



What lessons have countries/ jurisdictions learned from unintended consequences?

The strategies introduced in the challenges and strategies section (see “What types of challenges do countries/jurisdictions face in addressing curriculum overload, and what strategies do they use to address these challenges?”) could be options to address the challenges of managing curriculum overload. While the strategies may be helpful, they may also have unintended consequences. Some countries and jurisdictions have reported experiencing outcomes that were not anticipated when using these strategies. This added further complexity to minimising curriculum overload.

The following five key lessons learned are generated based on actual country experiences. These lessons can be used as a check list to reflect on the current state of play and avoid repeating similar unintended consequences that peer countries/jurisdictions have experienced.

Key lessons learned from unintended consequences on managing curriculum overload

- Keep the right balance between breadth of learning areas and depth of content knowledge.
- Use focus, rigour 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.

1. KEEP THE RIGHT BALANCE BETWEEN BREADTH OF LEARNING AREAS AND DEPTH OF CONTENT KNOWLEDGE

How to ensure that both breadth of learning and depth of content knowledge are achievable within the allocated time in a curriculum remains a persistent dilemma for countries as they seek to prevent curriculum overload (See “What does research say?”).

Altering selected content in the curriculum is politically challenging and a high-stakes undertaking. Curriculum change requires compromises and can result in the status quo for all content items if those compromises are not achieved. Changing content then often results in what is sometimes described as a “mile-wide-inch-deep” or shallow curriculum that does not allow students sufficient time to explore, understand and master the content. This can contribute to a sense of disengagement for students and teachers alike (See “What does research say?” and “What types of challenges do countries/jurisdictions face in addressing curriculum overload, and what strategies do they use to address these challenges?”).

Countries/jurisdictions often face pressures to keep all content knowledge and learning hours in prioritised academic subjects, potentially at the expense of non-academic learning areas or content (See “What does research say?”, “How do countries compare?”; and “What gets measured gets treasured” in (OECD, Forthcoming_[11])). However, recent research findings suggest that non-academic subjects contribute not only to whole-child development, but also to students’ cognitive and meta-cognitive development, which are considered key skills in academic subjects ([concept note on skills](#)¹ and [e2030 PE report](#)²).

Focusing solely on academic subjects may also disregard individual students’ interests and strengths, as well as differences in their learning progression trajectories and the amount of time they may need to master content. To embrace such differentiation and diversity in a standardised document, some countries/jurisdictions have started to take a spiral curriculum approach, recognising

non-linear learning progression and reinforcing material over time (See “What types of challenges do countries/jurisdictions face in addressing curriculum overload, and what strategies do they use to address these challenges?”).

In sum, securing the breadth and depth of content learning is important, but securing the space and process built into curriculum redesign is equally important as they are interdependent. The depth of learning can be enhanced by focusing not only on student performance, but also on the quality of the student learning experience as well as the quality of student-teacher interactions.

2. USE FOCUS, RIGOUR AND COHERENCE JOINTLY AS KEY DESIGN PRINCIPLES WHEN ADDRESSING CURRICULUM OVERLOAD

As design principles to guide curriculum development, focus suggests that a relatively small number of topics should be introduced to ensure deep, quality learning; rigour suggests that topics should be challenging and enable deep thinking and reflection, which is not to be confused with rigid or inflexible design; and coherence suggests that topics should be ordered in a logical way to create a progression (OECD, 2019^[2]). Each of the principles has its own challenges for implementation. But, they should be used jointly to avoid unintended consequences of using them one by one.

When reducing content, focusing on a relatively small number of topics can be met not only with resistance from stakeholders defending their subjects and interests, but also with a perception of lowering the quality and standards of education. This could, in turn, result in a backlash from key stakeholders that might lead to increased content and instruction time in subsequent reforms (See “What does research say?” and “What types of challenges do countries/jurisdictions face in addressing curriculum overload, and what strategies do they use to address these challenges?”).

It is, therefore, critical to strike **the right balance between focus and rigour**, articulating the importance of rigour to key stakeholders when focusing on core elements or selected concepts, contents and big ideas. At the same time, excess remains the enemy. Countries/jurisdictions reported that an overly rigorous curriculum may put students of disadvantaged backgrounds more at risk of falling behind and dropping out and may also lead to teachers not being able to cover all content during the allotted instruction time (See “3. Be aware of homework overload for students”). Thus, a balance of rigour and focus may help to ensure that all students are able to access and engage with the material.

To achieve a well-balanced curriculum, **coherence** is also essential. It is critical to ensure that topics are not removed without due regard to maintaining the logic and the appropriate sequential learning that exists in each discipline. This should be done while avoiding unnecessary overlap and/or duplication across grades and across subjects (See “What does research say?” and “What types of challenges do countries/jurisdictions face in addressing curriculum overload, and what strategies do they use to address these challenges?”). To make this happen, it is essential to engage subject experts (academics and practitioners) in cross-subject co-ordination from the onset of a curriculum reform process. They can undertake their drafting tasks within set boundaries without compromising the integrity and logic of individual disciplines/subject areas.

A coherent curriculum can also support articulating how certain topics can be related across different disciplines, suggesting possible ways to promote interdisciplinary learning. It ensures that the specified standards are pitched at developmentally appropriate levels (grade and age), while supporting teachers to respond to learners’ needs where student learning progress is framed by broader purposes. By adding focus, rigour and coherence combined into the curriculum redesign process, policy makers could therefore aim for a well-balanced curriculum in order to mitigate further overload.

3. BE CONSCIOUS OF AND AVOID HOMEWORK OVERLOAD FOR STUDENTS

When teachers are not able to cover the intended content within the allocated instruction time, they are likely to leave it up to students to catch up on the content on their own, resulting in homework overload. This was highlighted as a pressing issue by the students’ group of the OECD Future of Education and Skills project, in particular, with online learning or hybrid model as experience in the context of COVID-19 in 2020.

Excessive homework in turn has repercussions on after-school hours, leaving less time to sleep, play, eat and spend time with friends and family, with an ultimately negative impact on students’ health and well-being (See “What does research say?” and “What types of challenges do countries/jurisdictions face in addressing curriculum overload, and what strategies do they use to address these challenges?”). In addition, out-of-school work can increase teachers’ workload for homework preparation and marking. In short, homework overload can adversely influence both students and teachers.

Quality and complexity of homework are key components to keep in mind when mitigating homework overload. Homework is increasingly associated with new pedagogies (such as flipped classrooms or project-based learning), which require more complex

assignments to be taken at home. If homework becomes too complex, students are more likely to become disengaged. A possible unintended consequence is the disproportionate effect on disadvantaged students (OECD, Forthcoming^[3]), who may not be able to rely on the same support at home as advantaged students. It may thus have repercussions on perceptions/experience of overload, disengagement and possibly dropout rates.

However, a balance needs to be struck between complex and oversimplified homework. Some countries/jurisdictions have reported that simple tasks or drills (e.g. in mathematics or via digital platforms) might contribute to demotivation and disengagement among students (OECD, Forthcoming^[3]). While these types of tasks are easier for teachers to assign and assess and thus decrease overload in the short term, they may lead to more work and increased overload in the longer term.

When designed well, homework can also be beneficial for students, such as for long-term development of children's motivation, strategies for coping with mistakes and setbacks and the time for children to develop positive beliefs about achievement (Bempchat, 2004^[4]). Therefore, it is important that, before giving homework, teachers should ask themselves what kinds of homework is appropriate for diverse learners, so that the materials would help avoid excessive work for teachers and that students would not have undue pressures beyond the school day.

4. BE MINDFUL OF LOCAL DECISIONS LEADING TO CURRICULUM OVERLOAD FOR SCHOOLS

Schools and teachers are increasingly given responsibility in curriculum management in countries/jurisdictions where curriculum adaptations or autonomy are granted at the local or school level, to ensure that the curriculum meets the needs of students and of local communities.

However, some countries/jurisdictions report that curriculum overload tends to be heavier at the local level, with teachers and schools overburdened by the responsibilities such autonomy entails. This could be due to a lack of guidance on what to remove or what to prioritise in curriculum content at the school and local levels (See "What types of challenges do countries/jurisdictions face in addressing curriculum overload, and what strategies do they use to address these challenges?"). But it could also be due, as some countries/jurisdictions have experienced, to guidelines that are too prescriptive (e.g. teachers teaching the examples word for word). Teachers may also find it difficult to combine new competencies and subjects with traditional ones, contributing to an even greater perception of overload and a decreased sense of self-efficacy and motivation to teach.

It is, therefore, of critical importance to ensure proper initial teacher training and to offer guidance, continuous training and materials to accompany teachers and school leaders through the process of curriculum redesign and implementation. Such an intentional process of guidance and training can help ensure autonomy and lead to more efficiency rather than more overload (See "What does research say?").

In fact, much of the success of curricular redesign depends on the culture in which teachers and school leaders are operating. If teachers are encouraged to have agency, to be the designers, co-creators and facilitators of the curriculum and are properly equipped, they will find themselves making room for the intended goals of the curriculum that are relevant for their students' future.

5. STRESS CURRICULUM OVERLOAD AS A PRESSING ISSUE BY REDEFINING STUDENT SUCCESS AND WELL-BEING

When a curriculum reform is undertaken, the goals of education and the nature of the learner and/or the vision for young learners are often revisited. All stakeholders – policy makers, teachers and school leaders, academics and parents – strive for student success. This includes not only academic success, but also success in life as healthy, active and responsible citizens. The goals of education recognise the importance of students' well-being which, as previously noted, also means enough time to sleep, to play with friends, to eat and to spend time with the family (See "What does research say?").

However, well-intended goals regarding student well-being can be undermined if there is not enough space in the curriculum, and there are often pressures to retain and even add material within curricula. Subject experts, such as school teachers or faculty members, can often defend the retention of favoured content and press for their expansion (See "What types of challenges do countries/jurisdictions face in addressing curriculum overload, and what strategies do they use to address these challenges?"). Special interest groups can perceive the reduction/removal of subject content as a threat to their job security, which may promote an adherence to teaching and learning within rigid subject area boundaries, rather than utilising opportunities to use integrated approaches to enhance, and deepen students' overall learning. Content tribalism, as this is sometimes called, can thus pose obstacles to efforts to reduce curriculum content and promote transdisciplinary approaches.

What lessons have countries/jurisdictions learned from unintended consequences?

When confronted with difficulties in reaching consensus, reconciling tensions and contradictory views from a wide range of stakeholders, it is important to remind everyone of the intended ultimate beneficiaries of the curriculum redesign – the students and their holistic development (see “Lessons learned” section in (OECD, Forthcoming^[1])). In doing so, actively bringing in the voice of students, allowing them to participate in the planning of curriculum content, raising concerns and presenting ideas on how their learning and ultimately well-being can be improved, would be an important step forward (see “Lessons learned on student voice, choice and agency” in (OECD, Forthcoming^[5])).

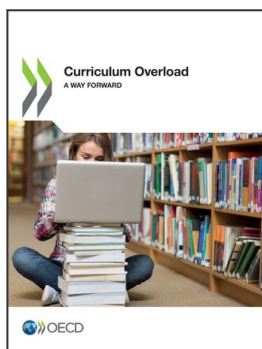
By moving away from the notion of “more is better”, student success can be rethought and redefined to embrace student well-being and to put it at the centre of curriculum reform and education overall. Such a redefinition would lead to cultural change in society and hence a change in priorities for stakeholders, recognising that an appropriately balanced curriculum is best for the well-being of students.

Notes

1. http://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/teaching-and-learning/learning/skills/Skills_for_2030_concept_note.pdf
2. https://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/contact/OECD_FUTURE_OF_EDUCATION_2030_MAKING_PHYSICAL_DYNAMIC_AND_INCLUSIVE_FOR_2030.pdf

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