



# THE RISE OF IDENTITY POLITICS: AN AUDIT OF HISTORY TEACHING AT AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES IN 2017

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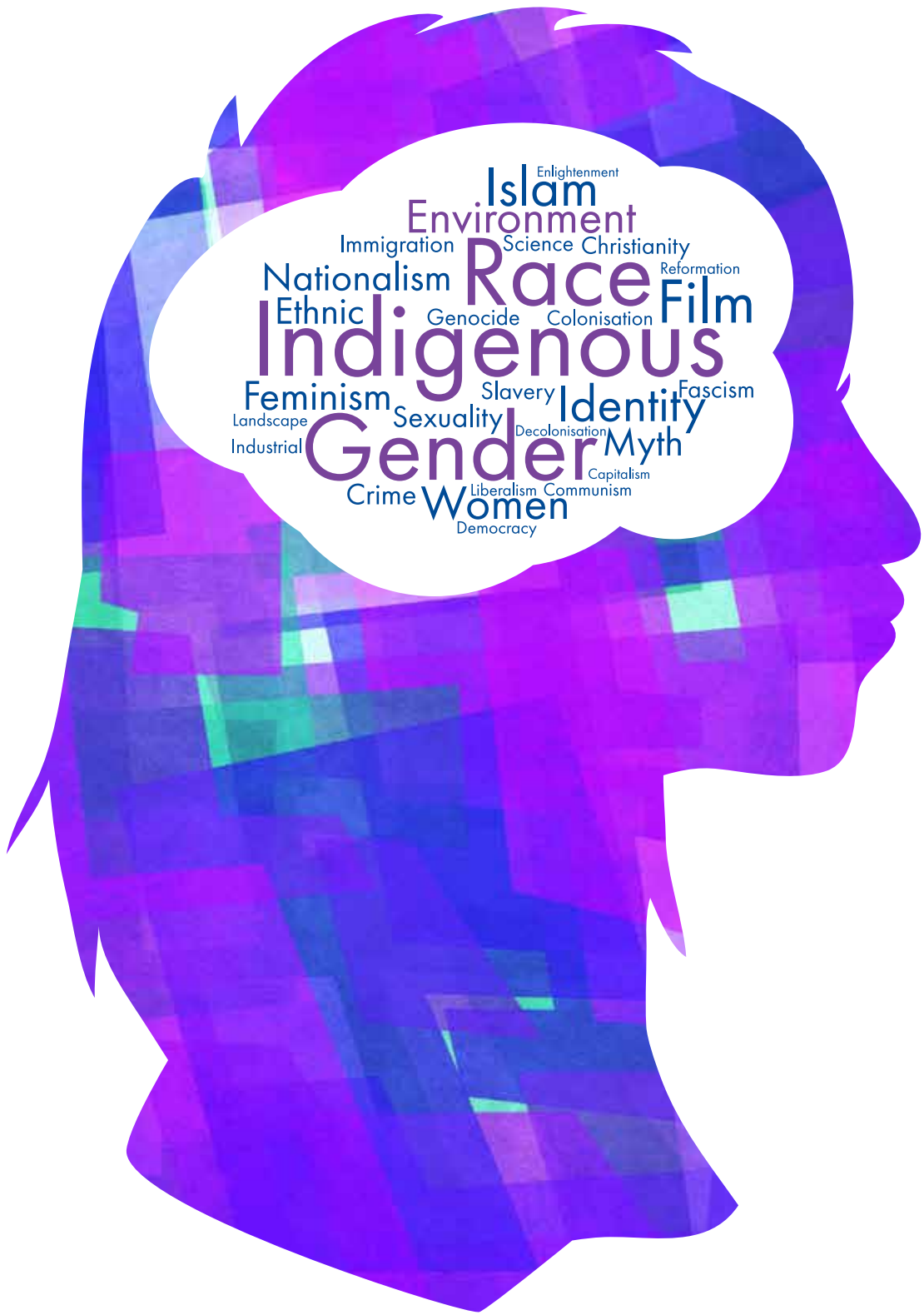
*Foundations of Western Civilisation Program*



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Enlightenment  
Islam  
Environment  
Immigration Science Christianity  
Nationalism Race Reformation  
Ethnic Genocide Colonisation Film  
Indigenous Slavery Fascism  
Feminism Sexuality Identity  
Landscape Industrial Decolonisation Myth  
Gender  
Crime Women Liberalism Communism  
Democracy

# 1. Key Research Findings

As part of its *Foundations of Western Civilisation Program*, the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) has undertaken a systematic review of all 746 history undergraduate subjects taught in 2017 at the 35 Australian universities that offer programs of study in history.

Key findings from *The Rise of Identity Politics - An Audit of History Teaching at Australian Universities in 2017* are:

- Subjects teaching 'Identity Politics' are the most common subjects taught in history departments at Australian universities. 244 of the 746 history subjects focus on 'Identity Politics'.
- The most common themes in the 746 history subjects offered in Australian universities in 2017 are, in order:
  1. Indigenous issues
  2. Race
  3. Gender
  4. Environment
  5. Identity
- The themes of 'Indigenous' (99), 'Race' (80), 'Gender' (69), 'Environment' (55) and 'Identity' (55) appear in a significantly higher number of subject titles and content descriptions than 'Enlightenment' (20) and 'Reformation' (12).
- More subjects make reference to the theme of 'Sexuality' (34) than either 'Enlightenment' (20) or 'Reformation' (12). More subjects make reference to 'Islam' (39) than 'Christianity' (34).
- More history subjects are offered at Australian universities that teach about:
  - 'Film' than 'Democracy' (41 subjects compared to 21 subjects)
  - 'Identity' than the 'Enlightenment' (55 subjects compared to 20 subjects)
  - 'Sexuality' than the 'Reformation' (34 subjects compared to 12 subjects)
- 241 of the 746 history subjects teach some aspect of the 'Essential Core Topics in the History of Western Civilisation'
- The most common topics from the 'Essential Core Topics in the History of Western Civilisation' taught at Australian universities in 2017 are:
  - Ancient Greece
  - Ancient Rome
  - World War II
  - Nazism/Fascism/Communism
  - Decolonisation
- The least common topics from the 'Essential Core Topics in the History of Western Civilisation' are:
  - The American Revolution
  - The U.S. Constitution
  - Any period of British history
  - The Enlightenment
  - The Industrial Revolution

- Three universities - Federation University, The University of Notre Dame Australia, and Campion College offer subjects which cover all 20 of the 'Essential Core Topics in the History of Western Civilisation'. Campion College, notwithstanding its size and recent origin, ranks particularly well in the teaching of the history of Western Civilisation in comparison to the larger, more established universities.
- 19 universities offer subjects that teach half the 'Essential Core Topics in the History of Western Civilisation'.
- 2 universities fail to offer any of the subjects of the 'Essential Core Topics in the History of Western Civilisation'.

## 2. The History Degree in Australia

### The Five Categories of History Subjects Taught at Australian Universities

The 746 history undergraduate subjects taught at Australian universities in 2017 can be placed into five categories, according to the principal focus of the subject:

#### **Identity Politics - 244 subjects**

Subjects that teach history from the perspective of class, race, gender and associated cultural theories.

#### **The 'Essential Core Topics in the History of Western Civilisation' - 241 subjects**

Subjects that contribute to an understanding of the history of Western Civilisation from Ancient Greece to the modern world.

#### **Australian History - 114 subjects**

Subjects that teach some aspect of Australian history.

#### **Other Histories - 104 subjects**

Subjects that teach the history of periods and regions that fall outside the history of Western Civilisation, and the history of Australia, for example Ancient Egypt, the history of Asia, and the history of Africa.

#### **Theory & Practical - 43 subjects**

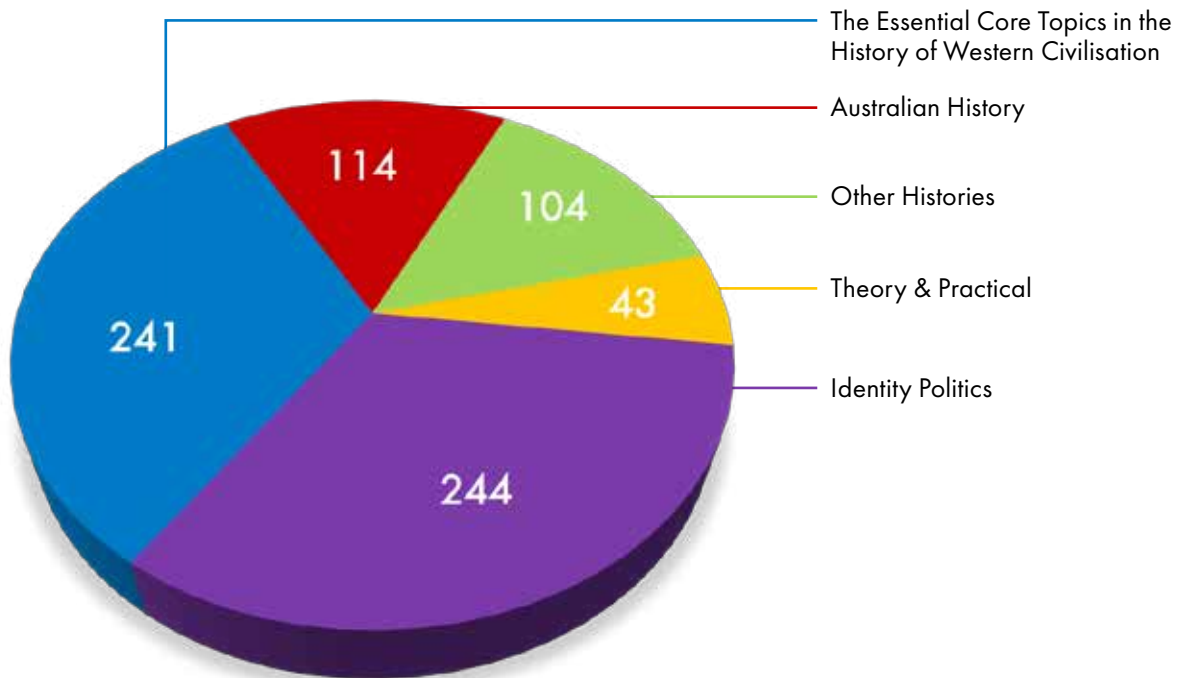
Subjects that are primarily theoretical or practical.

The fact that there are more history subjects which focus on class, gender and race than there are that teach students about the history of Western Civilisation reveals the extent to which history as an academic discipline has become dominated by concepts of Identity Politics.

Examples of subjects categorised as teaching Identity Politics include:

- 'Food For Thought: Discovering The World Through Commodities', La Trobe University
- 'A History of Sexualities', The University of Melbourne
- 'Being Bad: Sinners, Crooks, Deviants and Psychos', University of New England
- 'Thinking about Emotion in Historical Perspective', The University of Adelaide
- 'Masculinity, Nostalgia and Change', The University of Western Australia.

**Figure 1: History Undergraduate Subjects: The Five Categories of History Subjects Taught at Australian Universities in 2017**



### 3. Identity Politics

*The Rise of Identity Politics - An Audit of History Teaching at Australian Universities in 2017* demonstrates how the stunning complexity of the past is increasingly reduced by Australian universities to an analysis of class, race and gender. The most frequently employed keywords in the titles and subject descriptions reveals the predominance of Identity Politics in the teaching of history in Australian universities.

**Figure 2: Themes Taught in History:**

The number of history subjects which make reference to the following 30 keywords

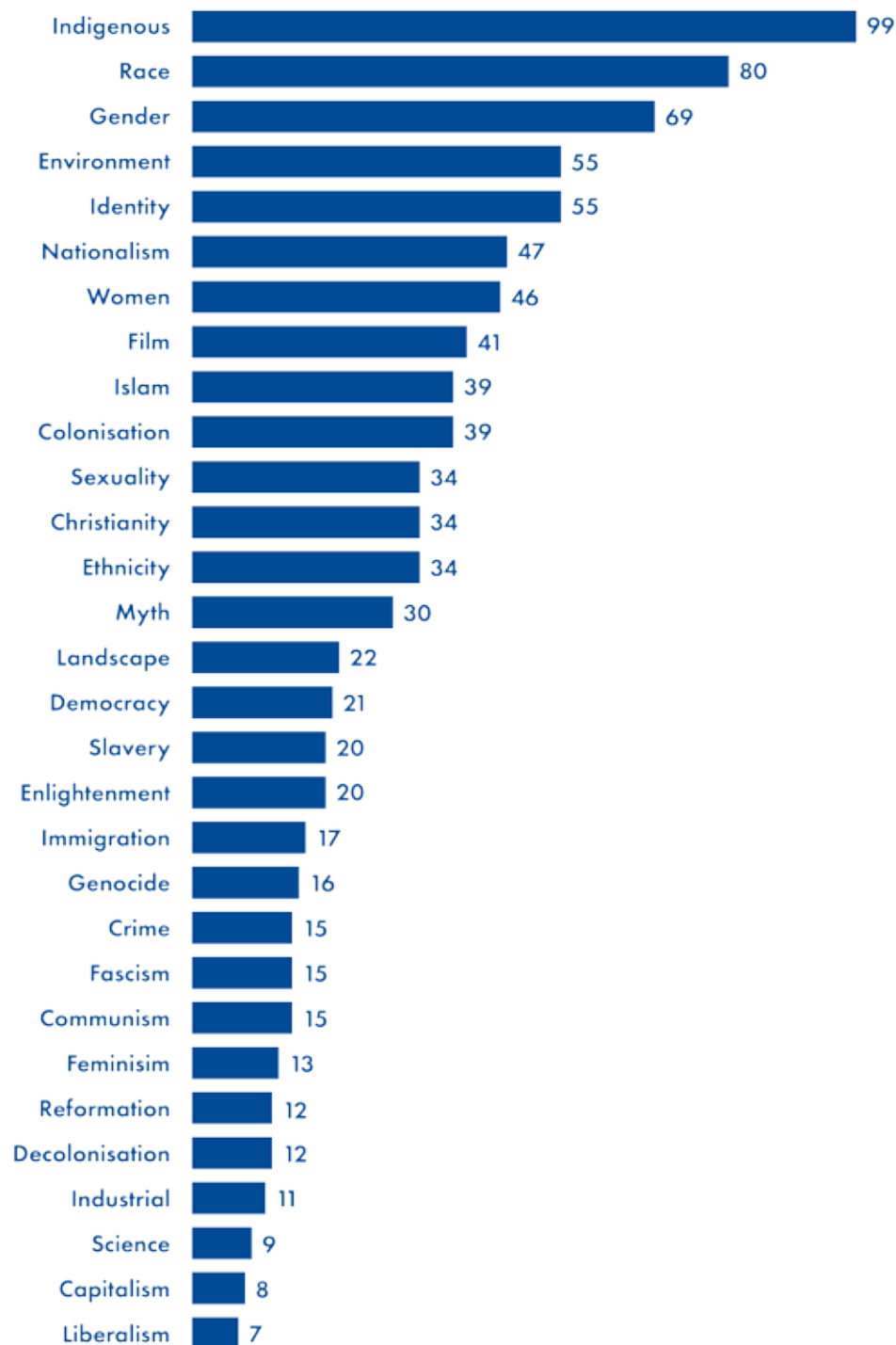




Figure 3: Prevalence of keywords in history subjects as depicted in a Word Cloud



# 4. The Essential Core Topics in the History of Western Civilisation

The concept that there are significant historical periods and events has in recent years become unfashionable. It has coincided with both a shift away from teaching a canon of historical events and the rise of Identity Politics.

The Institute of Public Affairs has developed an 'Essential Core Topics in the History of Western Civilisation' comprising 20 of the most significant topics in the history of Western Civilisation. These 20 topics should form the basis of an undergraduate degree in History. The topics explain the political, intellectual, social, and material basis of the history of Western Civilisation.

The concept of an 'Essential Core' is based on the notion of the canon of significant historical subjects devised by the British historian Professor Niall Ferguson, Professor of History at Harvard University and Senior Research Fellow at Jesus College, Oxford. The list of modern history topics set out by Ferguson were: any period of British history, the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, the American Revolution, the French Revolution, the U.S. Constitution, the Industrial Revolution, the American Civil War, German Unification, World War I, the Russian Revolution, the Great Depression, the Rise of Fascism, the Third Reich, World War II, Decolonisation, the Cold War, the History of Israel, and European Integration.

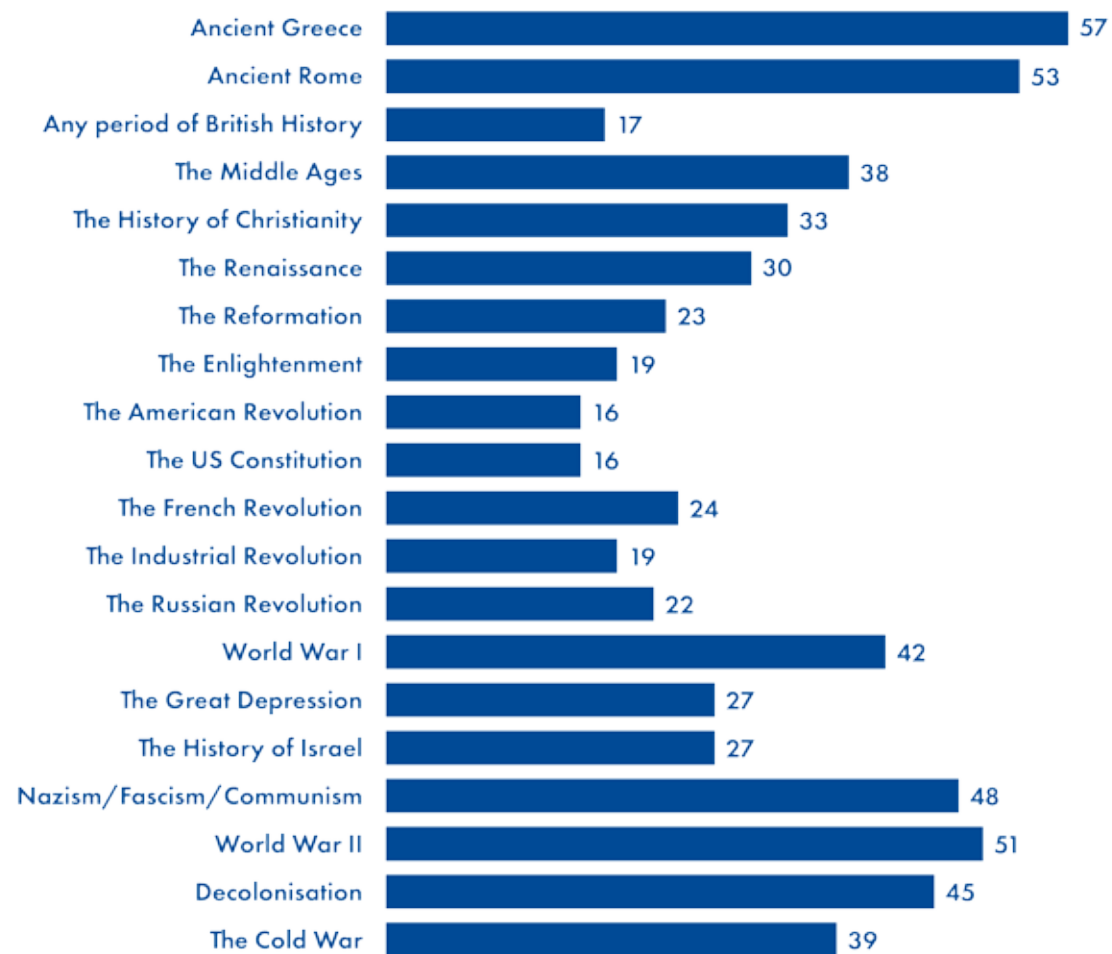
The Institute of Public Affairs' Essential Core Topics have been modified to encompass Western Civilisation, from Ancient Greece to the Cold War.

**Figure 4: The IPA's Essential Core Topics in the History of Western Civilisation**



### Figure 5: Distribution of Essential Core Topics in the History of Western Civilisation

Number of history subjects which cover the IPA's 20 core topics in the History of Western Civilisation



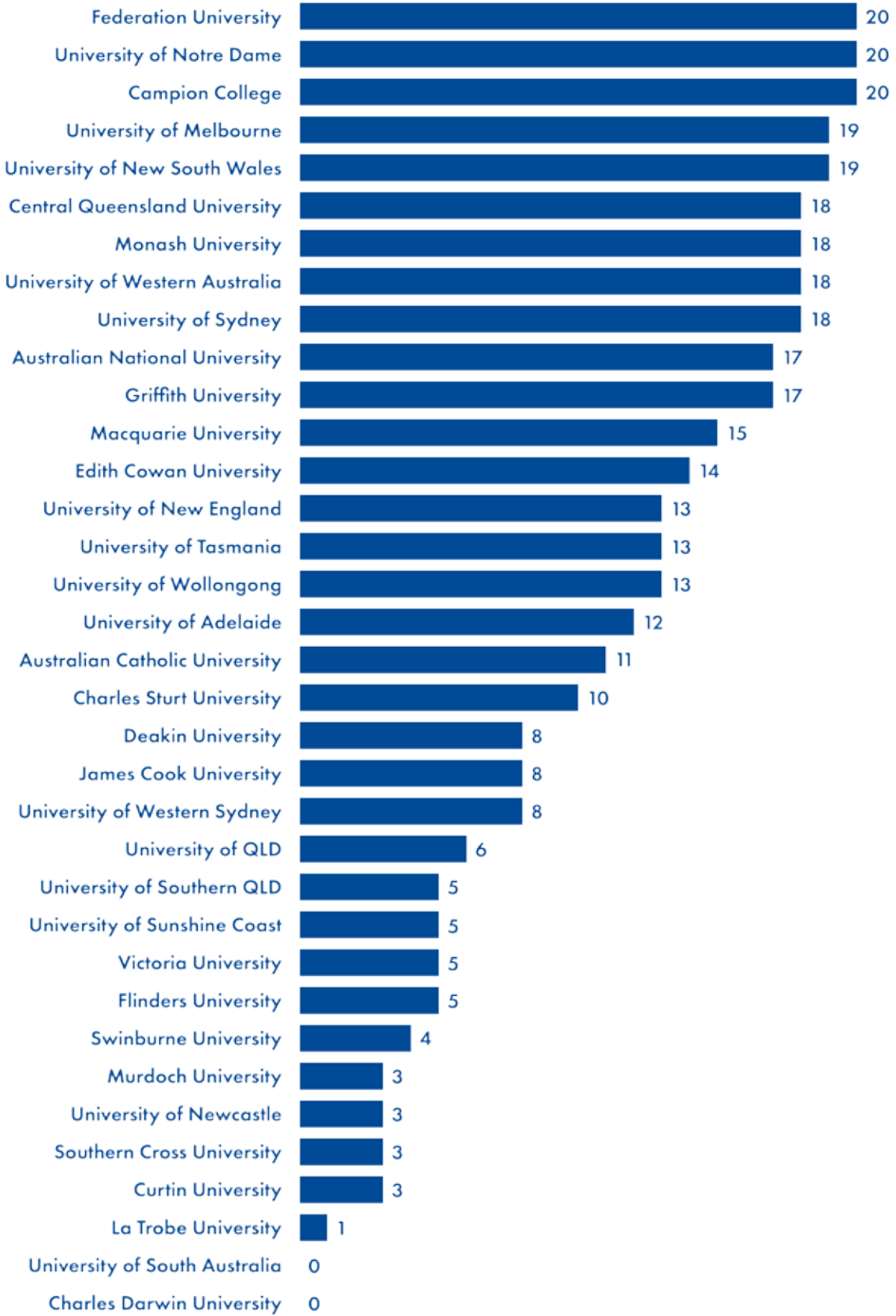
There is a large disparity between the number of subjects offered by Australian universities that teach aspects of the 'Essential Core Topics in the History of Western Civilisation'.

For example, there are 57 subjects that cover Ancient Greece, 53 subjects on Ancient Rome, and 51 subjects on World War II, while there are only 30 subjects covering the Renaissance, 23 which teach the Reformation, and 17 subjects on British history.

There is a strong emphasis on subjects concerning Ancient Greece, Rome and the twentieth century, while the events of intervening millennia are relatively neglected.

**Figure 6: How our Universities Rank on Western Civilisation**

Number of 'Essential Core Topics in the History of Western Civilisation' offered by Australian Universities



## 5. The Future of History

The teaching of history in Australian universities has become a bastion of the cultural theory of Identity Politics, whereby people are divided by their class, race, gender and their individuality is denied. Students studying history in Australia are at risk of finishing their degrees with a distorted view of the world in which the past is viewed as a contest between the oppressors and the oppressed.

As Brendan O'Neill commented, 'Western Campuses in particular have become hotbeds of identity politics, or what is sometimes referred to as the 'identitarian left' which now defines itself, and engages with others, through the prism of identity rather than on the basis of ideas...'<sup>1</sup>

There is a direct correlation between the recent rise of the 'snowflake' generation, a neologism used to describe young adults of the twenty-first century as being less resistant and more inclined to taking offence and being offended. These 'coddled students', encouraged by both university administrators and academics are eager to restrict freedom of speech and freedom of academic enquiry through mechanisms such as 'trigger warnings' and 'safe spaces' on campus. Jonathan Haidt, Professor of Ethical Leadership at New York University, calls this phenomenon 'the purification of the universities.'<sup>2</sup>

However, as this report identifies, three Australian universities offer subjects that teach all of the 'Essential Core Topics in the History of Western Civilisation'. Those three universities Federation University, the University of Notre Dame, and Campion College are all quite different. Federation University is a regional public university based in Victoria with a history dating back nearly 150 years, the University of Notre Dame is a private Catholic university in Western Australia and New South Wales, and was established in 1989, while Campion College in Sydney is Australia's first liberal arts college which was founded in 2006.

There are other positive signs. Since the IPA's first report on the teaching of history in 2015, for example, the University of Melbourne has added an undergraduate subject entitled 'Britain in the Wider World 1603-1815.' This covers major events in British history such as the War of Three Kingdoms (the Civil War) in the 1640s, the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the Second Hundred Years' War between France and Britain (including the Seven Years' War and the Napoleonic Wars), the Industrial Revolution and the Battle of Waterloo. Monash University has added 'Medieval and early modern Britain' which 'examines political change in the British Isles, from the arrival of the Normans in 1066 to the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, and the social and cultural shifts that accompanied it.'

Since it was established in 2010, the IPA's *Foundations of Western Civilisation Program* has generated significant public interest. For example, the video series produced in 2017 by the IPA, *The British Heritage of Our Freedoms - The Untold Stories* has been viewed more than 45,000 times. The series is available on the internet at no charge and is supported by curriculum materials for teachers to use in classrooms. The series features three videos: 'The Magna Carta in Australia'; 'The Castle in 18th Century Australia' which tells the story of Australia's first civil court case; and 'Australia's Own Tea Party Revolution' on the Eureka Stockade.

The welcome addition of new British history subjects, and the popularity of the resources produced by the *Foundations of Western Civilisation Program*, provides a way forward for the teaching of history in Australia. It is a positive sign for the future, as it demonstrates beyond a shadow of doubt that there is both the capacity by academia as well as an appetite among young people to learn about the history of Western Civilisation.

## 6. Western Civilisation and History

John Roskam - Executive Director, Institute of Public Affairs

### The Foundations of Western Civilisation

In 2010 the Institute of Public Affairs established the *Foundations of Western Civilisation Program* as one of the IPA's major research programs.

The purpose of the *Foundations of Western Civilisation Program* is to encourage Australians to understand and appreciate the heritage of Western Civilisation.

The influence of the West is universal. It is the legacy of liberty, of inquiry, of toleration, of religious plurality, and of economic and social freedom. Western Civilisation pioneered the recognition of universal human values.

Our ideas about human rights are grounded in Christian theology. Classical Greece, Republican Rome, medieval Cordoba, and eighteenth-century Edinburgh are some of the sites where the foundations of the Western tradition were built.

Contemporary society is only able to be understood if we consider the modern legacy of the Renaissance, which forms the basis of our cultural heritage. The Age of Discovery brought inquiry and rationalism. The Scientific Revolution brought the scientific mind and empiricism. The Enlightenment helped define liberal values. The Industrial Revolution laid the economic foundation of our modern prosperity. And the evolution of modern democracy - partly pioneered in Australia - has given us the universal franchise.

The Australian nation has benefitted enormously from the Western legacy. However, this legacy is largely absent from our understanding of our history... Modern Australia is founded on principles established in Europe over centuries, but democracy, civil society, economic freedom, and religious pluralism are presented as if they suddenly emerged at Botany Bay.

Australia has not always been so culturally forgetful. In 1871, the historian and biographer John Morley wrote that there were three books on every Australian squatter's shelf - the Bible, Shakespeare, and Macaulay's Essays.

The difference with today is stark. Australians now have a limited historical knowledge, particularly of British and European history. This lack of understanding undermines the legacy of Western Civilisation, and, ultimately, impoverishes the nation.<sup>4</sup>

The study of Western Civilisation is not an arid and academic pursuit. The legacy of Western Civilisation is being contested every day in Australia and throughout the world. Ideas such as the rule of law and the right of freedom of speech and religion are the subjects of intense debate.

Ayann Hirsi Ali has described the relationship between the legacy of Western Civilisation and the role of the university:

In a university setting, students hone their critical thinking skills so that they are able to discern what is true from what is false; what is of value from what is trivial; and what is moral from what is immoral.

All of this knowledge is built on a specific national heritage embedded in a Western culture and civilization that is distinct from other nations, cultures, and civilizations.

The concepts that university students should cherish - respect for the individual and his autonomy, the abolition of slavery, equality of citizens under the law, equality of men and women under the law, freedom of expression, religious tolerance, the separation between religious and political power - all of these are the products of Western civilization...<sup>5</sup>

History provides not only a context to the contemporary world. History provides meaning to our existence as explained by Rufus Black in *The Importance of a Liberal and Sciences Education*:

Not knowing our cultural past is like not having a memory of our growing up. Our loss of cultural knowledge is probably a lot worse than that. Imagine how little you would know about yourself if your memory only went back a week.

With the knowledge that we could choose differently comes perspective.

The triumph of freedom and reason as the cornerstone of government is not a law of physics, it is just an idea that has captured our minds for a tiny period of human history. There is no certainty it will continue to do so unless we choose to argue for its value and ensure that we pass it on as it was passed on to us, hard won from authoritarian rule of many forms.

With historical perspective comes meaning. There is nothing more grounding than having a sense of belonging to a story much larger than our own.<sup>6</sup>

Since 2010 under the auspices of the *Foundations of Western Civilisation Program*, the IPA has conducted an extensive course of research and publications, and undertaken a range of events, debates, and symposia for the general public and specifically for school and university students. In many of these activities the IPA has worked in consultation with the Mannkal Economic Freedom Foundation

Major publications of the program include *The Merits of Western Civilisation: An Introduction* (2011), *100 Great Books of Liberty: The Essential Introduction to the Greatest Idea of Western Civilisation* (2012), *Is the West Special? World History and Western Civilisation* (2012), *In Defence of Freedom of Speech: From Ancient Greece to Andrew Bolt* (2012), *Liberalism: A Short History* (2014), *Magna Carta: The Tax Revolt that Gave Us Liberty* (2015), and *The Culture of Freedom* (2016).

In 2015 the IPA published a major research report *The End of History...in Australian Universities* which reviewed 739 history subjects taught at Australian universities in 2014.<sup>7</sup> The report identified that history as a discipline in universities was becoming fragmented, parochial, and specialised. The report found that the most common types of history subject offered were varieties of social and cultural history, that the teaching of the history of intellectual movements was almost non-existent, and that economic history had disappeared entirely.

Guest speakers who have addressed public events organised by the IPA on the topic of Western Civilisation have included Professor Geoffrey Blainey, Dr John Hirst, Sir Antony Beevor, Professor Andrew Roberts and Sir Roger Scruton.

## History in Australian Schools

The IPA has a long record of research of school and university teaching, particularly the teaching of history. As a Senior Fellow of the IPA from 1988 to 1996, Dame Leonie Kramer directed the Education Policy Unit at the IPA which undertook an extensive range of analysis and research into the nature and content of history teaching in Australian schools.<sup>8</sup>

An examination of how history is taught at the tertiary level is important, because what is taught at university determines what is taught to every one of the 3.8 million young Australians in primary and secondary

school. How history is taught in Australian universities has a significance greater than is simply reflected in the number of 250,000 students studying subjects dealing with society and culture at university.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps more than any other subject, the teaching of history has the capacity to help shape young people's understanding of the world.

George Orwell's statement in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is no less true simply because it is quoted so often - 'Who controls the past, controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.'<sup>10</sup>

Orwell's statement about the role of history is explicitly acknowledged in the Australian National Curriculum. The National Curriculum dictates what every Australian child is taught from years P to 10. The document detailing the History Curriculum makes clear:

History provides content that supports the development of students' world views, particularly in relation to actions that require judgment about past social systems and access to and use of the Earth's resources.<sup>11</sup>

What is also clear in the National Curriculum is the particular perspective of history that it adopts. For example, one of the 'Aims' of history in the National Curriculum is to have students develop 'knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the past and the forces that shape societies, including Australian society.'<sup>12</sup>

Understanding change as the result of 'forces', implies the present and the future to be the product of historical determinism. Such an approach adopts a particular perspective on human action which takes no account of the role of individuals or of individual choice. The evidence that the National Curriculum regards history as the interplay of 'forces' and a process of conflict between classes and groups of people with different personal characteristics can be found in statements such as the following from the support materials of the National Curriculum:

In recent decades, some historians have explored new areas of significance or have brought fresh perspectives to traditional areas. Increasingly, there are histories of the oppressed, the marginalised and the 'ordinary' people of 'ordinary communities', including people who were relatively powerless due to race, religion, gender or class.<sup>13</sup>

The teaching of history to school and university students could well involve discussion of 'the oppressed' and 'the marginalised' and issues of 'race, religion, gender or class'. The problem is though that these themes overwhelmingly dominate the discourse of the teaching of history under the National Curriculum and at Australian universities.

The subject content for the teaching of history to Year 10 students demonstrates the preponderance of the theme of Identity Politics in the National Curriculum. The opportunity for Year 10 students to study any of the 'Essential Core Topics in the History of Western Civilisation' is not non-existent, but it is limited.

Under the heading of 'The modern world and Australia' students in Year 10 study one of the following three elective topics in detail:

1. World War II (1939 to 1945)
2. Rights and freedoms
3. The globalising world (Under this topic students study one of three electives: popular culture, or the environment movement, or migration experiences).

If students study World War II they will learn about the causes and course of the war, and topics such as 'Prisoners of War, the Battle of Britain, Kokoda, the Fall of Singapore'. However this is one of three



electives. In 'Rights and Freedoms' students study 'Reconciliation; Mabo decision; Bringing Them Home Report (the Stolen Generations), the Apology'. In 'The Globalising World' students study either 'Popular Culture (1945-present) which includes the 'Changing nature of the music, film and television industry in Australia during the post-war period, including the influence of overseas developments (such as Hollywood, Bollywood and the animation film industry in China and Japan)'; 'The Environment Movement (1960s-present) which includes 'Significant events and campaigns that contributed to popular awareness of environmental issues, such as the campaign to prevent the damming of Australia's Gordon River, the nuclear accident at Chernobyl and the Jabiluka mine controversy in 1998'; or 'Migration Experiences (1945-present) which includes an examination of 'The impact of changing government policies on Australia's migration patterns, including abolition of the White Australia Policy, 'Populate or Perish'.<sup>14</sup>

In 2010 the IPA published a research monograph analysing the National Curriculum, *The National Curriculum: A Critique*. Among the conclusions of the IPA's research were that the National Curriculum ignored the influence of Christianity in Australia, neglected the development of democratic liberalism in the nineteenth century, presented a politically partisan assessment of the concept of human rights, and was hostile to the role of private enterprise and capitalism.

In 2014 Aaron Lane, a Research Fellow at the IPA, and Stephanie Forrest, a Research Scholar at the *Foundations of Western Civilisation Program*, made a submission to a federal government review of the National Curriculum. The authors of the submission were in undertaking research for the preparation of the submission the IPA reviewed both the content of the National Curriculum itself and the content of the textbooks required to be used by teachers in classrooms under the National Curriculum.

The IPA's submission stated our research 'demonstrates that the National Curriculum is unbalanced, ideologically-driven and systematically hostile to the legacy of Western Civilisation.' It continues that:

The ideological nature of the National Curriculum is most manifest in the Year 7 to 10 history curriculum. The history curriculum over-emphasises themes such as environmental determinism, focuses attention disproportionately on the history of European colonialism and multiculturalism and takes a materialist approach to questions of class.

Conversely, the history curriculum entirely downplays the role of ideas as a driver of historical change, entirely misses the significance of liberalism in the development of liberal democracy in Australia and downplays and denigrates the development of Western Civilisation and religion.<sup>15</sup>

The submission provided a detailed analysis of the particular perspectives adopted by the National Curriculum and textbooks on key issues and themes. The approach of the National Curriculum, for example, to modernity is demonstrated via a Year 7 textbook which discusses economic development. In the absence of discussion of the potential benefits of economic development and scientific progress, the textbook presents the following to thirteen-year-old students:

Some historians speculate that the shift from the hunter-gatherer way of life to the settled life of farming was one of the worst mistakes humankind ever made. Studies by anthropologists of the few existing hunter-gatherer societies, such as the !Kung San of the Kalahari in Africa, show that they work far less hard than neighbouring farmers and have a better and more varied diet.<sup>16</sup>

A few pages later the textbook suggests teachers encourage the class to debate 'Should modern humans return to the hunter-gatherer way of life?'.<sup>17</sup>

The IPA's submission noted the almost complete absence of any reference to British history in the National Curriculum. It goes without saying that without some knowledge of British history the origins of this country's political and legal systems are difficult to understand. In an article entitled 'Does anyone but the IPA want to hoist the Union Jack over our history again?', a writer for *The Guardian* argued that a knowledge of British history is increasingly irrelevant to Australian students. Unfortunately, this seems to have been adopted by the authors of the National Curriculum.<sup>18</sup>

There might be a variety of reasons for the neglect of British history in the National Curriculum, including the possibility that the authors of the National Curriculum have themselves a limited knowledge of British history because of their own educational experiences at university.

The response of one of the authors of the National Curriculum to the suggestion that the English Civil War should be taught in the National Curriculum provides an insight into the mindset of those responsible for deciding what young Australians should learn:

...[the English Civil War] is arguably just a series of confused and confusing localised squabbles that may have a special significance for UK history, but not for anybody else (unless they like dressing up in period costume).<sup>19</sup>

From the English Civil War and its aftermath derive our understanding of our system of government and the concept of liberal democracy. To suggest the English Civil War has no special significance for Australia is remarkable.

Winston Churchill encapsulated the consequences of the English Civil war:

...[after 1660] everyone took it for granted that the Crown was the instrument of Parliament and the King the servant of his people...The idea of the Crown levying taxes without the consent of the Parliament or by ingenious and questionable devices had vanished. All legislation henceforth stood upon the majorities of legally elected Parliaments, and no royal ordinance could resist or replace it.<sup>20</sup>

Paul Johnson has explained the significance of the 'Putney Debates' of 1647, that:

proceeded to invent modern politics - to invent, in fact, the public framework of the world in which nearly 3,000 million people now live... Every major political concept known to us today...was expressed or adumbrated in the little church of St Mary.<sup>21</sup>

It is not only 'conservative' historians who believe the English Civil War to be one of the single most important events in world history. The Marxist historian, Christopher Hill said this about the period:

A great revolution in human thought dates from these decades - the general realisation, which the Levellers, Hobbes, and Harrington summed up, that solutions to political problems might be reached by discussion and argument; that questions of utility and expediency were more important than theology or history, that neither antiquarian research nor searching the Scriptures was the best way to bring peace, order, and prosperity to the commonwealth.

It was so great an intellectual revolution that it is difficult for us to conceive how men thought before it was made...

Even the ideas of men who would not compromise in 1660, of Milton and the Levellers, these ideas were driven underground but could not be killed.

'Give me the liberty to know, to utter and to argue freely according to conscience,' Milton had said.<sup>22</sup>

Given that students are not being taught about the origins or significance of liberal democracy, it is almost to be expected that according to the most recent Lowy Institute Poll only 52 per cent of young people (between the age of 18 and 29) in Australia believe 'Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government' while 33 per cent of young people believe 'in some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable'.<sup>23</sup>

Nor is it surprising that a member of parliament can dismiss one of the fundamental freedoms of liberal democracy, freedom of speech, as the Hon. Scott Morrison MP did when he said freedom 'doesn't create one job, doesn't open one business, doesn't give anyone one extra hour, it doesn't reduce the cost of, or make housing more affordable, or energy more affordable'.<sup>24</sup>

The IPA's submission acknowledged that by its very nature, school curriculum is inevitably determined according to particular ideological and philosophical perspectives, and therefore 'It is our view that no coherent and ideologically-neutral National Curriculum could be developed that would satisfy the needs of all schools, all parents and all children'.<sup>25</sup>

Dr Chris Berg, a Research Fellow at the IPA and Postdoctoral Fellow in the Economics, Finance and Marketing Department at RMIT University has considered the ideology of the notion of 'Sustainability', one of the three 'Cross-Curriculum Priorities' of the National Curriculum (the others being 'Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia', and 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures').

The sustainability theme is intended to '[create] a more ecologically and socially just world through informed action'. That's virtually the definition of ideology: a positive description (we are harming the planet) combined with a normative ideal of a better social order (an ecologically and socially just world)...

Perhaps this is an ideology you agree with. Ideology isn't a bad thing. Everybody's thought is shaped by ideology, whether they're aware of it or not. But it's ideology nonetheless.<sup>26</sup>

It is an exercise in ideology for the three 'Cross-Curriculum Priorities' of the National Curriculum to be 'Sustainability', 'Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia', and 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures', and not for them to be, for example, 'Freedom', 'Democracy' and 'Scientific Progress'.

In its submission to the federal government review of the National Curriculum, the IPA commented that:

The Institute of Public Affairs opposes the establishment of a National Curriculum.

It is essentially an ideological exercise, and it is inherently dangerous in a liberal democracy that a government should be given the power to determine the ideology of school curricula across the entire country.

Having a National Curriculum means that school curricula are politicised. Indeed, by definition, it is impossible to have a government-endorsed curriculum that is not politicised. As such, it is not only difficult to justify having an Australian National Curriculum in the first place, but any National Curriculum that we do have is likely to be both contentious and unstable for as long as it continues to exist.

Different sides of parliament are highly unlikely to agree upon an ideologically neutral curriculum. On the contrary, it is highly likely that each side will accuse the other of politicising various academic disciplines - especially history, the most political of all disciplines - and that a review of the curriculum will be announced every time a new government comes into power to correct any perceived imbalance.

On the basis of the above, the ideal situation would be to abolish the National Curriculum altogether and to introduce a competing curriculum model to allow for greater school autonomy and to prevent curricula from being politicised.<sup>27</sup>

Following the conclusion of the review of the National Curriculum some minor changes were made to its content, and the National Curriculum remains in place in the form in which it was established in 2008. Successive Coalition and Labor, federal and state education ministers have endorsed the 'Cross-Curriculum Priorities'.

## History and Identity Politics

This research report *The Rise of Identity Politics - An Audit of History Teaching at Australian Universities in 2017* elaborates on our previous report and classifies each one of the 746 history subjects taught at 35 Australian universities into one of five categories. Subjects teaching 'Identity Politics' are the most common history subjects taught in Australian universities.

'Identity Politics' is subject to a myriad of definitions. For the purposes of this report 'Identity Politics' is taken to be two related ideas. The first is that individuals are defined by their 'identity', the three primary identities being their class, their race and their gender. The second is that the process of politics, history and, indeed, all interactions between individuals and groups can be primarily understood through the role played by those identities and the conflict those identities generate. The underlying philosophical premise of 'Identity Politics' is that individuals are distinguished by their differences, rather than by their similarities. The political consequence of 'Identity Politics' is that the treatment afforded an individual should be decided by their identity. Instead of treating all people equally, all people should be treated unequally.

Identity Politics as it applies to history has a tendency to deny a role for human agency, and instead sees history as the product of inexorable forces and trends, primarily of an economic and material nature. Such a view of history, put forward most notably first by Hegel and then Marx is worthy of study - yet it is but one view of history. However this one view of what history is and how history can be understood, has to come to dominate the teaching of history in Australian universities, as demonstrated by the fact that subjects focussed on Identity Politics are the most common history subjects.

History can be understood in ways other than through the processes generated by Identity Politics. Ralph Waldo Emerson said 'There is properly no history; only biography.' In a way the teaching of history has gone from one extreme to the other. The 'Great Man Theory' of history of the nineteenth century has been replaced by a history that is almost entirely devoid of individuals and their personalities.

Another way of understanding history, and in particular the history of the West is offered by Larry Siedentop in his *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*. Siedentop considers the history of Western Civilisation from a perspective almost entirely absent from most history subjects offered by Australian universities and in doing so Siedentop identifies the single most significant contribution of the history of Western Civilisation - the development of the ideas of the individual and individuality, and the concept that all individuals are of equal moral worth.

Siedentop explains that the historical materialism of Marx was based on the differences between people as expressed through their 'class' identified by their income and occupation. Today, Identity Politics centres on the differences between people according to not just their class, but also primarily through their gender and race. For Siedentop the history of Western Civilisation is the story of how the notion of the difference and inequality of people as expressed through the thesis of historical materialism, came to be replaced with the principle that all individuals were equal and all individuals were therefore entitled to equal treatment. Siedentop dates the origins of this 'moral revolution' to the first centuries of Christianity.

More than anything else, I think, Christianity changed the ground of human identity. It was able to do that because of the way it combined Jewish monotheism with an abstract universalism that had roots in later Greek philosophy. By emphasizing the moral equality of humans, quite apart from any social roles they might occupy, Christianity changed 'the name of the game'.<sup>28</sup>

For Siedentop 'Christian moral intuitions played a pivotal role in shaping the discourse that gave rise to modern liberalism and secularism' which was the consequence of 'Hobbes's insistence on basic human equality, in preparation for defining sovereignty in terms of 'equal subjection', through Locke's defence of human freedom by identifying a range of natural rights, to Rousseau's making the case for the sovereignty of the people and self-government'.<sup>29</sup>

Siedentop's conception of the history of the West, and of Western Civilisation is fundamentally at odds from that embodied by Identity Politics. Both viewpoints merit study and debate, but one of those viewpoints is all but ignored, while the other overwhelms the discussion in university lecture theatres in Australia.

As *The Rise of Identity Politics - An Audit of History Teaching at Australian Universities in 2017* identifies the theme of 'Race' is taught in 80 history subjects, 'Gender' in 69 subjects, and 'Identity' in 55 subjects, while 'Christianity' is taught in 34 history subjects in Australian universities. 'Democracy' is taught in 21 subjects.

Dr Jeremy Sammut has written how a focus in academic study on matters such as race and its intersection with the ideas of postmodernism have influenced current political and public debates in the community, for example in relation to freedom of speech.

Postmodernism revolves around the idea that language used by the dominant culture or discourse creates social reality and oppresses certain victim groups. It follows that marginalised groups are liberated by restricting or regulating freedom of thought and speech around a range of issues that are simply no longer up for debate and discussion and dissent.

Yet debate, discussion and dissent are the foundations of the freedom of enquiry that universities should stand for as bastions of intellectual freedom - but not in the post-modern academy.<sup>30</sup>

A research report published last year by the IPA, *Free Speech on Campus Audit 2016* by IPA Research Fellow Matthew Lesh was a systematic review of the policies and procedures Australian universities now employ to limit academic enquiry. The report found that 80 per cent of Australian universities restrict free expression. Just one Australian university, the University of New England, was found to encourage freedom of speech on campus.

Perhaps the most infamous recent example of Australian universities' lack of commitment to intellectual enquiry came in 2015 when the University of Western Australia rejected a plan to establish Bjorn Lomborg's Copenhagen Consensus Centre in Australia.

The teaching of history at La Trobe University provides a good example of what is taking place now history has been overtly subsumed into the teaching of political philosophies.

La Trobe University has long been regarded as having a strong record of teaching and research in history. In 2015 according to assessment conducted by the Australian Research Council, the quality of history teaching and research at La Trobe University is rated as among the best of all Australian universities and at 'above world standard'. La Trobe University's Arts and Humanities subjects were recently ranked in the top 200 in the world by *The Times'* subject rankings, with a university spokesperson commenting 'This is an excellent result for La Trobe and great recognition of the global reputation of the school'.<sup>31</sup>

At La Trobe University in 2017, first-year history students must undertake two compulsory subjects and they have the opportunity to take one elective subject. The three subjects offered to first-year history students at La Trobe University are:

- 'Myth, Legend and History'
- 'Food for Thought'
- 'Globalisation and Development'.

The course description for each subject is as follows. It is worth quoting them in full because these descriptions neatly encapsulate the condition of history teaching in Australian universities:

#### 'Myth, Legend and History' (Compulsory)

How and why did people start to compose histories? We consider the cases of the ancient Mediterranean and medieval England. People have always valued stories about pasts [sic]. Students in this subject explore how some influential stories about pasts relate to actual events in history. We study long-lasting stories about war and heroism in ancient Greece and Rome, and about Arthur and the knights of the Round Table. We consider the evidence for the origins of these stories about pasts in oral and written texts, in objects, and in art. We trace the endurance of these stories into the modern world. We examine how composing stories about or from a past sometimes became the writing of history. This subject addresses La Trobe's Essential on Sustainability Thinking [sic] by reflecting on how age-old stories have altered and reflected conceptions of power and human well-being; theirs and ours. Myth, Legend and History helped shape cultural systems of human purpose and meaning that endure because they are forever re-invented. The subject discloses how histories are never just received, but are composed for a reason by someone, somehow, somewhere.

#### 'Food For Thought: Discovering the world through commodities' (Compulsory)

Food and drink are essential to human existence; they reveal the nature of human society and culture. In this subject you'll explore topics such as food taboos, colonialism, kitchens and cooking, feasting, famine and fair trade. Each week we will use a range of primary sources, including recipe books, advertising, newspapers and film, to help us understand how experiences of and attitudes towards food have changed over time, and what this can tell us about the world. Through reflecting on histories of food in local and global contexts, you'll discover and debate key concepts including gender, class, race and power. Over the course of the subject we will trace food from agricultural production, to industrial manufacture, to retail, marketing and consumption. In doing so, we will bring historical understanding to the very urgent contemporary question of food sustainability, allowing you to meet the La Trobe Sustainability Thinking Essential.

#### 'Globalisation and Development' (Elective)

Globalisation is a process by which distant regions are increasingly linked, shaping our lives and impacting on the fate of nations. In this subject students will explore world history by examining the process by which the wealthy countries expanded into, and influenced the rest of the world. We often think of globalisation primarily in terms of industry, trade and technology, but in this subject we will take a broader view, which includes the current problems of world poverty and conflict, environmental degradation and racism. Case histories from Latin America, Africa and Asia will be examined.

There are several things to note about these subjects.

The first is that the ideological assumptions of each subject are quite transparent. The first subject examines the nature of 'power', the second examines 'gender, class, race and power', and the third examines 'world poverty and conflict, environmental degradation and racism'. The conclusion an eighteen-year-old student would typically draw after having studied these subjects is that history is simply the process of the unfolding of inevitable material forces with little room for contingency, human agency and individual choice. It is not inappropriate to teach history the way that La Trobe does, from a perspective informed by identity politics, if first year students at La Trobe also had the opportunity to consider alternative interpretations of the past. But they don't. There is no diversity of thought. The only perspective on history offered to students is that provided through the prism of identity politics.

The second thing to note is that historical context and any sense of chronology is absent from these subjects. In the first year of a university history course it might be expected that students would engage in as broad a survey of history as possible, before involving themselves in more detailed studies in later years. Instead first year history students at La Trobe University are being taught about exotic and specialised subjects. Such an approach to history has been described as 'heirloom antiquarianism'.

The first-year history subjects at La Trobe University demonstrate what was identified in 2015 in the IPA's research report *The End of History...in Australian Universities*. As the report noted:

Today, many institutions across Australia provide history programs that are very narrow in scope, sometimes in a chronological sense, sometimes in a geographical one, and occasionally in both senses. General history subjects are giving way to more specialised, disconnected, thematically-based subjects on narrow issues such as imperialism, film studies, and ethnic and gender perspectives, making it possible for students to graduate with a history major with extremely little knowledge of history beyond a few nuanced areas.<sup>32</sup>

Of course, these problems are not unique to Australian universities.

## **History and The 'Essential Core Topics in the History of Western Civilisation'**

In a speech last year entitled, 'The Decline and Fall of History', Niall Ferguson quoted a question posed in 2013 by the National Association of Scholars in the United States: 'Are race, class, and gender dominating American history?' He made reference to research by the American Historical Association that found 'gender is now the single most important subfield in the academy.' In Australia, as measured by the number of history subjects that teach a particular theme, indigenous issues and race and are the most important subjects in the academy, while gender is the second most important. What Ferguson said about other fields of historical study in American universities is true also of Australia as demonstrated by the IPA's 2015 research report - 'The losers in this structural shift are diplomatic and international history (which also has the oldest professors), legal and constitutional history and intellectual history.'<sup>33</sup>

Ferguson went on to ask what were some of the most important things in history that students should be taught.

If one poses the question 'What are the most significant events in modern history?' No two people, and certainly no two historians, would give the same answer. For years, terms such as 'significant' and 'important' have been more or less proscribed in the academy for fear of 'privileging' the history of elites. Even the word 'event' was regarded with disdain by members of the Annales school. Yet when historians complain - as some do now - that their profession has 'ceded the public arena, nationally as well as globally, to the economists and occasionally

lawyers and political scientists,' they implicitly acknowledge that the priorities of the public arena should not be irrelevant to them. Not all historical subjects are equal in that arena.

I submit that a list of significant historical subjects that omitted the majority of the following twenty would be regarded as incomplete in the eyes of any reputable newspaper, magazine, textbook or encyclopaedia publisher.<sup>34</sup>

Ferguson's list was: [Any period of] British History; The Reformation; The Scientific Revolution; The Enlightenment; The American Revolution; The French Revolution; The U.S. Constitution; The Industrial Revolution; The American Civil War; German Unification; World War I; The Russian Revolution; The Great Depression; The Rise of Fascism; The Third Reich; World War II; Decolonization; The Cold War; The history of Israel and European integration.

The IPA has taken Ferguson's concept of the significant subjects of modern history by developing a list of twenty topics which can be taken to comprise the 'Essential Core Topics in the History of Western Civilisation' for students studying history at an Australian university and which are detailed in Figure 4 on page 8 of this report.

The research contained in *The Rise of Identity Politics - An Audit of History Teaching at Australian Universities in 2017* identifies that 241 of the 746 history subjects taught by Australian universities teach some aspect of one or more of the Essential Core Topics of the History of Western Civilisation. This number of 241 subjects disguises the fact that the teaching of Western Civilisation that does occur is heavily skewed to ancient history and twentieth-century history. The topic most commonly taught in subjects covering Western Civilisation is Ancient Greece, followed by Ancient Rome, and World War II. It is noteworthy that subjects covering early modern history that deal with the Reformation, and the Enlightenment are outnumbered by subjects dealing with, for example, Decolonisation, and the Cold War. Dozens of subjects are offered in modern history, but only a handful of subjects teaching students about the events and the ideas that created the modern world. The paucity of subjects considering the Reformation, and the Enlightenment reveals the decline of intellectual history in Australia's universities.

It is unarguable that the two most important countries to Australia, from any variety of perspectives, including politically, economically, and culturally are the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Yet subjects dealing with the history of these two countries are the least common subjects in the 'Essential Core Topics in the History of Western Civilisation'.

Of the 746 history subjects taught at Australian universities in 2017, only seventeen focus on British history. There are more university history subjects about ancient and modern Egypt (nineteen). Of the seventeen subjects dealing with British history, only seven study the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the seminal period of British history that gave rise to modern democracy in the western world.

There is substantial variation in the teaching of the Essential Core of the history of Western Civilisation across the 35 Australian universities. Three universities offer subjects that teach all twenty Essential Core Topics, while two universities teach no such subjects. (The IPA is currently undertaking research to identify the 'Essential Core' of Australian History.)

History at Australian universities has not always been like it is in 2017. To take La Trobe University again as an example, a glance at the history of its history teaching reveals the potential for change into the future.



Ten years ago, in 2007, the teaching of history at La Trobe University was described as:

The History Program offers a wide range of units covering aspects of European, British, North American, Latin American, African, Chinese and Australian history, as well as some units concentrating on the history of ideas, society or culture rather than on particular regions or countries.<sup>35</sup>

In 2007 first-year history students were offered the choice of eight subjects, of which they would normally choose two. These subjects were:

- 'Ancient Civilisations'
- 'Modern Europe A: From Monarchies to Nations 1760-1890'
- 'Modern Europe B: The Twentieth Century'
- 'Conquest of the Americas: Aztecs, Incas, Mayans, Spaniards'
- 'Greece and the Balkans in the Twentieth Century'
- 'Myth, Legend and History'
- 'Globalisation: The rise of the modern world'
- 'People, Power and Protest'.

The diversity and range of history subjects to first-year history students at La Trobe University ten years ago compared to today is immediately apparent. Students could investigate history from the perspective of identity politics, but they also had the opportunity to study the chronology and narrative of history and to begin to engage in the essential core of the history of Western Civilisation. That is an opportunity that first-year history students at La Trobe University in 2017 don't have.

The course descriptions for the first three listed subjects are:

#### 'Ancient Civilisations'

Students will explore the historical development of some of the civilisations of the Ancient Near East, Egypt, Greece and Rome, within the period 3500 B.C.E. to 600 C.E, through the study of documents, art and archaeological evidence. Such societies, rich in myth and legend, have often been considered the cradle of western civilisation. The major focus will be upon the characteristics and achievements - political, cultural, social, artistic and religious - of these societies. Interaction between these civilisations, which has consequences for western society, will be considered. Students will also acquire an understanding of the context within which early Judaism, Christianity and early Islam developed.

#### 'Modern Europe A: From Monarchies to Nations 1760-1890'

In this unit, students study how the old monarchical and paternalist orders of society in Europe were transformed by ideas of liberty, democracy and nationalism. Initially the focus is upon the values and traditions of the Old Regimes. Students will then trace how these were undermined by the French and Industrial Revolutions. The impact of new ideas of rights, citizenship, nationality, democracy and equality are the focus of studies of key and contrasting episodes in the history of European nations in the nineteenth century. In these developments can be seen the roots of the political and social crises of the twentieth century.

## 'Modern Europe B: The Twentieth Century'

In this unit, students study the turbulent twentieth century in Europe, beginning with the industrial, national and imperial rivalries which culminated in the First World War. The revolutions and revolutionary pressures which arose out of that war are examined as a background to the emergence of the ideologies of Fascism and Communism and the totalitarian regimes of Nazism and Stalinism. Post-war European prosperity and integration and the collapse of Communism are studied. Through this unit students will gain a deeper understanding of the crises which have characterised European history in the twentieth century.

Instead of students discovering the ideas of 'liberty', 'democracy', and 'equality'; the concept of 'western civilisation'; the religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; the ideologies of Fascism and Communism; and the history of epochs and events of Ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution and the First World War, students at La Trobe University now read recipe books to learn about gender, class, race and power.

### **A Way Forward**

Cicero remarked 'To know nothing of what happened before you were born is to remain forever a child.' Our schools and universities are at risk of impoverishing an entire generation of young people, and in turn all of Australian society, by denying young people the opportunity to learn about the enduring intellectual, cultural, and political heritage of Western Civilisation.

In his speech *The Decline and Fall of History*, Niall Ferguson was pessimistic about the future of history:

Let me be frank in my conclusion. I have come to doubt that the pathologies that I have described within our history departments can be cured. Strange though it seems, those who have driven this transformation of history are too deeply entrenched and too committed to their cause to pay heed to the declining enrolments. I sometimes think some of them would rather ply their trade in empty classrooms than appoint a single junior professor who studies and teaches the subjects that I have the temerity to call important.<sup>36</sup>

The Institute of Public Affairs is more optimistic. Few things in history or in the teaching of history are inevitable.

In fact there is great cause for hope as Dr d'Abrera has explained. Young Australians are keen to know about and understand the origins of the freedom they enjoy. The work of the Institute of Public Affairs and the *Foundations of Western Civilisation Program* is more important than ever.

## 7. Methodology

The methodology of *The Rise of Identity Politics - An Audit of History Teaching at Australian Universities in 2017* is derived from the research of the Australian Historical Association (AHA) that commissioned three 'State of History' surveys between 1994 and 2002, that analysed the content of the history programs of 57 universities in Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, and Papua New Guinea. The AHA surveys identified the key themes of each history subject, such as 'Theory/Ideas/Philosophy', 'Women/Feminism/Gender', 'Race/Ethnic History', 'Labour', and 'Crime and Punishment'.<sup>13</sup>

A similar methodology was adopted in the IPA's 2015 research report *The end of history...in Australian Universities* and has also been used for *The Rise of Identity Politics - An Audit of History Teaching at Australian Universities in 2017*.

A research team in the IPA's *Foundations of Western Civilisation Program* reviewed the content of every undergraduate history subject, as made publicly available through course descriptions and university handbooks, of the 35 Australian universities that offered a history program in 2017.

Following this review process each of the 746 subjects was placed into one of five categories, according to what was regarded as the primary focus or theme of the subject. Three of the categories (Australian History, Other Histories, and Theory & Practical) are based on categorisation of the AHA surveys. The category of Identity Politics is based on an analysis of the emphasis the subject gives to Identity Politics and associated critical cultural theories. The category of the Essential Core Topics of the History of Western Civilisation is based on the schema established by Professor Niall Ferguson.

To determine the number of subjects that teach particular themes, those themes were identified as keywords, and the occurrence of those keywords in either the name of the subject, or the description of the content of the subject was recorded. So for example the keyword 'Identity' appears in either the name or the description of the content, or both, in 55 subjects.

The information contained in this report is correct as at 1 August 2017. The Institute of Public Affairs has taken every reasonable step to ensure the data compiled, as was publicly available as at 1 August 2017, is accurately represented in this report. The data from which this report was compiled is available from the Institute of Public Affairs. For further information please contact Dr Bella d'Abrera, Director, *Foundations of Western Civilisation Program* at the Institute of Public Affairs on (61) 3 9600 4744 or bdabrera@ipa.org.au. The distribution and reproduction of this report is encouraged.

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## About the author

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She is the author of a number of academic works and scholarly articles and is a regular contributor to *The Spectator Australia* and national debate. She is passionate about educating young Australians on the values of our free society, in particular the origins and development of our core Western values, such as human equality, individual liberty and human rights.





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