



Australia's English Curriculum

A critique

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Foundation to Year 10 *Australian Curriculum: English* falls far short of what would reasonably be expected of a national English curriculum.

This analysis is based on a comparison with eight post-war Australian state curriculums. The existing curriculum has two main weaknesses:

- The curriculum largely fails to address the great works of the Western literary tradition, or to suggest which of these should be read and when. Most of the literature that is mentioned is designed to conform to the cross-curriculum priorities – sustainability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, and Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia.
- The curriculum incorporates a considerable amount of content that does not relate strictly to the study of the English language or English literature, at the expense of content relevant to English. Much of this would be better placed in a humanities curriculum.

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2008, the Federal and State governments have combined to develop a full National Curriculum. The curriculum is intended to apply to all Australian students from the Foundation Year to Year 12, and sets the minimum learning objectives for numerous compulsory subjects. English is considered a 'core learning area' within the existing curriculum documents.

The process of drafting the Foundation to Year 10 English curriculum began in 2009 through the combined efforts of 'expert writers' and an Advisory Group, comprising Lynn Redley (Chair – ACARA), Professor Peter Freebody (University of Sydney), Associate Professor Ruth Fielding-Barnsley (University of Tasmania), Associate Professor Mary Machen-Horarik (University of New England), Lorraine Rowles (NSW Department of Education and Communities), and Associate Professor Alyson Simpson (University of Sydney).

The National Curriculum was published in 2010 and refined through a lengthy consultation process, during which it was trialled in a number of schools. Since 2011, it has progressively been implemented in all Australian states and territories.

Under the *Schools Assistance Act* 2008, schools are required to implement the National Curriculum or a recognised alternative curriculum to qualify for Federal funding.

While we accept that the English curriculum is not so much a cause as a symptom of major issues impacting Australia's education system, we seek to highlight two major points of weakness in the documents.

1. English (and Western) Literature

The National Curriculum for English provides very little indication of which texts students at different levels should be expected to read. Whenever it does refer to certain types of 'texts', they are usually contemporary and with very limited lifespans (such as newspaper articles or current-affairs documentaries) or fictional and traditional stories that relate to the cross-curriculum priorities - sustainability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, and Asia and Australia's connection with Asia.

There is a lack of reference to significant works of the English language which we would define as 'literature'. There are occasional references to fairy tales (such as *Cinderella* and *Jack and the Beanstalk*); however, there is no mention of the great writers of the English language – Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton, Dickens, Austen, and countless others – let alone any indication of when, if at all, students should be encouraged to read them.

Literature of the Western canon should be a foundational element of the curriculum for English. The curriculum should provide some indication of the kinds of literature students should have the opportunity to read between the ages of six and sixteen; not having this opportunity prevents them from engaging in literary discourse, exploring elements of Western culture, and from being exposed to the greatest writing and storytelling of the English language.

2. 'Social Studies'

The National Curriculum devotes a large space to topics that are not strictly related to the English discipline, or would be more appropriate in other humanities curricula – particularly Geography or Civics and Citizenship. A large part of the material in the curriculum currently relates to the traditional stories, communication, and the perception of literature in non-English-speaking cultures. Other content relates to ethical issues.

Broadly, the overemphasised or misplaced content in this section of the curriculum falls under four categories:

- Languages other than English
- Cultural studies
- Ethics

We consider most of the content that falls under these categories inappropriate for an English curriculum. In addition to this, it detracts from content that should be prioritised in a curriculum for English – including grammar and literature.

Recommendations

For the combination of the above reasons – its failure to address literature and its overemphasis of misplaced topics – it is the view of the Institute of Public Affairs that the National Curriculum for English fails to set out the 'tools' to inspire and open up opportunities to students and is highly unlikely to 'raise standards' in either cultural or linguistic literacy.

In particular, we recommend the following:

- Literature of the Western Canon should be a foundation element of the English curriculum; and
- The curriculum should not include irrelevant material on 'social studies' that would be better placed in other areas.

Any imminent review of the English curriculum should take these shortcomings into account, and should ensure that unnecessary content is removed and the literature content significantly enhanced.

1. Literature

For the purposes of this submission, a work of literature is defined as a written or performed work which has transcended its immediate context and has influenced the thoughts and words of later generations of writers. Writers of literature in the English language include William Shakespeare, John Milton, Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, and George Orwell, among many others.

Familiarity with the English literary classics gives students a nuanced understanding of cultural references, and this knowledge allows them to explore the depths of meaning in both contemporary discourse and the greater body of works written in the English language. Unfortunately, the National Curriculum currently provides little support for the teaching of literature. Since the 1960s, trends in education across the English-speaking world have led first to the extension of the term 'literature' to practically any example of 'sculpted language', and subsequently to a decline in the reading of literary classics in many schools across Australia. The decline is well-demonstrated in state curricula published over the course of the last half-century.

Despite some promising signs early in the drafting process, the National Curriculum for English is essentially a continuation of this trend. The curriculum is now based on abstract learning outcomes and does not even give guidance as to how many books, plays or poems a student should read at school between the Foundation Year and Year 10. As such, the curriculum does not adequately support the teaching of literature in Australia.

Figure 1. Literature in Australian curricula: A comparison of eight post-war curricula

Literature in Australian curricula: A comparison of eight post-war curricula				
Curriculum	State	Year	Definition of 'literature'	Reading requirements per year
Course of Study for Primary Schools: English	Victoria	1955	Not strictly defined; however, literature appears to have been considered distinct from 'reading' and reference was generally made to extensive collections of what we would identify as 'literature'.	Students were expected to read the <i>Victorian Reader</i> for their year level and <i>The School Paper</i> and to read a wide range of other books. In particular, they were required to read certain set texts each year to qualify for scholarships. The expectations remained the same at High School level.
Syllabus in English for Forms I-IV	New South Wales	1972	The definition of literature was broadened to include writing by the students. The curriculum thus deviated from the canonical definition, although the documents acknowledged that a place should also be made for 'traditional classics in all literary forms'.	None specified, although the documents did stress that care should be made to choose works of literature relevant to the students or literature that will broaden their experience. While the documents did explicitly say that a place should be made for 'traditional classics', it does not indicate to what extent this should be done nor give examples of such works.
Syllabus Years 7-10: English	New South Wales	1987	This syllabus defined literature as virtually any written work, including everything from novels, plays and poetry to films, songs and writings based on oral traditions. It emphasised that literature studied should come from a variety of cultural groups that form Australian society and may also include writing by the students themselves.	None specified, although the curriculum did indicate that students should read 'texts' from a variety of genres, from a variety of cultures, and in a variety of forms.
The English Language Framework	Victoria	1988	Literature is broadly defined on page 27: 'Literature is shaped language which explores and interprets experience in a powerful and effective way so that it evokes in an audience and reflective, imaginative and emotive response. Literature can be based on fact or fantasy and can include not only novels, short stories, plays and poetry but also students' own writing... [and] can include nonfictional writing such as essays and biographies. It can be presented in oral modes... and in screen texts, as well as in print.'	None specified.

English Curriculum and Standards Framework II	Victoria	2000	A definition appears on page 8: 'Literature... uses language to represent, re-create, shape and explore human experience. Literature can be based on fiction or fact and include written and spoken texts. Examples include picture storybooks, traditional stories, speeches, novels, short stories, plays, poetry, translated works, non-print texts and non-fiction works such as biographies. Through reading, writing, listening to and talking about literature, students extent their understanding of the world and of themselves, and they see how cultural beliefs and values are formed.' Generally, however, the term 'text' is preferred.	There are vague indications throughout the tabulated 'learning outcomes' that students should experience a 'wide range of literature', but there were no specific learning outcomes.
Victorian Essential Learning Standards	Victoria	2005	The definition of 'literature' given in VELS is identical to the definition given in the 2000 <i>English Curriculum and Standards Framework II</i> .	Largely the same as the <i>English Curriculum and Standards Framework II</i> .
English K-6 Syllabus/English Years 7-10 Syllabus	New South Wales	2003-7	Literature is not explicitly defined anywhere, although the Rationale advises that students should explore 'texts that include the literature of past and contemporary societies', which may suggest a broader definition. In the <i>Suggested Texts</i> reading list, the Board of Studies was much more stringent about the use of the term 'classic', regarding which it makes the following comment: 'There are specific historical and social circumstances that make any particular generation value a text as a classic.' Generally, however, the broader term 'text' is preferred to 'literature' or 'classic'.	The curriculum set out 'content and text requirements' for each Stage. At Stage 4, for example – the equivalent to Years 7 and 8 – students were required to study at least two works of fiction, a wide range of types of poems, at least two films, at least two nonfiction books, and at least two works of drama. Each year, the curriculum also listed certain types of works that students must have experience of. In Stage 5, this list mentioned 'literature from other countries and times', 'Shakespearean drama', and other things.
The Australian Curriculum: English, v.6.0.	Australia-wide	2011	Implicitly defined in Overview as 'text of personal, cultural, social and aesthetic value', including 'some that are recognised as having enduring social and artistic value and some that attract contemporary attention', chosen 'because they are judged to have potential for enriching the lives of students, and because they represent effective and interesting features of form and style.' This is closer to the 'canonical' definition of literature than most previous Victorian curricula.	Students are supposed to experience a 'wide range of texts' and the content elaborations provide occasional indications of the kinds of 'literary texts' that should be studied. Generally, these closely relate to the cross-curriculum priorities. However, there is no indication of how many literary works (or different kinds of 'texts') should be read each year.

1.1 What literature is and why it matters

For the purposes of this report, we use the term 'literature' almost interchangeably with the word 'classic'. A classic, a work of literature, or a 'literary classic' is here defined as a written or performed work which has a significant history of reception and continues to be relevant beyond its original context.

The body of 'classics' is constantly changing and evolving. Nevertheless, it stands to reason that the average person will recognise a work of literature where it appears. We identify two main requirements: 1) it must not be contemporary, and should reflect a different historical and cultural context; 2) it must continue to be relevant, widely-read, or to influence contemporary writing regardless of its original publishing date. Put differently, a work of literature, presumably due to some aesthetic, narrative, or stylistic quality, must stand the test of time, and must transcend its original context. Given the nature of these two criteria, most works that we identify as 'classics' or as works of literature are also likely to be regarded as having significant 'historical' or 'cultural value'.

Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and even J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* all fulfil these criteria. So do certain works written in languages other than English, including the *Iliad*, *Arabian Nights*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and *War and Peace*. All continue to be widely read, translated and published and have a lasting influence on contemporary literature, despite having been written in different contexts to the present-day. Conversely, J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* does not qualify as a classic since it has not yet transcended its original context. Likewise, a newspaper clipping from the beginning of the twentieth century or a thirteenth-century monastic chronicle will not qualify as 'literature' on the basis of its age alone, if its readership is limited to archivists and historians.

Since the 1960s, there has been no shortage of debate over what exactly 'literature' is and what kind of role it should play in an English course for school-age students. Many Australian educationalists have pressed for change in the teaching of English literature – not so much by removing the term 'literature' from curriculum documents altogether, but by stretching and re-construing the definition of 'literature'. In many curriculum documents since the 1960s, the term 'literature' has been defined as practically any instance of 'shaped language', including contemporary fiction, unpublished material, and student writing.

This is not to say that contemporary fiction and non-fiction have no place in the classroom; nevertheless, as class time is limited, emphasising and spending more time on contemporary works will necessarily reduce the amount of time devoted to works of the literary canon.

At any rate, there is a strong case that 'literary classics' should be prioritised in the classroom over more ephemeral works. First, the English classics provide common reference points for all English speakers. Second, the classics represent the finest writing of the English language, and can serve as exemplars for modern-day students.

Those who argue that teaching the literary classics alienates students from underprivileged backgrounds do their students a disservice. In the United States, the success of programs such as *Shakespeare in American Communities* in reaching at-risk middle-schoolers is a testament to the power of literature, and a reminder that even the most underprivileged children are fully capable of

connecting with classic literature if given the opportunity.¹ When asked about his experiences teaching Shakespeare to at-risk middle-school students, Curt Tofteland (who now focuses on teaching Shakespeare to prisoners) said that these ‘kids, who’ve been told their whole lives that they are stupid and troubled, get hungry for it’ – that is to say, hungry for the challenges and rewards which the literary classics have offered for generations.² Shakespeare is not so valuable because (allegedly) few people can understand him; he is valuable because his plays have stood the test of time, and he is meaningful to everyone – including those who, for various reasons, feel marginalised. To withhold cultural literacy from vulnerable populations entrenches that marginalisation further.

This is not a new defence of literature. As early as 1869, Matthew Arnold wrote: ‘[Culture] seeks to do away with classes; to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere’.³ In 1970, W. Hannan and A. Reid urged Victoria’s Curriculum Advisory Board, ‘we would like schools to stop treating the best as though it were only for the best, and the worst as though it were fit for the worst.’⁴ The point of promoting literary classics is to give everyone an opportunity to understand and benefit from them, and not confine the classics to a small minority who have the support and means to study them outside of secondary schooling, or who attend specialised schools.

To share works of literature in the classroom does not in any way call for conformity of opinion. All readers do not necessarily need to enjoy a classic literary text in order to gain from the experience of having read it. Negative responses, positive appraisal and mixed feelings about a literary work all constitute meaningful discussion, and are in fact essential to a literary work’s continuing legacy.

In addition, a student who has read literary classics will gain greater cultural literacy. Terms such as ‘Dickensian’ and ‘Orwellian’ have a deep and rich range of meanings which are lost if students have not experienced such authors. To the reader of *Oliver Twist*, for example, ‘Dickensian’ brings to mind images of soot-blackened slums, pickpockets, and harsh working conditions. To the student who has read George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the adjective ‘Orwellian’ calls to mind a specific kind of dystopia that involves the ever-present hand of government, surveillance devices, and the brutal denial of individual freedom.

Furthermore, the knowledge of literary classics helps students to identify and understand ‘intertextual’ references – that is, references to other works within a piece of literature. The works most commonly quoted in published English works are the English literary classics, in addition to the Bible and works from classical antiquity. Therefore, if the National Curriculum states that year 10 students should ‘Analyse and evaluate text structures and language features of literary texts and make relevant thematic and intertextual connections with other texts’, it follows that students ought

¹ National Endowment for the Arts, “About the Program,” *Shakespeare in American Communities*, accessed 16 July 2014, <http://www.shakespeareinamericancommunities.org/about>.

² K. S. Prior, “Why Shakespeare Belongs In Prison,” *The Atlantic*, 23 April 2014, accessed 16 July 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/04/why-shakespeare-belongs-in-prison/361052/>.

³ M. Arnold, “Sweetness and Light,” originally from “Culture and Anarchy,” in *English Prose of the Nineteenth Century*, H. Craig ed. (New York: F. S. Crofts & co., inc., 1929), 576.

⁴ W. Hannan and A. Reid, *Secondary Curriculum: Reprints from ‘The Secondary Teacher,’* (Melbourne: Victorian Secondary Teachers Association, 1970), 37. Quoted from C. Beavis, “Changing constructions: Literature, ‘text’ and English teaching in Victoria,” in *Teaching the English Subjects: Essays on English Curriculum History and Australian Schooling*, ed. B. Green and C. Beavis (Geelong: Deakin University Press, 1996), 32.

to develop an increasing familiarity with the canonical texts of English literature both before and during Year 10.

The classics provide common cultural property for all English speakers who have encountered them. They foster a sense of cultural belonging even among the marginalised. Furthermore, knowledge of the classics helps the student develop a more nuanced cultural literacy, enabling the student to participate in wider discourses. To teach classics in school is therefore not merely good, but should be essential.

1.2 The decline of literature in Australian curriculums

The National Curriculum in its present form is merely the latest of a series of similar curricula churned out by Australian governments since 1985. Like the earlier state curricula, it is profoundly shaped by theories and philosophies that dominate the education establishment in most states.

While it would be wrong to claim that there was ever a 'golden era' of literary education in schools, it is nevertheless true that, from at least the beginning of the twentieth century and until the 1960s, teachers were not only expected but required to introduce their students to an extensive range of classic literature.

For example, the *Victorian Readers* were first published in 1928, and were compulsory reading for all Victorian school students. These publications typically contained many classics and works of historical or cultural significance. For example, the Sixth *Victorian Reader* – which would have been intended for upper primary school students – contained the following works of prose, in addition to many others and an extensive selection of poetry:

- 'The White Ship', extract from Charles Dickens' *A Child's History of England*, 12-14 (on events that happened in England in 1120, during the reign of Henry I);
- 'King Lear', short critical précis of the plot of Shakespeare's play, illustrated;
- 'The Judgement of Sancho', illustrated extract from *Don Quixote* by Cervantes;
- *The Ugly Duckling*, illustrated and adapted from Danish author Hans Christian Andersen;
- 'The Story of Abou Hassan the Wag', extract from *The Arabian Nights' Entertainments*;
- 'Zadig the Wise', extract from Voltaire's *Zadig, or, the Book of Fate*';
- 'Croesus and Solon', extract from *Croesus and Fate* by Tolstoy;
- 'David Copperfield Goes to Work, from *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens;
- 'Damocles', adapted from the Latin of Cicero.⁵

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, when increasing numbers of students were continuing their studies at High School level, literature continued to be valued as a critical part of the curriculum. It was considered important both for the intellectual development of students and to enhance their appreciation of Australian (and wider English-speaking) culture.

⁵ 'Victorian Readers: Sixth Book', accessed 1 August 2014, <http://www.austlit.edu.au/austlit/page/C630928>.

Each year in June throughout the 1940s and early 1950s, the government-issued *Education Gazette* published textbook lists for Victorian High Schools. These lists were compiled by the University of Melbourne – the institution then in charge of devising all High School curricula and guidelines in Victoria. For Year 7 students in 1945, the recommended textbooks included Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The Year 10 guidelines included Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* or *Twelfth Night*, Charles Dickens’ *Mr. Pickwick*, Matthew Arnold’s 1853 poem *Sohrab and Rustum*, John Drinkwater’s 1919 play *Abraham Lincoln*, and John Buchan’s 1910 adventure novel *Prester John*. In addition, high-achieving students were required to read Chaucer and a selection of Shakespeare’s historical plays.

Another key document of this era – the 1955 Victorian *Course of Study for Primary Schools: English* – also featured extensive reading lists. The titles listed for Years 5 and 6 included *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell, and *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame, among numerous other nineteenth- and early-twentieth century children’s classics.

Overall, until the 1950s, school students were required to read a wide range of culturally and historically significant works, in addition to some more contemporary ones. In the space of a few decades, however, the scene had rapidly changed. The move away from classics began in the 1960s. As a general trend, 1970s curricula throughout Australia began to focus much less on the ‘content’ that was to be learned and more on subjective ‘learning skills’. Likewise, they became less concerned about ensuring that students read the literary classics – whether Dickens, Austen, or Shakespeare – and slowly replaced concrete reading lists with general guidelines as to what ‘skills’ should be developed through reading and writing. Indeed, throughout this period, the meaning of ‘literature’ was stretched and transformed; it no longer referred to works of cultural significance with a long history of reception, so much as any written work with manipulated language – popular or literary, classic or contemporary, book or film.

The decline of literature was exacerbated under the influence of postmodernist works such *Literary Theory: An Introduction* by Terry Eagleton (a self-confessed Marxist), which essentially argued that ‘literature’ was an arbitrary construction upheld by the ruling class and did not exist in any concrete form. Similar ideas were actively promoted in Australia by educational groups like the Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE), which in 1984 published its own take on the new education theories – *The Making of Literature* by Ian Reid. This book, which has had a strong impact on subsequent curriculum drafts,⁶ advocated a similarly broad approach to literature. Moving against what he termed the ‘gallery’ approach, in which students were required to read works of cultural or historical significance, Reid advocated an approach that catered to the interests of children, in which ‘literature’ acquired a much broader meaning and ‘literary classics’ were no longer a necessary part of the English curriculum.⁷

⁶ Beavis, “Changing constructions,” 35.

⁷ In Ian Reid’s words, ‘a work of literature should be seen not as essentially distinct from other utterances but only as situationally distinct – not as an object possessing special properties but as an act performed in a special context.’ The ‘act’ and the ‘performance’ allow him to conclude that contemporary works are literature. Anything which is presented as literature or which imitates literature, for example anything which is printed in a book and given a literary-sounding title, is literature. I. Reid, *The making of Literature: texts, contexts and classroom practices* (Adelaide: Australian Association for the Teaching of English, 1984), 17.

Consequently, since the 1980s the literature components of Victorian English curricula have been severely compromised. By the 1980s, Victorian curriculum documents had ceased to include readings lists. In general, they would provide only vague guidelines as to what exactly 'literature' is, and provide little, if any, allusion to the classics. *The English Language Framework: P-10* (1988), for example, defined literature as 'shaped language' and included virtually all possible English texts under the banner of literature, regardless of cultural significance.⁸ At the same time, the curriculum made no mention of literary classics. The document stipulated that the 'texts' used in classrooms should both reflect themes relevant to the students and, to a degree, should embody the students' interests.⁹ It says elsewhere that they should 'enlighten and edify', be 'designed to give pleasure' and 'include fantasy', 'reflect our multilingual, multicultural society', and 'offer experiences from many social groups including those whose lives are sometimes undervalued, ignored or demeaned... [including] the lives of women and girls, Aborigines and the disabled'.

The trend in most other Australian states since the 1960s has been essentially the same. Like Victoria, all states were similarly influenced by postmodern theory and new learning theories, and from the 1960s onward they steadily abandoned the literary classics, moving to focus instead on 'learning skills' and 'responding to a range of texts'.

There was one notable exception, however. Although New South Wales had initially followed a similar course to other states, and their curricula in the 1970s and 1980s had seen a shift away from traditional elements of English such as grammatical terminology and literary classics, both were revived to a degree in the curricula published within the last twenty years by the New South Wales Board of Studies. While not every feature of this document is necessarily commendable, there were two aspects in the literature curriculum in which, in our view, it was vastly superior to all other state curricula in use at the time. The first is that the *English 7-10 Syllabus* provided a broad indication of how many works should be studied each year. The curriculum for Stage 5 (containing Years 9 and 10) states outright that the students must read Shakespearean drama, in addition to a variety of poetry, two works of fiction, and various other works. While this still does not compare to the range of literary classics that students were required to read in Victoria in the 1950s, it does acknowledge that there is value in studying literary classics.

The second favourable element of the *Syllabus* was that it had a corresponding recommended reading list, which listed 'classic texts' separately in each genre at each year level and encouraged teachers to set them in class. In fiction, the selected list is prefaced with the comment that 'students will still continue to benefit from exposure to classics', and includes works such as William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* and C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Under classic poetry, the list includes Shakespeare's *Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day?* and Percy Shelley's *Ozymandias*. The New South Wales curriculum's suggested reading list was both deep and broad, containing literary classics and topical contemporary works.

The case in New South Wales was unusual, however. By 2008 – on the eve of the implementation of the Australian curriculum – the majority of states had abandoned reading lists altogether. The overall focus of the English subject shifted from literature to abstract 'learning skills'. As a result, in 2008 the compilers of the National Curriculum found themselves in a very powerful position indeed:

⁸ Ministry of Education, *The English Language Framework: P-10 – Language for Living* (Melbourne: 1980), 27.

⁹ Ibid. 29.

they had the means and opportunity to dramatically improve the quality of English courses and enhance the presence of literary classics in classrooms around the nation. Unfortunately, they also had the opportunity to make the situation even worse.

In November 2007, both major political parties approached the Federal election with a policy to implement a National Curriculum. By 2008 – following Labor’s election victory – preparations were already underway to produce a National Curriculum for English, to be compulsory for all students attending Australian schools.

The canonical treatment of literature in the initial drafts of the national curriculum demonstrated that the National Curriculum Board (the body later to become ACARA) did indeed have an unusual opportunity to drastically improve the quality of English curricula Australia-wide, and even suggested that its writers had initially intended to follow the example of New South Wales. The Board’s *English Framing Paper*, published in late 2008, defined literature as:

texts that are valued for their form and style and are recognised as having important permanent or artistic value ... Such texts are judged to have personal, social and aesthetic value and particular potential for enriching young learners’ lives and expanding the scope of their experience.¹⁰

This definition acknowledged, at least in part, that literary texts include those which are ‘recognised’ and ‘judged’ through later reception as having an enduring value which reaches beyond the original time and place of their composition.¹¹ In addition, the *Framing Paper* encouraged teachers and students to consider ‘Why literature in some form has persisted in mattering to individuals and cultures’.¹² The drafters of the *Framing Paper* thus recognised the value of literature as part of longstanding cultural heritage and not only a collection of works written in ‘shaped’ language.

Moreover, the *National Curriculum: Initial Advice* paper, published a month earlier than the *Framing Paper*, went as far as demanding that literature should be taught in primary as well as secondary English classes:

The national English curriculum should deal head-on with commonly expressed concerns about ‘the loss of literature in primary English’... [this] would constitute a ‘loss of English’ as this paper has attempted to constitute it.¹³

In addition to supporting the reading of literature in primary years, the *Initial Advice* paper also recommended that students at the highest levels should read ‘textual forms developed as part of the more specialised study of literary texts’.¹⁴ This would suggest that the curriculum was initially interested in linking secondary English to the study of literature in universities.

The *Initial Advice Paper* and the *English Framing Paper* nevertheless made substantial breaks from the cultural heritage model of literature. The documents tended to group literature into geographic

¹⁰ National Curriculum Board, *National Curriculum: English Framing Paper* (November, 2008), 3, accessed 4 August 2014, http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/_resources/framingenglishfinal_300109.pdf.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 11.

¹³ National Curriculum Board, *National English Curriculum: Initial Advice* (October, 2008), 16, accessed 4 August 2014, http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/_resources/framingenglishfinal_300109.pdf.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

regions which have little to do with the history of the English language. 'Australian literature' is set against 'world literature' with a special focus on the Asia-Pacific region.¹⁵ The literature of England is not given any specific mention at all despite the fact that England has produced influential English literature for many more centuries than any other part of the world, and is the place in which the English language originated. The binary categories 'Australian literature' and 'world literature' do a dual disservice in that they separate Australian literature from its roots in English literature, while also burying the historical and cultural significance of England by only implicitly including it among the unnamed 'other nations' and emphasising elsewhere the need to focus on countries of the Asia-Pacific region.

While the *Initial Advice Paper* and the *Framing Paper* deviated from canonical approaches to literature in this sense, these early documents nevertheless suggested that the National Curriculum would be steered in the direction of appreciating the literary classics for their enduring cultural value. The tentative steps towards literary classics, however, were swiftly reversed, particularly under the influence of teachers' groups. The Board's *Framing Paper: Consultation Report*, a 2009 report on feedback for the initial curriculum documents, noted that the description of the literature 'Element' was 'possibly the most controversial of the three descriptions'. The *Framing Paper's* apparently canonical approach to literature was certainly controversial among the formal submissions, many of which reportedly 'took issue with the apparent privileging of Literature texts'.¹⁶

One of the most critical and influential groups to make a submission to ACARA was AATE – the group referred to above, which had been established during the reform period of the 1960s. Their response was cited frequently throughout ACARA's *Framing Paper Consultation Report*.¹⁷

AATE considered the *Framing Paper's* definition of literature to be 'inappropriately narrow' and called for the English curriculum to be made more 'inclusive of literary and other texts'.¹⁸ Additionally, the AATE argued that the category of legitimate English texts should be widened to 'embrace visual and multimodal texts as well as print.' It even argued that such texts should be studied at the expense of traditional literature:

It needs... to be recognised that the expansion of the range of texts used in English established in this section will necessarily mean a significant reconfiguration of the subject, including a relative reduction in the number of literary works, as the term is traditionally conceived, studied.¹⁹

When the National Curriculum was ultimately drafted in the months following the consultation, it is evident that the input of groups like the AATE had a very profound impact on the attitude to literature adopted throughout the National Curriculum for English.

¹⁵ NCB, *Initial Advice*, 11; NCB, *Framing Paper*, 7.

¹⁶ National Curriculum Board, *Framing Paper Consultation Report: English* (May, 2009), 8, accessed 5 August 2014, http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/_resources/Consultation_report_-_English.pdf.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8, 9, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, 25, 29, 31.

¹⁸ AATE, *Response to the National Curriculum Framing Paper* (AATE: February 2009), 4; 10, accessed 5 August 2014, <http://www.aate.org.au/documents/item/75>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

1.3 Literature in the National Curriculum

The National Curriculum for English that resulted from the consultation process above falls far short of the standards in literature which had been set by the New South Wales English curriculum.

ACARA has not released an associated reading list of suggested texts. Third-parties have, in the course of time, created their own reading lists; however they are mainly concerned with contemporary literature on Asian, Aboriginal and Environmental themes, reflecting the cross-curriculum priorities (such as *Thai-riffic!* by Oliver Phommavanh and *Trash* by Andy Mulligan).²⁰ While other lists – such as the extensive Premiers’ reading challenge lists – include literary classics, none of them attempt to separate out a list of classics for ease of selection as the former NSW curriculum once did. The current Victorian Premier’s reading challenge list, for instance, lists 1,702 works alphabetically by author, of which around 20 or close to 1 per cent may be considered literary classics. There is a decided lack of support for English teachers in Australia who want to specifically choose a literary classic appropriate to a particular year level from a list of classics.

The National Curriculum does little better at integrating literary classics into the body of the curriculum. Unlike the former NSW curriculum, it does not even require students to have read a certain number of ‘texts’ by the end of year 10. There is no requirement for any student to study Shakespeare, and in fact Shakespeare’s name does not occur except in the sample sentence in the glossary: ‘Because I am reading Shakespeare, my time is limited.’

Furthermore, while the preamble of every year level’s unit refers to ‘classic and contemporary world literature’, literary classics are only sparsely and sporadically acknowledged in the content itself. The curriculum contains few suggestions of how to include English classics in classroom activities even though it contains many suggestions for how to involve Aboriginal and Asian texts. The few ‘Western’ literary texts which are mentioned at all only come from two specific genres – namely, fairy tales and Romantic poetry, with is a contrast to the broader categories of drama, poetry, fiction and non-fiction supplied in the NSW curriculum and reading list. As such, classic English literature is notably deficient in the National Curriculum. The contribution of literature to English studies is only mentioned haphazardly in the form of fables and Romantic poems. Needless to say, the existing National Curriculum gives only a partial glimpse of our English literary heritage.

It is also useful to compare the number of references to canonical English literature (albeit, consisting of fairy tales and poetry) to the number of references to broader categories of texts in the curriculum. There are four times as many suggestions for how to include news media and advertising texts in English classroom as there are suggestions for Western literature. There are also twice as many mentions of ‘contemporary’ or ‘everyday’ texts (which include contemporary literature and speeches, as well as street signs and song lyrics) than there are for the literary classics.

There are numerous references to loosely defined texts from ‘earlier times’, ‘different historical contexts’, or a ‘tradition’. If a work’s age is the primary reason that a classic is studied, however, the lesson will be poorer for it, as the class will inevitably focus on features which serve to emphasise

²⁰ Third-party reading lists include: D. McPherson, H. Sykes and E. Tucker, *Suggested Texts for the K-10 Syllabus* (New South Wales Board of Studies: 2012) and F. Knight, *Literature to support the Australian Curriculum* (Pledger Consulting).

the work's indebtedness to its historical and social context, rather than on the literary qualities which ensured its survival beyond its native era. The vague references to texts from 'earlier times' in the curriculum therefore do not encourage the teaching of literature for the sake of the works' literary qualities and enduring contemporary relevance.

Overall, then, the National Curriculum fails to provide guidance or standards for teachers to introduce canonical English literature. This is in sharp contrast to the former NSW curriculum, which supported the teaching of classic literature by highlighting its importance in reading lists and in the content of the curriculum itself.

It must be acknowledged, however, that not all major educational groups are in favour of the current treatment of literature in the National Curriculum. A notable critic is the New South Wales English Teachers Association (ETA). In a response to an opinion piece in *The Australian* on 27 November 2010, a representative of ETA remarked:

... ETA asserts that grammar should be taught, that phonics instruction is essential for beginning readers and that literature must retain a central place in any English curriculum.

The ETA supports a national curriculum. The draft Australian curriculum is, however, not the equal of the existing NSW curriculum.²¹

We do not agree with the ETA that there should be a centralised mandatory National Curriculum. Nevertheless the ETA as an organisation is commendable for its stance in promoting the literary canon in the former New South Wales state curriculum and in debates surrounding the national curriculum.

We concur with the ETA's emphasis on literature, and note that they urged the drafters of the National Curriculum to define literature as 'culturally valued texts' and not leave it 'broadly defined' as to mean more or less any novels, picture books, films, or multimedia.²² As it stands, the national curriculum effectively fails to promote literary classics either in the curriculum itself or in reading lists as the New South Wales curriculum once did.

To illustrate the decline of classic literature in schools, on the following page we have compared the first 20 items on three reading lists and core readers for Year 6: extracts of literature in the 1940 *Victorian Readers*, book 6; the 1960 *Victorian Course of Study for Primary Schools*; and the 2014 *Victorian Premier's Reading Challenge* reading list for Years 5 and 6. The first two contain mostly classics. Although the third contains some classics, by our reckoning, they represent approximately one per cent of the total books listed (amounting to about 20 out of 1703 books), and so they are very difficult for a student to identify and there is certainly little incentive to select them over the other listed works.

²¹ "Where Teachers Stand", *The Australian*, 27 November 2010, accessed 5 August 2014, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/letters/where-teachers-stand/story-fn558imw-1225961710028>.

²² English Teachers Association, *Response to consultation on the National English Curriculum: Framing paper* (2009), accessed 6 August 2014, 16, <http://www.englishteacher.com.au/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=ehJ6pfXIX6E%3D&tabid=1125>.

Figure 5: Three illustrative sample reading lists for Year 6: 1940-2014.

ILLUSTRATIVE SAMPLE READING LISTS – YEAR 6		
Victorian Readers, 1940	Course of Study for Primary Schools, 1960 (rev.)	Victorian Premier's Reading Challenge, 2014
Charles Dickens, <i>A Child's History of England</i>	Mark Twain, <i>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i>	Randa Abdel-Fattah, <i>Jodie</i>
Miguel Cervantes, <i>Don Quixote</i>	C. Collodi, <i>The Adventures of Pinocchio</i>	Ian Abdulla, <i>As I Grew Older</i>
Robert Blatchford, 'The Men of Whitby'	Ray Harris, <i>The Adventures of Turkey</i>	Deborah Abela, <i>A Transylvanian Tale</i>
Hans Christian Andersen, <i>The Ugly Duckling</i>	Lewis Carroll, <i>Alice in Wonderland</i>	Jeanie Adams, <i>Pigs and Honey</i>
William Makepeace Thackeray, <i>The Rose and the Ring</i>	Kylie Tennant, <i>All the Proud Tribesmen</i>	Jessica Adams, <i>Kids Night In 3: A Sea of Stories and Oceans of Other Stuff</i>
Alexandre Dumas, 'Why Parrots Have Long Lives'	Rex Ingamels, <i>Aranda Boy</i>	Phillip Adams, <i>What a Joke! Collection</i>
Daniel Defoe, <i>The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe</i>	Anna Sewell, <i>Black Beauty</i>	Beth Ain, illus. Anne Keenan Higgins, <i>Starring Jules series</i>
Voltaire, <i>Zadig, or, the Book of Fate</i>	Mary Norton, <i>The Borrowers</i>	Buzz Aldrin, illus. Wendell Minor, <i>Look to the Stars</i>
Tolstoy, <i>Croesus and Fate</i>	Patricia Lynch, <i>The Boy at the Swining Lantern</i>	Goldie Alexander, <i>The Youngest Cameleer</i>
Charles Dickens, <i>David Copperfield</i> ,	Ralph Smart, <i>Bush Christmas</i>	Peter Allen, <i>Our Don Bradman: The Diary of Victory McDonald, Sydney, 1932</i>
Hughes Lapaire, 'Blanchard's Trousers'	Dale Collins, <i>Bush Holiday</i>	E.J. Altbacker, <i>Shark Wars</i>
Marcus Tullius Cicero, <i>Damocles</i>	David Morris, <i>The Castle of Secrets</i>	M.T. Anderson, <i>Me All Alone at the End of the World</i>
<i>Arabian Nights</i>	E. B. White, <i>Charlotte's Web</i>	Robyn Annear, <i>Fly a Rebel Flag: the Battle of Eureka</i>
Oliver Goldsmith, <i>The Vicar of Wakefield</i>	<i>Aesop's Fables</i>	Gill Arbuthnott, <i>What Makes You You?</i>
'The Man With the Carpets'	<i>The Arabian Nights</i>	Philip Ardagh, <i>Heir of Mystery</i>
Thomas Bailey Aldrich, 'Our New Neighbours'	Miguel Cervantes, <i>Don Quixote</i>	Felice Arena, <i>Andy Roid series</i>
Sir Walter Scott, 'The Lay of the Last Minstrel'	James Reeves, <i>English Fables and Fairy Tales</i>	Penelope Arlon, Tory Gordon-Harris, <i>Farm</i>
Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'	Rex Warner, <i>Greeks and Trojans</i>	Susan Arnott, <i>Astrolabe: Adventures in the Southern Seas</i>
A. A. Milne, 'King Hilary and the Beggar-Man'	Alison Uttley, <i>John Barleycorn</i>	Linda Aronson, <i>Naturally Rude</i>
Tennyson, 'Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington'	<i>Legends of Greece and Rome</i>	Isaac Asimov, <i>The Heavenly Host</i>
'King John and the Abbot of Canterbury'	Norman Lindsay, <i>The Magic Pudding</i>	Asphyxia, <i>Mortimer Revealed</i>
Irene Rutherford McLeod, 'Lone Dog'	Carola Oman, <i>Robin Hood</i>	
Thomas Moore, 'The Light of Other Days'	Eileen O'Faolain, <i>Sagas and Folk Tales of Ireland,</i>	
G. Walter Thornbury, 'The Cavalier's Escape'	<i>Stories from Uncle Remus</i>	
Homer, <i>The Odyssey</i>	Ann E. Wells, <i>Tales from Arnhem Land</i>	
	Leonie Picard, <i>Tales of Norse Gods and Heroes</i>	
	Arthur Mee, <i>Children's Life of Jesus</i>	
	Dorothy White, <i>I'll Tell You a Bible Story</i>	

1.4 Conclusion

Literature is essential to a well-rounded English education. Because literature is defined by its enduring popular reception over time, by its very nature it is the text type which is the most capable of uniting English speakers across different geographical, temporal and social boundaries.

Regrettably, the value of literature in English classes has been attacked and undermined by various educational groups and associations in Australia. Text lists and readers, which had made classic works of literature available and accessible to all students throughout the first half of the 20th century, were ultimately abandoned in all states except New South Wales. Moreover, since the 1980s literature was redefined in many state curricula as any texts with manipulated language, and the range of texts which could legitimately be studied in English was expanded. The effect of these developments was that the emphasis on literary classics disappeared from the English curriculum in all states, with the exception of New South Wales.

The initial drafts of the National Curriculum for English showed tentative signs that it would support the teaching of literature, defined as the texts of 'permanent or artistic value'. However, despite the contribution of the English Teachers Association of New South Wales, literature did not receive appropriate attention and emphasis in the final National Curriculum. Unlike the New South Wales curriculum, the National Curriculum does not give any indication of the number or type of texts which students should read at each stage, let alone the number of whole literary works.

Shakespeare is not mentioned at all in the document except as part of a sample sentence in the glossary. In addition, the National Curriculum has not released a suggested text list, much less a list which contains a section on literary classics which would help teachers choose works from the evolving literary canon. On these counts, the National Curriculum does not adequately support this essential element of English.

2. Social Studies in English

The priorities of the National Curriculum ought to have been to ensure that students learn to read and write, understand English grammar, have experience of classic literature, and provide guidelines as to what students at each level should be expected to achieve in each of these areas. Instead, the existing National Curriculum is more concerned about the personal and ethical development of students and provides few guidelines as to what concrete 'knowledge' students should have obtained. This is not only unhelpful to teachers but detrimental to the teaching of the English discipline, as the curriculum is crowded with irrelevant material.

The curriculum is not so much concerned about the content which is presented to children, but about the process of learning and exposure to ethical issues. In general, the ethical issues that are promoted are political.

For example, the optional 'content elaborations' of the curriculum recommend varieties of texts that are selected not for their literary or historical value but for their ability to reflect the controversial 'cross curriculum priorities': promoting sustainability; fostering Australia's engagement with Asia; and emphasising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.

The English curriculum, which is strongly influenced by functionalist linguistic theory, takes a 'whole-of-language' approach to English grammar and contains relatively little mention of standard grammatical terms. It links 'language' studies to the cross-curriculum priorities by emphasising languages other than English and dialects of non-standard English within Australia. As for literature, the Australian Curriculum defines it broadly without giving special mention of canonical literature, and tends to divide literature into geographic regions with a special emphasis on indigenous and Asian texts. The focus on Australia's geographic position in the world draws attention away from the bulk of English literary classics, the majority of which were produced in England or North America, not Asia or Australia.

The National Curriculum clearly intends to influence the ethical development of students. Its rationale states:

The study of English is central to the learning and development of all young Australians... it helps [students] become ethical, thoughtful, informed and active members of society. In this light it is clear that the Australian Curriculum: English plays an important part in developing the understanding, **attitudes** and capabilities of those who will take responsibility for Australia's future. (emphasis added)

In its current incarnation, the English curriculum does not aim solely to develop the understanding and capabilities of students, but also to influence their 'attitudes'. That the National Curriculum should be concerned with the 'attitudes' of students, particularly in reference to the ethical program of the cross-curriculum priorities, is a dangerous notion.

2.1 Languages other than English

The main focus of the any English curriculum should be to teach students to read and write coherently in English, as English is the only major language in Australia and the language of its laws, Parliamentary debates, and mainstream media.

As it is, the National Curriculum repeatedly includes content which emphasises languages other than English. Nowhere is this expressed more vividly than in a Year 7 content elaboration, which states:

all languages and dialects are of equal value, although we use different ones in different contexts, for example the use of Standard Australian English, Aboriginal English and forms of Creole used by some Torres Strait Islander groups and some of Australia's near neighbours

In almost every year under the heading 'Language Variation and Change', there is a content description similar to the above – namely:

Understand that Standard Australian English is one of many social dialects used in Australia, and that while it originated in England it has been influenced by many other languages

And:

Understand that languages have different written and visual communication systems, different oral traditions and different ways of constructing meaning.

On a similar note, the curriculum includes extensive references to literature and traditional stories that were not written in the English language. For example, Year 1 elaborations recommend that students learn about how 'spiritual beings are represented in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories' and explore 'performance poetry, chants and songs from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and Asian cultures', and another asks students to create 'visual representations of literary texts from Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or Asian cultures'. Two Year 2 elaborations even suggest studying different forms of non-verbal communication from these cultures, which can neither be called English nor even 'language' studies.

Such a focus on other languages and traditional stories from other cultures is not necessary in a curriculum for English, and would be much more relevant and better placed in a geography curriculum.

2.2 Cultural Studies

A related – and far more obvious – issue is that there is a strong emphasis throughout the curriculum on studies of indigenous and Asian cultures. References to 'culture' in content descriptions are accompanied with elaborations which refer to 'other' cultures more often than to mainstream Australian culture. For example, Year 3 contains the following 'content description':

Discuss texts in which characters, events and settings are portrayed in different ways, and speculate on the authors' reasons

The corresponding elaborations for the content description, however, recommend that students achieve this by reading Asian, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander texts from a ‘cultural studies’ perspective – namely:

reading texts in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children/young people are the central characters/protagonists and making links to students’ own lives, noting similarities

exploring the ways that the same story can be told in many cultures, identifying variations in the storyline and in music (for example, ‘The Ramayana’ story which is told to children in India, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, Burma, Laos, Tibet and Malaysia)

Occasionally, however, indigenous or Asian culture studies like these do appear in the (mandatory) core content of the curriculum as well – for example, in Year 8, there is a content description that reads:

Explore the interconnectedness of Country and Place, People, Identity and Culture in texts including those by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors

Another content description from the same year reads:

Recognise and explain differing viewpoints about the world, cultures, individual people and concerns represented in texts

Frequently, the content and elaborations of the curriculum alike recommend that students compare different cultures. In Year 1, there is an elaboration that recommends comparing representations of dragons in Asian and European cultures. In Year 2, there is an elaboration that recommends comparing moral and teaching stories from different cultures. In Year 4, another elaboration recommends comparing fables and allegories from different cultures.

Examples like this continue throughout the entire curriculum. While content of this kind might make sense in a geography curriculum, the emphasis on ‘different cultures’ seems somewhat out of place in a curriculum that is supposed to be about the study of the English language and literature.

2.3 Ethics

In addition to the above, there are numerous content descriptions and elaborations which emphasise the importance of teaching ‘ethics’ and social justice in an English curriculum. This is highlighted as a theme even in the rationale, which states that an outcome of the English curriculum should be to help students ‘become ethical, thoughtful, informed and active members of society’.

The inappropriate focus on ethics – another topic that would be better covered in a humanities subject – is apparent from relatively early in the curriculum. In Year 2, there is an elaboration that contains the following:

exploring in stories, everyday and media texts moral and social dilemmas; such as right and wrong, fairness/unfairness, inclusion and exclusion; learning to use language to describe actions and consider consequences

A further elaboration in Year 10 recommends that students create ‘texts that represent personal belief systems (such as credos, statements of ethical judgements)’.

Ethics in isolation should not be a problem, but there are indications that the writers of the curriculum were hinting at a specific kind of ‘ethics’. Unsurprisingly – given the cross-curriculum priorities – one especially prevalent ethical issue that is emphasised throughout is sustainability and environmental awareness. Sometimes this is relatively subtle – for example, a sentence in a Year 5 elaboration reads: ‘snakes are reptiles. They have scales and no legs. Many snakes are poisonous. However, in Australia they are protected.’ Sometimes it is rather more obvious – as in the below elaboration from the same year:

examining the narrative voice in texts from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditions, which include perspectives of animals and spirits, about how we should care for the Earth, for example reflecting on how this affects significance, interpretation and response

Another elaboration from Year 6 suggests ‘visiting an academic and a Year 3 class, to explore an aspect of biodiversity’; another in Year 9, ‘debating the reliability of the coverage of a range of news media of a contentious issue such as commercial logging of old growth forests’; and another from the same year, ‘presenting arguments that advance opinions, justify positions, and make judgements in order to persuade others about issues such as the importance of maintaining balance in the biosphere’.

Occasionally, the curriculum alludes to gender issues. For example, one elaboration in Year 4 says:

viewing documentaries and news footage from different periods, comparing the style of presentation, including costumes and iconography with contemporary texts on similar topics and tracking changing views on issues, for example war, race, gender

And another in Year 5 says:

talking about how suffixes change over time and new forms are invented to reflect changing attitudes to gender, for example ‘policewoman’, ‘salesperson’; ‘air hostess’/‘steward’ or ‘flight attendant’

A further example in Year 7 says:

identifying and explaining differences between points of view in texts, for example contrasting the city and the bush or different perspectives based on culture, gender or age

This is not to say that none of this should ever be covered in class or that it is unimportant, but it is surely not the place of a National Curriculum to suggest that schools teach such things in class. Perhaps the most concerning content elaboration of all, however, is the following:

investigating the qualities of contemporary protest songs, for example those about Indigenous peoples and those about the environment

It is greatly disappointing that a National Curriculum should recommend the study of protest chants in class, particularly given that the drafters were obviously sympathetic to these movements in particular and apparently present them in a favourable light.

It would make sense – and it is imagined that most people would probably agree – that an English curriculum should only contain material related to English. In the same vein, a history curriculum should only include material related to history, and a mathematics curriculum should only be about mathematics. As it stands, the sheer mass of content relating to social studies and ethical issues makes the existing English curriculum both an inadequate guide to what should be expected of students at each year level and a fundamentally political exercise. As a whole, it is highly unlikely to help teachers teach English; in fact, the cultural and ethical content could make it more difficult to do so.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This analysis has shown that there are numerous inadequacies in the existing National Curriculum which should be addressed in any review. First of all, the curriculum fails to address English literature. It is crucial that students coming through our school system should have the opportunity to read, appreciate, and evaluate the great works of the English language, from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*. Such works are significant to Australian (and Western) culture, and an important part of the English literary discourse. Denying students such an opportunity to read these works – or failing to give teachers the support and means to do so – only serves to entrench societal divides, not narrow them. The curriculum fails to provide any indication of when and which classics of the English language should be studied, and that the fair majority of the 'texts' mentioned in the documents are either not classics or not originally written English.

Recommendation 1:

Literature of the Western Canon should be a foundational element of the English curriculum. This report recommends that the curriculum should include guidelines as to how many works of literature of the Western Canon students should be exposed to at each level, and a reading should be developed to assist teachers in selecting classic works of literature.

Overall, however, the major problem with the English curriculum is the fact that it is more concerned about the personal and ethical development of students than it is about giving guidelines as to what concrete knowledge should be obtained by students – particularly with respect to reading, writing, grammar, and classic literature. To foster ethical development, the English curriculum contains a great deal of content that alludes to languages other than English, communication in other cultures, and practices in other cultures in general. It also has a strong focus on the overtly political cross-curriculum priorities. If these topics must be covered (and preferably not in a national curriculum, given that they are controversial and do not necessarily represent the views of mainstream Australia), then they would be much better placed in the humanities disciplines – particularly geography or civics. As it is, however, they colour much of the content in the English curriculum, where it is not necessary and not appropriate, and where it crowds out the content that should be the main focus of the English curriculum.

Recommendation 2:

The cross-curriculum priorities should not apply to the English curriculum in any way. The curriculum should be revised to remove all irrelevant content to ensure that it is focused on the teaching of English and literature.

Should it continue to exist, the English curriculum needs to be thoroughly rewritten and the structure overhauled. At the least, it would need to be stripped down to focus on the content that specifically relates to learning to read and write in the English language, with an enhanced focus on English literature. At best, it should be abolished altogether.

Recommendation 3:

The Minister for Education should directly appoint an expert panel to redesign the English curriculum. ACARA has demonstrated they are incapable of drafting and producing an appropriate English curriculum.

The Problem with any Curriculum

The Institute of Public Affairs opposes the establishment of a National Curriculum.

Any National Curriculum is essentially an ideological exercise, and it is inherently dangerous in a liberal democracy that a government should be given the power to determine the ideology of school curricula across the entire country.

Having a National Curriculum means that school curricula are politicised. Indeed, by definition, it is impossible to have a government-endorsed curriculum that is not politicised. As such, it is not only difficult to justify having a National Curriculum in the first place, but any National Curriculum that we do have is likely to be both contentious and unstable for as long as it continues to exist.

Different sides of Parliament are highly unlikely to agree upon an ideologically neutral curriculum. On the contrary, it is highly likely that each side will accuse the other of politicising various academic disciplines – including English – and that a review of the curriculum will be announced every time a new government comes into power to correct any perceived imbalance.

We have already seen this occur twice in Australia since 2006: the first time, when the Rudd government scrapped the Howard government's *Guide to Teaching Australian History*; the second just two months ago, when Christopher Pyne announced a review of the Labor curriculum. A very similar pattern has occurred in the United Kingdom since the Thatcher government introduced England's National Curriculum in 1988. The trend is likely to continue here, making the National Curriculum greatly destabilising for the teachers and students involved.

On the basis of the above, the IPA advises that the National Curriculum should be abolished altogether. Instead, introducing a competing curriculum model would allow for greater school autonomy and prevent curricula from becoming a plaything of governments.

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