

'For the Record' – some (lesser known) factual background to the work of the Expert Panel for the National Curriculum Review in England 2010-2012

Shortly after the General Election in May 2010, the Coalition Government announced its intention to carry out a review of the National Curriculum in England. The review was to be managed by the Department for Education, deploying a team of its own researchers, and was to be guided by an Expert Panel of academics and an Advisory Committee of, mainly, headteachers. For details and updates from the DFE see:

<http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/curriculum/nationalcurriculum>

Tim Oates, Director of Research and Assessment at Cambridge Assessment, was asked to lead the Expert Panel. He had come to the attention of Ministers through his published criticisms of existing Programmes of Study and his work on international comparisons (see, especially, Oates, T. 2010, *Could do better: Using international comparisons to refine the National Curriculum in England*, Cambridge Assessment). He was asked to suggest other Panel members and he approached three others, each with a wide perspective on curriculum issues but with different backgrounds: Professor Mary James (secondary education, arts and humanities, assessment), Professor Andrew Pollard (primary education, teaching and learning) and Professor Dylan Wiliam (secondary education, mathematics, science and PE, assessment).

Before being appointed, each of the panel members was called to a separate meeting with Nick Gibb MP, the Minister for Schools. After reflection on the likely implications and discussion with Andrew Pollard, Mary James wrote a letter to the Minister on 10th September, in advance of her meeting with him on 20th September. She wanted him to know her views on a number of matters so that they could both decide whether the relationship was likely to be productive. (The letter can be found here – <http://tinyurl.com/bvsfj24>)

Mindful of her interest in encouraging the pursuit of educational research and its application both for the improvement of practice and for the public benefit – the charitable aim of the British Educational Research Association, of which she is President - Mary James decided that she would become a member of the Expert Panel (EP) and give the task her 'best shot'. Other members made similar decisions and work began informally towards the end of 2010. Initially the contracts for James, Pollard and Wiliam were to run until 30th September 2011, but were extended to 5th December 2011 in order to cover the work needed. James, Pollard and Wiliam were engaged as consultants while Oates was seconded part-time to the DFE. The different nature of these contracts had some significance in terms of what could be said, by whom, when.

The Terms of Reference for the Expert Panel were finalised on 19th January 2011: see:

<http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/curriculum/nationalcurriculum/a0073091/expert-panel-terms-of-reference>

The initial priority for the DFE was to identify, collect and analyse curricula

from relevant other countries and states (termed 'jurisdictions') and to collate these into 'source documents' for scrutiny by those who would begin to draft new Programmes of Study (POS). This task was mainly tackled by Oates and the DFE team although the rest of the EP commented on drafts as they emerged. In addition there were obligations to read the 5763 responses to the Call for Evidence, and to attend the many meetings with groups and individual stakeholders that were arranged in the Spring and Summer Terms, 2011. Above all, time was needed for proper deliberation on the international and domestic evidence pertinent to the framing of the National Curriculum as a whole, and writing a report on this basis.

Over the summer, Pollard and James, particularly, took responsibility for drafting an Interim Report that the Panel had decided to produce for presentation to Ministers in September. This focused on overarching principles, aims, structure, and key issues such as progression. Meanwhile, Oates also supported the internal DFE team on preliminary drafts of POS. All EP members were concerned that the aims and structures of the curriculum should be explicated in ways that would inform work on the POS. In an ideal world the framework for the curriculum would have been agreed before work started on POS. However, the design, pace and pressure of the Review did not permit this. Some tensions were thus created when draft POS were tabled at meetings before Panel members had proper time to consider them. Eventually it was agreed that Panel members would receive such drafts but would not 'approve' them because they were not in a position to do so.

James and Pollard had other concerns about the general direction of the Review. In particular they were concerned about: the need for curricular breadth; constraints that would be imposed by any move towards year-on-year specification; the importance of oral language development; transitions from the early years into Key Stage 1; and the need for specification of educational aims to preserve curricular breadth and frame light-touch accountability. In essence, they were not confident that the development of draft POS was proceeding according to the principles agreed in the EP's Interim Report.

After much careful deliberation, Pollard and James decided that their usefulness to the Review had probably come to an end. So, on the 10th October 2011 they tendered their resignation to the Secretary of State, citing their concerns in detail. (Their letter can be found here – <http://tinyurl.com/cr22jvh>).

This was perhaps unfortunate timing because what James and Pollard did not know at the time was that both David Bell, the Permanent Secretary, and Jon Coles, the Director-General for School Standards at the DFE had also resigned to go to pastures new. This was reported on 16th October (see <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/conservative/8829726/Four-top-civil-servants-quit-Michael-Goves-department.html>) Jon Coles was in overall charge of the NCR at the time.

Secretary of State Michael Gove's response was to call Pollard and James to a personal meeting with him on 19th October. This was a positive and

constructive meeting and they were persuaded to continue work and to develop a final EP Report that, it was agreed, would be published. In a letter to Mr Gove on 20th October, they set out their understanding of the basis of their continuing involvement. (The letter can be found here – <http://tinyurl.com/ctdlwle>).

A formal letter of response from the Secretary of State was written on 8th December 2011, three days after James and Pollard's contracts had formally ended, and after the Expert Panel had delivered the Final Report. (The letter can be found here <http://tinyurl.com/dxds45f>). In this letter the SoS confirmed that he intended to extend the timescale for implementation of the National Curriculum, taking account of concerns about the pace of the Review; that he intended to publish the EP Report alongside a package of evidence reports; that having fulfilled its remit, the EP would be stood down; and that he hoped Panel members would continue to contribute to the debate in a personal capacity.

On the afternoon of 19th December 2011, just before Christmas, the Secretary of State issued a Written Ministerial Statement (see <http://www.education.gov.uk/inthenews/inthenews/a00201092/written-ministerial-statement-on-the-national-curriculum-review>) and published the Expert Panel's Report on 'The Framework for the National Curriculum', alongside the 'evidence reports' on the Call for Evidence responses and transnational comparisons.

On 19th December, as a contribution to the national debate which had been anticipated, Pollard and James posted a one page summary of the EP Report on the TLRP website. 'Report on a page' can be found here: <http://www.tlrp.org/docs/Reportonapage.pdf>. Pollard tweeted about each chapter through the twelve days of Christmas.

On 11th June 2012, a formal letter from Michael Gove was sent to Tim Oates, copied to James, Pollard and William, as a first official response to the EP Final Report. (The letter can be found here – <http://tinyurl.com/chtulcl>).

This focused on the primary curriculum and promised a follow up letter on the secondary curriculum at a later date. Accompanied by draft POS for primary English, mathematics and science, it was also posted on the DFE website <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/curriculum/national-curriculum/b0075667/national-curriculum-review-update>

Professor Mary James, BERA President, 11th June 2012