



ACARA senior secondary English Courses Response from the Australian Association for the Teaching of English

The Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE) is the national umbrella organisation for the state and territory associations for the teaching of English. Established in 1964, the association represents more than 5,000 English teachers and educators Australia wide.

AATE welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the draft senior school courses. This response is a consolidated response which captures the points on which most of the associations agree.

The AATE response is organised under the headings provided in ACARA's template for providing feedback. However, it has not been possible, in the time permitted, to provide a separate response to each course. Our response is, therefore, a combined one which addresses the Literature, English and Essential English courses.

In our response to the K – 10 Australian Curriculum: English we commented on the lack of time given to respond to this significant development and our concern is repeated.

The senior English courses were released in May. The deadline for submitting responses is Friday 30 July. We strongly believe that the consultation period has been too brief for teachers and associations to make an informed and detailed response to the documents.

Six weeks might seem a sufficient amount of time for associations to garner a response but the reality is that this is not the case. When these draft courses were released senior school English teachers were mid way through second term. With marking to undertake, followed by mid year exams and more marking prior to writing reports, and then, for many, attendance at the National Conference for teachers of English and literacy in Perth, there has been little time to seriously consider these draft documents or to respond to them.

It is pertinent to remind you that all delegates and members of AATE Executive are volunteers, and labour intensive tasks, such as this, must be carried out in our own time.

We also suspect that many teachers might have had a quick look at them and been happy just to see that ACARA had prepared four English courses. This, after all, is similar to what is currently on offer in the senior years in most states and territories. Teachers with little time to consider these documents might, we suggest, have assumed that there will be flexibility to enable them to adapt their existing courses to support students meet the requirements of the new courses.

Rationale

Although there was generally some agreement with the rationale for the three courses this was tempered by the fact that:

- The rationale for English is so broad that it could apply to any number of courses, including drama.
- Giving a course the same title as one of the strands in the K – 10 draft curriculum is confusing since it also includes material from the language and literacy strands.
- Similarly, giving a course the same name as the subject was also considered unhelpful and could suggest that the other courses are something lesser than this one which aligns with the overarching subject.
- The rationale for Essential English was uninspiring with too much emphasis on the 'workplace'. One association noted that the name of the course fails to convey a sense of richness or vibrancy to inspire enthusiasm.

We recommend an overarching rationale which covers the suite of English courses and which explains why English, at this level, is central to students learning and why the learning area has been structured the way that it has.

There was also general agreement, as there was in our response to the K-10 curriculum, that the document should be more student centred and that this should begin in the rationale.

All associations would, moreover, like to see the rationale explain:

- the relationship of each course to the other
- arrangements for students to move between the courses
- if students can undertake more than one of the courses
- the tertiary entrance rank status of each course.

Several argued that there should be three courses rather than four, suggesting that there should be one course combining elements of English and Literature, one combining English and Essential English and an EAL/D course. All agreed that the glossary needs to be expanded upon.

Above all, we believe that the English courses offered need to ensure the entitlement of all students to access a rich set of creative, analytical and reflective experiences. What students can expect to learn as a result of undertaking each course needs to be made clear in a preamble which precedes each course.

Aims

There was no general agreement from all associations about the aims. There was for example some support for 'collaboration' as an appropriate aim in the English course but others were less supportive of this because they believe it is too difficult to assess. Most favoured the use of active verbs in the aims but were concerned that the aims were too pragmatic; that is content oriented as opposed to skills-based.

With regard to the aims of the Literature course some believe that they are too dry and mechanical with a focus on response and the production of written tasks. Aims, they believe, should reflect a love of literature, as well as the benefits and joy of studying it.

Although most associations disagreed with the aims of the Essential English course, with one group suggesting that the students who undertake this course seem incapable of higher order discussions, most thought that with modifications they would be able to support them.

Structure and organisation

All member associations noted the inclusion of generic statements in this section and observed that these were unhelpful as they make it very difficult to differentiate between the courses. We recommend that the generic material becomes part of a general introduction to the suite of courses which would include the overarching rationale referred to earlier.

It was also noted that there is no clear articulation of these courses to the K – 10 draft curriculum and its three strands. The diagram, it was noted attempts to do this, but resulted in more questions than answers. The links seem forced and artificial, as we will expand on later in this response. The structure of four discrete units doesn't suit English courses and most associations deplored the compartmentalisation of these courses into four discrete units around content.

There was broad agreement that this section of the courses seems muddled and incoherent. We recommend an explicit statement for each course which identifies the scope and sequence and what students will learn as a result of undertaking the course.

It was also noted by several associations that without assessment criteria or tasks it is difficult to conceptualise the teaching and learning of the content described. It is disappointing that the achievement standards are not yet available.

Several pointed out that the first dot point in this section implies that English is a service subject, which we find to be disrespectful of the specific work we do in developing a love of language and of literature.

Units are clear in their purpose and work well together

Although there was some support for a generic structure of the English courses there was little support for the identified units. Describing English in four discrete units is counterproductive, since it acts against the interconnectedness of the English curriculum. It was observed that most English courses are text-based and that concepts are taught across units and texts rather than independently. One association wrote in response to the Essential English course that the four units appear to be mutually exclusive, which they aren't. All four should be part of an integrated study.

Several associations suggested changes to the units. It was pointed out that 'Making Connections' happens in all units and that this unit could be more effectively

integrated with units 1, 2 and 3. Others suggested that 'Representation' happened in the other units, as do 'Perspectives'.

It is our belief that the overall language framework which underpins the units should be stated to explain the connection between the units as well as the skill development expected in each.

Some associations commented that giving units the same title in each course seems to conflict with the spiralling of complexity across the units. Another asked with the same titles for units in English and Literature, why would you choose the latter?

Once again, because there are no suggested tasks it is very hard to conceive how the content described in each unit can be covered.

Unit titles are appropriate

The unit titles were disapproved of by a majority of the associations. It was noted that they do make sense, but that they are perspectives that should be involved in all units of work.

The titles don't, however, reflect the courses or their content. Giving all units the same titles works against the idea that the English courses are distinct. The unit titles, it was observed, seem artificial and don't make a lot of sense to even experienced English teachers as a four semester sequence..

The unit titles also fail to provide a clear link between the K -10 curriculum and these senior school courses.

Content

There were some positive comments with regard to the content. It clearly has potential and there is much to be excited about, however it was also noted that there are too many dot points in each course and that there is considerable overlap.

It is suggested that the content needs to be contracted and re-framed. The starting point in each case should be what we want students to learn as a result of undertaking each course/unit. Some argue for a taxonomy such as Bloom's, or Solo, or else a functional language model, four resources model or Green's 3D model, as a way of organising content.

Although it is difficult to assess content without knowing what the assessment criteria will be, it was generally agreed that there is some inconsistency in the description of content with some being teaching points while others are learning outcomes. We recommend reorganising content so that it effectively reflects the scope and sequence of the unit and a student centred approach.

Essential content missing

It would be easy to say that as we have already argued that there is too much content that to suggest that some is missing is counter intuitive. It is ironic that these courses which should provide students with opportunities for intensive exploration of texts could fail to deliver, because with so much content to be covered there will be no chance of doing anything in any depth.

Notwithstanding the above, there was general agreement that higher order skills and especially those concerned with creativity, independent thought and critical analysis, are missing from each course.

Some also noted a lack of ICT and multimodal texts skill and knowledge development in the courses in general. It is important that students are provided with opportunities to develop their creativity in this area if they are to be active 21st Century citizens in a technology-rich environment.

Content clear and unambiguous

Our response to the question on content has already indicated that a majority of the associations believe that the content is neither clear nor unambiguous. Several asked if all the points are essential, and if so, how the course could be managed. Others stated that the lack of a sense of scope and sequence creates ambiguity. It is recommended that each course unit needs its own preamble.

Some associations suggested that the content might be better organised through the strands employed in the K – 10 curriculum.

Text Requirements

Although a couple of associations have no problem with a list of mandated prescribed texts for the Literature course, the majority believe that it would be more useful to have a list of recommended texts which is frequently updated.

For the English and Essential English courses there was no support for a prescribed list. In each case there was some support for a list of recommended texts. There is a need to ensure that all students experience a wide range of texts so we support guidelines to stipulate what needs to be covered at each year level for each course. There would therefore be an expectation that in a given course, over a year, students would be expected to read an Australian text, a novel, a drama text, a pair of comparative texts, a body of poetry, a text from another era/culture etc.

Regardless of the guidelines, it was noted that the assessment requirements will play a major role in determining the number and type of texts studied.

Cross-Curriculum Perspectives

Indigenous culture/perspectives are important and all agreed should be included in the senior English courses, although some argued that this was not the case with Indigenous history.

All agreed that Australia's engagement with Asia is also important, but not at the expense of 'world' perspectives. We believe that it is more important that the texts selected for study in English classrooms should reflect the diversity of cultures represented in Australian society and our place in the world.

Sustainability is undeniably a significant consideration in the 21st Century, but there are concerns that what is meant by this is unclear and that it should not be mandated in the English curriculum.

All agreed that there will be a serious need for professional learning opportunities and suggested resources if English teachers are to do justice to these priorities in their courses.

We remain concerned that if these three priorities are being taught in all learning areas across the curriculum from K – 12 it could lead to a superficial treatment of them as well as boredom and a lack of interest from students. We recommend that these priorities should each be addressed each year but not in each unit, if the senior English courses remain divided into four units.

General Capabilities

With regard to the general capabilities, a majority believe that numeracy should not be mandated in the senior English courses. Some were also concerned that the description of Information and Communications Technology was too narrow, while Ethical Behaviour has the potential to be contentious.

We recommend the publication of elaborations for each general capability to suggest ways in which it might be meaningfully integrated into a specific learning area. We would also like some clarification of the relationship between the general capabilities and assessment.

Online Format

It is evident that very few of the teachers consulted had found time to look at these courses online. Some indicated that this was because they found the linear layout frustrating while others found access an issue. A number were just reluctant to sail these waters.

Some who did explore the courses online complained that they found the site clunky and that it took too many clicks to reach relevant documents. Others wanted some signage to indicate their location in the site at any given time.

Despite this there was general agreement that the online format had potential but with the following improvements:

- support documents/exemplars etc a click away
- make more use of links
- expand the glossary and make it printable
- make the print friendly button easier to find
- enable more than one page to be viewed at a time.

Overall strengths

Although there were no commonly agreed strengths for all three courses, the following were observed:

- The Essential English course is comprehensive and not solely focused on language for the workplace..
- The English course appears to acknowledge the professional expertise of teachers.

- The Literature course values different readings and has a focus on a range of skills including independent inquiry, the imagination and text creation.

Many believe that they could adapt their current practice to meet the requirements of these courses and suggested that it would be a good thing if they are flexible enough to be adapted to suit local level delivery.

One view was that these courses should be more of a framework – allowing states and territories to develop their own courses within this, which seems to miss the point of having a national curriculum!

Issues and Challenges

As we have previously noted English does not lend itself to a content-based syllabus, but rather the focus needs to be the development of skills, knowledge and understandings required to engage with texts and produce them.

We believe that English courses should be student-centred and aimed at producing critical, thinking citizens capable of active and productive participation in Australian society.

We believe that an organising framework is required and that the units and contents should be re-framed to reflect the recursive nature of English courses and which clearly identify student progression. A majority of our associations recommend dispensing with the artificial unit structure.

We remain concerned about the lack of achievement standards which makes it difficult to determine what students will actually need to do to demonstrate their learning. We believe, moreover, that the lack of information about the way these courses will be assessed compromises the consultation process.

Several associations are particularly concerned that the Literature course, as it is currently described, will attract so few students that it will not be able to be offered in some schools. In the long term we suspect that this course is unsustainable. One association observed that the scope is even more restricted than what universities demand of English undergraduates.

We recommend the content should be reduced, written in English that is devoid of jargon, and that support materials are essential. The focus must be on individual learning and not on learning content.

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