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To English Learning Area team and Course Advisory Committee: English.

Re: English Course Review

On behalf of the English Teachers Association of Western Australia (ETAWA) and the University of Western Australia's English and Literary Studies discipline group, we would like to formally submit the following for consideration in discussing the pressing need for an English course review.

This submission is in two parts: the case for review and priorities for the review. The submission represents findings from The Big Picture Project (a joint project between ETAWA and UWA), as well as specific consultation with secondary and tertiary English teachers regarding the English and Literature courses. To date the ETAWA have invested a total of \$371,694 in the project which has partly been used to investigate the need for a course review. This project took initial direction from the Course Advisory Committee for English to investigate the Year 12 ATAR English Syllabus Audit of 2018 and what could be revealed about schools' adherence to the assessment requirements of this course.

Part 1: The Case for Review

As has previously been presented to The Authority, some of the most pressing concerns for subject English and the future of the subject in WA could be resolved by reviewing the senior secondary English and Literature courses.

The research findings and consultations of the Big Picture Project have demonstrated that the ATAR English course, particularly in Year 12, shapes the programming, pedagogy, and assessment of the essential content of secondary English. While we recognise this is not best practice, it is the reality of what is happening in schools across Western Australia. Teaching English in WA is currently characterised by confusion and a teaching community with waning confidence in their knowledge and understanding of concepts central to the discipline. Our findings have shown that this lack of teacher confidence translates to students demonstrating hesitancy and a lack of critical engagement with the courses. We believe that this is, in part, created by some critical issues with senior secondary courses that are outlined below.

Conceptual Confusion

The findings of the Big Picture Project showed that there was confusion around the following concepts: voice, style, narrative point of view, perspectives, contexts, transformation, adaptation, and multiple readings. We also found there was a lack of pedagogical understanding around creative writing, as well as several Cultural Studies concepts that are embedded within the current courses. This confusion was evident through the analysis of course outlines and the construction of school-based assessment tasks, as well as trends in student responses, requests for Professional Development on course concepts, and teacher consultation.

Another issue evident in the findings of the project was the examinable content. One clear problem with the expression of the examinable content in the English courses is that the terminology used does not target the skills of the discipline. There is a layer of metalanguage and specific skills that sits below the concepts named in the syllabus. This impacts the teaching of the course, especially for those teaching out of their area, as concepts not explicitly stated by the syllabus means teachers are not aware of the need to target them in teaching. This also restricts the examination of the course which is required to examine the syllabus content and use the included terminology. This is particularly noticeable when setting Section 1 questions where language devices and stylistic features need to be specifically targeted but cannot as that language is absent from the syllabus.

Continuity of AC: English

Reports to the ETAWA have found that English teachers are concerned with the continuity of learning in English as students move from AC: English to the senior courses, particularly in the definitional understandings of key concepts and the standard expected of students. This is a particular concern for students going onto study the Foundation and General courses of English as there are fewer connections between AC: English 7 – 10 and these courses. As this group is a group characterised by their vulnerability in subject English, we find this to be concerning and a cause for review.

The Big Picture Project found that a considerable number of schools are designing all English courses (7-12), or at least their assessment structures, using the ATAR exam as the guiding document. This is a confused interpretation of the Backward Design, or Backward Mapping, methodology and indicates the pressures currently placed on teachers to demonstrate accountability to the ATAR examination. It also draws attention to the narrowness of the examination as an assessment of the English course as lower school learning is reduced in scope because of this planning method.

Validity of Assessment, including the Exam Design Brief

Course Weightings - The Year 12 ATAR English syllabus stipulates the school-based assessment weightings for Responding and Creating are 35% each, i.e., have an equal weighting. The Authority's own audit, as presented to the Course Advisory Committee in 2018, recognised that many schools had misassigned assessments as 'Creating' that were in fact 'Responding' assessments. Through prompting from the Course Advisory Committee, the Big Picture Project investigated this further and found that 14.5% of 'Creating' assessments addressed 'Responding' criteria, not 'Creating'. This was also true for the sample assessment tasks created by The Authority.

One plausible reason for schools to emphasise responding over creating is that the current examination design brief allocates two sections, and 70% of all marks, to skills relating to responding. There is clearly confusion over how to allocate tasks under these categories. This is understandable considering the interconnectedness of the skills and knowledge between responding and creating, or

at least studying the works of others to inform creative practice and output. It would be useful to reconsider this structure.

Reliance on Examination Models for Assessment - Findings from The Big Picture Project indicated a reliance on the ATAR exam as a model for creating programs. This was particularly evident in the questions being asked of students in assessments as these were taken directly from past exams. An overwhelming majority of students' school-based assessments are replicas of an examination section, often named as such on the assessment outline. Oral tasks are also modelled on examination sections with students delivering a response to a past-examination question to the audience. Many journal tasks are also examination-style responses and creative opportunities are modelled on Section 3 of the examination without opportunities for planning, drafting, workshopping, or editing. This can be explained by schools seeking to prepare students for the examination, as well as working to ensure school results are parable with examination performance. This might also be due to the vague expression of the school-based assessment categories in the English courses.

Examination Design Brief - The current Examination Design Brief is a narrow extrapolation of the English course, and 30% of the exam (Section 1) is shaped by the tertiary sector and their need for academic literacy. This has created a tension in this section of the examination due to a wide range of potential texts and the level and phrasing of examinable content of the English course used in the phrasing of questions. (See above.) The mean in this section of the examination sits well below the other sections, and despite specific attention to increase this mean, it is still lagging.

As addressed above, the examination privileges different skills and knowledge from the overall course, as evidenced by the examination marks distribution. This difference, along with the very narrow interpretation of statistical accountability used in schools, means that the teaching of the full course is compromised as teachers attempt to make school marks replicate expected examination results as closely as possible.

Creative writing under timed conditions - A key area of investigation of the Big Picture Project is the pedagogies of creative writing. This was initially set because of the number of teachers making enquiries about Professional Development regarding this topic. Through a survey of over 100 English teachers the project has revealed a growing confidence in teachers relating to teaching creative writing, but a dissatisfaction in relation to the methods of assessment and particularly time. Timed writing and creative processes are not easily reconciled, and other ATAR courses that involve creative assessment components have other methods of incorporating good creative practice into the assessment of the creative product. While we have seen a very slight increase in examination performance in this section of the examination, we have seen a reduction in schools utilising creative pedagogies and enabling students to fully explore writing processes.

Influence in Lower School Learning - Of great concern (as mentioned above) is that the ATAR exam is being used as the model for all assessments within the course. Through ETAWA Professional Development discussions we have also found that teachers are using the exam as a model for writing assessments and programs down to Year 7 in preparation for the ATAR exam. In addition, the increase in lower school examinations, often modelled on the ATAR examination, is of note.

Section 1 as Academic Literacy Assessment - The tertiary entrance process is currently altering, and a scaled score of 50% in the English examination is no longer a requirement for several WA universities. As the Responding Section was designed for this purpose, it is time to review the need for the English examination to be shaped by this requirement. If this review were to find it is still

necessary for the English examination to act as an academic literacy requirement, a further review of the effectiveness of the current model would be essential.

Declining Mean and Student Performance

Since the introduction of this course there has been a decline in examination performance as indicated through the mean of the paper. It is reasonable to expect a slight improvement in mean as a course becomes more familiar to teachers, and with the lower performing students moving to General English (in 2016 there were 11,285 students in the Year 12 ATAR English course, whereas in 2020 there were 9,821). The individual data for each section can be seen to correlate to the concerns about the course as previously stated in the pedagogical and programming approaches to the course. This is particularly evident in Section 2, which is worth 40% of the overall exam, and assesses the key concepts of the course as well as students' studied texts.

Year	Overall Mean	Section 1 Mean	Section 2 Mean	Section 3 Mean
2016	59.12%	55.63%	62.45%	59%
2017	59.3%	57.47%	61.28%	59.03%
2018	58.16%	54.17%	60.9%	59.13%
2019	57.08%	51.93%	58.3%	61.27%
2020	57.05%	53.3%	58.3%	59.13%
Difference	-2.07%	-2.33%	-4.15%	+0.13%

This data supports the arguments above concerning teacher confusion and declining confidence regarding the concepts being assessed in the exam. Below is a table identifying the key concepts and how well these were engaged with for each section of the exam from 2016 to 2020.

Section	Concept(s)	Performance
Section 1	Point of view, character, comparison, perspective, setting.	Lowest
Section 1	Visual texts, symbolism.	Highest
Section 2	Transformation, omission and marginalisation, point of view, values, multiple reading, context.	Lowest
Section 2	Mode, genre, generic conventions.	Highest
Section 3	Interpretive, persuasive.	Lowest
Section 3	Imaginative	Highest

A further consideration of this data draws attention to the reliability of recent examinations as a tool of measurement. This is particularly critical in Sections 2 and 3 of the examination where student choose the one question from 5 or 6 options. In 2020 the means in Section 2 for the questions ranged from 45.95% to 63.2%. This is a concern for examination construction; but it also highlights the capacity for students to cope with certain concepts from the syllabus, all of which must be assessed every three years.

Theoretical Discrepancy

A detailed analysis of the theoretical basis for the WA English and Literature courses can provide reasons for much of the confusion that teachers experience. As an adapted form of the Australian Curriculum senior secondary courses, WA's English courses infused a Cultural Studies inflection from our previous state derived courses into the nationally derived courses that are based on literary

studies and functional literacy models. This, combined with the additional need for academic literacy from the universities, means that the theoretic model that we work with contains tensions. These tensions are felt at various levels of the syllabus, including the use of terminology, conceptual frameworks, and assessment. These tensions complicate pedagogical choices and cannot be resolved by teachers to achieve clear explanations for classroom teaching or ensure confidence in teachers or students that full understanding of the course can be achieved. It is necessary to resolve some of these tensions through a review of the English and Literature courses. In addition, the Literature and English courses need to be reviewed simultaneously to help resolve some of these tensions.

Tertiary Perspective

The Big Picture Project conducted a symposium with tertiary teachers of English and English-related courses discussing the standard of in-coming first year students, their skills, conceptual understandings, and critical thinking skills. Several teachers spoke of student requests to have templates and model answers, with students lacking independence when writing arguments, creating original works, or constructing readings of texts – this was considered a new development by tertiary teachers. Teachers also explained that first year students now require more support in courses than in the past and demonstrated less capacity for critical thinking. There were no specific comments around subject knowledge.

The project has also investigated the expected standard for students in Year 12 and first year tertiary English courses. By examining the tertiary assessments and comparing them to the ATAR English examination, the ATAR course demands more than a first-year course. This concern is also borne out by comparisons to other ATAR scoring English courses across Australia. Therefore, the standard of the ATAR English course should be a subject of the review. (See recommendations below.)

A further consideration of the project is how the current English and Literature courses align with the discipline at a tertiary level. At this point in time there are some important disparities between WA's senior secondary courses and the wider discipline. In addition, the discipline at tertiary level is in decline due to dropping enrolments at most universities for English units. This is problematic for several reasons, one being the education of English teachers. Without tertiary enrolment, we do not have a secure future for the teaching of our discipline. It is critical that we look for ways to improve the relationship between second and tertiary English.

Timing and Scope of Course

The Authority has already recognised the excessive number of assessments contained in some school's assessment outlines, recommended a reduction to 8 rich tasks (including examinations) rather than multiple (re)assessments in each semester. Materials have already been produced to support teachers in designing courses that meet this recommendation. These resources, and the requirement to have 8 assessments, will not come into place until a course review has been completed. As this recommendation was explained as pertaining to student well-being it should be implemented as soon as possible.

Consultation with teachers has also drawn attention to the capacity to study all course content in depth during the teaching time available. There are several concepts listed in the examinable content that require lengthy studies to address, such as "how responses to texts and genres may change over time and in different cultural contexts." Anecdotal evidence from teachers records how they are forced to make decisions to exclude some content and advise students not to answer

questions on these concepts in the examination, as there is not enough teaching time to cover the whole syllabus.

A further difficulty in addressing the whole syllabus relates to the range of texts students can be asked to respond to or create in the examination. The Big Picture Project's analysis demonstrates a growing trend for schools to teach excerpts and short texts to expose students to the numerous possibilities of the exam.

Part 2: Priorities for Review

Review of the theoretical underpinning of the course

Consideration by teachers and scholars of curriculum history is needed to determine what theoretical tensions are present within the courses. Resolving these competing theoretical pressures, through small amendments to the phrasing of course content, would enable greater cohesion in the course and alleviate much of the anxiety associated with the teaching of the course.

Examination Design Brief and School-based Assessment Table

Various models of examination design briefs should be considered to determine the most effective and fair methods through which to assess the course. This will need consultation with TISC and universities with regards to university entrance to ascertain whether the English examination is still required as an indicator of academic literacy.

Some potential areas to investigate are:

- Separate design briefs for Year 11 and 12 so that text types assessable in each year could be narrowed in all sections.
- A separate submission mechanism for writing assessment so that the teaching of writing is not focused on timed writing, but instead enables best writing practices to become part of students' learning
- A shorter examination
- Set questions or concepts for Section 1

More detail around different methods of school-based assessment would be helpful to those designing school programs. A revision of assessment weighting should also be explored.

Clarification of Specific Course Concepts

Reviewing the phrasing, terminology and scope of content is essential. This should include a close review of the course glossary and the theories used to define the concepts. Additionally, close consideration of recent ATAR Marking Guides elude clarity in dealing with concepts relying on glossary definitions rather than demonstrating how candidates might apply a practical knowledge of concepts in their responses. As these documents serve as useful teaching and professional learning tools, they might be improved to assist the explanation of concepts.

Revision of Marking Practices

Consideration of various marking models is imperative. ETAWA has been offering to collaborate on a study into the efficacy of different methods in English for several years. This should also be extended

to consider standard setting and a full interrogation of the reconciliation statistics from the ATAR exam if we are to find the most effective method of judging student performance.

Course Standard

Considering the standard expected level of understanding and performance by the ATAR, General and Foundation English courses is a critical aspect of the review. Comparing the phrasing of concepts across the three levels of the course demonstrates problems with the pitch of the courses, with standards often being determined by our understanding and experience of the students rather than the syllabus or Grade Descriptors. Additionally, close review of recent ATAR Marking Guides demonstrates the elevated standard expected of students.

This investigation of standard should also focus on the transition from Year 10 into tertiary or workplace studies.

The Authority Materials and Suggested Text List

The Authority's support materials available have already been reviewed but cannot be made available to teachers until the course review is complete. However, with a full review of the course, these might need further amendment.

The Suggested Text List also requires amendment to greater reflect useful recommendations, but also a set of criteria for text selection so that teachers can be guided in their text selection and gain confidence in this process. As the ATAR, General and Foundation English courses do not operate with a Prescribed Text List this set of criteria is particularly important. It would also be useful for the Suggested List to be located outside the syllabus so that it can be updated as new works become available. This would work in line with the desire for this course to introduce students to classic and contemporary texts from various contexts and demonstrating a range of styles.

Managing Anxiety of Change

The analysis and recommendations represented in this submission are presented with the idea of managing anxiety. As explained above, English teachers report various elements of stress in relation to the teaching of this course, and changing the syllabus content, examination design or assessment structure will address some of these pressures. However, change often induces anxiety. Acting proactively, and expeditiously, to make amendments to this course now will avoid wide-scale change in coming years.

We thank you for your consideration of this submission. ETAWA are committed to supporting teachers through this process by communicating our fully-referenced research and collaboration findings to teachers throughout the state to help explain the need for review. We are also committed to producing resources and providing Professional Development through various platforms to assist transition to an improved course.

Your sincerely,

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