

Feedback Submission

Pacific Studies Shape Paper
ACT Senior Secondary Curriculum

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INTRODUCTION

The Australian Pasifika Educators Network (APEN) is a national collective of educators, researchers, students, and community leaders committed to advancing educational equity, cultural integrity, and systemic transformation for Pasifika peoples across Australia. Founded in 2022, APEN provides a platform for Pasifika voices in education, working to ensure that the knowledge systems, identities, and aspirations of Pacific learners and communities are recognised, respected, and embedded in education policy and practice.

Our work is guided by principles of cultural safety, collective action, and community-informed leadership. We advocate for policies and initiatives that empower Pasifika learners, families, and educators to thrive, while challenging deficit narratives and structural barriers in Australian education systems.

This submission reflects our deep commitment to culturally sustaining curriculum development. It draws on the expertise of Pacific educators and researchers from across Australia, offering strategic recommendations to ensure that the proposed ACT Pacific Studies course is co-designed, co-produced, community-led, and positioned as a national model of excellence.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Australian Pasifika Educators Network (APEN) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft Pacific Studies Shape Paper for the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Senior Secondary Curriculum. This initiative marks a significant and timely step toward embedding Pacific knowledge systems, identities, and perspectives within Australian schooling. To our knowledge, this is the first proposed Pacific Studies course to be developed within an Australian state or territory curriculum, and its development signals an important shift towards more inclusive and culturally sustaining education.

APEN extends its appreciation to Dr Murray Chisholm and the ACT Education Directorate for initiating this work and for engaging in early consultation with Pacific communities. We particularly acknowledge the contributions of Professor Katerina Teaiwa and Pacific educators in Canberra and Papua New Guinea, whose academic and community leadership have helped shape the draft Paper with cultural insight and integrity.

We recognise the early steps taken to engage Pacific communities in Canberra and the broader region as a strong foundation. However, we also encourage a more deliberate and sustained approach to co-design, co-production and consultation, particularly with Pacific communities in high-enrolment jurisdictions such as Western Sydney and South-East Queensland. Their insights will be critical to ensuring cultural relevance, rigour, and successful implementation.

As a national collective of Pacific educators, researchers, and practitioners working across education sectors, APEN sees the potential for this course to offer a meaningful and culturally affirming experience to both Pacific and non-Pacific learners. The Paper's inclusion of Pacific-centred pedagogies and interdisciplinary approaches is welcomed, reflecting a sincere attempt to engage with Pacific ways of knowing, being, and doing.

Following a collective *talanoa* process involving Pacific educators, community leaders, and researchers, APEN offers a series of recommendations to support the development of a course that is culturally grounded, sustainable, and responsive to Pacific learners and communities. These recommendations reflect our commitment to cultural integrity, equity, and transformative curriculum reform.

Finally, we believe this Shape Paper presents an opportunity for national leadership. With careful attention to cultural safety, community co-leadership, and equitable implementation, the ACT Senior Secondary Curriculum can become a model of best practice in Indigenous and Pacific curriculum development across Australia.



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FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

SUMMARY OF APEN RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. The Shape Paper acknowledges the importance of community consultation but provides limited detail on how this has occurred. It references initial engagement with Pacific community members but does not describe the process or scope of input that has shaped the curriculum.**

Strengthen transparency and legitimacy in consultation (Shape Paper, p. 2 – Section 1)

The current documentation provides insufficient detail regarding who was consulted, how consultation was conducted, and the scope or limitations of the engagement process. For a curriculum that aims to represent Pacific peoples, it is essential that consultation be not only meaningful, but also broad, inclusive, and transparent reflecting the diversity of Pacific experiences across the region and diaspora.

APEN recommends that a formal Pacific Advisory Group be established to provide strategic and cultural guidance across the full lifecycle of the curriculum. The advisory group should include Pacific educators, researchers, cultural knowledge holders, and community leaders, with clearly defined terms of reference and governance arrangements. To ensure transparency and accountability, the composition of the group, its decision-making role, and the mechanisms for community input should be publicly accessible. Additionally, we recommend that the cultural affiliations or community representation of those consulted be acknowledged, along with a summary of their contributions, to build transparency, trust, and accountability with Pacific communities.

Given the significant Pacific student populations in areas such as Western Sydney and South-East Queensland, regions that often experience systemic exclusion in national policy design, it is critical that consultation extends beyond the ACT to include their voices. These communities bring deep insights into the challenges, strengths, and cultural diversity of Pacific learners in Australian schooling contexts. Broader engagement through ongoing talanoa and co-design and co-production processes will strengthen the cultural integrity, relevance, and national applicability of the course.

This more inclusive, transparent, and community-led approach will ensure that the curriculum is not only representative but also accountable to the communities it seeks to serve.

- 2. The Shape Paper identifies professional learning as a key consideration for implementation but offers minimal guidance on what specific knowledge or competencies educators will need to deliver the course in a culturally safe and responsive way.**

Build educator capability and cultural safety (Shape Paper, p. 11, Pedagogy and Assessment; p. 10)

The success of the Pacific Studies curriculum hinges on the capacity and cultural readiness of educators to teach Pacific content in ways that are affirming, accurate, and culturally safe. However, the current Shape Paper appears to assume a baseline level of educator knowledge and confidence in Pacific epistemologies and pedagogical frameworks, that may not exist across the ACT. Without adequate preparation, there is a significant risk that Pacific knowledge systems will be misrepresented, tokenised, or taught through a Eurocentric lens. This undermines the course's integrity, risks student and educator harm, and places an unfair burden on Pacific students or community members to 'correct' or fill gaps in classroom delivery.

APEN strongly recommends the design and rollout of a comprehensive professional learning strategy to enhance teacher capability. This should be co-designed, co-produced and led by Pacific educators, scholars, and cultural knowledge holders to ensure both content accuracy and cultural integrity. The professional learning program must go beyond general intercultural awareness to include deep engagement with Pacific histories, values, epistemologies, and pedagogical practices.

We also recommend the development of a Pacific Cultural Capability Framework for Educators, which would provide practical guidance on what culturally safe and responsive teaching looks like in the context of Pacific Studies. This framework should inform teacher accreditation, professional development, and classroom resources, and align with existing national teacher standards and cultural safety guidelines. This investment is essential to ensure consistency in course delivery across diverse school contexts and to uphold the cultural safety of Pacific learners. It will also contribute to the broader professionalisation of Pacific Studies as a discipline in Australian education, setting a precedent for meaningful and respectful engagement with Pacific content at the senior secondary level.

Research shows that when teachers adopt culturally responsive strategies grounded in Pacific values and relational pedagogy, Pacific learners feel seen, respected, and more motivated to engage (Chu et al., 2013; Porter-Samuels, 2013). Professional development must not only increase content knowledge but also shift teacher dispositions and classroom relationships to affirm Pacific learner identities.

- 3. The Shape Paper includes references to Pacific frameworks such as *talanoa*, *vā*, and *kakala* and aims to centre Pacific perspectives. However, these concepts are not consistently integrated across unit structures, and key Pacific knowledge areas, such as regional diversity, wellbeing, and Pacific histories in Australia, are underdeveloped or absent.**

Strengthen cultural representation and Pacific knowledge systems
(Shape Paper, pp. 6–7, Aims of the Curriculum; p. 8 - Unit Descriptions)

While the *Shape Paper* gestures toward Pacific concepts such as *talanoa*, *vā*, and *kakala*, these frameworks are mentioned only briefly and are not meaningfully embedded across the curriculum's aims, unit structures, or learning outcomes. This lack of depth risks reducing Pacific knowledge systems to superficial references, rather than positioning them as central organising frameworks for teaching and learning.

The curriculum would benefit from a more deliberate and integrated application of Pacific epistemologies, pedagogies, and cultural protocols, developed in collaboration with Pacific scholars, educators, and community knowledge holders. Studies affirm that Pacific learners thrive in educational environments where curriculum reflects their lived realities and knowledge traditions, leading to increased academic confidence, belonging, and wellbeing (Pale et al., 2023; Chu et al., 2013). This includes a stronger articulation of what it means to teach from a Pacific standpoint and how such a stance shapes inquiry, relationality, ethics, assessment, and holistic wellbeing, defined not just as physical or emotional health, but encompassing cultural identity, spirituality, family, and collective care.

In addition, the current draft does not provide sufficient evidence of balanced representation across the Pacific region. While some concepts and perspectives appear to draw primarily from Polynesian contexts, there is limited visibility of Melanesian and Micronesian voices, histories, and frameworks. This imbalance risks reproducing regional hierarchies and excluding vast communities and knowledge traditions from meaningful inclusion.

Finally, the absence of any reference to Australian South Sea Islander peoples, and the historical practice of blackbirding, is a significant omission. These intersecting histories form a central part of Australia's colonial relationship with the Pacific and must be explicitly acknowledged. A Pacific Studies curriculum developed and delivered in Australia should not exclude or marginalise the experiences of South Sea Islander communities, whose presence is foundational to any meaningful engagement with Pacific histories in this context.

APEN recommends the following:

- Ensure regional balance by embedding equitable representation and content and from Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia across all units to avoid reinforcing existing hierarchies.
- Integrate Pacific languages meaningfully within curriculum content, not simply as cultural artefacts, but as carriers of knowledge, worldview, and identity. This must be supported by community expertise, appropriate teacher guidance, and resource investment.
- Embed Pacific knowledge systems throughout the curriculum, not as standalone references, but as foundational to learning design, classroom dialogue, and ethical engagement.
- Engage cultural experts in co-design and co-producing curriculum content to ensure alignment with diverse cultural protocols, practices and community expectations.
- Acknowledge the histories of Australian South Sea Islander peoples and the legacy of blackbirding as essential to understanding Australia's relationship with the Pacific and ensure historical relevance in an Australian-taught curriculum.

A Pacific Studies curriculum must do more than include Pacific content; it must be grounded in the intellectual, spiritual, and cultural traditions of Pacific peoples. This requires intentional design, regionally inclusive collaboration, and a commitment to resisting extractive or tokenistic approaches.

- 4. The Shape Paper seeks to introduce an interdisciplinary approach to Pacific Studies and outlines general unit overviews. However, it lacks a clear pedagogical rationale and does not fully explain how Pacific frameworks will shape the course’s structure, sequencing, or student progression.**

Refine curriculum design, language, and learning structure

(Shape Paper, pp. 5–10- Aims, Structure, and Unit Overviews)

To ensure the course is both pedagogically sound and culturally responsive, further refinement is needed across two key areas: the overall learning structure and the design of assessment expectations. Strengthening these elements will support inclusive delivery and maximise the course’s relevance and accessibility for all learners.

4.1 Learning Structure

We recommend further refinement of the course structure to ensure it reflects Pacific pedagogical principles and is accessible to a diverse range of learners. This includes providing a clearer rationale for the interdisciplinary approach, explicitly connecting unit overviews to the course aims and outcomes and embedding opportunities for culturally sustaining practices such as storytelling, talanoa, and place-based learning. Clearer scaffolding between units will also support teacher implementation and learner progression.

4.2 Assessment Expectations

Further detail is needed around assessment expectations to ensure they are culturally responsive and accessible, particularly for students who may not have prior knowledge of Pacific content. We recommend providing guidance on assessment design that includes appropriate adjustments, multiple modes of expression (e.g., oral, visual, performative), and inclusive rubrics. These should be informed by Pacific epistemologies and allow for differentiated entry points to affirm both cultural and academic learning.

- 5. The Shape Paper expresses an intent to explore Pacific perspectives through contemporary and historical themes. However, it does not offer sufficient safeguards against colonial framings or guidance on teaching from decolonial, community-led perspectives.**

Safeguard against colonising interpretations

(Shape Paper, pp. 8–10 – Unit Themes and Learning Content)

The current draft of the curriculum demonstrates a willingness to engage with Pacific perspectives but does not go far enough in disrupting colonial framings or affirming Pacific epistemic sovereignty. Several unit themes, such as *“Pacific in Popular Culture”* and *“Contemporary Issues”*, risk reproducing extractive or deficit-based narratives if not firmly grounded in critical pedagogy and community-authored perspectives. For example, content focusing on representation in media or globalisation lacks clear guidance on power, colonial legacies, and Pacific resistance and resurgence movements.

The Shape Paper also describes Australia as a “Pacific Island Nation” (Section 5.1), a characterisation that may require clarification. While Australia is part of the Pacific region geopolitically and strategically, it is not culturally, historically, or geographically recognised as a Pacific Island nation. This distinction is important to ensure the Pacific Studies curriculum centres Indigenous Pacific worldviews, rather than conflating Australia’s regional positioning with the lived identities of Pasifika/Pacific Island peoples.

Moreover, while there is reference to ‘Pacific perspectives’ throughout the Paper, the absence of clearly articulated Pacific-led analytical frameworks means there is a real risk of interpretation being left to educators who may not have the necessary cultural or political grounding. This leaves the curriculum vulnerable to well-meaning but potentially harmful misrepresentations.

To ensure cultural and intellectual safety, APEN recommends that the curriculum:

- Be co-designed and co-produced with Pacific educators, researchers, and cultural knowledge holders, with explicit guidelines on teaching from a decolonial and strengths-based stance.
- Position Pacific peoples as agents, not subjects, by embedding community-defined priorities, stories, and critiques into the core content, not as case studies or footnotes.
- Critically reframe unit themes, particularly those dealing with representation, identity, and global issues, to challenge colonial constructs and elevate Pacific-led narratives of creativity, activism, and innovation. As Pale et al. (2023) emphasise, affirming cultural identity and promoting Pacific learner agency are central to resisting extractive, tokenistic educational approaches.
- Include framing questions and inquiry approaches that reflect Pacific intellectual traditions and critique dominant discourses (e.g. interrogating who gets to speak for Pacific peoples, or how knowledge is validated in Western schooling systems).
- Embed diaspora perspectives, ensuring the lived experiences of Pacific communities in Australia inform not just content, but pedagogy and assessment.

Without these safeguards, there is a risk that Pacific Studies becomes another curriculum that exoticises, essentialises, or flattens the diversity of Pacific peoples. A truly transformative course must centre Pacific self-determination, knowledge sovereignty, and critical resistance to colonising frames.

- 6. The Paper identifies implementation as a next phase and mentions the need for professional learning and curriculum support. However, it does not detail a staged rollout, extended timeline, or how broader Pacific communities will be engaged in ongoing co-design and co-production.**

Adopt a phased and community-informed implementation approach
(Shape Paper, p. 11 – Implementation)

The *Shape Paper* outlines the potential for professional learning and resource development but does not sufficiently address the scale, depth, or duration of what meaningful implementation requires, especially for a curriculum aiming to centre Pacific knowledge

systems and serve both Pacific and non-Pacific learners. The current framing risks fast-tracking a culturally significant course without the structural supports necessary to ensure its success.

To support sustainable and culturally grounded implementation, APEN recommends extending the development timeline to 2026 or 2027. This extension would allow for:

- deeper engagement with Pacific communities across multiple jurisdictions.
- strengthened curriculum design, aligned with community-validated knowledge systems.
- phased teacher capacity-building programs.
- and the embedding of safeguards against cultural harm or misrepresentation.

While the ACT is home to a small but growing Pacific community, 4,956 people or 1.1% of the ACT population according to the 2021 Census (Gerace et al., 2023), the majority of Pacific peoples in Australia reside in areas such as Western Sydney and South-East Queensland, which collectively account for more than 76% of the national Pacific population (Gerace et al., 2023). These regions offer long-standing educational, cultural, and social infrastructure that has supported generations of Pacific learners (Howes & Raihan, 2023).

Failing to meaningfully engage these communities' risks producing a curriculum that lacks national relevance and cultural legitimacy. Conversely, their inclusion in co-design and co-production can support both ACT-specific responsiveness and the development of a model that is robust enough to inform future uptake in other states and territories.

We also recommend that this phased approach be overseen by a Pacific Advisory Group, whose responsibilities should extend beyond content development to include implementation planning, teacher preparation, resource review, and monitoring of outcomes. This body should operate transparently and be resourced to lead culturally responsive consultation with regional and diasporic communities.

Ultimately, a slower, phased rollout will yield a stronger, more resilient curriculum - one that honours the complexity of Pacific cultures, prioritises cultural safety, and reflects the aspirations of Pacific communities across the country.

7. While the Shape Paper is scoped for the ACT, it acknowledges that the curriculum could serve as a model for other jurisdictions. However, it stops short of outlining how national relevance or cross-jurisdictional engagement will be pursued.

Position the course for national leadership

(Shape Paper, p. 12 – Conclusion)

While the development of this course is being undertaken within the context of the ACT's senior secondary curriculum, its significance extends well beyond the territory. As the first Pacific Studies curriculum proposed within any Australian school jurisdiction, this initiative represents a groundbreaking step toward educational inclusion and cultural recognition for Pacific communities across the country.

With careful development, inclusive partnerships, and strong cultural governance, this course could become a national model for culturally responsive curriculum reform. It offers the opportunity to demonstrate what it looks like to embed Pacific knowledge systems, histories, and perspectives within formal schooling, not as an elective add-on, but as a rigorous and valued field of study in its own right.

APEN encourages the ACT Education Directorate to actively engage with:

- National education policy bodies such as Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and Education Services Australia (ESA),
- University partners with Pacific expertise and teacher education programs,
- and Pacific education networks and community leaders across jurisdictions, such as APEN, Pacific Island State Councils and Advisory Groups.

This engagement will not only enrich the current curriculum design but also enable the ACT to lead a national conversation on equity, cultural safety, and the rightful place of Indigenous and Pacific knowledges in Australian education.

Given the growing Pacific youth population in states like New South Wales and Queensland, where Pacific learners are often under-served by mainstream curricula, this course could help lay the groundwork for future state-based reforms. Its development could also inform teacher education standards, culturally responsive pedagogical frameworks, and inclusive content development practices across all Australian school systems.

By embracing this opportunity for national leadership, the ACT has the chance to set a new standard, one that affirms Pacific excellence, challenges colonial legacies in curriculum design, and strengthens Australia's broader commitment to educational equity and diversity.

BROADER IMPACT AND INFLUENCE

The social and cultural stakes of this curriculum are high. If the Pacific Studies course is implemented without cultural integrity, co-design, co-production or adequate teacher preparation, it risks reinforcing tokenistic representations, reproducing deficit narratives, and causing harm to the very communities it aims to represent. Such outcomes would not only alienate Pacific students but also miss the opportunity to foster deeper intercultural understanding for all learners.

Conversely, a well-designed, community-led Pacific Studies curriculum can improve learner engagement, foster cultural pride, and build a more inclusive education system. For Pacific learners, culturally responsive curriculum has been shown to support positive identity formation, increase academic motivation, and strengthen pathways to further education. (Pale et al., 2023; Porter-Samuels, 2013; Chu et al., 2013).

The initiative aligns with national and territory-based priorities for inclusive education, particularly under the Australian Multicultural Education Framework (2022) and the ACT's Future of Education Strategy, which emphasises equity, cultural responsiveness, and community partnership. It also

complements state-based frameworks in high Pacific population areas, such as the NSW Department of Education’s Multicultural Education Policy, which affirms the need to reflect the histories, cultures, and contributions of all Australians in the curriculum.

If developed with care, the ACT’s Pacific Studies course can become a model of best practice, enhancing cultural safety, strengthening intercultural capabilities, and affirming the educational aspirations of Pacific communities across Australia.

CONCLUSION

APEN remains steadfast in its commitment to ensuring that any curriculum representing Pacific peoples is grounded in cultural honour, informed by diverse community voices, and shaped through shared aspirations for educational justice. The development of a Pacific Studies course in the ACT presents a timely and transformative opportunity, not only for Pacific students, but for all learners to engage meaningfully with the depth, diversity, and contemporary realities of Pacific cultures, histories, and knowledges.

This course must be more than a symbolic inclusion. It must be co-created with Pacific communities, guided by transparent governance, and resourced to ensure it is taught safely, respectfully, and with rigour. We urge the ACT Education Directorate to adopt a phased, nationally informed approach, one that recognises the expertise of Pacific educators, draws on the insights of high-enrolment jurisdictions, and establishes strong professional learning foundations for teachers. By centring Pacific ways of knowing, resisting deficit framings, and embedding cultural safety in all stages of development, the ACT has the opportunity to lead nationally in curriculum innovation. This course can set a new benchmark for inclusive, values-led design, demonstrating what it means to honour the stories, identities, and futures of Pacific peoples within Australian education.

APEN welcomes ongoing dialogue, partnership, and accountability mechanisms to support the realisation of this vision. We stand ready to work alongside the ACT Education Directorate to help bring this important work to life.

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