



NSW Response to the Draft Shape of the Australian Curriculum: The Arts

Background

The Office of the Board of Studies has conducted consultation on the draft Arts Shape paper in order to provide feedback to ACARA.

- 55 K–6 teachers at focus groups conducted at:
 - Newcastle
 - Sydney
 - Dee Why
 - Campbelltown
- 80 Years 7–12 teachers at focus groups conducted at:
 - Newcastle
 - Lismore
 - Sydney
 - Parramatta
- a Reference Group of professional associations, systems and sector representatives, and specialist teachers in the Arts was conducted on 21 February 2011
- a Reference Group of academics in the Arts was conducted on 23 February 2011
- an online survey on the Board of Studies website which was available up to 17 December 2010; 319 completed responses were received. Figures and comments from the survey are included within this document. The survey provided general statements about the draft Shape paper and provided respondents a further opportunity to answer questions specific to their own artform. Respondents were given the following choices:
 - strongly agree/agree/disagree/strongly disagree
 - offer comments for each statement; typically respondents that strongly agree/agree did not supply comment
- correspondence received by the Board concerning the Arts in the Australian curriculum
- a submission from the NSW Department of Education and Training.

Summary of key findings

The summary of key findings is taken from the online survey, teacher focus group meetings, reference groups, the NSW Department of Education and Training response and correspondence received at the Board of Studies.

The *Draft Shape of the Australian Curriculum: the Arts* from Kindergarten to Year 12 lacks the clarity and quality required to form a suitable basis for the development of quality Arts education curriculum.

Specific concerns include:

- the organisation of proposed curriculum that is focused on generic strands at the expense of subject areas
- the use of generic strands (generating, realising, responding – apprehending and comprehending) for the Arts rather than artform-specific language and structures
- the materials do not build upon or enhance existing curriculum models in NSW
- there is some confusion surrounding the notion of entitlement and concern that this may lead to a reduction in time for some subject areas
- the materials are focused on a participatory approach where the experience and imagination are more important than the notion of practice, depth and rigour which is contained in the NSW syllabuses
- the description of each artform does not adopt a contemporary view of best practice in arts education, particularly in Visual Arts. This process-based approach was superseded in NSW in the 1980s
- the descriptions of learning are not consistent from Kindergarten to Year 12 and are not always developmentally realistic or appropriate
- the materials do not adequately reflect the needs of all learners, including students with special needs and gifted and talented students
- there is an emphasis on pedagogical notions such as integration, play and organic connectedness which are teacher based, rather than curriculum design decisions
- the paper does not adequately highlight the full range of benefits that the Arts offer, but rather there is a narrow emphasis on arts as a career prospect
- the paper's statement that industry needs to augment school programs should be replaced with a fuller argument on ways in which quality school programs can be supported through the Arts industry.

Specific comments relating to each section of the draft Shape paper

Rationale

The rationale received much criticism from respondents to the online survey. Seventy percent of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the rationale clearly establishes the nature and scope of the Arts in the Australian curriculum. Comments indicated that the rationale is a deficit model of Arts education rather than aspirational or inclusive.

Respondents in both the survey and at meetings believed the rationale should position the Arts as contributing unique knowledge, skills and understanding and empower students to be confident and informed in the Arts in the 21st century. The current document does not do this

and does not show forward thinking. There is little reference to the significance that arts education plays in important aspects such as cultural diversity and catering for the full range of students. As a rationale, it is a simplistic view of the Arts and does not reflect the uniqueness and complexity of arts learning. There is great concern that there is an emphasis on the Arts being used as a tool for learning rather than unique bodies of knowledge worthy of learning in their own right. In particular, the focus groups and reference groups rejected the generic approach to the rationale, arguing that a true rationale for the Arts would only be achieved when the rationale for, and integrity of, each of the artforms was addressed.

Defining the Arts

From the online survey 76% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the “Defining the Arts” section is clear and appropriate. Many respondents disputed the theoretical framework of “aesthetic knowledge” as an appropriate basis for the development of curriculum in the Arts. This positions the Arts within a very thin frame of reference and does not acknowledge other theories, methodologies and pedagogies that are important to arts learning. It was noted that this model does not position any of the Arts as practices in their own right, nor does it acknowledge how the Arts exist within the real world. Respondents noted an attempt to represent learning as fluid and flexible, however felt that the model proposed presents a linear and narrow view of the Arts and learning within the Arts. There appears to be a presumption that all arts learning is “organically connected” which is highly disputable. While there can be similarities and connections across the artforms, the notion of an integrated approach is more appropriately a pedagogical decision than one for curriculum design.

Respondents online and at meetings argued that the language used is cumbersome, unnecessarily layered and not in common use in the Arts or in arts education.

The area of arts learning and culture needs careful definition. The definition needs to more fully investigate the role the Arts can play in exploring and developing identity and intercultural understanding. The content to be developed will need to reflect and support the diversity of Australian cultures and communities.

The definition of design as a creative problem-solving process is questionable. There is a stronger application for this in the areas of Visual Arts, Drama and to some extent Media Arts. There is little relevance of this definition to Dance and no relevance to Music. It is also important to distinguish design in the Arts from design in the Design and Technology learning area.

The definition of Dance is simplistic and does not acknowledge the uniqueness of dance where the body is used for nonverbal communication and expression. The definition does not reflect current dance education practice that is evident in the NSW Dance curriculum. The notion of dance as an artform, which is at the forefront of current best practice, is not explored at all. There is too much emphasis on concepts like feeling, experimenting and the personal experience, ignoring the importance of skill training and the physical and cognitive demands of a quality dance education.

The definition of Drama seems to separate the notions of drama and theatre rather than seeing them as integrated practices. There seems to be a very heavy emphasis on process drama which is only one approach to learning in this subject. It is not the role of a curriculum to specify pedagogical approaches in this way. The definition does not adequately reflect the notion of playbuilding which has been an important core learning experience in the NSW

curriculum for many years. Some respondents also expressed concern that there is not enough emphasis on the student as an active participant in the learning and this was reiterated at focus group meetings.

The definition of Media Arts fails to effectively position the study of this area within an arts context. This needs to be revised to emphasise how the study of Media Arts embodies expressive and artistic intentions and conventions, as a great deal of the activities and processes in the definition can be studied in a range of other related contexts and learning areas. There were a number of respondents who questioned the inclusion of this as a separate area of learning, noting that NSW integrates these practices through a range of other learning contexts.

The definition of Music does not adequately describe music as a unique artform within the curriculum. There are very broad assumptions about how people engage with music and the draft Shape paper has positioned the subject as a passive experience in day-to-day life. The lack of emphasis on active engagement in all aspects of music does not reflect current classroom practice or an understanding of student engagement in music and creates a culture of music consumers rather than active participants. There is a lack of acknowledgment of both the expressive and cognitive demands of music as an artform and as a subject. While there is emphasis on music in a contemporary and digital context, there is no reference to the cultural and historical aspects that have made music so important to people and communities. Participants at focus group meetings were particularly critical of the reduction of music study to simply mark significant moments in people's lives.

The definition of the Visual Arts has drawn strong criticism by respondents and participants at meetings. The notion that Visual Arts is "making thinking visible" is greatly disputed. While there is mention of contemporary practice, little reference is made to the cultural and historical importance of the Visual Arts. The current definition does not capture the scope of Visual Arts education. It appears limited by an ideology that privileges imaginative engagement over deep learning. The definition does not effectively articulate how Visual Arts operates in the world and needs to focus more on art-making practice and the critical study of the Visual Arts.

The organisation of the Arts into three strands

This part of the draft Shape paper attracted the most attention and the approach taken in this document is clearly contestable. Seventy-four percent of online respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the proposed model is appropriate and workable. In reference to the explanation of the strands, 74% also either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the strands were well explained and articulated. These sentiments were echoed at the reference group meetings and all teacher focus groups.

A proposed 'arts' model of generic strands has dominated the curriculum model. This is at the expense of subjects with existing and well-established curriculum. The result is a loss of identity for each subject or acknowledgment of the individuality of each of the artforms. The balance has been skewed between the notion of subjects with their own histories, practices and traditions and a model that attempts to focus on a process. Survey respondents and meeting participants discounted this as a model and highlighted in great detail the problems and inconsistencies that are apparent across subject areas. The solution would be to make each artform a strand with nomenclature that reflects the learning and teaching that occurs in the Arts instead of a generic approach.

Respondents and meeting participants criticised the model for the generic approach to the Arts. Views were repeatedly expressed that the model denied integrity to each of the artforms and failed to acknowledge the existing curriculum models across the country. It was argued that this promotes a model of learning that will lack intellectual rigour and deny students the opportunity to engage in the distinct practices of each artform. It was frequently noted that a curriculum model focused on the development of knowledge, skills and understanding in each artform was preferable to a generic process-based approach.

Respondents and meeting participants disputed the importance of identifying an organisational structure that provides a unified starting point making the assumption that all arts learning occurs in the same way, and begins with the same starting points. This approach fails to recognise the histories, traditions and practices of the Arts and arts learning in each of the five identified artforms and consequently respondents considered this to be a backward step. Justifying this action in terms of linguistic meaning fails to acknowledge the artistic meanings inherent in each artform.

Some respondents recalled the attempt to establish a generic approach to arts curriculum structures and processes as a failure of the National Profiles in the 1990s. At the time there was considerable contention around the suitability of this approach. While some states and territories chose to implement this model, others did not. NSW did not implement this curriculum, instead favouring the development of subject specific syllabuses. The consultation reinforced NSW teachers' commitment to this approach.

Respondents and meeting participants felt the terms *generating, realizing and responding* (apprehending and comprehending) will not assist teachers to develop quality arts education programs. A number of respondents noted that a reason for using these terms was to avoid ambiguity, but in doing so language has been introduced that is not common or known in the nomenclature in the artforms or in existing curriculum documentation. Respondents and meeting participants also argued that established and understood language and arts practices within jurisdictions should be recognised and valued more overtly and clearly. There was little support for the diagram as a way of further articulating meaning. While some found some things in the table a useful guide, others focused on the inconsistencies between artforms and the risk of this table being seen as a checklist of activities. Many meeting participants noted the disparity of the level of demand between subjects and sample activities presented in the table. They also questioned the even further generic approach to responding, signalling the model has failed itself by not being able to articulate all areas within each artform.

Overview

The area of greatest comment in this section centred on the description of a learning entitlement. Only 22% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that the description of a learning entitlement in five artforms was clearly and appropriately explained and this was reflected in reference groups and focus group meetings. There is great concern regarding the assumption that 160 hours is sufficient time in each band of schooling. This is significantly less than current NSW mandated hours, particularly in the areas of Visual Arts and Music which form part of the mandatory curriculum for the School Certificate. Adding to this is the assumption that all jurisdictions will decide to implement all five artforms in the same way. While the draft Shape paper states that this curriculum will not determine how the Arts will be delivered, the model proposed attempts to influence these decisions. Participants at focus group meetings were particularly critical of the confusion that this section has created. It was noted, particularly among drama teachers, that they had responded favourably to aspects of

the Shape paper on the assumption that this section indicated that their subject would form part of the mandatory curriculum for the School Certificate.

Respondents and meeting participants expressed great concern that, even at this early stage, the proposed materials lack the depth and rigour of current NSW curriculum. There was concern that the proposed decrease in hours for implementation and the increase in breadth of curriculum expectation will further diminish the quality of arts education experiences that are offered to students.

There is some support for the curriculum being developed in bands as respondents are able to make correlations with existing NSW two-year stages of schooling, Stage Statements and the Primary Foundation Statements. It was clearly argued, particularly in the reference groups and K–6 teacher focus group meetings, that the Foundation (K)–2 band is pedagogically inappropriate. Participants argued that the nature of learning in Kindergarten is quite different to that in Years 1 and 2 and that they should be represented separately.

Many respondents and meeting participants noted the emphasis on integration and a play-centred approach in the early years. It was noted that integration in teaching and learning is best left for teachers to apply to particular work and circumstances rather than making this an assumption within a curriculum. Respondents also recognised the importance of exploration, play and discovery in the early years but reinforced that it is not the only way that students can learn and work in the Arts at these early stages. Students at this stage are capable of much more than play and the description of this does not adequately reflect learning at this stage, nor does it adequately address what students are able to do conceptually and in practice. Future descriptions of a play-centred approach to learning must acknowledge the layered and multidimensional aspects of student learning at this level. The academic reference group, in particular, noted that these statements do not reflect good practice or current research. They believed that the descriptions contradict the nature of learning, cognition and the acquisition of knowledge at this age.

There were mixed reactions to the descriptions of learning in each artform. The most concerns were expressed in the areas of Music and Visual Arts where it was felt that the continua described do not represent the possibilities or realities of learning through K–12. Respondents and meeting participants pointed out pedagogical, conceptual and language inconsistencies and misunderstandings apparent throughout these descriptions. It was noted, particularly in teacher focus groups, that there is very little reference to the historical traditions and understandings of each artform. Some also highlighted the, at times, forced layering of *generating, realizing and responding* into the artform-specific descriptions. The artform with the greatest support was Drama. The approach taken in the description of learning and the proposed structure of content is common to pedagogical approaches in this artform.

Respondents and meeting participants noted the lack of explicit reference to Australian content throughout the descriptions of learning. Focus group meetings, in particular, were very critical of the lack of increasing cognitive demand that is inherent in NSW syllabuses that are built on the notion of a ‘spiral’ curriculum. They also noted the attempt to address technologies among the artforms was simplistic and, at times, rather superficial. Some argued that the integration of Media Arts into existing artforms would make for more meaningful connections with existing and emerging technologies.

The following tables provide a very simple view of the level of support for the descriptions of learning in each artform.

Dance

	Response %	n =
Strongly agree	26.7	4
Agree	26.7	4
Disagree	13.3	2
Strongly Disagree	33.3	5

Drama

	Response %	n =
Strongly agree	47.9	23
Agree	20.8	10
Disagree	20.8	10
Strongly Disagree	10.4	5

Media Arts

	Response %	n =
Strongly agree	20	5
Agree	24	6
Disagree	12	3
Strongly Disagree	44	11

Music

	Response %	n =
Strongly agree	9.6	7
Agree	23.3	17
Disagree	28.8	21
Strongly Disagree	38.4	28

Visual Arts

	Response %	n =
Strongly agree	7.4	15
Agree	13.2	27
Disagree	15.2	31
Strongly Disagree	64.2	131

Respondents and meeting participants across the artforms reacted variously to questions about the description of different stages of learning. There was, however, an enormous reaction to Years 3–8 being described in the same way. Respondents cited variable implementation patterns currently in existence, the use (or not) of specialist arts teachers in primary schools and the transition to secondary schools with specialist teachers and facilities as justification to describe these years in a different way. The reference groups and teacher focus groups were particularly critical of this description noting that there were significant developmental stages that had been ignored, particularly in the Years 3–6. Some respondents also questioned the consistency of this approach with the statement in the overview regarding curriculum being developed in two-year bands.

Cross-curriculum priorities and general capabilities

Respondents and meeting participants generally thought that the inclusion of cross-curriculum priorities and general capabilities was an important aspect of the curriculum, noting that teachers are familiar with this approach in NSW syllabuses.

There was little support, however, for how the cross-curriculum priorities currently described in the draft Shape paper. Seventy-five percent of online respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the suitability of the materials provided. Comments centred on the statements being tokenistic and underdeveloped. A number of people took the opportunity to point out that these will need to be developed for each of the artforms rather than taking a further generic approach.

Participants at the reference groups and focus group meetings noted that the Shape paper states that it foregrounds Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts practices. They found there was little evidence of explicit reference to this and when it does appear is not always culturally appropriate. Participants argued that this needs to be more explicit and cannot be buried among culturally diverse practices “locally, nationally and globally”.

There were similar sentiments expressed with the general capabilities with respondents and meeting participants emphasising the need for each artform to be addressed separately. Again, 75% of online respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the suitability of the materials provided.

The Arts industry and community

While many respondents took the opportunity to emphasise the importance and desirability of collaborations with the Arts industry and arts education, 74% of online respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the materials provided were clear. There were two issues that were raised by a number of people. There was great concern that the document states that a necessary function of schooling is to contribute to building a career in the Arts industry. Many respondents and meeting participants took exception to this and emphasised a more holistic and rounded function of schooling. The other concern raised consistently was the need for professional artists and organisations to augment an arts education provision in school. Respondents and meeting participants spoke of this as being desirable, but not a requirement. Issues of equity and access were frequently raised. Respondents and meeting participants also thought that the curriculum should be able to be implemented primarily at a school level. Some felt that these statements denied the importance and capabilities of classroom teachers.

Glossary

The glossary of key terms was not well accepted by respondents. Seventy-three percent of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that the glossary helps clarify the proposed shape of the Australian curriculum for the Arts.

Conclusion

This report has been informed by the Board's online survey and written correspondence received at the Board of Studies from professional associations and interested groups and parties, teacher focus group meetings and the meeting of reference groups. It is clear from the consultation process that there is not support for this document. The majority of respondents and meeting participants do not believe that the draft Shape paper provides a sound basis for the development of an Australian curriculum in the Arts with only 14% of online respondents (5% strongly agree and 9% agree) providing support. These reactions were echoed by the reference groups and teacher focus group meetings.

Participants at the reference groups, and focus group meetings in particular, did not see the document as being a contemporary and forward-thinking document. They indicated the belief that it would diminish, not enhance, the quality of arts education available in NSW.

Participants felt that the lack of a strong arts-rich theoretical framework that acknowledged the individuality and diversity of each artform would be a retrograde step for arts education in NSW.