British Academy response to the Department for Education's Curriculum and Assessment Review Call for Evidence: General response

22 November 2024

Background

In September 2024, the Department for Education (England) opened a call for evidence for an independent review of curriculum and assessment, with Professor Becky Francis FBA CBE as review chair.

The British Academy is the UK's national academy for the arts, humanities and social sciences. As such, we have focused in this general, cross-discipline response on the questions that have most direct impact on and pertinence to our disciplines. Our response has been informed by our existing policy work into education pathways, higher education and research, as well as input from across our Fellowship which includes eminent scholars specialising in curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and the history of education and educational policy-making.

In addition to this general cross-discipline response, the Academy has also submitted an additional response with specific reference to Languages. This reflects the work of our longstanding languages policy programme. The principles guiding this general response underly this languages-specific response as well, and the two responses are intended to complement each other. The answers below comprise our general cross-discipline response, though reference our languages-specific response throughout.

Contents

Background	3
Key messages	3
Section 2: General views on curriculum, assessment and qualifications pathways	6
Section 3: Social justice and inclusion	13
Section 4: Ensuring an excellent foundation in maths and English	16
Section 5: Curriculum and qualification content	21
Section 6: A broad and balanced curriculum	26
Section 7: Assessment and accountability	30
Section 8: Qualification pathways 16-19	33
Section 9: Other issues on which we would welcome views	35

Background

In July 2024 the Department for Education in England (DfE) under the new government announced a Curriculum and Assessment review, appointing Professor Becky Francis FBA CBE as review chair.

The review aims to refresh the national curriculum and assessment system across Key Stages 1-5 (ages 5-19), emphasising a strong foundation of reading, writing and maths for all pupils, curricular breadth (including arts and vocational subjects), more diverse representation, the development of digital and oracy skills, and the need for a balance of assessment methods, including examinations. As a consequence of the review, all state schools, including academies, will be required to follow the national curriculum, pending legislation.

The DfE has indicated its approach is evolution, not revolution. The terms of reference make clear that existing qualifications framework of GCSEs, A levels and T levels will not be removed as a result of this review. The review scope also explicitly excludes discussion of core school funding, workforce supply issues and early years education.

Key messages

All young people should enjoy a broad and balanced curriculum in practice, and not just in theory, across each stage of the education system. The rapid pace at which society is developing requires a broad and dynamic curriculum that is better aligned with, and responsive to, society's complex and changing needs. Exposure to skills and knowledge bases from a wide variety of different disciplines, both STEM and SHAPE, is vital for young people to equip the next generation with the tools needed to face the future challenges of a changing world.

Young people's statutory entitlement to a broad and balanced national curriculum on paper does not reflect the education many learners receive in classrooms up and down the country. This can be seen from the primary level through to post-16 and includes (but is not limited to):

- Evidence of decline in access to/provision of Arts subjects, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, exacerbated by inequalities in access to extracurricular opportunities;
- Evidence of decline in access to/provision of Language subjects, as detailed in the Academy's Languages-specific response.

England's high-stakes system of assessment, linked to accountability measures, is having a detrimental impact on curricular breadth. England is an outlier in both the volume and high-stakes nature of assessment across the education system. The Academy encourages an approach to statutory assessment that balances the important role of national tests and externally-examined terminal examinations with openness to alternative forms of assessment which are fair and evidence-led, recognising that assessment and the curriculum actually accessed in practice are closely linked.

In many subjects, the content of the GCSE is not currently fit for purpose and needs reform. Many learned societies and subject associations have raised concerns about curriculum overload at Key Stage 4, linked to the current structure of assessment. The Academy is particularly concerned by issues raised by subject specialists regarding challenges with the present English GCSEs. We strongly encourage the review board engage

with subject specialists when considering the appropriate volume and nature of curricular content and assessment at Key Stage 4. It is important that the curriculum is rewarding, inclusive and accessible for learners, and that is does not put undue burden and pressure on pupils to absorb or on teachers to deliver.

The current requirement for continued study of maths and English for those who do not receive a passing grade at GCSE must be reformed. A system where approximately one third of students leave compulsory education without Grade 4 or above, with a low pass rate in resits, is not a system that is functioning as it should. The Academy continues to advocate for an expansion of post-16 Core Maths as well as an equivalent for English, for embedding numerical and literacy skills across a broader range of subjects, and more flexible and varied opportunities for young people to develop their numeracy and literacy skills.

The Academy is particularly concerned about the lack of breadth and balance in England's narrow post-16 curriculum. England's post-16 curriculum is one of the narrowest among OECD countries. Recent research from the British Academy and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) suggests a worrying trend towards further curricular narrowing at Level 3 in recent years as well as declining take-up of Arts and Humanities subjects post-16, linked, in part, to the phasing out of AS levels and 'decoupling' of AS and A levels in 2015/2016. This research also raises concerns about the relationship between student characteristics (e. g. gender, ethnicity, evidence of socioeconomic disadvantage) and subject choice at Level 3, given post-16 subject choice can greatly restrict opportunities for further study, progression to higher education and entry to career pathways.

There are also aspects of the current system that ought to be retained and strengthened. Strengths of the current system of curriculum, assessment and qualification pathways include:

- The longstanding statutory entitlement of all young people to a broad and balanced curriculum, which ought to be retained as a point of principle;
- The inclusion of Humanities subjects (History/Geography) and Languages in the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) performance measure at Key Stage 4, reflecting these subjects' vital importance for young people's educational and skills development;
- The ability to combine more academic qualifications, such as A levels, with more technical/vocational qualifications, such as BTECs, at Level 3, giving young people choice and the opportunity to develop a broad array of different skills, particularly in light of the introduction of T levels.

The national curriculum should provide young people with the knowledge and skills they need to prepare them for future study and work, but also as citizens and as individuals. Exposure to skills and knowledge bases from a wide variety of different disciplines is valuable for young people's academic performance and ability to build flexible careers resilient to economic downturns. But enjoyment, creative and imaginative exploration, cultural and digital literacy, and curiosity for its own sake have social value in their own right. The national curriculum should teach young people to think critically, speak clearly and persuasively, exercise creativity, follow curiosity, collaborate with others, and solve problems, to prepare them for the complex socioeconomic, technological and ecological demands of the future.

Any reform must be system-wide and conducted with input from subject specialists, including teachers. The risk of tinkering with one part of the system without considering how it integrates with other parts is high. Education is cumulative: access to a rich and broad curriculum to allow young people to build knowledge and skills across Key

Stages is therefore vital. Any reforms should seek to narrow the gap between breadth and balance of subjects and qualifications in theory and in practice, for instance:

- By ensuring that any potential reforms are planned and implemented carefully, collaboratively and sustainably with the sector, with input from teachers, school leaders, academy trusts and others working 'on the ground' in our schools;
- By recognising that, while some reforms may be introduced more quickly, others may require more time, especially where they require additional resource not in scope for this review, particularly teacher workforce.

The British Academy welcomes plans to require all schools to follow the national curriculum. This is an important step to making sure all young people can benefit from a statutory entitlement to curricular breadth and balance.

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

10. What aspects of the current a) curriculum, b) assessment system and c) qualification pathways are working well to support and recognise educational progress for children and young people?

Young people in England have always had a statutory entitlement to breadth and balance in the national curriculum. Reasserting a commitment to breadth and balance and strengthening the delivery of the statutory entitlement across the education system should be a core aim of any potential refresh of curriculum and assessment. It is positive that young people currently have a statutory entitlement to a broad curriculum from Key Stages 1-4, because it is vital that learners should leave school having been exposed to, and benefited from, the rich insights, skills and knowledge bases from across a wide array of disciplinary areas. This includes the STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and the SHAPE disciplines (Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts for People and the Economy), whose approaches and contributions to the economy and society remain vital for tackling the challenges of our changing world. The inclusion of History/Geography and Languages as core subjects for the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), for instance, is an important statement of these subjects' value and worth in a young person's educational development and one that should continue. We welcome plans to require all schools to follow the national curriculum as part of this review, recognising this an important step to making sure all young people can benefit from a statutory entitlement to curricular breadth and balance.

There is strong evidence, however, that this commitment to a broad and balanced national curriculum on paper does not reflect the education many young people receive in classrooms up and down the country. This is particularly the case in young people's access to SHAPE subjects. Lack of sustained, equal access to the Arts and opportunities for creativity, for instance, has been a longstanding critique of the national curriculum.[1] Students' exposure to Arts subjects has decreased further in recent years. There has been a sharp decline in teaching hours in Arts subjects in state secondary-schools, particularly at KS3, despite strong evidence of Arts' subjects value for students' development.[2] GCSE and A level entries in these subjects have declined since 2010.[3] As curricular provision declines, and as students' access to extracurricular opportunities in creative subjects continues to be limited by socioeconomic background, this already limited access the Arts for disadvantaged students in higher education and creative careers may reduce further still.[4]

Declining curricular provision, however, is not a problem limited to Arts. We should not be complacent about young people's declining exposure to the other vital SHAPE disciplines in the Social Sciences and Humanities, which offer learners vital skills in demand from employers and essential for economic and social growth. As the Academy's separate Languages-specific response to the review explores in depth, we are deeply concerned about young people's access to and exposure to Language subjects throughout key stages. Language subjects continue to experience worryingly low levels of uptake at KS4 (47% in 2019); of pupils who entered four out of the five EBacc components in 2019, 86% were missing the

[1] See for instance Gulbenkian Foundation (1982) *The Arts in Schools: Principles, Practice and Provision*. Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation; National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (1999) *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education* (Robinson Report), DfEE; Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (2012) *Cultural Education in England: an independent review by Darren Henley for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Education*. DCMS/DfE.
[2] Ofsted, 2023. *Striking the right note: the music subject report*; Johnes, R., 2017. *Entry to Arts at Key Stage 4*. Education Policy Institute.
[3] Campaign for the Arts and University of Warwick (2024). *The State of the Arts*. Campaign for the Arts & Centre for Cultural and Media Policy Studies, University of Warwick. pp. 9; The British Academy, 2024. SHAPE Indicators.
[4] Holt-White, E., O'Brien, D., Brook, O., Taylor, M. (2024) A Class Act: Social Mobility and the Creative Industries. The Sutton Trust, pp. 10,

languages component.[5] We also know that within individual SHAPE subjects – such as English – the curriculum is neither broad nor balanced either in content or in modes of assessment, in ways that limits the skills young people can develop and take on into later life. A need to find better balance in the GCSE curriculum is an issue that will be raised by a number of learned societies and subject associations in their responses to this call for evidence, including the English Association. We encourage the review board to make full use of these important insights.

There is also strong evidence that this commitment to breadth and balance, for most young people, ends at age 16. England's curriculum has long been narrow compared to many peer countries: where most pupils in OECD countries take seven subjects post-16, in England students typically only take three.[6] But recent research from the British Academy and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) suggests a worrying trend towards further curricular narrowing at Level 3 in recent years as well as declining take-up of Arts and Humanities subjects post-16. The virtual phasing-out of AS levels, following the 'decoupling' of AS and A level qualifications in 2015/16, led to students taking fewer qualifications at Level 3. Of these reduced choices, young people are also taking a narrower selection of subjects, and increasingly only take subjects within one subject group (e. g. only STEM subjects or only Social Sciences subjects). There has been a significant decline in the proportion of AS and A level students studying a three-way combination of subject groups (e.g. combining a STEM, Social Science and Humanities subject). Among the 2021/22 cohort, only 5% of students were combining subjects from a STEM, Social Science and Humanities subject. This represents a drop of almost two-thirds from 2015/16, where around 14% of each cohort opted to study a STEM, Social Science and Humanities subject together. This pattern is visible not just at A level, but across all Level 3 qualifications.[7]

Alongside this narrowing, the data on student subject choice at Level 3 also shows an overall decline in the number of students taking Humanities and Arts subjects. This decline is not driven by one or two individual subjects. Instead, we see a decline in take-up across all humanities subjects, particularly 'traditional' options like English, History and many Languages. Controlling for students' characteristics – which play a considerable impact on students' subject choice, as we discuss in Q12 and Q13 - the likelihood of a student studying a Humanities and Arts subject is around 21 and 15 percentage points lower in 2021/22 compared to 2003/04 respectively.[8] Taken together, this research strongly suggests that fewer young people are benefiting from exposure to the varied disciplinary knowledge bases, skills and approaches than they were ten years ago, and that a broader post-16 curriculum would offer.

As the British Academy's Skills programme has shown, employers strongly value the skills SHAPE disciplines provide: communication, collaboration, research and analysis, independence, creativity and adaptability. Our evidence shows that young people with these skills are able to build flexible careers which may move across a number of areas of employment while remaining resilient to economic downturns. They are employed in sectors which underpin the UK economy and are among the fastest growing – financial, legal and professional services, information and communication, and the creative industries – as well as in socially valuable roles in public administration and education.[9] These are also the skills required to face the demands of a complex and changing world and underpin a huge amount of the UK's R&D and innovation activity. For instance, of the top five R&D performing

[5] Holmes-Henderson, A. (2024) 'Par excellence? Government-funded language education programmes in England' in Czerniawski, G., Jones, S. Holmes-Henderson, A., Poutney, R., Pugh, V-M. and Yang, W. (2024) *Curriculum in a changing world: 50 thinkpieces on education, policy, practice, innovation and inclusion.*, Troubador Press, Market Harborough. pp. 38.
[6] Department of Education (2023). 'New qualifications to deliver world class education for all.'
[7] Scott, M., Julius, J., Tang, S., and Lucas, M. (2024) *Subject choice trends in post-16 education in England*. National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). Commissioned by the British Academy. pp. 7-10.
[8] *Ibid,* 8.
[9] The British Academy (2020) *Qualified for the Future: Quantifying demand for arts, humanities and social science skills.* pp. 4-6, 11, 14.

sectors, four employed more 'non-science' than 'science' graduates in 2020, pointing to the importance of SHAPE skills to R&D intensive sectors.[10]

These patterns of declining SHAPE access and take-up in schools ought to be cause for concern, given shortages of higher-level skills in demand from employers which are developed in the study of SHAPE subjects.[11] Ensuring all students, regardless of background or region, can access these vibrant and dynamic disciplines throughout their schooling must therefore remain an important aim of any proposed curricular reform. Exposure to skills and knowledge bases from a wide variety of different disciplines is valuable for young people's academic performance and their development as individuals and as citizens. A broader curriculum has been shown to increase overall academic performance and hence the quality of the workforce as a whole:

- 90% of studies on the cross-curricular effect of learning a modern foreign language report a positive subsequent impact on English language learning, literacy, maths and science.[12]
- Research commissioned by the Royal Society in 2017 found that the most important link between poverty and under-achievement in science is illiteracy and a lack of reading comprehension, skills developed in non-Science subjects.[13] This suggests equal access to curricular breadth should be a priority of any potential reforms.

There are, however, other aspects of the current Level 3 system that should be retained and strengthened. This includes the opportunity for students to combine more academic qualifications with technical and vocational. An important feature of Level 3 qualification pathways is the potential for students to combine a variety of qualifications, for instance A levels with BTECs, or combine work study, as in apprenticeships and T levels. According to data from the British Academy and the National Academy of Educational Research, 30% of all students at L3 study a mix of A levels and other L3 qualifications, a figure that has remained reasonably constant since 2007/08.[14] We recognise that T levels are still in the early phase of development, limited in their coverage of subject areas and relatively narrow in scope. It is vital that we do not remove more flexible vocational and technical qualification options that students have historically often taken alongside A levels, which have offered learners flexibility of choice and portability to different tertiary pathways. To overcome the current uncertainty in this area, a strong commitment to a broad offer that provides clear pathways to further study for a range of learners is needed.

The Academy recognises the need for curriculum evolution not revolution, as proposed in the remit of the review. Given the challenges currently facing schools and FE colleges in teacher recruitment, retention and funding, major curriculum reform would be unfeasible without considerable additional investment. Ensuring access to the current national curriculum for all children should be the priority, given that provision is currently unequal across schools and pupils due to a range of factors. This is including, but not limited to, shortages of teachers with relevant subject expertise, high pupil absence and an increase in the number of children with an education, health and care plan (EHCP) or identified as having special educational needs or disabilities (SEND), to name but three.[15]

We are concerned that England's post 16 curriculum is one of the narrowest in the world. In the longer term, this does need attention. However, reform to Key Stage 5 in isolation poses risks. The risk of tinkering with one part of the system without considering how it integrates

[10] British Academy (2023) *Understanding SHAPE Skills in R&D: Bridging the Evidence Gap.* pp. 8.
[11] British Academy, *Qualified for the Future,* pp. 8.
[12] Woll, Bencie, F.B.A. (2019) Cognitive Benefits of Language Learning: Broadening our perspectives. Final Report to the British Academy.
[13] Nunes, T., Bryant, P., Strand, S., Hillier, J., Barros, R., Miller-Friedmann, J. (2017) *A review of SES and science learning in formal educational settings. A Report Prepared for the EEF and the Royal Society*. University of Oxford Department of Education.
[14] Scott, M., Julius, J., Tang, S., and Lucas, M. (2024) Subject Choice Trends Data Dashboards. Data on combinations of A-levels with other Level 3 qualifications are available on Dashboard 1 under 'All L3'. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). Commissioned by the British Academy.
[15] McLean, D., Worth, J. and Smith, A. (2024) *Teacher Labour Market in England: Annual Report 2024*. National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER); Children's Commissioner, 2023. Briefing on school attendance in England; Department of Education (DfE), 2024. 'Special educational needs in England.'

with other parts is high. We must work to narrow the gap between breadth and balance of subjects and qualifications in theory and in practice. It is vital that any potential reforms are planned and implemented carefully, collaboratively and sustainably with the sector, with input from teachers, school leaders, academy trusts and others working 'on the ground' in our schools.

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

Given the challenges currently facing schools and FE colleges in teacher recruitment, retention and funding, the Academy recognises the need for curriculum evolution not revolution at this time. Nevertheless, we recognise that there are significant aspects of the current system of curriculum and assessment that can, and should, be improved. Some reforms may be introduced more quickly; others may require more time, especially where they require additional resource not in scope for this review, particularly teacher workforce. These are summarised here and explored in greater depth in response to later questions in this call for evidence.

Curriculum:

The national curriculum should equip learners with skills and knowledge they need to thrive in every aspect of their lives, including education and learning, and in the world of work. The rapid pace at which society is developing requires a dynamic curriculum that is better aligned with, and responsive to, society's complex and changing needs. This means teaching young people to think critically, speak clearly and persuasively, exercise creativity, follow curiosity, collaborate with others, and solve problems, to prepare them for the complex socioeconomic, technological and ecological demands of the future.[16] This also means a curriculum with greater space to explore cross-cutting topics, which empowers young people to develop future-facing skills, such as digital and data literacy.

A curriculum fit for the challenges ahead should provide young people with both knowledge and skills. It is important that this curriculum is rewarding, inclusive and accessible for learners, and that is does not put undue burden and pressure on pupils to absorb or on teachers to deliver. There is strong evidence to suggest the current curriculum is not meeting these criteria for all children in all phases of schooling. Research from OECD raises the challenges posed by curriculum overload, not least the pressure on teaching staff to deliver too much content under too many time and resource constraints.[17] This is particularly a challenge posed by the current GCSE qualifications at KS4, and for a number of core subjects in which the Fellowship of the British Academy have particular expertise. We are particularly concerned that GCSE provision for English Literature and English Language is not fit for purpose and in need of reform (see our response to Q18). Overloading the curriculum, and overloading content within individual subjects, risks exacerbating current challenges facing the education system. This includes deepening existing inequalities and contributing to deepening crises of teacher recruitment and retention.[18]

The Academy also recognises, however, that the aim of an effective secondary curriculum and qualification pathways should not be limited to a narrow emphasis on knowledge and skills for work at the expense of other important aims. Enjoyment, creative and imaginative exploration, cultural literacy and curiosity for its own sake have social value in their own right. These are all stated as core aims of the national curriculum in the statutory guidance

[16] The British Academy (2020). *Qualified for the Future: Quantifying demand for arts, humanities and social science skills.* pp. 4-6, 11, 14.
[17] The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), (2020) *Curriculum Overload: A Way Forward.*
[18] For English specifically see The English Association (2024) *Summit for Reform of the English GCSES: Report and Recommendations*. pp. 4; The English Association and University English (2024) 'Working Group on GCSE English Reform: Report and Recommendations.'; Goodwyn, A. (2019) 'The State of English: NATE's Annual Survey'. *Teaching English* (24).

for many subjects in the SHAPE disciplines.[19] The shrinking provision of the arts in secondary schools is concerning in part because of the valuable, useful skills young people develop through studying Art, Music, Drama and other subjects. Yet equally concerning is the lack of opportunities for young people to express themselves, reflect, pursue imagination and find joy in the day-to-day of their schooling.[20] Preparing learners for life means finding time in the school-day and investing resources in these aspects of education, aspects that the study of all SHAPE subjects can provide for young people.

The Academy has close links with learned societies and subject associations, many of whom are submitting evidence on curriculum related to their own disciplines, and particularly at GCSE. We strongly support engaging with subject-specialists regarding any reforms to curricular content and structure, including teachers as curricular co-creators. As a principle, the Academy encourages an evidence-led approach to curriculum that strikes the correct balance between depth and breadth, pragmatism and ambition, rigour and enjoyment, and which is guided by the expertise of subject experts.

Assessment:

The British Academy recognises the value of rigorous, independent written tests and examinations as a crucial part of young people's learning and development. But we are concerned by strong evidence suggesting the current system of assessment may be having an adverse effect on curricular breadth. England has a high-stakes assessment system and an accountability system that relies heavily on the results of those assessments. It is an outlier among peer countries in the volume of assessments in compulsory schooling, despite little evidence that this volume of assessment has a positive impact on student outcomes.[21]

This means that assessment and the curriculum actually accessed by children in practice are, necessarily, strongly linked. There have been longstanding concerns, supported by evidence, that a high-stakes approach to terminal assessment, linked to accountability, can threaten curricular breadth.[22] Any reform to assessment, whether evolutionary or otherwise, must recognise that assessment will have a major impact on the curriculum actually accessed by children in practice. At Key Stage 2, evidence from our fellowship suggests the current form of statutory assessment, the Year 6 SATs, is contributing to curriculum attrition.[23] Meanwhile, at Key Stage 4, there is compelling evidence that the present assessment system is overly mechanistic, creating curriculum bloat and putting excessive pressure on pupils and teachers to deliver too large amount of content, with little room for flexibility or opportunity to develop a wider variety of skills beyond those examined through the GCSE. We are aware that many learned societies and subject associations intend to highlight this point in their respective responses to this call for evidence, including the English Association and Historical Association, and encourage the review board to engage with these submissions from subject experts, including teachers.

The Academy encourages an approach to statutory assessment that balances the important role of national tests and externally-examined terminal examinations with openness to alternative forms of assessment which are fair and evidence-led. We are mindful that any potential reform will require careful consultation with teachers and exam boards, given division among teachers in many subjects over the desirability of a return to teacher-

[19] Department of Education (2013) 'Statutory guidance: National curriculum in England: art and design programmes of study.'; Department of Education (2013) 'Statutory guidance: National curriculum in England: history programmes of study.'; Department of Education (2014) 'Statutory guidance: National curriculum in England: English programmes of study.'
[20] Ofsted (2023) *Striking the right note: the music subject report*; Campaign for the Arts and University of Warwick (2024*). The State of the Arts. Campaign for the Arts & Centre for Cultural and Media Policy Studies*. pp. 9; Holt-White, E., O'Brien, D., Brook, O., Taylor, M. (2024) A Class Act: Social Mobility and the Creative Industries. The Sutton Trust.
[21] OCR (2024) *Striking the Balance: A review of 11–16 curriculum and assessment in England.*
[22] Alexander, R.J. (ed.) (2010). *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, Routledge, 311-342; 496-500; Aloisi, C., & Tymms, P. (2017) 'PISA trends, social changes, and education reforms.' Educational Research and Evaluation, 23(5–6), 180–220. https://doi.org/10.1080/13803611.2017.1455290; Bolden, D and Tymms, P. (2020) *Standards in education: reforms, stagnation and the need to rethink*. Oxford Review of Education.
[23] Alexander, *ibid.*

assessed coursework.[24] We also urge careful consideration of what alternatives are feasible in an AI-rich world and where assessments are also used for school accountability purposes. The Academy encourages engagement with key stakeholders, particularly teaching staff, to ensure reforms are feasible. This will be important to avoid adding increased pressures and burdens on teachers, particularly after considerable reform to assessment at KS4 and 5 over the past decade.

Overall, it is important to distinguish summative assessment procedures such as KS2 SATs and KS4 examinations from day-to-day formative assessment or assessment for learning (AfL), and to be wary of the 'backwash effect' on students of relying too much on a single assessment procedure to cover all of assessment's possible functions – supporting learning, measuring attainment, demonstrating school accountability, monitoring national standards.[25]

Qualification pathways:

Recent research from the British Academy on existing qualification pathways suggests a worrying trend towards curricular narrowing at the expense of SHAPE disciplines at Level 3, as well as declining take-up of Arts and Humanities subjects post-16. A major report commissioned by the British Academy and conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) into post-16 subject choice trends over two decades found that students are taking fewer subjects and a much narrower selection of subjects. Across Level 3 qualifications, students are increasingly taking subjects within one subject group only (e. g. only STEM subjects or only Social Sciences subjects). The data also shows an overall decline in the number of students taking Humanities and Arts subjects, including 'traditional' options like English, History and Languages. We are deeply concerned about this development given the rich and important set of skills and knowledges that the study of these subjects provides young people.

Our research suggests that the 'decoupling' of AS and A level qualifications in 2015/2016 contributed to curricular narrowing at Level 3. This is also discussed in depth in response to Q27-31. This research provides an instructive example of how changes to qualification pathways designed to make qualifications more rigorous may have an adverse effect on curricular breadth. We urge the review board to consider potential implications of further changes in light of this.[26]

As part of its commitment to interconnected knowledge and skills, the Academy encourages an evidence-led exploration of alternative qualifications which may offer young people additional opportunities for skills development, especially in the SHAPE disciplines. As we discuss in our response to Q12, we remain very concerned about the 'forgotten third' of students who do not achieve a passing grade 4 or above in maths and English at GCSE, particularly compulsory resits as a requirement of continued study given the strong evidence of low pass rates.[27] We believe that mathematical and quantitative skills, as well as the cultural knowledge and skills such as communication, critical thinking and problem solving that are taught through English, are central for encouraging social mobility and driving economic growth. Developing and strengthening alternative programmes of study in maths and English skills is imperative for these learners, and may take the form of an expansion of post-16 Core Maths as well as an equivalent for English.[28] We also suggest further exploration of alternative qualifications for languages at Level 3, in order to make language-learning more accessible at this stage of education. Discussion of alternative qualifications for languages is explored as part of our Languages-specific response to this call for evidence.

[24] See for instance survey data included in the Historical Association's response to this call for evidence; English Association, *Summit for Reform of the English GCSEs,* 4.
[25] Assessment Reform Group (2008) *Changing Assessment Practice: process, principles and standards.*
[26] Scott et al, *Subject choice trends in post-16 education in England*.
[27] Barton, G. (2024) Blog: 'ACSL leader calls for a more humane GCSE system.' Association of School and College Leaders; Education Policy Institute (EPI) (2024) Blog: 'Time for a resit reset?'; EPI (2024) *Annual Report 2024: Disadvantage.*
[28] The British Academy and the Royal Society, 2022. 'Joint statement on Core Maths qualifications: The importance of promoting Core Maths as practical and valuable qualifications.'

It is important, however, that any delivery of qualification pathways in these subjects is delivered in a flexible, equitable and accessible way that considers students' varying needs and previous attainment, and as part of a curricular streamlining so as not to overburden pupils and teachers. We welcome reforms that work towards reversing this trend of student subject choices being increasingly narrowed into one disciplinary area, and instead provide students, in all areas and of all backgrounds, with a broader curriculum and a variety of pathways into training and further/higher study.

Section 3: Social justice and inclusion

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

The British Academy remains concerned about attainment gaps for students experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, particularly post-pandemic.[29] While we welcome increased emphasis on attainment gaps in early years, we encourage equal attention to be paid to attainment gaps in later stages of compulsory schooling, including discrepancies for socioeconomic status and by region.[30] Gaps in participation, attainment and aspiration at Key Stages 3, 4 and 5 all have a direct impact on employment prospects and on widening participation in further and higher education. There is also evidence of considerable curricular variation between schools with pupils of higher/lower socioeconomic status as well potential variations in the quality of teaching.[31] Interventions to support learners experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage must therefore be renewed throughout the education system from start to finish. London schools' success in narrowing the attainment gap for students eligible for free school meals (FSM) is an important example of how steady incremental reforms and increases to teaching support and pastoral care can have a meaningful impact on outcomes for disadvantaged young people.[32]

The current requirement for continued study of maths and English for those who do not receive a passing grade at GCSE is a particular cause for concern. A system where approximately one third of students leave compulsory education without Grade 4 or above is not a system that is functioning as it should, nor one equipping students with strong skills in numeracy and literacy. The system of compulsory resits, as a condition of funding, is failing students who are experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, who are much less likely to achieve a passing grade in either subject.[33] That so few students go on to pass either subject after resitting makes clear the need for an alternative approach.[34]

Overcoming this 'cycle of failure' with maths and English resits will require reforms both to the curriculum and to the system of assessment/qualification pathways. It is important to be led by the evidence of subject-specialists, including teachers, on how to ensure the content of the maths and English curriculum both at primary and at KS3 and 4 is engaging and accessible to students. It is also important to embed numerical and literacy skills across a broader range of subjects, including the SHAPE disciplines, with consistency of terminology and concepts to allow learners to make links between usage in different domains.[35]

In assessment, we support exploration of an alternative qualification for the 'forgotten third' which will alleviate pressure both on learners but also on schools and FE providers.[36] This may take the form of an expansion of post-16 Core Maths as well as an equivalent for English.[37] Above all, we encourage a system-wide, joined-up approach that empowers learners and offers more flexible and varied opportunities to develop their skills and

[29] Education Policy Institute (EPI), 2024. Annual Report 2024: Disadvantage. https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2024-disadvantage-2;
[30] Farquharson, C., McNally, S. and Tahir, I. (2022), 'Education inequalities'. Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) Deaton Review of Inequalities; Thomson, D., 2024. 'Blog: The widening gap in attainment at Key Stage 4 between London and the rest of the country.' FFT Education Data Lab.
[31] See for instance Ofsted, *Striking the right note: the music subject report*; Rebecca Allen and Sam Sims, *The Teacher Gap* (Routledge, 2018).
[32] Blanden, J. et al, 2015. Blog: 'No magic bullet in London schools' success. Just years if steady improvement in quality.'
[33] FFT Education Datalab, 2024. 'GCSE Results 2024: The main trends in grades and entries.'
[34] Education Policy Institute (EPI) (2024) Blog: 'Time for a resit reset?'
[35] The Royal Society, 2024. A new approach to mathematical and data education. pp. 9.
[36] Barton, G., 2024. Blog: 'ACSL leader calls for a more humane GCSE system.' Association of School and College Leaders.
[37] The British Academy and the Royal Society, 2022. 'Joint statement on Core Maths qualifications: The importance of promoting Core Maths as practical and valuable qualifications.'

knowledge of maths and English, recognising that a one-size-fits-all approach may not be the best way to provide young people with the skills they need for working life.

We also know that socioeconomic status continues to play a key role in influencing subject choice at Level 3. Research from the British Academy and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) explored how socioeconomic background related to students' subject choice, alongside other characteristics including gender and ethnicity (NFER, 2024). While it is well established that students who are eligible for free school meals (FSM) are less likely than non-eligible students to take STEM subjects, our research shows that those students are also much less likely to take Humanities subjects, such as English (Literature or Language), History and Modern Languages.[38] FSM students are more likely to take Arts subjects at Level 3 than their peers. But these same students also are impacted by a lack of access to a broader array of creative opportunities – for instance, expensive extracurricular music tuition – and are much less likely to enter creative industries and careers than their peers.[39]

More research is needed to better contextualise and understand the relationship between student characteristics and subject choice, as well as provider offer. But it is clear that disparities in subject take-up according to socioeconomic background are a cause for concern. Post-16 subject choice can greatly restrict opportunities for further study, progression to higher education and entry to career pathways. It is therefore vital that students of all backgrounds have access to a broad array of disciplinary approaches, skills and knowledge bases.

13. In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation which may disproportionately impact pupils based on other protected characteristics (e.g. gender, ethnicity)?

Research by NFER, commissioned by the British Academy, shows that gender and ethnicity continue to play a key role in influencing subject choice at Level 3. Subject choices by AS/A-level students vary significantly by student characteristics, even once other factors have been accounted for: in general, the disparities observed between different student characteristics across subjects are longstanding and have persisted over time. Female students are more likely to engage in Arts, Humanities and Social Science subjects than their male counterparts. Students from non-White ethnic backgrounds are more likely to study STEM and Social Science subjects compared to students from White ethnic backgrounds. Some patterns vary markedly across individual subjects: for example, female students are more likely to study Social Science subjects like Psychology and Sociology, whilst male students are more likely to study others like Business Studies, Economics, Geography and Government and Politics.[40]

More research is needed to better contextualise student subject choice, as well as provider offer. Nevertheless, it is clear that disparities in subject take-up according to gender and ethnicity remain a cause for concern at Level 3, as post-16 subject choice can greatly restrict opportunities for further study, progression to higher education and entry to career pathways.

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

[38] Scott et al, *Subject Choice Trends in post-16 education in England.*
[39] Holt-White et al, A Class Act: Social Mobility and the Creative Industries, 10.
[40] Scott et al, *Subject Choice Trends in post-16 education in England,* 9.

[Not covered in Academy response]

15. In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any enablers that support attainment, progress, access or participation for the groups listed above?

[Not covered in Academy response]

Section 4: Ensuring an excellent foundation in maths and English

16.To what extent does the content of the national curriculum at primary level (key stages 1 and 2) enable pupils to gain an excellent foundation in a) English and b) maths? Are there ways in which the content could change to better support this aim? Please note, we invite views specifically on transitions between key stages in section 9.

The British Academy is committed to strengthening and championing the humanities and social sciences. Much of our own research, and indeed our commentary in this submission, is focused on secondary and post-secondary education. However, some themes resonate across all phases of the education system.

Education is cumulative. Access to a rich and broad curriculum in primary is vital if children are going to gain the necessary knowledge and skills to engage with a range of subjects in secondary and beyond. We are concerned that there may be barriers to curricular breadth at the primary level, which risks impacting the literacy and numeracy skills children can develop not just in English and maths lessons, but across the study of many other subjects.

Most primary schools do offer the full national curriculum. However, the high-stakes nature of KS2 assessments for schools can lead them to overly focus on English and maths with a consequent reduced emphasis on other important aspects of the curriculum.[41] For instance, Ofsted's recent subject report into English found a broad curriculum for pupils of all ages is essential for children to understand texts as students move beyond basic literacy. Yet the same report also found that, at most schools, assessment 'unhelpfully informs the design of the curriculum', distorting what pupils are taught and leading to reduced time 'to learn and practise key knowledge and skills'.[42] Earlier Ofsted reports, and indeed a 1985 White Paper, have consistently criticised the belief that the way to raise standards in maths and English is to concentrate on these alone. Indeed, Ofsted evidence points to the opposite conclusion, showing how primary schools that perform exceptionally well in the KS2 SATs embed the tested subjects in a curriculum that is broad, rich and well-taught.[43]

Depth of provision in some subjects, and by extension access to a broad curriculum, is highly variable across schools and pupils. More socioeconomically deprived pupils are less likely to be able to fully access Music, for example, given the limitations of the Music offer in their schools, their opportunities for studying instruments (which now need to be funded by parents) and their opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities.[44]. This inequality of access to a broad and balanced curriculum at an early stage in the education system is concerning for the knock-on effects it will have on children's future educational opportunities.

There is also a need to better ensure that enabling skills, such as oracy, literacy and numeracy, are purposively embedded across the primary curriculum. We welcome the renewed emphasis on oracy in young people's development though emphasise that oracy is as much about pedagogy as it is about curriculum: English is about more than the acquisition of the technical skills or reading and writing, crucial though these are, and English in KS1/2 should treat speaking with the same seriousness. Both reading and writing gain from being intertwined with speaking and listening, and hence literacy and oracy are best viewed as overlapping and

[41] Alexander (ed.) *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, pp. 240-243
[42] Ofsted (2024) *Telling the story: the English education subject report.*
[43] Department of Education and Science (1985). *Better Schools,* HMSO; Ofsted (1997). *National Curriculum Assessment Results and the Wider Curriculum at Key Stage 2: evidence from the Ofsted database*; Ofsted (2002) *The Curriculum in Successful Primary Schools*; Ofsted (2004) *Standards and Quality 2002-3: the annual report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools.*
[44] Ofsted (2023) *Striking the right note: the music subject report.*

mutually supportive genres.[45] We encourage the review board to explore examples of tested approaches to integrating oracy skills in the curriculum and embracing 'talk rich' teaching, such as trials by the Education Endowment Foundation on oral language interventions and dialogic teaching which linked these approaches to higher pupil attainment.[46]

In this matter, the needs of those students with diagnosed speech and communication needs and difficulties (SLCN) should be properly catered for within schools' wider oracy provision. The review should be aware that in policy, as in many schools, the urgent agenda set by the first Bercow report has not been pursued, with many pupils with SCLN still facing many barriers to effective oracy provision during their schooling.[47]

17.To what extent do the English and maths primary assessments support pupils to gain an excellent foundation in these key subjects? Are there any changes you would suggest that would support this aim?

The point made in response to Q16 about the importance of oracy implies a rethink of the assessment of pupils in primary. The use of high stakes KS2 assessment in primary school accountability drives behaviours of schools.[48] We agree with the Department for Education's own assessment that schools can overly focus on the narrow, written assessment of English and maths with a consequent reduced emphasis on other important aspects of the curriculum. We therefore encourage an approach to assessment that encourages access to a broad and balanced curriculum to flourish.

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

While the British Academy does not typically undertake research into subject-specific curricular content pre-18, evidence gathered during our recent report into the disciplinary health of English Studies in UK higher education (including English Literature, English Language and Creative Writing) has drawn our attention to serious concerns with English studies at the secondary level.[49] Many in the English Studies subject community have raised the alarm that that the current system of curriculum and assessment at KS3 and 4 in English is not fit for purpose and is in urgent need of reform.

We are aware of concerns from teachers and subject specialists that changes to curricular content may be impacting take-up of qualifications in English post-16. Between 2017 to 2022, students studying English Language at A level across England, Wales and Northern Ireland fell by 32%, from 21,178 to 14,478. Those studying English Literature fell by 23%, from 46,411 to 35,791. Additionally, those studying the joint A level English Language & Literature fell by 32%, from 11,058 to 7,507. In 2022, English literature fell out of the top 10 most popular subjects in England for A level study for the first time.[50] While take-up for A level English Literature and A level English Language & Literature showed small increases in 2023, take-up at A level is still lower than it was in 2017. Significantly, this same trend was

[45] Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) (2021) *Final report and recommendations from the Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group Inquiry*; Oracy Education Commission (2024) *We need to talk: the report of the Commission on the Future of Oracy Education in England*; Goody, J. (1987) *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge University Press); Alexander, R. J. (2020) *A Dialogic Teaching Companion*. Routledge, chapter 6, 'Grand dichotomy'.

[46] Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) (2021) 'Oral language interventions'. In Teaching and Learning Toolkit. https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/oral-language-interventions

[47] Department for Children, Schools and Families (2008). *A Review of Services for Children and Young People (0–19) with Speech, Language and Communication Needs* (the Bercow Report). DCSF; ICAN and the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, 2018. Bercow Ten Years On: An independent review of provision for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs in England. ICAN/RCSLT.

[48] Alexander, R.J. (ed) (2010) *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*. Routledge, pp. 496-500; Ofsted (2024) *Telling the story: the English education subject report.*

[49] British Academy (2023) English Studies Provision in UK Higher Education.

[50] British Academy, English Studies Provision in UK Higher Education, pp. 23

not seen in the equivalent Scottish qualifications of the Scottish Higher and Scottish Advanced Higher over the same period.[51]

Evidence collected by colleagues at the English Association, which is included in their response to this call for evidence, suggests that the content of the GCSE in 2015 is having a direct impact on the kinds of knowledge and skills young people develop at secondary level.[52] While improvements in the UK's PISA literacy rates tell a positive story for the new curricula, we are also aware of concern in the English Studies community about a loss of key skills due to a narrow focus on student performance at the expense of more profound, deeper and enriching engagement with language and literature in the classroom.[53] Many subject practitioners describe changes to the GCSE and A level curricula as now overemphasising the importance of memorising quotations and information over critical engagement, without a balance with critical and creative engagement, independent thinking and problem-solving.[54] This is seen by many in the sector to hamper skills development and curb enthusiasm for the discipline. To address these concerns, the English Association has recommended that the English Language GCSE in particular 'should be closer in content to the A-Level, bring back spoken language, and include multi-media and new media forms: journalism, games, non-fiction, and other non-literary writing… [developing] more formal linguistic knowledge and make explicit English's relevance for the workplace'.[55]

We are also aware of concerns that changes to the English GCSEs in recent years may be contributing to a less diverse and inclusive curriculum. For instance, in the English Literature GCSE in England, students are now required to study a complete nineteenth-century English novel. American texts have been removed from the curriculum, with assessment objectives including an 'appreciation of the depth and power of the English literary heritage'.[56] As the English Association argued in its recent report on GCSE reform, students may benefit from a canon of texts that is more diverse to allow students to be able to 'see themselves' in the curriculum.[57] Overall, on the content of English literature and language, and maths at KS3 and 4, we would encourage the review board to engage with evidence provided by subject specialists, particularly evidence produced by the English Association for this review. We would particularly direct attention towards the work of the Royal Society's Mathematical Futures programme and the English Association's response to this call for evidence, both of which draw on evidence and experience of disciplinary experts in schools and in higher education.[58]

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

As discussed throughout in our response, the British Academy continues to support exploration of an alternative qualification for the 'forgotten third' of students who do not receive a passing grade in maths or English at GCSE. The Academy has previously supported post-16 Core Maths in the curriculum, and we are similarly supportive of Core English.[59] The ultimate goal of any alternative qualification pathway should be to empower these students to build key skills without being trapped in a 'cycle of failure', and alleviating pressure on delivery for schools and FE providers.[60] We believe that all young people should have the opportunity to study maths and English to 18 in some form, as they provide young people with a crucial set of skills that encourage economic and social mobility as well as drive

[51] The British Academy, 2024. SHAPE Indicators.
[52] The English Association and University English, 'Working Group on GCSE English Reform: Report and Recommendations.'
[53] National Association for Teaching of English (NATE) (2020). 'The Decline in Student Choice of A Level English: A NATE Position Paper'. Teaching English, 24.
[54] Bleiman, B. (2018) 'The Changing Picture of School English', English Shared Futures, eds. Eaglestone R., and Marshall, G. Boydell & Brewer, pp.8-9.
[55] The English Association, Summit for Reform of the English GCSES: Report and Recommendations. pp. 5.
[56] Department of Education, 2013, 'English Language: GCSE Subject Content and Assessment Objectives', p.4. [November 2022].
[57] The English Association, Summit for Reform of the English GCSES: Report and Recommendations. pp. 10.
[58] For the Royal Society's Mathematical Futures programme see The Royal Society, 2024. A new approach to mathematical and data education.
[59] The British Academy and the Royal Society, 2022. 'Joint statement on Core Maths qualifications: The importance of promoting Core Maths as practical and valuable qualifications'.
[60] Barton, G., (2024) Blog: 'ACSL leader calls for a more humane GCSE system.' Association of School and College Leaders; EPI (2024), Blog: 'Time for a resit reset?'

economic growth. We particularly want to see students provided with flexible pathways that afford pupils a variety of options to suit the diverse needs and previous educational experiences of the 16-19 cohort. This is crucial to ensure that the provision of core English and maths is an opportunity and advantage for young people, rather than a deterrence that hinders participation and progression. A one-size-fits-all approach may not be the best way to provide young people with the skills they need for working life. We continue to support the Royal Society's Maths Futures programme and encourage the review board to make full use of the considerable evidence and research undertaken through this programme to inform any potential reforms to maths qualifications at pre- and post-16.

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

We share concerns across the sector about the current requirement for continued study of maths and English for those who do not receiving a passing grade at GCSE. A system where approximately one third of students are still leaving compulsory education without Grade 4 or above is not a system that is functioning as it should, nor one equipping students with strong skills in numeracy and literacy. The system of compulsory resits, as a condition of funding, is failing students who are experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, as these students are much less likely to achieve a passing grade in either subject.[61] It is equally concerning that two-thirds of those students who go on to resit these qualifications fail to achieve a passing grade, putting the rest of their study in jeopardy.[62]

The causes of this situation are complex. They include the residual, long-term impact of early years skills gaps on learners in later key stages and low learner confidence. But they also reflect many of the challenges facing further education (FE) providers who provide resit instruction to pupils post-16. The absence of expert teachers in Maths in particular in FE colleges is part of a broader crisis of teacher recruitment and retention at these providers, who have faced the largest real-terms cuts to funding of all parts of the education system. FE providers face a steep challenge of trying to deliver GCSE content intended to be taught over two years in a thirty-week period without the necessary staff, a challenge which is only exacerbating crises of student attainment in basic Maths and English skills.[63] Reform of this system is therefore urgently needed both for the sake of students stuck in this cycle of repeated 'failure', and for the FE sector struggling to deliver the instruction under tight financial and resource constraints.

We support exploration of an alternative to the current system for the 'forgotten third' which will alleviate pressure both on learners but also on schools and FE providers.[64] We continue to support qualifications in Core Maths and Core English, which offer students more flexible and varied opportunities to learn core content and gain necessary skills in more applied formats.[65]

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

As reflected in our response to Q12, the British Academy remains concerned about attainment gaps for students experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, and particularly for

[61] Education Policy Institute (EPI) (2024) *Annual Report 2024: Disadvantage.*
[62] FFT Education Datalab (2024) 'GCSE Results 2024: The main trends in grades and entries'.
[63] Education and Training Foundation (2022) Blog: 'Why do so many FE students struggle with maths?'
[64] Barton, G., (2024) Blog: 'ACSL leader calls for a more humane GCSE system.' Association of School and College Leaders; EPI (2024), Blog: 'Time for a resit reset?'
[65] The British Academy and the Royal Society (2022) 'Joint statement on Core Maths qualifications: The importance of promoting Core Maths as practical and valuable qualifications'.

those of this group who do not receive a passing grade 4 or above at GCSE. The system of compulsory resits, as a condition of funding, is particularly impacting socioeconomically-disadvantaged young people who are much less likely to achieve a passing grade in either subject and who have a very low pass rate in subsequent resits.[66]

Overcoming this 'cycle of failure' with maths and English resits will require reforms both to the curriculum and to the system of assessment/qualification pathways. It is important to be led by the evidence of subject-specialists, including teachers, on how to ensure the content of the maths and English curriculum both at primary and at KS3 and 4 is engaging and accessible to students. It is also important to embed numerical and literacy skills across a broader range of subjects, including the SHAPE disciplines, with consistency of terminology and concepts to allow learners to make links between usage in different domains.[67]

In assessment, we support exploration of an alternative qualification for the 'forgotten third' which will alleviate pressure both on learners but also on schools and FE providers.[68] This may take the form of an expansion of post-16 Core Maths as well as an equivalent for English.[69] Above all, we encourage a system-wide, joined-up approach that empowers learners and offers more flexible and varied opportunities to develop their skills and knowledge of maths and English, recognising that a one-size-fits-all approach may not be the best way to provide young people with the skills they need for working life.

[66] Education Policy Institute (EPI) (2024) *Annual Report 2024: Disadvantage*; FFT Education Datalab (2024) 'GCSE Results 2024: The main trends in grades and entries'..
[67] The Royal Society (2024), A new approach to mathematical and data education, pp. 69.
[68] Barton, G. (2024) Blog: 'ACSL leader calls for a more humane GCSE system.' Association of School and College Leaders; Education Policy Institute (EPI) (2024) Blog: 'Time for a resit reset?'.
[69] The British Academy and the Royal Society (2022) 'Joint statement on Core Maths qualifications: The importance of promoting Core Maths as practical and valuable qualifications'.

Section 5: Curriculum and qualification content

22.Are there particular curriculum or qualifications subjects where:
a. there is too much content; not enough content, or content is missing;
b. the content is out-of-date;
c. the content is unhelpfully sequenced (for example to support good curriculum design or pedagogy);
d. there is a need for greater flexibility (for example to provide the space for teachers to develop and adapt content)?
Please provide detail on specific key stages where appropriate.

We encourage the review board engage with subject specialists on questions of curricular content, particularly how to ensure that young people develop a diverse array of knowledge bases and skillsets, build a strong foundation for further study, training and working life, and enjoy learning about and discovering these vibrant disciplines and fields of knowledge in the classroom. Many learned societies and subject associations in the SHAPE disciplines have strong connections to specialist teachers in their subjects. This means they understand what it means to deliver curricular content to young people on the day-to-day, and the value of seeing and trusting teachers as curricular co-creators. These bodies can also draw on the expertise of those at the cutting-edge of research and teaching in their disciplines in higher education and beyond, to ensure that young people's encounters with these disciplines in the classroom reflects the vitality and dynamism of these living-and-breathing fields of knowledge and enquiry.

Through our close links with learned societies and subject associations, we note that many will be submitting evidence on curricular content in the GCSE, and particularly its links to assessment. This includes (but is not limited to) responses from the English Association, the Historical Association and the Royal Geographical Society, whose members strongly recommend a reduction in the volume of content at GCSE. We support engaging with these and other subject-specialists regarding any reforms to the GCSE or other qualification pathways. As a principle, the Academy encourages an evidence-led approach to curriculum that strikes the correct balance between depth and breadth, pragmatism and ambition, rigour and enjoyment, and which is guided by the expertise of subject experts.

Please note that the Academy's Languages-specific response to this call for evidence includes an extended discussion of potential reforms to the languages curriculum across Key Stages in response to Q22.

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

We encourage the review board to engage with the research and reflections of learned societies and subject associations in their response to this call for evidence, many of whom are addressing how to better ensure diversity and representation in the curriculum, particularly in the SHAPE disciplines. We also direct the review board towards our separate Languages-specific response, which provides strong evidence on the importance of qualifications recognising home, heritage and community languages (HHCL) as part of efforts to make curriculum and qualification pathways more representative of England as a culturally, ethnically and linguistically diverse society. This is discussed in Q23 of our Languages response.

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

[Not covered in Academy response]

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

A broad, rich and well-taught primary curriculum is a prerequisite for all that follows. This is particularly important if students are to have an adequate foundation for their later subject choices. An effective primary curriculum should not only cover the 'basics' of English and mathematics, but also science, the social sciences, humanities, and arts, and what earlier versions of the national curriculum defined as cross-curricular skills. The current primary curriculum may meet this requirement on paper, but there are longstanding concerns that the requirements are presented in a way that downplays the educational importance and societal value of all but literacy and numeracy.[70] We would welcome a serious engagement with these concerns, as well as with strong evidence of links between on the current system of assessment at KS2 on primary curriculum attrition.[71]

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

The Academy recognises that part of the aim of the secondary curriculum and of qualification pathways should be to provide young people with the skill and knowledge they will need for the future. While we are conscious of the risk of overloading the present curriculum by adding additional requirements, the Academy would welcome increased opportunity for young people to develop skills and exposure to knowledge bases which are currently not well-attended to in the curriculum at Key Stages 3 and 4.

Evidence from our expert Fellowship suggests students may not be receiving sufficient exposure to certain key skillsets, concepts and aptitudes that will be in increasing demand in the decades to come, particularly those that are not bound by subject but instead cut across disciplinary areas. This includes digital and data skills, the capacity to critically interrogate and evaluate information on social media and from other digital sources, education for climate change and sustainability, cultural literacy and the skills needed for active citizenship and democratic engagement. All of these are essential not only for the future world of work but also for tackling the economic, societal and global challenges that today's students will confront, and indeed are already confronting, and for enabling our students to contribute to the good society.[72]

While we see this to some extent as a need to update the curricular content – see, for example, the response of the Political Studies Association and the Association for Citizenship Teaching to this Review on re-prioritising and improving citizenship education – there is also a need to embed the teaching of these concepts and skills into pedagogy in a cross-disciplinary way. For instance, we would welcome interventions to develop young people's digital and AI literacy across disciplines.[73] Evidence presented at expert roundtables as part

[70] Ofsted (2024) *Telling the story: the English education subject report.*
[71] Alexander (ed.), *Children, their World, their Education,* 311-342; 496-500.
[72] NFER (2022) *The Skills Imperative 2035: what does the literature tell us about the essential skills most needed for work?*; H. M. Treasury (2006*) Prosperity for All in the Global Economy: world class skills* (the Leitch Report). TSO; QCA, (1998) *Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools: final report of the Advisory Group on Citizenship* (the Crick Report), QCA; Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (2012) *Cultural Education in England: an independent review by Darren Henley for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Education*. DCMS/DfE; Small, H. (2013) The Value of the Humanities, OUP, especially the chapter 'Democracy needs us', pp 125-150; Armstrong, I.M., Shepherd, S., Gatrell, P., Chatty, D., Shuttleworth, S., Currie, G., Johnson, J., Born, G., Secord, J.A., and McCabe, M.M. (2024) The arts and humanities: rethinking value for today, Journal of the British Academy 12(3).
[73] Livingstone, S., Mascheroni, G. and Stoilova, M. (2021). 'The outcome of gaining digital skills for young people's lives and wellbeing: A systematic evidence review,' New Media & Society, 25(5), 1176-1202.

of Academy's ongoing collaborative project with UCL Public Policy, AI and the Future of Work, suggested it is important that digital literacy and AI-related skills in the school curriculum are conceptualised in a pluri-disciplinary way that allows concepts and skills to be integrated into a wide range of subjects. AI-related skills are not limited to traditional STEM disciplines and computer science but include wider skill sets that ensure a holistic engagement with AI and its effects: as such, skills like critical thinking, emotional intelligence and leadership should be considered as part of the AI-skills blend.[74] The development of key skills for working life are an important aspect of secondary education. But the development of a different set of skills, aptitudes and approaches – creativity, imagination, enjoyment, curiosity and cultural discovery – should equally valuable aims of a young person's education. Declining curricular opportunities for all young people to access Art, Music, Drama and other creative subject s means many young people – particularly those experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage – have fewer opportunities to express themselves, reflect, pursue imagination and find joy in the day-to-day of their schooling.[75]

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

We are concerned that curricular narrowing at Level 3 may negatively impact the skills and knowledge with which young people leave compulsory education. This in turn risks limiting opportunities for future study and the skills they can bring into the workplace and wider society. Our recent work with the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) into post-16 subject choice trends over two decades found that students are not only taking fewer subjects than ever, but taking a much narrower selection of subjects from different subject groups.[76] The data also shows an overall decline in the number of students taking Humanities and Arts subjects. This suggests a worrying trend towards curricular narrowing at the expense of SHAPE disciplines at Level 3. Across Level 3 qualifications, students are increasingly taking subjects within one subject group only (e. g. only STEM subjects or only Social Sciences subjects). A link to this report, with interactive data dashboards which explore subject choice data from the National Pupil Database (NPD) in more depth, is given below.

More research is needed to better contextualise and understand student subject choice, particularly curricular narrowing. Nevertheless, this research may provide an instructive example of how changes to qualification pathways designed to make qualifications more rigorous may have an adverse effect on curricular breadth. It makes clear that pressure on schools regarding assessment and performance is directly linked to curricular provision. We can see that, in other national contexts – for instance, with Scottish Highers – curricular narrowing and pressure on attainment are also closely linked.[77]

England's post-16 curriculum is already narrow compared to many other countries. Most A-level students in England take only three subjects after age 16: in other OECD countries, students usually take up to seven. Further curricular narrowing at post-16, particularly at the expense of Arts and Humanities subjects, will necessarily limit the different skills and knowledge bases young people can develop. We urge the review board to consider potential implications of any further changes to the curriculum at Level 3 in light of this, particularly the declining exposure to SHAPE subjects for students post-16.

We are particularly concerned that this narrowing may be a symptom of young people's views that studying SHAPE subjects will negatively impact employment prospects, despite

[74] The British Academy and UCL Public Policy, 2021. 'AI and the Future of Work: Policy Briefing.', p. 9.
[75] Ofsted, 2023. *Striking the right note: the music subject report*; Holt-White et al, *A Class Act*; Campaign for the Arts and University of Warwick (2024). *The State of the Arts*. Campaign for the Arts & Centre for Cultural and Media Policy Studies, University of Warwick.
[76] Scott et al, *Subject Choice Trends in post-16 Education in England.*
[77] Shapira, M., and Priestley., M. (2023) Exploring the impact of curriculum policy on choice, attainment and destinations. Nuffield Foundation. pp. 20-22.

consistent evidence to the contrary.[78] There is a vast literature on the value of different types of skill in the labour market.[79] The value of cognitive skills, and particularly numeracy and literacy, is substantial, as is well known. However, recent evidence has also highlighted the value of, and complementary nature of, "non-cognitive" skills, sometimes referred to more colloquially as social skills.[80] This literature reinforces the point that a breadth of knowledge and skill is likely to be the best preparation for the labour market.

At the British Academy, we continue to publish robust evidence on demand for SHAPE skills by employers and on the link between the study of SHAPE subjects and the flourishing of major growth sectors of the UK economy. Decline in take-up of these subjects – and a decline in curricular breadth more broadly - will inevitably impact the health of these disciplines in higher education and as research fields. But these declines will also have economic impact, particularly on major growth sectors of the economy that rely on the skills developed through the study of SHAPE disciplines. As the Academy's Skills programme has shown, valuable and beneficial higher-level skills in high demand from employers are gained through studying SHAPE subjects: communication, collaboration, research and analysis, independence, creativity and adaptability. These are skills the changing UK economy cannot afford to lose. Those who go on to study these subjects at university are employed in sectors which underpin the UK economy and are among the fastest growing - financial, legal and professional services, information and communication, and the creative industries – as well as in socially valuable roles in public administration and education. Failure to develop these skills at 16-19 risks closing off key pathways into these careers for young people, limiting their ability to build flexible careers across a wide range of employment types while remaining resilient to economic downturns.[81]

The Academy also is concerned about the risk to UK R&D and innovation that declining curricular breadth at Level 3 may risk. Our recent report, *Understanding SHAPE in R&D*: *Bridging the Evidence Gap,* explored the value of studying social sciences, humanities and arts subjects, and of broad disciplinary engagement, for UK R&D.[82] It found that:

- Businesses across the UK economy understand SHAPE disciplines as important to their R&D and innovation alongside contributions from science, technology, engineering and medicine. From combining creative and technical skills to create Netflix movies to the use of geographers and economists to understand customer behaviour at Tesco, SHAPE is an important component to business innovation.
- The Academy has found that the contributions of SHAPE to R&D are largely undercounted in current statistical methodologies, particularly in sectors that have the greatest potential to contribute to the economy.
- Of the top five R&D performing sectors, four employed more 'non-science' than 'science' graduates in 2020, pointing to the importance of SHAPE skills to R&D intensive sectors.[83]

[78] Mandler, P. (2020) Blog: 'Does it matter what we study at school?' The British Academy.
[79] Aghion, P., Bergeaud, A., Blundell, R, and Griffith, R. (2023) 'Social Skills and the Individual Wage Growth of Less Educated Workers,' IZA Discussion Papers, no. 16456, Institute of Labour Economics (IZA), Bonn; Attansio, O., Blundell, R., Conti, G., and Mason, G. (2020) 'Inequality in socio-economic skills: A cross-cohort comparison,' Journal of Public Economics 191 (November): 104171.
[80] Aghion et al, *ibid*; Krusell, P., Ohanian, L., Ríos-Rull, J, and G. L. Violante (2000) "Capital-skill complementarity and inequality: A macroeconomic analysis," Econometrica, 68 (5), 1029–1053; Acemoglu, D. (2002), "Technical Change, Inequality, and the Labor Market," Journal of Economic Literature, Mar 2002, 40 (1), 7–72; Goldin, C. and Katz, L. F. (2010) *The Race between Education and Technology.* Belknap Press; Beaudry, P., Green, D. and B. M. Sand. 2016. "The Great Reversal in the Demand for Skill and Cognitive Tasks," Journal of Labor Economics, January 2016, 34 (S1), S199–S247; Castex, G. and Dechter, E (2014) "The Changing Roles of Education and Ability in Wage Determination," Journal of Labor Economics, 2014, 32 (4), 26; Lindqvist, E. and Vestman, R. (2011), "The Labor Market Returns to Cognitive and Noncognitive Ability: Evidence from the Swedish Enlistment," American Economic Journal: Applied Economics, January 2011, 3, 101–128; Deming, D.J. (2017), "The Growing Importance of Social Skills in the Labor Market," The Quarterly Journal of Economics, November 2017, 132 (4), 1593–1640; Heckman, J. J. and Kautz, T. (H012) "Hard Evidence on Soft Skills," Labour Economics, August 2012, 19 (4), 451–464; Hurst, E., Rubinstein, Y., and Kazuatsu (2021), "Task-Based Discrimination," NBER WP 29022, July 2021; Edin, P., Fredriksson, P., Nybom, M., and B. Öckert. 2022. "The Rising Return to Noncognitive Skill," American Economic Journal: Applied Economics, April 2022, 14 (2), 78–100.
[81] The British Academy, *Qualified for the Future.*
[82] The British Academy (2023) *Understanding SHAPE in R&D: Bridging the Evidence Gap*.
[83] *Ibid,* pp. 8.

It is vitally important, therefore, that qualification pathways on offer to students post-16 encourage and reward the pursuit of curricular breadth, and that we ensure SHAPE subjects continue to play an important part of young people's development at 16-19.

Section 6: A broad and balanced curriculum

28.To what extent does the current primary curriculum support pupils to study a broad and balanced curriculum? Should anything change to better support this?

[Not covered in Academy response]

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

The Academy encourages the inclusion of social science, humanities (including languages) and arts subjects as 'core subjects' in the secondary curriculum. We also want to see breadth and balance within individual subjects, such as in the English curriculum, as discussed in Q18. It is important, however, that enough is done to ensure young people are actually able to access these subjects in the classroom.

While we recognise that funding, teaching recruitment and pedagogy are all issues out of scope for this review, we are acutely aware that provision and effective delivery of core subjects is directly impacted by these other contextual factors. As we discuss in our additional Languages-specific response to this call for evidence, providers' ability to offer the kind of subject provision essential to a broad and balanced curriculum is likely to have changed in response to funding pressures and recruitment challenges, particularly at FE colleges and in subjects facing particularly acute teacher shortages. The ability of schools and colleges to provide language subjects at A level, for instance, will be particularly impacted by challenges with teacher recruitment and retention in Languages, which is particularly concerning given how narrow the Level 3 curriculum in England already is.[84] We therefore encourage a joined-up approach to ensure the core secondary curriculum is broad in practice and not just in theory.

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

The British Academy is very concerned that the current qualifications pathways at 16-19 do not provide learners with access to a broad curriculum, nor to the skills and knowledge bases they will need in later life and which are in high demand in a changing UK economy. As discussed throughout our response, the phasing out of AS level qualifications in 2015-16, with AS levels no longer counting towards the overall A level, may have exacerbated a further narrowing of England's already narrow post-16 curriculum, with students taking fewer qualifications and increasingly all from one subject group. This phenomenon, coupled with an overall decline in take-up of Arts and Humanities subjects, should raise alarm bells about the lack of disciplinary breadth and exposure to SHAPE subject skills among young people at 16-19.[85]

As shown in the Academy's extensive work on demand for SHAPE skills by employers, and research on the value of SHAPE subjects in tackling challenges as a local, national and global level, declining breadth and exposure to SHAPE subjects for young people post-16 will have

[84] Report of the Education Committee, 2024. Teacher recruitment, training and retention; Collen, I., Henderson, L., Liu, M., O'Boyle, A., and Roberts, J. (2023) *Languages Provision in UK Further Education. Commissioned by the British Academy*. 73-74.
[85] Scott et al, *Subject Choice Trends in post-16 Education in England*, pp. 7-8.

profound impact on the pathways our young people go into, the careers open to them, the ability of our economy to grow and our ability to meet the pressing challenges of the future.[86] Attempts to make qualifications more rigorous, therefore, may have an adverse effect on curricular breadth.

What we can see in the present system is an appetite among many young people to combine different qualification types at Level 3. 30% of all students choose to study a combination of qualifications, such as A levels with BTECs, a figure that has remained reasonably constant since 2007/08.[87] The option to combine more academic qualifications with more technical/vocational options provides young people with greater exposure to a variety of skills and knowledge bases from across disciplines and modes of study, and should remain part of the offer to students at Level 3. While we recognise the positive potential of T levels as they continue to be rolled out, we are concerned that in practice very few students will be in a position to supplement T levels with other qualifications such as A levels, due to the extent of the qualification workload. We therefore would like to see more flexible vocational and technical qualification options retained and a strong commitment to delivering a broad 16 offer re-asserted in any future changes.

31.To what extent do the current curriculum (at primary and secondary) and qualifications pathways (at secondary and 16-19) ensure that pupils and learners are able to develop creative skills and have access to creative subjects?

Access to creative subjects throughout compulsory education is vital for young people. The British Academy shares concerns from pupils, teachers, learned societies and subject associations about declining provision and access to the Arts throughout the curriculum: declining teaching hours in Arts subjects throughout primary and secondary, lower GCSE and A level entries in these subjects since 2010 and increased barrier to participation in Arts subjects that require extracurricular investment for students experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, such as Music.[88]

All students regardless of school type, background, region, gender and ethnicity should have access to creative subjects. They also should be able to develop creative skills across the curriculum, with an approach to subject content that balances the need for knowledge with the development of a broader array of skills, including self-expression, experimentation and imagination. This is not just a matter of what students deserve, but also an essential part of skills development for the UK economy of the future. Creative industries – a major growth sector – need young people with creative skills. So too do a wide variety of other careers that need people with the ability to create, explain, and inspire.[89]

We do however caution against an exclusive focus on Arts as the missing piece in a broad and balanced curriculum. At Level 3, for instance, evidence shows that sharp declines in Arts subject take-up are only part of the picture. Take-up of Humanities subjects – including more traditional subjects such as History, English Language and Literature, Languages, and Religious Studies– have also seen overall decline over the past two decades. For example, until 2016/17, around a fifth of AS/A-level students chose to study English Literature (19% of the 2015/16 cohort). This has since declined to 11% of the 2021/22 cohort. Similarly, the take-up of English Language has reduced from 9% in 2015/16 to just 5% of the 2021/22 cohort. Take-up of English Language and Literature also fell over this period. While this decline may also be linked to reforms to the English Literature and Language GCSEs from 2015, other popular Humanities subjects saw comparable drops over this period, suggesting changes to English studies at GCSE are not the singular driver. Indeed, for History, the

[86] The British Academy, *Qualified for the Future*; British Academy, 2017. *The Right Skills: Celebrating Skills in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences.*
[87] Scott et al, Subject Choice Trends Data Dashboards. Data on combinations of A-levels with other Level 3 qualifications are available on Dashboard 1 under 'All L3'. Commissioned by the British Academy.
[88] Ofsted. *Striking the right note*; Holt-White et al, *A Class Act*; Campaign for the Arts and University of Warwick, *The State of the Arts*.
[89] The British Academy, *Qualified for the Future*.

proportion of students studying the subject over the same period dropped from 21% to 15%. Further, the take-up rate of Religious Studies has halved from 11% in 2015/16 to 5% of the 2021/22 cohort.[90]

Declines in breadth, and in take-up Arts and Humanities, should both be a cause for concern given the growing shortage of higher-level skills our economy is facing and the value these subjects provide for young people as citizens and participants of a complex changing world with shifting political horizons. While we welcome increased focus on the Arts, we encourage the review board to see the value SHAPE disciplines – including Social Sciences and Humanities – as a whole, rather than an exclusive focus on one set of disciplines at the expense of others.

32.Do you have any explanations for the trends outlined in the analysis and/or suggestions to address any that might be of concern?

The Academy's recent research with NFER explored changing patterns of student subject choice at Level 3, particularly amid changes to qualification pathways over the past decade. Understanding why students make their subject choices – and why students may be making different choices to those made by students twenty years ago – is very difficult. Students may draw on any number of variables in making subject choices: prior attainment in the subject, enjoyment of the subject, past or anticipated quality of teaching, plans for further study or training, ideas about positive or negative labour market outcomes, to name but a few.[91] As this research showed, there are also clear links between subject choice and student characteristics (eg. gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, EAL and SEND).

Students also make choices in the context of changes to provider offer. Providers' ability to offer subject provision is likely to have changed in response to funding pressures and recruitment challenges, particularly at FE colleges and in subjects facing particularly acute teacher shortages. Conversely, providers may adjust their offer in anticipation of student demand or in response to pressures driven by accountability measures linking performance and student attainment.[92]

It is clear more research is needed to better contextualise and understand student subject choice, given the wide range of potential contributing factors. But it is also clear that the phasing out of AS levels after 2015/16, as part of a drive to make A levels more rigorous, has played a key role in the reduction in the range of subjects taken up by many students at Level 3 and exacerbated a trend towards reduced curricular breadth/narrowing in England and other contexts. Changes to qualification pathways, particularly changes intended to make qualifications more rigorous, have an impact on what students ultimately study. This, in turn, will necessarily shape young people's options for further study, training and work post-18.

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

[Not covered in Academy response]

34.To what extent does the current pre-16 vocational offer equip pupils with the necessary knowledge and skills and prepare them for further study options,

[90] Scott et al, *Subject Choice Trends in post-16 Education in England.* pp. 20.
[91] Mandler, P. (2017) 'Educating the Nation: IV. Subject Choice.' Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 27.
[92] Shapira and Priestley, *Exploring the impact of curriculum policy on choice, attainment and destinations,* pp. 20-22.

including 16-19 technical pathways and/or A levels? Could the pre-16 vocational offer be improved?

[Not covered in Academy response]

Section 7: Assessment and accountability

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

While the Academy does not typically undertake research into primary modes of assessment or their impact, we are concerned by strong evidence from our fellowship, close partners in learned societies and subject associations and from exam boards suggesting the current system of assessment in primary, secondary and post-16 may be have an adverse effect on curricular breadth and be in need of reform.[93] A balance must be struck between high standards for our young people and a system of assessment and accountability that does not put excessive pressure on learners and teachers, and that does not lead to a narrow primary curriculum in practice. While we recognise the value of summative assessment, we believe it is important to distinguish summative assessment procedures, including KS2 SATs, from other kinds of assessment for learning (AfL) in the classroom, and remain concerned about the danger of relying on a single assessment procedure to cover all of assessment's possible functions – supporting learning, measuring attainment, demonstrating school accountability, monitoring national standards.[94]

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

[Not covered in Academy response]

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

[Not covered in Academy response]

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

[Not covered in Academy response]

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

As discussed throughout our response, there is strong evidence that the current volume of assessment required for GCSEs is too high. We encourage close dialogue with subject experts from learned societies and subject associations regarding challenges posed by the current volume of assessment at KS4 and regarding potential reforms to curricular content and structure where appropriate.

The Academy advocates an approach to assessment which balances the important role of national tests and externally-examined terminal examinations with openness to alternative forms of assessment which are fair and evidence-led. We do note a lack of clear consensus

[93] Alexander, *Children, their World, their Education*, 496-500; Aloisi and Tymms, *ibid*; Bolden and Tymms, *ibid*; OCR, *Striking the Balance*; Harlen, W. (2014*). Assessment, Standards and Quality of Learning in Primary Education*, Cambridge Primary Review Trust.
[94] ARG, *ibid*; Alexander, *ibid.*

among teachers in SHAPE disciplines over the desirability of a return to increased teacher-assessed coursework at GCSE. A recent summit for teachers convened by the English Association found 'striking division' over the need for coursework among members; meanwhile, survey data collected by the Historical Association and submitted by the HA to this call for evidence found only a very small minority of those surveyed wanted a return to coursework at GCSE.[95]

We are mindful, therefore, that any potential reform will require careful consultation with teachers and exam boards and should be decided on a subject-by-subject level. We also urge careful consideration of what alternatives are feasible in an AI-rich world and where assessments are also used for school accountability purposes. The Academy encourages engagement with key stakeholders, particularly teaching staff, to ensure reforms are feasible. This will be important to avoid adding increased pressures and burdens on teachers, particularly after considerable reform to assessment at KS4 and 5 over the past decade.

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

[Not covered in Academy response]

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

In addition to our response regarding the content of English GCSE in Q18, we would direct the review board to responses from learned societies and subject associations who, as bodies representing subject experts, are best placed to make recommendations regarding qualification content, knowledge and skills. We also discuss recommendations for Language GCSEs in response to Q41 in our separate Languages response to this call for evidence.

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

[Not covered in Academy response]

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

[Not covered in Academy response]

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

There is strong evidence that the accountability system, and the accompanying assessments on which it is based, drive decision-making in schools and colleges. This issue has long been recognised.[96] The OECD has classed England as a high autonomy and high accountability system, where assessment, accountability and school/college decision making are closely linked.[97]

[95] See for instance The English Association (2024) *Summit for Reform of the English GCSES: Report and Recommendations*.
[96] Dearden, L. and Vignoles, A. (2011). 'Schools, markets and league tables.' Fiscal Studies, 32(2), pp.179-186; Education Policy Institute (2019), 'General election 2019.'; OECD (2015). 'Education Policy Outlook: United Kingdom.'
[97] OECD (2015). 'Education Policy Outlook: United Kingdom.'

There is also evidence that reliance on assessment for accountability purposes can boost test scores (in the subjects being assessed for accountability purposes) and that formal tests can reduce bias that might arise with teacher assessment. For example, the removal of school league table information from the public domain was found to have led to a reduction in academic achievement (as measured by test scores), particularly for students from lower socio-economic status households.[98] Such data confirm the sensitivity of schools and colleges to the accountability system.

The British Academy recognises the need for a rigorous accountability system. Nevertheless, we remain concerned that the reliance on high stakes tests can encourage unintended behaviours, such as an overly narrow focus on literacy and numeracy at Key Stage 2, and a narrowing of subject choice at GCSE, as discussed throughout our response. The accountability system can also pull against a more inclusive approach to children with SEND, who will struggle on standard assessments and can incentivise schools to off-roll for example.[99]

Overall, it is important to distinguish summative assessment procedures such as KS2 SATs and KS4 examinations from day-to-day formative assessment or assessment for learning (AfL), and to be wary of the 'backwash effect' on students of relying too much on a single assessment procedure to cover all of assessment's possible functions – supporting learning, measuring attainment, demonstrating school accountability, monitoring national standards.[100]

In sum, the impact of any reforms made to the curriculum will be determined both by how such changes are incorporated into assessment and in turn how they are measured by the accountability system. Close attention to the measures and models of the accountability system will be needed to ensure changes to curricula happen in practice rather than theory and do not lead to unintended effects.

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

[Not covered in Academy response]

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

[Not covered in Academy response]

[98] Burgess, S., Wilson, D. and Worth, J., 2013. 'A natural experiment in school accountability: The impact of school performance information on pupil progress.' Journal of Public Economics, 106, pp.57-67.
[99] Education Policy Institute, 2019. 'General election 2019.'
[100] ARG, *ibid*; Alexander (ed), *Children, their world, their education,* pp. 311-342, 496-500.

Section 8: Qualification pathways 16-19

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

As part of its commitment to interconnected knowledge and skills, the Academy encourages an evidence-led exploration of alternative qualifications which may offer young people additional opportunities for skills development, particularly in the SHAPE disciplines. As we discuss in our response to Q12, we are concerned about the 'forgotten third' of students who do not achieve a passing grade 4 or above in maths and English at GCSE. As a result, we believe it is imperative to develop and/or strengthen alternative programmes of study in maths and English skills is imperative for these learners in particular. This may take the form of an expansion of post-16 Core Maths as well as an equivalent for English.[101] We also suggest further exploration of alternative qualifications for languages at Level 3, in order to make language-learning more accessible at this stage of education.

Discussion of alternative qualifications for languages is explored in response to this question as part of the Academy's Languages-specific response to this call for evidence.

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

We recognise that there have already been a number of substantial changes to Level 3 qualifications in recent years, with T levels in particular are still being gradually introduced in many subject areas. Given our ongoing concern about curricular narrowing at 16-19, however, we encourage any further reforms to allow young people the option to combine different qualification types at Level 3, particularly given T levels' high content load, makes it unlikely most learners will choose to combine T levels with other qualifications such as an A level. 30% of all students choose to study a combination of qualifications, such as A levels with BTECs, a figure that has remained reasonably constant since 2007/08. Given concern about a lack of parity of esteem between academic and more technical/vocational qualifications, reforms that might see fewer students make these kinds of subject combinations would be a step back, rather than forward.

We would also note that T levels, in sharp contrast to BTECs, are very specialised qualifications, designed for particular industries/occupations. They will tend to narrow the curriculum breadth at 16-19. At a minimum, the offer post 16 for those pursuing a vocational route should include the option of a broader range of subjects. This is particularly important for those who have not already identified their specific industry or occupation of choice.

[101] The British Academy and the Royal Society (2022) 'Joint statement on Core Maths qualifications: The importance of promoting Core Maths as practical and valuable qualifications.'

We continue to support the expansion of alternative qualifications in Core Maths and English that would allow learners to pursue a wider variety of pathways to developing these vital skills by age 18.

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

[Not covered in Academy response]

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

[Not covered in Academy response]

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

In light of evidence of curricular narrowing at Level 3, as explored in response to Q30-32, the Academy remains concerned that learners taking a narrow selection of subjects may be closing off pathways to further study and careers, opportunities to develop higher-level skills, as well as limiting the range of intellectual, cultural and creative experiences and opportunities to which they could be exposed post-16. Studying a narrow set of subjects from one subject group – all Arts subjects, for instance, or all STEM – necessarily means pupils are exposed to a much narrower set of skills and knowledge bases in ways that restrict their future options in training and higher education. A system of Level 3 provision that emphasises the value of curricular breadth – equipping young people with a varied set of more transferrable skills and interconnected knowledge – will allow young people to keep their options open, build more flexible careers across a wide range of employment types while remaining resilient to economic downturns.[102]

As discussed in the Academy's additional Languages-specific response to this call for evidence, only a small proportion of learners in 16-19 education – those that take a languages A level – are able to develop and benefit from the skillsets gained through studying languages and intercultural communication. The Academy continues to reiterate the importance of diversifying the offer and provision of languages options and qualifications to be available to a wider range of learners on various pathways.

[102] The British Academy, *Qualified for the Future.*

Section 9: Other issues on which we would welcome views

52.How can the curriculum, assessment and wraparound support better enable transitions between key stages to ensure continuous learning and support attainment?

[Not covered in Academy response]

53.How could technology be used to improve how we deliver the curriculum, assessment and qualifications in England?

While the Academy does, in principle, believe that well-designed and carefully chosen technology could support teaching and attainment, we are concerned that existing inequalities in digital access may be exacerbated through the adoption of new technologies without appropriate mitigation measures. The COVID-19 pandemic made stark the levels and types of digital inequalities present in the UK, particularly amongst young people and in education.[103] There are many factors to consider when addressing digital inequalities in education, including: internet and data access, access to devices, access to software and applications, digital skills and literacy, school infrastructure and resources, teacher expertise, and parental skills and engagement.[104] These must be further examined and addressed before the introduction of further new technologies into the system.

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

We would draw the review board's attention to a recent Academy project, undertaken jointly with the Royal Society, exploring the landscape of educational research in the UK, which found that a significant uplift in government spending for educational research will be a necessary part of any programme of improvement for current systems of curriculum and assessment, including in England. Evidence from our recent joint policy briefing, *Investing in a 21st-century Educational Research System*, shows the positive influence of healthy and well-funded educational research system and improvement in pedagogy, optimised learning in schools, improved experience for pupils, and creating efficiencies in schools and colleges.[105] Previous Research Excellence Framework (REF) exercises show that educational research from across the UK is of high quality and is particularly strong in terms of societal impact. 80% of educational research was rated as world-leading or internationally excellent in REF 2021.[106]

Despite its vital role in providing evidence to and informing both policymakers and educational practitioners, the overall level of investment in educational research is low as a proportion of overall education spending, when compared to other key public services. In comparison with funding for health research, which in 2021/22 equated to approximately 1.7% of public investment in health, the spend on educational research was just 0.05% relative to public investment in education.[107] As a vital public service, the Academies have

[103] The British Academy (2021) The COVID Decade: Understanding the long-term societal impacts of COVID-19; The British Academy (2022) *Understanding digital poverty and inequality in the UK*; Coleman, V. (2021) *Digital divide in UK education during COVID-19 pandemic: Literature revie*w. Cambridge Assessment Research Report. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Assessment; Treanor, M. and Troncoso, P. (2023) *Digital exclusion in education: What the online learning technology Scholar tells us about inequality in Scottish secondary schools.* The Nuffield Foundation.

[104] Livingstone, S. and D. Zhang. 2019. 'Inequalities in how parents support their children's development with digital technologies,' Parenting for a Digital Future: Survey Report 4. London School of Economics; Livingstone, S. and D. Zhang. 2021. 'How and why parent support their child's learning online,' Parenting for a Digital Future: Survey Report 5. London School of Economics.

[105] The British Academy and the Royal Society (2024) Investing in a 21st-century Educational Research System.

[106] Research England, REF 2021 results.

[107] The British Academy and the Royal Society, *ibid,* 2-4.

therefore recommended that there should be a significant uplift in government spending on educational research to bring it in line with other public service research funding, properly reflecting the importance of education for the UK's future prosperity.