

QCA Consultation: Secondary Curriculum Review

UCET Response

1. UCET welcomes the opportunity to comment on the QCA proposals for the reform of the secondary curriculum. The proposals are in our view excellent. Indeed, the paper is the most thoughtful, generative and persuasive document on the secondary school curriculum that has been produced by an official body for many years. If the nation's schools could rise to the challenge which the consultation paper offers and engage learners fully in accord with the principles and suggestions made, we could indeed justifiably claim to have a world-class curriculum.

2. In our response we wish to consider, firstly, the general principles governing the curriculum as a whole and, secondly, to draw out some of the implications of the curricular proposals for the education of teachers. Since the format of the on-line response form was thought to be too constraining we have chosen to respond discursively.

3. There are five features of the curricular proposals that will rejuvenate pupils' learning and which we wish in particular to commend. Firstly, the consultation paper offers a framework for planning and mediating the curriculum rather than a blueprint. While it is proposed to supplement the proposals with supporting resources which exemplify the underlying principles, the onus is placed clearly on schools to assume responsibility for the quality of the curriculum they offer. The paper provides the tools which curriculum-builders and teachers will require in the revitalisation of the curriculum. Not the least of the advantages of such an approach is that it leaves schools with the flexibility to relate pupils' learning to their needs and circumstances.

4. Secondly, we applaud the way in which aims, values, learning experiences, teaching and learning approaches, and assessment are made integral features of the curriculum. Too often, curricular specifications focus only on what is to be learned; the proposals portray the curriculum as the totality of the learning experiences engaged in by pupils, including the aims the curriculum seeks to serve, the underlying values it espouses, the nature of the activities through which learning will take place, and how judgements will be made about the extent to which learning has taken place.

5. Thirdly, we are greatly encouraged by the attempt to make the curriculum a coherent learning experience instead of the dispensing of regular helpings of the different subjects, which can result in a highly fragmented education. That strengthening of coherence is to be secured by the adoption of an approach to subject teaching that is consistent across the curriculum and by ensuring that certain features such as the personal, learning and thinking skills framework, and the major dimensions such as enterprise and creativity permeate the curriculum in a way that allows skills, understandings and dispositions to be reinforced in a variety of different contexts.

6. Fourthly, we are impressed by the way in which the proposals build on the five outcomes of Every Child Matters. One of the requirements of the ECM agenda is that learning should be 'personalised'. That term has been the focus of some uncertainty in educational discussion. We agree that it includes at least two features: the curriculum must relate to the needs and aspirations of individual learners, through for example opportunities for choice and specialised study; and it must nurture through all its various forms of activity pupils' affective and emotional development as well as their intellectual understanding. We maintain that when the curriculum is humanised in this way there are much better prospects of engaging learners as more active participants in the educational process.

7. Finally, we found the frequent listing of items – for example, in relation to the features of an effective curriculum, and the unpacking of the values relating to self, relationships, society and the environment - helpful rather than tiresome, for these lists can all be used by schools as criteria in the light of which audits can be undertaken of current provision and future practice determined. We believe that such 'criterial' thinking is essential in planning, implementing and evaluating the curriculum.

8. In these and other ways we found the QCA paper to constitute a refreshing gust of good sense and innovative thinking, offering a comprehensive and challenging prospectus for schools.

9. Of course, the extent to which these curricular principles will be reflected in effective learning experiences for secondary school pupils will depend pre-eminently on the resourcefulness and commitment of teachers. As the body which represents higher education-based teacher education and professional development, UCET finds a disjunction between the vibrant characterisation of the curriculum provided by the QCA and the standards for classroom teachers recently promulgated by the TDA. Like other bodies, UCET was fully consulted on the revision of these standards and is to that extent formally associated with them. UCET institutions are responsible for ensuring that programmes of teacher education meet the new standards and requirements. It is clear that teacher education institutions will face a significant challenge in ensuring that teachers are prepared for effective participation in the reformed secondary school curriculum. They will need to find a way in which the curricular principles now under consideration can so interfuse and enliven the quasi-legal statement of standards that they energise the professional preparation of teachers. That is, the technical proficiency which the revised standards enshrine needs to be imbued with the vision of secondary education which the QCA paper sets before us.

10. In UCET's view, that can best be achieved if student teachers can be encouraged to adopt a more open attitude to subject teaching. They must come to acknowledge that the subjects they profess are educational resources of remarkable power, offering unlimited scope for realising an enormous range of educational purposes, for enquiry and reflection, for hypothesising and the interrogation of evidence, for adjudicating between the valuable and the meretricious; for the use of the imagination and creativity; for the examination of human motive and the improbability of the social condition; for coming to terms with the responsibilities of citizenship; for promoting personal, social and environmental competence; and much else besides. Nor are these purposes restricted to what is cognitive or cerebral: subjects nurture the sense of achievement, the growth of self-confidence and self-esteem, enthusiasm and enjoyment, the self-understanding that comes through challenge, the capacity to engage and interact with others, and the satisfactions that derive from participation in sport, adventure, the arts and forms of service to the community. In all of these ways subjects exert a humanising, liberating and ultimately transforming impact on learners.

11. Ultimately, the educational progress of learners will depend on how resourcefully teachers will be able to draw on their subject knowledge base, and how readily they will jettison the monocular professional vision that is associated with the blinkered pursuit of the subject, in favour of an approach that fully exploits all the opportunities for cognitive and affective development, and for the nurturing of skill, insight and judgement that subject teaching at its best involves. However, that pedagogical subject knowledge, and the capacity to ensure that it issues in accomplished professional performance, needs to be generalised so that, within the context of subject teaching and beyond it, the teacher is able to induce the disposition to learn, to relate the activities of the classroom to the social realities of the pupils' experience, to structure learning opportunities appropriately, to remove the obstacles that can impede learning, and to energise learners to assume fuller responsibility for, and become more effective managers of, their own learning. And in all of that work teachers will be operating from a professional base in which subject teaching expertise and proficiency in the facilitation of human learning will be mutually reinforcing features, rather than being so antithetical that possession of the one rules out possession of the other.

12. That approach to subject teaching calls for a more explicit recognition of the psycho-social and other educational aims that are to be pursued. That is, student teachers need to understand, analyse, apply and, importantly, demonstrate in their interactions with learners, just how their subject knowledge can be exploited as resources for addressing the needs of children as defined by ECM, for equipping them with the tools of autonomous living, for nurturing their affective as well as their cognitive development, and for cultivating a wide range of social and practical skills. They need to learn to relate to pupils in such a way that they can make pupils' personal and social experience the starting point for their exploration of all that subjects have to offer.

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