

INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP
AFGHANISTAN SECONDARY CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT:
PROCESSES AND PRODUCTS

Kabul, 26.09.06-07.09.06

Workshop Report (Outline)

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1. Context of the workshop and aims

The Ministry of Education of Afghanistan is deeply committed to improve education opportunities for all students in the country as a basis for quality learning outcomes at all stages. Curriculum is emphasised as an important leverage of overall reform efforts for it constitutes the heart of any education system. As such, it encompasses values, knowledge, skills and attitudes the society eyes as worth developing in learners.

As the ‘hub’ of the education system, curriculum has important connections with other education sub-systems such as assessment, teacher training and education management. Improving curriculum provisions ought to be linked to quality innovations in related areas in the context of comprehensive and coherent processes of education change. Countries that invest in education invest in their own future – Afghanistan and its Ministry of Education are ready to take the challenge of preparing a better future based on introducing necessary reforms steadily and with a view of ensuring sustainability.

While primary education has benefited to date from consistent international support (a curriculum framework, syllabuses and textbooks for grades 1 to 6 have been developed since 2002 and are now in different phases of implementation) secondary education has not yet been tackled systematically.

In order to pave the way for secondary education reform the Ministry of Education and UNESCO (UNESCO OFFICE Afghanistan) have launched a joint Programme ‘*Reconstruction of the Education System of Afghanistan*’ with curriculum and textbook development as one of its

major components. The International Bureau of Education/IBE UNESCO (UNESCO's Institute specialised in learning content and methods) is providing technical assistance to the Ministry of Education (*Curriculum and Textbook Directorate*) for secondary curriculum development (the IBE has also been involved in previous processes focusing on primary education).

The workshop was carried out as the first important activity in the context of the *Programme* mentioned above aiming at revising and improving framework provisions for secondary education (grades 7 to 9) and setting the grounds for syllabus development for all learning areas and subjects in lower and upper secondary education.

The international workshop was attended by 60 education specialists from the Curriculum and Textbook Directorate/MoE and from other institutions such as the *Academic Council* and different tertiary education units. They have interacted with the IBE team (Mrs. Dakmara Georgescu, IBE programme coordinator, doctoral candidate; Mr. Khalil Elaian, PhD, consultant, Jordan/OBEIKAN; Mr. Omar Humos, PhD, consultant, Palestine) and with high representatives of the Parliament and of the Ministry of Education.

His Excellency, Mr. Haneef Atmar, Minister of Education, has paid special attention to the workshop and has encouraged the participants to invest effort in the service of improving quality of learning in secondary schools (general education and other streams).

2. A new Curriculum Framework for Secondary Education

Developing a new Curriculum Framework for secondary education (grades 7 to 9) has become an imperative for the previous Framework developed in 2003 was implemented to date only in grades 1 to 6. New developments have to be considered that impose reconsidering secondary education foundations.

Four groups (A, B, C, D) have worked to articulate different chapters of the Curriculum Framework that ought to address structural and content issues of secondary schooling in Afghanistan:

Group A: The scope of secondary education and its place within the Afghanistan education system; general education aims; secondary structures; principles of developing the secondary curriculum;
Group B: Learning objectives; Curriculum areas and timetables;
Group C: Learning outcomes and assessment;
Group D: Learning methodology and Implementation of the new curriculum.

The participants were provided with relevant curriculum materials from other countries (neighbouring and far away; similar and different

to Afghanistan). The materials (samples of curriculum frameworks, descriptions of secondary systems and timetables/curriculum areas) were introduced to participants based on inputs from international colleagues.

While consensus could be reached in respect of many directions for change and improvement, such as providing equal opportunities for all students based on learner-centred approaches and meaningful learning participants have extensively debated over several aspects such as the status of upper secondary streams and tracks.

While the group admits that tracking in upper secondary education (i.e. sciences and social sciences) may constitute a fair solution to address the students' inclinations and interests for future careers many participants consider that, given the present situation in the country, Afghanistan is not yet ready to implement tracking. Discussions highlighted 'pros' and 'cons' in regard tracking and advanced different solutions for paving the way to tracking in the future. The Ministry of Education was called upon to take a decision in regard tracking based on informed consideration of all aspects and consequences tracking implies.

The issue of 'curriculum integration' (i.e. 'curriculum combination') has also triggered intense discussions. Possibilities to 'combine' subjects especially in lower secondary education have been explored such as in the case of creating new subjects: 'Sciences' (Physics, Chemistry, Biology) and 'Social studies' (History, Geography and Civic Education). While 'combined subjects' could provide better grounds for integrative and holistic learning (and less burthen for students) and could also represent an attractive solution from an economic point of view (fewer textbooks to be printed and better usage of teachers) many participants expressed their concerns in regard implementation. Afghanistan teachers are usually trained to teach only one subject and most teachers (even for secondary education) have only a secondary degree. Many participants think that, despite potential pedagogical gains for students, 'combination of subject' would represent an overwhelming challenge for teachers.

The Ministry of Education encouraged participants to nevertheless consider 'combination of subjects' when developing the new Framework taking into account the reforms teacher training and education will undergo in Afghanistan.

3. Syllabus Development

The participants have also developed a suitable template for syllabuses which contains three mains parts: (1) general information about the learning area/subject (including rationale for the subject,

learning objectives and mapping of subject); (2) content and learning outcomes ('scope and sequence') for different grades (strands/topics, outcomes, activities and methods of assessment); (3) other information, such as student homework.

Based on previous work of the Curriculum and Textbook Directorate personnel (draft syllabuses for secondary education) and on international examples introduced by the IBE different subject groups have then worked on preparing sample syllabuses for lower secondary (grade 7 or 7 to 9). The samples were discussed in the plenary and recommendations have been made concerning possibilities of improving the content and format of syllabuses, such as:

- While during the present workshop subject teams have worked separately it is necessary that in the future subject teams belonging to a 'combined' subject in secondary education work together and observe common learning objectives of that respective area;
- Syllabuses should inform teachers and textbook authors with regard to why, what and how/how well students should learn. In order to do so syllabuses ought to provide a meaningful selection and organisation of content, and to state the main learning objectives and outcomes of the subject carefully. They neither should be too detailed nor should they be too vague;
- The formulation of content selection and learning outcomes should reflect appropriately the competencies one intends developing in students. Higher-order intellectual skills and competencies should be emphasised along with social, emotional, motor, spiritual competencies and other.
- Curriculum developers will have to improve their writing skills in order to be able to use appropriate wording. They have to collaborate with other subject groups in order to ensure coordination and coherence of syllabus development, as well as possibilities for reinforcing integrated and holistic learning.

The participants consider the syllabus template useful and will continue improving their draft syllabuses based on consultations with subject specialists and other stakeholders.

4. Outcomes and follow-up

As outcomes of the intense two-week work the participants have produced:

- A draft Curriculum Framework for secondary education including scenarios for upper secondary education (tracking of general education and, respectively, preservation of a general academic track);

- Syllabus models for secondary education that are based on a common, flexible template for all subjects;
- Processes (i.e. working habits and routines) that ought to be consolidated during the next weeks/months in order to support advancement of curriculum and textbook development for lower and upper secondary;
- Recommendations to the Ministry of Education identifying issues that need informed policy decisions, such as the issues of tracking; combination of subjects; dynamics of implementing the new secondary curriculum; challenges to be faced and possible strategies to overcome them.

Based on discussions with the Ministry of Education (Minister Hanneef Atmar and advisors; Steering Committee of the MoE and UNESCO *Programme*; leadership of the Curriculum and Textbook Directorate/CTD) following directions for follow up have been envisaged:

- Mrs. Dakmara Georgescu, IBE programme coordinator, will work in Kabul until the 19th of September 2006 in order to refine the new Curriculum Framework with specialists of the CTD. The draft Framework along with other support documents will then be submitted to the Ministry of Education for consideration and revision.
- The Ministry of Education ought to constitute a consultative body that should prepare informed decision making in regard several important education policy issues, such as tracking in upper secondary, curriculum areas and timetables and implementation schedule and strategies. Decisions that are needed for the completion of the Framework should be taken by the end of October 2006.
- After the workshop the participants will continue working cooperatively and co-ordinately in order to further improve the draft syllabuses for lower and upper secondary. In November 2006, 25 of them will travel to Amman where, over one month time, they are supposed to refine and finalise the syllabuses based on exchanges with international colleagues (IBE technical assistance/OBEIKAN research and development unit).
- In December 2006 the team will return to Kabul and report to the Minister. Syllabuses have to be discussed with stakeholders for feed-back and fine-tuning, and prepared for publication and dissemination in January and February 2007.
- In 2007 textbook development for secondary education should start based on capacity building and professional approaches, such as the development of guidelines for authors and training of selected authors to convert new syllabuses into textbooks appropriately.