Effecting meaningful change

A summary of our Curriculum and Assessment Review call for evidence submission

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We're pleased to have contributed to the Government's call for evidence as part of the Curriculum and Assessment Review, and to have joined the voices of other sector experts, educators, parents/carers and learners to share our research, experience and recommendations with the panel.

Since the Review was announced, it's been encouraging to see much consistency and agreement across these voices – highlighting where there are opportunities to effect meaningful change. As the world's lifelong learning company and a leading UK awarding organisation, our submission and recommendations draw on our experience, research and on our wide-ranging collaboration with educators, students and families, as well as sector experts.

In this summary of key points from our submission, we set out our recommendations for how this meaningful change can be brought about. Over the coming weeks and months, we look forward to sharing more detail and continuing work with other sector experts, partners, educators and learners to further develop and bring these to life.

Our headline recommendations

- **Embrace and embed the principle that the curriculum comes first** and informs the assessment approach – rather than the other way round.

- **Commit to a structured programme of review** for the curriculum and assessment of each subject (qualification), with update or reform where it's needed. We believe that this structured review should take place in a planned manner (e.g. every seven years or sooner if needed – as may be the case for technical and vocational qualifications in particular).

  We also recommend that this review cadence makes sure content is up to date for the nature and progression purpose of the subject. This commitment will improve the currency of curriculum and assessment, ensuring areas that experience extraordinary change such as AI, the media/ fake news, the environment, and population demographics can be addressed more quickly.

  We recommend that this programme is carried out subject by subject, rather than by addressing all subjects at the same time. This approach will give a structured timeline and ensure the implementation of changes is manageable for the sector.

  Alongside this, it will also be important to look at current mechanisms for reviewing and approving awarding organisations' proposals for improvements and innovation. This is so that these processes can be made swifter to ensure the benefits reach schools, colleges and students more quickly.

To enable a more data and evidence-led approach, we also believe in providing greater flexibility and space for awarding organisations to test and pilot assessment models before assessment objective requirements are set.

- **Balance carefully what is right for a particular subject with any higher-level design principles** (for example, features for a full suite of GCSEs or Tech Awards). We believe this will improve the authenticity of subject curricula and assessments (i.e. fit of content and assessment with the nature of the subject), to better support students' engagement and experiences.

- **Embrace technology to play a stronger role in both curriculum and assessment.** We believe this will facilitate meaningful change, including a shift to onscreen assessment as an option in subjects that lend themselves to this, and paving the way for a longer-term shift towards more adaptive, 'digital-first' flexible assessment models.

A closer look: specific areas of focus

Underpinning these overarching recommendations, we've identified specific areas for improvement that we believe will best support educational progress for children and young people.

14–16 curriculum
Recommendations:

- Rethink the purpose of subject curricula to make sure young people have strong foundations across a wide range of subjects. We believe this will help them to understand where their passions and interests lie, and ultimately better prepare them for life.

- Support breadth at Key Stage 3 and protect this time as an opportunity for students to experience subjects from specialist teachers ahead of making informed subject choices at Key Stage 4.

- Develop a broader skills passport based on a combination of teacher and external assessment, to aid better transition from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3. Pilot this with an initial project focused on English and maths SATs outcomes, but which moves beyond levels to a more detailed report. The goal of the passport should be to ensure more detailed knowledge of incoming students for Key Stage 3 teachers, and work should be started to decide on the most effective range of data to share. These data should be drawn from across a broad range of areas, including not only academic but also potentially life skills and/or social emotional skills.

- Address over-burdened GCSE curricula and reduce excessive content to help free up curriculum space and time. In particular, we believe there are opportunities to reduce excessive content in GCSE English, GCSE Sciences, GCSE Geography, GCSE History, GCSE Maths, and GCSE Design and Technology.

- Encourage the development of creative skills by reviewing and improving the curricula of creative subjects and some core subjects. More detail on our recommendations here can be found in our *Cultivating a creative curriculum* report.

- Continue to build the offer and awareness of 14–16 vocational pathways available in schools and colleges, which provide a route for young learners who value a hands-on, practical approach. It is important not to overlook 14-16 vocational pathways in colleges, which can provide meaningful opportunities to thrive for those not flourishing in mainstream education.

- Don't apply accountability measures alone to drive change. Our research identifies specific unintended consequences here for students and the need for a more multi-faceted approach to drive a broader and more balanced curriculum.

English and maths to 16

Recommendations:

- Reform GCSE English as a priority. Our research and insights from teachers and learners highlight ongoing challenges with the current GCSE English curriculum – and by association, the related curriculum at Key Stage 4 and earlier – which neither prepare students well for future study in the English disciplines nor for the workplace. Proposed solutions are:
  o a broader range of literary text types and time periods, with a requirement for more diverse content
  o a wider range of non-literary texts – multimodal, digital, media, written and spoken
  o re-balancing the focus on both written and spoken English with explicit teaching of, and recognition for, spoken language knowledge and skills
  o a changed approach to developing writing skills (drafting, crafting and editing), to encourage greater focus on writing in authentic contexts
  o removal of undue repetition and excessive content and/or assessment
  o increased opportunities for creative engagement.

- Review the current maths curriculum at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 with a focus on:
  o foundational content that paves the way for higher-order mathematics knowledge and skills
  o general mathematics and data literacy that all students need for their future lives and careers

- the maths knowledge and skills needed by employers now and to serve jobs in the future, and the higher-order knowledge and skills valued for higher education.

- Explore the potential for a separate numeracy strand in GCSE Maths with a test-when-ready model.

Post-16 English and maths
Recommendations:

- Provide more flexible qualification pathways across all post-16 routes to cater for students of all abilities and to support progression for everyone.

- In the context of GCSE remaining the requirement for onward progression to further study and/or work, we believe a GCSE that caters to the post-16 sector should:
  - be substantively different to the GCSE for Key Stage 4 school students in both content and assessment
  - reflect the different context, age, background and experience of the cohort
  - have parity of grades with the pre-16 GCSE.

- In the context of a more fundamental change, we believe that separate qualifications that can be delivered alongside GCSEs in English and maths but assessed separately, could resolve the issue of repeated resits and:
  - operate as the threshold standard for onward progression into further study and/or work
  - reduce the public perception of a GCSE grade 4 pass indicating a certain degree of literacy and numeracy
  - be taken when ready between 14 and 19
  - recognise prior learning and attainment in level 2 English and maths when continuing in the post-16 sector.

- In both scenarios, we believe more flexible assessment models will improve student experience and reduce the burden on colleges of all students needing to sit exams in a hall at the same time. More flexible models are also able to better reflect the context of the workplace and higher education, preparing students for their next steps in life. As part of this, there is the opportunity to explore options for more transformational assessment models, modes of delivery, and cadence of assessment – such as criterion referencing, on-demand assessment and a greater use of technology. This will enable greater flexibility for testing when ready, increasing efficiency, and reducing the turnaround for results.

16–19 level 3 qualification pathways

Recommendations:

- Ensure stability for 16–19 vocational and technical pathways at level 3 and that suitable diverse and progressive level 3 vocational provision continues to be available alongside T Levels and A levels. The understanding and articulation of the different purposes of T Levels, A levels, and level 3 vocational qualifications (such as BTEC Nationals) is critical in determining the range of level 3 qualifications that should be available to students to enable their progression to higher education and employment.

- Bring A level content up to date and reduce the content burden, thereby leaving space for developing creative skills and subject depth.

- Change the current AS model to encourage Year 12 students to take another subject for a further year.

- Continue to allow for the development of vocational qualifications equivalent to 1.5 A levels in the reformed level 3 landscape.

- Review the proposed policy to allow students to take only one vocational qualification equivalent to one A level within a study programme.

- Evolve the design and delivery of T Levels with specific improvements to make them work for more learners including by:
  - better aligning the design of the content with the purpose of 'occupational entry competence'
  - reviewing the concept of a common core across T Level routes
  - removing the duplication of the content between core and occupational specialisms
  - introducing new flexibility for industry placements to support providers in overcoming the challenge of scaling T Level delivery
  - removing T Level specialisms that have low entries and are not appropriate for delivery in full-time classroom-based settings, for example Dental Nursing.

- Create a more dynamic and data-driven approach to the design and development of occupational standards upon which all technical qualifications, including T Levels, are based. This needs to bring together quantitative and qualitative data techniques to allow for the identification of a relatively stable set of knowledge, skills and behaviours that would form the core of a standard and the identification of newly trending and emerging skills.

16-19 level 2 and below vocational qualification pathways

Recommendations:

- Simplify the level 2 landscape by making qualifications pathways broader. Two broad qualification categories are needed to bring clarity and flexibility here and to allow students to alter their progression route if their career aspirations change:
    - Qualifications enabling progression to further study at level 3, whether technical or vocational.
    - Qualifications, including licence to practise qualifications, enabling direct progression to employment or further work-based learning, such as apprenticeships.

- Critically review the T Level Foundation Year, given that few students taking it currently progress to the T Level.

- Clarify the level 1 landscape and provide pathways that would help learners to progress to level 2 via a technical or vocational pathway alongside the current offer of two groups of pre-technical qualifications at level 1 and the single group at entry level. Further work also needs to be done to design and develop the right provision to support employability and skills for independent living at these levels.

Assessment

Recommendations:

- Implement a more balanced approach to both academic and vocational assessment, and reduce the assessment and exam burden for students:
    - Ensure exams continue to have a role, but as part of a more balanced system that includes methods such as continuous assessment.
    - Reduce the volume of exam-based assessments that a student will face and facilitate a shift to more subject and purpose-specific assessment methods.

- Move away from the expectation that 'anything that can be assessed by an exam should be', towards applying the form of assessment most valid and authentic to the subject curriculum and to the fundamentals of what students and employers need from the assessment.

- Embrace technology to play a stronger role in both curriculum and assessment, and in doing so, prioritise a shift to onscreen assessment as an option in subjects that lend themselves to this mode. We believe this will then pave the way for a longer-term shift towards more adaptive, flexible and 'digital first' assessment models.

- Consider alternative approaches to setting and maintaining standards for secondary qualifications to address some of the challenges, perceptions and impacts of the current approach. Despite the best efforts of Ofqual and awarding organisations to communicate the mechanics and nuances of the approach, there remains significant concern from many stakeholders – including teachers, students, parents/carers and unions – about transparency and fairness of the system. Other jurisdictions employ greater use of psychometrics – as does the approach used by STA for Key Stage 2 tests – and there is an opportunity to consider such approaches in the context of qualifications in England. A shift in this direction has the potential to pave the way for more digital and adaptive forms of assessment (including more flexibility in the scheduling of assessments across multiple test versions and windows), with a further opportunity to build public trust and confidence in an approach that is perceived as fairer and more transparent.

What's next?

Over the coming weeks and months, we look forward to sharing more detail on these recommendations and to continuing work with other experts, partners, educators and learners to bring them to life in ways that will work for the sector and our young people.

To hear more about these Curriculum and Assessment Review viewpoints as they're released, sign up to our News and Policy updates.

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