Curriculum and Assessment Review

Interim Report

March 2025

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Executive summary

The national curriculum is an investment in all our young people, for their benefit and for the benefit of the nation. In addition to supporting individual success, it plays a crucial role in providing the knowledge and skills required to build a prosperous economy and flourishing civil society, as well as promoting social cohesion and sustaining democracy. For these reasons, it is imperative that the national curriculum supports high and rising standards in our education system.

It is more than a decade since the national curriculum was last reviewed. It is right that it is now refreshed to ensure that it remains cutting edge and fit for purpose, and we must take this opportunity to address problems with the current curriculum.

In July 2024, the Government commissioned Professor Becky Francis CBE to convene and chair a panel of experts (hereafter, the Review Panel) to conduct the Curriculum and Assessment Review (hereafter, the Review).

Education is inherently valuable and important for its own sake, but it also plays a crucial role in preparing young people to address the civic and economic needs of our country and the wider world. The Review therefore seeks to ensure that the curriculum and assessment system in England delivers excellence for all. In addition, it seeks to support the Government's mission to break down barriers to opportunity by equipping children and young people with the knowledge and skills to adapt and thrive in the world and the workplace.

The Review Panel recognises the hard-won successes and educational improvements of the last quarter-century, and we share the widely held ambition to promote high standards. However, in practice, "high standards" currently too often means "high standards for some". Our ambition is "high standards for all". We must therefore drive high aspiration and raise standards for the significant groups of young people for whom our current curriculum and assessment system creates barriers to their progress, in order to ensure the best life chances for all young people, irrespective of their background.

The Review is informed by research evidence, data, and a wealth of perspectives from experts, stakeholders and the public, including over 7,000 responses to our Call for Evidence, and a range of research and polling. The Review is being undertaken in close consultation with education professionals and other experts; parents, children and young people; and stakeholders such as employers, universities and trade unions.

The evidence shows that many aspects of the current system are working well, although there is great diversity in the views of stakeholders about the present arrangements for the curriculum and assessment.

In comparison to other jurisdictions, we have a reasonably broad and balanced curriculum to age 16. International comparisons suggest that the present arrangements have had a positive impact on attainment, and we intend to maintain and build on the knowledge-rich approach and on the

coherent structural architecture established by the last Review.[1] We consider that the present architecture of key stages is broadly working well, and we intend to recommend retaining it. Likewise, our national assessments and qualifications are broadly working well, including the phonics screening check, the multiplication tables check, national tests at the end of key stage 2, GCSEs, A levels, T Levels, and some wider applied general qualifications at 16-19.[2]

However, the Review Panel has identified four areas it will focus on in the next phase, where it sees the greatest opportunities and need for improvement:

The system is not working well for all

The socio-economic gap for educational attainment remains stubbornly large, and young people with SEND make less progress than their peers. While the explanations often lie outside curriculum and assessment, we shall take steps to ensure that the curriculum and assessment system reflects high expectations for all, and properly supports the progress and achievement of all young people.

Challenges with specific subjects

Many submissions have argued for improvements in a range of curriculum subjects. Some of these are minor (for example, citations of specific dated content), and some are major (for example, suggestions of a lack of efficacy in Modern Foreign Language teaching in primary and transition to secondary).

There is strong evidence that securing mastery in a subject is vital for raising standards and enabling future expertise. But we have also heard that in some subjects the current construction and balance of content appears to be inhibiting this which may:

- impede mastery and young people obtaining an appropriate depth of understanding, hindering progress and undermining standards;
- reduce teachers' professional capacity to consolidate, tailor, adapt or extend material for their pupils; and
- reduce the time available for breadth of learning, with a knock-on impact on time for other subjects.

The causes of this apparent imbalance between breadth and depth of content are not always clear. The next phase of the Review will consider this issue closely. We will also ensure that the curriculum (and related material) is inclusive so that all young people can see themselves represented in their learning, as well as seeing others' perspectives and broadening their horizons.

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[1] Framework for the national curriculum - GOV.UK

[2] EYFS and reception baseline assessment are out of scope of the Review.

In addition, over the last two decades, some subjects have thrived, and take-up has increased; in others, take-up has declined. The reasons for this are complicated. Responses to the Call for Evidence suggest that the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) performance measures may unnecessarily constrain the choice of students, impacting their engagement and achievement, and limiting their access to, and the time available for, vocational and arts subjects.

We will therefore continue to analyse the evidence and assess the place of the EBacc performance measures within the wider accountability framework, paying close attention to evidence of the impact of all performance measures on young people's choices and outcomes, and their impact on institutional behaviours.

The curriculum needs to respond to social and technological change

Subject specific knowledge remains the best investment we have to secure the education young people need in a world of rapid technological and social change. Being secure in foundational subjects such as maths and science will remain pivotal, now and in the future; as will young people's understanding of human culture through the humanities, languages and arts. However, attention is needed to address opportunities and challenges created by our fast-changing world. The rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and trends in digital information demand heightened media literacy and critical thinking, as well as digital skills. Likewise, global social and environmental challenges require attention to scientific and cultural knowledge and skills that can equip young people to meet the challenges of the future.

Meanwhile, young people and their parents or carers have been clear that they would like to see more applied knowledge in certain areas, to support young people to be ready for life and work.

16-19 technical and vocational qualifications

We maintain – and continue to support – a broad and balanced curriculum for all up to age 16. This contrasts with many other jurisdictions, where young people are sometimes put on different pathways at age 14, or even earlier. Our 16-19 provision offers diversity, but it is relatively specialised in comparison to some jurisdictions. A levels in England provide successful preparation for a three-year degree.

T Levels have introduced a new, high-quality technical route for young people who are clear about their intended career destination. While teething problems remain, T Levels show great promise. However, a significant proportion of young people require a mix of qualifications, or cannot access A levels or T Levels, or have not yet decided on career plans. Employers, the public, and young people themselves are often unclear about what pathways might be suitable. Furthermore, for young people who did not secure strong level 2 qualifications at school, including those who need to continue their study of maths and English, the quality of provision appears to be uneven. Given that this group includes a disproportionate number of young people

with SEND and those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, it is especially important that these issues are addressed.

The Review also wants to ensure that the assessment system captures the strengths of every young person and the breadth of the curriculum, and that it has the right balance of assessment methods, while maintaining the important role of examinations. We consider that the system is broadly working well, and we intend to retain the mainstay of existing arrangements. However, there are opportunities for improvement. This includes the potential to improve the inclusivity of the assessment system for young people with higher levels of SEND while maintaining the rigour of the system. The evidence demonstrates many strengths with our assessment system, but our Call for Evidence and wider engagement has highlighted concerns with some areas, particularly the effectiveness of the key stage 2 statutory assessment of writing and the volume of key stage 4 assessments. We will carry out further analysis on these matters.

Our current system is not perfect, but all potential reforms come with trade-offs. It is the job of this Review to weigh up and manage these carefully. It is also clear that many of the challenges reported by stakeholders concern matters to do with practice, resourcing and implementation, rather than the content of the national curriculum and the effectiveness of the assessment system. As such, and in recognition of the significant problem of capacity within the system, we will continue with our “evolution not revolution” approach in the next stage of the Review, an approach that has been widely welcomed.

This Interim Report explores these issues in greater depth, and the recommendations that we will make in our final report will follow the consideration of all the available options and a balanced appraisal of risk and benefit.

In formulating the recommendations, we will aim to strike a balance between the key themes identified through our engagement with stakeholders and the wider research and statistical evidence that we are reviewing. We will continue to work in conjunction with the sector, as well as departmental and non-departmental bodies, including the Department for Education (DfE), Ofqual, Ofsted and the Standards and Testing Agency (STA).

A balanced and cautious approach is necessary, given the diverse, and often conflicting, views expressed by stakeholders. This approach is also necessitated by the fact that many of the issues that we are seeking to address are extremely complex, and some elements of the education system and other factors that are outside the scope of this Review may be contributing to the outcomes we are observing. We are also conscious of the impact that substantial changes to the curriculum and assessment system can have on the workload of education staff. It is essential that we do not place undue burdens on education staff and that we make sure that any recommended changes are likely to lead to meaningful improvements in outcomes for learners.

Next steps

Particular areas of focus for the next stage of the Review include:

- considering questions that have been raised across different subjects about the specificity, relevance, volume and diversity of content;
- conducting deeper analysis to diagnose the specific issues affecting each subject and explore and test a range of solutions;
- continuing to consider the impact of current performance measures on young people's choices and outcomes, and their impact on institutional behaviours;
- continuing to consider how best to equip children and young people with the essential knowledge and skills which will enable them to adapt and thrive in a rapidly changing and AI-enabled world;
- exploring level 3 pathways, with the aim of building on the successes of existing academic and technical pathways, with particular attention paid to how best to support learners who do not study A levels or T Levels;
- considering how best to develop strong occupational pathways at level 2 and examining how to strengthen progression routes from level 2 to level 3;
- considering how best to ensure learners who did not achieve the required standard in English and maths at GCSE are best supported to do so by age 18; and
- conducting further analysis of assessment at key stages 1 to 4 and considering any necessary improvements.

We expect to recommend a phased programme of work in different subjects or subject areas. This will allow reforms to be made incrementally in a way that does not destabilise the system. To ensure this, we will remain mindful of the present capacity issues in the system, and the need for care in implementation. We will seek to capitalise on what is working well so that productive evolution supports schools and colleges to improve the educational experience and outcomes of children and young people, giving all our young people the best chance to discover a love of learning, and to achieve and thrive.

Introduction

The last review of the national curriculum was launched in 2011, more than a decade ago. In July 2024, the Government commissioned Professor Becky Francis CBE to convene and chair a panel of experts to conduct this Curriculum and Assessment Review.

As set out in the Review Aims, Terms of Reference and Working Principles, we have been asked to undertake:

> A review of the existing national curriculum and statutory assessment system, including qualification pathways. The Review will seek to refresh the curriculum to ensure it is cutting edge, fit for purpose and meeting the needs of children and young people to support their future life and work. The Review will ensure that the curriculum appropriately balances ambition, excellence, relevance, flexibility and inclusivity for all our children and young people, and it will ensure meaningful, rigorous and high-value pathways for all at 16-19. The Review will contribute to the Government's missions to break down the barriers to opportunity for every child and young person, at every stage, as well as to the Government's mission on growth. The Review will develop a cutting-edge curriculum, equipping children and young people with the essential knowledge and skills which will enable them to adapt and thrive in the world and workplace of the future. The Review will build on the hard work of teachers and staff across the system who have brought their subjects alive with knowledge-rich syllabuses, to deliver a curriculum which is rich and broad, inclusive, and innovative.

The purpose of this Interim Report is to present our initial findings and insights. These have been gathered through our Call for Evidence, the polling we have conducted, our review of the existing data and research, and our engagement with the sector, parents and young people. Annex A sets out our methodology. We set out how these initial findings will inform the work we undertake in the next phase.

Background

The following sections provide a brief account of the present curriculum and assessment system, in order to contextualise the analysis that then follows.

Curriculum, assessments and qualifications from key stages 1-4

The national curriculum sets out the programmes of study and attainment targets for all subjects at key stages 1 to 4. All mainstream local-authority-maintained schools in England must teach these programmes of study. We are aware that in some education settings, such as special schools and alternative provision, the curriculum may need significant adaptation to meet needs.

The Education Reform Act introduced the national curriculum in 1988. Successive governments have reviewed it: in 1993-1995, 1997-1999, 2005-2009, and 2011-2013. Reviews have led to new requirements, including statutory programmes of study for individual subjects at each key stage and non-statutory guidance.

Assessment arrangements have been updated to reflect changes in the curriculum, as assessment should test knowledge that has been taught through the curriculum.

- For primary, national curriculum assessments are developed and delivered by the Standards and Testing Agency (STA), an executive agency of DfE.
- For secondary and 16-19, DfE determines curriculum and qualifications. Qualifications are delivered by exam boards and awarding organisations which are independently regulated by Ofqual for standards and quality.

The national curriculum was most recently reviewed between 2011-2013. Those reforms aimed to create a curriculum that was ‘knowledge-rich’, with an overarching goal to provide pupils with an introduction to the essential knowledge they need for successful induction into subject disciplines and to engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement.

All state-funded schools in England are required to teach a ‘broad and balanced’ curriculum, as stipulated by the Education Act 2002[3] and the Academies Act 2010.[4] For mainstream local-authority-maintained schools, the national curriculum is statutory and seeks to support schools to achieve breadth and balance by providing specific requirements at each key stage. Academy funding agreements stipulate the teaching of English, maths and science, alongside the basic curriculum subjects of RE and RSHE, but academies are not currently required to follow the national curriculum. They are, however, like any state-funded schools, subject to Ofsted inspection and therefore expected to deliver a curriculum that is broader than that in their funding agreements. When judging the quality of education in academies, Ofsted expects to see the provision of a ‘broad curriculum’ that is ‘similar in breadth and ambition to the national

[3] Education Act 2002

[4] Academies Act 2010

curriculum'. This is reinforced within the 'good' descriptor in Ofsted's handbook, which states that schools must offer a broad range of subjects which are 'exemplified by the national curriculum' at both primary and secondary phases.[5] The Government has said that, following the conclusion of the Review, all state schools, including academies, will be required to teach the national curriculum – though many are likely to already be doing so.

Figure 1: The present national curriculum: Compulsory subjects by key stage

Subject	Key stage 1	Key stage 2	Key stage 3	Key stage 4
English	N	N	N	C E
Maths	N	N	N	C E
Science	N	N	N	C E
Physical education	N	N	N	F
Computing	N	N	N	F E
Citizenship			N	F
History	N	N	N	O E
Geography	N	N	N	O E
Languages (modern or ancient)		N	N	O E
Design and technology	N	N	N	O
Art and design	N	N	N	O
Music	N	N	N	O
Religious education	B	B	B	B
Relationships, sex and health education[6]	B	B	B	B

Key	
N	National curriculum subjects that must be provided by schools
B	Basic curriculum subjects: not on the national curriculum, but must be provided by schools
C	Core subjects: must be taught and are assessed
F	Foundation subjects: must be taught but are not necessarily assessed
O	Optional subjects: schools must offer at least one subject from each of these subject groups
E	EBacc subjects (for computing, only computer science is considered as an EBacc subject)

[5] School inspection handbook - GOV.UK

[6] In primary schools, schools must provide relationships and health education (RHE) and, in secondary schools the requirement is for relationships, sex and health education (RSHE).

Source: The national curriculum: Overview - GOV.UK

Our current system offers breadth at key stage 4 across academic and vocational qualifications. GCSE subject content is set by the DfE. Qualifications are delivered by exam boards and awarding organisations, which are independently regulated by Ofqual to maintain standards and quality. GCSEs fulfil several purposes – they assess learning against a defined curriculum, support progression and hold schools to account for their performance.

Technical Awards are, like GCSEs, level 1 or 2 qualifications available at key stage 4, typically taken alongside GCSEs. Like GCSEs, Technical Awards measure a student's attainment within a specified subject, support progression to further study, but with a more vocational focus[7] compared to GCSEs. In 2024, 44% of students in state-funded schools took at least one Technical Award,[8] and roughly 1 in every 15 key stage 4 grades issued in summer 2024 was a Technical Award.[9] The majority of these students take one award, typically alongside around eight GCSEs. Like GCSEs, these qualifications also provide data for accountability purposes, to hold schools and colleges accountable for their pupils' performance.

Secondary schools are measured on four headline performance measures that address curriculum breadth and content at key stage 4: the English Baccalaureate, or 'EBacc', measures the proportion of pupils that take GCSEs in specified subjects (English language and literature, maths, the sciences, a language, and history or geography);[10] Progress 8 and Attainment 8 measure success in eight subjects, including English and maths (double weighted to reflect their importance), three other English Baccalaureate (EBacc) subjects and three 'open' subjects. These can be GCSEs in any subject or other approved qualifications, such as Technical Awards. These measures have different inflections, but all aim to incentivise the take-up of a range of subjects.

Subject take-up – key stage 4

Evidence shows that the majority of learners take around nine qualifications (including GCSEs and Technical Awards).[11] As discussed in detail in our analysis of curriculum subject trends over time (Curriculum subject trends over time - Curriculum and Assessment Review), there have been changes in the subjects that pupils take for examination at key stage 4 in recent years.

Looking at GCSEs only, history and geography have strong uptake, potentially reflecting their inclusion in the EBacc measure, but the take-up of modern foreign languages has plateaued in recent years. Religious studies also remains popular at GCSE, despite not featuring in the

[7] A vocational qualification is one that is aligned to a sector and is often (but not always) taught and assessed in an applied way. A technical qualification is classed as technical because of its direct alignment to an occupational standard. There are therefore no 'technical' qualifications at KS4, only vocational ones.

[8] Key stage 4 performance, Academic year 2023/24 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK

[9] Infographic: vocational and technical qualification results 2024 - GOV.UK

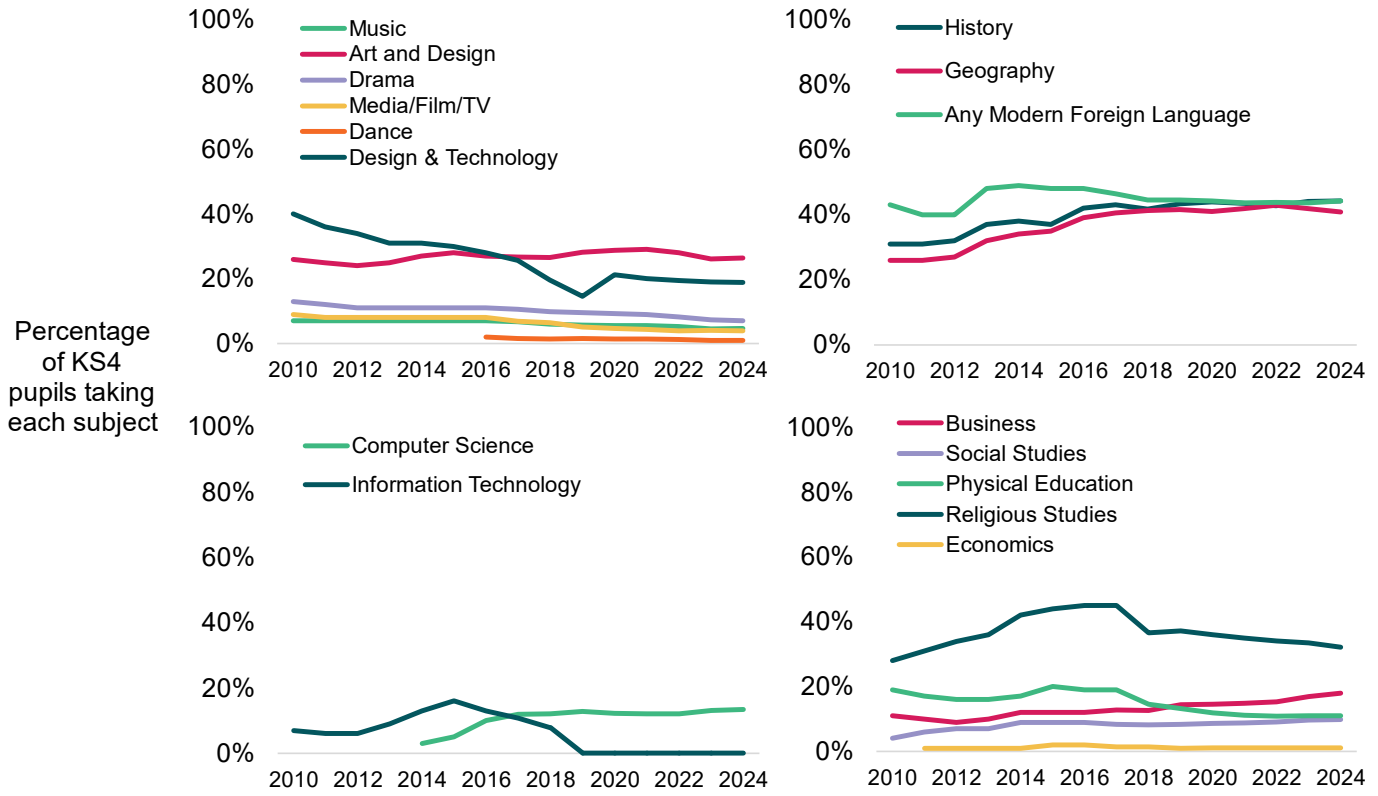
[10] https://www.gov.uk/national-curriculum/key-stage-3-and-4

[11] Analytical Annex to the Curriculum and Assessment Review Interim Report

EBacc. Meanwhile, art and design continues to thrive at GCSE: it remains among the most popular subjects for take-up. In contrast, some subjects within the category 'the arts' have seen a decline: notably drama and, to a lesser extent, music. However, design and technology stands out as the subject that has fared worst over time (Figure 2).

There are some subjects where there are both GCSEs and Technical Awards available. It is therefore important to take into account the trends in take-up of Technical Awards in these subjects, especially as there has been a shift towards Technical Awards in some subjects where there has been decline in GCSE take-up, for example, in PE, music and media. For example, while the proportion of pupils entering music GCSEs has declined from 7% in 2016 to 5% in 2024, we have seen an increase of entries into Technical Awards in music from 1% to 2% over the same period. There were also similar patterns in drama and media and for PE/sports, where the proportion of pupils taking Technical Awards had overtaken GCSEs by 2020.[12] Therefore, take-up of arts subjects qualifications may in some cases be more stable than the trends in GCSE take-up imply.

Figure 2. GCSE entries by subject, as a proportion of all pupils at the end of KS4, 2009/10 to 2023/24



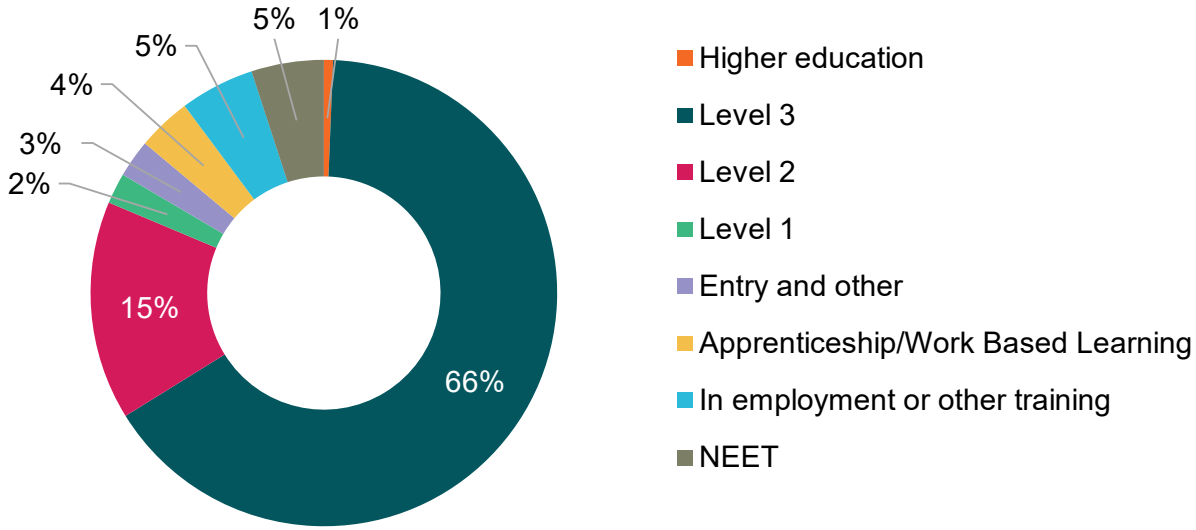
Source: Statistics: GCSEs (key stage 4) - GOV.UK

[12] Curriculum subject trends over time - Curriculum and Assessment Review

16-19 qualifications and programmes

16-19 study programmes are designed to be flexible and tailored to individual needs, abilities and career goals, with learners able to pursue various post-16 qualifications at different levels, including A levels, Applied General qualifications (AGQs), T Levels, Tech Levels, Technical Certificates and other vocational qualifications.

Figure 3. Participation in education, training and employment aged 16-17 in England, 2023



Source: Participation in education and training and employment

Around two-thirds (66%) of young people aged 16-17 are studying towards a level 3 qualification; 15% a level 2 qualification; and 5% a level 1 or below qualification. Of the remaining 16- to 17-year-olds, 4% are in apprenticeships or work-based learning; 5% in employment or other training; and 5% not in education, employment, or training.[13]

A level learners represent the largest group at level 3 (35% of 16- to 17-year-olds), with an additional 10% combining A levels with AGQs as a mixed programme. T Level learners currently represent only a small proportion of the cohort (2%), with a much larger share (19%) working towards other level 3 qualifications (e.g., AGQs, Tech Levels).

For learners whose highest qualification aim is at level 2, many study towards GCSEs, either as their only level 2 qualifications (5% of 16- to 17-year-olds), or more commonly, in combination with other types of level 2 qualifications such as Technical Certificates (7%).

These qualifications are supplemented by other activities which can be used to broaden the experience of the learner, including mentoring and coaching; certificates such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award; work experience and work-related activities such as preparing CVs and

[13] Participation in education, training and employment age 16 to 18, Calendar year 2023 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK

practising interview skills and techniques; and activities that offer enrichment to the student such as personal and social development.

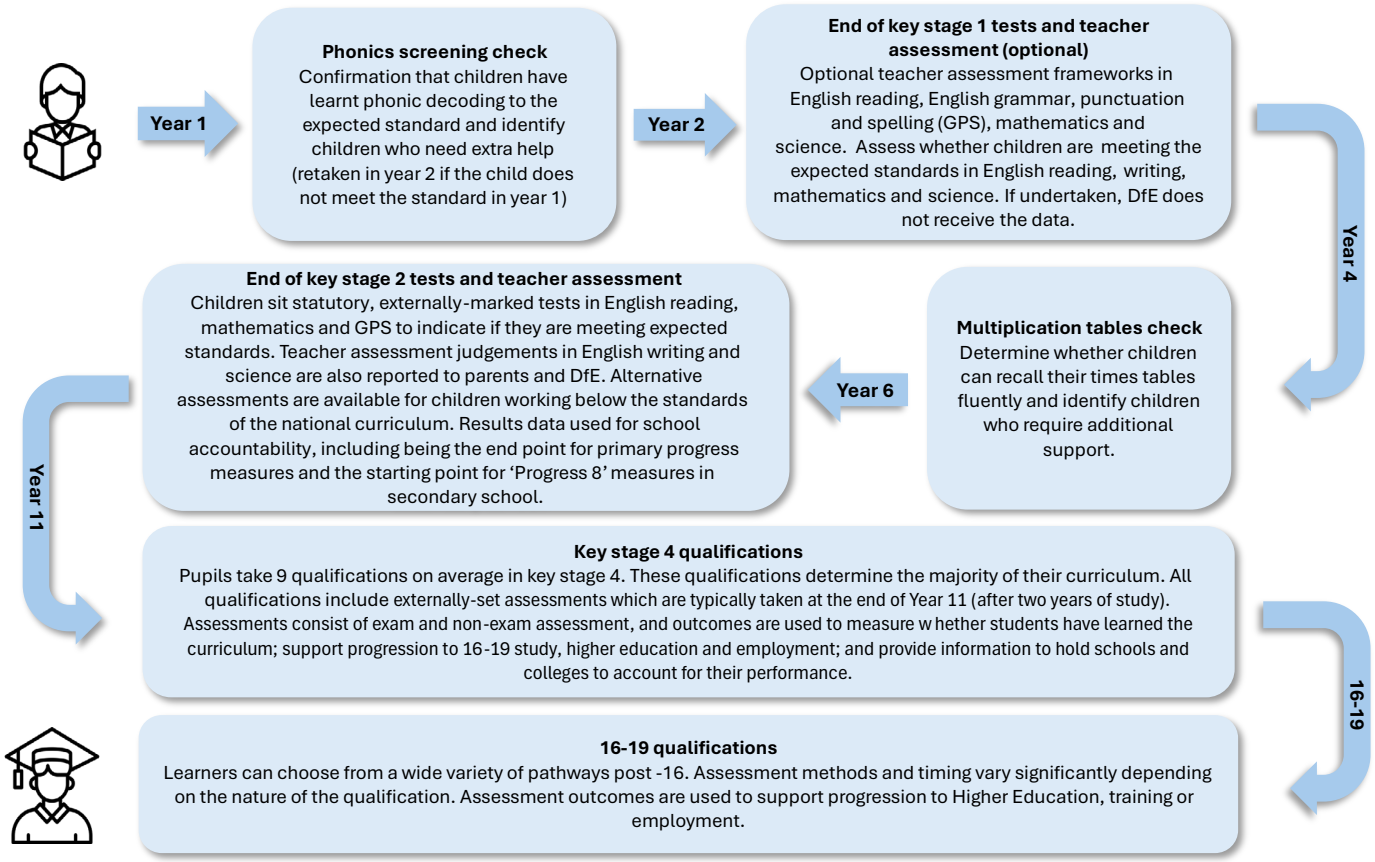
Assessment and accountability

Figure 4 (below) shows the present range of assessments in England from key stage 1 to 16-19. In primary school, statutory assessments focus on English and maths through the phonics screening check, multiplications tables check, assessments at the end of key stage 2 and optional assessments at the end of key stage 1.

At secondary level and in 16-19 education, learners take high-stakes exams and assessments at the end of key stage 4 and in their 16-19 studies. England is by no means unusual in assessing learners at the end of lower secondary education.[14]

In addition, national assessments in England are linked to accountability measures. For example, qualifications at the end of key stage 4 are linked to performance measures such as EBacc, Attainment 8 and Progress 8.

Figure 4. National assessments and exams in England's education system



[14] Cambridge Assessment (2021), High-stakes testing after basic secondary education: How and why is it done in high-performing education systems?

Our findings and analysis

The remaining sections of this Interim Report will outline the findings of the Review to date and indicate our emerging position, including identifying next steps.

The current system is not working well for everyone

High and rising standards for all rely on the excellent teaching of a curriculum that allows all young people to fully master the fundamental knowledge and disciplinary skills that education should provide. We must ensure that young people leave school having achieved qualifications that support their onward progression, and having gained the knowledge, skills and dispositions that enable them to go on to succeed in life. We think every child is entitled to high standards, a rich curriculum that articulates what they should learn, with reliable assessments that support their learning.

An excellent national curriculum and a high-quality assessment and qualifications system are fundamental to achieving these ends. However, it is important to note that a range of other factors also contribute to high and rising standards, from structures and resources to pedagogical arrangements. These factors are outside of the scope of this Review and are for the Department for Education to consider.

The present national curriculum is a knowledge-rich offer, and international comparisons suggest that the present arrangements have had a positive impact on attainment. Despite disruption from the pandemic, England has continued to perform comparatively well in international tests in English, maths and other core areas compared to other high performing countries[15] across different phases of education.

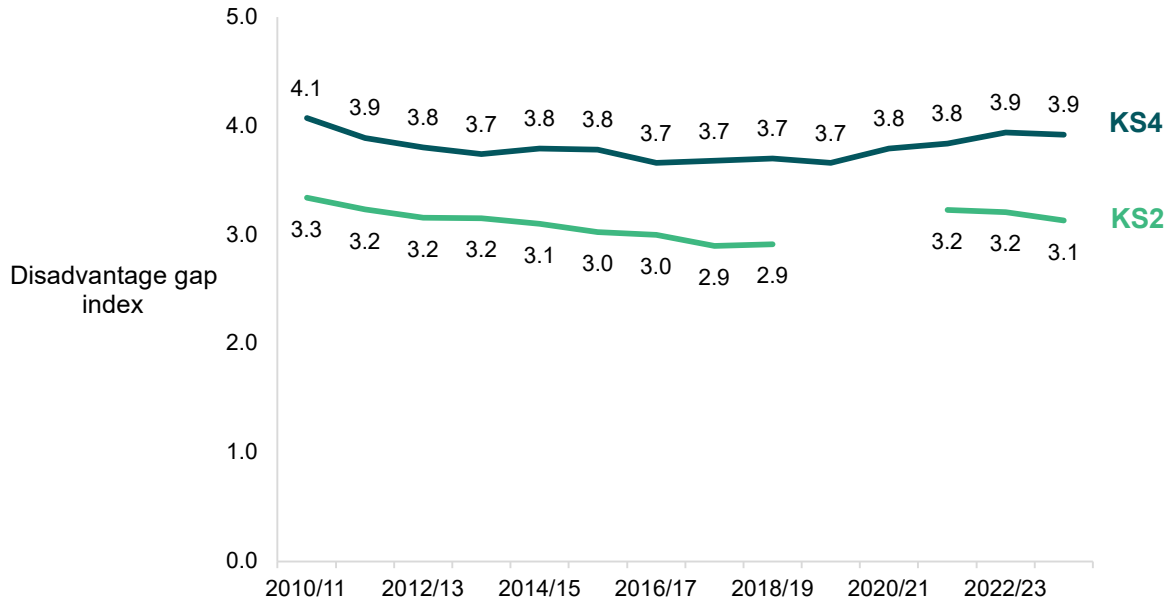
This success reflects a continued commitment to high and rising standards in state education across the last quarter of a century, as well as the enormous work of education professionals and leaders and the engagement of young people and their parents or carers. It is therefore imperative that this timely refresh of the curriculum and assessment system builds on this success.

However, excellence is not yet provided for all: persistent attainment gaps remain. There remains a stubborn attainment gap between those that are socio-economically disadvantaged and their

[15] PIRLS 2021: reading literacy performance in England; PISA 2022: national report for England; Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study 2019: England, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study 2019: England

peers (Figure 5), and young people with SEND fail to make sufficient progress in comparison to their non-SEND peers.[16,17]

Figure 5. Key stage 2 and key stage 4 disadvantage gap index, 2011 to 2024



Source: Statistics: key stage 2 - GOV.UK, Statistics: GCSEs (key stage 4) - GOV.UK

At key stage 2, 61% of pupils achieved the expected standards in reading, writing and maths in 2024. This shows some progress and recovery since the pandemic (the pre-pandemic peak was 65% in 2019). However, it still means that nearly 4 in 10 children are not meeting all the standards they need to build successfully on foundational knowledge and thrive in secondary schooling. And too many young people arrive at the end of key stage 4 without having succeeded in securing their level 2 qualifications, including in English and maths.

From the perspectives of both social justice and economics, it is vital that we take the necessary steps to drive up standards for young people who are presently underserved by our education system.

Therefore, in addition to making sure that the curriculum and assessment system prepares young people for life and work, the Review applies a social justice lens throughout its work, applying high aspirations for all. It will consider the positive impact we can make on the outcomes for socio-economically disadvantaged young people and those with SEND with the levers that are at our disposal, while remaining aware of the wider challenges the sector faces.

[16] See 'Attainment and progress by pupil characteristics' in Key stage 2 attainment, Academic year 2022/23 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK; Key stage 2 attainment, Academic year 2023/24 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK – please note: key stage 2 progress scores were not published in 2023/24 due to COVID-19 pandemic's impact on key stage 1 assessments

[17] See disadvantage gap index and progress 8 measure in Key stage 4 performance 2024 - GOV.UK

Curriculum shape and content

In line with the Review's conceptual position, we are taking a practical, evidence-led approach to curriculum reform. Therefore, we began this Review by seeking to gain a clear understanding of our current system and to evaluate fully both the positive impacts of, and problems facing, our national curriculum, before setting the strategic direction for our work.

We have begun to identify several themes and trends in the evidence. These are explored in more detail throughout this report. We have started to craft a strategic direction for a refreshed national curriculum, based on that evidence. Our initial ambitions are outlined below, and we will continue to review these as we gather more evidence in the next phase.

Ambitions for a refreshed national curriculum

1. The national curriculum and subject content should support schools to provide a rigorous and knowledge-rich education, aiming for breadth across subjects and depth within subjects.

2. The national curriculum should remain relevant and up to date while embedding and recognising the importance of cultural knowledge stemming from the past.

3. The national curriculum should empower teachers to foster a love of learning by enabling learning to be situated in a range of local, national and global contexts, to widen horizons, and to ensure that young people see meaningful representations of themselves in what they learn, as well as encountering and recognising the perspectives of others.

4. The national curriculum should allow schools to support the full development of their students and prepare them for their future life and work.

5. The national curriculum should be coherently and logically sequenced and allow space for schools to support mastery of core concepts, effective transitions, and progression through each key stage of education.

6. The national curriculum should enable students to master high-quality and aspirational learning, no matter what their individual needs or backgrounds. It should also support teachers to use their professional expertise in designing or selecting an engaging and stretching programme of learning that best suits their students' needs.

We will explore these ambitions in the following sections of this Interim Report. In the next phase of the Review, we will identify how we might better achieve these ambitions to ensure that the curriculum, assessment and accountability systems work as effectively as they can for children and young people.

A broad and balanced curriculum

State-funded schools in England are required to teach a 'broad and balanced' curriculum. The Review has considered, and will continue to examine, the many facets of this requirement for breadth and balance, which include:

- the range of different subjects available to study;
- the range of content within each subject; including the skills and aptitudes specified for development;
- the amount of time spent on each subject; and
- the framework that supports a breadth of subjects.

There is much to celebrate in the present approach, with the broad and balanced requirement having provided children and young people with opportunities to develop knowledge across a wide range of subjects (see Figure 1: Compulsory Subjects by key stage). When asked what is currently working well in our curriculum and assessment system, the most frequent theme in responses to the Call for Evidence was positivity about the breadth of the curriculum at key stages 1 to 4. Respondents celebrated that the diversity of subjects taught supports well-rounded development and provides a range of opportunities for students to succeed. In 2022/23, three quarters of state-funded pupils were studying more than eight qualifications at key stage 4, with the most common number being nine. Our polling also suggests that three quarters of key stage 4 pupils were able to study all the subjects they wanted to.[18] Whilst outside the scope of this Review, it should be noted that breadth may also be provided by enrichment activities beyond the curriculum, such as through musical and dramatic performances and sports.

We remain committed to the principle of a broad and balanced curriculum and recognise that the current shape of the curriculum at key stages 1-4 provides students with good exposure to a wide range of subjects. However, through our evidence gathering, we have identified that some features of the current system make the delivery of this broad and balanced curriculum challenging. Many respondents to our Call for Evidence cited the trade-off between breadth and depth, noting that while the curriculum has a large variety of subjects, there can be a challenge to address them all adequately. Moreover, advocates for the arts and some other subjects maintain that some subjects have been squeezed, either in relation to curriculum time, take-up by students, or both.

The arts are a good illustration of some of the dilemmas for this Review, in that not all of the issues that have been identified relate to the curriculum or assessment framework. For example, in arts subjects we have heard calls for improvements in equipment, more specialist teachers and better access to extra-curricular activities. These are important issues, and where we received evidence that extends beyond curriculum and assessment, we have passed that on to the Department for Education, who will reflect it in wider work.

[18] Polling of key stage 4 and 16 to 19 learners and parents: summer 2024

Breadth at key stages 1-2

At primary, standards in English and maths are rising, which is to be celebrated. The COVID-19 period saw declines in these measures, but we have seen recovery towards pre-COVID highs in the last few years. In 2024, 80% of pupils met the expected standard in the phonics screening check in year 1 (increasing from 58% in 2012 and peaking at 82% pre-pandemic in 2019).[19] At key stage 2, 61% of pupils achieved the expected standards in reading, writing and maths in 2024 (having peaked at 65% pre-pandemic in 2019, but improving year-on-year from 59% in 2022).[20] Respondents to the Call for Evidence generally noted that the mastery approach is helping students understand core concepts and there was praise for the role of phonics in teaching literacy.

However, we have also consistently heard from primary practitioners and subject experts that the curriculum at key stages 1 and 2 is not effectively balancing depth and breadth. This is reported to lead to a struggle to cover all content with sufficient depth and negatively affects pupils' ability to master foundational concepts. In the next phase we will review the volume of specified content at key stages 1 and 2 to ensure that a good level of breadth across the curriculum is achievable, while continuing to drive high and rising standards in all subjects, which includes mastery of foundational concepts in English and maths.

Breadth at key stage 3

The curriculum is at its broadest in terms of the number of subjects studied at key stage 3. Yet evidence shows that breadth is often being compromised at this stage. Due to the volume of content to be covered at key stage 4, many schools begin preparing pupils for GCSE in year 9 (ordinarily the final year of key stage 3), which narrows the curriculum offer and may curtail learning in curriculum subjects not selected for further study. Findings from the NFER's Teacher Voice omnibus survey in 2019 show that 56% of schools begin teaching GCSEs in year 9 for all or most subjects, and some even begin doing this as early as year 7.[21]

We have also heard through the Call for Evidence that transitions are not always well-aligned between key stages, particularly between key stage 2 and key stage 3, and that there is repetition in the key stage 3 curriculum, which can cause learners to become disengaged, and may contribute to slower progress and less sense of purpose in key stage 3. Respondents stressed the need to preserve key stage 3 as an educational stage with a broad and balanced curriculum that encompasses a rich variety of subjects, offers flexibility in teaching and learning and supports students' wider development and progress.

We want to ensure that students can benefit from breadth at key stage 3, and that learning is well sequenced as they progress through the stages of education. In the next phase, we will look at

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[19] Phonics screening check attainment, Academic year 2023/24 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK

[20] Key stage 2 attainment, Academic year 2023/24 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK

[21] Education Inspection Framework 2019 NFER Response: Teacher Voice Data

the alignment between key stages 2, 3 and 4, assessing how breadth and sequencing can better support students to build their knowledge and deepen their understanding.

Breadth at key stage 4

Key stage 4 is characterised by the selection of qualifications – by students, or on their behalf – and the study of these qualifications comprises the mainstay of the student's curriculum. There is a wide variety of subjects offered at key stage 4, both academic and vocational; and a range of performance and other measures that aim to ensure pupils study a broad range of subjects. This has helped to ensure young people complete key stage 4 with a breadth of knowledge and the requisite qualifications to facilitate their choice of meaningful educational pathways at 16-19.

However, we have heard two main barriers to achieving breadth and balance at key stage 4. As seen in key stages 1, 2 and 3, the first barrier is a question of volume which is reported to challenge adequate curriculum depth and to squeeze the curriculum time available for mandatory but non-assessed subjects such as PE, RE and RSHE.

The second challenge frequently noted relates to the EBacc performance measures. The EBacc was introduced in 2010. It refers to a certain combination of subjects and there are related performance measures reporting the percentage of students entering and achieving the EBacc GCSE subject combination. This combination of subjects reflects the previous government's priority curriculum subjects: maths, English (language and literature), sciences, a modern or ancient language, and history or geography.[22] Its purpose is to:

- ensure students pursue a broad range of academic subjects until age 16;
- break the link between students' backgrounds and GCSE choices, which often limit future study options, particularly for lower socio-economic groups. For example, it was hypothesised that study of what previously were referred to as 'facilitating subjects' at A level is more highly valued by high tariff universities; and
- reverse the declining entries in history, geography, and modern foreign languages (MFL) at GCSE level seen at the time (See Figure 6 overleaf).

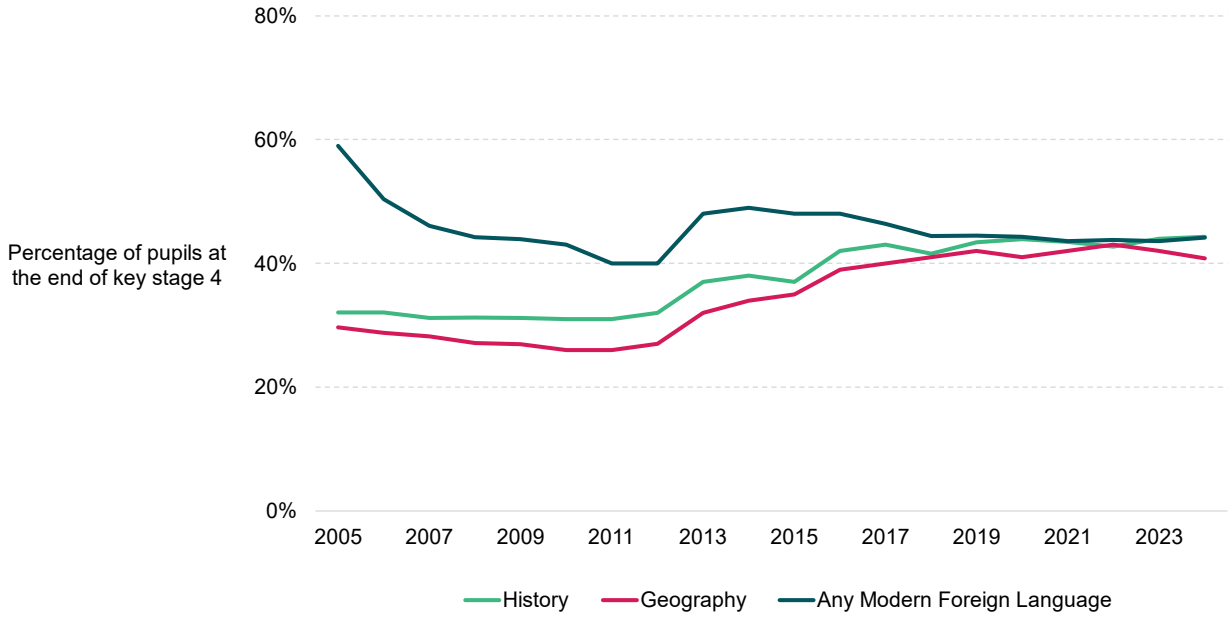
The EBacc performance measure sits within a wider accountability system which, at key stage 4, includes the headline measures of Progress 8 and Attainment 8. Progress 8 aims to capture the progress that pupils make from the end of primary school to the end of key stage 4. It is a type of value-added measure, which means that pupils' results are compared to other pupils nationally with similar prior attainment. Every increase in grade a pupil achieves in their Attainment 8 subjects counts towards a school's Progress 8 score. While Progress 8 seeks to incentivise uptake of EBacc subjects, it does not necessitate that the full suite is taken: its subject 'buckets' measure the progress that students make in the core subjects of English, maths and science, three EBacc subjects, and three 'open' slots which can be filled with GCSEs in EBacc or non-EBacc subjects or qualifications, such as Technical Awards, from the DfE approved list.

[22] English Baccalaureate (EBacc) - GOV.UK

The previous government set an ambition for 75% of students to be studying the EBacc by 2022 (for 2024 examinations) and 90% by 2025. However, EBacc entry rates plateaued at around 40% between 2017 to 2024, and fewer than 15% of state-funded schools are meeting the 75% ambition.[23]

Before the introduction of EBacc performance measures, take-up of MFL and geography was declining, and history uptake sat at just over 30% of pupils. The proportion of learners taking geography GCSE, history GCSE and MFL GCSEs all saw an increase in uptake of at least 5 percentage points[24] between 2012 and 2013, after the introduction of EBacc performance measures. This fell between 2014 and 2018, before remaining stable from 2018 onwards, with 44% of learners taking a MFL GCSE in 2024 (Figure 6). Of course, these patterns may also be explained, at least in part, by issues unrelated to performance measures, such as teacher supply.

Figure 6. Proportion of key stage 4 pupils taking history GCSE, geography GCSE and GCSEs in at least one modern foreign language



Source: Analytical Annex to the Curriculum and Assessment Review Interim Report

It is worth noting that increases in the uptake of EBacc subjects have also not consistently translated into increased study at 16-19. While history and geography GCSE percentage uptake rose by over 10 percentage points between 2010 and 2024, history and geography A level entries as a proportion of all A level entries remain relatively consistent since 2010.[25] In addition, language A level entries as a percentage of all A level entries fell from 3.8% to 2.7% between 2010 and 2024, despite the modest rise at GCSE.[26]

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[23] Search for schools, colleges and multi-academy trusts - Compare school and college performance data in England - GOV.UK

[24] Key stage 4 performance - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK

[25] A level and other 16 to 18 results

[26] Key stage 4 performance - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK

Furthermore, while EBacc uptake has increased among socio-economically disadvantaged pupils since 2010, with 29% of disadvantaged learners taking the full suite of EBacc subjects in 2024 compared with 9% in 2011, this uptake remains lower compared to their non-disadvantaged peers, among whom EBacc uptake increased from 26% to 45% over the same period. There is also a growing socio-economic gap in *attainment* of the EBacc, for those young people that take this suite of subjects. This gap in attainment has grown from 18 percentage points in 2013 (when 67% of non-disadvantaged students achieved EBacc success compared to 49% of disadvantaged students) and increased to 21 percentage points in 2024 (66% of non-disadvantaged students compared to 45% of disadvantaged students).

Evidence suggests that a portfolio of academic subjects does aid access to A level and to university,[27] and that taking the full suite of EBacc subjects positively correlates with a learner applying to and attending university. However, there is little evidence to suggest that the EBacc combination *per se* has driven better attendance to Russell Group universities.[28]

Responses from the Call for Evidence have highlighted that the EBacc performance measures may unnecessarily constrain student choice (and, consequently, their engagement and/or achievement). Respondents also maintained that in doing so, the EBacc measure limits students' access to and time for arts or vocational subjects, thus reducing breadth.

Given the structure of the EBacc, to be eligible for the performance measure, a student taking the national average of nine subjects at key stage 4 would necessarily have seven subjects already pre-selected (with a choice between history or geography), or eight subjects if taking triple science.[29] In addition, students in schools with a religious designation are often mandated to enter a religious studies GCSE. All this limits the uptake of triple science, computing, and arts subjects and we have heard strong concerns from schools, and from organisations representing the arts and other non-EBacc subjects, on this constraining effect of the EBacc.

We are strongly committed to the progress performance measures which focus on the difference a school makes, and which avoid a potentially problematic focus on grade borderlines. Progress 8 achieves a simultaneous beneficial focus on pupil progress and curriculum breadth. It is right that we review the impact of performance measures on curriculum breadth, depth, and choice for all pupil groups. We must also ensure that performance measures are not conflicting with, or duplicating, each other and that they are not introducing perverse incentives or unintended consequences into the system. We will continue to assess the place of the EBacc performance measures within the wider accountability framework, paying close attention to the evidence of the

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[27] Iannelli, C, Smyth, E & Klein, M (2016), 'Curriculum differentiation and social inequality in higher education entry in Scotland and Ireland'

[28] Incentivising-specific-combinations-of-subjects-does-it-make-any-difference-to-university-access.pdf

[29] To conform to EBacc, a student would take: maths, English language and English literature, three single sciences or combined science, a modern or ancient language and either history or geography, making seven GCSEs (eight if the student takes triple science rather than combined science which counts for two GCSEs).

impact of performance measures on young people's choices and outcomes, and their impact on institutional behaviours. The intention behind the EBacc to improve access to a comprehensive, academic curriculum for all should be acknowledged, but as the Review progresses, we will also consider whether this remains the most effective means of achieving this objective.

A curriculum fit for the future

As set out above, the current national curriculum has raised standards for many students. We want to build on this and ensure that all children and young people have opportunities to master their subject knowledge and further their understanding of the rapidly changing world around them.

A commitment to a knowledge-rich curriculum

The last review of the curriculum between 2011-2013 aimed to create a curriculum that was 'knowledge-rich', with an overarching goal to provide pupils with an introduction to the essential knowledge they need for successful induction into subject disciplines and to engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement. This approach drew on a body of evidence that supports the necessity of the curriculum providing all with rich and broad content knowledge. It ensures all students, regardless of background, have equal access to a foundational body of knowledge, reducing disparities.[30] It provides students with reliable and meaningful insights into the world around them, enabling them to explore topics outside of their everyday experiences,[31] and provides the requisite knowledge that enables students to become proficient in a skill[32] and to develop deep and effective disciplinary thinking.

The responses to the Call for Evidence often demonstrate a continued support for a high-quality, knowledge-rich curriculum that drives excellence in education across a broad range of subjects and pathways. And the majority of parents or carers are broadly content with the present curriculum offer overall, including three-quarters (76%) agreeing that their children's schools are providing the right level of focus to help their children develop an in-depth knowledge of English, maths and science.[33]

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[30] Surma, T., Vanhees, C., Wils, M., Nijlunsing, J., Crato, N., Hattie, J., Muijs, D., Rata, E., William, D., & Kirschner, P. A. (2025), 'Developing a curriculum for deep thinking: the knowledge revival - Queen's University Belfast'

[31] Young (2009) Education, globalisation and the 'voice of knowledge'; Young, M. (2013) 'Overcoming the crisis in curriculum theory: A knowledge-based approach'

[32] The Cambridge Handbook of Instructional Feedback

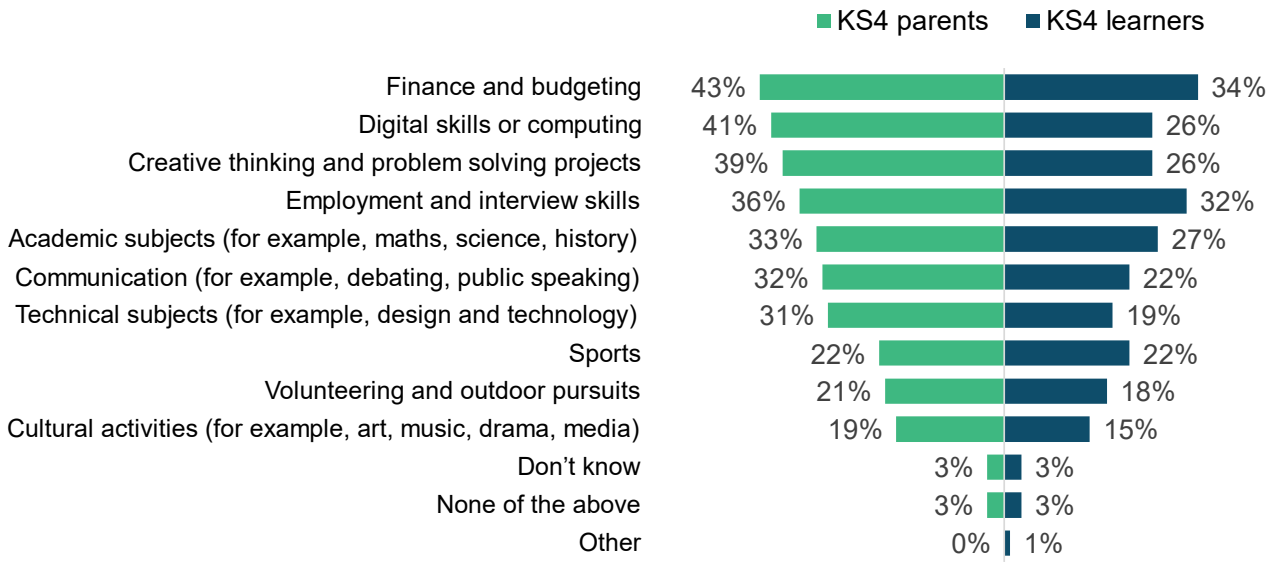
[33] The National Parent Survey 2024

Addressing global and social change

Rapid social, environmental and technological change necessitates that the curriculum keep pace; including a renewed focus on digital and media literacy, and a greater focus on sustainability and climate science. Moreover, a repeated concern in responses to the Call for Evidence has been that curriculum content in several subject areas should be brought up to date where it has become redundant or less relevant.

We have also heard consistently from children and young people and their parents that they want more focus on the applied knowledge and skills that will equip them for later life and work; such as financial education, careers knowledge and politics and governance. For example, our polling shows that 34% of key stage 4 learners and 43% of their parents would have liked more focus on finance and budgeting, and 32% of key stage 4 learners and 36% of their parents would have liked more time on employment and interview skills (figure 7). The National Parent Survey data further confirms these trends: nearly half of parents think that too little time is spent on skills related to financial management (48%); and around a third would like more attention to life skills (32%); and preparation for the job market (32%).[34]

Figure 7. Polling of key stage 4 learners and their parents: Which, if any, of the following areas would you have liked/would you have liked your child to spend more time on between year 7 and 11?



Source: Polling of key stage 4 and 16 to 19 learners and parents: summer 2024

Many schools already teach such areas of knowledge within curriculum subjects. For example, digital skills, media literacy, online relationships and safe and respectful use of technology are covered within the computing and RSHE curriculums, and there is alignment between both

[34] The National Parent Survey 2024

programmes of study. However, society is rapidly changing, and bringing new opportunities and challenges, including those presented by AI, and those relating to global political developments and climate change. These will require particular knowledge and skills to address, and to ensure that our young people can harness future opportunities and fend off threats to our democracy and cohesion.

Our ongoing work in this area will consider whether there is sufficient coverage of these (and other) areas of knowledge and skills within subjects, and how content can remain relevant and support young people to thrive in a fast-changing world. This could involve further embedding various knowledge and skills across different parts of the curriculum. For example, we must ensure that young people are equipped to shape an increasingly AI-powered world. They need to be able to navigate misinformation and other challenges, and they also need to be able to take the opportunities that will be available to those who can become the most skilful shapers and operators of AI. This requires a strong focus on maths, but also the development of sophisticated analytical skills, and higher order domain-specific problem-solving ability, rooted in secure knowledge.

Challenges with specific subjects

There is strong evidence that securing mastery in a subject is vital for raising standards and enabling future expertise. We have also heard consistently that in some subjects the current construction and balance of content appears to be inhibiting this, which may:

- impede mastery and young people obtaining an appropriate depth of understanding, hindering progress and undermining standards;
- reduce teachers' professional capacity to consolidate, tailor, adapt or extend material for their pupils; and
- reduce the time available for breadth of learning, with a knock-on impact on time for other subjects.

A restriction of opportunities for mastery (the process of ensuring students understand a particular foundational concept before moving to the next one)[35] has implications for progress: students need to be secure in core concepts and knowledge before moving forward to avoid gaps forming and growing (which are then hard to remedy). Moreover, mastery approaches are important from a social justice viewpoint as they have been shown to narrow the disadvantage gap when targeted support is given to students with gaps in understanding,[36] as well as because they incorporate high expectations that all students can successfully be supported to reach mastery of high-level content with the right support.

The causes of this apparent imbalance between breadth and depth are not always clear. While questions have been raised about the volume of content, we have also been made aware of

[35] Christodoulou, D. (2019), What is Mastery? The good, the bad, the ugly

[36] Mastery learning | EEF

challenges with under-prescription in subjects, with some programmes of study lacking specificity. Lack of specificity can, counter-intuitively, contribute to greater curriculum volume, as teachers try to cover all eventualities in demonstrating the quality of their curriculum; or repeat material due to a lack of clarity about what has previously been covered. This may be one of several potential reasons why teachers frequently report an experience of curriculum 'overload' even when the relevant programme of study does not appear over-prescribed. The next phase of the Review will consider these issues closely.

Many submissions have argued for improvements in a range of curriculum subjects. Some of these are minor (for example, citations of specific dated content), and some are major (for example, suggestions of a lack of efficacy in modern foreign language teaching in primary and transition to secondary).

In the next stage of the Review, we will conduct closer analysis to diagnose each subject's specific problems and explore and test a range of solutions.

Diversity of content

One of our strengths as a nation is our diversity, and our commitments to equality of opportunity and fairness. As such, we shall seek to ensure that all young people are able to feel included and engaged in the national curriculum. As set out in our Terms of Reference, the Review will seek to deliver a curriculum that reflects the issues and diversities of our society, ensuring all children and young people are represented, and also exposed to a wide range of perspectives that serve to broaden their horizons.

There is already scope within the national curriculum for teachers to weave together topics and themes to create an inclusive and diverse learning experience. However, we have heard compelling arguments that the curriculum needs to do more in ensuring that all young people feel represented, and that it successfully delivers the equalities duties to support equality of opportunity and challenge discrimination. Some of this has come from pupils themselves in our roundtables with young people. Pupils told us that not being able to see themselves in the content they learn, or encountering negative portrayals, can be disempowering and demotivating, a point supported by wider evidence.[37] Ensuring that a diverse range of perspectives, experiences and representation are contained in set texts has also been seen to support student engagement and positive outcomes, alongside empathy and understanding of others.[38,39]

As well as making sure that children and young people can see themselves represented in the curriculum, it will be important that we also make sure they encounter the unfamiliar, and have

[37] The Centre for Education and Youth [formerly LKMco] (2018), Boys on track: Improving support for black Caribbean and free school meal-eligible white boys in London

[38] Elliott, V., Nelson-Addy, L., Chantiluke, R. & Courtney, M., Lit in Colour: Diversity in literature in English Schools

[39] Dee, T. S., & Penner, E. K. (2017), The causal effects of cultural relevance: Evidence from an ethnic studies curriculum

their horizons stretched and broadened; representation does not and must not mean restriction to only some frames of reference for particular children or groups of children. Inclusion is also prompted by shared experiences, the creation of connections, and the ability to see and experience a wide range of perspectives. Clearly there is a need to appropriately balance the requirement to ensure coherence and efficacy in the curriculum with inclusivity; while also ensuring we do not detract from the importance and impact of what is currently taught. Curriculum coherence, efficacy and breadth for all children will remain central as we make sure the curriculum is more broadly representative. As part of our subject review work, we will look across the curriculum to examine where opportunities exist to increase diversity in representation, and to ensure that the curriculum facilitates a fostering of inclusivity and challenge to discrimination.

Subjects not on the national curriculum

RE and RSHE are subjects that schools are required by statute to provide, but which do not form part of the national curriculum.[40]

Despite the fact that RE is compulsory for all pupils up to the age of 18 (unless they are withdrawn), evidence suggests that a lack of national agreed content standards has led to national disparities in the quality of provision.[41] Similar sentiments have been raised in the Call for Evidence responses and in a Review roundtable with RE organisations.

In contrast, the DfE provides statutory guidance for RSHE. It is currently reviewing the existing guidance in parallel with this Review and we will ensure that any implications of its findings are considered as we move into the next phase of work.

For these subjects, there is a balance to be struck between securing an entitlement to high-quality content for all, and, particularly in the case of RE, the need for flexibility to be retained for different school types (i.e., schools with a religious designation and those without). We will consider these points through our analysis of each different subject before publishing our final report.

16-19 pathways and qualifications

The transition to 16-19 study is a significant milestone for young people. Giving students a firm grounding in primary and secondary education sets them up to progress successfully through academic and technical/vocational pathways at 16.

We have heard the importance of ensuring that the system of 16-19 pathways supports all learners to hone the knowledge and skills they need to step confidently into adulthood. This

[40] The national curriculum: Overview - GOV.UK

[41] Deep and meaningful? The religious education subject report - GOV.UK

includes both qualifications as well as skills (such as finance and budgeting, employment and interview skills), to support learners to develop into well-rounded individuals and to be ready for higher learning or work.

However, while we know that elements of the system are working well, we heard strongly that the current system is not working well for everyone. The evidence shows that too many young people are not gaining the right knowledge and skills as they progress through the system and by the time they leave formal education are not prepared to thrive in life and work. Almost four in 10 learners are not reaching level 3 by the age of 19 and, perhaps of most concern, around one in seven fail to reach level 2 by the same milestone.[42] Recent estimates suggest that over half (52%) of employers do not agree that young people are well-prepared to move from education to work.[43] All of this has implications for learners' life chances and for the economy.

Respondents to the Call for Evidence advocated that all pathways are designed with a clear line of sight to further study and/or fulfilling employment. However, we heard concerns clearly expressed about the technical and vocational parts of the system. These pathways serve over 40% of young people,[44] and yet, the high number of differently branded and graded qualifications means that learners and employers are unclear about the purpose and value of some study programmes. This can lead to churn in the system, with learners switching between courses, and, as a result, poor outcomes for them and for the economy. Employers struggle to identify and appraise accurately the knowledge and skills with which young people are leaving education.

We should build on what is working well. The A level route is seen as strong, well-respected and widely recognised, and facilitates progression to higher education as appropriate. In the academic year 2022/23, 82% of learners in state-funded schools who took A levels progressed to higher education by age 19.[45]

Likewise, despite the early challenges of implementing them, we heard repeatedly that T Levels are becoming an established brand and supporting successful outcomes for learners taking them. For example, over 90% of T Level completers in further education were in a sustained destination[46] in the year following their qualification.[47] T Levels are at the forefront of a welcome agenda to drive rigour and raise standards across the technical education system, including ensuring (through Skills England) that qualifications are aligned with industry needs and that employers have confidence in the knowledge and skills that young people are developing.

We need to build on these principles of high standards and clear destinations, ensuring all study programmes are high-quality and accommodate the individual needs of learners. This will

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[42] Level 2 and 3 attainment age 16 to 25, Academic year 2022/23 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK

[43] CIPD (2024) - The changing face of the youth labour market

[44] Participation in education, training and employment age 16 to 18

[45] Widening participation in higher education, Academic year 2022/23 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK

[46] Defined as 'students continuing to education, apprenticeship or employment destinations in the year after completing 16 to 19 study in schools and colleges in England'

[47] 'Further education outcomes' - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK

include, for example, continuing to require the study of English, maths or both for those who do not secure a grade 4 at GCSE, while taking important steps to improve learners' experience and outcomes. In the next phase of the Review, we will build on the extensive work on 16-19 pathways that has already been undertaken and look at how we can achieve the aim of a simpler, clearer offer which provides strong academic and technical/vocational pathways for all.

Level 3

Two-thirds of 16- to 17-year-olds (66%) study on level 3 programmes.[48] Studying at level 3 is important for learners' progression. Learners who study qualifications at level 3 are, on average, more likely to have a sustained education or employment destination than those studying at level 2 or below. Completing level 3 programmes is also important for learners' future earnings. Evidence suggests that the completion of level 3 qualifications provides a significant wage premium, even after controlling for other observable factors which affect earnings.[49]

We should continue to be aspirational in what we expect from our learners. This includes ensuring that as many learners as possible progress from GCSEs to study at level 3. Given the importance of level 3 study, the Review is committed to examining pathways at level 3 to ensure sufficient high-quality provision to further study and/or employment.

Academic pathway

Academic provision at level 3 is the most common pathway for 16-19 learners, with 35% of all 16 to 17-year-old learners studying exclusively for A levels. Stakeholder engagement and the Call for Evidence reaffirmed that A levels are well-established, are rigorous and have good progression outcomes. Respondents noted the importance of A level subjects continuing to provide enough depth of knowledge to enable progression at undergraduate level.

Learners typically study three A levels, at 360 Guided Learning Hours (GLH) each. In 2024, about two thirds (67%) of 18-year-olds studying A levels took three A levels, while 5% took four and 0.1% took five or more A levels.[50]

Alongside A levels, newly reformed and titled 'Alternative Academic Qualifications' (AAQs) have been introduced, with small AAQs available in 'strategically important subjects'.[51] They are designed for learners who want to progress through applied study and learners can choose to combine them with A levels, or technical qualifications, to make up a full study programme. They are distinct from A levels and, while their purpose is to support progression to higher education, they provide an opportunity for applied learning in vocational subjects. Further work is needed to

[48] Participation in education, training and employment age 16 to 18

[49] The value of progression in further education; Measuring the Net Present Value of Further Education in England 2018-19

[50] Infographics for A level results, 2024 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

[51] Department for Education (2024) Using the new level 3 qualifications reformed landscape from 2025

consider the implications of introducing these qualifications, the different combinations of qualifications that can be studied together, and the outcomes they support for learners.

Technical and vocational

T Levels are high-quality, two-year technical qualifications, based on the occupational standards of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE). They are the government's flagship level 3 technical offer. While T Levels are currently taken by a small number of learners (2% of 16 to 17-year-olds[52]), this is expected to grow as more pathways and providers become available and the programme continues to establish itself. The purpose of T Levels is to prepare learners for skilled employment across a range of industries.[53] We heard evidence from employers that they value the level of engagement they have had in co-creating and delivering T Levels. The time taken to reach these destinations depends on the subject and may involve progression to skilled employment, work-based study such as an apprenticeship, or higher education. For example, data from the recent Technical Education Learner Survey showed that learners who started an Education and Childcare T Level in 2020 were more likely to progress straight to employment (52%) rather than higher education (46%), while the opposite was true for learners who completed a Digital Production, Design and Development T Level, with 23% entering employment and 51% pursuing a university degree.[54]

The Review considers T Levels to be the gold-standard technical qualification, and we want to ensure that the quality of their design and delivery is supported. Throughout the engagement process, we were encouraged to hear substantial positive feedback on the potential of T Levels and we are supportive of the opportunities they provide for learners.

However, given T Levels embody this standard they will not be appropriate for all learners. Even with changes, it is clear that they are not suitable as the only technical/vocational pathway. This is due to many factors, including the high bar individual providers may choose to set for entry, the design of the programme, and the relatively low number of young people at age 16 who are confident about their likely career destination. We will therefore consider carefully what level 3 qualifications may need to exist alongside T Levels to ensure a simpler, high-quality offer that serves the needs of all learners.

From the Call for Evidence, it is clear that challenges with providing T Levels remain. We support the DfE's continuing work to improve accessibility for learners and delivery for providers and employers without compromising quality. We were concerned to hear evidence of high numbers of drop-outs compared with other technical/vocational routes, and, while figures are improving, we want to support the DfE to continue to make further improvements address these challenges. We heard evidence that would support the continuing development of:

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[52] Participation in education, training and employment age 16 to 18

[53] Introduction of T Levels - GOV.UK

[54] Technical Education Learner Survey 2023: Progression of the first T Level cohort

- Awareness and understanding. Stakeholders, especially parents and carers of young people, noted that awareness and understanding of T Levels remains low and that thought should be given to how to improve this.
- Qualification design and assessment. The Review is committed to working with the DfE to support all learners to succeed and complete their T Levels, including through continually refining their content and assessment.
- Industry placements. Young people told the Review Panel that the industry placement component of the T Level is a very valuable part of the qualification. As such, we are supportive of changes to delivery approaches which increase accessibility while maintaining quality; and to the further engagement of employers to provide placements.

In addition to T Levels, the DfE has announced new Technical Occupational Entry Qualifications (TOQs) that will be provided for 16- to 19-year-olds. These are smaller technical qualifications developed against specific occupational standards that are not covered by T Levels.

Further work will be completed following the publication of the Interim Report to explore how TOQs and other smaller qualifications (including Applied General qualifications, AAQs and A levels) can be taken together to build robust and high-quality study programmes for learners.

Further work will be completed following the publication of the Interim Report to explore what qualifications should sit alongside A levels and T Levels at level 3 to provide learners with an effective, comprehensive offer that is simple to understand. In doing this, we will consider how different qualifications can be combined to build robust and high-quality study programmes for learners.

Level 2 and below at 16-19

Level 2

Despite the positive impacts of level 3 study, progressing to level 3 at age 16 is not possible for every learner, nor the most suitable for learners wishing to progress to a level 2 occupation (as defined by IfATE's occupational maps).[55]

Given the over-representation of socio-economically disadvantaged and otherwise vulnerable young people studying at level 2 in 16-19 education, it is vital the Review continues its focus on level 2. Learners with SEND represent 29% of level 2 learners (excluding apprenticeships), compared with 15% of all young people aged 19; and free school meal eligible learners represent around a quarter of level 2 (excluding apprenticeships) learners, compared with 16% of all young people aged 19.[56]

Our evidence shows that the biggest barrier to learners progressing to level 3 is their prior attainment at key stage 4. Level 3 study is stretching, and providers set their entry requirements to reflect this. A grade 4 in maths and English at GCSE is typically required for entry to level 3 study. For the 2018/19 cohort (the latest cohort of learners whose key stage 4 and 16-19

[55] https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/occupational-maps/

[56] Analytical Annex to the Curriculum and Assessment Review Interim Report

qualification grading were not affected by COVID-19 adjustments), 40% did not achieve grade 4 in maths and English by age 16 and were therefore unlikely to be able to progress directly to level 3 study.[57] This results in a high proportion of learners studying at level 2 also continuing to study maths and/or English. Of those whose highest study aim was level 2 (excluding apprenticeships) at age 16, only 10% had achieved both maths and English at key stage 4.[58]

Crucially, we heard that studying at level 2 for one year supports learners to gain their maths and/or English level 2 (GCSEs or Functional Skills Qualifications) and address wider barriers that prevent learners from progressing directly to level 3 options. Over 40% of 16-19 level 2 learners progress to level 3 the following year after a level 2 course,[59] so it is important that there are strong progression opportunities to support these learners to move into level 3 study.

It is also important to ensure high-quality level 2 offers for learners looking to move into a level 2 occupation. Of the 2.5m jobs in critical demand, more than 1m are those requiring qualifications that broadly map to around level 2 which require work-related training on top of standard compulsory education.[60] The Review is supportive of both level 2 to level 3 and level 2 occupational pathways and wants to encourage them to continue.

Providers design their own study programmes at level 2 within the parameters set by the 16-19 Study Programme Guidance or, in the case of the T Level Foundation Year (TLFY), the Framework for Delivery. Providers have the freedom to choose which qualifications they offer within these programmes to best suit the needs of their learners. This gives providers flexibility to design appropriate programmes, but it can also make it harder for learners, parents and carers and employers to understand what is available.

The evidence is clear that there are overall positive progression outcomes from level 2 to level 3 for learners on the TLFY, comparable to equivalent offers. However, according to DfE data, just 8% of young people completing the TLFY in 2022 proceeded to access a T Level, showing that the TLFY is not successfully delivering what it purports to offer to young people (i.e., a support route to T Level).[61] We recognise and value the intention to provide a consistent and high-quality level 2 progression offer to those young people who wish to progress to level 3 at 16-19 but have not secured the necessary qualifications at age 16, or who may require additional support to do so. We want to build on good practice and consider how we can ensure learners get the best out of the TLFY.

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[57] Level 2 and 3 attainment age 16 to 25

[58] Analytical Annex to the Curriculum and Assessment Review Interim Report

[59] T Level Action Plan: analytical annex

[60] Skills England: driving growth and widening opportunities

[61] T Level Action Plan: analytical annex

Level 1 and entry level

Level 1 and entry level programmes are studied by a small number of learners (4.7%[62] of 16 to 17-year-olds). Learners with identified SEND or those that are eligible for free school meals are over-represented in this cohort.[63]
We have heard that programmes are most effective for learners at level 1 and entry level when they are tailored to learners' needs and provide the opportunity to gain basic skills. Given the diverse needs of the cohort, the Review will work closely with the DfE to support work to enable learners studying at these levels to engage and make progress.

Maths and English GCSE resits at 16-19

The evidence is clear that achieving grade 4 in GCSE maths and English has a significant positive impact on adult lives: increased levels of numeracy and literacy have been shown to have strong positive associations with earnings, employment, health, life satisfaction, and civic engagement.[64] Employers will often set this as an entry requirement, and providers often require a grade 4 in maths and English for progression to level 3 qualifications.

However, in 2018/19 (the latest cohort of learners whose key stage 4 and 16-19 qualification grading were not affected by COVID-19 adjustments), 40% of young people did not achieve level 2 (a grade 4 or above at GCSE) in English and maths by age 16. To support this cohort of learners, in 2014 the DfE introduced the maths and English condition of funding policy. This seeks to ensure that students on study programmes (and T Levels) without level 2 qualifications in maths and/or English continue to improve their skills and make progress towards achieving a minimum of GCSE grade 4 or Functional Skills level 2 during their 16-19 study.[65]

The Review Panel has heard strong evidence that a minimum of a grade 4 in English and maths should continue to be the ambition for as many learners as possible. However, there is also clear evidence that the condition of funding policy is not yet fully delivering its intended purpose.

Since the academic year 2014/15 (when the condition of funding policy was introduced), around 537,000 learners who failed to achieve level 2 in English and maths at 16, went on to achieve this by age 19. This is positive for these learners, but there are many more learners who do not achieve their level 2 English and maths by 19. Of the 2018/19 cohort who continued to study under the condition of funding policy:

- Of those that did not achieve level 2 in English and maths by age 16, fewer than one in three (29%) went on to achieve this by age 19.

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[62] Participation in education, training and employment age 16 to 18 - note that this figure includes a small number of other (unclassified level) qualifications.

[63] Analytical Annex to the Curriculum and Assessment Review Interim Report

[64] DfE (2021) - GCSE attainment and lifetime earnings; OECD (2024) - Do Adults Have the Skills They Need to Thrive in a Changing World?; ; OECD (2024) - Do Adults Have the Skills They Need to Thrive in a Changing World?; Kerr (2021), Paying the price: The cost of very poor adult literacy; Parsons, S. & Bynner, J. (2005) - Does Numeracy Matter More ; Gutierrez, Vignoles & de Coulon (2007) - The Value of Basic Skills in the British Labour Market

[65] 2024 to 2025 academic year: 16 to 19 funding: maths and English condition of funding - GOV.UK

- For just English, a third (34%) went on to achieve level 2 by age 19.
- This is even lower for maths wherein only a quarter of students (24%) went on to achieve level 2 by 19.

It is particularly concerning that a large proportion of learners studying level 2 maths and English at 16-19 have made no grade progress in these subjects during their 16-19 studies.[66]

Additionally, numbers as a percentage have not risen sufficiently since before the condition of funding policy was introduced in the academic year 2014/15. In 2018/19, across all 16- to 19-year-old learners who were continuing to study towards level 2 in maths and English, 29% achieved level 2 by the end of 16-19 study. This is only six percentage points higher than in 2014/15 (the year before the condition of funding requirement was introduced) when 23% of learners achieved level 2 in maths and English during 16-19 study.[67]

There were also significant variations in the characteristics of learners who did and did not go on to achieve level 2 in maths and English by the end of their 16-19 study. In 2018/19, among 16- to 19-year-old learners who did not achieve grade 4 in maths, English or both at GCSE:

- 20% of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds went on to achieve level 2 by age 19, compared with 35% of learners who were not from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- 15% of learners with SEND went on to achieve level 2 by age 19, compared with 34% of learners with no identified SEND.[68]
- Learners with lower grades at GCSE were less likely to achieve level 2 by the end of 16-19 study. For example, while 44% of learners who achieved grade 3 in maths at GCSE went on to achieve level 2 by age 19; this drops to 13% for those who achieved grade 2, 5% for those who achieved grade 1, and 3% of those who achieved grade U at GCSE. There were also similar patterns for English.[69]

In addition to concerns about attainment, we have also heard concerns about the practice of exam resits being expected repeatedly and rapidly. While the DfE does not require learners to resit exams as part of the condition of funding, the policy expectation is that they do so over the course of their 16-19 study, and the large majority do. For those required to study maths or English under the condition of funding in 2018/19,[70] 82% entered an approved English qualification and 86% entered an approved maths qualification.[71]

We heard the importance of learners having the opportunity to revisit basic core knowledge and skills before being entered into resit exams. However, we also heard that the existing accountability arrangements may not encourage providers to do this. Evidence presented by

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[66] English and maths progress - student characteristics

[67] Level 2 and 3 attainment age 16 to 25

[68] Attainment by characteristics - ages 16 to 25

[69] Post-16 English and maths attainment by prior grade, 2018/19

[70] The 2018/19 academic year is the latest year where qualification grading was not affected by COVID-19 adjustments.

[71] English and maths progress - student characteristics

Ofqual shows that entering learners into exams prematurely is rarely successful; of the 3,400 17-year-olds with grade 2 in GCSE maths from June 2024 who were re-entered by their provider in November 2024, around 50 achieved a grade 4.[72] The vast majority achieved another grade 2. These outcomes are indefensible. It is therefore critically important that, for learners who start the process with a grade 1 or grade 2, they are entered for exams in a timely way.

As we have heard clearly through the Call for Evidence, the experience of multiple resits with no success can have a negative impact on learners' self-esteem and level of engagement with their studies. A survey by the Association of Colleges found that learners' attendance rates in 16-19 English and maths classes continue to be just over 9 percentage point lower than for the main qualification they are studying.[73] The Review must remain cognisant of the fact that, while there are benefits of improving English and maths, current arrangements, in which learners have less time to devote to their other studies, may contribute to their disengagement and the higher rates of absence in this group.

Given the challenges presented on attainment, progress, providers' behaviour and the impact on students, we need to reconsider the available pathways, so that all learners have the best opportunity to reach level 2 in maths and English by the end of their 16-19 study. We also need to find ways to support and value the progress of all learners, including those who may not go on to achieve level 2.

Above all, given the relationship between achieving grade 4 and above at GCSE maths and English and access to future opportunities and life chances, we think the expectation for study of maths and English should remain, but with greater nuance in measures to ensure that as many learners as possible can achieve positive outcomes. Some post-16 institutions are achieving high success rates, and so we will seek to learn from, and promote, good practice within the sector. Before the publication of the final report, the Review will work closely with the sector, young people, subject experts and the DfE to evaluate potential solutions.

Assessment

In light of the importance of assessment, it is right we have been asked to consider how the assessment system can best 'capture the strengths of every child and young person and the breadth of curriculum, with the right balance of assessment methods while maintaining the important role of examinations'.[74]

This section presents key themes regarding assessment – and the links between assessment, curriculum content and accountability – raised in evidence considered so far. To ensure that the

[72] Analytical Annex to the Curriculum and Assessment Review Interim Report

[73] Association of colleges (2024) - College Attendance Survey Report

[74] Curriculum and Assessment Review (2024), Review aims, terms of reference and working principles

assessment system best serves children and young people and reflects what children and young people learn, our approach to assessment will flow from our position on curriculum.

Effective assessment is a crucial component of a high performing education system. While the curriculum outlines the knowledge and skills children and young people are expected to master across a range of subjects, assessments measure the extent to which they have mastered the prescribed knowledge and skills. Assessments can be formative (providing an opportunity to identify areas where students need extra support) or summative (evaluating whether students have met learning objectives at the end of a unit or qualification). The information assessments provide can be extremely helpful for a range of individuals and organisations, such as students, teachers, schools, universities and employers. The results pupils and students achieve in some assessments, such as key stage 2 statutory assessments and GCSEs, also play an important role in holding schools to account.

While some qualification types, such as GCSEs and A levels, are long-standing, the content and assessments themselves can and do change over time. GCSEs and A levels were last reformed over a decade ago. Changes included reducing the role of coursework, removing modular qualifications, and limiting opportunities for resits. When combined with changes to the curriculum and accountability, these reforms represented a significant overhaul of assessment of these qualifications.

Assessment has been, and will continue to be, crucial to raising standards. There are opportunities for the Review to ensure that assessment is fit for purpose, that the content, volume and frequency of assessments are not unnecessarily burdensome for students or teachers, and that the assessment system captures learning in a way that is fair, reliable and inclusive. We will also explore ways of ensuring that our assessment system is properly inclusive of all students, particularly those with SEND.

Assessment at key stages 1 and 2

There are several national curriculum assessment points in key stages 1 and 2, varying in format and purpose. The focus of assessments is on reading, writing and maths, and consists of the reception baseline assessment, the phonics screening check, the multiplication tables check and end of key stage 2 statutory assessments in reading, writing, maths, and grammar, punctuation and spelling (in addition to optional assessments at key stage 1).

Within these key topics, the form of assessment varies to meet different purposes, and pupils are assessed at the appropriate time for a given purpose. They range from teacher-led, activity-based assessment with individual pupils, to paper-based formal assessments taken by the cohort at the same time. End of key stage 2 assessments inform accountability measures for schools.

The Review has observed a number of strengths in the current assessment system at primary school. Assessments rightly focus on the core skills of reading, writing and maths, which are essential to equip pupils with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed as they transition to secondary school and throughout their lives. End of key stage 2 statutory assessments are an

important tool in holding schools to account for the progress and attainment of their pupils, and to ascertain whether pupils have learned the national curriculum. They also play a role in important accountability measures beyond primary school, as they are used to inform Progress 8 measures.

Given this, we are clear that formal assessments are an important part of key stage 1 and 2. However, the Call for Evidence and our wider engagement has highlighted concerns with some assessments. In particular, many expressed concern that the standalone end of key stage 2 assessment on grammar, punctuation and spelling might lead to the teaching of textual features in isolation at the expense of a sound understanding of reading and writing. We will review the curriculum and how this assessment might better equip pupils to use these foundational building blocks fluently.

The ability to write well is a key skill that pupils need throughout school and in later life. However, we have also heard concerns that the writing assessment at the end of key stage 2 does not validly assess pupils' ability to write fluently and does not incentivise effective teaching of writing. Evidence considered as part of the Review, including from the Call for Evidence, reports that pupils instead spend considerable classroom time learning to reproduce writing containing textual features to meet writing assessment criteria, rather than developing fluency in writing. In addition, analyses have shown concerns around the consistency of judgements in writing assessments.[75] Therefore, in the next stage of our work, we will examine how the assessment of writing at key stage 2 can be improved to support high and rising standards.

Assessment at secondary school and 16-19

Students typically take high-stakes assessments at the end of key stage 4, and during the 16-19 phase (previously, students were also assessed at the end of key stage 3 through SATs, but these were discontinued in 2008). For learners, these assessments are high stakes because the grades that they achieve in these qualifications will likely inform future study and employment choices and because they are used by providers to determine entry to programmes.

As with the assessment system for key stages 1 and 2, there are strengths in the current system at key stage 4 that are important in driving high standards and ambitions for young people. Externally set and marked exams are an important way to ensure fairness as part of our national qualification system.[76] They assess students in a standardised way and are marked anonymously, reducing the risk that assessment of students' performance is influenced by their gender, ethnicity or background. Polling undertaken for the Review shows that young people value the role of GCSE assessment, especially that exams give them the opportunity to

[75] Ofqual (2014), Marking Reliability of the Key Stage 2 National Curriculum English Writing Tests in England; Insight Inform (2024), Writing a wrong? - Insight Inform; FFT education Datalab (2016), Consistency in key stage 2 writing across local authorities appears to be poor - FFT Education Datalab

[76] Centre for education policy & equalising opportunities (2021), Briefing note: Should we abolish GCSEs?

demonstrate everything they have learned in their studies, and they feel GCSE assessments are fair.[77]

It is important that students are given the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and the capabilities they have developed during their studies. Not only does our polling show the value students place on this opportunity, but these qualifications play an important role in a student's future study and career. They are also an important lever to ensure schools are held to account for the performance of their students. The Review will approach reform of assessments in an evolutionary rather than revolutionary way, and we will therefore not, for example, fundamentally change the number of subjects that students study or are assessed in at GCSE.

However, the Call for Evidence has highlighted areas where the system could work better for students and the education sector. A frequently raised concern is the impact of an intensive, high-stakes assessment system on wellbeing, due to the pressure that exams can place on students. Our polling of young people found that half of those who completed their key stage 4 exams or assessments in summer 2024 found it difficult (41%) or very difficult (10%) to cope with stress during the exam period. Similarly, for those who completed their 16 to 19 exams or assessments in summer 2024, over half of students found it difficult (39%) or very difficult (16%) to cope with the stress during that period.[78]

A particular theme in the Call for Evidence responses is the volume of assessment undertaken by students at key stage 4. Evidence shows that, compared to many other countries, students in England spend more hours sitting exams (though we do not have evidence of how much time students in other countries spend undertaking other forms of assessment). Students in England typically sit between 24 and 31 hours of exams in year 11 (depending on subject combination), which is comparable to Singapore but significantly more than other high-performing jurisdictions such as Ireland (16 hours), New Zealand (18 hours) and Canada (Alberta) (10 hours).[79] However, it is important to note that students spend less time in formal assessment overall (including controlled assessment and coursework) than before these qualifications were reformed.

As well as the volume of assessment, responses to the Call for Evidence have also focused on the weighting of exams relative to other forms of assessment (which can include written coursework, a performance or oral presentation). Previous reforms reduced the proportion of non-exam assessment at key stage 4. Some subjects saw reductions, such as modern foreign languages (from 60% non-exam assessment to 25%) and design and technology (from 60% to 50%), while others, including English literature, geography and history, saw non-exam assessment completely removed and are now wholly assessed by exams. This means that a student's grade is predominantly (or entirely) determined by a student's performance in exams

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[77] Polling of key stage 4 and 16 to 19 learners and parents: summer 2024

[78] Polling of key stage 4 and 16 to 19 learners and parents: summer 2024

[79] This figure is illustrative and based on the five most popular combinations of eight GCSE subjects in 2018 (eight is the average number of GCSEs taken). Exact figures will vary depending on the number of GCSEs taken, in which subjects, and which exam board specifications are included. Figures do not include non-exam assessment (NEA) which varies in duration considerably across subjects.

‘on the day’, rather than being a reflection of their performance at different points across their course, which some respondents argued may not give all students the opportunity to fully demonstrate their capabilities. On the other hand, this approach mitigates against introductions of bias, and/or invalid means of help (especially given the prevalence of Generative AI).

We have also heard concerns that exams – coupled with the volume of content needing to be covered and their use in accountability measures – can lead to ‘teaching to the test’, with students spending too much curriculum time rote learning facts and model answer structures and revision at the expense of depth of understanding of the content. This squeezes out time spent developing the ability to synthesise and apply knowledge. As a result, some have called for greater diversity of assessment methods, both to better assess certain elements (in particular practical skills) and to allow more young people to demonstrate their skills and abilities.

However, we are also mindful of evidence on biases that can enter non-exam assessment and teacher-assessed work that can disproportionately affect certain pupil groups, further disadvantaging those already disadvantaged.[80] We have also heard about risks concerning AI in relation to coursework assessments, and the consequential risks to standards and fairness. Finally, we remain mindful of school and college capacity and teacher workload, and the relative resource and delivery challenges of non-exam assessment (and internally marked and set assessment) compared with exams and will continue to consider this as part of the evidence on the assessment system.

In our next phase of work, the Review will consider carefully whether there are opportunities to reduce the overall volume of assessment at key stage 4 without compromising the reliability of results, and therefore the trust that stakeholders (from colleges and employers to parents and young people themselves) have in these qualifications.[81] We will also take a subject-by-subject approach to consider assessment fitness for purpose and consider the impact of different assessment methods on teaching and learning. We will consider potential risks and trade-offs with non-exam assessments, such as deliverability (including the impact on teacher workloads), the risk of malpractice and risks to equity. Given all of the evidence, we are clear that traditional examined assessment should remain the primary means of assessment across GCSEs.

While we have heard that there are some positive opportunities for digital assessment, use is currently relatively specific and limited across the system, and therefore evidence of the potential for wider implementation is still in early stages. We also recognise that the wider use of digital assessments has considerable delivery implications for schools. The Review will continue to consider evidence on this topic, noting that the DfE is working with Ofqual to explore digital assessment, and giving due consideration to the reality that access to technology varies, both in school settings and the home, and the equity implications of further integrating technology into the assessment system.

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[80] Wyness (2021), Briefing note: Should we abolish GCSEs?

[81] OCR (2024), 717919-striking-the-balance.pdf

Next steps

The Review will publish its final report in autumn 2025. In the meantime, we will:

- consider concerns that have been raised across subjects about the specificity, relevance, volume and diversity of content;
- conduct closer analysis to diagnose each subject's specific issues and explore and test a range of solutions;
- continue to consider the impact of current performance measures on young people's choices and outcomes, and their impact on institutional behaviours;
- Continuing to consider how best to equip children and young people with the essential knowledge and skills which will enable them to adapt and thrive in a rapidly changing and AI-enabled world;
- explore level 3 pathways, with the aim of building on the successes of existing academic and technical pathways, particularly considering how best to support learners who do not study A levels or T Levels;
- consider how best to develop strong occupational pathways at level 2 and examine how to strengthen progression routes from level 2 to level 3;
- consider how best to ensure learners who did not achieve the required standard in English and maths at GCSE are best supported to do so by age 18; and
- conduct further analysis of assessment at key stages 1 to 4 and consider any necessary improvements.

We expect to recommend a phased programme of work in different subjects or subject areas. This will allow reforms to be made incrementally in a way that does not destabilise the system. To ensure this, we will remain mindful of the present capacity issues in the system, and the need for care in implementation. We will seek to capitalise on what is working well so that productive evolution supports schools and colleges to improve the educational experience and outcomes of children and young people, giving all our young people the best chance to discover a love of learning, and to achieve and thrive.

Annex A - Methodology and evidence base

As required by the Terms of Reference, the Review seeks to be rigorously informed by evidence and data. It is being undertaken in close consultation with education professionals and other experts, parents, children and young people, and stakeholders such as employers, colleges, universities and trade unions. We are seeking to identify and prioritise the most significant and pressing issues facing curriculum and assessment, to recommend practical and deliverable changes that will improve young people's outcomes without destabilising the system.

As such, we commissioned a range of research and analysis and sought a wide range of views on curriculum and assessment. A major aspect of this was our Call for Evidence, which ran for eight weeks between 25 September 2024 and 22 November 2024. We received 7,021 responses, with 5,327 individual responses (including 820 from parents and pupils and 2,360 from teachers, lecturers and school and college leaders), and 1,694 from organisations (including 523 schools and colleges, 73 universities and higher education institutions, as well as local authorities, charities and research organisations). A report summary of the key findings and methodology of the Call for Evidence will be published alongside the Review's final report. Alongside the Call for Evidence, we gathered further views from the public. We:

- polled over 2,000 young people who have just completed their KS4 and 16 to 19 exams, and the parents of these young people;
- supplemented this with polling undertaken by Parentkind, which surveyed over 5,000 parents across the UK;
- held 'roadshow' public engagement events in each of the nine regions, with more than 1,000 attendees;
- hosted webinars, open to all, which reached more than 2,000 people;
- held roundtables with more than 200 teachers and children; and
- hosted issue-specific roundtables and oral evidence sessions.

We also collected a wide range of research and statistical evidence, including analysis of learner data from the National Pupil Database and Longitudinal Education Outcomes data, as well as education research and published statistical evidence, to ensure the Review Panel had a thorough understanding of the empirical evidence.

In formulating the recommendations in the final report, we will aim to strike a balance between the key themes raised through the engagement with stakeholders and the wider research and statistical evidence that has been reviewed. We will continue to work in conjunction with the sector, as well as departmental and non-departmental bodies, including the Department for Education (DfE), Ofqual, Ofsted and the Standards and Testing Agency (STA). A balanced and cautious approach is necessary given the diverse, and often conflicting, views expressed by stakeholders. This kind of approach is also necessitated by the fact that many of the issues raised are extremely complex, and elements of the system that are outside the scope of this Review may be contributing to the outcomes we are observing. We are also conscious of the impact that substantial changes to the curriculum and assessment system can have on the

workload of education staff. It is essential that we seek to minimise any burdens and make sure that any recommendations are likely to lead to meaningful improvements in outcomes for learners.

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