

Australian History – Suggestion for a Flexible National Approach

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Many of us will have followed with interest media reporting of the recent summit on Australian history. Convened by the Federal Minister for Education, Ms Julie Bishop, it explored the possibility of establishing a ‘body of historical knowledge which should be taught to all Australian students’. Inherent in the discussion was consideration of two significant challenges: the different approaches to the teaching of history across eight different states and territories and the perception that Australian history is unpopular with students. As reported by HTAA President, Nick Ewbank, the Minister identified the purposes of the summit as being ‘to strengthen the teaching of Australian history in schools and to sketch the essential narrative for a model Australian history curriculum’.

Much of the discussion surrounding the summit has focused on a range of concerns that may be summarised under three headings:

Ideological In a nutshell, there are fears that a ‘model Australian history curriculum’ would be a politically influenced official history.

Curriculum Such an ‘essential narrative’, it was further feared, would be just that – a simple collection of facts that ignored both history’s essential analytical nature and a broad skills development approach. Many were also concerned about the impact of a (likely small) number of mandated hours being imposed on the nation’s widely differing school systems.

Strengthening Australian History Quite simply, a federal prescription that is unpopular with teachers and/or unworkable in classrooms will not strengthen Australian history but have the opposite impact.

I would suggest that the ideological area presents the least difficulty. Such a proposal can only be sponsored by a federal government. As was already evident at the summit, however, the actual development of any national history course will result from a collaboration of groups of academics and classroom teachers. It is inconceivable that such groups would produce a version of our national story that did not credibly reflect developments in Australian historiography over the past thirty years.

Notwithstanding media sound bites about Captain Cook, 1788, 1901 and Simpson’s donkey, I would also doubt that anyone seriously believes that there was ever a golden age when history consisted only of a well defined body of important detail. For me, the very real concerns about curriculum come down to practical matters. There *is* a danger that Australian history will be reduced to a bunch of (disjointed) detail if we are given a lot to teach in a short amount of time. This is likely if the challenge of developing an inclusive national story produces an overly ambitious content outline. Just as predictably, a mandated subject with too few prescribed hours will simply become a timetabling/staffing challenge in many schools. Under such circumstances it will be difficult for even committed history teachers to weave the detail into a compelling narrative, to encourage a critical perspective, to offer a coherent program of skills development and to take time out for the sort of enrichment activities that engage students.

Curriculum issues differ from state to state. In NSW we already teach Australian history as a discreet discipline in Years 9 and 10. In most other states history has been subsumed by SOSE in the junior school and approaches to assessment and skills development differ widely. While the current federal proposal sounds closest to what NSW is already doing, it is unlikely to proceed against the opposition of most other states. There is also the question of separate state and local histories and how they would fit into a national history.

Obviously, we should all be very concerned about the possibility that the imposition of an ill-thought out and unpopular national history will weaken rather than strengthen the position of Australian history. It is a worrying start to the process that the summit did not appear to address the issue of history teaching in primary schools. One of the reasons students give for the unpopularity of Australian history is their perception that they ‘keep learning the same stuff’. While this is a long way from being a total explanation, it surely must be a starting point for any national history curriculum that it has a genuine K-10 perspective. The problem is that this would considerably magnify the complexity of dealing with eight different educational jurisdictions.

With so many apparent difficulties, there is a strong temptation to assume that the national initiative is doomed to failure. This will almost certainly happen if the various ideological warriors, educational stakeholders and lobby groups respond defensively, unimaginatively or without regard to classroom realities. This would be a pity because I think many of us see a lot of merit in the idea of a truly national history course. Agreeing on the content may not present the ideological challenges feared by some. It would certainly be an interesting historiographical exercise and, in very many ways, a worthwhile national project. A good result would enhance the standing of Australian history in schools.

The following outline proposal is based on the view that practical rather than ideological concerns present the biggest problem. The solution suggested here is to develop a comprehensive but flexible and non-mandatory national history course that would develop topics in a coherent framework. Each of the states could decide the extent to which they would incorporate these topics into their own syllabuses.

A Flexible Proposal

Key features

- Develop a framework for a national history course, K-10.
- Develop topics that would slot into this framework at various stages. For example, The Vietnam War might be developed at the Year 10 level, The Gold Rushes might be developed at the Year 3 level. (Where some topics entailed historiographical controversy this could be incorporated into the topic. There would also be the possibility of offering alternative approaches to topics: research based, source based, survey & depth, teacher focused etc.)
- Within each topic, include activities for skills development that are consistent with a coherent skills development program, K-10.
- Within each topic, include suggestions for assessment that are consistent with a coherent assessment program, K-10. This assessment program would need to offer states flexibility in what they will adopt.
- Some of the topics will be local or state based.
- Develop a range of quality resources for each topic. Among other possibilities, the internet offers the opportunity for a regularly updated text.
- The course as a whole and individual topics could be updated as needed.
- An accompanying course could be developed for teacher preparation courses throughout Australia. (As with the states, such a course would be taken up optionally by the universities. However, there is the distinct possibility that such a step might make a significant contribution to improving the teaching of Australian history across the nation. At the moment, it could be argued, we have no idea how well prepared our graduates are to teach Australian history, something we assume they will all do.)
- Once the course is developed it could be supported with professional development.

Why it might work

- It would not be prescriptive. States would take up some or all of the topics as they saw fit. A key factor here is that it would allow states to continue with their own cycle of syllabus development. On the other hand, it is a safe assumption that an imposed syllabus will be very unpopular if it comes on top of recent syllabus development within any state.
- Given the expertise that could be enlisted to develop the course, the topics and supporting resources would be of a very high quality. Rather than reinventing the wheel, states might find both the framework and/or individual topics too attractive to resist.
- With no minimum hours or prescribed assessment tasks, states would have flexibility in incorporating the course into their own schools.
- While states would retain flexibility as to where topics are taught, the depth of treatment and skills activities for each topic would encourage a national approach that, over time, could result in a consistent approach to what stage each topic is taught at.
- Any national history competitions could be based on the national course.