

Why do we need a new Lower Secondary curriculum?

By NCDC

Think back to when you were in Lower Secondary school. You probably learnt 10 or 12 subjects and in each of them you learnt factual knowledge and information. How much of that do you remember now? How much has been useful to you after you left school? Probably not a lot.

You also learnt skills: literacy skills of reading and writing; numeracy skills of how to add and subtract and use figures; thinking skills of how to solve problems and find out things for yourself; practical skills of how to make or do things; and social skills of getting on with other people, working in a team, co-operating with others etc. How many of these skills do you remember? How many do you still use? Probably very many.

Some years ago, particularly with a report by the late Prof. Senteza Kajubi, Ugandans began to realize that the present Lower Secondary curriculum places too great an emphasis on knowledge, most of which is often forgotten or never used, and too little emphasis on skills which will be useful later in life. Over the last few years, therefore, we have devised a new curriculum at this Lower Secondary level. This moves education from a knowledge-based approach to a skills and competence-based approach. A competence is the ability not just to learn and reproduce knowledge, but to **use** the knowledge we gain. This involves an emphasis on skills: the ability to think for ourselves, to find things out for ourselves and to be creative by creating our own ideas, rather than just repeating the knowledge we have learnt.

At the same time employers were complaining that school leavers they employed did not have the right skills for the jobs they were given. Their heads were full of knowledge they had learnt, but they could not write, read or talk well; could not be left to do a job on their own because they could not think for themselves and use their own initiative; and could not work with others in a group to solve problems. The new curriculum is partly a result of an extensive survey of employers asking them what skills they wanted in school leavers.

How did we get into this situation? The present curriculum is largely derived from what we inherited at independence, with only a few changes made in the 1970s and after. The subjects remain the same, but new subjects have been added. Within each subject also, new knowledge has been added. The result is a curriculum involving learning a huge amount of knowledge to be reproduced for examinations, which mainly test knowledge, not even understanding. As long as you can remember what you read, or what the teacher told you, you can “pass”, even if you don’t understand what you are writing!

Since the original curriculum was devised, however, things have changed. The world has changed, Uganda has changed and our education system has changed. In the 1960s and 70s only a small proportion of students went to Lower Secondary school. Most of these either went on to further studies or to paid employment in towns. It made sense, therefore, for the curriculum to be geared to preparation for further studies or office employment. Now,

however, we are aiming for everyone to go to LowerSecondary school up to S4. The new curriculum, therefore, aims to be suitable for the vast majority who will leave school without going to further studies, and need skills for either employment or self-employment, as well as those who will go on to further studies.

Because of the emphasis on skills and the ability to learn for yourself, the new curriculum talks of *Learners*, not Students. *Learners* are active seekers of knowledge, students are passive absorbers of knowledge.

To move from a knowledge-based to a skills and competence-based curriculum we need to reduce the number of subjects studied. At the same time we need to retain the ideas and concepts as well as the important knowledge from the present subjects. It was recognized that, especially at Lower Secondary level, there are many important links between subjects. In the three Sciences, for instance, it is important that students understand the scientific methods which are the basis of all science, as well as the links between the sciences.

Take the simple example of diet: what we eat. This is clearly linked to Biology: the digestive system. But it is also linked to nutrition which has a chemical basis – the Chemistry of what we eat is very important. But the movement of food through the body is also linked to the Physics of movement. At this level, therefore, almost all aspects of science have links to all three sciences.

Similarly with Geography, History, Economics, Politics and Sociology. These are all linked together in the understanding of the society we live in, and Science is linked to this as well. To understand any area of the world we will need to understand the physical features and climate – part of Science. Then we need to look at how people have used this environment, which will in turn be influenced by the history of the area and economics of what is produced. This in turn will be influenced by the way people are governed and the social interactions of people.

The decision was taken, therefore, to base the new curriculum on the links between the traditional subjects rather than their separation. Thus the curriculum is based on 8 Learning Areas which link related knowledge and ideas together, including *Science*, integrating the three sciences and *Social Studies* combining all the fields mentioned above. The other Learning Areas are *Languages*, including English, local and foreign languages; *Mathematics*; *Religious Education*; *Technology and Enterprise* including ICT, technical skills and the business background of how to use them; *Creative Arts* including music, dance, drama and fine arts; and *Life Education* combining physical and social education. It is thought that at this level integration is more important than specialization. Once students have a grounding in the links between the different forms of knowledge and skills, they can understand the specialised subjects better. So this curriculum only applies to Lower Secondary education up to 'O' level. A new 'A' level curriculum will be based on the separate specialized subjects as at present.

The basis of the new curriculum, therefore, is not dilution of the present subjects, or even elimination of some subjects as some people have suggested. It is *integration* of the subjects

and the integration will include the important aspects of all the present subjects taught as rigorously as at present. This also avoids the overlap which often exists at present – learning the same things in two or more subjects. This new curriculum will be linked to a new examination being devised by UNEB based on these Learning Areas. This will test understanding, skills and the ability to *use* knowledge rather than simply knowledge itself. Such an approach will give sufficient background and knowledge for those going on to specialization at 'A' level, but will also give a good general education for the majority who will leave school, go to technical training institutions or become employed or self-employed.