



English Teachers' Association NSW Response to the English K-10 Draft Syllabus

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INTRODUCTION

ETA Consultation

The English Teachers' Association is a voluntary group of professionals with a membership of 1,900 individual English teachers and 300 English faculties in New South Wales.

We welcome the opportunity for this consultation and thank our members for their contributions at such a difficult time of the school year. English teachers in the second half of Term 3 are involved in the marking of Trial HSC Examination papers, finalising Extension 2 projects, compiling HSC assessment results for the Board of Studies, setting and marking Year 11 final examinations, report writing for Year 11 and Year 12 students and marking Extension 2 projects for the Board in addition to their usual classroom teaching. This is a particularly infelicitous time to be adding to their already onerous burdens and we ask that the Board reflect more carefully on the timing of future consultations to allow teachers the opportunity to give a document of this significance its due consideration.

To compile this response, the ETA has conferred at length and in detail with members across the state.

The ETA collected members' views through

1. a plenary consultation session at the Annual Conference after an earlier address by Board and ACARA officers. Comments arising out of group activities in this session have been incorporated
2. an online survey was subsequently uploaded on our web site for extended consultation.

Three hundred and twenty seven (327) English teachers in NSW have contributed to the contents of this document.

Development of English K-10 Draft Syllabus

The development of the English K-10 has been a difficult enterprise. Blending the Australian Curriculum: English which does not sit naturally with the conception and practice of English in NSW with the English Years 7-10 Syllabus (2002) was always going to involve a great deal of intellectual creativity.

At the last ACARA consultation, ETA members were critical of the way that the Draft Australian Curriculum represented the learning in the subject

...[Members] were clear and consistent in their view that the Draft Australian Curriculum: English does not reflect a world class curriculum nor does it adequately prepare students for living and working in the 21st century as it does not embody notions of change, flexibility, problem solving and creativity. They also believe that the document does not represent the Shape of the Australian Curriculum: English paper which values Quality Teaching, individual student achievement, flexibility and choice for teachers, equity and opportunities for students.

NSW English Teachers' Association (2010), *Draft Australian Curriculum: English Response to ACARA*.

The changes to the document since that consultation are evident and have brought about certain improvements, particularly around the lack of balance in the three strands. However ACARA has failed to address successfully concerns about the role of the student, the integration of the strands, creativity and education for the 21st century.

Members recognise that the English K-10 Draft Syllabus goes some way to rectifying these matters and comment on the document in the following analysis.

BROAD ISSUES

Addressing the needs of students

Diversity

A sizeable proportion of ETA members have expressed serious reservations about the quality of the NSW English 7-10 draft syllabus, particularly its capacity to meet the needs, interests and abilities of the full range of students, including Life Skills. The ETA's survey of its members did not identify a clear majority of respondents willing to affirm the capacity of the draft syllabus to cater for the needs, interests and abilities of all students

Answer Options	Response Percent
Very well	5.3%
Well	36.8%
Adequately	21.1%
To some extent	34.2%
Poorly	2.6%

A telling 57% of respondents were unwilling to affirm the draft syllabus as being any more than adequate in its capacity to cater for the needs of all students.

Given the claims made by ACARA as to 'the world class' quality of the Australian Curriculum, which have been resoundingly rejected by both the BOS's English Curriculum Committee and the Board of Studies itself, these figures take on great significance. They reiterate doubts as to the capacity of the Office of the BOS to retain the quality of the existing NSW English 7-10 Syllabus when it determined upon the strategy of melding the Australian Curriculum content to a revised set of outcomes for NSW students. In the eyes of the majority of ETA survey respondents at least, this leaves the NSW English 7-10 draft syllabus in the curious and untenable position of being a mostly inadequate and significantly flawed response to the Australian Curriculum, and one that is unlikely to advance the teaching of English in this state.

Central to criticisms made of the draft syllabus was a pressing concern about the conceptualisation of students, in all their diversity, as 'learners', and the capacity of the curriculum to engage students. The draft was seen as not doing enough to promote a "love of the subject", to cater for "different learning needs and styles" and to positively promote "student directed learning". Such criticisms were connected to the overly prescriptive nature of much of the draft content, a limitation most readily associated with the Australian Curriculum content. There was an express wish amongst respondents for a "more student-centred" curriculum.

[There is a] failure to cater for the full range of students and acknowledge what students bring to the class

There is not much in this document that makes me feel that I could take it into a classroom and we would all soar with it. The aesthetic is underplayed to privilege the instrumental, which is not my view of subject English. There is too much emphasis on students passively learning, rather than doing, and there are fewer metacognitive and collaborative aspects than in the current syllabus. The decontextualising of grammar content is a considerable concern.

The content expectations and level of prescription means that teachers will be merely covering course content to meet syllabus dictates rather than:

- 1. engendering love of subject*
- 2 catering to different student needs and learning styles*
- 3. ...[developing] student directed learning*

It is still not a course which allows better students to shine

On the positive side, there were comments identifying certain strengths in the draft syllabus. These included comments relating to the “good variety of mediums and types of texts”, a liking for the “integrated” format of the document”, and the capacity presented to “track” students “backward or forward”. These all suggest an inherent capacity to cater for a broad range of students. However, it remains the case that few comments of outright or unqualified support for the NSW English 7-10 draft syllabus and its capacity to cater for all students were made in the ETA’s survey of its members.

The issues of integration and coherence were notably raised in regard to the elements of structural support provided in the draft syllabus to promote differentiated learning for particular cohorts of students. It was noted that “the Life Skills outcomes are quite nebulous” and that “some of the requirements for Life Skills students (imaginative and persuasive texts) seem quite difficult”. One respondent asked “where is the connection between Life Skills and the English syllabus”, describing these as “too disparate”. Concerns were also raised about the ESL scales:

The loss of detailed ESL scales reduces the ability of inexperienced teachers to effectively program with differentiation for these students

The ESL provisions for each outcome are not as specific as in the past, and make assessment and goal-setting problematic. They are too open-ended, and don't set a standard or baseline indicator.”

High Expectations

Members also raised concerns about the capacity of the document to extend students. While a few did comment that

The new structure and content directed at higher order skills and metacognition are big improvements on the earlier draft.

a far more significant number believed that

there is a disappointing emphasis on the lower-order skills. Students spend much more time 'recognising' and 'identifying' than they do 'analysing' or 'synthesising'.

Stage 5 is a slightly harder variant of Stage 4, rather than a change in content and thinking to prepare students for Stage 6, especially at the Advanced and Extension levels.

[The syllabus] doesn't provide for extension and development of higher-order thinking skills

seems to be little emphasis on challenging more able students

seems to provide for mediocrity.

Given concerns about the performance of Australia’s most able students stemming from the 2009 PISA data, such statements should be ringing alarm bells. Concerns raised about the capacity of the draft syllabus to cater for all students, particularly the most able, stem from what respondents identified as the “overly prescriptive” nature of the document, and the fact it is “very lock-step in its content delivery”. Noted in such comments is the way the narrower, more rigid nature of the Australian Curriculum content sits uneasily with the proposed NSW content, making it difficult for teachers to identify how they will be able to devise teaching programs that are integrated, coherent, developmental and flexible enough to allow the individualisation of learning - something research suggests makes a significant difference for students.

The NSW English 7-10 Draft Syllabus as a Representation of the subject

Generally members felt that the syllabus offered a reasonable representation of the discipline stating that the document seemed overall ‘a sound synthesis of the various forms of English curriculum theory’.

Yes	26.3%
To some extent	55.3%
No	18.4%

The issue that drew the most comment was again, that of student centeredness and the processes related to it. Members felt that there was still an inclination towards student reception rather than activity and composition of texts

There is not enough emphasis on the teacher as a facilitator for students' discovery and self-directed active learning. There is no sense of process or methodical acquisition of skills through doing and there is not enough focus on students as incipient and developing competent practitioners.

and the apparent narrowing of the curriculum.

This syllabus narrows the image of English. De-evolution - returning to functional and utilitarian rather than rich and philosophical.

Overall, it is reduction of what we currently have. Stage 5 in particular offers fewer opportunities for extending and challenging students in new and different learning activities, to prepare them for Stage 6.

It is far too mechanical in its approach to the subject and the drive for standardisation introduces a lot of artificial elements in the way English is taught and assessed. But schools are required to teach to this test because our reputation depends on it [because of the influence of NAPLAN].

I think this is reductive. What we have now is an excellent syllabus and it would and has been difficult to improve on it. The draft syllabus, in fitting in with the Australian curriculum has had to compromise on what we have now.

Concerns were expressed about the lack of an explicit statement about a research base or underpinning theory stating that 'some clear statement of philosophical background to the document would be helpful.' Members wanted to see clearer indications of current 'research (scientific research into brain development) into ... middle school practices and philosophy' and of understandings about 'effective pedagogy'.

The NSW English 7-10 Draft Syllabus as appropriate for the 21st century

About 60% of members felt that 21st century imperatives were met at least adequately by the syllabus, with 40% having concerns to a greater or lesser degree.

Answer Options	Response Percent
Very well	2.7%
Well	29.7%
Adequately	27.0%
To some extent	35.1%
Poorly	5.4%

Of these concerns, most were centred on the lack of opportunities in the syllabus to develop critical literacy and critical thinking skills, a lack of perceived focus on the "creativity of students" and the development of their "imaginative capacities" and the lack of emphasis on the authentic use of ICT as an everyday tool in the English classroom and beyond.

Some members commented that ICT references seemed tokenistic:

The ICT elements are quite shallow and should be developed.

The ICT components seem somewhat superficial or token.

It needs to address our evolving communication forms.

The embedding of ICT as a medium of delivery, as a means of responding, composing and reflecting upon the learning experience has been marginalised. Multimodal, 21st century texts are basically ignored.

Does the syllabus cater enough to online learning platforms?

The lack of web 2 learning is of concern.

The recognition of new ICT texts and skills is tokenistic at best.

Teaching and assessing handwriting, and the legitimate role of English teaching in this activity, was discussed:

I do not believe that the teaching of handwriting has a place in 21st century high schools. If it is necessary, then it should be a cross-curricular stipulation that certain amounts of work are done by hand. It should not be an assessable outcome, and it should not be a burden shouldered solely by English teachers.

For one member, there was concern that the draft syllabus dealt inadequately with ICT in practice, yet,

Alternatively, we are assessing handwriting in Stage 4.

Members would like to see more focus on developing critical thinking skills in students and providing significant and meaningful opportunities for extension and challenge in the classroom:

Where is the provision for gifted and talented? Where is higher order thinking? Where is extension?

It does not address the higher order thinking skills in Bloom's taxonomy as well as the present syllabus does.

I am concerned not only about the lack of Web 2.0 learning but also the minimising of critical literacy skills, which empower all students to ask questions about the nature of texts and how to define their own world.

Removes the reference to 'imaginative expression'.

Too much focus on rote learning and not enough on lateral and critical thinking.

There is limited attention (if any?) to GATS. The brief focus on extension seems to be an afterthought. The possibility to accelerate from Stage 5 to Stage 6 is not the answer for GATS because these students often lack the emotional maturity needed for Stage 6, even if they are gifted and/or talented. This problem is accentuated by the removal of elements of higher order thinking.

The current syllabus has whole outcomes dedicated to developing students as independent learners and as young adults who are acquiring the cognitive, collaborative and self-management skills essential for self-efficacy and adult competence. However, members noted that most of this content in the affective domain has been removed from the draft syllabus, despite its evidence in the Rationale, an approach which does not seem to be consistent with the recognition that our students will be entering an adult world which is geared increasingly towards collaborative work, autonomy and decision-making. At the very least, the absence of these affective domain skills does not sit well with the syllabus' stated aim of encouraging life-long learning. Members commented:

There is a shift of focus from the student, to prescriptive content with the student perceived as a passive learner.

One member commented that it was disappointing that the cross-curriculum priority of sustainability was not referred to in the draft syllabus:

It is surprising that sustainable futures have been entirely omitted from the draft syllabus. This is rapidly emerging as a significant global issue and is a matter that young people take very seriously. ACARA refers to sustainability in social and cultural spheres, as well as in the environmental domain, and contemporary texts from all over the world examine social, cultural and environmental sustainability as it now applies to them, so there are many opportunities to integrate this concept into other mandated textual and conceptual studies. Ecocriticism has long been recognised as a valid approach to composing and responding to texts. The omission seems to me to be an unimaginative and backward-looking response to the ACARA cross-curriculum priorities.

The Continuum of Learning

Members were very pleased to see an attempt at smoothing the transition between Stage 3 and Stage 4 and were particularly impressed with the work done to create the progression of outcomes from Stage 1 to Stage 5.

The continuum of learning is much more effective than the current syllabus.

The scope and sequence of outcomes is excellent and a welcome addition

On closer study, there seem to remain 'inconsistencies in what is required from students from stage to stage'. This is evident particularly in the outcomes associated with experience in the primary school of literature, rather than language and literacy. Given the history of English syllabus documents from K-6, this is not surprising and the leap from Stage 3 to 4 for outcomes 6 and 7 is particularly significant.

Members have also pointed to the sad discrepancy between the syllabus and actual learning noting that the document does not take sufficient account of 'the levels of disadvantage in many communities and the 'gaps' in student learning within the continuum.'

Many students can arrive in Stage 4, which assumes a level of mastery of some language and literacy concepts and not actually have this. This may then have implications for teachers, particularly in rural and remote school in terms of grades and standards.

Clarity of meaning

While members generally felt they could discern direction and intention from the language of the syllabus, there was nevertheless some concern about apparent contradictions and the confusing mix of specificity and open-endedness, so that they were left wondering about the relative importance of items. There was also some concern about the wording of some items, where ambiguity and poor grammatical choices did not provide desirable modelling for English teachers.

Members commented that where items had been taken from the ACARA documents and inserted into the draft, they could be identified by language differences, such as vocabulary choices and ways of thinking about and organising content.

A number of members identified repetitive and/or awkwardly expressed content:

It is very wordy and the number of variables/components within outcomes and within content statements makes them very difficult to teach and assess thoroughly. Simplify the language. Try to not add multiple key ideas in each outcome subpoint.

Within the Content and Text Requirements section, it is unclear whether "including" means 'must include' or 'such as'. For example, does "a wide range of literary texts from other countries and times, including poetry, drama scripts, prose fiction and picture books" mean

that we must study all of poetry/drama/prose/picture books from both other countries and other times? Or can we select?

In the Rationale, ... what is meant by the phrase "learn about the role and use of language in their own lives, and in their own and other cultures"? Should it be the representation of other cultures?

Nor are the intention and purpose of some specific content items clear. These have been identified in the Content section under 'Clarity of Content'.

Members also asked that a glossary of English terms be provided, to reduce uncertainty and to ensure all teachers had a shared understanding of some of the concepts within the syllabus. This may reduce the need for some Board content descriptors which seem to repeat ACARA content solely to define it. Such repetition also impinges on the workability of the syllabus. Also, a glossary would help to clarify key terms and phrases such as "create *literary* texts" (Stage 5, Outcome 1.7), "multimedia texts", "breadcrumb trails" (Stage 4, Outcome 4.18), and define concepts such as "cultural expressions" (Stage 4, Outcome 7.7).

The lack of glossary and subjective terms such as 'home language' and 'world of texts' is confusing.

It is too difficult to determine some outcomes. Many aspects are vague and unclear and rely too heavily on jargon.

A glossary needs to be provided to ensure there is a common understanding of some concepts ... it would help to clarify the emphasis of the content: e.g., what is meant by "create 'literary' texts" (Stage 5, 1.7)?

Exactly what is now classified as a "multimedia" text?

What is a 'grammatical theme'? Very linguistic content in the grammar statements which teachers and students will find confusing.

However, the greatest difficulty in reading the document arises from the lack of coherence in the organisation of the multiple details in the content descriptors. While there clearly is an attempt to aggregate the ideas in some content points such as those below

4.16 applying knowledge – understand how to apply learned knowledge consistently in order to spell accurately and to learn new words including nominalisations

4.17 embedded clauses – recognise and understand embedded clauses are a common feature of sentence structures and contribute additional information to a sentence

there seems little logical development of content points to aid meaningful reading of the ways in which the learning outcome may be achieved.

Engaging with the content is very difficult as one gets lost in a sea of fragments.

It is difficult to get a sense of what an outcome means from the mass of the content to be taught as there is so much specific detail. It would be helpful to differentiate examples of content from mandated content and organise the mandated content into some kind of sequence.

The content points need to be sequenced or grouped in such a way as to provide signposts or points at which one can pause to consider a chunk of information so that the content offers a way of understanding the outcome and teaching towards it.

SPECIFIC SECTIONS OF THE SYLLABUS

Rationale and Aim

The ETA is pleased to see that there are minimal changes to these sections of the document and that the nature of the subject has retained a balance between the functional and aesthetic to offer students challenging and enjoyable learning experiences. The additions that are there are consistent with requirements of the national curriculum and the extension of the Rationale and Aim to include K-10.

There is one area that does need more emphasis for learning for the future. In recognition of the advances in technology since 2002 and its pervasive and ever increasing use, we suggest that an addition like the one below be made to the Rationale:

They develop clear and precise skills in speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing, and knowledge and understanding of language forms and features and structures of texts ***in the range of contemporary media of communication.***

Objectives

Members took no issue with the Skills, Knowledge and Understanding section of the Objectives. However, it is clear from explicit statements such as

the fewer values and attitudes statements are of concern

and comments on the other sections of their responses about the “loss of pleasure as a core element of the subject” and the devaluing of the affective that the Values and Attitudes section suffers significantly in its diminution to 2 items.

This is even more disturbing when one member asks

Is the first dot point expressed in a value form: develop appreciation of the enjoyment of language through becoming confident and independent learners?

What has been removed from the Objectives is the idea of valuing “the power of language to explore and express”. This notion is key to valuing the subject as a whole for with language comes capacity, connection, agency and joy. Indeed it seems odd that students should value a particular language, “their own home language”, and not the power of language itself. While this idea is evident in the Rationale, it is not borne out in the Objectives or, as members have repeatedly commented, in the rest of the document.

The Objectives fail to define the values and attitudes that are to be developed through the study of English and are the source of many of the concerns teachers have expressed about the draft syllabus.

Outcomes

When asked about the combining and reworking the outcomes of the 2002 syllabus members were generally supportive of the way they addressed students’ needs and abilities.

Answer Options	Response Percent
Very well	11.1%
Well	25.0%
Adequately	22.2%
To some extent	33.3%
Poorly	8.3%

They were pleased to see reduction in the number of outcomes in principle but many pointed out

The outcomes have been combined in many cases and while the number of outcomes have been reduced the aspects of each of the new 8 outcomes has doubled in most cases.

Those that commented in some detail about the outcomes themselves generally expressed concerns about some of the changes.

A concern with Outcome 1 is that 'engagement' seems to be the main differentiating feature between Outcomes 1 and 2. Members thought that this could well be a difficult process to identify and isolate and as one commented: 'How do you measure 'engagement?'

Furthermore, engagement is subsumed by or at least presupposed in the definition of the key terms *Responding* and *Composing* (p.18) making Outcomes 1 and 2 seem repetitive. This does not mean that members wanted to see the idea of student engagement removed from a primary position in the Outcomes. In fact, there were frequent concerns expressed that the nature of the outcomes and the content tended to remove students from the centre of activity in English into a more passive and receptive role than indicated in the current syllabus. This point will be more fully developed under the Content section of this response but one consideration that does apply here is that the new arrangement of outcomes tends to move the focus away from the student by losing "draws on experience" from the current Outcome 6 which seems to have been blended with Outcome 7 to form Outcome 1. "Draws on experience", an expression implying activity and personal engagement and one which can be clearly evidenced, is at the forefront of the outcome and would avoid the comment:

Stage 4 current Outcomes 6 and 7 have been replaced with Outcome 1 in the draft which shifts emphasis to a less personal and therefore less engaging focus which sidelines imagination as well as composition.

Members questioned the apparent discarding of current Stage 5 Outcome 5 relating to the transference of knowledge into new contexts, arguing that this is a particularly important 21st century skill.

Is current outcome 5 in Stage 5 lost? Or is it implied in Outcome 4 of the draft? It is an important aspect.

There was also a concern expressed about the change in the wording of Outcome 10 at Stage 5

*questions, challenges and evaluates **cultural assumptions** in texts and their effects on meaning*

to Outcome 7

*questions, challenges and evaluates how **aspects of culture are represented** in texts and the effects on meaning*

This weakens the inclusion of a critical literacy in the draft syllabus. The term *how **aspects of culture are represented*** is too broad in that it can easily be addressed by considering representations of other cultures, something students have been doing since Stage 1, even with the loading of higher order verbs at the front of the outcome. The term 'cultural assumptions' invites students to consider what has been naturalised by the way their own culture shapes their perceptions. This is crucial at Stage 5 and is particularly important in developing a student's personal response that has been critically interrogated, the 'informed personal response' so valued in the senior years.

Content

Integrity

Members recognised and were appreciative of the work done to try to align the ACARA document with NSW views of English curriculum.

The draft is vastly improved by the additions

The structure of the syllabus around outcomes is positive.

I liked the tracking of the Cross curriculum areas in the content.

They were particularly pleased with the integration of the Language, Literature and Literacy strands of the Australian Curriculum, English.

At least the three strands (which were never made clear in terms of how they married) have disappeared and assessment is more in line with previous expectations.

It is pleasing that the artificial division of the 3 Ls has gone, although it occasionally resurfaces via the specific grammar items.

There is a clear improvement in the abandonment of the three 'Ls' as the structuring principle but still the restrictive content points in the curriculum limit the ability to integrate all three elements.

However, there are still concerns about the unity and coherence of the syllabus

The content included by the Board's writers broadens the syllabus so that it includes many of the more positive aspects of the 2002 Syllabus but the content from the ACARA Draft Syllabus does not fit into the spirit of the broader scope of the NSW Draft.

This is the problem. There is a clear contradiction between the student centred, progressive aspects of the syllabus that have been provided by the Board and the narrow, limited content from the ACARA document. Teacher judgement to provide appropriate learning activities for the diverse needs of their students is compromised by the strict content prescription in the ACARA content points. These do not recognise the recursive nature of teaching and learning of English which is mentioned in the other parts of the NSW Draft.

Many of the key objectives of the current syllabus have been maintained. However, the way that reworking has occurred is awkward, repetitive and poorly organised. The syllabus seems onerous because of the combination of ACARA and BOS outcomes. The BOS content should sensitively supplement the ACARA content and merely fill in the gaps, rather than repeating and re-defining each of the points, resulting in too much content.

[There is] a mass of detailed minutiae as content, which is constraining in itself, but which also contains no discernible sequenced developmental path or indications of the recursive nature of teaching and learning

Members point out that the blending of the two documents changes the emphasis in the nature of the subject skewing of the course "away from 'English' to a course in functional literacy". They believe there is not sufficient weight given to "the deep engagement with literature on a philosophical and personal level."

This view arises partly from the perception that

...[t]he specificity of the content is not balanced. There is not the detail for some content as there is for punctuation for example. Types of texts and types of literature are not specified.

Members believe that any gains in the reduction of the number of Outcomes have been neutralised by the increase in the number of content descriptors.

Unfortunately, there are still too many individual sub-points in the outcomes. Some of these ...would require weeks to teach...there is significant overlap. I think getting rid of the similar or overlapping points and reducing the overly complex points would better serve everyone.

...[t]he reduction in outcomes means that there is too much content within each outcome and the ...[content] within the outcomes is not organised cohesively or developmentally. The

"gaps" are also problematic in that they don't capture the reciprocal nature of learning in English.

There is a great deal of repetition of approaches and specific content, so appearances are deceptive. Despite the quantity, I don't think it is a content-rich syllabus at all. Outcomes 1 and 2 in Stage 4 seem to share a lot of common content.

The specificity is too dense. Too pedantic, too explicit in the content points and therefore narrows the scope of the subject area to be taught. Far too prescriptive which leads to teaching which may not foster creativity and integration of KLAs.

There will be little room to base one's teaching around QT and other frameworks when we have to get through so confusing and content-heavy a syllabus, especially with the heavy focus on the technical aspects of language/grammar.

I do believe that some aspects of the syllabus will lend themselves effectively to cross-curricular teaching initiatives and PBL (e.g. Stage 4, 7.3), however it will be impossible to explore these outcomes in any depth when we are required to cover so much specific content.

In terms of programming it will not foster the exploration of key ideas or deep thinking for a range of students.

We have moved from 114 to 145 dot points in each stage. This is a large number of content points to map and can tend to create a crowded curriculum.

Others make the point that there are aspects in this level of specificity that may not be appropriate to their own school contexts.

Some of this content will be unrealistic to cover in schools. In particular, we need more information about how it will be possible to explore elements such as historical context of texts in Stage 4 (1.5), handwriting (3.11), exploring languages/dialects in relation to their own experiences (6.7) and how conventions of speech influence identity (7.13) - these seem very complex for Yr 7 and 8.

Because of the increase in specificity of content in this syllabus, members were asked to consider whether this was an advantage or a disadvantage. Given the antagonism towards the inclusion of so many particulars in the content in other areas of their responses, the result here was interesting.

Advantage	45.9%
Problem	54.1%

One would expect a much higher percentage of respondents indicating that, in principle, the increase in specificity were a problem. However, if we examine the statistics further, we find that only 45% of respondents elaborated on their choice of answer with a comment. Of these, the majority saw the specificity a disadvantage in the way it can be 'daunting', 'complex and limiting' and 'does not recognise teacher judgement or diverse student need and interests'. A few admitted that, with the increased emphasis on national testing, the added specificity was

Good in terms of the changing focus on the nature of teaching English and the link to the NAPLAN tests means that we need this level of detail.

Of this 45%, only 5% (11% of the total) pointed out the advantages of the increased specificity.

What it does ensure is that throughout the state we can benchmark certain key skills and ideas.

Younger teachers felt this was good.

Another commented that while the extra specificity was an advantage

far more elaboration is needed - particularly in the area of language. Teachers of English are very worried that they do not have the knowledge necessary to teach language. A syllabus must give them assistance by specifying with a clear framework for language as is in the Australian Curriculum and content elaborations

The issue of further elaboration on the language aspects of the syllabus could indicate a need for a support document in this area.

Learnt to/Learn about

While some members were pleased to see the familiar “Learn to/Learn about” structure as it suggests active learning through application of knowledge,

Loved the reduction to 8 outcomes. and the matching up of learn to and learn about...

others found it complicated the content and hindered the development of student independence and creativity.

The 'Learn to' 'Learn about' are repetitive as one has to model in order to encourage students to compose themselves.

The individual 'learn to' and 'learn about' statements are too dense. It is difficult to cover all content within each statement.

The 'learn to' and 'learn about' is inconsistent across stages and therefore not user friendly. There is a lack of continuity. It makes scope and sequence difficult to apply practically in programming given the difference in structures and organisation of content points across stages. Because of the restrictive and repetitive nature of 'learn to' and 'learn about' it restricts freedom to engage in student directed learning and tangential thinking. It disallows flexibility.

They expressed a desire for the content to be ordered logically using an appropriate cognitive taxonomy, reflecting appropriate learning theory.

The 'learn to' and 'learn about' structure is cumbersome and repetitive in this current model. Since the Board is obliged to include the detailed content descriptors from the national curriculum, it would be simpler to group and organise the content to exemplify the progress of student activity and learning within each outcome.

Please make sure that content and outcomes are arranged in as logical a fashion as possible. For example, in Stage 4 outcome 4, 4.11 and 4.12 concern coherence, and then there is another coherence point at 4.18. This jump doesn't seem to have any purpose, especially when linking to the "Learn tos".

Specific Outcomes

Members also commented on specific outcomes and content that they had issues with, particularly focussing on the specificity of the language and grammar. They argue that this level of detail ‘make[s] it seem as if particular aspects of grammar are deemed more significant than the others which are left out’.

Outcome 4 in Stage 4 is very disappointing. Despite the explicit focus on grammar in this outcome, students will have less exposure, because the items are narrow and repetitive. I am at a loss to understand why there is so much repetitive emphasis on embedded clauses and nominalisation, as though these were the only things that mattered in expression. There is nothing at all about verbs, not even how to use a finite verb to write a full sentence. Please reinstate the previous Outcome 4, or at least retain it and embellish where necessary with ACARA's limiting grammar statements.

Others also draw attention to a poor relationship between the outcome and its content. These often reflect the tendency away from student activity in the document.

Stage 4, Outcome 4 states that a student "selects and uses" which implies composing. However, a significant number of the content points centre around responding. Furthermore, some of the content doesn't seem to be placed in the appropriate outcome (for example, Stage 4, 8.2 would be more appropriate in Outcome 3).

Outcome 6 in Stage 4, the personal connection outcome, provides very few opportunities for personal expression - students are cast overwhelmingly as responders learning about what others do to express themselves in their texts. The same applies to Outcome 7 in Stage 4. This is a problem throughout - the document needs to be re-written to hand back the action, the doing and the creating to students.

Other comments align with members' concerns that the document does not allow sufficiently for the development of higher order thinking.

The content presented in Outcome 8 does not effectively fulfil the outcome. The outcome states that students will "use, reflect on and assess" their learning skills. However, only 8.7 and 8.8 (Stage 4) and 8.4 and 8.5 (Stage 5) ask them to reflect or assess. All other content points centre on "using" skills for learning. If students do not reflect on and assess their own learning then they are missing out on a vital stage of the teaching and learning cycle and they are not developing their metacognitive potential. It also does not effectively fulfil the PSC cross-curricular area.

In Stage 5, Outcome 8 requires students to "adapt" their skills in response to their reflection. However, this is again largely absent from the content points. What is the point of evaluating one's work if one doesn't then return to make the necessary adaptations? This would seem to be addressed by 3.19, which could be placed in Outcome 8.

The links between outcomes and content are obscured by the unnecessary repetition which occurs throughout the document.

For example, Stage 4 content 3.3 and 4.3 would appear to be almost the same, yet are situated in different outcomes. The same applies to 8.3 and 8.4, which equate to outcome 3.14; and 4.20, which seems the same as 1.6. If, in fact, these are supposed to be different points of content, then their intentions need to be made much clearer. In Stage 5, 2.15 is virtually identical to 5.20; and 4.15 + 4.16 seem to be the same.

In Stage 4, 6.12=7.14. Please rationalise the difference between these OR remove the repetition - the duplication becomes unnecessary content.

Examples which need to be reviewed are: Stage 4 7.5 and 7.6 (7.5 alone would be sufficient); 4.8 and 4.9; 3.1 and 3.4 (again, 3.4 alone would be sufficient; perhaps a glossary could be used to elucidate rather than creating 'more content'); 2.8 and 2.9 (surely "manipulate creatively, imaginatively combine and challenge different types of texts in order to compose new texts" means the same as "creatively adapt" in the previous outcome? Both these outcomes seem to be further repeated in 5.6 and 5.7); 1.8 and 1.1.

Text requirements

Members saw the inclusion of Asian and ATSI texts as positive but there were concerns raised over the prescriptive nature of the mandated breadth in the selection of texts. There were fears that this range would

reduce teachers' ability to teach content rich topics - instead reducing to units to small glimpses of a wide range of texts. The syllabus should encompass both (i.e. depth for some topics and breadth for others).

Clarity of Content

The following content descriptors were identified as being unclear.

In Stage 4:

2.10, “identify and evaluate devices that create tone, for example humour, wordplay and parody ... “ – This seems to limit tone to a subset of humour, rather than exploring it across the full range of emotions and feelings, as one of the key indicators of meaning in any text.

2.17, “informative and persuasive texts - ... identify underlying structures such as taxonomies, cause and effect and extended metaphors” – Further clarification is needed about how extended metaphors can be seen as underlying textual structures and how they may be considered in the same category as taxonomy and cause and effect.

2.18, “the structures and features of imaginative texts ... “ – The use of the term “imaginative” seems to preclude the exploration of documentaries and other non-fiction forms that also use these devices and features.

3.15, “combine visual and digital elements” – Does this simply mean using images as part of digital texts, or something more complicated and harder to define?

7.7, does "cultural expressions" refer to “expressions of culture” or language expressions, such as idioms?

In Stage 5:

1.15, “higher order thinking – understand how higher order concepts are developed in complex texts through language features including nominalisation, apposition and embedding of clauses” – This appears to say that a basic knowledge of nouns and subordinate clauses will confer the ability to think analytically and creatively.

2.20, “the ways irony, sarcasm and ridicule can be used to expose, ...“ – This seems to devalue the understanding of irony in English from its importance as a significant device in serious literary texts and relegate it instead to the popular culture realm of contemporary uses of irony.

2.22, the item on the conventions of reasoning, refers to “ellipsis”. Presumably, the intended sense here is “omission”, but it would be useful to have it clearly separated from the more commonly-known punctuation meaning, to avoid confusion.

4.17, in learning about using “paragraphs and images – understand how paragraphs and images can be arranged ...”, are the images visual, verbal or both? Do we treat paragraphs and images together in the teaching and learning here? Why “paragraphs”, and how are they connected to “images”?

4.21, “understand how certain abstract nouns can be used to summarise preceding or subsequent stretches of text” – This seems a limiting way of teaching abstract nouns, so it would be helpful to know what the syllabus writers had in mind when developing this item.

5.1, the current syllabus refers specifically to “new and unfamiliar texts”, but this has been replaced by the less clear “more demanding texts”.

Also in Outcome 5, 5.3 appears to be the same, but less than 5.2.

Assessment

When considering whether the advice on assessment would enable the development of a rich and valid program for assessing your students for learning, members felt that the information about assessment for learning was helpful, but would also have liked practical examples and a range of models to show what assessment could look like in various types of English classroom.

Answer Options	Response Percent
Yes	34.2%

To some extent	47.4%
No	18.4%

Some comments around the need for examples were:

... provided that a support document accompanying this would be available.

Just gives advice about assessment. Support documents would be beneficial.

In the current syllabus this aspect of programming and assessment is dealt with more thoroughly in support documentation.

There was also some frustration expressed

it seems ridiculous that the curriculum has reached this stage without performance descriptors or assessment standards being produced. These will inform/limit what is taught. The document still does not address assessment sufficiently and this will have implications on pedagogy.

The specificity of content items also produced further concerns as members questioned whether each item would need to be assessed so deflecting teachers from developing programs that assess the acquisition of understanding and skills at a multi-modal, higher-order level, as an integral part of the learning process.

There is so much focus on content that there will be little time to facilitate meaningful assessment tasks.

Not enough time or content is put into this part of the document, especially considering its importance. Some of the expectations appear difficult to achieve in addressing all areas and styles of assessments. Examples of how to possibly meet some of the big outcomes (like number 4) would be good to see, especially in a simple, precise way.

The advice is good but is clearly in conflict with the mandated A-E assessment. How can rich and valid assessment of and for learning be reported in such a limited way?

However, there was also a minority view that the specific content and fewer outcomes might make assessment an easier task than previously:

A rich and valid program for assessing students' learning is ultimately the responsibility of the classroom teacher and with outcomes that are specific and measurable this should be far easier with this syllabus.

The draft syllabus provides an opportunity to model meaningful assessment for learning and equip teachers with a roadmap for tasks that are genuinely comprehensive, extending and directed at assessing beyond mere content and knowledge:

English should move towards major projects as a means of replacing the one per term/unit, pen and paper, time-limit, examination-style summative assessment. Portfolios should be prescribed, building towards e-portfolios of draft, self and peer-edited versions and published documents that are displayed beyond the classroom wall.

Real assessment for learning engages students in independent enquiry and the development of skills, knowledge and understanding as they work through classroom content. Can we have some models and examples of this?

THE NSW ENGLISH 7-10 DRAFT SYLLABUS AND TEACHERS

Classroom Application

While a majority of members perceived the draft syllabus as workable within the classroom, there were significant numbers who were not prepared to endorse it for this purpose.

Answer Options	Response Percent
Yes	57.9%
No	42.1%

Some felt that the content elaborations were important to give direction to teachers, and felt that the outcomes were “specific, measurable and negotiated”, providing a “key set of skill indicators” for students to work towards, unlike the “vagueness of the previous syllabus”.

However, most other respondents felt that the statements should not include so much content, suggesting that “trying to cover every aspect will lead to a more superficial approach.” Furthermore, some members identified a significant contradiction and unevenness between the broad statements from the Board of Studies and the strict prescription of the ACARA document which they felt undermined the integrity of the document as it fails to provide a consistent philosophical basis in its direction to teachers. This concern is compounded by observations that the quantity and wordiness of the content descriptors will make programming difficult for all teachers. Some responders felt that the syllabus needs to be clearer and more user-friendly in order to improve its workability.

Members also expressed concern about the workability of the syllabus for Early Career teachers and teachers new to the NSW system. Whilst teachers with experience with the current syllabus will be familiar with this document and confident in using it, others will need extensive support materials to implement it effectively. If the syllabus is not accessible to all, and teachers do not perceive it as a working document, then it is not an effective curriculum.

Very little specific direction about programming and how to interpret the document. Experienced teachers who have programmed previously have trouble with the quantity and wordiness. There is not enough direction about how outcomes and learn to and learn abouts should be met across stages. This is generally assumed. Support documents should not have to interpret for us. The syllabus should be clearer and more user-friendly.

Many members expressed concerns that the extensive prescription and direction could lead to “bland” learning experiences and passive pedagogy. So, while it might be workable, the quality of teaching could be compromised.

Most members, when asked about the ease of programming the new syllabus believed it would be difficult and time consuming.

Answer Options	Response Percent
Yes	40.5%
No	59.5%

They did acknowledge that it would be much the same as the current syllabus, and the outcomes and content descriptors provided direction, but it would be a demanding and complicated task.

Yes direction but not ease

"ease of programming" - no because of the prescriptive and loaded component of the "selection of texts"

Despite the reduction in outcomes, members still felt that there was too much content to programme effectively and meaningfully. One respondent made the point that although the number of outcomes had been reduced, the complexity of the outcomes had increased, effectively adding more content.

Again the contradiction between recognising teacher judgement and student need and prescribing specific content at particular stages means that there is a contradiction in the philosophical basis for programming.

Some members felt that programming the language component (Outcome 4) in an integrated way may prove difficult. If this is not done well, it could be reduced to “chalk and talk” lessons or workbook exercises detached from the focus of the unit.

The language is too complex and at times inconsistent and repetitive. Too much prescriptive jargon.

Support material will be necessary. In particular how to recursively structure programs to cover the grammar and punctuation content.

Some members suggested that re-instating specific ESL content would make programming for diversity much easier and give consistency and cohesion to the syllabus. In addition, some members were concerned by the removal of the ESL scales, forcing teachers to access this document in print form. These respondents felt that teachers may not refer to these documents, which is crucial in programming for ESL students.

The ESL Scales links are no longer sufficient. The ESL scales are only accessible in print form (usually one elusive book per school) and teachers are unlikely to access these to support their teaching given the draft summary statements. It is imperative that an online version of the Scales be made available. Even if this happens, teachers still need to have it mapped for them as the support of ESL students can be tricky enough without having to look up the levels and map them themselves.

Implied Pedagogy

Members also acknowledged that the draft syllabus specifically provided for teachers to draw on different theoretical perspectives and models for teaching English. However, there is an inherent contradiction between this statement and the passive nature of many of the processes within the content, particularly within the ACARA prescriptions.

The ACARA document presupposed pedagogy which is teacher centred where students are seen as passive learners of a content driven curriculum assessed through strict skills measurement testing whereas the new Board material attempts to restore a student centred, needs based pedagogy of a broader negotiated curriculum where students are seen as active participants in the learning process and their assessment.

The implied pedagogy is teacher-centred. This is borne out by the omission of the independent, student-centred learning content, especially from Stage 5.

Whilst some members could see that the syllabus provided for a range of teaching styles, they felt that the poor organisation and extensive content does not allow for the development of deep understanding.

Surely we are not moving back to teacher directed lessons! There appears to be no acknowledgement of quality teaching in it.

Members were asked if the document provided adequate direction to teachers in valuing teacher professionalism and judgement and expressed a range of views on this question.

Answer Options	Response Percent
Yes	56.8%
No	43.2%

Some felt that the greater prescription in the draft syllabus was desirable and supported teachers:

Teachers are highly professional. However, they acknowledge the need for explicit content to be provided to them, particularly in the area of knowledge of language.

Concepts and textual selection continue to be the responsibility of the teacher. Giving teachers some direction as to particular skills, metalanguage and forms provides a framework to work effectively within, rather than the current document that gives English teachers permission to self-indulge their own interests without any limits.

Against these views, the majority of members who commented on this question considered that the high degree of prescription worked against teachers' professional judgement about the particular needs of their classes:

The extensive prescriptions and the low baseline don't value the desire of teachers to teach for excellence, quality and deep understanding. We want to do it better (and the curriculum should reflect that)!

It is contradictory and does not value teacher judgement sufficiently.

Too prescriptive and doesn't trust professional judgement.

More flexibility needed.

Being heavily biased towards teacher instruction is not the same thing as valuing professionalism and judgement. In fact, if this were so, there would be fewer nit-picky, prescriptive and repetitive grammar items, for example.

Over-prescriptive content does not value our judgement.

When asked whether the syllabus allowed sufficient scope for local curriculum development there was considerable agreement in the statistics.

Answer Options	Response Percent
Yes	63.2%
No	36.8%

Yes there is plenty of scope but perhaps not lots of spare time for school developed focus.

However, amongst those who said yes there were reservations

I will go with 'yes', but it is a bit hard to say. I think that because this document appears to have been written with only the average student in mind, teachers will be forced to adjust for their own particular conditions.

I'm not sure it does but I think teachers will do so anyway.

How far can you go and still be justifiably teaching the syllabus?

Some felt that the prescriptiveness of the document does not provide enough guidance or flexibility for adjustments to local circumstances:

Too prescriptive.

Far too prescriptive.

CONCLUSION

While the statistics tend to show that ETA members tend to fall equally on both sides of the yes/no divide in their quantitative responses, the comments that they have made about their choices are overwhelmingly negative. They recognise the difficulty of the task of blending the ACARA document, which offers a particularised view of English, with the NSW approach to syllabus which represents an integration of the different elements and perspectives of the discipline. They believe that there is still a lot of work to be done to address this intractable problem.

Members have identified aspects of the ACARA document that have not been sufficiently counterbalanced by the draft syllabus to address the needs of NSW students and teachers. These stem from the limitation of the Values and Attitudes objectives in not giving sufficient weight to

- pleasures of English study through imaginative exploration
- the affective and empathetic
- the development of student agency and independence.

This has resulted in a document in which the prescriptions are overly detailed and fragmented making it difficult to grasp a meaningful understanding of the subject and thrusting particularities of content into the centre of the subject to displace its rightful heart, the student.