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RE: Draft syllabus development Stage 6 (11–12): English, Mathematics, Science and History

Syllabus must rest on sound, evidence-based research

It is important that changes to the syllabus are based on sound, evidence-based research. Like all changes to education syllabus programs, intensive research studies on the social and educational outcomes should be undertaken to justify any change.

Draft syllabuses: Focus on Gender Perspectives

Draft syllabuses for a number of subjects, in both years 11 and 12, require that the selection of texts either should, or must, give students experience of “texts with a wide range of... gender perspectives”. This requirement is contained in the following Stage 6 Draft Syllabus’ for consultation:

- English Extension¹
- English Advanced²
- English Standard³
- English Life Skills (outcomes and content)⁴
- English as an Additional Language or Dialect⁵

¹ English Extension State 6 Draft Syllabus for Consultation.

http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/syllabuses/curriculum-development/pdf_doc/st6-eng-ext-draft-syl-16-v5.pdf page 20.

² English Advanced Stage 6 Draft Syllabus for Consultation.

http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/syllabuses/curriculum-development/pdf_doc/st6-eng-adv-draft-syl-16-v5.pdf page 20.

³ English Standard Stage 6 Draft Syllabus for Consultation.

http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/syllabuses/curriculum-development/pdf_doc/st6-eng-std-draft-syl-16-v5.pdf page 21.

⁴ English Life Skills Stage 6 Draft Outcomes and Content for Consultation.

http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/syllabuses/curriculum-development/pdf_doc/st6-eng-life-skills-draft-syl-16-v5.pdf page 10.

⁵ English as an Additional language or Dialect (EA/D) Stage 6 Draft Syllabus for Consultation.

http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/syllabuses/curriculum-development/pdf_doc/st6-eald-draft-syl-16-v5.pdf page 21.

The definition of gender provided by the draft syllabuses is as follows:

gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• In text study, exploration of the way notions of gender identity are constructed by the language and values of the text.• In grammar, a requirement for agreement between nouns, adjectives, verbs and pronouns that must agree when they are referring to males or females.
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Further clarification is provided in each respective draft syllabuses under the glossary term:

theoretical perspectives and models	Critical literacy: the ability to question, challenge and evaluate the meanings and purposes of texts. It involves an understanding of the ways in which values and attitudes are communicated through language, including how subject matter, point of view and language embody assumptions about issues such as gender, ethnicity and class. A critical literacy approach to teaching English has students composing, responding to, analysing and evaluating written, spoken, visual and multimedia texts from various perspectives in order to learn how they operate as cultural products.
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It is unclear what evidence-based research forms the basis for the requirement that the selection of texts either should, or must give students a wide range of gender perspectives.

Some social theory approaches to gender view gender as the social configuration of men and women's identities, interactions and relationships rather than the biological differences of sex that are male and female.⁶ Deconstructing gender and sexuality and adopting a social theory approach in order to define gender, through the inclusion of textual examination of gender perspectives, should not be incorporated into syllabuses. Separating the socio-cultural role of a person's sex (male or female gender) from their biological sex has no basis in genetics or sexual development.

The definition of gender provided by the syllabus as: "exploration of the way notions of gender identity are constructed by the language and values of the text", is sufficiently broad to allow for the opportunity to introduce theories which describe gender as socially constructed. This is an area laden with cultural and political sensitivities. Whilst a definition of gender based on the biological sciences that incorporates its direct relationship with biological sex, should be acknowledged in the definition, the more appropriate alternative is to remove the gender perspectives requirement from the syllabuses altogether.

By introducing the requirement that texts must engage with a wide range of gender perspectives, there is a risk that some teachers may not be equipped to cope with all these perspectives and avoid personal bias in their teaching as they start to tackle notions of gender that may be unfamiliar to them, or they may be ill-equipped to deal with students who are yet to form their own sense of self and are trying to relate to a character or perspective.

Consideration should be given to potential consequences for students who have views about gender that differ from the texts being studied. These may include discrimination towards students who do not share the texts' views of gender and sexuality, as well as isolation, the fostering of racial and religious tensions, marginalisation, and prejudice amongst peers. This may also be true for parents who raise these issues with the school. Consider the following testimonies from students and parents

⁶ Wall, L. (2014). Gender equality and violence against women: What's the connection? (ACSSA Research Summary). Melbourne: Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault, *Australian Institute of Family Studies*.

who held views about gender and sexuality consistent with diverse religious and cultural values, (some names have been changed on request):

Mother, "Sophie"

"It would be fair to assume there is diversity of opinion within a school community on a whole range of sexual values... In our multi-cultural society, and school community, there are many cultures and faith groups who hold deeply personal convictions about sexuality, sexual expression, monogamy and marriage. It is a matter of personal freedom and religious freedom to interpret sexuality from whichever belief system a person chooses. It is not freedom to discriminate, but it should include freedom of belief... In a government school, the school leadership should be aware that there would be students and families holding both these viewpoints, and both should be acknowledged and respected in the debate... We could have sent our child to a faith-based school where everything that is taught would agree with our convictions. Instead we decided it was important to send our child to a state school. The main reason is because we wanted our child to learn to get along with others and understand there are many different ways people interpret the world... There should be clear guidelines so that staff who are in a position of authority, never make students feel embarrassed or criticized for the beliefs of their family, faith or culture."

Student, "Rani"

"I think all people should be respected. But at school I feel that my views are not acceptable. I would never be able to stand up in class or on assembly saying what my faith and culture says about sex... I completely accept everyone but that doesn't mean that I agree with everything they say or do. I was upset because I love everyone and would never be mean or rude to anyone, even if they have different beliefs and values to me. I sometimes feel like I am being made to feel it is wrong to follow my faith. School should be a supportive and safe environment for students who have religious beliefs."

Student, "Monica"

"It seems in my experience as a senior student that when explaining my personal beliefs of marriage as being a God created union between a man and a woman, the insult is referring to me as 'homophobic'. In defending my religion, I am the one discriminated against because of my beliefs... It is not right for any student to be discriminated against, it is also important to hold your own opinion and to be allowed to defend your personal beliefs without not only being attacked by students but also by the system."

Mother, Janine

My daughter came home from school very distressed near the end of year 8 because her group had chosen her as a leader to present a mock petition to the parliament for same-sex marriage. She had pleaded with the group to choose a different topic because this went right against her religious moral conscience, but the group couldn't agree on a different topic, and even the teacher could observe my daughter's distress and asked her if she was O.K about doing it... she was really worried about doing same-sex marriage because it was only presenting the case for same-sex marriage and not mentioning the reasons against the practice. She felt she had no choice about presenting the petition even though this went right against her religious moral conscience.

English as an Additional Language or Dialect

The content requirements in the subject, *English as an Additional Language or Dialect*, objective D requires that students "engage personally with texts" in order to "evaluate culturally based values and

perspectives ... dealing with prejudice, discrimination and stereotyping on the basis of cultural and linguistic heritage, gender, age, beliefs, socioeconomic status, location, sexuality or disability."⁷

In Australia's multicultural society, cultural and social perspectives relating to gender, sexuality and identity are areas charged with cultural, religious and political sensitivity. It is important that the syllabus does not create the potential for some students to feel marginalised for holding values on gender that are consistent with their cultural, religious, ethnic or linguistic heritage.

Other learning across the curriculum areas

Difference and diversity

One of the learning across the curriculum areas that has been included in new syllabuses is the area titled Difference and Diversity.

Difference and diversity

Students experience and value difference and diversity in their everyday lives. Age, beliefs, gender, disability, sexuality, language, socio-economic status and race are some of the factors that comprise difference and diversity. In senior English, students have the opportunity to study ways in which issues related to such differences and diversity are represented in sophisticated and challenging literary texts, and in texts of other types. This imaginative investigation of complex ideas and emotions encourages the development of thoughtfulness and informed views, and an understanding of the features of a fair and just society that values difference and diversity

Words such as diversity and difference are politically laden terms broad enough in meaning that their placement within the curriculum, particularly with reference to gender may allow for the politicisation of the curriculum.

Recommendations

- 1. Remove the requirement, contained in stage 6 syllabuses, that the selection of texts must give students experience of a wide range of gender perspectives.**
- 2. Redraft objective D in the syllabus *English as an Additional Language or Dialect*, to be more culturally sensitive, particularly to ensure that students from diverse cultural, religious, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds will not be stereotyped as prejudiced, or discriminated against for having diverse views on gender and sexuality.**
- 3. Remove the other learning area "Difference and diversity" from the syllabus.**

⁷ Ibid. page 52.