



Qualifications and  
Curriculum Authority

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# The secondary curriculum review

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November 2007

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) is committed to building a world-class education and training framework. It regulates, develops and modernises the curriculum, assessments, examinations and qualifications. As part of this work, QCA recently (February – September 2007) carried out a significant review of the secondary curriculum.

The secondary curriculum review looked in particular at how subjects are taught and how they can be improved to make learning more interesting and relevant for today's youngsters.

The main aim of the review was to rejuvenate and revitalise the learning experience for children between the ages of 11 and 16. In the past, schools have argued that the curriculum was overloaded, over-detailed and constraining. QCA wanted to get rid of the low-level clutter – the teaching of isolated facts and knowledge at the expense of an understanding of the discipline of a subject. Instead of teaching bit by bit and hoping that it will come together in the end, QCA wanted teachers to address why a subject matters, what difference it makes to civilisation and society, how it has influenced the world in which we live and the job opportunities it offers.

The secondary curriculum review began with a wide-ranging national online consultation on the programmes of study. Teachers, subject associations, professional organisations, employers, parents and young people themselves were all asked for their views on what and how 11- to 16-year-olds should be taught. QCA's challenge was to take account of all these different viewpoints.

The new secondary curriculum aims to provide a less prescriptive and more flexible curriculum for 11- to 16-year-olds – something that teachers have been requesting in their droves in recent years. The subjects within the curriculum will remain the same, but the content and the way in which they are taught will be different. As a result, schools will be able to meet pupils' needs better, stretching the more able and helping those who fall behind to catch up.

One of the big challenges was to design the curriculum so that you get a local curriculum within national parameters. The excitement is to be able to take the big ideas in each subject and weld them together to build on a child's natural curiosity, interests and enthusiasm – creating a curriculum that matters to them.

QCA was not trying to get to a position where every school approaches everything in exactly the same way but was aiming for diversity in the way in which the curriculum is offered. There is a need to create a personalised agenda so the curriculum takes account of pupil diversity, pupil need, pupil choice and pupil specialism.

In terms of diversity, a school should be able to tailor its curriculum to meet the particular needs of its community. In terms of need, a school should manage the curriculum to ensure that children who are gifted and talented or have special needs see their requirements met. In terms of choice, this is a crucial period of adolescence and we should enable youngsters to make decisions for themselves within their learning. They may be very small decisions, about the type of material to use or the way in which they present their work, but it means they learn about decision making.

In terms of specialism, youngsters should study things in depth rather than skate over the surface. That means schools having to look again at the way in which they use time and having to think about blocking areas of study together so that young people get the time to do in-depth analysis and investigation and to produce extended reports from an early age.

Implementing the changes to the secondary curriculum will mean only minor modification to current practice in schools. There will be a need to look at the new expectations in terms of the thinned-down content and make sure that what schools are doing fits what is expected. For some schools it is an opportunity they have been crying out for. Many schools have felt constrained by the curriculum in the past and teachers have talked about 'straitjackets'.

QCA's new web-based platform (<http://curriculum.qca.org.uk/>) offers teachers invaluable support and guidance to take the new secondary curriculum forward. It provides lots of ideas about curriculum design and approaches, based on good practice. While the national secondary curriculum was in the past published as a book, the web-based platform is able to illustrate the statutory expectation and provide teachers with ideas, examples and case studies that they can use.

There are some essential learning experiences that youngsters ought to have. These might be things like working as a team, doing work in their local community, visiting art galleries and museums, watching the local council in action, taking part in fieldwork and learning the culture and language of other countries they are studying. The aim is to make sure that these

experiences accord with children's daily lives but also open new doors and offer new horizons.

But the 21st-century curriculum must adapt to the country's needs. Children are growing up in a world that is changing at a faster pace than ever before. The changing global economy, the impact of technology, the need to sustain the environment and the changing population, both in terms of its diversity and the fact that people are living much longer, mean that our children are growing up in an amazingly complex world. The curriculum should not be set in stone. Our children need to be taught to be adaptable, optimistic, influential, knowledgeable, articulate – all the skills that employers say they really need – but we should not forget the educational heritage that has built up in schools over the last century. There are some things that children need to learn about and understand – certain authors, books, pieces of music and art, for instance. There's a heritage you want to take forward too.

Teenagers are different now, and we have to come to terms with that in the way we treat them and offer them learning. They live a faster, more connected life than ever before. They want to see action and they want to see it quickly. They have a voice that should be heard. They are more physically mature. Some of the old ways of running schools are plainly out of date, given what we know about the changes in children and the world generally. So just as other industries have changed, the education industry has to change to make itself fit for purpose.

Eleven to 16-year-olds are a fascinating age group because it is a period when children become adults – but all at different rates and with diverse enthusiasms, energies and interests. The challenge is making the curriculum accessible to the child and helping them see both the possibility within each subject and the context of the bigger picture.