
RSA Opening Minds: a curriculum for the 21st century

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ABSTRACT This article discusses the RSA Opening Minds competence framework, an innovative curriculum to meet the needs of young people as future employees, lifelong learners and as citizens of the twenty-first century.

For over 250 years the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) has been a cradle of enlightenment thinking and a force for social progress. The RSA has long campaigned for a broader education offer that better equips young people for the demands of life in the twenty-first century.

Opening Minds was first developed by the RSA in 2000 in response to a belief that the way in which young people were being educated had becoming increasingly detached from their needs as creative, resilient learners, citizens and employees of the twenty-first century.

As has been numerously reported, young people leave education without the necessary skills to be effective in the world of business and commerce. The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) gives examples of these skills as: self-management, team working, problem solving, customer care and the application of numeracy and literacy.

In addition, many universities will attest, students lack the skills to make them effective independent learners. They are adept at passing exams and acquiring qualifications but are not equipped to study in depth. As a result, higher education institutions have needed to convene courses in study skills, research and referencing, writing and presentation, in order to help their students manage the rigours of studying at degree level.

Set within this context, the starting point for the development of RSA Opening Minds was to ask:

- What knowledge *and* skills do students need to be capable, creative learners, citizens and employees?

- How can we ensure the curriculum excites and engages young people?
- What are the needs of the economy?
- How can we balance specialised learning with developing a good all-round education?
- How can we best combine prescription about essentials with choice for students?
- How can student learning be maximised?

RSA Opening Minds Competence Framework

RSA Opening Minds is about a different approach to teaching and learning, an approach that develops and empowers young people at the same time as they broaden and deepen their subject knowledge. It seeks to bridge the binary divide between academic/vocational and knowledge/skills and to fuse and balance these important aspects of education.

The basis of Opening Minds is a competence-based curriculum framework. The competences are made up of broad areas of knowledge and skills linked to an understanding of how to relate and use them in the real world.

A competence refers to a complex combination of knowledge, skills, understanding, values, attitudes and desire which lead to effective, embodied human action in the world in a particular domain.

One's achievement at work, in personal relationships or in civil society are not based simply on the accumulation of second hand knowledge stored as data, but as a combination of this knowledge with skills, values, attitudes, desires and motivation and its application in a particular human setting at a particular point in a trajectory in time. Competence implies a sense of agency, action and value.

To understand competences, the spotlight is on the accomplishment of 'real world tasks' and on a multiplicity of ways of knowing – for example, knowing how to do something; knowing oneself and one's desires, or knowing why something is important, as well as knowing about something.

To this end, RSA Opening Minds does not preclude or replace subject knowledge; subject knowledge remains in the content of Opening Minds teaching and learning – but foregrounds the skills needed to effectively develop and apply that knowledge.

Each competence is developed through a mixture of instruction and practical experience. Young people are encouraged to plan their work, organise their own time and explore their own ways of learning.

The competence framework contains 24 competences organised into five categories. These categories cover a broad range, offering young people the opportunities they need to develop in areas critical to their social, economic and personal well-being. Each competence is expressed in terms of what a student could achieve having progressed through the curriculum. These are as follows.

Competences for Citizenship

- **Morals and ethics** – students develop an understanding of ethics and values, how personal behaviour should be informed by these and how to contribute to society.
- **Making a difference** – students understand how society, government and business work, and the importance of active citizenship.
- **Diversity** – students understand and value social, cultural and community diversity, in both national and global contexts.
- **Technological impact** – students understand the social implications of technology.
- **Self-reliance** – students develop an understanding of how to manage aspects of their own lives and the techniques they might use to do so, including managing their financial affairs.

Competences for Learning

- **Learning styles** – students understand different ways of learning and how to develop and assess their effectiveness as learners.
- **Reasoning** – students learn to think originally and systematically and how to apply this knowledge.
- **Creativity** – students explore and understand their own abilities and creative talents, and how best to make use of them.
- **Positive motivation** – students learn to enjoy and love learning for its own sake and as part of understanding themselves.
- **Key skills** – students achieve high standards in literacy, numeracy and spatial understanding.
- **ICT skills** – students achieve high standards of competence in handling information and communications technology and understand the underlying processes.

Competences for Managing Information

- **Research** – students develop a range of techniques for accessing, evaluating and differentiating information and have learned how to analyse, synthesise and apply it.
- **Reflection** – students understand the importance of reflecting and applying critical judgement and learn how to do so.

Competences for Relating to People

- **Leadership** – students understand how to relate to other people in varying contexts in which they might find themselves, including those where they manage, or are managed by, others; and how to get things done.
- **Teamwork** – students understand how to operate in teams and their own capacities for filling different team roles.
- **Coaching** – students understand how to develop other people, whether as peer or teacher.
- **Communication** – students develop a range of techniques for communicating by different means, and understand how and when to use them.
- **Emotional intelligence** – students develop competence in managing personal and emotional relationships.
- **Stress management** – students understand and are able to use varying means of managing stress and conflict.

Competences for Managing Situations

- **Time management** – students understand the importance of managing their own time, and develop preferred techniques for doing so.
- **Coping with change** – students understand what is meant by managing change, and develop a range of techniques for use in varying situations.
- **Feelings and reactions** – students understand the importance both of celebrating success and managing disappointment, and ways of handling these.
- **Creative thinking** – students understand what is meant by being entrepreneurial and initiative-taking, and how to develop their capacities in these areas.
- **Risk taking** – students understand how to manage risk and uncertainty, including the wide range of contexts in which these will be encountered and techniques for managing them.

Through the use of competences young people are enabled not just to acquire subject knowledge but to understand, use and apply it within the context of their wider learning and life. It also offers them a more holistic and coherent way of learning which allows them to make connections and apply knowledge across different subject areas.

Traditionally school timetables in secondary schools are organised around the teaching of subjects. The content of subject knowledge is dominated by what might be termed ‘propositional knowledge’ – the knowledge that something is true about the world.

Curriculum requirements and schemes of work are built on frameworks of concepts, information and skills that, once communicated to a young person, give them access to an understanding of aspects of the world created by others. Success in the delivery of this knowledge to young people is assessed and judged through pupil performance in exams or coursework.

Such knowledge is crucial. It provides the essential underpinning framework for acquiring basic and higher level skills and developing an understanding of the actions, achievements, discoveries and cultures of previous generations and current societies.

However, organising the curriculum and assessment solely based around subject knowledge underemphasises and may result in schools overlooking other forms of knowledge and learning. A curriculum based on RSA Opening Minds competences seeks to redress this. So Opening Minds also facilitates the development of:

- practical knowledge – learning how to do things;
- social learning – the process by which a young person comes to learn the values and practices of groups and communities;
- experiential learning – the process by which the relation of knowledge and its possible uses to the life and environment of the young person becomes clear; and
- self-knowledge – in terms of a young person understanding how they learn, reflecting and extending their competence to learn in other ways.

It is in the combination of these different forms of knowledge that students can come to understand and apply what is on the curriculum, and gain a deeper and richer experience of learning.

How are the RSA Opening Minds Competences Developed in Schools?

The competences do not determine *what* will be taught. They determine *how* it will be taught. Opening Minds is primarily a pedagogical tool. Opening Minds does not provide an alternative curriculum, rather an alternative way to develop and deliver a curriculum that is right for each school’s particular context and

circumstances. Schemes of work map how subject content and particular competences fit together and develop lesson plans to deliver the two together.

The competences are developed in classrooms through a mixture of instruction and practical experience, with more of an emphasis on students planning their work, organising their own time, working together, developing and extending their own ways of learning and assessing both their own and their peers' progress in learning.

Many schools choose to adopt a model where subject boundaries are less defined than in traditional curriculum teaching. They integrate the teaching of several subjects into modules, where competences can be developed through the exploration of common themes. However, the progress of students in developing subject knowledge and skills is maintained, alongside assessing students' capability in the competences.

Development and Consolidation of RSA Opening Minds Practice

Opening Minds is most commonly used at Key Stage 3, though the RSA Opening Minds charitable company is overseeing work that is developing the practice of Opening Minds within the 14-19 and primary phases.

Like any new and creative initiative there has been a wide variation of approaches between schools. This has provided the basis for innovation and learning, but, it has also brought with it a challenge to ensure that Opening Minds is always associated with high quality practice.

An independent review of Opening Minds in 2010 recommended the introduction of an accreditation system to assure quality and strengthen the support available to schools.

The charitable body that has been established by the RSA to oversee development of Opening Minds will phase in accreditation over the next two years. All schools, whether already implementing Opening Minds or new to using the framework, can now apply to become accredited RSA Opening Minds schools.

Accreditation is led by Opening Minds schools for Opening Minds schools. It will also enable teacher-to-teacher and school-to-school support to be properly resourced and organised. This will provide a catalyst for further development, creativity and innovation.

By introducing accreditation we are not looking to provide one single vision or template of the Opening Minds curriculum. We recognise the need to take account of a school's context and we want to maintain the creativity and innovation that has been at the heart of the initiative. It is important that in implementing Opening Minds schools develop a curriculum that is appropriate to their own circumstances and meets the needs of their students. Accreditation is a means of supporting this journey, providing assurance that rigour and quality are at the heart of what Opening Minds offers to young people and extending the scope of Opening Minds to more areas of the curriculum.

Outcomes of Implementation

There is no doubt whatsoever of the difference we are making not only to academic performance but also to personal development and to behavioural issues. (Opening Minds teacher)

We're learning teamwork, tenacity, self-motivation, problem solving, self-determination and negotiation. (Opening Minds student)

Opening Minds is not the only way to deliver holistic teaching and learning but the RSA's Opening Minds training schools are showing it is a powerful and effective pedagogical model. Students develop a wide range of competences that sit alongside their academic achievements.

Opening Minds appears to be solving a real issue of pupil engagement in learning, as well as addressing challenges of secondary transfer, and providing young people with the skills they need for successful progression.

Indeed many Opening Minds teachers have reported improvement in academic and independent learning, general and subject-specific skills, confidence, behaviour, enjoyment, attendance and relationships. Students are more engaged with school and lessons, more independent as learners, have developed real-world skills and have higher self-esteem. Also the focus on more active learning strategies and the use of a mix of independent and collaborative work together with a wide repertoire of teaching and learning approaches has supported student development.

Teachers have reported that Opening Minds helps them to enhance their effectiveness, improves their practice and builds their confidence. They also feel that Opening Minds values their professional skills and judgement through their direct involvement in creative curriculum development and delivery.

You can find more information about RSA Opening Minds at www.rsaopeningminds.org.uk

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