

Society of Authors' submission to the Education Select Committee's inquiry into the administration of examinations for 15-to-19-year-olds in England.

1 Executive Summary

1a A survey of members of the Educational Writers Group carried out in the summer of 2010 revealed grave concerns about the current structure of secondary education. Feedback suggested that there was little incentive or opportunity for students to appreciate a subject's subtleties, to research complexity, to write discursively or even to learn to think for themselves.

1b The impression our members have is that the prescriptive nature of the current Curriculum and short-answer examination questions are primarily responsible. In addition, the side-effect of league tables has been that schools are compelled to be results-driven, so the teaching focus is often narrowed down to little more than coaching pupils to achieve good exam results.

1c Textbooks are also central to this issue. If budgets effectively limit schools to the purchase of one book, teachers understandably select the one that will most directly provide what their pupils need to pass the exam. In practice that will most likely be the one endorsed by the examining body, often written by the examiner and rarely offering more than the exam specifications.

1d A requirement that students show in some part of their examination that they have consulted a range of different sources (and a course-structure which allows this to happen), and introducing exam questions which require longer, essay-style answers, would greatly increase students' breadth of learning and their literacy and communication skills. It would also make it easier for examiners to assess pupils' abilities in these essential and fundamental areas.

1e It is also essential that, in addition to the core curriculum and studying of set texts, reading for pleasure and creative writing are included within education as cultural experiences, and that school libraries are made compulsory.

2 Brief Introduction

2a The Society of Authors' membership includes over 700 educational writers of whom many are teachers and some of whom are also examiners and chief examiners in core subjects.

2b In autumn 2010 we raised with Michael Gove our concern about the reductive nature of the current examination structure, and we also contributed to the Independent Review of Cultural Education in spring 2011. We have repeated here those parts of the submissions which relate most directly to the Inquiry's concerns. The full submissions are also attached.

3 Factual Information

3a The Society has been concerned for some years about the increasingly reductive nature of teaching. In the light of the government's new austerity measures it was felt that schools might find it even harder to afford the time and money to seek out or invest in any materials other than those focusing directly on core exam questions. We asked members of the Educational Writers Group whether this was a fair understanding of the current situation, and

whether they shared our concerns. We suggested that they might elaborate their answers with details from their own experience. The comments most relevant to the current Inquiry are given at 5: Appendix A.

4 Recommendations for Action

4a • A requirement that students show in some part of their examination that they have consulted a wide range of different sources, and a course-structure which allows this to happen.

4b • Introduce exam questions which require longer, essay-style answers, as this will greatly increase breadth of learning and literacy and communication skills.

4c • Allow time before the new curriculum is launched for publishers and authors to create quality new teaching materials rather than rushing.

4d • Contrary to recently stated policy, abolish league tables.

4e • Contrary to recently stated policy, make school libraries compulsory. See 6: Appendix B.

5 APPENDIX A:

5a The Society has been concerned for some years about the increasingly reductive nature of teaching. Recent austerity measures mean that schools might find it even harder to afford the time and money to seek out or invest in materials other than those focusing directly on core exam questions. We asked members of the Educational Writers Group whether this was a fair understanding of the current situation, and whether they shared our concerns. Below are those extracts from their responses which bear most directly on the Inquiry's concerns:

5b(i) "We are all so driven as teachers to ensure students pass examinations that we have lost sight of the fact that we are supposed to be educating children. As a teacher, I am finding students to be ever more unwilling to think independently because all they want is the answer. As an examiner, I find that the same answers get regurgitated over and over again by pupils. As an author, I don't get paid enough to do anything interesting and I don't have the time to put to tasks because of demands for swift turnover because I teach and examine.

5b(ii) "I can't afford to teach from books anyway, so in work, I use materials I produce. Other schools cobble photocopies together and hope for the best."

5c(i) "I was asked if I wished to author a revision textbook for children doing GCSE that was linked to the exam board specification. I turned this commission down for several reasons, but my main reason is that I fundamentally object to the linking of textbooks with GCSE/As or A2 specifications, especially when the authors are the examiners. I see this as very destructive to science education (I suspect the same is true for all subjects).

5c(ii) "I feel that authors should deliver materials that meet the needs of the specification but which do not restrict the way in which the scientific ideas and concepts are delivered to teachers and pupils.

5c(iii) "I am also disturbed by the commercialisation of examinations and the links between publishers, examinations and textbooks. The specification is written, the textbook written by the examiners meets only the specification, and the teaching is restricted to the textbook. It is a circle that is difficult to break and destroys innovation, creativity and good teaching and learning.

5c(iv) “Specifications should not be straightjackets but guides of the areas that examinations will visit. Within our teaching surely we should be able to teach around that concept. We should feel confident that if we teach for understanding this will be recognised by the exam system.

5c(v) “The logical consequence of this is that the examinations cannot then be so restrictive that the questions require extremely specific one-word or one-sentence answers with a low degree of freedom allowed for sensible marking.

5c(vi) “The questions should allow pupils to show their understanding: longer answers.”

5d “As an author who has benefitted greatly by also being a GCSE Chief Examiner, I would totally agree with you. The League Tables have meant that schools are totally results driven and therefore their teaching has become results driven.”

5e(i) “It’s in the economic interests of an examining body and its partner publisher to say ‘this is the only book you need’ at both GCSE and A level - it taps into the fears and anxieties bred by league tables as well as by the much more laudable desire on the part of teachers to see their students doing as well as possible.

5e(ii) “The skills of the examiner aren’t necessarily those of an author. These books aren’t written to be read for enjoyment - they’re often written quickly and in a mechanical manner. The focus on exam questions and how to answer them takes space which could be used for increasing depth of knowledge and for writing in a more discursive and enjoyable way. The authors tend to be expert examiners, not necessarily experts in the topic. Coverage is restricted to the narrowness of the specification - no broader context, interesting byways etc.

5e(iii) “The existence of such ‘official’ books also has a negative impact on the availability of other books. Will other publishers try to challenge ‘official books’ at GCSE or A level? Teachers won’t buy books/materials that aren’t closely linked to government guidelines, and in straitened times educational publishers (like trade publishers) are constantly looking for bestsellers.”

5f(i) “I just see pressure after pressure to turn children out in conformity to a pattern. The National Curriculum was introduced to raise standards but there no longer seems to be any scope for individuality.

5f(ii) “Politicians’ obsession with accountability, in the misleading form of ‘league tables’ based on the results of standardized tests, has become an Anglo-Saxon phenomenon. The 1988 National Curriculum is the prime cause, and ten years of New Labour have only reinforced its emphasis on targets and the threat to schools of living or dying by the numbers. We need to stop the endless tinkering. We need to allow schools to develop their own strategies for things, which are then assessed by Ofsted during an inspection. Strategies evolve and change, and any process of evolution needs to be slow and considered and be adapted to a school’s individual needs.”

5g “In secondary schools, money is concentrated on KS4 and 5 (the results for league tables) and there is little money left for KS3 where a less results driven teaching is possible. I have had a KS3 series cancelled before publication by [publisher’s name removed] as they felt the investment would not pay off.”

5h “We need a genuine emphasis on creativity, not hidebound by targets. If that were part of the curriculum, I think educational publishers would produce worthwhile books (or digital materials) to support it. Without the government stamp, I doubt if most would be interested.”

5i(i) “In the courses I have worked on it is certainly true that books have become increasingly exam focused. Textbooks tend to resort to the bullet-point too easily. They are usually set out in a style that makes heavy use of little shaded boxes, icons and vacuous photographs. The authors are almost invariably senior examiners. They obviously have a good grasp of their subject but do not necessarily have a flair for lively, concise writing or provoking thought in the reader. Too often the books are an uncomfortable balance between slightly pedantic

explanation of a kind that assumes students are fairly dim and an almost neurotic concern with covering every possible base in terms of the exam. These books are sometimes dull and uninspiring.

5i(ii) "Exam boards have become increasingly concerned to maximise revenue. They have allied themselves with the big educational publishers to produce 'exam board recommended' texts. It is hardly surprising that examiners have authored these books. Sometimes quite slim books are co-authored by a considerable number of them. This might account for some of the lifelessness of the product.

5i(iii) "At first I used to say that my job was to make learning fun. Latterly I felt my job was to make the curriculum the least harmful that I could, but I am not always able to achieve this. On occasion it has seemed that the changes I was being asked to make to my materials would actually be harmful to the learning process and would put children off learning a second language, which of course eventually happened and the requirement to take a second language was dropped. I believe this was in no small part a result of the changes made to the curriculum and the fact that any 'fun' was taken out of the learning process and replaced with teaching for testing.

5i(iv) "Publishers have stifled initiative in their pursuit of materials more or less guaranteed to 'get pupils through the tests', which is what the schools want... until you get rid of this mentality or change the tests they will continue to do so. The exams are the tail which wags the dog."

5j "Materials for Modern Languages are currently written by teams of disparate people that now always seem to include a number of examiners with inadequate foreign language skills. There is no cohesion. As the quality of materials produced by exam boards (e.g. syllabus and actual exam papers) is pitiful (i.e. full of grammatical, lexical and cultural mistakes) how do you expect publishers, who have a special relationship with one exam board or another, to produce good quality materials?"

5k "Reputable publishers are still keen to provide quality and value in the material they publish for teachers. But they are hampered by the lack of money available to schools. Fewer books are being bought and publishers are being forced to concentrate more and more on market success. The abundance of free - but inferior - online material is not raising the children's standards. An injection of money to be spent on published teaching material is needed urgently."

5l "Last year I had discussions with a publisher regarding a proposal for materials to support cross-curricular topic work. Many young teachers, in particular, have limited experience of cross-curricular planning as a result of government initiatives such as the literacy hour. The publishers liked the ideas and outline proposal but ultimately the project failed because it focused too much on practical experience by children (something which in the past would have been seen as a strength), and on supporting a teacher's own planning and assessment across subjects (including self assessment by children). It could not be turned into, as they put it, 'an extensive resource using multimedia' which would justify the £100 price tag attached to most of their products."

5m(i) "As an experienced A level teacher over a 20 year period, I have no doubt that A levels have become steadily easier. This trend has accelerated since 2000 and the introduction of the AS/A2 system. I suspect that this is at bottom the result of pressure from government to achieve measured improvements in school performance and increase the staying on rate.

5m(ii) "It seems that the subject knowledge of younger teachers can sometimes be a little shaky. If teachers are insecure in their subject knowledge they are likely to gravitate towards books which make their subject easily digestible and provide the security blanket of 'preparing students for the exams'."

5n “There was a when time teachers liked to have books that expanded knowledge and perspectives on subjects, but nowadays the extra material is seen as a detraction from what has to be taught.

The Education Minister needs to encourage teaching and teachers to support the production and need for children’s books that stretch minds, interests, and needs and do not just focus tightly on the curriculum. Books are important to help reading, understanding, comprehension and, most importantly, how to organize, structure, and present information.”

5o(i) “We can confirm that publishers no longer seem keen to publish innovative ‘good ideas’. They are just no longer willing to take risks - supplementary resources in Modern Foreign Languages are not commercially viable (only main courses and textbooks have made money - until now, but even those no longer seem to guarantee earnings). More and more, schools are turning to free online resources for MFL - some are good, some terrible - especially those for Primary schools.

5o(ii) “The poor quality content of some materials is worrying. It is clear that some of the material is not being thoroughly checked before being made available (I was shocked by the contents of MFL on something as prominent as the London Grid For Learning a couple of years back). This is not just affecting MFL. Speaking to editors in other sectors (engineering, science, etc), the problem of quality control seems to be similar there too.”

5p(i) “Ironically teachers have been complicit in the reduction of real education for the very best of motives - they want their pupils’ achievements recognized. Many believe that this recognition can only come from the testing/examination system.

5p(ii) “The mega-committee that devised the first English curriculum tried to write down everything that good English teachers claimed to do with their classes. The result was a massive document which was almost impossible to teach. What they should have done was exactly the opposite: set down basic minimum criteria and then let good teachers get on with doing what they do best: teach.

5p(iii) “Politicians’ and administrators’ commitment to make everything measurable: it is extremely difficult, usually impossible, to measure the most important educational benefits numerically by testing an individual child.

5p(iv) “Public unwillingness to trust teachers: Politicians, administrators, and journalists have formed an unholy alliance to promote the idea that teachers cannot be trusted. This campaign has found willing ears amongst the general public, since adults tend to have more negative memories of school and teachers than positive ones.

5p(v) “Increasing centralization and a top-down approach to educational innovation: Politicians like to interfere with curriculum content, even when they don’t really understand it.

5p(vi) “Michael Gove appears to have accepted that ‘A’ level students are being assessed too much over too many subject areas, leading to superficiality. The same thinking could be applied to the rest of what goes on in school. Official curriculum requirements should be framed to allow enough ‘gaps’ in which real education can take place. In short, – test less, trust more.”

6 APPENDIX B:

6a We understand that the Inquiry is also considering ‘broader issues regarding the examination system’.

6b We are concerned that an exam-focused curriculum may not ensure that sufficient time or priority is given to nurturing basic skills. Inadequate reading and writing skills are emphatically not limited to young children; the problem is widespread even in universities (see Writing Matters, published by the Royal Literary Fund, www.rlf.org.uk/fellowshipscheme/research.cfm).

6c(i) Reading and being read to for pleasure can engender, better than almost anything else, an enquiring mind and a real capacity for deduction, empathy, and extended concentration. Readers encounter information and perspectives beyond merely those being sought, an awareness of values beyond those of celebrity. Extended reading encourages a critical faculty, independent thinking, the ability to be more discriminating, to assess things in their own right and realise the value of the source.

6c(ii) Communication skills are important for self-confidence. The best way to nurture such skills is through the reading and writing of narrative non-fiction.

6c(iii) We believe it is essential that, in addition to the core curriculum and studying of set texts, reading and creative writing are included within education. Failure to engage in culture, and poor literacy and imagination skills, lead to a failure in empathy (a large proportion of the prison population is illiterate yet intelligent). A child can learn more about, absorb and empathise more closely with a country, race or religion, say, through half an hour's drama or fiction, than through a day of news reports or baldly didactic lessons. Books stimulate the imagination and independent thought in ways that the more passive act of watching TV or films simply cannot. Some provide pleasure, others - equally importantly - provoke, or unsettle the reader.

6c(iv) The value of reading for pleasure was highlighted in a study on 'Family, scholarly culture and educational success: Books and schooling in 27 nations' published in the journal *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* (www.sciencedirect.com). It makes the point that regular reading for pleasure is the single most useful and effective improver of educational achievement, and that having access to books can raise a child on average 3.2 years in education. Many homes are without books; many parents do not take their children to public libraries (and indeed the future of public libraries is under serious threat).

6d For these reasons, in our submission to the Independent Review of Cultural Education we strongly urged the government to reconsider and make libraries statutory in schools (as they are in prisons), and - for schools with above a certain number of students - to make school librarians statutory also.