

## The case of the 2003 curriculum reform of higher secondary education in Uruguay

**Source:** extracted from Barcos R., and Trías, S. (2007): Diseño curricular basado en competencias para la escuela media superior en Uruguay (Personal communication).

*The following document describes an instance of curriculum change in higher secondary education (post-basic, for students between the ages of 15 and 18) in Uruguay, for which the implementation began in 2003.<sup>1</sup>*

Higher secondary education (HSE) in Uruguay consists of three branches: a general branch which prepares youth for entering university (Secondary Education: SE); and two technical branches: Technical Secondary Education (TSE) and Professional Secondary Education (PSE). Eighty percent of Uruguayan students are enrolled in the first category, Secondary Education.

The higher secondary education system has shown weaknesses, inconsistencies and outdated practices, which have translated into a decline in the quality of learning. The current provisions do not adequately prepare students for the personal and civic aspects of life, or for work. While they are suitable for going onto higher education, the skills acquired by the students are insufficient for a successful integration into the higher levels of education. In addition, only 30% of young people complete this cycle, despite the fact that the education system is becoming increasingly democratic in terms of its accessibility.<sup>2</sup>

Facing this situation, the public education authorities appointed a committee in order to pursue the challenge of a transformation of the higher secondary education. The Commission drafted a curriculum proposal based on multiple national studies and comparative education studies, meetings and exchanges with different stakeholders, including academics, business, teacher associations, technical-pedagogical assemblies, social scientists, and personalities from the cultural and scientific fields. The Commission also took into account the opinions of youth associations and sports and working world personalities, among others.

### Guiding ideas for the new proposal

The following aims are to be considered within the framework of a democratic society, which promotes freedom, coexistence, solidarity, pluralism and peace, and which also guarantees the respect of human rights in its different political, cultural, social and economic dimensions.

#### 1. Aims:

- ✓ Contribute to the continuation and deepening of the education process for the formation of the student as a person.

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<sup>1</sup> This information was obtained from the following documents: Transformation Committee of Higher Education (CODICEN. *Comisión de Transformación de la Educación Media Superior*). (2002). Document N° 3 and Annexes; COMISIÓN TEMS/ANEP. (2004). Work Book N° 25. "First Monitoring and Evaluation Report"; COMISIÓN TEMS/ANEP. (2005). "Second Monitoring and Evaluation Report" Non published.

<sup>2</sup> Barely one-third of students who entered 1<sup>st</sup> year of HSE in our country in 1998, attended the 3<sup>rd</sup> year (the last year of this level) in 2000.

- ✓ Promote the individual's personal and social development while respecting his identity and life choices.
- ✓ Provide ethics and civic education for responsible citizenship to enable the individual to exercise their role freely, creatively and critically.
- ✓ Strengthen education and development of youth to be active subjects who are able to process nature and culture through work, as a means of personal and collective development.

2. The objectives for this stage of education are to achieve:

- ✓ The holistic and tolerant consideration of the young person in his generational context, enhancing his emotional, social and intellectual development by strengthening universal values common to society as a whole.
- ✓ The acquisition of training with social and curricular relevance to face the challenges of integration in a highly competitive world.
- ✓ The acquisition of skills that contribute to shaping student's life projects, enabling them to continue further education, and facilitate the potential for employment.
- ✓ The acquisition of solid, academic, quality education that enables the student to pursue various further studies.
- ✓ Comprehensive education of youth for appropriate integration into the working world via diverse paths, to help sustain the development of the country socially and economically.

3. According to the goals and objectives outlined, the following focal concepts were set to orient curricular design:

- ✓ **Unit** of goals and objectives.
- ✓ **Diversity** of motivations and expectations, background and socio-cultural contexts.
- ✓ **Ability to Navigate** from one discipline to another and/or within a discipline from one option to another.
- ✓ **Guiding Functions** with respect to supporting subsequent student choices for schooling.
- ✓ **Giving Options** that allow the partial construction of educational tracks by each student.

4. The decision to base the curriculum on competencies was seen as the most suitable proposal. For this curriculum design, skills are understood as the development of complex abilities that enable students to think and operate in different fields of activity. To enable the development of competencies, the following conditions are required:

- An extended pedagogical timeframe to allow different teaching methods to deepen the pedagogical link between students and teachers, students and knowledge and among students themselves.
- Study programs which have a high degree of selection and relevance of content to teach and learn.
- A school organized so that young people take on a greater role in their education, and so that teachers are able to develop the curriculum in professional areas with their colleagues.

5. In order to explicitly define the ways in which school subjects collaborate in the development of competencies, the curricular structure is organised into tracks and curricular areas. These 'tracks' are formed by groups of subjects which develop similar competencies. The 'areas' indicate the type of competencies that

are promoted in a given subject and is linked to the levels of institutional and individual freedom in the curricular structure.

The tables below show the relationship between the tracks and competencies (table 1), and between the curricular areas and competencies (table 2).

**TABLE 1**

<b>TRACKS</b> <i>(organized by categories of subjects)</i>	<b>COMPETENCIES</b>
<b>I. Communication and Expression</b>	Communicative and expressive skills
<b>II. Natural Sciences and Mathematics</b>	Scientific and technical skills
<b>III. Philosophy and Social Sciences</b>	Philosophical and social skills

**TABLE 2**

<b>CURRICULUM AREAS</b> <i>(organized by type of learning experience)</i>	<b>COMPETENCIES</b>
<b>Curriculum equivalent</b>	Common to all branches and orientations; therefore, they should be developed in all young people attending secondary education.
<b>Specific curriculum areas</b>	Linked to different domains of knowledge and developed with respect to the various orientations and branches.
<b>Optional or exploratory areas</b>	Related to capabilities that enable young people to make decisions about their personal development.
<b>Decentralized curriculum areas</b>	Determined by the school and serve both the interests of young people and the community as they open spaces to other complementary knowledge or deepen the already-planned curriculum.

6. Once consensus was achieved in terms of the structure; subjects, whose content develops the competencies, were defined. The choice of competencies for each of the tracks was assigned to groups of teachers of the different subjects and coordinated by corresponding inspectors. For example, the track for *Communication and Expression* was integrated into the following subjects in the 1st Year of HSE: Mother-tongue Language, English, Literature, Art and Visual Communication, Physical Education and Recreation. The work done by teachers resulted in establishing that the developing of the following competencies corresponds to this track:

- Recognition, understanding, transformation and construction of cultural meanings (symbolic, multimedia, textual, musical and visual discourse).

- Ethical and aesthetic sensibility.
- Creativity (unique and innovative responses), through problem-solving, heuristic and meta-cognitive processes, divergent and metaphorical thinking.
- Critical judgment through the use of strategies to classify, rank and interpret the world of words, and the sounds and images which experience.
- Autonomously handling different expression and communication codes
- Coordination and object manipulation and of the symbolic domain.
- Projection of capacity in the world through the acquisition and improvement of motor-skills and high cortical integration.

One of the most striking innovations of this curriculum design is the existence of certain subjects in different tracks, whose final goal is to minimize the risk of fragmentation of knowledge. These subjects provide an environment for dialogue about the methodologies of different disciplines as a way of bringing together diverse knowledge. This includes, for example, Criticism of Knowledge for the Philosophy and Social Sciences track, Earth and Space Science for the Natural Science and Mathematics track, as well as the Arts and Visual Communication track, which integrates the area of expression.

Table 3 presents the **1st Year** (non-diversified) of HSE. It contains the curricular areas, tracks, subjects that correspond to each one, and the number of hours dedicated to each one.

**TABLE 3**

FIRST YEAR OF GENERAL SECONDARY EDUCATION (11 SUBJECTS)							
CURRICULUM AREA	TRACK I Communication and Expression	Hrs.	TRACK II Natural Sciences and Mathematics	Hrs.	TRACK III Philosophy and Social Studies	Hrs.	TOTAL HOURS PER AREA
EQUIVALENT	FOREIGN LANGUAGE I (ENGLISH)	3	MATHEMATICS	4	HISTORY	4	18
			EARTH AND SPACE SCIENCE (b)	3	PHILOSOPHY AND KNOWLEDGE CRITICISM	4	
EXPLORATORY	LITERATURE	3	PHYSICS	3	GEOGRAPHY	3	18
	VISUAL AND COMMUNICATION ART(a)	3	CHEMISTRY	3			
			BIOLOGY	3			
	25% RI	9	44% R II	16	31% R III	11	36
MANDATORY DECENTRALISED	PHYSICAL, SPORT AND RECREATION ACTIVITIES					2	4
	ORAL AND WRITTEN COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES					2	
NON- MANDATORY DECENTRALISED	NON-MANDATORY ACTIVITIES OFFERED BY THE SCHOOL: Music, Body Expression and Introduction to dance, computer and other activities						
<b>TOTAL OF CURRICULUM MANDATORY HOURS</b>							<b>40</b>
<b>TOTAL OF SUBJECTS: 11</b>							

Diversification of orientations appears in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Year with the following possibilities in the General modality: Humanities and Social Sciences, Life and Health

Sciences, Mathematical Science, Art and Language and Communication. The following table presents an example of the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of HSE (Languages Orientation)

**TABLE 4**

<b>THIRD YEAR OF HIGHER SECONDARY EDUCATION LANGUAGES ORIENTATION (10 OR 11 SUBJECTS)</b>							
<b>Emphasis in Foreign Languages</b>							
<b>CURRICULUM AREA</b>	<b>TRACK I Communication y Expression</b>	<b>Hrs.</b>	<b>TRACK II Natural Science and Mathematics</b>	<b>Hrs.</b>	<b>TRACK III Philosophy and Social Studies</b>	<b>Hrs.</b>	<b>TOTAL HOURS PER SPACE</b>
<b>EQUIVALENT</b>			(a) EARTH AND ENVIRONMENT SCIENCE	2	PHILOSOPHY	3	9
					CRITISM OF KNOWLEDGE	1	
					ECONOMY	3	
<b>SPECIFIC</b>	ENGLISH	6			ART AND CULTURE HISTORY II	3	19
	MOTHER LANGUAGE	6					
	LITERATURE	4					
<b>ELECTIVE (One of three is chosen)</b>	PORTUGUESE II (b)	8					8
	ITALIAN II (c)	8					
	FRENCH II (d)	8					
	73% RI	24	6% RII	2	21% RIII	10	36
<b>NON-MANDATORY DECENTRALISED</b>	PHYSICAL, SPORT AND RECREATION ACTIVITIES						
	OTHER NON-MANDATORY ACTIVITIES OFFERED BY THE SCHOOL: Music, Body Expression and Introduction to dance, IT						
<b>TOTAL OF CURRICULUM MANDATORY HOURS</b>							<b>36</b>
<b>MINIMUM OF HOURS NON-MANDATORY ACTIVITIES TO BE OFFERED BY THE SCHOOL</b>							
<b>TOTAL OF SUJECTS: 10 or 11 ACCORDING TO OPTION</b>							

The emphasis is given by the option the student chooses in the Elective Area
a.- These subjects are considered from the CTS SCIENCE-TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIETY approach
b.- The program contents of this subject qualify for the emphasis in Foreign Languages - Portuguese
c.- The program contents of this subject qualify for the emphasis in Foreign Languages - Italian
d.- The program contents of this subject qualify for the emphasis in Foreign Languages - French

#### **Innovations in school organization**

In addition to the changes in the curricular structure, there must be changes in the organization of schools. Of particular note are the following:

### **Teacher Staff Rooms:**

The teachers' rooms are institutional spaces designed to allow reflection and the collective work of teachers in order to accomplish the following: establish agreements on the selection of teaching content, didactic strategies and the evaluation criteria and instruments, as well as the certification tools; to adopt a common pedagogic language to establish common criteria and plan common activities; to produce a critical analysis of the practices, which should be favored within the professional development of teachers; to share information on the life of the school and to discuss the demands and necessities of students and their families by organizing and planning follow-up support and guidance for students.

### **Multiple Learning Resources Space**

This is a non-traditional space for learning and teaching, which includes an IT room with internet connection, individual tables for students, audio-visual resources (TV, video, slide projector, camera, camcorder, video library and map library), and a library with technical and recreational books. These spaces are created with the view of having a coordinator present who will carry out activities with all users, guide research, support students in the elaboration of reports and projects and who will make it possible for the space to be used as a learning environment.

### **Decentralized Space**

The decentralized space comprises obligatory and non-obligatory activities. It is organized by the school, according to the students' needs and includes: a) physical, sport and recreation activities b) oral and written communication activities c) musical activities d) voluntary community activities, and e) computer science activities. These activities are optional and the student can choose one or more, or none. However, if one or more are chosen, this activity becomes an obligatory requirement for the year as they vary in length and can be for a trimester, a semester or annual activities.

### **Implementation and evaluation**

Throughout the process of curriculum design, schools worked with teachers and students and conducted courses to update different actors. Since the new plan required organizational changes as well as different directive management in schools, meetings, conferences, seminars and workshops took place, where teachers were informed about the new curriculum design.

The launch of the new curriculum began in 2003 as a pilot project in 17 schools (11 of General Secondary Education and 6 Technical Secondary Education) for 1<sup>st</sup> Year. In the year 2004, the 2<sup>nd</sup> year for these 17 centers was implemented, as well as the experience being extended to 52 centers, corresponding to 24 schools of General Secondary Education and 28 of Technical Secondary Education.

The implementation of this experience has been accompanied by an evaluation process specially designed by a multidisciplinary team of researchers.<sup>3</sup> During the process, directors, teachers, students, tutors and coordinators were interviewed. In addition, classrooms, recess time, learning spaces (library and IT room), physical education activities, recreation activities and staff rooms were all observed.

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<sup>3</sup> The team was composed of a PhD in education, two Sociologists, two educational researchers and specialists in Teaching, an Economist and a Supervisor of Technical and Professional Secondary Education.

### ↪ **Curriculum development by competencies**

There was a relative improvement process in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of implementation of competency development; however, a majority of teachers should be supported on this issue. Particular challenges included:

- Teaching competencies entails a significant change in teaching practices, which requires support and time;
- Teachers do not have personal experience of learning through competencies in their teacher training, but rather through methodologies centered on the transmission of content. Naturally, teachers tend to reproduce what they have learned;
- Weaknesses were found in relation to the evaluation of competencies. It is challenging to create problematic situations that would permit students to apply and show understanding of such competencies while avoiding mechanical repetition of facts. Additionally, the rare application of knowledge to everyday life and the use of meta-cognitive strategies are not part of the traditional evaluation culture and therefore should be targeted and strengthened by the support and training strategies for teachers.

### ↪ **Evaluation**

In this new scheme, the exams at the end of each semester have significant weight in terms of student evaluation. However, they are perceived to be of greater significance by students and teachers than what is given by the official Rules of Evaluation. This confirms the challenge of breaking from traditional practices. The evaluation process appears heavily illustrated in the teachers' speeches without being translated into their practices. The use of tools enabling teachers and students to obtain information to support a process evaluation has not been observed in the visited classes.

### ↪ **Teachers' rooms**

Principals and teachers value the possibilities that these spaces can offer. For teachers, meetings positively influence professional and personal development, as well as the establishment of agreements that result in students receiving shared and coherent discourse. According to school directors, this space is beneficial to the management of the schools as it speeds up communication and generates an environment for planning and institutional evaluation.

In the second year of implementation, it was shown that the organization of the rooms was planned more carefully. The meetings held in this space require careful planning, as it is difficult to coordinate the teachers' hours.

### ↪ **Time Extension**

While this innovation is positively evaluated by teachers and principals, it is met by unanimous unfavorable views from the students. Lack of time "to be with family", "enjoy the company of friends," "have fun," "have space for non-scholar tasks" and "work", are some of the main reasons students mention.

### **Multiple Learning Resources Space**

The impact of the Multiple Learning Resources Space in school life greatly varies, due to the different ways in which it is being implemented in educational institutions. A positive impact was found in the spaces in which teachers and students have begun to transition through 'non-traditional' ways of teaching and learning, with an acceptable level of appropriation in terms of the purpose of this space. Students say that this space is very useful because it allows them to enter the world of information, namely through the library and computers which are linked to the internet.

### **Decentralized Space**

This space has not shown much change over time. However, it seems to have created institutional learning in the managing of it; therefore if it keeps on being implemented – and meeting the needs and interests of students – with the necessary resources, it will surely achieve greater cohesion between the objectives of the decentralized space and its operation.

## **Conclusions**

The monitoring and evaluation of this experience enables us to raise some considerations that might serve other curricular innovations:

1. The complexity of curricular change requires organizational changes in schools that facilitate the implementation of innovation processes, principals and teachers' training, and information and wide dissemination to all actors of the new curriculum and the implied innovations, as well as changing expectations. It is also essential that actors are aware of the progress of the implementation process, so that they can feel they are involved in the changes.
2. The implementation of a new curricular design is not linear. Actors incorporate changes from year to year, as is shown by the continuous decrease of conflicts and the acceptance of the innovations, as well as by the lessening of resistance to the changes.
3. Any process of educational change requires the need to create a support system from which demands and weaknesses arising from the systematic information gathering can be attended to with the necessary resources.
4. It is important to encourage the use of institutional spaces (such as teachers' rooms in this experience) for the shared task of curriculum development. This construction requires collective learning in order to improve and share valuable management and classroom practices.