

Curriculum and Assessment Review

Summary and Insights on the Interim Report

“It is more than a decade since the national curriculum was last reviewed. It is right that it is now refreshed to ensure that it remains cutting edge and fit for purpose, and we must take this opportunity to address problems with the current curriculum.”

Curriculum and Assessment Review Interim Report, March 2025, Page 5

The long-awaited interim report from the Curriculum and Assessment Review, led by Professor Becky Francis, has been published. The review has been informed by a wealth of perspectives from experts, stakeholders, and the public, as well as a range of research. The review explains that reforming the education system is no simple task and states that while it is clear that the current system is not perfect, every potential change comes with trade-offs.

Though the interim report does not include recommendations, which will be published in the final report in autumn, it does indicate initial findings and next steps. This summary explains some of the main findings, and alongside this, also includes the thoughts from some of our expert education consultants.

It identifies four areas of focus in the next phase of the review. These have been chosen based on where there is the greatest opportunity and largest need for improvement:

- The System is not working well for all
- Challenges with specific subjects
- The curriculum needs to respond to social and technological change
- 16-19 technical and vocational qualifications.

The findings of these, along with other areas the review has reported on, are summarised below:

1. The Current System is Not Working Well for Everyone

The report acknowledges that the curriculum must break down barriers to opportunity by equipping children and young people with the knowledge and skills to adapt and thrive in the world. The review explains that the existing education system no longer serves all students effectively, particularly those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. A persistent attainment gap indicates that high standards are currently achieved by some, but not all, students.

Expert Insight

The changes are long overdue and are needed to reflect the changing needs of pupils that we are teaching. The impact of COVID, the increasing awareness and acceptance of neurodiverse pupils, and the rise of social media have changed the way pupils are presenting in school. We need to adapt how and what we are teaching to ensure that all pupils are included. As the numbers of pupils with SEND continue to increase, we need to remember that the most effective support for children and young

people with SEND occurs when pupils' aspirations (and those of their parents) are linked to their needs, and then to outcomes and support (provision). This forms "The Golden Thread" that needs to run through the whole curriculum to ensure the best outcomes for all.

- Helen Marriott, Head of Inclusion

2. Curriculum Shape and Content

The review praises the work from the last curriculum review, with Dr Becky Francis ensuring that the education landscape knows that the review will be one of 'evolution not revolution.' The review also explores its ambitions for a refreshed national curriculum including:

- Rigorous and knowledge-rich curriculum aiming for breadth and depth in all subjects
- Remain relevant and up to date while embedding and recognising importance of the past
- Foster a love of learning through a variety of ways and ensure they are represented in their learning, alongside perspectives of others.
- Coherently and logically sequenced allowing space for mastery of core concepts, effective transitions and progression through each key stage
- High-quality and aspirational learning no matter what their individual needs or backgrounds.
- Allowing teachers to use their professional expertise in designing the learning to suit their children's needs.

The report also mentions:

- **Key Stages 1-2:** The KS1 and 2 curriculum is not effectively balancing depth and breadth, leading to a struggle to cover all content with sufficient depth and negatively affects pupils' ability to master foundational concepts.
- **Key Stage 3:** Evidence shows that breadth is often being compromised at this stage and transitions are not always well aligned between KS2 and KS3.
- **Key Stage 4:** The volume is reported to challenge adequate curriculum depth. In addition, the EBacc performance measures may unnecessarily constrain student choice and limit the breadth.

Expert Insight

The interim report highlights a reduction in the proportion of pupils pursuing arts subjects into KS4, including music (e.g. 7% of pupils taking up music GCSE in 2016 has fallen to 5% in 2024) and recognises the underlying constraints placed on schools particularly by the EBacc, challenging schools' ability to offer a truly broad and balanced curriculum to pupils. Whilst the report does also mention that some of this breadth of offer can be achieved through enrichment activities outside the delivered curriculum, there's an urgent need to reestablish the importance of arts/cultural education as part of the curriculum in order to maintain inclusive and accessible progression opportunities for all pupils.

We also welcome the DfE's announcement, in tandem with the curriculum review, of the establishment of a '[National Centre for Arts and Music Education](#)' from 2026 which will continue to support the Music Hub programme. The DfE's ambition to 'bolter collaboration' between schools and partner arts organisations can only help to reverse the decline in pupils accessing further study in arts subjects.

- Adam Cooke, Head of Music Service

3. A Curriculum Fit for the Future

The report highlights the necessity for the national curriculum to evolve in response to social and technological changes:

- **Knowledge-Rich Curriculum:** While supporting a knowledge-rich approach, the report advocates for applying knowledge in meaningful ways to prepare students for now and the future. This includes the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and trends in digital information demand heightened media literacy and critical thinking, as well as digital skills.
- **Global and Social Change:** Integrating themes such as climate change, technological advancements, and social inequality more explicitly into the curriculum.

Expert Insight

The review's focus on developing children and young people's media literacy and critical thinking skills is very welcome. In today's world, where social media provides an endless stream of information, we need to make sure everyone is able to navigate the digital environment safely. Young people need to understand the importance of consuming content from a range of sources, how to evaluate those sources for bias and most importantly, how to recognise and challenge misinformation. Having these skills explicitly prioritised in the curriculum is an important step in supporting children and young people's understanding of the modern world and their wellbeing living within it. However, if the review's aim of balancing depth and breadth is to be achieved, there needs to be careful consideration about what can be removed from the curriculum first, to ensure schools have the time they need to teach such a crucial life skill.

- Laura Buczko, Literacy Team Leader

Expert Insight

The government has recently announced a £1 million allocation for the development of AI tools for educators. This is with the intention of supporting teachers with workload, meaning teachers can spend more time focusing on teaching and learning. AI is currently used for a few pupils in very limited ways but as it develops and becomes part of everyday practice, pupils will be able to use it to support their understanding, read pupils work back for them, record their answers, help with communication, support EAL learners, and in many more ways that we have yet to imagine. As always, this would need to be supported with funding and training, alongside ensuring human connection is not lost – focusing on creating an education system that supports our children to thrive in, and beyond, education.

- Catherine Delaney, Education Consultant

4. Challenges with Specific Subjects

The review identifies the need to update certain subjects to remain relevant and engaging, addressing concerns about outdated content and gaps in subject coverage. The need to secure

mastery is often hindered by the current construction and balance of content, all of which impacts progress.

Expert Insight

There is no doubt that the curriculum is densely packed and that practitioners struggle with the balance of the effective teaching of knowledge versus skills due to volume of content. Currently, pupils are assessed on their knowledge linked to the subject content they cover rather than their mastery of the subject. At key stage 3 and beyond, pressures to cover this content due to the accountability linked to ongoing assessment heavily influences the format of teaching and learning, perhaps removing the flexibility to explore, discuss and learn from the vital links that make that knowledge relevant across the curriculum. Pupils are driven to retain information rather than progress further through its application which would further their progress across the curriculum. At Key Stage 1 and 2, schools who organise curriculums which develop pupils' understanding through themes or concepts by linking their learning as they progress through the school develop this notion of 'sticky knowledge'- key knowledge that is retained through repetition - a more effective way of developing subject-related understanding. Vivaly, the transition between the primary and secondary wider curriculum needs much improvement and to be tailored around these effective practices, rather than being inhibited by assessment format.

- Alice Pepper, Education Consultant

5. Diversity of Content

Increasing the diversity of perspectives in the curriculum is recommended to expose students to a wider range of histories, cultures, and experiences alongside ensuring all children and young people are represented within the curriculum they study.

Expert Insight

The commitment to ensuring all children feel included and engaged in the national curriculum is both necessary and long overdue. One of our strengths as a nation lies in our diversity, and it is essential that our education system reflects this richness in a way that allows all young people to see themselves represented in what they learn. As the curriculum review highlights, there is already some scope for teachers to create an inclusive learning experience, but more must be done to embed representation systematically rather than leaving it to individual interpretation or initiative. The quote by Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop—'books as mirrors, books as windows, and books as sliding glass doors'—powerfully captures the role of representation in education. Books, and by extension the curriculum as a whole, should serve as mirrors that allow children to see their own identities and experiences reflected. At the same time, the curriculum should act as a window into other cultures, histories, and perspectives. The notion of a sliding glass door suggests that education should not just allow children to observe other perspectives but to step into them—to truly experience and engage with diverse narratives.

Ultimately, the goal must be to create a curriculum that prepares all children not just to navigate the world but to shape it. A more representative, inclusive curriculum benefits everyone, fostering a society built on mutual respect, understanding, and the appreciation of diversity and inclusion as a strength rather than a challenge. I hope this review must be a turning point in making education truly reflective of all those it serves.

6. Subjects Not on the National Curriculum

The report acknowledges national disparities in the quality of RE provision due to lack of national agreed content standards. The report also acknowledges that the DfE have provided statutory guidance for PSHE and this is being reviewed in parallel with the review.

Expert Insight

Religious Education (RE) and Relationships, Sex, and Health Education (RSHE) play crucial roles in shaping young people's understanding of themselves and the world. However, the disparity in national standards for RE has resulted in inconsistent provision, leaving some students without a robust and inclusive education in this area. While RSHE does now benefit from statutory guidance, RE remains fragmented, making it difficult to guarantee all pupils receive high-quality content that reflects both religious and non-religious perspectives. Striking a balance between flexibility for different school types and a core entitlement to a well-rounded, inclusive education is essential. Without clear, national expectations, we risk failing to provide young people with the knowledge and critical thinking skills they need to navigate an increasingly diverse and interconnected world. We hope that the review, by identifying this, will ensure that national expectations are considered going forward.

– Liz Dwarampudi, Education Consultant

7. 16-19 Pathways and Qualifications

The review explores that we heard strongly that the current system is not working well for everyone and states that, “too many young people are not gaining the right knowledge and skills as they progress through the system and by the time they leave formal education are not prepared to thrive in life and work” (p.30). They also report that the expectation to study of maths and English should remain, but with greater focus on pathways for all.

The report also emphasises the need to cater to diverse interests and career aspirations:

- **Level 3 Qualifications:** Ensuring a balance between academic and vocational options.
- **Level 2 and Below:** Providing better support and alternative qualifications for students who do not achieve Level 3 qualifications to aid progression into employment or further study.

Expert Insight

The post-16 proposals seem promising, particularly in recognising the limitations of repeated GCSE resits and identifying that different pathways are needed. However, the review does not yet appear to fully consider the impact of the current GCSE structure on the mental wellbeing of neurodivergent students and those with SEND. It would be beneficial to see the thinking around 16-19 Pathways and Qualifications extended into KS4, with a structured functional skills pathway routinely available for students working towards GCSE grades 1-3. We hope this is considered in the next part of the review and expressed within the full report.

- Claire Carroll, Area Lead Educational Psychologist

8. Assessment

The report suggests reforms to ensure assessments are effective and fair:

- **Key Stages 1 and 2:** The review highlights a number of strengths that were observed in the primary school assessment system, focusing on core skills like reading, writing, and maths, which are crucial for pupils' success. End of key stage 2 assessments are important for holding schools accountable and informing Progress 8 measures. However, concerns were raised about the grammar, punctuation, and spelling assessment, which may lead to teaching these skills in isolation. The review will look into improving the assessment to better support pupils' understanding and fluency in writing. Additionally, there are concerns that the current writing assessment does not effectively measure pupils' writing fluency or incentivize good teaching practices. The next stage of the review will focus on improving writing assessments to support higher standards.

Expert Insight

The removal of KS1 SATs has been welcomed across the primary education sector. Though many are using a mixture of day to day oral, practical and written evidence for assessment (as suggested by the DfE) some teachers have stated that they feel the pressure to prepare KS1 children for the tests, with one of the biggest reasons being that the accountability measures have not changed at the end of KS2. In addition, the suggestion that KS2 SATs are likely to remain may cause conflict with the report suggesting the review would also ensure the system works for all learners. Schools will welcome a review into the curriculum content and assessment of Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling, alongside the assessment of writing at the end of KS2. Though we do not want to go back to the days of the writing test, teachers understand that the current teaching and assessment of writing does need to evolve, but how this looks will need careful consideration.

- **Jo Gray, Head of Educational Development**

- **Secondary (including GCSE):** The review acknowledges the strengths of the current secondary assessment system, particularly the role of GCSEs in providing a standardised measure of student achievement and holding schools accountable. However, concerns have been raised about the volume of exams and their impact on student wellbeing. The review will explore ways to reduce the overall volume of assessments at key stage 4 without compromising the reliability of results and consider the balance between exam and non-exam assessments to ensure they effectively measure student capabilities.
- **16-19:** The review highlights the importance of 16-19 qualifications in preparing students for higher education and employment. While A Levels are well-established and respected, T Levels are emerging as a high-quality technical route. However, challenges remain in ensuring all learners can access suitable pathways, particularly those who do not achieve the required standard in English and maths at GCSE. The review will focus on improving progression routes from level 2 to level 3 and ensuring learners are supported to achieve positive outcomes by age 18.
- **Digital Assessment:** The review recognises the potential of digital assessments to enhance the assessment system but notes that their use is currently limited and specific. There are significant delivery implications for schools, and equity concerns regarding access to technology. The review will continue to consider evidence on digital

assessments, working with the Department for Education and Ofqual to explore their feasibility and impact on the assessment system.

Expert Insight

The national curriculum's shift towards digital assessment in 2025 marks a critical evolution in education. As technology becomes integral to learning, it is only logical that assessment methods follow suit. Digital assessments offer adaptability, real-time feedback, and the ability to test a broader range of skills beyond rote memorisation. However, this transition is not without challenges. Equity remains a concern - ensuring all students have access to the necessary technology and internet connectivity is crucial. Additionally, cybersecurity and data privacy must be prioritised to protect student information. Teachers will also require comprehensive training to adapt their assessment strategies effectively. Done right, digital assessment can enhance learning outcomes, making testing more engaging and reflective of real-world skills. Policymakers must, however, ensure that this shift supports - not hinders - students, educators, and schools in delivering quality education for all.

- Mark Seddon, Director of IT & Business Development

Next Steps

A key takeaway from the review so far is that many of the challenges raised by stakeholders are not solely about curriculum content or assessment methods. Instead, they often stem from issues related to implementation, resourcing, and classroom practice. This means that while refining the curriculum is important, meaningful reform must also address the broader educational landscape - including teacher workload, system capacity, and support structures.

Expert Insight

The report highlights the increasing pressures on school staff, who are often expected to provide consistent psychological and emotional support to students. However, without the necessary training, space, and support, staff are not always able to manage these demands effectively. The changes in our children and young people further underscores the need for structured, embedded support systems, such as clinical supervision and reflective practice groups, to help staff navigate these complexities while maintaining their own wellbeing.

- Jeni Goodfellow-Pemsel, Head of Creative Psychotherapy in Education

As the review moves forward, the goal is to balance stakeholder feedback with research and statistical evidence. Diverse perspectives - sometimes conflicting - highlight the complexity of the issues at hand. That's why collaboration with key organizations, including the Department for Education (DfE), Ofqual, Ofsted, and the Standards and Testing Agency (STA), remains crucial. The review will continue to engage with educators, policymakers, and stakeholders before finalising its recommendations in the autumn with a focus on developing concrete proposals that ensure a more adaptable, inclusive, and future-proof curriculum.

The next phase of the review will make recommendations, and educational institutions will be crucial to driving forward meaningful change. The report explores that they will recommend a phased

programme of work in different subjects or subject areas to ensure that it can be implemented in stages, being mindful of the capacity issues in the system.

Expert Insight

Change will not happen without a commitment to coaching, training and developing all staff who work with pupils. This includes Teaching staff, Teaching Assistants, Lunchtime supervisors, office and caretaking staff. We hope that these changes come with compulsory training for SEND, for EYFS and for subject leads.

– **Helen Marriott, Head of Inclusion**

Ultimately, we hope the review leads to the creation of a 21st-century education system that not only imparts knowledge but allows for joy, alongside fostering the skills and adaptability necessary for students to thrive in a rapidly evolving world.

For up-to-date information on the educational landscape, curriculum support, or school development consultancy please contact head of Educational Development service, Jo Gray, jo.gray@oneeducation.co.uk