British Educational Suppliers Association

Curriculum & Assessment Review 2024

The British Educational Suppliers Association's submission to the Department for Education's call-for-evidence into the Curriculum & Assessment Review.

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General views on curriculum, assessment and qualification pathways.

BESA represents providers and suppliers who are key stakeholders in the education field with deep insights into what works learnt in-partnership with schools, teachers and research bodies, e.g. EPI, EEF, etc. Our members support teachers in delivering curriculum content and assessment through the delivery of supporting materials, training and CPD. BESA and its members have a shared mission in making a positive difference to students' and educators' lives.

England's education system and the resources that support it, largely developed by BESA members, have a world-wide reputation for excellence.

What is working well?

Curriculum

a) Phonics has been shown to have had a positive impact on children's decoding skills ("Phonics | EEF") and maths mastery has been introduced and embedded. These initiatives have been largely successful in providing children with a strong foundation for developing core literacy and numeracy skills. The emphasis on a knowledge-rich curriculum has promoted cognitive and equity gains, though it is important for this review to ensure that content remains powerful and balanced with essential skills.

Assessment

b) The phonics check and multiplication check at primary have become well embedded and serve a clear purpose.

Qualification Pathways

c) KS4 and 5 assessments are recognised worldwide and BESA members cater to a wide range of high-quality qualifications. However, BESA members recognise that changes to the curriculum, particularly over the last decade, have placed an increased burden on teachers and learners and so strongly endorse this Review as an opportunity to step back and consider the purpose and needs of education and the work environment of the future, the relevance of what is being learnt, and the wider skills students need both for life and in the workplace.

Post-Covid wider issues have been posed by a growing mental health crisis, the importance of wellbeing and meeting the needs of socio-economically disadvantaged groups and SEN children who have suffered disproportionately (NHS England).

BESA members recognise that the current curriculum does not always encourage a love of learning for teachers and pupils. With persistent absences at an all-time high, an increasing number of parents opting for their children to be homeschooled, and a persistent teacher workforce crisis, we also view this review as an opportunity to reflect on why we learn, and how we can use the curriculum, assessment and qualification pathways to instil a culture of a love of learning for teachers and pupils alike.

Areas for improvement

BESA members recognise the importance of a clear National Curriculum that sets an expectation of what all children are entitled to alongside an assessment and accountability system as a driver to ensure this entitlement is achieved. The Review is a timely opportunity to reassess what students need for the future that is relevant to any further education and employment needs, and to equip them as individuals in their future lives. This includes areas such as creativity, critical thinking, digital literacy and oracy. A refocus on the volume of knowledge within each subject domain would also be beneficial to ensure there is room for teaching and learning in the appropriate depth.

Much of this can be achieved by tweaks to content, and changes in guidance and emphasis, to allow for more scope for schools to cater to the needs of their individual intakes. It is an opportunity to slim down essential content and free up teacher time to teach what matters, reigniting passions in teaching and learning. There is also scope to rebalance the value of academic, creative and technical knowledge and the softer skills. In addressing these areas, we believe that there will be benefits for the teaching profession, putting some of the joy and creativity back, ensuring a better balance between knowledge and skills, informed by a focus on the bigger picture, that allows us all to share in the overarching purpose and goals of a good education today.

The Review offers scope to look at the high assessment load at the end of Primary and Secondary school and to consider how this could be reduced whilst retaining the value of the qualifications. This includes considering the role of coursework and innovative measures that are less burdensome.

In addition, we would like consideration to be paid into how SEND pupils are treated in the accountability system to ensure that settings are held accountable for SEND pupils' attainment alongside their peers. Inclusivity needs to be reflected in attainment, expectation and accountability and not just the classroom environment.

We believe this Review has the potential to have a positive impact on teacher retention and student attainment. Teacher retention in particular, has been identified in BESA's internal research as a serious challenge for 28% of schools – with issues being more substantial within the secondary sector (33%) (BESA).

We look forward, as a key stakeholder, to working closely with all parties as changes take shape.

Curriculum

Improving education requires deeper learning, reduced content overload, and better transition support. Strengthening vocabulary and reading progression in English, refining maths mastery, and prioritising essential concepts at KS3 and KS4 will enhance understanding. Post-16 pathways should be more equitable, fostering both academic and vocational success.

English

At Primary, build in a greater focus on vocabulary teaching (tier 2 and 3 words) and breadth and progression in reading to support transition to Secondary and the greater demands required to read across the curriculum. At Secondary, students in need of reading intervention should be identified at transition and secondary staff upskilled to deliver these. Language should also be rethought to continue the emphasis on vocabulary teaching across all phases and subjects, communication, talk, oracy – all skills for life.

A review of continuity in the teaching of reading, writing and grammar between KS2 and KS3 would support pupils in transition. This would help address some of the challenges currently posed by a very wide ability range entering secondary school. Assessments also need to be reviewed to support individuals' progress and measure what students can do rather than label them as failures as school leavers.

Maths

There has been a positive move to mastery, but the amount of content teachers are required to cover inhibits their ability to realise the full benefit of this approach. Concepts need to be covered in sufficient depth, and time is needed to check that they have been understood before progressing. The Reading to Progress guidance is a good starting point for this. This

applies at both primary and secondary. If concepts are taught in sufficient depth, then there is less reason to keep repeating them unnecessarily.

The maths curriculum also needs to be relevant, including real-life financial literacy and also modern applications of concepts. For example, teaching probability as a foundational concept for artificial intelligence.

KS3

Reduce the content burden and reframe what is essential based on quality and not quantity. Data is valuable and should be used to inform teaching, but schools need to be supported in adopting more innovative and time-saving assessments to get the benefit whilst reducing workload. Also encourage greater breadth and focus on creativity and a relevant range of skills that are valuable in the workplace and life, e.g. problem-solving, communication, collaboration, etc.

KS4

Reduce the content burden and offer narrower, deeper dives into content for improved conceptual understanding rather than the current breadth of coverage. Give greater recognition of the value of creative subjects and skills that foster independent learning and have a relevance for future life.

Post-16

Make learning pathways more equitable, whether academic or vocational and, as with KS3 and 4, introduce opportunities for creativity and relevant skills for life and employability.

Assessment

Over time, the purpose of assessment has become clouded and skewed by the accountability system. We see the Review as an opportunity to step back and reflect on what is being assessed and why, across the whole of the curriculum from KS1-4, to refocus on what is important and the value it brings.

More use of formative and adaptive assessments would help lessen the burden of testing at the end of KS2 and KS4, reduce the impact of accountability measures that have the unintended consequence of narrowing the curriculum, e.g. in primary spending much of Y6 teaching to the test and at KS4, the increased removal of subjects such as PSHE, PE, and creative arts. It would provide more scope to reduce the workload at KS3 and measure and value individuals in a more holistic way, by giving them statements of what they can do. Technology offers scope to help save teachers time and build more individual pathways to practice and make progress.

Implementation

BESA would like to stress the value of involving and working with its members - publishers and all suppliers - as partners, from the earliest stage in planning improvements or changes to the curriculum or assessment. While it may be easier for policy makers to enact change through Government arms-length bodies, such as Oak National Academy, BESA would like to stress the importance of commercial suppliers gaining exactly the same insights and information, at the same time, to provide practitioners with a choice of resources to best support their specific contexts.

This is to ensure that the long-term vision and aims are fully understood by all and that timetables can factor in the need to find the best expert authors and to design the best curricula, drawing on the best evidence. It will also help providers to build in the necessary development times, and to support the output of the highest quality resources and CPD.
A fruitful collaboration throughout the review process will greatly benefit teachers and schools and ensure a well-supported and effective roll-out of quality resources that offer plurality of choice.

Careful planning around lead times, the timely availability of well-designed, pedagogically sound materials and training, aligned with when teachers actually need them (usually 9 months ahead of when they actually start teaching), all drive a smoother implementation, less stress and anxiety among teachers and improved learning outcomes for children. We have learned from experience that without this early involvement, there can be unintended consequences e.g. delays in providing the right resources at the right time and the delivery of effective CPD.

Improving access and equity for all learners.

Addressing the barriers faced by socioeconomically disadvantaged children, as well as those with SEND and other disadvantaged groups, requires a more inclusive and balanced approach to curriculum design, assessment, and resource allocation.

The current emphasis on a content-heavy curriculum and high-stakes accountability leaves limited space for skill development, personal progression, and tailored support, exacerbating existing inequalities. Ensuring all children have the opportunity to build strong literacy, communication, and life skills from an early age would help to create a more level playing field, enabling better access to a broad and meaningful curriculum.

Additionally, a greater focus on oracy, financial and digital literacy, and creative and vocational subjects at both primary and secondary levels could support a more relevant and inclusive education system. Addressing financial constraints, improving access to diverse resources, and strengthening accountability for SEND learners are all key areas that need to be considered to create a more equitable education landscape for all students.

Barriers to children that are socioeconomically disadvantaged

The impact of a knowledge-heavy curriculum and high stakes assessments with high accountability for schools has meant that teachers lack time to focus on breadth and depth and the needs of individuals, and choices have been narrowed.

From primary onwards, there is insufficient time to build skills for life and employment, including strong literacy and communication skills. More time spent on foundational skills and building areas such as vocabulary, reading and writing at primary, would potentially benefit learners experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage and get them off to a stronger start, ensuring more opportunity to access the wider curriculum at secondary and a full range of academic, technical and creative subjects.

BESA members believe there needs to be a greater focus on progress and low stakes assessments at key milestones and more emphasis on soft skills, communication skills and areas such as financial and digital literacy, that allow pupils to engage with real-life situations and better prepare them for the workplace, with relevance for future life.

There is a range of evidence which suggests that the current curriculum does not adequately prepare young people for adult life. For example, on Financial Skills, a report from the Social

Market Foundation recently found the only 1% of Primary School teachers believe that their pupils possess adequate financial skills (Social Market Foundation). More generally, research commissioned by the Confederation of British Industry has found that 44% of employers do not believe that children are leaving the education system 'work ready' (CBI).

Barriers to children from other disadvantaged groups (e.g. disability, sexual orientation, gender, race, religion or belief etc.)

A content heavy curriculum and high accountability measures allows teachers less time to focus on students' specific needs. A slimmed down curriculum would potentially offer teachers more time to support individual students' diverse needs and achievements.

Financial constraints also limit schools' ability to purchase the range of resources they may need to reflect the diversity of their class. "Windows and mirrors" are particularly important to ensure pupils see themselves represented and valued in their reading.

Barrier to children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

Education needs to be inclusive and there should not be a low ceiling for SEND learners, but there does not seem to be enough accountability around the attainment of this group. SEND learners are often presented in different data sets as a way of excluding them from wider attainment profiles. SEND pupils' attainment data needs to be made available separately to show the attainment of learners but the curriculum needs to hold settings accountable for SEND learners alongside their peers. Inclusive learning needs to be reflected in attainment, expectation and accountability and not just the classroom environment.

Financial constraints may limit the role physically adapted resources and technology can play to support SEND pupils. BESA's own research conducted into the School Estate has shown that 81% of schools need but do not have the necessary funds to invest in adapted physical education facilities. More generally, 66% of schools expressed that their SEND facilities (including specialised classrooms and assistive technology) were not adequately resourced and were negatively impacting the outcomes for students. (BESA)

Enablers to children from socioeconomic disadvantage, SEND, or other disadvantaged groups

In 2023/24 nearly 370,000 children had a speech and language communication need, the most common type of need of children with SEN. Children with other categories of special

educational needs may also communicate differently or require some additional support, such as autistic children, deaf children and those with learning disabilities (Oracy Commission). More depth in a slimmed-down curriculum, a refocus on individual progress and competencies, and more teaching time would all benefit these young people. At primary, time to develop reading skills beyond phonics, and boost vocabulary, writing, and oracy would also be beneficial.

A research review by the Chartered College of Teaching has found that there is a significant body of evidence to suggest that the inclusion of Oracy interventions at an early age can have a positive impact on children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and with speech and language communication needs (Chartered College of Teaching).

At secondary, a slimmed down KS3 curriculum with an emphasis on depth rather than breadth of material covered could also support better progress as well as a continued focus on reading for pleasure and purpose to build reading fluency - factors that are greater determiners of outcomes than socio-economic status. Furthermore, a focus beyond the academic to creative and vocational subjects and relevant life skills would offer greater agency for students and curricula that better reflect their lives.

Research from the Literacy Trust indicates a significant decline in reading for pleasure among children and young people regardless of socioeconomic group, though levels of reading for pleasure have historically been lower in socioeconomically disadvantaged young people. For young people on FSMs, the number that enjoyed reading in their free time dropped from 39.5% to 33.9% between 2023 and 2024.

Ensuring an excellent foundation in English and maths.

Primary Level

Assessment and curriculum design play a critical role in shaping students' learning experiences, yet current structures often prioritise breadth over depth. Ensuring that students have sufficient time to practise and consolidate their learning is essential, particularly in securing strong literacy and numeracy foundations by the end of KS2. Likewise, assessments should serve as meaningful checkpoints that support progression rather than distort teaching priorities. A more balanced approach to both curriculum and assessment could help foster deeper understanding, improve transition to secondary school, and enhance long-term engagement with learning.

English

There is evidence that in spite of the focus on phonics and the Reading Framework, many children still enter secondary school below the necessary standard and so struggle to cope with the wider curriculum (Oxford University Press & Assessment, 2022). There has been much research on the “word gap” and, following Covid, we know this has widened along with the disadvantage gap (Education Policy Institute, 2024).

- More targeted focus on Tier 2 and 3 vocabulary development to support foundational reading comprehension, communication and writing skills.
- More focus on reading fluency as well as decoding and comprehension (Fischer Family Foundation, 2024). This is in the Reading Framework but not in the current National Curriculum.
- Greater emphasis on building pedagogical links across core English skills: spoken language, reading and writing to create a balanced progression. Role play (in EYFS) and drama (KS1/KS2) can help link speaking to the written text while broadening creativity and engagement. Drama is not on the curriculum, but it can be very usefully used by schools, linking both to oracy and academic subjects.
- A review of the grammar strand with improved guidance on integrating grammar into writing processes and consideration as to whether it can be slimmed down
- Improved guidance on the teaching and assessment of writing and language development
- Increased time for reading for pleasure or purpose within the school day to strengthen engagement with reading. A reduced focus on the reading test which distorts how reading is taught.

Maths

Mathematics is fundamental to a well-rounded education, yet there are still challenges in ensuring deep and sustained understanding across key stages. While the mastery approach has been widely adopted, the pressure to cover content quickly can sometimes come at the expense of true conceptual understanding. Ensuring consistency in effective teaching strategies, such as the CPA (concrete, pictorial, abstract) approach, and refining curriculum structures to allow for greater depth, will be crucial in strengthening mathematical foundations for all learners.

- Mastery has been embedded for content, but there is still a prioritisation of rapid coverage over deep understanding. This deviates from the intended Singaporean model which focuses on depth and mastery of a concept before moving on.
- CPA (concrete, pictorial, abstract) approach is effective in the Early Years, but less consistently applied at KS2. It should be extended across primary, and where appropriate across secondary, to ensure deeper, sustained mathematical understanding.
- Ready to Progress criteria have been a valuable addition, providing focused benchmarks for teachers. This structure would be a good basis for refining the primary curriculum to allow teachers to concentrate on foundational areas without having to rush to cover a vast array of topics.

Practice and Consolidation

The current curriculum structure prioritises rapid and extensive coverage, meaning deeper comprehension is sometimes undermined. It would be valuable to look at adjustments to the curriculum to allow students adequate time for practice and consolidation, so strengthening foundation skills by the end of KS2 to ensure the purpose and enjoyment of learning is embedded early. Children need to have a clear sense of the relevance and purpose of reading and writing in the real world and to understand it is not just about school.

Assessment

In English, the KS2 grammar test is not fit for purpose, and does not support a smooth transition to KS3 (Deignan, 2022). There is a concern that it distorts from the focus on developing writing (Centre for Research in Writing: University of Exeter, 2016).

The Phonics Screening Check and Multiplication tests, however, are good examples of where the assessments serve a very specific and useful, if narrow, role, to test the right things at the

right time with a clear purpose. The emphasis is on identifying those children that need more support and remediation. However, this purpose needs to be clear, and the test should not be seen as an end in itself. For example, passing a phonics test demonstrates children are decoders but not necessarily readers and the teaching of reading does not stop here. There is scope to look at the reading journey and consider what other broader checks can be made, including across other subject disciplines.

With maths, the multiplication tests ensure automaticity in recall, but with supportive teaching and resources, they have also developed students' mathematical conceptual understanding. Are there other individual checkpoints that can be tested formatively on the roadmap, taking a broader, low stakes view of assessment that supports the embedding of deeper knowledge as pupils progress. This would build stronger foundations and reduce the pressure on end of key stage summative assessments which can distort teaching in Y6 and does not facilitate a smooth transition to secondary education.

Secondary Level

The transition to secondary education presents significant challenges for both students and teachers, particularly in English and maths. Many Year 7 students enter with widely varying levels of literacy and numeracy, making early identification of barriers to learning essential. Teachers require greater support in addressing these disparities, ensuring that reading difficulties, gaps in writing skills, and foundational mathematical understanding are tackled effectively.

Beyond core skills, there is a strong need for curriculum reform to better integrate real-world applications—such as financial literacy and digital communication—so that students are equipped with the knowledge and competencies needed for further education, employment, and adult life. Additionally, the structure of qualifications, particularly GCSEs, needs to evolve to recognise progress and practical ability rather than operating on a rigid pass/fail system that can leave students without a meaningful record of their skills.

English

Secondary teachers currently cope with a very diverse intake of students and abilities in Y7 and early identification of these students and the barriers they face in reading is needed (Spielman, 2022). These could be decoding, fluency, or wider language comprehension issues.

- Teachers need support on how best to support struggling readers and their specific needs. This support should be a whole school issue not just something for the English or SEND team.
- There needs to be improved grammar and writing continuity from primary and potentially some of the more advanced grammar content introduced at primary (e.g. the subjunctive) moved into the secondary curriculum. This would enable a smoother transition between key stages and deeper understanding.
- Literacy skills that are directly relevant to life and further study, including critical reading, digital and media literacy, writing for a purpose, communication skills, oracy, should be better integrated into the curriculum with guidance on how to connect these skills to real-world situations. This would have a direct application to further education and the workplace.

Maths

- Reduction in unnecessary repetition of core content in maths repeated across KS3 and 4. There is an opportunity to refine the curriculum, streamlining the content to allow more time for deeper understanding.
- To include more life-skills based content pre-16, particularly financial literacy, e.g. understanding mortgages, bank accounts, interest rates, etc. Content that is relevant with practical applications of maths, will help prepare students for adulthood. This may require some content to be moved up to 16-19 (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2024) .
- The maths curriculum progression could be more effectively aligned with subjects like science and technology. Currently some maths concepts are introduced in science before maths which causes conceptual understanding problems. There is also scope to reinforce skills in a cross curricular context providing progression in maths is taken into account. For example, using data analysis and interpretation within science could help students understand the practical applications of mathematical skills (The Royal Society, 2024).
- The mastery approach at secondary should also embed a deep understanding of maths concepts. With current accountability measures, the implementation often focuses on exam preparation over fostering a lasting practical grasp of the subject.

Ensuring all learners gain a Level 2 in English and maths

There is a general concern amongst BESA members that the current qualifications, particularly GCSEs, prioritise assessment outcomes over practical skills development. This results in teaching methods that focus on exam preparation rather than fostering a deep understanding of subjects or developing real-world skills. Even where students have made substantial progress,

their achievements – or even strengths in some areas – may not be recognised because of the binary pass/fail approach taken.

English

- The English Language qualification does not adequately reflect the skills and knowledge needed today in life and employment. More focus should be placed on critical language skills, digital literacy and communication more broadly, including oracy.
- The qualifications do not demonstrate student competencies and what they can do; rather they brand students as failures if they do not achieve Grade 4.

Maths

- Maths qualification should be more relevant to the 21st Century and ensure life skills such as financial literacy (budgeting, understanding interest rates, managing personal finances), which would have a direct application outside the classroom, are taught and assessed (Social Market Foundation, 2024).
- Students' understanding and skills need to be more holistically assessed and reflected in a record of competencies on leaving school.
- The number of maths GCSE papers has expanded from 2 to 3. Is there scope for awarding bodies to look at drop-off rates between papers and consider the broader implications of this? OCR research points to the potential benefits of this in their report: Striking the Balance (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2024).
- The qualifications do not demonstrate student competencies and what they can do; rather they brand students as failures if they do not achieve Grade 4.

Post-16 Qualifications

- Breadth versus depth: for vocational qualifications, e.g. T Levels, the breadth and volume of content is often overwhelming, leaving limited time for students to truly engage with and master essential concepts. The same issue also applies to A level subjects. Could the Review consider a narrower focus which prioritises in-depth understanding over broad but shallow coverage, so better preparing students for specialised careers or further study?
- Passion and engagement can be lost at the expense of the volume of content that needs to be covered. If greater flexibility were built into the system, there would be more scope to cater to individuals' interests, so fostering genuine engagement and a deeper understanding of the subject.
- Although functional skills are not part of the Review, it was felt that they could play a significant role for those that do not meet GCSE standards in English and Maths by 16 and help pave the way for vocational pathways.

- Alternative portfolio-based assessments and coursework would help demonstrate skills and knowledge in those who may excel in practical or applied skills but struggle with formal exams. This would help students to demonstrate a wider range of competencies, impacting positively on wellbeing and revealing more helpful information to future education institutions or employers.

Supporting learners who do not meet Level 2 English and maths

A greater focus on building strong foundations at Primary, with a focus on phonics, vocabulary, wider reading and deeply embedded mathematical concepts which adhere to the Ready to Progress benchmarks, would better equip students for secondary schools. Links to the wider world are also important in English and maths teaching to show the purpose and relevance of the subjects beyond school.

There is an opportunity to make the content at KS3/4 more language – and financial skills – related with a focus on relevant real-life application skills across both subject areas. If the assessments then also focused on transferrable and applicable skills for the workplace, and recorded competences, students would be better equipped to thrive in the future world of work and employers would also be better served.

Supporting Learners with SEND

Stronger foundations for spoken language and the vocabulary teaching (tier 2 and 3 words) at primary, more breadth in reading for pleasure and across subjects, a new focus on oracy and communication, and an emphasis on assessing at key milestones, formatively, would all support learners in need of additional support in English.

Similarly, by building strong mastery foundations in maths and ensuring content is relevant and appropriately assessed at Secondary, a more inclusive approach can be taken, and the real-life applications would be of real benefit.

For English and maths, students need to be able to demonstrate in assessments what they do know – a record of competency – rather than what they don't know. The current approach has a negative impact on attitudes and there has been limited success with retakes.

Curriculum and qualification content.

The amount of content

Primary

Too much content

- Grammar is content heavy and some complex grammar concepts are introduced early and then not used at secondary, resulting in a lack of continuity. A review of content and sequencing across KS2/3 is needed and a paring back to what is really essential at primary. This would avoid a focus on advanced grammar taught in isolation, detracting from creativity and meaningful language application.
- Overloaded foundation subjects like history and geography can lead to a focus on knowledge-rich coverage at the expense of student engagement and enjoyment. There is scope to build in more flexibility or optional routes.
- Heavy content load reduces the time available for consolidation and mastery meaning students may not fully grasp foundational concepts.

Not enough content

- There is a need for more focus on building students' vocabulary across the curriculum – especially tier 2 and 3 words - as a foundation for secondary. This should be done across all subject areas. This strand of learning should continue up into secondary with a view to strengthening comprehension and literacy skills in context.
- Practical life skills and soft skills such as communication, discussion, critical thinking, resilience should be strengthened and woven through all subject areas at primary to underpin future learning (World Economic Forum, 2023) . The arts, including music and drama, are an effective way to do this and simultaneously have been shown to build children's resilience and wellbeing. These are essential for personal development and success in secondary education and beyond. (Zarobe & Bungay, 2017)
- Digital literacy and technology skills need greater emphasis. Skills such as basic data handling and responsible digital practices should be woven across the curriculum to ensure students gain practical experience from an early age.

Missing content

- Although the Reading Framework supports reading for pleasure, the curriculum does not formally support this. It should be explicitly included to allow teachers the flexibility and time to prioritise it. Wider reading and reading for purpose and enjoyment would support

transition to secondary and help foster a lifelong interest in reading as well as booster language skills (Deignan, 2022). Simple financial literacy concepts introduced at primary would lay the groundwork for future life skills (Social Market Foundation, 2024).

- AI and the skills and conceptual understanding necessary to use and interpret it.
- Some aspects of grammar alluded to above feel out of date.

Content unhelpfully sequenced

- There is a need for better sequencing of and guidance on foundational English skills: spoken language, reading and writing in a progressive way, building upon each stage. This would allow for a more holistic approach to literacy.
- Maths mastery is inconsistently applied across KS1 and 2 and CPA (Concrete, Pictorial, Abstract) approach is effective in early years, but not maintained through KS2. A more consistent mastery approach with carefully sequenced progression could enhance students' long-term mathematical comprehension.
- Cross-curricular integration is often lost by a focus on individual subjects. Links could help reinforce understanding across different areas of learning and integrate soft skills and real-world applications in daily learning.

Secondary

Too much content

- KS3 is content heavy and there is an opportunity to review subject areas and focus on quality over quantity.
- Science and History are particularly content heavy making it challenging for teachers and students to cover all required topics in depth. Some content could be streamlined or deferred to post-16.
- Exam-focused content encourages teaching methods geared towards coverage and passing exams rather than fostering comprehensive understanding, especially in maths where concepts are often repeated across years. This structure can lead to redundancy rather than progression.

Not enough content

- Wider reading and reading for purpose and enjoyment should be taught at secondary where reading for pleasure is at an all-time low (National Literacy Trust, 2024). The lack of motivation to read poses a significant barrier to supporting students with reading needs.
- More focus should be given to relevant skills for employment and life. These include financial skills in Maths, oracy and broader language skills in English (Oracy Commission, 2024) (Social Market Foundation, 2024)

- The curriculum lacks adequate focus on soft skills and social learning, including teamwork, resilience, and adaptability. According to a YouGov poll commissioned by The Times of school aged parents found that 84% did not believe there was enough emphasis on life skills within the education system (The Times Education Comission, 2024). These skills are essential for both personal development and employability, and should be embedded within subjects, particularly in PSHE (Personal, Social, Health, and Economic education) and cross-curricular projects.
- Digital literacy needs to be integrated across subjects allowing students to apply digital skills practically in subjects like science and maths. While the introduction of Computing has provided young people with a deeper technical understanding of how computers operate, the removal of the ICT curriculum has limited opportunities for those less inclined toward academic computer science to develop essential digital skills. These include key competencies required in both academic and professional settings, such as word processing, spreadsheet use, and creating presentations. Additionally, the ICT curriculum previously offered valuable insights into the societal implications of digital technology, including aspects of safety and responsibility.

Missing content

- Sustainability and Climate Change though addressed in science and geography, could be reinforced as core themes within the curriculum. Including these as cross-curricular subjects could enhance students' understanding of environmental issues and their impact, promoting responsible citizenship.
- More content on mental health and wellbeing is needed to ensure students are aware of self-care practices and emotional resilience. BESA's internal research has identified schools consistently ranking the mental-health and wellbeing of their students as one of the most acute challenges facing them today, with 44% of schools describing their challenges as 'serious' (BESA, 2024).
- New content needs to fit alongside other subjects and be planned as part of a whole rather than an additional subject in isolation. For example, if oracy or more focused vocabulary teaching of tier 2 and 3 words are brought in – and there seems a strong rationale for doing this – thought needs to be given to how it can fit alongside everything else so subjects can be mutually reinforcing. The bigger picture should be kept in mind at all times and industry can play an important role in helping to integrate this, subject to early involvement and understanding of the aims and desired outcomes.

Content unhelpfully sequenced

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Out of date content

- There is a need for the curriculum to reflect the diversity of the student population. There is scope to present a far more global view not just in history, but across subjects to texts in English, the selection of research showcased in the sciences and Psychology, the coverage of religions and worldviews in RE. BESA members in STEM highlighted the limited diversity of role models represented in the curriculum, pointing out a particular absence of women and ethnically diverse figures.
- The way certain topics are framed needs revisiting – e.g. there are some outdated approaches to Sex and Gender in A-level Psychology that mean whole topics that have been standard for years are likely to be reworked

Content unhelpfully sequenced

- The maths curriculum is repetitive, with similar content often being retaught at KS3 and KS4 without meaningful progression. This repetition results in lost learning opportunities. A clearer sequence could be established, allowing for continuous advancement rather than redundancy.
- At KS3 and KS4, alignment between maths and science and technology curricula is not always matched. For example, pupils can encounter mathematical concepts in science before they have been introduced in maths.
- Grammar and writing skills (as per primary above) need better sequencing, especially in transition from primary to secondary.

Greater flexibility

To allow for greater engagement and depth, teachers need time to be able to tailor content within a subject, to align with student interests and future aspirations. This would support both practical skill development and academic enrichment, allowing schools to respond more effectively to individual and community contexts.

Making content more diverse and representative

It is important for the curriculum to represent the country's diverse population. In history especially, but also across the humanities, there are insufficient diverse perspectives/narratives and a lack of historical representation and authentic voices. A more inclusive approach is needed to topics like the British Empire and Black history, moving beyond traditional narratives to include a broader range of perspectives, such as those of under-represented communities. STEM providers highlighted the limited diversity of role models represented in the curriculum, pointing out a particular absence of women and ethnically diverse figures.

Reconsider the GCSE and A level subject content guidance from the DfE and include a greater diversity of set texts, including texts written in English from around the globe, as evidenced by Lit in Colour report: Diversity in Literature in English Schools. Teachers need greater choice and flexibility to adapt to their individual school contexts.

Where new and diverse content is added, early involvement is important, and time must be allowed to ensure teachers and educational suppliers are able to cater for this in the best possible way with appropriate CPD and resources.

There is a need to foster a respectful, socially engaged mindset. PSHE or citizenship education could be expanded to cover social justice, cultural understanding, and respect for diversity. This would help students positively engage with and appreciate differences in society. One way of doing this would be to reprioritise the National Curriculum Citizenship PoS as essential for democratic knowledge and skills. As a universal entitlement from primary to 16, taught by specialist teachers with a carefully planned progression across the stages, it would enable children to develop their own voice and opinions in a safe space in school, able to respond to real-life issues facing society. This could increase a sense of agency, optimism and promote tolerance.

Preparing pupils with skills and knowledge needed for life and further study.

Primary

- The curriculum could better prepare primary students with skills essential for personal growth and future learning, e.g. critical thinking, communication and adaptability. These could be integrated into primary education to offer a solid foundation for secondary learning and social interactions.

- **By aligning the curriculum content with real-world contexts and applications**, children will benefit from understanding the relevance and the "why" of what they learn. This could be enhanced by including more practical applications and so encourage greater engagement.

- A **more holistic approach** would ensure the curriculum not only imparts academic knowledge but also supports students' overall development, reinforcing socio-emotional skills, fostering resilience, and enabling students to develop well-rounded perspectives that would serve them in diverse future settings.

Secondary

Secondary education should better connect academic subjects with **relevant real-life applications** and develop **core employability skills**, e.g. communication, problem solving and digital competencies, to ensure students are equipped for further study and the workplace. A more **cross-curricular approach** would help integrate this.

New content needs to fit alongside other subjects and be planned as part of a whole.

Post-16

The heavy content load and emphasis on coverage and academic pathways weakens skills teaching and preparation for future study, life and work. Post 16 education should better connect subjects with relevant real-life applications and develop core employability skills, e.g. communication, problem solving and digital competencies, to ensure students are equipped for further study and the workplace (CBI, 2019) (World Economic Forum, 2023). A more cross-curricular approach would help integrate this.

A broad and balanced curriculum.

The current curriculum faces challenges in balancing breadth with depth, particularly across key educational stages.

At the primary level, a crowded curriculum leaves little room for holistic development and cross-curricular connections, while the pressure of SATs distorts learning priorities. In secondary education, a strong focus on core subjects often sidelines creative and practical subjects that foster problem-solving and resilience, while opportunities to embed life and employability skills remain limited.

At post-16, extensive content requirements restrict in-depth learning, particularly in vocational pathways. Addressing these challenges through greater flexibility, balanced subject emphasis, and a stronger focus on real-world skills would better equip students for their future education and careers.

Primary

- The current primary curriculum is very crowded and there is little teacher time or opportunity to focus on more holistic student development, making learning more cohesive and relevant to young students. This could be better achieved by improved and mutually reinforcing cross-curricular links, a reduction in content in areas such as grammar and foundation subjects, more emphasis on soft skills and relevant life skills and greater flexibility in schools to cater to the needs of their own students. Greater autonomy for and valuing of teachers would have a direct correlation to teacher retention.

- A focus on science at primary has suffered from not being a high-stakes SAT and therefore not being prioritised over other tested subjects. As a result, there is huge variation in the quality of science teaching and the amount of time that is put into science across primary, making it more challenging to gauge intakes at secondary school.

- Particularly at upper KS2, the SATs preparation distorts focus and balance. Greater breadth and balance with less emphasis on teaching to the test would support a better foundation for secondary education.

Secondary

- The secondary curriculum heavily prioritises core subjects like English, maths, and science, often at the expense of foundation subjects (e.g., art, design and technology, and physical education). To provide a more balanced education, foundation subjects should be given increased emphasis, particularly in how they support skills like creativity, problem-solving, and resilience.

- A greater focus is needed on embedding life and employability skills, as stated in Q26 above. These include financial literacy, digital skills and interpersonal communication. These could be integrated across subjects rather than introduce them as isolated subjects.

- The curriculum needs to reflect a diverse and inclusive range of perspectives and incorporate a wider range of cultural, historical and social viewpoints, to create balanced educational experiences and greater respect for difference. BESA members believe that it is important for young people to 'see themselves and relate to the curriculum to encourage a broader diversity of young people to explore careers in fields that have historically been dominated by specific groups – e.g. males in computing.

Post-16

Currently, the emphasis on breadth means that although coverage is broad, there is insufficient depth, particularly in vocational pathways e.g. T-levels. Extensive content requirements make it difficult for teachers and students to explore topics in detail, impacting on student engagement and understanding. A narrower focus at this level, would allow students to specialise and gain in-depth knowledge in chosen fields, so also fostering engagement and individual passions and pathways.

As stated above, a greater emphasis on skills relevant to the workplace is needed.

Access to creative skills and subjects

Primary

- Creative subjects, such as art, design and technology (DT), PE and music, receive **limited emphasis** in the primary curriculum compared to core subjects like maths and English. The curriculum framework provides minimal guidance on the content and skills that should be developed in these creative areas, leading to inconsistent exposure and depth in creative learning across schools. For example, the government's Model Music Curriculum specifies there should be a minimum of just one hour of music teaching per week, but what is taught

in that hour is not specified. While this does give teachers autonomy, there is a great lack of specialist music teaching skills in the Primary sector. The result is a prioritisation of broad, inclusive, experiential music learning that is “an inch deep and a mile wide” (Ofsted, 2023). Commercial schemes are able to provide a solution but are subject to a market in which the least challenging products, which allow teachers to 'plug-in, play, and step back' are the often favoured by a disincentivised, un-skilled sector.

- **The impact of academic priorities**, particularly in preparation for assessments in English and maths, mean that creative subjects often receive reduced time allocation. This imbalance can limit opportunities for students to explore creativity and express themselves, impacting their overall development and engagement with and appreciation of the arts.

- The **primary curriculum lacks a structured approach to developing creative skills** in a way that builds from year to year. While some schools independently develop creative curricula, others may struggle without clear national standards or support, leading to variable experiences for students depending on the school.

Secondary

- Creative subjects become marginalised as students progress towards GCSEs. Some students are passionate about art, music or drama, but these subjects are frequently sidelined to prioritise core academic subjects and exam preparation, which limits students’ ability to pursue creativity throughout their education. They are also rarely inspected by Ofsted.

- Access to creative subjects varies significantly and is often influenced by the resources and teacher expertise available at individual schools. While some schools have robust arts programs, others lack the support necessary to provide high-quality creative education, limiting students’ opportunities to engage in these disciplines. BESA’s internal research indicates that while Art & Design resources remain well-supported at a large number of schools, other creative subjects such as Design & Technology, Music, and Drama have been neglected due to investment priorities. As a result, schools will likely require time and money to restore these facilities to a suitable standard for effective teaching and learning.

- In many schools there are GCSE option constraints and students interested in taking creative subjects may face restrictions due to school policies or timetabling issues. This limitation often forces students to choose between creative subjects and other electives, reducing the likelihood that they can fully pursue their creative interests. Music, for example, has declined significantly at GCSE and A level as it is not an Ebacc subject and only an open group option in Progress 8 in which all arts subjects must compete with each other for uptake (Department for Education, 2014) (Independent Society of Musicians, 2022).

While an emphasis on STEM is good, the narrowing of arts subjects and choices is concerning. If there were to be an increased emphasis on skills, the skills developed through creative subjects need to be communicated more effectively.

Post-16

- Vocational Pathways e.g. T-levels, offer limited integration of creative skills unless the chosen pathway specifically focuses on creative industries (e.g., media or design). While these vocational routes can be highly beneficial for students interested in creative careers, students outside of these tracks may have minimal access to creative learning in their 16-19 education.
- For students pursuing A-levels or other post-16 qualifications in creative subjects, there is an opportunity to explore these areas in more depth. However, the focus on A-levels as preparation for higher education can sometimes limit the emphasis on practical, creative skill development, especially when compared to more applied learning in vocational courses and so reduce the opportunity for depth.
- Even in non-creative learning pathways, scope should be made to expose students to creative thinking and problem-solving skills and integrating creativity into broader subjects for future life and employment application and greater balance.

The decline of creative subjects

The decline of creative and practical subjects in schools is largely driven by the prioritisation of core academic subjects, performance metrics, and resource constraints. Subjects such as art, design and technology, music, and modern foreign languages have been marginalised due to accountability pressures, funding limitations, and perceptions of lower academic or career value.

Addressing this decline requires a shift in government policy to encourage a more balanced curriculum, better funding support, and greater recognition of the long-term benefits these subjects provide. By integrating creative and practical skills across subjects and promoting their career relevance, schools can foster a more diverse and enriching educational experience.

Reasons for the decline

- The prioritisation of core subjects like English, maths, and science has led to reduced focus on other areas, particularly creative and practical subjects. This emphasis is largely driven by government performance measures, which place high value on core academic outcomes. As

a result, subjects such as art, design and technology (DT), and music are often sidelined to make room for extended preparation in core subjects.

- The influence of accountability metrics such as Progress 8 incentivises schools to focus on subjects that directly impact their standings. This structure discourages schools from prioritising non-core subjects, as they have less influence on overall performance scores. Consequently, subjects like languages, physical education, and the arts have seen declining enrolments or reduced time allocations in many schools (House of Lords, 2023).

- Resource and funding constraints particularly impact creative and practical subjects which require specialised resources, equipment, or facilities (e.g. art supplies, musical instruments, and technology for DT. This makes it challenging for schools to justify the significant investment which these subjects require, especially in less affluent areas. As a result, schools may reduce offerings in these subjects, particularly where budget pressures are high.

- Some subjects have declined in part because they are perceived as less relevant for university admissions or career progression. For instance, fewer students are enrolling in modern foreign languages, as many perceive that language proficiency is not essential for most careers. Similarly, subjects like DT and music are sometimes seen as less academically rigorous or valuable for students' future prospects, which affects both student interest and school offerings. There are also implications around teacher supply, particularly for language teaching. In English feedback suggests the reformed GCSEs have taken out the job of the subject by narrow text selection and more formulaic exam questions, not favouring self-expression. This may also have impacted the decline at A-level.

Addressing the decline

- Government accountability frameworks should place **greater emphasis on a balanced curriculum**, including foundation subjects like the arts and languages. Performance measures could be adjusted to reflect the value of a well-rounded education, potentially by introducing incentives for schools that offer a broad curriculum beyond core subjects.

- To combat resource constraints, **funding allocation should better support creative and practical subjects**. This could include grants or subsidies specifically for resources in the arts, DT, music, and PE enabling schools to offer these subjects without financial strain. Our research shows a significant need for capital investment in creative and practical subjects, with over half of schools rating their music, DT, and PE facilities as inadequate, negatively affecting student outcomes (BESA, 2024).

- Increasing support for extracurricular clubs or community partnerships could also help provide creative experiences outside the traditional curriculum.

- Creative and practical skills could be integrated across core subjects as a means of **fostering a more diverse skill set**. For instance, project-based learning in maths or science could include design and technology principles, or history lessons could incorporate art and creative writing. However, creative and foundational subjects should not become vehicles for teaching English and maths but be treated as subjects of value in themselves. Children need to learn that what they learn in English and maths has relevance beyond those subjects.

- Increased awareness about **career opportunities** in creative and practical fields would help counteract the perception that they lack relevance. Schools could work with industry professionals to highlight diverse career paths in fields like design, media, and the arts, helping students and parents understand the practical applications of these subjects and also highlighting where strong numeracy and literacy skills are meaningful. Additionally, expanding vocational options at the secondary and 16-19 levels could support students interested in creative careers.

- The curriculum should emphasise the value of **lifelong skills** that subjects like the arts, languages, and physical education can provide. For example, language learning could be promoted not only as an academic subject but as a valuable life skill that enhances cultural awareness and communication abilities. Similarly, music, dance, and art could be framed as essential for personal enrichment and mental well-being, encouraging broader participation.

Vocational qualifications

To support a diverse range of students, the vocational pathways offer a vital choice alongside academically focused GCSEs and scope to include e.g. relevant real-life skills and creative pathways within them. However, there is an over-emphasis on breadth of coverage over depth of learning in many T levels, impacting on student engagement and understanding. A narrower focus would allow students to specialise and gain in-depth knowledge in chosen fields.

There needs to be less focus on coverage and more opportunity to study selected fields in depth. There should also be a greater emphasis on skills relevant to the workplace including problem-solving, wider communication skills, digital literacy, including AI, etc. (World Economic Forum, 2023). This can be done through Literacy and ongoing language development, maths

with financial literacy as well as more exposure to a range of creative subjects (Oracy Commission, 2024) (Social Market Foundation, 2024) (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2024) (Chartered College of Teaching).

Supporting transitions

- Any curriculum and assessment changes need to be considered across all key stages in order to inform how best to phase content and give students a seamless learning experience with appropriate levels of progression. This is not the case with literacy across KS2-3.

- It is also essential that key stages are not treated in isolation as well-structured curriculum design needs to consider where students are coming from and what the desired outcomes are, and this information needs sharing with suppliers to ensure the best curriculum design. This also applies to the phasing of resources in schools.

- There are opportunities to build stronger links between the secondary and primary phases by focusing on vocabulary, oracy, writing and wider reading at primary and continue all these up into secondary, so ensuring a smoother transition into the demands of the secondary curriculum.

- There are opportunities to consider the heavy content demands at KS3 and how these might be reduced, while still preparing students for KS4.

- The inclusion of real-life applications and core skills, and the creative subjects should not be overlooked at all points of transition and the relevance of school learning to future life should be made explicit to give education a clear purpose.

Assessment and accountability.

Assessment

Assessment plays a critical role in shaping the curriculum and student experience, yet the current system often prioritises high-stakes testing over meaningful learning.

At primary level, the focus on SATs—particularly in grammar, punctuation, and spelling—drives teaching to the test, narrowing the curriculum and limiting opportunities for broader skill development. At secondary level, assessment frameworks such as Progress 8 and the EBacc further reinforce a rigid academic focus, often at the expense of creative and vocational subjects. There is growing recognition that alternative approaches—such as lower-stakes, formative assessments and more flexible pathways—could provide a more accurate picture of student progress while reducing unnecessary pressure.

Primary and national curriculum assessments

- The **grammar, punctuation and spelling test at KS2 tests skills in isolation** and not in a meaningful way. Children's grammar and spelling should be assessed as applied to reading comprehension and written work.

- The high stakes testing of students in Y6 **drives distorting behaviours** with an emphasis on **teaching to the test** and a **narrower curriculum in upper KS2** and for some a wasted year. There is also currently a conflict between Ofsted's focus on a broad, balanced curriculum and the unintended consequences of SATs driving a narrower curriculum.

- BESA members would welcome a review of the purpose of KS2 SATs, especially when so many students are baseline tested when they arrive at Secondary school. The **use of technology to support ongoing formative assessments** at key checkpoints along learning pathways has the potential to be less stressful and so more effective in tailoring teaching to meet individual students' learning needs.

- Many children struggle to access SATs papers but with developments in technology and with the tools available, there is scope to think about how information is collected as they progress through primary to offer a more rounded picture of what students are capable of

as they transition to KS3. **Learning as a continuum** has the potential to be a better reflection of student ability than a one-off, high stakes test.

Supporting progress at KS2

- The **role of formative, low stakes assessments at primary** should be reviewed as this will support students from lower socio-economic groups and if less emphasis were placed on KS2 SATs, more time could be focused on teaching the vocabulary, reading skills and broader subjects, e.g. Science, and knowledge gained from wider reading and reading for pleasure that would support comprehension and facilitate transition to KS3 and its high curriculum demands. This would benefit those students who do not meet the expected standard by reducing the pressure and increasing engagement and teaching time to focus on improvements.

- A focus on **science at primary has suffered from not being a high-stakes SAT** and there is huge variation in the quality of science teaching and the amount of time that is put into science across primary making it more challenging at secondary school. How might it be recognised by a formal but lower stakes assessment that still carries significance and weight?

- Any changes to assessment need **clearly to explain the purpose and why they are being made**, and guidance must emphasise what should not be lost in the process to avoid unintended consequences and distortion. At primary, a lower stakes approach with checkpoints along the learning journey would help to identify and address needs early, as with the example of regular phonics skills checks through R/Y1. This would benefit all children and help them to get off to a strong start. It would also provide a more rounded picture of progression to secondary schools of what children are competent in and capable of.

Secondary assessments

- There is a huge pressure on teachers and students brought about by **the blunt measure of progress** at 16 and **the volume of assessment** driven by EBacc, all in a short window of time. There is also strong evidence that those subjects that are measured push out those that are not (House of Lords, 2023).

- We believe the Review should look at a more **iterative view of progress** to relieve the GCSE exam pinch point and avoid the distortions caused by EBacc and Progress 8 that narrow

choices and over emphasise academic pathways to the detriment of more creative and vocational subjects and technical awards.

- This drives a **reductive curriculum design mindset** which disadvantages the already disadvantaged, taking away from a more holistic picture of performance. Can a better balance be found that genuinely does focus on progress and not just attainment, and a richer, broader curriculum? Are there alternative ways to assess areas such as literacy and numeracy or some of the arts subjects that can fall outside the pressurised GCSE window? For example, the AQA numeracy assessment is an approach that could be taken to recognise competency alongside the GCSE. What can be done to free up teacher time to ensure PE or creative subjects such as music or D&T do not end up being dropped?

- Computing was built into STEM to help incentivise more take up but it has not had the desired impact and there is a lack of expertise in computer science teaching. Whatever changes are made **need to consider teacher subject knowledge and teacher availability**, and involve the educational supplier sector early, to ensure desired outcomes can be achieved.

- The **content load at GCSE is very high**, especially in subjects such as Science and History. Is there scope to move some of this content into post-16 or offer more flexibility and optional routes to avoid knowledge overload? Does everything need to be assessed?

Supporting progress at KS3

There is a **very heavy content load at KS3** and a mass of data collection on performance, **driven by the high-stakes nature of KS4** and the accountability measures of Progress 8. This has led to an **over-emphasis on delivering and testing knowledge and memorization skills** and assessing too often for progress when time might be better spent teaching and having the freedom to explore smaller areas of content in greater depth and develop enthusiasms for the subject. There is an opportunity to review the amount of assessable content, provide more flexible routes to GCSE, and re-set expectations on the amount of progress testing required.

GCSE's

- **GCSE English Language should be changed to reflect its status as a discipline in its own right**, explicitly to develop student knowledge about language. This would make the path from GCSE to A level English Language clearer and more coherent. A review could look wider communication skills, including oracy, and digital literacy skills that are relevant and valued in the workplace and life generally. A more multimodal approach is needed.

- Across all subjects, consideration should be given to **the relevance of the content and the skills students need for life and employment**. Areas of focus could include financial skills, digital literacy, particularly with the rise of AI/fake news, communication skills, etc.

- The **use of technology** should be considered, but many schools will need to upgrade their technology to maximise its potential.

- The role of **generative AI** in creating and answering exam questions should be considered both in terms of opportunities and risks. Again, there is significant expertise among BESA members around this which we would welcome sharing.

Accountability measures

The current assessment and accountability framework has significant consequences for both curriculum breadth and student experience. At primary level, high-stakes testing in Year 6 has led to a narrowing of the curriculum, reducing teaching time for non-tested subjects and increasing stress for both pupils and teachers.

In secondary education, Progress 8 has reinforced a focus on academic subjects, often at the expense of creative, vocational, and technical pathways. This pressure to prioritise assessed subjects limits opportunities for students who might benefit from a broader range of learning experiences.

Additionally, while academic qualifications remain the primary measure of achievement, there is little formal recognition of the transferable skills that students develop, leaving employers with a limited picture of their capabilities. A re-evaluation of assessment and accountability could ensure a more balanced education system—one that values a wider range of skills and supports all students in preparing for future education, employment, and life.

- At Primary, league tables and high stakes assessments at Y6 have led to a **narrowing of curriculum, a loss of teaching time, and increased stress and anxiety**. There is also a lack of clarity around who this is for/what is being measured – the school, or the individual. Greater clarity is needed around the purpose of the assessments and accountability system to avoid unnecessary distortions and perversive behaviours.

- **Progress 8 has driven a growth in academic subjects** but has had a less positive effect on creative and vocational subjects/technical awards. The focus on attainment means that we

see schools removing those subjects that are not tested, e.g. PSE, PE, to make more time to teach the assessed curriculum.

- The pressure for results **narrows opportunities for students** who are not entered into Ebacc subjects for fear of their impacting negatively on these.

- Apart from an academic qualification, there is **limited evidence for employers of the skills students possess** to transfer to the workplace. A passport demonstrating progress and what students can do both academically and in terms of the skills they can demonstrate would be of benefit to all students and could be more motivational for disadvantaged or disengaged students. This should give weight to vocational as well as academic attainment

Leveraging technology for curriculum & assessment.

There is significant scope for technology to be used to support the delivery of engaging digital teaching and learning, meet the needs of diverse learners, including SEND, and to provide formative assessments and adaptive and personalised pathways for individual learners. There is also significant potential to reduce workload and marking time for teachers. However, in building these opportunities into the Review, it is also essential to consider the technology estate in schools and to seek to improve equipment and teacher expertise in making good purchasing decisions and using it effectively.

Enhancing access to digital resources

- Increased access to devices would allow for more interactive and diverse instructional methods. Limited access to digital devices in schools is a significant barrier, as also is connectivity and broadband. In many schools, students only have access to computers for a limited time each week, which restricts opportunities for integrating digital learning into the curriculum (BESA, 2024).

- Digital learning platforms offer the potential to be used more broadly to support interactive and personalised learning. Platforms with diverse resources, such as videos, simulations, and quizzes, could provide students with varied ways to engage with material and explore concepts at their own pace, enhancing their understanding and retention.

- Enhancing access to digital resources would also facilitate a more iterative, and rapid delivery of curriculum resources. The emergence of digitally distributed resources over the last decade has greatly improved competition within the market and provided schools with greater plurality of providers to choose from. Suppliers can also be more responsive to the needs of teachers and schools and can make the production cycle for curriculum resources more iterative, as changes can be made on the fly without having to re-print or redistribute resources on a periodical basis.

Supporting cross-curricular learning and skill development

- Technology can be used to facilitate cross-curricular projects that connect subjects like science, maths, and DT with digital skills. For instance, technology could support data

visualisation in science, coding applications in maths, or digital design in DT, allowing students to see the practical applications of digital skills across different subjects.

- As already highlighted, digital literacy should be woven throughout the curriculum rather than confined to computing classes. This approach would prepare students for a technology-driven world, giving them hands-on experience with essential digital tools such as spreadsheets, presentation software, and data analysis programs.

Enabling personalised and adaptive learning

- Adaptive learning tools, which adjust content based on a student's performance, are a way to offer personalised support. Such technology could allow students to progress at their own pace, helping them master foundational concepts before advancing to more complex topics. This would be particularly beneficial in subjects like maths, where a mastery-based approach is essential.

- Technology allows any resource to be presented in any language. The technology that allows for instant translation of text has been around for over a decade, but real-time translation of video. This could make a huge difference in schools with a high % of ESL students.

- Real-time assessment and feedback could be harnessed for students and teachers to monitor progress continuously and address learning gaps more effectively. Digital assessments and learning analytics could help teachers track student understanding in real time, offering targeted support where needed.

Enhancing Engagement and Creativity

- Interactive and immersive experiences e.g. virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) are powerful tools for creating immersive learning experiences, particularly in subjects like history, geography, and the sciences. For example, VR could allow students to explore historical sites or scientific environments, making learning more tangible and engaging.

- Digital tools can be used to foster creativity across subjects. Tools for digital art, music production, and video editing could support arts education, while coding and design software could enhance learning in STEM fields. Integrating creative digital tools would enable students to express themselves in new ways and develop relevant, marketable skills.

Improving Collaboration and Communication

Collaborative digital platforms are effective ways to promote teamwork, especially in project-based learning. These tools would allow students to work together on assignments, share ideas, and provide feedback to one another, developing both their digital and interpersonal skills.

Technology could be used to connect students with external experts, e.g. industry professionals, guest speakers, or even classrooms in other countries. Virtual sessions with experts from various fields could enhance learning by providing real-world insights and broadening students' perspectives on potential career paths.

Addressing resource and equity Issues

- Without equitable access to technology, some students may be left behind. Funding should be directed toward ensuring all students have access to the necessary devices and reliable internet connections, both at school and at home. Providing equitable access is essential to realising the full potential of technology in education.

- Effective technology use depends on teacher training. Schools should invest in professional development to help teachers feel confident and skilled in making good technology choices – where genuine educational benefits are delivered – and integrating technology into their teaching. This could involve training in specific digital tools, AI, or strategies for managing a tech-enhanced classroom.

BESA members would be keen to work in partnership with the Review team to share learning from the EdTech industry on current capabilities, case studies of good practice, future needs, and the realm of CPD to ensure that technology can be used to full effect and to support smooth implementation.

While digital testing has huge potential, for example, schools do not all have the connectivity, infrastructure or equipment required to make this a reality and the cognitive load for teachers needs to be considered, especially if they are not supported.

It is also important to consider the benefits and risks of technology and AI and carefully manage both the many opportunities and the ethical challenges these may pose within the education system. With the massive growth in AI, there will also be winners and losers and schools will need support to invest in reliable suppliers. We believe technology is currently under-used in education but has the potential to be harnessed more widely and effectively to the benefit of students and teachers.

Implementation.

BESA would like to reiterate the importance of Government working with Educational Suppliers and Publishers in an integrated way and from the earliest stage in all aspects of content change, timing, training and roll-out. In the past this has not always happened as suppliers have been seen purely as the delivery arm and the process has been sequential.

There are serious implications in delaying involvement and as an industry working with schools, teachers, children and educational experts we have deep experience to offer and real knowledge of the unintended consequences that can result from being brought in at the last minute.

Why is early involvement with BESA members a prerequisite?

Lead times for finding and working with the best experts and authors in new or emerging areas.

Any new or emerging areas e.g. oracy, climate change, sustainability, digital skills will require very early engagement with the industry so that they can build a pool of authors and experts to meet the need and provide the necessary support to the teaching profession.

When African Civilizations was introduced in primary history, there was very limited time to identify and work with experts and authors to create resources and provide the support teachers needed for a new subject. The outcome has been that this area is much less widely taught and many schools have failed to take up the opportunity to introduce a more diverse aspect of history to school.

Lead times for curriculum design and establishing the best and most effective, research-based pedagogies for new content

BESA members need to ensure that the resources they offer really help deliver the intended impact. Early sharing of performance measures and desired outcomes would help inform the curriculum design and ensure we are all aligned in delivering meaningful curriculum or assessment change.

Additionally, an early understanding of new areas of content would support thinking about how themes can be treated in a more spiral way across subjects and different curriculum areas in order best to support progression and reinforcement. For example, it is valuable at Secondary

to align Maths, Science and arguably Computing/digital skills to ensure the right knowledge and competencies are in place across subjects and at the right times.

Where new content is being added, it would be valuable to share a “research report”, like Ofsted Subject Reports, that contains the evidence base for inclusion. This could then be used to provide a sound underpinning for new resources.

Lead times for writing, editing, trialling and publishing new resources

We must ensure that timelines are aligned with what teachers need and when, and the actual time taken to develop high quality resources so that new resources can be delivered in a timely fashion, often 9 months ahead of implementation. This may mean an 18 month - 2-year lead time from concept to delivery.

In 2016, when National Curriculum levels were removed and limited guidance or notice was given to suppliers to consider how best to support schools in the vacuum created, reductive “quick fix” solutions were produced and bought. There was an assumption that teachers would welcome the “freedom” but having worked under A-levels’ structure for so long, many lacked the knowledge or skills to equip them for such freedom.) NB: For assessment – especially standardised assessments this time is much longer.

Lead times for amending existing resources if content is also to be removed. It will be important to reflect on what does not need teaching or becomes optional and ensure resources make this clear.

Lead times for appropriate levels of support

Significant training is often built into the delivery of new courses or resources, and the teaching profession looks to suppliers for implementation support across content, upskilling teacher’s subject knowledge, the pedagogy, and technology – how it works. Timeliness is a prerequisite as well as ongoing support.

Where completely new subject areas are introduced, we believe subject knowledge training should be offered by the DfE, especially in Secondary and Post 16, to upskill teachers and develop expertise in schools to better understand the resources they need. T level resources and technical award subject developments are examples where a lack of subject knowledge became a barrier to informed purchases.

Phasing

Suppliers can make a major contribution to discussions around how best to phase implementation and draw from previous experience of curriculum change. There may be some areas that benefit from a phased roll out and not a big bang start if there are significant changes or big new subject areas.

An alternative approach might be to have a “first published” date for the curriculum and an” implemented by” deadline with assessments phased in to lower the stakes of change for the teachers/learners affected and manage expectations with Ofsted. If phased across key stage, it is essential to know what background knowledge has been taught or needs activating and any cross-subject implications.

There were many issues with the introduction of Computing Science, for example, and insufficient support was offered with subject knowledge before teaching roll-out. Where new curricula are implemented overseas, it is common to implement these in a staggered way, by subject, to ensure teachers have the time to absorb new content.

The value of published programmes and resources

Curriculum change is an opportunity to support teachers in reducing their workload and feel confident in selecting a structured course or scheme. As an industry BESA members believe there is scope for Government to shift perspectives on “commercial providers” and recognise how they are an important part of the educational eco-system.

Teachers do not need to create the content themselves but need plurality and choice to make the best decisions for their school. We believe there is real value to be gained in reinforcing the benefits and expertise of the breadth of high-quality educational suppliers that exists and in recommending teachers look at well thought-through programmes to free up their time to focus on effective teaching and deepening their subject knowledge.

BESA would welcome a reset of relationships with industry and a much more collaborative approach going forward. Our members work effectively with Hubs, MATs, and countless teacher authors to support each other and develop solutions. This healthy eco-system should be fostered.

Funding

It is important to recognise that schools will need funding to resource new areas of the curriculum, assessments and new or amended qualifications. This will include the need for appropriate, up-to-date technology that enables teachers to teach and engage students in line with new developments.

To enlist the support of AI or strengthen the teaching of digital skills, the right technology and training needs to be in place and available for all students to use regularly. In a rapidly evolving technological world, students and teachers need to be properly equipped to understand the positive and negative implications of new technologies and to be prepared to use them within education and in the workplace.

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