

Opinion

A new start for Australian history

By Richard Broome

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Few subjects excite such passions as the teaching of history, despite it occupying a small place in the school curriculum, and Australian history an even smaller place.

Proposed changes to the curriculum for history dominated public discussion recently. Everyone agrees Australian history matters, yet, surprisingly, it remains a poor relation in the curriculum. Surely it's time to reverse the trend and give Australian history a fair go.

VCE Australian History study design changes

2020 VCE

2020 VCE Australian History sample exam questions

Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War

To what extent did the Tet Offensive and the reporting of the My Lai massacre change Australian public opinion about the Vietnam War?

Aboriginal land rights

To what extent were attitudes to Aboriginal demands for land rights affected by concerns about economic development and loss of individual property rights?

Equality for women

To what extent was significant change achieved in the 1970s in the quest for equality for women?

New patterns of immigration

To what extent did debates about both the Blainey controversy (1984) and the rise of One Nation (1996) reflect differing Australian attitudes towards immigration?

A global economy

To what extent were changes in Australian internal economic policy, such as the privatisation of government-owned assets, the management of wage growth and cuts in farm subsidies, effective in strengthening the Australian economy?

2022 VCE

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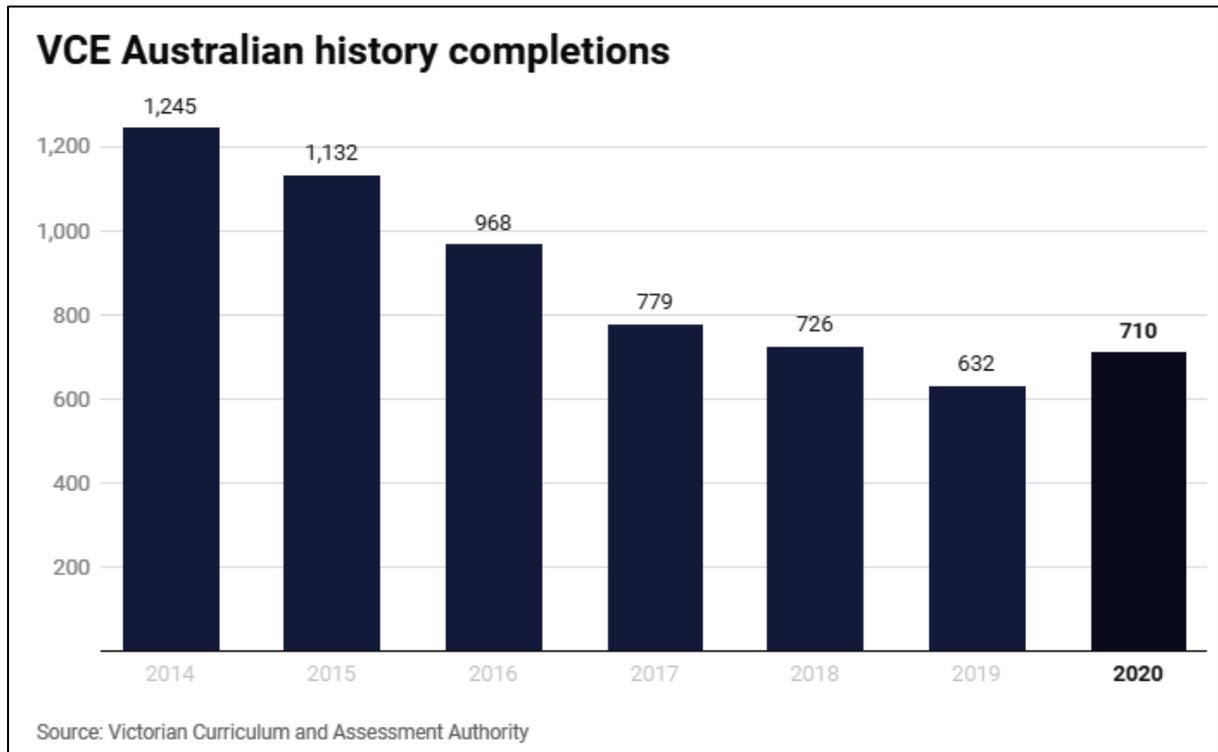
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Most advanced countries give pride of place to their national history in the senior levels of schooling. As young people approach adulthood and choose their careers, knowing their own history is an essential foundation for later study and for active citizenship – or what the influential American National Standards in History calls political intelligence.

“Without history, we cannot undertake any sensible inquiry into the political, social or moral issues in society,” it argues.

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority agrees: “Awareness of history is an essential characteristic of any society, and historical knowledge is fundamental to understanding ourselves and others.”

Yet in the furious battle for space within an overcrowded curriculum, history is often among the first subjects to be elbowed aside. Victoria is now the only state teaching Australian history at year 12. Even here it is not in robust health. About 15 per cent of year 12 history students study Australian history, equivalent to fewer than 2 per cent of all year 12 students.



These statistics are alarming given the importance of history to a diverse multicultural society still shaped by British law, education and cultural ways.

Australian history affords ample opportunities for cultivating “the sense of wonder, curiosity and respect” towards people, cultures and places that the Australian curriculum considers integral to the study of history.

Contrary to the rumour that nothing happened here, Australian history is dynamic, full of drama, and even revolutionary in certain ways. Its stories will engage students intellectually and cause them to marvel at their own society, without any cringe.

Australia’s history stretches back more than 60,000 years, during which one of the oldest cultures in the world engaged with the environment. The arrival of Europeans (students can explore if it was an invasion) brought calamitous changes for First Nations peoples but also forged an advanced democracy for white men, which the struggles of women and First Nations peoples made more inclusive, making it a world success story.

Australian history in Victorian schools will get a fresh start with the introduction in 2022 of a completely revised year 12 study design. Based on the latest historical and educational research, it will offer students an opportunity through independent inquiry to study exciting episodes of our history from original sources, creating a sense of wonder, curiosity and respect.

Emeritus Professor Richard Broome is co-editor, with Ashley Pratt, of a four-volume series for VCE year 12