

Submission to
**The Senate Committee
Inquiry into Academic
Standards of School
Education**

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1. This Submission in Brief

The Terms of Reference for the Inquiry into the Academic Standards of School Education draw particular attention to the issues of the extent to which each stage of schooling equips students with the knowledge and skills needed to progress to the next stage of their education, and those needed to participate in further education and training, and as members of the community. According to the Senate Committee's accompanying Information about the Inquiry document; *The purpose of this inquiry is to inform the Senate about perceptions and realities of standards and achievement levels in schools at a time when there is doubt in some quarters as to whether schools are preparing students adequately for the immediate workforce and for higher education.*

The purpose of this submission is to address the “doubt” surrounding the quality of school curricula in Australia and the “quarters” from which this doubt is being expressed, in order to determine the validity of various criticisms levelled at modern curricula, and the possible motivations behind them. With particular focus on senior secondary education, this submission will examine this aspect of the Inquiry, especially in regards to the following contemporary education issues:

- the current criticism being levelled at secondary school English and history curricula especially, mostly from the Liberal party and the conservative right, about an emphasis on “postmodern relativism” and “political correctness” over the development of core knowledge and skills;
- the current push for a national education system from both major parties, and the ongoing debate about how it should be developed and what should be included, and;
- the question of whether or not the current debate over these issues has been motivated more by the use of education as a tool in the “culture wars” than by interest in the welfare and development of Australian school students.

2. Criticism of Senior High School Curricula

2.1 English education and literacy standards

One of the most significant areas in which Australia's school curricula has been perceived as failing our students in the provision of core knowledge and skills is in the English syllabi of the states and territories. This perception has come about due to criticism made by high-profile figures in politics and the media, who question the merits of the current outcomes-based curricula being employed throughout Australia.

Considerable media attention has been paid to these high-profile attacks on Australian school curricula; on April 20, 2006, Prime Minister John Howard told ABC Radio that "*I feel very, very strongly about the criticism that many people are making that we are dumbing down the English syllabus. I think there's evidence of that in different parts of the country ... when the, what I might call the traditional texts, are treated no differently from pop cultural commentary, as appears to be the case in some syllabuses.*"[1] The criticism made by Mr. Howard, and the 'many people' he alludes to, seems to centre around the belief that our syllabuses have exchanged a focus on literacy and the study of classic literature for postmodernism and political correctness.

The perceived issue of a lack of real education of literacy has been a large talking point over recent years, compounded by reports of falling literacy standards (the proportion of year 3 students achieving national benchmarks dropped by 0.8% between 2003 and 2004, according to the Productivity Commission's most recent annual report)[2] and commentary, opinion pieces, and current affairs programming highlighting the basic reading, spelling and punctuation problems that are ostensibly prevalent among the student cohort. This position has been bolstered by the publication of government reports into Australia's curriculum's, such as the then Department of Education's 2005 study titled *Schooling for the 21st Century*, which, according to the then Education Minister Dr Brendan Nelson, "*recommends that Australia's education system, which has been infected by what's known as the outcomes-based education model, needs to return to a much more concise, prescriptive syllabus.*"[3]

These attacks portray our current system as one that allows students to enter senior secondary education with serious literacy deficiencies, and then subjects them to a syllabus which does nothing to rectify them. Instead, we are told, they study an overtly "postmodern" and "politically correct" course of learning that treats modern pop culture with the same reverence as traditional classic texts. However, the conclusions made about English education in this country are highly problematic, given both the realities of the course content itself, and the calibre of student it produces.

In the area of literacy, though there is evidence of a slight decline of standards among young primary school students, there is none to suggest that a serious deficiency exists in literacy education. Quite the opposite; in the most recent report from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Australia placed third overall in the assessment

of the reading standards of fifteen-year olds among the 41 participating OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) nations.[4] The data collected by the PISA suggests that only three percent of Australian fifteen-year olds are failing to meet international literacy benchmarks,[5] and that Australia's curricula perform particularly well in "*getting students to the highest level of proficiency*,"[6] with 18% of students achieving the highest performance level, almost double the OECD average.[7]

Additionally, there is no real evidence or academic consensus suggesting that senior English curricula throughout the country have "succumbed" to an overtly postmodern or politically correct approach in their creation and implementation. Howard's criticism seems to centre around two notions; that postmodernism is a literary theory that holds that all texts carry the same relevance and importance and are of the same quality, whether it be a Shakespearean play or a poster for the latest summer blockbuster, and; that this perspective is being foisted on Australian students. Both of these points of contention are problematic. The University of Sydney's Professor of postmodern theory, Margaret Sankey, contends that postmodernism is not, in fact, a politically correct philosophy of attributing the same gravity to every text, but rather one that merely suggests that there is more than one way of looking at the world, and at literary texts. According to Professor Sankey, "*There are lots of different ways of thinking and some are more valid than others; but you can't just say that one way of thinking is the only way that you should be thinking*"[8] (April 20, 2006). There is also little evidence to suggest that the curricula have been "dumbed down" by "postmodern" literature at the expense of the classics, with the NSW syllabus being a primary example. In it, Shakespeare is compulsory for all students from grades nine through 12, with Chaucer, Yeats, Jane Austen and Emily Bronte also featuring in the HSC syllabus reading list, along with modern classics like George Orwell's *1984*, and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. [9]

Federal Education Minister Julie Bishop's recent claim that our school curricula have been hijacked by left-wing ideologues in the states, leading to the emergence of themes that "are straight from Chairman Mao"[10] (October 6, 2006) may shed more light on the motivations behind the attacks on our education system by the conservative right. Reactionary claims that our curricula force students to, for example, "interpret Shakespeare from a feminist or Marxist perspective"[11] seem to ignore that our "postmodern" syllabi in fact teach students to deconstruct and evaluate literary texts from a variety of angles. Instead, there seems to be a focus on highlighting "Feminism, Marxism and names... that get people upset",[12] and the tacit suggestion that our curricula are in some way subverting the values and beliefs of our students. This raises an interesting question; is the Liberal Party's focus on reforming the English and history curricula in its planned national education system motivated by the prospect of gaining an upper hand in the culture wars (by usurping the influence the "left-wing ideologues" in the states and territories have on our students)? Is the use of education as a weapon in this ongoing ideological battle distracting us from the real deficiencies in the current system, and the plans in place (or lack thereof) to rectify them?

2.2 History education

The second major area of criticism in our present curricula, and the one that will undergo the most significant change if the Howard government's planned national education system is implemented, is the education of history. Prime Minister Howard has decried the influence of "postmodern relativism" on our history syllabi, claiming that they should be focusing on the teaching of important dates and events, such as the Battle of Hastings, in a narrative style. He claims, "*We don't know enough about our history*"[13] because its education in this country has been spoiled by a "*postmodern culture of relativism where any objective record... is questioned or repudiated*"[14] and consequently, our knowledge has become corrupted by a "*fragmented stew of theme and issues.*"[15]

However, there is significant reason to suggest that Howard's use of the term "relativism" is problematic – his use of the term seems to imply that there are people who believe that there is a different truth for everyone and anything, and that this is the approach that is being taught in our schools. This definition of relativism is debatable. According to Stephen Muecke, a Professor in the faculty of humanities and social sciences at the University of Technology, Sydney, though relativism is indeed the belief that we can 'experiment' with history and look at major events and time periods from various perspectives to draw differing interpretations, "*If a postmodern relativist can be found, he or she will not dispute the date of the Battle of Hastings, or dispute the importance of empirical facts.*"[16] No argument on any historical issue carries weight without the support of factual evidence, so it is very unlikely that any history syllabus would include the education of a theory that disputes the existence of any objective record of time, person or place. Relativism in history, according to Professor Muecke, follows "*the great tradition of experimental method – testing a new hypothesis against a measurement of data – (so that students) will be prepared to think relatively rather than absolutely.*"[17]

Under the Liberal Party's planned national curriculum, Australian history would be compulsory in years 9 and 10 for students nationwide, taught in the "narrative tradition" of isolated dates and events taught in chronological order, based on "objective record." Under this syllabus, "*students will spend all their time memorising dates and places with no depth, meaning or context.*"[18] Ostensibly, this emphasis on facts and timelines over interpretation and analysis is aimed at increasing the student's factual knowledge. But Prime Minister Howard's recent claim that it has become "*almost de rigueur in intellectual circumstances to regard Australian history as little more than a litany of sexism, racism and class warfare*"[19] suggests an ideological grounding for his criticism of "postmodern relativism" in the academic sphere. A relativist view of history suggests that, for example, the notion that Australia was *invaded* by the First Fleet is no more or less correct than the view that it was *settled*, as long as the one adopting either perspective does so using a strong argument, supported by factual evidence. The suggestion that the ability to enforce one federally-ordained version of history as *the* history of Australia (therefore eradicating any dissenting view from our syllabi) and the associated edge that would give to the conservative right in the culture war is the sole motivation for reforming the curriculum might seem just as alarmist as the hyperbolic characterisations

of our “postmodern” education system that this submission challenges. But there is inarguably cause for concern – at the possibility of a group of individuals that confess a desire to have students rote-learn only one version of history seizing control of the way the subject is taught nationwide.

3. Conclusion

The purpose of this submission is to examine the “*perceptions and realities of standards and achievement levels in schools at a time when there is doubt in some quarters as to whether schools are preparing students adequately for the immediate workforce and for higher education*” and address the quarters from which this “doubt” is coming, and the possible motivations behind the rhetoric of those that express this doubt. Some of the most vociferous criticism of the quality of current curricula nationwide has come from powerful forces in the conservative right, notably from leading members of the currently dominant Federal Liberal Party. Much of it seems aimed at characterising the English and history syllabi established by the state and territory governments as having exchanged the education of literacy, quality literature and objective fact with feel-good relativism, postmodernism and political correctness. In painting our curricula this way, these critics have gone a long way towards spreading the perception that education in Australia is tangibly and irrevocably failing our students, filling their heads with “rubbish” knowledge and ideas “straight from Chairman Mao”[20] while failing to provide the vital skills they need for life after school.

This submission does not intend to make the claim that there are no grounds for criticism under the current system. There are many areas in which our various curricula are deficient or vulnerable to scrutiny that will doubtless be documented elsewhere, most notably the disadvantages faced by the thousands of school students that move interstate each year (and therefore into a region with a vastly different curriculum). But this submission recommends that the vested interests of those that criticise our current system and curricula be taken into account when the Senate Committee draws its conclusions and makes its recommendations. The education of the next generation of Australians is far too important to be influenced by the ideological concerns of the left and the right. In recommending the changes to be made to our current system, the most vital consideration should be areas of deficiency and disadvantage, and the future intellectual, social and economic welfare of the citizens our schools produce. This should lead to results that benefit the most important group of people in any question of the quality of education in our country – Australian children.

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5. Contact Details

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