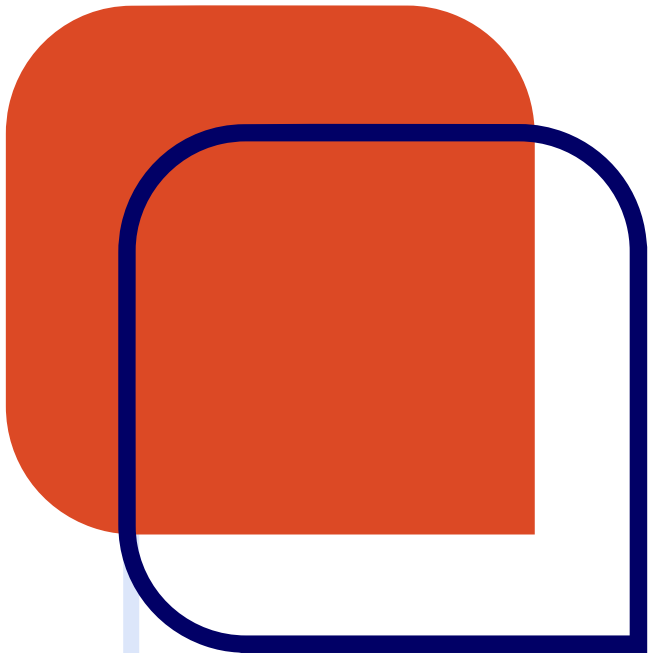




THE ENGLISH
ASSOCIATION

SUMMIT ON THE REFORM OF THE ENGLISH GCSEs

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS





The report was written by Professor Robert Eaglestone.

With thanks to Dr Lorna Smith, Dr Rebecca Fisher, Dr Rachel Roberts, Elizabeth Draper, Dr Andrea Macrea, Matt Carnaby, Tracey Maloney, Professor Katherine Baxter, Lucy Cuthbertson, and all at the Globe.

We also wish to thank colleagues from the Department for Education for engaging with stakeholders at this event.

The following organisations contributed to this communique by participating in the workshops at the summit:

Ark Curriculum Plus

Ark Schools

English Association

British Academy

CCEA

English and Media Centre

Forward Arts Foundation

LitdriveUK

NATE (the National Association for the Teaching of English)

OCR

Pearson

The Full English/Poetry By Heart

Royal Shakespeare Company

Royal Society of Literature

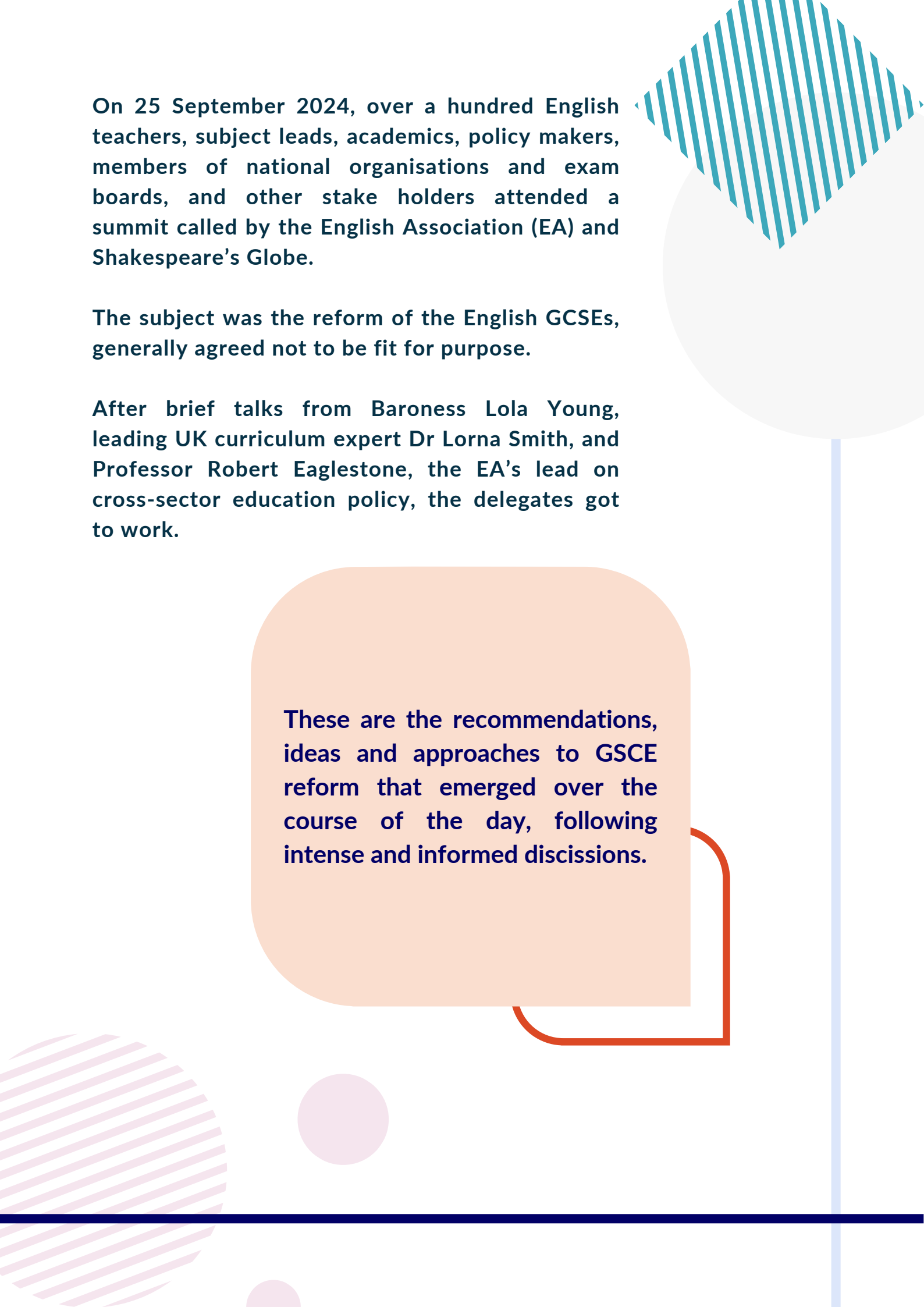
The Orwell Foundation

The Poetry Society

UKLA (the UK Literacy Association)

7 October 2024



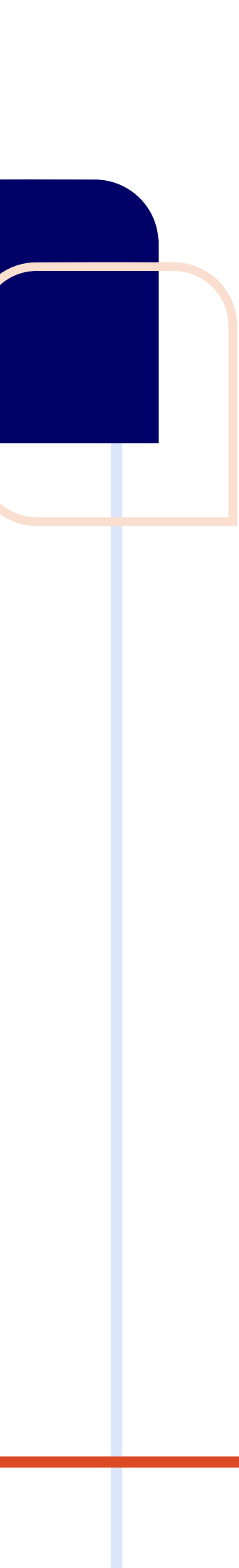


On 25 September 2024, over a hundred English teachers, subject leads, academics, policy makers, members of national organisations and exam boards, and other stake holders attended a summit called by the English Association (EA) and Shakespeare's Globe.

The subject was the reform of the English GCSEs, generally agreed not to be fit for purpose.

After brief talks from Baroness Lola Young, leading UK curriculum expert Dr Lorna Smith, and Professor Robert Eaglestone, the EA's lead on cross-sector education policy, the delegates got to work.

These are the recommendations, ideas and approaches to GCSE reform that emerged over the course of the day, following intense and informed discussions.

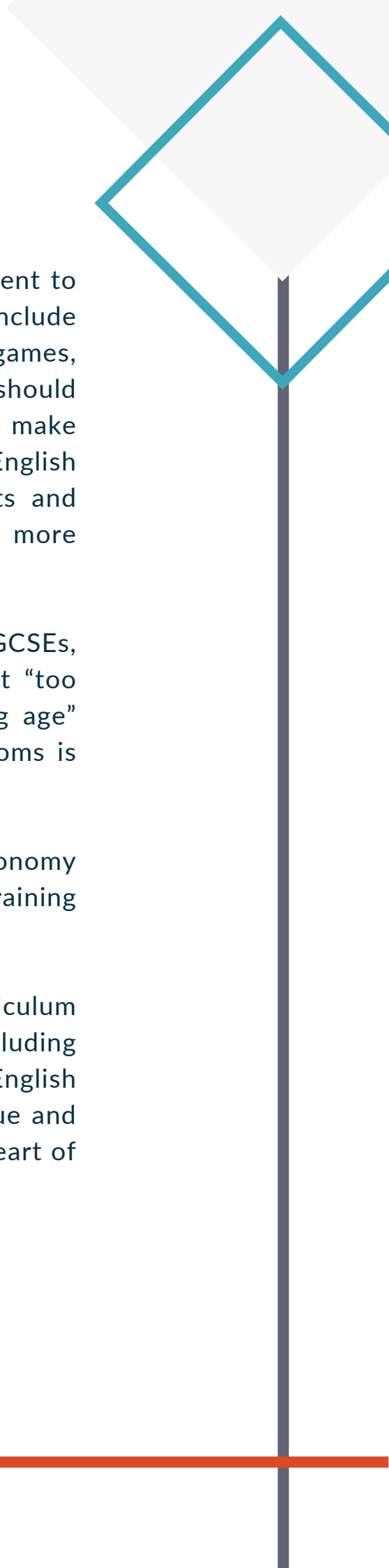


SUMMARY

The discipline of English develops students' abilities to communicate, collaborate, create and think critically, capabilities which enable them to develop as individuals, have rewarding careers and contribute effectively to society and the economy. This is why the National Curriculum speaks of the “pre-eminent place” place of the subject “in education and in society”, teaching students to “communicate their ideas and emotions” and to develop “culturally, emotionally, intellectually, socially”. To enable this, the GCSEs need to be reformed: the ideas laid out below reflected the conversations held at the summit.

Overall, the assessment burden needs to be reduced or altered. There was broad support for open book assessments and modular (rather than linear) assessment. The Assessment Objectives should be holistic and there should be fewer set texts. There was a striking division of opinion over coursework. Some thought it fitted English well, while others – citing issues of teacher workload, academic integrity and social justice – opposed it.





English Language GCSE should be closer in content to the A-Level, bring back spoken language, and include multi-media and new media forms: journalism, games, non-fiction, and other non-literary writing. It should develop more formal linguistic knowledge and make explicit English's relevance for the workplace. English Literature GCSE needs to update the set texts and offer more diverse, more contemporary, and more global literature.

While literacy is not technically part of the GCSEs, there was a general concern over the fact that “too many students are not at chronological reading age” and that the range of reading ability in classrooms is extremely variable.

Teachers argued that their expertise and autonomy should be trusted, and appealed for more CPD training and opportunities to share good practice.

In any GCSE reform, the design of the curriculum needs to be informed by everyone involved, including students, and to keep in mind the popularity of English with employers and the key role of both dialogue and pleasure in literature and language use. At the heart of the GCSE lies the idea of story, some argued.

ASSESSMENT

There was **general agreement** that:

- the assessment burden needs to be reduced or altered: “we need to think about how many exams students sit within a six week period and think about the child’s whole experience. We need to slim it down”).
- assessment needed to be “authentic” and reduce “by rote” responses.
- curriculum design needs to recognise the cognitive development of students at GCSE age (“they need space for learning, thinking and focusing on their own response”).
- open book assessments should be used (we “want to reward the application of knowledge and not just the retrieval of knowledge”; “No need for closed book exams – didn’t see any dissent on this!”).
- that the GCSEs must not “assess the same thing over and over again across the two exams”.
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There was **considerable support** for:

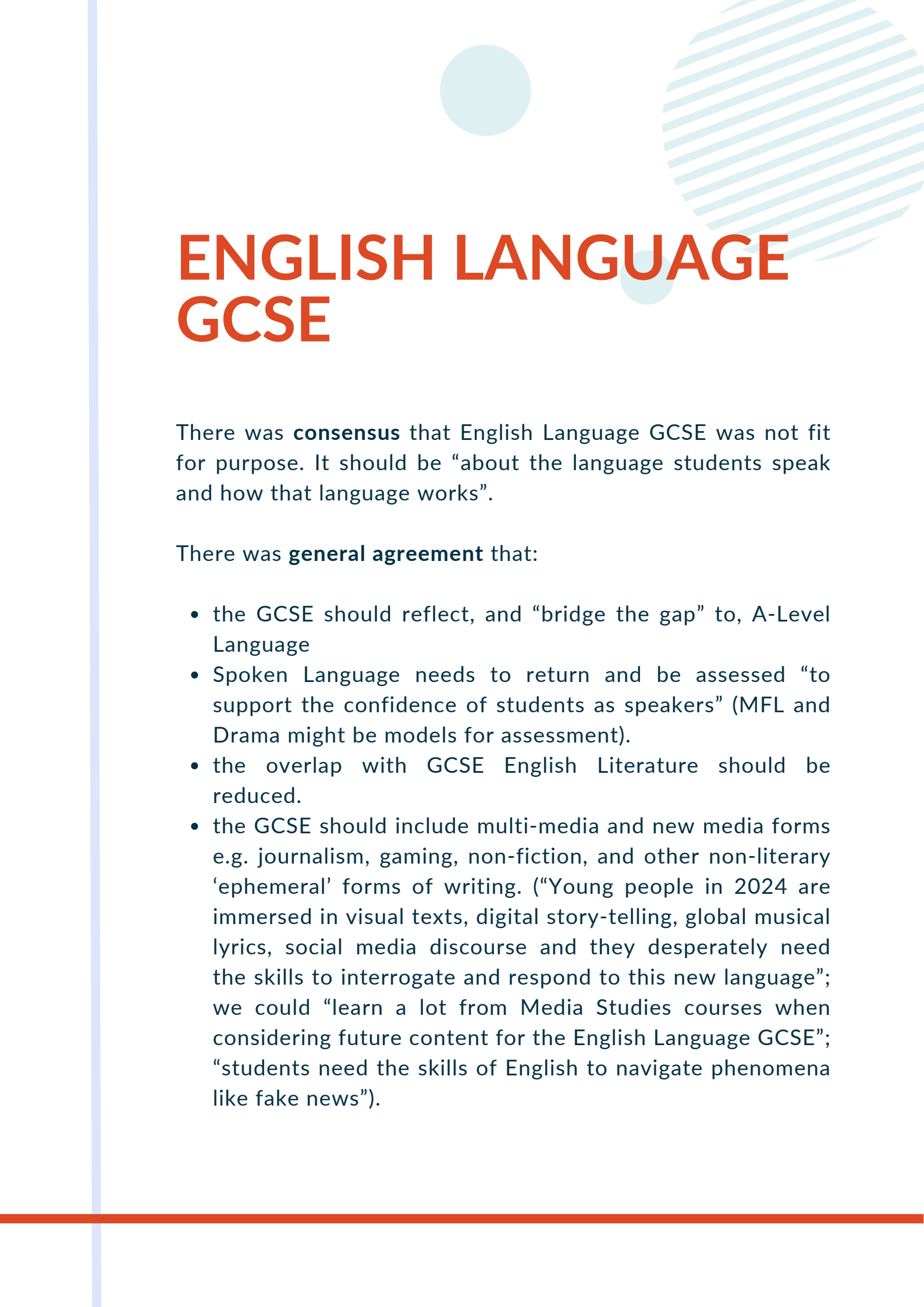
- modular formats, as better than linear assessments: “linear assessment models fail a lot of students, especially SEND, students with English as an additional language, students who are not represented in the course content”.
- the teaching of technique rather than ‘facts’ about a singular text.
- creating space for extended writing: this needs “time and an ecology of moderation”.
- the relevance of content of assessment to students’ lives (e.g. “they don’t need to learn how to write a letter to a local newspaper” but could, say, write an email to an author, a blog for young people on sixth form options, a news article for their school website).

There was **concern** that many teachers were better trained in English literature and needed to develop their linguistic knowledge.

It was **suggested** that:

- the Assessment Objectives need explicitly to assess forming an opinion and having a personal response.
- Assessment Objectives should be holistic: We “should stop differentially weighting AOs and stop assessing different AOs through different questions”. Instead, we “could have a broad set of AOs that are applied across the board and used diagnostically”.
- fewer set texts, and a synoptic unseen approach offering greater equality of opportunity (“Students tend to respond better to unseen poetry than to the anthology, which may reflect a more authentic, less retrieval-based approach”)
- giving teachers and students a choice in assessment modes.
- portfolios are a useful model; vivas may circumvent some of the issues with AI.

There was a **striking division of opinion** over the need for **coursework**. Some argued that it was most suited to the discipline (with one suggestion of “coursework only”), there were suggestions about “windows for coursework” or a “digital portal where students could write and revise securely without this requiring intervention from teachers”. Others forcefully stated that coursework raised issues of workload and academic integrity, and because “this methodology favours strongly those that are more privileged”, argued that coursework “disadvantages the already disadvantaged”. There was a claim that some teachers “would rather leave the profession than return to this workload”. It was notable that teachers with more leadership responsibilities were, in general, more opposed to coursework.



ENGLISH LANGUAGE GCSE

There was **consensus** that English Language GCSE was not fit for purpose. It should be “about the language students speak and how that language works”.

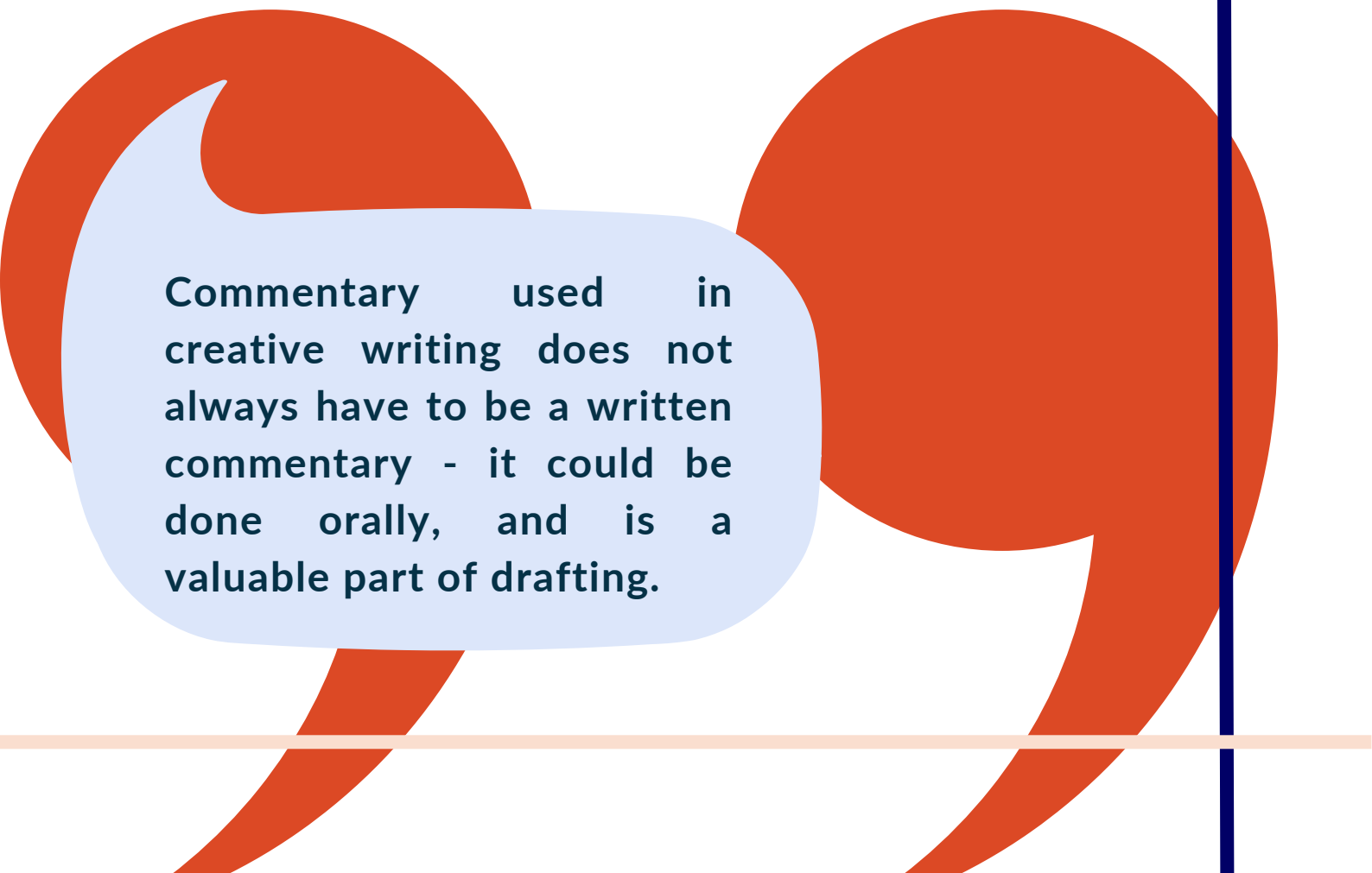
There was **general agreement** that:

- the GCSE should reflect, and “bridge the gap” to, A-Level Language
- Spoken Language needs to return and be assessed “to support the confidence of students as speakers” (MFL and Drama might be models for assessment).
- the overlap with GCSE English Literature should be reduced.
- the GCSE should include multi-media and new media forms e.g. journalism, gaming, non-fiction, and other non-literary ‘ephemeral’ forms of writing. (“Young people in 2024 are immersed in visual texts, digital story-telling, global musical lyrics, social media discourse and they desperately need the skills to interrogate and respond to this new language”; we could “learn a lot from Media Studies courses when considering future content for the English Language GCSE”; “students need the skills of English to navigate phenomena like fake news”).

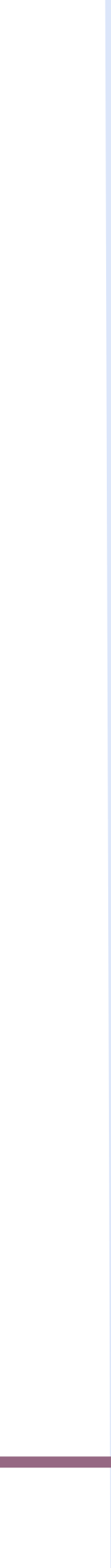
There was **considerable support** for:

- the study of broad linguistic knowledge, including etymology, morphology, sociolinguistics, language acquisition, and linguistic behaviour (e.g. code switching, exploratory talk, register)
- teaching grammar language awareness (this “can be really enabling”)
- making explicit how English is relevant in the workplace
- teaching slow writing, including drafting, for KS4 (as at KS2 and KS3). The switch at KS4 to examination was at odds with this ethos of slow writing and of most ‘real life’ writing contexts.
- commentary to be used to be in creative writing (it “does not always have to be a written commentary – could be done orally” and is a “valuable part of drafting”).

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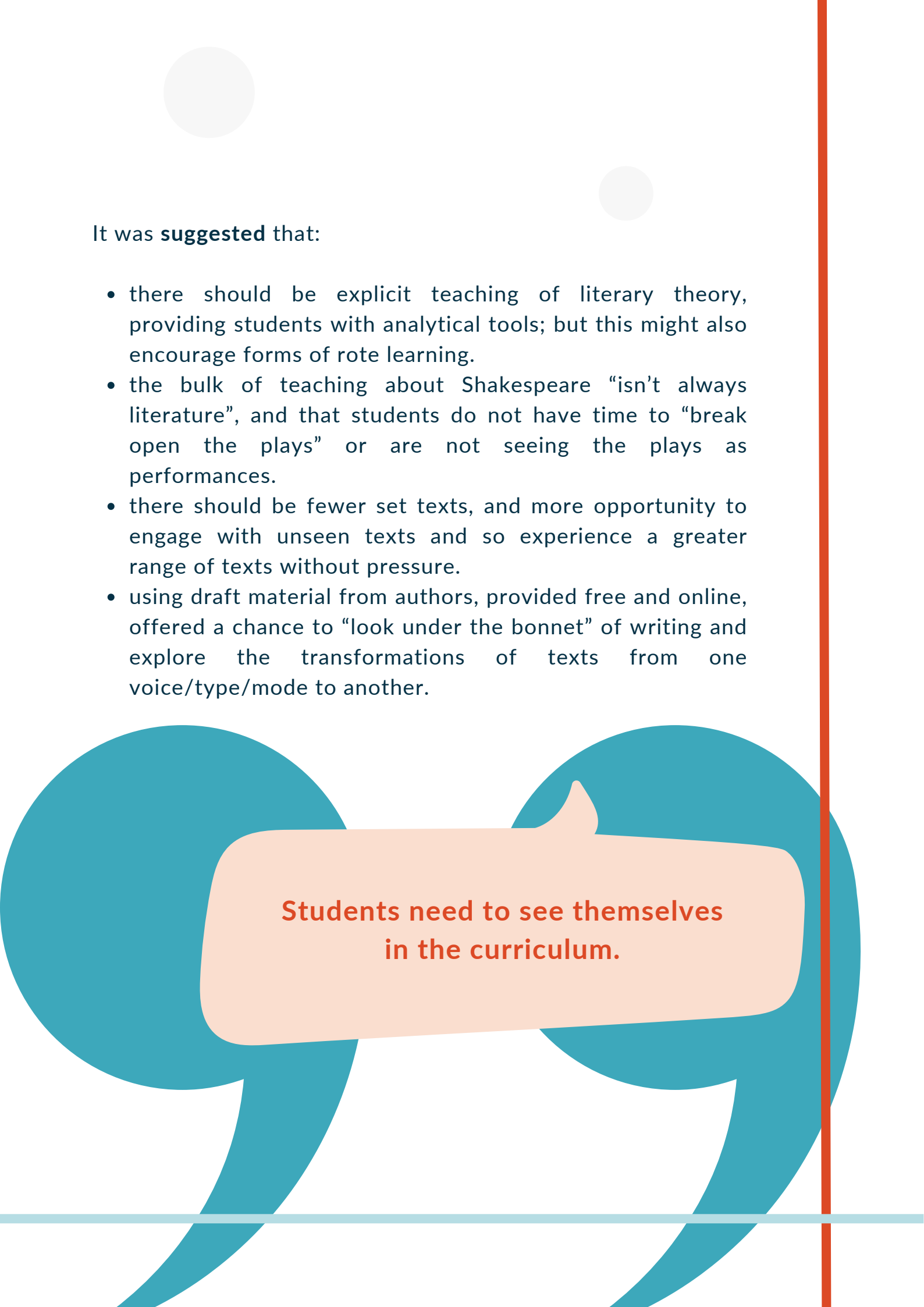


ENGLISH LITERATURE GCSE

There was **general consensus** that the texts chosen for the GCSE English Literature curriculum – its specific ‘canon’ – need to be updated (the “course texts haven’t changed in a long time”). They need to be more diverse (“Students need to see themselves in the curriculum”), more contemporary (“a recently published text that students like and enjoy, with shared themes, to help students see how literature can talk across generations and periods”), and more global, allowing texts in translation (“Ofqual need to remove the restriction of texts only from the British Isles”).

These changes raise issues over resources (“how practical or desirable is it for departments to be buying and all teaching different texts?”), workload, training, and responsibility (“who chooses?”; “Academies wanting to standardise can drive the decisions around content”). It was also suggested that “representative literature” is not always the best way to understand life experiences and the idea was aired that that “text choice was a proxy for more difficult pedagogical decisions about how we approach texts”.





It was **suggested** that:

- there should be explicit teaching of literary theory, providing students with analytical tools; but this might also encourage forms of rote learning.
- the bulk of teaching about Shakespeare “isn’t always literature”, and that students do not have time to “break open the plays” or are not seeing the plays as performances.
- there should be fewer set texts, and more opportunity to engage with unseen texts and so experience a greater range of texts without pressure.
- using draft material from authors, provided free and online, offered a chance to “look under the bonnet” of writing and explore the transformations of texts from one voice/type/mode to another.

**Students need to see themselves
in the curriculum.**

LITERACY AND THE GCSES

There was **general concern** over literacy (“too many students are not at chronological reading age”). The range of reading ability in classrooms is extremely variable.

There was **consensus** that literacy was not the exclusive burden of the English department, but issues with student literacy fell disproportionality onto the English department. However, English is an area where we can support and have positive impact on literacy.

It was suggested that:

- the unseen assessment disadvantages those who significantly struggle to read.
- “the language of the current GCSE is one that excludes a huge number of students whose class, family background and regional language use is not reflected in texts. It also discriminates against many students with SEN”.
- since the GCSEs carry the burden of indicating a literacy threshold (that is, assessment is being used to indicate both competence and performance) that there might be a parallel pathway offering a Functional English curriculum and testing regime.

TEACHERS AND THE GCSES

There was a general **agreement** that:

- teacher expertise should be trusted and teacher autonomy encouraged.
- there should be extended CPD training (“not just through PowerPoint”).
- opportunities for the sharing of good practice should be fostered.
 - The English Association is developing a Hub to support this.
 - Curriculum Wales supports teacher autonomy, offering teacher/school autonomy over choice of texts (though evaluation is pending) and Hwb (Hub), which pools CPD resources.
 - other examples include the work of LitDrive.
- There was **concern** over the recruitment and retention of English teachers.

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through PowerPoint.

PRINCIPLES TO GUIDE FUTURE GCSE REFORM

There was general **agreement** that:

- the design of the curriculum needs to be informed by discussions with a broad range of stakeholders, including students; the involvement of exam boards was welcomed.
- English is equally aspirational as STEM and needs to stress links to industry.[i]
- some good ideas exist in previous version of the National Curriculum, or in other disciplines (e.g. MFL, Media Studies, Art) or in the A Levels.
- dialogue is key to pedagogy: “time and space to be tentative and unsure and make decisions through conversation”.
- the GCSEs needed to develop pleasure, as mandated in the National Curriculum, and even joy (one exam board was singled out as “bleak”).)

It was **suggested** that the purpose of GCSE is to make students confident communicators and that **story** was key to this: why do we tell stories and what stories do we tell about ourselves? Why are stories told at different points in time? What story would we tell about our place in the world? What are stories for? How do they harness creativity, agency? Story is a way of creating space for student personal responses and creativity; a GCSE curriculum itself is a story.

There was **agreement** that **Oracy/ Speaking and Listening** will be important in the development of the GCSEs: can “Oracy, debating, recitals, the spoken word in performance poetry and other forms of inclusive and accessible spoken English be built into the classroom?”.



Can Oracy, debating, recitals, the spoken word in performance poetry and other forms of inclusive and accessible spoken English be built into the classroom?



**THE ENGLISH
ASSOCIATION**

Promoting, supporting and celebrating English Studies

The English Association is a membership association and learned society for individuals and organisations passionate about the English language and its literatures. Our membership includes teachers, lecturers, students, authors and readers, and is made up of people and institutions from around the world. Through our publications, events, networks and resources, we support the teaching, learning and enjoyment of English at all levels of education, from early years to further and higher education and beyond.

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