

SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE INQUIRY INTO ACADEMIC STANDARDS OF SCHOOL EDUCATION

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Introduction

I have no doubt that this senate committee will receive many submissions from subject associations concerned about academic standards in the Key Learning Area (KLA) of Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE) as opposed to standards that they believe could be provided by separate disciplines. This submission does represent some concern about standards but presents the proposition that the problem of standards has little to do with the KLA itself, and more to do with the preparation of teachers to teach it. Indeed, this submission argues strongly for the retention of an integrated social science subject for students in the compulsory years, and proposes that a move to three disciplines (as suggested in the recent Council for the Australian Federation Report - *The Future of Schooling*) would be a retrograde step. The main thrust of this submission is a plea for better professional development for teachers.

While this submission does represent the basic philosophy of two teacher professional associations – the Social Educators Association of Australia (SEAA), and its affiliate, the Studies of Society and Environment Association of Queensland (SOSEAQ) - it is essentially a personal submission, in that I have not been able to fully canvass my ideas for solutions within either association in the time available.

Nevertheless, supporters of SOSE welcome the opportunity to present our ideas to this Senate inquiry. Despite many efforts to have our views recognised in the supposedly free press, the Murdoch papers have generally refused to allow us our voice to counteract statements about ‘dumbing down’, lack of rigour and political correctness in SOSE as well as the call for separate disciplines.

However, I would like to provide the context of my submission by explaining our philosophy. In 1990 SEAA published a philosophical document called *Social Education in the Nineties: A basic right for every person*. This was updated in the 2003 biennial conference Keynote Speech given by Professor Rob Gilbert (University of Queensland), *SEAA Tomorrow: SOSE and the Future*, where he spoke of an ‘entitlement curriculum’. That is, all students are entitled to all perspectives on society and our interaction with the environment. However, the concern is not just for what students learn, but also that they be empowered to participate effectively in society. There has always been a strong citizenship element in what we do. Both of the above documents can be found on the SEAA website, www.afsese.asn.au/seaa. Scroll to Resources.

I believe that I am well qualified to make the following comments, and that my broad background can provide a ‘big-picture view’ that most teachers would not have:

- I have studied and taught a number of social science subjects (modern and ancient history, economic geography, sociology, social psychology and anthropology) whereas most teachers have trained in one or two at the most.

- I began teaching integrated junior secondary social science in the mid-1970s while also teaching history and geography as separate disciplines, and I have had a long time to think about the advantages and disadvantages of both approaches.
- I devoted 30 years to curriculum development in Queensland, firstly on a reference group while still a teacher, and later as a curriculum writer.
- I was part of the team that wrote the design brief for the Queensland SOSE syllabus, a job that required research into the delivery of social science around the nation and around the world, as well as research into student learning styles.
- I worked as a consultant within the Queensland Education Department to promote the national statement and profile for SOSE, working with both primary and secondary schools.
- I have also consulted with other KLA specialists while working on a major cross-KLA approach to lifelong learning, so my understanding is broader than SOSE.
- Over the last eight years I have tutored pre-service teachers at either Griffith University or Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in both primary and secondary SOSE curriculum.
- I have also worked as a private consultant providing SOSE professional development and writing SOSE curriculum materials.
- Many materials were for government agencies or organisations where single discipline approaches would not have sufficed. E.g. the cross disciplinary approach of SOSE (e.g. Brink Expedition, Beijing Olympics for the Australia-China Society), or across KLAs (e.g. AgAware materials on agriculture, and the Queensland Timber Board).
- I belong to a national association (SEAA) and helped form a state based one (SOSEAQ). I am a SEAA representative on the peak body for national social science associations, AFSSSE (Australian Federation of Societies for the Study of SOSE – www.afsese.asn.au). I also belong to Queensland associations for history and geography, and I am a member of the management committee of the Queensland Global Learning Centre (funded by AusAid).

I intend to comment on both parts of the first term of reference:

1(a). The extent to which each stage of schooling equips students with the required knowledge and skills to progress successfully through to the next stage.

- In my years teaching junior secondary students entering from primary school, it was common knowledge that there was so much variation in students' skill levels that secondary teachers had to re-teach the social science skills that were expected of students at the end of primary years.
- When I began tutoring pre-service primary teachers I realised that there is in fact something of a vicious circle operating. Primary SOSE/Social Studies/HSIE has always been a general course using concepts and skills from the major social sciences. However, student teachers do not come into their course with such a background and are provided with very little opportunity to learn concepts and skills from those social sciences they have not previously studied, either at junior or senior secondary level. I always ask my pre-service teachers what their background is in the social sciences studied at senior level. The following numbers were obtained in 2006, from two classes totalling 52 students, of students who had studied at senior: history (11), geography (5), economics (7), legal studies (7), more

than one (6) and no social science studied in the senior years (13). This is a fairly typical breakdown, and they are all obviously starting with a large content gap.

- It is recognised that this country does not always have the best senior students entering teacher education. Also, pressures on universities has meant that , in the universities that I am familiar with, the number of teaching units devoted to SOSE curriculum has been reduced from 2 semester units over the whole four-year undergraduate course to one unit. At QUT students do have an extra foundation course (“Wellness and citizenship”) which contains some topics related to SOSE curriculum. However, it seems to me that many of these students enter ill-prepared for primary teaching studies in SOSE and leave under-prepared for teaching SOSE.
- Nevertheless, it must be stated that these teachers have a different set of skills than earlier generations, and are far ahead in terms of understanding social science inquiry process and the use of appropriate teaching strategies than previous generations of teachers. They can use these skills to find information for themselves, but their deficit is in confidence and capability in teaching the skills and unique perspective of each of the social sciences. This does not prevent many primary teachers from doing excellent work with their students, but it does go to explain the variation in academic standards that do appear. I submit that these deficiencies could be rectified with targeted professional development.
- The reality of teaching in the junior secondary years is that there are not enough social science discipline specialists and many teachers are co-opted from other areas (e.g. home economics or physical education). This can apply to large schools as well as small country schools.
- A large number of secondary social science teachers have a good academic background only in the subject that is their focus for the senior years. However, it is assumed that the Council for Australian Federation has proposed that the ‘Social Sciences and Humanities’ in future will consist of three disciplines (history, geography and economics) because they think that those subjects will be taught by specialists and that this will somehow equate with better academic standards. However, I would question where all these specialists will come from for junior secondary classes? A great many schools already have trouble finding enough geography and economics teachers for senior classes and some schools don’t offer some of those subjects at the senior level. Therefore, the usual will apply (as it does in SOSE) that teachers adapt and teach subjects they were never trained for. (I had to adapt to teaching Citizenship Education, Legal Studies and Tourism Studies during my teaching career). The point that I am making is that such a change will make very little difference to academic standards, and therefore it seems unnecessary to change from SOSE.
- Thus, at any level there will be teachers who are teaching in areas where they have no basic ‘literacy’. Many quickly develop this literacy through the use of exemplary resources and the help of teachers with expertise. Where this does not happen, deficiencies in students’ understanding may be made up by other teachers as they progress to other levels, but not necessarily. Such had been the case before the introduction of SOSE, and is unlikely to change if SOSE were to disappear. Indeed, SOSE has encouraged more collegial planning of teaching units, and the sharing of expertise, whereas this did not happen when disciplines were maintained in separate ‘silos’.
- Accepting the SEAA argument that students are entitled to as broad a knowledge of their society as possible, the answer to questions about standards and all stages

lies not in more curriculum change or turning the clock backwards, but in improving teacher capability through targeted professional development.

1(b). The extent to which schools provide students with the core knowledge and skills they need to participate in further education and training, and as members of the community.

- At the 2006 SEAA biennial conference a final plenary session considered the question: What is the SOSE-literate person for the 21st century? Because we are not anti-discipline, but in fact want to see all the social science discipline perspectives used productively by students, we invited speakers on historical, geographical, economic, environmental, cultural and political literacy. It was interesting to see that many of the topics suggested for study were similar, but viewed from a different perspective. All of these documents can be seen on the SEAA website www.afssse.asn.au/seaa, in the section on the 2006 biennial conference.
- We are interested in students understanding the connections and overlaps between all of the disciplines in relevant and authentic ways. This may look like a 'stew' to some, but we believe that the role of SOSE is to help students interpret the "stew" of the real world. Concerned citizens would have very little chance of understanding the current position in Iraq without some ability to view it through political, economic, historical, geographic and cultural lenses. As our emphasis is on the development of civic competence, we promote student-centred learning that involves students in gaining practice over time in considering perennial problems from many different perspectives and making decisions that take those perspectives into account.
- This is not a new educational approach. Our association, SEAA, has been a national SOSE body for 25 years, and its affiliate, Victorian Association of Social Studies Teachers (VASST) has existed for many years. There is a large association in New Zealand with similar aims, a Humanities Association in the UK and the longstanding, large and powerful National Council for the Social Studies in United States, all of which promote integrated social science teaching within the compulsory years with the proviso that it is based on making students aware of the concepts and methodological skills of all of the associated disciplines.
- It needs to be noted that in the primary years the curriculum is largely taught in an integrated fashion, and that SOSE is the most- chosen integrator or "host" key learning area (KLA) for the incorporation of literacy, numeracy, and skills from The Arts and other KLAs. Based on contemporary educational theory and research about the needs of young adolescents, there is a current move across Australia to also integrate curriculum areas in the Middle Phase of schooling. Therefore the majority of schools in Australia prefer the integrated approach for young learners.
- An integrated multidisciplinary approach has been taken up by universities, businesses and government departments as the necessary way to approach problems, especially those of sustainability, so it makes sense for students to be trained to think in this connected, holistic way.
- A reversion to single discipline approaches (see *Future of Schooling* report mentioned above), apart from the teacher preparation issues outlined earlier, means reversion to overlap, lack of cohesion, and possible timetabling problems. Students will miss out on practice in seeing the inherent connections within topics. They will also miss out on some important perspectives. The current strand of Culture within SOSE seems to have been completely disregarded – this, in a multicultural society, a globalizing world and an era where understanding of 'difference' seems all

important. Indeed, we believe that to allow schools to fulfill many aspects of *Australia's Common and Agreed Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century*, SOSE must be retained. The Civics and Citizenship requirements of the federal government can be fulfilled only through a broad curriculum such as SOSE, which is the home of civics teaching.

- All educational literature promotes the inquiry method and this is used in all disciplines. However, it also suits the integrated approach. I have developed an online professional learning section for the SOSEAQ website which is based on rigorous inquiry learning that can take into account any new addition to the curriculum (e.g. Values Education, futures studies etc). See www.learningplace.com.au/en/soseaq. Find Online Professional Learning in the menu, go to Personal Pathways Program and scroll down to the Inquiry into Inquiry Table at the bottom of the page.
- We recognise that the integrated SOSE approach is still evolving and there are still many problems in teacher understanding of the preferred delivery. I recently had an article published in the SEAA journal (*The Social Educator*), also published by VASST in their journal, which proposed an approach that would be simple for teachers and students to follow, and develop the capability of both in considering any topic holistically. It uses the tried and true method of asking 'Who, when, where and what' questions at the beginning of an inquiry. (Please see Appendix 1). Each question directs students to think of social science disciplines and perspectives. However, this method should be used as a metacognitive device for students, in that when they ask e.g. 'When' questions, they understand the methodological tools that they can use to answer those questions. (In the case of When – historical data, records, timelines, etc, but also futures studies tools like preferred futures schema and scenarios). Being SOSE literate means knowing the right questions to ask and knowing how to find answers to those questions, in the general sense that one would expect a good citizen to be able to do. Within the school subject of SOSE, students are in training for this important citizenship task.
- Finally, we do believe that carefully constructed and sequenced SOSE curriculum can provide the core skills and knowledge for students to participate as members of the community much more adequately than can single disciplines during the compulsory years of schooling. We also believe that such courses are capable of providing the necessary background for students to choose a wider range of discipline –based subjects in the senior years, and that many SOSE outcomes raised the bar in terms of expectations of students' achievement in social science learning.
- **Our recommendation to this Senate Inquiry** is that the answer to improving standards in SOSE is through professional learning, not curriculum change. Any improvements should model for teachers the best ways of integrating disciplines with integrity and showing the connections and overlaps between them. Differential learning needs to be provided for those with deficiencies in background understanding. Such re-skilling of the teacher workforce has generally not been done, and to our knowledge certainly not been done in any concerted way within the KLA of SOSE. It should be linked to or mapped against currently available federally funded project materials such as Access Asia, Discovering Democracy, the Statements for Global Education and Education for Sustainability, and the Civics and Citizenship Statements of Learning.

- Such professional learning should conform to current acceptable practice. That is, it should provide guidelines for teachers to work as a community of learners, perhaps teaching each other from their respective areas of strength, in small local groups that can provide ongoing support and allow for continuous professional renewal through reflective practice. It may be possible to provide background information in online mode, as in the SOSEAQ model. The bulk of funding should go towards teacher relief within school time to allow collegial discussion. This is the only way in which any improvements will be either doable or sustainable and be reflected in change at the school level.

One further point

I would like to make one further point about the confusion for me, my associations and, I imagine, the majority of teachers around the country concerning a number of recent announcements concerning this Key Learning Area from different levels of government. It certainly appears (a) that the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing, and (b) that there has been little consultation with the whole profession rather than just parts that can lobby strongly. It is to be hoped that an Inquiry such as this can probe these inconsistencies. A few examples may suffice:

1. The idea from the Commonwealth History Summit to have 200 hours of Australian History taught in Years 9 and 10: Everyone wants better history teaching, preferably within SOSE, but the following had not been considered;
 - This is more time than is currently devoted to the whole of SOSE in those year levels. What was to be missed out?
 - It amounts to 'overkill' and excludes the study of other histories at that stage of learning when students are looking more broadly beyond our shores.
 - There was an apparent lack of knowledge of the Historical Perspectives section detailed in the Civics and Citizenship Statements of Learning where much of early Australian history is covered by the end of Years 5 -7. Were we to have doubling up in an already crowded curriculum?
 - Year 10 is now regarded as part of the senior band of schooling in WA, SA and NT and soon to be so in Queensland. Such a program would be disruptive for the organization of the senior phase.
 - A great many schools around Australia are following the Middle Schooling approach in years 6-9, and a single discipline approach would be disruptive of their integrated approach in Year 9.
 - The announcement that history teaching would be improved was apparently ignorant of the professional development work already being done around Australia by the Commonwealth History Project, which itself was federally funded.
2. The report from the Council for the Australian Federation announcing that they will retain the Common Goals of Schooling from the Adelaide Declaration was welcomed, but the outline of a national curriculum approach was not. SOSE was to be 'discarded' according to the Victorian Premier. The report outlines a curriculum area called Social Sciences and Humanities, and notes history, geography and economics are to be studied. (Note: The term SOSE may be difficult, but it does get away from the arguments surrounding whether history is a social science or a humanities subject. The title above is also rather clumsy. It may be better to just call it Society

and Environment, as in WA, as we don't talk about Studies of Science, and that is a similar multidisciplinary KLA, capable of taking in new areas of learning like genetic modification, just as SOSE can take on board new emerging sub-disciplines).

- This is unacceptable because of reasons outlined in this submission in favour of SOSE, and excludes many perspectives that students are entitled to consider – especially the cultural.
- It seems to be counteracted by the federal agreement to support the National Action Plan for Education for Sustainability, which requires “triple bottom line” thinking, and more than these three disciplines offer.
- It will not only fragment and ‘re-clutter’ the curriculum, but also return social science departments in schools to their previous ‘silo’ arrangement, with little interaction between discipline areas.
- Re-working of junior secondary curriculum requires re-working of senior discipline subject curriculum, which is very expensive and has already been done in most places to accommodate SOSE. Teachers are very tired of curriculum change.
- The biggest flaw in this report, however, is the indication that Civics and Citizenship (CCE) will be regarded as cross-disciplinary. We have tried this before and it doesn't work, except insofar as all teachers are preparing students for citizenship and there are many whole school activities that support citizenship. However, the detailed expectations of the endorsed Civics and Citizenship Statements of Learning, and the national assessment program for CCE mean that there is mandated teaching required and that it must have a home. The natural home for teaching about the structure and function of government, its historical development and indications of the dispositions of citizenship is within SOSE. To say that it can be integrated into history and geography as in NSW demeans both the disciplines and CCE.

APPENDIX 1

QUESTIONS	PERSPECTIVES	SKILLS/TOOLS	RESOURCES e.g.
WHO?	Groups, institutions, racial and ethnic groups, socio-economic status, gender, religion	Surveys, interviews, demographic data, biographical data, values clarification	Studies of Asia (AEF) Voices of Australia (HREOC) Census at School (ABS)
WHEN?	Immediate and distant past, futures studies	Timelines, interpretation of primary and secondary sources, consequences wheels, futures scenarios	Commonwealth History Project (Making History)
WHERE?	Geographical and environmental -verging into Science	Mapping skills, field studies	Geographical information Systems
WHAT SYSTEMS? -POLITICAL	Committees, governments and governance, legal system.	Committee procedure, elections, parliamentary debates, mock courts	Discovering Democracy project materials; Parl't Education Office; Australian Electoral Com
-ECONOMIC	Industry, trade, financial	Statistical interpretation, models	Financial Literacy APEC materials
-ECOLOGICAL	Systems thinking, food chains, populations	Field studies, catchment studies, recycling, calculate ecological footprint	Sustainable Schools; Action plan for Education for Sustainability