

EDITORIAL

Curriculum plan deserves support, not a retread of the history wars

The Age's View
May 2, 2021

The “history wars” reignited last week when the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority released its draft review of the national education curriculum for public consultation.

It’s a complex document, covering every aspect of education from prep upwards, and many of its suggested changes are uncontentious and unremarkable.



Federal Education Minister Alan Tudge.

The authority’s recommendations include maths classes having more units on financial literacy; business classes being more about entrepreneurship; more content at all class levels about consent in personal relationships; and primary school students being taught to have a greater awareness of online security.

The authority has also recommended reducing the overall curriculum by about 20 per cent in what chief executive David de Carvalho described as “the Marie Kondo treatment ... so that regardless of how much content is left in the curriculum, it is properly organised, logical in its presentation and sequence, coherent, clear and easily accessible”.

Again, hardly a barbecue-stopper: the current curriculum is widely considered by teachers as confusing and unwieldy.

What has proved inflammatory is that some of the authority’s changes and cuts, particularly in the humanities, give less emphasis to “Christian heritage” in the areas of civics and citizenship.

Also in the spotlight is its proposal to give status to First Nations culture and history as a “cross-curriculum priority” embedded within all key disciplines from maths and science to history.

This has rattled some in the sector, who, broadly, argue that prioritising First Nations issues and content should not come at the expense of studying Western civilisation. Catholic University academic Kevin Donnelly wrote in *The Australian* that the proposed revisions were an attempt to “decolonise the curriculum by removing or ignoring the debt owed to Western civilisation”. Nationals MP Barnaby Joyce, a member of the House of Representatives education committee, said the proposals were “driving history through the guilt-ridden lens of colonialism”.

Education minister Alan Tudge told Sky News it was a good development to include “more emphasis” on First Nations history but that he would be “looking for some changes” and the new emphasis “should not come at the expense of dishonouring our Western heritage, which has made us the liberal democracy that we are today”.

Mr Tudge, along with the state and territory education ministers, is required to sign off on the final curriculum, which now undergoes 10 weeks of public consultation.

The authority’s review of the current curriculum is clear: its content focuses too much on First Nations Australians “as artefacts of the past”, lacks mention of the Native Title Act, and fails to recognise that First Nations peoples “experienced colonisation as invasion and dispossession of land, sea and sky”.

Better engaging First Nations students through content that reflects their culture, or as the authority puts it, gives them “the ability to see themselves, their identities and cultures reflected in the curriculum”, could only be a positive step.

So, too, is giving all students an opportunity to learn from what the authority recognises as “the world’s oldest continuous living cultures”.

Doing this in a framework that discusses different historical interpretations and debates about the colonial and settler societies, in the context of how First Nations people view European settlement as “invasion”, is not revisionism; it is bringing the curriculum into line with community expectations.

There is much ground to be made up in Australian schools in learning about the full gamut of our past. Yes, many of our country’s institutions are based on Western ideas and ideals. And yes, our history of brutal colonialism continues to affect us all. We must be better informed about it.

Mark Rose, the pro vice-chancellor of Indigenous strategy at Deakin University and chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group at the ACARA, put it well:

“If you peel back our society, there are four faces of this nation. We have a colonial past, which is significant and should be in the curriculum. We are part of Asia. We are

one of the world's most multicultural nations. And we house the world's longest-living continuous culture.

“If those four faces are not represented, we are doing our kids a disservice.”