

Moving towards a modernised curriculum

Sir Anthony Greener, Chairman, QCA



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The five-year-olds that enter school next September will be the first generation never to have experienced the 20th century. They will be in the workforce, driving this country's economy until 2065. A good many of them will experience the dawn of the 22nd century.

The decisions we are making today about education and the curriculum, about Mike Tomlinson's proposals for a diploma structure and about a framework for achievement for young people and adults must meet the needs of individuals, employers and society in the 21st century.

Culturally we are a developing, fast-paced, consumer society. Jobs, lifestyles and ways of working are all changing against a backdrop of breathtaking developments in information and communication technology (ICT). In two or three decades schools will be quite different places. The traditional chalk-and-talk classroom of the 20th century will be transformed. Learning will take place in a range of places and in different ways. Children will use handheld devices for research and communication, to capture images and sound and to download moving images to help their learning. Children growing up in the digital age embrace ICT as easily as they learn their mother tongue.

The curriculum needs invigorating in light of all these changes. We need to develop the bedrock of traditional subjects into a curriculum that is responsive to the needs of learners in the 21st century.

I believe in education as personal enrichment; the route to fulfilment of individual potential. I believe in a national entitlement to the best thinking and culture that has gone before. I also think that young people need an education that

prepares them for the future world of work and sets their learning in a contemporary context. They need a curriculum that is engaging and equips them with the social and critical skills to help them chart a successful course through life.

I think of this as the modernisation of the curriculum. QCA has a vision of a curriculum that inspires and motivates young people, building on the strengths of traditional subjects and expanding their boundaries into territories that employers tell us they need.

At a recent conference in Washington, John Abbott, President of the 21st Century Learning Initiative, said:

'In high performance workplaces individuals have to do a lot more critical thinking – analysing problems, proposing solutions, troubleshooting, communicating with others and managing their own time.'

Surveys across sectors continue to identify the skills that employers see as essential to flourish in life and work. They include good communication skills, the capacity to work independently and cooperatively and an ability to think both critically and creatively. Employers identify the need for flexibility, the capacity and self-confidence to adapt to change. They value curiosity, a positive attitude to learning and a profound understanding of the importance of teamwork and a determination to make things happen.

Many academics would argue that these same skills are necessary for successful performance in traditional curriculum subjects. We need to throw these skills and dispositions under a new spotlight. It is important to ask how effectively young people are developing these skills through studying history, geography and mathematics. What additional models should we be considering?

Howard Gardener writes in *An education for the future, the foundation of science*

and values that, 'most students see secondary school as a series of unrelated topics, as they wander from one class or test to the next.' He calls for the need to develop a curriculum featuring complex problems that require consideration from a number of different disciplinary perspectives. He argues that more time should be devoted to active efforts at synthesis across disciplines. This surely poses the challenge for modernising the curriculum.

Not only must we emphasise with new vigour the value of communication, teamwork and flexibility, we also need to help students feel connected to the world in which they will create their future. The motivation to learn academic subjects could be greatly enhanced by aligning them to contemporary vocational areas. Vocational subjects, sometimes seen as second rate, would gain in credibility through firm association with academic learning.

Science might be taught with reference to, for example, medicine, engineering or manufacturing technology. English is brought to life as the bedrock for communication, media studies and politics. Maths, related in a child's mind to successful business, finance and market research, takes on new relevance. Connecting these concepts still more adventurously would also see young people understanding the value of communication in business, the importance of science and technology in art and the role of art and design in manufacturing.

We also need to prepare children for technological world we can only anticipate, by exploring the potential for e-learning and e-assessment.

Let's consider briefly some of the possibilities. Teachers will be able to monitor research undertaken and reading completed. Homework will be submitted electronically and advances in automatic marking will enable teachers to devote

more time to personalised teaching and learning. Banks of assessment material will ensure that performance measures are built in to the system without the need for large-scale, single-date whole-cohort external tests. Stores of performance data will enable standards to be measured over time with a level of accuracy not possible with traditional methods.

Teacher assessment, today seen as less robust than external assessment, may indeed become every bit as comparable, reliable and quality-assured as anything we can achieve today. Teachers and learners will be able to use assessment for learning and the traditional terrors of exams might give way to a more relaxed, though not less rigorous, approach to assessment.

Vocational concepts will be introduced to classrooms at a much earlier age via e-resources – using virtual work-environments and video and design techniques which

enable young learners to be exposed to a variety of learning contexts which is not possible in terms of practicality, cost and health and safety today.

Today we have a national curriculum with many strengths. However it cannot remain static if it is to respond to the changing needs of society and work.

A modernised curriculum needs to embrace key academic subjects with a new emphasis on their interdependence and partnership with vocational subjects. The curriculum should be explicit about skills for life. All learning should develop problem-solving skills, teamwork, and communication. We need to do this in a way that does not lose the value of broad learning in a framework of knowledge, culture and experience of academic subjects rooted in centuries of development, but we need greater flexibility and breadth to capture the imaginations of all our young people.

The challenge for all of us in modernising the curriculum is to arrive at a system that is more responsive to new and emerging needs. We need to harness the power of technology to extend when, where and how learning takes place. We need a framework that is sufficiently flexible to allow for ongoing evolution as we move through the next century.

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