

# DfE call for evidence: Improving the curriculum and assessment system

## About University Alliance

University Alliance (UA) represents the UK's leading professional and technical universities. Our members specialise in working with industry and employers. Their teaching is hands-on and designed to prepare students for careers. Their knowledge and research drive industry to innovate, thrive and meet challenges.

Our members are leading the way in innovation and business support in the green, tech, creative and healthcare industries. They are leading providers of teaching in healthcare, the creative arts, degree apprenticeships and more. We collaborate as UA to benefit our members and their communities, and to provide expertise to policy makers.

## General views on curriculum, assessment, & qualifications pathways

University Alliance is strongly supportive of the government's ambition for a national curriculum that delivers excellent foundations in reading, writing and maths, and ensures every young person gets the opportunity to develop creative, digital, and speaking and listening skills prized by employers. We also agree with the plan to require all state schools – including academies – to teach the national curriculum up to age 16.

As professional and technical universities with close links to industry we are particularly keen to see the [future skills](#) desired by employers more deeply embedded into the curriculum, which Kingston University has identified as creative problem solving, digital competency, being enterprising, having a questioning mindset, adaptability, empathy, collaboration, resilience and self-awareness.

Too many young people are failed by the current education system, with [12.2%](#) of young people aged 16 to 24 years not in education, employment or training (NEET). The [OECD](#) has noted that labour market outcomes for people without upper secondary qualifications (i.e. level 3 or key stage 5) are significantly weaker in the UK than in most other high-income countries. We must do more to ensure we are making full use of all young people's potential to give them a better future, make our nation more productive and grow the economy.

Our submission focuses primarily on our views concerning the secondary and post-16 curriculum and assessment system, alongside limited observations about earlier stages.

## What is working well to support and recognise educational progress for children and young people?

The key strengths of the current secondary and post-16 curriculum and assessment system are:

- **There is good progression to higher education for many young people.** The UK is a global leader in the proportion of 25–34-year-olds with a tertiary (post-18) qualification at [57.7%](#). However, the UK lags top performers such as Korea (69.58%), Canada (66.97%) and Japan (65.68%).
- **Students can study a range of academic and vocational subjects**, and it is theoretically possible to combine the two. For example, 11% of students combine A-levels with Applied General Qualifications (AGQs) such as BTECs. The government should reject the previous administration's plans to restrict this practice.
- **GCSEs and A-levels are well understood qualifications with popular currency in the UK and abroad.** However, more needs to be done to promote vocational qualifications such as AGQs and T-levels.

## What should be targeted for improvements to better support and recognise educational progress for children and young people?

The main weaknesses of the secondary and post-16 system are:

- **The curriculum places too much focus on knowledge-rich content at the expense of skills.** Our members report this encourages learning by rote, and the loss of key skills needed for further study. This affects even high achievers at A-level, who can lack critical thinking skills.
- **The assessment system is dominated by high stakes summative external exams at both levels 2 and 3.** [Evidence](#) shows this creates perverse incentives such as teaching to the test and a narrowing of the curriculum. It also creates a hierarchical system of winners and losers rather than one in which all learners can reach their potential and flourish.
- **There continues to be a false binary divide between academic and vocational subjects.** High achieving students continue to be directed towards the former and struggling students towards the latter. Stigma around technical and vocational training remains widespread.

The primary improvements that need to be made to address these weaknesses of the secondary and post-16 system are to:

- **Increase the breadth of the curriculum at all stages and embed core skills.** The focus on knowledge-rich content should be reduced and numeracy, literacy and creativity should be embedded more deeply, as well as the [future skills](#) students need to thrive in the workplace: creative problem solving, digital competency, being enterprising, having a questioning mindset, adaptability, empathy, collaboration, resilience and self-awareness.
- **Rethink modes of assessment and ensure they remain fit for purpose and enable more learners to succeed.** DfE should consult closely with a range of stakeholders, including universities and employers, to design a new forward-thinking, inclusive and authentic assessment system fit for the future. This should contain a blend of summative and formative assessment, as well as coursework and other projects such as presentations and reports.

- **Commit to the three qualification pathways of A-levels, T-levels and AGQs.** Prolonged level 3 qualification reform has been destabilising and is putting the quality and availability of vocational education at risk. The Government should ensure learners across the country have access to the three routes (albeit with reforms) and high-quality careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) to choose the best option for their needs.
- **Make the curriculum and assessment system independent.** Reform offers the opportunity to establish a new non-political independent body to design the curriculum and assessment system and update it as new evidence of best practice emerges, as recommended by the [TBI](#) (2022) and many other education experts over the years.

## Key barriers to social justice & inclusion

In the UK, educational attainment at all levels is closely linked to socioeconomic background, ethnicity, and geography – much more so than in other high-income countries according to the [OECD](#). This is manifestly unfair and does both learners and the nation a huge disservice.

A significant proportion of students are manifestly not well served by the current curriculum and assessment system. Disadvantage gets baked in very early and the system ultimately works against many pupils. Several key features of the system are particularly unsuitable for learners experiencing disadvantage or special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Children in England begin formal schooling before many other countries and are assessed from a very young age. There is a strong focus on very early reading and maths which is again at odds with other countries with better educational outcomes such as Finland.

Throughout their schooling, pupils are frequently streamed by ability which reinforces messaging about expectations of low attainment. Traditional knowledge-based learning is privileged over progressive and experiential approaches. Academic subjects and routes continue to be promoted over technical and vocational alternatives. High stakes summative external assessments at level 2 and 3 (at the end of key stages 4 and 5) are designed to create winners and losers, with those from disadvantaged backgrounds and disabilities most frequently missing out.

The situation is exacerbated in geographies with a high concentration of poverty and few highly skilled jobs for students to aspire to. Schools find there is little space and resource to incubate aspiration within the curriculum while high levels of anxiety around exams reduce engagement with academic work.

Many educational experts agree that the key to addressing social justice and inclusion is restoring access to early and sustained personalised support throughout the education cycle. Although it is outside the scope of this Review, access to extracurricular activities, as well as home computers and reliable Wi-Fi, also plays an important role, and is largely driven by household wealth and resources.

The most disadvantaged learners rarely progress to higher education, with [those eligible for free school meals](#) significantly less likely than other pupils to go to university. However, those who do make it benefit from a wide range of academic, employability and mental health support services put on by universities to enable their students to succeed in the face of adversity. [Analysis](#) shows that the UK has the highest completion rates for students on bachelor's degrees among comparable developed countries.

In recent years, universities have adopted a range of strategies to reduce pervasive attainment gaps between different groups of students, notably between white and minority ethnic students, which have included both curriculum and assessment reforms. For example, many universities have sought to 'decolonise' their curricula by including a more racially and culturally diverse range of scholars and involving students in course development. [Research](#) has found curriculum reform can improve students' learning experiences.

Evidence is emerging that assessment reform is particularly effective at helping more students succeed in higher education. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many UK universities made changes to assessments that were necessitated by the restrictions imposed upon them. They were intended to limit the negative impact of the pandemic on student performance while maintaining academic integrity. However, an unexpected result is that these changes positively affected awarding and/or continuation gaps.

Subsequently a group of UA members have jointly identified the [inclusive assessment attributes](#) that work on a practical basis, and which barriers need to be addressed to implement these. Another initiative developed by the University of Leicester, the [Racially Inclusive Practice in Assessment Guidance Intervention](#), has been found to measurably reduce the race award gap across multiple higher education providers, as well as improve the assessment experiences of students from all backgrounds.

Today, more universities are cutting back on the number of traditional final written exams and introducing more [authentic](#) and [inclusive](#) assessment such as presentations, research proposals and industry-style reports. The Review should take a close look at curriculum and assessment reforms in higher education sector a view to considering the potential implications for improving attainment and narrowing gaps between different groups of pupils in schools.

## **Ensuring an excellent foundation in maths & English**

University Alliance believe all students need good literacy and numeracy skills to thrive and support the principle of compulsory maths and English to 18 proposed by the previous government. The establishment of different English and maths options which reflect the diverse needs of the 16-19 cohort is crucial to the success of this. All too often students arrive at university with poor writing and maths skills, which suggests these are not being effectively taught earlier.

A quarter of young people currently fail to achieve a pass in GCSE maths and English by 19. This is nothing short of a national scandal, and the problem is getting worse, with a doubling of maths resits in recent years. Simply requiring more of the same is not the answer. The GCSE resit policy should be scrapped as soon as possible, and learners should be given alternative level 2 qualification options, such as existing English and maths functional skills qualifications. They may find more vocational, sector-focused and applied approaches more engaging and effective at instilling good numeracy and literacy. A simple pass/fail approach may also be more appropriate than high stakes external exams.

In addition, the DfE should work with education experts from the early years, primary, secondary, and post-18 education sectors to identify the key factors contributing to the persistent failure of large numbers of students to achieve good GCSEs in maths and English and find evidence-based solutions. We understand cumulative deficits in literacy and numeracy at the end of primary school both persist and deepen throughout secondary

school and present significant barriers to students' learning and progression. The [House of Lords Education for 11–16 Year Olds Committee](#) has called on the government to determine why so many pupils do not secure a grade 4 or above in GCSE English and maths each year, and publish its findings. We are hoping that this Review may be able to do just that.

## Curriculum and qualification content

There is a cross-party consensus forming that the national curriculum has tipped too far in favour of knowledge at the expense of skills. The final report of the [Times Education Commission](#) (2022) argues that the divide between knowledge and skills is a “false dichotomy”. The [TBI](#) (2022) claims that the overemphasis on knowledge is crowding out space for students to develop the so-called “4Cs”: critical thinking, creativity, communication and collaborative problem-solving. These will be essential skills in the increasingly digital workplaces of the future. The [House of Lords Education for 11–16 Year Olds Committee](#) (2024) found that the 11–16 curriculum is “overloaded with content”, and “hampers pupils’ understanding of core concepts and stifles engagement”, recommending a reduction in the overall content load. We strongly concur.

The [Times Commission](#), the [TBI](#) and the previous government all called for a new, broader qualification drawing on the International Baccalaureate (IB). Mindful of this government’s preference for evolution rather than revolution, we think that it is possible to reform existing qualifications to ensure pupils have the skills and knowledge they need for future study, life and work. This would involve taking steps to increase the breadth of the curriculum at all stages and embedding core skills. The focus on knowledge-rich content should be reduced and numeracy, literacy and creativity should be embedded more deeply, as well the [future skills](#) desired by employers, which Kingston University has identified as creative problem solving, digital competency, being enterprising, having a questioning mindset, adaptability, empathy, collaboration, resilience and self-awareness.

## A broad and balanced curriculum

Many educational observers have decried the narrowing of the school curriculum in England over the past decade. In key stages 1 and 2 this is evident by a relentless focus on English and maths at the expense of other subjects – tellingly the only disciplines that are formally assessed. At key stage 3 and beyond there has been a privileging of science and maths over the arts and humanities – and creative arts in particular.

University Alliance is extremely concerned by the erosion of the education pipeline in key creative subject areas aligned to the creative industries. The creative sector is the fastest growing area of the economy. It brings in [£126bn](#) in gross value added to the economy and employs over 2.4 million people. However, growth is being hampered by national skills shortages. The [House of Lords Education for 11–16 Year Olds Committee](#) (2024) found that UK businesses are “crying out for creative skills”.

In the state sector, there is now dwindling provision and student enrolments in design and technology (DT), as well as music and drama. Many state primary and secondary schools lack specialist arts facilities, resources and teachers. A knock-on effect is there are few teacher training placements available in these subjects, further compounding the problem. Teacher shortages in creative subjects are particularly acute, and [two thirds](#) of art and design teachers are considering leaving the profession.

One stated reason for the decline is that creative subjects are not recognised as qualifying subjects in the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) and Progress 8 school accountability measures. Some schools have also reported that the AQA exam board's coding system prevents students from studying more than one creative arts subject at a time at GCSE or A-level.

This is increasingly becoming a social justice issue as creative arts provision in the independent fee-paying sector (both curricular and extracurricular) has continued to flourish. The [Sutton Trust](#) (2004) found that the creative industries are now completely dominated by the privately educated, and young people aged 35 and under in the creative industries are around four times less likely to be from a working class than a middle-class background. Top selling musicians are six times more likely than the public to have attended private schools (43% vs 7%), and BAFTA-nominated actors are five times more likely to have done so. Over half of music students at the most prestigious conservatoires attended independent schools.

The lack of creative arts provision in state schools is not only detrimental to would-be creative professionals. There is a wealth of [research](#) that demonstrates how study of the creative arts supports learning across the curriculum and is highly beneficial for later learning and employment. For example, learning a musical instrument has been found to positively impact on maths ability. Pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), including neurodiverse learners, may find creative subjects better meet their needs.

## Assessment & accountability

This Review offers a unique, once-in-a-generation opportunity to rethink modes of assessment and ensure they remain fit for purpose. The assessment system is currently dominated by high stakes summative external exams at both levels 2 and 3. [Evidence](#) shows this creates perverse incentives such as teaching to the test and a narrowing of the curriculum. It also creates a hierarchical system of winners and losers rather than one in which all learners can reach their potential and flourish.

The [TBI](#) (2022) argues that the current assessment model “fails to reflect a full range of pupils’ achievements and aptitudes”. This is a concern shared by much of the higher education sector, and University Alliance members in particular, who have been at the forefront of developing new models of more [inclusive](#) and [authentic](#) assessment. At the heart of these is a desire to ensure university assessments do not inadvertently exclude some students, and to embed employability skills into both the curriculum and assessments.

The [HMC](#) (2021) has asserted that exams serve the purposes of university selection and employers, but it is far from clear that is still actually the case, at least from the perspective of University Alliance and the employers with whom we work. Recent [research](#) conducted by CBI Economics on behalf of UA found that when hiring, employers tend to value a graduate's skills, the subject they studied, and vocational experience gained during their degree ahead of grades achieved or whether the graduate studied at a particular university,

We recommend that the DfE consult closely with a range of stakeholders, including higher education providers and employers, to design a new forward-thinking assessment system fit for the future. We agree with the TBI that this should encompass multiple, rigorous forms of continuous assessment that would blend summative and formative assessment. We believe using a combination of assessment types is more effective at capturing the full range of learner achievements than traditional written examinations on their own.

The volume of exams at GCSE, particularly where they fall on the same day because of scheduling conflicts between exam boards, creates unacceptably high pressure for 15- and 16-year-olds, even those who are high achieving. Many universities now assess students throughout the year to alleviate the pressure and enable them to achieve more successful outcomes.

In the past few years, a wide range of influential cross-party stakeholders, including the [Times Education Commission](#) (2022), the [House of Lords Education for 11–16 Year Olds Committee](#) (2024), the [TBI](#) (2022), the [HMC](#) (2021), and the [Rethinking Assessment](#) coalition, have called for significant reform to or the abolition altogether of GCSEs. The [Times Education Commission](#) (2022) found that 65% of parents think that the education system puts too much emphasis on exams, and the [HMC](#) (2021) found 94% of teachers surveyed from both the state and independent sectors believe GCSEs need either complete or partial reform.

Given the requirement for students to stay in education and training until age 18, there is a huge question mark over the relevance and desirability of requiring 15- and 16-year-olds to sit circa 30 hours of exams. At the very least, key stage 4 assessment should be slimmed-down, with external exams used across a smaller set of subjects.

A significant issue that needs to be urgently looked at in the 11-16 curriculum is the impact of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) accountability tool. Since the EBacc was introduced 2010, it has incentivised schools to provide a more academic curriculum for all learners. At the same time, there has been a precipitous decline in creative and digital subjects being taken at GCSE. The [Times Education Commission](#) (2022) found that there has been a huge reduction in the number of students sitting GCSEs in design and technology (-80%), music (-36%), drama (-40%) and computing or ICT (-40%). [The Times Education Commission](#) (2022), the [House of Lords Education for 11–16 Year Olds Committee](#) (2024), and the [TBI](#) (2022) have all called for the EBacc to be scrapped.

At a minimum, University Alliance and our [#ArtsEssential](#) coalition partners would like to see creative arts subjects to be included in the EBacc in order to help protect the critical talent pipeline that feeds the UK's successful creative economy, and with it the economic backbone and cultural identity of the country.

## Qualification pathways 16-19

University Alliance believes that the three-route qualification system of A-levels, T-levels and applied general qualifications (AGQs) should remain a permanent feature of the 16-19 landscape that is available in every region of the country. Although maintaining three routes causes complexities for higher education providers, as students arrive with variation in their skills and knowledge, it is clear to us that different qualifications suit distinct learner needs and preferences. As far as possible, students should also be able to combine academic and vocational subjects.

Allowing students a wide range of choice about their level 3 qualifications enables more students to have successful outcomes, including progression to higher education. It is vital that all students have access to high-quality careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) to make an informed choice about which route is best for them.

It is concerning that 16- to 19-year-old students in England receive a third less teaching time than their international counterparts, and we are supportive in principle of the previous administration's plans to increase teaching time at key stage 5.

## A-levels

A-levels are highly respected academic qualifications with a great deal of currency in the UK and overseas. However, reforms over the past decade have meant that they can encourage rote learning within a narrow band of a subject. Once at university, our members report many A-level students need to broaden and deepen their subject knowledge and learn to develop critical thinking skills. This means even those students who succeed at A-level are not acquiring all the skills needed for higher education. Reforms to the curriculum content and assessment should be taken to address this. We also strongly support the reinstatement AS levels to increase the breadth of the key stage 5 curriculum.

## T-levels

University Alliance is supportive of T Levels as a progression route to a range of higher education provision that we would like to see improved and rolled out more widely. As highly specialised, large sector-specific vocational qualifications that cannot be combined with any others, T-levels are only appropriate for students who are relatively certain about their future career goals and aspirations by the age of 15 or 16. Only a small number of students – around [16,000](#) – started a T-level in 2023.

T-levels continue to face a number of logistical challenges. There is a lack of capacity in some sectors and regions for the 12-week industry placement requirement, which may prove a limiting factor to growth. To help address this, the government should increase capital funding to encourage industry to host students for the placement element of T Levels.

So far, the outcomes of T-level students are mixed. Whilst some are positive, research from the [Education Policy Institute \(EPI\)](#) has found T-level students overall are 20% less likely to complete their qualification than students on other types of courses. Nearly one in three students doing a T-level in health and science drop out in their first year. UA members report that some T levels do not adequately equip students to progress to level 4, and a foundation year is required in these cases. In our view these issues need to be urgently addressed by this Review.

## Other applied or vocational qualifications at level 3

For a substantial number of young people, AGQs such as BTEC Nationals provide a more [effective](#) route to higher education or skilled employment than A-levels or T-levels, particularly for [disadvantaged learners](#). The progression of students with BTECs to higher education has had a significant impact on widening participation in higher education.

As universities across the sector are increasingly adopting more [inclusive](#) and [authentic](#) assessment methods, BTEC students – who are accustomed to coursework and continuous assessment methods – may even find themselves better prepared in some ways for higher education than their A-level counterparts.

Unfortunately, many applied or vocational qualifications at level 3 have been under threat of being defunded for many years. Prolonged level 3 qualification reform has been destabilising and is putting the quality and availability of vocational education at risk. UA is a founding member of the [#ProtectStudentChoice](#) campaign and is calling on the government to retain funding for 21 Level 3 applied general qualifications in key subjects; confirm that students can enrol on these AGQs up to and including the 2026/27 academic year; and reject any constraints on combining different types and sizes of qualifications. This will avoid a sharp increase in the number of young people disengaging from education and generate a significant cost saving for the public purse.



To ensure as many students as possible achieve at level 3, UA is strongly in favour of retaining a category of general vocational qualifications across a range of subjects and sizes which have some overlap with A Levels and T Levels. It is also vital that students can continue to combine ACQs with A-levels, and more should be encouraged to do so.

**Susanna Kalitowski**  
**Head of Policy, University Alliance**  
[susanna@unialliance.ac.uk](mailto:susanna@unialliance.ac.uk)