



NSW Response to the Draft Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Languages

Background

The NSW Board of Studies conducted consultation on the Draft Languages Shape Paper in order to gather responses from key stakeholders that would inform the Board's feedback to ACARA. The consultation through the Board included:

- teacher (K–12) focus group meetings attended by teachers representing the spectrum of languages offered by the NSW Board of Studies (including modern European and Asian languages, Aboriginal languages, classical languages and community languages) at:
 - the Board of Studies on 28 February 2011
 - Parramatta on 1 March 2011
 - Blakehurst on 10 March 2011
 - Narrandera on 15 March 2011
 - Coffs Harbour on 17 March 2011
- an Aboriginal Languages Reference Group teleconference of academics involved in Aboriginal community languages programs and teacher education, and school and community Aboriginal languages teachers, on 8 March 2011
- a Languages Reference Group meeting of academics (from both European and Asian languages, as well as from teacher education), representatives from the professional associations, systems and sectors, the NSW Community Languages Schools Board, the Saturday School of Community Languages, principals of government and non-government, primary, secondary and K–12 schools, Head Teachers of Languages, and specialist K–6, 7–12 and K–12 Languages teachers on 9 March 2011
- an online survey available on the Board's website from 28 February to 25 March 2011 that received 81 responses
- a submission received from the Association of Independent Schools of NSW
- a submission received from the NSW Community Languages Schools Board
- correspondence received by the Board in relation to Languages in the Australian curriculum.

Summary of key findings

Over the years Languages education has been subject to a wide range of 'fads' and 'new pedagogical approaches', all of which have promised much, but, when historical enrolment data and trends are carefully examined, have failed to deliver. The decline in Languages

education is alarming, particularly in a global community where educationists and other experts are contending that education should now be focusing on ‘the four “Rs” – reading, writing, arithmetic [and] the fourth “R”: the Reality of today’s interconnected world.’¹

Feedback received by the NSW Board of Studies showed strong support for the early sections of the document, including the rationale, the distinctiveness of Languages in the curriculum, and the key concepts and understandings in language learning. However, it was felt that the Draft Shape Paper did not provide a firm curriculum basis for Languages in the future. Without a genuinely new, fresh and contemporary approach to the philosophy and practicalities of Languages education in the 21st century, and clarity of goals, the project would fail to deliver yet again and Australia would be facing the same issues of declining numbers in 5, 10 or 20 years’ time.

New South Wales is committed to integrating quality Languages education into mainstream curriculum by providing quality syllabuses that are appropriate to the needs of students and that support first, heritage, second and subsequent language learners, learners of Aboriginal languages and learners of classical languages, as well as the maintenance of community languages. It was therefore considered disappointing that while the Draft Shape Paper claims to cater for all students, in reality, this is not the case. There was a strong feeling that the needs of students wishing to study classical languages, or whose interest extended to the study of literature, had been ignored. Likewise, there was little recognition of the place of community languages in the curriculum, or of the role of community languages schools as complementary providers of Languages education in Australia.

ACARA’s *Draft Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Languages* makes a clear and unequivocal commitment to the positioning of Languages study, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages (Australian Languages) in the Australian curriculum. In general, this was seen as a very positive endorsement of Languages. Responses to the Board’s consultation process generally welcomed the inclusion of Languages as a mandatory key learning area in the Australian curriculum, commencing in primary school. This was tempered, however, by concerns about the current capacity of education systems to implement and deliver such a curriculum.

A key issue that had a significant impact on the way in which the Draft Shape Paper was viewed by respondents was the tension between the aspirational goals of a Languages curriculum for the future, with particular regard to the resourcing of substantial language study in Foundation/Kindergarten to Year 6, and the current reality of Languages education in Australian schools.

Of particular note was the acknowledgement in the Draft Shape Paper that for many students the study of a language represents more than just a subject learned at school – it equates with their identity and cultural heritage. This applies to a range of language learners, including those studying community languages, but it is particularly relevant for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The language of the Draft Shape Paper was considered to be unnecessarily verbose and complex. The majority opinion was that the academic terminology employed throughout makes access to the document difficult for its intended audience, in particular for teachers of Aboriginal and community languages, whose first language may not be English.

¹ Rosemary C Salomone, ‘The Foreign Languages Deficit: A Problem in Search of an Obvious Solution’, *Teachers College Record*, 28 January 2011, <http://www.tcrecord.org>

The inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages, referred to in the Draft Shape Paper as Australian Languages, is generally welcomed. Their profile and status have been enhanced with the development of a Framework for Australian Languages to take place in the first stage, alongside the development of Chinese and Italian. This is seen as giving due recognition to their status as the first languages of Australia.

The use of the term ‘Australian Languages’, however, led to the following issues being raised:

- There is confusion and a lack of clarity in the document around the use of ‘Australian Languages’. The reference to a framework has been widely misunderstood to mean a framework for all languages, not just for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages.
- For some Aboriginal community members the preferred nomenclature is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations Languages.
- Various community language groups are of the opinion that the use of ‘Australian Languages’ to refer only to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages is discriminatory, since their languages are also ‘Australian Languages’.

The paper falls short of its claim of being inclusive of all languages. It does not cater for the diversity of language learners or the full range of languages. It is written from the perspective of second language learners of modern Asian and European languages, with insufficient regard, in particular, for the full range of heritage language learners, community language learners or classical language learners.

While the allocation of hours to the curriculum is a matter for individual jurisdictions, the time ‘allocation’ for Languages study built into the draft has been viewed as contentious. That the Languages curriculum will be developed ‘on the assumption’ that all students will have learned a language in K–6, is considered inappropriate and detrimental to the cause of Languages teaching. The range of hours presented does not provide clarity about expectations. It was generally contended that principals would opt for the minimum number of hours within the range. In Years 7–12 this could potentially result in a significant reduction in the time allocated to Languages teaching and learning.

The Draft Shape Paper is lacking in specific detail and does not yet provide a sound basis for developing the Australian curriculum for Languages. The overwhelming opinion expressed by respondents was that the document focuses largely on justifying the place of Languages in the Australian curriculum, rather than articulating the shape of the curriculum in this learning area.

Specific comments relating to each section of the Draft Shape Paper²

Introduction: history, challenge and opportunity; Languages as a learning area in the Australian curriculum; A rationale for learning languages; The distinctiveness of languages in the curriculum

These sections of the Draft Shape Paper include detailed discussion about the recognised, well-researched and well-documented benefits and value of Languages learning, as well as a strongly argued justification of their place in the Australian curriculum. In general, these sections of the *Draft Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Languages* were well received by attendees at the reference group meetings, the teacher focus group meetings and also by the respondents to the Board’s online survey. They were considered sound, providing a clear articulation of the importance and place of Languages as a mandatory key learning area.

² Please note that specific references to Australian Languages will be addressed in a separate section of this paper.

While the general consensus was that these sections encapsulated the essence of Languages learning and could be used to promote the case of Languages in the wider community, concern was expressed that they were too wordy compared with the rationales and introductions in other key learning areas. The emphasis on ‘justification’ was felt to be defensive and out of place in a curriculum document.

Other comments include:

- the distinctiveness of languages in the curriculum is seen as positive and sound, but it is not necessarily new
- the rationale does not belong in this document. No other key learning area needs to justify itself
- there is no reference to literature. Literature needs to have a higher profile in Languages education. There needs to be reference to the benefit of accessing literature
- there is a need for clarification of how special needs and gifted students are catered for
- there is no mention of the particular value of second language learning for boys. Recent research into the growth and development of the human brain was cited regarding the role of language learning in the adolescent male’s ability to communicate
- the rationale must be more clearly worded so that it is understood by all – not academics only. It must be accessible for all stakeholders
- the limited emphasis on an economic/trade justification for languages learning was viewed positively. Community perceptions of the value of learning languages are best enhanced through recognition of its benefit to students’ cognitive and social development
- there is too much emphasis on communication, to the exclusion of the study of literature
- the second dot point in paragraph 17 should be rephrased to say: ‘develop students’ knowledge and understanding of, and reflection on, the nature of language, culture and of processes of communication’. An additional dot point should be included at the end of paragraph 17 to read: ‘promotes inquisitiveness and inquiry in students’
- there is concern about the exclusion from the Draft Shape Paper of any meaningful references to classical languages
- the ordering of the document implies a hierarchy of motivators with ‘communication’ as the goal. This may not be the case for all students as heritage, identity and connectedness may be of greater importance for some. In any case, the implied hierarchy should be explained and its rationale argued more explicitly.

Key concepts and understandings in learning languages

The general consensus was that the interrelationship of language and culture and the resulting intercultural understanding, as well as the links between language learning and literacy are fundamental considerations when developing a curriculum for Languages. While important concepts, their articulation in the Draft Shape Paper was deemed not to be user-friendly and therefore not accessible to the general target audience. Most commented that the language used in this section was too academic.

Other comments include:

- the terminology here is too dense. Not all people who are accessing this document will be native English speakers
- the use of Australian Languages to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages is confusing. It could be interpreted as all languages that are spoken in Australia

- it was suggested that there should be reference to literary works as works of art with enduring aesthetic value and occupying an important place in the study of languages, especially classical languages.

The learners, pathways and time on task in language learning

This section defines three student cohorts and three learner pathways (second language learners, ‘home users’ and first language users), and nominates suggested times for language learning from Foundation (Kindergarten) to Year 12. This section generated a considerable amount of comment. The definitions of the cohorts were not considered sufficiently comprehensive. It was felt that they did not capture the diversity of learners. In particular, the appropriateness of the term ‘home user’ was questioned by the majority of respondents. There was a definite preference for the term ‘heritage language learner’, although it was acknowledged that this could also be problematic.

A significant number of respondents suggested that the pathways should be expanded to include students whose primary goal is to study the target language as a linguistic system and to access the literary traditions of both modern communities and classical civilisations.

The diversity of language (second language, ‘heritage’ language and ‘first’ language) learners is acknowledged. However, the strong focus on second language learning is noted. Articulation of ‘language learning as an intercultural process’ and how it relates to ‘heritage’ and ‘first’ language learners requires refinement. In particular, this notion of intercultural process is potentially problematic, especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who are learning their own languages within their own communities.

The term ‘home user’ does not capture the breadth of that target group. This group includes students who have typically been brought up in a home where the language is used, who have a connection with the culture of the language and who are to some extent bilingual, with some degree of understanding and knowledge of the language and whose oral proficiency is generally more highly developed than their proficiency in the written language.

There is a lack of clarity in terms of the pathways. It is not evident whether Languages would be developed as three differentiated curricula for each of the identified cohorts.

There is significant concern about the proposed indicative hours of study in K–6. The reduction of time allocated to Language study in Years 7–10 will impact negatively on the effectiveness of Languages education.

The proposal that Languages be included in the K–6 curriculum was generally supported by Languages experts, since they acknowledge the research confirming the benefits of commencing the teaching of Languages when students are in the early years of schooling. The general feeling, however, was that current levels of staffing and the ‘overcrowded curriculum’ preclude this as a realistic option. For this to be effective, there would need to be significant policy changes. Its implementation would need to be phased in over a number of years, and accompanied by adequate funding for professional development.

There was an objection to the use of the word ‘assumption’ in relation to time allocation, rather than ‘specified’ or ‘mandated’ The majority of teachers wanted time allocations to be mandated. The suggested range of time was thought not to provide the required clarity of expectation.

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

- there needs to be another grouping of language learners. The following should be added:
‘Languages learners can be grouped in another way:
 - *Learners whose primary goal is to communicate in the target language*
 - *Learners whose primary goal is not to communicate in the target language, but either to study the target language as a linguistic system, or to gain access through the target language to the culture and literature, and to historical and archaeological documents of other cultural systems and civilisations*

Within these two groups of learners there is a diversity of communication goals with respect to the target language.’

- the definitions of the three learner groups are not sufficiently clear. In particular, the term ‘home user’ needs clarification but is considered inappropriate
- the description of three pathways does not recognise the many different pathways in learning languages. Students’ experiences are more varied than those proposed in the document. The document does not address key language curriculum issues such as the way in which a flexible curriculum continuum K–12 embracing multiple entry points can be developed
- there is a risk in identifying pathways. Schools will not be able to offer all levels in all courses. Some students may need to access courses elsewhere, but some will not be catered for
- there would be significant implications for primary schools and systems in terms of teacher supply, teacher qualifications and expertise for those teachers delivering Languages courses K–6
- there is concern about the continuum of learning and the ability of schools to provide for continuity of language learning from primary through the secondary school and the implied expectation that feeder primary schools will have to coordinate with secondary schools to be able to ensure continuity of language study. The range of feeder schools and their language programs presents a challenge to secondary schools
- respondents expressed the view that eligibility issues would arise and would be a logistical nightmare to resource. Questions were asked about who would be responsible for applying eligibility rules and determining the appropriate pathways for students. There will be significant implications for programming and assessment
- clarity is required as to whether differentiated curricula will be developed for the three identified learner cohorts.

Curriculum design for languages

Comment on a number of significant curriculum-related issues is constrained by the absence of detail relating to proposed content and course structure in this key document. The nature and role of the ‘common procedures and guidelines’ document referred to in the document is not clearly articulated in the Draft Shape Paper.

The curriculum design defines 3 interrelated aims and 3 interrelated organisational strands, the general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities, the key considerations for developing the Australian Curriculum: Languages, and a diagrammatic representation of the relationship between hours of study and achievement standards for each of the three groups, as well as the plan for the staged development of the Languages curriculum. While the Draft Shape Paper refers to curriculum design, there is no detailed or substantial elaboration of the curriculum content or structure.

There is too narrow a focus on communication and its associated skills in the Aims and Strands, as they are expressed in the Draft Shape Paper. Respondents questioned why there was no focus on language learning as a means of accessing literature and literary traditions. The assumption that language study is undertaken purely for vocational reasons or for university entrance is narrow.

There is a lack of clarity in the descriptions of the Aims and Strands. In particular, the concepts encapsulated in the aim: *Self-awareness: understanding self as communicator* and the strand *Reciprocating* need to be clearly articulated as they were not understood by many respondents. It was considered that reciprocity is, in fact, subsumed within 'Communicating' and does not warrant being a discrete strand.

Concern was expressed about how the implementation of the *Reciprocating* strand would impact on programming, assessment and reporting. An example of the way in which the achievement standards can report against the strands of 'Understanding' and 'Reciprocating' would allay fears that these strands cannot be assessed in any meaningful way.

In essence, the general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities reflect the cross-curriculum content already embedded in the NSW syllabuses. Literacy underpins the document, but why numeracy has been omitted and what the appropriateness of sustainability is in a modern or classical Languages context have both been questioned. On the other hand, Aboriginal respondents saw merit in the notion of sustainability being embedded in the Australian Languages Framework.

The articulation of the achievement standards was found to be confusing. Much more detailed information would need to be provided before an informed judgement could be made about the nature of the achievement standards. This would include clarification of the way in which it is envisaged that achievement standards will be expected to inform the development of the Languages curriculum design.

The prioritisation of Languages for the staged development of the Languages curriculum was viewed as establishing a hierarchy of languages. There was considerable support for the development of frameworks rather than individual curricula. This would make it possible to develop all languages at the same time which was favoured by the majority. The development of individual Languages curricula by the Curriculum and Assessment agencies across Australia has been based on frameworks that successfully accommodate differences in languages. The Draft Shape Paper does not provide a cogent argument for not including frameworks as part of the curriculum design.

The application of the criteria to prioritise the languages was contested. While the decision to develop a character-based Asian language and a non-character-based European language at the same time as the development of the framework for Australian Languages was acknowledged as appropriate, the choice of Italian was challenged. The popularity of the Italian language in Australian schools is largely confined to primary school-aged students, many of whom learn the language in community languages programs. The numbers decline significantly once students reach secondary school. The contention that the three learner cohorts are represented in the Australian community is not borne out by school enrolments and students undertaking the study of Italian at secondary level. There are few first language learners and heritage language learners of Italian. Respondents suggested that Spanish should take precedence. Its student numbers include first and heritage language speakers. It also satisfies the criterion of being a language of global importance as it is one of the six official languages of the United Nations. Similarly, French is spoken more widely and, with Japanese, is one of the two most widely studied languages in Australian schools.

In keeping with the Federal Government's initiative to double the number of students who complete high school with fluency in one of the four targeted Asian languages, the view was expressed by some respondents that Japanese should also be developed in the first stage. It is a priority language and is currently the most widely studied language in Australian schools. The three cohorts are represented, but the largest cohort is second language learners. This is not the case with Chinese, where the largest cohort by far is the international Chinese-speaking student cohort.

The table of Language-specific development does not capture the current provision of languages Australia-wide. The implication that courses in Arabic, Modern Greek and Vietnamese would only be offered at heritage language learner level is at odds with the current provision for these languages. In view of the demographics of these cohorts, it would be considered inappropriate to develop these languages as Heritage Language courses.

Leaving Arabic to the third phase is questionable, in view of its global importance, its strategic, political and economic importance for Australia, and the large Arabic-speaking community in Australia. Like Spanish, it is one of the six official languages of the United Nations.

Other comments include:

- an additional dot point should be added to paragraph 59b following:
 - in learning a language, learners should develop an understanding of and make informed judgements and comparisons about:
 - language and languages
 - culture and cultures
 - *literature and literary traditions*
- the description of achievement standards is very vague
- *reciprocating* and *self-awareness* are not clearly explained. The third aim of self-awareness is a relatively minor focus and should not stand alone. The organisational strands are unclear in their intent
- the criteria for prioritising languages are arbitrary and contentious. The staging of the languages-specific curricula based on these criteria will always be divisive. Better to introduce all the languages at once
- the choice of Chinese and Italian sets up a hierarchy of languages. Some respondents assumed that this meant that Chinese and Italian would be the two mandatory languages that would be taught in Australian schools
- for Languages other than those targeted we need a generic framework as we have in NSW in order to provide a comparable curriculum document for community languages
- the growing relevance of Arabic in the Western world and the growth in other language communities in Australia were suggested as considerations for prioritisation of languages.

Australian Languages

Respondents generally agreed that the Draft Shape Paper rationale adequately articulated the uniqueness, diversity and current health of the Australian Languages. However, having identified the significant level of distinctiveness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages, the remainder of the document does not provide the necessary detail to inform comment on how the Australian Languages Framework will meet the needs of Aboriginal Languages in NSW. More specifically, the following issues were identified as being of concern:

- references to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages are interspersed throughout the document, resulting in a blurring of the issues that relate specifically to Australian Languages. In order to address the place of Australian Languages in the curriculum more effectively, it is recommended that a set of underpinning principles be developed and that Australian Languages be represented in a separate section of the Shape Paper
- the inclusion in the programs for Australian Languages of ‘languages ecology’ is questionable. The Languages curriculum for Australian Languages should focus on language acquisition, maintenance and development, as well as language reclamation, not on a program of ‘language appreciation’. Languages ecology should be embedded as an element in all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages programs as an integral part of the course. As a stand-alone program it becomes a social science, not a language study
- there was confusion around the use of Australian Languages to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages. A preference was expressed by some for the use of the term Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations Languages. Others expressed some enthusiasm for the use of Australian Languages to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages when it was understood as a parallel term to European or Asian languages, indicating the origin of the languages
- there must be an acknowledgement that there needs to be a different curriculum design for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages. Clear guidelines need to be developed around the protocols associated with the teaching and learning of these languages
- the uniqueness of Australian Languages is acknowledged in the document. Reference has been made to the significant variability across and within the vast range of these languages and effect of language reclamation over time on language resources and its impact on the teaching, learning and assessment of the languages. Given this unique nature, the development of achievement standards that support valid measures of student achievement present an important challenge
- the diversity of the nations that make up Australia and the diversity of the languages spoken need to be acknowledged
- there needs to be recognition of the community teachers of Australian Languages, most of whom do not have formal teaching qualifications
- there is a perceived danger that communities could lose control of their languages
- the definition for the language learner cohorts need to be rethought to reflect the situation with learners of Australian Languages
- provision needs to be made for the development of a senior secondary curriculum framework for Australian Languages.

Conclusion

The *Draft Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Languages* was judged to be a very good document for the purposes of advocacy and for promoting the case for Languages education in Australia. The paper was, however, considered to lack sustained clarity and quality, as well as any description of curriculum content that would provide a suitable foundation on which to base the development of the Australian Curriculum: Languages. The general consensus was summed up in a comment made at one of the focus group meetings:

The draft paper is disappointing in its lack of specific detail. The paper reads like a justification for studying languages, none of which is new to teachers. It is unnecessarily verbose and inaccessible in its wording. What we want to see is what we’ll have to teach and what the curriculum will look like.