



National Curriculum Review

A submission from the Association of Colleges

April 2011

Introduction – the Association of Colleges

The Association of Colleges (AoC) represents and promotes the interests of Colleges and their students. Colleges provide a rich mix of academic and vocational education from basic skills to higher education degrees. AoC represents and promotes the 352 Colleges in England incorporated under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, including 94 Sixth Form Colleges and 258 Further Education Colleges.

Colleges play an important role in diversifying the education system, in providing a breadth of high-quality choices for young people and in preparing them for higher education and adult life. Colleges educate 831,000 young people aged 16 to 18, twice as many as schools¹. This includes 187,000 young people taking A-levels and 644,000 young people aged 16 to 18 taking vocational courses². Colleges also train approximately one third of the total 174,000 apprentices³. In addition, they have a growing role in the education of those of compulsory school age, including 59,500 14 to 15 year olds taking part-time courses and 3,500 studying full-time⁴. Thirty Colleges are now involved in sponsoring Academies, six as the main and sole sponsor⁵. Colleges account for 38% of entrants to higher education⁶.

Section C: General Views on the National Curriculum

The majority of students in Colleges are over the age of 16 and Colleges do not therefore currently deliver the National Curriculum. The school will be responsible for delivering the National Curriculum entitlement to the 59,500 14 and 15 year olds attending College on a part-time basis, and although the 3,500 who are in Colleges on a full-time basis may be receiving National Curriculum subjects, on the whole Colleges do not have practical experience with its implementation. However, the majority of young people progress from school to College at age 16, and so Colleges form the largest group of institutions that receive young people who have studied the National Curriculum. A significant proportion of Colleges' provision is at levels 1 and 2, working with young people who have not achieved the Government's benchmark of 5 GCSEs A* to C including mathematics and English, and Colleges have had increasing concerns in recent years regarding the inability of many young people to progress to the next level when they move from school to College at age 16. In addition to being the largest 'receiving' group, the Wolf Report⁷ recommends that Colleges are able to directly recruit young people at age 14, and in addition, Colleges are actively involved in all of the emerging University Technical Colleges. The result of these initiatives means that Colleges will themselves be delivering the National Curriculum in the future. We agree then that this review is necessary, and we would urge that the recommendations in the Wolf Report are considered alongside it.

¹ AoC analysis of Individual Learner Record 2008/09; The Data Service analysis of Individual Learner Record Data 2008/09; DfE Statistical First Release - Participation in Education, Training and Employment by 16-18 year olds in England

² AoC analysis of Individual Learner Record 2008/09

³ The Data Service analysis of Individual Learner Record Data 2008/09

⁴ Individual Learner Record 2009/10

⁵ DfE list of open academies

⁶ UCAS dataset of Applicants and Entrants in England for 2009 entry

⁷ Review of Vocational Education – The Wolf Report (March 2011)

AoC understands that, whilst the National Curriculum was originally designed as a guide to what children should learn in key subjects, it has developed to include more subjects, more prescribed outcomes and now takes up more school time than was originally intended. It is now the Government's stated intention to slim it down so that it 'properly reflects the body of essential knowledge in key subjects' and allows schools greater time and freedom to construct their own curricula to reflect the needs and local circumstances of their pupils.

What are the key strengths of the current National Curriculum?

We believe that the key strength of the current National Curriculum has been to set out clearly to schools, teachers, parents and others what children should be expected to know and understand at given ages and stages. It has ensured that all schools are delivering a core curriculum in a standardised way.

What are the key things that should be done to improve it?

That said, we can see that over the years it has become too prescriptive and rigid with insufficient flexibility for teachers to use their discretion to be able to tailor delivery to take account of the different learning styles of their pupils. The increasing emphasis on assessment has led to 'teaching to the test', and many young people have a demotivating experience of education. The high level of prescription in the teaching and assessment framework of the National Curriculum, has made it more difficult to meet the needs of those young people at either end of the spectrum of ability, namely the less able and those who are gifted and talented.

We believe that a revised National Curriculum should provide a guarantee of a core curriculum necessary for progression at age 16, but that in order for this to be successful consideration needs to be given to the concept of what makes an educated 16 year old in the 21st century. We are concerned that the National Curriculum Review emphasises the acquisition of knowledge along with the consequent ability to remember and reproduce facts. This is one discipline, but only one, and there are others such as the development of skills and use of technologies, that are essential in the modern world.

The College sector has been concerned for some time that increasing numbers of young people are unable to progress when they move from school to College, and we agree with Alison Wolf, that there is an urgent need to address this by ensuring the acquisition of essential knowledge and skills by age 16.

Finally, Colleges support a broad-based Baccalaureate model, which could accredit both academic and vocational qualifications, as well as wider personal and employability skills. Whilst we understand the rationale for the new English Baccalaureate, we are concerned that without a Technical Baccalaureate of equivalent worth it will undermine high quality vocational qualifications for 14-16 year-olds and focus students on a narrow range of academic subjects that will not be appropriate to all students.

We believe that young people should have a choice of rigorous and high quality academic and vocational subjects from the age of 14, and that they should be able to make an informed choice about which subjects to study based on independent objective advice related to their future educational and employment interests. While the range of subjects in the English

Baccalaureate may be right for some students, particularly those going on to study academic A-levels, a different range of subjects would be more appropriate for those keen to pursue apprenticeships and other vocational or practical options.

How can the National Curriculum be slimmed down?

AoC believes that the curriculum needs to be broad in primary and early secondary education, with all subjects taught until 14 and that a range of options should then be available from age 14. We think that there are currently too many discrete subjects and that the curriculum could be revised to have fewer larger combined subject areas in the early stages of KS3, with a range of optional pathways from age 14. We believe it is essential that there is room for creativity within the National Curriculum, and that there is sufficient flexibility to allow for different teaching methods and to accommodate different learning styles including practical, applied and experiential learning. These larger areas would provide opportunities for more integrated and thematic learning.

We think that, from age 14, there should be the option of some practical, hands-on vocational learning and that it is essential that this is delivered by staff with the relevant occupational experience and expertise, in institutions with the full range of relevant resources. We agree with Alison Wolf, that Colleges should be able to enrol young people from age 14 where this is what they choose, but that Colleges could also become hubs of vocational excellence in their locality delivering vocational provision on a part-time basis to support their local schools.

Section D: English, mathematics, science and physical education

The remit for this Review makes it clear that English, mathematics, science and PE will remain National Curriculum subjects from 5-16 years. We agree with this, and do not propose to comment on the detailed content of these programmes of study other than to make the following suggestions:

1. **English Language** should include a substantial amount of literature, with the suggestion that grammar be taught through literature.
2. **Mathematics** should include the mathematical elements of ICT such as spreadsheets and databases. Consideration needs to be given again to the place of Functional Mathematics in the National Curriculum. Given the complex concepts in mathematics, it is essential to ensure that each child has a full grasp of these before moving on to the next stage.
3. **Science** should be general combined science to KS3 and should include technology. At KS4 there should be separate pathways with the option of either double or three single sciences GCSEs.
4. **PE** should not only be about competitive sport, although this is important. We believe that PE should educate young people about the value and benefits of exercise for health. Valuable lessons have been learnt from Sports Coordinators who have succeeded in opening up the PE curriculum to include a wider range of activities, which has been successful in engaging more girls in particular.

Section E: Other subjects currently in the National Curriculum

The other subjects currently in the National Curriculum are:

- Art and Design compulsory to KS3
- Citizenship compulsory in KS3 and KS4
- Design and Technology compulsory to KS3
- Geography compulsory to KS3
- History compulsory to KS3
- ICT compulsory to KS4
- Modern Foreign Languages compulsory to KS3
- Music compulsory to KS3

We note that Personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) and Religious Education (RE) are not part of the National Curriculum and are not being considered as part of this review. We understand that no changes to the statutory basis for RE are planned, and that there is to be a separate review of PSHE education.

We believe that the curriculum for these subjects could be structured in a different way, and that rather than having a large number of discrete subjects throughout KS 3 there should be broader areas of study at least in the first year of KS 3 (Year 7) within which pupils could experience the individual subjects but also understand how they interrelate. This would allow flexibility to deliver the curriculum in a more innovative and integrated and thematic way. In Years 8 and/or 9 the subjects could then be offered discretely to enable a deepening of subject specific knowledge.

Area 1: Creative Arts, which we believe should include:

- Art and design
- Music
- Drama/performing arts

Each individual subject would be compulsory within KS3, but offered in an integrated way in Year 7, and moving towards more discrete delivery in Years 8 and 9, then the choice of at least one subject in KS4.

Area 2: Humanities, which should include:

- Geography (core)
- History (core)
- with the opportunity to include other optional subjects such as Social Sciences

Each individual core subject compulsory within KS3, but offered in an integrated way in Year 7, and discretely in Years 8 and 9, then the choice of at least one in KS4.

Area 3: Modern Foreign Languages:

We would support the view that one language should be compulsory to KS 4, but we would also like to see the option to study a rigorous but applied language for example, business

language for travel and tourism. Language qualifications should not necessarily have to be the existing GCSEs in French, German or other languages, there should be the option of an applied language.

Other subjects:

- Citizenship should be incorporated into PSHE and RE
- Technology should be included within the Science requirements
- ICT should be embedded across all subjects.

This model should allow sufficient time for practical/applied learning via vocational subjects, and/or other options from at KS4 for those aged 14-16.

We think that all National Curriculum subjects should have non-statutory programmes of study to act as guidance to teachers.

We believe that this would provide an inclusive curriculum with a more thematic approach in Year 7 that would motive and encourage achievement.

Section F: Supporting and recognising progress

In general, we think that the National Curriculum should continue to specify requirements for a range of achievement levels and that, if the levels are correct, then it should be possible to measure progress against these for the vast majority of young people.

We believe that there should be a more thematic approach to learning up to KS3, as takes place in many primary schools, rather than the teaching of discrete subjects. We think that this would better meet the needs of all learners, but particularly those that currently struggle with the move from primary to secondary education.

Discrete pathways should be available in KS4, but with increased time for additional subjects including vocational options.

Section G: International Comparisons

We would suggest that, as some of our biggest competitors internationally, there should be investigation of the systems in the USA, Canada and Australia. In addition, we suggest Finland, because they have a reputation for high quality education. Finally, AoC has an EU funded partnership with MBO Raad which is the Dutch equivalent to AoC, and our experience suggests that comparison studies in Holland are very useful.

Section H: How children learn

We would advocate a staged approach to progress through the National Curriculum, ensuring that major concepts are grasped before young people move on. In addition, teaching styles need to appeal to different and preferred learning styles with the inclusion of more practical, hands-on and experiential learning at all stages.

Section I: Transition

Many young people do not make a successful transition from primary school to secondary school, resulting in a setback to their progress. There are many factors that may influence this transition, but for the purposes of this review, consideration should be given to the content of the curriculum in KS3, the way it is structured and the way in which it is taught.

Section J: Implementation

The programmes of study at KS4 should be developed in line with new GCSE criteria. In addition, new programmes of study at KS4 need also to consider the content of the preceding programmes at KS2 and 3. It is absolutely essential that the Review takes account of the Wolf Report and to the Green Paper, Support and Aspiration: A new approach to SEN and disability.⁸

⁸ DfE: Support and Aspiration: A new approach to SEN and disability (March 2011)