The English Teachers Association of Queensland Inc (ET AQ)
Feedback on ACARA draft senior English subjects

1. Introduction

1.1. ETAQ has both individual and school corporate member categories together “reaching” some 3000 educational professionals in Queensland with an interest in subject English. Most are English teachers in secondary schools.

1.2. The following mechanisms were employed to develop this response:

1.2.1. Members were alerted to the release of the ACARA drafts by several ETAQ e-pistle email bulletins;
1.2.2. Draft 1 of an ETAQ response was produced by the president;
1.2.3. An initial feedback session was conducted as part of a routine PD activity at Brisbane Grammar school on 26 May;
1.2.4. A series of discussion and feedback meetings were held in Brisbane and on the Gold Coast during the week beginning 4 June;
1.2.5. Branches and school English departments were encouraged to conduct similar discussions and contribute comments;
1.2.6. Several Word documents with information from the ACARA consultation site copied and pasted into tables to facilitate comparison of the subjects and their component units were posted to the Discussion page of the ETAQ website;
1.2.7. Part of the Management Committee’s June meeting was devoted to a discussion of what sort of response ETAQ should make to ACARA;
1.2.8. The draft response as amended by the Management Committee was posted it to the website for further member input;
1.2.9. The draft document was then further considered at a meeting open to all members held at QUT on Saturday 14 July.

1.3. The time available for the consultation process spanned the busy final weeks of Semester 1 and the mid-year vacation. Consequently, the opportunities for discussion amongst member were limited. It was disappointing not to see public forums of the sort that were conducted in consultation over the F-10 section of the curriculum.
2. **Suite of subjects**

2.1. We support the principle of having several English subject options to cater for the range of students currently completing Years 11 and 12. However, as detailed below, we do have concerns about the detail of what is proposed for the various subjects.

2.2. Queensland does not have a tradition of senior students being able to select either the mainstream English subject or one which concentrates on literature. The QSA does have an Extension English (literature) course which students may take just in Year 12 in addition to, but not instead of, the mainstream English course. It is difficult to forecast how the Australian Curriculum suite of subjects would be taken up by schools in this state. A significant question is whether English and Literature would be seen as either/or alternatives or alternatively whether students might be permitted to take both English AND Literature. While this would suit the interests of a minority of students, a double dose of English subjects would narrow the breadth of the education received at senior level. No doubt some will see this as a plus and others as a minus.

2.3. Most Queensland high schools currently offer two QSA English subjects: English, taken by the majority of students, and English Communication, taken by a minority group of generally lesser academic ability. It can probably be anticipated that smaller schools would find it logistically difficult to offer three alternative 2-year English subjects.

2.4. Currently in Queensland, the QSA’s English and English Extension contribute to tertiary entrance rankings but English Communication does not. Apart from the nature of the draft ACARA subject which is discussed below, it would need to be clarified whether or not it is intended that Essential English would contribute to tertiary entrance. It would seem unacceptable for it to do so in some states but not in others.

3. **Subject names**

3.1. The proposed names for the subjects English, Essential English and EAL/D are considered to be appropriate.

3.2. We do not, however, consider it appropriate for one of the offerings to have as its name one of the three strand labels. To have one of the proposed subjects called Literature has the unhelpful potential to misleadingly suggest that the other subjects do not include an element of literature. In addition, if this subject is intended to be a more challenging offering suitable for the more academically able, it would be preferable to call it something like Advanced English.
4. **Texts for study**

4.1. It is good that no attempt has been made to impose a national list of set texts. Decisions about what texts best suit the educational needs of students are best left to the professional judgement of teachers in schools or to those states and territories which still have to meet the needs of external examinations.

4.2. It is good, too, to see that multimodal texts such as films are included in the definition of literary texts.

4.3. The provision of sample text lists is a good idea but these lists probably need to be more extensive to be really useful. Currently they are rather short.

4.4. The suggested text lists could be further improved by specifically identifying titles that would be useful for schools to meet the three cross-curriculum priorities: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories, perspectives etc; Asia literacy; and sustainability.

4.5. The sections dealing with sample text lists could also be improved by pointing out that sometimes the appropriate level of intellectual challenge derives not from the text itself but from what students are required to do with it. An example here is the inclusion of Jonathan Swift’s novel *Gulliver’s Travels* in the suggested list for Literature. This is entirely appropriate but of course the first two sections of this book can productively be used with much younger students.

5. **A model of language**

5.1. Much of the material presented across all four units in the three draft subjects examined seems to derive the context-text model of language which also obviously underpins the F-10 stage of the English Curriculum.

5.2. It would be much easier for teachers to develop appropriate shared understandings of the information in the curriculum documents if this model were presented and explained separately using both graphics and verbal text.

5.3. Overt acknowledgement of this model of language would also provide a more useful framework for the information presented in the achievement standards.

6. **Unitized structure**

6.1. The unitized structure proposed by ACARA for the suite of senior English subjects is considered to be seriously flawed and, indeed, fundamentally unworkable. ETAQ considers
that this aspect of the proposed subjects will need to be changed for them to be acceptable in Queensland.

6.2. ETAQ considers that one of the weaknesses of the F-10 Australian Curriculum: English is the detailing of content descriptions on a year-by-year basis. No doubt this arrangement suits subjects that are organized largely by content but English is more concerned with processes and skills. For English, spelling out the desired learning outcomes/content descriptions in stages of several years duration would have much better matched the way in which students’ mastery of language actually develops. Similar advice was part of our feedback on the F-10 section of the English curriculum.

6.3. This weakness has been exacerbated in the draft senior English subjects by the (unsuccessful) attempt to detail four different semester units across the two years of the senior phase of schooling. Again, this probably works reasonably well for some subjects but it does not suit English. It would be regrettable indeed if the quality of English education provided to Australian high school students had to be damaged for the sake of having a standard organizational template imposed on all subject areas.

6.4. The attempted differentiation of four semester units seems artificial rather than real. The units as described are not significantly different. The unit outlines and learning outcomes describe things which ETAQ believes should be happening in all units.

6.5. The organisation of school work programs into semester units (or those based on any other time units) is really only meaningful when aspects of the aims and learning outcomes for the whole course are married to particular selected texts, themes, topics etc. In addition, the focus of particular units of work is often dictated in practical terms by the assessment arrangements that apply in different states and territories. In Queensland at present there are requirements about the type and range of assessment tasks that need to be included in sample folios for moderation.

6.6. There is no single correct way to organize teaching and learning across two years to achieve the aims of a course. These planning decisions should be left to the professional judgement of groups of teachers in schools. To impose fixed units at a national level could be anticipated to have a long term detrimental impact on the professional capacity of English teachers.

6.7. ACARA itself has been at pains to stress that materials released for consultation are not themselves courses, but content descriptions and achievement standards which curriculum authorities in states and territories will incorporate into courses of study. This is all the
more reason why an attempt at detailing four distinct semester units for English is inappropriate.

7. Essential English

7.1. ETAQ members who currently teach the QSA’s “Authority-registered” (ie it does not contribute to tertiary entrance) syllabus English Communication consider that Essential English would not adequately meet the learning needs of the relevant cohort of students. Detail supporting this position is as follows:

7.1.1. The description of Essential English reads as though it is generally equivalent to the QSA’s English Communication and suitable to meet the educational needs of the cohort of students who currently select that subject.

7.1.2. The rationale for the Essential English also seems reasonably appropriate for the cohort of Queensland students although warning bells are sounded by the inclusion of such words as: “literary skills” (as opposed to literacy skills), “analyse”, “evaluate” and “interpretive . . . texts”.

7.1.3. When the learning outcomes and content descriptions for Essential English are examined, this proposed offering seems unsuitable for many of the students who currently take English Communication. This assessment mainly relates to the use of such verbs as “analyse” and “evaluate”. ETAQ would argue that if this subject is to be genuinely equivalent to English Communication, an appropriate outcome is for students to use language effectively rather than to analyse and evaluate language use.

7.2. If the elements cited above are not modified, ETAQ’s view is that Essential English could not be honestly viewed as a genuine equivalent to the QSA subject English Communication which currently serves the educational needs of a significant cohort of students well. In that case, Queensland schools should continue to offer English Communication and ACARA’s Essential English would be irrelevant to secondary education in this state.

7.3. Any federal government efforts to force the adoption of Essential English in its current form to replace English Communication would have to be resisted as detrimental to the educational needs of a significant group of students.

8. Literature

8.1. While the ACARA draft Literature subject is seen as providing valuable learning experiences, members who have recently taught the QSA’s English Extension (Literature) one year course do not consider that ACARA’s proposed subject is a completely equivalent offering.
9. **EAL/D**

9.1. Like the other 3 English syllabuses, a text-context, functional, language skills model is evident giving the syllabus a strong ‘access orientation’.

9.2. Aesthetic appreciation is limited considering the range of suggested text types which includes many literary texts used in largely functional ways. The word “aesthetics” is mentioned briefly in the glossary. Unit 2 Content description section – Creating a range of Texts – includes aesthetics, idioms and figurative language with no analytical and imaginative preparation to do this. In the Language Table any reference to aesthetics is under Lexical Competence which reduces it to an access model. The attention to Appraisal is welcomed and we suggest aesthetic work can be done here and should be acknowledged.

9.3. Critical and creative elements are in the General Capabilities on p. 9 but not in core content. This may lead to a lack of explicit teaching of critical inquiry and aesthetic design elements in text production. A functional, workplace-preparation model may limit learners academically for university entrance. Critical evaluation is evident throughout the 4 units. However, in the Aims section, critical analysis and higher order thinking are not mentioned in the description on page 2. Are ‘perspectives’ synonymous with ‘reader positions’?

9.4. Bridging unit content seems useful for those at the emerging and developing proficiency levels. 1 and 2 are skills-based; 3 and 4 are introducing literature and content more comparable with the English syllabus. However, questions that arise for us are:

9.4.1. What does ‘concurrently’ mean (p.3)? Concurrently with each other, or with the EAL/D syllabus in Year 11. Bridging students are typically under a lot of pressure to ‘catch up’ while they are also expected to ‘perform’ alongside their mainstream counterparts.

9.4.2. Does Level 5 on the NLLIA ESL Bandscales equate to ‘Developing’ or ‘Consolidating’ on the EAL/D Learner Progression? The NLLIA descriptors are more delicate and thereby give teachers, many of whom are not EAL/D specialists, a clearer picture of students’ current capabilities and requirements at each level. There appears to be a significant leap from ‘Beginning’ to ‘Emerging’ levels and from ‘Developing’ to ‘Consolidating’ levels in the EAL/D Learning Progression which may lead to attributing incorrect levels. Teachers will require assistance to determine movement within and across the levels.

9.4.3. What happens with a learner who is 15, outside the metropolitan area, at the Emerging proficiency level and enters Bridging unit 1. Does she have to complete all four bridging units and then all 4 EAL/D units? What are some suggested pathways given the complexity of learner diversity in the EAL/D population (i.e., students who have had limited exposure to SAE; students who have recently exited an Intensive
English Centre, or be in a rural, remote or very remote setting with limited or no access to EAL/D specialist intervention, or students who are new to the Australian educational setting or who have had little or no prior formal education (ACARA, 2012 p. 3).

9.5. Language for academic learning is very explicit in the Qld ESL senior syllabus (2009, p. 19) and should be made more explicit in the ACARA syllabus.

9.6. We agree that texts remain ‘not prescriptive’ but that teachers make choices based on learner level and interest and cultural appropriateness. Some of the non-fiction text examples are at junior secondary level though this may be because they contain simpler language and fewer complex cultural references.

9.7. In the Language Table, how is ‘relevance’ determined in mixed proficiency classes? As has been the case with the enactment of the 2009 Qld ESL Senior Syllabus, not all teachers are fully conversant with the elements of the Language Table, in a metalanguage sense, and may require professional development. A combination of traditional and functional grammar is used in the glossary.

9.8. Achievement standards for EAL/D are quite generic (p. 8 and 9) but do seem to cover the socio-cultural and critical dimensions. They fall short of the detail in the Qld 2009 syllabus.

10. **Achievement standards**

10.1. The achievement standards mirror the problem with the proposed unitised structure detailed above. The proposed descriptors for each level for Units 1 & 2 and Units 3 & 4 use some different words but they are not substantially different. As with the units, they describe aspects that should apply to both years of the senior course. We doubt that it is really possible to spell out genuinely different standards for the two year levels of the senior course. The same standards should be addressed but different levels of effectiveness and sophistication should be expected. Moderation processes can establish shared understandings over time but the vocabulary resources probably do not exist in the language to explicitly describe different standards for the two year levels.

10.2. Currently, significantly different elements of the achievement standards are unhelpfully lumped together (eg in English / Creating / Units 1 & 2 / Level A: “experiments with text structures, language features and stylistic features for different modes and types of texts”). For example, the organisation of the texts that students are required to produce in assessment tasks needs to be differentiated from vocabulary choice and clause and sentence structure (ie deployment of appropriate grammatical patterns). Some further examples are:
10.2.1. The surface writing features of spelling and punctuation need to be mentioned separately; not just assumed to be a component of the larger category “language features”.

10.2.2. For speaking tasks, elements such as use of voice (volume, clarity, expression etc) and body language (stance, eye contact, gestures etc) need separate mention.

10.3. The descriptors seeking to differentiate the various levels of the standards need considerable further work if they are to be useful for the development of criteria and standards schemas for particular assessment tasks. To take the element for English mentioned in 9.2 above as an example, the discriminating parts of the descriptors currently are:

10.3.1. A – “experiments with” (one can experiment unsuccessfully!);

10.3.2. B – “integrates” (with what degree of success?);

10.3.3. C – “uses” (again, how effectively?);

10.3.4. D – “uses common . . .”

10.3.5. E – “uses some . . .”

10.4. The explicitly described and explained model of language mentioned earlier should be the obvious framework on which the achievement standards are constructed.

11. Conclusion

11.1. Overall, the proposed subjects generally describe learning experiences that are appropriate for students in Years 11 and 12.

11.2. As described in detail above, ETAQ’s major concerns include:

11.2.1. The proposed unitized structure;

11.2.2. The level of challenge that we perceive to be involved in Essential English making it inappropriate as a replacement for the QSA English Communication syllabus;

11.2.3. The name and nature of the proposed Literature offering;

11.2.4. The usability of the achievement standards;

11.2.5. The absence of an explicit underpinning model of language.

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