

UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY SUBMISSION ON THE CONSULTATION DRAFT OF THE NEW ZEALAND CURRICULUM.

Introduction

The university has a vital interest in the preparation of students for entry and successful academic careers at University. While we acknowledge that preparation for university is not the main driver of the school curriculum we do believe it must receive careful consideration in both the overall objectives of schooling, and in the particulars of the individual subjects.

We place the requirement for preparation for further study alongside, but not ahead of preparation for personal success, for active participation in the community and for contribution to the social and economic well-being of the nation.

We also acknowledge that universities must respond to the qualities of the students who come through the schooling system, no matter what those qualities are, but obviously the best possible outcomes can only be achieved for the eventual university students if this outcome has been given careful consideration throughout the school curriculum.

This submission is not a coherent package of responses to the whole curriculum. It is a compilation of individual contributions forwarded to the Secretary of the Academic Board for assembly into a submission. The points made by individuals and departments have been listed below. We regard them as valuable in themselves. Certainly more valuable than any process of developing a consensus view that would satisfy the whole university. We are a community of academics with a multiplicity of viewpoints.

Some points have been highlighted in bold, but they have been left in the context in which they were written.

General Comments

- ...it all appears very worthy and contains the appropriate language and sentiments
- ...I think the MoE is over-reaching itself in some of the social engineering aspects of the curriculum, **but I do applaud their concern with literacy standards.** The focus on these appears to be strong and if schools are able to deliver, it should feed through to students who are better equipped to enter tertiary study.
- To me the statement is so worded that no-one can quarrel with it. **It is too generalised to allow critical comment** or convey a precise understanding of how such feel-good outcomes might be realised...unless there is a vast number of fabulous teachers out there engaging with docile classes rapt with the learning process.
- It seems positively brilliant – **I just wonder if it is something which can be followed through?**
- What's not to like? Such principles and values... But really, the documents – both the overall curriculum and the specific curricula are written in the kind

of language that makes it almost impossible to penetrate or criticise.
....Without seeing how these values and principles actually play out in the schools it's hard to respond effectively.

Subject – Specific Comments.

Law.

The School of Law notes:

“The social sciences area seems a little ‘soft’ and **would benefit from some inclusion of New Zealand’s political and governance systems.** We find that many current students have very little idea of these things.”

Music.

“With regard to music: the second sentence suggests a return to music as the subjective experience beloved in the romantic period - and this ‘aim’ is repeated in the closing (definitive) sentence. It all sounds like a jolly good fun time for all **with nary a mention of rigorous training and practice (in performance) or the honing of critical and analytical skills,** let alone the cultivation of literacy sufficient to communicate with some signs of scholarship.

The statement is that ‘...students develop skills and knowledge.’ I’d like to see clear indications of how they ‘develop’ these, as a deliberate act of teaching / learning rather than through the natural process of development with age and maturity.”

Drama

“If the question is: how might the Drama curriculum be seen to serve as a foundation for students entering university? Then the answer is not really revealed in this document. In my experience the problem is that students arrive somehow believing they are complete in their knowledge of “drama” and in their abilities. It takes a big shake to knock some of their more confining expectations out of them.....and to begin to persuade them that there is more to learn. Perhaps the problem ...(exists) because **part of what they learn at school is to reduce the dramatic experience to what they already know of themselves.** That is, they learn that ‘drama’ is a way of understanding their own experiences and feelings.....”

(A comment added to this contribution by the Dean puts this into a context that needs to be considered: “ Dr X is expressing the feeling that the secondary school curriculum does little to prepare students for university **academic** studies in this area, but it may be OK for those moving on to a tertiary dramatic academy or school of performance.”)

Mathematics and Statistics

The writer has used the headings from the Maths and Statistics curriculum to structure his comments:

What is Mathematics and Statistics about?

This section is woolly and misses the point. For most people, at all levels of mathematics expertise, **mathematics is the art of calculation and of solving quantitative problems**: How big, how fast, how much time? Its predictive abilities have made it a powerful tool in science, engineering and commerce. **Statistics has a similar role to play for problems involving uncertainty and variation in data.**

Why study Mathematics and Statistics?

Goals like: ‘develop the ability to think creatively, critically, strategically and logically’ are not peculiar to maths and stats, but rather a feature of education in general. Clients of students of mathematics and statistics usually just want our students to know how to do various types of calculation, or how to solve certain standard types of problems. **Of course, as mathematicians and statisticians we would love our students to understand what they are doing, but in practice most will only ever be able to apply these standard techniques intelligently.** It should be said too that, at the moment, only the very best high school students come to us able to ‘create models and predict outcomes, to conjecture, to justify and verify and to seek patterns and generalisations’. Making this the goal of all mathematics students may be more than just slightly optimistic. **It is more important that students know the limitations of the methods they learn.**

How is the learning area structured?

It is good to see the number of strands has been reduced, but three is still too many! Mathematics and statistics do not naturally fall into such categories and the curriculum admits as much when it says that it is important that students see the many connections within and between the strands. **Making artificial partitions in the curriculum makes very real barriers to student understanding**: topics are left out because they are, for example, geometry and not number, when in fact some people will understand number better if it is explained geometrically.

University courses will undoubtedly adapt to whatever the final list of topics is. Over the years several topics have been dropped (often for quite good reasons) and universities have had to bring students up to speed by pushing material from first year courses into second year ones. This lowering of standards is probably inevitable given the much larger proportion of the population now going to university. It is more difficult to accommodate such changes in professional courses like engineering, where students become squeezed between poorer backgrounds from high school and more advanced topics filtering down from higher level courses from the natural progress of the discipline.

“Learning Languages”

The Head of the School of Languages and Cultures strongly endorses and appreciates the inclusion of “learning languages” as one of the eight learning areas in the new curriculum. In support she notes that inclusion of learning languages will:

- Align the New Zealand Curriculum more closely with international best practice.
- Enhance the ability of future New Zealanders to participate in global communities and compete effectively on the international stage
- Assist in developing the key competencies, particularly: “Participating and contributing”, “Relating to others”, “Thinking”, and “Using language, symbols and text”.

“Sustainability”

A number of generalised comments have been made to the effect that the underlying ethos of the new curriculum is based on a worldview that economic development is the purpose of education. This has been the focus of some reasoned and some extreme comment in the media.

The following contribution takes a closer look at this issue, as it is treated in the draft curriculum, from the point of view of a person whose role in the university is: “Advocate for Sustainability”

“There is an increasing focus both nationally and internationally in socio-ecological sustainability and sustainable development, which, as the Prime Minister said recently, is **the most important challenge of our time**. The sustainability challenge is essentially: how can all people realise their potential and improve their quality of life in ways which simultaneously protect and enhance the Earth’s life support systems?”

Given the major, interconnected socio-ecological challenges facing us this century (e.g. climate change, biodiversity loss, ecosystem degradation, global and intergenerational inequities) it is disheartening that the draft curriculum **still appears to put sustainability in the ‘optional extra’ camp**.

Environmental aspects are included in six of the eight learning areas within the draft curriculum framework, and sustainability is at least mentioned in a few places. Its most substantial inclusion is in the design of the school curriculum (p26): “Sustainability: students investigate the long term impact of social, scientific, technological, economic or political practices and consider alternatives that might prove more durable for the economy, for society and for the environment.” While this is very promising, **sustainability is a hugely complex area for individual schools to try to design and implement throughout their curriculum**. Given that this is not mandatory and given the existing time pressures on staff and schools, **unless substantial resources are developed to support and guide the process** I suspect only the very keenest schools will be willing to use sustainability as an integrating theme.

Instead, it would be preferable if sustainability was more explicitly included in the school curriculum framework. As noted by its inclusion in the design section, sustainability works well as a unifying, integrative theme, but one which really needs some level of mandatory integration throughout the curriculum, with greater support and guidelines, not just as an optional add-on.

Sustainability also fits in well with the vision statement (p8) and would add much greater depth and inspiration to the vision if it was included more explicitly. Much of the effective pedagogy section (p.24-25) is highly encouraging and aligns well with needs for sustainability, including reflective thought and action, making connections, and shared learning.

Treaty of Waitangi

There have been a number of comments, but the last word goes to this contribution:

“..... that there is no mention of the Treaty of Waitangi beggars belief in a NZ school curriculum. The treaty and its importance to NZ’s history and future must be a core part of our understanding if we are to create a socially and ecologically sustainable, uniquely New Zealand future.

Compiled by

Bill Matthew.
Academic Projects Manager
Secretary to the Academic Board.
University of Canterbury.

From submissions solicited through the Academic Board.