

**SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE INQUIRY
INTO ACADEMIC STANDARDS OF SCHOOL EDUCATION**

AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH (AATE)

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AATE represents 6,000 teachers of English and literacy from government and non-government sectors across Australia. AATE members are part of an international network of teachers with a commitment to teaching and learning in the field of language and literacy.

AATE's focus is to provide teachers with a voice in national issues related to the teaching of English and literacy. It reviews and responds to state and national educational initiatives and is a member of the *International Federation for the Teaching of English (IFTE)* and the *National Education Forum (NEF)*. AATE publishes a regular refereed journal, *English in Australia*, which includes research and a diverse range of opinions on issues of concern to English teachers and literacy educators. It also publishes and distributes quality resources for teacher and student use in English and literacy education, and assists with the organisation of national and state conferences and seminars.

While membership of AATE is open to all educators interested in the teaching of English, members of AATE come mainly from the secondary sectors of government and non-government schools and from the tertiary sectors. Hence our focus in this submission is on adolescents and the middle and secondary years of English and literacy learning.

AATE welcomes the Senate Inquiry and its potential to affirm the practices of Australian educators.

1. How well are schools preparing students in English for further education, training and employment?

Australia introduced compulsory education in the early twentieth century because it recognised the value of having a literate community. That Australia has been spectacularly successful in achieving this end has been confirmed by international testing (PISA) undertaken by the OECD, and national literacy testing and benchmarking. Behind Australia's international success lie internationally acclaimed, rigorous, research based and balanced curricula and teaching methodologies.

Our students' reading comprehension and knowledge application outcomes are, by international measures, amongst the best in the world. For example, only one country, Finland, performed better than Australia in reading literacy in PISA 2003. In fact, in PISA 2003 Australia had one of the highest proportions of students of any country at the highest proficiency level and one of the lowest proportions of students at the lowest level. All Australian states and territories performed at or above the OECD average.

The 2004 National Report on Schooling indicated that the majority of year 7 students are achieving at the benchmark level or better in reading and writing in all States and Territories. Approximately 90% of year 7 students are achieving at or above the national benchmark level for reading, with the percentage for writing being 91.5%. This trend has been a very consistent one in recent years.

Taking their lead from Industry, English educators have recognised the critical role of generic competencies in ensuring that the Australian workforce is equipped with the necessary skills for effective participation in the workplace. The Mayer Key Competencies, basic transferable competencies that underpin employability and the capacity to adapt to different types of whole work roles, as well as personal and community activities throughout an individual's life, have been incorporated within English curriculum frameworks around the nation. The Key Competencies specifically addressed in English are: collecting, analysing and organising information, communicating ideas and information, planning and organising activities, working with others and in teams, working with others and in teams, and using technology.

The pace of change in the twenty-first century and the pressing social and environmental problems we now face demand workers and citizens capable of creativity and innovation. A twenty-first century society requires individuals to be educated in how to identify and evaluate competing interests, agendas and solutions. Workers must be able to find creative solutions to new problems. They must be able to determine how they can best work with other people and what range of resources they can draw on to achieve their goals.

English curriculum frameworks across the nation have embraced these challenges. Critical literacy and constructivist teaching approaches are two significant elements of English curricula and teaching in Australia that address the demand for new kinds of students who have new kinds of knowledge and skills. Such approaches must remain part

of any innovative and forward looking English curriculum. English teachers in Australia have a rich history of principled eclecticism, of applying proven rigour and effectiveness in their curriculum design. This is evidenced by a recent international survey of secondary English teaching which concluded that Australian English teaching and learning provides the 'way forward' for policy makers, teacher educators and teachers in the US and the UK.¹

It is worth noting that Australia has a much stronger history than the US and the UK of allowing teachers a high degree of professional autonomy in meeting the needs of their students. It is axiomatic that this must remain the case, as we move towards a national curriculum, if Australia is to remain so successful and highly esteemed internationally in the teaching of English and literacy.

AATE is convinced that there is no single teaching method or approach which can equip students with the necessary range of literacy practices. Therefore, we strongly advocate that teachers use a balanced approach to English and literacy teaching in order to meet the diverse needs of all students. Adolescent students who need support in developing their literacy skills have very different needs than early years students. They may struggle with reading linguistic texts but may be very competent readers of visual and digital texts. Many adolescents are also able to decode words but need additional support to develop their comprehension skills when reading longer complex print materials. A common area of need for middle years students is to develop inferential and critical comprehension skills, as they are already able to read competently at the literal level. A basic skills approach that focuses on developing simple comprehension cannot meet the needs of the majority of underperforming adolescent students in literacy, let alone the complex skills needed by Australia's future global citizens.

While the overwhelming majority of our young people are finding success in their English language and literacy learning, more can be done by all stakeholders to support those who, for many reasons, find schooling more challenging. Some Indigenous students, those students with special learning needs, and those that live in conditions of social or economic disadvantage, often need additional support. It is a tragedy that in a relatively wealthy society such as Australia, which prides itself on a fair go for all, some students are still not getting a fair go. AATE supports efforts by Government to understand and address such challenges in ways that recognise the existing and potential contribution all young people do and can make to their communities.

2. The Core Curriculum in English

The rich imaginative and aesthetic qualities of the best literature remain a necessary component of schooling in the twenty first century. It has often been said that the formative influences of such qualities are necessary to the psychological health of

¹ Peel, R., Patterson, A., and Gerlach, J. (2000) *Questions of English: Ethics, aesthetics, rhetoric, and the formation of the subject in England, Australia and the United States*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

individuals, and therefore society as a whole. Through literature we can arrive at a better understanding of ourselves and a more empathetic understanding of others. In short, a literary education is an education in the human condition.

In addition to this, it is essential to recognise that in an increasingly globalised society, in which knowledge management and information transfer are becoming much more important, our students need expertise in a wider range of literacy competencies than has been the case in the past. It remains the case that basic reading comprehension, an appreciation of our cultural and literary heritage, correct spelling and a facility with a range of written genres continue to be important in English. This has been confirmed by the recent Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) report on syllabus and achievement standards in Australia. However, in keeping with the complex and fluid demands of life and work in the twenty-first century, AATE advocates a definition of literacy that is broader than the basic ability to read and write. Such a definition emphasises the importance of skills in critical reflection and questioning. Such skills support civics education initiatives by equipping students to be informed participants in our democratic society, allowing them to thoughtfully consider issues and effectively articulate their own informed and reasoned viewpoints, in keeping with their developing moral and ethical frameworks.

Further, in this 'hi-tech' age, mastery of new information communication technologies (ICT) has also become essential for students. Consequently 'screen' and 'digital' literacies are now a crucial component of any forward-thinking school curriculum. It is evident to AATE that the importance of such skills is acknowledged by English teachers. These 'literacies' have been incorporated in the different state curriculum frameworks and are being taught in English and literacy classrooms around the nation. Teachers continue to report, however, that inadequate resourcing and maintenance, a growing focus in some areas on narrow standardised literacy testing, as well as the provision of effective professional learning remain areas of concern with regards to the use of ICT in English and literacy teaching.

Members of AATE Council would welcome the opportunity to speak to members of the Inquiry further about the issues raised in this submission. Acknowledgement of teacher professionalism is essential so that the teaching profession is not undermined at a time when teachers are facing ever increasing scrutiny and criticism.

Karren Philp
President