

# Flexibility in the secondary curriculum

## The National Curriculum

Handbook for secondary teachers in England [www.nc.uk.net](http://www.nc.uk.net)

# Flexibility in the secondary curriculum

## Purposes of this booklet

The booklet provides information about the flexibility available in the national framework for the curriculum, including the revisions to be implemented from September 2000.

The national framework includes the national curriculum, religious education and other statutory requirements. This booklet summarises and exemplifies the range of opportunities within it for schools to match curriculum provision effectively to all learners' needs.

The school curriculum goes beyond the national framework and schools have further curriculum flexibility outside national requirements. This will be a focus of later guidance.

This is the first of three booklets providing guidance on planning the secondary curriculum. The second, available in January, will consider use of time and timetabling issues. The third, available in March, will consider whole curriculum planning to support effective teaching and learning. Further guidance to support the implementation of the revised national framework is listed in *National curriculum publications for secondary schools* (QCA/99/427).

## The national framework for the curriculum

All maintained schools are required to provide for all pupils a balanced and broadly based curriculum which:

- promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society;
- prepares pupils at the school for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life.

The national curriculum at key stages 3 and 4 includes English, mathematics, science, design and technology, modern foreign languages, information and communication technology, physical education and, from September 2002, citizenship. At key stage 3 it also includes art and design, geography, history and music. National curriculum subjects are specified in programmes of study.

Schools must also provide religious education for all pupils. Requirements for each key stage are set out in locally agreed syllabuses. Guidance is provided in DfEE circular 1/94.

Schools are also required to provide sex education during key stages 3 and 4 and careers education during years 9, 10 and 11. There are no nationally specified programmes of study. Guidance on sex education is provided in DfEE circular 5/94 which will be revised in January 2000. Guidance for careers education is provided in DfEE circular 5/98 and *Learning outcomes from careers education and guidance* (QCA/99/359).

## Flexibility within the full national framework

### *Emphasis on each national curriculum subject within the curriculum*

In allocating time to each curriculum area, schools have the flexibility to provide emphases within the curriculum appropriate to their aims. Although programmes of study at key stages 3 and 4 have been developed against notional times, there are no nationally prescribed time allocations for particular subjects. The time spent on each subject is for the school to decide.

Decisions will vary from school to school. Within the requirement to provide a broad and balanced curriculum, schools may build on their distinctive strengths and put particular emphasis on some subjects or approaches in the curriculum. Schools may wish to give different emphases at different key stages.

#### *Examples*

In order to raise literacy levels, a school introduces a whole-school focus on language, including in years 7 and 8 three timetabled literacy sessions each week. The skills developed support pupils' learning across the curriculum and are particularly linked to work in English. The school decides to introduce a similar focus on numeracy and to integrate the numeracy sessions with pupils' mathematics lessons. As a result, 35% of the year 7 and 8 curriculum time is in the broad areas of English and mathematics.

In order to focus closely on the wide range of cultures that make up their community, a school timetables an additional subject in years 8 and 9 entitled 'Our World'. The course is developed to enrich and extend aspects of pupils' learning in history, geography and RE and schemes of work are developed together to ensure continuity and progression.

### *Organisation of learning within the curriculum*

Whilst the national curriculum is specified in terms of separate subjects, schools are not required to teach the subjects discretely. The way teaching is timetabled and how lessons are described and organised is not prescribed and it is for each school to decide the organising structures to use.

#### *Examples*

A school develops a modular programme in years 9, 10 and 11 integrating PSHE, work-related learning and community projects with ICT, history, geography, art and design and music. The modules offer opportunities for pupils to work towards a range of qualifications through the three years, to consolidate key skills and to enrich and extend their learning in other subjects.

A school develops several integrated programmes for year 7 pupils in order to ease transition to secondary school by reducing the number of teachers pupils come into contact with and allowing teachers more sustained contact with pupils. English, history, geography and religious education contribute to one programme and all design and technology disciplines and art and design contribute to another. This has the added advantage that subjects can have longer lessons in order to maximise learning.

### *Organisation of learning within the key stage*

The programmes of study for national curriculum subjects set out what the majority of pupils should be taught during each key stage. It is for schools to decide how to organise time within the key stage. It is not necessary, for example, for pupils to study all national curriculum subjects each week, term or year and a school may decide to concentrate on particular subjects during particular terms or particular years. Pupils must, however, engage in physical activity throughout each key stage.

#### *Examples*

A school has the opportunity for all year 7 pupils to take part in a community arts project – a local initiative for a year. The school considers the gains for pupils' learning and decides to take part. During year 7, pupils will not study from the key stage 3 programmes of study for art and design and music and the school will build on the community arts project in years 8 and 9 to teach the programmes of study in two years.

Within key stage 4, a school suspends the timetable for blocks of time to allow pupils a concentrated focus on design and technology coursework projects. These weeks are deducted from the total amount of time agreed for design and technology through the key stage. At some times of the year, pupils have no design and technology lessons and the time is used for modules of RE and careers education.

### *Completing programmes of study early*

When a key stage programme of study has been taught in full, pupils can progress beyond its requirements or take up other subjects. For example, a pupil who achieves a GCSE in a national curriculum subject during key stage 3 or in year 10 need not continue to study the subject. Further details of this flexibility are available in the DfEE letter to schools of 1 October 1996 '*National curriculum: completing key stage 4 requirements early*'. The only exception to this flexibility is that pupils must engage in physical activity throughout each key stage''.

#### *Examples*

A pupil who is a talented musician has already attained grade 8 in her music examinations and taken French GCSE at the end of year 8 attaining a B. During key stage 4 she will study A level music with year 12 students at the time when other key stage 4 pupils will study a modern foreign language.

A school allocates additional time in years 8 and 9 to developing pupils' ICT skills in order that they may use them effectively across the curriculum during key stages 3 and 4. By the end of year 9, the majority of pupils have achieved the GCSE short course and a few have a full GCSE. All subjects encourage the use of ICT at key stage 4. There is no further need to map and track progress against the programme of study. Pupils who choose to develop the subject further can work towards Advanced level GNVQ units in IT during key stage 4 with the option of completing the six or twelve unit award post-16.

### *Teaching and learning approaches*

The programme of study for each national curriculum subject prescribes what is to be taught, not how it is to be taught. Revised programmes of study in all subjects, to be implemented in September 2000<sup>1</sup>, are less prescriptive. They give greater flexibility for teachers to use their professional judgement to decide on the most appropriate teaching and learning approaches and the aspects of a subject pupils will study in depth. Schemes of work for key stage 3, to be published in spring 2000, will exemplify a range of approaches to teaching the revised programme of study for each subject.

#### *Examples*

A school develops a key stage 4 course specifically for pupils whose attainment in science at the end of key stage 3 is significantly behind their peers'. They work to the programme of study for the single award in the time usually given to the double award. This allows the school to offer a very practical course with opportunities for pupils to engage with science applications outside the school context and to build links between their work in science and in other subjects.

A school invests in a suite of ICT-based individualised learning packages relating to each of the subjects in the key stage 3 curriculum. The packages are available on networks in ICT rooms and the resource centre and are used in the case of teacher absence to ensure that all time allocated to a subject is effectively used. The success of this approach prompts the school to provide increasing access for pupils to the internet and, in two subjects, to trial distance learning through video conferencing.

### *Matching learning to pupils' needs*

Teachers will aim to give every pupil the chance to experience success in learning and to achieve as high a standard as possible. At each key stage, the full programme of study will be appropriate for the majority of pupils. Some pupils' learning needs, however, will be better matched by concentrating on particular aspects of the programme of study or by the programme of study from earlier or later key stages. The national curriculum inclusion statement outlines how teachers can modify programmes of study to provide all pupils with relevant

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<sup>1</sup> Key stage 4 programmes of study in design and technology, mathematics, modern foreign languages and physical education will be implemented in September 2001, in line with revisions to GCSE specifications.

learning experiences and appropriate and challenging work. *Guidance on providing for pupils with learning difficulties* and *Guidance on providing for gifted and talented pupils* (to be published by QCA in June 2000) will set out further approaches.

#### *Examples*

A school has liaised closely with its three main feeder primary schools to ensure effective continuity and progression in pupils' learning from the start of year 7. Based on detailed information from primary teachers about pupils' levels of attainment and their preferred learning styles, the mathematics department has developed a year 7 curriculum for two groups of pupils which combines aspects of the programmes of study for key stages 2 and 3.

The art and music departments in a school draw on GCSE specifications to inform the development of differentiated activities and approaches in their year 9 schemes of work. This enables pupils who are ready, to experience the demands of a GCSE course and the approach to art and music at key stage 4, so informing their option choices.

#### *Choice of qualifications*

There is no requirement to assess national curriculum subjects at key stage 4, although, for most pupils, schools will want the learning from the appropriate programme of study to be assessed through national qualifications. Within the requirements of the programmes of study, schools can decide on the most appropriate qualifications for their pupils.

A key stage 4, there is a direct link between national curriculum programmes of study and GCSE specifications. In addition, some programmes of study are matched by GNVQ specifications. Certificates of Achievement in all subjects can be used for pupils who are working at national curriculum levels 1, 2 and 3. Qualifications matching the full programme of study for each subject are listed below.

English	GCSE
Mathematics	GCSE
Science	single award GCSE double award GCSE the three separate science GCSEs together
Design and technology	short course GCSE GCSE Part One GNVQ manufacturing or engineering
Information and communication technology	short course GCSE GCSE Part One GNVQ information technology from 2000, information technology key skill unit

Modern foreign languages	short course GCSE GCSE the two GNVQ language units together
Physical education	short course GCSE* GCSE*

(\*these courses go significantly beyond the programme of study)

From September 2000, a wider range of qualifications will be specified through which schools will be able to meet the statutory requirement for pupils to study design and technology, modern foreign languages and science (see page 7).

Only approved qualifications listed in the annual DfEE circular ('the Section 400 list') may be used with pupils of compulsory school age in maintained schools. Approved qualifications include GCSE, GNVQ (or units) at foundation, intermediate and advanced, Part One GNVQ at foundation and intermediate, NVQ (or units) at levels 1 and 2, entry level qualifications, AS levels and other qualifications.

#### *Examples*

A school enhances a key stage 4 course leading to a GCSE in art to meet the programme of study for design and technology. The course has a high ICT component and includes planned project work with graphic designers, artists and craftspeople. When opting for the course pupils commit themselves to a design-based work experience placement.

Half the key stage 4 pupils in a school are working towards the two GNVQ language units, in one of three European languages. The school has secured work experience placements for ten pupils in one of the European countries and has built on these links, and the opportunities provided through the internet, to create a contemporary, relevant and challenging language course.

### *Contexts for learning*

At key stage 4, schools have greater flexibility in determining where learning takes place. For example, since 1998, pupils have been able to study any aspect of the key stage 4 national curriculum in further education colleges; pupils can now undertake work experience from the start of year 10 and, as a result of greater opportunity for work-related learning, key stage 4 pupils are also undertaking placements with training providers and in the workplace.

#### *Examples*

A school identifies pupils who are unlikely to consider further education or training post-16 and plans, with an FE college, a programme at the college which provides pupils with a range of vocational taster experiences. To ensure the vocational course complements and builds on their study in national curriculum subjects, pupils are also taught English, mathematics, science and design and technology at the college. Pupils attend the college for three days a week. In the remaining two days, pupils study a modern foreign language, a humanities subject, information and communication technology, religious education, personal and social education and physical education with their peers at school.

A local education authority, with sponsorship from a major national employer, has set up a curriculum centre for small numbers of pupils from schools across the authority. Pupils participate in a full time integrated programme, provided at the curriculum centre, for three days each week and in work placements for two days. Pupils' mentors from their placements support individual target setting for the curriculum as a whole. The curriculum meets all statutory requirements with the exception of subjects disappplied under Section 363 regulations.

## Opportunities for modifying or disapplying the national curriculum

The national curriculum provides an entitlement to learning in particular subjects. Exceptionally, a school may consider that a pupil's interest will be better served by modifying or disapplying some or all of the national curriculum. In doing so, schools should retain pupils' access to as much of the national curriculum as is appropriate for them, and ensure a broad and balanced curriculum. National curriculum subjects may be modified or disappplied for any pupil who would benefit from the curriculum provision described below.

### *Providing courses leading to a wider range of qualifications in design and technology, modern foreign languages and science at key stage 4*

From September 2000, schools will be able to provide courses leading to a specified range of qualifications, not all of which will meet the programme of study in full, to meet the statutory requirement to study design and technology, modern foreign languages or science. This will allow pupils to maintain their study in the statutory subjects through a course which is better matched to their learning needs. Schools will be notified of the permitted qualifications in January 2000 and they will be separately specified in the annual list of approved qualifications.

### *Disapplying aspects of the national curriculum at key stage 4 using Section 363 regulations*

Regulations were made in September 1998 which allow schools to disapply aspects of the national curriculum for work-related learning. From September 2000, regulations will allow disapplication for two further purposes: to allow pupils making significantly less progress than their peers to study fewer national curriculum subjects, and to allow pupils to build on their strengths and talents by exchanging a national curriculum subject for a further course in a particular curriculum area.

To disapply aspects of the national curriculum through Section 363 regulations, schools and their governors must satisfy themselves they have met the regulations in full, including the criteria within them. For any one pupil, schools may disapply up to two national curriculum subjects.

### *Disapplication to allow work-related learning*

Since September 1998, schools have been able to disapply up to two of design and technology, modern foreign languages and science to provide pupils with a wider work-related learning programme than would be compatible with the full statutory requirements. Guidance on disapplication for work-related learning is available in *Disapplication of the national curriculum at key stage 4 using Section 363 of the 1996 Education Act for a wider focus on work-related learning: Guidance for schools* (QCA/98/215).

#### *Example*

A school provides a programme of work-related learning for 22 year 10 pupils. Pupils spend between 1 and 2 days on a range of courses provided by an FE college and a local training provider. Six pupils also spend one day a week on work placements with local employers. All pupils work towards approved NVQ units and two towards a full NVQ. Pupils have a mentor in the college or the workplace who works closely with the link teacher from the school to ensure pupils are appropriately challenged and that the programme supports and is supported by their in-school courses wherever possible.

### *Disapplication to allow exchange of a national curriculum subject for a further subject in a particular curriculum area*

From September 2000, in order to respond to pupils' individual strengths and talents, schools will be able to allow pupils to emphasise a particular curriculum area by exchanging a design and technology and/or modern foreign languages for further course(s) in that curriculum area. Guidance will be available in spring 2000.

#### *Example*

The majority of pupils in a school follow full GCSEs in all national curriculum subjects with two further GCSEs of their choice. Using the regulations, a small number of pupils follow courses in a modified range of subjects. All pupils study English, mathematics, RE, PE, ICT, sex education and careers education and, in addition, follow courses in, for example:

- history, geography, economics, single science, design and technology (systems and control), art (*emphasising humanities, disapplying modern foreign languages*);
- PE(GCSE), Part One GNVQ leisure and tourism, double science, modern foreign language (*emphasising sport-related studies, disapplying design and technology*);
- expressive arts, music, history, single science, 2 modern foreign languages (*emphasising the arts and languages, disapplying design and technology*);
- double science, Part One GNVQ health and social care, design and technology (food), geography (*emphasising science, disapplying modern foreign languages*).

### *Disapplication to allow study of fewer national curriculum subjects*

From September 2000, schools will be able to disapply design and technology and/or modern foreign languages to allow pupils making significantly less progress than their peers to study fewer national curriculum subjects in order to consolidate their learning across the curriculum and to concentrate on national curriculum and option subjects in which they are likely to succeed. Guidance will be available in spring 2000.

#### *Examples*

A school disapplies design and technology for a group of pupils in order to develop their confidence in learning through a programme for key skills development devised by a consortium of local schools. The programme engages pupils in assignment-based activities related to the work context and closely linked to the key skills specifications for communication, application of number, working with others and problem solving.

A school disapplies part of the modern foreign languages programme of study to allow pupils to participate in a behaviour management programme facilitated by a youth worker and the educational psychologist. The programme aims to build pupils' self-esteem, develop the skills they need to work with others and provide opportunities for pupils to practise strategies for managing their personal response to a range of situations.

### *Disapplication through a statement of special educational need*

National curriculum programmes of study in all subjects can be modified or disapplied through a pupil's statement of special educational need. The statement will detail subjects or assessment procedures disapplied and the alternative curriculum provision. The procedure is detailed in the *Special Educational Needs Code of Practice* (DfEE).

### *Disapplication through temporary exceptions*

Headteachers have the flexibility to make temporary disapplications if they consider a pupil cannot fully participate in, or benefit from, the national curriculum. The headteacher's direction will detail the subjects or assessment procedures to be disapplied and the alternative curriculum provision. The procedure is detailed in DfEE circular 15/89, which will be revised in December 1999.

### *Disapplication for development work or experiments in the curriculum*

Any school may apply to the Secretary of State to disapply aspects of the national curriculum for the purposes of development or experimentation. This flexibility has been used by schools in some Education Action Zones. Applications to the Secretary of State will detail the subjects or assessment procedures to be disapplied and the curriculum development or experiment to be introduced.

## Deciding to use the flexibility

Many schools already use these opportunities for flexibility. When evaluating the effectiveness of their curriculum, schools will want to consider whether the opportunities would remove any constraints to maximising pupils' achievement. The following questions are a useful basis for evaluating the opportunities.

- To what extent are you confident that all your pupils are well served by your curriculum?
- What factors in your curriculum are significant in maximising pupils' achievement?
- Could any of the opportunities for flexibility help to secure these factors in the curriculum whilst maintaining the effectiveness of the existing curriculum?
- What are the implications for the whole school curriculum?

The next booklet in this series, to be published in January 2000, will provide guidance on managing time to maximise the opportunities provided by the flexibility.

## About this publication

**Who's it for?** Headteachers, senior managers in schools and FE colleges, LEA advisers, inspectors.

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**What's it about?** Offers guidance on flexibility in the secondary curriculum. First in a series of three publications following the review of the National Curriculum.

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**What's it for?** Informs school managers and others about the extent of flexibility in the national curriculum. Provides guidance on planning the curriculum to match all pupils' needs.

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**What next?** *Versatility within the secondary school day* (January 2000).  
*Whole school approaches to developing effective teaching and learning* (March 2000).

***This publication has been sent to:***

All secondary schools, FE colleges, ITT institutions and LEAs.

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