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Response to the Australian Curriculum

What we appreciate and value in the new Australian Curriculum

We like the unifying ideals of a national curriculum on education and the plans for its online accessibility.

We appreciate the integration of reading, writing, speaking and listening.

We also like the focus on integration of the strands in the introduction.

We like that the text choices are not prescribed and that it will be teachers who determine what pedagogical strategies they will use. We believe this is essential to ensure inclusivity and allow teachers to meet the individual needs of schools and students depending on their diverse contexts.

We appreciate the attempt to build in social justice for students, allowing students of different cultural, linguistic or academic backgrounds access to the curriculum.

The elaborations make it very clear what is expected based on the content descriptors. Without them it is difficult to interpret the document.

We are pleased that many of the elaborations focus on teaching the concepts in context. It is important to keep the emphasis on putting knowledge to use by implementing the curriculum in context and this is reflected in the curriculum document. However, without the elaborations, it might encourage teachers to teach the language strand, in particular, out of context. Interestingly the elaborations have not been included in the consultation sessions; in fact we were explicitly told to ignore them.

General issues of concern in the Australian Curriculum

A major concern is what is foregrounded in the teaching of English. In the description of the strands, language is first; the first column is language also and so could easily be interpreted as the most important aspect of the teaching of English. Further how this has been interpreted by the media and communicated to parents and teachers emphasises a back to basics curriculum rather than a curriculum of the 21st century.

The issue of foregrounding in this document is a major one. We understand the political imperative of communicating to the media that this is a 'back to basics' curriculum. However this message is also being communicated to many English teachers who are confused that 'critical literacy' can now not be said 'aloud' let alone be included in the Australian Curriculum and hence in their practice. This is of great concern at a time when emerging technologies are demanding that our students must have critical literacy skills. Yes the Australian Curriculum refers to research skills, technical skills, and critical analysis. These are important in the receptive mode when students have to verify sources, widen their searches beyond Google and Wikipedia, and separate fact from commentary or fiction. However students are also producers/writers/creators of knowledge in the new social media platforms. Hence critical literacy becomes even more vital for students who must understand the choices that they can make to position audiences in a particular way, and that producers/writers/creators make to position them.

With increasing levels of participation in social networking sites by our students and the wider population, there has been a shift from computer users being the passive readers/audiences of knowledge to become authoritative knowledge writers/producers/creators and members of a participatory culture. These knowledge writers/producers/creators now number millions and they contribute daily to YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Wikipedia and sites on computers that are cheap to buy and easy to use. In the future these numbers will only increase as there are few barriers to being members of this participatory culture.

The issue for the Australian Curriculum is that by not acknowledging the importance of critical literacy, our students will have to experiment with and gain these skills outside of their formal school learning. In the interests of social justice, they should be incorporated and foregrounded in the curriculum.

Foregrounding is also an issue in the inclusion of Studies of Asia as the first item in the first column. In the Year 7 Language point 1 the content descriptor is not represented in the

achievement standards and does not seem to be cohesive with the other descriptors and content. We question why it is even included – is this really an important priority?

The focus on the impact of English on language in Asia, rather than looking at the impact of Asia and other continents on our own English seems overly complex and decontextualised for students. The curriculum would be more inclusive if teachers focused on multiple Englishes and use of register instead. This would build on the knowledge gained in year 6 (language point 1) in more depth. It also does not cover languages of other countries, for example the Pacific. Asia could be an example of how to look at the impact of English on other countries, but this point seems tokenistic. It would be better for teachers to be able to adapt this point to a culture that is more relevant to the students that they are currently teaching; for example, a school with a high Arabic or Pacific population can focus on the impact of English on these countries.

Some of our members have commented that the Australian Curriculum brought back fond memories of English curriculum documents of the 1970s. This reflects the emphasis on grammar, some of which points are very obscure and would be irrelevant to many students. We are not averse to the teaching of grammar; it is very relevant for students as knowledge creators. However we fear that the way it is presented in the curriculum document would reinforce outdated practices of teaching grammar in decontextualised ways. Teachers might develop checklists so they can guarantee that all grammatical terms have been covered. There needs to be far more emphasis in the document on teaching these IN CONTEXT. This will ensure at least that there is some transfer to students writing as extensive research demonstrates, (see Andrews, R., Torgerson, C., Sue Beverton, S., Locke, T., Low, G., Robinson, A. & Zhu, D. (2004a, 2004b), *The effect of grammar teaching (syntax) in English on 5 to 16 year olds' accuracy and quality in written composition*, University of York.

[http://www.york.ac.uk/depts/educ/research/ResearchPaperSeries/EnglishGrammar\(Syntax\).pdf](http://www.york.ac.uk/depts/educ/research/ResearchPaperSeries/EnglishGrammar(Syntax).pdf)

– a synthesis of relevant research in Canada, USA, UK, Australia and New Zealand in English since 1900.

The emphasis on grammar does not align with the concept of a curriculum for the 21st century. Most of the grammar that is included relates to the linguistic mode. In each of the year groups only scant attention is paid to the other modes such as visual, audio and gestural which are vital to meaning making in the multimodal texts of today's world.

In the introduction the section on grammar refers only to grammar in general terms. Within our membership we have teachers who use a variety of grammatical approaches from functional to

Latinate and a mixture of the two. We would like the document to be open enough to allow teachers to continue their practice. We are in favour of teaching grammar in a contextual framework and are happy that this has been emphasised in this section. We appreciate the statement under the Curriculum Content heading that says: 'do not prescribe approaches to teaching' but this needs to be emphasised further in the Language sections.

The issue of standards is also of concern. At the ACT feedback session on Monday 29th March 2010, Rob Randall suggested that the standard described in the document would, he thought, be at a 'C' standard. This is very confusing for teachers. Firstly we believe what should be articulated in the document should be the highest standard, i.e. an 'A' standard so teachers don't have to guess what else might be covered (besides going to the following year's curriculum).

Also if this document is a 'C' standard, the obscure examples of grammar that might emerge in the elaborations would be irrelevant for many students. Does this mean we are setting them up to be 'failing' students from the outset? For example, in year 8 the figurative language descriptor that includes analogy and allusion seems of a high standard. Furthermore, the year 7 literature point about idiomatic expression, innuendo and parody would probably be only taught in a very superficial manner at this stage of cognitive development. It does not seem to be work that a 'C' standard student could cover in depth. Extension classes may be able to cover this, but not all year 7 students. Perhaps this needs to be a priority for students at an older age?

The aims should include the idea of developing an interest in reading for pleasure. As a 21st century curriculum, the aims should also acknowledge the importance of critical thinking/literacy as this becomes increasingly important as students access more complex texts.

There is a general lack of cohesion in the document. Things appear in some years and not in others. Are we meant to carry on all the descriptors from the previous year? How are we to judge which ones are the most important to continue on? Furthermore, people will not read the whole document. For example, a teacher of years 7-10 may not necessarily read the year 6 descriptors and standards.

Is the development of students assumed? The achievement standards across the years don't seem to flow from one year to the other. They are not sequential. For example, in year 8 the writing achievement standards include spelling, but it is not represented in the content descriptors. Vocabulary, grammar and punctuation are all explicitly discussed but not spelling.

Is this because it is mentioned in year 7 and we are just expected to assume that we should include it in later years?

We can't see a rationale for the allocation of different content within different year groups. The sequencing is often scatter-gun/arbitrary and would be difficult for teachers to implement. An example of the scattergun approach to the sequencing is in the Language section. Firstly the heading of 'Connecting ideas' is not consistent throughout the document. While there is some cumulative learning about clauses, overall the points in year 10 about connecting ideas are really no different to the year 6 ones. Perhaps the elaborations would make this much clearer but many teachers will not access those. A clear scope and sequencing document needs to be aligned to the curriculum to ensure teachers have a strong understanding of the development of the curriculum and the links across year groups.

The following example demonstrates our concern about cohesion:

Year 6

*6. Complex Sentences: **Higher order connections between ideas can be made by using a complex sentence.***

Year 7

7. Connecting Ideas: Different kinds of connections between ideas and information can be made by using conjunctions to combine clauses.

This seems to build on year 6 by adding conjunctions to the use of clauses.

Year 8

6. Connecting Ideas: Sentences can consist of a number of independent and dependent clauses combined in a variety of ways.

7. Clauses: Some clauses are finite and some are non-finite.

Students are now learning about dependent, independent clauses, finite and non-finite clauses and other ways of combining them besides conjunctions so there is development here.

Year 9

6. Clause Types: Use a variety of clause types can enhance written expression. This seems to be the same point that would be taught in years 6, 7 & 8. We learn about clauses to enhance written expression at all stages.

7. Nominalisation: Information can be condensed by collapsing a clause into a noun phrase (nominalisation). This builds on years 6, 7 and 8.

Year 10

6. *Connecting Ideas: A rich repertoire of grammatical resources allows for the expansion of higher order thinking.* Connecting ideas is now about thinking and not clauses. Surely this point is relevant from year 6 onwards as a rationale for teaching complex sentences.

6. *Complex sentences: **How to manage the expression of complex ideas in sentences.*** Isn't this the same as year 6 too?

In the Literature stand, students are asked to look at puns and innuendo in year 7 and then symbolism, allegory and allusion in year 8. It is fine to allocate these ideas to specific year levels but there is no building of one idea to the next year. Also in the Literacy strand, vocabulary is very similar between years 7 and 8 so there appears to be limited cumulative development here.

Some content descriptors seem to double up. For example, year 10 language point 3 and 11 – are both about citing the work of others within students' writing. These two points could easily be combined. Some points are confusing without the elaboration so the content description needs to be clearer as it cannot be assumed that all teachers will read the elaborations and the curriculum will not be taught at an appropriate level in all instances with this confusion.

Some aspects of English are not equally represented. For example, in year 7, there are only two content descriptors, which explicitly refer to speaking and listening, and yet, according to the achievement standards, this is a third of what is taught. Similarly, there is only one content descriptor in year 7 that refers to multimodal texts, which makes this seem less important.

Given that the year 10 document has a greater emphasis in the Literature strand, while the document up until year 9 has a greater focus on Language and Literacy, the focus seems too closely aligned with the NAPLAN literacy testing. To what extent will this be tied to NAPLAN? Will we be moving towards testing years 8 and 10 as well?

This document seems clunky, too simplified - particularly when you compare it with existing documents such as VELS in Victoria and *Every Chance to Learn* in ACT. Problems here include the inconsistency between the Language/Literature/Literacy strands and the listening and speaking/writing/reading.

Shouldn't the achievement standard of *Reading* be *Reading and Viewing*? Similarly, shouldn't the achievement standard of *Writing* be *Writing and Creating*? The descriptors include multimodal texts so this should be accurately represented in the Achievement Standard

headings. Also in other modes, there doesn't seem to be the same detail as there is in the linguistic mode. We understand this is a political issue but again the message to teachers using this document is that the other modes are less important when they are in fact vital to the comprehension of texts and also in the choices creators/producers of texts make.

We support literacy across the curriculum and the cross curriculum perspectives. However, the document needs to be very clear about whether the elaborations are intended only to be taught by English teachers or whether some aspects can be covered in the science curriculum?

In years 7-9 the document requires teachers to teach vocabulary by using dictionaries for understanding. For conceptual understanding, students need to see these concepts in texts, in action. Dictionaries alone do not give understanding. The use and effects of these ideas need to be seen in context. In year 7-9 language, the document refers to *vocabulary expansion* and then the item that builds on this later in year 10 Literacy is described in the same way (as expanding vocabulary) but it has changed strands and it is listed as just *vocabulary*, rather than *vocabulary expansion*. There is inconsistency between the strands and the terminology there.

There is too much to cover in this document meaning that it will not be covered in enough depth. There is too much content to ensure that this will be a world-class curriculum; we are not going to get depth, only breath. The issue of time allocation must be resolved. Numbers of 60% and 80% of the time allocated to the teaching of English were flagged at the ACT consultation. However the available teaching time across jurisdictions and indeed within jurisdictions varies considerably. So the available teaching time to implement the Australian Curriculum will vary. In all cases, it is doubtful that the available teaching time will be sufficient to implement this curriculum.

To ensure engaged and transformative learning and that this is a world-class curriculum, depth rather than breadth is required. There is far too much content in the English Curriculum and so teachers will be forced to focus on the breadth and superficial treatment of much of the content. This will also encourage checklists of teaching grammar in the language strand. The maths curriculum seems much more manageable.

Using the repetition of headings in content descriptors becomes confusing. For example, in year 10 the first 3 points under Literature are all titled *appreciating* and in year 7 the term comprehension strategies is used three times in the literacy strand. For ease of use of the document, it would help to rename these.

While the political imperative for Julia Gillard is that the Australian Curriculum is fully implemented by the beginning of 2011, this seems to disregard the well being of teachers and students. We request that a longer trialling period of 12 months with opportunities for feedback and revisions are put in place. Once the online teaching resources are in place to support teachers in delivering the curriculum, teachers will have the opportunity to adapt and change their current curriculum documents. However, if the curriculum will be operational completely in 2011, teachers will find it extremely difficult to rewrite curriculum documents and deliver a world-class curriculum with limited resources provided.

We also request that support for the implementation is communicated to teachers who are already feeling the pressures of being overworked and undervalued in a political environment where their professional expertise is being constantly undermined.