

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Curriculum and assessment review](#), HC 864

Tuesday 8 July 2025

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Members present: Helen Hayes (Chair); Jess Asato; Mrs Sureena Brackenridge; Amanda Martin; Darren Paffey; Manuela Perteghella; Mark Sowards; Caroline Voaden.

Culture, Media and Sport Committee member present: Damian Hinds.

Human Rights (Joint Committee) member present: Alex Sobel.

Questions 257 to 318

Witness

[I](#): Professor Becky Francis CBE, Chair, The Curriculum and assessment review.

Examination of witness

Witness: Professor Becky Francis.

Q257 **Chair:** Can I welcome members and our witness this morning to our oral evidence session on the curriculum and assessment review? This morning we will hear from Professor Becky Francis. Professor Francis, can I invite you to introduce yourself to the Committee?

Professor Francis: Thank you for welcoming me. I am leader of the curriculum and assessment review. I have a mixed portfolio career: broadly academic, but with a lot of policy work along the way. My day job is CEO of the Education Endowment Foundation, the resource that supports evidence in the education system. I am presently seconded to the DfE to do this work. It is lovely to be here.

Q258 **Chair:** I will begin our questioning this morning. Can you update the Committee on what form your final report to the Government will take? Are you likely to create new national curriculum documents, come to principles to guide the generation of future curriculum documents, or will it be something else? What are you preparing at the moment?



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Professor Francis: It has been an enormously intense and challenging task to review all the way through from key stage 1 right through to post-16 in just over a year. I am very glad to say that we will not be creating programmes of study and so forth for the national curriculum and we will publish our final report in autumn 2025.

We will set out the recommendations across a range of themes that were flagged in the interim report, of course. Those themes really exemplify where the expert panel sees the greatest opportunities and need for improvement. As I said, we will not be drafting programmes of study or exam content, but we will be making recommendations about how those things should be approached. We then anticipate that the Government will publish a response to the final report which will include next steps on delivering any recommendations that they accept.

Q259 **Chair:** Apologies, I should have said at the start of the session that we are pleased to welcome two guests to our Committee this morning: Damian Hinds from the Culture, Media and Sport Committee and Alex Sobel from the Joint Committee on Human Rights. You are both very welcome to be here with us this morning.

Professor Francis, as you look at the evidence gathered, where there is disagreement in that evidence and disagreement of opinion among experts, what are the guiding principles that you are using to make a decision on your final recommendations?

Professor Francis: You can imagine that there is a huge array of different opinions, including in the evidence that we have taken from the call for evidence across the sector in different stakeholder groups. The thing that gives us safeguards is reliance on the data. Wherever possible, we use rigorous national data sets, evidence curated by the DfE, and existing robust research and polling and so forth that we commission, to steer us through.

The evidence that we are taking through the call for evidence, our stakeholder workshops, public events and so forth, is incredibly important to us. It often reflects deep expertise on particular issues or areas of the curriculum and shows the range of views and opinions across different stakeholder groups, which is really important for us to be aware of. Given that there is disagreement on almost every aspect of the curriculum, it is also really important that where possible we are steered by the data and hard evidence.

Q260 **Chair:** Are you publishing all the submissions that you receive?

Professor Francis: Yes. The call for evidence will be summarised in terms of those findings and published alongside the final report. As you have seen along the way, where possible we are also publishing data and so forth that we are drawing on, which is an important resource for the sector as well.

Q261 **Chair:** Absolutely. How are you going to take teachers and education



leaders with you on a journey of change for curriculum assessment?

Professor Francis: Our strongly evidence-led approach has really garnered support and trust with the sector, which has been a really important element of securing that credibility and buy-in across the sector. We have worked really closely throughout the review to ensure that our recommendations are built on what works and address the key challenges facing the system, which again secures confidence from the sector.

As I have said, we have gathered a very wide range of evidence, including from the sector itself, but the mainstay in bringing the sector with us has been an ongoing consultative approach. We have done a raft of public events across the country. At each of those events, as well as speaking to the general public, we have wrapped in roundtables with young people and practitioners to understand the different temperature across different parts of the country. I have done lots of public events, keynotes and so forth, and we have really tried to take and make the time to engage different stakeholder groups.

Q262 **Chair:** It sounds like there will be a way to go for the Government to implement reform of curriculum assessment following your report. I wondered whether you plan to make recommendations on the process for that further implementation, as well as the content and the framework that should surround it.

Professor Francis: Yes, absolutely. Both things you say are right. On the one hand, it is of course for the Government to consider how best to undertake implementation and so forth. On the other hand, given that we have heard this array of evidence which often includes matters of implementation, it is very important that we share it and that that information actually impacts our thinking because, as I have said very regularly to teacher audiences, I do not want to tip the system over. We are really committed to the evolutionary approach, and we are aware of capacity issues in the system, so that feels important.

Q263 **Caroline Voaden:** While your interim report says the “Knowledge-rich” curriculum is producing good outcomes, we know that teachers’ organisations have described it as excessive, content-heavy and overfilled. When I speak to key stage 1 teachers particularly, they say there needs to be more time in the school day for the youngest children to just play, socialise and learn those vital skills, and they just do not have time to allow that. How are you going to respond to this, and how will your work address the concern that there is simply too much knowledge packed into the national curriculum?

Professor Francis: It is a really important question. I would probably try to separate out the knowledge-rich from the issue of content volume. If you look back at the prior review in 2011 to 2014, it is really interesting that it was overtly knowledge-rich in terms of its intentions. It was also very overt in its efforts to comb back the curriculum because it is really



important from a knowledge-rich framework that core concepts and key aspects of knowledge are communicated successfully through teaching and learning so it can then be well sequenced and built on. Obviously, if you have an overlaid curriculum, it becomes very challenging so I would say that the two things are quite distinct.

What has been really interesting to hear in the evidence we have taken is that there are many different causes for this experience of an overburdened curriculum. Sometimes it comes from the programmes of study, which are struggling to manage breadth and depth in proper balance. But other times it is very puzzling because the programmes of study are very thin, and yet the experience on the ground is that there is overstuffing.

We have heard that teachers often feel they have to teach everything because they are not sure what might come through in an exam spec, or what Ofsted might be looking for and so forth. Actually, we think that better specification in some areas might help teachers to make sense of that. This is basically reflecting a subject-by-subject approach that we will take to different subjects across the board.

Q264 Caroline Voaden: You may not be able to answer this yet, but have you identified any specific subjects where there is a consensus that the content should be reduced to allow for deeper learning?

Professor Francis: Yes. There are some subjects where we hear particular concerns. I would illustrate that with science—combined science or triple science—as we hear a lot about that, but there are others as well. Again, we are being really careful in looking both at the existing subject content, hearing what people are saying about it, and then taking that measured approach to try to find where the pinch points are and what is causing them.

Q265 Mrs Brackenridge: Over the years, the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers has been ever widening. The interim report states that the review will consider the positive impact we can make on outcomes for socio-economically disadvantaged young people. What evidence have you received from schools and local authorities that have been successful in narrowing the attainment gap? Are there any specific practices and strategies that could have a wider impact?

Professor Francis: We are very clear that social justice and inclusion are at the forefront of the review's concerns. We are really trying to apply that social justice lens. Everybody, not just the sector is behind us in that the current size of the gaps, whether it is attainment for socio-economic diversity or progress measures for SEND, are unacceptable and we really need to try to do more. It is probably worth saying that many of the challenges and the explanations for those gaps sit outside curriculum, and even outside assessment, and reflect whether it is pedagogy,



resourcing or arrangements at school level, and in the case of the socio-economic gap, issues outside schools.

We are dedicated to doing what we can. We have been exploring the curriculum and assessment barriers underpinning those unsatisfactory trajectories for those not meeting the expected standards including the identification of problematic transition points, which has been a strong area of concern for us; hidden ceilings to attainment, of which there are various and many; and processes of intentional and unintentional segregation, and considering possible remedies. It is really at the front of our minds as we work through. You asked about good practice; I have been visiting schools and colleges across the country looking at successful practices, and I agree that we can learn a lot from that as well.

- Q266 **Mrs Brackenridge:** Have you delved deeper within demographics within disadvantaged children? For example, working-class boys' attainment has been a cause for concern for quite a few years now. Are there any strategies and benefits that will come out of the curriculum and assessment review?

Professor Francis: Yes. We are now going back to my own academic expertise because prior to my EEF work and my university leadership, my own area was social inequality and education. I was professor of education and social justice at King's College London, so I am very familiar with the different intersections and problems facing different groups of young people.

As I have said, this cannot all be explained by the curriculum, but there are issues and challenges. In the case of white working-class boys, and often white working-class girls actually, a lot of the explanation for the slower progress comes down to early reading and writing. Again, we are very much focused on a few key areas as we move forward.

- Q267 **Manuela Perteghella:** Several education unions have raised concerns about the current curriculum's inclusivity. What approaches are you considering to promote inclusivity for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities?

Professor Francis: Very much in keeping with social and economic disadvantage, we are also very much focused on SEND and the challenges for progress, as I have said. There is a lot of promise in ensuring really good curriculum design that is then reflected for all young people, including stretching higher attainers, many of whom also have SEND, and supporting those who are struggling. I am talking again about the need to look after kids at transition, including thinking through curriculum sequencing and so forth.

However, there are also a range of other issues we are looking at around assessment, concerns about access to different parts of the curriculum and segregation, which might be through streaming and so forth. It is probably important and will be no surprise for you to hear that we are



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constantly trying to balance the importance of rigour and high expectations for all young people with the need for diversification, flexibility and so forth. Sometimes these dilemmas are quite challenging. These are things that we are holding in tension as we are moving forward with the review.

Q268 Manuela Perteghella: What do you see as the main opportunities and obstacles in using a wider range of curriculum and assessment methods? How might these impact learning outcomes for children and young people with SEND?

Professor Francis: As I say, there is an opportunity through the review to address some of the key challenges—sometimes with different subject areas, sometimes that are working across the board—that impact that progress. Sometimes, there are more holistic elements, such as issues around transition or careful curriculum sequencing. My answer remains the same: we are looking across all these areas to try to do what we can to improve both the experience for young people and of course for teachers in their ability to diversify the curriculum.

Q269 Chair: Can I just ask a supplementary question to that? As a Committee we have heard quite a lot about the very rapidly increasing numbers of children who need adjustments in order to be able to access assessment and exams.

We had a very stark example of this at a college we visited a couple of weeks ago where they told us that they require 132 rooms across the college to be able to get through their GCSEs and maths resits due to the numbers of young people requiring reasonable adjustments to be able to access the exams. Is there something fundamentally wrong with the way that we are assessing young people when the assessment processes as they are laid out are inaccessible to such a high proportion of young people? Is that something that you are thinking about?

Professor Francis: We are thinking about it and we have reflected on this a lot and heard evidence both from the sector and from the exam boards: Ofqual and so forth. Again, the dilemmas are very difficult. There are questions about what it is we are trying to test. Once we are agreed on that, there are certain consequences in the modes of assessment that follow. We are also bearing in mind that non-exam assessment, which is often advocated as an alternative to sudden-death exams, is becoming more and more difficult due to the infusion of AI in our society and the potential for cheating and so forth.

Again, these are really difficult trades and we are very aware that schools are already spending an enormous amount of time around these reasonable adjustments. Nevertheless, we have also been quite impressed at the scope of reasonable adjustments at the moment. There is a very wide range of reasonable adjustments, more so than is sometimes recognised. As I have said, we are working with different agencies, but the one that I have not mentioned is Tom Rees, the chair of



the EAG for inclusion. We are discussing both these dilemmas and opportunities as we work forward.

Q270 Jess Asato: What evidence have you received on how the curriculum can better ensure all young people feel represented? Are particular subjects a priority for improving representation, or is a cross-curricular approach best?

Professor Francis: We want all young people to be able to see themselves in the curriculum. This is included in our terms of reference and is something that we take very seriously for all British citizens; the curriculum is for everybody. It is really important that young people have that representation and engagement. We want to make sure that we have a curriculum that enables all young people can access and see themselves reflected in it. As we move forward in this, we are trading the different subject areas in which this can best be done and makes the most sense.

We do not want to damage curriculum efficacy by tokenism and so forth. Instead, we want to really make sure that the curriculum, its framework and its high-level aims are inclusive for all young people. Then, through the programmes of study as appropriate, or through different agencies such as Oak Academy and so forth, it can be brought to life and exemplify for teachers what an appropriately diverse and inclusive curriculum looks like.

Q271 Jess Asato: What could the mechanisms be for improving inclusion in the curriculum? What engagement have you had with experts and young people themselves?

Professor Francis: We have had a lot of engagement with both experts in this area and young people, who often feel very passionately about this area. What was the first part of your question?

Q272 Jess Asato: What are the mechanisms for improving inclusion?

Professor Francis: First, as I have spelled out, there is often an opportunity within the aims of the national curriculum to be clear, and it should be inclusive; it is an inclusive tool, of course. Secondly, there are the programmes of study for the different subject areas where actually inclusivity is often built in. Sometimes we can do more to flag that in some areas. There is then the issue about how that curriculum is brought to life.

Rather than teachers on the ground always teaching the safe option or the one that has been taught for a long time, we ensure that they are encouraged to ensure diversity, both in materials and of course in the content of those materials. That is often done through exam specification by making sure that that is adequately diverse because as we know, especially in key stage 4 and sometimes into key stage 3, what gets taught in the exam infuses the curriculum.



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It can be brought to life by the Government's exemplary agencies, such as Oak Academy. It would be inappropriate for us to put too much detail into the national curriculum itself because the national curriculum is supposed to be broad and operate at principle, rather than mandating the daily detail of a classroom. We really want to make sure that this is taken seriously; that is the balance.

Q273 Jess Asato: I am sure we have all heard from teachers, particularly in primary schools, about whether it is appropriate for year 2s to be learning about subordinate clauses. The NAHT has described the grammar and writing curriculum in primary school as "Not fit for purpose." It attributes a decline in reading for enjoyment among young people from 50% to 35% in 2024 to the English curriculum changes. Has a consensus emerged from the evidence you have received on reforming the teaching and assessment of writing and grammar in primary schools?

Professor Francis: The interim report was clear that primary assessments are an important part of the school system, particularly in supporting the transition from primary to secondary education. Also, we were clear that we have been conducting an analysis on areas highlighted in the evidence as not working well, and this is one that we have heard a lot about. We are focusing on the end of key stage 2 writing assessment and will make recommendations on the basis of that evidence in the final report.

Q274 Darren Paffey: There is evidence to suggest that the 30% of GCSE maths candidates who achieve below grade 4 are held back by misunderstandings of maths concepts that originate in primary schools. I visited a primary school last week and saw the work of the maths hubs. I saw some fantastic work there. Have you had discussions on how to resolve that issue and how to make sure the curriculum secures those fundamentals at primary so we will not see what we are seeing at secondary?

Professor Francis: You are spot on. The answer is yes and we are looking in exactly that space. The interim report was clear that the review is looking at particular issues with particular subjects, and this is one of them. As we said in the interim report, we are very much focusing on those who are not achieving grade 4 or above in GCSE and how best to support their progress. We are trying to do that while ensuring that there is no damage or negative implication for those achieving highly in maths because we are also very much aware of the success and good progress that we have seen in maths over the last 20 years. There have been some great outcomes: for example, we had the largest number of pupils doing maths A-level ever last year and we really need to make sure that we maintain that. I hope I am reflecting that we are taking maths very seriously, both pre-16 and post-16, and are very much attending to the issues that you have mentioned.

Q275 Darren Paffey: Without pre-empting what the final report will say, do you think that will result in changes to how it is taught or how it is



assessed, or both?

Professor Francis: Obviously, I cannot pre-empt our findings and outcomes, but we are looking at both. For the reasons that you have mentioned, we are taking teaching and learning through the curriculum very seriously.

Q276 **Mrs Brackenridge:** Thank you, Professor Francis. A letter that was published in *The Times* in March 2025, which came from 720 arts and education leaders, said "Since 2010, creative subjects have been disappearing from state schools, making access to art, dance, design, drama and music education the preserve of the wealthy. The previous Government's EBacc and Progress 8 policies have done untold damage to our children and their life chances."

What evidence have you received on the impact of EBacc and other performance measures on the take-up of creative subjects in schools?

Professor Francis: As was set out in the interim report, we have heard a lot of evidence about the impact of the EBacc performance measure on student choice, and consequently their engagement and achievement; in particular, how it can limit access to arts and vocational subjects. We have continued to look at this issue by assessing the place of the EBacc in the wider accountability framework while looking at the impact on young people in terms of their choices, outcomes and of course on institutional behaviours.

One aim of the review is that we seek to deliver a broad and balanced curriculum that ensures young people do not miss out on subjects like the arts. We have been looking at all subjects, including arts subjects, to understand the challenges and how best to ensure a broad curriculum for all, entitlement for all, and to ensure high-quality teaching and access to the arts through curriculum and assessment.

Additionally, it is important to say that there is some nuance here, which is sometimes not heard in the public debates. Some subjects in the arts are relatively thriving, but others have really severe issues. Interestingly, of all the subjects, design technology—a subject often included within the arts bucket—is probably the one that has experienced the most detrimental impact on uptake over the last 10 years or so. We are trying to disaggregate the different issues and identify the problems that sit behind them, and so forth; we are taking the situation very seriously. As a panel, we are very committed to a broad curriculum for all young people, including arts.

Q277 **Darren Paffey:** I want to ask a particular question about the broad and balanced curriculum which is designed to have children ready for the world around them. That world is not a monolingual world. I declare a bit of an interest: I was a linguistics researcher and teacher for 20 years. There is an increasing need for languages; we have seen that in the global uncertainties around us.



There is an increasing value of languages, with some projections indicating that for every £1 invested in language teaching, it opens up £2 to GDP because of the trade opportunities that are there. Coming back to your point about social justice, languages are a great leveller of inequalities in life experience. Yet, over the last 20 years, we have allowed languages to become hamstrung and decline in a way that I do not think we would allow for other subjects. Could you speak a little to how the review is looking at languages as a core subject rather than just one that might be left to flounder?

Professor Francis: Yes, your points are well made. The evidence on the impact of modern foreign languages is actually quite mixed and contested. Nevertheless, there are very strong arguments to the importance of languages across the piece. Again, the panel are very committed to ensuring the success of languages.

As you have already indicated, there are a range of challenges and reasons why languages have struggled. We have really tried to reach out to other English-speaking nations about their experience and expertise in teaching languages. What we hear is that this is a really common problem across English-speaking nations. Of course in Britain, we do not have a sort of natural second language, which means that there are very severe problems across transition.

Every secondary is taking primary feeders where there have been an array of different languages taught, which means that either some kids are starting from scratch in secondary or they are having to rehearse a rather boring lesson where they are retaught things that they already know, which is quite a profound problem and not one that is easy to fix. We have thought a lot about the different ways that you could address this; they are pretty radical and unpalatable for the main. The discussions that we have been having are really about how we can secure better teaching and learning, particularly in primary.

Of course, you will be aware that there has been a revision to the GCSE suite for modern foreign languages. It is really important that we wait to see the effects of that before we make further changes, but we are looking at the piece in the round and trying to make sure there is efficacy through the key stages and to try to ensure improvements at transition.

Q278 Darren Paffey: It is really welcome that you are looking at it from primary because there is literally no other subject that we ask students to start aged 11 and then be assessed on aged 15, 16.

I will just bring you back to the social justice point and the EBacc; there is a tension. In some cases, the EBacc is one of the sole drivers to keep languages on a curriculum, and yet it is mostly happening in those schools that tend to be selective, one way or the other. There is definitely a decline in schools in more deprived areas. Actually, there is a perverse outcome to that which would be welcome for the review to address.



Professor Francis: Absolutely; that is spot on. The Sutton Trust's recent report on this was very helpful in highlighting that problem.

Q279 **Amanda Martin:** You have already referred to science with the various elements of the GCSE triple, double or individual. The Royal Society notes that the current curriculum focuses on memorising facts, but it also notes that "Restructuring the science curriculum to provide a single universal and coherent science pathway at GCSE; the use of practical inquiry-based learning; and the incorporation of technical routes." They are looking at the change.

How will the review address the Royal Society and the Association for Science Education's view that the current dual route to GCSE science structure—double versus triple science—may entrench social inequalities and limit future participation in science in further education?

Professor Francis: My own research shows two things. The first is that triple science is a very successful route into further study for the young people who take triple science; they are much more likely to go on and take A-levels and then progress to undergraduate study of science than their counterparts who have done combined science.

The second is that socially disadvantaged young people and young people from particular ethnic groups, including white majority, are less likely to take triple science, which shows that there is an equity issue. The question is how to address that, which is something that we are thinking about very carefully.

There is also a range of complexities around tiering in the science exam and so forth that need to be layered on top of that. Basically, there is a range of different potential explanations for why young people doing triple science go on to be more successful, and we need to treat those carefully. As I have said from the outset, the review has applied a social justice lens, so we will continue to place that and inclusive practice at the forefront of our thinking as we continue with our deliberations.

Q280 **Amanda Martin:** Just on that social justice point, I was a teacher for 24 years and "social mobility" is not the right phrase; the fact that you are using "social justice" is very welcome.

Professor Francis: Thank you.

Q281 **Damian Hinds:** When the Prime Minister met the Lionesses in June, he spoke of a new framework that would include a clear focus on equal access and two hours a week of physical education. Two hours a week of physical education is already, and has been for some time, the DfE recommendation to schools as part of the overall CMO's recommendation of 60 minutes a day. Do we take from that that two hours is going to become mandatory?

Professor Francis: Certainly, we are looking at PE and continue to deliberate on it. We are very mindful of the issues around the squeeze on



curriculum time, and particularly in secondary schools—the examined subjects that are sometimes squeezed in although they are meant to be held dear in the basic curriculum, but are often not. I have been very interested to see how severe that can sometimes be, not just for PE but other subjects in the basic curriculum, despite the fact that these are expected subjects. We are looking at that.

We are also very mindful of the different complexities and debates within PE, such as the role of competitive sport versus healthy lifestyles, and so forth and when it comes to the GCSE, sports science versus being able to play sports. In our consideration, we are taking all these matters seriously.

Q282 Damian Hinds: Do we take from that that PE may well become, as it is known, a core subject, as opposed to a foundation subject?

Professor Francis: As you can hear, I am being very careful in my answers because we have not come to any conclusions. We are still in the middle of our reporting, but we are hearing the issues.

Q283 Damian Hinds: You mentioned earlier that the national curriculum is actually quite a loose framework, much looser than most people commonly understand. One change we have coming with current legislation is that the freedom to deviate from the national curriculum will be extinguished. It is not used by many anyway, but it is there as a sort of safety valve. An important question for this review is whether the national curriculum is going to stay in as loose a form as it is today, or will it become even slightly more detailed or more prescriptive?

Professor Francis: That is a really important question, and especially important for the sector. I will answer your question, but just to come back to the sort of principal point, it has been heartening for me to hear that, for example, 70% of headteachers feel that this application to their academy will not change their practice. That is probably right because as we have been having our sort of stakeholder engagement sessions with academy CEOs, headteachers and so on, I have been very keen to check how big a change this will be. The main area that we have heard talked about is design technology, where some multi-academy trusts have used their freedoms not to provide often expensive equipment and so forth. So that is one area that we are considering as we make our recommendations. Broadly, you are right; there will be continuity rather than change.

On the issue about specification versus autonomy, my view is that the national curriculum should never be seen as the entirety of the curriculum; it should be an ambitious, but nevertheless minimum entitlement for all young people. There should always be room for academies or local authority schools to go beyond that, particularly in being able to articulate and bring to life enrichment activities: the soft skills and so forth that both young people and parents feel are so important. We are very mindful of that.



When it comes to the curriculum itself, we are dedicated to not over-specifying what you rightly referred to as a relatively loose framework. Nevertheless, in the programmes of study in some areas where we think that the lack of specificity is causing problems, either in curriculum design, transition and sequencing, or resulting in a cacophony of content because people are not sure, then we will be offering greater specificity being mindful of that trade with autonomy as well.

- Q284 **Damian Hinds:** I just want to ask one other question on a completely different aspect, which is handwriting. There is some debate at the moment about the relevance or importance of handwriting in a world where more and more people use keyboards or other technologies to communicate the written word. I just wonder if you think there is a special importance of handwriting in learning to write.

Handwriting and writing are not the same thing, but one seems to be an important part of the other. Bearing in mind that yours is a curriculum and assessment review, do you think the format in which most children for most subjects—setting aside those who have a special educational need or art, DT, whatever it is—doing their exams with a pen and paper has a knock-on effect down through the school in terms of the importance of learning to handwrite?

Professor Francis: Your question is, are we looking at handwriting?

- Q285 **Damian Hinds:** First, is handwriting still as important as it was? Secondly, if you were to change the way that assessment is done for most children in most subjects, might that have an adverse effect on handwriting lower down the school?

Professor Francis: The evidence that you are referring to is pretty clear. The importance of handwriting cognitively is inceptive, but it is growing. Certainly, the panel are really clear on the importance of handwriting in primary as a competence. You bring in some interesting questions about assessments further up the pipeline. Those are important questions to raise. We hear a lot from the exam boards about the prospects of digital and online assessments, and so forth, but we are weighing all the issues. I guess there is a potential segue here to wider points about the role of digital in assessment, which we are also looking at.

- Q286 **Manuela Perteghella:** What evidence have you heard as to the place of religious education in the national curriculum and how it should be treated compared with other subjects?

Professor Francis: We have just talked about PE; RE is another basic curriculum subject, but we know that the offer is patchy and inequitable. Obviously, we have a very complicated and interesting history in the actual design and set-up of schools in this country, which adds complexity to this. We are aware of the issues and the inequalities. We are aware that this is creating issues at the moment in terms of equitable access to high-quality religious education. We are also aware that there



are myriad sensitivities and sensitivities in different historic arrangements on the kind of settlement for this.

There is no national standard for religious education at any key stage, despite it being a compulsory subject for all pupils right through from age five to age 18. The fact that many people do not realise it is meant to be offered to age 18 is telling in terms of the patchiness of that offer, so clearly there are issues here. We continue to deliberate on the evidence and think about the consequences of that for moving forward to a better place in terms of that entitlement.

Q287 Manuela Perteghella: Just to follow up, what are the problems with locally agreed curricula? You mentioned the legacy we have regarding religious education. Have you heard of a consensus of opinions on national content guidelines?

Professor Francis: The National Content Standard shows some potential as a prospect. Nevertheless, it is not a curriculum; it is a set of principles, but we are aware of it and considering it. In terms of the Standing Advisory Council for RE, SACREs, the challenge is that the role, reach, and remit of the SACREs are basically diminishing as more and more schools have become academies. They remain strong in some parts of the country, but they have been necessarily weakened in others, which has raised concerns that the RE framework is not fit for purpose. We are really mindful of the issues and are deliberating on solutions.

Q288 Alex Sobel: In 2022, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, over 30,000 children came from Ukraine, and we have had a steady stream since. The Ukrainian Government class them as temporarily displaced. Many of them went the majority of the way through the Ukrainian education system. The European Convention on Human Rights ensures the right to an effective education, and this applies to all children in UK schools. To what extent does the curriculum allow Ukrainian children to access effective education in the UK? What impact would a Ukrainian GCSE have in this assessment? Obviously, we do not currently have a Ukrainian GCSE.

Professor Francis: Obviously, the review is focused on the national curriculum. My understanding is that the Government have set out their support for Ukrainian children and families. Earlier this year, they asked the exam boards to consider introducing a Ukrainian GCSE to give those young people the chance to celebrate their heritage and, of course, their native language. This also segues into the broader conversation about modern foreign languages and ancient languages and their important place in the curriculum. However, in terms of the specifics, that is my understanding of how the Government have approached this.

Q289 Alex Sobel: We also have many other asylum refugee communities in the UK. How does this provision affect children from other language communities?

Professor Francis: Exactly. It is possible to teach community languages in primary and secondary. There are various GCSE options that are



available as well. We have heard about the concerns of how those languages are able to be assessed and the extent to which they are accelerated and encouraged. Again, that is an important part of our deliberations.

Q290 Mrs Brackenridge: I would like to consider the volume and intensity of examinations. GCSE students on average sit 31 hours of exams, which is much higher than many of our international comparators. We heard evidence from Jill Duffy, head of OCR exam board, who told us that GCSEs could be capped at two papers at 90 minutes each without reducing the reliability of results. Is it time to reduce the length of time that our 16-year-olds are spending in examinations?

Professor Francis: We have heard a lot about this. You are absolutely right to capture the point that although we are not an outlier internationally in conducting national examinations at age 16, we are absolutely an outlier in the time it takes us to do so. It is an area that we are looking at and was flagged in the interim report.

Obviously, when I come back to my theme of dilemmas and trade-offs, we are really mindful that often the more volume, the higher the reliability, and that there is a risk that if you cut too far you might damage reliability, which is something that we are not going to do. Finding the art of the possible, consulting experts and working with Ofqual is the approach that we have been taking.

You are right to mention that there are three papers in some subject areas. We have heard a lot in our evidence about the trade-offs between the number of papers that young people take. Given that these are sudden-death examinations at GCSE, if you were to dial down to one paper, not only would that be an issue about reliability but it would be a kind of one-shot for such an important exam. Two papers and beyond diminish that risk, but equally, the more papers, the longer the total. So those are the kind of dilemmas and trades that we are looking at and the approach that we are taking; we are taking it very seriously.

Q291 Mrs Brackenridge: Bearing in mind the one-shot sudden-death model that we have, have you looked into diversifying assessment methods? Not just at GCSE, but other stages in education?

Professor Francis: You are absolutely right that formative education assessment is enormously important and should be taken seriously as part of good practice. Schools can judge how best to do that, and they do so in many different ways. In terms of our national exams, you will be aware of the evidence on the importance of national tests for parity and fairness, and the issues with bias and different trends that we can see coming into play once we move to non-nationally examined assessments. We want to guard against that.

As I mentioned earlier, the other danger that we have heard a lot about is the current difficulty with the impact of AI, particularly in written, non-



exam assessment approaches. That being said, I do not want to give the impression that we are only thinking about exams or only thinking about national written tests. It is really important that the assessment is fit for purpose, and that is something that we take very seriously. For example, where performance is involved, you cannot compromise; it has to be based on performance. Those are the different issues that we are looking at in the round.

Q292 Caroline Voaden: I would like to move on and talk about post-16 pathways. Witnesses to our further education and skills inquiry have been clear that those students who are following vocational pathways lack the guidance, clarity and esteem enjoyed by those following academic pathways.

The Edge Foundation found that careers education in secondary schools, "Typically reinforces traditional choices by not presenting young people with adequate or full information about the advantages and logistics of vocational options." What possible solutions have been presented to you as the way forward for promoting vocational pathways more widely to children at school?

Professor Francis: This is an area that the review is taking very seriously, as was flagged in the interim report. It is probably a key area where things have not been working so well in the English education system. We are considering how to ensure rigorous and high-value qualification pathways are available to all young people post-16.

Through the call for evidence, we heard really substantial positive evidence in support of A-levels and lots of positivity about the promise of T-levels, but it is clear that A-levels and T-levels will not meet the needs of all learners. Currently, around 25% of 16-year-olds at level 3 do not study A-levels or T-levels.

We are carefully considering what level 3 qualifications might need to exist alongside A-levels and T-levels to ensure a simpler, high-quality offer that serves their needs and offers the clarity around a pathway, or what we have been referring to as a third pillar to sit alongside A-levels and T-levels. We need that to be high-quality, clear on destinations and clear for young people, employers, and higher education institutions.

That is the kind of direction that we are taking at level 3. We are also taking level 2 very seriously post-16 because that is where a lot of socially disadvantaged young people and those with SEND often find themselves. At the moment, there is a real lack of clarity in that space, as well as the issues that we highlighted in the interim report around the T-level foundation year. We want to look at that as well and really make sure that there is clarity and expected progress for young people at level 2 post-16, either into occupation or into a level 3 further education pathway.

Q293 Caroline Voaden: Prior to 16, do you think that young people are being



given enough of a sales pitch, if you like, about the advantages of going down the apprenticeship route rather than the academic route when they leave school? There is a need for apprenticeships given that we want to create growth, build 1.5 million houses, repair all our hospitals and all that stuff. Do you think there is too much focus on the academic route and we are not giving equal parity of esteem to the other pathways that young people could follow?

Professor Francis: We have heard a lot in our public events and in the call for evidence about this, including the importance of the Gatsby Benchmarks and so forth. However, it is outside our terms of reference to look at careers, education and so forth, so it is not something that we have been considering directly.

Q294 **Darren Paffey:** The interim report that you produced said that the expectation to study maths and English beyond 16 for those who have not achieved grade 4 should remain. Others take a different view and describe it as demotivating, humiliating and in urgent need of reform. Given the low rates of grade improvement—just a third in English and a quarter in maths—what evidence have you seen that convinces you that remaining with that policy can tackle the very low rates of grade improvement?

Professor Francis: It is a really important point, and there is no doubt this is an area that needs addressing. As you said, we were clear on this in the interim report. We have, though, heard strong evidence that a minimum of a GCSE grade 4 ought to continue to be the ambition for as many learners as possible.

Basically, when we come back to our trades and dilemmas theme, we are clear about the impact of that as a gateway to open so many different opportunities for young people's further paths and ultimately life chances, even their remuneration and so forth. There is a spectrum of young people we are talking about here who gained a GCSE grade 3 at age 16, for whom, again as I said, having that prospect of making their grade 4 should not be beyond the art of the possible within a further two years of education given the bearing that has on their life chances. We also have young people who gained maybe an ungraded or a grade 1 or 2 at GCSE, for whom the level of those grades expresses a surprisingly low level of capability.

Obviously, there are issues about young people coming through their areas of compulsory schooling with low grades, which we are trying to address through attention to English and maths pre-16. We must not forget that. Nevertheless, we have heard strong evidence that, for those young people, getting a better grasp of literacy and numeracy is still very important for their life chances. That is why we said in the interim report that we are supportive of the policy that maths and English continue to be taught to young people who have not secured their grade 4.



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My rather long-winded—sorry—response has probably already indicated that we are trying to think of a much more nuanced approach to this. We do not think that current policies necessarily drive right or helpful behaviours from providers post-16. We want to make sure we drive behaviours that will best support a nuanced approach to the diverse needs of learners and support progress either in their knowledge of maths and English—where at the moment, sadly, the evidence suggests lots of kids are not making progress at all—or to be able to achieve their grade 4.

Q295 Darren Paffey: Why should it remain if your task in the review is to look at the fundamentals? Are we flogging GCSE maths and English, or should we be looking at the broader point of literacy and numeracy and how you achieve those? Is now not the moment to say in the review, “There is a better and more effective way of doing this,” rather than simply saying, “Let’s stick with what we’ve got, despite the fact that it is demonstrably not working”?

Professor Francis: Are you talking about post-16, pre-16 or both?

Q296 Darren Paffey: It is the post-16, but obviously something is not working pre-16. This leads to a wider point: if enough children do not grasp, or are not motivated enough to grasp, why maths and English are crucial—do not get me wrong; I absolutely believe they are—is there not a wider point around what is in the curriculum? Is there detail that could be stripped out so that we could add in more applied knowledge—which parents are calling for, from your review—to then say, “Aged 14, 15, you get why it is going to be valuable to you to engage with the maths curriculum as it is, whether you want to become a professor of astrophysics or run your own one-person carpentry business in a few years. You get why maths is so important”?

Are you looking sufficiently at the issues of literacy and numeracy for use in the world they are going to be stepping into post-16, so that you do not then just keep putting them through the loops to get something which is not happening?

Professor Francis: There is a lot in what you have said.

Darren Paffey: Yes, apologies.

Professor Francis: I realise I probably have not been clear enough in my prior answer as well, because we very much look at both maths and English pre-16. As I said, if we can do better, particularly for young people who are struggling pre-16, there will not be the same numbers coming through post-16, and that is something we want to achieve.

Nevertheless, there will probably always be a small proportion of young people coming through post-16 without those outcomes, and we need to make sure that provision is good for them. Again, just to be clear, we are planning to make recommendations there rather than maintain the status quo, which we do not find acceptable. So that is a plan.



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In terms of applied knowledge, it is a really interesting point. I am not aware of evidence that young people do not see the relevance of maths or English for their later life, although that is not to say that opinion is not out there. In terms of applied knowledge, using Maths For Life can bring the subject to life for young people, and that is important. But nevertheless, we have also heard on many different levels about the cognitive challenges that young people have had, for example, with functional skills qualifications and the need to try to apply maths if you do not have the conceptual knowledge in place first.

It has been driven home to us that this is the first priority before young people can successfully apply the maths that they learn, and that sequencing is deeply important. As part of our work, we are considering all the thing you have said, both on pre-16 and post-16.

Q297 Amanda Martin: I have an additional question to that. Jill Duffy, the chief executive of OCR, said they are proposing a new short GCSE in maths to be taken by all pupils at the end of year 10 before they go on to the full course at year 11. Have you considered those elements as well?

Professor Francis: Yes, we are considering all these ideas in the round. I will not speculate on that particular idea. As we all recognise, all these different ideas have different trades, different issues. There are a lot of suggestions for additional assessment through the education system, often for driving-licence-equivalent kinds of qualifications to be introduced. There is a real challenge, as if you benchmark those too low, they become pointless, because everyone can get them and they do not really mean anything. If you benchmark them high, you get the same problem with significant groups of young people unable to pass them, and then people are concerned that kids have been excluded and so forth. Adding qualifications is not always the solution, in my view, but definitely has a role.

Q298 Caroline Voaden: I am a bit confused by this, because if you have a significant number of kids, be it 25% or 30%, who are not securing GCSE English and maths, despite doing it over and over again—we all know how demotivating it is to repeatedly fail at something you are trying to do—I cannot understand the resistance to having a lower-level qualification that children can do, so they can feel that they have achieved something. They have the badge, and then maybe they will go on because they believe in themselves a bit more and have the confidence to go on and try GCSE.

As Darren said, you do not need to have GCSE level to have a useful, functional numeracy in further life. So why the resistance to having a qualification that would give them enough numeracy to move forward without insisting they have to keep bashing their head against the wall to get the GCSE, which they are never going to get?



Professor Francis: I am worried that I have given you the impression that we are not considering this. What have I said that you think means I resist the idea of a different qualification?

Q299 **Caroline Voaden:** You were talking about not wanting to have a qualification that is too low.

Professor Francis: Oh, no, sorry, I was talking generally. I was talking in the abstract, not about maths and English post-16.

Caroline Voaden: Okay.

Professor Francis: Was the OCR question post-16? I thought it was pre-16.

Q300 **Amanda Martin:** It is year 10. It would be fundamental maths skills like number and data handling, a bit like Darren said, that everyone would need for work and life, that everyone sits it in year 10 and has the option to do the full GCSE in year 11. It is that interim element; if you have passed that and you do not feel able to go on or you wish to pursue other subjects.

Professor Francis: That is what I had understood. Whereas, I think you are talking about post-16.

Amanda Martin: The re-sits.

Caroline Voaden: I am not necessarily talking about—

Professor Francis: Just to be clear, I am not ruling anything out. We are looking at all these things. I am just highlighting some of the dilemmas about adding assessment, which we hear in the round. Genuinely, I meant it in the abstract. We hear suggestions about additional exams and qualifications on so many different subject areas, not just maths.

Q301 **Jess Asato:** Your interim report states that the curriculum needs to adapt to reflect social and technological change, particularly in the light of AI, which you have mentioned. How can climate science, media literacy and digital skills be embedded into the curriculum? Which subjects are the best place to incorporate these?

Professor Francis: You will have seen in our interim report one of the key areas of focus for us is to think about the applied knowledge that young people need for work and life. We hear a lot of concern, including from young people and parents, as you indicate, and employers too, that young people need more attention in particular areas.

Just to bring that to life for you, in a large-scale poll conducted by Parentkind on our behalf, almost half of parents wish their children had more financial education. That is something that we hear a lot from young people too. Also, as you have indicated, there are global challenges that we confront at the moment, whether that is from



geopolitics, climate crisis, or indeed the need for young people to understand politics and so forth. It includes the point you made about the infusion of AI across our social activity as well. All these areas seem to demand particular applied knowledge, or indeed more general skills, to be able to accommodate them.

It is probably important to say that core foundations in maths, science, communication and human culture will still best prepare young people for the shocks and opportunities of the future, whether it is climate science or the infusion of AI and so forth. In other words, the mainstay of our knowledge-based curriculum will also support them to take the opportunities of the future. Nevertheless, we are very mindful that more can be done when it comes to areas such as digital and media literacy. With climate change, there are particular subjects in the curriculum that should be better supporting young people to address those challenges.

We take those points in the round, but we also look at the particular subject disciplines that can best accommodate those needs, because, again, it has to be done through the disciplines. Often, things become a bit meaningless if you try to infuse them through everything. Teachers are not prepared for it, and sometimes it can lead to overkill as well. That is the approach that we are taking. We have our areas of key concern that we have heard through the evidence, and then we are looking on a subject-by-subject basis to see where they best sit. We are trying to map, because again, some areas are attended to in the existing curriculum, but sometimes there is insufficiency, gaps and so forth. That is the nuanced approach that we are taking as we move this forward.

Q302 Jess Asato: Has the review considered the Pears Foundation report into countering online conspiracies in school, and the recommendations in that—the need for embedding critical thinking to help children navigate disinformation and conspiracy theories?

Professor Francis: Yes, we have. We are very aware of that report, which is very helpful. There again, I would say, when it comes to media literacy, critical thinking, particularly when addressing disinformation, it is important that young people have the requisite knowledge in place to be able to apply that critical lens. Otherwise, we risk an increasing danger of a critical lens being applied to everything and there being no prioritisation of information, whether it is something that you see on TikTok or the BBC—the same critical lens being applied to everything, which leads to everything from vaccine scepticism to climate denial and so forth. The knowledge that underpins those skills is super important, but nevertheless, we need more of that applied knowledge as well.

I am aware that in my list of applied knowledge I have not included oracy, which is another challenge that comes to us frequently and we have heard of a lot through the evidence. We are very mindful of the need for the spoken word and that aspect of communication, which is again strongly evidenced to be important for young people's teaching and



learning more broadly and for their life chances. That is another area that we are looking at closely.

Q303 **Jess Asato:** Finally, do available assessments need to change to drive change in these areas?

Professor Francis: That is a really good question and one we are mindful of. In terms of oracy, we have been deliberating around how this is assessed. But for the mainstay, whether it is climate knowledge within the science or geography curriculum, or whether it is human rights, politics and governance coming through the citizenship curriculum, we come to this and to the assessment through those subject-based areas. Beyond the broader points that we have made about assessment efficacy, I suspect the status quo will suffice.

Q304 **Amanda Martin:** Can I come in on that with a further question? You talked about the importance of oracy. There has been a rumbling debate. How much evidence have you had in terms of requests to look at the balance of practical versus written in GCSE? For example, the speaking and listening element was removed from English GCSE, which goes against what you say about oracy and having to do that. With PE, the practical element is 30%, and 70% is written. Are you looking at those changes as well?

Professor Francis: We are definitely looking at those concerns and the balances. As I said earlier, ultimately, our mandate through our terms of reference is to ensure that assessment is fit for purpose. That is where we are kicking the tyres on these things. We are also mindful of issues around teacher workload. Non-exam assessment often precipitates an emphasis on things being done on the ground, which is an important trade that we are mindful of.

The other issue we are mindful of is bias, trying to avoid it, and fairness. Bearing in mind the earlier remarks about the infusion of AI, there is evidence that young people already use AI across large swathes of not just their schoolwork but other aspects of their life, and there is a need for rigour and efficacy in our assessment system. The answers are not always easy, but those are the different things that we are considering as we deliberate.

Q305 **Mrs Brackenridge:** An essential outcome of education must be to prepare children and young people for the grit of life and to be ready for the world of work. Picking up on a few statements and discussions that were made earlier, what can the review do to improve students' life skills and employment readiness, as well as understanding of jobs and careers that they have around them?

Professor Francis: As I have said, we have heard consistently from children and young people, and their parents as well, that they want more focus on applied knowledge and skills that will give them that equipment for later work and life. I have talked a little already about particularly parents' views on that, but young people are very clear on



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some of those elements as well. We are trying to address key problems and these hard-to-overcome barriers to achievement in the system, including trying to ensure that young people are ready for the world of work.

I take your point about grit. I have lots of thoughts there, but they are probably not very evidence-based, so I will try not to get too far drawn in. The point about the remit of the national curriculum comes back to: what is its duty, and also that of a school, to be able to flex the curriculum, make it locally bespoke, respond to the needs of a local area or to the demographic of the kids in the classroom?

I am clear that the national curriculum needs to be an entitlement for every young person, but schools need space so they can then bring the curriculum to life, develop life skills and so forth that they need to address the challenges of their daily lives and be ready as they move forward into employability and further education. I do not think it is so much the job of the national curriculum to specify particular life skills; that is the job of the curriculum that sits around the national curriculum at the school level. I see my job as making sure schools have the space to do that incredibly important work.

Q306 Mrs Brackenridge: Are we going to see a greater focus or value on financial literacy?

Professor Francis: As I said, in regard to particular areas of applied knowledge, financial education is already in the national curriculum.

Mrs Brackenridge: But it is inconsistent.

Professor Francis: It is inconsistent, absolutely.

Damian Hinds: Terribly inconsistent!

Professor Francis: We have heard many times that young people and their parents would like to see more of it. We are very mindful of that and the other areas that I listed out as well, concerns around digital and media literacy, applied knowledge around climate and sustainability. We heard about them in response to the call for evidence, and we would see those areas of applied knowledge as being within the national curriculum.

I am trying to disaggregate between what I call applied knowledge, which often leads to particular skills that should be expressed through the national curriculum, compared to particular experiences and capabilities, including, careers education, knowledge of employment and so forth, that might sit beyond both the national curriculum and our remit but nevertheless are very important that schools deliver. Does that make sense at all?

Q307 Mrs Brackenridge: It does. Finally, if I may, what would you say regarding performance measures that, let us say, unintentionally work against important discussions that we have raised regarding life skills and



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nurturing young people to be citizens? I go back to an early discussion regarding the journey a young person may take as regards GCSE maths, where they enter a treadmill of reassessments and failure. We have functional skills; we have level 1. But many schools are possibly reluctant on that avenue, because it works against them in performance measures. What would you say?

Professor Francis: Again, I am sorry to be predictable with my themed answer for the session about dilemmas and trades. In the examples you raise, we see a dilemma between ensuring that young people come out both motivated through the education system but also with something that recognises what they can do and that they can take away, versus the things that best support their life chances and their equitable access to pathways beyond education. That is a difficult trade. There is no correct answer. It is just something we need to try to balance in the round.

To illustrate that in regard to your question about performance measures, I am very mindful, because I was around and partly involved at the time, that some designs of the performance measures very deliberately attempted to ensure that all young people can access equitably the academic breadth that gives the best chance of routes into higher and particularly elite education. There is some evidence to support that. It is certainly true, as Alison Wolf's report back in 2012 showed, that working class young people were failed by equivalent qualifications, which schools were using to support league tables but were not recognised by employers or universities in terms of those young people's progress post-16.

Those performance measures were designed to facilitate and ensure academic breadth for all young people. That is a very important ambition. The challenge, which we are deliberating is: at what point does that insistence on a diet start impeding young people, both in terms of their choice, which might impact their motivation, but also in some cases, their attainment? As you see in our modelling in the interim report, for young people who are put into the EBacc accountability measure, a smaller group succeed at the EBacc, and those who fail are disproportionately from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. It is finding the right balance and ensuring that performance measures drive good behaviours. This is the dilemma.

Q308 **Darren Paffey:** Staying on the theme of jobs and careers and then motivation to learn, it is pretty obvious that if there is a greater knowledge of the potential careers that are out there, and you foster an aspiration in young learners to do one or multiple of those jobs, then there will be a greater engagement with studies and their success. The first point is to your wider research and your previous role. Is there evidence to support what makes logical sense in that case around the link between those?

Secondly, while I accept what you say about your terms of reference



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being to look at the content of the curriculum and how it is assessed rather than wider careers advice and that kind of thing, would you not accept that currently, in many cases, the assessment load that schools have impedes the wider life skills preparation activities that they could be doing?

I am pretty sure I am not the only one to have visited lots of schools where they say, "I'd love to take all the kids to that careers fair. We'd love to have more employer visits in and do that enrichment work, but we're loaded down with SATS and GCSE preparation, and we simply can't afford the time out to take them to that." Would you agree that in your trades and dilemmas, there is currently one that already needs resolving, that could help with that wider issue that, if they were exposed to all those life enrichment skills, there could be greater engagement with the curriculum and success out of it?

Professor Francis: Yes, again, there is a lot there. In terms of motivation, clearly some young people will be motivated by hearing about careers at school and so forth, but lots do not know what it is they want to do yet. You probably rightly say that part of the point about school visits and careers education is to bring to life the array of jobs and occupations that young people can lodge to inform their choices much later in their school-to-work trajectory. That is important. When it comes to this being a motivating factor, I am a bit more sceptical, although it may be true for some young people, of course.

We know from the evidence that being able to see how their subjects are relevant has a motivating impact for young people, and that is important. You mentioned again the trades and dilemmas. Having the requisite knowledge in place for young people and their qualifications is super important in terms of facilitating those next steps.

But the point I am trying to articulate is that it should not or must not be an either/or. Whether it is about later employability or equitable access to arts and culture, or the many other things that schools do wonderfully, and we rely on schools to do, it is about allowing schools to have that space and flexibility to engage with those activities as well. That is the duty of our review.

Q309 **Damian Hinds:** With any curriculum review, there are bound to be multiple objectives that you have to try to balance. You have very clearly set out what some of those are. In the last curriculum review in 2014, the headline or single-sentence explanation that Ministers wanted at the time would have been, "We looked around the world to learn from the highest performing jurisdictions." If you were to come up with a single-sentence description of the process you are going through, what would that be?

Professor Francis: It would be evidence-led improvement. That is top of head. I think that is right.

Q310 **Damian Hinds:** There are differences between stakeholders, as there



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always are with these questions. You mentioned earlier that you would follow the data. So what data are there available to be followed?

Professor Francis: It would be evidence-led improvement for all. The “for all” was also important for us.

Damian Hinds: I think we have the front cover.

Professor Francis: Thank you. In terms of the evidence available, it is wonderfully exciting for a wonk like myself to have at my fingertips the resource of evidence that sits in the DfE, so all those datasets on exam success, time dedicated to teaching in different areas, all the omnibus survey work and so on. We have also been relying on the NPD, the National Pupil Database, the LEO data and so forth. So we really are making use of those.

Q311 **Damian Hinds:** Are you looking at causality? I am not sure I understand how those things would affect your recommendation to up-weight or down-weight a particular subject area. With LEO, you could say you are looking at predictive factors that if children study this early on they do better in a broader range of things later. But what are the things that help you to say, “We have a little less of that, a little more of that. We’re not doing this at all, and we should be?”

Professor Francis: You are absolutely right to mention that destinations are incredibly important. That is an asset. You are also right that data cannot always help with causality. But being able to identify trends and understand what sits behind either popular discourses or particular outcomes is really important.

Just to illustrate that, knowing how much teaching time is spent on different subjects at different key stages, and what has happened to that trend over time, is important in terms of understanding behaviours on the ground. We talked about the arts, and I said that the picture is a little more nuanced. Being able to find out where the nuance lies, where there has been tail-off and uptake, where subjects remain quite strong or where in particular they do key stages and what is going on, really does help guide our areas of forensic focus. I find it enormously useful.

Q312 **Damian Hinds:** Are you going to make recommendations to Government in the summer?

Professor Francis: We will do so in the autumn.

Q313 **Damian Hinds:** Those recommendations are at a certain level. As you rightly say, there are still then programmes of study, resources and so on. It takes a very long time to re-spec public exams. I realise that it will not be in your control, but based on your experience and knowledge of the process, what will be the earliest point at which there will be noticeable changes in schools?

Professor Francis: It will very much depend. In terms of implementation, you are right that this is beyond our purview, but we will



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make some suggestions. You have seen through the interim report that we have already recommended a rolling programme of change across different subjects in terms of implementation, rather than trying to do everything at once because of capacity in the system and the need to do things properly.

Likewise, presumably some of our recommendations will require consultation, whereas others will be much more straightforward. The Government have also committed to that timeline between announcements and things being expected to take place on the ground. I am salami slicing here. There will be a range of different timelines for change.

Q314 **Damian Hinds:** What is the earliest time?

Professor Francis: This is completely top of head. I have not worked backwards, but I imagine it would be at least a year because of the Government's stipulation about landing zones. Recommendations have to work with academic years and so forth, and I imagine they will include everything from more pithy fundamental change to very in-the-weeds, easier things to address.

Q315 **Manuela Perteghella:** Should a broad and balanced curriculum that we all want foster in every child, no matter their needs, a lifelong love for learning? Are you looking at that in your terms of reference?

Professor Francis: I love that question. It is so important that we try to engender a joy of learning and that being wedded to lifelong learning, as you say. From that point of view, again, it is the duty of the review to provide that entitlement to a rich, broad array of curriculum areas and then to facilitate best practice in teaching and learning, because we know that when young people feel they are succeeding, they tend to enjoy things better. The two things go hand in hand. I hope that answers your question.

Q316 **Caroline Voaden:** Looking at the early years, the very beginning of school, are you taking any evidence from countries where formal learning starts later? Given the mental health crisis we have, the massive rise in children with special educational needs, and the fact that more and more are not school-ready, are you considering a softer landing when they arrive in reception and more time for getting used to school, learning through play rather than formal learning? Is that on your radar?

Professor Francis: I am absolutely fascinated by your question, because this is something that interests me personally and deeply. The early years are so fundamental for later-life chances. We know the importance and the benefits of investment in terms of supporting those later-life chances. However, the early years are beyond our purview. We start at the beginning of key stage 1, and that is interesting in terms of—

Caroline Voaden: Sorry, I am one of the few in the room who is not an ex-teacher. I meant reception.



Professor Francis: Even so, that is part of the early year foundation phase. However, you are on to something there, because the idea of reception is that it is a transition year. It is beyond our purview, but it is incredibly important. It will be for the Government as to whether, following our review, they goes on to look at the early years foundation stage and so forth, but clearly those areas are incredibly important.

Q317 **Chair:** The final question is from me. This morning, you have given us a very clear indication of all the different pressures on your review and all the finely calibrated decisions that you are going to have to make. You have also spoken about the need for retaining flexibility within the curriculum.

We know that in some areas where your review is trying to drive change—I mention your very important aspiration to create a curriculum in which every child can recognise themselves—there have been good options available within the existing curriculum for schools to use on a flexible basis, and yet this happens in only a tiny minority of schools across the country.

How are you going to make sure that your review will drive change, accepting the reluctance to mandate too much? Are there areas where you can look at what has happened already and see that an approach of too much flexibility has not delivered and the curriculum needs to be firmer in its requirements of the education system?

Professor Francis: That is a brilliant capture of one of the dilemmas for us, because we want to achieve that, again, with that balance around autonomy. As I said before, it is important for us to be clear on the ambition so that we can flag, in terms of the aims and principles way, the ambition that we want to set without being overly prescriptive. We want to find, if we can, the sweet spot that provides enough clarity to do some of that encouragement, so that we do not simply, as you say, slip into the status quo, but equally resisting the temptation to start specifying in great detail.

The key to the latter part is to rely in quite a muscular way on the wonderful resources that the Government now have in the likes of Oak National Academy, which is tasked to exemplify good practice and bring the curriculum to life for class teachers on the ground. That hand-in-hand work will be very important in giving the clarity of message but then working with other government agencies effectively to make sure that the support goes out in a multifaceted way.

Q318 **Chair:** Will you make recommendations about the training and support that is needed for teachers to adapt to a revised curriculum? We know, for example, that one of the things that holds teachers back from teaching history in a more inclusive way is the lack of confidence about subject matters and the lack of opportunity for CPD to be able to develop their confidence. In order to implement change, you have to create the conditions in which change can happen as well.



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Professor Francis: The thrust of your question is exactly right. Those points about implementation will be absolutely critical, whether it is through initial teacher training or ongoing CPD to support our recommendations to land well. As I said earlier, implementation is beyond our terms of reference, but I am sure we will give signals about its importance, because it is so critical.

Chair: Can I thank you very much for coming in and giving your evidence to us today? We look forward to seeing your report and to playing our role in scrutinising it and what the Government choose to take forward from it. That brings our session to a close.