

Curriculum and Assessment Review Call for Evidence: United Learning response

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This is an overarching narrative response on behalf of United Learning to the Curriculum and Assessment Review – Call for Evidence. We provided specific responses to the separate questions in the online consultation as well; this narrative response sets out some important overarching and cross-cutting points we would wish the Review to consider.

About United Learning and the United Curriculum

We are a group of schools which aims to provide excellent education to children and young people across the country. We seek to improve the life chances of all the children and young people we serve and to bring out 'the best in everyone' – students, staff, parents and the wider community. Our growing group has over 100 schools, from Cumbria to Kent, over 70,000 pupils and over 10,000 members of staff.

Our size and scale means that we employ experts in curriculum and assessment for the benefit of all of our schools, as well as a team of dedicated subject advisers across all curriculum subjects. Our Education Directors and Regional Directors have extensive experience of school leadership and improvement.

Our common curriculum – the United Curriculum – has been an important part of our success as a trust, and we are now sharing this successful curriculum with a growing number of schools outside the group. We have drawn on this depth and breadth of specialist expertise in putting together our response.

The importance of the National Curriculum and its limitations as a tool for improvement

An effective National Curriculum aims to establish a clear entitlement for all children to learn those things we as a society collectively understand to be fundamentally important for citizenship or essential prerequisites for success in our country. It sets high expectations for what children can achieve and it establishes specifically what we consider to be a broad and balanced education.

Through being a stable articulation of key ideas, concepts, knowledge and skills which are of substantial importance in understanding and engaging with the natural and human world, the National Curriculum gives schools, their leaders and teachers a clarity of shared purpose in their endeavours. The National Curriculum was never intended to encompass the whole of the school curriculum, though in practice, teaching its prescriptions quickly came to take up more than the available teaching time and in practice many teachers consider that it continues to fill almost all teaching time.

Equally, the National Curriculum has rightly never sought to set out exactly how key concepts should be exemplified or taught. Overall, the National Curriculum rightly aims not to prescribe specific contexts through which to teach key concepts; it does not attempt to include so much detail that schools have no space to teach other things they believe are important locally; it does not attempt to set out how the curriculum should be enacted and taught; it does not try to respond to trends and therefore require constant updating.

Because the National Curriculum sets a standard, it cannot also function as a tool for improvement. It can provide a benchmark and a measure of success – and must do so in a sophisticated way to avoid disadvantaging some – but most importantly must set out objectively what children need to learn in order to be prepared to succeed in life and what our

country will need from the next generation. In doing so, it can set high expectations for educators to meet and therefore play a critical role in our system – but it cannot simultaneously carry out this function with integrity and also be a tool of gap-narrowing.

These broad principles of the National Curriculum are right and should be preserved and strengthened. In some respects, the current National Curriculum meets them in full, in others only in part. However, the current level of prescription, the current sequencing and the current structure of the National Curriculum are about right. While there are areas which can be improved, this is not a ‘broken’ part of the education system.

Alongside the National Curriculum as such are qualification specifications and attainment measures and targets. We think that the most substantial problems experienced in the school curriculum are the result of the ‘backwards effect’ of accountability on qualifications and in turn on the curriculum enacted in schools. These points are explored in more detail below.

The importance of curriculum stability

Curriculum stability is essential to meeting the aim of the National Curriculum to provide a clear long-term goal and direction for the school system. While the 10 year period since the last substantial changes to the Programmes of Study is a long time in some respects, we now require children to participate in education and training for at least 13 years and so 10 years is some way short of a ‘full cycle’ of a child moving through school.

The importance of a properly thought-through, coherent and well-sequenced curriculum is clear. However, a coherent and well-sequenced curriculum on paper is only a theoretical construct if changes to curriculum requirements mean that for any individual child, the curriculum sequence is disrupted mid-flow. Too many National Curriculum Reviews have had this effect on too many children.

Equally, substantial curriculum stability is key to allowing there to be professional focus on the development of teaching practices and teaching quality. Significant re-writing of Programmes of Study at national level requires complete re-planning of all schemes of work and lessons at school level. We saw at the last Review of the National Curriculum that substantial changes to all key stages and to GCSE and A level specifications occurred at broadly the same time, creating an enormous workload for teachers and leaders. This had substantial cost, financially and on teacher wellbeing and meant a loss of attention and focus on quality improvement.

If the Review Group decides that changes are required in some areas of the curriculum, much more thought should be given to implementation than in previous Reviews of this kind. It is of course implementation which matters in the end.

Avoiding unnecessary change is an important principle. Equally, implementing any necessary change in the minimally disruptive way is important: in the past, sometimes Programmes of Study have had a complete re-write when the intended objective could have been achieved with much more limited change. Equally, past sequencing of changes has not always been well-designed to avoid leaving children with gaps or repetition and certainly not to avoid over-loading schools and teachers.

Finally, we would note that some suggestions made by some public responses to the Review about what should be added to or removed from the curriculum do not take account of the

implications of such changes for previous or subsequent key stages. We know that the Review Group will take account of this in assessing responses to the Call for Evidence.

Disadvantage and attainment gaps

As outlined above, the purpose of the National Curriculum is to establish a clear entitlement for children. It sets high expectations of all pupils, regardless of background, based on as objective a view as possible of what children actually need to be able to do to succeed in the wider world. Setting high standards is good for everyone: having lower standards would of course mean that more children meet them and so published 'gaps' might appear smaller, but the real gaps – between young people in what they can do relative to what they need to be able to do in future to succeed – would grow.

Changing the curriculum in our collective concern for disadvantaged pupils – whether by reducing the level of challenge or attempting to make the curriculum 'more engaging' for this group – therefore risks 'the soft bigotry of low expectations'. The very best thing we can do for children experiencing socio-economic disadvantage is to have high expectations for them and what they can achieve in the things that will be most important for their future, and then enable them to meet those expectations.

For these reasons, and if it is to continue to fulfil this key function, the National Curriculum cannot be seen as a major solution to issues of gaps or lack of inclusion. It is the role of the school to ensure that every child – including especially those experiencing socio-economic disadvantage – is taught at school the concepts they need to thrive in future, specifically as set out in the National Curriculum. Schools of course should meet pupils where they are but then teach effectively to fill gaps and ensure that pupils progress through the curriculum. Prescribing *how* schools should do this is, and should always be, outside the remit of the National Curriculum.

In this context, it is important to recognise that children do need to learn unfamiliar and sophisticated words and how to use them in unfamiliar contexts (including contexts which may seem 'middle class' in some respects). But it is also important not to do this unnecessarily or in ways which create higher hurdles for some: there is no compelling reason why a primary reading assessment needs to use the word 'chalet', to take a well-known example.

Representation does matter – we know that for pupils to succeed, it is important that they feel that they belong. Ensuring this is primarily a matter for the school, but a way in which the curriculum supports this is by ensuring that children and young people can feel represented in the curriculum they study. It is important not to be reductive about this: people are more than their 'protected characteristics' and can feel represented by someone of a different sex, class, age, ethnicity etc. Nevertheless, serious and accurate representation of women, working class people and people of all ethnicities, their history and contribution across subject disciplines is important. While this should not be forced (science is not about 'famous scientists'), neither should it be ignored: the 'hidden curriculum' of the assumptions and values we display and represent through our everyday actions is a critically important part of the school experience. Again, this is mostly a matter for the 'local curriculum' – the curriculum as enacted in individual schools – but the National Curriculum can support schools to get this right through setting clear overarching expectations.

The distorting effect of accountability

The backwards effect of accountability on qualifications and assessment, and from there on curriculum, is in our view a much bigger issue than anything in the curriculum itself. It is this that is distorting subjects. The job of assessment should be to assess whether children have learnt the key concepts and met the high standards specified in the curriculum, and the job of accountability is to assess whether schools have taught those things successfully.

This should be the logical flow, from the high standards and expectations set by the curriculum, to appropriate assessment of whether those have been learnt, to accountability of institutions for their success in teaching what was to have been learned. Instead we now have a strong *backwards* flow, where accountability is affecting and determining the design of assessment, and what is assessed then determines the content of the curriculum – to the detriment of children’s educational experience in school.

It is right that schools should be accountable. It would not help children to succeed if schools became less accountable. However, thought needs to be given as to how to make this accountability sharper, to avoid distorting effects on the taught curriculum, such as:

- In primary schools, the National Curriculum supports a broad and balanced curriculum. However, particularly in Year 6, other curriculum subjects are often squeezed out by the focus on English and maths – and their planning and sequencing often attracts much less attention. While numeracy and literacy are fundamental skills for pupils to develop, the backwash effect of key stage 2 accountability has a narrowing effect – and a particularly distorting effect on Year 6, two terms of which can be end up being dominated by SATs rehearsal, while the third term may lack substantial educational content as schools catch up on the 'fun' missed earlier in the year. For children failing to achieve age-related expectations, this can be miserable and off-putting and fails to prepare them well for secondary school.
- At key stage 3, the curriculum can be sharply affected by preparation for assessments at the end of key stage 4. Key stage 3 can be reduced in breadth where there is narrowing of subject range ahead of GCSEs and reduced in depth or coverage (because GCSE content is being taught ahead of Y10 and particularly where core aspects of a subject, such as a practical science are seen less in key stage 3 when they do not contribute to GCSE grades). GCSE-style question technique can become central to the key stage 3 experience, sometimes at the expense of real subject understanding (scholarship in a subject does not always fit neatly into the framework of a 'six mark question').
- Key stage 4 shows many of the same teaching concerns as key stage 3. A large proportion of students’ independent work is focused on exam questions in many schools. This can be more appropriate in some subjects than others. At its worst, it can stand in the way of proper understanding of subject matter – for example, time taken to teach students ‘how to pick up the easy marks’ on maths questions is time that is not focused on ensuring that they have a deep understanding of key concepts or skills needed for life.
- Certain subjects are being distorted by the need to ensure the ‘authenticity’ of assessment response – following concerns about ‘cheating’ or inappropriate assistance from parents or staff under accountability pressure. For example in GCSE science there is insufficient emphasis on practical experiments and the broader skills of scientific enquiry; in English,

speaking and listening are taught less effectively and more schools are now adopting a whole-school oracy approach in the context of increased speech and language needs.

- Fundamental skills that we should be extremely concerned to develop (such as the ability to think independently, to construct a reasoned argument, to write in a sustained way and so on) are not being examined, and too often this leads to their not being taught.

How to ameliorate this distorting effect of accountability on the curriculum at the system level is much more important than any specific question of content.

Responding well to this issue is not straightforward. One important step the Government can take is to commit to avoiding use of the accountability system to incentivise behaviours. For example, the introduction of the EBacc measure was done purely to drive uptake of particular GCSEs. The Government is within its rights to promote a particular curriculum – but should do so overtly through use of the National Curriculum legislation rather than by pretending to give schools agency but then incentivising them to make decisions which they may see as conflicting with the interests of particular young people.

Secondly, there should be focus on improving the validity of assessment and reducing the pressures on reliability. We should seek to improve the validity of GCSEs and A levels by making assessments as appropriate to the subject as possible – there is scope for summative assessments to assess more validly important skills currently under-represented in the assessment construct, such as speaking, practical science, and extended writing. This would have to come with greater tolerance of variability in performance, which would require an easing of pressure on reliability.

It may be necessary to reduce the stakes attached to qualification-based accountability, and/or to reduce the number of grades at GCSE in order to offset a reduction in reliability. Overall, having 9 GCSE grades serves no useful educational purpose and reduces grade reliability.

Both validity and young people's wellbeing could be enhanced by assessing important skills (which are not currently assessed effectively by GCSEs) outside an exam context. For example, young people should have the opportunity to engage in a substantial project involving research and extended writing or other artefact creation – this could be achieved through a project qualification along the lines of the A level extended project.

As an aside, technology offers the potential to change the way that we think about the role of assessment in both the accountability and qualification space. A stated ambition from Government would be welcome in this area, so that schools, exam boards and the adjacent education technology sector can invest appropriately. Technology will never be a silver bullet, but certain digital assessment tools could help reduce the observed 'backwash effect' through lowering the stakes and increasingly the validity of assessment (as more frequent or continuous assessment and more use of comparative judgement would likely do). Additionally, old ideas around digital portfolios may offer new promise as part of a wider vision for the future of a more personalised and digitised learning experience.

Meeting more needs better

There are some ways in which the curriculum, qualifications and assessment system as a whole could serve a greater range of needs better than it currently does.

Functional skills

English GCSE is not effective at assessing functional literacy. Maths GCSE does assess functional numeracy, but the breadth of content in the qualification and the compensatory nature of the assessment (where a 'pass' level does not guarantee that any particular content was properly understood) means that the focus on functional numeracy is insufficient for those pupils who would most benefit. The current focus on re-sitting full GCSEs is undesirable and unsuccessful. A re-framed pass/fail core or functional maths/English unit focused on the basics every member of society needs would be a much more useful threshold – both widely achievable and tightly focused on what is most important for flourishing as an adult.

We think that mastery-style assessment (high pass mark, pass/fail qualification) of a core maths and core English unit with GCSE status as a free-standing assessment and/or as a 'hurdle' on the way to full GCSE (as was proposed in the 2005 14-19 White Paper) would be a valuable step forward.

Such a unit would not have to be taken at 16 and could be taken at the end of key stage 3 for pupils who had comfortably reached the standard; during key stage 4 on the way to full GCSE; or at the end of key stage 4 or even later for pupils who needed extra time to develop those skills. Giving the qualification GCSE status and making it universal would avoid the risk of it being seen as an indicator of low ability; making it a pass/fail mastery-style assessment would sharply reduce the risk that students would be gaining pass marks while having understood only part of the curriculum. Making achievement of these basics for all a central goal of education would benefit all children and the whole of society.

For those young people unable to achieve this level by 16, who should be a much smaller minority than cannot currently achieve a grade 4 GCSE, there needs to be much more thinking about an integrated curriculum to 19, with a view that virtually all can achieve this level by 19.

Vocational pathways

A national vocational pathway needs to be developed with the same level of recognition amongst employers and HEIs as GCSEs and A levels.

At key stage 4, 43% of pupils take one or more vocational or applied qualifications alongside their GCSEs. Particularly following recent reforms, these are of good quality. The large proportion of students studying these subjects find them to be valuable, and important for breadth and to develop skills and knowledge in subject areas outside of GCSEs. However, these qualifications do not enjoy the same recognition or status (and therefore, labour market value) as GCSEs – and nor are they designed to support progression to T-levels post-16. General education remains centrally important for all young people and it should continue not to be possible to select a predominantly vocational route before 16, since this is associated with reduced progression. However, coherent packages of vocational study taking up to 25% of taught time would be valuable if organised as a national qualifications pathway.

Post-16, a national vocational system could reasonably be based on T levels – the detail of the assessments matters less than the fundamentals of strong focus on basics, employer-valued vocational study, employer engagement and HEI recognition, and clear progression routes and destinations. The success of a new national route does depend on having a single route and 'switching off' competing qualifications at an appropriate time. The government needs to stick with a single approach to the new route for at least a decade to implement it successfully.

Stage not age for those not succeeding – so that they do succeed by age 19

We know that having high expectations of what all young people can achieve and aiming to focus teaching on enabling as many as possible to reach this standard is a highly effective approach. However, we can see that for some children and young people it is unsuccessful. There are children who do not achieve expected standards early in school (e.g. not achieving the early learning goals; not succeeding at the phonics reading check twice) and then go on never to meet 'age-related expectations'. These children go through school being repeatedly told they have failed and never receiving sufficient support to enable them to succeed. The SEND system visibly fails to address this problem in any significant way.

It would be a mistake to think that this is only a curriculum issue. However, there should be more focus on 'stage not age' thinking for those children who are consistently unable to achieve age-related expectations. Lower-attaining pupils often have a poor curricular experience and a poor assessment experience, with assessments which do not enable them to show what they know and can do.

For pupils working below the level of the 'mainstream' assessment/qualification for their age, there is little to recognise and support their progress. For example, for pupils who do not achieve the expected standard for Phonics by Year 2, expectations for their progression are unclear at a national level and there is no assessment framework to support or recognise their onward progression in reading. GCSE courses with exams taken at 16 are not effective at supporting or recognising the progression of young people with SEND whose achievement falls outside of the top 80% of the cohort: getting a low grade by picking up 'the easy marks' on a number of GCSE questions after a two (or five) year course is not a good experience for anyone.

It would be a mistake to think that the answer lies in lower level qualifications. Qualifications below L2 tend to have a negative return in the labour market (i.e. holders of these qualifications earn less over a lifetime than people with similar characteristics/attainment who do not hold those qualifications), indicating that they serve as a signal of 'low ability' rather than as a mark of achievement.

Instead, and just as in the earliest stages of learning to read, we should concern ourselves more with those who haven't yet jumped any given hurdle and make better provision for them. There should be clear, system-wide expectations for the support of pupils who do not meet age-related expectations. These expectations should be designed to ensure that schools remain focused on these pupils' progress towards reaching a L2 threshold – even if they do so later than at 16.

The government should consider increasing focus on attainment by age 19. A much larger proportion of the cohort could achieve current L2 standards by age 19 given time and thoughtful support for progression. The previous Labour government was on track to achieve a target of 80% of 19 year olds achieving the Level 2 standard. A target of 90% seems achievable in the medium term.

Specific areas for improvement

As set out above there are many aspects of the National Curriculum that work well and should not be changed. There are, however, some areas where we believe some amendments to the curriculum would be beneficial to the system. These are outlined below.

‘Content overload’: We are sceptical of the view that the National Curriculum is overloaded in general. Broadly, the National Curriculum rightly insists on depth in the number of subjects studied and does not over-prescribe them. We think that there may, however, be a small number of changes that would be beneficial:

- The number of subjects in primary school may be too high. Computing in general contains some out of date material, but primary computing in particular is not a well-designed programme of study. Omitting this would allow more space for fundamental principles in mathematics, logic and digital literacy. Likewise, primary languages study is very unsuccessful (see below).
- There is an over-focus on grammatical terminology driven by the key stage 2 grammar, punctuation and spelling test. Learning to write in a grammatically correct way is important, but learning grammatical terminology is not a useful contributor to this goal – indeed time spent on this detracts from the fundamental skills that pupils should develop as writers. The key stage 2 GPS test should be abolished and more attention paid to writing which conveys meaning accurately and effectively.
- In some GCSE specifications, the volume of content detracts from depth of study. This is true in the key stage 4 science specification, which can drive a superficial understanding of science.
- The National Curriculum could usefully include as non-statutory guidance a clear sense of what is and is not expected in the teaching of a particular subject at a key stage. This would have the intention of giving schools reassurance that there is no need to go overboard with content, while also encouraging sensible ‘localisation’ – e.g. in planning trips, visits and fieldwork, for example.

Assessments and targets: The Review could reasonably set an objective that parents should be able to compare the performance of schools across any measure they choose. For example, if parents are interested in how many children at a school achieve at least a grade 7 in all three sciences; or if they want to know how well children with SEND achieve in music and drama, they should be able to do so. This is a perfectly achievable goal through refining the existing ‘compare schools’ online portal.

This would mean that government could stop promoting the EBacc as a preferred measure – though it would still be accessible to parents. For professional accountability purposes, the Attainment 8 and Progress 8 measures are good measures of the progress of children across a broad and balanced curriculum essentially in line with the National Curriculum and could still have some prominence. These measures include the results of all children (unlike a threshold measure like the EBacc) and give a good measure of children’s progress (in years where key stage 2 tests were sat).

We have also indicated that the GPS test at key stage 2 could be removed; and while we agree that learning times tables is fundamental, we are not convinced that a national test of this is justified – it clearly distorts teaching time and progress of children who have learned their tables earlier, for example.

Updating: The Review should ensure that the National Curriculum remains a spare articulation of key concepts, well sequenced. This should mean that it does not require frequent updating. Nonetheless, there are developments over time in academic disciplines, and there are some areas which do need to be updated – most obviously in the computing curriculum, which has aspects that are out of date and which does not reflect the importance of ethics and logic in the subject. We are not convinced that computing as it is should be a compulsory part of the National Curriculum.

Sequencing: In most cases, the sequencing of the curriculum is correct, and leaves enough flexibility for schools to ensure that they teach things in the right order. As a general comment, however, there are a few cases where there could be greater consideration to the sequencing of curriculum across subjects. For example, the water cycle appears in both key stage 2 science and geography, and again in 'hydrology' in key stage 3 geography, without a clear progression in how pupils' understanding of this should develop across subjects (and key stages). Similarly, the concept of healthy eating and balanced diet appears variously in primary and secondary science and Design and Technology, without any recognition of what may previously have been taught.

Sustainability, citizenship and other cross-curricular topics: This cross-subject sequencing is also important when introducing issues like climate education or citizenship – which should be neither turned into separate discipline on their own nor treated vaguely as a 'theme'. The National Curriculum should be clear about what concepts are taught in primary and secondary phases and in which subjects. Understanding climate change requires understanding of relevant concepts across geography, science, English and art. Topics like this need to be worked out as a coherent scheme and split across the right subjects at the right stages (for example, key stage 2 geography; key stage 3 science). The detail of this must be worked through locally – this is how we have approached sustainability, for example, in the United Learning Curriculum. However, the National Curriculum could usefully support this by highlighting the key components and in which subject discipline they belong.

Modern Foreign Languages: current MFL curriculum and qualifications are not fit for purpose. Languages GCSEs have the reputation for being particularly difficult GCSEs – but if we compare the standards achieved in foreign languages in the UK by age 16 with those achieved overseas, they are low (while we compare well in other subjects). Expectations at age 16 are low in part because of the lack of consistency and continuity in language learning earlier. There is no clear progression from key stage 2 to key stage 3 and pupils are negatively impacted by repetitive lessons that assume no prior knowledge and 'start again', or by the prospect of starting a brand new language. The standards of language teaching and learning in key stage 2 are poor on average, with very little progression in any target language across the key stage.

The optimum solution – which we favour – would be to specify a single language that all pupils should be taught in key stage 2. This is the only realistic way for us to improve the nation's currently woeful performance in learning other languages. It would require significant thought, planning and support to implement well. If this is considered not to be feasible, the place of MFL at key stage 2 should be reviewed: if there is limited effective curriculum planning and teaching and no progression in language learning, the time may be more effectively spent in other areas of the curriculum. This view is held commonly in schools, particularly in the context of growing speech and language and literacy needs.