

Response from the Geography Teachers' Association of NSW & ACT to the '2023 Have your say' consultation for Geography Years 7–10

Response written by Dr Susan Caldis on behalf of GTA NSW & ACT

Overview

The Geography Teachers' Association of NSW and ACT (GTA NSW & ACT) are delighted to provide a response to the New South Wales Education Standards Authority (NESA) about areas of support and areas of concern with revisions to the syllabus for Geography. In highlighting our areas of concern, we also offer possible ways forward. Our response includes voices from Association membership and from Council. Focus is given to Years 7–10 (Stages 4 and 5), however, remarks also connect to the primary years and Stage 6. Key areas of the syllabus including the rationale and units across Stage 4 and Stage 5 provide structure to the response. An appendix with detailed comments follows.

In summary, areas of support for the syllabus revisions to Geography include the rationale; the intent to prioritise 'Thinking and working geographically'; fieldwork; and the scope for flexibility to support diverse learners. Areas of concern with the syllabus revisions to Geography include but are not limited to: loss of inquiry questions; lack of clarity about use of specific geographical tools within units; lack of unit-specific context about 'Thinking and working geographically' in relation to concepts, tools and content; loss of geographically distinctive and relevant content for units: 'Water in the World' and 'Food Production'.

Suggested ways forward include but are not limited to: specifying key geographical tools and skills for use within each syllabus unit; clarifying how 'Thinking and working geographically' are applied and made specific to each syllabus unit; and revisiting and reinstating geographically-focused content for 'Water in the World' and 'Food Production' as the units causing most concern. A detailed Appendix follows which further unpacks the areas identified in this response.

Introduction

During the 'Have your say' timeframe, the Council of the GTA NSW & ACT met to review and discuss syllabus revisions. Two Executive members also ran online consultation sessions with members. This response includes the voice of members and the voice of Council. Each shares their feedback based on lived experiences from (i) regional and metropolitan locations as in-field or out-of-field teachers of geography across career stages and across Independent, Catholic and Government sectors; also from (ii) curriculum development, curriculum consultant, academic or industry contexts.

The response is structured around the following sections: diagram, rationale, and units across Stages 4 and 5. Each section addresses areas of support, areas of concern and potential ways forward.

Diagram

This section identifies areas of support, areas of concern, and potential ways forward for the diagram which represents the intent and flow of the syllabus.

AREAS OF SUPPORT

"Thinking and working geographically" is consistent with science (Working scientifically) and it is about time the syllabus for geography and science became more aligned due to geography also being a science.

The diagram provides a good snapshot of the syllabus and its focus; it nicely threads together concepts, tools, inquiry and topics. It is good how the diagram emphasises the concepts, inquiry and tools are, because in programming they are the thing that you have to think most carefully about with your planning. A continuum would also be helpful.

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AREAS OF CONCERN	POTENTIAL WAYS FORWARD
<p>Red text in the diagram – what does it mean and how is it executed in teaching? What are the ways of knowing and doing geography.</p> <p>Language and nomenclature – tools vs skills vs inquiry.</p>	<p>Clarification, how will teachers know when they are covering content, inquiry, tools.</p>

Rationale

This section identifies areas of support, areas of concern, and potential ways forward for the rationale overall. Focus is given to whether we can see ourselves as geography educators in the rationale and if we can also identify the distinctive core of geography and geography teaching.

AREAS OF SUPPORT	
<p>The rationale suitably captures what geography and good geography teaching looks like.</p> <p>One of the things I really like in the rationale is the idea of inspiring curiosity and wonder; it is also timely to have sustainable management identified.</p> <p>Great to have fieldwork and active citizenship included in the rationale.</p>	
AREAS OF CONCERN	POTENTIAL WAYS FORWARD
N/A	N/A

Units across Stage 4 and Stage 5

This section identifies areas of support, areas of concern, and potential ways forward for items reaching ‘throughout’ or which are common to units across Stage 4 and Stage 5. Attention is then given to separately to Stage 4, for example Water in the World, and to Stage 5, for example Food Production.

• Throughout

AREAS OF SUPPORT
<p>Generally, the document is okay and presents the content more concisely (and is therefore less threatening to teachers who may be out of field).</p> <p>Use of fieldwork examples, such as soil testing, is welcomed.</p> <p>Agree with central nature of Thinking and working geographically being identified throughout the syllabus (but its clarity and connection in the syllabus document needs work).</p> <p>Flexibility in teaching the content will make it easier to meet the needs of diverse learners.</p> <p>The First Nations context is embedded strongly and clearly; however, it is repetitive and the same examples are used on more than one occasion. The resources and supporting ideas about how to deliver this content effectively and respectfully must come through in the teaching notes and through clearer identification in the content descriptions.</p> <p>Good to have a reduced number of outcomes to assess and report against.</p>

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AREAS OF CONCERN	POTENTIAL WAYS FORWARD
<p>Lack of clarity about how to resource and address the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples/First Nations outcome and content.</p>	<p>Further refinement to retain the geographical focus in connection with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander/First Nations content, particularly at a local scale. The local scale is where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content will come to life and have authenticity and relevance. It needs to be respectful, appropriate and meaningful – how can this be achieved – this is not currently clear in the syllabus.</p> <p>Ensure suitable resources and teacher training are available to teach outcome and associated content in a respectful, meaningful and non-repetitive way.</p> <p>Clarification with nomenclature – be specific and consistent – is it First Nations of Australia? is it First Nations? is it Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People? is it Indigenous or indigenous? Clarify when it is expected to focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and cultures and when it is expected to focus on indigenous communities from elsewhere in the world.</p>
<p>Lack of specificity about Thinking and working geographically which mean teachers will gloss over it to find the content descriptions. There is a lack of emphasis about how thinking and working geographically relate to concepts, tools and fieldwork.</p>	<p>Include specific examples or contextualise the 'Thinking and working geographically' statement to each unit – needs to be contextualised for each unit and in its own section.</p> <p>Include reference to developing geographical inquiry questions this could be added to the Stage 4 point "Engage with the geographical inquiry process, including developing inquiry question" and delete where appropriate as it suggests you can opt out.</p> <p>Alternatively, include an additional dot point before 'evaluate' ... inquiry process (Stage 5) in reference to Evaluating the effectiveness of an inquiry process (Stage 5).</p> <p>It would be more relevant if there was a compulsory Inquiry Task such as the old RAP from a previous syllabus, otherwise it is confusing as to how to do inquiry.</p>

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<p>Loss of inquiry questions and lack of specificity about Geographical tools and skills in units. Geographical tools are numerous and overwhelming which will be problematic for out-of-field teachers and time-poor teachers. Greater clarity needs to occur in the syllabus so that geographical skills and tools are made explicit to teachers and therefore become more accessible to students.</p>	<p>Include in the syllabus document, appropriate and specific examples of skills and tools that can be embedded in each unit. Narrow the required range of tools and skills in each stage. Consider some tools and skills as compulsory and others as options within each unit.</p> <p>Reinstate the inquiry questions – they are the hooks for the teacher and student and provide context and framing to the unit.</p> <p>Inclusion of a junior Senior Geography Project would help to develop focus on tools, skills and questioning, and provide a meaningful opportunity to link into active citizenship.</p> <p>The tools and skills are part of the distinctiveness of geography and academic rigour of the subject. It is important to address what skills to use in each unit. The presence of, and capacity to successfully use, tools and skills also influences the calibre of student taking geography which is important for the future of the subject within and beyond school settings.</p> <p>Include virtual fieldwork e.g., Google Earth, and more local fieldwork examples that can be done easily within a lesson and part of a lesson and without any equipment or minimum, inexpensive equipment.</p> <p>Consider including a minimum number of tools and skills within each unit – the syllabus should be understood by out-of-field, early-career, and experienced teachers. Often there is one experienced teacher only in a school having to teach the course.</p>
<p>Lack of rigour as part of preparation for the study of geography in Stage 6 and lack of rigour and opportunity for High Performing and Gifted Students, particularly in Stage 4.</p>	<p>Additional and more sophisticated concepts in Stage 5 would enhance academic rigor and subject knowledge and provide a better foundation for students entering Stage 6.</p> <p>Adjust the directive terms e.g., from Explain to Analyse.</p>
<p>Lack of links to, and alignment with, STEM (especially the Science syllabus and career pathways) and lack of connection into other subjects. Geography is an interdisciplinary subject and is also considered a Science – there needs to be clear links identified into the science syllabus.</p>	<p>Align with STEM and the science syllabus for inquiry, data collection, communication and interpretation, and also for content. Recommend alignment with career pathways in the water industry; planners, engineers, scientists, operators, comms/IT, operators etc. We need problem solvers with a wide range of skills in the industry to support communities and the environment into the future.</p> <p>Include explicit links to STEM e.g., a diagram or explanation in the front part of the syllabus, or through hyperlinks to relevant sections of Science, Mathematics, Technology – e.g., Mathematics for scale, distance, bearings; Science for fieldwork and inquiry method; Technology for geospatial technologies.</p>
<p>Lack of timings and weightings for the units.</p>	<p>Include guidelines about timing and weighting of each unit, or clarify if all are equal.</p>

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<p>Conflating the communication focused outcomes is not helpful, e.g., evaluates and applies a range of geographical concepts and tools to acquire process <i>and</i> communicate geographical information. In the English syllabus, the outcomes are dense and in geography it becomes really difficult to work out what to assess and it is not user-friendly for students.</p>	<p>Higher order verbs could be used in the outcomes to develop rigour. Stage 4 is a bit light on for higher ability students – students should not be prevented from moving towards analyse and evaluate if outcomes are not changing to higher-order verbs in Stage 4.</p> <p>Separate out the outcomes so that you can assess application of concepts and tools, and so that you can assess communication of geographical information.</p>
<p>Layout and structure is not well aligned with Stage 6, it is hard to see progression.</p>	<p>Revisit Stage 6 once revisions to K–10 are settled and develop as a continuum not as a silo.</p>
<p>Footnotes are hard to navigate in their current form</p>	<p>Include the footnotes under the content like Stage 6.</p>

• Stage 4

AREAS OF SUPPORT	
<p>Generally, the syllabus suitably considers global and First Nations perspectives, however, this is sometimes at the expense of clarity around considering the local context.</p>	
AREAS OF CONCERN	POTENTIAL WAYS FORWARD
<p>Water in the World lacks inclusion about water scarcity, water security, climate change, impact on water futures, and a local context. Additionally, removal of ‘Australia’s water resources’ and the loss of local context as dot points raise concerns. We have so many examples of different sources and water challenges. Without explicit requirement to cover the local context teachers may lean towards global examples only.</p> <p>The shift from addressing the value of water from a key sub-heading to now only a dot point under a collective heading diminishes the significance of acknowledging and appreciating water beyond its economic value.</p>	<p>We recommend the syllabus addresses future challenges and opportunities in a local context relating to liveability, water security, circular economy, and emerging technologies in water management.</p> <p>Incorporate the local context and be specific about it. It is critical to incorporate the local perspective allowing for the development of an informed citizen. By including the local context, students can comprehend their local challenges such as water scarcity, drought and flood patterns, and as an informed citizen engage in region-specific solutions, practices and policies.</p> <p>The examples for ‘The nature of and responses to ... water scarcity’ ... need to include <i>causes</i> of water scarcity. The responses address causes and these causes can be analysed using examples.</p> <p>For the hazards content – the second and third dot points would best be applied to a study in the third dot point. Again, the concepts (magnitude etc) are best applied in context (the ONE study) so as to gain deeper knowledge and understanding, therefore, concepts should be clearly identified.</p> <p>Include ‘Water security’ in the strategies – this is the aim of the strategies and adds academic rigour whilst providing an opportunity for differentiation.</p>

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<p>Landscapes and Landforms lacks an overview; repetition for addressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content from the primary years and years ahead; lack of opportunity to engage with depth studies.</p>	<p>The 'landform and formation' dot point could be reworded as 'overview'.</p> <p>Dreaming stories need to include different examples to those covered across K–6 and in other units across Years 7–10. Repetition will render content irrelevant, careful refinement is needed given the reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in every content Focus Area.</p> <p>Include a depth study of one landscape and its landforms because this is where processes are applied in context and provides a chance for students to learn how to explain geographical transformation of places in depth.</p> <p>For 'Causes, impacts and responses' of hazards, it should be applied to ONE hazard studied again for context and depth.</p> <p>The 'Nature' dot point could also be expressed as an overview. I think the current syllabus had it right. Why change for a lesser depth of study?</p>
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• Stage 5

AREAS OF SUPPORT	
N/A	
AREAS OF CONCERN	POTENTIAL WAYS FORWARD
<p>Food Production reads more like Agriculture and diminishes geographical focus.</p> <p>The proposed content is insufficient in depth and breadth and has lost its geographical focus and academic rigour in content and concepts. Currently it is dry and stripped back which diminishes geographical integrity. Stage 5 sets students up for Stage 6 where conceptual understanding is very important.</p>	<p>The focus needs to remain on biomes and the issue of food security. Change the title to be geographically oriented e.g., Biomes and Food Security or Food Security. Focus the unit towards understanding the importance of biomes and sustainable agriculture which allows reference to food, fibres and career pathways, and potentially lean more into Stage 6 Geography.</p> <p>Provide an opportunity to examine globally-referenced geographical concepts such as biomes and the ecosystems and habitats within.</p> <p>Reinstate a Biomes section and include a content description about the nature and spatial distribution of biomes and a content description about biomes that produce food.</p>
<p>Changing Places needs to be reorganised so population is addressed before migration. There is a lack of coherency between urban content dot points.</p>	<p>Population should come before migration.</p> <p>Include a move from global to national to local scales in migration.</p> <p>Include reasons for and impacts of international migration at a global scale.</p> <p>Include a new dot point about international migration to Australia; followed by a dot point about internal migration in Australia and another country; followed by changing settlements and then urban planning. This will better connect the urban section.</p> <p>In the first dot point for Urban planning, replace 'approaches' with 'strategies'. In the second point, delete strategies and include 'management of population change in one Australian city' (now it is appropriate for population to be included as part of influence on settlements).</p>

Closing remarks

To conclude, voices from GTA NSW & ACT members and from Council agree the main areas of support for the syllabus revisions to Geography are the rationale; the intent to prioritise 'Thinking and working geographically'; the specific inclusion of fieldwork; and the scope for flexibility to support diverse learners. Our broad areas of concern include but are not limited to: loss of inquiry questions; lack of clarity about use of specific geographical tools within units; lack of unit-specific context about 'Thinking and working geographically' in relation to concepts, tools and content; and loss of geographically-distinctive and relevant content for Water in the World and Food Production. Suggested ways forward include but are not limited to: specifying key geographical tools and skills for use within each syllabus unit; clarifying how 'Thinking and working geographically' are applied and made specific to each syllabus unit; and revisiting and reinstating geographically-focused content for Water in the World and Food Production as the units causing most concern. A detailed Appendix follows which further unpacks the areas identified in this response.

As experts in, and advocates for, quality geography education and as a representative Association for geography educators who work across school-based and non-school-based contexts, we compel the NESA team and those connected to the revision process to closely attend to the advice contained within this response. It is important to retain the integrity of geography as a subject and to ensure the reputation remains of New South Wales being a leading model of quality curriculum development and implementation for geography.

End of report



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