Labour Together

Broad and Bold

Building a Modern Curriculum

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About the Author

Oli de Botton has spent over 20 years in education in a range of roles. He started as an English teacher and has been a Head of Sixth Form and Headteacher. He co-founded School 21: a 4-18 school in Stratford, East London, and a charity, Voice 21, which seeks to put speaking at the heart of the curriculum. He is currently the CEO of the Careers and Enterprise Company - the national body for careers education. He has also held a number of policy and advisory roles.

Oli has been commissioned by Labour Together to write an independent report with a focus on what a future curriculum could look like.

About Labour Together

In Labour's wilderness years, Labour Together was founded by a group of MPs fighting to make the party electable again. Today, Labour Together is a think tank offering bold ideas for Britain under a Labour government.

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Executive Summary

Both Labour and the Conservatives have stated they intend to reform the curriculum during the next parliament. Answering that call, this paper sets out a series of principles fit for a modern curriculum, and the policy decisions that follow.

Children need to learn a lot about a lot before they grow up; this is a matter of equity and a matter of excellence

What children learn in school needs to be broad enough, for long enough, to help them find their way through life. A more varied curriculum means more opportunities to succeed. This is crucial. Young people are our future entrepreneurs and engineers, carers and inventors, scientists and poets. Their excellence, and Britain's future, will be built on a wide range of knowledge and skills. Our curriculum must be designed to provide it.

The broader the curriculum, the fairer it is

There is a difference between 'learning' (which is continuous, often informal - and unevenly distributed) and 'education' (which is structured, measured and focused on an end goal). Education is - to an extent - guaranteed through school; learning is often left to chance. This leaves some children missing out, particularly those without support from outside school. For the curriculum to be fairer, it must be broader, reaching beyond 'education' to encompass 'learning' too.

The future demands an alliance between breadth and depth

At the highest levels of business and government, leaders think in interdisciplinary ways. Climate change will only be solved if we combine the sciences with economics, psychology, design and many other disciplines besides. Young people need the chance to achieve excellence in a wide range of fields, both for the sake of their future and ours.

For a young person, a modern curriculum means:

- *Accessing more variety, for longer, with some areas receiving more emphasis and others less.*
- *Experiencing a wider range of opportunities – both inside and outside the classroom.*
- *Achieving a broader set of outcomes - academic, vocational, personal.*

There is political energy behind an expansive curriculum

The Labour Party has promised a curriculum and assessment review with an ambition to broaden the offer. The Government has set out plans to develop a new qualification for 16-19-year olds - the "Advanced British Standard" - with implied changes to GCSEs. Both parties accept that a new balance needs to be drawn - less narrow, and broader.

Despite progress, not everyone is succeeding

- 25% do not achieve a 'standard' pass in English and Maths by 19. Nearly 40% do not reach Level 3 (equivalent to 2 A-levels). Disadvantaged students are more likely to miss out.
- Students in England have fewer options and pathways compared to other countries, particularly post-16 when they specialise far earlier than most international peers, with negative consequences for the labour market.
- Access to high-quality enriching experiences is unevenly distributed.
- Young people (and their future employers) worry about their readiness for work. And over a third do not feel connected to school.

This paper will set out how a modern curriculum can address some of these challenges.

How do we expand a curriculum that already has a lot in it?

Debates about the curriculum are heated, which is hardly surprising. What children learn in compulsory education represents a canon spread over 14 years, an unparalleled amount of 'directed' time.

There are already varied demands on how that time is used. Employers want more skills. Universities want more subject knowledge. Young people wish for more experiences. Teachers worry about the pace of change.

The curriculum can't meet every expectation, and there are trade-offs between choosing one path over another. Opening up space for new things will require that less content is taught in other areas. For traditional subjects, like Science and Geography, this means studying fewer topics so as not to sacrifice depth (known as 'de-weighting' the curriculum). For skills, this means placing an emphasis on integrating skills learning into the existing curriculum.

A broader approach rests on four principles with each leading to different policy choices:

1. **Plural (vs. singular).** The national curriculum describes the need to introduce children to the 'best that has been thought and said', quoting a famous dictum of the nineteenth-century cultural critic Mathew Arnold. While this is indeed important, the curriculum also needs to prepare young people for work and life, and help them find the things they are passionate about. A curriculum will always have more than one goal. There is no other way to meet the ambitions of all children and their families.
2. **Connected (vs. siloed).** Subjects, both academic and vocational, are the building blocks of learning. However, as we see most obviously in primary education, some fundamental aspects of learning work across subjects (like reading, speaking and listening). These need practising and reinforcing across the curriculum and in a range of contexts.
3. **Outward facing (vs. insular).** The traditional classroom is not the only place the curriculum is delivered. A modern approach provides opportunities for young people to develop skills and deepen knowledge in different contexts (e.g. workplaces, adventure, sport, creative enterprise, workshops, individually). As well as extending education outside the classroom, we should bring the outside world in. Important issues from the wider world should be discussed and debated in school.
4. **Directed (vs. dictated).** The curriculum sets out goals and determines content. Teaching involves bringing learning to life, careful sequencing and assessment. This inevitably requires tailoring by circumstance, which works best by devolving some decisions to schools themselves. A degree of choice, within a national framework, is a feature of a good system, not a bug.

What areas of the curriculum need addressing?

An excellent foundation in reading, writing and Maths

Reading, writing and Maths are fundamental, now as they always have been. They are the keys to accessing all further study and work. In each domain, there are important technical elements that need to be in place early on to reach proficiency (such as matching letters with sounds in reading). However, excellence requires a broader and multi-layered approach. Learning to read is a cross-curricular, whole-school endeavour, and is not limited only to English classes. Meanwhile, cultural attitudes to Maths are holding back many pupils, particularly girls. A modern curriculum must prescribe a wide range of interventions.

Policy decisions:

- *Should writing and numeracy be further supported with systematic approaches in early primary and pre-school, e.g matching phonics for reading?*
- *Should Maths and English be studied in some form until 18?*
- *Is there enough practical focus and relevance in the curriculum to ensure young people leave school literate and numerate?*

Broadening the range of subjects and experiences

A rounded education encompasses learning to play an instrument, performing on a stage, and using your hands to build and craft. In the independent sector, these opportunities are widely available. The same is not true everywhere in the state sector.

A broad curriculum boosts 'taught' subjects like Drama, Art and Music which, amongst many other things, build creative capacities that are of use far beyond a stage or studio. This demands ensuring these subjects have equal weighting compared to other subjects for as long as possible (e.g. by making Music as important as Geography). It also means ensuring the content has a focus on applied elements like active sport or performance, particularly in assessments.

Other areas to consider include:

1. How to encourage creativity in subjects outside of the arts. The OECD is publishing the results of creative thinking assessments later this year which will establish which countries are excelling at this and why.
2. The relationship between 'taught' subjects and connected 'co-curriculum' activities e.g. playing in a sports team, carrying out independent study or new methods of teaching and learning like 'Maths circles'.
3. How to include activities that are not strictly allied to existing subjects, like volunteering, which provide opportunities to develop important personal characteristics.

For the latter two, a curriculum could set out a common set of experiences young people should have access to by a certain age. This could become a formal entitlement, supported by better local and national coordination with co- and extra-curricular providers (e.g. charities, the youth sector, foundations, museums).

Policy decisions:

- *Should arts subjects such as Music and Drama be better supported at primary (with specialist training and input) and have more prominence in secondary (even if not included in examinations)? Should creative thinking be embedded across the curriculum?*
- *Should greater emphasis be placed on applying learning in subjects like Drama? Should there be more active sports in PE?*
- *Should the curriculum include a set of experiences for young people (with associated learning outcomes and support from across government)?*

Helping young people get ready for work

The worlds of education and work often talk past each other. Businesses say they want more skills, both specific and general. Teachers counter that they need to build knowledge (and that skills are hard to teach anyway). While there is truth in that, there are three types of skills that can be developed:

1. Skills that are inherent in subjects, and build out from knowledge, such as method evaluation in Science or data handling in Maths. These need space and time to be carefully taught and then practised throughout.

2. Skills that are relevant across subjects (and important for work readiness), such as speaking or digital skills. Speaking skills, in particular, have the power to meet academic and vocational goals: early language development is crucial to reading; presenting and teamwork are critical to the world of work.

3. Skills that are directly related to specific pathways or jobs. These are best developed through high-quality technical subjects and meaningful engagement between employers, young people, and their teachers.

Policy decisions:

- *Should speaking and digital skills be included across the curriculum with associated support for all teachers and space for students to practise e.g. in classrooms, workplaces etc?*
- *How much emphasis should be placed on building work readiness e.g. young people working with employers to engage with 'real' problems?*
- *What is the role of vocational subjects pre-16 and their connection to post-16 routes?*

Contemporary issues: the tyranny of relevance or the relevance of tyranny?

Part of the joy and jeopardy of school life is the way contemporary issues bleed into the classroom. Whether the subject is an international dispute, an internet controversy, gender identity or electoral politics, teachers often find themselves at the sharp end of the biggest debates of the day.

These issues affect young people, often profoundly, and so can't be ignored. A modern curriculum helps schools manage these discussions with care and balance. It must also make it easier for teachers, who can easily feel they are dealing with issues far beyond their expertise. The discipline of History is important and helpful in this regard. Thinking like a historian, with a critical eye on sources, is a key way of navigating the modern world. Local histories are a particularly fruitful place to start thinking about social issues. Likewise, a text-based approach to discussing pastoral concerns provides the necessary distance for young people to explore any worries, whilst also reinforcing their reading skills.

Policy decisions:

- *How can we use the taught skills of History to help young people engage in contemporary issues, including the use of 'local histories'?*
- *Should the 'pastoral' curriculum have greater importance – e.g through using 'distancing texts' and drama techniques?*

A word on assessment

There is much debate about the role of assessment, in particular exams and qualifications. This paper will not rehearse the arguments except to say that written (or digital) exams are hugely important when thinking about measuring the knowledge young people have learned through their subjects. They can, however, be less helpful when judging a young person's performance skills, or as evidence of their wider strengths. A number of jurisdictions around the world, including some pilot work in England, are looking to develop digital learner profiles as a way of recognising a broader view. There is also interest in using a unique learner number to capture learning in school and beyond. The wider point here is that what children study is intimately connected to how it is taught and assessed. Any review of the former has implications for the latter.

How best to manage change

This paper describes changes to the curriculum that intend to be ambitious, and some steps that must be taken to get there (with more expanded changes included in *Appendix B*). However, there are existing challenges in nurseries, schools and colleges that might get in the way and will need to be addressed. In particular, there are concerns relating to the teacher workforce and wider support services for young people. A new curriculum should consider the craft of teaching as its essential building block and support it in the following ways:

- Start by working within teachers' expertise (e.g. for secondary teachers, this would mean building newer skills from established subject knowledge).
- Provide opportunities for teachers to develop a wider repertoire of evidence-based techniques to match the broader offer for students (e.g. the methods for developing a 'dialogic classroom').
- Bring in any changes slowly and ensure they are included in teacher training support.
- Ensure changes have a degree of consensus and can last beyond electoral cycles.

Introduction

The case for a modern curriculum

We are forever told that the curriculum needs to be ambitious. Young people need to be literate and numerate. They should excel in important subjects like Science and History. They should love learning for its own sake, but also be prepared for the world of work. They should be financially savvy and digitally responsible. They should be active citizens, living healthy lives. They should experience success and failure, and build character on playing fields, theatre stages, and in the great outdoors.

The sheer number of people with a view on our curriculum is dizzying: parents, teachers, the Government, universities, employers. Each has different priorities for what young people should be taught, and all are legitimate. The result, however, is that children find themselves caught in the crossfire of a fight for time in the school curriculum (which is itself engaged in an ever more challenging competition for young people's attention in this age of over-stimulating online content).

Faced with this, there is a strategic choice for any government looking at the curriculum, as both main parties are seeking to do during the next Parliament. Either, you create a singular focus on the grounds of efficiency and effectiveness. In doing so, you argue that it's impossible to include everything or please everyone, and so it's better to narrow down and concentrate on some key, well-established areas of knowledge.

Or, you choose another route – the one this paper recommends. Here, you argue that learning a broader range of knowledge and skills in different contexts is a better bet for the future. More, in this case, does indeed mean more. Breadth matters, even if there are side effects that have to be managed. After all, what better place to have big ambitions than in the education of young people?

Learning more early on and for longer

The case for breadth is more than just a philosophical talking point or a way of managing the diverse interests of all stakeholders. There are strong reasons, both educational and economic, that learning more for longer makes sense.

International systems are broader

A-level students in England study an average of 2.64 subjects. In the OECD, on average, that figure is 7. Vocational learners often focus on just one area (albeit with some wider compulsory elements). The evidence suggests that this has negative labour market consequences, with

higher wage returns going to those who follow wider study programmes. After all, adaptability is seen as an important skill for future employees.

Breadth gives young people more time to discover what animates them

The 'problem of premature specialisation' was one of the driving forces behind the introduction of the new A-level qualification in 1951. The view at the time was that keeping things broader for longer would avoid a cliff edge at 15-16. Then, as now, it was understood that a curriculum that restricts access to a wide range of learning privileges those who might have access to greater opportunity by virtue of their circumstance, and excludes those who might excel in pathways not currently offered. A narrow curriculum exacerbates these problems, and today over a third of young people miss out on "achievement Level 3" (equivalent to 2 A-levels) by 19.

Young people pursue different pathways post 16 and post 18 - academic, vocational and a mix of the two; the curriculum should help get them ready

The cliff edge described above means many young people cannot meet their ambitions, with damaging consequences for them and for the nation as a whole. A broad curriculum, encompassing both knowledge and skills, gives young people a first-hand sense of what the world of work could be. If we want to secure stronger transitions between school, further study, training and work then this is vital. This is particularly true for disadvantaged learners who face multiple barriers at points of transition. It is also crucial to ensuring young people stay in education, training or employment for longer, an area where on some measures we are behind the OECD average.

There are areas where more time and focus is essential

Among the many curriculum disagreements, there is one area of firm consensus: we must ensure young people leave school confident readers, fluent writers and proficient with numbers. Each is crucial to accessing further study and thriving far beyond the classroom. A one-grade improvement in GCSE English is associated with an earnings return of £7,300. For Maths, that figure rises to £14,500. Both are greater uplifts than for other subjects.

Learning happens in a wide range of contexts - but access to that variety favours the wealthy

Activities such as volunteering are powerful learning opportunities, and have been shown to have an impact on academic achievement, as well as supporting confidence and motivation. There are also links between music and sport and intentions to stay in education. However there is no common entitlement to this type of learning and so disadvantaged young people are more likely to miss out.

Young people (and their future employers) worry about their work readiness

A common argument made in favour of changing the curriculum is linked to the fast-changing world of work. New industries and frontiers of knowledge mean we need to change how we prepare young people. Whilst it's difficult to accurately predict the future (and therefore the skills required), it is already clear that 'work readiness' is important to get right. Young people's confidence in critical work-related skills, like speaking and listening, dips during secondary school (despite being high on entry). This is particularly acute for disadvantaged students, who are less likely to meet age related skills levels.

Principles for reviewing the curriculum

The two main parties are making the case for a modern and broad curriculum. Labour's fifth mission for government - Breaking Down the Barriers of Opportunity - promises an all-encompassing, expert-led curriculum and assessment review. The stated goals include spreading excellence and broadening the offer. Equally, in December 2023, the Government launched a consultation on a new post-16 curriculum offer called the Advanced British Standard. The model would include the opportunity for young people to study more subjects to 18 and as well as an enrichment, employability and pastoral entitlement.

Both are significant and require broad consensus. Labour's review would lead to a national curriculum compulsory for all schools, including Academies (who can currently opt out). The Government's reforms would lead to changes in teaching hours post-16 and an implied change to GCSEs. In any scenario a new curriculum will set the weather for the rest of the system and impact how teachers train, how universities admit and how training routes are structured.

Whatever happens, change is coming. With it comes a renewed focus on breadth. But what principles should policy-makers use to manage and influence it? What should the scope of change be? How can we show enough ambition to do justice to our young people, without overwhelming a system that is already under pressure?

This document argues for a broad approach that rests on four principles:

- **Plural (vs. singular)** - a curriculum with multiple objectives.
- **Connected (vs. siloed)** - a curriculum built on subjects and the connections between them.
- **Outward facing (vs. insular)** - a curriculum that stretches to a range of contexts.
- **Directed (vs. dictated)** - a curriculum that starts with a common entitlement but makes space for local discretion.

Ensuring the system isn't overwhelmed

Focus on the important gaps: 'rich/poor' and 'now/next'

Each curriculum iteration (the last one was under the 2010-2015 coalition government) is a view at a moment-in-time rather than the final word. The focus should therefore be on two gaps. Firstly, what is missing now for young people, particularly those who face the greatest barriers. And secondly, what might be most useful to them over the next 10-15 years. Given that curriculum reform takes time and that change is constant, with a never-ending pressure to learn new things, a focus on these gaps can discipline reform.

The non-examined curriculum is still the curriculum

Not everything a child learns needs to be assessed. In fact, not everything a child learns *can* be assessed. Equally, not everything that is assessed needs to be included in a qualification. The non-examined curriculum is an important space to broaden the offer within the school day, providing an opportunity for young people to practise new skills and gain diverse experiences.

Teachers are the 'craftspeople' who will deliver a modern curriculum - they need space, time and support

Teaching is a complex task. It relies on transmitting lots of information, in an engaging way, into the minds of large numbers of sometimes recalcitrant learners. Because learning happens in our heads, teachers need to then deploy a range of tools to check that what's been taught has also been learned, and to provide feedback that moves things along. This is a craft that needs honing and time. Any new curriculum is only as successful as the incentives that keep excellent teachers teaching it for longer. This demands, amongst other things, high-quality professional learning that affords space and trust for teachers to develop and build their repertoire.

Rigour matters

Those who argue against a broader curriculum often voice concerns about what new or different content might mean for young people who face barriers, and for teachers who (at the secondary level) are trained primarily in subject disciplines. In particular, they worry that a move away from well-established subjects risks undermining rigour. These are important concerns and there are two ways a curriculum review can respond:

1. Subject disciplines are a vital foundation for developing knowledge, ways of thinking and specific skills. In science experiments, for example, young people learn how to collaborate and communicate with others. Subjects should remain the central organising structure for a curriculum.

2. Where there is new content - or new contexts for learning outside of subjects - this should be supported by research and practical examples that demonstrate impact for all children. The growing body of evidence in favour of developing speaking skills as their own discipline is a good example.

There are trade-offs in any curriculum - it is important to be clear what they might be and then help the system prepare

All curriculums place bets and so there are side effects. Some focus more heavily on skills, some on knowledge. Some seek to limit vocational options, while others expand them. A curriculum reform is a chance to establish emphasis and address gaps.

The case for breadth creates a trade-off against the weight of content in some areas (as the Government's proposed Advanced British Standard makes clear). Whilst there are costs to losing topics, there are also costs to denying young people access to other opportunities. Often the more informal aspects of education, where children can practise their skills, are sacrificed on the premise of content coverage. A way of thinking about this balancing act is included in *Appendix A*.

The rest of this paper takes the case for breadth as its starting premise and explores how it might look in practice. The parts are structured around the areas set out in the Labour Party's proposed review and, it should be noted, are designed to be illustrative rather than comprehensive:

1. How to achieve excellence in reading, writing and Maths?
2. What does it mean to broaden the subjects and experiences for young people?
3. How do we build work readiness with rigour?
4. What's the best way of bringing contemporary issues into the curriculum?

(1) A strong foundation in reading, writing and Maths

This is an area where consensus is building. The Government's wish to see Maths and English studied, in some form, to 18 mirrors a policy previously proposed by Ed Miliband when he was Labour's leader in 2012. Labour's current approach, meanwhile, is focused on ensuring support early on, even before primary school.

Much has been written about the barriers in this area, not least the difficulty in recruiting enough teachers and the need to ensure the GCSE resit process works for more learners. However, it is worth setting out here the curriculum principles that arise and some examples of how we can make progress.

English and Maths stand out, perhaps uniquely, as subjects with huge canons of knowledge that can be studied to the highest level as well as being the context for learning many of the most essential life skills. Literacy rates and comfort with numbers are foundations for access to good employment and are therefore a key measure of the relative health of the workforce. The curriculum's primary responsibility is to ensure everyone has enough literacy and numeracy to function in the world, whilst also giving young people the opportunity for further study if they choose.

Although learning to read, write and be confident with numbers all require different curriculum approaches, they share a number of common features:

1. There are important technical elements that need to be in place to reach proficiency. To attain excellence, meanwhile, you need a broader curriculum approach.
2. The technical elements - e.g. being able to move from a concrete understanding of numbers to an abstract one - benefit from structured programmes that are embedded early on and pursued until young people have strong foundations.
3. Cultural barriers stand between moving from proficiency to excellence. Maths anxiety is an observable issue that is holding young people back, particularly girls. Reading is a habit that requires young people to be independently motivated.

A modern curriculum focuses on both the technical and wider barriers to excellence

Learning to read and reading to learn

England's readers are doing well compared to others, with successive governments having placed particular focus on reading. David Blunkett, New Labour's first Education Secretary, introduced national literacy (and numeracy) strategies, together with training and increased assessment. The emphasis on phonics in primary school has been a hallmark of the current Government's approach. However, given reading's importance, there will always be a case for further emphasis.

Excellence in reading has a number of components. It's about equipping children with sounds and helping them understand the meaning of words. It's about supporting them to comprehend through vocabulary acquisition and giving them a range of opportunities to practise. As young people use these skills to access the rest of the curriculum, nothing is more important than getting reading right.

Cross-curricular reading

One of the barriers that prevents young people from becoming confident readers is their relative lack of knowledge. Learning to decode a word phonetically is not the same as understanding it. The cognitive psychologist Daniel Willingham gives a famous example about the word 'baseball'. You cannot decode its meaning from its constituent parts – you must already understand the whole.

There are a number of ways to remedy this. Learning vocabulary in a traditional way is important. So is a broad curriculum with lots of knowledge and lots of reading opportunities.

Cultural experiences are important too. Understanding baseball might be best achieved by watching it live or playing it (which also accrues other benefits at the same time). Of course, you can't go on a trip for every bit of vocabulary. However, we can see reading as a whole curriculum endeavour linked to wider experiences (which, as things stand, are more easily and often accessed by more advantaged young people).

The mechanics of reading make the case for a connected curriculum. All teachers are teachers of reading because all subjects require reading. Difficulty reading is therefore a barrier to access in every subject. Building on primary practice, there are effective and repeatable cross-curricular reading methods at secondary level that are critical for all teachers to learn. All curriculums should mandate them.

A local canon

Another barrier to excellence in reading and writing is motivation. Here, there are a full range of school-based and external interventions to help, including personalised online programmes, writing competitions, and reading role models.

One approach that a modern curriculum should explore is more local ownership of the sorts of books studied. This could help young people and their parents engage with the curriculum process, which can otherwise seem remote. It is something already being delivered in a number settings, including Cowes Enterprise College, which has linked its Key Stage 3 curriculum to local maritime industries.

For this model to work, schools need space, and the discretion (and permission) to make connections between the curriculum and the outside world. As argued in part 4 of this report, this model also has the power to help children engage with contemporary issues

Modern Maths

Maths is an area where both main political parties have placed particular emphasis. Labour has announced a desire to introduce 'real world Maths' so young people can connect classroom learning to practical application, such as by linking percentages to opening an ISA (a specific example that shows how this approach could be an important springboard to a broader financial education). The current Government has stated an intention for all young people to study some sort of Maths to 18. The framing here and elsewhere points to some principles for reform:

1. Maths is essential to everyday life and there are considerable benefits in making this clear through the curriculum. Evidence suggests this is true for primary Science too.

2. There are negative attitudes to Maths that are holding some children back and leading to wider problems. Eight million adults in Britain have Maths skills lower than those expected of a nine-year old.

The deficit that is most pressing is a practical one, and it is more about numeracy and less about studying Maths to a high level. This makes sense given that Maths is already the most popular A-level.

'Phonics' for numeracy

There has been progress in primary Maths achievement over the past 20 years compared to other countries. This has been built on investment in high quality Maths teaching and programmes like the 'Maths mastery' approach. However, to surpass our international peers there is more to do.

There is currently an expert advisory group looking at the Maths curriculum to 18. Its remit could be expanded to examine the most effective approach to Maths teaching early on, including in pre-school settings. Evidence suggests a more practical approach is effective for 4-5 year olds, including 'learning through play', using real objects and meaningful contexts to introduce learning, and building on individual children's interests. Writing could benefit from a systematic approach early on too - with some initial thinking underway.

Numbers make the world go round

For older children, there are a number of successful models that seek to demonstrate how Maths connects not only to careers but the practicalities of daily life. The goal here is to make classroom study feel relevant to young people's future. In practice this might include teaching data handling in Year 9 with reference to how modern industries like AI rely on this skill.

An extension of this model could include opportunities for teachers to work with employers to co-design curriculum content so young people can understand the up-to-date application of the Maths they study. This could be accompanied by student site visits to consolidate learning. A US programme showed gains in student learning as a result of this approach.

'I hate Maths'

Negative attitudes towards Maths are well evidenced. Often this presents as anxiety which disproportionately affects girls whose enthusiasm decreases over time. Amongst other things, this is thought to reduce the number of girls studying Maths, who made up just 39% of A-Level awards (and 29% in Further Maths) in 2020. It is also a factor in the underrepresentation of women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) careers.

The reasons are complex, but when asked about barriers young people in general pointed to a lack of confidence, with some pointing to fewer opportunities to work practically. This would point to a broader range of curriculum interventions to build greater motivation.

One example is University College London's work on the concept of STEM capital which includes the knowledge, experiences and relatability of STEM subjects for primary aged children. When the curriculum builds STEM capital through varied and engaging material and experiences, young people's attitudes improve. In practice this includes STEM clubs, Maths challenges and the involvement of parents.

Policy decisions:

- *Should writing and numeracy be further supported with systematic approaches in early primary and pre-school (to match phonics for reading)?*
- *Should Maths and English be studied in some form until 18?*
- *Is there enough practical focus and relevance in the curriculum to ensure young people leave school literate and numerate?*

(2) Broadening subjects and experiences for young people

Creating, performing, crafting, volunteering. All are part of a rich and rounded education. All are opportunities widely available in private schools, but are more scarce in state schools. These activities build confidence and skills, but they also help to raise standards and influence intentions to stay in education. A modern curriculum must strive to level the playing field.

There are three elements to consider:

1. The content and status of 'taught' subjects like PE, Drama, Art and Design, Music.
2. The relationship between 'taught' subjects and related 'co-curricular' activities, such as playing in a sports team, conducting individual research or Science Technology Engineering Maths (STEM) clubs.
3. How and whether to include activities that are not strictly allied to existing subjects, such as volunteering, but still provide powerful learning experiences (extra-curricular).

The Curriculum

Subjects like PE, Drama, Dance, Music and Art and Design build creative and physical capacities. They are theoretical and practical disciplines, best experienced by adapting 'knowledge-first' approaches. Taught music, for instance, gives young people opportunities to practise and perform in ensembles, whilst also helping them understand the cultural power of different genres.

A curriculum review needs to ensure these subjects are seen as equal to others, from primary school upwards. Drama is not currently included discreetly in the national curriculum and yet has extraordinary power for young people, including in supporting their personal development, as this report will go on to show

Parity has two parts. One relates to the value of these subjects in qualifications at 16 and 18 and their prominence in school performance measures. The other, relates to their inherent value as part of the non-examined curriculum. Young people having access early on and for as long as possible is important, whether or not this results in a grade.

Studies show that participation in these subjects has declined in recent years, particularly at GCSE, and yet their importance to the economy has grown. There are examples of post-16 institutions that show where creative capacities can lead, however there is a strong case for starting earlier.

East London Arts and Music (ELAM)

ELAM is a 16-19 Sixth Form College that describes itself as an 'industry academy' for young people who want to pursue a career in music, production or games design. The college's founders identified limitations in education options for children with creative passions and talents and a particular lack of meaningful opportunities for young people from lower-income backgrounds.

ELAM's 300 'trainees' study a curriculum that has been co-designed with industry in each specialist area. Diplomas in Music, Games Design and Film & Television Production are studied to Level 3 (equivalent to A-level). This is complemented by English and Maths and a wealth of industry encounters through masterclasses, mentoring and work experience. Student outcomes are strong and there is increasing demand from young people.

Later in this report, we discuss the role of vocational learning pre-16. The model above suggests there is much to learn from the post-16 system.

More broadly, it is important to note that creativity is not the preserve of arts subjects. The OECD's decision to test Creative Thinking in 2022 suggests strong international demand for working out how to build creativity throughout the curriculum. Creativity Collaboratives are currently being funded in eight areas of England to develop practice and any curriculum review should draw on their learning.

The Co-Curriculum

The 'taught' curriculum is amplified by connections to 'co-curricular' activities. Teaching about anaerobic respiration in PE might be best understood (and enjoyed) through competitive sport. Whilst the former is, to an extent, guaranteed through the curriculum, opportunities for the latter are left to chance.

Co-curricular activities are often academically enriching. Extended and higher project qualifications allow young people to conduct independent research. The Harkness method combines group work, exploration and study of texts. Maths circles, described below, have a similar approach that can be adapted for primary and secondary.

Maths Circles

Maths Education for Social Mobility and Excellence (MESME) is a charity that aims to develop mathematical reasoning through Maths Circles. This involves a small group of students coming together regularly with an experienced, knowledgeable mentor to grapple with intriguing questions, to discover and explore exciting ideas, and to learn to think like advanced mathematicians.

The questions, tasks and explorations in Maths Circles develop students' mathematical reasoning and expand their mathematical curiosity, at the same time as refining their technical knowledge and skills. In Maths Circles:

1. *Students engage with tasks that they find challenging but satisfying.*
2. *Students develop their knowledge of significant topics in mathematics.*
3. *Students follow a coherent and carefully sequenced curriculum.*
4. *Students learn and develop mathematically by the conversations they have about the tasks they are engaging with: either individual conversations with their mentor, or conversations with their peers that are moderated and steered by the mentor.*

There are local efforts across the country to provide more of these opportunities. Policy often coalesces around two features:

1. A statement of entitlement for young people (e.g. 11 cultural experiences by 11).
2. The mobilisation of local institutions and charities to offer experiences to young people.

At the national level, there could be a systematic approach, such as:

- A statement of expectation that identifies what experiences we would ideally want young people to have and what quality looks like.
- The ability for the system to track progress against the entitlement at the student level to identify gaps.
- Local coordination of providers to target deficits, with a focus on young people who face more barriers.
- A commitment to 'de-weight' curriculum content overall to provide space for these activities, achieved through fewer topics rather than fewer subjects.

Previous reviews have highlighted that there is both appetite for this type of activity and already a lot of school and family spending in the system, with a large range of providers. The job is to make sure this is well targeted.

The Extra-Curriculum

Activities such as adventure, volunteering and engagement with employers broaden horizons and build skills. Characteristics like resilience and teamwork which are desirable but harder to teach are often best developed in these contexts. These experiences therefore warrant inclusion in an offer for students. As with the co-curricular approach described above, better coordination, expectations (via a curriculum) and data would mobilise wider sources of support for young people.

The development of an extra-curricular system is a multi-institutional endeavour and therefore would benefit from a cross-government, mission-led approach. The Department of Culture Media and Sport has the power to direct youth provision, charities and creative industries. The Department for Business has sway over employers. The opportunity now is to set expectations, convene locally and build capacity.

Policy decisions:

- *Should arts subjects such as Music and Art be better supported at primary (with specialist training and input) and have more prominence in secondary (even if not included in examinations)?*
- *Should creative thinking be embedded across the curriculum?*
- *Should creation and performance have greater prominence in Music and Drama assessment?*
- *Portfolios of evidence are used to help assess GCSE Art and Design – could this be extended elsewhere?*
- *Should the curriculum include a set of experiences for young people (with associated learning outcomes and support from across government)?*

(3) Helping young people get ready for work

"What, if any relation, should exist between school teaching and the work of life?" So asked a Royal Commission on Technical Education in the year 1882.

The worlds of education and work have been in dialogue for over a century, but each has often talked past the other. Businesses say they want more skills, both of a specific and general nature (meaning more heat-pump engineers and more critical thinkers). Teachers counter that they need to build knowledge. Students say they want more hands-on, work-related learning. Headteachers say the curriculum is full enough.

There are rapid changes in the economy that warrant a more porous relationship between educators and employers. A greater focus on young people's readiness for work is essential. Global changes, like – more people living into very old age, rapidly accelerating climate change and the growth of AI will disrupt every industry. It would be odd if education was left untouched.

Much has been written about potential changes to the means of education, such as the use of Artificial Intelligence in marking, assessment and teacher support. However, changes in the economy also have the power to disrupt the substance - the curriculum - of education. They have in fact already done so. through a new computing qualification at GCSE. The Mayor of Greater Manchester's proposed reforms, introducing a "Manchester Baccalaureate", rest heavily on the growth of the tech industry in the city region.

Skills, skills, skills

Over the past 10 years there have been significant reforms to the skills system including new apprenticeship standards, the introduction of T-levels and wider changes to vocational learning. Each has been designed to improve the quality of skills-based learning post-16 and young people's transition to work.

These reforms have focused on new qualifications and have left the pre-16 curriculum largely untouched. However, both main political parties have expressed an interest in creating a more seamless approach, one that marries knowledge and skills throughout the system. The Government's plans for the Advanced British Standard seek to bring academic and technical routes post-16 under one framing, with an implied reform to GCSE as well. Labour has emphasised the need to integrate work-related skills within subjects.

There are three ways of thinking about the skills that are, or could be, developed in the curriculum:

1. Skills that are inherent in subjects and build from knowledge such as method evaluation in Science or data handling in Maths.
2. Skills that are relevant across subjects and important for work readiness in general such as speaking or digital skills.
3. Skills that are directly related to specific vocational pathways or jobs.

There are opportunities to develop all three in a productive way, respecting the needs of educators and employers.

Skills within subjects

One of the criticisms of skills-based curriculums is their perceived opposition to subjects and knowledge. But in truth, knowledge is the foundation for most skills. The key for teachers is to strike a balance between building enough knowledge so that young people can use it in practice. Knowledge comes first, but applying it is the goal.

Consider predicting the outcomes of chemical reactions, something children must do in Science GCSE. Reaching the right answer requires the mobilisation of subject-specific content and then its application. In this moment, knowledge and skills mesh in the mind to produce excellent work.

As described earlier, there are opportunities to build these subject skills in context through more holistic approaches, including linking to their real-life application. We have already explored how subjects like Drama might have their applied skills more pronounced in assessments. The key question for a curriculum is to identify the knowledge base that supports subject-specific skills and then provide opportunities for learning and practice throughout the curriculum.

Skills across subjects

The notion of transferable skills - skills that can be learned in one context and used in another - is contested. For some, the analysis used in History is so specific it has limited relevance to the analysis we use when thinking about Shakespeare's plays.

Others, particularly those who value work readiness (and often have experience employing school-leavers), suggest there are a set of transferable, essential skills. Speaking and listening, for example, are used in the workplace across different contexts in much the same way. This school of thought argues that young people would do well to at least understand these workplace skills, and would ideally have opportunities to learn them in school. Practice in this

area is increasingly strong in the independent sector where scholarship and skills often go hand-in-hand.

There are practical ways to balance these interests. “Oracy” - the skill of speaking - has the power to meet the demands of the curriculum and the workplace. In the early years, the acquisition of oral language is critical to learning to read and write (and an area where social disadvantage can be pronounced). As described earlier, Maths Circles and the Harkness method embed academic excellence through discussion and oral exploration (the latter is used in some of the most elite schools in America).

Equally, the skills of presentation - so crucial in the world of work and often in job application processes - can and are well simulated within education. Working together - important in curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular contexts - is built on effective talking frames, clear roles and scaffolding for pupils who struggle. These sorts of speaking skills are best reinforced when they are clearly defined and repeated with a common language across the curriculum (see below for the framing around group talk already being used across the system).

Figure A: Guidance on group talking for students from the oracy charity, Voice 21

The evidence - and an increasing body of practice, particularly at primary - points to a specific focus on oracy between and within subjects. This should include opportunities for young people to practise their oracy in a range of settings, such as the classroom, the workplace, and parents evenings. There is a clear deficit to consider. National tracking suggests young people's confidence in speaking dips during secondary education despite being high on entry.

Digital skills are also known to have academic and applied value. Computer Science is an important subject for those who are seeking further study. However, like literacy and numeracy, there is a strong case that all learners need a certain level of proficiency, not least so they can exploit and not be exploited by new technologies.

Care is required here. Given the training requirement for teachers, we must not overload the skills than run across the curriculum and so diminish the likelihood of implementation. Reading must come first. Equally, technical digital skills - like the ability to operate common programmes - have most value when they are taught in concert with the skills required to interact - safely - with digital media. The former without the latter can leave young people accessing more and more unsafe content with no defence mechanisms. This report will later explain how the 'pastoral' curriculum has a role to play in helping young people manage these issues.

In practice, the first stage of a curriculum review should be gathering the essential digital skills that need to be taught *in concert*. Only then can we establish if and how they can best be taught and reinforced across the curriculum.

Skills and jobs

The transition between education and work can be difficult for young people, particularly those who face barriers. Ensuring learners have secure pathways, including work-based routes like apprenticeships, is important to prevent them from becoming NEET ("Not in Education, Employment or Training"). Part of the challenge here is exposure to the world of work and the skills required before young people have to make a decision about what's next. Misaligned expectations between young people and employers is a commonly cited reason for why work-based routes or early talent schemes fail.

This is an area where helping employers, learners and their teachers interact with purpose can make a difference. Ongoing and employer-focused careers education has an important role to play, particularly if it starts early and is in the mainstream of school and college life.

Disadvantaged young people who have fewer connections and social networks disproportionately benefit from high-quality careers education. As part of this, direct workplace experiences can be effective learning moments, particularly if they focus on problems to solve.

Reinvented workplace experiences

School: *George Dixon Academy, Edgbaston, Birmingham*

Employer*: Maternity and Children Team at Ladywood and Perry Barr Locality Partnership (NHS)*

Health and social care students at George Dixon Academy were trained as community researchers and completed projects on maternity care and aftercare. Throughout the project, learners accessed clinicians from Birmingham Women's Hospital and developed their knowledge and understanding of allied health career pathways.

Learners involved in the project undertook visits to the hospital, met a range of clinicians including midwives and undertook a specific work-related research project which involved presenting their findings back to a group of midwives at the hospital. Learners who experienced the programme were able to confidently describe the value of the programme in terms of giving them a line of sight through to allied careers pathways. They also developed skills through the application of a real project which contributed to on-going community health research in the local area.

In programmes like that described above, workplace experiences are most effective when they are planned in advance (with clear learning outcomes), reflected on afterwards and brought to some sort of conclusion. Employers, who best understand what they are looking for, are well placed to be part of any assessment of the learning. It is also important they connect to wider careers programmes, rather than one-offs.

More broadly, high quality employer-led technical qualifications like T-levels, alongside more work-based routes like apprenticeships, are critical to a broad curriculum offer for young people. These are primarily questions about pathways post-16, but there remain vocational options pre-16. These qualifications accrue strong benefits to learners, including reductions in exclusion and increases in attendance. However, they account for only 5% of entries. A curriculum review should consider whether access to vocational routes at GCSE needs enhancing. This is a subject which has been much discussed in other papers (and relates to calls for a wider baccalaureate of subjects from 14-19).

Policy decisions:

- *Should speaking and digital skills be included across the curriculum with associated support for all teachers? And should we make space for students to practise, e.g. in classrooms and workplaces?*
- *How much emphasis should be placed on building work readiness, including young people working with employers to solve 'real' problems?*
- *What is the role of vocational subjects pre-16 and their connection to post-16 routes?*

(4) Contemporary issues: the tyranny of relevance or the relevance of tyranny?

Part of the joy and jeopardy of school life is the way in which contemporary issues bleed into the classroom, often long before they reach the attention of policy-makers.

Schools and colleges locate discussion of contemporary issues in different places. There is the Citizenship curriculum (statutory for maintained secondary schools but not for primaries and Academies). This tends to focus on the nature of being a citizen in the UK, including the political process. There is a linked requirement to promote British values. There is also Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education, which is non-statutory but recommended (and left to local tailoring). An element of this - Relationships and Sex Education - is compulsory, with Relationships taught in primary, and Relationships and Sex Education in secondary. There is also a general duty to develop children's spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

Form time, assemblies and drop-down days (where activities replace the regular timetable), alongside individual lessons, also tend to be the places these curriculums are delivered.

There are a number of questions to consider here, particularly what is mandatory and what isn't as well as who decides what should and should not be taught. As a general principle, a broad curriculum finds ways for young people to learn about and discuss contemporary issues that affect them and wider society. And they do so in a way that promotes balance and connects to the wider goals of the curriculum.

The history of now

Part of the challenge when discussing contemporary issues is they often sit outside the expertise of teachers. At secondary this can happen when Citizenship is not delivered by specialists. The same is true when all teachers have a role (as they tend to in primary).

As described in the sections above, subjects contain powerful ways of thinking that can be used to serve wider purposes. History, which has a focus on critical thinking and evaluation, is essential for discussing the present. What better way to explore the validity of internet claims than by thinking like a historian? The questions historians pose of the past – 'Where does this source come from?' 'Who benefits from its use?' 'How does it fit into wider narratives?' – can just as well be turned to the present.

In practice this might mean emphasising historical skills more fully in the history curriculum and/or making space to apply those skills to contemporary issues. We could also equip teachers

early on in their careers with some of these specialist history skills to support discussions (which are in turn supported by the emphasis on speaking skills as described above).

More direction within the curriculum to explore local histories, as many schools already do (see below), is another way the past can animate the present. The history of a local area and the stories of people who have lived there can often help to contextualise issues of social, racial and religious divides. The History curriculum can make these links explicit and act as a coordinating mechanism for examining the modern world.

That's next to my Gran's house: building local history into the curriculum

Harrow Way School in Andover weaves local history throughout its entire History curriculum from year 7 through to GCSEs. The concept is not always a standalone lesson plan, but a golden thread where local history is consistently researched and connected to international and national topics.

For example, by exposing students to the fact that the inhabitants of their local area spoke a variety of languages in the past (Brythonic, old German, Latin, Norse, French), there is a frame to thinking about migration in Year 8, with a particular focus on the Irish famine. In Year 9, attention turns to Windrush. In Year 10, they examine policing in the East End.

A sense of belonging

A great deal has been written about the decline in mental health of young people, particularly teenagers. There are a large range of potential causes from social media to societal instability. Much of this is very difficult to tackle. But effective schools are expert at building a culture of belonging and safety and often use curriculum time to do so. This has the power to improve student well-being and academic achievement. However, young people who face more barriers tend to feel less connected to their schools.

This work is hard to define and links to the more relational aspects of teaching. Trusting learner-adult relationships are essential to building culture in a school and should continue to be) important parts of teacher training. Building a sense of belonging also relates to the non-formal but structured time young people spend together with each other and their teachers. As described earlier, trips, events and clubs are all essential to a rounded education.

But the curriculum can help too. Assembly and form time are spaces in the school day often described as 'pastoral', and they range from the mundane to the profound. Whole school messages, fire drills, school surveys compete with discussion of school and 'British' values and local issues. Although this aspect of the school day is, necessarily, locally tailored, a modern curriculum could include effective 'pastoral' curriculum models. They should provide a foundation rather than an after-thought.

This might involve taking a text-based approach (as many schools do). Stories are 'distancing' tools, allowing young people to explore difficult issues in safety whilst also developing their reading and speaking skills. The discipline of Drama also provides an organising structure for exploration, and can have a positive impact on student well-being. Modern financial education, building from Maths, further helps children understand how to open bank accounts, and could be included too. In all cases the mental models are closer to those that teachers (particularly primary practitioners) work with and are therefore more likely to be well implemented.

Policy decisions:

- *How can we extend the role of History (and associated skills) in the curriculum to help young people engage in contemporary issues, including the use of 'local histories'?*
- *Should the 'pastoral' curriculum have greater definition in the curriculum and support - including through using 'distancing texts' and drama techniques?*

Conclusion

This paper has put forward a set of principles that could underpin a modern curriculum, and pointed to a series of policy decisions that follow. The approach is broad, multifaceted, and - at times - potentially a little messy. In this sense, it is more representative of what childhood should be.

Debates about education tend to start from the question of purpose: what should schools be for? Here the emphasis is different: what can education offer to help more children find success?

In seeking to answer that question, this paper has pointed to a series of reforms that would tilt the curriculum towards, as the title of this report suggests, a vision for education that is broad and bold. These include:

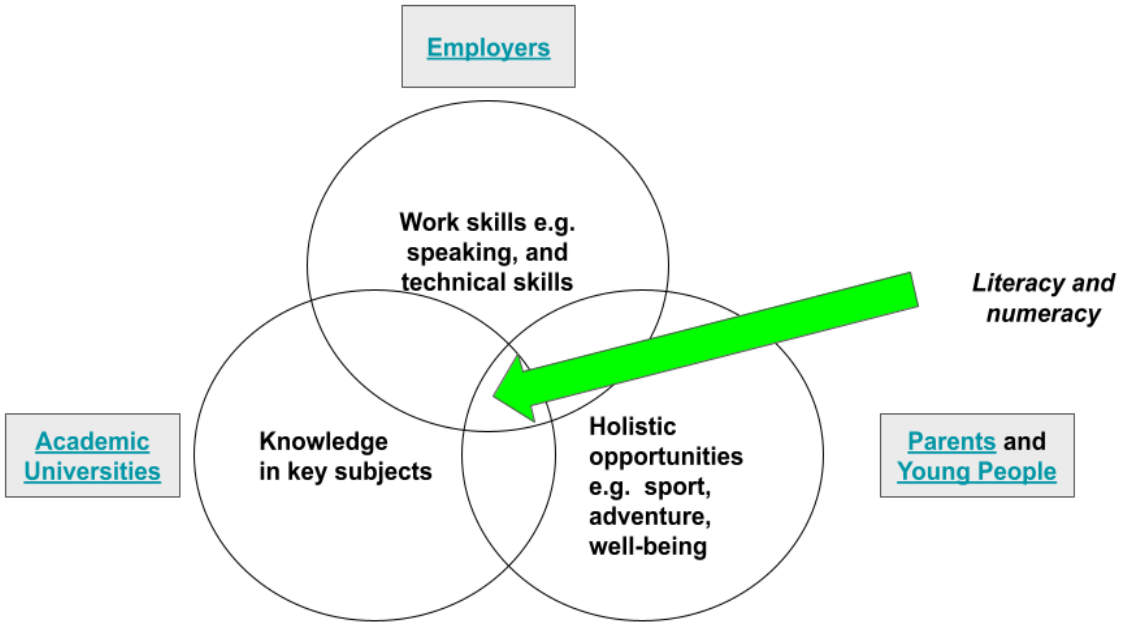
1. Systematic approaches to writing and numeracy early on to match phonics, as well as studying English and Maths for longer.
2. A greater emphasis on the practical application and relevance of reading, writing and Maths - using them as a way of building critical life skills.
3. More focus on arts subjects, PE and creativity in the examined and non-examined curriculum, and more opportunities to practise and perform.
4. A focus on extra-curricular activities and the 'pastoral curriculum' as wider sources of support for young people.
5. More development of specific skills that work across the curriculum (speaking, listening and digital).
6. An emphasis on work-readiness that sees employers involved early on.

The path to this becoming a reality is long, of course. Any curriculum review requires a wide range of views, from a broad array of sources. This paper only intends to begin that conversation, to invite agreement and encourage disagreement in equal measure. A truly broad curriculum can be formed in no other way. I hope that this paper encourages, in equal measure, the boldness I believe our country needs and our children deserve.

Appendices

A. A frame for balance

The illustrative diagram below seeks to provide a frame for thinking about how to apportion emphasis in a curriculum.



A desired balance might be achieved by taking a view on the relative importance of each of the segments above. For example, you could weight this 70/20/10 which would mean in any given week: three and a half days would be devoted to subject content, such as science and computing, one day to activities like sport, performance and well-being support, and half a day to skills, for instance further literacy and numeracy if not covered in the core subject content, or as children get older, access to technical skills.

There are caveats, of course. The balance might change with age and interest. Equally, skills are best taught by being woven into subject content e.g. young people might learn 'to think critically' by studying sources in History. There is also a difference between Drama as an additional activity, which might mean performance, and Drama as a subject which might include more textual analysis.

However, a framework - like the one above - can help us think through the practical implications of breadth and give clarity to the possible side effects.

B. The expansion of a modern curriculum

This paper has set out some principles for reform based on the current debate. However, the same vision for breadth and modernisation could be extended to explore more far-reaching changes.

Principle	***Example extension questions***
Plural (vs. singular)	• *Could there be an entitlement to vocational subjects. pre-16 to ensure all young people are more work ready?* • *Might there be space for individual projects so young people can pursue their passions?* • *Could this be linked to more online and self-study enabled by advances in Artificial intelligence?*
Connected (vs. siloed)	• *Given its importance to human flourishing and economic progress, should creative thinking be seeded across the curriculum? The OECD has carried out international benchmarking assessments which are being released later this year to respond to changing curriculums around the world.*
Outward facing (vs. insular)	• *Could schools be genuine hubs for local services and innovation (as some have suggested) and might this bleed into the curriculum? There are examples of co-located perinatal services and even some entrepreneurs in residence, both of which link into wider learning goals.*
Directed (vs.dictated)	• *Could there be more space in the curriculum left to local discretion? This might mean fewer examined subjects at GCSE, less content overall (including at primary) and an emphasis on the non-examined curriculum.*