

Oak National Academy & The Art & Design Curriculum

During 2022 and 2023 AccessArt attended consultations organised by Oak National Academy to explore the potential for relaunching Oak after its initial creation during the pandemic. Like many educational publishers, we were concerned at the time about both the nature and quality of the resources created, the ethics of the creation of a curriculum by government, and also the potential impact of a so called “free” curriculum on commercial and charitable educational suppliers.

First, a little history about AccessArt. We are [25 years old](#) this year, and we are proud to say that for the last few years we have become a [self-supporting arts organisation](#), requiring no funding from outside sources. We are in this fortunate position because our (many thousands of) [members](#) pay a small subscription fee to access all our resources. In turn, this allows us to create new resources for our community, and most importantly, remain true to our vision and integrity. The insight, intelligence and pragmatic nature of our offering to schools means that we are privileged to help thousands of teachers inspire hundreds of thousands of pupils. This is no more in evidence than in the creation of the [AccessArt Primary Art Curriculum](#). When we planned and created our

curriculum, we were brave, followed our instinct and experience, and made certain that alongside the curriculum ethos and resources we created a support system and network to enable teachers to become enthusiastic, knowledgeable and confident art facilitators. The success of the curriculum has been recognised, with schools and Trusts recommending the flexible and empowering scheme to their colleagues. Our real pride though, is that artists, designers and craftspeople recognise the curriculum as being robust, exciting and rich – exactly the kind of experience they appreciate and value as artists.

So you can image we are justifiably proud of our achievement. We are now busy at work on our [Key Stage 3 pathways](#), and beyond into adult and community education. Our vision is true, our team and trustees incredible, and our business model as a membership charity is strong.

In 2023 AccessArt was approached by Oak National Academy to explore partnership working in the creation of new curriculum resources, and later the same year I was approached to join the Expert Group. We turned both opportunities down. Here's why.

There is currently a [Judicial Review](#) brought about by three claimants: The British Educational Suppliers Association (BESA), the Publishers Association, and the Society of Authors. This is also supported by the National Education Union who

are participating as an “interested party”.

“The government’s plans for Oak will be an unprecedented and unevidenced intervention that will cause irreparable damage to the education sector as we know it. The government is in effect creating a one-size-fits-all state publisher that promotes a single curriculum, controlled by the Education Secretary of the day. This will undo years of work by publishers who have invested expertise over many decades in creating a rich range of world-leading resources for school children across the country.

“There is simply too much at stake to let these plans proceed unopposed. The potential impact on teacher autonomy, learner outcomes, and curriculum diversity and quality is too significant. That is why authors, publishers, educational suppliers, school groups, teachers’ unions, and others have all voiced strong concern over these plans.” [Dan Conway, CEO of the Publishers Association](#)

“If we don’t act now, educators will be left with one set of state approved online resources which will threaten diversity and choice, remove financial incentives, and damage the healthy competition which is at the heart of educational publishing. The result will likely be a weaker overall pool of resources, greater challenges for teachers, and a negative impact on students’ learning.” [Nicola Solomon, Chief Executive of the](#)

Society of Authors

“Converting Oak from an emergency response to Covid to a permanent part of government is a decision with ominous implications. Without consultation or parliamentary debate, the government has taken a long stride towards directing the detail of teachers’ work. Unless its actions are challenged, what is now presented as an optional resource will soon become the norm in schools. The government should recognise its limits: it does not have the capacity, the imagination and the understanding to intervene in this way.” [Kevin Courtney, Joint Gen Sec, NEU.](#)

The concerns echoed by the case brought to Judicial review, are echoed by the National Education Union. [Key NEU concerns:](#)

Claims that OAK is “by and for teachers” and “operationally independent” of Government misrepresent its true nature: OAK is under the ultimate control of ministers. Its resources are produced by a range of organisations by way of a commercial tendering process.

The Government’s business case for Oak is clear that it will be “continuously strategically aligned with Government policy as it develops over time”.

OAK’s status means there is a risk its materials will be seen as Government approved and “safe”.

This will increase pressure for schools to use their products, particularly given the pressures that Ofsted exerts, and its current focus on curriculum

Examples of how OAK is aligned with Ofsted include:

Each of the “Subject Expert Panels” set up to advise on the production of Oak materials includes an Ofsted Inspector

The Government’s business case for the OAK ALB acknowledged that Ofsted’s overall emphasis, since 2019, on the curriculum within school inspections “may...be influential in shaping and accelerating the uptake of [Oak’s] service.”

[Read the Full NEU Statement here.](#)

We believe Oak is a flawed and dangerous idea, and we are not alone. We believe that whilst Oak attempts to involve experts in its creation, the mechanisms and ethos behind creation of resources will ultimately restrict and control. And let’s remember that whilst Oak touts itself as being “free”, it does in fact cost money which the government could choose to spend in wiser ways to value teachers, build knowledge and seek real vision. Those original consultations we attended? We see no evidence of listening to what we heard during those sessions, and in many other education roundtables, as a no thank you to Oak National Academy.

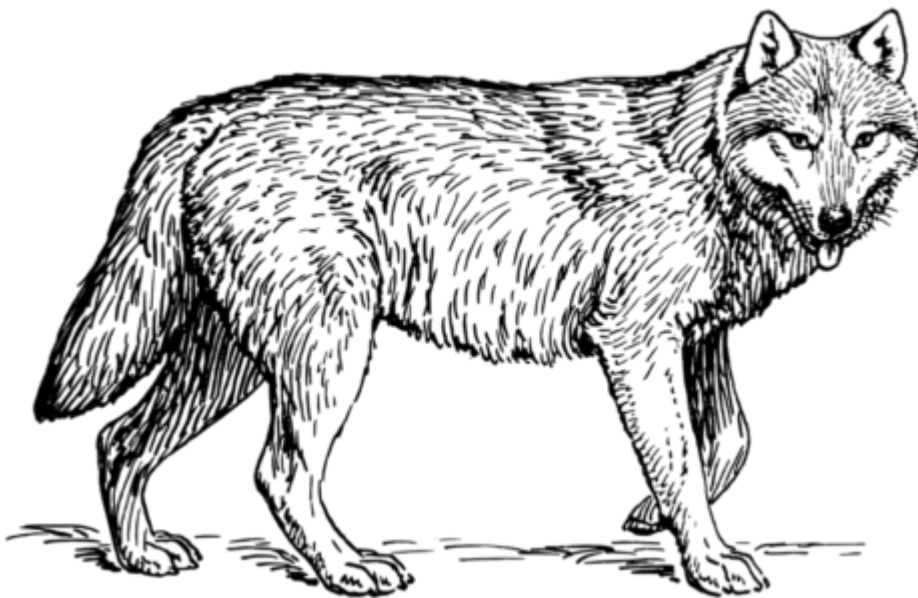
As a Subject Association and charitable organisation which has worked long and hard to develop expertise which develops and enables our community of users to feel supported, inspired and empowered, AccessArt will continue to work independently through our principles and practice to support our members. We thank you for your

continued support and understanding about what's really important in art education.

Paula Briggs, CEO & Creative Director AccessArt,
April 2024

Explore...

Taking Control of the narrative



"I realised through conversations with school leavers that they could no longer use words like intuition, entitlement, dreaming, invention, play. These words are unfamiliar to them, and they no longer resonate. These words, and therefore the ways of being they describe, are not available to them right

now."

Read why we need to change the narrative and speak with more courage about the purpose of education...

Not just ideas: Action Too



"One cold, rainy morning in January 1999, I received a phone call from the then DfES. The woman started the call with the words: "What is the best news someone could call you with on such a rainy January day?""

Explore and understand all that AccessArt has achieved and the impact we are making