Geography
Geography Life Skills
Stage 6 syllabus review

Syllabus review report and broad directions

July 2018
Geography Stage 6 syllabus review

Background

In 2017, the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) commenced a review of the Geography Stage 6 syllabus to include Australian Curriculum content.

The new syllabus will reflect the principles of the NESA K–10 Curriculum Framework and Statement of Equity Principles, the reforms of the NSW Government Stronger HSC Standards (2016), and nationally agreed educational goals.

The Stronger HSC Standards reforms provide the following directions for development of draft syllabuses, school-based assessment and examination specifications:

- refining content to focus on depth over breadth and the acquisition of deep knowledge and mastery of skills
- limiting the number of school-based assessment tasks in Year 11 and Year 12 to focus on teaching and learning, and providing effective feedback
- reviewing school-based assessment tasks to ensure variety and to gather evidence of achievement in different ways to the HSC written examinations
- reviewing the design of examinations to focus on the application of knowledge, understanding and skills, and to reduce predictability.

Syllabus development will follow the NESA syllabus development process including consultation at each phase: syllabus review, directions development, and syllabus development.

NESA conducted a survey in Term 1, 2018 to gather feedback about the current syllabus.

Consultation opportunities also included:
- targeted consultation meetings for Aboriginal education
- written submissions.

Analysis of feedback will inform the development of the Draft Directions for Syllabus Development in 2018.
Stakeholder feedback

This summary details data and findings gathered from monitoring of syllabus implementation, 238 responses to an online survey and 4 written submissions.

Strengths of the current syllabus

The major strengths identified from the review of the syllabus were its structure, nature of content, skills and tools and the Senior Geography Project.

Course structure and content

Respondents strongly supported the current syllabus structure, with several noting that it provides a balance of physical, human and applied Geography. Similarly, the majority of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the current syllabus content is relevant and appropriate for students in their senior years of schooling.

The opportunity in the current syllabus to select contemporary case studies to meet the needs and interests of students, was strongly supported by respondents, who noted that this allowed for flexibility when delivering the course.

The majority of respondents also agreed that the current syllabus provides opportunities to build on knowledge, understanding and skills of the new Geography K–10 syllabus.

Geographical tools and skills

The majority of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the current Geography Stage 6 syllabus places an appropriate focus on geographical tools and skills; however, a range of suggestions were provided to enhance this aspect of the course.

Senior Geography Project

The Senior Geography Project was seen by respondents as a valuable component of the course which offers scope to integrate learning across the curriculum areas, including general capabilities. This view also applied to the case studies, which were seen to provide flexibility and an opportunity to deliver the cross-curriculum priorities. Several respondents commented on the significance of fieldwork and supported its current status in the course.

Geography Life Skills Stage 6

Respondents indicated support for the current structure of the Geography Life Skills Stage 6 course. In particular, the flexibility of the course to provide opportunities for learning about Geography for the full range of students for whom this is an appropriate course option.
Areas for improvement

While most aspects of the current Geography Stage 6 course were strongly supported by respondents, a range of recommendations were provided by respondents.

Outcomes

A variety of outcomes were identified by some respondents as being too general or broad; however, it was noted that this may be the case in order to accommodate the range of case studies teachers may select to teach the content. A number of respondents commented on the need for Stage 6 outcomes to reflect a progression of learning from the outcomes in the K–10 syllabus.

Content

Several respondents identified the opportunity with the review of the syllabus to update content to reflect contemporary issues and current theories and research. The Urban Places topic was identified by several respondents as needing to be reviewed due to overlap with content now included in Stage 5. The amount of content was also identified as an area requiring review, particularly in the Urban Places topic. Some respondents identified potential duplication of content in some areas, particularly within Stages 4 and 5. It was noted that the removal of duplication would allow a greater opportunity to build on the knowledge, understanding and skills described in the Geography K–10 syllabus. The inclusion of new content was supported by some respondents, with a range of suggestions provided, including content relating to climate change and political geography.

The inclusion of new content was also seen by respondents as providing an opportunity to strengthen opportunities in relation to cross-curriculum priorities, for example Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditional land management strategies, and case studies relating to Asia. Consideration of the diversity of learners was also identified as an area for review in the development of the new syllabus.

Geographical tools and skills

Some respondents suggested a review of the Geographical skills and tools, including the consideration of new technologies such as augmented reality, GPS and remote sensing. Some respondents suggested that there are too many skills in the Stage 6 course, and that clarification is required as to their application.

Geography Life Skills Stage 6

The majority of respondents supported a revision of the current Geography Life Skills Stage 6 course as an opportunity to enhance outcomes and content which better reflect contemporary issues. It was noted that review of aspects of the course content may allow for an opportunity to build on the knowledge, understanding and skills described in Geography Years 7–10 Life Skills content within the Geography K–10 syllabus.

Respondents noted that the revision of the course should allow for increased opportunities for students to engage with practical geographical tools and skills that are linked to real-life contexts.
**Assessment and examinations**

The majority of respondents supported the current structure of the HSC examination, noting that it provided opportunities for students to show what they know and can do. The current structure was considered to provide a balance of knowledge and skills, and respondents noted the flexibility the current extended response options provide. The provision of stimulus material was viewed by the majority of respondents as relevant and essential for students to demonstrate application of knowledge and skills.

Some respondents noted that some multiple choice questions requiring the use of particular geographical skills may require students to allocate a disproportionate amount of time to their completion. Several respondents suggested that there may be scope to include additional skills questions in the short-answer section that require the application of stimulus material. The inclusion of geographical formulas in the examination was suggested by a number of respondents. Some respondents commented on the need to review questions related to fieldwork to strengthen opportunities for students to apply knowledge, understanding and skills. The extended response questions were viewed by some respondents as requiring review to enhance critical thinking and the application of knowledge and understanding.
NESA Advice

Assessment and examinations

A review of the use of ‘such as’ in syllabus content may facilitate the development of stronger objective-response questions. Clarity regarding the depth of study required must also be considered when reviewing syllabus content, and the application of higher-order skills that build on those in the Geography K–10 syllabus. It was noted that the inclusion of an updated glossary may allow for a consistent understanding of key geographical terms.

The current structure of Section III requires review. While there are no topic options in the Year 12 Geography course, in Section III students must answer two out of three optional questions. This means each student is effectively doing a variation of the examination, depending on the two questions they select. Writing comparable questions presents a challenge for Geography examination committees each year. Optional question scaling can be applied, but the outcome is not optimal. Assessment Standards recommends Section III be changed to two compulsory questions. This would provide an opportunity to improve the correlation between the core and the other options for increased validity.

A computer-based Geography HSC examination should be considered for this course, as it will facilitate the assessment of higher-order skills, while addressing issues surrounding accessibility of the stimulus material presented.

Course participation

Enrolments in Geography Stage 6 have been relatively consistent, with a slight increase in candidature in recent years. Any potential impact of the new Geography K–10 syllabus is yet to be seen in student cohorts commencing their Stage 6 studies.

Geography Stage 6 – Course participation

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In Years 11–12 students may access the Geography Life Skills Stage 6 course as a single course or as part of an integrated study within the Human Society and its Environment Stage 6 Life Skills course which draws on content from across two or more of the HSIE modules.

HSIE Stage 6 Life Skills – Course participation

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### Geography Stage 6 Life Skills – Course participation

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### Other considerations

**Australian Curriculum developments**

The development of the Geography Stage 6 syllabus will incorporate the content presented in the Australian Curriculum: Geography for Years 11 and 12.

**NSW Curriculum developments**

The implementation of the Geography K–10 syllabus and the Earth and Environmental Science Stage 6 syllabus will be considered in developing the Geography Stage 6 syllabus and the Geography Life Skills Stage 6 course.
Overview of national and international research and practice

Summary of national research

There has been significant discussion in Australia by geography educators such as Alaric Maude and Nick Hutchinson about the need for students to understand the relevance of geography to living and working in the 21st century.

The notion of ‘powerful knowledge’ in geography has attracted attention. Maude (2015) emphasises the analytical power of geographic concepts such as ‘place’ and ‘space’ in supporting and developing geographical understanding, enabling students to find deeper meaning in factual content and to engage in critical thinking and evaluation. Similarly, the value of fieldwork in geographical learning has been highlighted. Lou Preston (2016) notes the opportunities that fieldwork provides for experiential learning and inquiry-based approaches to meet the needs and interests of the diversity of learners.

Summary of international research

International research, particularly in the UK, has affirmed the important role of fieldwork in enabling students to think geographically, particularly at the senior level. The form it takes and the assessment approaches that apply is a continuing area of debate. David Lambert (2014) highlights the opportunities that fieldwork provides for students to apply their knowledge and skills to specific contexts and for review of the way fieldwork is assessed.

Another aspect of recent research that requires consideration is the GeoCapabilities project (2013). Initially led by the American Association of Geographers, the project has focused on the value of geography and what it means to think geographically. This reflects broader discussion in countries such as the UK, US and Singapore of the need for students to develop a holistic understanding of geographical challenges and to pose problems and engage with issues of complexity that do not involve straightforward answers.

There has been increasing recognition, particularly in the UK and the US, of the role of digital technologies in geographical learning. Mary Fargher (2016) highlights the opportunities afforded by digital technologies in creating a curriculum that is contemporary and relevant to young people and consistent with new ways of learning in geography.
Broad directions for syllabus development

The following broad directions for syllabus development have been informed through consultation with stakeholders. These broad directions will guide future development of the Geography Stage 6 syllabus.

1. The development of syllabus content, school-based assessment requirements and examination specifications will reflect the *Stronger HSC Standards* reforms.

2. Strengthen the continuum of learning in geographical concepts, skills and tools across Geography K–12.

3. In the review of key concepts to further develop students’ conceptual understanding, appropriate to Stage 6, consider depth of study and relevance of course content.

4. Retain opportunities for the study of physical, environmental and human geography within the overall course structure to provide flexibility as appropriate, including an integrated approach to support geographical understanding.

5. Review the representation of spatial and other technologies within Geography Stage 6, to ensure there are opportunities to apply them in geographical inquiry.

6. Review and clarify opportunities to engage in fieldwork within Geography Stage 6.

7. Ensure the Senior Geography Project continues to be a valuable and relevant feature of the Year 11 course.

8. Consider options for the structure, types of questions and delivery mode (eg computer-based) of the Geography Stage 6 HSC examination, to provide authentic opportunities for students to apply their knowledge and skills.

9. Content relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures will be reviewed and strengthened to focus on a strengths-based approach.

10. Review the Geography Life Skills Stage 6 course to ensure meaningful learning opportunities for the range of students for whom Life Skills is an appropriate option, in alignment with the broad directions for the Geography Stage 6 Syllabus.
Reference list


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