

# **ETAWA Submission**

## **Review of Australian Curriculum: English**

### **1. Background information:**

The English Teachers Association of Western Australia (ETAWA) is a not-for-profit professional association which aims to promote English and Literature and the teaching thereof, as well as engaging in discussions about developments in teaching practice and theory. There are over 900 members of the association who are generally secondary teachers, with tertiary educators in Education, Literary Studies, Cultural Studies and Creative Writing fields, and a small number of primary English specialist teachers. Members are located throughout the state, including regional and remote teaching contexts, as well as Indigenous community schools.

With the April 29<sup>th</sup> release of ACARA's review documents, ETAWA launched a consultation series with collaborative sessions held in metropolitan Perth, the regional centres of Karratha, Geraldton, Kununurra and Kalgoorlie, as well as web sessions to cater for teachers in areas without face-to-face sessions. Transcripts of these sessions collected contributions from teachers regarding their responses to and queries about the proposed changes, and a survey (open to all) analysed views about the revised curriculum. Survey data and consultation session transcript references are included in this submission. In addition, ETAWA utilised the experience and collective knowledge of the association's council and executive, as well as locally-based academics, to shape this response. ETAWA has also submitted feedback to the WA School Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCSA) and the WA Minister for Education, Sue Ellery.

ETAWA acknowledges the aims of ACARA and supports the efforts to refine the Australian Curriculum: English. Survey responses concurred with the need for amendments to the English curriculum and most respondents reported appreciation for the efforts to refine and declutter the curriculum. A number of survey respondents and consultation session attendees expressed that the review was a missed opportunity to do more in terms of refining the curriculum content, and to embed the Alice Springs Education Declaration (2019) in a more complex and authentic way.

ETAWA respects and supports the Alice Springs Education Declaration (2019) and ACARA's commitment to incorporate the central tenets of the declaration in the English curriculum. The proposed changes relating to the increased representation of First Nations peoples in the English curriculum, and the improved educational experience and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young peoples, are supported by the association.

ETAWA also acknowledges that each state or territory educational jurisdiction has its own curriculum history, regional and demographic diversities, and imperatives to prepare students for distinct senior secondary English courses. As such, the national curriculum for English acts as a foundational document, providing a national framework and standard, allowing for jurisdictional difference in implementation.

**ETAWA's position on the proposed changes (released April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2021) is that;**

- **The recommendation of the Alice Springs Education Declaration should be incorporated into the English curriculum as soon as practicable.**
- **The proposed changes in part achieve the aims of decluttering, refining and realigning the curriculum, yet further redrafting is necessary to ensure a clear, fair and accessible curriculum document.**
- **Consultation with WA Aboriginal communities and educational and literary representatives is essential to ensure sensitive uses of terminology, cultural heritage models and literary examples in specific educational contexts.**

The association seeks an improved version of the Australian Curriculum: English that can meet the aims of the ACARA review, while also satisfying the principles below regarding curriculum.

The revised curriculum should;

- maintain the shared understandings of subject English
- provide a 'teachable' framework for classroom teachers
- enable accessibility and inclusivity for all students in subject English classrooms
- allow teachers to construct fair and equitable methods of assessment and judgement
- prepare students for senior secondary pathways.

**The proposed changes do not deliver a curriculum document that meets these criteria.**

This report draws attention to areas of the curriculum that ETAWA believes to be problematic and, where appropriate, suggests changes or alternatives to the framing or expression of the review documents.

## **2. Shared Concerns and Suggestions:**

### **Shared understandings of subject English**

The suggested changes to the English curriculum alter the shared understandings of subject English. The addition of the five Core Concepts, and the redistribution of content descriptors within the Literature strand, shift the focus of the discipline away from literature as a foundation of the subject and concentrate greater attention on the Literacy strand and particularly the grammatic aspects within the Language strand. Retaining the balance of these strands is imperative to maintaining the integrity of the curriculum and to address the varied concerns of K-10 English educators.

Those responding to ETAWA's survey supported the inclusion of Core Concepts in principle but provided useful criticism of the phrasing of the concepts. They considered them to be more statements or aims than concepts as these five sentences emphasise politically motivated positions on early reading and writing approaches, and also present oral communication as an early (even infantile) aspect of communication superseded by written forms in later stages of education. We suggest that Literature (not only the term 'text') needs incorporation into the core concepts, and that all five concepts be reduced in expression, and better balanced in terms of the later stages of the curriculum scope of K-10.

The **conflation of the Literature content descriptors** not only lessens the importance of Literature as a foundation of the subject, but also impacts on the clarity of the sub-strands/descriptors. If we consider the *Key Considerations* of English, 'Texts' and 'Appreciation of Literature' feature prominently; however, within the three strands and particularly the Literature strand content points, the role of the text, and the approaches to reading, analysing, interpreting, and constructing literary texts has been diminished in this review. It is imperative that this be reconsidered, and Literature is returned as a foundation to the English curriculum. (This is discussed further in relation to the 'teachability' of the curriculum.)

A further aspect of the revisions that disrupts the shared understanding of subject English relates to the **definitions and categories of literary texts** and those who create them. Feedback from teachers throughout the country found disagreement with any group of Australians being defined as *non-First Nations Australian Peoples*, and the dichotomy of First Nations and non-First Nations also alarms those looking to promote the central tenets of the Alice Springs Education Declaration. Teachers also noted caution around the categorisation of authors and creators of texts and the fraught issues of authenticity and appropriation. Further questions around self-identification and the term First Nations are raised below. The term World Literature is a contested term with various interpretations. It incorporates Australian, as well as Indigenous, literature which are separated from this literary category in the revised curriculum document.

ETAWA suggests a **glossary** can help to resolve some other concerns over terminology differences across the document, and also within senior secondary curricula. In the words of one survey respondent "[c]are must be taken to develop a cohesive and consistent glossary of concepts/terms across English at all course levels in order to not confuse students."

### A 'teachable' framework for classroom teachers

Concerns have been expressed about the amount of **required content**, as well as clarity of required content and teaching suggestions. The attempt to refine and declutter the content has in part been successful, but there are areas where this could be better achieved. The distinction between content descriptors and elaborations appears inconsistent at times. For example, in Year 7:

#### Content point

recognise and understand that subordinate clauses embedded within noun groups/phrases are a common feature of written sentence structures and increase the density of information (AC9E7L06)

#### Elaboration

identifying and experimenting with a range of clause structures and discussing the effect of these in the expression and development of ideas (AC9E7L06\_E1)

In particular, the revised **Literature strand content points lack refinement and progression** across the years. A comparison between the Language and Literature content descriptors demonstrates the way that the Literature descriptors lack specificity, which in turn makes understanding the progression of content difficult.

understand the use of punctuation including colons, semicolons, dashes and brackets to support meaning in compound and complex sentences (AC9E7L10)

identify and explore ideas, perspectives, characters, events, and issues represented in literary texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts and created by First Nations Australian and non- First Nations Australian authors, and authors from around the world (AC9E7LE01)

explore the ways that ideas and perspectives may reflect or challenge the values of individuals and groups in literary texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts and created by First Nations Australian and non-First Nations Australian authors, and authors from around the world (AC9E8LE01)

Here the Literature descriptor requires engagement with elements of narrative structure, textual understanding, acknowledgement of text as social commentary and multiple contextual understandings. The Language descriptor requires understanding of four grammatical symbols within sentence structure. This demonstrates the imbalance of the descriptors, as well as the lack of refinement of the Literature strand. The Year 8 example of the same sub-strand of the curriculum demonstrates how progression is also difficult to ascertain when the content lacks refinement. This point might be illustrated through any of the Literature sub-strands or content descriptors.

ETAWA's survey data shows that WA English teachers are looking to the AC:English for guidance in the area of teaching First Nations literature. While they are concerned about the terminology and constructed dichotomy of language, teachers are supportive of the specified study of Indigenous works, and the **elaborations** provided. When asked about the usefulness of elaborations relating to teaching of First Nations texts 66.67% of respondents agreed that the revisions were useful.

The **Year Level Descriptions** have also drawn concern from a number of teachers. While teachers support the changes, these following comments demonstrate that teachers feel that progression is not clearly indicated in the descriptions and are not as helpful as they could be in establishing the types of texts to be studied, as well as framing the scope of each year's study. Numerous teachers noted that the descriptions were "repetitive" and that the logical sequencing of texts and concepts is overlooked in favour of lists of possible contexts, skills, concepts and text possibilities.

### **Accessibility and inclusivity for all students in subject English classrooms**

Increased recognition of First Nations authors, texts and diverse perspective at all levels of the curriculum. Teachers are, however, raising questions about the phrasing of this inclusion, as well as the **consultation process with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities, teachers and creators of texts**. In addition to concerns over the use of 'non-First Nations' mentioned above, state and territories are raising concerns over the usage of First Nations as a term within Indigenous communities and recognising that it is problematic to impose a term that is not used as a term of self-identification for communities. ETAWA recommends further consultation with jurisdictions, community members and Indigenous creators about the language used, as this would be the most authentic embedding of language and the Alice Springs Education Declaration. In addition, it would be helpful to indicate within the curriculum document that terminology and phrasing should be dependent on teaching context.

The reduction of the **speaking mode** within the Content Descriptors risks the level of accessibility for students from an EAL/D background. While this is an English (and not EAL/D) curriculum reducing the verbal aspect of the curriculum limits the interaction and involvement of student where their verbal expression is the most available mode. The movement of oral production from Literature to Literacy (while logical in some respects) also indicates that oral communication is a matter of functional literacy. This appears to be at odds with the inclusion of 'oral narrative' in the First Nations literature and valuing oral modes of expression. One teacher wrote '[w]here are Australia's EALD students served specifically by this syllabus and how do the Western Australian EALD Progress Maps fit with the proposed curriculum? Was there any consultation with remote schools who teach hybrid classes of first-language and EALD speakers across multiple year groups, as to how this syllabus affects the operation of small schools with blended syllabuses?' The enquiry here serves as a useful recommendation.

Finally, there appears to be a missed opportunity embedding the Alice Springs Education Declaration by addressing the representation of Indigenous language through literature only. It is important to recognise **Aboriginal English in the Language strand**. Embedding the CCP only as a text selection issue could be considered a superficial engagement.

### **Fair and equitable methods of assessment and judgement**

The draft Achievement Standards present a challenge to the fair and equitable assessment of student progress. The proposed statements present a clear range of skills, understanding and subject knowledge but there is little indication as to what standard each year level should perform skills or level of understanding and knowledge needs to be demonstrated. As one teacher responded "[t]here is very little - if any - difference between Years 9 and 10. This is of great concern. If you unpack the Year 9 achievement standards - including the use of the word 'evaluate' - they are identical in intent. While the use of the word 'innovate' is used in Year 10, there is very little else that discerns the 12-month developmental growth that students are expected to demonstrate". Another teacher synthesised ideas echoed by many teachers writing "[t]he descriptors are broad and vague. 'Identifying an author's perspective' at Year 7 level: what does this

look like in comparison to the same skill at year 12 level? Similarly, with 'spells correctly'. What sorts of words constitute an appropriate standard for each year level?"

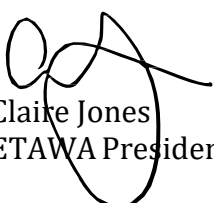
The standard that is currently outlined at Year 10 level presents problems for teachers in terms of Senior Secondary pathways. Teachers in various jurisdictions have reported this current Year 10 standard would be a pleasing outcome for students at the end of Year 12. An observation at multiple sessions with teachers throughout the state was the increased standard at Year 10 level. This is reflected by the following comment by one survey respondent: "The standard for Year 10 in particular seems challenging: it is more difficult than the requirements for General English in Year 11/12. Are we setting a standard by which anyone bound for a General (or indeed Foundation) pathway in 11 & 12 'fails' Year 10." In WA we have the availability of OLNA data to measure competency in Literacy. While this is only one aspect of English, this would provide a useful comparison of standard.

This concern is further supported by ETAWA survey data. When asked "do you feel these changes will impact the Year 11 and 12 course and how students progress to senior secondary graduation", 79.31% of respondents answers yes, 20.69% responded no.

### **3. Further Recommendations and Future Consultation:**

ETAWA recommends consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, Indigenous educators and scholars of Australian Literature to ensure the terminology and definitions of the document (relating to First Nations and literature) represent the views and preferences of a wider community position. This would provide English teachers with assurances regarding teaching sensitive literary materials and cultural stories, as well as confidence in using of terminology that is most appropriate to communities and individual students. ETAWA has been holding conversation within WA regarding this issue.

ETAWA also recommends further consultation with remote schools who teach in hybrid language settings. While this is clearly understood that the Australian Curriculum: English is an English curriculum, and that support documents are in effect for EAL/D learners in English classroom, the review presents an opportunity to improve the accessibility of the curriculum. This is an important consideration of the Alice Springs Education Declaration, and a critical concern for a number of educational contexts in Western Australia.



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