*Paper for BERA Annual Conference September 2011*
*Symposium on* ***Curriculum policy: cases of translation***

# Curriculum as a public policy enterprise:
# Australian state differences and the past forty years of curriculum reforms

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***Abstract***
*Since the 1970s, curriculum reforms in Australia and in the UK have faced a number of common challenges, including drives to improve retention, concerns about unemployment and vocational preparation in a global economy, impact of international benchmarking and assessment programs, questions about how to deal with both the basics and the proliferating expansion of knowledge in the 21st century, challenges in relation to difference and inequalities and student engagement, and highly visible and volatile press discussions about particular curriculum reforms. This paper is a discussion of findings from a project funded by the Australian Research Council that set out to examine commonalities and differences in how different Australian states developed curriculum agendas over that period, and more broadly to contribute to some more general thinking about how curriculum gets made as a public policy. The project examined policy documents for each of the Australian states at decade intervals between 1975 and 2005; and it included oral history interviews with a number of key curriculum actors in each state, people who had had an active and sustained role in different aspects of curriculum making of that state. This paper discusses three key findings of this project that are relevant to analysis of curriculum as public policy. First, 'evidence-based' policy discourse obscures the intrinsic significance of values and purposes in curriculum, and the differences between Australian states in recent decades show the impact of their demography, geography and history in how they address purposes and starting points. Second, the impact of accountability and audit regimes has been a key driver of recent decades but also a central component of why a number of curriculum reforms have failed. And thirdly, this recent history and the different processes and conflicts apparent in different states brings to the fore the question, in a democratic society, where does the appropriate authority in relation to curriculum lie?*

In this paper I want to consider the curriculum policy level itself (that is the level of policy texts and overarching policy frameworks) through a lens of translation (loosely conceived). How, as well as why, do some relatively enduring concerns regarding curriculum and schooling (educating the child and young person; assessment and selection for life beyond school; managing different political interests) get such frequent rewriting and reshaping as

policy frameworks for curriculum? How as well as why do some policy texts succeed in the public political arena and some fail?

This paper arises from an Australia Research Council funded project studying curriculum changes in Australia over the past half century[1] (Yates, Collins & O'Connor 2011). The project set out to study curriculum texts and experiences of key policy actors in each decade from the mid 1970s to the first decade of the 21st century, and to do this comparatively across the different Australian states. In Australia, curriculum is constitutionally a matter for the states to direct and fund, though the commonwealth government has had some financial means of intervening. In recent years this has been taken further. In agreement with the states, the Commonwealth Government has constituted a new national curriculum body, initially called the National Curriculum Board, and later the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)[2]. ACARA oversees a national literacy and numeracy testing program, is responsible for a 'My School' website which displays comparative data on all schools, and is developing a new 'Australian Curriculum' whose first subjects are currently being trialled, while other aspects of its developing work, such as the cross-curriculum priorities, are open for comment. In part the research project discussed in this paper was intended to understand better as a backdrop to these new developments the consistency or otherwise of how the different states 'do' curriculum policy, and also to understand some of the changing emphases and matters at issue over time that are a backdrop of any new Australian curriculum (Yates, Collins and O'Connor, 2011).

The project was framed by my previous work in sociology of education and in curriculum studies (Yates 2006,2007,2009; Chappell et.al., 2003; Yates and Holt, 2009), not set up specifically within an Actor Network Theory perspective. Its key interests were in how curriculum is conceptualized and the ways that has been changing. While not conceived of from an ANT perspective, the project could be considered a case-study (or set of case-studies) that does have something to say about 'translation' and the re-writing of policy or curriculum frameworks 'via new texts, events and artifacts to become inflected with local dialects, contexts and interests'. In this case however the focus is a macro one rather than a study of schooling practices.

[1] See http://www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/curriculumpoliciesproject/

[2] http://www.acara.edu.au/default.asp

In the thirty years covered in this research (1975-2005), and without including specific purpose reports, enquiries and frameworks on topics such as the education of girls or boys, or indigenous education, or education for students with disabilities, or the many enquiries into particular school subjects, we sourced over 100 general curriculum policy documents produced by Australian states, and another 15 produced at Commonwealth level.[3] What is being 'translated' by this mass of activity (not just what is being 'translated' from it)? What is acting and being acted on?

In the 1970s in Australia, reports and curriculum frameworks were commonly thin documents, produced by 'Education Departments' of the respective state public service, except for the final phase of schooling designed for a minority as entrance to university studies, which normally was derived from an examination heavily controlled by cognate university academics. The documents were designed more for schools and teachers than for the general public. In the 1980s however, states began to bring curriculum more directly under the relevant Minister ('the ministerialization of education') and concomitantly into more direct political debates, and began setting up new forms of authority to deal with curriculum (Boards of Studies). They began to build more glossy forms of curriculum communication, with documents often intended not just to outline frameworks for teachers but to justify and advertise the quality of the curriculum work of that state government, that is, to directly embed it within the political purposes and cycles of governments.

These changes in the forms in which curriculum policy is now assembled are part of a more general global movement in doing policy and doing government, that has been called 'new public management' (Clarke and Newman 1997; Power 1997; Rizvi and Lingard 2010). In the case of curriculum frameworks, the shifts change who are significant actors here (the 'community', the media, voters) as well as the material forms curriculum framing and justifications now take. The glossy brochures designed for both a general reader and education professionals, often come to grief in this ambiguity of purpose. Including too much jargon or technical specifics or expert appeal incites ridicule from the media (Snyder 2008); but the imperative to demonstrate to the public the utopian visions and the multiple forms of

[3] These are listed in Yates, Collins and O'Connor (2011), pp.326-335. In that book and in an earlier conference paper, Yates and Collins (2008) I discuss some of the ambiguities of what counts as a curriculum text, and the difficulties of doing this project.

accounting that the governments will achieve by the new reforms (the highly employable flexible life-long learner of the 21st century with teachers and students multiply tracked and measured in fine detail to ensure discipline and progress) can impose too great a burden on schools and teachers as to how to bring such multiple and often utopian agendas together (discussed further in Yates and Collins, 2010 as well as later in this paper).

At the same time, marked differences between states were evident in their curriculum policy formulations, and in the ways those with longstanding involvements in curriculum making in different states took up their accounts of curriculum as a policy arena in our interviews with them: the issues they emphasized, their starting points, their values. When in the 1980s and 1990s many states combined history and geography as 'social education', NSW continued with the traditional subjects.

> "we were aware what other states were doing – we thought they were wrong"
>
> [interview, NSW. 27.9.07]
>
> "one of the best things we ever did at the Board of Studies […] was to introduce what we called distinction courses "
>
> [later in the same interview]
>
> "New South Wales, in terms of curriculum history, is a very conservative State […] [there is a view] that we have one of the best public education systems in the world because we have conservative, centralised examinations and because we keep up standards in an academic curriculum. [a view that] you are protecting your academic core as long as you can provide opportunities for working class kids in the TAFE sector."
>
> [a different NSW interview, 26.9.07]

NSW emphasized its interest in (and to some extent focus on) high standards and the top end of schooling and students, and maintained multiple levels of certification after other states had abandoned these.

Reworking its curriculum regularly, and facing many similar issues as NSW (fears of unemployment in the 1980s, questions about vocational preparation, concerns about the 21st century) South Australian documents maintained a strong flavour of 'social justice' concerns: they focused especially on the groups who were in danger of losing out through schooling, and worked on the general curriculum frameworks from a perspective of how to keep these groups

engaged (Collins & Yates 2009). One former Executive Director of Curriculum in this state, Jim Dellit (2011), entitled his reflections on a succession of curriculum reforms 'the quest for quality and equality in SA curriculum'. When a recent review of the South Australian Certificate of Education is set up, its very terms of reference reflect the values and assumptions of what is the starting point for a curriculum design, that *begin* with thinking about difference and those who may miss out:

> [to] achieve a curriculum and assessment framework that will meet the diverse needs of all students and results in high and more socially equitable levels of retention, completion and pathways beyond school.
> [quoted in an account by the chair of the review, Alan Reid, in Yates et.al., 2011, p59][4]

Queensland, uniquely, manages a final year 12 certificate and entry to university without an external examination, instead using well developed forms of teacher moderation. In doing interviews in that state, it was striking to us, that those we interviewed did not talk about university selection or the problem of ranking at year 12 unless specifically asked, very different from other states where it was a common point of reference for discussions. Here the key issue for the state has long been one of its huge geographic spread, and the issue of how to build retention for distant and rural populations and for indigenous students.

Tasmania, a small state with a small population, was able to engage in state-wide consultations about what matters. Its 'curriculum thinking' has a flavour that to an outsider aligns more readily with the ways curriculum is often discussed in primary schools rather than secondary schools: begins by taking about values, and is much more concerned with developing kinds of actions and thinking than with school subjects as such. In the community consultation that produced the 'Essential Learnings' curriculum, the community, itself with a lower than national average experience of higher and post-school education, answered in terms that made no reference to particular subjects or knowledge and instead produced a list of its five 'essential learnings': communicating, personal futures, social responsibility, thinking, world futures.

[4] Some of the prominent educationists who have come from South Australia and whose work reflects (without being identical) these shared values about curriculum thinking include Pat Thomson, Garth Boomer, Alan Reid, Jean Blackburn, Barbara Comber.

Local cultures, local values here translated global curriculum trends in ways that were often tacit, yet embodied different assumptions about how good curriculum is built. Does it need to deeply embed opportunity for local diversity (as in Queensland, and to lesser extent South Australia), or the different conception of fairness and opportunity seen in the guarantee offered by a common textbook, uniformity, external objective guarantees of its quality (NSW)? Are the voters more worried by evidence of change and concerns about falling standards, or are they worried more about a loss of jobs and the kinds of skills young people will need in their lifetime? In some ways these might seem like enduring debates, or enduring party political differences, but one interesting finding of the project was the way that a particular stance, a particular commonsense about curriculum endured within a state over time and through changes of party in government. Of course party political differences were also part of the story, as were broad changes such as the concern with school retention and schools as vocational preparation that came through the various state-based 'Into the 80s' reports as they faced new evidence of unemployment and global changes in the kinds of jobs that would be available. But history, demography, geography, 'culture', state differences were part of the curriculum formation we saw, and the issue of how these will 'translate' and Australian ACARA-based curriculum will be an interesting future object for study.

A second aspect of our study that is of interest in relation to the metaphor of 'translation' is the issue of 'curriculums that come to grief'. Again our focus was at the level of policy and public and professional reception of policy rather than at the school enactment phase. Our interest was in what kinds of things specifically came to grief in the move to embed policy text as a framework for practice? This is a different lens on 'translation' than classroom-focused studies where we might explore how texts become changed in their translations *as* practice - what comes into play, and what different and unintended effects as well as forms of selective take-up. Our study remained at an overarching level, but explored a number of cases where initial policy reports and intentions seemed initially to have some general public support but eventually attracted so much professional and public ridicule that they not only failed but played a part in the demise of particular state governments. And although the issue of actors (such as the media) and politics (political interests and agendas) comes into the story, the argument I want to make here is more about the issue of overarching curriculum conceptualization today, and the problems embedded in the new public policy approach to doing schooling.

The two cases that are of particular interest here are Tasmania's development of ELs (Essential Learnings) (Anderson and Oerlemans 2011; Connor 2011) and Western Australia's development of its Outcomes-based curriculum (Marsh 2011; Leggett and White 2011). In both cases an initial document and report that had some measure of public and professional support (more strongly in the case of Tasmania then the WA policy) attracted sustained press criticism, vocal lobbying and organized opposition groups, and eventually, with changes of government, both were publicly disowned. In both cases multiple 'actors' were being brought together in the policy formation, and also in its downfall. However what is of particular interest is that some new forms of policy norm associated with an 'audit culture' and 'new public management', often cited as key features of a new and more effective 'evidence-based' approach to governance today, were here 'actors' in the *demise* of the policies, were features that were widely rejected as not working. The features associated with these new forms are the reliance on pre-specification of standards and outcomes, that 'quality' must take measurable forms, the move away from trust in the professionals involved in the activity:

> In policy cycle terms, this is a new type of relationship between the context of policy text production and the context of policy practice or implementation. This involves steering at a distance via performance measures (including testing) as a new form of outcomes accountability […]
>
> Rizvi and Lingard, 2010, p119.

The Tasmanian development of ELs began with widespread public consultation and agreement over the five key themes for a new 'essential learnings'-based curriculum. Groups of teachers began working on developing it for within school-practice. As a participant, Jenni Connor, assesses it:

> The Essential Learnings curriculum […] had clearly stated sets of values and purposes which were intended to underpin and pervade students' educational experience. In recognition that youth, in particular, need to feel a sense of belonging and community, 'connectedness' headed the list of values, which included resilience, achievement, integrity, responsibility and equity. The purposes closely resembled the UNESCO four Pillars of Education. The values and purposes had derived (at least in part) from the 'Curriculum Consultation' phase in 2000 and while there was some debate about whether 'resilience', for example, was a 'value' or a personal characteristic, both sets seemed to resonate with those teachers and parents directly involved…
>
> (Connor, 2011, p.264)

Two other participants in the developments, Anderson and Oerlemans (2011), give a similar account. Like Connor they emphasize the extent to which the ELs was developed out of this widespread consultation in Tasmania, and also built on previous consultations and previous reports on primary and secondary curriculum, and its intention to provide a new continuity for

Tasmanian curriculum across the primary and secondary phases of school, from prep to year 10. However, what happened at an initial key phase of implementation is that two forms of new audit demands were transmitted to schools. One, formally unrelated to the curriculum reform, but impacting heavily on the ability of principals and teachers to give time to the new curriculum, was a new school resourcing policy. The second was that the policy as initially developed had focused on the central 'essential learnings' but not specified how these were to relate to school subjects, or to assessment. When being made active as policy for schools to implement, in line with the new levels of detail of contemporary accountability forms, teachers were faced with tightly specifying what an 'essential learning' looked like at every particular stage and in each particular subject area:

> Once assessment and reporting processes were put in place […] it appeared to become increasingly difficult for teachers to deal with the complexity of these approaches and each key element of each essential learning became like a discrete 'subject'. […] the inevitable outcome was that each key element of each essential began to be seen as something that had to be covered throughout each year, contrary to the goal of achieving a less crowded curriculum.
>
> (Anderson and Oerlemans, 2011, pp.81-2).

A number of things came into play in the demise of this curriculum: political agendas of the local newspaper in relation to a new young female Minister; the reluctance of some teachers to change their practices; the in principle difficulty of combining 'essentials' agendas with some disciplinary (subject) teaching; communication; timing, etc. But a demand to pin down in fine detail stages and criteria for assessment was the death knell of a curriculum constructed around visions of how the community wanted their future to be built.

Western Australia's curriculum development was also subject to sustained newspaper ridicule, this time by the national newspaper, *The Australian*, which was running a broad educational agenda critical of new forms of pedagogy and of any subject content that was not deeply traditional. But the 'outcomes' curriculum being attacked might itself be seen as a form of 'audit culture' thinking, in which the same newspaper is deeply embedded (for example in its approach to the needs of indigenous education). 'Outcomes' curriculum, in the sense of beginning by pre-specifying in detail what is to be achieved and how it will be measured, is a form of pedagogical and assessment thinking that is widely seen today (for example in government demands that universities measure the 'graduate attributes' of students). The principle is that the policy should specify and not leave to professional judgement what learning students should be able to demonstrate at the end of their study. The interest is not in

what they should be taught but in the measurable and identifiable behaviours they can demonstrate on completion (Donnelly, 2007).

The WA curriculum also came to grief because it took too little account of the embedded actors in its own professional arena, in particular the fact that teachers themselves were subject trained and have professional identities that need to be considered as part of any reform process, and that the new curriculum demanded significant internal restructuring of schools. But the element of instituting a curriculum framework based on accountability thinking rather than educational thinking was, I would argue, a player in the problems it encountered.

The project discussed here was interested in curriculum thinking: in how people and documents, especially at policy and political levels frame what matters, and this includes questions about what is foregrounded and what is not, and what is assumed about the forms curriculum policies and their translations into practice need to take. In the first part of the paper, focusing on state differences in Australia, I drew attention to some complex but often relatively enduring traces that ran alongside and reshaped locally some of the bigger and commonly-felt influences on curriculum (globalization, 'new times', concerns about employment, appeals to evidence-based and audit cultures). The differences drew on the histories of different states (South Australia, for example, was founded by free settlers, compared with the needs to management and discipline a convict settlement seen in NSW; and it was the first state to give women the vote); their geographic size and the material differences this makes to communication and consultation; their demographies and employment patterns; as well as their own history of education acting forward into the next generation. In the second part of the paper, I discussed two recent reforms that failed in translation, and argued that the drivers of an audit approach to curriculum and management played some part in this, not withstanding their status as a widely shared commonsense of governments today.

*Acknowledgement*

The Curriculum Policies Project, titled *School knowledge, working knowledge and the knowing subject: a review of state curriculum policies 1975-2005* was funded as a Discovery Project by the Australian Research Council (2007-9). I am indebted to Dr Cherry Collins who worked with me as an honorary principal research fellow on this project, and to Katie Wright, Brenda Holt, and Kate O'Connor, who at different phases supported the project both administratively and via their research assistance. More about the project and its findings can be found on the project website is http://www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/curriculumpoliciesproject/ and in the publications by Yates, Collins and O'Connor listed in the references. A new ARC-funded project which builds on that work but extends

it into higher education has now begun, investigating developments of disciplinarity, graduate and cross-curriculum competencies, and audit mechanisms in Australia, see http://www.education.unimelb.edu.au/kbp/ .

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