



Government Curriculum Review (England):

response to call for views from Learnus

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Organisation: LEARNUS

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Section 1: About LEARNUS

Learnus, the thinktank of the Learning Skills Research Foundation, is at the forefront of initiating and supporting engagement and dialogue between researchers working in the field of educational neuroscience, education practitioners and policymakers. Our mission is to act as a bridge between the challenges of classroom practice and academic research into the brain, the mind and behaviour in order to use the insights gained to improve and enrich the quality of teaching and learning for all.

Learnus is open to all, supported by a diverse membership which includes academics, teachers and other education professionals. This response to the consultation has been prepared following a call for an expression of views from the Learnus community. Given the specific nature of Learnus, we do not feel in a position to comment on the day-to-day details of the curriculum (others are better qualified to do so); rather we have focused on issues that arise from our specific area of interest and perspective.

In the submission that follows we have used the section structure set out in the online questionnaire but have made open responses based on our experience and expertise.

Section 2: General Issues

The core principle underpinning the Learnus approach to education is that **understanding how we learn is just as important as what we learn**. We would very strongly argue that any curriculum should reflect this in terms of what it is trying to achieve; its intent, how it is structured and implemented, and the way in which learning is assessed and reported.

The current version of the National Curriculum has been successful in providing a document that sets out content to which every child should have access but the vast majority of this relates to the ‘what’ providing lists of ‘factual content’ that is to be ‘learned’ and ‘recalled’ via the assessment process. Although some subjects do include reference to ‘how’ to learn too often this is overlooked, especially in terms of what is assessed. Moreover, the experience for students, especially in secondary years, is of subjects in isolation. Thus many learning opportunities are lost due to the curriculum being perceived and implemented as subjects ‘bolted together’ rather than viewed as a ‘whole curriculum’ in which the knowledge and skills supporting learning ‘in’, ‘between’ and ‘across’ subjects are expressed and developed.

It has been said that the most important section of the National Curriculum (i.e. that setting out the underpinning principles, aims and objectives) is the least read and understood. In addition, schools often glean the intent of the curriculum from Ofsted documentation and / or examination specifications rather than the original curriculum documents. Learnus would argue that the review should consider how to strengthen this section of the National Curriculum and identify ways in which the principles set out there can be incorporated more effectively during the implementation of the content.

Similarly, the review should reflect on how the curriculum, assessment and pedagogy can be better aligned in order to maximise the impact on learning for all students. Too often these three elements are considered in isolation resulting in tensions which are compounded by the accountability regime. The result is that a potentially sound curriculum becomes narrowed by a system that over-emphasises the ‘what’ of ‘factual learning’ rather than the ‘how’ of ‘learning for understanding’ that provides the foundation for life beyond education in the rapidly changing world in which we and our students live.

Section 3 – social justice and inclusion

Without question the curriculum should meet the needs of ALL learners, building on their strengths and capabilities in order to develop their potential. To this end, the review might consider how to build a curriculum within a system based more on recognising progress rather than almost exclusively on end-points fixed at specific ages. Such an approach would require adjustments to pedagogy but has the potential to provide not only stretch and challenge for all students but also a sense of achievement; not the failure felt by many students today.

Learnus would also argue that the review should take account of the growing awareness of neurodiversity. Great strides have been made in understanding the nature and effects of conditions such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, ADHD and autism, but ongoing research is recognising other conditions, such as Maths Anxiety, as well as the general neurodiversity in the wider population. Good teachers know each child / student is unique and requires support in different ways. The current curriculum fails to acknowledge this, thus restricting opportunities for some students, regardless of background, experience and abilities.

Furthermore, there is a good case for sharing with students both primary and secondary, at an appropriate level, ‘how the brain works’ so they become more aware of how they learn and the reasons why some approaches are more effective than others. In addition, if students become more aware of the processes of learning (such as the functioning of memory, developing schema, the need to make connections and the challenges of transferring information) they come to understand why learning can be hard and potentially they become more resilient; recognising that learning requires effort, practice, energy and it takes time.

Section 4 – Excellent foundation in English and Maths

A thread running through the curriculum debate is a lack of clarity in the language used; even in the current questions prepared for this review it isn’t clear whether the term ‘curriculum’ refers to the ‘National Curriculum’ or the ‘whole curriculum’. Greater efforts are needed to use the terminology more precisely.

This is particularly seen in the debate about the use of the terms ‘English’ and ‘Mathematics’ versus ‘literacy’ and ‘numeracy’. The review needs to give serious consideration as to what the terms mean and how they should be incorporated into the National Curriculum. Currently there is a tendency for anything to do with ‘language’ or ‘numbers’ to be restricted to ‘English’ and ‘mathematics’ while any reference to such

matters in other subjects is ignored. There is a requirement for literacy and numeracy across the whole curriculum, therefore this should be recognised in all subjects in both primary and secondary phases, alongside wider communication skills using a variety of media.

Learnus would therefore argue that the promotion and teaching of ‘literacy’ and ‘numeracy’ should be built into the requirements for all subjects, not just compartmentalised into ‘English’ and ‘Mathematics’. This would need to ensure that there is a shared set of principles underpinning the approach to literacy and numeracy and that there is recognition of the variety of everyday contexts in which literacy, numeracy and communication skills are applied.

Section 5 – Curriculum and qualification content

Learnus feels it does not have the expertise to comment on specific content of the curriculum and qualifications. However, we would reiterate our argument that the content, both cross-curricula and discipline-specific, should place greater emphasis on the ‘how’ of learning alongside the ‘what’ in order to improve students’ capabilities in skills such as problem solving, collection, use and interpretation of evidence, argumentation and critical thinking.

Section 6 – a broad balanced curriculum

Learnus supports the need for a broad and balanced curriculum but a third component, that of depth, needs to be incorporated. Learnus would argue that there should be opportunities for students to deepen their conceptual understanding and expertise in wider contexts (theoretical, applied and practical) possibly by developing a study of their own by drawing on their broad curriculum experiences.

Attempting to meet the demands of a curriculum which has breadth and opportunities for depth requires exploration of the balance across a number of dimensions such as: within and across subjects; between the subject matter content and the skills required to investigate ideas further; and the subject specific material and the generic principles underpinning learning.

More attention should also be given to acknowledging and developing shared approaches to teaching especially with tools (e.g. graphs) that are used in a range of subject based contexts.

Two further dimensions should be given additional consideration in reviewing the curriculum and how it is implemented. These are ‘continuity’ and ‘progression’. The current arrangement of the National Curriculum divided into key stages has some strengths but it also has the major drawback of hindering both continuity and progression in learning. Too often the stages are planned in isolation of what has been experienced by students before and after the key stage in question. Planning too often fails to take account of previous learning with the result that many students are either bored due to repetition of ‘stuff’ or they are ‘lost’ due to gaps in their experience.

The curriculum itself (National or otherwise) cannot solve all the challenges but the review should consider whether there are mechanisms available that mitigate against ‘playing the system’ in attempts to meet assessment and accountability criteria. For example, in humanities, schools are not required to teach the example content stated in the National Curriculum and therefore teachers often introduce GCSE Case studies in early KS3 and then repeat during GCSE to boost attainment. It seems sensible but it vastly narrows children's wider learning and understanding of the world.

Section 7 – Assessment and accountability

Without doubt forms of assessment and accountability drive the curriculum as experienced by many, if not all, students. The temptation at all levels to ‘teach to the test’ is very strong not only to get as many students as possible to ‘pass the exam’ but also to reflect the ‘success’ of the institution. Such practices, which we would argue act against deeper learning, engagement and individual progression, further emphasise the need to plan curriculum, assessment and accountability regimes together in order to establish consistent themes leading to a more balanced approach to assessing what is taught and the accountability that goes alongside it.

Section 8 – Qualification pathways 16 -19

As with curriculum content, comments on qualification pathways would be outside the remit of Learnus, suffice to say that pathways beyond 16 should not become too narrow and over specialised.

Section 9 – Other issues

The arrival of Artificial Intelligence (AI) offers opportunities as well as major risks but it is widely used across all aspects of our lives, education is no exception. The review will

need to consider possible implications of the use of AI as it could impact on approaches to teaching and learning, assessment and accountability. AI should be taken into consideration as a candidate for inclusion in the content of the curriculum.

Related to the use of AI, another issue that the review might consider is the need for students to be able to identify information that is trustworthy and that which isn't. In short this is another skill that students should be able to develop as they understand how to learn, not just what to learn.