New South Wales response to the Draft Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Geography

Introduction
The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) included Geography in phase two of development of the Australian curriculum and released the Draft Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Geography (draft Shape Paper) for Kindergarten to Year 12 on 21 June 2010.

The Board of Studies NSW is working with the education sectors in NSW to support ACARA in this initiative and to provide input and feedback on the development of the curriculum. This report is the NSW response to ACARA regarding the draft Shape Paper.

Background information
The Draft Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Geography for Kindergarten to Year 12 is organised into sections that reflect a curriculum structure as well as providing additional information to guide curriculum writers. Two organising strands of Geographical knowledge and understanding and Geographical skills are used across all Years of schooling. A central feature of the paper is the proposed structure of the content for Kindergarten to Year 10. The sample structure consists of four layers:

- geographical knowledge and understanding – presented as three separate ‘analytical perspectives’: Place, Environment and Space
- geographical skills – examples include for K–2 ‘understanding location, direction and distance’; for Years 5–6 ‘planning geographical inquiries’; and for Years 7–10 ‘understanding a GIS and its uses’
- major concepts – examples include location, remoteness, spatial distribution, scale
- approaches – examples include for Years 3–4 ‘comparative analysis’; for Years 5–6 ‘spatial interaction’; and for Years 7–10 ‘cultural/social constructivist’.

For the senior years the draft Shape Paper does not provide a similar structure. It does indicate however that there will be four units across Years 11 and 12 organised by the strands of Geographical knowledge and understanding and Geographical skills.

The Board of Studies and the education systems and sectors in NSW recognise the quality of the Geography curriculum in NSW and value the current provision for Geography education in this state. It is noted that other states and territories have not provided Geography in their curriculum to the same extent as in NSW.
Current situation
The Office of the Board of Studies conducted consultation on the draft Geography Shape Paper in order to provide feedback to ACARA. The consultation included:

• teacher (K–12) focus groups conducted at:
  o Newcastle on 12 August 2010
  o Coffs Harbour on 16 August 2010
  o Sydney on 17 August 2010
  o Parramatta on 18 August 2010

• a Geography Reference Group of academics, professional associations, systems and sector representatives, environment education experts, and specialist teachers of geography conducted on 23 August 2010

• an online survey on the Board of Studies website which was available up to 9 September 2010; 136 responses were received. Figures and comments from the survey are included within this document. The survey provided statements about the draft Shape Paper and offered respondents the following choice:
  o strongly agree / agree / disagree / strongly disagree
  o respondents were able to offer comments for each statement; typically respondents that strongly agree / agree did not supply comment

• correspondence received by the Board concerning Geography in the Australian curriculum

• a submission from the NSW Department of Education and Training.

Summary of Key Points
The Draft Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Geography from Kindergarten to Year 12 lacks the clarity and quality required to form a suitable basis for the development of a quality Geography curriculum.

The Geography Teachers Association NSW and secondary school teachers who participated in the consultation stated their concern that the proposed curriculum will not match the current quality of the NSW Geography curriculum and that Geography education in NSW will be compromised and diminished.

A central issue relates to the proposed curriculum structure for Kindergarten to Year 10. The two proposed strands of Geographical knowledge and understanding and Geographical skills are appropriate; however, the structure has some additional complicating aspects. The purpose of these additional aspects has not been well explained and may be confusing for curriculum writers. They also present additional layers for teachers to manage.

While place, space and environment are important in the study of geography, they are interrelated and must be considered in a holistic way. The writers should develop integrated content statements that address the three ‘analytical perspectives’ rather than as separate content under each of place, space and environment.
The sections ‘major concepts’ and ‘approaches’ are not referred to in the draft Shape Paper, except in the proposed structure of content. The ‘major concepts’ could be an effective additional aspect for the curriculum writers and teachers, however they would need to be carefully considered, sequenced and be seen to be reflected in the content statements in each Year. The purpose of the ‘approaches’ is not clear and are considered an unnecessary component.

The draft Shape Paper does not provide a suggested course and content structure for the Years 11 and 12. The paper indicates the strands of Geographical knowledge and understanding and Geographical skills are to be applied and this is supported. However the paper needs to provide a structure to guide the writers. It is recommended that the current proposal for K–10 should not be considered for Years 11 and 12.

Another key issue relates to ACARA’s proposed hours to guide writers across the curriculum and implications for the quality of Geography education across Australia and particularly in NSW. While the draft Shape Paper does not state the hours to guide writers across the Years for Geography there is a growing call from the education community, especially Geography teachers for this to be clarified. Stated in other ACARA documents, the hours to guide the Geography curriculum writers are the same for History from Kindergarten to Year 6 (40 hours per Year) but are half for Years 7 to 10 (40 hours for Geography compared to 80 hours for History each Year, with Years 9 and 10 indicated as ‘elective’).

While allocation of hours to the curriculum is a state jurisdiction matter, the time assumptions built into curriculum drafts has been contentious in Phase 1 for teachers in all learning areas. The failure to provide direction concerning the hours in the draft Geography Shape Paper will not assist the curriculum writers, and will remain an unresolved matter that distracts during the curriculum development and consultation processes.

Aspects of the draft Shape Paper establish a solid foundation for the development of the Geography curriculum. Stakeholders indicated a level of support for the sections ‘Rationale and Aims’ and ‘Geography’s contribution to the development of the cross-curricular dimensions and the general capabilities’, with some amendment.

**Specific comments relating to each section of the draft Shape Paper**

**Rationale**

While some amendment is recommended there is overall support for the Rationale. The Board’s online survey indicated that 78% of respondents agree or strongly agree with the Rationale.

The three sections, ‘What is geography’, ‘Why geography’ and ‘Aims of the K–12 geography curriculum’ provide the basis for a comprehensive rationale, that describes the scope of Geography and the importance of the discipline. It would benefit from general editing, a more succinct approach and clearer emphasis on students and student learning.
The section ‘Why geography’ has less support as its place in the Australian curriculum has already been established. It may be, however, that parents, community members and teachers in states and territories that have not had a tradition of Geography in their curriculum may find this information useful. Whether the Shape Paper is the appropriate place for this information is questioned.

Other comments drawn from the reference group, focus groups and Board survey:

- a more rigorous approach to the study of Geography is needed to maintain the integrity of this important subject
- there was agreement that the curriculum should be engaging and intellectually challenging, and focus on depth of understanding rather than breadth of content
- the over-emphasis on human geography needs to be balanced by greater inclusion of physical geography which is likely to be more engaging for students
- the role of geography within civics and citizenship education could be strengthened. Geography can be an effective context to advocate for, and persuade students to take, individual and community action
- the definition of ‘environment’ should be re-considered to ensure the meaning is clear, unambiguous and accessible to teachers, students and the community
- the teacher-centred approach has greater emphasis than learning. Students and learning must be the clear, central focus
- the importance of students developing a deep appreciation and understanding of the operation of the natural world was emphasised. Given the environmental issues which are of concern today it is important that students understand how we can be a positive part of the natural world
- the human geography component is too locally based. Students need to learn how the globalised world works.

**Geography’s contribution to the development of the cross-curricular dimensions and the general capabilities**

Overall the cross-curricular dimensions and the general capabilities are well presented and appropriate. This section includes advice to writers in terms of a discussion of each cross-curricular dimension and general capability; their relevance and application in geography. The Board’s online survey showed that 68% of respondents agree or strongly agree with the way the cross-curricular dimensions and the general capabilities are included in the draft Shape Paper.

Other comments drawn from the reference group, focus groups and Board survey include:

- the cross-curricular dimensions and the general capabilities must be integrated within the content, not located separately
- there is a need to ensure the cross-curricular dimensions and general capabilities are appropriately represented
- intercultural understanding is not as clear as the other general capabilities with a lack of empathy apparent
opportunities for students to learn how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples value the land as central to their being and how they have managed the land should be clearly evident
opportunities for students to link with local Indigenous people are not evident
action connected to sustainability is not evident
geographical content that is also included in the Mathematics and Science curriculums needs to be carefully mapped and coordinated across subjects and Years of schooling so the coverage of content is sequenced and complementary.

How is the Geography curriculum organised?
The main aspects of the proposed curriculum structure for Kindergarten to Year 10 are supported but the need for refinement is indicated. The Board’s online survey showed that 77% of respondents agree or strongly agree with the way the curriculum is structured. The two proposed strands of Geographical knowledge and understanding and Geographical skills are appropriate; however, the structure is complicated by other features that may be confusing for writers and difficult for teachers to manage.

The ‘analytical perspectives’ – place, space and environment – are important in the study of Geography but they do not work well as separate organisers of the curriculum. Place, space and environment are interrelated features of Geography that should be represented in integrated content statements that allow students to develop deep knowledge and understanding and apply skills within geographical contexts.

The ‘major concepts’ could be an effective component of the curriculum but they need to be built into the content descriptions in each Year, and not appear as an unconnected layer of the curriculum. The purpose of the ‘approaches’ section is unclear with a number of respondents suggesting that it be deleted.

The draft Shape Paper does not provide a suggested structure for Years 11 and 12 courses. The proposal that the strands of Geographical knowledge and understanding and Geographical skills are to be applied is supported. However, the Shape Paper needs to provide more structure to guide the writers. The proposed K–10 structure, however, should not be considered for Years 11–12.

Other comments drawn from the reference group, focus groups and Board survey include:
• separation of perspectives for learning is artificial, they need to be identified and integrated when approaching geographical issues
• concern about the use of ‘place’, ‘environments’ and ‘space’ for organising curriculum content
• the emphasis on fieldwork outside the classroom is important as a geographical inquiry method
• geographical inquiry and fieldwork should be mandatory
• some skills are quite sophisticated and will require adequate time to be well learnt
• understanding of the key concepts in Geography is important
• the approaches set out in the paper may be useful for finding different approaches to appeal to different learners
• the two strands should not be seen as separate, but as interdependent
• separating the skills is problematic; they should be integrated in the content and this should be clear in the structure and layout of the curriculum
• the real joy of Geography is that it is a practical subject with a strong theoretical base
• the strands are similar to ‘learn to’ and ‘learn about’ but are complicated by the other layers; the overlapping structure will make it difficult to write a curriculum
• the organisers are a problem – content in a single column would be better
• this layered structure of the curriculum structure model may create a management issue for teachers when programming the curriculum
• non-specialists will be teaching this curriculum so it needs to be kept as uncluttered as possible
• a fragmented approach is unsuitable for K–6.

**Suggested scope and sequence**

The draft Shape Paper provides examples of ‘possible content’ for K–2, Years 3–4, Years 5–6, Years 7–10 and the senior Years. Comments about the content are limited as they are only based on the examples of ‘possible content’ provided. More detailed discussion will be provided following consultation for the draft Geography K–10 and senior Years curriculum scheduled in 2011.

One of the key issues for the scope and sequence as presented is the need to map the Geography curriculum so that learning is appropriately sequenced, developmental and complementary to that in other subject areas, particularly Science and Mathematics.

In Geography place, space and environment must be considered as interconnected and represented in integrated content statements. The curriculum should provide a continuum of geographical skills to be addressed across Years of geographical learning. Skills should be introduced, practised and mastered by students within appropriate contexts. The skills should not be directly tied to specific knowledge and understanding, allowing teachers the flexibility to program them with related content that will engage students. Fieldwork should be a mandatory feature of the curriculum.

The content in the curriculum must allow all students to achieve in Geography – including the most able, those with learning difficulties and those from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds.

The comments below are drawn from the reference group, focus group meetings and Board survey responses. Quantitative results from the Board’s online survey are presented.
K–2
The Board’s online survey showed that 82% of respondents agree or strongly agree with the ‘possible content’ for K–2. Comments included:

• more definition and consistency in the use of terms is required
• clearer recognition required of the role of early childhood and primary education in building strong foundations for and continuity of learning in Geography
• the skills are sometimes misplaced and some are inappropriate for students in these Years
• the numeracy requirements of Geography are unclear
• there is inconsistent use of terms ‘weather’ and ‘climate’ throughout K–6
• distance is a difficult concept for K–2.

Years 3–4
The Board’s online survey showed that 56% of respondents agree while 28% disagree with the ‘possible content’ for Years 3–4. Comments included:

• some of the underpinning assumptions for these students are incorrect
• there is a misalignment of issues across the scope and sequence
• fieldwork needs further explanation
• some of the skills and concepts being developed in Years 3 to 6 appear to be very high order for this age group.

Years 5–6
The Board’s online survey showed that 20% of respondents agree while 47% disagree with the ‘possible content’ for Years 5–6. Comments included:

• some skills are misplaced for these students
• Australia and global issues need clarification
• content suggested for Years 5–6 would be more appropriate in Year 7 and the Year 7 content better suited to Years 5–6
• some terminology for Years 3–6 is too sophisticated, but the level for Years 7–8 is too low
• many primary teachers would have difficulty with the expectations associated with constructing climate graphs.

Years 7–10
The Board’s online survey showed that 38% of respondents agree or strongly agree while 62% disagree or strongly disagree with the ‘possible content’ for Years 7–10. Comments included:

• Year 7 especially needs considerable work
• global geography should be made more central to the content
• the ‘flow of learning’ is disjointed, is not logical and needs further work
the skills need to be more clearly aligned to other content statements
more guidance is needed in relation to ‘deeper study of selected countries’
where is the concept of a globalised world?
content must move from the local to the global with interconnections made explicit
could be so much more exciting; what of human rights issues?
need to have the 'spiral' nature of skills development in Geography
no mention of fieldwork and over-emphasis on social and economic geography and not enough on physical geography.

Senior Secondary Years
The Board’s online survey showed that 56% of respondents agree or strongly agree while 44% disagree or strongly disagree with the ‘possible content’ for the senior secondary Years. Comments included:
• the structure is not supported and needs considerable development
• the concept of geographical research is important but the proposed one semester of research and report, out of context from other content, is not suitable
• the balance between physical and human geography should be clarified and appropriately integrated in the content
• the spiralling of learning from junior Years into the senior Years is not evident
• opportunity to drill down into physical geography is not sufficient
• unit 1 is worrying because it separates the environment from the rest of the study
• senior Geography course lacks a focus on physical and human geography that has the potential to be highly engaging for students
• senior Years independent study needs to be integrated.

Pedagogy
Inquiry-based learning can be an effective learning process; however, it should be balanced with other approaches to teaching and learning. Inquiry-based learning works well when the teacher has expertise and it is anticipated that many teachers will need professional development for effective implementation. The content will need to be well thought through and clear to support teachers for effective student learning. There would be concerns if the curriculum were to take on a SOSE rather than a geographical approach.

It is noted that the draft Geography Shape Paper includes a section on pedagogy, whereas this was not included for the Phase 1 subjects. Pedagogy is an aspect of implementation of a curriculum and is therefore an area for jurisdictions and schools to address. It is unclear why this section has been included for Geography and suggest that it be removed from the final Shape Paper.
\textit{Links with Environmental Science}

The Board’s online survey showed that 47% of respondents agree while 53% disagree that the curriculum links with Environmental Science are appropriate.

There is recognition that Geography as an area of the Australian curriculum has a major role to address the sustainability cross-curriculum dimension and link with Environmental Science. Some are concerned that Geography moves too far away from learning in the discipline and advocate that a balanced approach is maintained. Curriculum mapping across the Geography and Science curriculums will be needed to provide a clear picture of the links between Geography, sustainability and Environmental Science.

The draft Shape Paper needs to further recognise that Geography investigates the environment in a different manner to Science, ie from a geographical perspective that incorporates civics and citizenship assisting students to become responsible global citizens.

Other comments drawn from the reference group, focus groups and Board survey include:

\begin{itemize}
  \item assumptions appear to be made that students will study Geography and the Earth and Environmental Science curriculums which will often not be the case
  \item there is concern that significant areas of the physical aspects of Geography have been allocated to Science
  \item students need to develop a core understanding of why there is a need for people to be environmentally aware by understanding biophysical interactions and the physical side of geography.
\end{itemize}

\textbf{Conclusion}

The Board’s online survey showed that 30% of respondents agree or strongly agree while 70% disagree or strongly disagree that the draft Shape Paper provides a sound basis for developing the Australian curriculum for Geography.

The draft Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Geography from Kindergarten to Year 12 lacks the clarity and quality required to form a suitable basis for the development of a quality Geography curriculum.

Concluding comments drawn from the reference group, focus groups and Board survey:

\begin{itemize}
  \item the draft Shape Paper does not yet have a curriculum structure that provides the basis for a high quality curriculum for Geography
  \item NSW students will have less geographical understanding at the end of their Year 10 education under the proposed curriculum
  \item the draft Shape Paper does not clarify intentions regarding indicative time for the study of Geography. The 40 hours per year in secondary suggested in other documents is not sufficient time for an in-depth appreciation of this subject or an exploration of the skills of inquiry necessary
  \item there is a need to ensure civics and citizenship are central to Geography
  \item there is concern at the lack of rigour to challenge our most able students and retain them in elective and senior Years Geography courses
\end{itemize}
• the content must allow all students to achieve in Geography including the most able, those with learning difficulties and those from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds
• there is a need for more consistent use of terminology/language across the document
• the curriculum must encourage students learning in the geographical context with significant levels of fieldwork.