

NOTRE DAME COLLEGE



To Seek To See To Respond

Notre Dame College

Years 7 & 8 Curriculum Review

July 2015

Review Facilitators:

Cath Watter & Max Fletcher

(in collaboration with the NDC Reference Group)

Context

As part of its process of review of the educational programme offered at Notre Dame College, the College has sought a review of its Years 7 & 8 curriculum.

The current structure is based on a 10-day cycle with six 47-minute periods/day. These are timetabled as either 'longs' (double periods) or 'shorts' (single periods). The number of 'short' periods per subject per cycle is as follows:

Year 7		Year 8	
Religious Education	8	Religious Education	8
English	8	English	9
Mathematics	9	Mathematics	8
Science	7	Science	7
History	6	Geography	6
LOTE (Italian/Japanese)	5	LOTE (Italian/Japanese)	5
Physical Education	4	Physical Education	4
Textiles/Graphics	8	Materials/Art	8
Music	4	Home Economics	4
Pastoral period	1	Pastoral period	1

AusVELS English, Mathematics, History and Science have been introduced and some courses have been loaded onto Moodle and the College w-drive. The focus is now on moving to Moodle only. Work has been done on documenting the curriculum across each of the Domains and this work continues.

In the whole college context, the following initiatives are in process:

- A year 7 – 12 curriculum-mapping audit
- An Assessment & Reporting Working Party is reviewing policy and practice in these areas
- Professional Learning Teams, comprising year level subject-based teams of teachers, to collaboratively plan for curriculum delivery
- Four Professional Practice Leaders who are primarily in teacher coaching roles

Purpose of the Review

The purpose of the review is to identify the particular strengths and challenges associated with the Year 7 & 8 curriculum, with a view to making recommendations to the College Leadership Team for ongoing improvement and maximizing of student learning and wellbeing outcomes.

In order to do this, the following are focus areas for the review:

Documentation:

- The documentation that outlines the College's philosophical beliefs and values about learning & teaching
- The extent of appropriate curriculum documentation, including the level of focus on sequential student skill acquisition and development
- The use of data in a team environment to improve student learning outcomes

Student Engagement:

- The extent of student engagement with the curriculum

Pedagogy:

- Learning & teaching pedagogical approaches, referenced against best practice, as for example described in *"The Nature of Learning - Using Research to Inspire Practice"*, OECD Centre for Educational Research & Innovation, 2010 (Appendix 2) and *The Charter of Sandhurst School Improvement* (CoSSI) www.cossi.ceosand.catholic.edu.au
- The extent of differentiation within the curriculum to cater for individual student learning needs
- The use of evidence-based practice to improve student learning
- The use of formative and summative assessment
- The use of technology as an effective learning & teaching tool

Structure:

- The organizational structure and balance of the curriculum

Methodology and Timeline for the Review

A College Reference Group was formed to oversight the process, in collaboration with the two external facilitators

Reference Group Members:

- Tiffany Chandler (Math/Science teacher)
 - Lena Cross (Maths/Chemistry teacher)
 - Claire Doherty (Junior Phys Ed/Science)
 - Jen Frisadi (Professional Practice Leader)
 - Carole Thornton (English/Psychology teacher)
 - Kris Walker (Deputy Principal, Learning & Teaching)
 - Wendy Watt (Year 7 & 8 Learning Teaching Leader)
 - Cath Watter & Max Fletcher (external facilitators)
- On-line student surveys were developed by the Reference Group and completed by:
- All current Year 7, 8 and 9 students
{See Appendix 1 for collated student survey data}

- Professional conversations were facilitated by the external facilitators with the following Professional Learning Teams (PLTs)/Learning Area Convenors:
 - Art
 - English
 - Humanities: Geography and History
 - Learning enrichment
 - LOTE
 - Mathematics
 - Physical Education
 - Religious Education
 - Science
 - Technology

- Individual interviews were held with the facilitators and:
 - A Head of House, Leanne Lemon
 - The former director of Learning, Emma Reynoldson
 - Deputy Principal, Learning & Teaching, Kris Walker

- Focus Group interviews were conducted with the facilitators and:
 - Parents of current and former Year 7 & 8 students
 - Parents of Year 7 & 8 students who are also teachers at Notre Dame
 - Year 7 NDCCC student leaders
 - Year 8 NDCCC student leaders

- Classroom observations were conducted for a day by the facilitators:
 - Year 7: Cath Watter
 - Year 8: Max Fletcher

The review commenced on 14th April 2015, when the external facilitators met with the NDC Reference Group to finalise the scope, methodology, timeline and reporting for the review. A final report is to be completed and presented to the NDC Leadership Team Executive and the Reference Group on 7th August, 2015.

Observations and Recommendations

Documentation

At present there is no overarching philosophical document that underpins the College's beliefs and values about what constitutes quality learning and teaching across the whole College. Working through a process with staff to develop a Learning & Teaching Charter which articulates common understandings and agreements would provide a framework for Professional Learning Teams and individual teachers to reflect on their teaching practice, to support their professional dialogue and to strengthen pedagogical practice.

➤ **Recommendation 1:** that the College undertake a collaborative process to develop a Notre Dame Learning & Teaching Charter.

During the past few years there has been a focus at the college on writing of curriculum documentation across the domains in a common format. At this point in time there is some variability in where each domain is at with this process and it remains a work in progress. Many of the documents have been loaded onto Moodle. In reviewing the documentation, the following points are noted:

- A number of domains are still in transition between VELS and the Australian Curriculum. Domains that have made the transition include Science, History and English.
- Many unit outlines focus on content more than skills and there seems to be a lot of staff emphasis on “getting through the course”, as evidenced by discussions with PLTs about the documentation.
- It is not clear as to what are the essential skills for students to have acquired in each domain.
- English and Mathematics were the only two domains that have a clearly documented scope and sequence.
- There is not a lot of evidence of cross-curricular activities or inter-personal skill development in the documentation.
- There seems to be a significant amount of difference in the development and use of rubrics for the assessment of work. There also seems to be significant differences in the extent to which rubrics assess the skills described in the AusVELS standards. This seems to be connected to some subject areas focusing on content rather than skills. Most, if not all assessments appeared to be summative. There was little evidence of mastery learning or re-visiting a topic after testing.
- Many of the assessments seemed to focus on recall, explanation, comprehension and ‘testing’, rather the development of higher order skills such as evaluation, drawing of conclusions or application of learning.

➤ **Recommendation 2:** Prior to any further curriculum documentation, there is a very strong need for domains to complete the vertical skills audit across 7 to VCE and implement a horizontal audit across years 7 and 8. This will help to determine the ‘essential learning’ that all students need to have mastered to move to the next level of learning. This would also have the benefit of identifying the ‘nice to know’ areas of skill or content that could be reduced or removed to ‘de-clutter’ the curriculum, allowing teachers to cover less but go deeper in the learning. ‘Nice to know’ content and skills could be used for students requiring extension. The ‘balance’ between breadth of offerings and depth of learning was identified as an ongoing tension. The horizontal audit would also provide an opportunity to consider cross-domain skills and provide better coordination of course outcomes.

- **Recommendation 3:** That the Assessment & Reporting Working Party continue to work with PLTs in developing rubrics for assessment tasks and to focus on the use of formative assessment in informing teaching practice when students have not mastered a skill.

- **Recommendation 4:** That there is a focus on the inclusion of higher order skills (analysis, interpretation, synthesis, critical thinking) in program documentation, delivery and assessments.

Student Engagement

The comments and recommendations regarding the level of student engagement are based on the student survey responses, the classroom observations and on the focus group interviews with student leaders.

- The classroom observations showed that there was a lovely ‘feel’ in the classrooms, with students and teachers relating positively and respectfully to each other. There was a genuine sense of wellbeing. This is being effectively supported by the House system, where pastorally the students are being well cared for.
- The survey responses from the Year 7 and 8 students was overwhelmingly positive in terms of their **wellbeing, connectedness to school and safety**, whilst there was a noticeable drop-off in the Year 9 student responses as they reflected on their Year 7 and 8 experience:

	% of Positive Responses		
	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9
I feel/felt positive at school	93	94	76
I feel/felt energized at school	87	78	52
I feel/felt enthusiastic at school	87	81	56
I like/liked being in my year level at NDC	95	95	70
I get/got on well with other students in my year level	98	96	92
I get/got on well with most of the students in my class	97	95	90
My friends at Notre Dame care/cared about me	97	98	87
I feel safe at school	97	90	88
I have/had a good relationship with my teachers	89	79	69
I feel/felt comfortable to ask questions in my class	86	85	71
I feel/felt safe to make mistakes in my class	83	76	57
I feel that my culture is respected at NDC	90	89	82

- Student responses and some written student comments indicate the presence of some low-level teasing (Year 7 - 20%; Year 8 – 34%) and bullying (Year 7 - 17%; Year 8 – 25%).

A sample of the student survey responses to their **learning** is shown below:

	% of Positive Responses		
	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9
I feel the range of subjects offered is good	96	88	67
I feel that the range of subjects meets my needs	85	75	51
The work we do in class is interesting	76	65	51
There is variety in the work we do in class	92	79	69
I enjoy learning	88	80	60
The work we do in class is enjoyable	80	63	51
The work we do in class helps us work together	77	61	55
The work we do in class is challenging	72	74	67
It is hard to learn in class because some students are disruptive	58	66	65
It is hard to listen in class because some students misbehave	63	65	63

- Responses show a trend that:
 - as students move into Year 8 they are not as engaged as in Year 7.
 - students feel that the learning tends to be largely individual and that there is not a lot of collaborative work undertaken. This was highlighted in the classroom observations where students sitting in rows for many lessons does not appear to facilitate collaborative learning. Recent OECD research suggests that collaboration between students is one of the most important precursors for improving student outcomes.
 - there were some comments about disruptive classroom behavior from particular boys.
 - students feel that they do not engage effectively with a small number of teachers.

- Student responses to **homework and study** questions suggest that most students regularly do homework (Year 7 – 92%; Year 8 – 88%) and that they regard homework as being closely connected to their class work. The students do not generally consider homework as being creative or new work. The percentage of students who record their homework in their Planner decreases as they move from Year 7 to Year 8 (Year 7 – 79%; Year 8 – 71%), as do the percentage of parents who regularly check Student Planners (Year 7 – 45%; Year 8 – 33%).

- Student responses to the **assessment, feedback and reporting** questions suggest that online, progressive feedback from teachers on the portal is valued by students and regularly checked by parents. There were some questions raised about the quality of the feedback.

	% of Positive Responses	
	Year 7	Year 8
I regularly check my online progressive feedback	86	88
My parents regularly check my online progressive feedback	81	70
Online progressive feedback gives me useful information to help me improve my learning	91	82

- Student responses to **engagement with the learning** reinforce an earlier response, namely that the much student work is individual and that there is not a lot of collaborative learning, particularly at Year 8. There was evidence of collaborative learning occurring in Religious Education and Science classes. Problem solving in interesting and useful ways and the responses to the statement *“If I am not doing well with my school work, the teachers do something about it quickly”* raise some questions about the use of formative assessment. There was also a decrease in student responses to using technology in interesting ways from Year 7 to Year 8:

	% of Positive Responses	
	Year 7	Year 8
The work in class required me to think through and solve problems in teams	83	67
We solve problems in interesting and useful ways	79	63
I have the opportunity to work with other students in class	86	71
If I am not doing well with my school work, the teachers do something about it quickly	71	60
We use technology in interesting ways to help my learning	87	77

➤ **Recommendation 5:** That more opportunities be provided in classes for students to work collaboratively in inquiry and problem-solving activities.

➤ **Recommendation 6:** That online feedback is progressive, not focusing so much on assessment as on skill development, and how students can use the feedback to improve their future learning.

➤ **Recommendation 7:** That in designing appropriate learning activities for students, an appropriate balance between rigor and enjoyment, theoretical, visual and hands-on activities is struck.

➤ **Recommendation 8:** That the College Homework Policy be updated, perhaps with a view to making some homework activities more creative and interesting for students.

➤ **Recommendation 9:** That further investigation occurs around the low-level teasing and bullying that was mentioned in the student responses, and also referred to in the focus group interview with parents.

Pedagogy

- In many of the classroom visits, the pedagogical practice observed was quite didactic, with the teacher controlling the learning space. OECD research (see *Appendix 2*) suggests that opportunities for student to learn from each other are very important for improving student outcomes. Students noted that in

some subjects the work was always individual and there was no opportunity for problem-solving teamwork. Is there an opportunity to investigate more flexible approaches to learning activities, seating and student voice?

- Evidence of differentiation of learning activities and assessments was limited. While students who are struggling are provided with support, there appeared to be less evidence of differentiation for high achieving students who require extension of their skills. Analysis of student growth data within the school shows that it does well with student outcomes in the lower and middle quartiles but poorly with the upper quartile.
- Laptops seem to be used for research, word processing, PowerPoint and emails. There is an opportunity to provide a wide range of technological learning experiences through Moodle. There is also an opportunity to use the Moodle platform to ensure all students have access to work that they may have missed due to illness or interruption to the timetable. This could help to resolve some of the issues raised concerning missing of class time.
- Students identified that they learned better if provided with 'hands on' or visual learning opportunities. Some subject areas, particularly those that are heavily text based, provide little opportunity for these types of activities. Mathematics falls into this category. Is there an opportunity for subject areas to audit programmes to identify which learning styles are catered for, and which may not be adequately addressed?
- The introduction of peer visits to each other's classrooms in the English domain is a positive and is to be encouraged across other domains.
- There was considerable difference identified by students and parents across classrooms as to pedagogical practice. Is there an opportunity to gather student feedback around effective learning experiences?
- Some students were doing the same projects that siblings had done more than 5 years ago. Is there an opportunity for domains to be involved in more 'generative' evaluations and creative learning and teaching activities?

➤ **Recommendation 10:** That further consideration is given by teachers, with input from students, to the physical layout of the learning spaces to best cater for contemporary learning and teaching approaches.

- **Recommendation 11:** That further professional learning and PLT discussion occurs regarding:
- a. effective differentiation of the curriculum to better cater for individual learning needs.
 - b. the use of technology as an effective learning and teaching tool.
 - c. modifying pedagogy for 'long' periods.

➤ **Recommendation 12:** That there is less of a teacher focus on teaching content and 'getting through the course' and more on identifying and teaching the essential skills.

➤ **Recommendation 13:** That in 2016 when the Domain leaders will be in a coaching role, there is the opportunity to work with individual staff to build capacity and improve pedagogical practice and this should be pursued.

Structure

- The Year 7 and 8 curriculum and curriculum delivery at Notre Dame is quite traditional and the curriculum has been in place for a number of years. The traditional delivery of curriculum and the contrast for students exiting primary schools would be worth exploring further. There have been staff visits to other schools to view different curriculum models. Consideration of an integrated curriculum at Years 7 and 8 has occurred previously and a decision was made not to pursue this option.
- In 2016 a new POL structure is being introduced which will include the position of a Year 7-10 Learning Leader (currently Year 7 & 8, Year 9 and Years 10-12 Learning Leaders) and Domain Leaders will have coaching introduced as part of their role. The focus will be on building the capacity of teachers in order to improve student learning outcomes. The significant number of part-time teachers at Years 7 & 8 was also noted.
- Staff, students and parents raised a number of concerns about the current timetable structure, and it is unclear whether the timetable is driving the curriculum or, as it should be, the curriculum as a starting point for developing a timetable structure that meets its needs. Issues identified were:
 - Frequent interruptions to timetabled classes
 - Lack of continuity in contact time and learning for some subject areas, particularly those with less scheduled periods. This was noted for example in subjects such as Physical Education, where the stadium was at times booked for other events and some subjects with a larger number of 'long' periods
 - Different domain timetabling needs not necessarily being met and a lack of consistency within domains (e.g. as to the number of long and short periods scheduled within a domain)
- The introduction of Professional Learning Teams (PLTs) is generally seen as a positive by staff. They have been a valuable forum for professional discussion and collaboration. There is the opportunity for these to develop further, particularly in the shared use of data and formative assessment to inform teaching practice and improve student outcomes. At present there are differences in the focus and operation of PLTs across the 7 & 8 domains and there is still some way to go for them to operate as authentic PLTs. For example there was no evidence that PLTs were used to cross-mark or moderate assessment tasks.

- There appear to be some gaps in pathways from subjects in years 7 & 8 and those in years 9-12. A vertical audit as recommended earlier in this report would be useful in mapping the pathways of subjects across all year levels to identify and potentially address these. Particular instances cited were:
 - Economics does not appear to be covered in years 7 & 8. There have also been a number of issues raised regarding the coverage of History and Geography at one year level only. Given that one of the stated aims of AusVELS in years 7 & 8 is to provide breadth for student learning, it might be useful to give consideration to an alternative structure for these subjects, for example Humanities across both years that covers all 3 disciplines, project-based learning or inquiry units.
 - Health and Human Development is currently being delivered as 'extras' when a Physical Education teacher is absent. This seems to be a very unsatisfactory situation. An audit across subject areas, as recommended earlier, would help to identify whether this area of learning is being covered adequately, or whether there is a need to further embed aspects of health, body systems, fitness, interpersonal development and social learning into the 7 & 8 curriculum. The time allocation to Physical Education is relatively low compared with other schools in the diocese. Is there an opportunity to revisit the allocation in light of time being provided for both theory and practical aspects of this subject?
 - Is the single semester approach to Language in year 7 the best structure? Might other models provide improved depth of learning?
- There was divided opinion about the frequency of attendance at morning Mass. While students appreciated the opportunity to participate in parish celebrations, there was disagreement about how often this should be the case, particularly given that some subject areas are seeking increased allotments of class time. Students responded very positively to Religious Education, and this was also evidenced through the classroom visits.
- The Pastoral Group period was identified by staff, students and parents as important for student wellbeing and for working towards achieving student goals. Is there an opportunity to develop a more coordinated approach to the use of this time to ensure it is as effective as possible?

➤ ***Recommendation 14:*** That it would be useful for the College to have key staff explore other Year 7 & 8 curriculum models to determine the optimal desired structure for Notre Dame.

➤ **Recommendation 15:** Regardless of the issue of time allocation, it would be helpful to enter into discussion with domains to discuss needs, issues and possible strategies for overcoming these. If the starting point for programming was: “*What do we want to achieve?*” this may help to provide focus, direction and priority for many of the decisions that need to be made for program renewal.

➤ **Recommendation 16:** That further professional learning focusing on PLTs is provided. A model for PLT operation might help middle level leaders to focus on the use of evidence and formative assessments to improve student outcomes.

➤ **Recommendation 17:** That as staffing vacancies arise, every opportunity is taken to increase the number of full-time teaching staff at Years 7 & 8.

Conclusion

It would be helpful for the College to consider the above recommendations in the context of the recommendations from the 2014 Learning & Teaching Review, as there are a number of commonalities:

2014 L&T Review Recommendation	Year 7 & 8 Review Recommendation
Complete curriculum and assessment mapping for learning across Learning Areas	Recommendation 2
Improve balance of explicit teaching instruction and inquiry learning	Recommendations 4, 5, 12, 13
Continue to support teachers to unpack data sources to drive differentiated classroom practice	Recommendations 11 & 16
Improve differentiated curriculum practices and teacher pedagogy	Recommendation 11
Curriculum and assessment mapping across the school to ensure that the curriculum is guaranteed, viable and provides clarity for what is essential for students to learn.	Recommendation 2
Develop and implement more rich and engaging learning experiences to promote greater ownership of learning by students	Recommendation 7
Increased use of data to ensure evidence informed decision about the effectiveness of the learning process	Recommendation 16
Embed and strengthen the emerging practices of the Professional Learning Community – in particular the work of Professional Learning Teams.	Recommendation 16

The facilitators would like to acknowledge the very valuable contribution of each of the members of the Reference Group for their wisdom and discernment throughout the process, Deputy Principal – Learning & Teaching, Kris Walker for her leadership during the review and Kellie Morison for her excellent administrative support.

Cath Watter & Max Fletcher, July 2015