

AAEE Position on the National Curriculum

22 August 2009

AAEE position summary

A sustainable future should be the primary goal of all Australian education systems. Therefore, sustainability needs to be the organising logic for learning and curricula in schools.

AAEE¹ sees education as a critical tool for achieving sustainable development, good governance and informed decision-making. Therefore, curriculum plays a central role in student learning and in the organisation of learning. To this end, a reorientation of education toward sustainability is required in the curriculum and in the management of schools and school systems. This must include the development of a strong ecological identity through a sense of place and real connections to the natural world. Similarly, a love of nature is paramount in developing a commitment to sustaining environments.

AAEE holds that

If Australian society is to become sustainable, systemic change is needed immediately.² The environmental crises we face are real and urgent. Learning to live sustainably and adjusting our systems and priorities to facilitate sustainable living are vital for the future of Australian communities. The National Curriculum needs to reflect this.

As a transformative education, education for sustainability needs to challenge current mindsets about our world and be oriented to developing action competence that enables all to contribute to a sustainable, safe, healthy, prosperous and more equitable world. It needs to stimulate critical reflection and innovation so new concepts can be explored and new methods and tools can be developed. Education for sustainability should be responsive to changing circumstances, contexts and student needs. It should connect students to the environment both locally and globally and strengthen their capacity to establish and maintain constructive relationships in their communities.

The Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative (AuSSI)³ provides a useful framework for integration of sustainability into whole of school organisation, including curriculum. It offers the chance to model active citizenship and enable student participation in decision-making processes. AAEE believes structures and processes in schools, including governance, school organisation, testing, resources and teacher competence, need to help rather than hinder student learning in sustainability.

The National Curriculum

The Australian Government's *National Action Plan for Education for Sustainability* (DEWHA, April 2009) recognizes that students need to learn the skills, knowledge, values and approaches for transition and reorientation toward sustainability. It is imperative that the National Curriculum support strategy 2 in the NAP that calls for education systems to be re-oriented to sustainability. Those systems include the curricula required to be taught in schools.

AAEE recommends the following outcomes in the national curriculum

Students

- Understand our global environmental and humanitarian⁴ interdependence: human existence depends on viable ecosystems, healthy soils, a stable climate, clean air and water: all planetary systems in dynamic interplay. They understand that the intrinsic value and quality of nature needs to be protected and enhanced.
- Are capable of being active citizens⁵. Students are able to articulate and enact a vision of a sustainable and caring Australia, locally and nationally.
- Understand sustainability as an organising logic for learning in schools and living their lives.
- Are able to participate in informed decision-making and environmental action for changing our society towards sustainability.
- Think critically and question assumptions about our world in order to contribute to making our world safer and healthier and with quality of life for all, within the limits set by the environment.
- Develop a strong sense of place and real connections to the natural world. National and international research shows a strong ecological identity and love of nature is paramount in developing a commitment to sustaining environments so this should be built into the curriculum.
- Value cooperation, equality, the environment and mutual respect between peoples, cultures and generations. Students are able to articulate and apply values that express the vision of a sustainable future.

Rationale: AAEE Position on the National Curriculum

Sustainability issues pose powerful environmental, social, and economic challenges of our time: as the driest inhabited continent on earth, Australia experiences severe drought, fires and water shortages and is significantly vulnerable to the effects of climate change, particularly sea-level rise since over 80% of our population live in coastal zones.

“Australia also has a carbon intensive economy ... The Government believes that meeting this challenge is critical and is committed to the reduction of greenhouse pollution in Australia, as well as actively preparing for an altered climate in the near future... Australia should aspire to be a leader in taking

effective action on climate change and water management ... a focus on a healthy Australian ecology, incorporation of environmental considerations into economic assessments and the development of sustainable cities.”⁶

Australia’s biodiversity is under threat. “Currently about 40 species of mammals and many hundreds of species of plants are threatened with extinction. These figures are the worst in the world...”⁷ The Australian government has called for:

“a national direction for biodiversity conservation over the next decade...(that) asks all Australians to contribute...to ensure our biodiversity is healthy, resilient to climate change and valued for its essential contribution to our existence.”⁸

Sustaining the environment and managing resources underpins national food, water and energy security and is increasingly a consideration in all sectors of society. Social as well as environmental responsibility is being embedded in industry and corporate practice requiring citizens to be literate in acting for sustainability. For example the Australian SAM Sustainability Index (AuSSI) tracks the performance of Australian companies in terms of corporate sustainability.⁹

In recognition of the importance of education to bring about a society that can live sustainably, the UN Agenda 21 (1992) called for reorienting education to sustainable development and for national plans to achieve it. In 2005 the UN declared a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development which is supported by UNESCO. Many OECD countries have also prepared national strategies for education for sustainability.

Living Sustainably - The Australian Government’s National Action Plan for Education for Sustainability (2009) calls for reorienting education systems to sustainability as Strategy 2. Education, according to the Plan, must equip students with the capacity to make the transition towards a sustainable society. Students must acquire the skills, knowledge, values and approaches for transition and reorientation towards sustainability.

The Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative (AuSSI) provides a framework for integration of sustainability into whole of school organisation, including curriculum. It also models active citizenship and provides opportunities for participating in decision-making processes. Active citizenship¹⁰ is a key to a sustainable and livable future.

The AAEE vision

In 2007, AAEE developed its vision statement on the role of education in developing a sustainable future for Australia.

Every Australian government - federal, state, territory and local - recognises sustainability as an essential goal by having comprehensive sustainability policies and programs to support all Australians in moving to more sustainable lifestyles through integrated education, regulatory, economic and infrastructure provision measures.

Every business in Australia is encouraged to develop sustainable practices through appropriate infrastructure and educational support, economic incentives and regulatory framework.

Every large and medium corporate entity trading in Australia uses a sustainability reporting framework¹¹ and trains its staff in environmental conservation and practices beyond legislative compliance.

Every community and professional organisation takes a role in supporting its members to integrate sustainable practices into their activities.

Every formal educational institution (pre-school, school, TAFE college, university and registered training organisation) demonstrates best practice in establishing sustainable campuses and curriculum that integrates sustainability content and principles to enable all graduates to develop sustainable lifestyles and working practices.

Every school student is engaged in practical, hands-on, dynamic sustainability education, including experiences in the natural world, in every year of their learning through a curriculum that integrates coherent sustainability principles.

Every educator (in both formal and non-formal sectors) is professionally trained in both education and sustainability content, methods and principles.

Every provider of environmental education for sustainability recognizes that education should be directed at developing improved knowledge, skills, capacity and motivation to adopt more sustainable practices.

Every member of the Australian community and every visitor to Australia learns about sustainable practices in all spheres of their lives or visit to Australia, including the sustainability implications of all purchases of goods and services, and is provided with relevant infrastructure and appropriate choices in all aspects of their lives in, or visit to, Australia.

Every household, supported by ongoing education, improved public infrastructure and a supportive culture, engages in an increasing range of sustainable behaviours.

AAEE will review this position paper in mid 2010.

End notes

¹ AAEE like UNESCO, UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, UNECE and many OECD countries are progressing education for sustainability

² This includes changes in education systems and institutions, government, transport, industry and production, agriculture, consumption, food choices, workplaces, energy and water use.

³ AuSSI <http://www.environment.gov.au/education/aussi/index.html>

⁴ For example the interdependent impacts of planetary environmental crises such as Climate Change and the Murray-Darling water shortage; and humanitarian crises such as one billion people living on earth in absolute poverty.

⁵ The three interdependent aspects of active citizenship are environmental sustainability, social justice and democratic participation.

⁶ Australia 2020 Summit - Government Response p.59
<http://www.australia2020.gov.au/response/index.cfm>

⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics 1990
<http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@.nsf/Previousproducts/1301.0Feature%20Article31990?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=1301.0&issue=1990&num=&view=>

See also Kingsford R. Watson, J. Lundquist C. Venter, O, Hughes, L Johnston E. Atherton, J, Gawel M Keith, D, Mackey B Morley, C, Possingham, H, Raynor, B, Recher, H & Wilson, K Major Conservation Policy Issues for Biodiversity in Oceania, *Conservation Biology*, Volume 23, No. 4, 834–840

“Although our region (Oceania) has an extremely high level of species extinction, there is now sufficient knowledge to implement effective policy, but implementation depends on education, political will, community aspirations, social and economic capacity, and scientific understanding that vary with cultural and political institutions.Education and building knowledge within communities about conservation and environmental protection are critical.”“and of needs and rights of indigenous communities.” (p839)

⁸ DEWHA <http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/strategy/draft-strategy.html>

⁹ Australian SAM index <http://www.aussi.net.au/>

¹⁰ The three interdependent aspects of active citizenship are environmental sustainability, social justice and democratic participation.

¹¹ Such as the Global Reporting Initiative <http://www.globalreporting.org/Home>