OFFICIAL RESPONSE TO THE

DfE CONSULTATION ON CURRICULUM & ASSESSMENT

This is an official response on behalf of members of Community Union

Community is a general Trade Union affiliated to the TUC and GFTU. We provide legal and casework support to our members and regularly engage with them in determining our response to policy proposals.

Community's Education and Early Years sector represent thousands of serving teachers and support staff, headteachers, lecturers, nursery and early years workers, nannies and other education professionals in schools and academies, nurseries and early years settings, colleges and universities across the whole of the UK.

This evidence was submitted to the commission on behalf of our members and as such represents the views of a wide range of individuals from different backgrounds across England and the UK.

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The information shared within this response may be used and quoted as appropriate for the purposes it was gathered, with Community Union acknowledged as the contributor. We would be happy to discuss the comments in this response further, please contact us using the details supplied.

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Section 2: General views on curriculum, assessment, and qualifications pathways

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> **What aspects of the current a) curriculum, b) assessment system and c) qualification pathways are working well to support and recognise educational progress for children and young people?**
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> Community Union has members working in all phases and stages of the education spectrum. Our early years professionals enjoy delivering the Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum as it is child centred and prepares children to be able to learn in a way which supports them and their development without rushing them to do something they are not yet ready for.
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> We understand that this review is not looking at the EY curriculum, but we know that the outcomes contained within the Foundation Stage Profile are held in high regard by those working in KS1 and that it provides a robust grounding that the subsequent curriculum can build upon. With this in mind, we urge the review to consider how they can bring the success of EYFSP into the main school curriculum.
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> The primary curriculum has the potential to be a vibrant place bursting with facts and information across a wide range of subjects. There is a lot of detail about what children must study and when it should be delivered. It is rigidly structured such that a child moving from one school to another is very likely to be able to pick up their learning just where they have left off. This brings with it strengths and weaknesses such as consistency, but also inflexibility and the inability to pursue a particular interest or nuance, furthermore it has workload implications due to the heavy content burden.
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> There is an explicit focus on reading, writing and mathematics - not just literacy and numeracy which is important for ensuring that all learners have the foundational building blocks to enable them to access the rest of the curriculum which is heavily literacy based. However, despite the skills and abilities of teachers, due to the specifics of the content and government prescription, this is not always delivered in a way which is accessible to all learners and requires significant tailoring to make it accessible. For example, the heavy reliance on just one method of teaching reading through synthetic phonics meets the needs of many pupils but not all. This has a particular impact for those with SEND.
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> The curriculum can offer a balance of theoretic and practical learning through subjects such as science, technology and the arts, as well as in PE which when managed well help to shape a pupil's day and provide the light and shade that is necessary to maintain interest and activity.
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> Theoretically, the regular formal assessments that occur throughout primary school should provide robust data for teachers, however there can often be a disconnect between pupil performance in examinations and in their actual demonstrable ability. This is especially the case in practical subjects such as Art, Music and Drama, but also in Science and Technology where performance can sometimes be better demonstrated through practical experiments and project work.
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> We acknowledge that KS2 SATs results can provide reliable data for use in predicting students' future performance at GCSE, but as they occur at the end of primary school it is too late for them to action any further interventions. It would also seem that SATs are little valued as assessment data by secondary schools therefore, one has to question their role in the system.

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What aspects of the current a) curriculum, b) assessment system and c) qualification pathways should be targeted for improvements to better support and recognise educational progress for children and young people?

The national curriculum and associated national assessments are expansive, in many ways overly prescriptive and inflexible. For example, the numeracy and literacy strategies imposed a daily lesson with the learning prescribed in specific detail. Although no longer forming part of the national curriculum, most primary schools continue to abide by the practices and techniques that the strategy espoused. English and Maths is usually taught in hour-long blocks in morning sessions and although schools are now more responsive to pupil need and are more able to revisit learning that is not embedded, the sheer quantity of content is overwhelming.

This overwhelming content is not unique in English and Maths, but because they are almost the sole measure of performance in Primary Schools, foundation subjects are more easily pushed aside, especially in Y6. And it is not only in Primary Schools where this is evident. Students who arrive in secondary schools below the expected standard will often be withdrawn from foundation subjects to attend supportive literacy and numeracy classes in addition to the timetabled English and Maths. The requirement to be numerate and literate running roughshod over the entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum.

Since 1988 the National Curriculum has outlined what is taught in most schools and this is particularly specific in the "core" subjects. But does it meet the needs of modern learners? And whilst there have been some first indications of a curriculum modifying itself with the introduction of computer science is this sufficient itself to prepare learners for the future? Should it all be about the "core" subjects, or about STEM? What about computer programming which with the addition of English, Art, Music and Drama and you have a Creative Industry that contributed almost £13 million to the economy every hour in 2019, pre-pandemic.

The national curriculum and GCSE exams were reformed under Michael Gove to strip away independent learning, coursework assessment and projects in favour of a knowledge-rich and terminally assessed curriculum. Consequently there is little opportunity for students to discuss and debate why or how due to the overwhelming content and preparation for formal written assessment. The content has to be learned, and students quickly are expected to know the 'correct' answer. But this does not prepare students for further study in many subjects, nor indeed the world of work where the ability to problem-solve and 'think outside the box' is heavily sought. This has led to situations where children are reticent, scared even, to try new things or to express opinions that risk being 'wrong'.

This fear of being wrong is seen throughout primary and KS3 learning and does not help students to become independent thinkers or resilient students, as they become conditioned into thinking of everything in a binary 'right or wrong' manner. This is reinforced through the high-stakes assessments by which schools are held accountable and leads to students understanding that they are failures when told they have not met the expected standard.

Similarly, students are told they must pass English and Maths at GCSE, but this actually means a pass at Grade 4 or above, instantly devaluing any achievement made by learners to secure a Grade 1, 2 or 3, which is an issue for many students with particular learning difficulties who's needs are rarely met by the assessment system. Can we truly measure the learning of our learners or do we only value what we can test? And what does that mean for knowledge and skills that are difficult to assess? The exam specification forms the basis of many schools' GCSE curriculum, and all learning time is dedicated to this giving rise to the question, do we measure what we value or value what we measure? How can we assess and measure all learning?

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The debacle caused by an over-reliance on one-time examined assessments in summer 2020 highlighted the weakness in an examination only system. A system built on a range of assessment would have been more robust and provided a wider data base on which to calculate any outcome much more reliably than the much-derided centre assessed grades. And yet we have not built in resilience nor modified the assessment system in the light of this.

Improvements could include a wide variety of assessment methods such as online, coursework, and practical assessment rather than just written exams – since it is unlikely in their future careers that candidates will have to handwrite a document in exam conditions, and it is undoubtably better to allow candidates to demonstrate all of their learning rather than just be tested on a narrow selection.

It is often said that we educate children for jobs that do not yet exist. We know that a foreign language is increasingly useful in a global economy and that learners need good communication skills, both spoken and written. Computing skills and those which imbue confidence are certainly increasingly attractive to employers and we will always need practical numeracy. So, maybe now is the time to consider a huge change. What is the purpose, when education or training must continue 'til 18 of subject exams at 16? What does that tell us as educators and what is the value for the learner?

Is theoretical study more useful than practical and applied? What skills do we need learners to have? Can we appreciate the practical skills of plumbing, electrical engineering, horticulture and farming and those relating to trades? How do we validate the skills agenda? And, if the GCSE is obsolete, what are the alternatives?

The shape and design of the curriculum and assessment has to involve those in the classrooms as well as the employers, colleges and universities and might have a more holistic approach rather like the international baccalaureate which looks at students' intellectual, emotional, personal and social skills across a range of subjects – maybe this could provide a route map for the future?

What we need is a system that recognises all achievement and does not label learners as failures but encourages further study and development. We need a curriculum of opportunity for all and assessment that accurately reflects their achievements; existing for the benefit of learners and recognising their knowledge and ability and decoupled from school attainment tables.

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In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation (class ceilings) for learners experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage?

The current curriculum and assessment system contains many barriers to learning that since its introduction a decade or so ago, schools and teachers have sought to overcome.

P levels were withdrawn in 2022 in favour of the engagement model. Where P Levels allowed mainstream schools to assess learners against a framework, the engagement model is more about recognising what a learner can do, even when they're not engaging in subject-specific study. For learners who are unable to access the curriculum the engagement model is transformative because, like the EYFS, it recognises what an individual _can_ do on an individual basis. However, for the vast majority of primary-aged learners who are below the expected standard, the engagement model does not work and should not be applied as these learners are able to access the subject-specific study, they are just unable to achieve the expected standard. This leaves a significant proportion of learners 'labelled' as substandard at an age when we should still be recognising all achievement.

Since the national curriculum and standardised assessments were introduced in 1988, each time the curriculum and assessment framework has changed, adaptations have needed to be made to prevent learners from otherwise being excluded. This has worsened since the curriculum changes introduced from 2010 with the expansion of subject specific content and a focus on terminal assessment. In short, the curriculum is overburdened, the method and style of assessment is not always the best suited to its purpose and the frequency of assessment, especially in primary schools, is very demanding in preparation, administration, class time and resources.

The current GCSE specifications are heavily geared towards ongoing academic study and are assessed in a way to reflect that thinking. Not all KS4 students wish to pursue academic study indeed they may already have made a decision that they do not wish to continue into any further study. This does not mean that they should not continue to pursue learning at level 2, simply that an academic focus assessed through terminal GCSEs might not be the most appropriate pathway.

The heavy focus on British authors can alienate learners, particularly where they focus on class and privilege that cannot be easily understood without the wider context. Even then, knowledge of that context does not mean understanding of the drivers or actions that derived from them. Similarly the focus on exclusively British history can have a similarly distancing and alienating impact on those born outside of the UK and in areas of significant deprivation.

Community believes that an emphasis on "British" is important but must be considered within the wider global context of the world in which we live, and the children will work. A world of disparate views and internet influences. We need our literature and history curricula to be positioned to inform and educate, to allow critical thinking and encourage balanced views and debate without resorting to nationalism and even jingoism which can spark extreme behaviours.

This extends to methods and styles of assessment which must encourage critical thinking and use of evidence to support views, with practical demonstration of skills and knowledge employed where appropriate instead of the automatic reliance on written exams. As mentioned elsewhere a child's ability may not be properly assessed in maths if they are unable to understand the problem due to language difficulties.

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We have seen the success of functional skills qualifications at level 1, and vocational courses at level 2 and beyond that have engaged students in learning through the different mode of learning with similarly successful outcomes due to the different nature of assessment which is often modular. Critically, this often includes the opportunity to resit, something which could help to improve outcomes at GCSE.

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In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation which may disproportionately impact pupils based on other characteristics (e.g. disability, sexual orientation, gender, race, religion or belief etc.)

There are several barriers to improving attainment, not least of which being that assessments do not adequately measure all that a learner is capable of. For example assessments do not recognise a learner's expertise in sport, nor their prowess on stage and yet these two skills are highly regarded in the real world with select sport stars and actors highly sought after.

The barriers which disproportionately affect those with protected characteristics have all been alluded to in the previous questions. The way that achievement is measured, and what specifically constitutes attainment places barriers in front of anyone who has difficulty learning be that through a physical disability, learning difficulty, language difficulty or many other. The problem is that the assessments are not designed to assess what children know, but to measure how well they can perform in a test and not all learners are able to perform in high pressure environments. For example, KS2 SATs are only a snapshot: they are under four hours' work which are supposed to represent seven years of education.

Some assessments are poorly constructed, with maths and science problem solving questions usually requiring learners to decode a written problem before applying the maths to solve. This instantly prevents those for whom English is not their native language, those who have lower levels of literacy and those with learning difficulties affecting inference from ever accessing the question.

Written questions that assume a prior knowledge, or cultural framework are widely used in English and History assessments with students assessed after reading a set text but without any contextualisation, glossary or dictionary to help with specialised words. Again this means that those who have difficulty with the English language cannot even access the question let alone attempt to answer it.

Put simply, if learners cannot decode the question, they cannot demonstrate that they have the knowledge or mathematical skills and so fail to achieve in maths due to their lack of literacy or fail in English because they live in a deprived area of the UK with little concept of the lives characters in a historic novel may have experienced.

Finally, Community is wholly against the option for parents to remove children from RE and the sex education elements of RSE.

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In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers in continuing to improve attainment, progress, access or participation for learners with SEND?

The single biggest issue affecting learners with different type of SEND is the lack of funding available in the system. This means that the specific needs of the learner frequently go unmet or causing the learner to fall even further behind whilst they are waiting for them to be met properly. Not only that, but many students with SEND will require additional time away from class to support their specialist needs, such as hospital appointments, physiotherapy, speech and language support, counselling all of which conspire to prevent the learner from ever 'catching up'.

Learners with SEND have a statutory right to support which also needs to be recognised through the assessment pathways. As with everything, the earlier that the need is identified and adjustments made, the quicker they become normal practice rather than being specific only for the exam. In all cases learners need to have their needs assessed much sooner and for the support to be available more quickly without parents having to fight tooth and nail.

As previously mentioned, it is vital that assessment methods are the most appropriate to evidence competency and knowledge. In our current assessment system there is a primary assumption that this will be through written exams, but not only is this not always the best form of assessment, it is often detrimental to the success of those with learning difficulties and physical and mental disabilities. It is simply impractical for the 'normal practice' in schools to include widespread use of amanuenses and readers in every lesson so this becomes a special adjustment made for the exam, but perhaps the assessments could be adjusted so that learners can demonstrate their skills and knowledge differently through viva, prepared presentation, coursework, online, voice recognition and other digital platforms.

One of the things we must do, is ensure that our assessment system does not discriminate and that includes how it is used for school and teacher accountability. Because of accountability measures, some schools do not encourage learners with disabilities to remain on roll as their achievement may have a damaging effect on the school's overall outcomes.

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In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any enablers that support attainment, progress, access or participation for the groups listed above? [e.g. socioeconomically disadvantaged young people, pupils with SEND, pupils who are otherwise vulnerable, and young people with protected characteristics]

Section 4: Ensuring an excellent foundation in maths and English

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> **To what extent does the content of the national curriculum at primary level (key stages 1 and 2) enable pupils to gain an excellent foundation in a) English and b) maths? Are there ways in which the content could change to better support this aim?**
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> The very fact that section 4 is entitled, "Ensuring an excellent foundation in maths and English" already separates these two disciplines from the rest of the curriculum and puts them on a pedestal. This is then made more explicit as these disciplines are the only ones which are formally assessed throughout primary education and particularly at the end of KS2. Despite the breadth of the primary curriculum just two areas are deemed important enough to assess pupil performance and school's accountability wholesale.
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> That is not to say that literacy and numeracy are not important tools, they are and a solid understanding of how to read and write can be critical to accessing and understanding the wider curriculum offering, but as has been mentioned, because these are the areas on which schools are measured, they are areas of high stakes and this causes significant stress to be passed on to staff and often onto pupils as well.
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> We need not secure skills and abilities in literacy and numeracy, distinct from the academic study of maths and English. We need to engender a love of reading for enjoyment as well as to allow pupils to access knowledge and to engage in research. Despite the amount of time dedicated to English and maths, many pupils spend insufficient time reading or being read to – it is difficult to love reading when there are no opportunities to experience it and it is increasingly rare for schools to end the day with a story in KS2.
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> English lessons have a heavy focus on the components of writing, with pupils required to identify these in tests for no reason other than to pass the test. Knowledge of these components is not needed in KS3 lessons, so why is it required in KS2? It could even be argued that this knowledge does little to develop writers and actually puts them off from being creative as they are always worried about including 'fronted adverbials'.
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> Members have noted that the current English and Maths curricula are not helpful for primary level. The National Curriculum Handbook for primary teachers in England from 1999 contains a more balanced approach that might begin to help to reshape the curriculum. Similarly, the National Numeracy Strategy Framework for teaching mathematics from reception to Y6 (also 1999) is an effective resource.
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> But it is not just a focus on reading and writing that is important. Spoken word makes up a significant portion of the content we consume on radio, TV, Film and the internet through blogs, podcasts and videos. When does drama and oracy become important? Or does it remain relegated to the school play once a year?

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To what extent do the English and maths primary assessments* support pupils to gain an excellent foundation in these key subjects? Are there any changes you would suggest that would support this aim? *These include SATs at the end of key stage 2, the phonics screening check and the multiplication tables check.

Community have noted before that standardised primary assessments do not have any supportive impact on pupils. They do not provide helpful or constructive feedback to the teachers in order for them to be supportive, and they have an unhelpful impact on formalising education during a child's formative years. According to a 2022 survey of school leaders undertaken by NAHT, just 8% of Head Teachers believe that SATs provide meaningful data about their school's performance. And teachers are unable to use the tests as diagnostics as they do not get the data immediately and some data is never released to the teacher.

Primary pupils in England now face SATs and other government tests in four out of seven school years – that's more formal assessments than in almost any other country. And according to the *More Than a Score* campaign, over three-quarters of parents believe there should be no statutory tests in primary schools and 93% of heads think the government should review the entire system. Meanwhile, children continue to suffer the negative consequences: 82% of teachers said pupils were distressed by SATs tests in 2023.

Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that KS2 SATs have a narrowing affect on the curriculum in year 6 which leads to higher stress and exacerbates behaviour issues. Put simply schools prioritise the things that pupils are tested on, and children are only assessed on a narrow range of skills and knowledge. Furthermore, the way the SATs are prepared and administered makes it difficult for some children to succeed, due to neurodivergence and concentration issues, as well as learning difficulties and disabilities that do not qualify for or the school cannot afford to provide, additional classroom support.

As a result significant numbers of children leave primary schools below the expected standard. In other words they are labelled as a failure at the age of 11 or before that age since the phonics screen requires children to retake the test the following year if they fail. And a recent report by the Education Policy Institute found no evidence of improved key stage 1 or key stage 2 reading results since the phonics screening check was introduced in 2012.

KS2 SATs are rigorous and robust assessments that provide the government with data on the achievement of pupils in a set of standard tests, but does that actually achieve anything for the children? We know that they can be reliable indicators of pupils' performance at GCSE, but they are often considered unreliable for the purposes of ability setting at KS3 hence schools use CAT tests.

Some stakeholders, including school leaders, teachers and parents, also have concerns about the efficacy of SATs and the extent to which the continued focus on test scores as a measure of school standards risks displacing a broader and more balanced evaluation of both pupil and school achievement. There are further concerns that SATs, though intended to be low stakes for pupils, have unintended consequences including an effect on wellbeing and impact on breadth of curriculum through a heavy focus on preparing for tests.

Perhaps there is a middle ground where the system can be reformed to address the main concerns with SATs without a significant overhaul of the system. More focus should be given to how we can address the breadth of the curriculum, the narrow focus on English and mathematics, and the length of SATs testing which is done over four days.

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Education Policy Institute / More than A Score *"Re-defining standards in English Primary Education"* (2023)
https://www.morethanascore.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/EPI_MTAS-summary-paper_Primary-Standards_May23.pdf

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To what extent does the content of the a) English and b) maths national curriculum at secondary level (key stages 3 and 4) equip pupils with the knowledge and skills they need for life and further study? Are there ways in which the content could change to better support this aim?

We have a significant attitude problem with maths in the UK. There is a widespread perception amongst the general public that maths is hard and that they are no good at it. Parents don't get it, and they pass on the attitude that maths is hard commenting, "I'm no good at maths and it never hurt me…" This is despite the fact that well over 70% achieved the expected standard in the 2024 maths SATs and 60% achieving grade 4 and above in GCSE maths.

This could be explained perhaps by the lack of relevance of the maths curriculum to the daily lives of many adults. Perhaps teaching on how interest rates work, statistics, financial transactions, budgeting, loans and mortgages could feature in the school curriculum since these are often the skills that people need and have no opportunity to gain whilst at school.

Furthermore, as has been already mentioned we need to ensure that everyone can access the maths content and that it is no obfuscated by the language used in setting out the problem. Language barriers can prevent highly able mathematicians from accessing the question, leaving them unable to demonstrate their learning because of an inability to interact with the mode of assessment and the length of examinations can have a detrimental impact on students' ability to perform.

Leading on from the primary curriculum, the KS3 English curriculum risks undermining the learning completed in KS2 by failing to recognise or place the same value upon the components of writing that are required curriculum in KS2. Community members would argue that knowledge of the components of writing only become important when analysing texts, something that rarely happens in great depth at primary school.

The development of reading and writing seems to focus on more formal compositions despite the commercial success of magazines, newspapers, comic strip reading or online content and despite recent efforts to broaden the reading lists, English lessons remain associated with dead white male writers and Shakespeare which increasingly require significant contextualisation. We should be mindful of the time period in which books were written. Out-of-date views and language can help us to understand the past and why it is a good thing that situations have changed, but they can also be a barrier to some people being able to access the stories they tell. This is as true with novels as it is with old news articles, comic books, and biographies. Perhaps there is an argument for tying together English literature and history lessons so that the content and context are explored together.

As in primary schools reading for pleasure is undervalued and not prioritised often seen as a holding activity or used to fill time. And there is too little focus on reading for knowledge and critical thinking despite the importance of this throughout the wider KS3 and KS4 curriculum. We know that children who read for pleasure make accelerated progress in maths and English compared to

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those who do not read, but books are expensive and without access to them this accelerated progress is the reserve of the wealthy. Furthermore, the decimation of school libraries means that access to books outside of lesson times is becoming harder. There has also been a significant drop in secondary schools with a school library – by around 10%, and one in seven primary schools does not have a designated library space, impacting most of all on those pupils living in areas of deprivation who may not have access to resources at home. Put simply, we need to ensure that we resource what we want to see improve.

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To what extent do the current maths and English qualifications at a) pre-16 and b) 16-19 support pupils and learners to gain, and adequately demonstrate that they have achieved, the skills and knowledge they need? Are there any changes you would suggest that would support these outcomes?

As has already been noted, the widespread perception amongst the general public is that maths is hard and that they are no good at it. This despite the fact that more students take GCSE maths than any other subject, and with a pass rate in 2024 of almost 60% at grade 4 and above suggests actually most people are more than capable.

However, there are elements of the maths curriculum that seemingly have little to no relevance in the daily lives of many adults. Perhaps we need to ensure that maths is something which has meaning and value to our lives and is not just a nebulous concept. For example, teaching on how interest rates work, statistics, financial transactions, budgeting, loans and mortgages could feature in the school curriculum since these are often the skills that people need and have no opportunity to gain whilst at school. Of course, adding additional content must come at the expense of removing other content.

Furthermore, as has been already mentioned with regards to the language used in assessment, in mathematics the assessment system does not always provide reasonable opportunity for students to demonstrate their learning. Language barriers can prevent highly-able mathematicians from accessing the question, leaving them unable to demonstrate their learning because of an inability to interact with the mode of assessment and the length of examinations can have a detrimental impact on students' ability to perform.

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How can we better support learners who do not achieve level 2 in English and maths by 16 to learn what they need to thrive as citizens in work and life? In particular, do we have the right qualifications at level 2 for these 16-19 learners (including the maths and English study requirement)?

As has already been alluded to there are significant differences between functional literacy and numeracy and having a GCSE and many adults are able to thrive without securing a level 2 pass in English and maths. There is good argument for ensuring that those who do not achieve level 2 are able to secure qualifications that recognise what they can do, rather than being required to repeated resit and reinforcing the message of failure.

Functional literacy is primarily about skills or applied knowledge, rather than textural analysis. It is about reading for a purpose and implementation and needs less understanding of context or the

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author's intent. The best functional literacy courses teach students about the tasks that they need to complete in their daily lives and are able to adapt to meet the needs of those learners.

Whilst functional literacy may include them, it's only secondarily about facts or subject-matter knowledge. For example, scientific literacy or business literacy doesn't mean you've memorized the intricacies of how quantum computers work, but you do know how to write a letter and an email. Being functional means you know how to ask questions and apply systems and methods to the work that you are required to do.

A recent report from the Organisation for Economic and Cultural Development (OECD) suggests that the GCSE maths pass bar in England is unachievable for some students and that maths resits should be replaced with a foundation course.

The report also notes that there are limited choices available which allow students to continue with some form of maths outside of the GCSE, but it does not refer to the current suite of functional skills qualifications that do exist.

Therefore, it occurs to Community, that many of the qualifications to support ongoing literacy and numeracy already exist and these would recognise the achievement rather than highlighting any failure, they would also secure the skills and knowledge needed to thrive as citizens in work and life.

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Are there any particular challenges with regard to the English and maths a) curricula and b) assessment for learners in need of additional support (e.g. learners with SEND, socioeconomic disadvantage, English as an additional language (EAL))? Are there any changes you would suggest to overcome these challenges?

The Early Years has a very rich and broad play-based curriculum which allows children to explore their environment, learning through doing and experiencing rather than in formalised and constrained classroom environment. This change from Early Years free-flow, to a more rigorous and formalised learning environment happens too soon for some children and can have a significant impact on those with SEND who may find it difficult to adapt to change, may not be developmentally ready, or for whom appropriate support is not able to be put in place due to delays in formal diagnosis or funding difficulties.

One of the ways that this could be addressed is through proper early intervention through nurseries and child minders and with better Early Years support. In Wales they have begun to roll out their Flying Start programme which highlights a similar need in England and raises the question of restoring Sure Start Children's Centres.

It is clear that there has to be a clear understanding of the needs of the child. 'SEND' covers a huge breadth of needs, with a vital emphasis on knowing the individual child, alongside working with the family and building trusted relationships. All too frequently, the diverse needs are not met, or not met soon enough. All too often the curriculum and assessments can not be adapted to allow learners to succeed before they have even begun.

Understanding and proper support is critical, for example, by using explicit instruction, by checking student understanding more frequently and modelling a task before students begin to work independently. These steps provide support for students who may otherwise struggle to grasp new concepts or understand how to begin a task.

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Fundamentally it is all about breaking down the barriers to opportunity (Labour campaign 2023) and this requires more flexibility, more adaptability and better understanding of need. In order to do this properly, assessments need to be built on a basis of inclusion, and this requires a complete change of approach and will have a significant impact on how we use assessment for accountability.

Section 5: Curriculum and qualification content

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> **Are there particular curriculum or qualifications subjects* where: a) there is too much content; not enough content; or content is missing; b) the content is out-of-date; c) the content is unhelpfully sequenced (for example to support good curriculum design or pedagogy); d) there is a need for greater flexibility (for example to provide the space for teachers to develop and adapt content)? Please provide detail on specific key stages where appropriate. *This includes both qualifications where the government sets content nationally, and anywhere the content is currently set by awarding organisations.**

The balance of content and its relevance has changed over the time since the National Curriculum was first instigated. Sometimes this has been with pupils and learners' needs in mind and at other times with a particular focus, such as a knowledge-based curriculum and a return to formal terminal assessment. However, and for whatever reasons the curriculum is constituted it will forever be requiring adjustments to better support student learning, engage pupils more effectively, and ensure that content is relevant, well-sequenced, and flexible enough to allow for adaptation. What is vitally important, is that we do it because it is in the best interests of the learners and is done in collaboration with those staff who will have to deliver it.

The English curriculum from key stage 1-4 is often seen as overcrowded with content that focuses heavily on labels for literary components and prescribed areas of study, rather than enabling students to explore the art of writing and developing their narrative skills. The requirement to study specific components such as poetry, Shakespeare, and 19th-century fiction, alongside a series of detailed, analytical tasks, often detracts from more creative, flexible writing skills that are essential in life beyond school. And has been already mentioned, some of these texts don't always connect with modern contexts and require significant contextualisation before they can be accessed.

Community agrees with author Michael Rosen that we need to reduce the emphasis on labelling language devices, themes, structure and focus instead on developing students' ability to write compelling narratives, make persuasive arguments, and express themselves fluently since this is likely to be how they will use language skills throughout their adult life.

Technology (including design and technology, computer science, food technology, and resistant materials) is often criticised for having content that is either outdated or insufficiently adapted to the current technological landscape. Whilst it is vital in primary schools to establish strong skills in design and use of manual equipment, old design principles and manual processes are often taught right through to GCSE, with insufficient integration of new technologies like CAD (Computer-Aided Design), 3D printing, or robotics. This is often due to the speed with which technology advances and the prohibitive costs of purchasing appropriate equipment and resources. However, in order to properly study these subjects we need to be doing so in a setting that is appropriate so that up-to-date skills can be developed. We need to update course content to focus more on modern manufacturing methods, digital prototyping, robotics, programming, and smart technologies as this would better align students' learning with current industry trends.

Similarly, music education, particularly at GCSE and A Level often focuses on traditional music theory and performance, but digital music production, which is a significant part of the modern music industry, is underrepresented. There should also be a stronger link between performance and music technology ensuring that music is not just about consumption but also about performance. Music production software like Ableton or Logic Pro is not typically covered in depth, missing out on important practical and vocational skills, the skills that are most widely used in the industry. Again a significant reason is the cost of maintaining up-to-date equipment and resources

and staff being able to develop their own skills in this area through appropriate training and development.

Obviously, computing curriculums often fall short in providing students with up-to-date knowledge of modern computing. Many schools are only just getting to grips with artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, big data, and cloud computing and are unsure how they can be explored safely by pupils and students. However, a stronger emphasis on practical coding and computer science theory alongside hands-on programming tasks will be of benefit once the ethical issues surrounding AI have been resolved.

In Health and Physical Education (PE) the concepts taught around healthy eating, and physical activity may not fully reflect current scientific understanding of mental health, mindfulness, holistic well-being, or emerging health issues such as mental health challenges among young people, obesity, and eating disorders and the sports and exercise available to pupils and students can actively dissuade some from engagement. Sports such as dance, aerobics and fitness could be taught alongside traditional sports with football available to all. And students should be about the importance of mental and emotional health across a wide range of subjects too.

RSE, Citizenship, and RE subjects need more flexibility in their delivery to ensure that the content is relevant, respectful, and reflective of the values and beliefs of local communities. In some regions, there is significant variation in the social and cultural context of students, and a one-size-fits-all approach to these sensitive areas can feel alienating or irrelevant to certain groups of students. This is where the work of local SACRE becomes vital for a school allowing the curriculum to be more tailored to focus on specific issues of importance within that community.

Also, these subjects are where critical thinking, debate, and respectful dialogue on complex issues like gender identity, sexual orientation, and religious beliefs can take place, but in many schools they are not taught by teachers trained in RSE or Citizenship which needs to be properly addressed to enable those skills to be more fully nurtured.

Members have commented in the past that content sequencing in History can often feel disjointed, with pupils in primary schools jumping from one historical period to another without a coherent framework for understanding historical progression or cause-and-effect. There is an argument that history should follow a timeline model from ancient history through the medieval period and into more modern events, but this is a simplistic view which fails to recognise the importance of themes and comparison and does not always place sufficient weight on understanding motive. A better approach may be to draw connections between periods and understand overarching historical movements like imperialism, global trade, and industrialisation or themes, such as power, change, and conflict, which can apply across different time periods and geographies.

There is an opportunity here for wider cross subject sequencing that allows history, geography, music, and literature to all contribute to contextual understanding of a time period.

Teachers need to have more autonomy to adapt the curriculum to suit the learning needs of their students and the specific context of their school.

23

Are there particular changes that could be made to ensure the curriculum (including qualification content) is more diverse and representative of society?
Changes to ensure curriculum is more diverse and representative of society

The use of the community in developing an effective regionally reflective curriculum can be clearly seen through the work of SACRE who develop RE lessons and resources. It is a shame, therefore that this curriculum is often ignored by MATs who choose to have a unified RE curriculum across their, sometimes widespread and very different, schools.

Community believe that having local representation from the community that the school serves is a good way of establishing, building upon and strengthening bonds, and using something, such as SACRE which already exists, to do this would seem logical.

Of course, this is not possible in all subject areas, but there are ways that the curriculum can and should be diversified, such as through reading and the books in the library and by linking the curriculum in music, English and drama with history and geography to support the context and location understanding and reminding students that nothing they study exists in isolation.

24

To what extent does the current curriculum (including qualification content) support students to positively engage with, be knowledgeable about, and respect, others? Are there elements that could be improved?

As has been mentioned in previous answers, the curriculum is very content rich. This means that there is a strong focus on facts with little opportunity for discussion or debate. This can be clearly seen in the differences between state and independent school applicants to university, with independent school pupils often having greater debating skills. This is not simply a confidence difference, nor is the debate necessarily an oral one. The curriculum and the way it is assessed, especially in the primary sphere, but also in the closed questions found at level 2 and level 3, are all based around recall of facts.

Again, we have already mentioned that children feel the need to have the right answer. In creative subjects such as drama and art, learners very quickly decide they are no good, because they don't get it right, and yet so much art is subjective, so much history is interpretative, and these skills need to be developed too.

We need to develop research and debating skills, especially oracy, because much of the information that learners acquire will come from sources on the internet. We need to teach learners how to filter and identify different points of view. This is crucial to enable students to positively engage with, be knowledgeable about, and respect, others in the light of the sometimes polarising and extreme views that proliferate on social media and other internet forum. This can be done through high-quality citizenship lessons and through experiencing proper debate. However, we must ensure that debate is properly taught to avoid the pitfalls of politics and personal attacks.

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In which ways does the current primary curriculum support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for life and further study, and what could we change to better support this?

The current way we measure pupils through assessment is an inexpensive way for the Department for Education and Ofsted to collect data, but this system is set up to use data to assess standards, rather than considering what is best for children. As has been previously mentioned schools have to meet accountability standards, and this strongly influences the curriculum that they deliver. Put simply schools focus teaching on that which is valued by the test despite the overwhelming value of a wide range of skills and knowledge.

Evidence from schools following the Covid-19 pandemic has shown the damage to social skills and the ability to interact on a social level has been dramatic. The Generation Catch-Up report by SIMS notes "Education does not happen in a vacuum and children need good social skills to forge the right environment for learning. The lack of opportunity to socialise during the pandemic is still having an impact on how children interact with each other. This has left schools in a position where they need to help children build social skills appropriate for their age. Secondary schools reported seeing social interactions in Y7 and Y8 that would normally be associated with primary school pupils." And whilst we hope this is an extreme once-in-a-lifetime example, we do need to consider the needs of this current generation in the light of the things that have happened in their lives and continue to affect them.

We need to ensure that our curriculum supports good mental health as well as promoting physical health through sports. We need to encourage art, drama and music – communal singing is especially good for mental health, but drama is beneficial to literacy and helps to understand written text as well as developing vital communication skills and oracy that is highly valued.

We live in a world rich with information and poor on knowledge. The internet can tell you everything that you might need to know if you just know where to look, so we must have a strong focus on age-appropriate research skills, using source material and discerning between fact and fiction.

Generation Catch-Up report
https://lp.educationsoftwaresolutions.co.uk/generationcatchup?utm_source=website&utm_medium=website&utm_campaign=generationcatchup&utm_content=homebanner

In which ways do the current secondary curriculum and qualification pathways support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for future study, life and work, and what could we change to better support this?

There has been an awful lot of change in the level 2 and level 3 course content and assessment methods in the past 15 years, not least the recent discussions around the Advanced British Standard. This creates instability in the system and makes it vulnerable to the whims of government.

Today's GCSEs specification is radically different to the courses sat almost 40 years ago with a particular focus on ongoing study despite the fact that students will only be able to continue with

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study in a select few subjects. Arguably GCSEs no longer have any real place in our education system since students must remain in education or training until age 18.

The vocational pathways that have been developed over the past decade have close links to the world of work and yet many schools do not value them in the same way as academic courses. Both academic and vocation learning are beneficial, and neither is better than the other and need to be equally valued.

The way the accountability system currently works plays a role in how the current secondary curriculum supports pupils to have the necessary skills and knowledge for future study because it does not allow vocational courses of substantial size to be recognised as bigger than a single GCSE so schools do not offer courses of certificate or diploma size due to a lack of funding and recognition of the qualification. Because of this schools can find it difficult to justify the necessary investment required to equip and resource many vocational subjects with dedicated classrooms, workshops, studios and other specialised spaces.

However, the recent rationalisation of courses has led to a better understanding of the needs of employers, and this is now a particular feature of many courses, including T-Levels. Conversations with employer groups, though has highlighted some obvious skills gaps such as basic IT skills – word/excel, critical thinking and imagination and the ability to speak to different members of the public/customers. These skills are things which are rarely taught in schools – arguably you cannot teach some of them, and others, such as basic IT skills, are naturally assumed of learners in the 21st Century.

To be clear, Community is not saying that the purpose of education is to prepare pupils and students for the world of work, it is there to prepare them for their future and that is likely to include a range of employment opportunities as well as further study. Indeed we need to prepare our learners for opportunities and jobs which very well may not yet exist.

27

In which ways do the current qualification pathways and content at 16-19 support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for future study, life and work, and what could we change to better support this?

The ways that the current qualification pathways and content at 16-19 support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for future study, life and work are very similar to the previous answer, especially because in some areas there is a distinct lack of choice for post-16 study which is a limiting factor in the choices students can make. This is particularly the case in rural areas, some coastal areas and some inner-city areas.

Where there is choice and opportunity then there is a wide range of academic pathways which favour ongoing study and vocational pathways have closer links to the world of work and many post-16 centres are able to support students on mixed pathways including both academic and vocational study. This is of critical importance because so many students still do not know what future they wish to pursue, and a mixed study model allows them to keep their options open for longer. But it does open the question is theoretical study more useful than practical and applied? What skills do we need learners to have? Can we appreciate the practical skills of plumbing, electrical engineering, horticulture and farming and those relating to trades?

Arguably a mixed model which supports vocational and academic study in one programme can help to support attendance with students able to make a personal decision of the route they wish to

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follow without being required to continue studying subjects they see little value in. Indeed, we know that both academic and vocational courses are beneficial, and neither is better than the other, but they need to be equally valued. We saw the emergence of this thinking in the flawed ABS proposals, but the question does have to be asked what is the purpose, when education or training must continue 'til 18 of subject exams at 16? What does that tell us as educators and what is the value for the learner?

It is often said that we educate children for jobs that do not yet exist. We know that a foreign language is increasingly useful in a global economy and that learners need good communication skills, both spoken and written. Computing skills and those which imbue confidence are certainly increasingly attractive to employers and we will always need practical numeracy.

The shape and design of the curriculum and assessment has to involve those in the classrooms as well as the employers, colleges and universities and might have a more holistic approach rather like the international baccalaureate which looks at students' intellectual, emotional, personal and social skills across a range of subjects – maybe this could provide a route map for the future?

What we need is a system that recognises all achievement and does not label learners as failures but encourages further study and development. We need a curriculum of opportunity for all and assessment that accurately reflects their achievements; existing for the benefit of learners and recognising their knowledge and ability and decoupled from school attainment tables.

Section 6
A Broad and Balanced Curriculum

28

> **To what extent does the current primary curriculum support pupils to study a broad and balanced curriculum? Should anything change to better support this?**
>
> The Early Years has a very rich and broad play-based curriculum which allows children to explore their environment, learning through doing and experiencing rather than in formalised and constrained classroom environment. This change from Early Years free-flow, to a more rigorous and formalised learning environment happens too soon for some children and not soon enough for others and the way that it is managed is important in encouraging the thirst for learning that is critical for all subsequent learning.
>
> As has already been mentioned Primary pupils in England face standardised government tests in four out of seven school years, more than in almost any other country, and this has a narrowing effect on the curriculum. Put simply schools prioritise the things that pupils are tested on, and children are only assessed on a narrow range of skills and knowledge.
>
> Community have noted before that standardised primary assessments do not have any supportive impact on pupils. They do not provide helpful or constructive feedback to the teachers in order for them to be supportive, and they have an unhelpful impact on formalising education during a child's formative years. According to a 2022 survey of school leaders undertaken by NAHT, just 8% of Head Teachers believe that SATs provide meaningful data about their school's performance. And teachers are unable to use the tests as diagnostics as they do not get the data immediately and some data is never released to the teacher.
>
> Education is not just about knowledge acquisition; it is not just about achievement against national standards. It is about developing skills, how to learn, how to live, how to communicate. What is it that we want young people to develop?
>
> The current assessment system dominates our curriculum development, but we need to be creative to think about the range of knowledge, skills and abilities pupils should learn at different stages, how these can effectively be assessed and how assessment can support teachers to do their jobs effectively.
>
> The current system is also skewed at certain pinch points towards assessment, meaning that the supposed Broad and Balanced curriculum can be narrow and restrictive for the 9 months leading up to Y6 SATs. And even in schools who take pains to not narrow the curriculum will deliver subjects at the same time each week, focussing on key subjects such as English and maths in the mornings when learning could take place throughout the day or throughout different ways with projects that focus on themes to expand and embed that learning?
>
> The way the SATs are prepared and administered makes it difficult for some children to succeed, due to neurodivergence and concentration issues, as well as learning difficulties and disabilities that do not qualify for or the school cannot afford to provide, additional classroom support. As a result significant numbers of children leave primary schools below the expected standard. In other words they are labelled as a failure at the age of 11 or before that age since the phonics screen requires children to retake the test the following year if they fail
>
> Even with a National Curriculum, there is little that is likely to change when the assessment value and the accountability value remains with such a narrow range of skills. As we said previously, perhaps there is a middle ground where the system can be reformed to address the main concerns

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with SATs without a significant overhaul of the system. More focus should be given to how we can address the breadth of the curriculum, the narrow focus on English and mathematics, and the length of SATs testing which is done over four days.

Education Policy Institute / More than A Score "Re-defining standards in English Primary Education" (2023)
https://www.morethanascore.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/EPI_MTAS-summary-paper_Primary-Standards_May23.pdf

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To what extent do the current secondary curriculum and, qualifications pathways support pupils to study a broad and balanced curriculum? Should anything change to better support this?

In 'normal' circumstances, it could be argued that the range of subjects and the breadth of curriculum content at secondary school is strong and provides opportunities to develop a solid grounding on which further study can be built. However, this ignores the reality of what happens in schools and how life affects students in those schools. And too many times, the incentives for schools run counter to the needs of the students, for example, EBacc and Progress 8 measures encourage schools to create pathways to ensure they meet the accountability measure rather than providing the best qualification route for the learner.

Arguably, the primary focus of education is to ensure that students have the ability to access learning and since most subject learning will be through reading, writing, speech and numeracy it is reasonable to assume that these need to be secure and functional. This is not the case for all students, many of whom are able to access creative subjects to great success without the assumed pre-requisite literacy and numeracy skills, and yet withdrawal from foundation subjects to focus on English and Maths is common practice.

The shortage of specialist teachers in many subjects and the overwhelming level of content means that in too many lessons, students are not being enveloped, engaged and enthralled by the subject, but perhaps subjected to it. And despite the best endeavours of online resources, students still respond best to an adult in-the-room.

As has already been mentioned, many students do not know what they want to do as they get older. The options process in Year 9, is not about developing the student, but about what the schools can reasonably offer due to limited staffing and funds. This is too often influenced by accountability with schools creating pathways to ensure they meet the measures rather than providing the best qualification route for the learner.

The wide range of subjects that are offered to students as they begin KS3 must be preserved to allow them to explore different areas of knowledge, develop varied interests, and discover strengths or preferences for particular subjects whilst also engaging in critical thinking, problem-solving, and independent learning.

Key stage 3 could be such a rich opportunity for learning, building on a solid foundation of primary education with enthusiastic learners. And whilst it should also equip students with the academic, social, and personal skills necessary to succeed in the later stages of education and life beyond school, too often it has become all about what comes next rather than about the moment and we need to elevate its importance within our schools in its own right.

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We can do this by recognising personal growth and place greater emphasis on social, emotional, and mental development which will help to support wellbeing and develop resilience. We also need to celebrate achievements outside subjects. Primary schools are good at this, and it is important to help students see that success is multi-dimensional.

Finally, we need to ensure that we connect learning to real world situations and scenarios to aid students in understanding its relevance. This will also help to improve engagement and behaviour.

30

To what extent do the current qualifications pathways at 16-19 support learners to study a broad curriculum which gives them the right knowledge and skills to progress? Should anything change to better support this?

In many ways the qualifications landscape at post-16 is too broad and there is an argument for simplifying it to reduce confusion and make it easier for students to navigate. One way to do this would be by further integrating academic and vocational learning so that students can access both academic and practical skills without having to choose between them too early. We have before argued that qualifications such as the International Baccalaureate (IB), offer a broad curriculum combining subjects from various disciplines and are respected for fostering well-rounded individuals with both academic and practical skills.

Community believe that greater flexibility is needed in the system, however, it will be essential that any move away from the current model be properly considered with all stakeholders, including representative bodies for staff, to avoid the debacle of the flawed ABS.

We do agree with the concept of literacy and numeracy being embedded in all subjects rather than delivered separately and there could be more integration of these skills into other subjects. Functional skills in English and maths could be woven into the broader curriculum, ensuring students develop practical literacy and numeracy skills that can be applied across different domains. This would ensure that English and maths skills are seen as essential, everyday tools, not just standalone academic subjects.

Drop-out rates are high in post-16 education, so one potential change could be to allow students to "test out" different subjects before committing fully. For example, offering a broader range of 'hybrid' or multidisciplinary courses in the 16-19 phase could allow students to study a mix of academic and vocational subjects, with the option to specialise later on.

We also need to develop skills and make critical thinking and research skills more systematically delivered across all subjects at 16-19. These skills are universally valued in both academic and vocational contexts. Schools and colleges could embed these skills into every subject, with specific modules or assignments designed to develop students' ability to analyse, synthesise, and evaluate information. The EPQ already does some of this but offering students more opportunities for independent learning and research would help them build essential skills for life beyond school.

In addition, introducing a cross-curricular focus on research, data analysis, and effective communication could better prepare students for a variety of career paths, whether they go on to higher education, apprenticeships, or into the workforce.

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31

> **To what extent do the current curriculum (at primary and secondary) and qualifications pathways (at secondary and 16-19) ensure that pupils and learners are able to develop creative skills and have access to creative subjects?**
>
> We have already stated that the primary curriculum has become increasingly focused on English and maths, particularly in response to the pressure of accountability measures and the data derived from SATs. The introduction of more prescriptive content, such as detailed grammar and mathematical fluency, has led to concerns that time for creative subjects has been significantly reduced in some schools and particularly in Y6.
>
> While literacy and numeracy are undoubtedly important, this intense focus on English and maths—especially on the components of writing, of formal grammar and phonics is very binary and drives out creativity so that it is easier to assess.
>
> Despite the value of creativity in developing critical thinking, problem-solving, and innovation, creative subjects are often seen as "nice-to-have" rather than "need-to-have" for success in education and future careers. As a result, these subjects are sometimes not given the same investment. And as has already been mentioned, their value is further undermined when students are withdrawn from foundation subjects to focus on academic subjects perceived as more critical for their future or for the school's accountability standings.
>
> As a result, creative subjects such as art, music, drama, and design and technology are often seen as secondary to core subjects. This narrowing of the curriculum means many students don't always receive the broad, balanced education that was designed.
>
> As mentioned earlier in our response, curriculum content at Primary schools should not solely be about developing the skills and knowledge required for secondary and 16-19 pathways. It should be a protected opportunity to ensure that all subjects have the same value and focus as English and maths.

32

> **Do you have any explanations for the trends outlined in the analysis and/or suggestions to address any that might be of concern?**
>
> Over the past 15 years, school funding has been cut to the bone. Support for students with special educational needs, learning difficulties and behavioural issues is more difficult to access than ever with long waiting lists for professional.
>
> These financial issues have forced schools to focus even more on the things that 'count'. Since schools are measured on progress derived from test outcomes this is what the dwindling pots of money have been spent on. Things like musical instrument lessons and residential trips now have to be paid for through fund-raising or by parents and carers. This impacts socioeconomically disadvantaged children more than children in more affluent areas, but even these are being disadvantaged by these cuts because students do not see their peers taking music lessons and do not know it is an avenue they can pursue.
>
> Members shared that they felt that accountability measures such as EBacc have forced schools to reduce access to the creative subjects and as already shared this has a dramatic impact on developing critical thinking, problem-solving, and innovation that is highly valued in post-16 study and in many careers.

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33

To what extent and how do pupils benefit from being able to take vocational or applied qualifications in secondary schools alongside more academically focused GCSEs?

We have already argued that there is benefit in integrating academic and vocational learning so that students can access both academic and practical skills without having to choose between them too early. Qualifications such as the International Baccalaureate (IB), offer a broad curriculum combining subjects from various different and sometimes contrasting disciplines and are respected for fostering well-rounded individuals with both academic and practical skills. We also want to see functional skills in English and maths woven through the broader curriculum to ensure that English and maths skills are seen as essential, everyday tools, not just standalone academic subjects.

Pathways such as this help to introduce flexibility into the system, however, as mentioned, any move away from the current model must be properly considered.

Again, we draw attention to the high rate of students who leave subjects they have chosen at post-16 and the model at GCSE is similar. Allowing students to "test out" different subjects before committing fully could be done once they have "left" after their GCSE exams.

We also need to develop skills such as critical thinking and research skills. These skills are important in both academic and vocational study. Schools and colleges could embed these skills into every subject, with specific modules or assignments designed to develop students' ability to analyse, synthesise, and evaluate information.

And finally, introducing a cross-curricular focus on research, data analysis, and effective communication could better prepare students for a variety of career paths, whether they go on to further education, apprenticeships, or into other workplace training.

34

To what extent does the current pre-16 vocational offer equip pupils with the necessary knowledge and skills and prepare them for further study options, including 16-19 technical pathways and/or A levels? Could the pre-16 vocational offer be improved?

As we have already stated, there has been an awful lot of change in the level 2 and level 3 course content and assessment methods in the past 15 years, not least the recent discussions around the Advanced British Standard. This creates instability in the system and makes it vulnerable to the whims of government. However, the recurring argument is around vocational learning and the way that it is valued by the accountability system and too often treated as a lesser route than an academic one.

The vocational pathways that have been developed over the past decade have close links to the world of work and yet many schools do not value them in the same way as academic courses. This means that the availability of vocational routes, pre-16 is not as broad as it could be. And there are still firmly-held perceptions by many students and parents that academic qualifications are the 'gold standard'.

The way the accountability system currently works plays a role in how the current secondary curriculum supports pupils to have the necessary skills and knowledge for future study because it does not allow vocational courses of substantial size to be recognised as bigger than a single GCSE so schools do not offer courses of certificate or diploma size due to a lack of funding and

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recognition of the qualification. Because of this schools can find it difficult to justify the necessary investment required to equip and resource many vocational subjects with dedicated classrooms, workshops, studios and other specialised spaces.

There needs to be more curriculum integration both pre-14 and pre-16. For example projects which combine academic research with skills based practical learning. And in Pre-16 courses there is no reason why students should not be able to work towards both vocational qualifications and GCSEs or A-Levels. For instance, a student could study a vocational qualification in engineering alongside a maths GCSE or science A-Level, allowing them to pursue both practical skills and academic knowledge in parallel.

Conversations with employer groups, has highlighted some obvious skills gaps such as basic IT skills – word/excel, critical thinking and imagination and the ability to speak to different members of the public/customers. These skills are things which are rarely taught in the academic subjects – arguably you cannot teach some of them, but they are more widely taught in vocational pathways. We need to ensure that vocational courses are recognised and valued by employers. Partnerships between schools, colleges, and industry bodies have existed in the past and can be used so that vocational qualifications are developed in collaboration with the sectors they serve. This would ensure that vocational courses are not just academically rigorous but also practically relevant to employers.

To improve the pre-16 vocational course offer in our schools, we need to ensure that our approach is holistic and open to both academic and vocational courses and that they are equally valued and resourced. This will keep schools up-to-date with both student interests and what the industry needs. Building stronger partnerships with industry, offering greater flexibility in course delivery, and ensuring that employability skills are embedded in vocational education, mean we can create pathways that are meaningful, engaging, and lead to rewarding careers for all students.

To be clear, Community is not saying that the purpose of education is to prepare pupils and students for the world of work, it is there to prepare them for their future – whatever that may look like, though for many it is likely to include a range of employment opportunities as well as further study. Indeed we need to prepare our learners for opportunities and jobs which very well may not yet exist.

Section 7: Assessment and accountability

35

Is the volume of statutory assessment at key stage 1 and 2 right for the purposes set out above?

As has already been mentioned, primary school pupils in England face more formal assessments than in almost any other country. According to the More Than a Score campaign, over three-quarters of parents believe there should be no statutory tests in primary schools and 93% of heads think the government should review the entire system. And the stress and mental impact of the exams on children and staff who are held accountable for the outcomes, far exceeds any benefit to the education system. 82% of teachers said pupils were distressed by SATs tests in 2023.

Schools already benchmarked pupils upon entry to their reception classes using a variety of data from pre-schools and nurseries, through observations and other resources. This provided a rich vein of information that could immediately be implemented to support pupils and staff to ensure that the necessary support is in place for everyone. The RBA delays active learning at the beginning of reception, removes key staff from the learning environment which may have a particularly negative impact on vulnerable pupils and worst of all it provides no formal information to the teacher or to the school to help them to better understand the pupil.

Again, we have noted that KS2 SATs can have a narrowing effect on the curriculum in year 6 which leads to higher stress and exacerbates behaviour issues. Put simply schools prioritise the things that pupils are tested on, and children are only assessed on a narrow range of skills and knowledge. Furthermore, the nature of the assessment is too formal. The way the SATs are prepared and administered makes it difficult for some children to succeed, due to neurodivergence and concentration issues, as well as learning difficulties and disabilities that do not qualify for or the school cannot afford to provide, additional classroom support.

In summary, the assessment volume in KS1 and KS2 places too much burden on pupils, schools and staff for too little gain. The assessments are needlessly formal bringing teenage exam-style assessment into the primary sphere before many pupils are capable of dealing with it. And there is little direct feedback to help support and develop learning. In the RBA and the KS2 STAs teachers would benefit from the immediate feedback on the pupil performance so that weakness can be addressed.

36

Are there any changes that could be made to improve efficacy without having a negative impact on pupils' learning or the wider education system?

Community is not only concerned with the volume of assessments in primary schools, but also with the high-stakes nature of the assessments. In particular we are concerned that these assessments are not for the benefit of the pupils nor the school but as an accountability tool which drives workload, stress and pits school against school in the most unnecessary manner.

We are not against assessment nor monitoring but we should start with the needs of children and young people and build a system that recognises their achievements rather than painting them as failures in the formative years.

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The way that achievement is measured, and what specifically constitutes attainment causes fundamental problems. The problem is that the assessments are not designed to assess what children know, but to measure how well they can perform in a test.

As has already been mentioned, schools value what is measured by tests. So what does that mean for knowledge and skills that are difficult to assess? SATs papers influence the lessons taught in Y6 shaping the curriculum and the timetable, stripping away the non-essential to focus on what will score, and the exam specification forms the basis of many schools' GCSE curriculum with all learning time dedicated to this, giving rise to the question how can we assess and measure all learning?

We have mentioned already the benefits that technology could bring to the assessment system. This could have multiple benefits if implemented well such as streamlining multiple assessments into one test. AI could be used to adapt the test to stretch more able learners and support less able ones whilst providing personalised feedback to support ongoing learning. This sort of system could also be used to lower the stakes of the assessment since it would be difficult for schools to compare outcomes, which would have the benefit of improving the happiness of staff and learner alike.

37

Are there other changes to the statutory assessment system at key stages 1 and 2 that could be made to improve pupils' experience of assessment, without having a negative impact on either pupils' learning or the wider education system?

In a similar way to has been mentioned in the previous question, we need to decouple pupil performance from accountability.

Assessment should start with the needs of children and young people and provide rich feedback to the teacher so that learning can be affected. Schools already gather feedback to inform their planning so why can we not trust this internal assessment? We also need to consider what it is that we are assessing, maths and English, the whole breadth of the curriculum, or also the skills we want young people to develop, including their sense of self.

One of the things that the COVID-19 pandemic made starkly clear is that children don't have equal access to quality study conditions when they are working at home, including a quiet study space and access to technology. The BERA model aims to support understanding for how poverty intersects with learning and influences what children need to thrive. Any changes we make to the assessment system must take into account the socio-economic and deprivation index of the schools and pupils.

38

What can we do to ensure the assessment system at key stages 1 and 2 works well for all learners, including learners in need of additional support in their education (for example SEND, disadvantage, EAL)?

It is worth going back to the essential question that underpins the assessment system at key stages 1 and 2, and that is what benefit does it bring to the children? Does it help to improve teaching and learning? And if not, should we be subjecting pupils to formal assessment at all?

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This would help to reduce stress, anxiety and teacher workload and reopen the curriculum which sees narrowing as testing increases.

Given that SATs and other statutory assessment forms a significant part of the key stage 1 and key stage 2 landscape it is important that they do function properly for schools and all pupils. But there are some pupils who will never be able to access SATs no matter how much additional support is afforded them. Community Union firmly believes that pupils with severe SEND, EAL learners, or those from disadvantaged backgrounds who are unlikely to benefit from SATs should be exempted from taking these tests. This would reduce the pressure on vulnerable children and prevent their scores from distorting overall data.

And even where pupils are able to take the tests, we believe that data must be contextualised with schools providing information about the external factors impacting their performance (e.g., poverty, family situation, mental health challenges). This could be done by schools submitting a contextual narrative alongside the SATs data, which provides a fuller picture of the child's circumstances and helps avoid unfair conclusions based solely on the test results.

39

Is the volume of assessment required for GCSEs right for the purposes set out above? Are there any changes that could be made without having a negative impact on either pupils' learning or the wider education system?

Any formal assessment system needs to assess the work of students in the most appropriate way possible. As has already been mentioned in this response, the pendulum has swung too far towards terminal exam assessments which, despite the assertions of Ofqual, are often not the best way to assess students.

Community is of the view that there is too much written based assessment and too much weight given to the final exams with not enough recognition of practical work or demonstration of practical skills, such as science experiments, speaking languages, presenting research, coding, or practical skills.

There is also a lack of creativity and critical thinking beginning in the primary curriculum and running right through into GCSE study. Too many GCSEs focus on memorisation and recall of facts, which can limit the development of creativity, problem-solving, and critical thinking — skills that are essential for both further education and employment.

We would like to see more assessments that reward creativity and problem-solving, such as in science, design and technology, or the arts, where students could demonstrate original thinking by designing solutions to a given problem. This could be assessed through a combination of project-based work, presentations, and discussions. And subjects such as business studies, computing, or social sciences, could carry out research, and present their findings and be assessed in part through engagement in real-world scenarios.

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What more can we do to ensure that: a) the assessment requirements for GCSEs capture and support the development of knowledge and skills of every young person; and b) young people's wellbeing is effectively considered when assessments are developed, giving pupils the best chance to show what they can do to support their progression?

As has already been stated, our exam system needs to be able to assess the work of students in the most appropriate way possible and this terminal exam assessments should not be the default assumption as they are often not the best way to assess students. We need assessment methods to evolve to better reflect learning, skills, and real-world application, while also considering the emotional and psychological impact of assessments.

The current focus on memorisation and recall is inadequate for capturing a full range of skills. GCSE assessments should ensure they also capture the application of knowledge, problem-solving, and creativity rather than just testing whether students can recall facts. This could be achieved through a resetting of the balance between examination and non-examination assessment, and by the wider use of technological solutions.

Terminal exams are intense and can be stressful, particularly for students who do not perform well in high-pressure situations. The last few years have seen high-profile news reports about the numbers of students suffering with clinical stress at exam times and steps need to be taken to address this within the system. A better balance between coursework, other non-examined assessments (NEAs), and terminal exams would allow students to demonstrate their learning over time and in different formats. This helps ensure that the assessment is more representative of a student's actual ability and learning journey.

By blending practical assessment and exam assessment we can also close the gap between so-called academic and vocation qualifications, since similar content is often studied it is just the method of working and the forms of assessment which differ.

Are there particular GCSE subjects where changes could be made to the qualification content and/or assessment that would be beneficial for pupils' learning?

Arts subjects such as music, drama and performing arts. These subjects are inherently practical and performance-based, but the current system often doesn't give enough weight to the development of practical work or the creative process.

Technology and Creative Design subjects would benefit from assessments which require students to demonstrate their ability to design, prototype, and create, yet these skills are currently only partly captured by final submissions.

Modern Foreign Languages typically focus on written exams and translation, with less emphasis on speaking, conversation and listening skills. This can disadvantage students who excel in oral communication but struggle with written language skills. We would like to see oral assessments carry more weight. Perhaps continuous speaking and listening assessments could take place throughout the course which would encourage students to use the language more naturally and improve their fluency.

Computing currently focuses heavily on theoretical understanding through written exams and any coding is also completed on paper. This does not adequately reflect the practical skills students need for real-world computing jobs.

There are clear benefits to shifting GCSE assessments in several subjects towards a more balanced, practical and project-based approach. Reducing the over-reliance on written exams, increasing the weight of coursework, and creating opportunities for creative problem-solving, real-world application, and collaboration will allow students to showcase a fuller range of their abilities. And it is not just those more practical subjects that would benefit, more traditional subjects such as Science and English could benefit from reform to the current model of assessment.

42

Are there ways in which we could support improvement in pupil progress and outcomes at key stage 3?

Community has real concerns around the nature of this question. All schools have their own monitoring systems which allow them to track student progress and attainment throughout KS3. What these systems do not and seemingly cannot take into account is contextualised data, for example disability, illness, bereavement or changes to the home life of the student. In short, they are crude, data driven numbers. And because this data is crude, we would argue that it does not provide the necessary data to confirm that pupils do not make progress in KS3?

Schools do monitor student performance, but outcomes are not and do not need to be measured through formal assessments therefore there will be some variability in KS3 data which is to be expected. Whatever method schools use to monitor progress, the fact is they do and are able to initiate interventions when these prove necessary. However, interventions can prove costly and often require additional staffing support which may not result in material gain for the accountability data, even if it has a positive impact on the individual.

Perhaps what we should be asking, is what can we do to ensure that KS3 is rich and engaging and supports students to enjoy learning so that they have a secure background knowledge when they begin their GCSE courses.

43

Are there ways in which we could support pupils who do not meet the expected standard at key stage 2?

Whilst schools work very hard to avoid labelling pupils, the fact is that the system identifies pupils who do not meet the expected standard, and for too many children this labels them as failures, a label which can remain with them for life. Therefore, a key change is to shift the language around pupils who don't meet the expected standard. Instead of framing them as failures or underachievers, we need to recognise their progress and encourage a growth mindset. This helps to build resilience and self-confidence, as well as creating an environment where students feel they are on a learning journey rather than being defined by a single test or outcome.

Where schools have the resources, offering holiday clubs or summer schools focused on key areas of learning can help close learning gaps and keep pupils engaged over long breaks. There is recent evidence of this from the Covid recovery programmes that schools ran in the summer of

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2022. And as long as they are fun and interactive, encouraging learning through games, projects, they can provide very helpful in closing the learning gap.

Libraries can also play a key role in supporting pupils. Libraries can offer a safe space for learning during lunchtime or outside of school hours, providing access to resources that students may not have at home, including books, computers, and educational games. Sadly, as already mentioned very few schools now have a properly staffed library and many community libraries are closing due to local authority funding cuts.

Again, although not part of the remit of this consultation, a significant amount of academic progress happens before children reach primary school, so it is vital to focus on early intervention from ages 0-5, especially for children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. We saw this in the previous Labour government's Sure Start Centres which provided support for families and ensured children had access to high-quality early education and development opportunities, including language development, social-emotional learning, and early literacy skills, because of the lasting impact they have on their educational trajectory.

44

To what extent, and in what ways, does the accountability system influence curriculum and assessment decisions in schools and colleges?

100%
Ofsted colours everything schools choose to do regarding the curriculum and assessment. It is not healthy and does not contribute to the broad and balanced curriculum that all of our children deserve. But Ofsted is just one part of the accountability system.

As we have repeatedly outlined, the accountability system is the major driver for school decisions. This is why children are withdrawn from foundation subjects, this is why the curriculum is shaped and narrowed at assessment times, this is why options processes focus students into routes that prioritise EBacc and Progress8, this is why funding is focussed on those courses that have the biggest impact on outcomes. The current system values what can be measured and since schools are rated on their outcomes this influences curriculum choice, staffing levels and additional support, funding and resources.

Even with a National Curriculum, we fear that little will change whilst the assessment value and the accountability value remain with such a narrow range of skills. More focus should be given to how we can address the breadth of the curriculum in all it's richness, rather than just valuing achievement outcomes. Because, despite the breadth of the primary curriculum just two areas are deemed important enough to assess pupil performance and school's accountability wholesale and it is little different at secondary schools where the focus is on EBacc and Progress8.

That is not to say that literacy and numeracy are not important tools, a solid understanding of how to read and write is often critical to accessing and understanding the wider curriculum offering, but as has been mentioned, because these are the areas on which schools are measured, they are areas of high stakes and this causes significant stress to be passed on to staff and often onto pupils as well.

Despite the value of creativity in developing critical thinking, problem-solving, and innovation, creative subjects are often seen as "nice-to-have" rather than "need-to-have" for success in education and future careers. As a result, these subjects are sometimes not given the same investment. And as has already been mentioned, their value is further undermined when students

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are withdrawn from foundation subjects to focus on academic subjects perceived as more critical for their future or for the school's accountability standings.

Indeed in some schools, members have reported that because of accountability measures, some learners with disabilities are encouraged to not be entered for some courses as their achievement, or lack of, may have a damaging effect on the school's overall outcomes.

The way the accountability system currently works plays a role in how the current secondary curriculum supports pupils to have the necessary skills and knowledge for future study because it does not allow vocational courses of substantial size to be recognised as bigger than a single GCSE, so schools do not offer courses of certificate or diploma size due to a lack of funding and recognition of the qualification. Because of this schools can find it difficult to justify the necessary investment required to equip and resource many vocational subjects with dedicated classrooms, workshops, studios and other specialised spaces.

We want to see wholesale reform of the accountability system from school level right up to national level, but this is far beyond the remit of this consultation. For the purposes of curriculum and assessment, we must make sure that everything we deliver is considered of equal value and importance so that no one thing is prioritised above any other. This will help to reduce the high stakes nature of some subjects and their assessments.

45

How well does the current accountability system support and recognise progress for all pupils and learners? What works well and what could be improved?

At the risk of repeating previous responses, it does not and cannot in its current form.

In its current format the accountability system is about outcomes derived from formal assessment, either SATs and primary assessment or GCSE and other recognised Level 2 qualifications. The problem with this system is it only values the data which is gathered, and this is based on a narrow range of assessment outcomes. This is a relatively inexpensive way for the Department for Education and Ofsted to collect data, but it is not the best way of judging pupil progress.

And while Ofsted inspections can drive school improvement, the inspection process is stressful and potentially demoralising for staff. The focus on inspection grades can sometimes overshadow the broader context of a school's work, particularly in areas like pastoral care or extra-curricular provision which means they are not always a reliable source of information about what a school is really like.

To be clear, the current system does have clear benchmarks, such as GCSE and A-level results, which are widely recognised by employers, universities, and vocational training providers. And whilst this potentially makes it easier to measure student achievement and progress at a national level this is only because we are measuring very simplistic data points at national level. This sort of data becomes increasingly unreliable the closer we get to individual schools and classrooms.

And there is an overemphasis on high-stakes exams, such as GCSEs and A-levels. These exams put significant pressure on students and teachers despite them only being a snapshot of pupil performance and unlikely to fully capture a student's abilities, particularly in areas like creativity, problem-solving, and emotional intelligence.

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And, as already mentioned, the pressure to meet academic performance targets can lead schools to narrow the curriculum, focusing heavily on subjects that are tested at the end of Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4. This can marginalise subjects like the arts, physical education, and vocational qualifications, even though these can be equally important for a student's personal and professional development. Additionally, the system tends to overlook the needs of students who excel in non-academic areas but may struggle with standardised exams.

A move towards more holistic assessment practices that incorporate teacher assessments, project-based work, and portfolios of student progress could provide a fuller picture of a learner's abilities, particularly for those who struggle with traditional exams. Such assessments could reduce the pressure on students and offer more meaningful feedback on their strengths and areas for improvement. Similarly, fairly valuing a broader curriculum that includes not only academic subjects but also the arts, physical education, and vocational education would better reflect the diverse range of skills and talents that students develop and can contribute to society.

We would like there to be a better understanding of and support for inclusive schools with recognition for how schools can demonstrate progress for disadvantaged students, including those with special educational needs. For example, schools could be held accountable for their efforts in providing support, but progress could be measured in more personalised ways that reflect individual starting points.

One thing that must happen is addressing the high-pressure environment created by Ofsted inspections and standardised testing. Together with workload, the accountability system is one of the biggest causes of teacher burnout causing them to leave education completely. Ensuring that teachers have more autonomy and flexibility in how they teach, along with more support and professional development opportunities, could improve both teaching quality and job satisfaction.

46

Should there be any changes to the current accountability system in order to better support progress and incentivise inclusion for young people with SEND and/or from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds? If so, what should those changes be?

As we have pointed out already, the current accountability system often fails to recognise the diverse needs of young people with SEND and/or from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and it can sometimes place undue pressure on schools that are working with the most vulnerable students.

Community is of the opinion that as long as appropriate support is available, children with profound and multiple learning difficulties and those with significant disabilities, amongst others, together with their peers benefit from a unified learning experience. Yes, the curriculum delivery will have to be modified, yes expectations may also have to be modified but it is right for all children to be able to learn together. However, it is wholly inappropriate to assume that the same assessment should be used for all pupils. This is the same as asking a fish to climb a tree. While it is important to monitor progress, the rigid use of mainstream assessments may not be a fair or accurate measure of their abilities or achievements.

It would seem logical then to disapply students with severe SEND from mainstream assessments, where appropriate, and instead implement alternative assessments that are tailored to their needs and abilities. Assessments that recognise what they can do, rather than penalising them because they are different. These could include portfolios, teacher assessments, or project-based work and

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would likely allow for a more accurate reflection of the student's individual progress, though consideration would have to be given to staff workload to manage this.

Consideration could also be given to how Ofsted assess and report on how schools support SEND students. This could include evaluating the resources and interventions in place, the quality of individualised education plans or EHCPs, and how well the local services are supporting the school to meet the needs of students with a wide range of SEND. Schools that invest in high-quality SEND services should be recognised for their efforts, even if their overall exam performance is lower than that of mainstream schools with fewer SEND students.

Similarly, one of the challenges that schools with higher numbers of SEND students or students from disadvantaged backgrounds face is lower attendance rates, which can be linked to the additional challenges these students experience, such as medical needs, mental health issues, or caregiving responsibilities at home. Currently, schools are held accountable for high attendance rates, which can penalise them if their SEND or disadvantaged students face difficulties in maintaining regular attendance. We need to ensure that the wider social context is understood and recognised to ensure that schools are not dissuaded from providing the right support to the most vulnerable pupils and students.

To better support students with SEND and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, the accountability system should become more flexible, inclusive, and responsive to the diverse needs of these learners. Changes such as disapplying students with severe SEND from mainstream assessments, making Ofsted inspections more focused on SEND provision, acknowledging the impact of attendance and socioeconomic factors, and offering greater flexibility in how schools are assessed for inclusion could help create a fairer, more supportive system. These changes would help ensure that schools are not only held accountable for academic results but also for how effectively they support the progress of all students, regardless of their background or challenges.

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Section 8: Qualification pathways 16-19

47

> To what extent does the range of programmes and qualifications on offer at each level meet the needs and aspirations of learners? a) Level 3 b) Level 2 c) Level 1 and entry level

48

Are there particular changes that could be made to the following programmes and qualifications, and/or their assessment that would be beneficial to learners: a) AS/A level qualifications b) T Level and T Level Foundation Year programmes c) Other applied or vocational qualifications at level 3 d) Other applied or vocational qualifications at level 2 and below

As we have said in the previous comments assessments, whatever qualification they are for, need to be appropriate to the subject and nature of the work being assessed. Examinations are not always the best and most appropriate way of doing this. For example there is little point doing a science exam that does not contain any practical demonstration or a music qualification that includes no performance.

And again, the content of A Levels needs to be carefully curated and refined to ensure that it is still fit for purpose, that it is not so full of content that all students are required to do is to regurgitate the facts they have acquired and that there is opportunity for enquiry and critical thinking that will support learners with employment or further study.

Sadly, the problems that affect A Levels have been transposed into T Levels too. The T Level content is huge and precludes students from doing any wider study. This means learners narrowing their learning into one key area at age 16 despite many not knowing what career they wish to pursue.

This has led to high drop-out rates for students according to an EPI report, with T Level students 20 per cent less likely to complete their qualification than students studying alternative qualifications, and with disadvantaged and female students particularly more likely to withdraw.

The ongoing independent review of T level content should put a particular emphasis on the pathways that appear to be performing less well, such as the Health and Science, and Education and Early Years pathways.

The report recommends what teacher unions have been saying for the past couple of years, that the government should pause the defunding of existing alternatives to T level qualifications. We also agree that this review should also consider the introduction of smaller alternatives to T levels, to allow a broader spectrum of access to high-quality level 3 provision.

Community believe that this is an opportunity to learn from some of the international systems. For example, in Denmark, students can switch between academic and vocational tracks more easily, and the system is designed to be flexible in terms of both course content and transitions between different stages. If a student in Denmark wants to change direction, they can often do so without having to start over completely. In England this could mean moving from a vocational course into A Levels, and could include clear pathways from apprenticeships into further education, and from vocational courses to higher education or specialized training.

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In Denmark, there is a strong collaboration between schools, vocational colleges, and employers, ensuring that students receive the support they need at each stage of their education. This joined up thinking ensures that learners are prepared for the workforce and can make smooth transitions between educational stages.

Level 2 vocational qualifications are often seen as a poor relation to GCSEs to be taken by those who cannot achieve in an academic pathway. Therefore, as has been mentioned, they are not offered in many schools due to lack of support from the parent community. In some areas they are not valued by some colleges and whilst they can count towards Progress 8 and EBacc, that is only true of "approved, high-value qualifications" and not the full suite of level 2 vocational offerings and certainly nothing larger than an award.

Please see previous answers for more full arguments in support of vocational learning alongside academic courses at both Level 2 and Level 3.

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How can we improve learners' understanding of how the different programmes and qualifications on offer will prepare them for university, employment (including apprenticeships) and/or further technical study?

It is crucial that learners are well-informed of the options available to them at every step of their education journey from Y9, GCSE and post-16. As well as programmes and qualifications that will prepare them for university, students need to be made better aware of vocational routes, apprenticeships and workplace or technical study that may be better suited to their future plans. Currently, there can be confusion and a lack of clarity about the pathways available, particularly between academic routes and vocational or technical routes. We need to ensure that students are provided with clearer information and better support, so they are able to make informed choices.

One of the key factors in improving students' understanding is ensuring that there is dedicated time for career guidance and exploration of different educational pathways within the curriculum. This could be through dedicated time in the curriculum for students to explore the full range of post-16 options, including university routes, apprenticeships, T-levels, vocational qualifications, and employment. Ideally, this should be integrated into careers education programs from Year 9 onwards though this is difficult at the moment due to the lack of prioritisation that careers education is given in England.

This is also reflected in the fact that students often lack the information they need to make informed decisions because the advice they receive may be fragmented, insufficient, or unclear. Many schools and colleges do not have access to qualified careers advisers who can offer guidance to students about the range of qualifications available and online programmes often provide so many options that they add to the confusion. It should be straightforward for clearer resources to be created that compare the different routes and the potential career pathways that each route can lead to. These resources should be easy to understand, with a focus on real-world examples of how different qualifications lead to specific careers, ideally linked to local employers who can provide first hand experiences.

Students need to hear from employers and industry professionals about the skills and qualifications they value most, as well as what career opportunities are available through various routes. This will help to demystify the options and show that university isn't the only pathway to success.

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Partnerships between different schools and further education colleges, as well as local apprenticeship providers are important. Education settings should not be in competition with each other. By working together they can ensure that students are regularly exposed to a variety of options. For instance, colleges and training providers could visit schools to run sessions on T-levels or apprenticeships, and employers could offer work experience placements that complement classroom learning.

Collaboration between schools, colleges, and employers is essential to ensure that learners are exposed to a range of opportunities and that qualifications are designed with employment and further education pathways in mind.

As we have mentioned repeatedly, there remains a societal stigma associated with vocational qualifications or apprenticeships, with some students and parents viewing them as "second best" compared to academic routes like A-levels. It is essential to normalise all pathways to success and demonstrate their value. This could be done through success stories of individuals who have followed non-university routes but have gone on to have successful careers. Especially if they are well known or alumni of the school or college.

And finally, it will be critical to engage parents since they play a critical role in influencing students' decisions. If parents have a better understanding of the qualifications available and their potential career benefits, they will be better able to guide their children in making informed decisions.

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To what extent is there enough scope and flexibility in the system to support learners who may need to change course?

The current education system in England, particularly at the post-16 level, has significant limitations when it comes to supporting learners who may need to change course or pathway after enrolling in a programme. While there is some scope for flexibility in certain areas, there are various barriers that prevent this flexibility from being widespread or easily accessible. These include funding issues, rigid course structures, a complex patchwork of qualifications, and limited collaboration between providers.

Many learners, particularly those who have not fully settled on their career aspirations or discovered their academic strengths, may find that their initial choice of course does not suit them. This lack of flexibility can be demotivating and can lead to disengagement or even dropping out. While some educational providers may allow students to change courses or pathways, many do not, particularly once the academic year has started. Moving from one A Level to a different one may be relatively straightforward, but wholesale change, particularly where chosen options run at conflicting times can cause major problems. Changing course can involve administrative hurdles, time lost in the transition, and a lack of available space in the desired programme.

As noted previously, qualifications, particularly academic ones like A-levels, are highly prescriptive and require students to follow a set course structure. This can be useful if a student moves geographic area and wishes to continue with their studies, but it leaves little room for students to pivot toward a different area if their interests or strengths change over time.

Funding is also an issue since it is often tied to the number of students enrolled in a particular course or programme. This creates financial pressure to maintain specific cohorts and limits the ability of institutions to accommodate learners who want to switch courses, especially if the new

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course does not meet minimum enrolment thresholds. This is particularly problematic in vocational or technical subjects, which may have fewer students overall.

Some students may be interested in a particular qualification but are unable to access it because it is not offered at their local school or college. Again this is particularly true for vocational qualifications, which may be offered in only a limited number of institutions due to the specialist teaching resources required.

But even before students have started a course there can be confusion. The sheer variety of qualifications can be confusing and students may struggle to understand which qualifications best align with their career goals, especially when institutions may offer different combinations of qualifications or have limited availability in certain subjects or fields. Conversely there may actually be too much choice. And while having a range of options can be a positive thing, it can also overwhelm students who are unsure about what they want to study or what career they want to pursue.

Even with many options, students often feel stuck once they make their choice because they cannot easily pivot toward another course or pathway if their interests change. The lack of flexibility is particularly notable in the transition from academic to vocational courses or from one vocational track to another. Similarly transitions between different types of providers, such as moving from a school to a college or from a college to an apprenticeship can create barriers to continuing education or training.

We could learn from Denmark's vocational education system, which is known for its high quality and strong integration with the labour market. Denmark places a strong emphasis on vocational education and training (VET) alongside academic education, and it has developed a system that allows for flexibility, smooth transitions, and strong connections with employers.

In Denmark, students can switch between academic and vocational tracks more easily, with the system designed to be flexible in terms of both course content and transitions between different stages. If a student in Denmark wants to change direction, they can often do so without having to start over completely. And there is a strong collaboration between schools, vocational colleges, and employers, ensuring that students receive the support they need at each stage of their education. This coordination ensures that learners are prepared for the workforce and can make smooth transitions between educational stages.

Maybe we could create more flexible pathways between academic and vocational qualifications (such as T-levels, apprenticeships, and A-levels), allowing students to move between them without losing time or credits. This could include clear pathways from apprenticeships into further education, and from vocational courses to higher education or specialist training.

There is a definite need for greater flexibility in the English education system to support learners who may wish to change courses or pathways. As seen from the EPI report, high drop-out rates are causing concern and improving flexibility would certainly help with student retention. However, financial constraints, limited course availability, and the complexity of qualifications do present significant barriers to such flexibility.

By learning from systems like Denmark's vocational education system—where there is greater integration between academic and vocational education, more flexibility in qualifications, and stronger links with employers—England could build a more responsive and student-centred education system. This would enable learners to make more informed choices, switch pathways with fewer barriers, and ultimately access the education and training they need to succeed in their careers.

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Are there additional skills, subjects, or experiences that all learners should develop or study during 16-19 education, regardless of their chosen programmes and qualifications, to support them to be prepared for life and work?

Arguably there is much that all students should learn about through their schooling and many skills that it would be beneficial for them to develop, however there remains a question about the education system's role in teaching life skills. Is it the role of a primary school to be teaching children how to clean their teeth when children don't start school until they are four or five years old? Surely this is a skill that parents should be demonstrating and supporting during the formative years and we need to ensure that whatever skills we do require learners to develop or study through primary, secondary or 16-19 education does not assume responsibility for something that is outside of a school's proper remit.

Having said that there are several key skills, subjects, and experiences that all learners should develop during their 16-19 education, regardless of the specific qualifications or career paths they choose. While academic and vocational qualifications are crucial for further study and employment opportunities, it is increasingly clear that young people need a broader set of competencies and experiences to be prepared for life and work in today's fast-paced, interconnected world.

Written and verbal communication is essential, especially the ability to articulate ideas clearly, listen actively, and communicate with diverse audiences such as colleagues, clients, or customers, as is the ability to work as part of a team. In schools and colleges this can be done through group projects, collaborative problem-solving, and teamwork-focused activities.

Increasingly learners need to be able to analyse situations, identify solutions, and think critically about complex problems. This includes resilience in facing setbacks and the ability to adapt plans when things don't go as expected. Even identifying sources requires ever more critical thinking to discover truth hidden amongst a web of information.

And people always need to be able to manage their time - time management, prioritisation, and meeting deadlines are crucial for success in both education and work.

We have previously mentioned the importance of numeracy rather than mathematics as a life skill. Understanding personal finance and budgeting is vital, but many young people leave formal education without the knowledge they need to manage their finances effectively. There is opportunity through subjects such as citizenship for students to be taught how to create and manage a budget, understand bank accounts and credit, and manage debts as well as knowledge about salary, tax deductions, and the implications of employment contracts ready for when students enter the world of work. And going further this 'financial literacy' could include understanding how to make informed decisions about loans, savings, pensions, and investments, as well as basic tax knowledge.

The ability to manage stress, deal with setbacks, and maintain a healthy work-life balance is essential for both academic success and long-term career progression. We are already seeing young workers who are prioritising their mental wellbeing and resilience training can help students face challenges in their education and future work environments. Mental health is important for our schools, with each school having a designated champion, the next step is to integrate wellbeing into the curriculum to help students recognise signs of mental health challenges in themselves and others, and to promote healthy coping mechanisms.

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The list of skills and knowledge could go on and on, but we must be careful to ensure that our colleges and schools are not overwhelmed with additional duties which are not within their remit. For example, everyday skills such as basic cooking, cleaning, managing household tasks, and self-care. These skills provide learners with the independence needed to thrive in their personal lives and whilst they are specifically taught to some learners to support them to develop independent living, the vast majority of learners should not require specific instruction in these skills through their education.

Our education system does need to have a strong emphasis on a broad range of skills, knowledge, and experiences that go beyond the chosen academic or vocational programme. From financial literacy and emotional intelligence to digital skills and cultural awareness, these competencies equip students with the tools they need to thrive in an increasingly complex, globalised world. By ensuring that all learners have access to these essential life skills, we can support them in becoming well-rounded individuals who are prepared for whatever paths they choose, however, this must all be balanced with course content, student and teacher workload and resources.

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Section 9: Other issues on which we would welcome views

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> **How can the curriculum, assessment and wraparound support better enable transitions between key stages to ensure continuous learning and support attainment?**
>
> The sociological impact of moving schools has a significant impact on pupils. This is made worse by changes in the way that learning is presented – moving from free flow to formalised learning, having one teacher for everything to having specialist teachers in different rooms, however most of this is successfully overcome thanks to the efforts of schools.
>
> As mentioned previously, Community has concerns about the value of KS2 SATs. Although we acknowledge that the data is commonly used to model outcomes at KS4, it is less commonly used to inform teachers of individual achievement and this can mean students revisiting learning that has already taken place, leading to disengagement. This could be minimised with good, clear and frequent collaboration and communication between feeder primaries and secondaries and a curriculum which builds on prior learning without repetition.
>
> By looking at the curriculum as a whole and considering the programme of study from Early Years through to the end of KS5 would allow learning to be better scheduled so that it can be built upon with skills and knowledge developing over time in a cyclical learning model.

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> **How could technology be used to improve how we deliver the curriculum, assessment and qualifications in England?**
>
> Community is of the opinion that assessment needs to be tailored to the needs of the subject or learning that is being assessed and flexible to meet the diverse needs of the learners. This means that a default position that assumes that exams are always the best and most reliable way of doing this is flawed as it is simply not always the most appropriate form of assessment, nor is it flexible and able to meet the needs of diverse learners.
>
> Understanding that we need a wide range of assessment methods is the first step to making sure that we recognise the learning that has taken place and can recognise that achievement. Technology can play a huge role here as assessments can be designed to be intelligent and responsive to learner needs.
>
> In primary schools, there is already an element of testing which is supported by technology. The Multiplication Test Check is entirely online and uses a randomiser to ensure that pupils take different tests but ones of the same difficulty, but this could go further. Smarter assessment design which assesses pupils on all of the SATs content could be considered. This would make it more difficult to anticipate questions and could decrease teaching to the test and curriculum narrowing. And using computer-based assessments has the potential to decrease the amount of time dedicated to testing.
>
> At GCSE this could be expanded to assess wider subject knowledge using computer-based assessments which adapt to the particular options that students are taking.
>
> This could be supported by the use of wider evidence such as coursework or e-portfolios, in order to build an understanding of children's learning over time and consider a broader range of knowledge and skills. Of course, real care needs to be taken with portfolio work to ensure that it

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does not drive additional workload for the teachers and there will need to be a careful balance so that the focus remains resolutely on teaching and not constantly on assessment, because it has been observed in the early years, that the continuous paperwork created by assessment can strain this balance.

However, an e-portfolio that is established in the Early Years and remains with the learner throughout their schooling could be a useful way of assessing when staff cannot rely on standardised tests. Teacher assessment complimented by e-portfolios made by the children themselves could support teachers in their decision making and provide valuable evidence to support achievement bringing trust back into the teaching profession.

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Do you have any further views on anything else associated with the Curriculum and Assessment Review not covered in the questions throughout the call for evidence?
Any further views

As was said at the very beginning of this response, it is a good idea to start at the beginning and look at the success of the EYFS and considering what can be learned from it. Starting with KS5 and working backwards presupposes that every piece of learning that takes place in Primary Schools and KS3 just feeds into the GCSE and post-16 curriculum but instead we must ensure that every stage has intrinsic purpose and value all of its own.

It is essential that all learning has value, not just academic outcomes, and that the process of learning itself, how to do it, why it should continue, and how it will benefit you in the long term, are recognised and developed throughout every experience not just in the classroom.

We know that humans can rarely sustain concentration of more than 20 minutes and for children and teenagers it is often much less and yet we schedule hour long lessons sometimes immediately following them with another. The pace and complexity of modern life – particularly social life integrated with social media – means that too many learners are unable to switch off at home.

School needs to lead the way in modelling good practice. There needs to be space to reflect, respond and react. The school day is so busy that even tutor time contains scheduled activities to occupy students. It may be that we need to teach learners how to be still and reflect. This sort of learning would help to support mental wellbeing and provide a necessary break in an otherwise overwhelming day.

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