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Dear Gerry,

Comments on VCE History Draft Study Design for 2021-25

The History Council of Victoria is the peak body for history organisations in Victoria, with delegates from Museums Victoria, the Royal Historical Society of Victoria, the Professional Historians Association (Victoria & Tasmania), the History Teachers Association of Victoria, the Heritage Council of Victoria, State Library Victoria, Public Record Office Victoria, the National Trust of Australia (Vic.), Old Treasury Building, and universities among others, as well as a number of individual historians.

The History Council has for many years been responsible for conducting the annual *History Roadshow* program of curriculum-specific presentations tailored for rural and regional (non-Melbourne) History students in the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) and delivered locally through regional tours by subject experts. The Council therefore values the opportunity to comment on the VCE History Draft Study Design before the new curriculum implementation in 2021.

We have chosen to comment using some of the subheadings of the draft document rather than the questionnaire, which is designed more specifically for teachers and students. Thank you for agreeing to accept our views in this format.

We are impressed with the amount of work and thought that has gone into reconceptualising and reframing some of the subjects, and the increasing level of sophistication the redesigned curriculum expects of VCE History students. Our comments are brief and aim to expand on this excellent work.

Scope (page 1)

- The last paragraph describing **Australian History** could be more clearly and succinctly written, as follows (Australian History investigates perspectives on and reasons for change in Australian

national history from colonial times; it specifically includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.)

- **Revolutions.** We are not sure that 'significant social upheaval' is a good replacement for 'revolution'. Why replace?

Aims (page 2)

- 'contested debates' is tautologous. Maybe use 'contested historical interpretations' but the simpler earlier version is clearer (i.e. 'engage with debates between historians in an informed, critical and effective manner' on page 6 of the current (2016-2020) SD).
- 'recognise how our understanding of the past informs decision-making in the present'—change to 'recognise that ...'

Structure (page 2, plus the detailed statements for each subject)

- The main structural changes we observe in the draft study design are:
 1. Substitution of '**Modern History**' for 'Twentieth Century History' with similar focus on conflict and change but extended back to the last part of the 19th century and forward into the 21st century. The change in time span and content makes sense—it now includes World War I and more recent conflicts and movements—although we are concerned that pacifism is not mentioned in the curriculum statement for a subject that is mostly about international movements. (We appreciate that pacifism is referenced in textbooks and presented by many teachers.) Most importantly, we wish to point out that the term 'Modern History' is confusing given the variety of meanings associated with the term 'Modern'. The term 'modern' when used to describe historical periods is usually subdivided into 'early modern' (Renaissance/Reformation) and 'late modern' (mid-18th century on). We suggest it would be wise to give this new subject a title that refers more specifically to its content—e.g. Conflict and Change 1880–2020.
 2. Change of title from 'Global Empires' to '**Empires**' is more accurate and flexible and the variety of empires listed for choice of closer study has been greatly expanded to include more European, Indian and Chinese empires. Perhaps in the future South and Central American and other Asian empires might be included? The approach to and questions structuring both units are now also much more complex and sophisticated. This is commendable but a serious problem here is that the preliminary introductory paragraphs describing the framework are very Eurocentric—only one sentence refers to the Romanov, Ming, Qing and Mughal empires to categorise them as 'regional'. The rest of this introduction refers only to a Western European cultural and economic context for imperial expansion. The study questions and approaches for both units are more applicable to the empires arising from European expansion than to those centred in India and China.
 3. **Ancient History**—there are no major changes to the structure but the guiding questions have been expanded considerably, and this will be of great help to teachers. However, although the courses include detailed discussion of the variety of primary sources, this is not reflected in the changes suggested to the key skills and assessment where primary and secondary sources have been merged. This merger also applies to draft changes for

all the history subjects and will remove one of the major skills necessary for understanding historical investigation and interpretation.

4. **Australian History**—this has been restructured to add a new conceptual basis of ‘contested pasts’ and their impacts on contemporary society to the existing ones of ‘continuity and change’. The greater emphasis on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences and perspectives is commendable, but we are concerned that there is virtually no mention of gender perspectives at all despite the significant amount of published research now available, especially in contesting the largely masculine assumptions and perspectives that underpin the so-called ‘turning points’ that are uncritically repeated here. Has the publication of *Creating a Nation* and subsequent feminist reinterpretations of history had so little influence on the study of Australian history in schools? The politics of maternalism were particularly influential in defining political agendas for the first half of the 20th century. At the very least this should be a key topic in the historical investigation ‘Making a Nation’—perhaps it could be titled ‘Making or Creating a Nation?’ Similarly, the concept of class is notable for its omission—it must surely be a part of any understanding of socio/economic conflict and political formations? Presumably gender and class are understood to be part of ‘forces, motivations and movements for change’ but we suggest they should be made more explicit. Further, the naming of the two units ‘Forces for Change’ and ‘Movements for Change’ seem to imply that there were no ‘forces’ from World War II on, and no ‘movements’ for the pre–World War II period. It would be preferable if the units were named by the chronological period covered to clarify what is to be included—including forces and movements in both periods. Again, the considerable influence of pacifism from the early 20th century is absent from the Study Design, even if it is referenced in textbooks and presented by teachers. Overall, we believe this subject outline needs more clarity and definition.
5. **Revolutions**—there is very little change here apart from extending the period of study for China in Area of Study 2, slightly changing some of the other periods, adding ‘continuity and change’ to ‘Key Knowledge’ objectives, and reconceptualising ‘Key Skills’ objectives, all of which are commendable revisions.

Assessment

1. There seems to be general consensus in the new draft that primary and secondary sources should be merged into a generic category ‘historical sources’ for analysis and evaluation. We note that primary and secondary sources are defined / distinguished on page 6 of the draft Study Design, but thereafter the umbrella term is employed. We are concerned that this underestimates the significant differences between these types of sources and ways professional historians approach them. Arguably the concept of ‘primary sources’ should be teased out more and the variety of such sources and the skills needed to interpret them given more attention, otherwise one of the major skills necessary for understanding historical investigation and interpretation will be removed.

We also note that detailed questions about primary sources for Ancient History and

especially the early Chinese Empire are included in the course outline but are not part of the assessment.

2. We suggest that the term 'extended response' needs expansion and clarification.
3. We would also like to see more detail about what a 'Multimedia Presentation' might include.

We hope that these comments are helpful for the VCAA and its five History Review Panels. If you would like to discuss this matter further, please communicate via our Executive Officer (Margaret Birtley), as per the letterhead details.

With kind regards,

(Dr) Liz Rushen
CHAIR