



Royal Society of Edinburgh: comments on Curriculum for Excellence draft experiences and outcomes for Literacy and English, for Expressive Arts and for Social Studies

Further to its response on the proposals for numeracy, mathematics and science, the RSE has convened an expert working group to respond to these sets of proposals. The group consists of senior Fellows and practitioners from the disciplines of English and language, expressive arts and social studies as well as those with a background in education policy and teaching.

Commendable features of the curricular review

1. The RSE welcomes the all-embracing review, notably the review's broad-based coverage of all subject areas and of all ages from 3 to 18. The Society also welcomes the review's understanding of the manner in which subjects link to each other and its statement on the development of students' understanding as they grow.
2. The Society commends the attention to fundamental skills and understanding, such as how to think, how to speak and write, how to make links between diverse areas of learning, how to link formal learning to experience, how to learn independently and how to solve problems. Whilst these aspects of the proposals are not new – the best teachers and schools have always sought to achieve these aims as have several previous curricular reforms – having such goals set out explicitly and officially is very welcome.
3. Particularly commendable is the attention given to expressive arts as a group of subject areas – both the disciplinary areas of the expressive arts and their associated craft skills – which are now firmly at the heart of the curriculum. The inclusion of dance as a named area of study is particularly innovative and welcome.
4. The review's sustained attention to literacy, in both written and spoken form, is welcome and overdue.
5. The review's consideration of Scottish cultures, writing, history and society is welcome as one part of a broad curriculum.
6. The new scope given to teachers to interpret guidelines is welcome.

Overall structure

7. However, the proposals are not yet workable as a revised curriculum. The first problem that the Society identifies is a lack of coherent architecture, either in the sense of a theory of how children progress from level to level, or in the sense of over-arching themes that might give coherence across diverse curricular areas. Specifically:

- a. The proposals offer no account of how children progress through levels or kinds of learning, and offer no sense of learning as cumulative. For example, the five levels of the curriculum are arbitrarily imposed, with no rationale being offered for them or any definition of them other than as sequential stages.
- b. The ways in which the curriculum as a whole might unify the diverse subjects is not explained, merely asserted. No reasoned case is offered for how certain principles might unify learners' experience. In this the very definition of the curriculum (in *Building the Curriculum 3*) is so vague as to be meaningless: if the curriculum is defined to be merely all planned experiences for children, then we need to find a new language to describe those particular planned experiences that have more traditionally been called 'the curriculum'. Otherwise, we would be in the confusing situation of discussing, for example, the rules about which side of the corridor students should walk along in school under the same heading as the reading list for Advanced Higher English.

The importance, integrity and breadth of subjects

8. The attention to interdisciplinarity is welcome. However, championing interdisciplinary without strong attention to and investment in the subjects (the 'disciplines') themselves is futile. The over-arching documents (such as *Building the Curriculum 3*) pay hardly any attention to specific or particular skills and crafts, knowledges and understandings of the subjects, and so there is no sense of what their place is in the overall architecture, nor of how they might be renovated in themselves. At the same time, there is no robust understanding or framing of interdisciplinary goals.
9. The documents claim that the expressive arts may be transformative – reasonably asserted as a 'good' thing – without mentioning that this might require a great deal of prior hard work. For the expressive arts there is a lack of attention to both the craft skills of making art and the critical skills of understanding it (see paragraph 11 below). For example, no attention is given to the arduous tasks of learning to play a musical instrument, of learning the skills involved in role-play or the advanced skills required by characterisation, or of moulding the dexterity of hands and eyes as a preparation for accomplished painting or sculpture. Often these craft skills are best learned in a context akin to that of apprenticeship, but no recognition is given to this mode of learning in the proposals.
10. In language, likewise, there is no attention to fundamental understanding – no systematic discussion of grammar, spelling, syntax, pragmatics, register or rhetoric. The main thrust of the document on 'Literacy and English' is to 'develop critical and creative thinking as well as competence in listening and talking, reading, writing', etc; the document also stresses how 'language lies at the centre of the development and expression'. These goals, and this view of the place of language, require a teaching and learning system which enables students to analyse formally the structure of their written and spoken English, so that structured progress can be made in developing writing and reading skills. Linguistic knowledge of this kind – the structure of sentences, of words and larger linguistic units etc – is central to any plan to improve the writing,

interpretation and analysis of texts of all kinds. None of these activities is dealt with in any depth in the proposed curriculum. Furthermore, while it is commendable that attention is given to the languages which children bring to the classroom, there is no sense that children, as they get older, might have to learn that different registers might be appropriate for different occasions.

11. There is insufficient attention to the language of criticism, to developing the capacity to critique and interpret cultural outputs, historical movements or social events or to judge between different levels of quality. For example, in respect of the expressive arts, it is not enough for students merely to 'experience' a novel or a performance of a play or of a piece of music (in whatever genre): understanding in these areas must include being able to understand and interpret contextual factors and to discern and critique its qualities and the criteria of quality, be they inherent or socially constructed.
12. In none of the subject areas is it clear what students will read (whether in books or in some other medium). This deficiency betrays the lack of attention to knowledge and understanding in these subjects. Key questions overlooked in the documents include: what minimum of acquaintance with the facts and understandings of, say, geography, history or politics is required before someone might be said to be educated in these subjects? What minimum knowledge of the chronology of historical development needs to be grasped before a learner might be said to have any truly historical understanding? What range – or even what canon – of literary works, of drama, of music or of art ought to be read, appreciated or accomplished before the student might be said to be educated in these areas? These are difficult questions to answer, but that is no reason to avoid them; in fact, it is a reason why they must be widely debated before the new curriculum is put in place.
13. Despite all the attention to defining the curriculum liberally, there are also some rather worrying ways in which it seems to have been conceived too narrowly. One general area is in connection with the apparent prescription of ethical outcomes. For example, students will be expected to adopt 'an enterprising attitude', to 'present informed views on the importance of developing sustainable [transport] systems' and to 'understand the nature of our multicultural society'. These might well be desirable outcomes, but they are contestable: do they leave room for students to discuss the advantages and weakness of an 'enterprising attitude', or to dispute the 'importance' of sustainability (in its numerous definitions), or to question whether 'our society' is or ought to be 'multicultural'? The purpose of a curriculum is to stimulate informed debate and to ensure that students have the critical tools to engage with that debate not to prescribe the conclusions.
14. The welcome attention to Scottish content in the curriculum is sometimes at the apparent expense of understanding other places and contents, whether or not they bear much relation to Scotland. For example, in Social Studies, the first general 'outcome' makes reference only to an understanding of how Scotland has developed, and what Scotland's place is in the world etc. There is no objection to this being a goal, but there should be recognition of the need to understand how other places have developed – not only as points of comparison for Scotland but also as important topics of study in themselves.

Connections between subjects

15. The relationships between subject areas are often imprecisely specified in the documents, even though these connections are intended to be one of the strengths of the new approach to the curriculum. For example, although literacy might be developed across the curriculum, it is not given consistent attention in the experiences and outcomes: thus, in history, almost nothing is said about literacy.
16. Despite the intention to give full regard to all the several subject areas, some are treated much more instrumentally than others. For example, the expressive arts are more often seen in the documents as means by which *other* subjects might be learned rather than as a worthwhile – and difficult – activity in themselves. Likewise, language is seen instrumentally, without proper attention to its own characteristics. Of course, these instrumental relationships among subjects are important, but they should not be adopted to the exclusion of any other approaches.

'Outcomes'

17. The lack of attention to details of the syllabus leaves the reader wholly unclear as to how the often laudable 'outcomes' might be achieved. Although we would certainly agree that not all outcomes should be measurable, at some point many of them do have to be measured, not least in the examinations taken in S4-S6. Mainly because of the absence of clarity about syllabuses, the documents are unclear about the ways in which valid and fair measurement might be carried out.
18. There is no assurance that the outcomes in each area would qualify a student at the highest level of achievement to enter a higher education course in that area. While it would not be appropriate to have the whole curriculum driven by this consideration, it ought to be a key criterion in designing courses in the senior school, especially when around one half of the age group now proceed to higher education from school or within a few years of leaving school.

Teachers

19. Most of the proposals will require a very significant strengthening in the disciplinary expertise of primary teachers, and in the interdisciplinary features of the teaching of all subjects in secondary and primary. There will have to be much more frequent and widespread participation by teachers in professional development in specialist subjects and in pedagogical issues (eg concerning the particular difficulties of relating disparate subjects to each other). For some parts of the proposed new curriculum there are hardly any specialists in post, not least in respect of dance. So the new curriculum has significant implications for teachers' initial education and for their continuing professional development. That, in turn, has significant implications for the nature and quality of the programmes of study offered in the Faculties of Education in the Scottish universities.
20. In particular, schoolteachers need training in linguistic theoretical issues in order to allow the schools to achieve the linguistic goals of the document on 'Literacy and English'. This kind of linguistic training of teachers – both within the generalist training of primary teachers and in the transferable skills training

of secondary teachers – has to be central to any plan to improve skills in both writing and reading. To address this particularly challenging goal it may be useful to investigate training dedicated literacy teachers both to work directly with pupils and to work with other teachers to develop literacy across the curriculum.

21. Although the scope given to teachers to interpret guidelines is welcome, teachers should not be expected to invent the details of the syllabus for themselves. To avoid an assessment-driven focus, developing the syllabus will require that teachers work in partnership with each other and with people from universities, specialist higher-education colleges, and organisations with particular expertise in certain curricular areas (especially in the expressive arts). The need for professional development noted in paragraph 19 above is also relevant to this point.

Other lessons

22. The Society sees that these conclusions are similar to those reached by its scientists and mathematicians in their submission on the draft experiences and outcomes in science, mathematics and numeracy. The important points in common are:
 - a. the welcoming of cross-disciplinarity and independent, active learning;
 - b. the need for attention to disciplines;
 - c. the importance of craft skills or methods of working that are specific to particular subject areas;
 - d. the need for attention to progression within subject areas as well as across transferable and interdisciplinary skills; and,
 - e. the implications for teacher expertise and hence for the initial and continuing education of teachers.

Additional Information and References

This submission represents the views of an expert Working Group of RSE Fellows, and not necessarily the views of all of the Fellowship.

In responding to this consultation the Society would like to draw attention to the following Royal Society of Edinburgh response which is relevant:

- The Royal Society of Edinburgh's submission to Learning and Teaching Scotland on *Curriculum for Excellence draft experiences and outcomes for Numeracy, Mathematics and Science (April 2008)*.

Any enquiries about this submission and others should be addressed to the RSE's Consultations Officer, Mr William Hardie (email: evidenceadvice@royalsoced.org.uk).

Responses are published on the RSE website (www.royalsoced.org.uk).