

Curriculum and Assessment Review – Skills Federation Response

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?

About the Skills Federation

The Skills Federation brings together the shared perspective of different industries on how the UK can build a workforce able to meet our skills needs. Our members are 18 employer led sector skills bodies who work across more than 20 sectors of the economy and represent over 150,000 employers, both large and small, across the UK. They are funded by their industries to provide sectoral voices and vital support on skills issues.

The Skills Federation response

Our response, which has been put together with our members, focuses mainly on post 16 education and training and what needs to change to ensure that young people can make smooth transitions into and through work.

Whilst we understand the reasons for an 'evolution not revolution' approach, we believe that there are some changes needed which are more radical. We'd suggest the review's evolutionary approach should not come at the expense of also recommending more significant changes where needed, which could be implemented over a longer timescale.

One of the key purposes of education is preparation for work

One of the key purposes of education is to prepare young people for work. This is not just the view of the Skills Federation but also reflects the thinking of the public. The Edge Foundation carried out a [survey](#) which found that 88% of people think that education should focus more on teaching young people skills that will be useful for the workplace. Ensuring that curriculum and qualification pathways are focussed on helping develop the right knowledge, skills and behaviours for work is essential and there is clearly a role for employers in helping to get this right.

There is a long and well-documented list of asks of employers. Some of these asks, for example, providing T Level or work experience placements, need to be fulfilled by individual employers. Better coordination of this extensive and complicated list would help employers to be clear about what is expected of them and what support is available to help them engage. This coordination is a place-based activity and should form part of the role of Mayoral Combined Authorities.

However, employers will always have limited capacity, and employer led sector skills bodies, who work to align the skills and training provided with the needs of specific sectors, ensuring that the workforce is well-equipped to meet industry demands, have the capacity and capability to support. It is important that sector skills bodies are brought into the discussions at an early stage to co-design and develop rather than being consulted after decisions are made.

Aspects which are working well

For the around 40% of young people who undertake A Levels following GCSEs with a view to moving into higher education, the system broadly works well. In general, study programmes are well-established and well understood, including the methods of assessment, and wider support including tutorials, enrichment and careers information advice and guidance. There are a range of options available with progression routes to higher education. Employers understand this route, and will use qualification attainment alongside [other methods](#) to test specific skills and aptitudes during recruitment processes.

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?

Proposals

Vocational and technical routes are less well-understood and valued by employers which leads to a range of challenges which are outlined below. We propose that the following aspects need to be targeted for improvement:

- Retain applied general qualifications where they provide a valued route into work and maintain the option for learners to study vocational qualifications alongside applied generals, A Levels and technical qualifications.
- Shift the priority from achievement at level 3 to be about the system supporting young people's aspirations, whether this is to further study, or to work.
- Assessment and grading methods should be appropriate to test vocational skills as well as testing knowledge. Employers via sector skills bodies should be consulted to ensure relevance to the skills needed for the workplace.
- Review maths and English qualifications and in so doing ensure that they are relevant and contextualised to develop skills needed for the workplace.
- Increase options for schools to be able to offer a percentage of the curriculum as technical/vocational subjects. This will help overcome recruitment challenges in some industries caused by students' lack of knowledge of occupations.
- Embed digital skills within the curriculum and support educators to incorporate technology, including responsible use of AI, into their teaching and learning.
- The curriculum should promote the effective teaching of climate change and the knowledge and skills (in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and other key subjects) required for green jobs.
- Learn the lessons from the past in introducing change, and once a new system is implemented allow sufficient time to embed before making further modifications.
- In developing policy, review the impact on the whole education system, not just specific elements of it.
- Provide more effective careers guidance in schools which provides information about the value of vocational and technical routes to all young people, not just those who are not expected to achieve well at GCSE.

Vocational and technical routes aren't as well understood and valued

For young people who gain good GCSE grades and move into A Levels and onto university the system broadly works well. Vocational and technical routes, however, are less well-understood and valued by employers than academic routes. The Ofqual [survey](#) of technical and vocational qualifications indicates that only a minority of employers (32%) feel these qualifications provide good preparation for work. T Levels are still relatively new qualifications and a [survey](#) of the first cohort of young people who undertook T Levels found that only one third (34%) of T Level learners currently working reported that their employer

was 'very' (10%) or 'quite knowledgeable' (25%) about T Levels. This is in comparison with a different survey which found [64% of employers](#) feel A Levels are well understood.

It isn't surprising that vocational and technical qualifications are less well understood by employers. There have been significant changes to the system over decades whereas the route from GCSEs to university via A Levels has not been reviewed in the same way. Making changes to specific programmes without considering the impact on the system overall has created a system which is fragmented. This causes challenges for young people in knowing what decisions to make for post 16 study and for employers who struggle to understand the currency of qualifications that are less well known to them.

The value placed on the academic route has negative consequences for progression routes

Academic qualifications are often considered (at least implicitly) to be the 'best' route and this has negative consequences. For example, T Levels were introduced to provide a technical route, but many are considered to have become overly academic which reduces the number of young people who can successfully undertake them and means they are only part of the solution. T Levels don't cover all areas either (for example, there is no T Level which covers the Energy and Utility sector) which also underlines the importance of ensuring there are other technical routes available.

A further negative consequence is the shift to written exams which test knowledge as the primary assessment method. Assessment methods should test the skills of learners, as well as knowledge retention, including wider skills such as teamwork, communication and problem solving. They should be integrated within teaching and learning, and the outputs of assessment used to inform learning. These points also apply to GCSEs where assessment methods need to test practical skills, not just knowledge.

Relatedly the policy focus on level 3 and above has perhaps also contributed to under-valuing work for which level 2 is an entry point. For example, skilled operative roles in the fashion and textile industry, on-site roles in construction, butchers, bakers and fishmongers in the food and drink sector, all require skills at level 2 not level 3. In the Energy and Utility Skills sector, around 20% of new jobs are anticipated to be at level 2 and below. These are all skilled roles which are valuable to the economy.

However, in addition to needing to value skilled work at level 2, it is also essential that there are coherent pathways for people who do want to progress to higher level qualifications. The intention of the current reform of qualifications, to streamline options and bring greater coherence to qualification routes, is positive. However, providers need clarity about the defunding decisions to plan their offer effectively for 2025. Qualifications shouldn't be defunded until T Levels have become more embedded. Applied general qualification registrations are high, particularly in some sectors, for example, 30,000 learners took a Level 3 BTEC National in Applied Science in 2021.

Qualifications shouldn't be defunded where they are well-established routes to work. For example, the Level 3 applied general qualification in Games, Animation and VFX Skills was developed in partnership with employers to ensure that young people develop the skills that are needed for this industry. It is a well-established route that is valued by employers. Learners also value the opportunity to study applied general qualifications alongside other qualifications, including A Levels, and this option needs to be retained.

There are challenges with English and maths provision which need to be addressed

English and maths are essential skills for life and also for work. However, a third of all young people don't achieve grade 4 in English and maths at school and in some areas, for example, the West Midlands the figure is closer to half. Fewer than 30% of those that don't achieve a level 2 at 16 go on to achieve by age 19. This indicates that the current system isn't working and that changes need to be made to avoid limiting opportunities for progression to further study and work.

Qualifications, curriculum and assessment needs to keep pace with the changing nature of work

The nature of work is changing. Increasing levels of digitisation are creating both new jobs and a heightened need for new skills. Technology also provides opportunities to enhance teaching and learning. AI brings a wealth of opportunities but also requires individuals and workplaces to develop new ways of working to ensure that it is used responsibly. The move to net zero also brings the need for change both in relation to curriculum content and ensuring that young people, including at school age, understand opportunities in green jobs.

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 main points covered in our response are:

- There is a class divide built into the system as vocational and technical routes are viewed as a less attractive option and more disadvantaged learners achieve less well at GCSE.
- The increasing number of young people with mental health and other challenges need to be well supported.
- Routes to work and further study need to clear, without missing elements at lower levels.
- The introduction of the EBacc risks creative subjects becoming less accessible for learners from less well-off families.
- Devolution provides opportunities to coordinate provision across areas to ensure learners can still study more niche subjects.

Learners who don't achieve well at GCSE are encouraged to take vocational and technical options which are often seen as a 'remedial', less attractive option. A higher percentage of disadvantaged learners achieve less well at GCSE which means that a class divide is also built into the system. The aim should be a system with both academic, and technical/vocational routes, which are equally valued, provide clear and flexible progression routes to further study and work, and which are therefore attractive to a wider subset of learners.

The Association of Colleges [reports](#) an increasing number of young people who are experiencing mental health challenges. Many young people also continue to suffer negative consequences as a result of the pandemic, particularly on their social and communication skills. Schools, college and providers need to respond to these challenges and ensure that young people facing additional barriers are well supported.

The aim needs to be on enabling more young people to access pathways into good jobs. This means that pathways need to be clear, and without missing options at lower levels. We

welcome the proposed introduction of pre-apprenticeships in relation to this, although this needs to be done on a sector by sector basis. It also means that both young people and employers need to both understand and value these routes. For young people this means better career guidance which is focussed on vocational and technical routes as well as academic options. For employers this means clear and accessible information about qualification pathways and stability within the system to allow time to embed.

The introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) has led to a decline in numbers of learners taking design and technology, drama and music GCSEs. This is a risk because if young people who want to pursue careers in the creative industries need to do this outside of school, it will be easier for students from better off families to do this, which could have a negative impact on social mobility. The Sutton Trust has already identified this as a trend with [recent research](#) finding that younger adults from working-class backgrounds are four times less likely to work in the creative industries compared to their middle-class peers.

There will always be subjects which are more niche, where there are fewer jobs, and therefore fewer qualifications offered. This causes a challenge for T Levels because of the placement and risks creating a 'postcode lottery'. More flexible ways of offering work placements, including virtually, should be investigated to maximise the opportunities for young people across the country to study their chosen subjects.

We welcome wider and deeper devolution as an opportunity to ensure that skills provision can be better tailored to the needs of young people, including connecting them to employers and employment opportunities in their local area. A maturing system of devolution should also provide opportunity to test and learn 'what works' in supporting young people to succeed, and should also ensure that the education opportunities available for young people are not narrowly focussed solely on the jobs in that area but are broad enough to support young people who may want to work elsewhere.

There is effective practice to learn from. For example, [Engineered Learning](#) is an alternative education provider which supports and empowers young people aged 11 to 30 from some of our most deprived areas to succeed and achieve through engineering.

Section 4: Ensuring an excellent foundation in maths and English

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)?

English and maths are essential skills for work and learners need to be able to apply the concepts in real-world settings. We recommend that government:

- Reviews maths and English GCSEs and functional skills qualifications to create options which focus more on supporting young people to understand how concepts apply to real-world situations and which employ different assessment methods, not just knowledge-based exams.
- Reviews qualifications to make them more accessible for learners whose first language isn't English.
- Pilots decoupling the requirements of maths and English in apprenticeships from achievement, ensuring that the off-the job training includes maths and English contextualised to the role.

- Considers piloting incentives for employers to support development of maths and English in the workplace. This could include financial incentives and/or recognition schemes.

There is no doubt that maths and English are essential skills, for life as well as work and further study. The requirement for all 16-19 learners who have not achieved grade 4 in maths and English GCSE to continue to study these subjects has been in place for 10 years and this has increased the number of young people who achieve by age 19. However, of the young people who retake post 16, around 70% do not achieve level 2 English and maths despite the support and focus on this by post 16 providers.

Feedback from employers is that the requirements for maths and English within apprenticeships is a barrier to completion and, more importantly, doesn't test whether people have got the skills required to do the role. For example, apprentices can correctly calculate their overtime, or accurately work out how much material is needed for a complex pattern, but may struggle with more theoretical learning.

This point is broader than apprenticeships. The current qualifications don't sufficiently support young people to understand how the concepts that they are studying apply in real-world situations, particularly in the workplace.

The current qualifications also disadvantage many young people. For example, young people whose first language isn't English find the GCSE English exams extremely challenging because too many culturally specific references and idioms are used. This is an unnecessary barrier which could be easily overcome by reviewing the qualification specifications and exam content.

There is effective practice in other parts of the UK. For example, apprenticeships in Scotland include embedded core skills like communication and problem solving. With the underpinning training additional elements like employability can also be included and this allows for practical, context-driven learning. CITB are working with Qualifications Wales on a pilot with a similar aim to identify these skills within construction apprenticeships. The goal is to eliminate more formal assessments and produce more capable apprentices.

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.

The main points made in response to this question are:

- Changes are needed to the curriculum to include topics that support the move to net zero.
- Careers guidance needs to include information and support to understand job opportunities in emerging industries.
- The balance of funding between government and employers needs to be considered.

Skills are essential to meet the net zero objectives set out in the Industrial Strategy Green Paper. Changes need to be made to the curriculum, in STEM, design/technology, and other key subjects to include topics that support net zero/energy transitioning, new fuel sources and associated technologies (hydrogen, nuclear, carbon capture and storage).

More flexibility is required in the curriculum to support teachers to adapt to the changing requirements of net zero and technology. Experienced educators, with the right support in place, are best placed to understand how to engage with young people on these areas and we believe there should be sufficient space within the curriculum and exam specifications to allow them to do this.

Career guidance services need to ensure that young people understand the importance of sustainability and the job opportunities that are available to them in emerging industries. This goes across multiple occupational routes including health and science, engineering and manufacturing, construction, energy and utilities.

To help young people develop relevant and current skills required for the workplace greater flexibility should be considered about what government funds. There are many well-established industry approved schemes which can provide young people with the skills they need for the workplace. For example, there is training which provides a licence to operate on-site in the energy and utility sector, and a suite of 22 industry approved qualifications in fashion and textiles. These are not offered by colleges and providers because they aren't regulated and don't attract government funding but could provide young people with the skills they need for work. To better support young people into careers government could helpfully work with sector skills bodies about what skills are needed for competency, how best to develop these, and where the balance of funding should be between government and employers.

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?

For vocational and technical qualifications, it is essential that the curriculum content reflects the up-to-date requirements of work, whether specific occupations or of the wider sector. Qualifications should be underpinned by occupational standards which detail the knowledge, skills and behaviours required and which are reviewed and refined regularly to ensure relevance to the evolving needs of the workplace.

Sector skills bodies, alongside employers, have played a key role in developing Occupational Standards in England and the National Occupational Standards which are used across the UK. They have a detailed understanding of what's needed for their sectors, including carrying out detailed occupational mapping exercises. For example, the CITB have identified occupations where there is not an associated standard and are developing competence frameworks for the built environment sector. This work is a key outcome of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry and is aligned to the new Building Safety Act.

Section 6: A broad and balanced curriculum

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?

Technical skills and academic knowledge are only part of the definition of a 'broad curriculum', learners should also be supported to develop essential employability skills, digital skills and study skills within a supportive and inclusive environment.

The creation of a binary system of academic and technical pathways is not helpful and specialising at 16 will work for some but not all young people. There should be opportunities for learners to move between different options, both academic and technical. The potential defunding of applied general qualifications also closes down a route which many young people and employers find valuable.

There are a range of post 16 providers operating in local areas, particularly more densely populated locations. This creates choice, but a wide variety of options can be difficult to navigate. More collaboration between providers, including between colleges and independent training providers, at local level could help to ensure that young people can easily access the full range of opportunities. There is a key role for Mayoral Combined Authorities to support this.

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?

Screenskills are the sector skills body for the screen industries and are a Skills Federation member. They are supporting a proposal by Ukie, the trade body for the UK games and interactive entertainment industry, to create a [Digital Creativity GCSE](#). The proposed qualification aims to combine the principles of computer science with creative digital applications, addressing the need for a curriculum that fosters both technical and creative skills.

Section 8: Qualification pathways 16-19

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

T Levels

T Levels are still relatively new but are working well in some sectors for learners and employers, particularly where they are a route to professional level roles. There are, however, still some challenges. The dropout rate improved this year but at 29% is still high. The reasons for this need to be investigated and it may relate in some cases to the content of the qualifications.

In addition, Skills Federation members have highlighted the following points about T Levels:

- The occupational standards on which T Levels are based are both too broad in some cases (for example in high hazard industries to define competence with sufficient precision) and too narrow in others (that is, not occupations but jobs). This indicates the content taught may not be optimal in all cases.
- There are challenges around securing work placements including about the appropriateness for safety critical environments, where remote working is prevalent,

and where employers require additional insurance for people aged under 18. More flexible ways to deliver work placements would support more learners to succeed.

- Due to the assessment methods T Levels are more academic than applied general qualifications which means that a smaller cohort of learners will successfully undertake them.
- Some T Levels aren't considered to provide the skills and on-site experience required to progress to an Apprenticeship or to work. For example, the Onsite Construction T Level suffers low industry, learner and provider uptake due to concerns over successful progression from the new qualification into industry or further relevant training.
- There are challenges with the T Level Transition Programme (TLTP) as highlighted in a [recent report](#) by the Education Policy Institute including the low progression rate to T Levels (8% in 2021/22) and that less than a third of TLTP students engage in any formally recognised work experience or placements.

Level 3 and below

It is essential that other vocational and applied qualifications at level 3 and below provide clear progression routes to higher level qualifications, apprenticeships and into the workplace. Design of qualifications should start with the competence required for roles to ensure that the content is relevant.

This is particularly important for qualifications at level 2 that provide a route into work in many sectors, for example, construction. Sector skills bodies understand the routes to competence for the occupations in the sectors that they cover and are a key source of information and intelligence. They have the capacity, knowledge and expertise to play a central role in the skills system.

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?

The Skills Federation have called for a new careers strategy to set the direction and purpose of career development for young people and adults. A strategy exploring career development's potential to help address broader economic and social issues and connect individuals and industry which would:

- Widen perspectives, ensuring the skills for the future and supporting levelling-up.
- Remove fragmentation in the English system and promote an "all-age" approach to Careers Information Advice and Guidance.
- Engage with sector skills bodies and use the very rich information already available including existing industry careers sites/materials.
- Utilise the tools and training already available through organisations including the Careers Development Institute and the Careers and Enterprise Company.

We believe young people can be best supported as part of an all-age careers strategy with particular attention on:

- Maintaining the [high percentage \(96%\)](#) of young people who have interactions with employers.
- Ensuring that young people receive high quality balanced career guidance about technical and vocational education as well as academic options.

- Building on the good progress made by education institutions in reaching the revised eight Gatsby benchmarks for good career guidance.

In addition to the key role for sector skills bodies, inputs are also needed from individual employers including work experience placements, talks and workshops, hosting site visits and contributing to developing curriculum. A high percentage of young people benefit already from these. It can be challenging, however, for employers to find the time and there are specific challenges in some industries where there are safety concerns for young people on site. Better promotion of the support available including guidance on offering work placements and networks that link business and education would help encourage more employers to engage.

Better coordination would also bring benefits. There is effective practice that can be learned from in different parts of the UK, most notably in Wales where Careers Wales coordinates opportunities for schools and colleges to engage with employers. There is a role for Mayoral Combined Authorities in England and thought needs to be given to what happens in areas where devolution is currently further away.

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?

It is crucial that young people are supported to develop the transferable 'essential employment skills' that will be vital across the future labour market, particularly in growing occupations. [Work](#) carried out by NFER funded by the Nuffield Foundation identifies six essential employability skills: communication, collaboration, problem solving and decision making, organising, planning and prioritising work, creative thinking and 'information literacy' (skills related to gathering, processing, and using information). In addition, employers, via their sector skills bodies, report that they value resilience, critical thinking skills, entrepreneurship, and young people understanding appropriate workplace behaviours.

Work carried out by [Youth Employment UK](#) is concerning because it highlights that only 36% of young people in secondary school think they understand the skills employers are looking for and that young people in education feel less confident across all employability skills.

Contact with employers, particularly more in-depth interactions such as work experience, can support young people to understand the importance of these key skills and how they are integral to job roles. It also provides the opportunities for young people to develop more knowledge of how to operate in a workplace (e.g. about tax, national insurance and payslips) and can help dispel myths about what's needed to enter careers in specific sectors. This type of activity is also valuable for employers with the [Careers and Enterprise Company](#) identifying that 91% of the most engaged employers identify that it helps them develop new talent pipelines and is supporting young people to take up careers in their industry.