

**Curriculum and  
Assessment Review**

**Curriculum and  
Assessment Review:  
a conceptual  
position paper**

**March 2025**

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# Understanding the national curriculum

The national curriculum can be understood in three dimensions: (1) its purposes, goals, and expectations; (2) its programmes, school subjects, and courses of study; and (3) teaching that reflects its implementation.

## Purposes, goals and expectations

The national curriculum is a purposeful, teleological endeavour aimed at nationally advancing education. It serves three key goals: equipping students with knowledge and skills necessary for life and work; fostering responsible citizenship in a democratic society; and promoting holistic development – intellectual, social, cultural, spiritual and moral, emotional, and physical.

Highlighting the goals of the national curriculum underscores its crucial role in enabling individual success, fostering a prosperous economy and promoting social cohesion and sustaining democracy. Many scholars also argue that it can enhance social mobility and contribute to a more equitable and just society.

The three goals are evoked in the Curriculum and Assessment Review Call for Evidence:

The curriculum represents our society’s collective investment in conferring our precious knowledge and skills to the younger generation, so that they in turn may flourish as individuals and as citizens that build our civil society and economy. It is right that we all have a say.<sup>1</sup>

These goals highlight the national curriculum's public and national significance. As a national initiative, it represents the collective interest, transcending the private concerns of individual schools, teachers, students, and parents. The curriculum must be relevant and meaningful to young people while empowering, rather than limiting, teachers' professional practice. As Professor Becky Francis states, 'The curriculum belongs to the nation. And especially, it must work for the young people who follow it, and the teachers and lecturers that communicate it'.

We have further indicated a set of principles that inform our approach to the national curriculum, and the work of the Review:

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Education, 2024. [Curriculum and Assessment Review, Call for Evidence - Department for Education](#)

The Review will develop a cutting-edge curriculum, equipping children and young people with the essential knowledge and skills which will enable them to adapt and thrive in the world and workplace of the future.

The Review will build on the government's commitment to high standards in the curriculum in England, whilst ensuring greater attention to breadth and flexibility and that no child or young person is left behind.

Other more specific principles are provided in the terms of reference.

A clear vision and well-defined goals, guided by established principles, will enable a thoughtful and responsible response to the data and evidence reviewed as part of our work.

## **Programmes, school subjects and courses of study**

The national curriculum takes the form of frameworks and guidelines that outline programmes, school subjects, and courses of study across key stages. These frameworks and guidelines specify expectations, content requirements, and the organisation and sequencing of content for all subjects and courses of study. They also serve to regulate and guide the implementation of the curriculum in schools and classrooms.

A school subject or course of study is not merely a collection of knowledge; it must be understood in the context of the national curriculum's goals and expectations, as well as the practical work of teachers in the classroom.<sup>2</sup> Equally important is the careful selection and organisation of knowledge within the curriculum to ensure it builds a strong foundation in core subjects and equips students with 'the essential knowledge and skills which will enable them to adapt and thrive in the world and workplace of the future'.<sup>3</sup>

We are mindful that the national curriculum is inextricably linked to assessment, examination and qualifications, and inspection systems that ensure the quality and standards of teaching and learning. Changes to the national curriculum need to be accompanied by corresponding changes in the assessment and accountability systems.

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<sup>2</sup> Deng, Zongyi. "The formation of a school subject and the nature of curriculum content: An analysis of liberal studies in Hong Kong." *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 41.5 (2009): 585-604.

<sup>3</sup> Department for Education (n 3).

## **Teaching: realising the national curriculum**

A rich and well-specified national curriculum supports and empowers teachers' professional practice. Teachers act as 'curriculum makers' in that they interpret and transform the content of a school subject within the national curriculum to 'author' instructional events with students in the classroom. At the core of curriculum-making is the process of unpacking and interpreting content to unlock its educational potential.

Hence as stated in the terms of reference, the Review seeks to 'build on the hard work of teachers and staff across the system who have brought their subjects alive with knowledge-rich syllabuses, to deliver a curriculum that is rich, broad, inclusive, and innovative'. And especially, 'The Review will support the innovation and professionalism of teachers, enabling them to adapt how they teach the curriculum to their students' lives and life experiences'.

The national curriculum provides an entitlement to an aspirational, stimulating and valuable offer for all young people. However, it is intended as a baseline rather than imposing limits, and it is the expertise of our teachers that brings it to life in the classroom, a point that will be addressed further in the last section.

## Approach to the Review: A ‘practical’ approach

Our philosophical approach to the Review’s work is informed by Joseph Schwab’s conception of ‘the Practical’.<sup>4</sup> This approach is especially appropriate to the circumstances of the Review, given that we consider there is much existing strength in the present arrangements for curriculum and assessment on which we wish to build, and costs and capacity challenges associated with change – but, that there are still important areas to consider and improvements that need to be made. Schwab forcefully rejects ‘theory-instigated’ reform – reform based on a theory of new persons, new knowledge, or a new society. He stated:

Under the control of theory, curricular changes have their origin in new notions of person, group or society, mind or knowledge, which give rise to suggestions of new things curriculum might be or do. By its nature, this origin takes little or no account of the existing effectiveness of the machine or the consequences to this effectiveness of the institution of novelty.<sup>5</sup>

Theory-instigated reform, often driven by elite elements in society, involves crafting an ideal curriculum at the policy level, out of touch with the realities of schools and classrooms, ignoring what has worked and what hasn’t in the system.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, a significant body of research has repeatedly shown that radical, theory (vision)-driven reforms have little to no impact on the work and practice of schools and classrooms.<sup>7</sup>

Instead, Schwab’s paradigm of the Practical offers a more realistic, respectful and viable method for curriculum reform. Its starting point is not the establishment of a vision or theory, but rather a thorough investigation of the problems and issues facing the curriculum within the community. The ‘practical’ approach to curriculum reform and development starts with an intimate understanding of the current state of affairs within an education system and a diagnosis of the problems facing the curriculum. This process is followed by deliberation over various alternative solutions and a decision on the

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<sup>4</sup> Schwab, Joseph J. "The Practical: A Language for Curriculum." *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, vol. 45, no. 5, 2013, pp. 591-621. Reprint of *The Practical: A Language for Curriculum*, 1970, National Education Association.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> Deng, Zongyi, Saravanan Gopinathan, and Christine Kim-Eng Lee. "The Singapore curriculum: Convergence, divergence, issues and challenges." *Globalization and the Singapore curriculum: From policy to classroom* (2013): 263-275.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Cohen, David K., and Deborah Loewenberg Ball. "Relations between Policy and Practice: A Commentary." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1990, pp. 331–338. Also see Westbury, I. "The Making of Formal Curricula: Why Do States Make Curricula, and How?" *The SAGE Handbook of Curriculum and Instruction*, edited by F. M. Connelly, M. F. He, and J. Phillion, SAGE, 2008, pp. 45–65.

appropriate course of action. Rather than demanding immediate changes to the curriculum, the Practical emphasises long-term, incremental improvements.<sup>8</sup>

It is this approach that we apply to the Review, as indicated in the three working principles in the Review terms of reference:

- The Review will seek evolution not revolution. The Review will recognise the hard work and successes of those working in education. The Review will build on the existing relative strengths of a system with finite resources and will not seek to fix things that are not broken.
- The Review will seek to identify and focus on addressing the most significant and pressing issues facing curriculum and assessment without destabilising the system.
- The Review will identify those elements of our existing system that can lead to barriers to accessing quality provision and/or to particular pathways. The Review will identify these and develop solutions.<sup>9</sup>

Schwab is clear that this approach requires meticulous consideration and care: 'Deliberation is complex and arduous. It treats both ends and means and must treat them as mutually determining one another. [...] It must then weigh alternatives and their costs and consequences against one another, and choose, not the right alternative, for there is no such thing, but the best one'.<sup>10</sup> Hence this approach is especially appropriate to our current content and challenges we are considering; encouraging judicious, evidence-led refinement.

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<sup>8</sup> Schwab (n 9).

<sup>9</sup> Department for Education (n 3).

<sup>10</sup> Schwab (n 9): 618.

## Conception of curriculum knowledge

From the perspective of the Practical, what matters most to teaching and learning is the curriculum that is ultimately animated by a teacher together with a group of students, within a particular school or college classroom.<sup>11</sup> This curriculum is not only vital to helping students develop an excellent foundation in core school subjects, but also contributes to equipping them with the 'knowledge and skills required to thrive as citizens, in work and throughout life'.<sup>12</sup>

Achieving these two goals requires the enactment of a knowledge-rich curriculum or knowledge-rich teaching where knowledge is regarded as 'powerful' because it provides 'more reliable explanations and new ways of thinking about the world' and allows us to move beyond personal experiences and 'envisage alternative and new possibilities'.<sup>13</sup>

There are three elements of 'knowledge-rich' curriculum content:

- Substantive knowledge refers to the established facts, information, widely accepted concepts, and core principles drawn from academic disciplines and specialised fields. This knowledge allows students to understand and interpret the world, enabling them to participate and function in society.
- Disciplinary knowledge involves specific ways of knowing and reasoning – e.g. what it means to know and reason in mathematics, history, geography, literature, music, and the arts. It also includes an understanding of how guiding conceptions and narratives – both their promises and limitations – shape ways of knowing, interacting, and inquiring about natural, social, and cultural phenomena. Additionally, this knowledge includes methods and canons of reasoning, as well as evidence for generating and verifying knowledge.
- Knowledge for personal, social, and cultural practices emphasizes applying knowledge to everyday life. It meets citizens' practical needs by showing how substantive and disciplinary knowledge can address real-world challenges.

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<sup>11</sup> Schwab, Joseph J. "The Practical 4: Something for curriculum professors to do." *Curriculum inquiry* 13.3 (1983): 239-265.

<sup>12</sup> Department for Education (n 3).

<sup>13</sup> Lambert, David. *The Potential of Knowledge-Rich Teaching*. Unpublished paper; Young, Michael and Johan Muller. "On the Powers of Powerful Knowledge." *Review of Education*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2013, pp. 229-250.



School subjects in the national curriculum should not be viewed as a mere collection of facts and knowledge, but an embodiment of intellect, ways of thinking, wisdom, and values, and thus possessing the potential to develop human capabilities, including life skills.<sup>14</sup> In this way, school subjects, rooted in or informed by academic disciplines and specialised fields, serve as a means of developing understanding, skills, capabilities, and dispositions.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the skills and capabilities that are an inherent and desirable aspect of a rich, broad and balanced curriculum arise from and are situated within the three knowledge elements listed above.

Hence our conceptual approach to the Review is one that:

- a) understands the national curriculum in terms of purposes and goals, programmes and school subjects, and teaching as curriculum practice
- b) applies a practical lens that, following Schwab, adopts an empirical approach that uses evidence to detect and protect ongoing effective practice, while identifying areas requiring improvement; and
- c) extends the focus on 'powerful knowledge', together with related work on knowledge-rich curricula, to incorporate understanding of how the effective pedagogical communication of knowledge also facilitates and enhances the skills and capabilities required for life and work.

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<sup>14</sup> Dewey, John. *The School and Society & The Child and the Curriculum*. University of Chicago Press, 1990. Original work published 1902.

<sup>15</sup> Deng, Zongyi. "Powerful knowledge, educational potential and knowledge-rich curriculum: Pushing the boundaries." *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 54.5 (2022): 599-617; Lambert, David, Tine Bénéker, and Gabriel Bladh. "Teaching Quality in Geography: What Are We Trying to Achieve?." *Zeitschrift für Geographiedidaktik (ZGD)* 51.3 (2023): 156-159.

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