

Submission to the board of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), September 2009

**Home economics in the national curriculum**

Never has home economics education been more vital to the wellbeing of a generation. The key elements of home economics empower young people to live sustainably and to take responsibility for their own physical, mental and social wellbeing. No educator or legislator in this country should be ignorant of or surprised by the breadth and potential of home economics. Nor should they overlook the consistent value and support given to this learning area by school communities. For example, without a specific mandate for inclusion, it is compulsory in 82 per cent of Victorian schools at Year 7–8<sup>1</sup>.

The positive attitude within school communities towards home economics – a multi-disciplinary learning area that encompasses health, development, the management of resources, decision-making and the building of practical life skills – can be equally matched by the levels of frustration among home economics practitioners that its principles, its hands-on components – and its very name – should in Australia be so diminished by successive educational decision-makers.

With the exception of Queensland, you may have to decipher the language of state and territory curricula in order to confirm the continuing existence of home economics in our nation's schools. But within the schools themselves (particularly secondary schools), across all year levels and under a range of subject names, the young people of Australia are learning and practising how to be independent, self-sufficient, healthy consumer citizens. It is not an exaggeration to say that in some states home economics survives in spite of the written curriculum, not because of it.

The Education Revolution has at its core a 'human capital revolution'<sup>2</sup>, where human capital is comprised of 'human health, skills, and motivation'<sup>3</sup>. An investment in human capital through the education system is seen as critical to the achievement of this goal, as is the identification of an appropriate curriculum to serve this purpose across all levels of school education. The inclusion of home economics as a unifying element for all students is imperative for this focus on human capital. Enhancing capacities for individual and family wellbeing – a core focus of home economics – is precisely the missing element in the proposed investment of human capital.

The history of home economics in this nation is both long and proud, and contemporary professionals carry with them a strong legacy of teaching relevant, sound, practical life skills. Yet a

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<sup>1</sup> Corstorphan, B, Warren, C, Fordyce-Voorham, S 2005, 'Where have all the home economics teachers gone?', *Victorian Journal of Home Economics*, Vol 44, No 2, pp. 2–9

<sup>2</sup> Australian Labor Party 2007, *The Australian economy needs an education revolution*, [www.alp.org.au](http://www.alp.org.au)

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 15

current sense of being overlooked and undervalued is also strong. When a Rudd Government Minister announces another round of funding that ‘helps tackle childhood obesity by giving children a hands-on experience in healthy eating’<sup>4</sup> (committing almost \$13 million over four years), we of course applaud the initiative. But it also brings up what to us are familiar questions. If the delivery of the ‘hands-on experience in healthy eating’ is innovative, why do we feel so marginalised?

Are home economics teachers in schools invisible? What about their potential to link with primary school communities? We have extensive first-hand experience of successful engagement between secondary home economics teachers and primary school health promotion initiatives. We are already in schools – thousands of us, right across the nation – with resources and infrastructure at our fingertips. The possibilities for collaboration and links with a broad range of government and non-government health promotion initiatives are enormous, especially since we already have a wealth of experience with the challenging post-primary, adolescent cohort. Our existing curriculum already embraces such goals, and its potential cannot be overstated.

This submission has been prepared by members of Home Economics Victoria, in conjunction with key representatives of the International Federation for Home Economics (Pacific Region). It advocates for the development and provision of home economics in all states and territories as a curriculum entitlement for all young Australians. It advocates that home economics be recognised as a broad, multi-disciplinary learning area, with its own identity and its own name.

## About Home Economics Victoria

Home Economics Victoria is a growing and progressive organisation with a membership of over 1000 Victorian teachers. It is affiliated with the International Federation for Home Economics (IFHE), an International Non Governmental Organisation (INGO) with consultative status to the United Nations (ECOSOC, FAO, UNESCO, UNICEF) and the Council of Europe. In 2012 Home Economics Victoria will host the IFHE World Congress in Melbourne, bringing more than a thousand delegates from around the world.

Since 1958 Home Economics Victoria has advocated for the field of home economics and has supported educators. As a Registered Training Organisation Home Economics Victoria has written and delivers a Vocational Graduate Diploma of Home Economics Education including nationally accredited units. ‘This is the first course offered by a professional teaching association for Victorian teachers and provides a new model for teacher education to meet the demand for teachers in a specialist area experiencing a real shortage of qualified teachers’<sup>5</sup>.

As a provider of programs Home Economics Victoria works in partnership with the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development through the Strategic Partnerships Program and the Department of Human Services to deliver the statewide Fruit + Veg program in primary schools (reaching over 152,000 students since 2003). Home Economics Victoria operates a full-time office with seven staff, providing leadership, support and services to home economics educators.

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<sup>4</sup> Nicola Roxon MP, Minister for Health and Ageing, Media release: Second round of funding for Kitchen Garden National Program, 3 September 2009

<sup>5</sup> Victorian Institute of Teaching, ‘Examples of how teachers are meeting PD requirements: Changing your specialisation’, *iteachonline*, Issue 3, p. 13, September 2008

## What is home economics?<sup>6</sup>

Home Economics is a field of study and a profession, situated in the human sciences, that draws from a range of disciplines to achieve optimal and sustainable living for individuals, families and communities. Its historical origins over 100 years ago place home economics in the context of the home and household with a strong public health imperative, and this is extended in the 21st century to include wider living environments as we better understand that the capacities, choices and priorities of individuals and families impact at all levels, ranging from the household, to the local and also the global community.

Home economists are concerned with the empowerment and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities, and with facilitating the development of attributes for lifelong learning for paid, unpaid and voluntary work. Home economics professionals are advocates for individuals, families and communities.

Home economics content draws from multiple disciplines, synthesising these through interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary inquiry. This coalescing of disciplinary knowledge is essential because the phenomena and challenges of everyday life are not typically one-dimensional.

The content (disciplinary bases) from which studies of home economics draws is dependent upon the context, but might include:

- food, nutrition and health
- textiles and clothing
- shelter and housing
- consumerism and consumer science
- household management
- design and technology
- food science and hospitality
- human development and family studies
- education and community services.

Home economics is globally recognised for its contribution to enhancing the wellbeing of individuals and families, and this is most prominently demonstrated through the designation of World Home Economics Day, a United Nations declared day of prominence held annually on 21 March. The identification of this day is an honour that reflects the value placed in the field, and its ongoing contribution to society.

## Why is the study of home economics important for all Australian students?

Home economics aims to build human capacity, including knowledge, hands-on practical skills, social connections, and the ability to make independent decisions. Such human resources are essential to promote the wellbeing of individuals and families in the context of a socially just and ecologically sustainable environment.

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<sup>6</sup> This explanation is an agreed international position for home economics. See International Federation for Home Economics 2008, Position statement: Home economics in the 21st century, [www.ifhe.org](http://www.ifhe.org)

The benefit of home economics to individuals, families and communities has sometimes been overlooked by government and other decision makers. This reflects a lack of familiarity with the field of study, as it is intended in its comprehensive sense. It also reflects the existence of commonly accepted assumptions of what is valued and what is not in our education system. At this moment in time there is a chance for a reconfiguration of this historical positioning of the field, where a valuing of citizenship, sustainability, creativity, resilience and wellbeing are being advocated as the platform for the newly developed curriculum. On this basis, home economics provides the vehicle for delivery of such goals.

Evidence of the need to locate home economics as pivotal to the curriculum is abundant, and increasingly recognised by those responsible for community planning and decision making, including governments around the world. Several examples are provided to illustrate this:

1. **Education for sustainability:** In a UNESCO document released in 2005 entitled *Guidelines and recommendations for reorienting teacher education to address sustainability*<sup>7</sup>, the importance of the world's 59 million teachers to educate for developing understandings about sustainable development is articulated and strategies for action outlined. It is argued that 'the core themes of education for sustainability include lifelong learning, interdisciplinary education, partnerships, multicultural education and empowerment'<sup>8</sup>.

The document urges a multidisciplinary approach, noting that 'no one discipline can or should claim ownership of Education for Sustainable Development'<sup>9</sup>. To achieve sustainable development in a world characterised by the global economic squeeze, climate change, the distribution of scarce resources and shifting values back to the importance of personal health and wellbeing, there is a need for a greater emphasis on creativity and innovation for solutions to our most challenging problems. These topics are core business for home economics.

2. **Changes to individual and family characteristics around the globe:** The United Nations identifies four trends that now and in the future impact families around the globe:
  - a. changes in family structures
  - b. demographic ageing
  - c. the rise of migration
  - d. the HIV/AIDS pandemic<sup>10</sup>.

The effect of these four trends is a 'challenge to the ability to fulfil basic functions of production, reproduction and socialisation as well as needs of family members regarding health, nutrition, shelter, physical and emotional care and personal development'. The United Nations argues that in terms of policy considerations, any social policy should have the above-mentioned trends and the needs of families in mind; that best national practices should be studied when designing a new approach to family policies; and families should be at the centre of any future social policy development<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Source: [unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001433/143370E.pdf](http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001433/143370E.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, p. 15

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

<sup>10</sup> Source: [www.un.org/esa/socdev/family/majortrends.htm](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/family/majortrends.htm)

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*

Home economics has at its core the enhancement of individual and family wellbeing. Family has been at the heart of the profession for 100 years. It is not surprising that the current Director General of the World Health Organisation, Dr Margaret Chan, was initially trained as a home economics teacher, which provided her with the foundations required for this key role in the international community.

3. **Obesity in society:** Over the last 20 years, rates of obesity in children have risen significantly in many countries around the world. From 1985 to 1995 the level of combined overweight/obesity in Australian children almost doubled, so that today we have one in four children outside the healthy weight range and there are indications that this is heading towards one in three. Some experts predict that if the current trend in childhood overweight and obesity continues, this generation of children may experience shorter life spans than their parents<sup>12</sup>. Causes include a limited knowledge of nutrition and minimal ability to make informed decisions or to prepare suitable foods for consumption. Nutrition knowledge, combined with food preparation and consumer decision making, are core components of home economics teaching and learning.

Society is likely to be a far different place if home economics is core curriculum for all students. In the United Kingdom, this has been addressed through the development of the Food Competency Framework<sup>13</sup>, which mandates food skills and knowledge for children and young people for the ages of 7–9, 11–12, 14 and 16+. This includes knowing what foods to eat and why, how to read food labelling information and what it means, and how and why we need to prepare and cook food safely. This will be delivered in all schools by home economics teachers.

### How has home economics appeared in the Australian curriculum?: P–10

Previous attempts to develop national curriculum have left considerable scope for interpretation at state and territory level, and within this approach home economics as a field of study has received differential treatment. For instance, in several jurisdictions home economics was recognised as contributing much more than the narrow scope of one Key Learning Area (KLA) allowed (such as Technology; Health and Physical Education; The Arts; or perhaps Studies of Society and the Environment) and hence was approved, developed and delivered as a separate syllabus<sup>14</sup>. *The Home Economics Education Subject Area Syllabus and Guidelines Level 4 to Beyond Level 6* (Queensland Studies Authority 2005<sup>15</sup>) identifies the focus of home economics as:

... the wellbeing of people within their personal, family, community and work roles. Home economics encourages personal independence, living effectively within the wider society, and promoting preferred futures for self and others in contexts related to food and nutrition, human development and relationships, living environments and textiles (p.3).

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<sup>12</sup> <http://education.qld.gov.au/schools/healthy/food-drink-strategy.html>

<sup>13</sup> Food Standards Agency, December 2007. See [www.food.gov.uk/healthiereating/nutrition/schools/competencies/](http://www.food.gov.uk/healthiereating/nutrition/schools/competencies/)

<sup>14</sup> See for example the Queensland Curriculum where a stand-alone syllabus for Years 8–10 and then 11–12 have been in place since the first attempts at establishing a nationally developed curriculum [qsa.qld.edu.au/downloads/learning/snr\\_home\\_ec\\_09\\_syll.pdf](http://qsa.qld.edu.au/downloads/learning/snr_home_ec_09_syll.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Queensland Studies Authority 2005, *Home Economics Education Subject Area Syllabus and Guidelines Level 4 to Beyond Level 6*, Brisbane

In other jurisdictions, the subject was framed into one of the KLAs, typically leading to a narrowing of the field and limiting of its possible contribution<sup>16</sup>. It is the position of Home Economics Victoria that the structure of KLAs in the P–10 curriculum has to a large extent diminished and devalued unique disciplines such as home economics, which do not fit neatly beneath a designated umbrella heading such as Technology or Health and Physical Education. In Victoria we must be both imaginative and proactive as we seek to confirm and understand our place within the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS).

For example, the KLA of Health and Physical Education has a learning dimension of *Health knowledge and promotion* but lacks any mention of putting this knowledge into practice. Surely for health knowledge to be promoted and transformed into behaviour, there must be an element of practical, hands-on application? We locate the practical element in the Technology KLA, where food becomes a material subject to a design brief. This is of course a valid dimension of food education but the main point is this: the holistic value of multi-disciplinary approaches such as home economics has been dismissed.

Imagine home economics teachers, KLA departments and schools all making decisions about where the teacher and the subject belongs. It becomes arbitrary, inequitable and/or political. The subject is almost inevitably undermined in terms of its identity and content, and in terms of who is perceived as qualified to teach it. At Home Economics Victoria we have seen an immediate and devastating flow-on effect of the disappearance of our subject area's rightful name from official curriculum documents: universities no longer find it viable to train teachers in a subject that their ill-informed research tells them doesn't exist. Undergraduate pathways to home economics teacher education are now depleted and difficult to identify in Victoria, yet teacher demand is undiminished.

We support the solution of retaining the identity and name of home economics in schools throughout Australia, and elevating it to a multi-disciplined learning area of its own. Within the Victorian Essential Learning Standards, home economics has been shown to cross all learning strands and most if not all domains, including: Health and Physical Education; Design, Creativity and Technology; The Arts; Mathematics; Science; Interpersonal Development; Civics and Citizenship; and Communication.

As such, home economics lends itself to cross-curricular learning of immense value to all students, easily adapted to the curriculum programs of most schools, and above all likely to be aligned with the interests and goals of individual students and their families. Along the lines of recent UK legislation introducing compulsory home economics to all students, in the interests of long-term national health outcomes, this would be a proactive step forward for the protection of a generation.

## Post-compulsory home economics education

The post-compulsory years have presented a broader scope in which to maintain a unique home economics curriculum approach. In Queensland, home economics is a stand-alone, approved subject. According to the *Home Economics Senior Syllabus* (Queensland Board of Senior

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<sup>16</sup> See for example the New South Wales curriculum where home economics was framed within the Technology Key Learning Area, leading to a narrowing of the field.

Secondary School Studies (QBSSSS 2001, p. 4)<sup>17</sup>, studies in home economics aim to develop in students:

- Knowledge and understanding of the diversity of individuals and families, and of the basic needs that underpin their wellbeing
- Knowledge and understanding of the concepts, principles, processes and practices that inform the fields of study
- Understanding of the range of contexts, perspectives and issues that influence individual and family wellbeing
- Reasoning processes that are fundamental to critical and effective participation in a range of life roles related to food, textiles and living environments
- Skills and understandings to take informed, practical action that promotes the wellbeing of individuals and families in the contexts of food, textiles and living environments
- Commitment to active, informed and collaborative participation to promote the wellbeing of individuals and families in the context of a socially just and ecologically sustainable environment.

Victoria has not been as successful in retaining the integrity of its senior home economics subject, first introduced in 1976 as HSC Home Economics – Human Development and Society. This study proved very popular with students and became part of the new VCE from 1992 with the name Human Development – Home Economics. However, during the reaccreditation phase for 1995, the home economics stem was dropped from the title amid great consternation among those who had written the study and those who had been trained to teach it. By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century the subject had been further eroded through its amalgamation with the VCE study Health Education.

Now known as VCE Health and Human Development, this study is identified as home economics only by those who know of its evolution, and who understand that it concerns many of the educational principles of home economics. However, many of our members teach this study, and our vocational postgraduate diploma prepares teachers to deliver it.

VCE Health and Human Development remains a popular subject among senior Victorian students, this year enjoying the third highest enrolment among all VCE studies. It is an excellent subject for those who have enjoyed their earlier education in home economics and wish to expand their knowledge of health, development and nutrition in individual, family, community and global contexts. Other VCE studies that fall beneath the professional jurisdiction of our organisation include VCE Food and Technology, VCE Design and Technology (Textiles) and VET Hospitality.

## Conclusion and recommendations

It is our position that communities that no longer value the skills and practices inherent to home economics suffer a loss that is both detrimental and dangerous to healthy and sustainable community living. In an age of unprecedented transition from industrial to knowledge-based culture and global economics, the key imperative of home economics is to retain the elements of society that are valued, while looking ahead to improved and sustainable living for all.

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<sup>17</sup> *Queensland Board of Senior Secondary School Studies (QBSSSS) 2001, Home Economics Senior Syllabus, Brisbane*

Ironically, just as the need for formal study that centred on home and family led to the emergence of home economics 100 years ago, contemporary society is again floundering in the wake of world events and societal evolution that has led to individual alienation, loss of sense of community, inequality, health crises, economic mismanagement and predicaments that challenge the stability of individuals, families and communities globally. It is at this time that home economics must be recognised as a key component of the curriculum of all Australian students.

Home Economics Victoria recommends that the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA):

- recognises the value and enormous additional potential of the home economics teachers already in Australian schools – their training and qualifications, professional goals and school infrastructure all support the improved health and wellbeing of Australian individuals, families and communities
- recognises the contemporary and continuing benefits of home economics education for all young Australians; such recognition would elevate home economics education in Australian schools to the status of a stand-alone, multi-faceted discipline worthy of retaining its identity and its name
- curtails recent damaging tendencies in Australia to place home economics beneath curriculum headings that undermine its holistic worth (e.g. in Victoria, Technology narrows the home economics application to food and textiles design contexts; Health and Physical Education omits any reference to practical food-related applications)
- supports the development of a home economics subject in the national senior curriculum, mapped against existing courses such as Queensland's Home Economics, Victoria's VCE Health and Human Development and NSW's Family and Community Studies.
- considers the lead being set internationally by curriculum initiatives such as the United Kingdom model of imposing compulsory hands-on home economics classes in schools, in the interests of improved community health and wellbeing.

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