

# Evolution and revolution

**A 10-year plan to reform the curriculum  
and assessment system in England**

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After three years in teaching, he moved into politics to work on policy development and research across the education, skills and welfare sector. This included roles at think tanks such as Policy Exchange and the Social Market Foundation, Pearson, G4S and working for an MP.

He subsequently spent two years as an advisor to ministers at the Department for Education, first under Michael Gove and then Nicky Morgan, where he helped to design and deliver new policies as well as improve existing ones. After leaving the Department for Education, he spent two years teaching at a Sixth Form College before moving back into education policy and research, first at the Reform think tank and then at Policy Exchange before deciding to launch EDSK.

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The views expressed in the report are attributable to the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of EDSK's advisory board or supporters. Any errors remain the responsibility of the authors.

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## Executive summary

Seeing as the Conservative Party is planning to replace A-levels and T-levels with an ‘Advanced British Standard’ while the Labour Party is planning a wide-ranging ‘curriculum and assessment review’, there is evidently a sense among politicians that our education system is in need of reform. That said, there is much less agreement on precisely what those reforms should entail. In recent years, EDSK has published five reports that have collectively analysed the strengths and weaknesses of the present approach to the curriculum, assessment and accountability in state schools and colleges. Based on our extensive research, this new report seeks to provide a balanced critique of the current primary and secondary education system so that both supporters and critics of the recent direction of travel can recognise that those on the other side of the debate have an equally valuable perspective to share.

### The case for the status quo

Supporters of the agenda pursued by successive governments and Education Secretaries since 2010 can point to a number of success stories. For example, England’s rise in the international rankings for tests such as PISA (reading, maths and science for 15-year-olds) and PIRLS (reading for 9/10-year-olds) suggests that many interventions over the last decade or so have contributed to these welcome improvements. These interventions include the promotion of ‘phonics’ as the dominant method for teaching reading in primary schools as well as the ‘knowledge rich’ approach that underpinned the new National Curriculum in 2014.

Opportunities for plagiarism and bias within GCSEs and A-levels had also become a serious concern by the time that the Coalition Government took office, with numerous studies questioning the trustworthiness of the grades being awarded to students. This led to a greater emphasis on academic rigour within the reformed versions of GCSEs and A-levels that were rolled out from 2015 onwards, including the switch from coursework to externally marked written exams in many subjects – a change that was criticised by some stakeholders but was nonetheless based on compelling evidence. The use of external assessments for SATs in primary schools has endured for the same reason. Furthermore, the creation of new accountability measures that focus on pupils’ progress (from ages 4 to 11 and then 11 to 16) instead of pupils’ attainment has also been widely acknowledged as a positive innovation.

The continued reliance on GCSEs to measure the performance of pupils and schools is also firmly rooted in the important purposes that these qualifications serve. More than 50 per cent of students move institutions at age 16 – a process that is supported by the existence of external assessments at this point in secondary education. Similarly, the specialisation into a smaller

number of subjects after age 16 (e.g. three A-levels) facilitates access onto single-subject university degrees. Without this specialisation, major changes may be required to the structure and content of university courses, including the possibility of an extra year of study and the associated costs that this would generate for both students and taxpayers.

## The case for reform

Irrespective of the benefits offered by the current education system, the drawbacks are hard to ignore. The lack of breadth after age 16 – where many students only study three A-levels, one BTEC, one T-level or one apprenticeship – is in stark contrast to almost every other developed nation, as is the absence of any compulsory subjects. Prior to this narrow diet at the end of secondary education, schools are faced with ‘complete content overload’ in the National Curriculum and GCSEs, with over half of GCSE teachers reporting that they struggle to get through the syllabus in time. The most startling example of content overload is T-levels, with a single T-level being equivalent in size to three A-levels. Both Ofsted and the Education Select Committee have published damning reviews of how T-levels have been designed and implemented, forcing the Department for Education (DfE) to recently announce an urgent review of the content of every T-level as drop-out rates have now hit one-in-three students.

Alongside the lack of breadth in subject choices, the current system appears unable to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of many young people. England is an international outlier in allowing 16-year-olds to drop all forms of English and maths rather than continuing to take them until age 18. Moreover, when pupils only need 47 marks out of 240 to ‘pass’ GCSE maths (higher tier), or 73 marks out of 160 to ‘pass’ GCSE English, it is hard to have confidence in these exams as a method of guaranteeing a basic level of literacy and numeracy. Meanwhile, ‘Functional Skills’ qualifications that explicitly aim to teach literacy and numeracy have been deliberately sidelined and the GCSE resits policy is widely regarded as having a negative impact on the three-quarters of students who end up failing the same exam (sometimes more than once). Some of the problems with literacy and numeracy can be traced back to primary education, with 40 per cent of pupils still failing to meet the ‘expected standard’ in reading, writing and maths before they start secondary school.

The relentless focus on academic subjects and accompanying relegation of technical and vocational learning to second-class status is another unwelcome feature of the current system. The dramatic decline in art, music, design and technology, drama and other related GCSE subjects has been well documented, yet the DfE has resolutely refused to treat these subjects as equivalent to supposedly more academic GCSEs in the sciences and humanities. The dominance of A-levels over other courses for 16 to 19-year-olds is another indication of how little value has been placed in recent years on non-academic pathways. Despite the

government's rhetoric, the proposed 'Advanced British Standard' would not resolve this problem, not least because it excludes apprenticeships and would force students who want to pursue a technical course down a separate channel.

The emphasis on high-stakes tests such as SATs and GCSEs has also promoted undesirable behaviours such as 'teaching to the test' and a narrowing of the curriculum to focus on test preparation – all of which can damage a pupil's education. Worse still, an increasing number of pupils no longer receive a broad and balanced curriculum from age 11 to 14 because more schools are teaching GCSEs over three years instead of two – a situation that ministers have complained about but failed to solve. The considerable time gaps between the high-stakes tests (ages 4 - 11 - 16) compound these pressures because the performance of both pupils and schools is essentially distilled down to these one-off assessments, thereby making them even more significant. As noted earlier, recording pupils' progress between these tests is sensible, but the DfE's current 'progress measures' contain serious flaws. For example, there is no progress data recorded for almost one-in-five primary schools, while secondary schools and colleges that only teach pupils from age 14 onwards are still being held to account for a pupil's progress from age 11 to 16 - creating an inaccurate view of their performance.

What's more, the enduring fixation with pen-and-paper exams as the dominant form of assessment in schools and colleges makes England look increasingly behind the times, with other countries such as Australia, Wales and Denmark having already switched to national digital assessments. Using regular online tests throughout primary and secondary school (particularly in reading and maths) is a far superior method of monitoring pupils' attainment and progress over time, yet ministers have not made any commitment to implementing online national tests despite the benefits they offer. The ongoing use of pen-and-paper exams is not helped by the increasingly absurd approaches to grading, with GCSEs using numbers (9-1), A-levels using letters (A\*-E), many vocational qualifications and apprenticeships using Distinction-Merit-Pass (sometimes with triple-starred variations) and T-levels handing out separate grades for each course component. Such inconsistency creates unnecessary confusion and complexity for students, parents, employers and universities.

## Conclusion

Regardless of which political party forms the next government, there will no doubt be a temptation to leave behind the legacy of previous administrations and set our education system on a brand new course. As this report explains, significant reforms are certainly needed to address the obvious limitations in the present approach to the curriculum, assessment and accountability. However, that is no reason to throw out the policy baby with the political bathwater, and future ministers should tread carefully when seeking to change

an education system that has many commendable features and has delivered strong outcomes in several areas. Consequently, this report aims to inform the thinking of policymakers in the next parliament by identifying the existing features of primary and secondary education from ages 4 to 18 that deserve to be protected in future while also highlighting those features that should indeed be reformed.

Some observers may question the need for large-scale reforms when schools and colleges are battling a funding crisis as well as a recruitment and retention crisis. Far from being a reason to ignore such reforms, many of this report's proposals – such as scrapping SATs and GCSEs and slashing the amount of curriculum content in all year groups – are intended to give students more time to enjoy their learning and give teachers more time to enjoy their craft by reducing the pressures that they currently face. As the title of this report suggests, the 'revolution' set out in its recommendations – including national online tests in primary and secondary schools and a four-year 'Baccalaureate' in secondary schools and colleges – would be delivered as a gradual 'evolution' over the course of a decade to ensure that there is enough time to build the new approach to primary and secondary education in England.

## Recommendations

### A new foundation for primary and secondary education in England

- **RECOMMENDATION 1:** To create a consistent and coherent approach to state-funded education in England, the system should be formally divided into three phases: Primary (ages 4-11), Lower Secondary (ages 11-14) and Upper Secondary (ages 14-18). This will underpin a single approach to the curriculum, assessment and accountability across primary and secondary education.
- **RECOMMENDATION 2:** In advance of the full package of recommendations in this report being implemented, the Government should set an immediate goal of reducing the curriculum content in all Key Stages across primary and secondary education by a minimum of 10 per cent in all subjects.

### A strong core of literacy and numeracy skills from 4 to 18

- **RECOMMENDATION 3:** To promote the development of core skills through primary school and into Lower Secondary education, SATs at age 11 will be replaced by online adaptive assessments in reading, spelling, punctuation and grammar (SPG) and numeracy. Pupils will take the new adaptive tests approximately once every two years, from Year 1 (age 5) to Year 9 (age 14).



- **RECOMMENDATION 4:** To encourage pupils to develop their writing skills from Primary into Lower Secondary education, writing will be formally assessed in Year 2 (age 7), Year 6 (age 11) and Year 9 (age 14) through ‘comparative judgement’ exercises.
- **RECOMMENDATION 5:** To make sure that everyone leaves school or college ready for work, study and life, all students will be required to study two compulsory subjects in Upper Secondary education: ‘Core English’ (literacy) and ‘Core Maths’ (numeracy). Students will sit an online test in Years 11, 12 and 13 in both Core English and Core Maths and must study them until age 18 unless they achieve the highest possible grade before then.

### **A clear purpose for Lower Secondary education (currently Key Stage 3)**

- **RECOMMENDATION 6:** To ensure that all pupils receive a broad and balanced education in Lower Secondary education from ages 11 to 14, the National Curriculum will be made compulsory for all state-funded schools delivering this phase of education including academies.
- **RECOMMENDATION 7:** To monitor their progress during secondary education, all pupils will take online adaptive ‘Progress Check’ assessments in Core English, Core Maths and almost all National Curriculum subjects at the end of the Lower Secondary phase (Year 9 / age 14). The results of these low stakes ‘Progress Checks’ will support pupils’ decision-making as they choose which subjects to study in Upper Secondary education.

### **The new Upper Secondary ‘Baccalaureate’**

- **RECOMMENDATION 8:** To put academic, applied and technical courses on a level playing field in Upper Secondary education, students in state-funded schools and colleges will progress through a four- year ‘Upper Secondary Baccalaureate’ (USB) from Year 10 to Year 13. The Baccalaureate will provide a rigorous and flexible framework in which students can select courses from a wide range of disciplines to suit their interests, abilities and aspirations.
- **RECOMMENDATION 9:** To allow students to gradually specialise in their preferred subjects, the USB will use a ‘slot’ system to signify how many courses need to be studied alongside Core English and Core Maths. Most subjects will be ‘single’ subjects i.e. fill one slot. The number of slots will reduce to allow more specialisation as a student progresses:
  - Year 10 – six slots
  - Year 11 – five slots
  - Year 12 – four slots
  - Year 13 – three slots

**The new 'slot' system for the Upper Secondary Baccalaureate that indicates how many subjects must be studied in each year**

	CORE ENGLISH	CORE MATHS	SLOT 1	SLOT 2	SLOT 3	SLOT 4	SLOT 5	SLOT 6
YEAR 13	✓	✓						
YEAR 12	✓	✓						
YEAR 11	✓	✓						
YEAR 10	✓	✓						

✓ = compulsory subject

- **RECOMMENDATION 10:** To promote a broad and balanced education for all students, minimum requirements will be applied in terms of which subjects are studied in the first year of the USB (Year 10). Alongside Core English and Core Maths, students must study:
  - Double or triple science (2-3 slots)
  - At least one humanity or language subject e.g. geography, history, French (1 slot)
  - At least one artistic or technical subject e.g. art, music, D&T, construction (1 slot)

This will leave 1-2 spare slots that students can fill with any other subject.

- **RECOMMENDATION 11:** Large technical subjects and apprenticeships will become available in Year 12 and will be 'double' subjects, filling two slots in the USB to account for their size. Students will only be able to choose one 'double' subject in Year 12 alongside two 'single' subjects to maintain a broad and balanced education.
- **RECOMMENDATION 12:** To significantly reduce the existing exam burden, students will only be externally assessed when they drop a subject or when they reach the end of the USB in Year 13.

- **RECOMMENDATION 13:** To support transitions between institutions at age 16, students can sit extra ‘transfer tests’ in addition to their Core English and Core Maths assessments in Year 11 to provide more information to prospective institutions about their current level of attainment.
- **RECOMMENDATION 14:** End-of-year assessments in the USB will be ‘digital by default’, meaning that students will take digital rather than pen-and-paper exams in the majority of cases. Subjects with a significant practical element (e.g. art, design & technology, engineering) will continue to use non-exam assessments where necessary. Digital assessments in the USB will typically last 1.5-2 hours for each subject.

### **A new accountability system for primary and secondary education**

- **RECOMMENDATION 15:** To create a more coherent approach to grading, a 10-1 scale (with 10 being the highest grade) should be used to assess all classroom-based subjects, starting from the new Progress Checks in Year 9 up to the end of the USB in Year 13.
- **RECOMMENDATION 16:** When they finish school or college, students will be given an ‘Upper Secondary Certificate’ that displays the grades that they achieved in all their courses during the USB from Year 10 to Year 13.
- **RECOMMENDATION 17:** To hold schools and colleges to account in a fair and transparent manner, the digital tests in primary and Lower Secondary education and the end-of-year assessments in the USB will be used to construct a new and fairer accountability system that consists of two main measures:
  - Progress – the average progress made by learners during their time at a school / college relative to their peers attending other institutions
  - Attainment – the average scores achieved by learners in their national tests

## 1. Introduction

*“Education is the closest thing we have to a silver bullet. It is the best economic policy, the best social policy, and the best moral policy. Increasing educational attainment boosts wages, increases life chances, and gives young people the best chance to succeed in life. This new approach to post-16 is the right thing to do for young people today, and the right thing to do for the country in the long term.”<sup>1</sup>*

Politicians making grandiose claims about their education reforms is hardly a new phenomenon, yet the announcement in October 2023 of the ‘Advanced British Standard’ (ABS) for 16 to 19-year-olds – “a new Baccalaureate-style qualification that takes the best of A levels and T levels and brings them together into a single qualification”<sup>2</sup> – was particularly striking for two reasons. First and foremost, the announcement came 13 years after a Conservative-led government had taken office, which raised obvious questions about why successive Conservative Education Secretaries since 2010 had apparently not realised it was ‘the right thing to do’. Second, it was claimed that “these final years of education shape aspiration and achievement for the rest of a young person’s educational life”,<sup>3</sup> which appeared to (perhaps conveniently) discount the role played by the previous 12 years of compulsory education in shaping a young person’s prospects.

That is not to say every element of the ABS was meritless. On the contrary, increasing the number of teaching hours, improving the prestige of technical education, making some form of English and maths compulsory to age 18 and creating a simpler system for young people are all laudable policy goals. It is also noteworthy that some of these ideas echo previous proposals by the Labour Party, including English and maths to 18.<sup>4</sup> Regardless, the ABS announcement left the strong impression that the present government believes they have already “transformed educational attainment in schools” up to the age of 16, so it was now merely a question of being “more ambitious in how we set up our 16-19 system to be world-leading” in order to finish what they started in 2010.

Needless to say, the belief that all is well in primary and secondary education before age 16 is not necessarily shared by others. Even before the ABS appeared, the Labour Party had announced in July 2023 that, should they form the next government, they would conduct a “full, expert-led review of curriculum and assessment that will seek to deliver a curriculum which is rich and broad, inclusive and innovative, and which develops children’s knowledge and skills”.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the ABS, though, this Review would “consider children’s education and experiences from the beginning of primary through to the end of compulsory education.”<sup>6</sup>

The Review is set to be based on the following five principles:

1. “An excellent foundation in core subjects of reading, writing, and maths.”
2. “A broader curriculum, so that children don’t miss out on subjects such as music, art, sport and drama.”
3. “A curriculum that ensures young people leave school ready for work and ready for life, building the knowledge, skills and attributes young people need to thrive. This includes embedding digital, oracy and life skills in their learning.”
4. “A curriculum that reflects the issues and diversities of our society, ensuring every child is represented.”
5. “An assessment system that captures the full strengths of every child and the breadth of curriculum, with the right balance of assessment methods whilst maintaining the important role of examinations.”<sup>7</sup>

In short, both main parties agree that our education system is in need of reform, but there is evidently disagreement about where, when and why any such reforms are needed.

It is not just political parties who have been calling for significant changes. Last year, a cross-party House of Lords committee published a report on the curriculum for 11 to 16-year-olds that called for, among other things, a reduction in the content and volume of exams at age 16, dedicated literacy and numeracy qualifications for pupils aged 14 to 16 and changes to the school accountability system such as abandoning the English Baccalaureate (EBacc).<sup>8</sup> Outside of Westminster, two other recent reports – from the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change<sup>9</sup> and the Times Education Commission<sup>10</sup> – have also put forward a raft of sweeping reforms in response to what they perceive to be enduring weaknesses in our education system.

To judge the merits (or otherwise) of these various proposals to reform the education system in England, this new report draws on the evidence accumulated by EDSK across several of our previous publications, including:

- [Re-assessing the future part 1: how to move beyond GCSEs](#) (2021)
- [Re-assessing the future part 2: the final years of secondary education](#) (2021)
- [Making progress: the future of assessment and accountability in primary schools](#) (2021)
- [Finding a NEET solution: how to prevent young people from falling out of our education system](#) (2022)
- [Examining exams: are there credible alternatives to written examinations?](#) (2023)

Having already constructed a strong evidence base through these earlier investigations, this new report from EDSK begins by assessing the arguments made by the current government's supporters and critics. To this end, the report opens with 'the case for the status quo', which pulls together a wide range of evidence used by the Government to justify their education policies over the past decade or so. Following this analysis, the report presents 'the case for reform', which outlines the criticisms levelled at the Government's agenda and related policy decisions over the same period.

Based on the evidence offered by both sides of the argument, the report will then determine which features of our primary and secondary education system from the ages of 4 to 18 should be protected in future and which features should be reformed. To conclude, the report will describe a package of recommendations that would deliver the necessary reforms to the curriculum, assessment and accountability across primary and secondary education while retaining the best aspects of the current arrangements. It is therefore hoped that this report will make a useful contribution to debates over how to improve our education system in the coming years.

## 2. The case for the status quo

Since 2010 successive governments and Education Secretaries have largely stuck to several specific goals and attributes that they wanted to see rolled out across primary and secondary education in England – some of which built on initiatives set up by the previous Labour administration and some of which were entirely new innovations. This chapter sets out the areas that supporters of these enduring approaches commonly cite as evidence of educational progress in recent years.

### A ‘knowledge rich’ curriculum

After the 2010 election, the Coalition Government decided to place a greater emphasis on ‘phonics’ as the most appropriate way to teach reading after it transpired that one-in-five children left primary school in 2010 unable to read at the expected standard.<sup>11</sup> While the use of phonics was instigated by the previous Labour government from 2006 onwards,<sup>12</sup> then Schools Minister Nick Gibb went a step further by investing government funds in additional training and resources from 2011 to 2013<sup>13</sup> and making the DfE review phonics programmes against ‘core criteria’ to promote the most effective schemes.<sup>14</sup>

The emphasis on phonics appears to have paid off as England has since made great strides in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). In 2011, England was placed 11<sup>th</sup> out of 45 countries that assessed 9 and 10-year-olds,<sup>15</sup> but by 2021 England had moved up to 4<sup>th</sup> place out of 43 countries.<sup>16</sup> England also saw an increase in overall performance, with the average score rising from 552 in 2011<sup>17</sup> to 558 by 2021.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the gap between the lowest-scoring and highest-scoring pupils in England has reduced over time, seemingly due to an increase in performance among lower-achieving pupils.<sup>19</sup> There has also been a reduction in the gender gap in reading performance, with girls outperforming boys by just 10 points on average in 2021 compared to 23 points in 2011.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to changing how reading was taught to primary pupils, the Coalition Government undertook a major review of the National Curriculum (NC) for pupils aged 5 to 14. This review was spurred on by a report in 2010 from Tim Oates, Group Director of Assessment Research and Development at Cambridge Assessment, which highlighted several weaknesses with the NC. In a speech shortly after its publication, Nick Gibb said that the report confirmed that an “acute overload of content” had resulted in “too much pressure to move through material with undue pace”, contributing to a “tick list mentality.” The report also argued that

having too many core topics and subjects “diluted and undermined” the curriculum, and that the link between testing and assessment was “too weak and inconsistent”.<sup>21</sup>

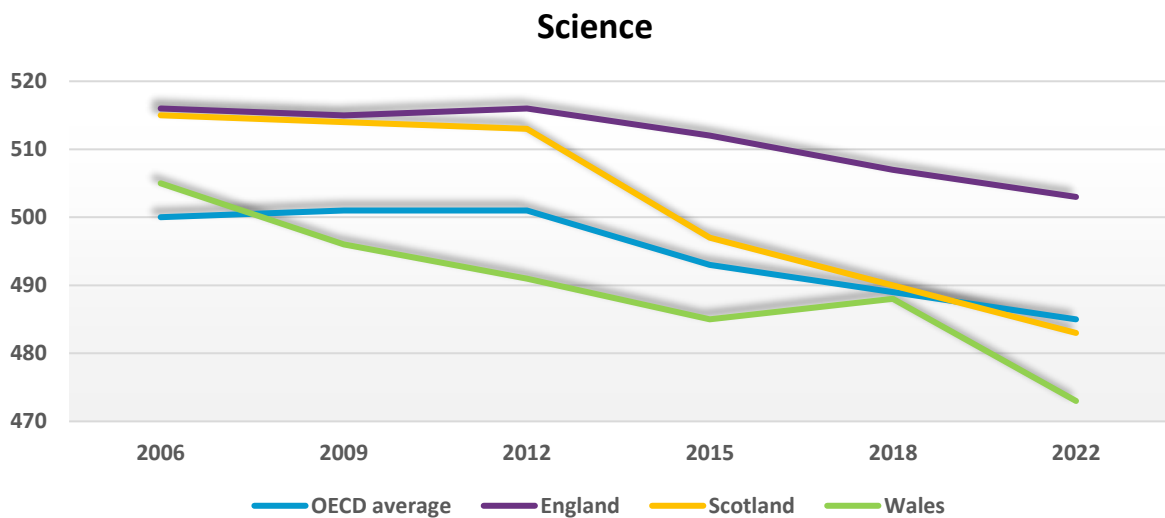
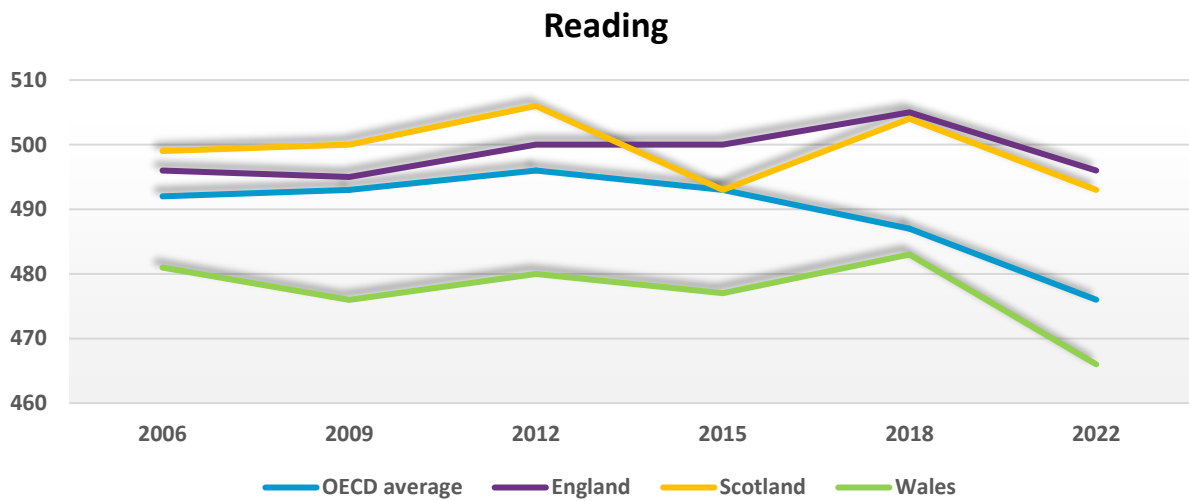
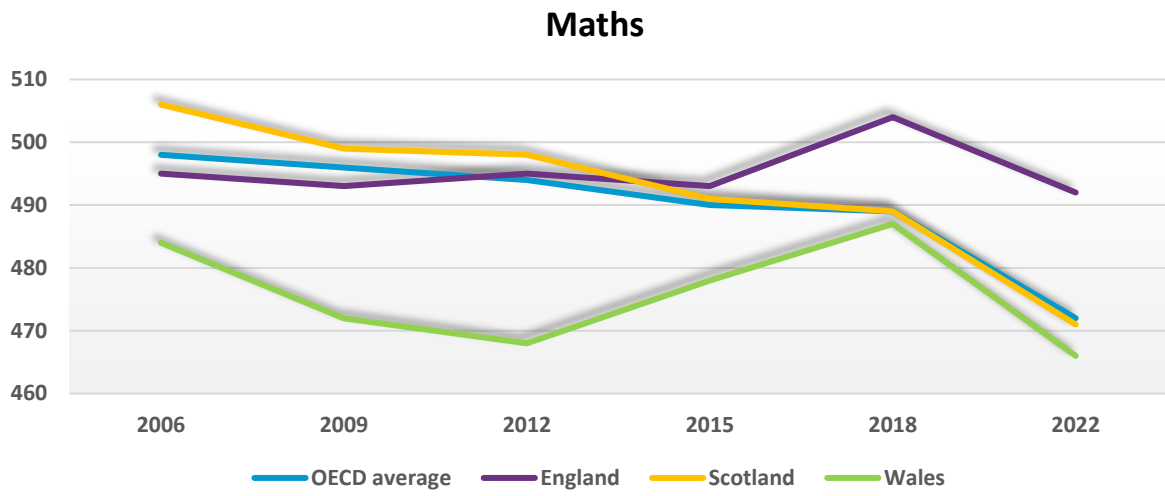
A review of the NC was formally launched in January 2011, with Nick Gibb voicing his concern about “too many children... still being let down”. He also noted that the attainment gap between rich and poor children was “stubbornly and unacceptably wide at all levels of education.”<sup>22</sup> What’s more, England was falling behind in the OECD’s Programme for International Assessment (PISA) rankings, having dropped from 4<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> in science, 7<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> in reading and 8<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> in maths.<sup>23</sup> Nick Gibb attributed these issues to a curriculum “thin on content and... not doing our children any favours.” To address these shortcomings, a new NC would be designed to “embody rigour and high standards” and “give every child the chance to gain a core set of essential knowledge and concepts.”<sup>24</sup>

The updated NC included more maths at an earlier age, English having a greater emphasis on spelling and Shakespeare, and slimming down the content in almost all subjects (excluding primary English, maths and science).<sup>25</sup> Following the introduction of the new NC in 2014,<sup>26</sup> England’s PISA performance has improved in both maths and reading, and England remains above the OECD average in maths, reading and science (see Figure 1 overleaf). Over this same period, Scotland and Wales – which do not have the same ‘knowledge rich’ curriculum as England – have seen their scores stagnate or decline. Following the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, all participating countries saw their performance decline in the most recent PISA results from 2022, although England’s deterioration was noticeably less stark than in Scotland or Wales or relative to the OECD average.

In response to the latest PISA results (released in December 2023), Nick Gibb said that England’s performance demonstrated the “phenomenal success” of the “evidence-led” education reforms that had been enacted since 2010.<sup>27</sup> In a comment article, he also claimed that they had “proved the critics of academic rigour wrong” as he hailed “an astounding achievement by England’s 15-year-olds” despite the pandemic.<sup>28</sup> Supporters of the current approach may also point to developments elsewhere in Britain as more evidence of the drivers of success in England. After Scotland’s performance in PISA deteriorated even further in the latest results, Scottish Education Secretary Jenny Gilruth unveiled plans to improve their curriculum, including strengthening the place of “knowledge” along with a “full scale update” to the maths curriculum.<sup>29</sup> After suffering dramatic declines in their PISA maths score, Wales introduced new numeracy tests in 2013 and 2014 that include an assessment of basic numeracy skills such as addition, multiplication and division. The Welsh government aimed to drive up standards by making these tests “clear, consistent and rigorous”,<sup>30</sup> which may have contributed to Wales’s subsequent improvement in maths before the pandemic.



Figure 1: Mean scores achieved by pupils in PISA tests



Meanwhile, the most recent results from the Trend in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) show that the average mathematics score for Year 5 pupils in England has increased substantially from 542 in 2011 to 556 in 2019.<sup>31</sup> There has also been an improvement in the performance of Year 9 pupils over this period (albeit less dramatic) with an average mathematics score of 515 in 2019 compared to 507 in 2011.<sup>32</sup> These results lend further weight to the idea that the reforms to the NC, particularly in primary education, have paid off in relation to higher academic standards.

Following the NC review in 2014, GCSEs and A-levels also underwent significant changes. In 2013, the Government outlined its belief that “the demands of GCSEs had lessened over time” and that GCSEs were “not giving our pupils the best chance to succeed”.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, there were concerns that a ‘learn and forget’ approach had been encouraged for A-level students due to a culture of exams and resits.<sup>34</sup> To address these problems, then Education Secretary Michael Gove overhauled all GCSE and A-level courses so that they focused on “more rigorous content” as well as making GCSEs “more challenging [and] more ambitious”.<sup>35</sup> The Government’s aim was for these changes to “address the pernicious damage caused by grade inflation and dumbing down” while also giving pupils, teachers, universities and employers “greater confidence in the integrity and reliability” of the qualification system.<sup>36</sup>

Not only was the content of the new GCSE English and maths designed to be more rigorous, the DfE also stated that “GCSEs will remain the primary qualifications that provide evidence of young people’s literacy and numeracy” and would ensure that students can “demonstrate fluency in the basics”<sup>37</sup> (e.g. spelling, punctuation and grammar in GCSE English). The first reformed GCSEs with their new specifications – in English language, English literature and maths – were taught in schools from September 2015,<sup>38</sup> with the remaining GCSEs and reformed A-levels rolled out over the next few years. Although there is no official data on teachers’ views of the reformed GCSE and A-level courses, a 2019 survey of 1,882 secondary teachers by TeacherTapp found that two-thirds were broadly positive about the reformed GCSE specifications, as they either strongly liked (15 per cent) or somewhat liked it (49 per cent).<sup>39</sup> This suggests that teachers are generally keen on having a rigorous and structured course for these high-stakes qualifications.

## A ‘broad and balanced’ curriculum

The goal of a ‘knowledge rich’ curriculum, which has underpinned policymaking since 2010, was promoted in parallel with an emphasis on ensuring that pupils receive a mostly ‘broad and balanced’ education. For many years, ministers have been committed to the notion that “a broad education is a good education: it is the basis for a child’s cultural inheritance and too

narrow an education can narrow a child's life chances."<sup>40</sup> Other stakeholders have shared this belief, including then Ofsted chief inspector Amanda Spielman who emphasised in a speech last year that "there's value in a broad and well-rounded curriculum, not just the subjects a child enjoys the most."<sup>41</sup>

Throughout primary school and the first three years of secondary school the list of compulsory NC subjects includes English, maths, science, design & technology, history, geography, art and design, music, PE, computing and languages.<sup>42</sup> Academies (state schools run outside of local authority control) are not required to follow the NC but must still deliver a 'broad and balanced' curriculum.<sup>43</sup> From age 14 onwards, pupils are able to choose which subjects they continue to study (typically GCSEs). In theory, pupils have complete freedom over what they study from age 14 to 16 (Key Stage 4), although the Government has introduced a range of measures to supposedly encourage pupils' education to remain 'broad and balanced'. These measures – such as 'Progress 8' and the 'EBacc' – form part of the accountability system for schools and incentivise them to enter pupils for "a set of subjects at GCSE that keeps young people's options open for further study and future careers": English language and English literature, maths, the sciences, geography or history and a language.<sup>44</sup> Secondary schools are then measured on the number of pupils that take GCSEs in these subjects, as well as how well their pupils perform in these subjects. In the years since Progress 8 was introduced there has been an increase in GCSE entries for EBacc subjects.<sup>45</sup>

Measuring the performance of schools in this manner was justified on the grounds that a broad and balanced curriculum is a feature of high-performing jurisdictions across the world. When the new NC was introduced, Nick Gibb claimed that it combined "the best elements of the world's most successful school systems, including Hong Kong, Massachusetts, Singapore and Finland".<sup>46</sup> He highlighted that "several high-performing countries, including South Korea, Japan and the Netherlands, ensure that a core curriculum of academic subjects is studied and then examined at the age of 16."<sup>47</sup> On that basis, the Government has maintained that pushing schools towards offering more academic subjects is the right goal as this delivers, in their view, a broad and balanced education, with students being allowed to specialise in other subjects and courses after age 16.

This hierarchy of academic over vocational courses was reinforced by the Government-commissioned review of vocational qualifications by Professor Alison Wolf in 2011. The review recognised "the value of practical skills as part of a rounded education" and that "the opportunity for young people to excel on a variety of dimensions ...should be encouraged" but nevertheless declared that "there should be no substantial degree of specialisation before the end of [Key Stage 4; age 16]"<sup>48</sup> – a view that ministers share to this day.

## The move towards external assessment

Alongside ensuring that pupils receive a broad and balanced knowledge-rich curriculum, there have been significant changes to national assessments. The most obvious change has been the move away from ‘internal assessment’ (typically done by teachers) and towards ‘external assessment’ (usually marked by external examiners).

Concerns over the use of internal assessments are longstanding. For example, SATs at the end of primary school use minimal internal assessment, with all but the writing assessment being externally delivered and marked. This reflects the fact that when teachers are asked to assess pupils’ performance for a high-stakes assessment there is a risk that they may “come under increasing pressure to make generous assessments for some or all of their pupils.”<sup>49</sup> What’s more, numerous research studies have found that internal assessment creates a risk of bias against pupils based on their characteristics such as gender, ethnicity or past performance when their work is marked by their teachers.<sup>50</sup> This bias is often subconscious and unintentional but it can be particularly harmful to the prospects of pupils from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

In secondary schools, earlier iterations of GCSEs had relied heavily on internal assessment such as coursework but – as [EDSK’s detailed research on this topic](#) has shown – this reliance was criticised due to the widespread opportunities that it created for plagiarism and inappropriate assistance from teachers and / or parents, which in some cases led to students having their coursework written for them.<sup>51</sup> In response, the then Labour government introduced ‘controlled assessment’ that often involved coursework-style tasks being completed under exam conditions. However, a review of controlled assessments in 2013 by the exam regulator Ofqual found that multiple problems remained, including “too many opportunities for plagiarism” as well as the potential for “too much teacher input”.<sup>52</sup>

In light of these findings, then Education Secretary Michael Gove argued that GCSEs were ‘open to abuse’<sup>53</sup> and that there was a need to “move away from a discredited model and move towards one that is fair and has more rigour.”<sup>54</sup> The reformed GCSEs - introduced from 2015 onwards - are therefore assessed predominantly (indeed, solely in many subjects) by written examinations completed under supervision and marked externally. There was also a shift towards GCSEs being assessed at the end of the two-year course, with no modular elements.<sup>55</sup> Reformed A-levels took a similar approach as ministers sought to “end the treadmill of repeated exams” in September, January and June.<sup>56</sup> Together, these changes were intended to create more time for teaching and learning as well as increasing the objectivity and fairness of the exam system more broadly.

## Accountability reforms

Alongside the updated NC and reformed suite of GCSEs and A-levels, a new accountability system has been introduced to supposedly measure how well schools are performing. The most notable change has been switching from emphasising pupils' attainment to emphasising pupils' progress when judging a school's overall performance. For example, primary schools are assessed not only on how many pupils reach the 'expected standard' in reading, writing and maths, but also on the progress that pupils make from the end of Key Stage 1 (age 7) to the end of Key Stage 2 (age 11). Meanwhile, the main secondary school performance measure is Progress 8 (introduced in 2016), which measures the progress that pupils make from their SATs scores at age 11 up to their examinations at age 16 in GCSEs and other courses, although pupils' attainment is still recorded and published.

In a speech in 2017, Nick Gibb asserted that as a result of these reforms "schools are now judged based on the outcomes and progress they achieve for their pupils, giving a truer picture of the achievements of schools", adding that the new accountability system "rewards schools for their achievements and incentivises behaviour that improves outcomes for pupils, maintaining standards and allowing for innovation."<sup>57</sup> This view is widely shared among academics and statisticians, with the FFT Education Datalab noting that Progress 8 is "much more equitable to pupils than threshold measures of raw attainment – such as the percentage of pupils achieving 5 or more A\*-C grades including English and maths, the dominant measure prior to its introduction."<sup>58</sup>

Other new accountability measures are also thought to have had positive effects. The 'phonics screening check' (introduced in 2012) tests whether primary pupils in Year 1 (age 6) can decode i.e. understand letters and sounds to an appropriate level, which will allow them to read many short words. The latest PIRLS international reading results found that pupils who performed well in their Year 1 phonics check went on to perform well in PIRLS, and that a pupil's phonics check score was the strongest predictor of their PIRLS performance, followed by the number of books a child has at home. In response to this finding, Nick Gibb said that "the approach the government has taken, in the face of quite a lot of opposition from the vested interests, has been successful in seeing children's reading improving in this country."<sup>59</sup>

## Preparing pupils for their next steps

One of the main functions of GCSEs at age 16 is to help students determine their next steps in terms of post-16 education. For example, the exams can help students identify the subjects in which they perform most strongly. In addition, more than 50 per cent of students move

institutions at age 16,<sup>60</sup> and GCSEs give these students a recognised qualification with which to apply to a new school or college. Similarly, GCSE results give post-16 institutions a recognised means with which they can differentiate between applicants on a broadly fair and consistent basis, as do A-levels and other Level 3 qualifications at age 18 when it comes to applying to university, apprenticeships or employment (GCSE results also typically form part of such applications). Consequently, the ‘signalling’ function of these qualifications is crucial for supporting the choices and actions of both students and institutions. Conversely, the absence of external exams – particularly at age 16 – could have many unintended (and almost certainly negative) consequences for these same stakeholders.

Like GCSEs, the structure of post-16 education plays an important role in preparing students for their next steps. Most obviously, the specialisation into a smaller number of subjects after age 16 is a central feature of secondary education in England and one that has existed for many years. Tim Oates has argued that “having specialist education in the 16-18 phase, where learners typically specialise in three to four subjects for two years, brings better performance at university” because of the depth of content that students can study.<sup>61</sup> Without this depth of study, significant changes may be required to the structure and content of university courses, including the possibility of an extra year being added onto degrees (and the associated costs that this would incur).<sup>62</sup> On that basis, it is unsurprising that the Government has continued to allow specialisation in the final years of school and college alongside all the other reforms that they have introduced since 2010, despite recent pressure from many independent reports calling for A-levels to be replaced by a ‘Baccalaureate’ requiring students to study a minimum of six subjects.<sup>63</sup>

### 3. The case for reform

As the previous chapter demonstrated, there are several features of primary and secondary education in England that are commendable in terms of their impact on pupils' outcomes. Nonetheless, this chapter will explore the limitations of the existing education system, and in doing so highlight several areas in need of reform.

#### The lack of breadth and balance in 16-19 education

Although a 'broad and balanced' education has been a frequently stated priority for the Government throughout their reform journey since 2010, last year's announcement of the new ABS recognised that "we have not prioritised as broad and balanced a curriculum for 16-19 year-olds as we have pre-16."<sup>64</sup>

A-levels were first introduced in 1951 to address "the problem of premature specialisation"<sup>65</sup> and encourage a "gradual tapering off" in the number of subjects studied through secondary education.<sup>66</sup> However, A-levels have been unable to deliver this goal and the 'cliff edge' reduction in subject breadth from Year 11 to Year 12 is more prominent than ever. Students on an academic pathway go from studying approximately eight GCSE subjects<sup>67</sup> down to only three subjects at A-level – with just 4.7 per cent of students studying more than three subjects in 2023.<sup>68</sup> In addition to acknowledging the cliff-edge reduction in subjects, the original ABS announcement accepted that England's post-16 system is "narrower than in most other comparable countries" as there are "no mandatory subjects – whereas across the OECD, students typically study around seven subjects."<sup>69</sup> For example, students in France studying the *baccalauréat général* can choose three courses alongside the requirement to study six common subjects (French, philosophy, history & geography, languages, sciences and sport).<sup>70</sup>

As well as studying fewer subjects than in many other countries, 16 to 19-year-olds in England also receive less teaching time. On average, schools and colleges receive funding for 1,280 hours of teaching time over two years. In Italy and Canada, students of the same age receive around 1,700 hours and in France and many US states it is even higher at over 2,000 hours across two years. Moreover, students in Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Finland and Sweden all receive more hours of teaching time than students in England.<sup>71</sup> Such comparisons are deeply unflattering and suggest that major investment is still required.

The lack of breadth in 16-19 education is not confined to the academic pathway. On the contrary, the situation is arguably even worse for students who do not follow the A-level route



such those who progress to an apprenticeship, T-level or BTEC. Students on technical and vocational programmes can have their education narrowed even further by dropping from eight GCSE subjects down to just one subject from age 16 up to 18/19. Again, this approach makes England an outlier compared to other developed countries, as even those that prize the quality of their technical education and apprenticeship programmes still require students to study a broad array of subjects. For example, Switzerland, Germany and Austria require apprentices to complete some ‘general education’ (e.g. German, maths, business studies) alongside their vocational training.<sup>72</sup>

## Too much content within courses and qualifications

GCSEs are a core component of the English education system and their rigour is laudable, yet there is a ‘complete content overload’<sup>73</sup> within these qualifications. A survey in 2022 of 3,769 teachers by TeacherTapp found that 57 per cent were either unable or ‘just about’ able to complete teaching their course prior to the commencement of GCSE exams.<sup>74</sup> A separate survey of 1,882 teachers found that 76 per cent felt there was too much content in their subject, with history teachers being the most discontented (95 per cent).<sup>75</sup> Teachers have also reported that pupils are ‘turned off’ by the amount of content they must learn and that the course specifications are ‘letting down’ those who are less academically able.<sup>76</sup> Some schools have chosen to deliver fewer subject options for their pupils “in response to the increased content in the reformed GCSEs”.<sup>77</sup> Ironically, Nick Gibb had recognised the importance of cutting down the amount of content during the 2014 NC reforms, as discussed in the previous chapter, but this thought process was apparently not applied to the reformed GCSEs being rolled out at a similar time.

With such a vast amount of content included in many GCSE specifications, pupils are then having to be assessed with lengthy exams. At the end of Year 11, it is common to sit 25 to 30 hours of exams, which can be “a stressful experience for many pupils”.<sup>78</sup> As a result, GCSEs are an expensive system to maintain, costing schools around £230 million last year.<sup>79</sup> With pupils required to spend a further 2-3 years in compulsory education beyond age 16, investing so much time and money in GCSEs is increasingly difficult to justify even if some form of external exams at age 16 is important for the wider education system.

After years of silence on this issue, the Government stated within their ABS announcement last year that they “recognise that GCSEs can be onerous for students and teachers, which can detract from the time available for teaching and learning”. Consequently, ministers were keen to “look at where [GCSEs] can be streamlined, while still retaining their inherent rigour.”<sup>80</sup> Some tentative ideas for reform were floated, including a reduction in “the number and/or



length of papers that children sit, thereby saving time spent on exams and on marking” as well as adopting “digital solutions, such as on-screen assessment”.<sup>81</sup> However, in the subsequent consultation on the details of the ABS (published in December 2023), these potential reforms had been removed, suggesting that the Government remains reluctant to admit or act on the problems that the current crop of GCSEs have created.

It is not just GCSEs that are weighed down with excessive content. The ABS consultation called for A-level courses to be slimmed down to the point where they were “covering at least 90% of the [existing] content”, which was deemed to be perfectly feasible while still maintaining “sufficient depth of content to support onward progression”.<sup>82</sup> What’s more, numerous concerns have been raised about T-levels. An Ofsted thematic review found that the “high level of content” in these new courses was proving problematic.<sup>83</sup> This is perhaps unsurprising as, although they vary in size, T-levels can require over 900 Guided Learning Hours (GLH) across the two-year programme<sup>84</sup> compared to a single A-level requiring 360 GLH over the same period.<sup>85</sup> The announcement from the DfE in April 2024 that they would urgently review the “volume of content” in every single T-level is a clear indication of how poorly these qualifications were designed.<sup>86</sup> The Education Select Committee in Parliament highlighted that around one-fifth of the first cohort of T-level students dropped out because the qualification proved too challenging for those with lower academic attainment or Special Educational Needs and Disabilities,<sup>87</sup> while more recent data suggests the drop-out rate has now risen to one-in-three students.<sup>88</sup>

Concerns about T-level students struggling to complete their courses are being further amplified by the Government’s decision to continue defunding other vocational and technical courses, which could potentially leave students without an alternative to T-levels or A-levels in future. That said, the ABS consultation signalled that the Government may now be willing to alter the way that T-levels operate. The consultation proposed that most academic subjects within the ABS will be available as ‘Majors’ (approximately the size of one A-level) or ‘Minors’ (half an A-level), whereas technical programmes would be available as ‘Double majors’ (roughly two A-levels).<sup>89</sup> If future technical courses were equivalent in size to two A-levels rather than three A-levels (as per existing T-levels), it would reduce the burden on students as well as freeing up more time to study other subjects alongside technical courses – something that the ABS consultation also wishes to deliver.

Aside from the excessive content seen throughout secondary education, primary schools also face a significant burden from the NC in Key Stages 1 and 2. Although quantitative research on this topic has been limited, it is frequently asserted that the NC in primary schools contains more content than is realistically able to be covered effectively. For example, some reports have suggested that “many in the primary sector feel [the NC] has led to primary schools

being deluged with content to cover, without the necessary funding, time and support to deliver it". In addition, the lack of capacity and specialist subject expertise in some primary schools means there is a risk of "things becoming tokenistic" when it comes to covering the whole curriculum, while others openly admit that "the national curriculum is probably oversaturated."<sup>90</sup> Reflecting these attitudes, a survey of 2,800 primary school teachers by TeacherTapp found that over half of respondents wanted to remove topics such as Roman numerals and detailed grammar instruction from the curriculum.<sup>91</sup>

Professor Dylan Wiliam, a key adviser to the Government during the development of England's current NC, told a research conference in 2020 that "there is no doubt that there's far too much stuff in our curriculum", adding that the desire to "make sure there's enough stuff in the curriculum for the fastest-learning students to be occupied all year [means that] there's far too much for most students". According to Professor Wiliam, this leads to a situation in which "some teachers just teach the curriculum, they meter it out and they go from beginning to end, and 20 per cent of the kids get it and the rest don't - I think that's logically consistent but immoral."<sup>92</sup>

## Concerns over literacy and numeracy skills

As noted in Chapter 2, the Government set out to make the reformed GCSEs more demanding and challenging while also ensuring that the content improved literacy and numeracy skills and met the needs of both high and low achievers. However, many pupils still struggle to pass the reformed GCSE English and maths despite the grade boundaries being incredibly low in some cases. For example, on last year's GCSE 'Higher' maths exam (supposedly accessible to all ability levels) pupils only needed 47 marks out of 240 to achieve a Grade 4 (pass). On last year's GCSE 'Foundation' maths exam (aimed at lower achievers, with less challenging questions and the highest grade being capped at 5) pupils needed just 147 out of 240 marks to get a Grade 4. Meanwhile, achieving a Grade 4 in English language required pupils to achieve 73 marks out of 160.<sup>93</sup> This suggests that the content for these exams is far too challenging for a significant proportion of pupils taking them.

With such low marks required to pass GCSE English and maths, it raises serious questions about whether policymakers can have confidence in GCSEs as a means of ensuring that a basic level of literacy and numeracy has been reached – even by those who pass their exams. In truth, the warning signs about a lack of focus on literacy and numeracy skills were evident many years ago. In the 2013 consultation on the reformed GCSE English and maths courses, only 46 per cent of respondents agreed that the mathematics content incorporated the right level of numeracy for progression and only 39 per cent agreed that the proposed English content covered the key elements of literacy needed for employment and further study.<sup>94</sup>

If literacy and numeracy are accepted as important objectives but GCSEs are not able to fulfil this function, an alternative qualification already exists in the form of 'Functional Skills' courses from Entry Level to Level 2 (GCSE standard) that are awarded on a Pass / Fail basis.<sup>95</sup> The content of Functional Skills qualifications is supposed to be more applicable to real-world scenarios, including employment.<sup>96</sup> However, these qualifications are only available to pupils after age 16 if they achieved a Grade 2 or below in their GCSE English and / or maths (and if their school or college offers them).<sup>97</sup> The reason that these qualifications are not offered to 14 to 16-year-olds is that they do not contribute to the Progress 8 measure of school performance because GCSEs are deemed to be the only valid 'English' and 'maths' qualification for this age group. As a result, some pupils could be failing to develop literacy and numeracy skills due to the exclusion of Functional Skills from this Key Stage.

Pupils who score a Grade 3 in their GCSE English and / or maths (just below a 'Pass') are required to resit their GCSE exam(s), but few students go on to improve their grade. In the 2023 summer exams, just 16.4 per cent of 17 and 18-year-olds who resat GCSE maths secured a Grade 4 or above and only 25.9 per cent did so for GCSE English.<sup>98</sup> Ofsted has previously stated that "the impact of repeated 'failure' on students should not be underestimated" particularly in relation to their confidence and self-esteem.<sup>99</sup> Expecting pupils to repeatedly resit exams that very few go on to pass seems misguided and may in fact be detracting from the goal of helping all pupils, particularly lower achievers, to develop these crucial skills.

Not only are many pupils not passing GCSE English and maths, England is also an outlier in allowing age 16 to be the end point for studying these core subjects rather than continuing to take them until age 18, as many other countries do. Of those who achieved Level 2 (i.e. passed their GCSE) in English by age 16 in 2021, just 21 per cent continued to study the subject after age 16, while the figure was 25 per cent for maths.<sup>100</sup> In the original ABS announcement in October 2023, the Government recognised that "we need to go further... to prioritise a strong, consistent core of knowledge" including maths and English.<sup>101</sup> This led them to propose that in future English and maths should be compulsory for all pupils up to age 18, albeit with courses "available at different levels" to suit different pupils' abilities.<sup>102</sup>

While this notion of studying English and maths until age 18 is promising, it does not consider literacy and numeracy at the earlier stages of education. As far back as primary school, many pupils do not manage to achieve the 'expected standard' in reading, writing and maths combined. In 2023, just 60 per cent of Year 6 pupils met this standard, meaning that 40 per cent of pupils were not performing at the expected standard in these core skills as they entered secondary school.<sup>103</sup> This is potentially setting these pupils up for further difficulties as they progress through secondary education. If any government wishes to see sustained

improvements in literacy and numeracy, creating a strong core of these skills from primary into secondary education will therefore be a vital component of future reforms.

## The imbalance between academic and technical subjects

For many years, the Government has explicitly prioritised academic subjects over technical and vocational courses – particularly in the 11-16 phase. The focus on academic subjects within Progress 8 and the EBacc is “overly restrictive and demotes to second-tier status subjects that bring breadth and balance and enable the development of essential skills.”<sup>104</sup> What’s more, these accountability measures incentivise schools to “focus their resources on a narrow set of academic subjects” which “constricts the take-up of creative and technical qualifications”.<sup>105</sup> The recent House of Lords committee on the 11-16 curriculum expressed concern at the “dramatic decline”<sup>106</sup> in the number of pupils taking [creative and technical] qualifications, with a significant drop in the number of pupils taking subjects such as music and drama<sup>107</sup> while entries for GCSE Design and Technology have fallen by more than 70 per cent since 2010.<sup>108</sup>

With these accountability measures in mind, it is unsurprising that academic qualifications such as GCSEs dominate the curriculum. Technical Awards are “high quality level 1 and 2 qualifications that provides 14 to 16 year olds with applied knowledge and practical skills”.<sup>109</sup> However, just over 380,000 Technical Award certificates were awarded in 2023, compared to over 5.4 million GCSE certificates.<sup>110</sup> This stark contrast in fortunes between academic and technical courses is even harder to justify when the DfE’s own analysis has shown that technical qualifications for this age group can have a positive impact on pupils who take them, including a 23 per cent reduction in unauthorised absences and a 62 per cent reduction in permanent exclusion, with a similar pattern for pupils with Special Educational Needs.<sup>111</sup>

The lack of parity between academic and technical routes continues into post-16 education. The original ABS announcement accepted that “for a long time, governments have claimed technical education is equal to academic, but in practice it is not”,<sup>112</sup> adding that “it is very hard for it to be equal if it is separate, and even harder if it is over-complicated”.<sup>113</sup> There are around 7,300 qualifications available to 16 to 19-year-olds, and this complex landscape is said to have “perpetuated a lack of parity across academic and technical routes.”<sup>114</sup> After years of resisting calls to address this issue, the Government has finally admitted that change is needed. The ABS announcement proposed a new approach that would “bring together technical and academic routes into a single framework”<sup>115</sup> with the option to study a predominantly academic or technical programme, or a combination of the two.

Regrettably, the subsequent ABS consultation contained proposals that recreate many of the existing problems. Rather than a single ABS programme, the consultation put forward two separate programmes: the 'Advanced British Standard' to provide an academic pathway, and a separate 'Advanced British Standard (occupational)' route for those pupils "who are clear that they want to specialise in one subject area".<sup>116</sup> What's more, the consultation completely ignored the role of 16-19 apprenticeships by not incorporating them at all into the new and supposedly cohesive post-16 system. In other words, there is little prospect of the ABS helping to tackle the enduring imbalance in the value attached to different pathways.

## The impact of high stakes tests on schools

While the use of high-stakes assessments in primary and secondary education offers several benefits, particularly in terms of monitoring standards over time, the current emphasis on high-stakes assessments can promote undesirable behaviours in schools due to the pressure to perform well. For example, teachers can spend too much time 'teaching to the test', meaning that "the focus of lessons will be narrow, with teachers coaching their pupils on examination technique, question spotting, going over sample questions... and generally focussing on teaching... in a way best calculated to maximise marks in the test."<sup>117</sup> Teaching to the test can also narrow the curriculum because additional time and resources are directed at subjects (or even parts of the curriculum within subjects) that are most likely to be tested. Former Ofsted chief inspector Amanda Spielman has previously warned that in some cases "teaching to the test, rather than teaching the full curriculum, leaves a pupil with a hollowed-out and flimsy understanding."<sup>118</sup>

These issues can manifest in different ways. In primary schools, Ofsted has found that the narrowing of the curriculum can lead to "intensive, even obsessive test preparation for Key Stage 2 SATs that in some cases started at Christmas in Year 6."<sup>119</sup> In secondary schools, the pressure to achieve good GCSE results can lead to the Key Stage 3 curriculum (ages 11-14) being shortened. In 2017, research by Ofsted showed that around a quarter of pupils were having to choose their GCSE options at the end of Year 8, meaning that "a considerable number of pupils will be experiencing only two years of study... possibly never to study [some] subjects again."<sup>120</sup>

Nick Gibb has spoken out against such practices and maintains that shortening Key Stage 3 is "wrong" as "young people need that broad array of subjects for those full three years".<sup>121</sup> The House of Lords 11-16 curriculum committee came to the same conclusion, as they believed it was "vital that pupils experience a wide range of subjects and curriculum content up to the age of 14 to keep their future options open, inform their subsequent choices and ensure they

receive a broad and balanced education.”<sup>122</sup> Regardless, schools are not breaking any rules by shortening Key Stage 3 and are indeed acting rationally in response to the incentives that the high-stakes accountability system has created.

‘Teaching to the test’ and a narrowing of the curriculum are compounded by the large time gaps between the various high-stakes national tests: seven years from the Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA) at age 4 (and previously four years from the Key Stage 1 tests at age 7) to SATs at age 11, then a further five years from SATs to GCSEs at age 16. These gaps mean that the national tests can take on even greater significance for teachers and schools because several years of schooling are essentially distilled down to how well pupils perform in these one-off tests, and the scores achieved by pupils are often used to judge the performance of schools as much as the pupils themselves. That is not an argument against high-stakes testing per se, but rather the precise configuration of national tests that England has adhered to for many years. The ongoing dispute over the shortening of Key Stage 3 is a useful illustration of how a high-stakes test at the end of five years of secondary school can have a considerable (and unwanted) ‘washback’ effect on the curriculum for pupils who are still several years away from sitting the same test.

### **A lack of fairness in ‘pupil progress’ measures**

While the change of emphasis from measuring attainment to measuring progress is welcome, the existing progress measures are starting to creak. As a result, tracking pupils’ progress in a fair and consistent manner is becoming increasingly challenging, and in some cases is no longer possible. Progress is generally measured by the difference in a pupil’s performance between two separate one-off national assessments (e.g. Key Stage 2 SATs at age 11 to GCSEs at age 16). However, such assessments only occur intermittently throughout primary and secondary education. The demise of Key Stage 1 SATs at age 7 means there will now be a seven-year gap between the RBA (age 4) and SATs, followed by a five-year gap from SATs to GCSEs at 16. These significant time intervals are hugely problematic because many aspects of a school can change drastically over such a long period of time (e.g. a new headteacher). This means that even the most recent pupil progress data may lack validity when making a judgement about a school’s performance because the data could be reflecting aspects of a school’s teaching and learning as far back as seven years ago.

In primary schools, the gap between the RBA and Key Stage 2 is especially pertinent. Measuring a pupil’s progress from the RBA up to SATs only functions correctly if a primary school educates a pupil for that entire seven-year period, but not all primary schools cater for pupils aged 4 to 11. For example, there are many infant (age 3-7) and junior (age 7-11) schools



that do not fit into the standard '4-11' mould, meaning that the RBA-to-SATs progress measure is of no use when assessing a school's performance. Around 3,500 primary schools (1 in 5) do not fit into the assumed 4-11 model, so there is no longer any way to capture the progress of their pupils.<sup>123</sup> In addition, 20 per cent of primary pupils in England move school at 'non-standard' times of year (i.e. not at the end of an academic year),<sup>124</sup> which is likely to further undermine the value of the current approach to measuring pupil progress. These fundamental weaknesses in primary school progress measures have yet to be addressed, despite the obvious risk that the Government's current approach means that underperforming schools could go unnoticed.

In secondary schools the gap between Key Stage 2 SATs and GCSEs means that our understanding of some institutions' performance is badly flawed. Depending on the local area, pupils can switch between secondary schools and colleges at either age 12, 13, 14 or 16, yet the accountability measures for secondary schools only consider the full 11-16 age range. Consequently, a pupil may attend a school or college aimed at 14 to 18-year-olds such as a University Technical College (UTC) for two years leading up to their GCSEs (ages 14-16), but the Progress 8 measure means that the UTC is made accountable for their pupils' progress over the whole 11-16 age range. 168 secondary institutions in England admit pupils between the ages of 12 and 14, representing almost 5 per cent of secondary institutions,<sup>125</sup> but the current progress measures do not fairly reflect their contribution to a pupils' education.

Despite his praise for the concept of UTCs, former Ofsted Chief Inspector Michael Wilshaw was well aware of the possibility that UTCs might "become a dumping ground for the difficult or disaffected".<sup>126</sup> Although Michael Gove was not a fan of UTCs either during or after his stint as Education Secretary, he too accepted that "students whose poor academic prospects might hamper league table performance have been directed towards UTCs and higher-performing contemporaries have been warned off".<sup>127</sup> In short, the current secondary school progress measures can unfairly penalise certain schools and colleges by making their performance look significantly weaker, as they are being held accountable for any problems that their 'difficult' or 'disaffected' pupils faced in other institutions.

## The reliance on written exams

The reliance on written high-stakes assessments in primary and secondary education is plainly evident, but in recent years there has been a quiet movement towards introducing digital assessments - albeit on a small scale. The 'multiplication check' introduced in 2022 requires all Year 4 pupils to complete an on-screen test to assess whether they can recall multiplication tables up to 12 x12.<sup>128</sup> The RBA also relies on technology - one device is used

by the teacher administering the assessment, while another is used by the pupil to respond to some of the questions they are asked.<sup>129</sup> There are also plans (albeit slightly delayed) to convert the whole RBA into a digital assessment.<sup>130</sup>

GCSEs and A-levels are still primarily assessed through written exams in many subjects, although there have been some tentative signs that change may be on the way. In the ABS announcement and consultation documents, the Government stated that they were considering adopting “digital solutions, such as on-screen assessment” for GCSEs.<sup>131</sup> Similarly, the leading exam boards have stated their intentions to move towards digital GCSEs. Pearson Edexcel has set the ambition for all GCSEs to “have both paper-based and onscreen formats” by 2030.<sup>132</sup> AQA has stated that “moving to the digital exams is the next step” and that they plan to replicate their existing exam papers on-screen.<sup>133</sup> OCR has also set out plans to launch the first solely on-screen GCSE in 2025 in computer science to “allow for more authentic assessment” of programming skills.<sup>134</sup>

While these steps are welcome, other countries have long since moved beyond relying on written exams by not only introducing national digital assessments but also making them ‘adaptive’. In adaptive assessments, the difficulty of the questions adjusts during the test to match the proficiency of the pupils i.e. correct answers typically lead to a harder question, whereas incorrect answers lead to an easier question, and so on throughout the assessment. This adaptive approach offers a personalised assessment to every pupil, motivating them to succeed while also accurately capturing their attainment. What’s more, adaptive tests open up opportunities for pupils to take their assessments at different times of the academic year – a considerable blessing when compared with every pupil in the country having to sit the same test at the same time, and all the logistical challenges and financial costs that this entails.

To illustrate how far other countries have progressed in this regard, all national tests for primary and junior secondary school students in Denmark have been online and adaptive since 2010.<sup>135</sup> More recently, Australia has transitioned their national literacy and numeracy assessments to being computer-based and adaptive<sup>136</sup> and Wales has replaced their paper-based national tests in numeracy and reading with adaptive online assessments.<sup>137</sup> These countries have shown how digital assessments are far superior to paper-based tests in terms of monitoring pupils over time rather than recording a pupil’s performance at a single point in time after several years of schooling. Across these three countries digital assessments typically cover students from Year 2 / 3 up to Year 9, with the assessments taking place intermittently for pupils in Denmark<sup>138</sup> and Australia<sup>139</sup> as opposed to annually in Wales.<sup>140</sup> Compare this level of technological progress with England, where ministers have not made any commitment to pursuing online national assessments, let alone adaptive assessments, save for a vague mention of the potential for future “innovative” assessment methods.



## Confusing approaches to grading

Another challenge, particularly in secondary education, is the variety of grading systems in place across different qualifications and pathways. GCSEs use a numerical 9-1 scale (with 9 being the highest grade), yet A-levels continue to use letter grades (as GCSEs used to do) ranging from A\*-E, with A\* being the highest available grade. Alongside this disjointed approach for academic subjects, vocational and technical courses have an even greater variety of grades. Applied General Qualifications (AGQs) for 16 to 19-year-olds use different systems depending on the type and size of the course. These are often ranked from D\* (Distinction\*) to M (Merit) to P (Pass), but larger BTEC qualifications incorporate up to three letters such as D\*D\*D\* down to PPP for the BTEC National Extended Diplomas.<sup>141</sup> At the same time, apprenticeships use different systems depending on the occupation, although Distinction-Pass and Distinction-Merit-Pass are typical options. Adding to the complexity of this landscape is T-levels, which use different scales for different elements of the qualification. These include an overall grade ranging from Distinction\* to Pass, a grade for each occupational specialism ranging from Distinction to Pass, and a grade for the 'core component' of their course ranging from A\*-E.<sup>142</sup>

This assortment of approaches to grading inevitably creates complexity and confusion. Parents are expected to understand and keep up with changing grading scales at different stages of their child's education and across different pathways. Meanwhile, employers and universities are expected to understand how grading works for a huge variety of qualifications and may be unable to compare applicants without this knowledge. In the ABS announcement, the Government accepted that this complex landscape is a problem and they want to "consider carefully how to design the grading that students will receive" in the ABS to ensure that "both employers and universities can understand individuals' achievement".<sup>143</sup>

The subsequent ABS consultation outlined an intention to create a grading scale that was "simple to understand and consistent across subjects" as well as being "recognised and have currency with employers and FE and HE providers".<sup>144</sup> This commendable goal will not come about without overcoming the Government's ongoing reticence to acknowledge the value in a consistent grading system across all subjects and pathways throughout secondary education, which would include rethinking the approach to GCSEs and A-levels.

## 4. Recommendations

This report has demonstrated that many elements of our primary and secondary education system are desirable and valuable, yet this should not be used as an excuse for avoiding discussions of the problems that continue to hamper pupils and schools. The task facing any government that wants to review the curriculum, assessment and accountability system in England is therefore to keep hold of the elements of our current approach that are beneficial while introducing new reforms to mitigate (or even eliminate) the existing drawbacks. The following lists summarise what this report has identified in terms of the case for and against the status quo.

### THE POSITIVE FEATURES OF PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION THAT SHOULD BE RETAINED BY FUTURE GOVERNMENTS:

- **Pupils receive a broad and balanced education** for most of their time in school courtesy of the National Curriculum and the breadth promoted by GCSEs at age 16.
- The reforms instigated over the past decade or so have created **rigorous and demanding curricula** across the vast majority of subjects available in primary and secondary schools.
- **Core subjects such as English and maths are prioritised** in both primary and secondary school accountability measures to ensure that schools continue to place a greater emphasis on these crucial subjects.
- The widespread use of **robust externally marked assessments** avoids the risk of bias found in internal assessments, thereby giving pupils the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding in an objective manner.
- An **emphasis on exams conducted under supervised conditions** helps to protect against plagiarism and increases the fairness and reliability of the assessment because students are judged on a 'level playing field' in most subjects.
- **The accountability system aims to incentivise schools to help all their pupils progress as far as possible** rather than focusing solely on pupils' final attainment.
- **Pupils being able to specialise in the later years of secondary education** allows them to choose the subjects that are most helpful for their progression to university, employment, an apprenticeship or further education.
- Having **national assessments at age 16 facilitates the switch between institutions that many students make after their GCSEs**, particularly in areas of the country where there are few 11-18 schools.

## **THE NEGATIVE FEATURES OF PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION THAT SHOULD BE REFORMED BY FUTURE GOVERNMENTS:**

- The **'cliff edge' reduction in the number of subjects taken in post-16 education** severely curtails the breadth of a student's education, with as little as three A-levels, one T-level or one apprenticeship being permissible for the whole post-16 period.
- Too often there is **an excessive amount of content in the National Curriculum and in both academic and technical qualifications in secondary education**, which puts unnecessary pressure on teachers and students.
- The **sheer volume of exams that students must take, particularly at age 16**, places a heavy burden on them and their teachers.
- **Large numbers of students are still leaving school or college with limited literacy and numeracy skills**, and the ability to drop both English and maths at age 16 reduces the progress that even higher-achievers make in these core skills.
- **Vocational and technical subjects have been explicitly downgraded** to the point where there is now a two-tier qualification system in secondary schools and colleges.
- There is **a lack of clarity about the purpose of Key Stage 3 (ages 11-14)**, with many schools teaching it over two years instead of three even though this significantly reduces the breadth of the curriculum.
- The **long gaps (up to seven years) between national assessments** encourages 'teaching to the test' and a narrowing of the curriculum, even in instances when the outcome of the assessment is not consequential for pupils.
- **Existing measures of pupils' progress have serious flaws**, as thousands of schools do not have any progress data while other institutions are being unfairly held to account for pupils' progress during the years when they were taught elsewhere.
- The reliance on pen-and-paper tests that require all students to sit the same exam at the same time after several years of schooling is **poorly suited to monitoring the progress of pupils over time**.
- **The absence of a coherent approach to grading, particularly in secondary education**, has led to a confusing system from the perspective of pupils, parents, employers, universities and other stakeholders.

The recommendations described in the remainder of this chapter will therefore seek to combine the best features of the current primary and secondary education system with a package of reforms that address the worst features of the current system.

## A new foundation for primary and secondary education in England

### RECOMMENDATION 1

To create a consistent and coherent approach to state-funded education in England, the system should be formally divided into three phases: Primary (ages 4-11), Lower Secondary (ages 11-14) and Upper Secondary (ages 14-18). This will underpin a single approach to the curriculum, assessment and accountability across primary and secondary education.

There have been many advances in the performance of pupils in England since 2010, but the educational journey from age 4 to 18 remains worryingly disjointed in several respects. The complicated post-16 landscape, confusion over the role of Key Stage 3, the inability to measure how pupils are progressing over time and the ‘cliff edge’ created by the enduring obsession with GCSEs are just some of the reasons to question the present approach. If the goal is to improve the education system as a whole, the first step must be establishing strong foundations that bring clarity and coherence to every stage of a pupil’s journey.

The most viable way to create a coherent system is to legally divide education into three distinct phases: **Primary** (ages 4-11), **Lower Secondary** (ages 11-14) and **Upper Secondary** (ages 14-18). These phases will apply to all state-funded schools and colleges in England. As will become evident throughout the recommendations in this report, establishing these distinct phases will bring numerous benefits, including:

- A single curriculum offer for pupils regardless of which state-funded institutions they attend during primary and secondary education
- A unified approach to assessment and accountability that measures the performance of pupils and schools in a fair and consistent manner from when they start primary school up to the end of compulsory education and training at age 18
- A more clearly defined role and purpose for each part of a pupil’s journey from age 4 to 18, particularly the initial years of secondary education (Key Stage 3)

Given that this report has criticised the ‘cliff edges’ in our education system, especially at age 16, it would be unwise to recreate the same issue after introducing these three phases. On that basis, there will be a clear emphasis throughout this recommendations chapter on ensuring that progression from one phase to the next is as smooth as possible to avoid the existing disruption that many pupils experience – particularly as they switch institutions (within primary education, after primary education or in the later stages of secondary education). Similarly, although the proposed Upper Secondary phase from 14 to 18 may be longer than the existing phase from 16 to 18, the way in which pupils progress through this four-year period will be designed in such a way that it too promotes a smooth journey for all pupils

regardless of which qualifications and pathways they choose. In addition, having every pupil in state-funded schools and colleges studying their chosen subjects within the same Upper Secondary phase will mean that academic, applied and technical courses will at last be operating on a level playing field.

## RECOMMENDATION 2

In advance of the full package of recommendations in this report being implemented, the Government should set an immediate goal of reducing the curriculum content in all Key Stages across primary and secondary education by a minimum of 10 per cent in all subjects.

This report has documented the excessive curriculum content found throughout primary and secondary education in England. Regardless of the purported merits of a 'knowledge rich' curriculum, there is no justification for cramming so much content into each Key Stage that teachers are unable to cover all the content in the depth needed to improve students' knowledge and understanding. Needless to say, teachers and leaders may actively choose not to cover all the specified content (or perhaps cover some of it in less detail) but this does not resolve the underlying problem of an overloaded curriculum. The status quo is particularly problematic – and arguably unfair – for students taking large numbers of high-stakes exams at age 16 and 18 as they must absorb an unnecessarily large curriculum in many subjects, even when a slightly smaller but equally rigorous curriculum would have been perfectly sufficient to help them progress to a positive destination.

This report recommends that the Government should immediately set a goal of removing at least 10 per cent of the curriculum content in every subject from the beginning of primary education (Key Stage 1) to the end of secondary education (Key Stage 5). This will be achieved using slightly different channels depending on the Key Stage in question:

- **National Curriculum subjects from Key Stages 1-3 (ages 5 to 14):** as the NC was constructed by government, it is already within their gift to remove whatever content it chooses. On that basis, the DfE should open separate consultations on Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 to allow teachers, school leaders, curriculum experts, subject associations and other stakeholders to identify the content that should be removed from each subject.
- **Classroom-based subjects in Key Stages 4 and 5 (ages 14 to 18):** the DfE should work with Ofqual and exam boards to set up separate consultations for each subject so that the same stakeholders listed in the previous bullet (especially classroom teachers) can name the topics from the specification that they would most like to have removed. Following these consultations, exam boards should publish a new specification with the reduced content (the end-of-course assessments will remain unchanged).

- **Key Stage 5 technical qualifications i.e. T-levels:** as the ABS consultation recognised, the size of T-levels is an impediment to their success. It is therefore essential that the content of these qualifications is markedly reduced – potentially by around a third from the current 900+ learning hours. As will be explained later in this chapter, such a reduction will put T-levels on a much more positive trajectory moving forward.

## A strong core of literacy and numeracy skills from 4 to 18

### RECOMMENDATION 3

To promote the development of core skills through primary school and into Lower Secondary education, SATs at age 11 will be replaced by online adaptive assessments in reading, spelling, punctuation and grammar (SPG) and numeracy. Pupils will take the new adaptive tests approximately once every two years, from Year 1 (age 5) to Year 9 (age 14).

England’s recent performance in international tests, particularly in maths, has been encouraging. Even so, to achieve the DfE’s stated ambition of more pupils developing their core skills to a higher standard, a more coordinated approach is needed to assess the progress of pupils from primary into secondary education. The most obvious way to create a single coordinated approach that produces valid and reliable judgements on pupils while reducing the impact of high-stakes assessments on teachers and schools is through introducing national online adaptive assessments that span primary and secondary education.

Other countries have led the way in showing how these tests can be administered quickly through secure platforms. [In line with the recommendations from EDSK’s previous work on primary assessment](#), the next government should develop a similar model for England. The main delivery model should be an online assessment that can be completed on a desktop computer, laptop or tablet. As these tests will be delivered online, multiple pupils can be tested at the same time (even on different subjects). The three new adaptive tests, which typically last around 30-40 minutes, will be on the following areas:

- Reading
- Numeracy
- Spelling, punctuation and grammar (SPG)

A consultation process will be needed before any proposals are finalised, but a starting point for discussions is that all pupils in England from Year 1 (age 5) to Year 9 (age 14) should sit each of the three tests approximately once every two academic years – similar to the frequency seen in countries such as Denmark, Australia and Norway. A selection of pupils in every school will be chosen at random to sit the assessments in each academic year. While most

pupils will only complete each adaptive test every other year, some pupils may be required to sit one of the tests in consecutive years or even sit the same test more than once in a single year. These new online adaptive tests will be ‘low stakes’ for pupils because there are zero consequences for them regardless of how well they perform at any point.

Such coordination between Primary and Lower Secondary education is virtually unheard of in the existing system yet the benefits for pupils, teachers and parents of a continuous path between these two phases would be substantial. For example, this approach will ensure that pupils’ progress from primary into secondary school can be easily monitored over time (even if they move schools during and / or after the primary phase) but without one-off high-stakes assessments at the beginning or end of primary school – meaning that the RBA (age 4) and SATs (age 11) can both be abolished without compromising academic standards.

#### RECOMMENDATION 4

To encourage pupils to develop their writing skills from Primary into Lower Secondary education, writing will be formally assessed in Year 2 (age 7), Year 6 (age 11) and Year 9 (age 14) through ‘comparative judgement’ exercises.

With reading, numeracy and SPG now assessed through online adaptive tests, there should also be some form of standardised writing assessment to monitor pupils’ progress in this important skill. At present, separate national assessments in writing are only used for primary school pupils, which limits the information available on pupils’ writing skills beyond this stage. What’s more, the existing assessments are marked by a pupil’s teacher, which can cause issues with their reliability and validity – including the potential risk of bias against particular students ([as discussed in a detailed report on non-exam assessment by EDSK](#)).

[In line with EDSK’s previous work on primary school assessment](#), all pupils in Years 2, Year 6 and Year 9 should sit a national writing assessment. Like existing primary school assessments, this will be an unseen pen-and-paper test sat by a whole cohort at the same time under controlled conditions to ensure that pupils are judged fairly on the same task. The assessment will be marked using ‘comparative judgement’, meaning that teachers will be asked to compare pupils’ scripts and make a judgement on which of the two scripts is ‘better’ than the other, as opposed to assigning a specific score or grade. These judgements will then be used to create a ranked list of pupils. Teachers will also be required to compare the scripts of pupils from other schools, which will act as an ‘anchor’ that allows comparisons between schools. This technique will avoid the above concerns regarding teacher assessment in its current form. Again, the results of these writing assessments will be low stakes for pupils, as they are merely a checkpoint at the end of each Key Stage.



## RECOMMENDATION 5

To make sure that everyone leaves school or college ready for work, study and life, all students will be required to study two compulsory subjects in Upper Secondary education: 'Core English' (literacy) and 'Core Maths' (numeracy). Students will sit an online test in Years 11, 12 and 13 in both Core English and Core Maths and must study them until age 18 unless they achieve the highest possible grade before then.

If the goal is to maximise the development of students' literacy and numeracy skills during their time in school or college, it is simply not logical to allow most young people to drop these subjects at age 16. Equally, it makes little sense to undermine the confidence of lower achievers by waiting for them to 'fail' a one-off academic qualification such as a GCSE, only to then demand that they continue studying the same subject. That there are serious doubts over whether even those students who pass their GCSEs have reached an acceptable level of literacy and numeracy only adds to the need for a new approach.

[As previously recommended by EDSK](#), all 14 to 18-year-olds should be required to study two subjects in Upper Secondary education: 'Core English' and 'Core Maths'. The aim of these subjects will be to develop the practical real-world skills that students need to succeed in work, study and life. This will be achieved by focusing on the 'applied' knowledge in both subjects rather than purely theoretical constructs. Although a detailed consultation will be critical to making final decisions about the content of Core English and Core Maths, the following approaches would be candidates for inclusion:

- **Core English:** a 60-minute 'Critical Reading' online adaptive assessment to test each student's comprehension skills and vocabulary, while a 60-minute 'Critical Thinking' online assessment could test their writing skills and their ability to analyse novel information (with the possibility of comparative judgement to mark their answers).
- **Core Maths:** a 90-minute online adaptive test to assess a student's ability to use various mathematical concepts in applied settings such as personal finance, travel, food and leisure (e.g. probability; ratios; fractions; percentages; decimals; graphs, conversions).

Students' performance in Core English and Core Maths will be assessed once a year in Years 11, 12 and 13 to check their level of literacy and numeracy. Students can take the assessments at various points during the year, thereby reducing the burden on the wider education system. To protect the integrity of these tests, they must be taken under controlled conditions like any other external examination. The only exception to a student sitting these assessments in Years 11, 12 and 13 is if they reach the highest possible grade in their annual test in either Year 11 or 12, at which point they would be entitled to drop the subject(s) because the goal of reaching a high level of literacy and / or numeracy will have been achieved.



What's more, Core Maths and Core English will be separated from two subjects that will become known as 'Additional English' and 'Additional maths', which focus more on the theoretical / non-applied content in each discipline. Additional English and Additional maths will be discrete subjects that are available alongside other academic and technical qualifications for those who wish to choose them after age 14.

### A clear purpose for Lower Secondary education (currently Key Stage 3)

#### RECOMMENDATION 6

To ensure that all pupils receive a broad and balanced education in Lower Secondary education from ages 11 to 14, the National Curriculum will be made compulsory for all state-funded schools delivering this phase of education including academies.

At present there is a lack of clarity around the purpose of Key Stage 3 (ages 11-14). The current NC entitlement for this age range sets out a broad and balanced curriculum for all pupils, yet many schools are choosing not to teach the full curriculum across three years as intended. This shortening of Key Stage 3 is particularly common in academies, who are not legally obliged to follow the NC. Ministers are right to complain that narrowing the curriculum in these crucial years at the start of secondary school is undesirable, especially for pupils from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. To deliver a clear and coherent education system for all pupils, this seemingly endless standoff over the merits and drawbacks of shortening Key Stage 3 needs to be addressed immediately. Thus, the NC should be made compulsory for all state-funded schools as part of the wider package of reforms outlined in this report to ensure that pupils receive a broad and balanced education. This move could be further bolstered by including this requirement within the school inspection regime.

#### RECOMMENDATION 7

To monitor their progress during secondary education, all pupils will take online adaptive 'Progress Check' assessments in Core English, Core Maths and almost all National Curriculum subjects at the end of the Lower Secondary phase (Year 9 / age 14). The results of these low stakes 'Progress Checks' will support pupils' decision-making as they choose which subjects to study in Upper Secondary education.

To underscore the importance of a broad and balanced curriculum in Lower Secondary education as well as providing a valuable checkpoint for pupils' progress in the early years of secondary education, new online adaptive assessments should be introduced in Core English,

Core Maths and almost all National Curriculum subjects at the end of the Lower Secondary phase (Year 9 - age 14) to act as a 'Progress Check' for all pupils.

These Progress Checks will focus on testing pupils' knowledge and understanding of what they have learned in the first three years of secondary education and will last approximately 60 minutes per subject - a far cry from the 3-4 hours of assessment required by GCSE examinations. Any subject that requires more practical forms of assessment (e.g. art) will continue to use these alternative approaches, although in some cases a combination of methods may be used (e.g. PE might require a practical component as well as an online adaptive assessment).

These new low-stakes Progress Checks will act as a checkpoint for measuring a pupil's progress over the course of the Lower Secondary phase and will have no consequences regarding a pupil's commencement of Upper Secondary education. The results will also support each pupil's decisions about which subjects they wish to continue studying in Upper Secondary education (from Year 10 onwards). As these Progress Checks are low stakes for pupils, there is no reason why they could not be more spread out across the spring and summer term relative to the narrow exam window used for GCSEs. This would give schools more flexibility over how they ensure that pupils complete the assessments before the end of the academic year while also leaving time during the summer term to consider the results and subsequent subject choices in discussions with pupils and parents.

## The new Upper Secondary 'Baccalaureate'

### RECOMMENDATION 8

To put academic, applied and technical courses on a level playing field in Upper Secondary education, students in state-funded schools and colleges will progress through a four-year 'Upper Secondary Baccalaureate' (USB) from Year 10 to Year 13. The Baccalaureate will provide a rigorous and flexible framework in which students can select courses from a wide range of disciplines to suit their interests, abilities and aspirations.

By placing academic qualifications on a pedestal and downgrading the status of technical and vocational courses, the value of non-academic routes has been consistently undermined for years on end. To unwind this explicit bias towards academic subjects and instead place all subjects and pathways in Upper Secondary education on a level playing field, this report follows [previous work on this issue by EDSK](#) by recommending that in future all students should study towards a new Upper Secondary 'Baccalaureate' (USB).

The USB will encompass all academic, applied and technical courses that students can pursue from age 14/15 (Year 10) to 17/18 (Year 13), including apprenticeships. This will be a significant step forward in addressing the current imbalance between different pathways (and it also represents a considerable improvement over the ABS proposed by the current government). As a result, this single Baccalaureate will be far more coherent and easier to navigate for students, parents, employers and universities because everything will be happening within one framework rather than having students moving into different pathways that may or may not interact with each other.

### RECOMMENDATION 9

To allow students to gradually specialise in their preferred subjects, the USB will use a 'slot' system to signify how many courses need to be studied alongside Core English and Core Maths. Most subjects will be 'single' subjects i.e. fill one slot. The number of slots will reduce to allow more specialisation as a student progresses:

- Year 10 – six slots
- Year 11 – five slots
- Year 12 – four slots
- Year 13 – three slots

Students specialising in the later years of secondary education is a useful feature of our current system. However, the cliff-edge reduction in the number of subjects studied after GCSEs as students move from Year 11 into Year 12 is undesirable and unnecessary. To allow specialisation while avoiding cliff edges, the new USB will operate using a 'slot' system from Year 10 to Year 13 – with each slot generally representing one subject (with some exceptions, such as 'Double Science' taking up two slots). As a student progresses through the USB, the number of slots they must fill will reduce each year, allowing them to gradually specialise over time without any cliff edges.

Students will start Year 10 with six slots to fill, and as they move up the USB they will have one less slot to fill each year (see Figure 2). Students will choose their initial subjects on entering the USB in Year 10 (see Recommendation 9 for more details) and must continue with each subject until age 18 unless they drop the subject in line with their decreasing number of slots or, after age 16, substitute a subject for a brand new subject. This 'slot' system will also allow students in the same year group to study subjects at different levels rather than all students being forced to move through qualification levels at the same time regardless of their prior attainment.

**Figure 2: the new ‘slot’ system for the Upper Secondary Bacculaureate that indicates how many subjects must be studied in each year**

	CORE ENGLISH	CORE MATHS	SLOT 1	SLOT 2	SLOT 3	SLOT 4	SLOT 5	SLOT 6
YEAR 13	✓	✓						
YEAR 12	✓	✓						
YEAR 11	✓	✓						
YEAR 10	✓	✓						

✓ = compulsory subject

### RECOMMENDATION 10

To promote a broad and balanced education for all students, minimum requirements will be applied in terms of which subjects are studied in the first year of the USB (Year 10). Alongside Core English and Core Maths, students must study:

- Double or triple science (2-3 slots)
- At least one humanity or language subject e.g. geography, history, French (1 slot)
- At least one artistic or technical subject e.g. art, music, D&T, construction (1 slot)

This will leave 1-2 spare slots that students can fill with any other subject.

Given that the NC promotes a broad and balanced education throughout Primary and Lower Secondary education, it would be inappropriate to suddenly reject this approach as soon as students enter the Upper Secondary phase in Year 10. Students’ subject choices at the beginning of the USB in Year 10 will be heavily guided by their performance in national assessments in Year 9 (see Recommendation 7) alongside their personal preferences, but this is unlikely to always lead to a balanced set of choices for every student. Although Progress 8 and the EBacc wrongly prioritise academic subjects above all else, it is important not to allow students to specialise too early because this may limit their opportunities for progression into some courses later on in the USB.

To ensure that all students begin the USB with a broad range of subjects that keep their options open for future progression, this report proposes that there should be some restrictions in terms of which subjects students can select to fill the USB slots in Year 10. These minimum requirements on subject choices will be as follows:

- Double or triple science (2-3 slots)
- At least one humanity or language subject e.g. Additional English, geography, history, French, Spanish (1 slot)
- At least one artistic or technical subject e.g. art, drama, music, D&T, construction, health and social care (1 slot)

Depending on whether a student studies double or triple science, this would leave one or two slots to be filled with any other subject of their choice.

In line with the reduction of slots after Year 10, there will be no need for further minimum requirements in later years of the USB because, as set out in Recommendation 9, students will be allowed to gradually specialise in their preferred subjects in Year 11 onwards – something that policymakers can support knowing that all students started the USB with a broad set of subject choices and will therefore retain some breadth all the way through to Year 13.

### RECOMMENDATION 11

Large technical subjects and apprenticeships will become available in Year 12 and will be ‘double’ subjects, filling two slots in the USB to account for their size. Students will only be able to choose one ‘double’ subject in Year 12 alongside two ‘single’ subjects to maintain a broad and balanced education.

The slot system will work slightly differently depending on the subjects that a student chooses. Most subjects will be ‘single’ subjects i.e. they will fill one slot in any of the four years of the USB. However, large (typically Level 3) technical subjects and apprenticeships will become available in Year 12 and they will be ‘double’ subjects i.e. fill two slots in the USB because they contain much more content than most academic subjects. This approach is similar to the ABS including ‘double majors’ to accommodate large technical courses.

To make sure that students who select a large technical subject or an apprenticeship in Year 12 are not allowed to specialise too early within the USB, students will only be allowed to select one ‘double’ subject within their four slots in Year 12. This means that alongside their double subject they must study Core English and Core Maths as well as two ‘single’ subjects in Year 12 and then one ‘single’ subject in Year 13. Again, this is not dissimilar to what the

ABS proposed in terms of students on a technical pathway still being required to study English, maths and an additional subject alongside their 'double major'. Having selected a 'double' subject in Year 12 (either a large technical course or apprenticeship) to fill two of their slots, students will then be unable to drop the 'double' subject in Year 13, as this would leave them with a gap in their allocation of slots. In practice this is no different to the current system, as students studying technical courses or apprenticeships are not able to drop their course halfway through.

## RECOMMENDATION 12

To significantly reduce the existing exam burden, students will only be externally assessed when they drop a subject or when they reach the end of the USB in Year 13.

The existing examination system places an enormous burden on students, schools and colleges, particularly in the final years of secondary education. Although it is important that students sit external assessments to judge their progress and attainment in a valid and reliable manner, the USB presents an opportunity to take a different approach by creating a system that is far less onerous but without sacrificing the rigour and high standards found in the current examination system. It is therefore proposed that, in addition to the annual Core English and Core Maths assessments described in Recommendation 5, students will only take exams in the subject(s) they choose to stop studying at the end of each academic year. Figures 3 and 4 on the following two pages contain illustrative examples of how this could work in practice for an individual student – starting from Year 10 (bottom of the diagrams) and ending up in Year 13. In one example, the student wishes to gradually specialise in mostly academic subjects, whereas in the other example the student chooses to specialise in technical subjects towards the end of the USB – including a 'double subject' that takes up two slots in the USB.

As these examples show, the USB and its 'slot' system has multiple benefits. Although students will be able to specialise towards the end of the USB, their education will remain broad and balanced for longer than at present because students must study at least one extra subject relative to the status quo regardless of whether they specialise in academic or technical programmes. This will mean that students keep more options open for their future progression, whereas the current system forces students down certain paths at a much earlier age. Crucially, this proposed setup will also dramatically reduce the exam burden by only requiring students to take rigorous external assessments in the subject(s) they choose to drop each year as opposed to the current system that requires students to take large numbers of demanding and time-consuming exams in subjects that they may not have even finished studying at that point.

**Figure 3: an illustration of how a student studying predominantly academic subjects could progress through the Upper Secondary Baccalaureate**

	CORE ENGLISH	CORE MATHS	SLOT 1	SLOT 2	SLOT 3	SLOT 4	SLOT 5	SLOT 6
			At the end of their final year of the USB, the student is assessed in all their remaining subjects.					
Y13	✓		Additional Maths	Chemistry	Economics			
			At the end of Year 12, the student chooses to drop biology and therefore sits an external exam in biology. They also reach the highest possible grade in Core Maths so they are no longer required to study it in Year 13.					
Y12	✓	✓	Additional Maths	Chemistry	Biology	Economics		
			At the end of Year 11, the student drops (and takes exams in) music and physics. Dropping two subjects rather than one means they free up an additional slot so that they can study a new subject in Year 13 (economics).					
Y11	✓	✓	Additional Maths	Chemistry	Biology	Physics	Music	
			At the end of Year 10, the student decides to drop Geography so they sit an external exam in Geography.					
Y10	✓	✓	Additional Maths	Chemistry	Biology	Physics	Music	Geography



**Figure 4: an illustration of how a student studying predominantly technical subjects could progress through the Upper Secondary Bacallaureate**

	CORE ENGLISH	CORE MATHS	SLOT 1	SLOT 2	SLOT 3	SLOT 4	SLOT 5	SLOT 6
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At the end of their final year of the USB, the student is assessed in all their remaining subjects.

<b>Y13</b>	✓	✓	Design & Technology	Construction (double subject)				
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At the end of Year 12, the student decides to drop geography and sits the external assessment.

<b>Y12</b>	✓	✓	Design & Technology	Geography	Construction (double subject)			
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At the end of Year 11, the student drops (and is externally assessed in) Double science, which frees up two slots – allowing them to choose a ‘double’ subject in Year 12 even within the reduced number of slots.

<b>Y11</b>	✓	✓	Double science	Design & Technology	Geography	Construction and the Built Environment		
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At the end of Year 10, the student decides to drop Drama and sits an external assessment in Drama.

<b>Y10</b>	✓	✓	Double science	Design & Technology	Geography	Construction and the Built Environment	Drama	
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## RECOMMENDATION 13

To support transitions between institutions at age 16, students can sit extra ‘transfer tests’ in addition to their Core English and Core Maths assessments in Year 11 to provide more information to prospective institutions about their current level of attainment.

Tens of thousands of students move institutions at age 16 - some because their school only goes up to age 16, and others simply because they want to move to a new Sixth Form, college or other institution for their post-16 education. These ‘new’ institutions currently rely on information from GCSE exams to decide who they admit. In the new USB model, students may only be sitting Core English and Core Maths tests plus an assessment in the subject they are dropping at the end of Year 11, which would generate far less information about a student’s current level of attainment than a full set of GCSEs. To make sure that post-16 institutions have enough information about applicants to make a judgement on who to accept, some students may need to sit extra ‘transfer tests’ i.e. sit the same end-of-year assessment that other students take in addition to the assessment for the subject they are dropping. It is proposed that, on top of their annual Core English and Core Maths tests, pupils moving institutions will need to be assessed in a minimum of three subjects at the end of Year 11 depending on the subjects they plan to study in Year 12. This produces three possible scenarios for an individual student in terms of the USB:

- **If a student is dropping one subject at the end of Year 11:** they will be assessed in the subject being dropped and will also have to sit additional ‘transfer tests’ in a further two subjects of their choosing.
- **If a student is dropping two subjects at the end of Year 11:** they will be assessed in both the subjects they are dropping as well as sitting one other ‘transfer test’ in a subject of their choosing.
- **If a student is dropping three or more subjects at the end of Year 11:** extra ‘transfer tests’ will not be necessary, as institutions will already have enough information from the results of the end-of-year assessments in the subjects that the student has dropped.

This approach would mean that some students are sitting more assessments than their peers – particularly those who are essentially ‘dropping’ all their subjects at the end of Year 11 because they want to take a new set of subjects in Year 12 that they have not studied before. That said, even in a worst-case scenario, students would still be sitting far fewer exams (no more than five) at the end of Year 11 relative to the current suite of GCSEs. The results of any additional ‘transfer tests’ would also not appear on a student’s final ‘Upper Secondary Certificate’ (see next section) because their purpose is to facilitate the switch to a new institution rather than passing a final judgement on a student’s attainment at this point.

## RECOMMENDATION 14

End-of-year assessments in the USB will be ‘digital by default’, meaning that students will take digital rather than pen-and-paper exams in the majority of cases. Subjects with a significant practical element (e.g. art, design & technology, engineering) will continue to use non-exam assessments where necessary. Digital assessments in the USB will typically last 1.5-2 hours for each subject.

As discussed in the previous recommendation, students being assessed only in the subjects they drop each year will help tackle the burdensome exam schedule that many students currently face in Year 11. However, just cutting the number of exams does not address other weaknesses with the current assessment system, most notably the reliance on written exams that make little or no contribution to preparing students for future work and life.

Building on the existing trials of digital exams described earlier in this report, it is proposed that the new end-of-year assessments in the USB will be digitised wherever possible – most obviously, for those subjects assessed exclusively through exams such as maths, science, history and geography. At least initially, digital exams would look broadly similar to the pen-and-paper exams already in use, albeit with adjustments to account for assessing a single year of content rather than two years. This approach will further reduce the exam burden on students as well as ensuring that national assessments remain objective and rigorous.

An important caveat is that fully digitised assessments will not be suitable for every subject as ‘non-exam assessments’ (NEAs) will remain necessary in some areas:

- Portfolios of work (e.g. art, design & technology)
- Oral assessments (e.g. foreign languages)
- Performances (e.g. music, PE)

In some cases, the non-exam assessment will be in addition to the new digital tests. For example, PE currently combines written assessments with practical assessments, meaning that the written elements could be digitised while leaving the practical assessments unchanged. Subjects that rely the most on NEA such as art will most likely be unaffected by this switch to digital tests. Nevertheless, the overall number of hours of assessment should be reduced by this new digital-by-default approach, with the goal that the digital assessments would typically take 1.5 – 2 hours per subject.

## A new accountability system for primary and secondary education

### RECOMMENDATION 15

To create a more coherent approach to grading, a 10-1 scale (with 10 being the highest grade) should be used to assess all classroom-based subjects, starting from the new Progress Checks in Year 9 up to the end of the USB in Year 13.

The variety of approaches to grading currently used across different academic, applied and technical courses within secondary education has created an incoherent grading landscape. This has made understanding and comparing students' achievements unnecessarily complicated from the perspective of students, parents, universities and employers.

This report proposes that the most effective solution is to use a single grading approach for assessing classroom-based subjects, starting from the new 'Progress Checks' in National Curriculum subjects at the end of Lower Secondary education (Year 9) through to the end of the USB in Year 13. In future, these assessments will be graded using a 10-1 scale, with 10 being the highest possible grade. The simplicity and comparability offered by this approach would be a major step forward in terms of delivering a more coherent system across the full range of courses available to students. What's more, treating academic and technical courses in the same way would help instil a more 'level playing field' across these routes.

The only exception to the 10-1 grading approach will be apprenticeships. This exception is necessary as there is no age limit on apprenticeships, so the apprenticeship system extends well beyond the USB. To ensure that there is a coherent approach to grading apprenticeships across all age groups, the existing Distinction-Merit-Pass options will continue to be used.

### RECOMMENDATION 16

When they finish school or college, students will be given an 'Upper Secondary Certificate' that displays the grades that they achieved in all their courses during the USB from Year 10 to Year 13.

With a consistent grading system in place, the next step is to introduce a consistent reporting system so that a student's achievements within the USB are documented in the same way regardless of which institution they attend. As the USB will span four years and seeks to promote a broad and balanced education, it is important that parents, universities and employers can see the full range of courses completed by a student and how well they

performed in each of them. It is therefore proposed that at the end of the USB, students will receive an 'Upper Secondary Certificate' (USC) – based heavily on [EDSK's previous proposal for a 'Record of Achievement'](#) – that outlines the subjects that a student studied and the grades they achieved over the course of the USB.

Figure 5 (overleaf) contains a basic illustration of how an USC might look for a student who studied mainly academic subjects:

- The highest level that they achieved in Core English and Core Maths is recorded at the top of the USC, given that these subjects are compulsory. In this example, the student reached the maximum possible grade (10) in Year 12, which is why they did not continue the subject into Year 13, whereas they had to continue studying Core English into their final year.
- In addition to Core English and Core Maths, the USC displays the student's performance in every subject throughout the Upper Secondary Baccalaureate and the year in which they achieved a specific grade. This includes the subjects dropped by the student in earlier years.
- Most qualifications available in Years 10 and 11 will be Level 2 courses (equivalent to GCSEs) whereas qualifications in Years 12 and 13 will typically be at Level 3 (equivalent to AS- and A-levels). That said, some technical courses in Years 10 and 11 may be at Level 1 and some technical qualifications may be delivered at Level 1 or 2 for older learners – hence the need to include this information about levels.

There are two main advantages to this approach to presenting a student's performance relative to the current system of GCSEs, A-levels and technical qualifications. First and foremost, it brings together all the relevant information about a student's achievements across the final years of secondary education into a single accessible document, representing a major improvement over the existing reliance on multiple certificates from different exam boards. Second, the information about a student's achievements will be presented in the same way regardless of whether they chose an academic route, a technical route or a mixture of the two, which would help to create a level playing field between the different options for young people as well as ensuring the system is simple and transparent.

It would also be worth considering how the USC could be stored, opened and presented in a digital format so that employers, UCAS and education providers such as universities could have secure access to the same information about every student.

**Figure 5: an illustration of how a new ‘Upper Secondary Certificate’ could present the various accomplishments of students completing Upper Secondary education**

<b>UPPER SECONDARY CERTIFICATE</b>			
<b>Statement of provisional results as of August 2026</b>			
<b>(NAME)</b>			
<b>(CANDIDATE NUMBER)</b>			
<b>SUBJECT</b>	<b>HIGHEST GRADE ACHIEVED</b>	<b>YEAR GROUP</b>	
Core English	6	13	
Core Maths	10	12	

<b>SUBJECT</b>	<b>GRADE ACHIEVED</b>	<b>YEAR GROUP</b>	<b>LEVEL OF QUALIFICATION</b>
Chemistry	8	13	3
Economics	7	13	3
Additional Maths	9	13	3
Biology	6	12	3
Physics	5	11	2
Music	4	11	2
French	5	10	2

## RECOMMENDATION 17

To hold schools and colleges to account in a fair and transparent manner, the digital tests in primary and Lower Secondary education and the end-of-year assessments in the USB will be used to construct a new and fairer accountability system that consists of two main measures:

- Progress – the average progress made by learners during their time at a school / college relative to their peers attending other institutions
- Attainment – the average scores achieved by learners in their national tests

Given the gaping holes in the existing accountability system described earlier in this report, it is essential that the new national assessments throughout Primary, Lower Secondary and Upper Secondary education are used to address the manifest unfairness that leads to some schools sitting outside the accountability system while others are held to account for what happened to pupils when they attended other institutions. Now that the new assessments will follow pupils from age 4 to 18, there is an opportunity to construct new ‘progress measures’ that capture how well every school and college is performing in the same unbiased manner.

Although the precise details of the new accountability system should be consulted on widely, it is recommended that the results of the digital tests in primary and Lower Secondary education and the end-of-year assessments during the USB are used to calculate how much progress pupils make in each school or college as well as recording the level of attainment that individual learners reach at the end of each course or qualification. Below are examples of how progress and attainment will be calculated in a fairer and more flexible way compared to the current flawed system that is based around large and inequitable time gaps between the RBA, SATs and GCSEs:

- **A primary school (ages 4 to 11):** progress and attainment in the digital tests in Primary education (reading, numeracy, SPG) from ages 5 to 11 plus progress and attainment in the writing assessments at age 7 and 11
- **A primary school (ages 7 to 11):** progress and attainment in the digital tests in Primary education from ages 7 to 11 plus progress and attainment in the writing assessments at age 7 and 11
- **A middle school (ages 8 to 13):** progress and attainment in the digital tests in Primary and Lower Secondary education (reading, numeracy, SPG) from ages 8 to 13 plus attainment in the writing assessments at age 11
- **A secondary school (ages 11 to 16):** progress and attainment from the digital tests at age 10/11 (reading, numeracy, SPG) up to the end-of-year assessments at age 16 plus progress and attainment in the writing assessments at age 11 and 14.



- **A secondary school (ages 11 to 18):** progress and attainment from new digital tests at age 10/11 (reading, numeracy, SPG) up to the end of Upper Secondary education at age 18 plus progress and attainment in the writing assessments at age 11 and 14.
- **A college (ages 14 to 18):** progress and attainment from the Progress Checks at the end of Lower Secondary education at age 14 up to the end of Upper Secondary at age 18
- **A college (ages 16 to 18):** progress and attainment from the end-of-year assessments at age 16 up to the end of Upper Secondary education at age 18

In other words, the new accountability system will be able to accommodate a far greater range of start / end points of a school or college because pupils' performance is recorded throughout their time in primary and secondary education – something that the present system is incapable of delivering. The new 10-1 grading system from Year 9 up to Year 13 will provide a robust basis for calculating pupils' progress in the later years of secondary school or college because their performance is being graded in the same way irrespective of the qualifications that they have chosen within the USB.

That said, some adjustments would be needed in the new system to ensure that comparisons between schools are as fair as possible. For example, not all pupils will be tested in Year 6 (the final year of many primary schools) because the new digital tests in primary education only test a sample of pupils each year, but there are several ways to accommodate this requirement for a 'baseline' at age 11 (e.g. estimating a pupil's Year 6 score based on their Year 5 test result(s); treating pupils who sat the digital tests in Year 5 or 6 separately when calculating progress relative to the pupils' peers). Some elements of the existing accountability system are also worth preserving. For example, the Progress 8 measure of secondary school performance gives a 'double weighting' to GCSE English and maths to ensure that they receive the greatest focus, and something similar could be achieved with Core English and Core Maths.

Nonetheless, with these new and stronger foundations in place, it is envisaged that a single 'progress score' would be calculated for each institution (similar to Progress 8) based on this fairer and more consistent approach to accountability, although more granular breakdowns (e.g. 11-14 progress and 14-18 progress within an 11-18 school) should still be made available. As [EDSK proposed in our report on primary assessment](#), one could convert a 'progress score' into a more helpful qualitative description such as 'well above average' / 'above average' / 'average' / 'below average' / 'well below average' to avoid confusing numerical indicators (e.g. +0.37 or -0.09). Regardless of how the final progress measure or metric is displayed, this new accountability system will produce a superior perspective on which schools are performing well and which may need additional support compared to the current approach.

## 5. Implementation

As there is little appetite for a dramatic upheaval of the curriculum and assessment system immediately after the next General Election, this report takes a long-term view of how and when the recommendations in the previous chapter should be delivered. Last year's ABS announcement accepted that its proposals represented "a long term reform [that] will take a decade to deliver in full" as it would "need careful development, in partnership with students, teachers, leaders, schools, colleges, universities and employers, as well as the public."<sup>145</sup> Meanwhile, Keir Starmer has said that a Labour government would seek to bring about a 'decade of national renewal' if they won the next election,<sup>146</sup> including their 'Curriculum and Assessment Review' that spans primary and secondary education.<sup>147</sup> With both main political parties set to embark on a decade of reform, this chapter offers a suggested timeline for implementing the recommendations in this report with the aim of ensuring that the required reforms are enacted in a sustainable manner.

### What reforms are required to implement the recommendations?

There are many elements of the existing education system that are worth preserving, and this mindset will remain important because minimising disruption to pupils, teachers and school and college leaders is vital to a successful implementation. For example, drawing on the rigorous curriculum content already in place for GCSEs, Technical Awards, A-levels, T-levels and other courses will save considerable amounts of time rather than spending years rewriting all the course specifications. That said, several reforms are still required to gradually move towards the new model for primary and secondary education. These include:

#### CURRICULUM

- A new real-world practical curriculum for Core English and Core Maths in the USB
- An associated new curriculum for Additional English and Additional maths in the USB (based on current GCSE and A-level specifications)
- Splitting current qualifications such as GCSEs, Technical Awards and A-levels into two separate one-year courses (based on the existing specifications in each case) so that students can drop the subject at the end of Year 10, 11 or 12 in the USB
- Reducing the content of some Level 3 qualifications to ensure they fit the single / double subject model (e.g. A-levels by approximately 10 per cent and T-levels by approximately 30-40 per cent – as already proposed in the ABS consultation)

## ASSESSMENT

- New online adaptive tests for 5 to 14-year-olds in Reading, Numeracy and SPG
- New writing assessments for pupils aged 7, 11 and 14
- New Core English and Core Maths online adaptive tests for 14 to 18-year-olds
- New online adaptive Progress Checks in almost all NC subjects for 14-year-olds
- New digital tests to replace the written exams currently used in academic and technical qualifications, which will be used in the new one-year versions of GCSEs, Technical Awards, A-levels and other courses within the USB

### Who should deliver the new national tests?

When looking across the whole 4-18 age range in state-funded education, it becomes immediately apparent that there are multiple approaches being used to deliver different statutory assessments. These include the following arrangements:

- Assessments from reception (e.g. RBA) up to the end of Key Stage 2 (e.g. SATs) are developed by the Standards and Testing Agency (STA) - an executive agency of the DfE. Although the delivery of test papers to schools for assessments such as SATs is subcontracted to an external provider, the test development is carried out by the STA.
- Many academic qualifications such as GCSEs and A-levels are produced by examination boards such as AQA, Pearson Edexcel and OCR. Schools and colleges are allowed to choose which exam board provides the specification for each course in their institution. Although the exam regulator Ofqual oversees the exam boards (including monitoring standards), the exam boards create the assessments as well as carrying out other important functions such as delivering exam papers to test centres.
- For some technical qualifications such as T-levels, the DfE runs a procurement exercise to select a single provider who delivers each T-level nationally throughout the duration of a multi-year contract. The provider is overseen by the DfE and Ofqual to ensure that it delivers what is required of them, including the development of a course specification and assessment materials alongside the delivery of the tests.

While none of these options represent a 'perfect' approach to national assessments, they show the variety of options available to policymakers. Although any final decisions on who should be responsible for each digital test described in this report will require extensive consultation, a logical approach would be to build on the existing foundations (e.g. competition between exam boards in secondary education) while introducing modified assessment arrangements where there are sensible grounds for innovation.

On that basis, a new delivery model for digital assessments could operate as follows:

- **Online adaptive tests for 5 to 14-year-olds in Reading, Numeracy and SPG:** these tests would be overseen by the STA, who would contract with a single third-party provider or consortium to design and deliver the national online assessments in line with the requirements set out by the STA.
- **Writing assessments for pupils aged 7, 11 and 14:** as these tests will remain on paper, they are best suited to being designed by the STA and delivered by third party providers. Given the need to compare large numbers of pupils' scripts, the associated 'comparative judgement' marking exercise may be better delivered at a local or sub-regional level rather than a single national system, with separate contracts in each area.
- **Core English and Core Maths online adaptive tests for 14 to 18-year-olds:** similar to the approach for online adaptive tests in reading and numeracy, the STA would contract with a single third-party provider in each case to design and deliver one of the two new online adaptive assessments.
- **Online adaptive Year 9 Progress Checks in National Curriculum subjects:** as these tests will be sat by every student in state schools in the same testing window each year, it is proposed that the digital test for each subject (plus any NEA) should be designed and delivered by a single third-party provider such as an exam board.
- **New digital tests to replace the written exams in the USB:** every subject will need to be available at the end of Years 10, 11, 12 and 13, although the volume of students per subject will be much lower than for the Year 9 Progress Checks. On that basis, it makes sense to award a contract for each subject to a single provider to design and deliver the specification and full suite of annual digital tests.

All these contracts should be awarded on a multi-year license given the amount of time and resources needed to produce high-quality digital assessments. Inevitably, the roles of the STA and Ofqual would change in response to this new environment, and this would need to form part of the respective consultations. To protect the resilience of the assessment system and prevent excessive concentration of provision, it would also be sensible to limit how many digital tests (and in which primary and secondary phases) providers would be allowed to bid for e.g. exam boards could only win a maximum of four contracts for individual subjects within the full spectrum of new USB digital tests.

### **In what order should the reforms be delivered?**

As these proposed reforms mostly relate to secondary education, they should be delivered 'bottom up' i.e. starting in primary education and subsequently feeding into secondary

education, in contrast to the ABS that sought to reform the final stage of secondary education without any consideration of what comes before it. Figure 6 (overleaf) outlines a suggested schedule for how to phase-in this report's recommendations. The first five years is dedicated to three goals:

1. **Replacing SATs with the new online adaptive tests in Reading, Numeracy and SPG and the new writing assessments:** the experiences of other countries in delivering online adaptive tests should ensure that England does not need to start from scratch in relation to the delivery and logistics of such assessments at a national level. The focus should therefore be on selecting the best format of these new tests so that the content of the National Curriculum is operationalised effectively within each assessment. As a starting point, it is proposed that pupils in Primary and Lower Secondary education would begin sitting the new Primary / Lower Secondary online adaptive tests and writing assessments in the academic year 2028/29.
2. **Designing new online adaptive tests for Core English and Core Maths:** alongside the development of adaptive tests in Primary and Lower Secondary education, the new Core English and Core Maths tests in Upper Secondary education should follow a broadly similar timeline, albeit with a longer period for consultation on the content of these tests. A two-year consultation to assess the value of existing literacy and numeracy qualifications (e.g. Functional Skills) while drawing on any relevant material from academic qualifications such as GCSEs should be sufficient to identify the real-world literacy and numeracy skills to be included in Core English / Maths.
3. **Preparing for the new digitised subject assessments from Year 9 upwards:** the main focus here will be starting the process of converting the existing written assessments in GCSEs (Year 11), A-levels (Year 13) and technical qualifications such as Technical Awards (Year 11) and T-levels (Year 13) into digital formats as well as designing new end-of-year digital tests for Years 10 and 12 (essentially covering the first year of existing two-year courses such as GCSEs). In addition, the new Year 9 Progress Checks will require a consultation on their coverage and format to determine how best to assess students' knowledge and understanding of the National Curriculum. This will also be a valuable opportunity to evaluate different approaches to conducting online tests in a way that protects the integrity and security of the national exam system.

Once the first wave of reforms has been implemented, the second five-year period can concentrate on rolling out the new Year 9 Progress Checks in 2031/32 followed by the new end-of-year USB assessments, which will be ready for this same cohort of students as they enter Year 10 and then move through the four years of Upper Secondary education.

**Figure 6: suggested timeline for implementing the main recommendations in this report**

	<b>PRIMARY AND LOWER SECONDARY</b> Online adaptive tests in Reading, Numeracy and SPG + written assessments (ages 5-14)	<b>UPPER SECONDARY</b> Online adaptive Core English / maths tests (ages 14-18)	<b>UPPER SECONDARY</b> Year 9 online adaptive 'Progress Checks' + online assessments for USB subjects
<b>2024/25</b>	Consultation to gather views on format and coverage of new tests	Consultation to gather views on content, format and coverage of new tests	Consultation to gather views on format and coverage of Year 9 Progress Checks for National Curriculum subjects
<b>2025/26</b>	Select provider to deliver new tests		
<b>2026/27</b>	Pilot studies with schools to extensively check suitability, accessibility and testing procedures + giving schools access to practice materials	Select provider to deliver new tests	Government to work with exam boards and Ofqual to prepare for digitisation of existing end-of-year assessments for the USB (+ creation of Year 10/12 tests)
<b>2027/28</b>		Pilot studies with schools and colleges to extensively check suitability, accessibility and testing procedures + giving schools and colleges access to practice materials	
<b>2028/29</b>	<b>Roll out of new tests nationally</b>	<b>Roll out of new tests nationally</b>	Select providers for Year 9 Progress Checks + subject-based USB tests
<b>2029/30</b>			Pilot studies with schools and colleges to extensively check suitability, accessibility and testing procedures + giving schools and colleges access to practice materials
<b>2030/31</b>			
<b>2031/32</b>			<b>First Year 9 Progress Checks</b>
<b>2032/33</b>			<b>First USB assessments in Year 10</b>
<b>2033/34</b>			<b>First USB assessments in Year 11</b>
<b>2034/35</b>			<b>First USB assessments in Year 12</b>
<b>2035/36</b>			<b>First USB assessments in Year 13</b>

## 6. Areas for further consideration

### Oral assessments

Moving to digital exams will be a step in the right direction in many respects, yet they will have some of the same limitations as existing written exams (e.g. a strong focus on recalling knowledge) whereas other assessment methods can measure a wider range of competencies. For example, T-level students and apprentices are given the opportunity to develop their verbal communication skills by being assessed through a mixture of presentations, vivas and interviews alongside written tests, which makes sense given that employers often cite verbal communication as one of the skills most commonly lacking among school and college leavers.

Given the importance of verbal communication skills, there is no reason why these skills should not be developed among all students. [EDSK's recent report 'Examining exams'](#) recommended that when students drop a subject at the end of Year 12 (which all students will do in future in the USB) they should be assessed in that subject entirely through an oral exam. The aim of this innovation is to enable every student to develop these crucial communication skills in a way that would otherwise be ignored by written exams. Some subjects would lend themselves more easily to being examined entirely through oral assessment, while others could be more challenging (e.g. maths). Even so, this approach is still worthy of consideration if the goal is to make sure that all students leave school or college 'ready for work and ready for life'.

### Extra-curricular activities

As discussed in the recommendations chapter, the USB will ensure that students study a broader array of subjects for longer. Nevertheless, there is still room to go further with improving the breadth and balance of secondary education, including a greater emphasis on extra-curricular activities. Some examples of extra-curricular activities are:

- **Extended projects:** to develop students' research and writing skills, an 'extended essay' is compulsory for International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma students. Similar optional programmes are available in England (e.g. the Level 2 Higher Project Qualification and the Level 3 Extended Project Qualification).
- **Volunteering** i.e. helping out in the local community, which many IB students participate in to achieve their Diploma.



- **Extended work placements:** [EDSK has previously proposed 'Young Traineeships'](#) to enhance student's employability by giving them the opportunity to do an extended work placement (e.g. 50 days) with a local employer during Year 10/11.
- **Activities that require students to be physically active:** IB students can complete an 'activity' such as team sports to contribute towards achieving their Diploma. Alternatively, the new USB could give credit for the completion of the Duke of Edinburgh award.

It would be worth considering whether extra-curricular activities should be formalised in the USB i.e. made compulsory to emphasise their value and importance (see Figure 7). If so, there would need to be guidelines in terms of how extra-curricular activities contribute to the USB (e.g. some activities such as community service or work placements being restricted to older learners), and whether details of any extra-curriculars should appear on students' final Upper Secondary Certificate. Regardless, by introducing extra-curricular activities into the USB, students would receive a more well-rounded education – particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds who may not have access to these activities outside of school.

**Figure 7: a possible model for incorporating extra-curricular activities into the Upper Secondary Baccalaureate**

	CORE ENGLISH	CORE MATHS	SLOT 1	SLOT 2	SLOT 3	SLOT 4	SLOT 5	SLOT 6
YEAR 13	✓	✓						
YEAR 12	✓	✓						
YEAR 11	✓	✓						
YEAR 10	✓	✓						

✓ = compulsory subject  
 = required extra-curricular activities

## More effective monitoring of national standards

Alongside the changes to the assessment and accountability system proposed in this report, there is an opportunity to take a new approach to monitoring national standards across primary and secondary schools. At present, national standards are captured in the later years of secondary education through GCSE and A-level exams along with additional tools such as 'National Reference Tests'. However, aside from SATs (Year 6), there is limited understanding of national standards from primary school up to the early years of secondary school.

One way to improve the monitoring of national standards would be to use 'sample testing' in the new digital adaptive tests. Sample testing consists of inserting a set of identical (or very similar) questions into the same test every year. Pupils will be unaware of sample testing during the assessment itself and will answer the question as normal, but being able to ask identical questions to a large number of pupils each year will allow national standards to be carefully tracked over time. Sample testing would work particularly well for the proposed maths and SPG tests from primary school through to age 14, the Progress Checks at age 14 and the Core English and Core Maths assessments in the USB. This would create a better system for monitoring standards than the present approach because measuring national standards would occur more frequently and across a wide range of year groups and content.

## Finding a place for oracy in the curriculum

Should a future government wish to promote new concepts such as oracy within the NC, this could be twinned with a process of reducing the existing NC content described in the recommendations chapter. That said, many crucial questions remain as to how, where and why oracy should be incorporated in the NC and possibly into the later years of secondary education (e.g. will oracy be assessed, and if so, how? Will oracy be taught within Core English or across all subjects? How would teachers be expected to teach this skill?).

Given the high stakes attached to students' performance in the later years of secondary education, including university entrance and apprenticeship applications, it is important for a future government to focus on delivering the necessary reforms to these elements of the education system. Nonetheless, the recommendations in this report are intended to leave enough space for discussions about oracy's place in the curriculum alongside the more significant and resource-intensive reforms needed to build an effective primary and secondary education system.

## Informing parents about their child's performance

An important feature of the education system is keeping parents informed about how their child is progressing. With more information now available due to the introduction of online tests, it would be sensible to pass this information onto parents at regular intervals alongside existing check-ins such as parents' evenings. For example, schools could send reports at the end of certain academic years that show a pupil's most recent results on the new adaptive tests for SPG and maths as well as their results for writing assessments.

As students will be completing the new online tests approximately once every two years during Primary and Lower Secondary education, parents could be given their child's results at the end of Year 2, Year 4 and Year 6, as well as Year 9 (alongside the results in the Progress Checks at age 14). For primary school children, raw scores would not necessarily need to be presented as attainment and progress could instead be measured on a scale such as 'well below average' to 'well above average'. Meanwhile, students in Year 9 will be awarded a grade on a scale of 10-1 to reflect their performance in the Progress Checks for every National Curriculum subject, and parents will receive this information to provide a foundation for joint discussions between pupils, teachers and parents about subject choices as the pupil enters the USB in Year 10.

## Activities beyond the curriculum

As the NC illustrates, there are many important aspects of school life that sit outside of traditional subjects. These include religious education, PE, citizenship and personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education. This report has not discussed precisely how and where these matters should sit within or alongside the USB after age 14, although there are several options available to policymakers such as incorporating them into the extra-curricular activities described earlier in this section or potentially making them a formal requirement of Key Stage 4 and 5. Regardless of the preferred approach, it would be sensible to consult widely on the content that they should cover as well as the most effective way to include them in a student's timetable alongside their chosen subjects.

## Conclusion

*“We must ensure rigour and that all young people are equipped with the knowledge, skills and attributes needed for HE, employment and adult life. Despite its weaknesses, the current system has its strengths. Many elements of the reforms we propose can already be found in schools and colleges around the country and we want to build on their good practice. We also wish to retain the best features of existing qualifications and particularly the well-established GCSE and A level route.”<sup>148</sup>*

2024 marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the final report from the Working Group on 14-19 Reform chaired by (now Sir) Mike Tomlinson (the ‘Tomlinson Report’). As can be seen from the above quotation the working group recognised that, despite their appetite for bold reforms – notably, the proposed introduction of 14-19 Diplomas – it was important to acknowledge that some aspects of secondary education were functioning well and should be retained. Most obviously, the clarity offered by the academic route (GCSEs to A-levels) was worth preserving even if those two qualification brands were no longer needed.

This analysis from two decades ago is strikingly similar to that presented in this new EDSK report. Even if there is a change of government at the next election, there is no reason to throw the policy baby out with the political bathwater. On the contrary, politicians should tread carefully when seeking to change an education system that has many commendable features and has delivered strong outcomes in several areas. Nevertheless, this report has explained in detail why reforms are necessary to address the obvious limitations in the present approach to the curriculum, assessment and accountability that can undermine the good intentions sitting behind many of the reforms enacted since 2010.

Some observers may question the need for large-scale reforms when schools and colleges are battling a funding crisis as well as a recruitment and retention crisis. Far from being a reason to ignore such reforms, many of the proposals in this report are specifically designed to reduce the burdens currently placed on students and teachers alike: slashing the number of high-stakes tests by scrapping SATs and GCSEs; cutting back the curriculum content in all phases; ending the bias against technical and vocational subjects; and using online tests to track pupils throughout their education journey. All these proposals ultimately seek to give students more time to enjoy their learning and give teachers more time to enjoy their craft.

It is not possible to put a precise pound sign on the cost of the new system described in this report because much would depend on how a future government chooses to arrange the oversight and delivery of the proposed digital tests. That said, the goal should be to reduce

the financial strain created by the current approach to examinations – with well over £200 million spent each year on GCSEs alone. Furthermore, the Tomlinson Report was right to be wary of simply imposing radical reforms on the school system, leading them to suggest a “managed evolution” in which “all stakeholders are involved in the detailed work necessary and that all decisions are informed by sound evidence borne out of careful piloting and modelling.”<sup>149</sup> Such an approach is eminently sensible. As the title of this report suggests, the proposed ‘revolution’ would be delivered as a gradual ‘evolution’ over the course of a decade to ensure that there is enough time to build the new foundations for primary and secondary education. It is therefore hoped that this report provides a valuable framework for politicians and policymakers in the next parliament and beyond.

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