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Reflecting on the Implications of the 2025 Curriculum and Assessment Review for Design and Technology in England

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Introduction

This reflection critically examines the implications of the 2025 Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR) for Design and Technology (D&T) education in England. Drawing on our role as expert advisors to the Department for Education (DfE), we explore the Review's recommendations for clarifying the subject's purpose, refining curriculum content, and embedding sustainability, social responsibility, and inclusivity. We argue that while the Review articulates a progressive vision for D&T, significant challenges remain in addressing systemic barriers such as declining participation, inequitable access, and assessment practices. The discussion highlights opportunities for strengthening applied knowledge areas (digital literacy, oracy, and climate education) while cautioning against structural constraints that risk further marginalising the subject. We conclude that realising the Review's ambitions requires targeted investment in teacher development, infrastructure, and inclusive curriculum design, alongside assessment reform. Without these measures, D&T's potential as a vital bridge between creativity, technology, and societal needs may remain unrealised.

As expert advisors to the DfE's CAR panel following the interim report (DfE, 2025a), we welcome the final report's recognition of D&T as a vital subject within a world-class curriculum (DfE, 2025b). This reflection bridges our discussions with the DfE and our public response to the final report, focusing particularly on its recommendations for D&T. We also critically analyse the implications of the CAR for D&T by comparing them with recommendations for art and design (A&D), science, and geography.

The Report positions itself as evidence-led, inclusive, and forward-looking, aiming to "ensure the curriculum is fit for purpose, addresses the rich knowledge and skills people need to thrive in a fast-changing world and encourage a love of learning" (DfE, 2025b, p.9). For D&T, this vision translates into two overarching recommendations:

1. **Clarify the subject's purpose** by articulating aspirational aims that emphasise its distinct body of knowledge and capabilities.
2. **Refine the D&T curriculum and GCSE subject content**, including:
    a. Explicitly addressing sustainable solutions to design challenges.
    b. Embedding social responsibility and inclusive design throughout the design process.
    c. Developing critical decision-making skills in material selection.
    d. Ensuring that realising designs remains integral to pupils' D&T experience. (paraphrasing of DfE, 2025b, p.70)

These recommendations align with our own vision for a future-facing D&T curriculum; one that equips young people with the capability to ideate, realise, and critique designs in response to complex societal and technological challenges (McLain et al., 2019).

Opportunities and Challenges

The Report marks a (potentially) significant moment in the evolution of England's national curriculum. D&T occupies a uniquely complex position, bridging traditional academic, practical, and creative domains while carrying the legacy of its vocational roots (Hardy, 2025). We see the recommendation for aspirational aims as an opportunity to advance the subject while building on its history. We propose these two aspirational aims for D&T:

- Develop design and technology capability through selecting knowledge of how to imagine, create and critique artefacts, systems or models for a range of contexts, purposes and users.
- Develop conceptual, procedural, and contextual knowledge to critically evaluate the societal, cultural, and environmental impacts of design and technology.

The Report's emphasis on critical design-making skills, sustainability, social responsibility, and inclusivity aligns well in these aspirational aims. However, realising this potential will require significant investment in teacher training, infrastructure, and curriculum development. The Review's ambitions risk being undermined if not matched by systemic support.

The Report recommends that the curriculum should place rich knowledge and skills at its heart. However, in D&T, the subject's intention lies in what pupils do with that knowledge, which we think are addressed in these two aims. Firstly, to make purposeful changes to the made world through their active use of knowledge and skills; and secondly, to use their developing knowledge to understand the wider impact of D&T.

Applied Knowledge Areas

Next, the Review also states that D&T should contribute to applied knowledge areas (often called 'life skills') including climate education and sustainability, digital literacy, and oracy. Geography and science are recommended to focus on teaching about climate change, and sustainability is the focus for D&T – again its knowledge for action and change, rather than the theoretical or scientific aspects. This is an opportunity for real discussions between subjects to clarify subject-specific knowledge and where these can be drawn on between subjects – not as simple cross-curricular themes, but rather to strengthen learners' knowledge and skills.

The applied knowledge areas of digital literacy and oracy in D&T will need further development during the next stage of the review, when curriculum drafters and stakeholders shape the aims, purpose, and content for each subject. The report defines digital literacy as "the knowledge, behaviours and confidence required to use technologies and computer systems creatively, safely and effectively" (DfE, 2025b, p.36), with the example of D&T using 3D modelling. We know that digital literacy in D&T already goes further than this with computer aided design (CAD), digital fabrication (including 3D printing), and programming microcontrollers (DfE, 2013, 2015a, 2015b), for example. We suggest that the scope of digital literacy in D&T should include digital collaboration, communication and presentations.

Finally, oracy. Using precise terminology to articulate ideas, concepts and process to others and for a arrange of audiences has gradually faded from the D&T curriculum. Yet language is what enables pupils to think clearly and engage in meaningful conversations about design with teachers, peers, and eventually, for some, with professionals across the breadth of design practice. The next phase of the national curriculum development offers space to revisit and research effective strategies for teaching and pupils learning design and technology vocabulary that go beyond a simple word wall or textbook glossary.

Future school planning must move past form-filling exercises and formulaic, assessment-driven portfolios, that merely show where and when these applied knowledge areas are taught, learned, and demonstrated. In D&T, we have an opportunity to share what is already being done and what more we could showcase to other subjects.

Access, Equity, and Assessment

The Report also reaffirms D&T's status as a foundation subject at key stages 1 to 3 (primary through to lower secondary) and as an entitlement subject at key stage 4 (upper secondary) in all state schools, placing it back as an essential component of a general education for all children in compulsory education. However, it also acknowledges a troubling picture of declining access and participation in D&T, evident through GCSE and A Level entries, which has been an issue since 2004 (McLain, 2025a). Only 57% of state-funded schools entered pupils for GCSE D&T in 2024/25, with access significantly lower in schools serving disadvantaged communities. The analytical annex (DfE, 2025c) highlights persistent disparities in uptake by socio-economic status, gender, and special educational needs. For example, pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are markedly underrepresented in D&T entries, raising concerns about equity and inclusion. This suggests we need to investigate schools' structural systems and decisions made by D&T teachers that may be causing or affecting these disparities. Our view is that if a recommendation for inclusive design to be embedded within the D&T curriculum then, as a subject, we must reflect on our pedagogical, curriculum and assessment decisions; including what we exclude and consign to the past.

A comparative analysis with the A&D curriculum underscores these concerns. A&D enjoys significantly broader access, with 94% of schools offering qualifications in the subject. Gender participation is more balanced, and the subject benefits from a stronger cultural and creative education narrative. Moreover, A&D's assessment model, which includes substantial coursework, contrasts with D&T's more examination-centric approach. The Review's call to reduce the volume of GCSE examinations and explore alternative assessment methods could benefit D&T, but only if accompanied by structural changes to its qualification design.

Policy and Progression

The proposal to remove the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) as a performance measure may offer some relief, potentially freeing up curriculum space for practical and creative subjects, like D&T, that were marginalised under the last curriculum review (DfE, 2025d, Whittaker, 2025, Hardy 2017). Yet, the retention of the EBacc's structure within Progress 8 as an "Academic Breadth" bucket suggests that the underlying hierarchies of subject value may persist. Without a more fundamental rebalancing of accountability measures, D&T risks remaining marginalised in the curriculum offer of many schools. This should be a cautionary tale for other countries around

the world as they review their curricula; particularly where ideologically narrow conceptions of knowledge rich curricula dominate (McLain, 2025b).

The Food and Nutrition Dilemma

Finally, the Review's treatment of food and nutrition (F&N) represents a significant shift, renaming the former "Cooking and Nutrition" and granting it distinct aims and a purpose of study within D&T, as a "parent" subject DfE, 2025b, 2025d). While this acknowledges the subject's broader scope (emphasising practical cookery, sustainability, and healthy eating) it stops short of elevating F&N to a standalone subject, as some stakeholders advocated. This decision reinforces its dependency on D&T, which risks constraining its identity and progression pathways, despite the Report's call for clearer curriculum detail and stronger post-16 routes into food-related careers. The implications for D&T are twofold: on one hand, the integration maintains the historic connection of food, as a material for designing and making, within D&T by embedding life skills and interdisciplinary links; on the other, it may dilute focus on core design principles if F&N dominates practical skill development. Ultimately, the review's approach reflects a compromise, strengthening food education without fully resolving tensions around subject autonomy and curriculum coherence. The decision to have separate stakeholder groups for D&T and F&N (with little interaction between the two) during the review process reinforced the divisions, with the recommendations failing to grapple with the complexity of the relationship between food a D&T imposed in the last review. The Review effectively kicks the can down the road, leaving the D&T and F&N communities to work with potentially unresolvable issues or a braver future review.

Conclusion

The Review offers a mixed outlook for D&T. It articulates a progressive and relevant vision for the subject but stops short of addressing the structural and systemic barriers that have led to its marginalisation. Although the panel may argue this was beyond their remit, ensuring D&T thrives within a world-class curriculum requires policymakers to go beyond curriculum reform and tackle issues of access, equity, assessment, and progression.

For equity in D&T, strategic support for the subject and its education community must be addressed through both policy and practice. This includes:

- Targeted investment in teacher education and development, particularly in schools serving more disadvantaged communities.
- Infrastructure funding to ensure all schools have access to the resources (including appropriate tools, materials, and spaces) needed for high-quality D&T education.
- Inclusive curriculum design that reflects diverse learners' needs, interests, and lived experiences.
- Assessment reform that values practical and creative work, reducing reliance on high-stakes examinations that disadvantage certain groups.

Only then can D&T fulfil its potential as a vital bridge between creativity, design, technology and the future of life and work - where all pupils can flourish.

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