Languages Curriculum in Victoria and Australia

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Abstract: The government of the state of Victoria is very supportive of the teaching of languages in Victoria's schools. As part of the introduction of a national Australian curriculum, the states and territories of Australia are embarking on an ambitious programme of languages education that aims to deliver language-specific curricula for fifteen languages by 2025. Victoria is aiming to implement these fifteen curriculum documents and also to create generic models for other languages not included in the national project. This paper seeks to provide some background information to the policy and give an overview of current developments.

Background and Introduction

Australia is currently in the process of introducing a national curriculum. Up till now each state or territory devised its own school curriculum for primary and secondary students. The "Shape of the Australian Curriculum", first approved by the council of Commonwealth and state and territory education ministers in 2009, is the document that guides the development of the Australian Curriculum. It was devised by ACARA, the Australian Curriculum and Assessment and Reporting Authority. This paper reflects the position adopted by these ministers collectively in their 2008 Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians. The most recent version was approved by the ACARA Board in late 2012 but this is still a work in progress.

ACARA leads national collaboration to produce the Australian Curriculum from Foundation (the first year of schooling) to Year 10 (henceforth **F-10**) and for some learning areas up to Year 12. The available F-10 curriculum can be viewed at the Australian Curriculum website. It should be stressed that this curriculum is an evolving process, with Maths, English, Science and History in the forefront.

The preamble to the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, sums up the Educational Goals for Australian students:

- Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence and

- All young Australians (will) become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, active and informed citizens.

The Commitment to Action includes

- Developing stronger partnerships
- Supporting quality teaching and school leadership
- Strengthening early childhood education
- Enhancing middle years development
- Supporting senior years of schooling and youth transitions
- Promoting world-class curriculum and assessment
- Improving educational outcomes for Indigenous youth and disadvantaged young Australians, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds
- Strengthening accountability and transparency.

Each state or territory reserves the right to implement the national curriculum in a way best suited to their particular and very different needs.

The Australian Curriculum: Languages

The Australian Curriculum: Languages is designed to enable all students to engage in learning a language in addition to English. The design of the Australian Curriculum: Languages recognises the features that languages share, as well as the distinctiveness of specific languages. There are aspects of the curriculum that pertain to all languages. The key concepts of language, culture and learning, as described in *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Languages*, underpin the learning area. They also provide the basis for a common rationale and set of aims for all languages. The Australian Curriculum: Languages originally included language–specific curricula for eleven languages and a Framework for Aboriginal Languages and Torres Strait Islander Languages. The latter is deliberately designed to cater for the 250 or more Aboriginal languages and Torres Strait Islander languages of Australia.[1]

Professor Angela Scarino from the University of South Australia was the lead writer for the languages curriculum (excluding the Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages – see **Appendix**). In a journal abstract she outlines her thoughts:

> *Developing curricula for languages in the context of the Australian Curriculum is a complex undertaking that needs to address a number of demands. These include: the nature of language-and-culture learning for contemporary times within an increasingly diverse linguistic and cultural world; the goals of mainstream education and the 'given' curriculum as a whole and language curricula as a part of that whole; the process of transposing concepts from current research into a design for language learning for diverse language learners and diverse languages; the need to achieve jurisdictional and professional consensus about the nature and extent of change that is sustainable and productive for the present and the future.(Scarino, 2014: online)*

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[1] Cf. http://ausvels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/

Under ACARA, Chinese and Italian were the first two languages to be developed, followed by nine others. Because the ACARA language curriculum document is designed for specific languages, it seemed earlier in 2014 that there would be about 39 languages currently taught in Victoria without any curriculum provision from ACARA. (Languages developed at that time were – Arabic, Chinese, Italian, French, German, Greek, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, Vietnamese with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages still under development).

However, in May 2014 the Federal government allotted additional funding for the development of another three specific languages (Auslan = **Au**stralian **S**ign **Lan**guage, Hindi and Turkish) together with Classical Languages so that those without provision then numbered approximately 35. The state of Victoria is planning to produce generic versions of the curriculum, which will need to be amended to particular language requirements, to cater for all of these languages

Victorian Curriculum F-10

Prior to the planning for the Australian curriculum the state of Victoria used a curriculum framework known as the VELS curriculum (Victorian Essential Learning Standards). The former VELS model (2005) formed the basis for the AusVELS curriculum, which the Victorian government and Catholic schools now use for planning, assessment and reporting and which outlines what is essential for all Victorian students' learning. The name "AusVELS" refers to a combination of the Australian Curriculum and VELS since Victoria is currently in transition from VELS to a local version of the Australian Curriculum. AusVELS incorporates the Australian Curriculum as it is progressively developed.

AusVELS uses an eleven level structure (F-10) to reflect the design of the new Australian Curriculum, whilst retaining Victorian priorities and approaches to teaching and learning. Implementation of AusVELS began in 2013, when schools could use the achievement standards for reporting to parents in some learning areas, and is optional until mandated for 2017. [2]

When the VELS (Victorian Essential Learning Standards for Languages) was developed in 2005[3], the distinctiveness of different languages was acknowledged through six generic models, e.g.

- Roman alphabet languages
- Non-Roman alphabet languages
- Character-based languages
- Auslan
- Classical Languages
- Victorian Aboriginal (Koorie) languages

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[2] Cf. http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/languages/preamble
[3] Cf. http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/P/vceages/studies/lote/lotelistindex.aspx

This is not so in AusVELS. As of 2015 it is planned that the following languages would have their own new specific F-10 curriculum documents: Arabic, Auslan, Chinese, Classical Languages, French, German, Greek, Hindi, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, Turkish and Vietnamese. This leaves other languages, taught in small numbers of Victorian schools, not provided for, e.g. Albanian, Armenian, Bosnian, Chin Hakha, Croatian, Dari, Dinka, Dutch, Filipino, Gujarati, Hebrew, Hungarian, Karen, Khmer, Macedonian, Maltese, Persian, Polish, Portuguese, Punjabi, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Sinhala, Somali, Swedish, Tamil, Thai, Tigrinya, Ukrainian and Yiddish.

However, as mentioned earlier, Victoria is planning to devise two new generic templates for the new F-10 Australian Curriculum: one for Roman alphabet languages and the other for Non-Roman alphabet languages. This now allows teachers of other languages in Victoria to work on the new national curriculum and so share the new terminology and concepts embedded in the documents designed for the Australian Curriculum: Languages. The creation of two new generic models will increase opportunities for all language teachers to participate in professional learning related to the new national curriculum.

In 2010, when discussing the curriculum for the first four curriculum areas being developed by ACARA, Professor Barry McGaw AO, ACARA Board Chair, stated,

> *The overall aim is to produce a final curriculum in English, history, mathematics, and science that equips all young Australians with the essential skills, knowledge and capabilities to thrive and compete in the globalised world and information rich workplaces of the current century. (ACARA, 2010, online)*

This quotation now applies equally to Languages. Students of Languages will be able benefit from access to the curriculum developed by ACARA through its more sophisticated approach to language curriculum design. The ACARA Languages curriculum documents are based on current research into language acquisition, to present a more complex view of communication and interculturality. This new understanding of language interactions involves, for example, the moulding of identity through reciprocal, inter- and intraculturally-complex and dynamic communication. Furthermore, the ACARA model for Languages has recognised the need for language-specific curricula, thereby acknowledging that languages, whilst sharing common elements, are very individual in nature.

During a meeting in March 2014, Andrew Ferguson, President of the MLTAV[4] asked a small group of teachers present for a show of hands about their preference regarding inclusion of all the languages taught in Victoria in the Australian Curriculum. Confronted with staying with "friendly, old and known" VELS vis-à-vis the innovative AusVELS model, the vote went for change, despite the associated problems. The maxim of the celebrated leader Abraham Lincoln comes to mind:

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[4] Modern Language Teachers' Association of Victoria

The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. (Lincoln, 1862)

The statement stresses the need to persevere, and perseverance has indeed resulted in success for language provision in Victoria. The Victorian Government has included in its language policy the requirement that all primary schools offer a language program at Foundation level in 2015 and that by 2025 a language will be mandated for all students up to Year 10 (ages 15/16). In other words, Victoria has accepted the challenge of accommodating its multicultural heritage.

Summary of VELS and AusVELS

The curriculum is the defined and mandated set of knowledge and skills that schools must teach and assess, a democratic entitlement rather than an individual determination of what is required for effective participatory citizenship. Languages are no longer an option for Victorian schools – all schools will be required to report on each student every year. Howes (2014)

In 2004 the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) were developed. The VELS framework of essential learning had three interwoven purposes to equip students to:

• Manage themselves and their relations with others

• Understand the world and others

• Act effectively in the world

The three components of the AusVELS curriculum are designed to enable students to meet the demands of a modern, globalised world:

• the processes of physical, personal and social development and growth

• the branches of learning reflected in the traditional disciplines, and

• the interdisciplinary capacities needed for effective functioning within and beyond school.

The Australian Curriculum has since been developed using the following overarching design structure: Learning areas, General capabilities, Cross-curriculum priorities.[5]

LEARNING AREAS (Branches of Learning)

English, Mathematics, Science, Health and Physical Education, Languages, Humanities and Social Sciences (History, Geography, Civics and Citizenship, Economics and Business), The Arts (Performing and Visual), Technologies (Design and Technologies; Digital Technologies).

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[5] Cf. http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Pages/foundation10/f10index.aspx

GENERAL CAPABILITIES (Physical, personal and social development)

Critical and creative thinking, Personal and social capability, Intercultural understanding, and Ethical Understanding (ICT, Literacy and Numeracy are also categorised as General capabilities).

CROSS-CURRICULUM PRIORITIES (Interdisciplinary)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia, Sustainability.

Senior Secondary

Currently there is no planned change to the suite of languages at the senior secondary level. The VCE (Victorian Certificate of Education) is the certificate that the majority of students in Victoria receive on satisfactory completion of their secondary education.

Victoria offers 45 VCE languages in the VCE. Some languages are taught more widely in mainstream schools, (e.g. Chinese, French, German, Italian, Modern Greek, Indonesian, Japanese). The After Hours Community Schools cater for many other languages, e.g. Polish, Bosnian, Hindi, Khmer etc. up to Year 12, under the supervision of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA).

At this time, due to demand, three new VCE studies are being implemented, Vietnamese First Language, Chin Hakha and Karen, both languages of Myanmar.

"Chinese Language, Culture and Society" is under development and is intended for students who have had little exposure to the study of Chinese. . There is a large cohort of students of Chinese and VCE Chinese is already offered at three different levels:

- Chinese Second Language (students who have learned all their Chinese in Australia)

- Chinese Second Language Advanced (students who have resided in a Chinese – speaking country or region for more than 3 years)

- Chinese First Language (students who have had extensive exposure to the study of Chinese)

Concluding Thoughts

The new Languages Curriculum in Victoria, whilst still not fully implemented, has a number of innovative and ambitious features. It is trying to cater for a wide range of languages, some with tailored curricula, to allow the cultural components to come to the forefront. The main challenges to successful implementation will depend on both the availability and appropriate training of existing and future language teachers.

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Appendix: Explanations for Abbreviations and Acronyms

Aboriginal Languages and Torres Strait Islander Languages	Prior to the arrival of Europeans, about 250 distinct languages were spoken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups in Australia. Each of these languages had several dialects, and it is estimated that there were at least 600 plus dialects.
	The languages of mainland Australia are classified as either Pama-Nyungan or Non-Pama-Nyungan. The Pama-Nyungan language family covers 90% of the Australian mainland. The name is derived from the words for man, *pama* in the north-eastern languages and *nyunga* in those of the south-west. Non-Pama-Nyungan languages are found in the far north of the Northern Territory and Western Australia. They are a disparate group of languages that vary greatly from each other and from the Pama-Nyungan languages.
	Many Australian languages have been lost and now fewer than 20 remain 'strong', that is, spoken by people of all ages.
	There are two traditional languages in the Torres Strait Islands. Kalau Lagau Ya, the language of the Central and Western Torres Strait Islands, is a Pama-Nyungan language, but Meriam Mìr, the language of the Eastern Torres Strait, is related to the neighbouring languages of Papua New Guinea.
ACARA	The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) is an independent statutory authority with the aim to "improve the learning of all young Australians through world-class school curriculum, assessment and reporting." Further info: http://www.acara.edu.au/default.asp)
AFTMLA	The Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations (AFMLTA Inc.) is the national professional body representing teachers of all languages in Australia. The term 'modern' is used for historical reasons and is not intended to exclude any language. The AFMLTA believes that there is value in all language learning and is accordingly interested in promoting the teaching and learning of any language (ancient, modern, 'community', Aboriginal, traditional, international, European, Asian or other). Downloaded from: http://afmlta.asn.au/about-afmlta/
AO	Officer of the Order of Australia
Auslan	Auslan is the sign language of the Australian Deaf community. The term Auslan is an acronym of "**Au**stralian **S**ign **Lan**guage", coined by Trevor Johnston in the early 1980s,[3] although the language itself is much older. Auslan is related to British Sign Language (BSL) and New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL); the three have descended from the same parent language, and together comprise the BANZSL language family. Auslan has also been influenced by Irish Sign Language (ISL) and more recently has borrowed signs from American Sign Language (ASL). (Downloaded from Wikipedia entry)
AusVELS	AusVELS is the Foundation to Year 10 curriculum that aims to provide a "single, coherent and comprehensive set of prescribed content and common achievement standards, which schools use to plan student learning programs, assess student progress and report to parents." Further info: http://ausvels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/
F-10	Foundation to Year 10 (ages 5 to 15/16)
MLTAV	The Modern Language Teachers' Association of Victoria Inc. is a professional association for Languages teachers, and is the umbrella organisation for approximately twenty-two Single Language Associations (SLAs) in Victoria. Further info: https://www.mltav.asn.au/
VCAA	Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority
VCE	Victorian Certificate of Education