

# **Submission to the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA): Consultation – Review of VCE English, History, Mathematics and Science studies**

**Submitted by:** The Victorian Association for the Teaching of English

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## **Authored by:**

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## **About The Victorian Association for the Teaching of English**

The Victorian Association for the Teaching of English (VATE) is an independent, not-for-profit organisation, governed by a Council drawn from its membership, that aims to foster the highest quality teaching of English throughout Victoria.

Through professional networking, dialogue and learning, research, journals and publications, VATE strives to nurture a community of educators of English and is committed to the advancement of the profession. VATE exists to support and challenge its members in the continual process of renewal necessary to engage with the dynamic nature of both the profession and the subject English. VATE provides leadership and advocacy through its involvement in discussions, forums, and strategic partnerships with other teaching associations, bureaucracies, statutory authorities and organisations, giving members the opportunity to be represented and learn from a wider audience. Further, through its relationship with the peak national English teaching association, AATE, VATE's perspective is both local and national.

VATE's members reflect a diverse range of voices: VATE's current 2013 membership includes 404 institutional members, 275 individual members and 300 primary members (TEAM:P). Through these various levels of membership, VATE represents 3694 individuals and 569 individuals through TEAM:P. The majority of the membership comprises classroom teachers, heads of departments, but also represents other areas such as university English teacher educators, PhD students and pre-service teachers, teachers not currently engaged at schools, including

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consultants and CRTs, and retired teachers. VATE's membership is drawn from all sectors and regions.

VATE Council's interaction with its membership is through regular email communication (including e:Bulletins and surveys), various committees (Curriculum and Assessment, Professional Learning and Research and Publications and Communications), hardcopy and online publications posted 3 times a year, a diverse calendar of Professional Learning opportunities, member forums, and a comprehensive website which reflects the concerns, interests and issues that are at the forefront of the English education community.

## About the VATE Submission

VATE does not have a set position on the future directions of the VCE Englishes on offer. Nevertheless, it is clear that any changes to the VCE courses made by VCAA will have a significant impact on our members and English teachers in Victoria more generally. The VATE Council decided to make a submission to the VCAA to communicate some of the experiences we had heard from the membership, or experienced ourselves, both as English teachers in schools and English teacher educators in universities.

We sent a brief anonymous survey (using an online survey tool) to the membership via email around the three questions articulated below. Given the VCAA published the “Proposed directions” paper near the end of term, and required submissions by the end of Week 1 or 2 (depending on the school and sector) of Term 3, we were concerned that this would restrict the possibility of generating responses from teachers. However, in the week that we had the survey open, we received 66 responses. The survey responses came from a wide range of sectors, career stage and regions. As the respondents work in the CEO (9), the Independent (22) and State (33) sectors, the voices in these survey responses represent a sense of what teachers are thinking across all secondary sectors. 59 of the respondents identified as teachers in their late- or mid-career (30 and 29 respectively), 5 early career and 2 are retired. Finally, although the majority of the respondents work in metropolitan schools (48 working at Eastern, Southern, Western and Northern metropolitan schools), respondents also came from the regions: Barwon South West (2), Gippsland (4), Grampians (1), Hume (1), Loddon Mallee (2). We also collated data from members who are part of VATE’s Curriculum and Assessment Committee. The committee currently consists of 16 members who represent the full range of career-stage, from pre-service to late-career, and a range of sectors and regions.

There are a number of strong themes evident from our data. There was strong support for the continuation of both Literature and English Language as discrete

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subjects, with few changes suggested to the existing courses. A significant number of respondents were concerned about the *Creating and presenting* section of the English course, with many suggesting that it either needs to be removed from the course or significantly reimagined. For a variety of reasons, mostly related to resources currently available to schools and teacher training, VATE members are divided on the question of whether an EAL study should be stand-alone or written so that the EAL study is equivalent in standard to an English study. Very few expressed an explicit view against the proposed EAL Units 1 and 2 Bridging course. Students' eligibility for EAL was seen as a vexed and complex issue, with teachers acknowledging that taking into consideration the host of different circumstances and backgrounds affecting students who may benefit from the proposed new study will make clear rules difficult. The majority of teachers are concerned about two Englishes if they have parity in relation to ATAR scores if one is much "easier" than the other. However, they recognise that for some students with literacy challenges, an extension of Foundation English would be useful.

*Although the VCAA's "Proposed directions" paper explicitly said that the development of a Foundation English Units 3 and 4 study will be postponed, it is worth noting that respondents did suggest that Foundation English should expand to Units 3 and 4, with the option of no ATAR score.*

## Q1. What changes to the VCE English, EAL, English Language and Literature would you like to see adapted, adopted or eliminated?

*Respondents had the capacity to respond to each English as a separate category; some chose to respond to a number of the Englishes, some only to the English in which they felt they had the most to say.*

### English

Not surprisingly, the largest numbers of respondents were concerned with the proposed VCE English course, with 56 responses to this first question. 13 of the respondents wanted to retain English in its current format, supporting the proposals in the VCAA "Proposed directions" paper. The overwhelming majority of responses indicated a review of the current Study Design for English is imperative.

Teachers expressed no direct concerns with regard to *Reading and responding* (AoS 1), generally stating that this aspect of the course should stay as it is.

The highest volume of responses concerned *Creating and presenting* (AoS 2). Overwhelmingly, teachers would like to see the Context be eliminated or reimagined. Those who support the removal of this AoS suggest that, as a study, it is

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“too open-ended, too subjective, and not achieving its [assumed] aims”. A number of respondents suggested that the outcome is “unclear and confusing for both teachers and students - especially early career teachers” (which this respondent was). Many suggested that the expectations of the students’ writing should be clearer. Teachers are concerned that it is a “ridiculously complicated and overly busy task” and “overly convoluted” which requires a level of literacy and specialisation beyond what should be expected from the majority of students and ultimately “stifles the creativity of the students ... forc[ing] very contrived responses”. There was conflict, though, as teachers were both asking for more clarity and limitations with regard to this writing task while also asking for more breadth and flexibility. Many suggested that the Context study be replaced with what used to exist as the “writing folio” unit/s of work as this is “equally representative of student writing”. Another respondent noted that a significant difficulty arose because a written explanation is allowed in the students’ SAC work, but not in the exam. There was also the suggestion that the Contexts themselves, if this AoS were to remain, are ready for an overhaul; having the same Contexts has “become monotonous for teachers”.

*Using language to persuade* (AoS 3) had fewer direct responses, but there was a feeling that some changes could be considered to better focus the study for 21<sup>st</sup> century students. “Clear thinking” skills and a “more generic study of language, rather than just language to persuade” were suggested as appropriate foci for this AoS; such approaches were seen as being more aligned with the studies of language and literacy as developed in the AC:E. One respondent suggested that the oral task should be eliminated.

Four respondents directly addressed concerns with regard to the English examination; these concerns do reflect broader conversations and anecdotal evidence raised in the VATE Committees. The three hour, hand-written examination is seen as “arduous for students who ... [are] accustomed to using digital technologies for communication”; using laptops and/or setting a two hour examination – to bring English in line with both Literature and English Language – is seen as a logical step. One respondent raised the concern about students who are not considered EAL students, but who do not have English-language backgrounds; this might be a consideration for the potential Foundation English subject.

There was also concern expressed about what was needed to achieve a “pass” for Year 12 English. It was suggested that students should be required to complete 4 units of English across units 1-4 (rather than the existing 3), and that students should have a “solid background in literacy” to achieve a satisfactory Year 12. Concern was also voiced about the lack of richness and room for “top flight” for students who use language “magically” within the current English framework. A number of the

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responses suggest that schools do not necessarily offer students choices of Literature and English Language as their “English” study for VCE. While the VCAA has made it clear that students do have this choice, these school-based assumptions did lead to a number of concerns raised about the nature of the English course as being inappropriate for “all” students. One respondent believed that the current English study, and the VCAA proposals for all subjects, seem sensible and manageable for schools. Another respondent affirmed the continued focus on visual as well as written texts.

## EAL

We received 35 responses directly concerned with English as an Additional Language, and this study has been a significant focus of discussion at VATE’s Curriculum and Assessment Committee meetings.

There are significant concerns raised with regard to schools being able to afford to run EAL classes. Many schools currently have to teach EAL students in English classes as there are often only one or two eligible EAL students in any given year level. Respondents were also concerned about how the EAL cohort was determined. Clearly there is a significant knowledge difference between students who have recently arrived in Australia, those who have been previously taught in English language education systems but in non-English speaking communities, and those who have been in Australia and in the Australian education system for a number of years but who still qualify for EAL status. There were calls for more rigorous regulation of which students should qualify as EAL students.

VATE members are divided on the question of whether an EAL study should be stand-alone, or written so that the EAL study is clearly ‘equivalent’ (in standard) to an English study. One possible advantage of a stand-alone EAL study is that it might enable the VCAA to dispense with eligibility criteria. However, a stand-alone EAL study presents the serious problem for schools, that English is compulsory and yet they may not have the numbers of EAL-eligible students to form viable class(es). Further, one respondent did express concern that tying EAL to English does require a focus on literature in a way which is “grossly unfair to many” EAL learners. For this reason, the members of the VATE Curriculum and Assessment Committee suggest that there should be two EAL studies, one attached/equivalent to VCE English, and one attached/equivalent to the literacy-based units for VCAL Literacy (and/or VCE Essential English).

Again, there were significant concerns expressed about the *Creating and presenting* Area of Study. Teachers’ responses demonstrate an understanding of the difficulty faced by many EAL students, maintaining that this outcome

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is exceedingly difficult for EAL students who have been in Australia for only a few years. There are too many components for many students to deal with. I think a creative writing section of the course for EAL students would be more beneficial.

requires ... sophisticated and creative thinking from students. Many find this difficult and the cultural context is far too hard.

[an] artificial task ... [and] the necessity of reference to a set text limits the writing. Expectations ... must be clearer for EAL students.

With regard to the examination, many teachers have raised concerns about the complexity of Section C for EAL students. A number of respondents and VATE Committee members have suggested that a “different and distinct set of materials for Section C” should be written for the examination. Concerns around the examination were closely tied to concerns about the text list. It was suggested that EAL is treated as a “poor relation of English” because “accessible texts” were not included in the reading list. As the “selection of texts for Units 3 and 4 has become increasingly problematic for EAL classes” as EAL students “apparently receive very little consideration in the current lists”, it was suggested that a separate text list which “take[s] language into consideration” should be adopted.

As a number of teachers saw the current EAL course as not meeting the needs of EAL students, it was suggested that there should be a VCE course which enables greater focus on language acquisition and extension rather than text response essays and language analysis. It was also suggested that there “needs to be a branch for students intending to pursue traditionally academic tertiary studies where critical literacy is essential, and a branch for students for whom functional literacy (in combination with critical literacy)” is a priority.

## English Language

From the 25 responses to the English Language study, there was overwhelming support for retaining the subject in its current form, with several respondents supporting a move to its inclusion in the suite of Englishes in the senior offerings of the Australian Curriculum. The increased attention to “linguistic awareness”- in terms of explicitly teaching aspects of grammar, Standard Australian English (SAE) and the history of English – through the inclusion of a language strand in the AC:E was seen as a strong reason to maintain the current study. A number of respondents stated that English Language was an “effective and popular alternative specialist English subject” and one respondent stated that they saw this as a “popular course

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and teachers have welcomed it”. A number of members have suggested that this “linguistics” subject on offer in Victoria is a good way to “invigorate students tired of the traditional English course”; however, others see this difference as a reason for the subject not to be offered as part of the English group. 3 respondents explicitly suggested the subject should be removed as the “nature of this subject is so different to that of English and Literature that it has seemed to be unfair to afford it the same status”. With regard to the course content, respondents suggested that there was too much content to cover, particularly in Unit 3, AoS 2 and that there needed to be more alignment of the assessments across the outcomes.

## Literature

There were 26 responses from the survey and considerable discussion about the Literature course through VATE’s Committee structures. Overwhelmingly respondents would like to see Literature continue in its current format. It is a complex subject, which is taught and assessed at a very high standard in this state. It fits better with a range of students and their interests, is seen to broaden student experiences beyond what English alone offers. It is viewed as an excellent alternative to English and is seen as offering students the capacity to specialise in a way comparable to the differently targeted choices in disciplines such as Mathematics in the VCE.

Within this overwhelming support for Victoria’s Literature course, there were a number of suggestions with regard to changes to the course. There was a strong suggestion that Considering alternative viewpoints (Unit 3, AoS 3) should be given more weight and moved to Unit 4 as this could encourage students to develop “a more polished piece of critical writing”. It was also suggested that the weighting of the Creative task in Unit 4 (AoS1) be reconsidered; many teachers do see this task as being over-privileged in the marks assigned to this task. Teachers have also argued that it would be worthwhile having a Passage analysis task (currently Unit 4, AoS 2) in both Units 3 and 4. There have also been suggestions that an “unseen” passage be included in the examination. Teachers continue to express concern about what is perceived to be a lack of transparency with regard to examination marking, and that more of the content of the outcomes which form the basis of SACs be examined in the final, external assessment.

It was suggested by one respondent that there is a

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need to look at achievement data. Many students still feel the need to do English. If it is at the same level as VCE English but with a different focus and skill set, why is this the case?

There was considerable frustration expressed with regard to the text lists for Literature. One respondent saw the “emphasis” on film as unfortunate; however, many teachers of Literature welcome the multiple modes of “text” possible to use in the Literature classroom and the ability for teachers to select texts based on the cohort of students in the particular context in which they are teaching. Concerns around the use (and potential abuse) of List A texts was also noted.

## **Q2a. Could your school offer a separate EAL study and bridging units for EAL students with very limited English literacy?**

There was qualified support for an EAL course which which separated from English, the qualification being based on access to resources and the school’s capacity to support such a course. However, 25 of the 56 respondents explicitly disagreed with the proposal.

The majority of the teachers who agreed with the proposed bridging units were from schools in which EAL was able to run as a discrete class, due to both numbers and having appropriately trained teachers in the school. A number of respondents maintained that the “current EAL VCE course does not suit or match the English knowledge and/or literacy needs” of their students (including students from NESB families, not just those who are relatively new to the Australian education system), implying that a new course could address these concerns. The majority of respondents who answered this question in support of a proposed change believed their school could accommodate a separate EAL study offered a variety of observations to accompany their responses. Views suggested that “this would be beneficial to our cohort who have only been in Australia for a short period” while others spoke about how their schools already offered effective EAL bridging programs from Years 10 to 11. VATE’s Curriculum and Assessment Committee noted that some schools have reported (informally) using Foundation English Units 1 and 2 as, effectively, bridging units, with some schools making this compulsory for students seen to have a need for this extra language instruction.

Those who explicitly disagreed with the proposal did so because they worked in schools where the EAL cohort is small and the school and teachers did not have the resources to facilitate a separate EAL class, let alone a bridging unit. This was summed up by one recipient thus:



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We cannot currently offer EAL because we do not have any teachers with sufficient EAL qualifications. However, we do acknowledge that there has been an influx of refugee families in the neighbourhood and that we will need to rectify this situation soon.

Thus the primary difficulty in adopting a bridging unit and/or separating the EAL course from the English course does seem to be numbers, training and other school resources rather than any philosophical or pedagogical reason.

## 2b. What would be a reasonable EAL eligibility criteria in the school you are teaching or have taught?

From the survey, we received 39 responses to this question; these reflected a wide range of ways of thinking about what the question was asking.

For many, the question as to whether an EAL study should be stand alone or written so that the EAL study is clearly “equivalent” to English Units 1-4 made a significant difference with regard to eligibility criteria.

Teachers responded to the eligibility question in two broad ways – 1, the number of years a student has been studying English; and 2, how examinable skills and reports may assist with the question. Seven responses explicitly agreed with the current Victorian eligibility criteria, two respondents argued for eight years or more instruction in English whereas six argued for less than seven years instruction in English. The latter typically suggested that an eligible student may be a new migrant of less than 5 years or a student with inconsistent access to English. One respondent suggested a staggered system along the lines of 0-3 years and 4-5 years and nothing thereafter. One respondent summed up what was a general feeling amongst respondents:

Students who have been here for 5-6 years are proficient and should not be judged against those who have been in the country for 2 years.

A sense of “fairness” was central to the responses to the question of eligibility; there was a consistent concern around abuse of the current system.

Three respondents, whose answers focused more on student skills rather than the number of years access to English instruction, suggested that NAPLAN results could provide a useful guideline. One teacher made the point that at present an IELTS score of 5 is considered the minimum requirement for entry to Year 11. Anything less, the teacher suggested, disadvantages the student wanting to complete VCE. Another teacher criticised the broad-brush approach of the current seven year

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system, pointing out that “there are students who speak and write near perfect English who are eligible and those who struggle with English are forced into the mainstream”. This teacher advocated that a more discriminating examination of written and spoken literacy levels needs to be employed. Yet another teacher suggested that students need to have SL4 level English.

A number of teachers commented on the difficulty in answering this question. One pointed out that his/her school has a constant flow of refugees and migrants particularly from Africa with varying kinds and degrees of language skills. Two respondents suggested that even parents and home backgrounds could be considered as such students may get no additional help from home, especially if the primary language of the family at home was not English.

## **Q3. What would be the implications for mainstream English if Foundation English extended to Units 3 and 4? What form would these units take, and what cohort would this extension address?**

The majority of the 58 respondents to this question were concerned that the development of a Foundation English Units 3 and 4 which led to an ATAR score might negatively effect enrolment for the present VCE English course. However, one respondent suggested that the introduction of such a course “could allow for a more rigorous curriculum within mainstream English”. Respondents were concerned that the labeling of the course “Foundation” may lead it to be seen as a “building blocks course” and that students (and teachers/schools/parents) may see it as an “easier option”. This negative bias was evident in some of the responses from teachers in this survey. For example

My school is very affluent middle class with IB and we don't offer Foundation English at all.

And:

I do not think Foundation English should be extended to Units 3 and 4. It is a utilitarian course that does not cover every aspect of English.

These are interesting responses as they do highlight the potential stigmatisation and marginalisation of those who would choose this option, should it become available as a VCE English.

There were concerns about equity if Foundation English had a weighting similar to the other Englishes offered at VCE, and that the introduction of such an alternative would “create a streaming environment”. The passion in the responses was palpable. One respondent stated

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I cannot see why VCAL would not be the logical course here. More importantly I would hate for this course to be the thin end of the wedge and ... [see it adopted] and developed a bit like Further Mathematics.

Some saw the implications as also leading to a diminution of standards and therefore a lessening of the validity of English as a subject. There were many comments about the recognition of Foundation English, Units 3 and 4 by tertiary providers. Questions which arose centred around whether tertiary providers would accept completion of this English as sufficient for entry into tertiary courses.

It was also evident that VCE English/EAL is seen by many teachers as too challenging for some students, particularly those with literacy difficulties. Offering a Foundation sequence, it was suggested, may “allow these students to stay in VCE” as the needs of these students was not met by VCAL. As one respondent noted

[Offering Foundation English] would mean that students with weak literacy skills accessed greater opportunities for success and that resources for mainstream English could be more focused with a corresponding improvement in student performance.

One respondent commented that they believed “Foundation English would only be offered to students undertaking VCAL, so it would not impact mainstream English in any way”.

There was an assumption in the responses which looked at the benefits of a Units 3 and 4 Foundation English that this course would be designed for those struggling with English because of literacy problems rather than being available for anyone to choose, and that it would not necessarily lead to an ATAR score. Another student group singled out by teachers who struggle were EAL students and teachers commented that if Foundation English were to be extended into Year 12, it should be carefully structured to be accessible by EAL students.

Other concerns that emerged related to streaming and access to all courses by all schools if an advanced/standard course structure were developed. A number of respondents did raise the difficulty of sustaining so many English courses in schools, particularly smaller schools. The VATE Curriculum Committee developed the following submission

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## *Compulsory English/Literacy in the VCE and VCAL qualifications*

A number of VATE members expressed concern about confusions associated with the compulsory status of English, in particular the problems that may arise if two general-English VCE studies – both with scored assessment including examinations – are introduced, as is suggested by ACARA senior secondary English outlines.

The VCAA Strengthening Pathways paper provides opportunity to differentiate compulsory English studies, to clarify that VCE English is an advanced study, while VCE Essential English is a literacy-enhancement study. Thus, a student who aims to achieve a VB, or certain SPs, might be restricted to selecting VCE English, its equivalent VCE EAL, or VCE Literature, in order to achieve Victorian Certificate of Education, whereas a student who aims to achieve a VCAL, or certain other IPs/SPs within VCE, might be expected to select an un-scored VCE English, or its equivalent EAL, as compulsory literacy-based units.

Such differentiation between an ‘advanced’ English study and a ‘standard’ English study, each with its equivalent EAL, opens up the opportunity to provide for the many students who are still, frankly, learning to read and write at the senior secondary years. VATE member Chris Wheat advocates for the needs of such students, and we recommend his ideas to the VCAA. A literacy-based English study may be appropriate for this cohort of senior students, while an English study similar to the present VCE English/EAL will remain the study of choice for the majority cohort. In schools where enrolments in VCAL are already strong, VCAL Literacy is used flexibly and badged as ‘VCAL ESL’. Some schools enrol a whole cohort of students in Foundation English Units 1 and 2, followed by a year-long Unit 3 of VCE English.

Some VATE members would like clarity in what is currently a confusing grey area, that students can achieve the VCE qualification with merely an un-scored VCE English plus a required number of VET units. On the other hand, other members see the available flexibility of VCE English/EAL as a plus.

## *Scored and un-scored assessment, ATARs and the role of VCE in tertiary entrance*

There are particular issues associated with the nexus between compulsory English and tertiary entrance. VATE members recommend that whatever decisions the VCAA makes about incorporation of ACARA senior material into its VCE Reviews, there should be clarity, equity and viability in the curriculum and assessment structures, including the viability of monitoring of compliance.

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If it were decided that a 'standard' English/EAL study – AC 'Essential English' or VCE 'Foundation English – will be extended to Units 3 and 4 - members suggest that a literacy-based compulsory English study could include:

- a recommended, not prescribed, text list; and
- S/N school-based assessment (i.e. unscored VCE units)

OR:

- scored assessment, with a short examination containing questions shared with the 'advanced' VCE English/EAL, for the purpose of statistically moderating the scores from both studies.