

## **MEI response to the December 2011 report by the Expert Panel for the National Curriculum review: “The Framework for the National Curriculum”**

The December 2011 Expert Panel Report makes a number of recommendations concerning the National Curriculum. MEI welcomes the emphasis placed on curriculum coherence expressed in statements such as the following:

*“It is essential to be clear about the purposes that the curriculum is expected to serve; this will support the best possible selection of curriculum content. We believe defining curricular aims is the most effective way of establishing and maintaining coherent provision.”*

MEI’s main area of expertise is in secondary mathematics and most of the following comments relate to this rather than dealing with the detail of the Expert Panel’s recommendations for primary mathematics. Consequently, this response is relatively brief.

MEI considers that mathematics at secondary level should be taught as a coherent whole, developing students’ understanding from year 7 to GCSE assessment in year 11 and beyond. MEI sees the division of the secondary mathematics curriculum into Key Stages 3 and 4 as artificial, in view of the nature of mathematics as a subject which builds on students’ prior understanding. Further, MEI is mindful of the possibility that a two year Key Stage 3 could be interpreted as encouraging early entry for GCSE Mathematics. MEI is concerned about the current level of inappropriate early entry, combined with insufficient attention paid to students’ progression beyond GCSE. The 2011 DfE report, *Early entry to GCSE examinations*, expressed the following concerns about early entry:

*“The main argument against early entry is that statistically, early entry candidates perform worse overall than those who do not enter early, even when taking account of resits. This suggests that some students are being entered for GCSEs before they are ready. Also, candidates could be ‘banking’ their grade as soon as they get C or above and as a result not achieve their full potential.*

*There are also other factors to consider:*

- Dropping the subject part way through the year may lead to pupils losing interest in the subject and therefore less likely to progress beyond GCSE.*
- Early entry could lead to the programme of study being delivered over a compressed time period, which in turn could result in coaching to the test rather than delivery of a broad curriculum.*
- Early entry also increases the number of retakes (to secure the required grade) which has additional cost implications. It is better to ensure pupils are adequately prepared for the exam first time round.”*

Whilst appreciating the arguments, based on international evidence, for broadening the curriculum for pupils at KS4, MEI remains mindful of the need to ensure that the content for the Programmes of Study for core subjects, including mathematics, is not diluted due to a need to decrease teaching time to allow such broadening to happen.

MEI would like to see the Expert Panel’s suggestion on the presentation of Programmes of Study taken forward for serious consideration to ensure that the relationship between assessment and the curriculum is clear while preventing an over-emphasis on assessment distorting the curriculum.

*“Programmes of Study should be stated as discursive statements of purposes, anticipated progression and interconnections within the knowledge to be acquired, with Attainment Targets being stated as statements of specific learning outcomes related to essential knowledge.*

*Programmes of Study could then be presented in two parallel columns. A narrative, developmental description of the key concept to be learned (the Programme of Study) could be represented on the left hand side. The essential learning outcomes to be assessed at the end of the key stage (the Attainment Targets) could be represented on the right hand side. This would better support curriculum-focused assessment. This idea needs to be explored further.”*

MEI endorses further exploration of this idea; it is essential to ensure that the statements of learning outcomes do not lead to atomisation of the curriculum.

MEI shares the concerns of the Expert Panel about the uses to which the current National Curriculum levels have sometimes been put and welcomes the idea of testing at KS2 as a measure of students’ readiness to progress to the next stage of learning. The suggested approach encourages a clearer relationship between assessment and the aims and purposes of the national curriculum. However, readiness to progress should not be a sole accountability measure; meeting the needs of more talented students is also important.

MEI welcomes the recommendation that resources should be made available to help students at risk of falling behind; however, it wishes to emphasise that identification of students who are falling behind cannot be left until the end of KS2.

*“We recommend that resources should be prioritised for pupils who have either fallen behind or are identified as at risk of falling behind the rest of the class.”*

Intervention for students who are falling behind needs to be available throughout primary education to ensure that as many students as possible are ready to progress to secondary level. The effect of transition from primary to secondary level needs to be carefully considered to ensure that students continue to make progress. MEI agrees with the following Expert Panel statement

*“Further work is needed on outstanding issues such as transitions between key stages and, in particular, on more detailed consideration of provision for children with learning difficulties, special educational needs and disabilities and/or those regarded as high attainers.”*

MEI is keen to see improved provision of mathematics courses suitable for the needs of a wide range of learners. There is a wide range of ability in mathematics; improving outcomes for students who are currently not attaining well should not be at the cost of holding back higher attainers.

The idea of assessment as a test of whether students are ready to progress could have wider applicability, for example it would be possible to change the way AS Mathematics is thought of to make it a way of checking whether students are ready to progress to A Level Mathematics.