

A critique of The ACARA geography curriculum Version 9.0

This document is a detailed commentary on the revised geography curriculum for Australian schools, approved by the Ministers of Education and released in May 2022 for implementation in 2024. It presents the evidence for concluding that the new curriculum is not suitable for teaching in Australian schools, and needs to be thoroughly rewritten, as it has errors, inconsistencies, unclear statements and omissions, and in Years 7-10 will be more difficult to teach than the previous one. These deficiencies are explained below for Years F-6 and then Years 7-10.

Note: Content descriptions are statements that describe what teachers should teach and what students should learn. Elaborations to content descriptions are suggestions to teachers about how the content could be taught, and are not mandatory.

Years F-6

The revision has removed large areas of knowledge from primary school humanities and social sciences. While overall the school curriculum has had a 21% reduction in the number of content descriptions, there has been a 48% reduction in primary school geography. The consequences are described below.

Students' knowledge of the world will be significantly reduced

The revised curriculum has only two content descriptions about the world:

Australia's neighbouring countries (in Year 3)

The geographical diversity of the Asia region (in Year 6)

These content descriptions in the previous curriculum (some of them abbreviated) have been removed:

The division of the world into hemispheres, continents and oceans (in Year 2)

The main climate types of the world and the similarities and differences between the climates of different places (in Year 3)

A brief study of the continents and major countries of Africa and South America (in Year 4)

A brief study of the continents and major countries of Europe and North America (in Year 5)

Differences in the economic, demographic and social characteristics of countries across the world (in Year 6)

The world's cultural diversity, including that of its indigenous peoples (in Year 6)

The previous curriculum had a good coverage of world knowledge, but the revised one is seriously deficient. Students will be taught nothing about some of the countries Australia is closely connected to through history, trade, migration, alliances, and government and non-government aid, such as the United States, the United Kingdom and countries in Europe. There will have had no study of Africa, a major destination of Australia's non-government overseas aid. They will also learn nothing about the economic, demographic, social and cultural differences between the countries of the world, and will have no sense of the world as a whole. This is not a foundation for global awareness.

Students' knowledge of their own place will be significantly reduced

Children will learn less about the place they live in (i.e. their neighbourhood, suburb, town or rural area), and why it is an important part of their life. This content description in Foundation in the previous curriculum:

The places people live in and belong to, their familiar features and why they are important to people

has been replaced with this one:

the features of familiar places they belong to, why some places are special and how places can be looked after

The change removes the emphasis on 'the places people live in and belong to', and puts it on features. It also removes the words 'and why they are important to people'. This eliminates much of the point of the original content description, which was to start children thinking about the significance of their place to them. Similarly, this elaboration in Year 3 of the previous curriculum has been deleted:

exploring people's feelings for place and the factors that influence people's attachment to place, through reading and viewing poems, songs, paintings and stories

Combined with other changes, students will now will have less opportunity to become familiar with their place, yet developing an attachment to it contributes to their personal development and sense of belonging.

Students will also learn less about how their place has been created by people and could be changed by people, which is a foundation for local citizenship. In the previous curriculum Year 5 had this content description:

The environmental and human influences on the location and characteristics of a place and the management of spaces within them

This was intended to complete a sequence of content descriptions that developed an understanding of places by examining ways of explaining their characteristics, and by exploring how the spaces within them are managed. It provided an opportunity for students

to learn more about their own place, and to engage with local planning issues and conflicts, and it showed students how their understanding of places could be applied to real world issues. The content of the deleted content description is partly included in this one in the revised curriculum:

the influence of people, including First Nations Australians and people in other countries, on the characteristics of a place

However, the new one no longer includes mention of the management of the spaces within a place.

Students will no longer learn about the concept of climate

This content description in the previous curriculum has been deleted:

The main climate types of the world and the similarities and differences between the climates of different places

together with this elaboration:

examining how weather contributes to a climate type

Climate is not in the primary school Science curriculum, so students will not learn the difference between weather and climate, something that is frequently misunderstood and which confuses people's understanding of climate change. They will also learn nothing about the climates around the world, knowledge which is required later in the curriculum.

Useful geographical knowledge has been lost

For example, this content description in the previous curriculum has been deleted:

The similarities and differences between places in terms of their type of settlement, demographic characteristics and the lives of the people who live there, and people's perceptions of these places

This further developed an understanding of places by studying them as settlements, populations and communities, and it also provided an opportunity for students to learn how to use ABS statistics to find out about their own place and others that they were interested in. This is a task well within the capacity of Year 3 students.

Addition of unnecessary content

The revision was meant to reduce the content in the curriculum, but several changes add content. In Year 5 this revised content description:

the management of Australian environments, including managing severe weather events such as bushfires, floods, droughts or cyclones, and their consequences

has replaced this one from the previous curriculum:

The impact of bushfires or floods on environments and communities, and how people can respond

The revised content description has greatly increased the content of the previous one, and is now about the management of Australian environments. This change is carried through in the two elaborations:

exploring how environments are used and managed, the practices and laws that aim to manage human impact, the use of zoning to manage local environments, creation of wildlife corridors and national parks

examining how changes due to environmental practices create issues, such as water shortages and increased floods and bushfires, the impact of issues on places and communities, and how people can mitigate the impacts through building codes, zoning, firebreaks and controlled burns, and efficient irrigation

The content description in the previous curriculum was solely about reducing the impacts of bushfires or floods, and was quite limited. Its three elaborations were:

mapping and explaining the location, frequency and severity of bushfires or flooding in Australia

explaining the impacts of fire on Australian vegetation and the significance of fire damage on communities

researching how the application of principles of prevention, mitigation and preparedness minimises the harmful effects of bushfires or flooding

Now teachers are asked to cover a wide range of environmental management practices, almost as many as in the Year 10 unit on environmental change and management. At the same time the principles of prevention, mitigation and preparedness that would help students to grasp the range of practices that can be adopted to manage the impact of bushfires or floods have been deleted. How this change contributes to stripping back the curriculum is unclear.

Errors and inconsistencies

Year 2 in the revised curriculum has this content description:

how places can be spatially represented in geographical divisions from local to regional to state/territory, and how people and places are interconnected across those scales

Its elaborations are:

investigating the places locally and at a broader scale that they and their families visit for shopping, health, recreation, religious or ceremonial activities, or other reasons

identifying links they and other people in their community have with people and places at the regional and/or state/territory scale; for example, where produce in their supermarket comes from or produce from their farms goes to, relatives they visit, places they go for holidays

describing how communication and transport technologies connect their place to other places at the regional and/or state/territory level; for example, online communication, phone, road, rail, planes, ferries

Both the content description and the elaborations are confused about scale. The visits, links and connections they describe are between individual places, as each one clearly states, and are therefore at the same scale. They are not visits, links and connections between a place and a region or a state, but between a place and other places that are located in another region or state. They are connections across distance, and not across scales as stated in the content description. As very few primary school teachers have studied much geography, they may be misled.

Elaborations that don't match their content description

Elaborations should describe ways that teachers can teach the content description to which they belong. The following are instances where the elaborations appear to be incompatible with their content description.

1. Year 3 of the revised curriculum has this content description:

the similarities and differences between places in Australia and neighbouring countries in terms of their natural, managed and constructed features

Two of its elaborations are:

investigating differences in the type of housing that people use in different climates and environments

exploring different types of settlement and classifying them into hierarchical categories, such as isolated dwellings, outstations, villages, towns, regional centres and large cities

To be compatible with the content description the first elaboration should be limited to Australia and its neighbouring countries. The second elaboration has been imported from a content description in the previous curriculum on types of settlement that has been deleted, and has no relationship with the revised content description.

2. Year 6 of the revised curriculum has this content description:

the geographical diversity and location of places in the Asia region, and its location in relation to Australia

It looks similar to this one in the previous curriculum:

The geographical diversity of the Asia region and the location of its major countries in relation to Australia

However, the revised content description is now about the diversity of places, and not of the diversity of the region as a whole, which would include its climates, topography, populations and cultures. It is also about the location of the Asia region in relation to Australia, which is not particularly useful. It is also about places, not countries, yet these changes are not matched in several of the elaborations, which continue to about the diversity of the region and about countries. Two other elaborations are:

comparing the daily lives of people in other countries, in terms of food, clothing, personal and household goods, housing and education, and differences between the wealthy and poor in a country

researching the proportion of the Australian population and of the population from their local area who were born in each world cultural region, using data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, and then comparing aspects of selected cultures

They have both been imported from content descriptions that have been deleted. The first covers the world while the second is only about Australia; neither belong to a content description that is about the Asia region.

Removal of study of the human aspects of places

In two content descriptions and their elaborations there has been an elimination of the human aspects of places.

1. One example is a Year 3 content description in the revised curriculum:

the similarities and differences between places in Australia and neighbouring countries in terms of their natural, managed and constructed features

It replaces this one in the previous curriculum:

The location of Australia's neighbouring countries and the diverse characteristics of their places

Three of the elaborations in the revised content description are:

identifying and locating examples of the main climatic types in Australia and neighbouring countries (for example, equatorial, tropical, arid, semi-arid, temperate) and the features of those climate types and their impact on other natural features

identifying and describing the similarities and differences between places in Australia and places in neighbouring countries, such as Indonesia and Pacific Island nations, in their natural features; for example, rocks, landforms, bodies of water, climate, soils, natural vegetation and animal life

choosing a place in a neighbouring country, such as Indonesia or Pacific Island nations, to compare with a place in Australia in terms of managed and built features, to explore the reasons for similarities and differences

There are several issues here. One is that by Year 3 students should be examining the characteristics of places, not the more limited concept of features. The content description in the previous curriculum was about characteristics, which are both natural and human, but in the new elaborations there is no mention of human characteristics such as populations, cultures, economies and ways of living. Instead, it is suggested that teachers focus on 'rocks, landforms, bodies of water, climate, soils, natural vegetation and animal life,' and on 'managed and built features'. This is an inexplicable and limiting change. A second is that a content description on climate and climatic types has been deleted from the revised curriculum, yet is needed for students to understand the first elaboration. A third issue is that the revised content description is about features, and climate is not a feature of a place according to the definition in the glossary.

2. A second example is a content description in Year 5 that has already been mentioned for a different problem. The previous curriculum had this content description:

The environmental and human influences on the location and characteristics of a place and the management of spaces within them

The content of this content description is partly included in this one in the revised curriculum:

the influence of people, including First Nations Australians and people in other countries, on the characteristics of a place

Three of its elaborations are:

identifying how First Nations Australian communities altered the environment and sustained ways of living through their methods of land and resource management; for example, firestick farming

exploring the extent of change in the local environment over time (for example, through vegetation clearance, fencing, urban development, drainage, irrigation, erosion, farming, the introduction of grazing livestock such as sheep and cattle, forest plantations or mining), and evaluating the effects of change on economic development and environmental sustainability

exploring examples of positive influences people have on the characteristics of places; for example, reforestation, land-care groups, rehabilitating former mining, industrial or waste disposal sites

These elaborations are only about the environmental characteristics of a place, so once again learning about the human characteristics of a place has been removed.

The conceptual level of the curriculum has been reduced

Students will have a poorer understanding of the concept of place, because of content and ideas that have been deleted, while content that explored the concept of location, and how location, distance and accessibility affect our lives, has also been removed. Concepts are important because they are what we think with, and intellectual development is based on conceptual thinking.

Comment on F-6

I am well aware that the pressure to reduce the content in primary school humanities and social sciences came from Education Ministers, and particularly from the Federal Minister, who wanted more time in schools to teach literacy and numeracy. In response I would argue that it is possible to produce an excellent curriculum that still reduces content by around 30% overall, and by much more in the first four years of primary school. I also point out that children develop their literacy and numeracy skills within geography and the other humanities and social sciences.

Years 7-10

The curriculum for Years 7-10 has not been greatly reduced, but it has some of the same problems as the primary school years. These are outlined below.

Loss of conceptual coherence

The ways that the curriculum has been rewritten has produced some loss of conceptual coherence. An example is this content description in Year 7 Water in the world:

the location and distribution of water resources in Australia, their implications, and strategies to manage the sustainability of water

It combines these two content descriptions from the previous curriculum:

The quantity and variability of Australia's water resources compared with other continents

The nature of water scarcity and ways of overcoming it, including studies drawn from Australia and West Asia and/or North Africa

The previous curriculum had a sequence of ideas, from the quantity and quality of water resources to the concept of the scarcity of this water and ways of overcoming it. In the revised content description quantity and quality has been replaced by the location and distribution of water resources, which has nothing to do with their quantity and quality, or with the sustainable management of water resources. The previous curriculum had a clear sequence of ideas that teachers and students could follow, while the revised curriculum has two largely unconnected topics. This will not make it easier to teach.

Confusing use of geographical concepts

The revisers of the curriculum appear to have decided to emphasise geographical concepts by inserting 'location and distribution', 'interconnection' and 'sustainable' or 'sustainability' into content descriptions. In many cases this has been inappropriate. Some examples are described in other parts of this document, but here are some more. This content description in the previous curriculum:

Different types of landscapes and their distinctive landform features

has become

the location and distribution of Australia's distinctive landscapes and significant landforms

This changes the emphasis from understanding landscapes and landforms to knowing where they are, which in the context of the unit is pointless information. Another example from the same unit is this content description in the revised curriculum:

the interconnections between human activity and geomorphological processes, and ways of managing distinctive landscapes

This part of the unit is about the effects of human activities on landforms, not their interconnections with geomorphological processes.

A third example is from a Year 8 unit on Changing nations. This content description in the previous curriculum:

Management and planning of Australia's urban future

has become:

strategies to manage the sustainability of Australia's changing urban places

Most of the strategies to manage and improve Australia's cities are not about sustainability. The insertion of sustainability here is inappropriate.

Errors

There are errors that are frankly embarrassing in a public education document. These include:

- a) A content description on the 'causes of urbanisation and its impacts on places and environments, drawing on a study from a country such as the United States of America, and its implications'. The United States is not urbanising, as it has finished the process of urbanisation. In the previous curriculum the case study suggested was Indonesia, which is urbanising.
- b) A content description on 'challenges to sustainable food production and food security in Australia and appropriate management strategies'. Australia does not have a problem of food security at the national level, as we produce sufficient food and are a food exporter, and there is nothing in the elaborations to suggest that teachers look at individual and household food security. The content description in the previous curriculum was appropriately about world food security, but this has been deleted.
- c) An elaboration in a Year 8 unit on Landscapes and landforms suggests students explain the effects of rock type on a selected landform at the local scale; such as Fraser Island, Queensland or Twelve Apostles, Victoria; for example, sedimentary – igneous and metamorphic; chemical weathering – oxidation and solution; physical weathering – exfoliation and frost wedging. Fraser Island is a sand island, formed by winds and tides. The only connection with rocks is that the sand came from weathered rocks, and has been transported long distances. Rocks do not have any influence on the landforms on Fraser Island.
- d) An elaboration in another Year 8 unit suggests Wollongong as an example of population decline in an industrial city. The population of Wollongong is not declining, and has not been declining.

Loss of coherent sequences

In two units a coherent sequence of content descriptions has been destroyed.

1. The unit on place and liveability in Year 7 had this sequence of content descriptions in the previous curriculum:

Factors that influence the decisions people make about where to live and their perceptions of the liveability of places

The influence of accessibility to services and facilities on the liveability of places

The influence of environmental quality on the liveability of places

The influence of social connectedness and community identity on the liveability of places

Strategies used to enhance the of places, especially for young people, including examples from Australia and Europe

After the first content description the next three examined different influences on people's perceptions of the liveability of a place. In the revised curriculum the content descriptions are:

factors that influence the decisions people make about where to live, including perceptions of the liveability of places and the influence of environmental quality

the location and distribution of services and facilities, and implications for liveability of places

the cultural connectedness of people to places and how this influences their identity, sense of belonging and perceptions of a place, in particular the cultural connectedness of First Nations Australians to Country/Place

strategies used to enhance the liveability of a place, including for young people, the aged or those with disability, drawing on studies such as those from Australia or Europe

Environmental quality is now about its influence on where people live, not on liveability. The accessibility of services and facilities is now about the location of services and facilities. This is not the same as accessibility, because accessibility includes the availability of transportation to where services and facilities are located, which will vary from person to person. Social connectedness and community identity has now become cultural connectedness, which is a very different concept and mainly applies to First Nations Australians. The cultural connectedness of First Nations Australians is to their Country, a place, as well as to the people who belong there. Social connectedness is connection to people, not to a place. As a result of these changes, the sequence of influences on people's perception of the liveability of a place has been destroyed.

2. In the Year 10 unit on Geographies of human wellbeing three of the six content descriptions in the previous curriculum were:

Reasons for spatial variations between countries in selected indicators of human wellbeing

Reasons for, and consequences of, spatial variations in human wellbeing on a regional scale within India or another country of the Asia region

Reasons for, and consequences of, spatial variations in human wellbeing in Australia at the local scale

These were intended to get students to examine spatial variations in human wellbeing at three different scales, and to see the difference that scale makes. In the revised curriculum they have been replaced by:

the methods used to measure spatial variations in human wellbeing and development, and how these can be applied to determine differences between places at the global scale

reasons for, and consequences of, spatial variations in human wellbeing at a regional and national scale, drawing on studies such as from within India or another country in Asia

reasons for, and consequences of, spatial variations in human wellbeing in Australia, including for First Nations Australians

The sequence of analysing spatial variations in human wellbeing between countries, between regions within a country, and between small areas within part of a country, has been lost, and with it an understanding of scale. Also lost is the requirement to study variations in human wellbeing at a local scale within Australia, which would get students to think of the inequalities between local government areas, suburbs or rural areas within their own area. These inequalities are a major social issue as they have detrimental effects on educational attainment, health, employment and social mobility.

Lost concepts

Some important concepts have been deleted, such as water scarcity (which has been replaced by sustainability, which is not the same), and the water balance (essential for an understanding of water resources in Australia).

Incomprehensible statements

ACARA describes the new curriculum as 'a more stripped-back and teachable curriculum'. Yet the new curriculum for Years 7-10 geography has 26% (or 990) more words than the previous one, and some statements that are hard to interpret. For example, in the Year 10 unit on Environmental change and management a content description is:

causes and effects of a change in an identified environment at a local, national or global scale, and strategies to manage sustainability

It is not clear what an identified environment at a global scale might be. Does it mean an environment somewhere else in the world? Or does it mean that the student should study all examples of the identified environment throughout the world? Second, what does it mean to 'manage sustainability'? The implication of the first half of the content description is that the managing is of the environmental change, not sustainability.

Misleading or unrelated elaborations

As noted for the primary school years, elaborations should describe ways that teachers can teach the content description to which they belong. They should also be accurate. Here are some of the many instances of elaborations that do meet these criteria.

1. In the revised Year 9 unit on Biomes and food security this content description:

the effects on environments of human alteration of biomes to produce food, industrial materials and fibres

has these elaborations:

identifying the biomes in Australia and a country in Asia that produce some of the foods and plant material people consume

explaining the differences between natural and agricultural ecosystems in flows of nutrients and water, and in biodiversity; for example, the tropical rainforest biome in Indonesia produces food such as fruit, grains, nuts, vegetables and spices, and non-food products such as wood, rubber, coffee, chocolate and palm oil

explaining how human alteration of biomes (for example, drip irrigation, fertilisers, pesticides, genetically modified seeds, agrobiotics, terracing, and controlling erosion and overgrazing) has increased agricultural productivity in Australia and a country in Asia

In the second elaboration the example suggested does not illustrate the differences between natural and agricultural ecosystems, and actually belongs to the first elaboration because it is about what a biome produces. The third elaboration is a curious mixture of alterations. It misses vegetation clearance, introduction of exotic plants and animals, drainage and cultivation, which are major influences on the environment. Yet it includes controlling erosion and overgrazing, which are measures to reduce human alteration of biomes.

2. Another content description in this unit is:

the environmental, economic and technological factors that impact agricultural productivity, in Australia and a country in Asia

Two of its elaborations are:

examining how environmental factors, such as climate, soil, landform, water and hazards, support higher agricultural production, such as wheat, rice and maize, in Australia and a country in Asia

examining how agricultural innovations have reduced environmental limitations on food production in Australia and a country in Asia; for example, increased food production due to research into and development of high-yielding and genetically engineered pest resistant varieties, construction of drip irrigation systems, and the use of stubble mulching, intercropping, agroforestry and crop rotation

In the first elaboration, how do hazards support higher agricultural production? In the second elaboration the last four examples are not about reducing the environmental limitations on food production, which are climate and soils. They are ways of reducing the environmental impacts of food production.

3. A third content description from the same unit is:

challenges to sustainable food production and food security in Australia and appropriate management strategies

Two of its elaborations are:

examining environmental impacts of changes to food production causing a decline in the capacity of the land to provide agricultural products; for example, land and water degradation such as soil erosion, salinity and desertification, shortage of fresh water, competing land uses, climate change and pollution contribute to a decrease in food production

explaining management strategies that restore the quality or diversity of agriculture in Australia; for example, improving the function of natural biomes and anthropogenic biomes, monitoring land management practices, improving the condition of the soil or building the capability of farmers

In the first elaboration the second half is correct, but the first half is misleading. The problem described in the elaboration is not about the impacts of changes to food production causing a decline in the capacity of the land to provide agricultural products, but about changes to the environment that are affecting food production. In the second elaboration, is the quality and diversity of Australian agriculture really a problem? And how do you improve the function of natural and anthropogenic biomes? What is their function? And if agriculture is present, the biome is not natural. How can teachers understand this elaboration?

Conclusion

In its clarity, structure and quality the new geography curriculum for both primary and secondary school is unsuitable for implementation in Australian schools. Its quality is well below the standard of comparable curriculums, especially in England, which is a leader in geographical education. It will not be easier to teach than the previous curriculum, particularly for the many teachers who have done little or no previous study of geography and are required to teach out-of-field.