

1 February, 2018

Annelise Balsamo  
Council member  
Victorian Association for the Teaching of English  
1/134–136 Cambridge Street  
COLLINGWOOD VICTORIA 3066

Dear Annelise

Thank you for your letter of 4 December 2017 on behalf of the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English (VATE) Council concerning the 2017 VCE Literature examination.

The VCAA greatly appreciates receiving views from the teaching community about examinations as part of our commitment to continual improvement. Your valuable feedback has been forwarded to the VCE Examinations Unit. The concerns and recommendations expressed have been discussed with the 2018 Examination Development Panel.

As you are aware, some concerns regarding the 2017 VCE Literature examination were communicated to the VCAA following the examination. These concerns were brought to the attention of the Chief Assessor and assessing team for their consideration. As is VCAA practice, the student responses were then closely monitored during the assessing process, ensuring that all students were assessed fairly.

The data from the 2017 Literature examination indicates that the student cohort performed strongly in the examination. As indicated in the Literature Examination Report (which has now been published) the percentage mean of the Section A essay in the 2017 examination was 63.5%. This is 1.2% higher than the Section B essay which had a percentage mean of 62.5%. Further, the mark distributions show that students were appropriately spread across the mark range and that the tasks allowed for differentiation of student levels of performance.

### **Section A – Language**

Your letter outlined a concern that some of the language used in Section A topics was inaccessible. The feedback from the assessing group indicated that students dealt with topics in a way that demonstrated their understanding of both the texts and the topics. The word 'indictment' in the *Heart of Darkness* topic was taken by students to mean 'critique', 'condemnation' or 'criticism'. Given the narrative details in the text, it would have been difficult to ignore Conrad's negative response to circumstances in the Belgian Congo.

Indeed, the Introduction to the text by Owen Knowles refers to 'colonial rowdyism' and a probing of 'the credentials of the European mission in Africa'. The word 'archetypal' in *Buried Child* was also questioned in your letter. Nevertheless, students who responded to the topic discussed the family's adherence to a flawed and out-dated American Dream, or to colonialist and patriarchal values. As these values are the basis of the damaged family relationships in the text, such interpretations were entirely appropriate.

The VCE Literature 2017-2020 Written Examination - Examination specifications stipulate an 'informed, relevant and plausible interpretation of the text' and an 'understanding and analysis of the text, demonstrated through the use of textual evidence'. It was therefore not unreasonable to expect that students would show an awareness of Conrad's 'indictment of colonialism'. The examination and sample examination topics were designed with the intent to decrease the possibility of allowing for a pre-prepared, pre-learned response.

The word 'inadmissible' in the *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* topic is a direct quote from the text about one of its central concerns. It was not unreasonable, therefore, to expect that students would be familiar with the word and be able to discuss its implications. Many students were able to do so.

Your concerns expressed about the language used in Section A have been discussed at length by VCAA management. As a result, the VCAA reviewing process, particularly with regard to the accessibility of language used in Section A topics, will be strengthened during the 2018 examination development process and beyond.

Please note that dictionaries are permitted in only a limited number of examinations: English and EAL, to assist students with language in Section C, and bilingual dictionaries are permitted in Language examinations. In these examinations students are presented with long extracts of previously unseen texts. As the extracts in the Literature examination have been studied by students, it is assumed that they are familiar with the language.

### **Section A Literary Perspectives**

In line with the VCE Literature Examination specifications, the topics in the 2017 examination were framed to accommodate a range of literary perspectives (and clearly specified 'one literary perspective of the student's choosing'). The criticism directed toward the *Heart of Darkness* topic was focused on its inclusion of the word 'colonialism', and assumed that a post-colonial perspective was expected. Such a perspective was available but certainly not mandated by the topic, as colonialism and post-colonialism refer to quite distinct periods. It is possible to discuss colonialism without discussing post-colonialism. VATE Perspectives also make this point, noting that:

*the colonial period [entails] the history of appalling imperial conquest and the subjugation and plunder of cultures far older than those of the merely modern European nation states that provided the political and economic structures of imperialism, namely the modern development of European capitalism in its monopoly or imperialist phase. Conrad selects arguably the most extreme version of this colonial model.*

The VCE Literature assessment criteria specify 'an analysis and evaluation of the views and values foregrounded in the topic and underlying one literary perspective of the text, and awareness of how these views and values relate to the text's views and values'. The word 'colonialism' refers to the setting and the concerns of the text, not to a literary

perspective, so allows students to use a literary perspective of their 'choosing'. The Conrad topic required an acknowledgement of Conrad's indictment of colonialism but many students used it to develop a feminist, a psychoanalytic, a Marxist or New Historicist reading, and often, to make connections between colonialism and the oppression of women – or 'the other', or to condemn European territorial expansion or to reflect on characters' journeys into the unconscious. Other responses discussed colonialism within the historical and cultural context of Conrad's time and drew on Achebe's condemnation of Conrad's 'racism'.

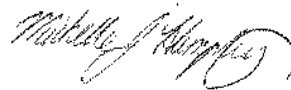
Similarly, a strong narrative focus on blurred gender roles in the *Twelfth Night* topic seemed, to some, to mandate a 'queer' reading. As with *Heart of Darkness*, students were also able to produce excellent feminist and Marxist responses. These discussed the empowerment of Viola in masculine attire, Maria's challenge to Malvolio's assumed social superiority and the cruel thwarting of his social pretensions in a rigidly class-divided society. It was also clear that teachers had discussed a New Historicist perspective on *Twelfth Night*, (looking at the text's 'production, consumption and status' (J.A.Cuddon: a dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory).

I trust that this response provides the clarification required and that the VATE Literature community can feel confident that the concerns presented in your letter have been considered and addressed by the VCAA. Please contact us if you require any further clarification. The VCAA looks forward to continuing to work with VATE in support of the teaching of VCE Literature in Victorian schools.

Yours sincerely



JACQUELINE MOORE  
Curriculum Manager, English



MICHELLE HUMPHREYS  
Manager, Examinations Unit