

Executive Summary

The rapidly changing world places new demands on society and especially the education sector. Skills, attitudes, values, and knowledge about topics such as digital and data literacy, globalisation, literacy for sustainable development, and computational thinking are ever more relevant. Interest groups, parents, teachers, school leaders, and governments may put pressure on the curriculum to change in response to these novel demands. At the same time, curriculum lacks the space to easily add new content without causing overcrowding in the curriculum. Students need to learn deeper and not more; their learning time should not be extended nor should students learn at a surface level. Countries face a significant challenge of being responsive to changing needs while also minimising curriculum expansion and overload.

Curriculum expansion is the tendency to include new content items in a curriculum in response to new societal demands without appropriate adjustment of other parts of the curriculum. Curriculum expansion can result in curriculum overload, which can include: content overload, perceived overload, or curriculum imbalance. Content overload is the excessive amount of content taught in relation to the available time for instruction. Curriculum imbalance occurs when some subjects are given priority at the expense of other areas of the curriculum. Therefore, it is important to address curriculum overload without losing the balance when adding/removing contents.

Perceived overload is the perception on the part of teachers or students of an overcrowded curriculum and can be the result of the perception created by the number of topics and allotted time, assessment periodicity, the size of the curriculum documents and related materials, or lack of readiness to implement new reforms. The perceived or experienced dimensions of curriculum overload are just as important as its actual dimensions, as they can equally undermine the success of a curriculum reform through the loss of support from school leaders, teachers and students.

Student and teacher well-being should be of primary importance in curriculum design, especially when it comes to curriculum overload, because well-being enhances learning, and vice versa. An overloaded curriculum can put pressure on teachers to teach all the material, potentially risking a 'mile-wide, inch-deep' content coverage. Students also may feel stress and pressure, while lacking the time in or out of school to complete all required assignments. This stress, in turn, can undermine students' ability to engage in deeper learning or the productivity or quality of learning time may be lower.

A balance between aiming high and focusing on essentials must be struck so as not to disengage high-performing students or confuse and alienate lower-achieving students. All students need the opportunity to learn and to succeed, no matter their background or skills. As a way of promoting learning for diverse students in different contents, subjects should not be independent blocks, but rather inter-dependent pieces of a puzzle to enable student learning.

The OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030 policy analyses of country/jurisdiction curriculum and reform suggest a variety of approaches to balancing content and competencies to address new societal demands while not overloading the curriculum. For example, countries can embed cross-curricular themes or competencies into existing subjects or structure their curriculum around subject-specific goals. Themes most frequently articulated across countries include "environmental education, sustainability", "local and global citizenship, peace", and "health education, well-being and lifestyle" and are addressed in different subjects depending on the country. Some countries choose to embed them most in the national language whereas others embed them in humanities. Themes themselves may be standalone courses as well.

Countries also may choose to embed cross-curricular competencies in the curriculum. Common cross-curricular competencies include: local and global citizenship, taking responsibility, co-operation and collaboration, reconciling tensions and dilemmas, creating new value, data literacy, and financial literacy. Cross-curricular competencies can, in turn, be embedded in the curriculum

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in a variety of ways. As with cross-curricular themes, cross-curricular competencies can be integrated in a variety of subject areas to varying degrees. Subject-specific goals can provide coherence and guidance to school leaders and teachers when they are designed well. Clarity regarding curriculum changes, which often occurs via subject-specific goals, is critical to ensure that teachers have appropriate guidance on how to incorporate new cross-curricular themes and competencies in responding to changing societal demands.

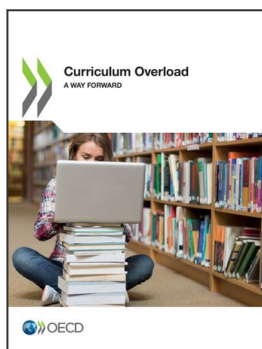
The following are other potential strategies for tackling and mitigating curriculum overload during a redesign process:

- Regulating learning time to avoid the expansion of a curriculum to be an expansion of required learning time.
- Carefully defining the pitch of what is included in curriculum. Balance aiming high while focusing on essentials.
- Build in coherent learning progressions across grades and education levels.
- Focus on conceptual understanding or “big ideas” to avoid an excessive number of subjects or topics within the allotted time.
- Manage perceptions of overload by adjusting the size and/or format of curriculum documents.

Countries have learned a variety of lessons from unintended consequences of curriculum reform to adjust to new curricular demands. Five key lessons identified from country examples include the following:

- Keep the right balance between breadth of learning areas and depth of content knowledge.
- Use focus, rigor, and coherence jointly as key design principles when addressing curriculum overload.
- Be conscious of and avoid homework overload for students.
- Be mindful of local decisions leading to curriculum overload for schools.
- Stress curriculum overload as a pressing issue by redefining student success and well-being.

Curriculum overload can be a stressor to students and teachers and even serve as an impediment to learning. Analyses suggest methods for embedding subjects or competencies and ways to set subject-specific goals. Examples from countries serve as lessons learned or potential strategies that can be adapted to avoid curriculum overload. An effective design process, with a focus on student needs and adoption of effective design strategies can serve as potent examples for countries undergoing curriculum redesign.



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