Where HASS thou gone
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Are Transversal Competencies the ‘New Black’?

Ms Leonie McIntuenn, Associate Professor Rachel Sheffield, Curtin University

ABSTRACT

“The debate surrounding what constitutes quality education and learning in the 21st century is ongoing” (UNESCO 2015, p.3). While traditional disciplines such as English, mathematics and science continue to have a strong hold, there is a concern that the current educational focus is not addressing the ‘new generation’ of skills, often referred to as ‘21st century’ or ‘soft’ skills. The questions Australian educators must ask include: What are these competencies, to what extent, and where; if at all, are they addressed within the Australian Curriculum? This article examines the existing frameworks and key competencies embedded within the curriculum as the General Capabilities, therefore, there is no new framework to consider - they are not the ‘new black’. The challenge for educators, however, is to recognise these competencies, provide strategic learning opportunities, and collect evidence to ensure their students attain the necessary skills to be ready for the future.

INTRODUCTION

An increasing number of reports are espousing the importance of the so-called ‘21st century’ or ‘soft’ skills. For example, the OECD (2012) states that “Skills have become the global currency of 21st century economies” and McKinsey (2017) suggests that as machines are becoming more capable of (AI) artificial intelligence, workers of the future will need to focus more on activities that require skills rather than content knowledge. Gonski (2018, p.36) stated, “every student needs to be equipped with the skills and knowledge to navigate a rapidly changing world”, indicating both skills and knowledge are equally important. In Australia, this trend will impact 4.3 million young people who will be required to make this shift towards balancing skills and knowledge and consequently the Australian education system will need to equip young people with the necessary skills and capabilities required in the era of the ‘new work smart’ (FVA 2017, p.8). It is imperative then, that we identify shortcomings in our current curriculum and develop bold strategies to create a progressive education system that develops a ‘new work smart’ workforce of the future (OECD, 2012 p.124).

A QUESTION OF TERMINOLOGY

Various terminologies are currently in use in an attempt to capture, compartmentalise and name this shifting cluster of skills and competencies. Within research communities, educational institutions and international organisations, however, there is no definitive list or title to describe them collectively (Gonski 2018 p.39). Terms in use include ‘21st century skills’ or ‘21st century learning’ (e.g. the Assessment and Teaching of 21st Century Skills (ATC21S) Partnership for 21st century skills (P21), ‘key competencies’ (OECD 2005), ‘soft skills’, ‘new collar skill’ (McKinsey 2017) and ‘entrepreneurial skill’ (New Work Smarts). ‘21st century skills’ is widely used, but many argue that the skills and capabilities referred to were important before the 21st century, while also noting that with rapid change, century-long milestones are inappropriate (Voogt 2015, p.301). Another term, ‘transversal competencies’, is re-emerging as a way of describing these broad-based skills, knowledge and understandings. For the purpose of this article, the authors will be referring to this cluster of skills as “transversal competencies” (tVCs).

In April 2018, the European Parliament and Council (EU) 2018/646, articulated a common framework for the provision of better services (for skills and qualifications (Europass), acknowledging that “transversal or soft skills, such as critical thinking, learning, problem solving and creativity, digital or language skills, are increasingly important and are essential prerequisites for personal and professional (ful)fillment and can be applied in different fields” (European Commission 2018). The European Commission also suggests that transversal knowledge, skills and competences are the building blocks for the development of the ‘hard’ skills and competences required to succeed in the labour market (European Commission 2018). ATS2020 (2018) describes tVCs as a broad set of key skills that are known to be extremely important to success in school, further education, and the world of work.

TRANSVERSAL COMPETENCIES IN THE CURRICULUM

There is evidence that education systems from a number of countries and across the world have taken steps to redesign their curriculum and explicitly embed 21st century competencies such as problem-solving, collaboration, global awareness, and communication skills in the curriculum (New Basics 2017, p.8). UNESCO (2015) suggests that these are two main approaches to this process:

• an analytic approach where learning of tVCs is facilitated through a cluster of learning areas or learning experiences, each intended to provide the learner with a particular competency (e.g. the Australian Curriculum’s General Capabilities); and
• an holistic approach in which tVCs are introduced as a scheme or programme that ensues an overall message. All participating countries use the analytical approach, except for Japan, which sought to engage in an holistic approach called ‘Test for Living’ (UNESCO 2018).

The UNESCO Report also identified a number of challenges facing educational institutions in their efforts to address tVCs in the countries they canvassed and identified them as Definitional, Operational, and Systemic (Table 1).

The Australian Curriculum implicitly and explicitly includes transversal competencies in every educational activity. To this end, the Australian curriculum provides detailed information on each capability and how it can be adapted across each subject.

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA 2017) reiterated this:

The Australian Curriculum identifies seven capabilities that play a significant role in equipping young Australians to live and work successfully in the twenty-first century.

The recent Gonski Report (2018, p.74) also stated that the General Capabilities provide a “clear list that has been nationally agreed and established as part of the Australian Curriculum” and that they “are not the one and only part of our curriculum and teaching practice” (p. 36). It is important that Australian teachers understand that these skills are already embedded in the Australian curriculum, though not explicitly identified as ‘transversal competencies’. Table 2 illustrates how frequently these ‘transversal competencies’ are presented within the Australian Curriculum.

Table 1. Challenges to the Implementation of Transversal Competencies in the Curriculum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definitional</th>
<th>Operational</th>
<th>Systemic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of a clear definition of transversal competencies</td>
<td>Lack of assessment mechanisms</td>
<td>Large class size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient teaching/learning materials and teaching guides</td>
<td>Insufficient capacity of teachers</td>
<td>Overloaded curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of clarity in curriculum</td>
<td>Lack of budget (policy-budget inconsistency)</td>
<td>Pressure to achieve academic success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of clarity in scope of transversal competencies</td>
<td>Additional burden on teachers</td>
<td>Insufficient capacity with high-stake exams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of clarity in the desired outcomes of the teaching of transversal competencies</td>
<td>Lack of budget (policy-budget inconsistency)</td>
<td>Lack of understanding among parents and other stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of development of community culture</td>
<td>Lack of teacher and institutional capacity</td>
<td>Lack of development of community culture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The current curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA 2017) reiterated this:

The Australian Curriculum identifies seven capabilities that play a significant role in equipping young Australians to live and work successfully in the twenty-first century.

The recent Gonski Report (2018, p.74) also stated that the General Capabilities provide a “clear list that has been nationally agreed and established as part of the Australian Curriculum” and that they “are not the one and only part of our curriculum and teaching practice” (p. 36). It is important that Australian teachers understand that these skills are already embedded in the Australian curriculum, though not explicitly identified as ‘transversal competencies’. Table 2 illustrates how frequently these ‘transversal competencies’ are presented within the Australian Curriculum.
MAJOR OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES FOR EDUCATORS

ASSESSMENT

A major challenge associated with the implementation of ‘21st century’ competencies or tVCs concerns their assessment. Gonski (2018) suggests there is a lack of supporting data on the General Capabilities as there is no consistent method of assessment. Many scholars agree that there are few research-based tools or assessment methods for use in education settings that facilitate the assessment of ‘transversal competencies’. Despite the attention and importance given to the general capabilities, teachers and schools are insufficiently supported to teach and assess them. (Gonski 2018, p. 79).

The focus of assessment has traditionally been the measurement of factual knowledge and not the more complex competencies of problem solving, critical thinking, and communication, which require students to complete complex tasks, apply to real-world situations, and be integrated into teachers’ daily teaching work (Rand 2012).

INTERNATIONAL APPROACHES

A number of education systems around the world are offering project and problem-based learning experiences that go beyond the classroom environment. These include working with local businesses or facilitating arts and film projects in local communities. These learning experiences are designed to develop transferable life management and enterprise skills that will be critical for future success. OECD (2014). These support the development of the tVCs in real life contexts.

The development of a comprehensive assessment model (Rand 2012) is central to address this issue. Despite the attention and importance given to the general capabilities, teachers and schools are insufficiently supported to teach and assess them (Gonski 2018, p. 29).

The worldwide trend of recognising the importance of “transversal competencies” as essential for the future world of work has elevated the importance of the General Capabilities in the curriculum. The challenge for Australian schools, therefore, is to ensure they are given operational attention at both a school and systemic level.

Table 2. Key skills and competencies from the UNESCO Transversal Competencies Framework and General Capabilities from the Australian Curriculum (AC)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UNESCO tVCs</th>
<th>Australian Curriculum General Capabilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical Innovation Thinking</td>
<td>Creativity (‘53), entrepreneurship (55), resourcefulness (3), application skills (324), reflective thinking (344), decision-making (328)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Skills</td>
<td>Personal and Social Capability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-discipline (637), independent learning (1651), flexibility (860), adaptability (99), self-awareness (880), perseverance (31), self-motivation (606), compassion (7), integrity (44), risk-taking (227), self-respect (900)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global Citizenship</td>
<td>Intercultural Understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Awareness (2163), tolerance (9), openness (20), respect for diversity (16), intercultural understanding (221), conflict resolution (99), civic / political participation (190), respect for the environment (950), national identity (1080)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media and Information Literacy</td>
<td>ICT Capability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accessing information (3667), locating information (2704), communicating ideas (2177), participating in democratic processes (2039), analysing information and media (3468), evaluating information and media content (3011)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References

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- Hickies, R., Boyd, S., and Joyce, E. 2005, Documenting learning of the key competencies. What are the issues? A discussion paper forTvington New Zealand Council for educational research

Biographies

Leenie McIlvenny, Library and Information Consultant is an experienced educator of 15+ years with interests in the transformative power of learning in a connected world.

Dr Rachel Sheflord is an Associate Professor in the School of Education at Curtin University and is passionate about innovative and engaging STEM education.
and graduating Year 12 in 2020 with Year 11 students. Students in Queensland schools, commencing and assessment system for all ‘wave’ of changes to the curriculum has seen the introduction of the first responsible global citizens”. 2019 learners, valued employees and in the 21st century need to be work and life, young Queenslanders come into effect this year. According to the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment have Queensland Senior Schooling curriculum as changes to the assessment set and marked by QCAA. The changes to the senior schooling curriculum are aimed at ensuring Queensland’s education system is keeping pace with a ‘transforming society and economy’ and to ensure Queensland school leavers have the 21st century skills they will need for the future. Earlier this year, the federal government inquiry into the status of teaching held its Brisbane hearings. According to reports, one in three Australian teachers leave the profession within their first five years. According to the Queensland Minister for Education, Grace Grace, “Analysis by the Queensland College of Teachers indicates that around 34 per cent of new teachers leave the profession within four years”. Further to this, the Queensland College of Teachers have cited several articles reporting that “between 30 per cent and 50 per cent of Australian teachers leave the profession within the first five years”. The inquiry has officially been closed due to the recently held Federal Election. The College will continue to monitor and report on the outcomes from the inquiry and ensure that members are afforded every opportunity to actively contribute to this important and ongoing discussion.

**BOOK REVIEW**

**Committed to Learning: A History of Education at The University of Melbourne**

Juliet Flesch

Reviewed by Anthony Mackay AM

Author Juliet Flesch notes that accounts of administrative changes do not make for riveting reading. However, in her History of Education at The University of Melbourne, administrative changes coupled with personalities, politics and institutional changes do make for compelling reading.

This is a remarkable story of the transformation of Education at the University from “Cinderella to Star” – on the local, national and international stage. It is a play of four acts spread over 100 years – taking us on a journey encompassing the amalgamation of the University and College, the inauguration of the Melbourne Model, and the transition from Faculty of Education to the Melbourne Graduate School of Education.

It is a journey that reveals the reasons why MGSE is consistently rated amongst the world’s five best faculties of Education.

For those of us who have a strong affinity with and deep affection for “Education @ Melbourne” the leading actors came to life in a way that strengthens our admiration for outstanding scholarship, thought leadership, ground breaking research and development, quality teaching and learning, world leading professional and clinical practice, highly influential policy formulation and advocacy, administrative acumen, disciplined innovation and experimentation – and above all superb leadership.

Many who will read this wonderful account have been participants or contributors - fellow travellers – happy to be implicated in the past, present and immediate future of what is a highly respected institution.

Other readers, once removed - educators, historians, and those drawn to the drama of a “compelling story” with a cast list of Australia’s outstanding educational leaders - will find from the pen of this professional historian a narrative of drama, twists and turns, volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity and success – a work worthy of a VUCA world.

Reputation of the order that MGSE now enjoys is hard won - and retaining it further enhancing that standing is even tougher in today’s global environment where sustainability is the ultimate prize.

The Foreword to Committed to Learning reminds us that public discourse on education in Australia is poor at best. At a time when learning has never been more important to our individual and collective well-being the role of Faculties of Education is crucial.

Judith Flesch’s History of Education at the University of Melbourne is a celebration of the extensive influence of one institution’s contribution to an educated society. It is good to have this story now to inspire all of us to lift our game to ensure we have the service of the next generation of equally outstanding educational leaders.

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