

ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS AND LECTURERS

7 NORTHUMBERLAND STREET, LONDON WC2N 5RD TEL: 020-7930-6441 FAX: 020-7930-1359
e-mail: info@atl.org.uk web site: <http://www.atl.org.uk> VAT REG NO 539 0866 17



National Curriculum Review – Call for Evidence
Response from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers
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ATL, the education union, is an independent, registered trade union and professional association, representing approximately 160,000 teachers, head teachers, lecturers and support staff in maintained and independent nurseries, schools, sixth form, tertiary and further education colleges in the United Kingdom. AMiE is the trade union and professional association for leaders and managers in colleges and schools, and is a distinct section of ATL. We recognise the link between education policy and members' conditions of service.

ATL exists to help members, as their careers develop, through first rate research, advice, information and legal advice. Our evidence-based policy making enables us to campaign and negotiate locally and nationally.

ATL is affiliated to the Trades Union Congress (TUC), Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and Education International (EI). ATL is not affiliated to any political party and seeks to work constructively with all the main political parties.

ATL policy

ATL believes that teachers as professionals must be recognised for their knowledge, expertise and judgement, at the level of the individual pupil and in articulating the role of education in increasing social justice. Within light national parameters, development of the education system should take place at a local level, within local authority structures: the curriculum should be developed in partnership with local stakeholders; assessment should be carried out through local professional networks. Schools should work collaboratively to offer excellent teaching and learning, and to support pupils' well-being, across a local area. Accountability mechanisms should be developed so that there is a proper balance of accountability to national government and the local community, which supports collaboration rather than competition.

Executive Summary

ATL greets this Curriculum Review with caution and seeks reassurance that fundamental issues such as assessment, accountability and the impact of political agenda will be considered within this remit. We welcome the place of education experts on the Review panel but we are concerned at the level of government control of the process, particularly at the level of decisions around subject content. We are disappointed that this Review is limited in scope; its focus is evidently to prune the existing statutory curriculum without any deeper engagement with what the curriculum should be; missing the opportunity to examine not only what is currently

in the national curriculum but also what is left out and to engage with society's and pupils' broad needs to determine the curriculum that is needed.

Based on member and research evidence ATL believes that:

- A key weakness in the current curriculum is its overprescriptive and content-heavy nature which allows little opportunity for innovation and flexibility in schools, and is often subject to the ideological bias of ministers.
- The current system should be replaced with a light national statutory curriculum framework setting out the skills, knowledge, understanding and attitudes that pupils need now and in the future for employment, caring roles and citizenship. At local regional level, supported within the Local Authority model, detailed programme content would be designed locally by educationalists.
- The Review team are mistaken in thinking that slimming down the curriculum necessitates a loss of curriculum breadth. ATL believes that the national curriculum should guarantee statutory entitlement to a broad range of subjects or disciplines rather than an overemphasis on four subjects. However the statutory curriculum framework should be as small as possible, allowing teachers to flesh it out, supported by good quality CPD and expert-provided guidance developed by the broader education profession, including the higher education sector.
- Professionals in education, ie teachers, lecturers, researchers, must have the key role in determining the curriculum, at the national statutory framework and the local content levels.
- It is more meaningful to ask what skills, understanding and attitudes pupils should have by particular stages, rather than asking what knowledge is essential on a year-by-year basis. These could be expressed in curriculum progression statements included in the statutory curriculum framework, like the current 8-level attainment target scale, judged through teacher assessment and used formatively to support pupil progression and learning.
- Defined areas of study should not narrow the curriculum, often currently the case, and the areas of skill and understanding to be pursued in education should look to the needs of society as a whole, rather than merely the needs of future employers.
- Assessment and accountability structures must be considered in the curriculum review with recognition of their impact on the taught curriculum. We welcome the Bew review's assumptions that KS2 assessment and accountability will be considered alongside the curriculum review, but this needs to extend to all other key stages.
- Recognition of pupil needs is crucial. ATL welcomes the Review's emphasis on low-attaining pupils, high-attaining pupils and children with SEN. ATL believes that curriculum flexibility and teacher access to high-quality ITE and CPD around child development, pedagogy and SEN is vital, supported by access to effective resources, including external expertise.
- International comparisons should be tempered by evidence from UK and international research, including longitudinal research studies.
- Research evidence on how children learn and the relationships between teaching and learning should inform curriculum review and development, and the sequencing of knowledge within subject areas is a matter for subject experts.

Furthermore, ATL advocates a model that sequences particular skills and understanding with groups of across-subject experts working together to develop cross-disciplinary approaches.

- The design of the curriculum from the foundations up is key to effective transition between phases, particularly with the support of strong local structures.
- Implementation should be informed by experience from those involved in the pilots, with education professionals involved throughout the piloting process, from initial design to evaluation.
- This Review needs to address the impact of school diversity as embodied in the development of academies and free schools and differing curriculum delivery requirements on the notion of a national curriculum and how all pupils can be guaranteed access to a broad and balanced curriculum.

National and local curriculum

ATL greets this Review with some caution. We welcome the opportunity to voice our members' concerns and they have long observed the weaknesses within the current national curriculum framework. Yet there has been no shortage of Reviews over the last couple of years and our teachers are getting worn down by constant change which fails to tackle fundamental issues such as assessment, accountability, transition and the impact of political agenda on professional practice. Our members seek reassurance that these vital issues will be considered within this Curriculum Review.

ATL members believe that the current National Curriculum's complete coverage and overprescription in detail are a substantial barrier to innovation and flexibility, although we celebrate those professionals who have overcome this. It does not result in pupils having the broad and balanced learning experience which was originally intended at its inception, and the centralised nature of the model has produced a curriculum which is subject to the enthusiasms and ideological agenda of ministers.

ATL is not alone in its critical evaluation of the curriculum and by looking at research evidence and listening to our members, we have identified an alternative model¹. We believe that there should be a light national statutory curriculum framework, which guarantees pupils a broad national curriculum and which sets out the skills, attitudes, knowledge and understanding which pupils need now and in the future for employment, caring roles and citizenship. This framework should be developed by teachers and other educationists from across a range of disciplines, and the skills etc. included should be generic ones, rather than an attempt to 'second guess' the actual skills etc. required, for example, by employers.

The development of significant content should be done at local, ie regional, level, supported through the local authority structure. Across-phase teacher and lecturer representatives should work together to ensure a curriculum with content which facilitates pupils' access to key conceptual understanding, within or across subjects, within relevant local contexts, informed by a broader global understanding, which builds from the foundations up through the phases. This will not only allow flexibility and increased relevance of the curriculum in schools and colleges but will also afford pupils and staff opportunity to access local experiences supportive of their learning, important in a time of funding shortages.

¹ M Johnson et al, [Subject to Change](#), ATL, 2007

By developing the national curriculum as a light statutory framework rather than the overprescriptive, heavily content-laden model our schools currently struggle with, room for innovation is provided as well as opportunity for professionals to make links between disciplines. This will encourage creativity and innovation, and will ease the pressure of the proportion of class-time given over to the National Curriculum (NC). With this lighter model, the decision on minimum national curriculum proportion is less critical, as it allows a flexibility which the current NC model does not.

Stages

This review is limited by asking which knowledge is essential on a year-by-year / stage-by-stage basis. ATL believes that it would be more meaningful to ask what children and young people should be able to do and understand by certain milestones. If those milestones are to be related to stages, then it is important that the Review asks what skills, understanding and attitudes pupils should have by particular stages and how these can be expressed in curriculum progression statements to be contained within the statutory national curriculum framework. These statements can be used like the current 8 level scale attainment targets, using teacher assessment and informing pupil progression and future learning. This focuses more helpfully on learning as an incremental and participative process which builds skills and understanding around problem solving, intellectual inquiry, rather than one which focuses on acquisition of information alone. The curriculum needs to address the current imbalance towards the knowledge of 'what' with redress belonging in a shift of focus to knowledge of 'how' and 'why' with pupils playing a highly participative role and learning to become lifelong learners.

ATL also believes that caution must be exercised around the setting of targets by a yearly or stage-by-stage basis. Within the current standards agenda, target-setting has led to a system of age-dependent levels which researchers argue mitigate against learning through its inculcation of an erroneous and demotivating belief about the nature of ability. Findings include how students' views of the nature of ability profoundly impacts on how they react to challenging tasks. Those who see ability as a fixed entity, 'how clever you are is how clever you stay' will tackle a challenging task if they believe their chance of success is high but will not engage if they believe that their chance of success is low. Those who see ability as incremental will see a challenging task as offering a chance to 'get cleverer', ie to improve ability. As Professor Dylan William (Institute of Education and Expert Panel member) observes in ATL's publication [Level best? Levels of attainment in national curriculum assessment](#), 'in order to optimise the conditions for learning, it is therefore necessary for students to believe that ability is incremental, rather than fixed. A system of age-dependent levels would lead to a situation in which many students would get the same grade or level at ages 7, 11 and 14, thus potentially reinforcing a belief in ability as being fixed'². Therefore it is crucial that this Curriculum Review includes a review not only of how content is sequenced in a national curriculum model but also the impact of targets and assessment.

Programmes of study

The model of a light National Curriculum framework would allow for a statutory insistence on breadth and skill/understanding coverage whilst allowing local determination of the content of programmes of study. ATL would urge that, in absence of such a model, that the issues of i) which programmes of study are statutory, and ii) what they should contain, must look to the needs of society as a whole, rather than merely the perceived needs of future employers. We agree that literacy and numeracy are key both to learning and to the roles of citizens within our

² P.6, William [Level best? Levels of attainment in national curriculum assessment](#), ATL, 2001.

society but we reject the current emphasis on these to the detriment of the broader curriculum, particularly as the emphasis on the measurable end of these skills, removed from the context of other enriching experience, has impoverished the learning experience for many pupils. This can be seen in the recent proposals around the Y1 phonics test, which, with its view of literacy as decoding, removes much of the learning from the understanding of words and the love of reading and we fear that pupils and education staff alike will lose out from this approach.

Within the current education context, ATL believes that the extent to which elements of the National Curriculum are statutory and how it is to be expressed should be a matter for a broad panel of education experts and practitioners to decide, informed by consultation and research evidence and not confined with reference to current National Curriculum choices.

ATL's statutory national curriculum framework model, expressed through statements and descriptions of skills, attitudes and understanding across a broad range of subjects and disciplines, would in no way undermine the autonomy of professionals or their opportunity to be flexible and innovate to support pupil learning and engagement. We believe that this should include statutory core concepts which are key to further learning and to the roles of pupils as well-rounded, ethical and informed lifelong learners and citizens in a diverse society, eg key understandings from Citizenship, RE and PSHE, these concepts to be determined again by educationalists and relevant stakeholders but without undue pressure from government ideology.

Assessment and accountability

Our current system of assessment and accountability has a much-documented narrowing effect on the curriculum as taught in schools and any sincere review of the curriculum must include systems of assessment and accountability. Earlier, we have alluded to the impact of the Year 1 phonics test on the literacy part of the curriculum, further impacting negatively both on the coverage of the English subject curriculum and on the breadth of the overall curriculum offer for pupils.

As we outlined in our response to the Bew Review, ATL believes that national testing of individual pupils should be postponed until terminal stage. Before that, we believe it more effective that assessment be undertaken by teachers within strong local structures of moderation and support. To answer national concerns regarding pupil proficiency in literacy, numeracy and IT skills, we recognise the case for national proficiency test arrangement in these areas, so that pupils can take a test from a national bank on a when-ready basis. Broader national monitoring needs can be met through a system of regular surveys of small random samples of pupils, thus reducing the overall test burden whilst increasing the relevance and breadth of the learner evidence.

ATL is concerned that the assessment and accountability tail currently wags the curriculum dog, with a focus on league table- and employer-friendly qualifications determining what schools do rather than an educational focus on the needs of pupils and of society as a whole. The findings of the Wolf Review bear this out and portray an education system which divides pupils far too young into narrow academic versus vocational routes with the qualifications determining the curriculum. The current E-Bac review and its focus on the narrow choice of subjects to be included within the E-Bac undermines this Curriculum Review, with a worrying preconception on the 'worthwhile' subjects to be included and the obvious ranking of subject that it contains.

If this Review is to be open-minded and open to the voices of the education experts, it must urgently review our systems of assessment and accountability and the plethora of evidence that describes their negative impact on the learning of our children and young people, their engagement in education and the resulting toxic mixture of cynical compliance and/or disengaged failure that affects high- and low-achievers.

Pupil needs

We welcome the Review's concern with how the National Curriculum could meet the needs of low- and high-attaining pupils and pupils with SEN and other specific groups of pupils. However, we firmly believe that the National Curriculum should not be detailed to this degree; again, this concern has overtones of making the National Curriculum teacher-proof rather than trusting the profession who work with these groups of pupils in our classrooms. Answering the needs of these pupils does not lie in specific detailed prescribed content within the National Curriculum, but rather with a system which supports high-quality teacher professionalism.

ATL believes that the first vital step towards meeting these needs is to afford teachers, the experts in pedagogy, curriculum and assessment who know the children and young people they teach, the curriculum flexibility and space to adapt and innovate to meet those needs. In order to do this most effectively, teachers and support staff need to have access to high-quality initial training/education and continuing professional development, particularly around child development, pedagogy and SEN. Furthermore, staff need to have access to resources to support effective practice with particular groups of pupils. These resources include external expertise whether from HEIs, through research, multi-agency teams and other networks' practice based research.

International and national evidence

International comparisons

It is interesting that this Review asks which features of international comparison should be used; such circumspection in using international comparison data is all the more welcome for its being rarely observed in political rhetoric.

ATL believes that we can learn from other countries; international studies can show us alternative perspectives on curriculum, pedagogy, professionals and assessment which can enrich understanding of our own policy and practice choices. However, observations from other countries' practice need to be evaluated critically; there are often so many different factors in play that apart from in-depth research studies with proper controls, we risk indulging in harmful policy tourism where comparisons are used only to promote a particular ideological viewpoint rather than to learn something meaningful about our own system.

These factors relate both to the broader society and to the education system of the countries being compared. We note the Expert Panel's Tim Oates' identification of 13 'control' factors which need to be accounted for in transnational analysis and which exist in complex relations and balances; 1) curriculum content, 2) assessment and qualifications, 3) national framework / system shape, 4) inspection, 5) pedagogy, 6) teacher professional development, 7) institutional development, 8) institutional forms and structures, 9) allied social measures, 10) funding, 11) governance, 12) accountability arrangements, 13) selection and gatekeeping.³ Using international research is complex and needs to recognise the impact of broader national

³ P.13, T Oates [Could do better](#), Cambridge Assessment, 2010

circumstances upon education choices. We know that this Curriculum Review is placing a heavy emphasis on such transnational analysis and we hope that those concerned will treat any conclusions with the required caution and rigour, although the speeches of government ministers and the speed of this Review might suggest otherwise.

It is interesting that across-UK examples are rarely used yet these can tell us much about the choices that can be made across societies and countries that have much in common. Longitudinal research studies also offer important perspectives on education and the impact of interventions on pupils and staff, offering an effective remedy to short-term studies and rushed pilots which can be myopic in their focus on the short-term.

Research evidence

We welcome the Review's question on research evidence on how children learn. There are many studies backed by a range of academic and practitioner-based evidence which examine the conditions in which children best learn, the comparative qualities of different approaches to education, the advantages of play in the curriculum, the impact of different assessment models on different groups of pupils, sequencing of knowledge within subject areas and so on. It is vital that curriculum developers engage with, critically evaluate and use research. ATL has commissioned/developed a number of research publications on curriculum, assessment and accountability which are relevant to this Review, and we provide links to these in our references at the end.

The Review also asks about the use of research evidence in the sequencing of particular knowledge. At national level, ATL believes that subject and educational experts, informed by research on how children learn, should determine the statutory sequencing of concepts within subject areas and across disciplines. At local level, other groups of subject and educational experts, working within the statutory light conceptual national framework, should determine the sequencing of curricular content. This would also be open to cross-disciplinary approaches.

As the education union, ATL has long presented research evidence to government, teachers and the public, through commissioned publications and collating evidence within consultation responses. These range from curriculum to assessment, SEN to behaviour, sustainability to equalities issues, early years through to further education. Representing our members, we have directly participated in research and policy development work, for example, in the recent Cambridge Primary and Lamb Reviews. We are committed to continue to participate in this kind of collaborative, informed and constructive process.

However, we are unsure of the government's commitment to this collaborative and constructive process. It is apparent, even before this national curriculum review is anywhere near conclusion, that it is academic learning that will be at the heart of the curriculum. The introduction of the English Baccalaureate presupposes the outcomes of the Review and undermines professional consultation or evidence-based developments. The government has made some international comparisons, and found that other countries have a range of compulsory subjects for 16 year olds. Those countries chosen for comparison do have a broad range of compulsory subjects it's true, but as they include social studies in Alberta, the USA, Netherlands and Japan, civics and computer science in France⁴, there is neither international nor educational reason given for this government's choice of subjects.

⁴ Michael Gove to the Education World Forum, 11 January 2011.

Transition

Transition is a crucial time for pupils and one which frequently presents great challenges to pupils and staff alike. Within the current National Curriculum and assessment system, there is little flow between education stages. This can be exacerbated by the logistical challenges of ensuring strong routes of communication and effective transition arrangements between stages, eg between big secondary schools and multiple feeder primary schools. This is particularly highlighted by the seeming lack of trust in secondary schools of pupils' Key Stage 2 primary data as shown by the immediate re-testing of Year 7 pupils on their entry into secondary. At the very least this calls for strong local structures to support practical working partnerships between stages.

However, ATL believes that, fundamentally, curriculum needs to be designed from the foundations up, ie from Early Years upwards. This would involve a curriculum which is designed with transition in mind, which flows from one key stage to another, rather than each stage being developed almost in isolation. Statements of curriculum progression should relate across stages and specifically build on targets achieved in earlier stages. Research shows that the majority of teachers favour the current eight-level scale but find that the levels are too broad, with many observing that the scale is not being used as a continuum because of the difficulties of comparing pupils with the same level across different key stages.⁵ The defining of progression statements by educators across the sectors working together at national and local levels will lead to improvement in shared understanding across stages. A system of levels such as the current eight-level scale would be fit for this purpose if teachers are given the opportunity to discuss and define the meaning of each level, across key stages.

It is also vital that the constant downward pressure of later stages is counteracted through an emphasis of building up from the earliest stages. Currently, the curriculum and assessment system encourages cynical compliance with test demands rather than true engagement with learning and downward pressure increasingly undermines curiosity, creativity and love of learning in the earlier stages.

The current separation of stages is reinforced in political discourse; the range of reviews, from Tickell to Wolf, Bew to the SEN Green Paper, lead to a fragmented examination of the education system with little examination of the whole, and of how each stage could flow better from and to its neighbouring stages. We know that a far more fundamental review is required, which would acknowledge links between curriculum, assessment, accountability, behaviour and SEN and between early years, primary, secondary, further and higher education stages within a context of the number of roles that pupils will fulfil in their adult lives, as citizens within families and communities. This would be a substantial piece of work but the education world is not short of those with the expertise and commitment and it could build on previous detailed research in these areas.

Implementation

ATL's response to the question of phasing in and implementing a revised curriculum is to urge the government not to rush, to consult properly, to develop a revised curriculum framework with heavy involvement of education professionals and experts. Only then, should pilots occur and these pilots need to allow enough time for bedding down issues to be realised and for lessons to be learned. Implementation should be informed by experience from those involved in the pilots,

⁵ P.2, S Clarke & C Gipps, 'The Role of Teachers in Teacher Assessment in England 1996-1998'.

having had time to evaluate their experience, its impact on matters such as pupil learning, behaviour, staff workload, and the further opportunities and challenges they foresee. Teachers and other education staff have suffered previously from hasty changes, following from rushed pilots with little emphasis on lessons learned nor likely effects of national roll-out.

We also urge the government, supported by the Review, to develop the slimmest possible National Curriculum framework in terms of detailed content, to which teachers can, and will, add, informed by their pupils' needs and their own pedagogical and subject expertise. We are concerned that the Government's evident ideological drive will result in a narrow-subject and content-heavy curriculum which will only allow teachers any 'freedom' in the curriculum fringes which is where many subjects will be consigned.

This is evident in the two-part implementation proposal within this Review which are particularly problematic. It reflects a subject-focus so strong that it forgets how subjects link together, especially at primary level. What this will mean in practice for teachers is the upheaval of re-writing their curriculum for English, maths, science and PE one year to be followed by having the disruption again regarding the remaining subjects the following year. This will cause unnecessary upheaval and reinforces a narrowing of curriculum.

The broader educational context

It is very interesting that the National Curriculum is under review at a time when state schools are increasingly being given freedom from its edict. This Review needs to address the impact of the current policy agenda of school diversity and differing curriculum delivery requirements on the notion of a national curriculum and how all pupils can be guaranteed access to a broad and balanced curriculum. If this Review does as it hopes, it will come to conclusions over what is important for our children and young people to be entitled to know and understand. Yet this is not an entitlement which will be enjoyed by all. ATL is also concerned that there are no guarantees that those who design and follow their own local curricula will be informed by strong educational principles; are the vagaries of the marketplace to be the only, and it will not be a solid one, safeguard of pupils' right to a broad and balanced curriculum?

The place of government in relation to the national curriculum is particularly concerning. One of the main frustrations of the teaching profession has been the feeling that their work has been subject to the whim of politicians with interventions based more on ideology than on sound evidence. The forthcoming abolition of the QCDA which managed both curriculum and assessment at arms' length from the government means a corresponding increase of the Secretary of State's influence on these issues.

Conclusion

ATL represents teachers from across a range of subject specialisms and we hope that their expertise will inform this Review. Within this response, we have not discussed individual subjects in detail but we strongly believe in the entitlement of our children and young people to an enriching, broad and balanced curriculum, statutorily expressed through skills, attitudes and understanding.

We urge the Review panel to widen their remit and thus consider the curriculum from the point of view of pupil entitlement. This review needs to ask deeper questions about what education is for and the needs that it must meet, from social, individual, employment and other role perspectives, rather than merely looking at the current

offer with the view to pruning 'extraneous' subjects. This Review needs to recognize the importance of disciplines such as the arts, music and drama, of vocational learning and of the principles embodied in PSHE, Citizenship and RE to the learning of our children and young people alongside the skills and understanding related to subjects such as English, maths and science.

While we have not engaged in specific discussion of individual subject content, we have noted with concern this government's prejudgement on a core curriculum with the remaining subjects relegated to 'bit player' status even though most commentators, including Ofsted, argue that schools do best in the 'core' subjects when they take the whole curriculum seriously. If this Review merely specifies what key knowledge should be taught, it misses a vital opportunity to engage with the purpose of a national curriculum.

As a union of 160,000 members in education, ATL knows that, across subjects, there are two key sets of goals: that pupils learn with understanding (develop understanding of concepts which can be applied in different contexts, identifying the links between different situations, applying the learning); and, understanding learning (that learners develop awareness of the process of learning). We have argued in a number of different fora, and indeed it is widely recognised, that 'students cannot learn in school everything they will need to know in adult life' [OECD, 1999] and therefore, schools must provide 'the skills, understanding and desire needed for lifelong learning'. It is this belief in the need for lifelong learning and strong commitment to it within our own membership, which has informed our response to the National Curriculum Review.

Finally, this Review needs to look critically at our education system as a whole; our current curriculum and assessment systems, staffing, accountability and institutional structures, all of which have a huge influence on what is taught in the classroom. It needs to build on evidence from the profession including that expressed through education unions, subject associations and key studies such as the Cambridge Primary Review. ATL is committed to lending the voice and expertise of our members to this Review and to the ongoing work around curriculum.

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