INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE REVIEW

Centre for Education Systems

CURRICULUM POLICY

Summary of Findings

Secondary title of report

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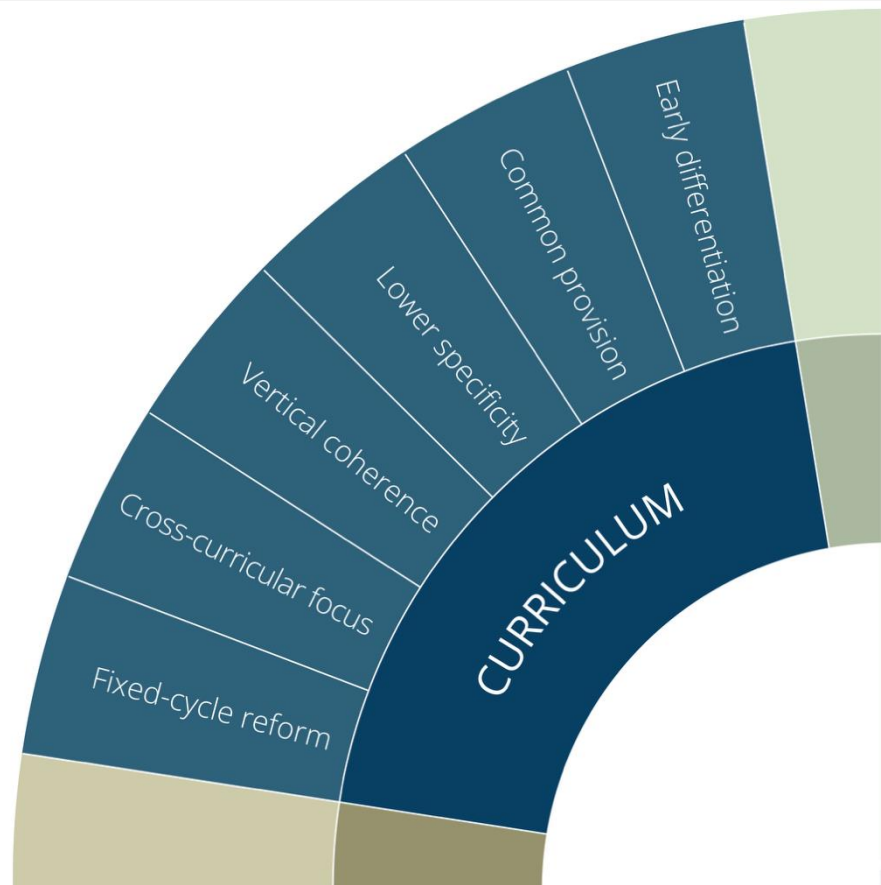

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Acknowledgements

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Section 1 | Key takeaways

Curriculum differentiation	Curriculum differentiation by early student choice or academic selection tends to **reinforce existing inequalities.**
Curriculum content	There are **risks associated with having too much content in the curriculum**. An overloaded curriculum leads to curriculum narrowing: if teachers attempt to include everything, not enough time is given to each topic.
	There are also **risks with having too little content in the curriculum**: students aren't guaranteed access to important knowledge and skills
Curriculum focus	The 'sweet spot' is a **focused curriculum** which allows time for secure understanding of foundational topics.
Specificity	**Specificity about what is to be learned** in a curriculum is important for clarity, progression, and equality.
Flexibility	**Flexibility to adapt the curriculum** is often valued by teachers and can be achieved in different ways.
Measuring rates	**Systems take a combination of different approaches** to managing different rates of student progress.
Teaching time	Most systems prescribe a **certain amount of teaching time** per curriculum subject.
Cross-curricular components	The introduction of **cross-curricular components** such as '21st Century skills' and competencies often leads to teacher **confusion** and/or additional workload.
	The curriculum features of **specificity and organisation by subject** are compatible with a focus on **cross-curricular components** – they are not in opposition.
Student wellbeing	Although many systems now emphasise student **wellbeing**, **high-stakes examinations** and **limited teacher capacity** to take on additional responsibilities often undermine these aims.
Implementation	**Implementation conditions** matter more than the formal reform model.
Curriculum purposes	**Stated curriculum purposes were similar across systems** but not systematically related to their structure.

Source:

Section 2 | Questions for policymakers

What are the **purposes of this curriculum**, and how should they be expressed?

What is the best way to achieve the **appropriate amount of content** in each subject?

At what age should **student choice or selection** be prioritised over a common curriculum?

How can the curriculum provide **sufficient specificity** to support **clarity, progression and equality?**

How can the curriculum build in **sufficient flexibility** to support **teacher autonomy?**

How can this curriculum **support student progress** over time, and address **different rates of progress** between different pupils?

Should the **amount of time** spent per subject be **centrally mandated?**

How can this curriculum **support links across subjects,** and broader skills, without confusing or overwhelming teachers?

Who should **oversee** curriculum reform, and how should wider **involvement and consultation** be managed?

How will the implementation of the **curriculum framework** allow teachers **the time, resources and support** to make a success of it?

Section 3 | Overarching findings

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Purpose and structure

Most jurisdictions drew on the same four broad objectives, although systems did differ significantly in how these purposes were expressed, with some keeping these aims concise, and others going into more detail.

Common provision vs. student choice or selection

All systems differentiate curricular provision at some point, either via student choice or academic selection. The more equitable systems tend to delay this differentiation.

Amount and specificity of curriculum content

Curriculum overload is reported in two types of curricula: those that are **specific about content** and include too much of it; and those that are **not specific** about what should be taught or learned. A sweet spot between the two is possible.

Progression and vertical coherence *(links over time)*

A lack of specificity in a curriculum undermines vertical coherence at a system level, harming progression. Such systems tend to conceptualise progression as a movement through a series of levels defined by broad outcomes, independent of year groups or stages. This approach is associated with teacher confusion about student progression and assessment.

Section 3 | Overarching findings continued

Centre for Education Systems

Horizontal coherence *(links across subjects)*
Systems commonly attempt to support horizontal coherence in their curricula through combining subjects into broader 'areas of learning', identifying links between specific subject content in different subjects, or including cross-curricular components

Cross-curricular components
Perceived conflicts with examinations and curriculum overload meant teachers in many systems deprioritised cross-curricular components in favour of test preparation. Contrary to global narratives, systems with cross-curricular frameworks included several with specific, subject-based syllabi.

Reform model
The approach to designing reforms appeared less influential than the availability of time, professional development, and high-quality resources.

Context
Curricula are shaped by historical experiences of colonisation or occupation, cultural philosophies and linguistic diversity, political structures, and international organisations such as the OECD.

Section 4 | Descriptive findings and typology

Centre for Education Systems

Purpose and structure

Systems could not be meaningfully grouped by expressed purpose, because most drew on the same **four broad objectives:**

- **Academic development**
- **Preparation for citizenship and work**
- **Personal development and wellbeing**
- **Societal change**

Although relationships between the stated purposes of national curricula and their structural features might be expected, this analysis across 14 systems revealed no such overarching pattern.

While the emphasis placed on these objectives varied between countries, these differences were not substantial enough to identify common types, and individual relationships between purpose and structure did not generalise across the group.

Systems did differ significantly in how these purposes were expressed, with some keeping these aims concise, and others going into more detail, among other differences.

Section 4 | Descriptive findings and typology

Common provision vs. student choice or selection

Three main typologies represent the extent to which systems which prioritise common curricular provision vs. choice or student selection:

All systems differentiate curricular provision at some point, either via student choice or academic selection (based on a test or teacher recommendation):

- Differentiating the curriculum by either choice or selection at a younger age (12–14) tends to lead to a narrower curriculum for less advantaged students;
- More equitable systems tend to delay this differentiation, with almost all students studying a broad common curriculum until age 15 or 16.

1. **Early differentiation by choice**

These countries prioritise curricular differentiation via student choice over the subjects chosen and the pathway taken at a younger age than other systems (typically 14).
Includes England, Northern Ireland, Ireland, Scotland, Wales.

2. **Early differentiation by selection**

These countries prioritise curricular differentiation via selection over the pathway taken, and within this sample differentiation happened at a younger age than in other systems (with selection at 12).
Includes Singapore and the Netherlands.

3. **Common provision**

These countries prioritise a common, broad curriculum for longer, delaying student choice over subjects or pathways until students are 15 or 16.
Includes Finland, Estonia, Poland, Japan.

Section 4 | Descriptive findings and typology

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Amount of curriculum content

The first type of overloaded curricula is one that is **specific about content** but includes too much of it.

Curriculum overload leads to a **narrowing of the curriculum** to focus on tested content

Too little content **limits universal access to foundational knowledge** and skills

The 'sweet spot' is a **focused curriculum**, in which there is time for foundational knowledge and skills to be covered in depth, allowing for students to access more content later in the curriculum.

Systems take two distinct approaches to reducing curriculum overload:

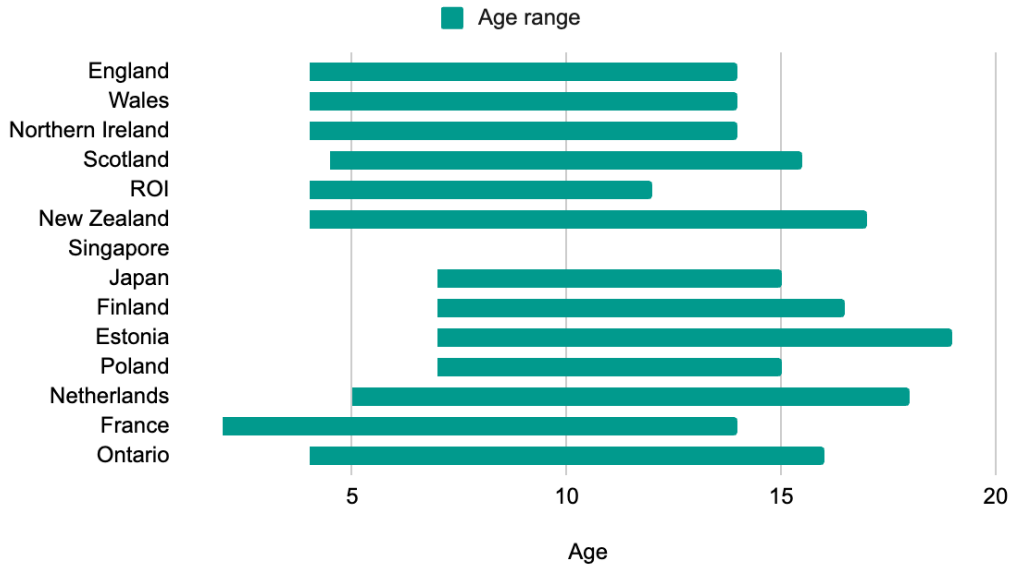
Reducing the amount of content in the curriculum, by reducing the number of topics or narrowing topic breadth.

Estonia, Poland, Singapore

Replacing specific content with **fewer, more generic statements.**

Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales

Ages during which jurisdictions teach a common curriculum



Section 4 | Descriptive findings and typology

Centre for Education Systems

Focus and specificity of curriculum content

The second type of overloaded curriculum is one that is **not specific** about what should be taught or learned.

- Six of the 14 systems have **low to medium-specificity curricula**, leaving a lot of room for interpretation
- Practitioners in these systems tend to report:

High incidence of teacher confusion

Additional teacher workload

Perceived or actual inequalities between schools and students

And/or difficulties with student progression at transitions

- Four of these six systems are responding to these problems by shifting back to being more specific about what children should learn
- However, teachers also report **benefits to the flexibility** inherent in lower-specificity systems, including the ability to be **responsive** to the interests and needs of the students.

Lowest-specificity systems: *Wales, Northern Ireland, New Zealand, and the Netherlands*

Highest-specificity systems: *England (in science), France, Poland, Estonia, and Singapore*

The degree to which curriculum content is either specific or broadly stated sometimes **varies within countries between subjects.**

	Science Specificity – 9-10 year olds	Science Specificity – 13-14 year olds	Music Specificity – 9-10 year olds	Music specificity – 13-14 year olds
England	High	High	Low	Low
Wales	Low	Low	Very Low	Very Low
N.Ireland	Low	Low	Medium	Low
Scotland	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium
Rep of Ireland	Medium	Medium	Very High	High
Ontario	Medium	Medium	Very High	Very High
New Zealand	Low	Low	Low	Low
Singapore	Very High	Medium	Very High	Very High
Japan	Medium	Medium	Very High	Very High
Finland	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium
Estonia	High	High	Very High	Very High
Poland	High	High	High	High
Netherlands	Low	Low	Very Low	Very Low
France	Very High	Very High	Very High	Very High

Section 4 | Descriptive findings and typology

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Progression and vertical coherence *(links over time)*

Vertical coherence is the degree to which topics in a curriculum are logically sequenced and connected across grades.

- **A lack of specificity** in a curriculum undermines vertical coherence at a system level, therefore harming student progression.
- Systems with low-specificity curricula also tend to conceptualise student progression as **independent of movement through year groups** or stages.
- This conceptualisation intends to be **inclusive of students with SEND**. However, this risks further **exaggerating the differences.**

A contrasting conceptualisation is to **use the curriculum itself as the progression model**

In these systems, curricula are specific enough that students who are falling behind can be identified. Responses then differ:

- **targeted support** in specific areas to keep up with the class,
- **movement of students** into streams or ability-based sets,
- giving students **more time within the education system**, e.g. repeating a grade, or having an additional year at the end of basic schooling,
- for students with identified SEND, **introducing flexibility** in curricular requirements and varying pace or content in individualised ways.

Section 4 | Descriptive findings and typology

Horizontal coherence *(links across subjects)*

Systems commonly attempt to support horizontal coherence in their curricula (the links between subjects).

This can happen in three main ways:

Combining subjects into broader 'areas of learning'	**Identifying links** between specific subject content in different subjects	**Including cross-curricular components** such as '21st century skills'

Collapsing subjects completely into 'areas of learning' undermines subject-specificity and is therefore associated with the challenges described above. However, several systems identify and organise content by subject within 'areas of learning'.

Also related to horizontal coherence is the way in which systems organise their subjects. Three main ways emerged:

1. Organisation by **individual subject**
2. Organisation by **learning area, subsequently broken down** by subject
3. Organisation by **learning area**

Section 4 | Descriptive findings and typology

Cross-curricular components

Systems differ in the extent to which they include cross-curricular components.

These broadly fall into two typologies:

1. Those with **little or no focus** on cross-curricular components

2. Those with a **clear cross-curricular** framework

	Little/no focus on cross curricular components	Clear focus on cross-curricular components
Lower specificity	Netherlands	Wales Northern Ireland New Zealand Scotland Finland
Higher specificity	England Japan Poland	Ireland Ontario Singapore Estonia France

Section 4 | Descriptive findings and typology

Reform model

The approach to designing reforms appeared less influential than the availability of time, professional development, and high-quality resources.

Three broad approaches to designing the curriculum framework, which incorporate how reforms are organised, who leads them, and how legitimacy is established were identified:

1. **Participatory reform**
2. **Expert-guided and strategic reform**
3. **Government-driven reform**

- **Teacher stress and workload pressures** occurred across all three models, due to frequent changes, compressed timelines, and overlapping reforms.
- **Professional development was consistently identified as critical** to successful implementation, with lack of induction, delays in training, or insufficient time to participate undermining curriculum delivery.
- **The quality of resources and guidance strongly influenced confidence** and fidelity of implementation.

Systems differ based on:

How their reforms are **initiated** (planned and/or fixed cycle reform vs ad hoc or responsive reform)

Their **approach to consultation** and wider involvement

Whether they reform their curriculum **subject-by-subject or across the board**

Whether they **phase in** its implementation

The type and extent of **support materials and teacher training** available during implementation

Section 4 | Descriptive findings and typology

Context

Historical experiences of colonisation or occupation shape how systems use curricula to build identity and citizenship. Some use the curriculum to strengthen national identity, and some face pressure to incorporate both Western and Indigenous perspectives to address historical injustices.

International organisations also have influence. The OECD is seen to support '21st Century skills' that transcend national contexts. The inclusion of such skills reflects the growing influence exerted by the OECD on system-level curriculum development. International assessments such as PISA and TIMSS also shape reform decisions.

Political structures affect how politicised curriculum making becomes. Some jurisdictions reduce political influence through stable or insulated processes, others experience politically charged curriculum debates where shifts in governance drive ideological changes.

Cultural philosophies and linguistic diversity influence curriculum priorities. Linguistic and cultural diversity also shapes decisions: some systems expand curricular recognition of diverse groups, while others centralise a dominant language or adopt English to avoid privileging any group.