciled Australia.

The Australian Reconciliation Barometer also tells us that only 31 per cent of all Australians currently report having a high level of knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories, while 82 per cent of Australians agree it is important to know about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders cultures⁵. Similarly, 71 per cent of all Australians agree that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are important to Australia's identity as a nation⁶. The significant variation in people's level of knowledge compared to their desired level of knowledge highlights the importance of including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in the Australian curriculum.

³ Reconciliation Action Plan Impact Measurement Report 2012. Available from < <http://reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Reconciliation-Action-Plan-RAP-Impact-Measurement-Report-2012.pdf>>

⁴ Reconciliation Action Plan Impact Measurement Report 2012. Available from < <http://reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Reconciliation-Action-Plan-RAP-Impact-Measurement-Report-2012.pdf>>

⁵ Australian Reconciliation Barometer 2012: An overview. Available from < <http://reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/2012-Australian-Reconciliation-Barometer-Overview.pdf>>

⁶ Australian Reconciliation Barometer 2012: An overview. Available from < <http://reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/2012-Australian-Reconciliation-Barometer-Overview.pdf>>

Despite improvements in recent years, there are still vast disparities in key quality of life indicators between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and non-Indigenous Australians. Education approaches and policy will be key in addressing these disadvantages. Incarceration rates are increasing⁷, the employment gap has widened⁸, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have far lower levels of literacy and numeracy⁹. The inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories in the curriculum will not only help educate non-Indigenous Australians, but will also assist in creating a welcoming learning environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. With the increased focus on ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children attend school, it is critical to ensure these students see themselves reflected in the education system, with culturally relevant curricular¹⁰. Reconciliation Australia believes that without creating the right environment of good relationships and mutual respect, efforts to close the gap in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage will be slow.

Reconciliation Australia acknowledges the difficulty of incorporating all necessary content and viewpoints into the national curriculum. However, we believe the current content is well-balanced and representative of areas necessary for a robust education system in modern Australia. With the involved process of collaboration and input, changes to the curriculum content would require a renewed consultation process, which has the potential to set Australian education back by years. Reconciliation Australia advocates strongly for maintaining the current content in the curriculum, and we believe it provides a solid basis for learning within the 21st century. Further, we believe that any review of the curriculum should examine opportunities to further strengthen and deepen the content around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. Finally, Reconciliation Australia believes any removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content would be a step back in Australia's journey to reconciliation.

Recommendation 2: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures remains a cross-curriculum priority.

⁷ 4512.0 - Corrective Services, Australia, September Quarter 2013, Australian Bureau of Statistics. Released 21 November 2013.

⁸ COAG Reform Council. Indigenous Reform 2011-12: Comparing performance across Australia. Report to the Council of Australian Governments. Released 30 April 2013.

⁹ COAG Reform Council. Indigenous Reform 2011-12: Comparing performance across Australia. Report to the Council of Australian Governments. Released 30 April 2013

¹⁰ Purdie, N and Buckley, S. School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students. Issues paper No. 1, Produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, September 2010. Available from <<http://www.aihw.gov.au/uploadedFiles/ClosingTheGap/Content/Publications/2010/ctg-ip01.pdf>>