



# All domains are not equal

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Section: News

## As Scotland wrestles with a new 3-18 curriculum, a very different prescription is emerging for England's primary schools. Helen Ward reports on the proposals there

A transformation of testing is needed to ensure the primary curriculum south of the border is broad and balanced, says a report from the Cambridge Primary Review published last week.

It also calls for the abolition of the Primary National Strategy, empowering authorities to set local curricula, and an aggressive campaign to reinstate the arts and humanities in primary schools.

The review, led by Robin Alexander, an academic at Cambridge University, has held back suggestions on what the key stage 2 tests (for 11-year-olds) should be replaced with. Recommendations on assessment will be published in the summer.

The review has published its vision of a primary curriculum based on 12 aims of primary education and eight broad subject areas, or "domains", which include a protected local component (see panel).

It recommends the end of the Primary National Strategy, which grew from focusing on literacy and numeracy, and a change to testing as currently the "assessment tail which wags the curriculum dog".

The Cambridge recommendations will feed into the Government-commissioned review, led by Sir Jim Rose, former director of inspection at Ofsted. It has proposed six "areas of learning".

Mick Brookes, general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, said: "Equal domains would only be possible if the assessment system changed."

The House of Commons children, schools and families select committee will publish its own report into the entire national curriculum next month. Its chairman Barry Sheerman said the Alexander review was "interesting" and "thorough" and would be taken into account by the Commons committee.

Although Alexander's eight domains and Rose's areas of learning stem from a shared view that the curriculum should not be built around subjects or skills, the Cambridge Primary Review is not merely a response to Sir Jim's consultation. Not only did it precede the Rose Review and help to shape it, it is a passionate, intellectual argument for far more radical change.

The Cambridge Primary Review report identifies four main challenges to the curriculum: it is dominated by the core subjects, driven by the key stage 2 tests, it is overloaded and there is excessive prescription.

The report states the two-tier curriculum of English and maths versus everything else has been apparent for at least 100 years. But Professor Alexander argues it is time that ministers and officials started taking notice of research which shows that standards and a broad curriculum are linked. "The evidence may be politically counter-intuitive but it is also well-established, consistent and unequivocal," he said.

The existing curriculum is not inherently unmanageable, states Professor Alexander; it is the emphasis on high-stakes testing which makes heads feel the need to timetable more than half the week to literacy and numeracy.

Despite starting with similar challenges and having similar solutions, the framework is different from that proposed by Sir Jim, not only in its structure, but in the institutions and its under-lying thinking.

Numeracy, for Sir Jim, must continue to be prioritised. Professor Alexander said some witnesses to his review challenged the assumption that it is as much a "basic" as language, and wants more rigour in deciding what is truly essential in primary maths.

Local flexibility is also treated very differently. Professor Alexander wants an explicit and protected allocation of 30 per cent of curriculum time. Sir Jim's interim report calls for the national programmes to be flexible enough for schools to adapt content.

Not all differences are so stark. Much would depend on how things played out in practice. Professor Alexander, for example, stresses that all domains are equal, and should be treated with equal seriousness. But he also admits language and literacy would be the "undisputed priority for primary education".

And, more importantly for teachers, neither review goes as far as setting out exactly what should be taught. Anyone wanting to know whether to ditch the Florence Nightingale resources or stop explaining why the moon is not a light source, will not find the answers here.

[www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk)

Robin Alexander's inquiry

Title: The Cambridge Primary Review

Launched: October 2006

Curriculum report: February 2009

Final report due: Summer 2009

Twelve aims:

Well-being; engagement; empowerment; autonomy; encouraging respect and reciprocity; promoting interdependence and sustainability; empowering local, national and global citizenship; celebrating culture and community; exploring, knowing, understanding and making sense; fostering skill; exciting the imagination; enacting dialogue.

Curriculum:

Eight domains: arts and creativity; citizenship and ethics; faith and belief; language, oracy and literacy; maths; physical and emotional health; place and time; and science and technology.

Core subjects:

"The core curriculum at the primary stage is redefined as requirements for all the specified domains, not just some of them, so 'core' disappears."

SIR JIM ROSE'S REVIEW

Title: The Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum

Launched: December 2007

Interim: December 2008

Final report due: Spring 2009

Aims: Successful learners who enjoy learning, make progress and achieve; confident individuals who are able to lead safe, healthy and fulfilling lives; responsible citizens who make a positive contribution to society.

Curriculum:

Six areas of learning: English, communication and languages; maths; science and technology; human, social and environmental understanding; physical health and well-being; the arts and design.

Core subjects:

"Primary schools must continue to give priority to literacy, whilst making sure that serious attention is paid to developing spoken language intensively."

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- [What is primary education for?](#)
- [Primary Review calls for radical curriculum change](#)

Robin Alexander has brought forward publication of his three-year independent inquiry to coincide with Sir Jim Rose's official curriculum proposals. Helen Ward examines

proposals. Hereward examines  
the issues that divide and unite the  
two men

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