

# ANROWS

AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL RESEARCH  
ORGANISATION FOR WOMEN'S SAFETY  
*to Reduce Violence against Women & their Children*

Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)  
Level 13, Tower B, Centennial Plaza  
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## Re: Australian Curriculum Review

Dear Reviewers

ANROWS thanks the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) for the opportunity to respond to the review of the Australian Curriculum.

ANROWS is an independent, not-for-profit company established as an initiative under Australia's *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022* (the National Plan). Our primary function is to provide an accessible evidence base for developments in policy and practice design for prevention and response to violence against women, nationally. Every aspect of our work is motivated by the right of women and their children to live free from violence and in safe communities. We recognise, respect and respond to diversity among women and their children, and we are committed to reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

Primary (core) funding for ANROWS is jointly provided by the Commonwealth and all state and territory governments of Australia. ANROWS is also, from time to time, directly commissioned to undertake work for an individual jurisdiction, and successfully tenders for research and evaluation work. ANROWS is registered as a harm prevention charity and deductible gift recipient, governed by the Australian Charities and Not-for-profit Commission (ACNC).

The information provided below is focused upon the Foundation–Year 10 Australian Curriculum: Health and Physical Education learning area. It draws on evidence from rigorous peer-reviewed research, including relevant ANROWS-funded research. This submission is not confidential, however some information, clearly identified, is provided under embargo until the research report is released on 21 July.

We would be very pleased to assist ACARA further, as required.

Yours sincerely



**Dr Heather Nancarrow**

Chief Executive Officer

7 July 2021

## Response to Health and Physical Education learning area

### Support for ACARA's changes

ANROWS welcomes ACARA's review of the current Foundation–Year 10 Australian Curriculum. We have chosen to respond to the Health and Physical Education (HPE) learning area because it is the key learning area responsible for addressing many of the social issues that arise in broader society. However in order to achieve gender equity and reduce violence against women, all learning areas need to be assessed with a gender lens to ensure consistent messaging relating to both public and private life. Consistent with our remit, the key issues of interest to ANROWS are respectful relationships and consent education. It is the view of ANROWS that the proposed revisions to the HPE learning area have gone some way to addressing these issues, and have strengthened the content and guidance for teachers on how to deliver learning around these areas of the curriculum.

It is ANROWS's view that work is required to ensure that young people better understand all forms of violence against women, and are able to tell the difference between a healthy relationship and abusive behaviour. This is evidenced in ANROWS's and VicHealth's report, *Young Australians' attitudes to violence against women and gender equality* (2019), which surveyed 1,761 young Australians aged between 16 and 24 about their views on violence against women and gender equality as part of the larger 2017 National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS). This evidence shows that across several waves of the NCAS (2009, 2013 and 2017) young people's understandings of violence against women and attitudes toward gender equality have remained fairly consistent. The 2017 iteration of the survey revealed some improvements in young people's knowledge about the forms of violence against women (mean score of 70 in 2017 compared with mean score of 61 in 2013; Politoff et al., 2019, p. 18). The other minor improvement was a slight decrease in young people's endorsement of attitudes condoning violence against women (Politoff et al., 2019). Together, these results show that young Australians' knowledge of, and attitudes towards, violence against women and gender equality are gradually improving – but they are fairly entrenched, indicating a need to act earlier in education efforts in the HPE learning area.

**Recommendation 1:** The National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey indicates that young Australians' knowledge of, and attitudes towards, violence against women and gender equality are fairly entrenched in the 16 to 24 year old cohort, suggesting a need to move education efforts earlier in the Health and Physical Education learning area.

### Knowledge of consent and sexual assault

The overwhelming majority of respondents aged between 16 and 24 understood that one partner forcing the other partner to have sex was a form of domestic violence (95% “always, usually, sometimes” in 2017; 97% in 2013; Politoff et al., 2019, p. 19). A very small proportion of respondents aged between 16 and 24 agreed that “If a woman doesn't physically resist – even if protesting verbally – then it isn't really rape”, which is to say that only a small proportion misunderstood that rape is not necessarily violent, nor does it

results in injury (8% agreed with this statement in 2017; Politoff et al., 2019, p. 20). Nearly two thirds of young people aged 16 to 24 understood that women are more likely to be raped by someone they know than by a stranger (63% nett agree in 2017, up from 57% nett agree in 2013; Politoff et al., 2019, p. 19). However, nearly one in five (19%) young people did not think this was the case, while one in ten (11%) did not know the answer (Politoff et al., 2019, p. 20). This suggests that more work is needed to ensure young people understand that sexual assault is most commonly perpetrated by someone known to the victim and survivor. The majority (88%) of young people in 2017 understood that it is a criminal offence for a man to have sex with his wife without her consent; however, nearly one in eight (12%) either did not agree with this statement, or did not know whether or not the statement was accurate (Politoff et al., 2019, p. 20). In contrast to young people's solid understandings of consent and sexual assault, the 2017 NCAS results for young people indicated lower levels of understanding about the varied non-physical forms of domestic violence, particularly those that related to controlling behaviours, including controlling a partner by denying them money, monitoring whereabouts with technology or repeated harassment via technology (Politoff et al., 2019, p. 19).

### **Attitudes toward violence against women**

While the NCAS knowledge items show young people have a good understanding of consent, the attitudinal items show that there is work to be done to dispel support for violence against women, especially in terms of disregarding the need for consent and mistrusting women's reports of violence. The 2017 NCAS revealed a high level of support for attitudes disregarding the need to gain consent in sexual matters. For example, almost one in five (18%) young Australians agreed that "Women find it flattering to be persistently pursued, even if they are not interested". Young men (24%) were nearly twice as likely to agree than young women (13%; Politoff et al., 2019). Pleasingly, young people were less likely to agree with the statement "Women often say 'no' when they mean 'yes'" in 2017 than they were in 2013; however, one in eight (13%) young people still endorsed these attitudes in 2017 (Politoff et al., 2019, p. 29).

Many young Australians continue to hold attitudes suggesting that sexual aggression can be attributed in part to men's "natural" or "innate" sexual drive. Nearly three in ten (28%) young people agreed that "When a man is very sexually aroused, he may not even realise that the woman doesn't want to have sex" and "Rape results from men not being able to control their need for sex" (Politoff et al., 2019, p. 29). While the waves of the survey have shown a decrease in these attitudes among young people over time, the attitudes are worthy of attention in respectful relationships education as they provide the context by which men's sexual aggression is excused.

Among all the attitudes toward violence against women measured in the 2017 NCAS, the most widely supported among young people (and also, notably, the general population) were those that related to mistrusting women's reports of violence. For example, over one third (37%) of young Australians supported the statement, "It is common for sexual assault accusations to be used as a way of getting back at men", with young men (45%) more likely to agree with this statement than young women (29%; Politoff et al., 2019, p. 28).

## Attitudes toward gender equality

NCAS also shows there is room for improvement in attitudes relating to women's independence and decision-making in the private sphere, especially attitudes that position men as in control of relationships. The 2017 NCAS findings suggest low levels of support for rigid gender roles and stereotypes among young people aged 16 to 24 (Politoff et al., 2019). The 2017 results for respondents aged 16 to 24 also suggest high levels of support for women's independence and decision-making in *public* life (Politoff et al., 2019). However, the results also indicated that young people are considerably less likely to hold attitudes supporting women's independence and decision-making in *private* life. Almost one in three young people (31%) believed that women prefer a man to be in charge of a relationship; this view was more widely supported by young men (36%) than young women (26%; Politoff et al., 2019). Additionally, young men (22%) were also almost twice as likely as young women (12%) in the 2017 results to agree that men should take control in relationships (Politoff et al., 2019).

## Summary and recommendation

Combined, these three NCAS insights mean more work is needed to address consent and gendered attitudes and respectful relationship expectations, together. Fixing ideas of consent and entitlement to sex cannot happen without addressing gendered relationship dynamics and other attitudes that condone or excuse violence against women. While ANROWS supports ACARA's suggested changes to the Health and Physical Education learning area, the Relationships and Sexuality focus area could be strengthened by the earliest possible inclusion of the nature of gender-based violence, and the beliefs and attitudes that drive this behaviour, as well as learning to challenge gender stereotypes and social norms that lead to inequalities, disrespect and violence.

**Recommendation 2:** ANROWS evidence supports the earliest possible, age-appropriate inclusion of the following two items in the Health and Physical Education learning area:

- understanding the nature of gender-based violence, and the beliefs and attitudes that drive this behaviour
- challenging gender stereotypes and social norms that lead to inequalities, disrespect and violence.

## Difference and diversity

ANROWS would also like to emphasise that some groups are disproportionately affected by sexual violence. ANROWS-funded research (Cox, 2015; Mitra-Kahn et al., 2016) identifies that these groups include culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) women; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women; women with disability; LGBTQ and intersex people; women living in rural or remote areas; women in prison; and sex workers. Members of these population groups often experience multiple and intersecting barriers to reporting the violence they experience, and to accessing appropriate support. For example, culturally specific gender norms can affect the capacity for women to identify and/or disclose abuse, and they can also create contexts where traditional gender roles enable abuse, including by emphasising a woman's submissiveness (Cox, 2015).

Other ANROWS-funded research into sexual violence found that trans women may experience higher rates of sexual violence than cisgender women (Ussher et al., 2020). The study participants highlighted the importance of education about sexual violence, as well as education about the nature of transgender identities, in order to aid in the prevention of transphobia and discrimination, as well as to prevent sexual violence from occurring. (Ussher et al., 2020, p. 114)

Educating children about consent within school was repeatedly raised by study participants as an important consideration in preventing sexual violence (Ussher et al., 2020). The research included a comparative survey that examined the sexual violence experiences of CALD trans women; non-CALD trans women; and cisgender, lesbian, bisexual, queer and heterosexual women. The findings supported community-wide, multifaceted sexual violence prevention measures that effectively ensure cultural change occurs across all communities by promoting respect for gender, sexuality and cultural diversity, with zero tolerance of sexual violence for all women (Ussher et al., 2020).

In other ANROWS-funded research into sexual violence, heteronormative beliefs and conservative gender norms were both associated with the acceptance and experience of sexual coercion for both men and women (Cox, 2015). ANROWS supports the earliest possible, age-appropriate inclusion of changing identities and the factors that influence them (including personal, cultural, gender and sexual identities) as well as celebrating and respecting difference and diversity in individuals and communities in the HPE learning area of the curriculum.

**Recommendation 3:** ANROWS evidence supports the earliest possible, age-appropriate inclusion of the following two items in the Health and Physical Education learning area:

- changing identities and the factors that influence them (including personal, cultural, gender and sexual identities)
- celebrating and respecting difference and diversity in individuals and communities.

## Support for implementation

To assist ACARA in reaching the domestic and family violence sector for curriculum feedback, ANROWS convened a webinar, [“Sex Ed”: Young people, consent and the Australian curriculum](#), where we invited Janice Atkin from ACARA to discuss the rationale for the proposed changes with a diverse panel of experts. The panel discussion featured Professor Kath Albury (Swinburne University of Technology), Anne-Marie Henley (SHINE SA), Professor Alan McKee, (University of Technology Sydney), Professor Helen Cahill (University of Melbourne), Oliver Keane (SHINE SA) and Kim Henderson (Our Watch). While implementation of the curriculum is beyond the remit of ACARA, many panellists had suggestions on how to ensure critical areas relating to consent and violence against women are addressed in classrooms. “Bring the teachers in as our partners and get the timetable to be an enabler, not a barrier,” said Professor Helen Cahill, who went on to explain that the “2 Ts” – timetable and teachers – are critical to the success of sexual and consent education in schools (ANROWS, 2021).

Sector development is crucial to the successful implementation of these important curriculum changes. As outlined in the HPE learning area curriculum, digital literacy for students will involve exploring the nature of digital technologies and their implications for establishing and managing relationships, and ethical online behaviour which will include protocols and practices for using digital technologies for respectful communication. In order to teach young people better digital literacy, teachers need to be supported with professional development. As Professor Kath Albury pointed out in the aforementioned webinar,

so many adults are very antsy when they're trying to think about, well, how do I talk about mobile phones and what they mean specifically in relation to sexual learning? How do I talk about different platforms like Tumblr or Instagram and what that means in relation to sexuality? So, there are lots of calls, often, for young people, to develop better literacy in this space. If there's one thing that I could really say, in relation to supporting educators and supporting teachers, it would be that teachers need a lot of support around digital literacy. (ANROWS, 2021)

This need is further evidenced in forthcoming ANROWS-funded research relating to technology-facilitated abuse (TFA). This research, under embargo until 21 July, found “more training and professional development is needed for them [support service workers] to understand the intricacies of TFA, including regular updates on the types of abuse and types of technologies being used” (Flynn et al., in press, p. 35). The research highlights the need for continuing and expanding existing professional development options to keep up with the changing nature of TFA and the “ever-expanding and vast landscape of digital technologies” (Flynn et al., in press, p. 38). With young people often being early adopters of new digital technologies, educators must be afforded ongoing and regularly updated professional development opportunities in order to keep pace.

**Recommendation 4:** ACARA’s implementation advice makes reference to both ongoing and regularly updated professional development on digital technologies for educators, along with sufficient time allocated within the timetable for the Relationships and Sexuality focus area of the Health and Physical Education learning area.

## Recommendations

ANROWS evidence supports the following improvements to Foundation–Year 10 Australian Curriculum in the Health and Physical Education learning area.

**Recommendation 1:** The National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey indicates that young Australians’ knowledge of, and attitudes towards, violence against women and gender equality are fairly entrenched in the 16 to 24 year old cohort, suggesting a need to move education efforts earlier in the Health and Physical Education learning area.

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