



# The Norwegian Curriculum Renewal: Political Intentions, Processes, and Content

Summary of Report no. 1

Berit Karseth, Ole Andreas Kvamme & Eli Ottesen



UNIVERSITY  
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## Summary of Report no. 1

### **Introduction**

This report presents analyses of the Curriculum Renewal in Norway, known as LK20<sup>1</sup>, which builds on and rejuvenates the Knowledge Promotion Reform (LK06). The report addresses certain characteristics of the processes leading up to LK20 and how the political intentions behind LK20 have been described, attended to, and interpreted. The first topic pertains to expectations from the government and parliament for a national process based on broad and open involvement. The second topic pertains to the development of the LK20 curriculum: its content, structure, and inner consistency.

The analyses demonstrate tensions within educational and political discourse. In addition, the report shows how the intentions behind LK20 involve tensions and ambiguities that must be dealt with when implementing the curriculum. Our analyses specifically draw on research and theories from three knowledge domains. The first domain, *perspectives on governance*, yields insights used to examine the kinds of governance logics that characterise reform work in Norwegian public administration. In particular, the report pursues what seems to be a movement towards networked governance, also known as ‘new public governance’.

The second domain, *perspectives on knowledge*, emphasises dominant discourses related to the concept of competence, the relationship between content-driven and competence-driven curricula, and the integration of or differentiation between school subjects. LK20 reflects global reform trends in which competence-based curricula constitute the dominant model. At the same time, school subjects represent an important framework and marker for Norwegian curricula.

A third domain especially relevant for the Norwegian educational tradition is research that connects to analyses of a curriculum’s *value dimensions*. An important goal of LK20 is to contribute to an emphasis on values in schooling.

The report makes use of a broad range of documents: policy papers constituting the principles of the reform, documents that detail the development of the reform and curriculum, and the finalised curriculum. We have also conducted interviews with key informants from organisations, people involved in developing the core elements of the curriculum, and high-level policymakers and administrators.

### **The processes: intended transparency and involvement**

The analyses show that there is a good correspondence between the Ministry of Education’s strategies and the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training’s plan for implementation. There is considerable consensus that the process has contributed to:

- Involving key stakeholders in the education sector
- A positive experience of involvement through invited responses and hearings

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<sup>1</sup> In this summary, the acronym “LK20” both the Norwegian curricula and the Sami curricula (LK20S).

- Clarification of roles and responsibilities

However, the informants also pointed to intensive and time-consuming work. Many experienced the challenges of taking part in processes where work in progress is expected to be shared widely. Also, some found it demanding to cope with instructions that changed during the processes – either originating from requests from the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training or from decisions made at policy levels.

To summarise, our analyses show that intentions regarding involvement, co-creation, and coordination were fulfilled throughout the processes. It appears that the strategy resulted in a fine balance between political governance and networks in which participants experienced sufficient autonomy. However, participants also observed that the concept of ‘co-creation’ might obscure the power inherent in the fundamental objectives of framing and finalising the process.

### **Emphasis on values**

In a parliamentary session on a white paper (Meld. St. 28, 2015–2016), there was political consensus that LK20 should contribute to an increased emphasis on values in schooling and educational practices. We show how this has been followed up in the LK20 core curriculum, where the values found in the objectives clause in the Education Act have been re-contextualised to accommodate societal as well as individual perspectives and where students’ personal growth is linked to such fundamental values. For example, creative zest and inquiry-orientation constitute parts of the fundamental values.

The report also examines how the values expressed in the LK20 core curriculum connect to practice. On one hand, the objectives appear normative and relate to what schools are expected to do; on the other hand, there is an emphasis on teachers’ professional discretion and judgment. These tensions amount to a challenge concerning how to maintain the overarching intentions found in the objectives clause in the Education Act within a structure that emphasises the role of the individual school subject.

### **A new structure for subject curricula**

Prior to developing the subject curricula in LK20, there was a process of defining core elements in the separate school subjects. The aim was to give priority to content and knowledge as guides for formulating competence goals. However, a question remains as to how the core elements function as a content category. Our analysis indicates ambiguity and the role of the core elements is not explicitly communicated in LK20.

Analysing the work of the groups developing the subject curricula, we found that they grappled with finding a balance between a competence-oriented and a content-oriented document. In LK20, the structure of the previous curriculum presenting the school subjects’ main aims and content is replaced by the category ‘About the subject’. This category pertains to a subject’s relevance, core values, core elements, interdisciplinary themes, and basic skills. In the report, we raise the question as to whether this structure contributes to a balance between competence aims and content descriptions. Such a balance entails that competence aims should contribute to making explicit the *deliberations* that go into the selection of

content. Our preliminary analyses of two school subjects indicate that LK20 has not strengthened the content dimension in the competence goals; the process dimension of the goals is still strongly evident, for instance, in the wide use of the term ‘inquire’.

LK20 introduces three interdisciplinary themes: public health and life skills, democracy and citizenship, and sustainable development. These themes concern vital societal challenges, they are overarching and reflect the objectives clause in the Education Act. Our analyses show how these interdisciplinary themes reflect the intention in LK20 to strengthen the connections between subjects. Nevertheless, it appears that there is uncertainty as to how the term ‘interdisciplinary’ (rather than ‘multidisciplinary’ or ‘transdisciplinary’) should be operationalised, how the themes interconnect, and how interdisciplinary work can be envisaged. This may be one of the reasons why connecting the interdisciplinary themes to specific school subjects has uncovered tensions between diverse approaches – including public controversy – in the LK20 discourse.

### **Connections and consistency**

The report points to vital aims in LK20 that converge in the intention to strengthen the individual school subjects while simultaneously contributing to greater inner consistency in the LK20 curriculum. These two intentions materialise in the concept of deep learning. Deep learning involves studying a subject in depth by spending more time on core elements while also developing an understanding of connections within and across subject domains. In the core curriculum that introduces LK20, such connections appear in the forms of an emphasis on values, a continued emphasis on basic skills, and the introduction of the multidisciplinary themes. We demonstrate how LK20 operates within the tensions between attention to individual school subjects and the integration of these subjects. However, it appears that LK20 has prioritised the inner consistency of the separate school subjects, and this might have weakened the possibilities for subject integration.

### **The curriculum and professional discretion**

LK20 is intended to give clear directions to support teachers, school leaders, and school owners in their work to operationalise schools’ objectives. Net-based tools and resources, published on the Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training’s webpage ([udir.no](http://udir.no)), have been important, during the development process as well as during implementation. They have contributed to engaging and involving the school sector. However, exactly how these resources have functioned is beyond the scope of the present report. Here, we simply point to the role such resources may have when actors recontextualise the curriculum and how they may impact teachers’ planning and preparation in other ways than the curriculum as a statutory document. In addition, the boundaries between the statutory curriculum and supporting resources may appear blurred. Guides and other resources may be seen as the only legitimate interpretation, and thus the resources impose certain restrictions or regulations on the profession’s more autonomous reflections and judgments.

Although schools have an explicitly articulated set of values expressed in the objectives clause in the Education Act, there are diverse perceptions of values, knowledge types, and attitudes as to what constitutes the best preconditions for appropriating them. When central authorities invite such diverse perceptions into a joint project, as is the case with LK20, tensions, dilemmas, and disagreement will emerge. Sometimes these are ‘solved’ through

government intervention. Other dilemmas remain as tensions within the curricular texts. It is important that such tensions are not buried by a belief that digital supporting resources constitute correct answers. Professional work largely involves coping with and resolving tensions when curriculum is transformed into practice.