

Mr David de Carvalho
Chief Executive Officer
NSW Education Standards Authority
116 Clarence Street
Sydney, NSW, 2000

Dear Mr de Carvalho,

We write to express our opposition to a number of changes to the recently-released NSW *English Stage 6 Syllabus* (NESA, 2017).

We believe these changes significantly diminish the intellectual rigour, disciplinary integrity and status of the subject and therefore directly undermine the potential for high standards of student learning, literacy, critical thinking, and holistic accomplishment in HSC English.

Specifically, we are opposed to the following.

- The reduction in the text requirements and content in the Year 12 English Standard and English Advanced courses from *four to three* texts, and from *five to four* texts, respectively.

The text requirements for the inaugural HSC English syllabus in 1965 required students in the equivalent of the Standard course to study *nine* texts. It required students in the equivalent of the Advanced course to study *twelve* texts.

Current equivalents of Year 12 English courses in other jurisdictions, nationally and internationally, expose the extent to which the changes in NSW HSC English have significantly weakened the scope, expectations, status and rigour of the subject. In the Victorian VCE Literature course, for example, students are required to study *six* mandatory types of texts, including: one novel; one collection of poetry; one play; two further texts from novels, plays, collections of poetry, collections of short stories, other literature or film; plus, a live performance by a professional theatre company, or a film and film script, or a television miniseries, or a playscript. At least one of these texts *must be Australian*.

- The decision to scrap the long-standing requirement that ALL students undertaking the Year 12 English Standard and English Advanced courses study the *core set* of mandatory types of texts defining the subject: novels, poetry and drama.
- The optionalising of novels and poetry in Year 12, including the works of Australian novelists and poets.

These two types of texts have been at the heart of the subject since its inception in NSW in 1911-1912, for well-established educational, epistemological, theoretical and philosophical reasons.

Novels and poetry are *fundamental components* of the intellectual foundation of the subject and discipline of English. The study of both is central to the optimal development of higher-order critical, analytical, interpretive, literacy and language skills. The study of both is necessary to cultivate the depth of knowledge, skills, understandings and capacities that define and distinguish the subject in the curriculum, as set out in the NSW *English Stage 6 Syllabus* aim, rationale, objectives and outcomes (NESA, 2017).

It is highly improbable that any other subject in the Year 12 curriculum would be stripped of the requirement to study its quintessential content. There is no valid rationale, justification or evidence to support this serious dumbing-down of English.

In making these deleterious changes, NESA has ignored the informed advice of English educators, researchers, curriculum experts, academics, former Chief Examiners and Board Inspectors, and other leading stakeholder representatives in the field.

- The inevitable inequity and disparity that will emerge as a consequence of removing the 'level playing field' requirement that in Year 12, all teachers teach and all students study a core set of texts: novels, poetry and drama.
- The self-evident discontinuity between English Advanced, English Extension 1 and English Extension 2 in the light of the removal of the requirement to study novels and poetry in English Advanced.
- The discontinuity between the mandatory text requirements of the NSW *English K-10 Syllabus* (2012), where *all* students are required to study novels and poetry in each stage, and the reduced texts requirements for Year 12 English.

Students in Stage 4 and Stage 5 English are required to engage with more texts and more types of texts than students in Years 11 and 12 English courses.

Stage 5 English represents a *greater intellectual challenge* and level of rigour in terms of content and textual engagement than that now expected in English in Stage 6.

- The change in status of the HSC English Studies course from a non-ATAR to an ATAR-eligible course.

This course was initiated, developed and implemented to cater for the needs, interest and capacities of those students *not wishing to proceed to university*. It was approved as a Content-Endorsed Course by the then NSW Board of Studies on the strict proviso that it would **not** be an ATAR-eligible course and would not be assessed through an external examination.

The course was developed in full cognisance of the need to avoid a repetition of the detrimental impact (during the 1980s and 1990s) of the dramatic decrease in student numbers in the more rigorous HSC English courses due to increasing enrolments in the less demanding 2-Unit Contemporary English course. That shift in enrolment patterns in HSC English led to: serious inequities and disadvantages for the cohort of HSC English students for whom this 2-Unit Contemporary English course was originally designed; deliberate 'gaming' of HSC English requirements; and a diminution in the overall status and integrity of the subject.

The addition of ATAR-eligibility to the current English Studies course has occurred in the absence of any educational or other rationale and ignores the lessons from history. This proposal was almost universally opposed by the English teaching profession.

The change in status of this course directly counters the fundamental principles of equity, access and high standards established through the McGaw reforms.

- The dumbing-down of English Extension 1 through the removal of historically-informed, intellectually-coherent and higher-order literary electives.
- The flow-through impact of these decisions on:
 - the intellectual rigour, disciplinary integrity and status of English in the secondary curriculum and more broadly;
 - the scope, depth and quality of student learning, including high-order literacy and critical thinking skills;
 - the role of literature in individual, social, intellectual and cultural life;
 - university admission requirements and 'assumed knowledge', particularly for students wishing to apply for teaching degrees specialising in teaching English and other degrees majoring in English;
 - the place and significance of the work of Australian and international novelists and poets in senior secondary English and in contexts beyond schooling; and
 - Australian publishing.

Until now, NSW had a proud, century-long record of leading the way in the development of world-class curricula. It accrued such esteem through inclusive processes that respected and depended on the disciplinary, historical, research, scholarly and pedagogical capital of those who are experts in the field.

The recent reforms to HSC English, however, have significantly eroded the national and international credibility and reputation of NESA.

These changes undermine the role of NESA as an 'authority' committed to educational standards based on the highest expectations for student learning, current evidence-based research, and curriculum expertise.

As educators, writers, poets, researchers, publishers and others with a stake in the quality, rigour and integrity of subject English and the senior secondary curriculum in NSW, we call on NESA to:

1. Restore the fundamental requirement for ALL students in Year 12 English Standard and English Advanced courses to study at least ONE novel and ONE set of poems (as is the case in each year of English in Years 7-10).
2. Restore the text requirements in Year 12 to *four* texts in English Standard and *five* texts in English Advanced.
3. Remove the option of ATAR-eligibility from the English Studies course.
4. Restore the rigour and literary integrity to English Extension 1 by reinstating the suite of intellectually robust electives.

March, 2017

Cc: NESA CEO
NESA Chairperson
NSW Minister for Education
NSW Premier