

Testing patience: Reducing the burden of the English school curriculum

BRIEFING PAPER

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Nearly a decade on from the last major reforms, politicians are again turning their attention to the national curriculum. This briefing assesses claims that the curriculum is 'too packed with content', and sets out how curriculum and assessment reform can improve secondary level education in England.

KEY POINTS

- There is an excessive amount of content in the national curriculum, leading to rote learning and teachers skipping through content too quickly.
- This issue isn't caused by the curriculum, but is due to the GCSE assessment regime.
 - A large amount of time is spent preparing for exams rather than learning new concepts and gaining a deep understanding of subjects.
 - The importance of GCSEs for schools leads them to maximise exam results rather than meaningfully developing student's comprehension.
- There is scope to slim down the curriculum, but these will have minimal effect without significantly reducing the extent and importance of assessment at 16.
- The process by which curriculum reforms are carried out is critical. Effective reform needs to be expert-led, impartial and carried out on a predetermined cyclical basis.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Reforms should seek a modest, not drastic, reduction in the level of curriculum content, prioritising subjects like History where there is greatest dissatisfaction.
- GCSEs should be slimmed down.
 - They should involve less assessment, and alternative approaches such as online assessments should be explored.
 - The stakes of GCSEs for schools should be reduced, for example by using annual testing of randomly selected students to measure performance, and using Ofsted as a counterbalance to incentives for rote learning.
- Implementation of reform matters as much as what it involves
 - Changes should be expert-led, with the creation of an independent curriculum review group, with its terms of reference set by the government.
 - A citizens' assembly, which tries to find consensus on contentious political questions like what history young people need to know, could set fundamental long-term goals for this review group.
 - Reforms should be carried out on a cyclical periodic basis, divorcing them from the political cycle – reviewing curriculum every ten years would bring England in line with Finland and Japan.

THE CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT REGIME AT SECONDARY LEVEL

Background

The national curriculum for England is a set of subjects and standards that stipulates what all children going through school should learn. It covers what subjects are taught and the standards children should reach in each subject. The curriculum has undergone a series of significant reforms and revisions since it was initially launched in 1988. The most recent of these came in 2014 when Michael Gove, then Education Secretary, set out significant changes designed to streamline content and reduce prescription, whilst making the content more demanding and placing a greater emphasis on knowledge acquisition.¹ The following years saw the government implement extensive reforms to the system of GCSE examinations taken at the age of 16. These included an increased focus on end-of-stage examinations (with coursework only used when essential to assess skills specific to a particular subject), the creation of a new one to nine grading scale and the introduction of ‘Attainment 8’ and ‘Progress 8’ (both derived from GCSE exam results) as the main measures of secondary school performance.^{2 3}

Ten years on from the last set of significant reforms, the state of the curriculum and assessment regime in England is receiving growing political attention. In particular, the Labour Party has signalled that if it enters government it will “commission a full, expert-led review of curriculum and assessment that will seek to deliver a curriculum which is rich and broad, inclusive and innovative, and which develops children’s knowledge and skills”.⁴ In a recent speech, shadow education secretary Bridget Phillipson said that the party is “determined to move at pace” to carry out this review, indicating that reform in this area is one of the party’s key educational policy priorities.⁵

The purpose of this briefing

There are growing calls to add new content to the curriculum, particularly skills-based content such as financial education (see recent SMF paper)⁶ and mental health. A common response such campaigns is that the curriculum is ‘too full’. We wanted to understand why this perception exists – whether the curriculum is indeed ‘too full’ – and how new things can be added to the curriculum given this constraint. To that end, we conducted an extensive review of relevant literature, with a particular focus on the way the curriculum and assessment regime limits the effectiveness of education in English secondary schools, and on the processes by which implementing curriculum and assessment reform can achieve positive outcomes for children’s education. Furthermore, a dozen in-depth interviews were held with individuals with expertise in this policy area, including academics, charity leaders and education policy experts. The aim of these interviews was to develop deeper insights into the problems, and related solutions, facing the curriculum and assessment regime in England.

Several issues with the secondary-level curriculum and assessment were identified, but two stand out

There are a wide range of problems relating to curriculum and assessment at secondary level, a number of which a thorough curriculum review will have to get to grips with. It ought to consider the trade-off between breadth and depth in the curriculum, as well as the weight core subjects should be given relative to more creative ones. The debate over the efficacy of a knowledge or skills focused approach to curriculum design was frequently raised in both the literature and throughout discussions with specialists. So was the question of whether academy schools should keep the freedom not to follow the national curriculum. How best to design assessments (for example through coursework or exams), and the impact of different forms of assessment on student mental health, also came up several times.

However, our focus in this paper will be two specific issues identified in interviews as among the most fundamental problems facing secondary schools:

- That the curriculum is ‘overloaded with content’, with an excessive amount of content to be taught and learned in relation to the time available for instruction.⁷
- That the assessment regime at secondary level is overburdened, both in terms of sheer volume of examination and the importance of that examination to schools.⁸

Excessive curriculum content

Despite the aim of previous reforms to slim it down, the national curriculum at secondary level has received criticism for being ‘overloaded’. A recent House of Lords report found evidence that the extent of content in the secondary curriculum and the Government’s focus on a ‘knowledge-rich’ approach has resulted in “an overburdened curriculum” packed with content.⁹ Teachers seem to agree. A survey carried out in 2022 found that 76% of secondary school teachers felt that there was too much to cover in their GCSE classes.¹⁰ Most experts interviewed for this research shared the view that there is too much material, particularly at Key Stage 4 (KS4; age 14-16, leading up to GCSEs).

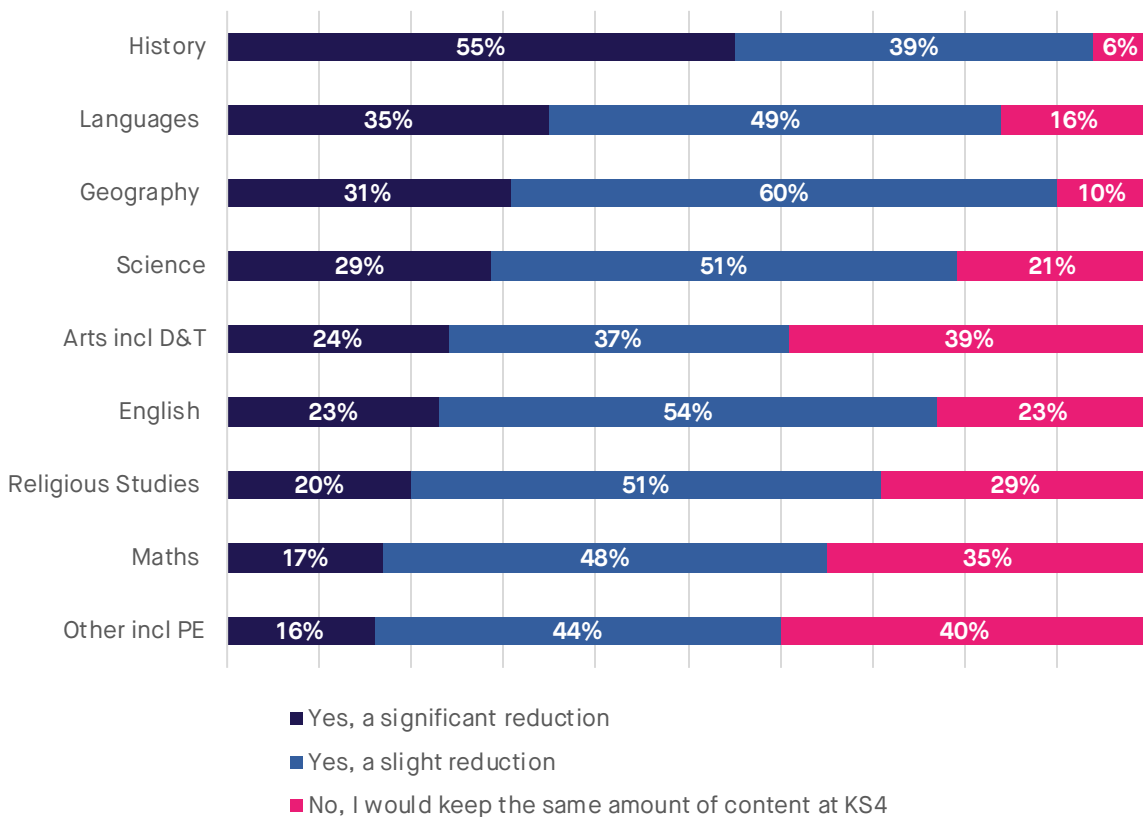
A congested curriculum can have negative implications for schooling. It provides little opportunity to cover things not included on the curriculum but important to children’s development, such as team-building and outdoor learning. It also prevents the inclusion of new areas of study that are increasingly deemed to be important to young people’s education, such as financial education and digital literacy, due to the lack of space available.

However, the most concerning impact is on the efficacy of teaching that content in schools. The House of Lords report found that the curriculum demands teachers deliver rote learning in classrooms, skipping through content at pace in order to cover the required syllabus. The report suggested that the sheer volume of material and emphasis on knowledge acquisition means covering a large amount of subject content at pace has taken precedence over enhancing students’ understanding of subjects in a meaningful and engaging way.¹¹ One expert interviewed for this research concurred, arguing that the extent of content in the curriculum means that pupils are taught “too much, too quickly”. As such, “they can’t take it in”.

Reforms should seek a modest, not drastic, reduction in the level of curriculum content, prioritising subjects like History where there is greatest dissatisfaction

It is clear that the extent of material in the curriculum is putting pressure on teachers to, in the words of one expert, “gallop through the content”. As such, the government should aim to reduce the overall level of content prescribed by the 11-16 curriculum. To achieve this, reforms should involve relevant stakeholders – namely curriculum experts, school leaders and teachers – to remove content from the national curriculum where it is appropriate to do so. As Figure 1 shows, certain subjects should be prioritised for this pruning exercise. History would be a natural place to start: a majority of History teachers want a ‘significant reduction’ in content, with Languages a distant second (35%). By contrast, only 17% of Maths teachers say the same.¹²

Figure 1: “Would you like to see a reduction in the amount of content you are expected to cover in the KS4 curriculum in your main subject”, October 2022:



Source: Teacher Tapp

The overall level of content prescribed by the curriculum should indeed be cut down, but across all subjects other than History, the most popular approach among teachers was a 'slight reduction' in curriculum content, indicating that there is support only for modest reforms. Experts interviewed for this research broadly agreed. Some interviewees expressed the view that a curriculum packed with demanding content is a good thing because it demonstrates a high level of ambition. Furthermore, there is a need for curricula to be somewhat prescriptive in order to provide guidance for teachers. One leading Scottish academic was adamant that policymakers south of the border should avoid following the missteps of Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), the introduction of which was succeeded by a drop in international educational rankings. Giving the example of CfE's "page and a half on how to teach reading, versus 20 pages in England", they argued that the new curriculum "has given teachers too much autonomy to teachers and not enough guidance". Education Scotland has produced reams of guidance in response to such criticisms, but the equivocal nature of the CfE is still an issue. The Royal Academy of Edinburgh has argued that changes have made curriculum guidance inaccessibly long, and combined with the fact that many features of the CfE are open to interpretation, it is still difficult for teachers to "make sense of its expectations".¹³

In any case, there are ways to reduce the overloaded nature of the curriculum without taking things out of it. For instance, we could reduce duplication across stages. Giving the example of introducing algebra to pupils in year 6, before they forget about it and everything has to be learnt again in year 7, one charity leader remarked that "there's overlap that's not necessary, so you end up teaching it twice, which is just wasteful". Some argued that the curriculum burden could also be reduced by integrating certain subject areas into one another, without actually removing content. Estonia provides lessons for England in that respect. Instead of having standalone IT classes, digital learning is incorporated into every subject.¹⁴ On the whole, evidence suggest that there is little support for slashing and reworking curriculum content. Instead, changes should be incremental rather than fundamental.

Curriculum overload is an issue, but it's not the main cause of rote learning in schools

Whilst modest cuts to the level of curriculum content will help, it is unlikely that they will fully alleviate the pressures to deliver rote learning in classrooms. This is because the principal cause of this push to memorise things comes from the GCSE assessment regime, which incentivises schools to focus on exam revision, rather than teaching students in a meaningful, effective and engaging way.

The scale and importance of GCSEs drives rote learning

“The more we assess, the less we teach”

A large part of the problem is the sheer number of examinations students have to take when they reach the end of KS4. Following changes to the GCSE assessment regime in 2017, the Association of School and College Leaders warned that under the new GCSE specifications students will spend a longer period of time sitting more exams, highlighting that pupils may be forced to undertake more than 30 hours of examinations for their GCSEs (over eight hours more than under the old GCSE regime).¹⁵ Not only does this place a great deal of pressure on students, it sucks an inordinate amount of time and energy out of the rest of their schooling. It results in students spending a huge amount their school day revising for their exams, leaving little time to spend actually learning new concepts and gaining a deep understanding of the subject in question. One interviewee with specialist knowledge of the system of curriculum and assessment in England was clear:

“the more we assess, the less we teach... if you didn't have assessment, you could have a much bigger curriculum...you'd have more time for actual learning rather than revision.”

The importance of GCSEs for school accountability exacerbates this problem. Alongside Ofsted inspections, ‘Progress 8’ has become one of the main ways in which school performance is measured. This means school leaders and teachers are incentivised to do everything they can to ensure students get the highest exam grades possible. This leads schools to prioritise revision and rote learning for exams above all else, including teaching students in a way that will enhance their genuine comprehension of a discipline.

Evidence that this problem is caused more by assessment issues than curriculum ones can also be found in the ‘squeezing of KS3’ in academy schools. By virtue of not having to follow the national curriculum, these schools have been found to be increasingly covering GCSE content by year 9 (or even earlier) in order to maximise the GCSE grades of students, at the expense of learning content in the much broader KS3 national curriculum.¹⁶ Furthermore, given that young people are now required to continue in education, employment or training until the age of 18, it is clear that the magnitude of GCSEs is significantly out of proportion to their role in the education system. The Times Education Commission has pointed out there is no other country in the developed world that has so many high-stakes tests at both 16 and 18.¹⁷

Reforms should reduce the scale and stakes of assessment at 16

It is clear that the requirements and consequences of GCSEs are excessive, but before cutting them down policymakers must recognise the important role GCSEs serve in the education system. GCSEs have been justified on many grounds, but two purposes have come to dominate:¹⁸

- To assess student achievement and to enable post-16 institutions and universities to select students based on a consistent measure.
- To provide a metric to hold schools to account for their performance.

These purposes, given the structure of the education system in England, make some degree of assessment at 16 necessary. The existence of a separate level of education for 16-18 year olds means that students must be sorted by ability, in addition to themselves choosing certain pathways based on demonstrated strengths or weaknesses in particular areas. Furthermore, without GCSEs, there would be no comparable way to measure school performance, and the lack of an objective mechanism to identify underperforming schools would limit inspectors' ability to intervene where failures are occurring, to the detriment of children enduring them.

That means GCSEs should be shrunken, not abolished. Reducing the amount of time and energy going to the wrong places and redirecting it to facilitate productive teaching would free up space in the curriculum.

Reducing the requirements of GCSE assessments

The Department for Education (DfE) should work with exam boards, schools and other key stakeholders to cut the amount of subject matter assessed in each GCSE subject area, focusing on the core skills and competencies relevant to a specific discipline. Done in tandem with reducing curriculum content more generally, these changes would curtail the amount of content students have to cover in preparation for their exams, freeing up more time for more meaningful learning.

Introducing online exams could also help in this regard. EDSK think tank found that moving to online assessments – as is done in many other countries – would dramatically reduce the burden on students, by virtue of being more adaptive and by assessing students on a leaner pool of essential subject matter.^{19 20} In proposals set out in the EDSK report, *Reassessing the Future*, History and Geography would switch from around four hours of assessments under GCSEs to just 1.5 hours, whereas the three sciences would drop from 3.5 hours down to 1.5 hours as well. English and Mathematics would see slightly more assessment time given their importance within the curriculum, but the overall impact of the scheme would be to bring large reductions.²¹

Reducing the stakes of GCSEs

Cutting the amount of material in GCSEs without altering incentives for schools would bring little benefit. It would likely just lead to students spending the same amount of time rote learning, just in greater depth on a slimmer pool of content. One expert interviewed for this research went as far to say that government could chop 25% of content out of the curriculum, and this would do nothing about the assessment and accountability pressures that results in teaching time being devoted to revision and rote learning.

As such, the stakes of GCSE examinations for schools must also be reduced. The government should consider modest changes to achieve this, such as altering the Progress 8 and Attainment 8 measures of secondary school performance to be calculated on three-year rolling-averages rather than being based on results from a single academic year, as set out in proposals from EDSK, among others.²² This would reduce the impact on school performance of having one abnormal ‘off’ year, reducing the pressures on teachers (“taking some of the heat out of it”, in the words of one expert) whilst simultaneously making the system of school accountability more robust.

However, whilst these changes may take the pressure off, they arguably don’t fundamentally alter the exam focus for schools. Reforms to the system of school accountability could be bolder, rethinking school performance measures, moving away from reliance on GCSE results. This could be done with more regular non-exam testing throughout secondary school. One interviewee suggested that the government could introduce annual testing of randomly selected students across all secondary school stages to measure how well schools are developing students’ proficiency in subjects (analogous to the PISA exams but focused on measuring school, rather than national, performance). Assessing school standards in this way would be more reliable, offering a more comprehensive vehicle to see whether schools (and the national education system in general) have become better or worse over time. Most importantly, it would reduce the pressures schools face that incentivise them to focus on revision and rote learning in preparation for GCSEs. Under this scenario, GCSE results would still play a part, but would be a much less significant factor in determining how well schools are performing.

Ofsted inspections, the other pillar of secondary school accountability alongside GCSE results, could also play a greater role in reducing the incentives schools face to focus on maximising exam grades at the expense of meaningful learning. The criteria that ratings are based on can weigh heavily on where schools focus their efforts. One expert asserted that Ofsted’s ability to shape learning in schools was fundamental, as “what gets measured [by Ofsted] gets done”. Viewed through this lens, there is considerable scope to use Ofsted as a ‘counterbalance’ to GCSEs by ensuring inspectors judge schools on the priority they attach to exam preparation and rote learning relative to that given to teaching curriculum content in an effective and meaningful way.

Implementation of reform

This briefing has so far set out what curriculum and assessment reforms the government should be focused on. But whilst it is important for policymakers to understand *what* to do, it is equally important to understand *how* to do it. The experience of Scotland’s implementation of the CfE is hugely instructive in this respect. Initially met with general acceptance across professional and political spheres, the crux of CfE’s problems is rooted in its implementation and how this has diverged from what was originally conceived.²³ The lesson for England is that the process by which reforms are carried out is critical to whether the objectives of reform will be achieved.

Expert-led and insulated from political interference

Much dissatisfaction with curriculum reform stems from perceptions of political interference, with reforms driven by ideology rather than evidence. This is a particular concern for subjects like History and English, which are more vulnerable to being dragged into culture wars. Furthermore, the impartiality of reform is critical to ensuring teachers, those enacting the changes on the ground, are on board.

In a speech to the SMF in 2021, then schools minister Nick Gibb decried figures suggesting that 83% of undergraduates “do not know that Wellington led the British army at Waterloo”.²⁴ Comments like this illustrate the challenges of developing a satisfactory History curriculum. First, his insistence on a ‘traditional’ approach to British history is liable to provoke a counter-reaction from those who favour a different approach. Second, even those who agree philosophically with his objective of ensuring all children know the ‘key facts’ of British history, there is likely to be substantial disagreement over which specific facts are key, creating a temptation to overload students rather than prioritise.

This elucidates the case for a non-partisan approach to curriculum reform that incorporates views from across society. On a more practical level, the ‘swings’ from one political point of view to another that typically occur as governments change colour often entail sweeping reforms to curriculum content and risk harming students’ interests.

Being a set of things that society has collectively decided to teach children, the curriculum is inherently political. But whilst some degree of political interference is inescapable, there is merit in a cross-party approach to curriculum reform. Fortunately, there are ways to carry out expert-led and non-partisan reform without undermining democracy.

Independent curriculum review group

The government should create an independent curriculum review group, as suggested by the Association of School and College Leaders, as a way to navigate reform to the curriculum and assessment regime.²⁵ A number of leading education and skills policy experts would be selected by DfE to sit on this group, and they would be required to consult with a variety of key stakeholders, such as teaching unions, research institutions and industry representatives, to help formulate recommendations. The group's terms of reference would be set by government, with the final decision on whether to accept those recommendations remaining with the government. It would thus operate in a similar way to the current independent School Teachers Review Body on teachers' pay.²⁶ A risk with such a scheme is that the government of the day could simply pick experts that suited its political agenda. Equally, governments could just ignore the recommendations of the independent body, or disband it altogether (albeit likely doing so at some political cost). But overall, whilst requiring a large degree of goodwill, this proposal seems like one of the most effective ways to approach curriculum reform. If this group is enacted, it is critical that a broad range of views and expertise are included, including those from outside the education sector. One expert said that "if we want a knowledge-based curriculum that also pays attention to the practical uses of that knowledge, then we should better utilise different views from industry in the curriculum reform process".

Citizens' Assembly?

Citizens Assemblies – a randomly selected representative group of citizens, given supporting information (e.g. expert testimony) and support to deliberate and achieve consensus – are another tool that the government should examine as a way to insulate curriculum reform from undue political interference. They could be tasked with navigating the more politically charged aspects of curriculum reform, such as what constitutes British history or which authors should be studied in English classes. The Labour Party has signalled a willingness to employ citizens' assemblies to determine policy on contentious issues, and this is an area as appropriate as any for their use.²⁷

Once established, a citizens' assembly would be tasked with setting the broad goals of curriculum reform. Once the assembly has democratically concluded what changes ought to be made, it would then be up to the independent curriculum review group of experts to determine how the aims of reform can be achieved. Under this scenario, the citizen assemblies would replace the role of government in defining what should be taught to children, but implementation would remain the domain of experts.

Reforms should be carried out on a periodic basis

Curriculum reform around the world has suffered from what is termed 'the implementation gap', the disconnect between the intention and outcome of reform.²⁸ A key finding that emerged from the research is that timescales on which reform occurs can have a great bearing on whether the aims of reform will be achieved.

To ensure that the teachers implementing changes on the ground are “allies of reform”, it is crucial that they have time and certainty over the timescale of reform. If changes are rushed, teachers will have a limited ability to absorb what they need to do and will consequently be less effective enacting them in the classroom setting. It is clear from the literature that the timing and pace of change must be gentle enough to enable effective implementation.

To overcome this challenge, reforms to the curriculum and assessment regime should be carried out on a pre-determined cyclical basis of ten years, with annual evaluation of the progress towards the objectives of reform. This would give teachers and other relevant stakeholders the ability to understand the changes they need to make and to effectively plan the implementation of such changes (with the added benefit of divorcing the curriculum reform process from the electoral cycle, further insulating it from political interference). This would put England in line with several other leading education nations such as Finland and Japan, both of whom conduct reforms on planned cycles spanning about ten years.²⁹

ENDNOTES

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