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Research and analysis

High-quality curriculum and pedagogy in business education in further education and skills

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Applies to England

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The collection of further education and skills reviews

This is the first publication in a collection of reviews about further education and skills curriculums. In each review, we use the research and principles underpinning Ofsted's education inspection framework to consider what makes for high-quality education in different subjects. [\[footnote 1\]](#) The reviews also draw on good practice we have seen on inspection. We are publishing the reviews in the interests of transparency and because we know that providers often find these materials helpful.

The reviews give examples of high-quality curriculum planning and teaching. However, these examples of good practice are not prescriptive or exhaustive; there are many effective ways of planning and teaching. We hope that the examples are helpful in highlighting some of these methods and sharing ideas that you could use or adapt for your own provision.

The reviews are not inspection instruments. Our inspectors do not grade subjects during inspections. They review the quality of curriculum design, teaching and impact in a range of subjects and provision types. This enables them to identify and evaluate systemic curricular strengths and areas for improvement in a provider.

Features of the reviews

Each review covers certain aspects of curriculum design and teaching, and some of the wider institutional processes that support high-quality education.

Throughout the reviews, we refer to 'pillars of progression'. By this, we mean the fundamental curriculum categories in a given subject. For example, in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), these include lexis, grammar, pronunciation and literacy. Progress means mastering more of the content in these pillars.

Each review will also implicitly or explicitly acknowledge different kinds of knowledge and skills that are found in many subject curriculums. These are:

- declarative knowledge, or 'knowledge that': for example, in carpentry and joinery, a learner knowing that teak is a type of hardwood

- procedural knowledge, or ‘knowledge how’: for example, a learner knowing how to plane wood
- conditional knowledge, or the ability to apply the right declarative and procedural knowledge in a given situation: for example, a learner knowing which wood to select and how to prepare and install it to complete a particular job

These are not the only ways of thinking about knowledge and skills in the curriculum. There are other helpful epistemological classifications and concepts too, such as embodied cognition, propositional knowledge and knowledge by acquaintance. [\[footnote 2\]](#)

Crucially, thinking about the ‘what’ of teaching often helps illuminate the ‘how’ of teaching. In our inspection framework, curriculum intent informs curriculum implementation. This means asking: What are the best methods for teaching this particular piece of the curriculum? How should the curriculum be designed and taught so that learners make good progress? In this series of reviews, we share some of the ways good providers approach these questions. We hope you find them helpful.

Introduction and context

High-quality business education prepares learners for further study and careers in business, economics, management and leadership. It contributes to the supply of well-trained learners and apprentices to a range of industries.

Business education curriculums differ in scope and level. Business is one of the largest subject areas in the further education and skills sector. This review focuses on general classroom-based and work-based business curriculums, from levels 2 to 7. Young people, adults and apprentices study these courses.

Courses encompass a variety of business qualifications, including:

- level 7 senior leader apprenticeship
- level 5 departmental/operations manager apprenticeship
- level 3 A level, BTEC, Cambridge technical, T level
- level 3 team leader, business administrator apprenticeship
- level 2 GCSE, NCFE, T level foundation

This review considers high-quality curriculum and pedagogy in FES business education in relation to:

- content and sequencing of the curriculum
- pedagogy and assessment
- wider policies, processes and culture

Curriculum content

Business education is multi-disciplinary. Much of its content comes from the separate disciplines of economics, accounting, law and human psychology.

Business education focuses on the principles, theories, models and procedures that explain and improve business decisions. It looks at the world through the eyes of businesses.

Effective providers select, sequence and recontextualise the knowledge learners need to:

- make well-informed business decisions
- contribute to the smooth running of their workplace
- accurately explain the reasons for their decisions and outcomes
- adapt their future decision-making in the light of experience

Effective business programmes usually include:

- foundational content that experts agree is most important in the subject
- key 'pillars' of knowledge and skills through which learners progress as they develop expertise
- cross-cutting themes that are essential to knowing how and when to use the key business theories, models and principles
- well-planned curriculum content that enables learners to integrate new knowledge and skills into larger concepts
- planned opportunities to repeat and practise knowledge and skills
- a curriculum that builds on learners' starting points, correcting any misconceptions and filling any knowledge gaps

As noted, the business curriculum includes declarative, procedural and conditional knowledge. This is true of many subjects with a practical focus. Declarative knowledge is often theoretical. Procedural knowledge can be equated, usually, with subject-specific skills. Conditional knowledge is the knowledge of when to apply which aspects of declarative and procedural knowledge. It is usually complex, composite knowledge that requires learners to already have the underpinning skills and theory. It follows that it usually makes sense to teach conditional components of the curriculum after declarative and procedural components. Developing conditional knowledge is often a sign of learners' increasing expertise.

We have seen plenty of examples of teachers who sequence the curriculum so that declarative and procedural knowledge come before conditional knowledge. For example, many teachers teach the impact of price cuts on demand in different goods markets before they give learners case studies where learners need to decide whether they should reduce price.

Most providers ensure that learners are enrolled on the right business course. However, in a few cases, in the absence of a level 2 business apprenticeship, providers place learners inappropriately on the level 3 team leader programme. In these cases, the curriculum content may be too hard for the learners, or the learners may not be in roles that give them the necessary learning opportunities.

In most providers, curriculum plans reflect the level of the course and ensure a smooth transition as learners progress to higher levels. In most cases, the higher-level curriculum includes a broader and more strategic focus, mirroring the expansion of responsibility that learners might expect as their careers develop.

Consider the following example, from an effective provider. It focuses on the sequencing of business theory in team leader (level 3), departmental manager (level 5) and senior leader apprenticeships (level 7).

At level 3, the team building curriculum included the importance of emotional intelligence, understanding team dynamics, and the ability to communicate team and individual goals. For level 5, it extended to the challenges of managing multiple teams and remote teams, and what makes for effective delegation. For level 7, it was extended further to include managing people/teams across businesses and with a strategic focus, such as a vision for workforce development.

In weaker providers, the curriculum is sometimes not coherently planned between levels. Providers do not ensure that the topics/pillars contain more challenging theory or breadth as the levels increase. At level 3 and level 5, they may not make enough reference to the strategic context. At level 7, they may not teach business theory enough and wrongly assume that all apprentices are ready for extensive independent learning.

Foundational concepts

Effective providers check that learners already have the foundational content that they need to know before they can progress through the curriculum. These providers address any gaps in this background knowledge very quickly.

Foundational knowledge includes:

- why businesses exist
- business missions and objectives
- different sizes and forms of business
- business departments/functions
- types of business ownership
- the notion of internal and external environments (factors within and outside business control)

Without this knowledge, learners will struggle to understand business activity or their role in it. For example, we have seen some learners on level 3 courses who do not thoroughly understand the difference between cash and profit, or the stakeholders involved in private and public limited companies. This impedes their progress.

This foundational content can be sequenced well in a variety of ways. For example, we have seen good programmes where it is included both in curriculum blocks at the beginning of the programme, and in smaller sections before each subsequent topic.

Main pillars of progression

If a learner is making progress in business education, then they will be learning more about (at least some) of the following:

- finance
- human resources (HR)
- business operations (including production)
- marketing
- business strategy and the external environment
- leadership, management and enterprise

Some business curriculums cover all these pillars; others address one or more aspects. For example, the T level in management and administration includes detailed and broad content in preparation for the industrial project, but it has relatively little marketing content.

Effective business programmes include current evidence-based theories, make explicit links between topics/pillars and build towards a strategic understanding and knowledge of the 'bigger picture.' For example, team leader apprentices need to understand the strategic context within which their decisions take place.

Ambitious business curriculums include the knowledge and skills learners need in preparation for their next steps at work or in further study. In a few cases, apprenticeship providers restrict the curriculum to the knowledge and skills that apprentices need to perform their role within a specific employer. More effective providers extend the curriculum to show how knowledge and skills apply across different sectors, employers and types of business.

We have considered the most important themes below. This is not an exhaustive or prescriptive account of curriculum content. Rather, it highlights some features of more and less effective practice we have seen on inspection.

Finance

Good providers carefully select content from the different accounting disciplines of basic

bookkeeping, financial accounting, budgeting and cashflow management. For example, at level 3, a successful curriculum gives learners a basic understanding of debits and credits, expenses and revenue, and liabilities and assets. Teachers will spend considerable time on aspects of accounting that inform decision-making within a business.

Effective providers teach learners to plan and monitor budgets and cashflow forecasts, and to analyse financial statements. An ambitious curriculum includes explanations of the links between these management financial tools. These providers know that it is the strategic/holistic view that helps learners to develop expertise in business education.

Less effective teachers focus on the accounting discipline without seeing the wider business or strategic context. For example, they cover the mechanics of profit and financial statements without explaining the links between the statements or how this information relates to other topics in the course.

HR

The HR (or personnel) pillar draws on content from a range of disciplines, such as psychology, law, economics and ethics. For example, theories of motivation spring from psychology. In the context of HR, this content is recontextualised and linked to business decision-making.

Effective teachers often emphasise connections between HR topics and other aspects of business education. This helps learners to develop a holistic and increasingly strategic understanding of the role and function of HR.

We will also explore this theme in more depth in a separate review.

Business operations

The aim of this curriculum topic is to enable learners to assess and make decisions that improve operational performance. The curriculum for operations management includes the production of goods and the provision of services. It is also likely to include financial concepts such as fixed, variable and marginal costs and the importance of minimum stock levels, re-order quantities and lead times.

Skilled teachers include clear explanations of underpinning economic and stock-control models, and their strengths and limitations. This helps to ensure that learners understand the assumptions within operational models. Without an understanding of those assumptions and their limits, learners may struggle to operate in times of rapid change (when assumptions may not hold). For example, teachers might discuss the implications for just-in-time manufacture of the pandemic, Brexit and the war in Ukraine.

Effective teachers provide varied contexts and case studies where learners need to make different assumptions to apply models successfully in new sets of circumstances. This helps learners to develop the kind of conditional knowledge that is characteristic of expertise in business education.

For example, we have seen helpful explanations of the impact of expanding production on fixed and marginal costs of manufacture, coupled with comparative case studies illustrating situations when there is spare capacity and instances when additional investment is required.

Marketing

An effective marketing curriculum looks in depth at how businesses communicate with customers. The curriculum includes how businesses learn about their customers so that they can provide the goods and services that they want. It also includes how they make sure that customers are aware of and want to buy the product or service.

Providers often teach marketing early in the curriculum as it seems accessible and is appealing to many learners. Most learners will have seen plenty of adverts and may enjoy completing surveys.

The best teachers know, though, that learners need a thorough grounding in the theoretical business knowledge that underpins the marketing mix, and quantitative and qualitative approaches to market research. For example, level 3 learners will study sampling techniques and statistics before engaging in their own market research and proposals for changes in a marketing strategy.

Business strategy and the external environment

This curriculum topic includes:

- the external environment – the political, economic, legal, social and technological contexts within which businesses operate
- the knowledge and tools that support strategic decisions – decisions that have an impact on significant parts of the business and require large-scale management of change

Effective teachers plan the curriculum so that learners develop a strategic perspective. They do this by making links between topics, and by developing a greater understanding over time of the external and internal business context.

Teachers often introduce strategic tools, such as tools that analyse competition, and the business' own place in the market, towards the end of the course. Alternatively, some teachers introduce strategic tools as learners progress through the curriculum pillars. For example, teachers might introduce the concept of project management in relation to content on leadership, and network analysis in relation to content on operational management. Both approaches can work well.

We have seen good examples where providers ensure that learners are taught about a broad range of external factors. They provide recent examples of how these factors have impacted on business behaviour and performance. These examples include: the economic implications for the north of England of withdrawing HS2; the impact of inflation on the food market; the impact of social media on the marketing of hair and beauty treatments; and the use of GPS technology within the fast-food delivery industry.

Leadership, management and enterprise

Here, we consider the difference between more and less effective approaches in relation to theories of leadership styles, decision-making and managing change – 3 important topics related to leadership.

Most business education curriculums include theories about leadership styles. Effective providers present these theories in a critical context that enables learners and apprentices to understand the arguments for, and limitations of, each theory. If learners and apprentices are to develop expertise, they need to understand the means of evaluating and adding to knowledge in business education.

It can also be helpful if they learn about the historical, social and cultural context of the seminal leadership theories. [\[footnote 3\]](#) We have seen that this helps learners and apprentices to make well-informed choices about how to use different approaches to leadership in practice. For example, learners may be taught that the personal characteristics of ‘charismatic’ leaders were historically seen as primary leadership traits, but that such ‘great man’ theories of leadership have subsequently been questioned. [\[footnote 4\]](#) More recent theories may consider factors such as the nature of the task and the characteristics of the workforce.

Weaker curriculums do not include the critical tools that learners need. Some present a narrow range of theories in an uncritical or decontextualised fashion.

Good teachers will include reference to decision-making as it relates to small and large business at different points in their development. Effective providers will refer to the concepts of enterprise and innovation, and the importance of good risk management within decision-making.

Skilled teachers highlight the challenges and complexities of making decisions in uncertain and changing contexts. They include quantitative and qualitative dimensions of decision-making. For example, these teachers include in the curriculum not only how to use decision trees but also the benefits and limitations of quantifying risk and probability.

In less effective providers, quantitative aspects of decision-making are sometimes left out of the curriculum, or their limitations not fully explained.

Leadership and the management of change are complex parts of the business curriculum. Effective providers recognise that learners require knowledge not only of project management tools, but also of the reasons for the change, and how to manage the consequences. T-level learners and business apprentices are frequently asked to implement a change project as they study this part of the curriculum. Good providers make sure that they have taught the necessary underpinning knowledge and skills before requiring learners to start the project. These providers therefore often place this project at the end of the course, when learners have developed the necessary expertise to complete a complex project successfully. Less effective teachers expect learners to complete the project before they have the necessary underpinning knowledge. As a result, learners can become demotivated and make mistakes.

Cross-cutting themes

High-quality curriculums include the mathematics, communication, digital and interpersonal/personal knowledge and skills that learners need to understand the content in each topic/pillar.

Good teachers identify and teach the mathematical knowledge a learner needs before attempting calculations in the context of business operations. For example, they teach percentage change before teaching elasticity of demand. These teachers identify and fill any gaps in learners' prior knowledge of fundamental mathematics before moving on to subject-specific applications, such as in relation to gross domestic product and the economy, financial ratios, elasticity of demand and interest rate calculations.

We have also seen a few cases where teachers extend learners' mathematical knowledge well by teaching probability (when using decision trees), correlation, sampling, confidence intervals (when interpreting marketing data) and network analysis (when managing a strategic project).

Skilled teachers make explicit the different levels of formality, tone, vocabulary and structure that are needed in both written and spoken communication within businesses and in relation to different stakeholders. These teachers give clear guidance on content and style of delivery, which helps prepare learners to make good presentations. They also plan opportunities for repetition and improvement over time.

Some teachers expertly plan strong curricular links between the topic of leadership and the cross-cutting theme of interpersonal/personal knowledge and skills. Within the team leader apprenticeship course, for example, some teachers include theories that relate to team building and development.

Less effective providers do not prioritise the cross-cutting themes enough. Some teachers tell us that these themes are 'embedded' but not taught explicitly. As a result of this lack of focus on the curriculum, learners do not usually have the secure knowledge they need to make rapid progress in business.

To summarise the section on content of the curriculum, high-quality business education curriculums emphasise:

Substantial subject-specific knowledge; business education is not just an extension of general knowledge.

Key declarative, procedural and conditional business knowledge content that helps learners to be effective in and beyond their own immediate contexts. This means learners can move from the training/classroom to the workplace, and from their immediate job to the wider sector.

Disciplinary content that illustrates the nature and limitations of business knowledge. This content addresses the purpose, value and limitations of economic models and business theories, such as those for leadership and motivation. For example, when using economic models, learners are taught that the impact of reducing the price of a product on the volume of sales depends on assumptions made about the response of competitors. Disciplinary content highlights the nature of accounting conventions, laws and regulations. Providers re-contextualise this knowledge effectively to aid business decision-making.

The importance of context and change in the internal and external environment. Good providers select case studies and examples from the past and present. They show how the rapidly changing environment means that businesses must respond swiftly to change. They also show that change can shift the previous consensus on how businesses should operate.

Clear and accurate connections between pillars of content/topics that build a strategic understanding. Good teachers choose content that demonstrates connections, over time, between the pillars/topics of business. In combination with content that covers the external economic environment, these teachers build a strong strategic picture of business. Some effective providers plan the journey through the pillars/topics sequentially and build towards strategic understanding. Others might visit and then revisit topics quite quickly as they 'spiral' through the curriculum and consider each topic in relation to a different size of enterprise (from sole trader to multi-national). Both approaches can work well.

Pedagogy

Effective teachers give clear explanations of the fundamental principles and theory in each of the curriculum topics/pillars. Clear descriptions and explanations are especially important with novice learners, as they help them to avoid misconceptions. They can take multiple forms, such as a presentation by the teacher, video, podcast or text.

Teachers frequently use clear demonstrations to show learners how to use business theories and models (procedural knowledge), such as ratio analysis and decision trees. We have seen good examples where teachers split processes up into manageable components and give learners plenty of opportunities to practise and build their skills over time.

Once teachers have taught the key declarative and procedural knowledge, they often help learners to think more deeply about the topic by making comparisons, justifications and simple choices. This is a good first move in developing conditional knowledge.

Effective teachers on courses that are predominantly classroom-based (such as A level, BTEC

and technical qualifications) frequently use case studies, [\[footnote 5\]](#) scenarios, live briefs, games and simulations [\[footnote 6\]](#) well to develop learners' conditional knowledge. These teachers usually establish links between different topics by using carefully designed, synoptic case studies towards the end of the course. They increase the level of challenge appropriately by matching the complexity of the case study with the expertise of the learners. Through practice, learners in these providers become skilful in selecting the right knowledge to apply in different contexts.

In work-based provision, expert teachers usually develop apprentices' knowledge and skills through classroom or training environments, case studies and role plays, before exposing them to live business decision-making. They sequence the curriculum so that apprentices can then select and apply declarative and procedural knowledge as conditional knowledge in the workplace. These providers work with employers to make sure that opportunities to develop conditional knowledge opportunities are timely and plentiful.

In weaker apprenticeship providers, the links between off- and on-the job training are weak. In the weakest provision, the apprenticeship curriculum is viewed as a separate piece of training or study that is parallel to work but not integrated sufficiently.

In many effective providers, apprentices develop conditional knowledge by moving from small to large projects and from extensive to minimal mentor support, and sometimes by shadowing a colleague.

We have seen good examples where teachers teach the theories of team development and group working before apprentices begin group tasks. In these providers, apprentices improve their understanding and practice in collaborative team working. Many good teachers develop learners' collaborative working skills through group tasks that mirror actual business meetings. For example, apprentices assume specific roles such as chair, minute-taker and functional managers. This gives apprentices experience of the conventions and expectations of a formal business meeting.

In weaker providers, collaborative working procedures are assumed to be a matter of general knowledge or common sense. Teachers do not teach the underlying theories, and do not measure progress over time with sufficient precision. Too often, teachers take teamwork for granted. They simply add it, without enough explanation, to another learning activity.

In a few providers, apprentices carry out group work tasks too early in the course, before they have enough knowledge about successful group working. As a result, poor group dynamics often impede learning. When teachers do not teach group work well, it becomes an unhelpful distraction, leading to frustration and slow progress for some apprentices, while others may complete a disproportionate amount of work.

When teachers give expert learners [\[footnote 7\]](#) the opportunities to do group work tasks with other expert learners, they usually make good progress. This is particularly the case when apprentices share and compare expertise. It is often a successful way of encouraging apprentices to develop knowledge beyond their own immediate situation or role.

The ability to reflect and learn from experience is both a route to, and a characteristic of, professional expertise. It is a vital ingredient in apprenticeship courses. In effective apprenticeship courses, business learners reflect on the outcomes of their work/decisions and consider the improvements they can make the next time they encounter a comparable situation. Good teachers ensure that they teach the principles and theory of reflective practice to learners on classroom-

based courses too, in preparation for their next steps. [\[footnote 8\]](#)

In less good practice, reflection is superficial, or unsupported by a tutor or mentor. In these cases, apprentices rarely make strong progress.

Good teachers use assessment well to check on progress, support learning, refine the curriculum and prepare learners for external examinations. They consider the stage learners are at in their journey through the curriculum. For example, good teachers use forms of assessment that focus on learners' knowledge of curriculum components at first. Later, they use assessments, such as analysis of case studies, that test conditional knowledge.

Skilled teachers plan the curriculum to build on learners' starting points, close any gaps in knowledge and correct any misconceptions. For example, in the 16 to 19 curriculum at level 3, effective teachers quickly determine which learners have completed level 2 courses. They then design activities that bring all learners to a similar level in terms of foundational knowledge. In apprenticeships, good teachers quickly assess whether apprentices' procedural knowledge is supported by their theoretical understanding. They can then plan the curriculum accordingly.

Wider processes and policies

Continuous professional development

Effective providers usually prioritise professional development in subject expertise and pedagogical content knowledge. For example, we have seen leaders encourage teachers to read academic research independently. They provide time for teachers to develop a deep understanding of contemporary business practice.

Good providers ensure that business teachers have specialist disciplinary knowledge (such as in economics or law) combined with a sound strategic or holistic understanding of business education.

In weaker provision, we sometimes find specialist teachers who do not make the links to other topics/pillars. They do not put their specialism in a strategic business context for learners.

Effective providers offer specific support for teachers who have gaps in their own knowledge. For example, one provider offered advanced mathematical training so that teachers were more confident with using probability and sampling techniques.

Employer engagement

In successful providers, leaders make extensive and useful links with employers. They involve them in curriculum design, implementation and review. In these cases, employers and providers

share the same culture of high expectations about the nature and significance of the apprenticeship programme. This frequently leads to sound enrolment decisions, high retention and good progress for apprentices.

Conclusion

Business education makes a vital contribution to business performance and the economic wealth of the country. In this short report, we have highlighted some of the areas of good and weaker practice that we have seen on inspections. We hope that business education providers and employers will find it useful.

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1. [‘Education inspection framework: overview of research’](#), Ofsted, January 2019, and [Educational effectiveness research and further education and skills’](#), Ofsted, July 2019;

[‘Education inspection framework’](#), Ofsted, May 2019. [↩](#)
 2. See, for example, C Winch, ‘Curriculum design and epistemic ascent’ in ‘Journal of philosophy of education’ Volume 47.1, 2013, pages 128 to 146. [↩](#)
 3. For example, see S Benmira S and M Agboola, ‘Evolution of leadership theory’ in ‘BMJ Leader’, 2021, volume 5, pages 3 to 5. [↩](#)
 4. For example, see G Yukl, ‘Managerial leadership: a review of theory and research’, in ‘Journal of Management’, volume 15, number 2, 1989, pages 251 to 289. [↩](#)
 5. For more on using case studies in business education, see, for instance, René WJ Moolenaar and Michael B Beverland, ‘The case for cases: using historical and live cases to enhance student learning’, in ‘Handbook of teaching and learning at business schools’ edited by Thyra U Thomsen, Adam Lindgreen, Annemette Kjærgaard, Eleri Rosier and Aybars Tuncdogan, Elgar, 2021, pages 178 to 194. [↩](#)
 6. Simulations and games are frequently used in business education in higher education. See, for example, D Chulkov and X Wang, ‘The educational value of simulation as a teaching strategy in a finance course’, in ‘eJournal of business education and scholarship of teaching’ volume 1, number 1, June 2020, pages 40 to 56. [↩](#)
 7. Learners develop increasing expertise as they progress through the curriculum. [↩](#)
 8. The importance of reflective practice in business education is discussed by a range of scholars, such as Shali Wu, [‘Guided reflection in business education: an example from leadership development’](#) in ‘Business communication, research and practice’, volume 6, number 2, 2023, pages 98 to 104. [↩](#)

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