

THE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTE OF SCOTLAND

Scottish Texts in Higher and National 5 English Exams AGM 2012 Resolution

"This AGM opposes the Scottish Government's decision to include a compulsory question on Scottish texts in the new Higher English exam, and instructs Council to lobby the Scottish Government, the SQA and Education Scotland with a view to having this decision revoked."

EIS Position Paper November 2012

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The EIS considers the cultural argument about Scottish texts in the new Higher and National 5 English exams to have been won and to be compelling: Scottish pupils should be taught Scottish texts at all levels as part of their learning in, and as a mandatory feature of, English courses.
- 1.2 However, the decision to make it compulsory for all pupils to answer **an examination question** on a Scottish text goes against the spirit and the principles of Curriculum for Excellence, narrows and limits pupils' exposure to Scottish literature and detracts from deep learning and critical thinking. EIS opposition to the Scottish Government's decision to include a compulsory question on Scottish texts in these exams is therefore based on specific educational arguments about assessment, the principles of CfE and the experiences of learners, and not any cultural argument about Scottish literature.
- 1.3 The voice of teachers should always be heard when major curricular change is made, especially when such change emanates directly from the heart of Government. It is regrettable that the consultation process that led to The Scottish Government's decision did not include the EIS which represents 80% of Scottish teachers. The Scottish Studies Working Group, which made the key recommendation on Scottish texts, extended no invitation to the EIS to make a submission to its work and The Cabinet Secretary for Lifelong Learning did not consult with the EIS before acting on that recommendation. Those omissions have made this paper a necessity.

2.0 Rationale

- 2.1 The only way to ensure that all pupils sitting English will be able to answer a question on a Scottish text is to prescribe a list of set texts and then to set what is often called a context question on each of the texts in the list. A context question includes an extract from the text followed by a variety of analysis questions about that extract and how it relates to the text as a whole. The SQA has just

consulted teachers on what the set texts should be, but has made clear that the final list will have to be 'manageable' i.e. it cannot be comprehensive and choice will be limited.

3.0 Background

- 3.1 The context question is a return to a format that existed in Revised Higher English in the 1990s, a format that was universally disliked and then scrapped when Higher Still was introduced because it was so limiting and narrow. A central criticism was that it forced teachers and their pupils to over-analyse and over-revise texts in order to ensure success in the exam at the expense of holistic exploration, enjoyment and personal response.
- 3.2 There were only nine authors on the list, with the same texts by them repeated year after year. Extracts from the novels or plays, or complete poems, were published followed by questions such as "By referring closely to the language of the opening stanza, show how sympathy for the mouse is created" (that one was worth 4 marks). In the same 1994 paper, only 8 marks were awarded for discussing one of Burns' central themes in his poetry. Teenagers end up bored with and loathing literature that is tested using such questions.
- 3.3 A further problem with the context question in the English exams is that it will distort the balance of skills which exists in the current format of the English papers, because it tests close reading and textual analysis skills already covered to a large degree by the Close Reading section of the paper. Maintaining two critical essays in the Literature paper, which would be the EIS' preferred option, would keep an appropriate balance between analysis questions, answered often in bullet-points, and extended critical writing which tests candidates' critical thinking, personal response and ability to argue a line of thought on pieces of literature.
- 3.4 The introduction of the compulsory exam question on Scottish texts will weaken and unbalance the new English courses, severely compromise central tenets of the new curriculum and, ironically, lead to a diminishing of Scottish literature and culture in the eyes of young learners. Breadth, depth, challenge, enjoyment, choice, coherence and relevance – these are principles worth placing at the heart of the assessment regime of a new curriculum that seeks to be radical and are the true progressive means of engendering a life-long love for the literature and culture of our nation. Lists of analysis questions out of 20 marks on the same set texts year after year simply are not.

4.0 Recommendations

- 4.1 The EIS suggests several alternative arrangements to ensure those principles of CfE are adhered to, while also guaranteeing that a range of Scottish texts are covered meaningfully.
- 4.2 The compulsory Scottish text element of the English exams should be scrapped.

- 4.3 The compulsory Scottish text element of the English courses should be made unambiguous and unequivocal.
- 4.4 It is highly likely that most candidates will answer a critical essay question on a Scottish text in the final exam, but they should have the option of not doing so, in the case of certain questions not fitting their text. The SQA could also consider creating a separate section in the exam dedicated to critical essay questions solely on Scottish Literature.
- 4.5 In relation to shorter texts by Scottish writers, such as poems and short stories, the SQA should support teachers' coverage of a range of texts by recommending entire collections and anthologies. Specially produced anthologies for schools might be commissioned and published by organisations such as the Scottish Book Trust or the Scottish Poetry Library.
- 4.6 Lists of suggested texts and authors should be provided by the SQA and could be added to by teachers, pupils and parents with vetting by the SQA. These lists should be very long and offer a vast range of choice.
- 4.7 Teachers could be asked via a simple form to inform the SQA of the Scottish text(s) and author(s) they intended to teach each year.