



Response to Consultation Strengthening Australian Literature in the NSW English Curriculum

INTRODUCTION

The English Teachers' Association (ETA) is a voluntary group of professionals with a membership of over 1,800 individual English teachers in New South Wales and 300 English faculties.

To compile this document, the ETA invited members to complete the Board of Studies survey or to email ETA directly with comments in response to the issues raised in the survey. In addition, a video conference in regional branches was held to allow for a fuller discussion of the issues. There have been a total of 43 responses, some of which represent entire faculties.

The report from the video conference and the views expressed by individual ETA members have been integrated into this response for the New South Wales Board of Studies.

THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

The ETA is keen to participate in the development of curriculum in this way and thanks the Board for this opportunity. We need to point out, however, that the consultation on this issue has taken place at the worst time of year for English teachers. They are particularly pressured with Trial HSC marking, submission of Extension 2 projects and student HSC assessment results to the Board of Studies and many are unable to give these proposals the close consideration that they require.

Of additional concern is the fact that members in regional areas have reported that they were unaware of the consultation meetings taking place. This highlights issues about the efficiency and reach of the consultation process set in train. Regardless of the intentions behind the consultation process, teachers have expressed concerns that this is not a genuine consultation.

GENERAL ISSUES

Australian literature in English courses

ETA members have conveyed their surprise at this initiative as they believe that Australian literature is richly evident in NSW English syllabuses and is already emphasised in schools at every possible opportunity. They question why these additional requirements are necessary and whether the Board has conducted surveys to ascertain how many and what kinds of Australian texts are actually being taught.

ETA members do not believe that there is any need to impose further restrictions on professional choice and judgement than those that are already in English syllabuses.

Definitions

1. Australian

Many schools are committed to the notion and practice of diversity and do not want to see a narrow or exclusive interpretation of 'Australian' and Australian concerns.

ETA members believe that any definition of 'Australian' needs to see Australia in a global context, and to take account of Indigenous and multicultural perspectives.

2. Literature and print medium

The ETA is most concerned at the use of the term 'literature' which remains, as it is in other English syllabuses, undefined. Dictionary definitions are very broad and generally accord with the Macquarie Dictionary

writing in which expression and form, in connection with ideas of permanent and universal interest are characteristic or essential features.

This definition of literature allows for generic and technological innovation and does not exclude such forms as non-fiction, the graphic novel, animated poetry or hypertext fiction. While we have no issue with its remaining an open definition, and indeed in these times of change believe it is prudent that it remain so, we are disturbed by the reductive modifications applied to it in this document which, by their nature, tend to exclude contemporary literary works. These modifications are most evident in

- the abandonment of the term 'text' when dealing with Australian literature. This cuts across the conceptual foundations of the syllabus whose central purpose is for students to come to understand how meaning is made in and through texts. At students' level of experience, this is best done through judicious comparison to highlight similarities and differences. This puts Australian literature outside students' other textual experiences and as such, can only be detrimental to their cultural understanding and appreciation
- the privileging of 'print medium'. This stipulation harnesses Australian literary achievements to an important technology, but one that no longer enjoys the cultural predominance it once enjoyed. For some time, the term has lost its stability and its exclusive hold on the literary. Does drama count as the print medium given the fact that, through performance, it exceeds it? Where does electronic literature sit in this or graphic novels? What about electronic versions of previously printed texts, particularly given significant digital archive projects being undertaken as a way of returning to us Australian works which have long been out of print?

Traditional print is financially and ecologically expensive and the gradual increase of electronically generated texts will in all probability, see fewer books in circulation in favour of online delivery. Furthermore, this technical issue is significant in an English course as we cannot ignore the fact that the physical properties of e-books reconfigure the quality of the reading experience itself.

- the exclusion of forms and media which are consistent with the definition of literature but go beyond the print medium. This fails to recognise artistic achievement in other modes and media such as film, text in performance, graphic novels and animated poetry.

ETA members feel strongly that a definition of literature with a restriction to the print medium is imprudent, reductive, short-sighted and, most importantly, undermines the integrity of current English syllabuses.

SPECIFIC CURRICULUM AREAS

1. English K-6

Amendment 2

The ETA endorses in principle the increased specification of ways that Australian literature may be incorporated into K-6 English. Teachers recognise that support for teachers, particularly non-specialist English teachers is critical for the effective delivery of the English curriculum.

This, however, is precisely the reason we have concerns about the details of this support. While these may be seen only as examples, there are key omissions that can be read as significant. Literary nonfiction is absent and drama is not identified as a genre of text for study. Given that the study of drama entails performance, this signals the very problematic nature of restricting these proposals to the print medium rather than recognising that Australian literature is manifested as texts.

Amendment 3

- *Publish on the Board's website a reference list of reputable, authoritative websites providing titles and authors of quality Australian literature.*

The ETA believes that the inclusion of “references to lists of quality Australian literature” instead of a recommendation of texts developed in consultation with teachers sends out a message that undermines the expertise and professionalism of teachers. We understand that such lists have the advantage of being updated regularly. Our point is that criteria for assessing the worth of the list should include that the list has had teacher input in either the formulation of the list or its subsequent evaluation and review.

- *Teachers will provide opportunities for students to discuss and analyse texts critically and with appreciation.*

The classroom activities implied in this statement are narrowly restricted to a receptive study of an Australian ‘canon’. It ignores such rich approaches as imaginative recreation, creative intervention or different frames of response — all of which can bring together notions of creation, critique, aesthetics and pleasure.

ETA members believe that the amendments to the K-6 English syllabus do not provide the richness of direction required for non-specialist English teachers particularly in the areas of what could constitute literature and the kinds of creative responses it may inspire. They also think that teacher professionalism needs to be acknowledged by specifying their involvement in the development of recommended text lists.

2. English 7-10

There was overwhelming agreement among ETA members that Stages 4-5 needs to cater for a broad range of students and contexts. They recognise that its aim is to provide students with a rich learning environment and that Australian literature is already an integral component of English classrooms and does not need to be mandated by additional requirements in English syllabuses.

Amendment 1

- *Students in Stage 4 must read, listen to and view a variety of texts, including Australian literary and other texts*

ETA members strongly object to the binary established in which Australian literature is privileged over other texts and the literature of other cultures. This determination to focus

on literature is problematic because of definitional issues outlined above and comes at the cost of significant elements of the curriculum, such as dramatic performance, film, computer generated texts and visual texts. This is particularly so for those schools which have made a commitment to cultural diversity in the texts they study and already include Australian texts, both historical and modern.

- *Students will undertake the essential content and work towards course outcomes through close reading, listening to and/or viewing the following:*

There was some confusion expressed as to the purpose of this deletion. An ambiguity exists here. Is the intention to remove film and television as a stand alone media for study or is it simply removing what may be seen as a tautology?

If the former, the ETA strongly objects to any reduction in the status of film and television in English syllabuses.

Amendment 2

- *At least two need to be drawn from different types of Australian literature in the print medium*

This point is taken up in the definitional issues at the beginning of this report.

Amendment 3

- *The selected texts **must include***

There was some perplexity expressed about the purpose of this change and whether it would in fact be counter productive as its effect would similarly strengthen the other aspects of the curriculum specified in the list. It also intensifies the problem for those respondents who claim that it is difficult enough to accommodate all the other requirements of the syllabus for their range of students.

- ~~a widely defined~~ Australian literature

There was some concern expressed at the removal of the qualifier 'widely defined', particularly as no definition of Australian or literature or a combination of both is included in the document. Moreover, a broad definition of literature becomes very important at primary and junior secondary as students are generally reading works that are not necessarily part of a literary canon. Teachers need the flexibility that will allow them to begin from where their students are 'at' and then move them on in an appropriate and supportive way. Increased prescription is not helpful in this regard.

The ETA opposes the selective nomination of some types of text as this implies hierarchies in generic form and medium rather than in the qualities of the texts themselves. Members are particularly concerned at the narrowing of the definition of literature in the syllabus and believe that strengthening the inclusions in the syllabus restricts the capacity of teachers to effectively support weaker students.

3. STAGE 6: Preliminary English (Extension)

It is this aspect of the proposal that caused the most antagonism amongst members. They were particularly annoyed by the mandatory nature of the module which they saw as restrictive, unpopular with students and doing little to prepare students for Extension courses in the HSC year.

There were also questions about the choice of Preliminary (Extension) as the positioning of an Australian literature module. As this course is not one which includes the majority of students, it hardly seems appropriate as a site for strengthening Australian literature in the English curriculum and constitutes a very limited response to the Minister's directive regarding the study of Australian literature at a 'high level'. Suggestions for earlier years involved all students. In practical terms, focusing this kind of Australian literature on 'elite' students at Stage 6 could have the unintended consequence of reducing its availability for Advanced students in the interests of designing a balanced course for their Extension classmates.

This proposal is also a violation of the conceptual design and coherence of the Syllabus itself. It does not accord with the rationale of Extension courses which requires students to

*explore multiple meanings and **relative values of texts**. They explore **a range of conceptual frameworks** for the reading and composition of texts and examine **a range of reading practices to develop awareness of the assumptions that guide interpretation and evaluation**.*

The restricted scope of the proposal does not provide enough basis for the comparative and contrastive practices needed for students at Stage 6 to understand these sophisticated concepts.

Similarly, the narrow focus of the module does not allow students to meet the first outcome of the Extension 1 course which requires students to understand

*how and why texts are valued in and appropriated into **a range of contexts**.*

Additionally, the increased load of content will limit students' capacity to develop the skills of investigation and independent learning that are required for success at the HSC Extension 1 and Extension 2 courses.

So the proposal for the mandatory module in the Preliminary Extension course ironically has the effect of 'dumbing down' the curriculum at what should be a high level of English study. It also signals an insularity and lack of confidence about the place of Australian achievement in world literature reminiscent of the 'cultural cringe' that we thought had been laid to rest.

Members also saw issues with the proposed examples.

Model 1. Author Studies

An author study usually involves the study of the work of one author, not two. Moreover, an author study limited to two texts is unlikely to provide the kinds of insights necessary to understand an entire corpus. When the author study is then extended to "2 texts from two significant Australian authors", through different textual forms as the example suggests, this proposal becomes unworkable, particularly in the time available for the module.

Furthermore, this example once again highlights the problem of restricting this course to the print medium as the implication here is that once drama texts are realised in performance, they no longer qualify as literary.

Model 2. Historical Periods

This suggestion foreshadows the current Module in HSC Extension 1 Course which “requires students to explore and evaluate a selection of texts relating to a particular historical period.” As such, it risks providing an opportunity for repetition of study in Year 12, contravening the syllabus injunction that ‘Preliminary electives are not to duplicate the prescribed HSC modules, electives or texts.’ (p.43) This constraint was not previously included in the Extension course requirements simply because duplication was not possible under the previous course structure.

Furthermore, Australian writing needs to be viewed in a world context to have meaning beyond the superficial. Perhaps a more productive exploration would be considering literary movements or trends rather than historical periods and how they are manifested overseas and in Australia.

The Colonial Period

This suggestion highlights the problem of nationalistic approach to the study of ideas and expression. Why privilege some locally produced diaries or little known plays and poems produced in the early days of the colony over the rich writing of the later classical period and the romantic revolution produced elsewhere? The curriculum is already crowded. We need to be selective to ensure our students get the best out of their time. Further, such a proposal papers over debates within the literary community as to when a ‘truly’ Australian literature – a nationalistic literature – really began. It provides a simplistic and unproblematic vision of our cultural history and issues of national identity by equating colonial literature with Australian literature. Of course, in the 15 weeks (i.e. 21 lessons on a timetable that runs on a 2 week cycle and a 4 period day) available for this module, such debates can hardly be done justice, if entertained at all.

Australia at War

This suggestion is more appropriate to a history or civics course than English or literature. Given that Australia has fought in wars from South Africa to Afghanistan, there will be little literary unity to be found here. This is particularly the case when so much is written about any period in later periods and when, perhaps, the most telling insightful material that comes out of these events does not conventionally qualify as ‘literary’ or print.

The Contemporary Era

The definition of literature implied by this document does not allow for a convincing study of the literature of our own time where the biggest issue the way in which what is deemed literary now exceeds the print medium. In an age of convergence of media and of multimedia, the restriction to print is distorting. Who writes these days without an eye on the filmic possibilities? What understanding is to be gained by ignoring the literary experiences of the majority of the population? How do you even begin to understand contemporary Australia and issues of national identity without reference to film and television, and the Australian film and television industries?

Model 3. Thematic Study

Module Title: *Representations of Australia*

Several concerns were raised over this proposal. Firstly, there is the issue of a theme study itself. Theme suggests unity of idea which creates an immediate tension between this and the Module title which looks at ‘representations’. ‘Representations’ does not

have that unifying overlay and allows for contradiction and problematising - as is the case in the Area of Study. Members questioned why students in an Extension course should be meeting fewer challenges through a theme study than all other students address through the complexities of the common content.

This model also replicates the HSC Advanced Module C module and so again, contravenes the syllabus injunction that 'Preliminary electives are not to duplicate the prescribed HSC modules, electives or texts.' (p.43)

Furthermore, none of the suggested modules is possible without going outside of Australia: pastoral, time / history, and landscapes are all defined elsewhere and students can only understand Australian manifestations in relation to the 'other'.

Budgetary issues

Members also drew attention to the issue of financing the purchase of new books. They claim that funding for resources is diverted into technology. This means that Australian literature changes will be accommodated with what is in the book room or the Library. This will not result in innovative interpretations of the requirements but is likely to deaden what has been an exciting and popular English course.

The ETA strongly opposes the addition of this mandatory module in the Preliminary English Extension course as it

- does not accord with the rationale of Extension courses
- does not provide sufficient opportunities for the achievement of course outcomes
- contravenes the injunction against duplication of HSC electives and modules
- fails to provide opportunities for extension of student knowledge, understanding, skills and values
- fails to provide structures for the study of literature appropriate to an English course.

ETA SUGGESTIONS

In responses from members there were some suggestions for ways in which Australian literature may be further strengthened in NSW English syllabuses.

1. K-6

ETA members suggest the inclusion of further examples of student activities using Australian literature to include

- dramatic performance
- film and other visual aspects of literary achievement
- imaginative recreation of Australian literary texts
- creative activities stimulated by Australian literary texts.

2. 7-10

ETA members strongly urge the removal of all proposed amendments in the 7-10 syllabus, particularly the limitation to print medium, and simply include in the Content and Text requirements for stages 4 and 5:

Students in Stage 4/ Stage 5 must read, listen to and view a variety of texts, **including Australian literature**, that are appropriate to their needs, interests and abilities.

3. Stage 6

ETA members are of the firm opinion that the study of Australian literature already pervades the Stage 6 syllabus. They point to the Rationale of all courses

Standard

These courses provide diverse approaches to texts so that students may become flexible and critical thinkers, capable of appreciating the variety of cultural heritages and differences that make up Australian society. p.22

Advanced

Students are encouraged to value a range of approaches to texts so that they may become flexible and critical thinkers, capable of appreciating the variety of cultural heritages and differences that make up Australian society. p.41

ESL

This development of English language skills, knowledge and understanding, and engagement with literature, will increase students' understanding of the diversity and values of Australian and other cultures. p. 59

They claim that the 'highest level' of inclusion should involve all students and suggest that literature can be made explicit by

1. including a reference in the course requirements

In the Preliminary English (Standard) and (Advanced) courses, students are required to:

- study Australian and other texts
 - **Undertake a study of Australian literature**

or

2. adding another course objective

Students will come to **value and appreciate**:

- **The importance of Australian literature to the world of ideas and artistic expression**

or

3. developing an additional outcome

6. A student engages with a wide range of texts to develop a considered and informed personal response.	6. Students learn about the ways they can respond to texts by: 6.1 engaging with a wide range of texts in personal, social, historical, cultural and workplace contexts 6.2 relating responses to aspects of human experience 6.3 composing personal responses to texts and considering the responses of others 6.4 discussing and reflecting on the wider issues arising from their engagement with texts.
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<p>6a A student engages with a range of Australian literary texts for various and specified purposes</p>	<p>6a Students learn about Australian literature by 6a.1 reading and responding personally to a selection of Australian literature 6a.2 comparing Australian literature to other Australian texts or to literary texts from other countries 6a.3 considering the value of these texts as ‘Australian’ or as ‘literature’.</p>
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or

4. making it the core of the Area of Study which is the ‘highest level’ attained by the majority of students as it is the most challenging part of the Standard course and an integral (40%) part of Advanced.

An Area of Study is the exploration of a concept that affects our perceptions of ourselves and our world. **In the Preliminary course, the exploration of this concept springs from a work of Australian literature.**

or

5. adding it to a requirement for electives

The electives require students to explore the ways particular texts, forms, media, contexts or aspects of language shape meaning.

The electives are developed by teachers to allow for:

- their students’ needs, interests and abilities
- choice of approach • choice of texts for study
- student–teacher negotiation of content.

In the Preliminary Course at least one elective must involve a selection of Australian literature.

Each of these suggestions

- highlight the study of Australian literature
- blend naturally into the conceptual design of the syllabus and
- ensure a study of Australian literature for *all* students.

CONCLUSIONS

While the ETA believes that there is already adequate representation of Australian literature taught in NSW schools in years K-11, members are happy to see its presence *further* strengthened under such circumstances that

- recognise the range and fluidity of media of textual production in the early 21st century and
- accord with the conceptual design of current NSW English syllabuses.