

## **Review of the National Curriculum in England**

### **Submission of Evidence from Whole Education**

#### **Introduction**

1. Whole Education brings together leading education organisations that demonstrate a commitment to an education for young people that:
  - a. develops a range of skills, qualities and knowledge that young people will need for the future;
  - b. makes learning more relevant and engaging, with students at the centre of their own learning, providing a mix of practical and theoretical learning;
  - c. recognizes that learning takes places in various settings, not just the classroom, and that the best schools engage the wider community in learning.
2. Whole Education has an interest in the National Curriculum Review in that we would want the National Curriculum to provide a framework in which early years settings, schools and colleges can fulfill the three aims stated above.
3. As defined above, a Whole Education combines practical skills with theory, vocational and academic study for young people of all abilities and interests. This is already taking place in some learning institutions. Whole Education's partner organisations are working with more than 5000 schools and colleges, including three-quarters of secondary schools, and with many youth groups and charities.
4. Whole Education has over 30 partner organisations that offer schools and colleges a wide range of ways in which they can broaden what they offer to young people. The partners include: ASDAN, Building Learning Power, CCE, Channel 4, The Co-operative College, Coach in a Box, Council for Learning Outside the Classroom, Discovering Language, Flow, Food for Life Partnership, Futurelab, HTI, Human Scale Education, Incerts, Innovation Unit, Iris Connect, Learning to Lead, National Literacy Trust, Open Futures, Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Personal Development Point, RSA Opening Minds, School-Home Support, Sixth Form Colleges Forum, Skill Force, Space Unlimited, Speakers Trust, Sports Leaders UK, UK Youth, University of the First Age, ViTaL Partnerships and World Challenge.

#### **C: GENERAL VIEWS OF THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM**

##### **Q6 a) What do you think are the key strengths of the current National Curriculum?**

5. The current National Curriculum has a universality that offers all young people, of whatever background, guaranteed access and entitlement to a broad curriculum.
6. It sets out the knowledge and skills to be learnt in each subject and combines this with a degree of flexibility that enables teachers to respond to the needs

of individual pupils and to teach their subjects in the way that they consider best. This is in marked contrast to the earlier versions of the National Curriculum, which were too detailed and gave too little flexibility to teachers.

7. The current National Curriculum is strong on progression within each subject.
8. It provides good links between subjects and useful signposts to key skills and thinking skills.
9. Since the reform of the Key Stage 3 curriculum, the National Curriculum has provided at each Key Stage a good deal of freedom and flexibility for teachers to develop other interesting work for young people, suited to their age and intellectual development. Schools are also able to organise in the way that they consider best suits the needs of their students, with some teaching each subject discretely and other combining certain subjects into integrated courses while still meeting the National Curriculum obligations in each individual subject. This is the kind of organisational flexibility that helps to promote a Whole Education in a local context. Whole Education supports the recommendations for early years made by Dame Claire Tickell<sup>1</sup> on the transition from the Foundation Stage to primary school.

**Q6 b) What do you think are the key things that should be done to improve the current National Curriculum?**

10. It is at the core of the beliefs of Whole Education and its partner organisations that the curriculum should seek to develop the knowledge, skills and qualities of young people in a planned way whilst having the freedom to respond to the children's interests, particularly within the primary phase.
11. That is not to say, however, that the National Curriculum should define all three of these in detail at every stage of a young person's education. Ideally, the National Curriculum should provide a concise framework of knowledge and skills in a way that enables schools to take a holistic view of the development of every student and plan their curriculum in a coherent way.
12. Whole Education strongly supports the government's statement in the White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching*, that:
 

"There is much of value that children need to learn and experience which sits outside subject disciplines ... which makes up national curricula across the globe. So we will ensure that there is space in the school day, and resources for school leaders, to guarantee a truly rounded education for all."<sup>2</sup>

Whole Education could hardly have put it better and is continually encouraging schools to take advantage of the additional flexibility that the coalition Government advocates and seeks to develop further.
13. Whole Education is, however, dismayed at the apparent dismissal in some quarters of the work of schools in developing skills in young people. The curriculum – whether a National Curriculum or a school-based local curriculum – should seek to develop knowledge and skills seamlessly. To try to split knowledge and skills into artificial categories is to create a false

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<sup>1</sup> Tickell, C (2011) *The Early Years: Foundations for life, health and learning*. An independent report on the EYFS to Her Majesty's government.

<sup>2</sup> Schools White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching*, HMSO, 2010.

distinction which is unhelpful to curriculum planners seeking to develop a coherent whole. We know that young children, in particular, learn most effectively through first-hand experience.

14. In fact, it is impossible to grow knowledge in a skills-free environment, or to develop skills devoid of content. Education cannot be merely a list of facts to be learned, nor can it be content-free exercises to learn useful skills. Knowledge and skills are irrevocably inter-linked and should be treated as such in the revised National Curriculum.
15. The National Curriculum should support the work of schools in providing every young person with a relevant and engaging education through a wide range of curriculum experiences.
16. The curriculum should prepare young people for life, work and further study.
17. The National Curriculum should therefore help schools to educate young people in a way that provides them with knowledge, skills and interests that they maintain and build upon in the rest of their life. For example, the knowledge, skills and interests developed in the arts and technology, which young people may not directly use in their subsequent working lives, nonetheless enrich their lives in very many ways. Creativity is a key skill that is highly valued and is prized in countries such as Singapore and Japan; we should ensure that we continue to develop creative divergent thinkers amongst our children and young people.
18. The National Curriculum should help schools to meet the perceived needs of employers. It should be informed by the views of employers, but not constrained by them, since knowledge, skills and attributes needed for successful employment are likely to change during the working lives of the young people currently in school.
19. In this respect, the National Curriculum should leave adequate space for schools to provide vocational education in ways that are appropriate for the students in the school, often working closely with local colleges and workplace learning providers.
20. A broad and balanced education is a combination of theoretical and practical learning – a more useful distinction than academic and vocational – and the National Curriculum should encourage both theoretical and practical approaches in all subjects.
21. Higher education is a broad church and its needs should not be defined solely by Russell Group universities. Good preparation for higher education includes, of course, subject knowledge in depth, but it should also include the development of skills that enable students to flourish at university. The most successful university students are not necessarily those with the highest grades at A-level.
22. The National Curriculum should be sufficiently flexible for schools to be able to listen to the voices of young people and adapt the curriculum accordingly. The days are long past when student voice concerned only topics such as the colour of the toilet walls. Student voice now places the young people at the centre of their learning, engaging with their schools and their teachers in a mutually beneficial way to develop their learning. The Cambridge Primary

Review<sup>3</sup> recommends that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child should be the accepted framework for all policies relating to young children and their education.

**Q7 a) What are the key ways in which the National Curriculum can be slimmed down?**

23. Whole Education recognises the particular importance of mathematics, English, science and physical education, but believes that there is a danger of creating a hierarchy of subjects because of the way in which these four subjects appear to be receiving preferential treatment in the Review.
24. Whole Education strongly supports the notion, embodied in Acts of Parliament, of a broad and balanced curriculum for all young people and wishes to see a National Curriculum that promotes that ideal for all.
25. Whole Education therefore believes that all subjects should be valued and would not advocate the removal of any of the current subjects in the National Curriculum.
26. The essence of the slimming down process should therefore be, not to reduce the range of subjects, but to reduce the content within each subject.
27. This process has already taken place to a certain extent, but can go further. We have already moved a long way from the 1988 National Curriculum, set out by discrete subject groups working separately and with little or no central co-ordination. The result was a curriculum that took up 120 per cent of the teaching week – or so it felt – and put teachers under pressure to get through the material. This “led teachers to move with undue pace through material and encouraged a ‘tick list’ approach to teaching,”<sup>4</sup> although that pressure has reduced considerably since the 1988 version of the National Curriculum.
28. The National Curriculum should recognise that learning opportunities occur daily and should therefore resist the temptation to define too comprehensively the knowledge to be learned by young people.
29. Recent examples abound of events and issues about which, and from which, young people should learn. The global recession and the issues of immense importance arising wherefrom could not have been foreseen in a National Curriculum devised in 2006; the increasing number of major catastrophes occurring in 2010 and 2011 would not have been included in a National Curriculum written in 2009. No single curriculum subject covers the breadth of issues raised by these events. Children and young people who gave evidence to the Cambridge Primary Review<sup>5</sup> were insistent that they wanted curriculum time to discuss global issues such as terrorism, war, famine and sustainability.
30. The National Curriculum should provide a framework on which teachers can build in order to give young people a Whole Education that includes

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<sup>3</sup> Alexander, R.J. (ed) (2010) *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, Abingdon: Routledge.

<sup>4</sup><http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/curriculum/nationalcurriculum/a0073149/national-curriculum-review-launched>

<sup>5</sup> Alexander, R.J. (ed) (2010) *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, Abingdon: Routledge.

knowledge, skills and personal attributes to be learned from current world events.

**Q7 b) Do you think that the proportion or amount of lesson time should be specified *in any way* in the National Curriculum; eg for particular subjects and/or within particular key stages?**

31. No.
32. Whole Education believes that a good curriculum for every student is most likely to occur if there is a broad National Curriculum framework on which individual schools and teachers build a curriculum that is right for their pupils, their school and their community.
33. Schools and teachers are then held to account for the effectiveness of that curriculum and the quality of the learning experience for all young people.
34. With accountability rightly focused on outcomes, there is no place for a statutory national requirement for time allocations for each subject. This is a matter that should be left to professional teachers, in consultation with students, parents and the local community.

**F: SUPPORTING AND RECOGNISING PROGRESS**

35. It is consistent with the principles and beliefs of Whole Education that the assessment of the work of learners should be holistic in nature and that each different assessment process should be clear in its purpose and in its contribution to effective learning. Provided that there is a clear connection, Assessment *for* Learning and Assessment *of* Learning both have their place. Progress checks and summative assessment each have a role to play. Achievement in informal settings and the development of skills and personal qualities can also be assessed and reported on as part of a fully rounded, coherently planned education.
36. Thus external and internal assessment should be complementary and each should contribute to learning. External assessment is subject to perverse incentives because of its link to accountability. Instead of aggregating individual pass rates in National Curriculum tests to create national achievement statistics, sampling should be used to determine the progress of the national education system as a whole.
37. While achievement statistics cannot be wholly separated from outcomes for school accountability at 11 and 16, assessments of these age groups should be carried out in a way that minimises the extent of perverse incentives on schools to narrow the curriculum to what school inspectors at the time of the Revised Code in the 19th century called the “counting subjects”.
38. High stakes school accountability, based almost entirely on external national tests at 11, has led to a narrowing of the curriculum at Key Stage 2, which is at odds with the notion of a Whole Education at the time when children most need holistic educational development in order to cope with the transfer to secondary school. In the words of the Education Select Committee:

“... teachers generally have the very best intentions in terms of providing the best education they can for their pupils. However, the way that many teachers have responded to the Government’s approach to accountability has meant that test results are pursued at the expense of a rounded education for children.”<sup>6</sup>

39. With the Bew Review of assessment at 11 still to report and the results of the National Curriculum Review also unknown, it is difficult to put forward definitive recommendations for assessment of achievement and progress at this time.
40. In general terms, Whole Education seeks an assessment system that is curriculum-led – not the other way round, as has too often been the case in education history – and which promotes the aims set out in the opening paragraph of this submission.
41. The Schools’ White Paper has already made clear that it considers that GCSE exams will continue to be the “benchmark examination”<sup>7</sup> which most state secondary school students will sit, and which act as the “principal accountability mechanism for those schools”<sup>8</sup>. Added to this, voluntary tests are to be introduced at the end of Key Stage 3 as a mark of progress.
42. The accountability measure most affecting the decisions being made by secondary schools in 2011 is the English Baccalaureate (E-Bac), which was introduced retrospectively in early 2011 for the performance tables of 2010 results.
43. The percentage of 16 year olds with a pass at grade C or above in English, mathematics, two sciences, history or geography and a limited range of languages (including Latin) is acting as a major constraint on the freedom that schools – even academies – were told by Government ministers that they were being given.
44. The E-Bac is a threshold measure – and all threshold measures create perverse incentives. The E-Bac is already narrowing the curriculum in an undesirable way for many young people. Like the proportion of students with five high grade GCSE passes, it provides no incentive to schools to raise the achievement of the brightest students of those who fall well below the E-Bac threshold.
45. Whole Education is part of a coalition of organisations developing proposals for a “Better Bac”, stimulated by the introduction of the E-Bac as an accountability mechanism and the adverse consequences that it is having on the curriculum of many learners. We shall be producing our proposals during the lifetime of the National Curriculum Review and we hope that these will be helpful to the review team later in its deliberations.

## **G : INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS**

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<sup>6</sup> House of Commons Select Committee on Children, Schools and Families, *Testing and Assessment*, Third Report of Session 2007-08, vol 1 HC 169-1, 2008

<sup>7</sup> Schools White Paper, 2010, page 42

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

**Q27 a) Please give examples of any jurisdictions that could usefully be examined to inform the new National Curriculum. Please also briefly describe the reasons for the examples given.**

46. Transposing elements of educational systems from around the world is not a case of simple 'cut and paste'. Any educational system must be seen in its entirety. Many factors are brought to bear in order to alter outcomes and attainment and transposing a single element from one country to another may not work. Nonetheless, it is instructive to study the National Curriculums of other countries and use them to reflect on policy in England.
47. Some countries are taking a holistic view of the development of knowledge and skills in their National Curriculum and Whole Education encourages the National Curriculum Review in England to take a similar approach.
48. The Singapore curriculum aims to produce "a holistic education, focused on both academic and non-academic areas ... to develop the skills and values that they will need for life".
49. Hong Kong includes the explicit teaching of learning and thinking skills as a key element of the curriculum.
50. The National Curriculum in Finland includes, *inter alia*, creative problem solving skills.
51. In Australia, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) - the independent authority responsible for the development of a national curriculum – has undertaken an intense consultation process on a national curriculum with federated states. The focus is on providing 21<sup>st</sup> century learning, and the knowledge and competencies required to serve individuals, community and society.
52. New Zealand and Scotland have 'key competencies' at the heart of their curriculum.
53. Hungary includes knowledge, skills and attitudes in its National Curriculum.
54. The Welsh Bac operates at three levels and has a strong core programme. Its website states that "it combines personal development skills with existing qualifications like A levels, NVQs and GCSEs to make one wider award that is valued by employers and universities."
55. The International Baccalaureate "seeks to promote the whole person through an emphasis on intellectual, personal, emotional and social growth". The EBac comes nowhere near to doing this.

**Q27 b) Considering your response to question 27a above, what features of their national curricula or wider education systems are most significant in explaining their success?**

56. Whole Education encourages the National Curriculum Review group to conclude that their recommendations should be for more than lists of subject knowledge and that they should create a framework in which knowledge,

skills and personal attributes can be taught and learned in a coherent way in all schools in England.

**Q28 Please use this space for any other comments you would like to make about the issues covered in this section.**

## **H: HOW CHILDREN LEARN**

57. Children do not acquire *knowledge and skills* separately. Learners need skills to understand knowledge. The two are inexorably linked and the National Curriculum Review should not seek to place knowledge above skills, as is implied in the Introductory Letter to the Review's Call for Evidence. To state that "... the inclusion of skills development and the promotion of generic dispositions have distorted the core function of the National Curriculum and diluted the importance of subject knowledge" is not an accurate reflection of the current situation.
58. The problem, which the Review has an opportunity to solve, is the lack of a coherent approach to skills development and its artificial separation from knowledge building. As has been stated above, the development of knowledge and skills is inextricably linked and it is the role of a National Curriculum framework, without setting out immense detail, to point the way to a more coherent approach across subjects as a whole.
59. The National Curriculum should allow space for *community-based learning* and must value the culture of that community.
60. Deep and sustained learning within a community setting allows students to learn in, and make connections to, the communities in which they live. Making the world of school relevant to the one in which they live improves engagement in young people<sup>9</sup> and teaches learners how to apply their skills and knowledge to real world problems.
61. Learning in the community is not new; indeed, many notable PISA performers, including Singapore, Canada and Australia, use it to enhance the learning of their students. Learning that takes place in a community setting allow students to apply their knowledge, skills and learning to that community, engaging and encouraging students to think about wider local and societal issues outside school. It empowers and raises levels of self-efficacy in students by showing them how their actions can have real-world impact and has a role to play in encouraging students to think of themselves as members of a community who can have a positive influence upon it<sup>10</sup>. Recognition that children often have 'considerable funds of knowledge' from their learning outside school should inform the curriculum<sup>11</sup>
62. *Work-related learning* also offers opportunities for the development of useful skills and knowledge alongside each other and should be encouraged in the Review. Engaging young people in work-related learning projects improves student engagement, preparedness for work and has been found to reduce the numbers of young people abandoning compulsory education early<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Enquiring Minds, Engaging Schools

<sup>10</sup> Education for citizenship and the teaching of democracy within schools. Crick, 1998

<sup>11</sup> Pring, R & Pollard, A. (2011) *Education for All. Evidence from the past, principles for the future* TLRP Research Briefing [www.tlrp.org](http://www.tlrp.org)

<sup>12</sup> Kemple, J. and Snipes, J (2000). Career Academies: Impacts on Students' Engagement and Performance in High School

Work-related learning in the US is associated with higher grades and better motivation<sup>13</sup>. Studies have found that work-related learning helps students to:

“gain knowledge and skills in particular occupations; providing career exploration and planning; learning all aspects of an industry; improving personal and social competence related to work in general; and enhancing students’ academic achievement and motivation through contextual learning.”<sup>14</sup>

63. The encouragement of learning outside the classroom, whether community-base or work-related, helps to fulfil the aims of Whole Education, set out in the opening paragraph of this Submission:
- a. to develop a wider range of skills, qualities and knowledge that young people will need for the future;
  - b. to make learning more relevant and engaging for young people, with them at the centre of their own learning, providing a mix of practical and theoretical learning; and
  - c. to recognize that learning takes places in various settings, not just the classroom, and that the best schools engage the wider community in learning.

## I: TRANSITION

### **Q31 What are the most important factors to consider in developing the National Curriculum for Key Stage 3 to ensure a smooth transition from Key Stage 2?**

64. A smooth transition from one Key Stage to the next, and in particular at the transition between Key Stages 2 and 3, is about more than curriculum content and is at its best when schools exchange information not only about academic progress but about the wider development of the child.
65. It is therefore important that the National Curriculum Review considers the wider context in which children transfer from one institution to another so that the development of their knowledge, skills and attributes becomes part of a continuous process.

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<sup>13</sup> Swail, W and Kampits, E (2004) *Work-based Learning and Higher Education: A Research Perspective*, Washington, DC: Educational Policy Institute, Inc.

<sup>14</sup> Chin, P. M., Munby, Hugh, and Hutchinson, Nancy L. (2000). “Post-secondary students’ intentions for participating in high school co-operative education programs: a descriptive study.” *Journal of Vocational Educational Research* 25(2): 126-54.