Sharyn Donald

Chief Executive Officer

Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority

Level 7, 2 Lonsdale Street
Melbourne, 3000

8 May 2020

Dear Sharyn,

I am writing again to you on behalf of VCE English, EAL, English Language and Literature teachers whom we represent, with respect to the adjustments to their Study Designs in Unit 4 this year, which were announced on 1 May. This letter is intended to convey the views of a wide section of these teachers who have contacted our organisation concerning these adjustments and the challenges they face in teaching remotely. Please be assured that VATE values its open working relationship with the VCAA, especially through our ongoing contact with the English Curriculum Manager, Dr Annelise Balsamo, who is in regular communication with our Executive Education Officer, Ms Kate Gillespie.

There are several clear areas of concern our members have communicated to VATE about these significant Unit 4 changes which, as a matter of urgency, we wish to highlight.

1. **Lack of prior notice**

While both the Premier and the VCAA previously indicated that “school-based assessment tasks will be reduced where possible to relieve some pressure on students as they move to remote and flexible learning arrangements” (VCAA: 7/4/20), there was no prior warning that there would be major adjustments made to the Unit 4 SAC tasks until the delayed VCAA Webinars of 30/4/20 and 1/5/20.

It should be apparent, that the usual modes of school communication are not operating and teachers were unaware that such major changes were being contemplated or would be expected to be implemented as of term three this year.

VATE recognises the challenges posed by COVID-19 on all of us, but would assert that teachers, as a profession, are being obliged to adapt, change and realign their professional practice every day more than almost any other societal group. Surely, this lack of prior warning could easily have been overcome and a clearer and more timely signposting of the VCAA’s intentions would have been preferable.

1. **Added pressure caused by VCAA imposed changes**

Many of our members have noted that the need to now adapt and change their Unit 4 planning is totally unreasonable and imposing excessive pressure on them. As one of our members has stated, “Novelty is simply undesirable at the time when the system has been

turned on its head”. Given that the foreshadowed teacher webinar will not occur until week 5

of this 11-week term, this is imposing considerable pressure on already overworked and exhausted VCE English/EAL/ Literature/ English Language teachers to turn their attention to such an important matter.

Many schools are expecting their teachers to teach all usual classes, upload work onto on-line learning systems, communicate electronically with students and parents and participate on on-line meetings at present. Therefore, the expectation to now become informed about the nature of such curriculum changes and then determine the best way to adapt these to their own school circumstances, is both unreasonable and ill-considered. Rest assured that VATE will be working proactively with teachers to assist and support them but this does not compensate or alleviate the additional psychological or professional pressure this expectation imposes.

VATE therefore wishes to voice its extreme concern at the added pressure imposed on VCE English /EAL/ Literature/ English Language teachers and students at such a challenging time.

1. **Inequity across VCE studies**

At the official VCAA webinars last week, the Acting CEO, Stephen Gniel asserted that this was a “tumultuous time for all” and that the “review of all VCE Study Designs, with a particular focus on Unit 4, to reduce, where possible, school-based assessment tasks to relieve some pressure on students” (1/5/20) was “pragmatic” and “equitable”.

Our members would strongly challenge this assertion. It has been noted, and indeed explicated by the Maths Curriculum Manager, that all Maths Study Designs have had a module removed in Unit 4, which will clearly have a corresponding impact on reducing some content in their Unit 4 exams. This will reduce pressure both on teachers and students.

However, none of the proposed changes to our English studies will have a similar impact. While it may be argued that in Literature, one less text is now required to be taught in Unit 4, as many Literature teachers have noted, this is neither fair nor practicable, given that students have purchased and read these texts and many wish to be able to study them to potentially write on them in the Unit 4 exam. So, this change in the “Adjusted Study Design” will not, in many instances, be able to be implemented.

Indeed, many Literature and English Language teachers have indicated that it would be much easier and more preferable to teach the original Study Design. There would seem to be real confusion on the part of many English Language teachers with respect to what has been removed from the key knowledge and skills and what the precise implications are for the teaching and assessing of Unit 4 Area of Study 1. In the case of some Literature teachers, they have designed their course, based around the published Study Design and selected texts to best support relevant outcomes and now are in the position whereby they need to change their Unit 4, Outcome 2 text for study. As one teacher noted, “I think it is an equity issue also; some teachers may choose to do five, but others are forced to, while some

only do four. I will find it hard explaining to students and parents why we must do another full text - even less thoroughly - than other schools.”

VATE requests that this inequity be acknowledged by the VCAA.

1. **Exam concerns**

At the VCAA Webinar on 1/5/20, the incredibly important matter of exam timing and nature was raised by participants, as Stephen Gniel indicated it had been at the previous webinar.

It is simply inadequate for the VCAA to indicate that the exam schedule, including the date of the rescheduled GAT, and nature of exams, will be confirmed by the end of May.

Students, parents, teachers and schools need certainty and clarity on these key matters, since they are the essential drivers for student success. It was acknowledged at the VCAA webinar that exams and the GAT would be especially important in 2020 to ensure equity and fairness, as well as the reliability of school-based assessment.

VATE implores the VCAA to expedite its decision-making processes such that the nature of exams in all studies, the date of the GAT and the starting period for the Unit 4 exams be communicated before the end of May, since this impacts on all planning for the second half of the school year when, hopefully, face-to-face teaching will resume

1. **Specific concern about the nature of the change to Unit 4 English**

Our members have strongly and consistently criticised the change announced for Unit 4 English. Moreover, many have pointed to the need to, as one school has put it, “spend more time on the key knowledge and skills when we return to on-campus teaching” and not to have to adapt to a new, untried and unclear task.

It might be argued that the adjustments as identified to the wording of the assessment task for Outcome 2, do not even make real sense: “A written outline of a point of view, articulating a planning process, that can demonstrate and understanding of argument and persuasive language”. This is supposedly aligned to the outcome which now reads: “Construct a reasoned point of view on an issue currently debated in the media.” VATE would assert that the two are not even compatible, as written here.

VATE would also wish to suggest that had the task been more clearly and predictably worded to require students to write a ”point of view”, as many teachers have noted, this would have been far more intelligible and reasonable. It is regrettable that the proposed adjustment was not more widely canvassed before being formalised.

It has also been observed by many teachers that the unexpected changes to the relative weighting of Units 3 and 4 seem illogical. Surely, once face-to-face teaching resumes, as anticipated, in Unit 4 the coursework and resultant assessment tasks will again be able to be conducted as intended, unlike the logistical challenges faced in Unit 3? Unit 3 SACs and not

Unit 4 SACs are most likely to be unrepresentative of the true capacity of students.

Some teachers have also indicated the pressure they feel to complete Unit 3 school assessed coursework only when face-to-face teaching resumes, given that this is the practice adopted by the administration of their schools. One member asserted, “Unit 4 could have offered some opportunity for disadvantaged students, given that some Year 12s are still without laptops, to get their learning back on track”. They now believe that this change will only add to pressure upon such students. Another member noted, “removing the opportunity for students to do the oral presentation just further compounds things for disadvantaged students. These are kids who often find a few extra marks in that task, and now even that has been removed!”. Another member noted, “Teaching in a low SES school, removing the oral component of the Study Design will almost certainly prove disadvantageous to many of our students; data analysis from the last two years reveals that students with medium to low literacy often have the opportunity to achieve excellent outcomes in the oral component of Unit 4.” Other teachers have noted that their students were preparing and practising these oral presentations and feel disillusioned that their efforts have been wasted. Indeed, now that all of the reduced Unit 4 coursework score is solely derived from written work on the paired texts and the small written point of view task, VATE would contend that such lower-achieving students have been denied true equity, now that the oral component has been excised in 2020.

Therefore, VATE would urge the VCAA to provide additional advice to VCE English teachers to allow the writing of a persuasive point of view on the researched recent issue, in keeping with the Study Design. We would also request an acknowledgement that the expectation to adopt a new task is imposing additional pressure on already hard-working VCE English teachers at such a fluid time.

Naturally, VATE appreciates that the VCAA has much to determine and plan for at present, However, we would earnestly request a considered reply to the concerns raised in this letter, which we can then convey to our membership, which represents the collective voice of the teachers of VCE English in Victoria.

Yours sincerely,



Dr. Emily Frawley

VATE President