

NSW Curriculum Review

NSW Business Chamber

SUBMISSION | November 2018



About the Chamber

The NSW Business Chamber (the Chamber) is one of Australia's largest business support groups, with a direct membership of more than 20,000 businesses.

The Chamber works with businesses spanning all industry sectors including small, medium and large enterprises. Operating throughout a network in metropolitan and regional NSW, the Chamber represents the needs of business at a local, state and federal level.

Introduction

Access to skills is consistently cited as a leading concern for NSW businesses.

The Chamber maintains our education system needs to play a greater role in building critical foundational skills to ensure young people have the capability to be effective contributors in the modern workplace and to assist them in fulfilling their career goals and aspirations.

Assessments of labour shortages in NSW highlight the need to boost training in trade qualifications and the need to deliver more contemporary and practical skills training. Further to this communication, teamwork and problem solving are key capabilities employers across all industry sectors routinely comment are essential to contribute and succeed in the modern workplace. .

The Chamber believes the review of NSW Curriculum provides a perfect opportunity to commence the recalibration of our school system to better support young people into pathways that lead to positive and sustained work outcomes and to address some of the chronic skill shortages faced by NSW businesses.

Our observations and contributions to this review are based on the intelligence gathered from our 20,000 member businesses; our experience in delivering apprenticeships and traineeships; and our involvement in various initiatives looking to solve the problem of youth unemployment.

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A step towards school transformation

Despite the importance of school education to students, industry and society at large, opportunities to fundamentally change the way in which we teach and support young people appear to be mired in a complex bureaucratic system that stifles innovation and which actively resists change.

For example, the NSW Higher School Certificate (HSC) has not been reviewed since the mid-1990s McGaw Review.

Over that time, the number of young people sitting the HSC has grown significantly, as have the social and economic environments in which they live. Changes to workforce and population demographics, and the vocational and higher education systems mean that we need to ensure that both the HSC and our school system more generally is meeting the demands and expectations of students, parents, tertiary institutions and industry.

The NSW Curriculum Review provides a unique opportunity to examine both how and what we teach along with ways to inject more flexibility in course offerings, improve the integration of vocational education, bolster careers advice and improve the assessments of student capacity and competency.

While the Curriculum Review marks a major milestone in transforming schools in NSW, an education and training system as large and complex as NSW demands a holistic commitment from Government to ensure that any change commenced is embedded effectively and that positive results can be built on and sustained.

The Chamber appreciates this submission forms the first formal opportunity to engage in the NSW Curriculum Review which will run into 2019. The Chamber will continue to engage as the review progresses, however, our initial recommendations for the review are as follows:

1. **Put** student needs at the centre of the system
2. **Re-focus** the curriculum to ensure all students can build and develop industry relevant general capabilities as well as key literacy and numeracy skills
3. **Decouple** the ATAR from the final years of schooling by revitalising and re-emphasising the HSC as a final credential that celebrates and recognises the attainment of skills and capabilities by all students
4. **Ensure** more contemporary careers advice to students and their families is available from year 9
5. **Reduce** the breadth of the curriculum by removing subjects that are more effectively delivered outside the school system

1. Put student needs at the centre of the system

Putting student needs at the centre of the system appears an obvious statement. It is increasingly apparent, however, that both the curriculum and wider school system is subsuming the needs of students in favour of pathways geared towards university.

Following changes to compulsory schooling in 2010, NSW students are now required to complete year 10 and be in school (or other approved training, education or employment) until they turn 17.

Although the Chamber is in broad support of students that have not identified suitable training, education or employment to remain in school, the changing needs of students undertaking senior schooling and opportunities in the workforce are not being reflected in many of the offerings provided by the school education system. Traditional academic offerings are both easier (and cheaper) for schools to deliver but with more than 60 per cent of students not going to university, a more diverse offering is required to meet the needs of students.

While a curriculum should have a purpose, aim and objectives reflecting the aspiration of our community, curriculum should also be developed and designed in a way that supports students across their educational journey and provide so far as possible direct linkages and opportunities to secure a meaningful career.

2. Re-focus the curriculum to ensure all students can build and develop general capabilities and critical literacy and numeracy skills relevant to the needs of industry

In 2017, the Chamber conducted a survey of businesses focusing on skills needs. The survey found that nearly forty percent of businesses who had hired young people found them poorly (31.7%) or very poorly (5.9%) prepared for work. These businesses indicated young people they had hired lacked the right attitude or motivation (26.5%), lacked common sense (26.0%), had poor literacy/numeracy skills (15.1%), or had other general educational deficiencies (8.7%).

In support of this submission, the Chamber has more recently reached out to member businesses to receive more detailed feedback on their experiences. When discussing the capabilities business required in their workplace feedback suggested:

"One of the key attributes I look for is staff who can adapt to change quickly, and who are able to "join the dots" – that is, here's a situation, I need to get to this point over here, and the staff member fulfils the task using their own problem solving abilities."

Business (Financial Services)

"Creativity is essential to differentiate our product from competitors and ensure innovation and an environment of constant improvement."

Business (Property Management)

"Essentially... problem-solving means being able to come up with innovative solutions to a client's limitations, whether these relate to a brand hierarchy, a budget constraint, or fixing an outdated customer perception."

Business (Design and marketing Services)

While the Australian Curriculum already looks to embed general capabilities in content areas, a more robust framework needs to be created to ensure that these capabilities are developed and reinforced throughout students' learning journey.

The Foundation for Young Australians in its 2015 report, *The New Basics*ⁱ undertook research of 4.2 million online job advertisements between 2012 and 2015.

That research identified that over the period, the proportion of jobs that demanded critical thinking increased by 158 per cent. For digital literacy, creativity, presentation skills and problem solving the increase was 212 per cent, 65 per cent, 25 per cent and 26 per cent, respectively.

The research also indicated that only 1 in 10 teachers had undertaken recent professional development to help students develop generic, transferable skills for the future workplace with less than half of Australian secondary school teachers reporting that they frequently involved students in "small groups to come up with a joint solution to a problem or task".

It's critical to future work and success that these skills be more explicitly developed and measured at school. Introducing a more robust general capabilities framework which supports experiential and project based learning throughout the K-12 curriculum is strongly supported.

3. Decouple the ATAR from the final years of schooling by revitalising and re-emphasising the HSC as a final credential that celebrates and recognises the attainment of skills and capabilities

Consistent feedback from both businesses and our engagement with young people suggests that the current emphasis on the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) over the final years of schooling is having a negative impact on student development and the alternative learning pathways.

The focus on ATAR can substantially derail the "education" component of the final years. Perceptions on how to game the ATAR influences subject choice and the approach to how teachers teach and how students learn. The emphasis on ATAR is however not solely driven by schools and teachers, but also by parents and in many cases students themselves. While the ATAR was designed for universities to sort and select students, it has evolved to have a much broader reach with many students and parents seeing it as the key way of measuring success at the end of school.

As was identified by the Mitchell Institute in its 2018 report, *Crunching the Number*ⁱⁱ, the ATAR is neither effective as a final credential or as a basis of admission to university.

The Institute identified that only 1 in 4 students were admitted to university on the basis of their ATAR. Early offers, aptitude tests, special entry schemes or VET award courses were all alternative options to enter university.

The Institute also identified that between 2001 and 2015, there was a 10 per cent drop in HSC students studying intermediate maths (HSC Mathematics) and a 9 per cent increase in the number studying lower level maths (HSC General Mathematics). About half of students and teachers surveyed by the Institute indicated that maximising ATARs was the reasoning behind choosing the less advanced course.

To improve learning opportunities and to refocus the final years of schooling on skill and education development it's essential steps are taken to de-emphasise ATAR achievement as the objective of the final years.

Such an approach would require a revitalisation and re-emphasis of the HSC's Record of School Attainment as a final credential that more effectively recognises student achievement and skill attainment (particularly vocational skills) for all students. Such a revitalization would require VET studies to be fully integrated within the curriculum (not an 'alternative' to the mainstream study path) and measures taken to remove any structural disincentives on schools from supporting students into vocational pathways (in terms of both school based and externally based training).

4. Ensure more contemporary careers advice to students and their families is available from year 9

Research performed by the Chamber indicates high quality careers advice and guidance is vital to support young people make the best decisions about education and employment. This is especially the case for the cohort of young people who are at risk of being disengaged from work or training.

More than 30,000 15-24 year olds participated in the Chamber's recently released *Skillsroad Youth Census 2018*ⁱⁱⁱ.

That report highlighted that in discussing their career options at school, 19% of NSW respondents felt pushed/encouraged into a university pathway, while only 3% felt they were pushed/encouraged into an apprenticeship or traineeship. While 52% of respondents felt they got great information from their careers advisor, 23% felt they would have liked to know more about the options available to them.

The report also highlighted the critical role parents can play in student's attitudes towards learning and employment pathways. The survey identified that 43% of 15-19 year olds perceived that their parents expected them to go to university.

To improve the capacity of students to make effective decisions around learning pathways, higher quality information about career opportunities, short and long term skills needs and employment conditions needs to be made accessible to students. Such an approach should include:

- The development of an industry-led careers hub model in collaboration with schools and external specialist organisations to help ensure students have the right information about the job outcomes their subject choices and performance at school lead to;
- Embedding a middle/senior secondary work experience program in the curriculum so that students can see how their classroom studies link to real world careers;
- The use of technology platforms to help match assessments of a student's personality, interests, capabilities and preferences with potential job opportunities and leaning pathways; and
- The development of an ongoing post school survey (similar to the Victorian Government's *On Track*^{iv} survey of school leavers) to better monitor student outcomes and school performance in terms of transition to work and further study

5. Reduce the breadth of the curriculum by removing subjects that are more effectively delivered outside the school system

The Chamber acknowledges the concerns that the current curriculum is overcrowded and that steps need to be taken to reduce its size and scope.

The Chamber is not in a position to provide detailed advice on subject matters, we note however, that the Secondary Principals Council has called for the removal of compulsory languages from the current 7-12 curriculum. The Chamber recognises the concerns of Principals in this regard and the challenges in resourcing these subjects (where resources might be better utilized to other areas of the curriculum).

While noting there is a need for foreign language competency in business, the Chamber notes that since December 2016, proficiency in foreign languages has been the lowest technical skill in demand by respondents to our Business Conditions Survey.

With the emergence of a range of technology support for language development and the strength of private and community based schools in delivering language training, consideration should be given to the role of languages in the curriculum and whether they might be removed from requirements.

Finally, the Chamber encourages this Review to consider the findings of the recently conducted SkillsRoad youth census. The Census provides valuable evidence that will assist in completing this review.

ⁱ http://www.fya.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/The-New-Basics_Update_Web.pdf

ⁱⁱ <http://www.mitchellinstitute.org.au/papers/crunching-the-number/>

ⁱⁱⁱ www.skillsroad.com.au

^{iv} <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/research/Pages/ontrack.aspx>