

Education for 11-16 Year Olds Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Education for 11-16 Year Olds

Thursday 25 May 2023

11.10 am

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Members present: Lord Johnson of Marylebone (The Chair); Lord Aberdare; Baroness Blower; Baroness Garden of Frognal; Lord Knight of Weymouth; Lord Lexden; Lord Storey; Lord Watson of Invergowrie.

Evidence Session No. 7

Heard in Public

Questions 61 - 67

Witnesses

I: Dr Mary Bousted, General Secretary, National Education Union; Tom Middlehurst, Curriculum, Assessment and Inspection Specialist, Association of School and College Leaders.

Examination of witnesses

Dr Mary Bousted and Tom Middlehurst.

The Chair: Good morning and welcome to this session of the Education for 11-16 Year Olds Committee. It is good to see you. As usual, there will be a transcript and you will have an opportunity to correct it if you need to do so after the meeting. I pass to our first questioner, Lord Knight.

Q61 **Lord Knight of Weymouth:** It is very good to see you both. Apologies in advance that I have to leave the session in about 25 minutes.

We received your evidence, which is very helpful. Both your organisations talked about the EBacc and Progress 8. To kick-off, how do you think those two accountability measures affect pupils, teachers and school leaders in practice? If you had the magic wand of reform, how would you change the current systems to deal with those problems?

Tom Middlehurst: The important thing to note is that the measures are fundamentally different. It is worth thinking about accountability measures in terms of entry data: what qualifications are students entering? That is relevant to the concept of a broad and balanced

curriculum. Then there is attainment: what do they get in those qualifications? Then there is progress: how far do they make progress from their starting points in those qualifications? ASCL's view on that is that Progress 8 is quite nuanced, in that it allows schools to adapt their curriculum. It incentivises an academic core but allows for some flexibility, whereas the EBacc, whether in entry rates or attainment, is very limited. It is just a core set of subjects.

If we look back at what could have been different, a focus on Progress 8 is probably right. We probably want more young people to do academic subjects, but that does not mean that they have to do MFL if it is inappropriate for them. Progress 8 does not require them to do that; it just requires them to do at least three academic subjects and English and maths. I think that is fundamental.

The EBacc is so restrictive, particularly with Ofsted and the inspectorate—I know Mary will talk about this—looking at the EBacc and EBacc entry so closely, that it really limits the number of subjects that can be taught at key stage 4. When we have stretched budgets in all schools, including in the stage we are talking about, it means that key stage 3 is inevitably reduced as well. You cannot run key stage 3 subjects if you cannot fund them through key stage 4. In short, the point is that EBacc is restrictive and Progress 8 is slightly more nuanced. We might discuss in this committee whether you could have a broader EBacc and what that would mean for the curriculum.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: When we heard from the subject associations for the creative sector—music, drama, and design and technology—they suggested that Progress 8 makes it hard for people to choose all three of those subjects, because you use everything up in bucket three of the measure. Is that a valid criticism of the breadth of curriculum in creative subjects?

Tom Middlehurst: Undoubtedly, yes. Particularly at a time of stretched school budgets, it is entirely impossible to do a wide range of creative subjects. Schools simply cannot offer that. It would mean classes of 10 or 15 pupils, which is just not viable.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Finally on Progress 8 with you, my understanding is that with the high levels of persistent absence that we currently have, if a child is absent for the tests, you are instantly down minus 40 on Progress 8 as a school. You then need 40 kids getting plus 1 to compensate for one child being persistently absent. Is that another area where we might be able to make some adjustment in fair accountability for schools?

Tom Middlehurst: Absolutely. There is some allowance for that. The DfE has done some good work on that since its introduction, and it has got better, but it is certainly a concern of our members.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Thank you. I remind the committee and anyone who could be watching that I am doing some work with the

National Education Union on the future of school inspection. Mary.

Dr Mary Bousted: Tom dealt with the technicalities really well. I like to get off the technicalities quickly, because I know some of them but not others. My technicalities deal with the wider context of education, both as a nation and politically. It is absolutely clear that Progress 8 could be a useful measure: the aim of it was to measure not just attainment but progress from key stage 2. That is a laudable thing to do. Of course, you need a rigorous and correct baseline at key stage 2 for it to be a correct measure. Schools that do very well on Attainment 8 are not under as much pressure on Progress 8, but schools that do very well under Progress 8 still find that Attainment 8 comes to bite them with Ofsted.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: To help the committee, could you clarify the difference between Attainment 8 and Progress 8?

Dr Mary Bousted: I can do that. I know it, but I would have to read it out. Tom could do it better. He will be able to tell you straightaway.

Tom Middlehurst: It is the same for both of them. It is a collection of subjects. There is English—either literature or language—and maths, and at least double science and at least two humanities. That is the range of subjects. There are then three additional subjects, which can be academic subjects or vocational and technical subjects. Attainment 8 is the raw score that students achieve in the subject on average. Progress 8 is the progress that students make on average in those subjects from key stage 2, based on English and maths, to GCSE. A score of zero would mean that, on average, your school was adding an average amount of value on to your pupils.

Dr Mary Bousted: One is good.

Tom Middlehurst: A score of 1.0 would be exceptionally good.

Dr Mary Bousted: Progress 8 was an attempt to validate the achievements of schools in deprived areas, where pupils would do less well on a raw score. What was the progress in those schools? We find that schools with very good Progress 8 but low Attainment 8 still get really hammered in Ofsted judgments. That leads me to the view that Ofsted does not know about the nature of learning and cannot measure it effectively.

There is no doubt that the combination of the EBacc, Attainment 8 and Progress 8 has absolutely and fundamentally narrowed the curriculum. We now have the narrowest pre-16 and post-16 curriculum take-up in the OECD. There is a real problem with the range of subjects that pupils take. The Education Policy Institute did some work on that recently. It is a particular problem for disadvantaged students who already face the biggest challenges. They are much more likely to study a narrowed range of the curriculum. There is also an increasing divide between state schools and private schools. Private schools are still much more likely to offer a rich arts curriculum. State schools are much more focused on

EBacc subjects, Progress 8 and Attainment 8, because those are the measures by which they will be judged in the accountability system.

Other things have happened to narrow the curriculum. The decoupling of AS and A-level resulted in a narrowing. The EPI analysis was that students are far less likely, particularly if they are deprived, to be studying a basket of subjects: humanities, a science, maths and languages. We are one of very few countries that allows such clear narrowing of the curriculum offer, both through secondary and post-16. The figures are shocking. There has been a decline in arts GCSE entries of 40%, from nearly 700,000 in 2010 to just over 400,000 in 2022. That is data from the Cultural Learning Alliance.

There has also been a decline in other subjects that appear to us to be fundamental to the future of this country. There has been a massive decline in design and technology, and in computing studies. I was not being rude with my phone just now; Microsoft recently published a report on rebooting tech skills, which I looked at last night. I do not have a hard copy, but I could send it to the committee. There is a shocking graph in that report showing the take-up of different subjects. Computing is minuscule compared with other subjects.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: If my colleague Lord Baker was here, he would share graphs with us on that.

Dr Mary Bousted: I am happy to send that report to you. I think there is a complete misunderstanding of the sorts of skills and abilities, and the jobs, that young people will need.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: The take-up of technical and vocational qualifications at 11-16 is poor. Clearly, the accountability system we just talked about is a big part of that story. Are there problems with the quality of some of those qualifications? Do we need a TCSE as preparation for T-levels, or should we just enhance, celebrate and use the existing suite of qualifications better?

Dr Mary Bousted: That is a highly technical subject. The state of qualifications is a bit in flux anyhow through what will happen to BTEC and how T-levels will land. If we have GCSEs at the moment, we should use them. We should make sure that they are of the best quality they can be. The wider context is the problem of the dearth of teacher supply, which I can talk about, and there is a dearth of funding. Quite a few of those courses require significant funding.

I was on a picket line on the last day of strike action at a school outside Oxford and I talked to the computer studies teacher. She will be as rare as hen's teeth, because she is a black woman teaching computing studies. She used to be in a department of four, but now there is only her left. Computing used to be taught throughout the year to all students, whether they took computing studies or not. Now, there is only her left, so she teaches GCSE and A-level to highly ambitious cohorts because there is not enough room. The narrowing of the curriculum is a function

not just of EBacc and the accountability measures but of the real-terms decline in school funding and a teacher supply crisis.

The Chair: Tom Middlehurst, can you unpack part of your answer to Lord Knight right at the start? You implied that if funding were not an issue, the accountability frameworks might actually be fit for purpose and would not narrow the curriculum in quite the same way as they are doing. To what extent is the problem funding rather than the frameworks?

Tom Middlehurst: Can I respond first to something Dr Boustead said on recruitment and retention, which is crucial to this? The inquiry needs to understand that it is happening now with our current GCSE and A-level students. It will directly affect the number of undergraduates in a couple of years' time. It is a vicious circle. The fewer students who study these subjects at GCSE, and particularly at A-level, the fewer undergraduates will study them for PGCE. The problem will only compound over time. We need to be conscious of that. It will only get worse unless we have quick intervention.

Unpacking my point on funding versus the accountability measures, the key point is that in most cases, in the way Mary described, independent schools that have greater funding and are not bound by the same accountability measures are able to offer the smaller subjects. If you were simply reporting on what percentage of students were entering science, history or geography, it would be a lot easier if you could afford to run very small subjects, and it would not matter as much. Because you cannot afford to run those subjects, you have to make a choice: "Are we going to go for a high EBacc entry rate, high Attainment 8 and Progress 8 rate, or do we run these very small subjects at key stage 4?"

Lord Knight of Weymouth: The independent sector has a longer school day, which is another resource issue.

Tom Middlehurst: Absolutely. We can come on to the longer school day separately. It is a ridiculous requirement of the Government's. For the inquiry's benefit, non-statutory guidance that came out last year requires all schools to have 32.5 hours of school day over the week. It is really important to note that that is not teaching time. The vast majority of schools already run that anyway. Those that do not are usually 10 or 15 minutes off per day. The Government expect schools to increase that, but not in learning time. All schools will do is add it to break-time or increase the time that pupils are expected to be in school. It is a nonsensical expectation that in no way increases learning.

Dr Mary Boustead: Funding is crucial. We have a teacher supply crisis and a drop in funding. Between 2010 and 2020, there was about a 10% real-terms cut in school funding. It was worst for the most deprived schools, up to about 14%. Now, according to the OECD, we are up there with Mexico and Columbia for class sizes, and fourth in the TALIS—Teaching and Learning International Survey—league table. In state schools, class sizes are routinely over 30. That creates a huge extra workload for teachers. It is funding combined with teacher supply,

combined with, "What do we need to do to be okay in the accountability framework?" When schools are under that triumvirate of pressures, it is not surprising that they do what they have to do. What they have to do is the EBacc subjects, so they do them.

- Q62 **Baroness Blower:** This question is about how we might assess GCSE. I note from the evidence from ASCL that you are more or less okay about GCSE, and there might be more questions from the NEU about GCSE. If Lord Baker were here, he would be encouraging us all to be radical in the way we think about this stuff. What would be the impact on teachers and schools of reintroducing non-exam assessment, such as written coursework or oral presentations, to a wider range of GCSE subjects? This neatly follows on from what Mary just said, which is that we cannot possibly do any of that unless we have better funding and more people to do it. There is clearly a workload implication here, but let us not repeat that. In other terms, what are the positives or negatives of looking at non-exam assessments of the type with which we are all quite familiar?

Dr Mary Bousted: When you ask that question, you need to start with, "What are the problems with the current system?" The current system is based on the mantra that exams are the best, fairest and most reliable way of assessing pupils. Of course, exams absolutely have their place in the assessment system. There are skills, abilities and areas of knowledge where it is perfectly possible to run a fair, reliable and valid assessment, and for that to be the best way to do so. We run a mass education system. We all know that the longer you spend doing assessment, the more reliable and valid it is, but you cannot spend forever on assessment because you have to teach and there are only so many hours in the day, and you do not want the whole of education to be dealt with by assessment.

Of course, if you look at any research on just going with exams, you will realise that exams do certain things very well but certain things not well at all. They are not necessarily a valid way of assessing attainment in a subject. I talked to a head teacher yesterday. At the moment in computer science, project-based programming has been relegated. In history, there is no extended inquiry or research. In geography, fieldwork is demoted to forming a case study that may be referenced in the examination. I am useless at computing, but I understand that in computer science programming is really important. In history, an extended project is really important. In geography, fieldwork is really important. Those assess essential fields of knowledge in the subject.

If you move, as we have, to an almost blanket exam system, you have to ask real questions about its validity. Does it actually assess skills, competence and knowledge in that subject or does it assess the ability to sit down for two hours and write a lot of essays? I think our system assesses very well the ability to write in timed conditions, but that is a particular skill. We do not assess the ability to speak well. Other, high-performing, countries put a lot more emphasis on oral assessment and the ability to explain, think things through and communicate. We hardly have any oral assessment in our system. The result can be seen in the

2018 TALIS run by the OECD. Wales and Scotland did not enter, but England came top of the international league tables for rote learning. That was reported by teachers, leaders and students. Rote learning is fine for tables. It is not fine for the sorts of skills and abilities that the OECD says are needed in the 21st century. To explain it in a sentence, it is the ability to take knowledge learned in school and use it for a variety of ends. You transform it so that it becomes knowledge in practice.

The other forms of assessment should encourage learning that takes students into the essence of the subject. In science, that is practical research inquiry backed up by learning. In literature, it is being able to understand, empathise and respond to a text, and then recreate aspects of the genre of that text. You cannot do that in a timed exam. We need to get off the rote learning league table and on to a form of assessment that is more nuanced and better able to address the core competences and knowledge in a subject.

The NEU ran a commission on secondary assessment that reported last year. There are lots of things that you could do, but the fundamentals would be a system that recognises achievement and does not fail a third of children in maths and English every year because of the norm-referenced curve. That has catastrophic consequences for their life chances. You need to look at a much more criterion-based system. If you meet the criteria, you achieve it. You need to end high-stakes testing as virtually the only method of assessing student achievement. You could look at new technologies. A lot can be done through information technology on just-in-time testing and assessment when ready. If I were looking at this, I would think about a 14-19 system. If you want to keep GCSEs, why must they all be done in the same week? I can see the argument for assessment at 16. Lots of students leave school at 16 and go on to college, so there needs to be a measure of what they are doing and how well they are doing.

My aim would be an integrated qualification system from 14 to 19, with different sorts of assessment that are reliable and valid for the core competence and knowledge of the subject, and which can be taken in different ways. That would also allow something else. If GCSE English and maths as currently constructed mean that a third of children fail, we need other qualifications where their learning in those subjects is recognised. They can then go on to apprenticeships, vocational education, FE and lifelong learning. We can no longer afford a system based on narrow academic routes that means that we routinely fail so many of our young people. It is not sensible or a good use of the nation's resources. It is terrible in terms of social disadvantage. The children who fail are hugely disproportionately children who are already hugely disadvantaged in their lives. The school system—the assessment system—does not help them.

We are coming up to a general election. The NEU is not party politically affiliated, but it seems to me that the whole issue of a national assessment system from 14 to 19 will need to be revisited. I do not mean going back to Tomlinson, which was too complicated, but the current

system needs change. Lastly, if change is made, it should not be all in one go. The problem with the changes made in 2014-16 was that a reign of terror came down on the profession. It was not properly trialled. It had significant unintended consequences. Equally, I am not saying that you should wait 10 years. We cannot afford to do that.

Baroness Blower: I failed to declare an interest in that I am an NEU member. I think people already knew that.

Tom, in responding to the question generally, could you address the issue about the pace of change? There are clearly many questions about GCSE and the current system of assessment. Mary made a point about not waiting for 10 years. Perhaps you would like to talk about what the impact would be on teachers and schools of introducing new ways of working. How might that best be done if it were to be done?

Tom Middlehurst: It would be huge. As I think the committee knows, any change or reform, particularly to qualifications and assessment, will add significant workload to individual teachers and schools. The committee in its inquiry and report needs to think carefully about any recommendations it makes and whether there is a good trade-off between benefits for young people and society, and what that would mean for school leaders and individual teachers. When you have your report and recommendations, to be really clear it would be good to have a stress-test: are the benefits that you think each recommendation will make worth the sacrifice in workload? As Mary already said, that is particularly key in a time of crisis for teacher recruitment and retention. It is a key concern. I urge the committee to stress-test each recommendation that it makes.

When we think about the introduction of more forms of coursework and oral presentations and so on, one thing that will inevitably come up is that in 2020-21 we had centrally assessed grades, CAGs, and teacher-assessed grades, TAGs, based largely on teacher assessment. One of the arguments that you might hear in this committee is that that led to an inflation of grades. We need to be clear that that is not the type of assessment that Mary and I are talking about. That was schools acting very quickly under quite loose parameters, and in some cases very sketchy guidance. That is not what we mean when we talk about the reintroduction of coursework.

Ofqual, the standards regulator, recently talked about this, particularly with the rise of generative AI such as ChatGPT and so on, and whether that undermines coursework, controlled assessments and those sorts of activity. Clearly, that is the future and we need to work with it. We completely agree with Mary that it is entirely wrong that a third of young people fail exams every year. We need to think about a different assessment system. If we have stuff like ChatGPT and generative AI, there is no reason why we cannot explore with more interest adaptive assessment, pitched at the right level for students and based on their answers to previous questions—aside from access to devices, technology and data. In theory, there is a huge opportunity.

Where I slightly disagree with Mary is that I think that GCSE and A-level exams do what they say they are going to do and assess what they say they are supposed to assess. The question is more fundamental than that: is it the right thing to assess? Actually, they are very good. I think the committee has heard from Tim Oates, who would tell you that exams in England are very good at assessing what they are supposed to assess. The broader question is whether that is what we want to assess, who decides that and what is the parliamentary scrutiny behind the content of those exams. Only then can we have a proper discussion about whether the assessment system is working and whether there is consensus on what we want to assess.

Dr Mary Bousted: Last night, as I prepared for this session, I asked a very good school leader about GCSEs and their effect on students. He wrote me this, which is notable: "For one-third of students, GCSEs are barely accessible, resulting in grades that are of minimal value for study or employment, obtained with scores so low that no one actually knows what the individual can or can't do. There is an urgent need for a graduated assessment of key skills in numeracy and literacy, accessible at a point in time, open for repeated revisiting, with criterion-referenced grading—pass, merit, distinction, perhaps—no pre-determination in apportioning grades, and probably online and adaptive".

He went on: "For the middle third, schooling is dominated from 14 to 16 with content they half master in subjects they barely enjoy, with limited access to skills-based vocational or creative alternatives. The end result is a battery of mid-ranking GCSE grades, secured through a tormenting experience in which most questions on most papers cannot be answered, but the 25% to 35% obtained is awarded a grade. Tiered papers help but do not offset the real issue of a backwards-facing 1950s curriculum model. The final third probably benefit from existing assessment modes, although do so under considerable duress. The number of subjects they study is maximised for league table scores. Almost nothing they do in school is for delight, self-motivation or designed to foster a love of learning. Performativity is prized over deep reflection and understanding. A typical candidate might spend 40 to 50 hours in examinations in a three-week period, a test of endurance and resilience rather than learning".

Tom said that what exams do is what they do, but this leader, who leads a highly academic grammar school, made this point about exam-only assessment: "Exam-only assessment serves as little more than an indicator of which students might intelligently progress to higher levels of exam-based academic study, which is not what most pupils do and not why they were being educated in the first place". That is the most intelligent thing I have read about exams in a long time.

Tom Middlehurst: On English and maths, we completely agree. We are really concerned about the third of young people who do not get a pass, a grade 4, in English and maths every year. First, we are keen on the idea of a new assessment, not a new qualification. I make that distinction. We

are talking about ongoing assessment that people could take at different times to show that they are literate and numerate.

Secondly, ASCL members from primary schools say that if you get an expected standard in a key stage 2 SAT, you are pretty literate and numerate, so what are you doing after that? We have to question that in the scope of this inquiry. If you are literate and numerate at 11, what is happening in the next five years? Lastly, we must be very cautious about using the disciplinary nature of English literature or English language and of mathematics as proxies for being literate and numerate. We need to dissociate those; if we did, it would be very helpful. My background is in English and I love the idea that young people would study English as a discipline rather than it having to be used as a proxy for being literate.

Q63 Lord Watson of Invergowrie: You have both made very interesting comments in the last 10 to 15 minutes in answers to Christine's question. My question builds on that. You will both be well aware of the Independent Assessment Commission report last year. It is only fair to Mary to say that it was funded by the National Education Union. One of its recommendations was that we should identify "reliable, alternative, blended approaches to assessment that rigorously gather evidence of student achievement and competence", ending high-stakes examinations, as Mary certainly made clear. How realistic is that? What changes would you prioritise, if you had the opportunity, in assessment at key stage 4?

Tom Middlehurst: As we say in our written evidence, we do not disagree with assessment at key stage 4. The issue is the way it is used. It is about the accountability mechanisms. If you reduced the high-stakes accountability at key stage 4 that Mary talked about, a lot of people might have a different view of what that assessment felt and looked like and the pressure it puts students under. It is not in the scope of this inquiry, but the same is true of key stage 2. It depends how it is used.

The first priority for any Government would be to reduce that accountability pressure. There are various ways in which you could do that, which we have already touched on. The second—again, I have already talked about it a bit—is that we do not use adaptive technology. Young people across the country right now are sitting exams in exam halls. Some open an exam paper and struggle. The research tells us that if you struggle on the third question, you are unlikely to continue. You will find it very hard to answer more questions, so all your marks are lower. Adaptive technology could say, "Okay, you haven't got that question right, so let's give you a question that's slightly lower in skill, content or knowledge that you might be able to answer". Then we can build that up.

The technology exists in the commercial market, and, to be fair to exam boards, they are all looking at it in a real way. I am not sure that the Government and Ofqual are doing so in as much detail, but it is there. We can do that. That would allow young people to show their abilities and what they can do, rather than seeing the third question and saying, "I can't do this. Therefore I'll give up on the rest of the paper". Those two

things would be ASCL's priorities: thinking about how we can use technology better, particularly adaptive technology; and a reform of the way assessments are used at the level of high-stakes accountability.

Lord Watson of Invergowrie: Is it simplistic to say that if you have a group of questions on a subject, you could grade questions so that they get tougher as they go along? I know that different students will react in different ways, but can you grade them without needing the technology?

Tom Middlehurst: In some subjects you can absolutely do that. It depends on the disciplinary nature of the subject and of that assessment. With others, you might be really good on oxbow lakes but really awful on earthquakes. If you happen to have the simple question on earthquakes, you feel as if you cannot answer the rest of the paper. It very much depends on whether we are talking about disciplinary skills, or subjects or topics. The point is that we can do it much better than we currently do.

Dr Mary Bousted: Oxbow lakes are the last thing I remember from geography, which I gave up in the third year at my girls' grammar school in Bolton. I agree with nearly everything that Tom said, but the NEU would say that the scale of ambition should be broader than that.

Fundamentally, we think there is something really wrong with putting 16 year-olds through 50 hours of exams in a two or three-week period. The mode of assessment does not speak to the competencies of the subject. It is not just us who think that. I have had conversations with Andreas Schleicher, director of education and skills at the OECD, who said repeatedly that we have a system that is completely overreliant on exams. Exams test subject content knowledge but are far less good at testing adaptive knowledge—what you do with it. It is not just what you know but what you do with it that marks out somebody who is really confident and competent in the subject. It is about how you take that knowledge and apply it to new situations. They are not very good at applying the knowledge to real-world situations.

Lots of young people need to see that there is a real-world application to the knowledge. I was taught maths by a needlework teacher because there were not enough maths teachers in my girls' convent grammar school. I remember studying differentiation and integration and asking "Why?" all the time. "Why do you have to do this calculation?" No one could ever tell me. I was not very good at maths. There are lots of students like me who are quite practical learners; they need to know why they are doing something and what the real-world application is.

The OECD would also say that you should attempt to inculcate in young people cognitive activation strategies to make use of the knowledge they are learning and to give them opportunities to use it in real-world situations. In order for that to happen, you have to assess more widely. I am absolutely with Tom that we have to have assessment systems that do not mean that there is an explosion of more work for teachers, because there are not enough teachers to do it. The current system relies on practice paper after practice paper, and teachers in England report a

marking load that is far in excess of the OECD average—far in excess. In the latest DfE teaching and learning workforce study, the most onerous aspect of their work is marking. We have a system for teachers and for pupils where there is a mass of written work. Writing exams will not get you through the skills you need when you get a job. They do not even get you through the skills you need if you are going on to university. We need to consider that. We are not as sanguine as ASCL that the current system is as good as it could be.

I go back to Robin Bevan's point that exams tell you very well which students can do more exams in that subject, but they are far less good at telling you other things. There is a need to know who else is good in the subject. Please do not mistake me: I am not saying that exams do not have an important place. They do. My only argument, and I do not think it is extreme, is that at the moment they hold too central a place in our system, as the OECD clearly says.

Lord Watson of Invergowrie: In answer to an earlier question, you said, "Why should it be necessary for everyone to sit their GCSEs at the same time?" How practical would it be to have whatever the form of testing is taking place at different times? That would inevitably impact on teachers' workload as well, would it not?

Dr Mary Bousted: Not necessarily.

Lord Watson of Invergowrie: I would like to see it work. Could you tell me if it would?

Dr Mary Bousted: There is a whole revolution coming with AI and adaptive testing. It is a big reform. You can think of different pathways through for 14 to 19. The pathways through can be what were formerly vocational subjects and more academic subjects. Most subjects are a mixture of academic and vocational. You could think about ways of testing that are more adapted to the level the students are at and where they need to go next. That also has big implications for how you teach, of course, so it is a big system reform. We can consider that in more detail, but the priority before that is looking at examining, if it is at 16 and 18, and at a range of competencies, skills and knowledge under a wider assessment base than we currently have, in which exams would play an important part but not the overwhelming part they play now.

Q64 **Lord Aberdare:** We have covered quite a lot of my question, so I will focus it a little. Does the current 11-16 system support all pupils to develop essential literacy, numeracy and digital skills? If not, what changes could be made to the curriculum, assessment and accountability systems to improve that? Maybe you could focus on two specific areas.

The first is the all-pupils area. To me, the advantage of what we have is that it is a very simple system; everybody has to go through and do their GCSEs. If we move to a more balanced curriculum and a better balance of technical, vocational and practical skills and cognitive application strategies, how would we develop a similarly balanced assessment

system—Mary talked about a wider assessment system—that would cover all those things? Exams would have their part, but then we would have adaptive technology-based things. That is the first dimension I would like to focus on.

Secondly, what would work for teachers or be welcomed by them? You rightly said that making these things happen involves extra workload and is not a straightforward process. How could we make it as straightforward as possible by ensuring that teachers saw it as something to be welcomed rather than yet another set of requirements that they had to meet?

Dr Mary Bousted: Teachers welcoming another government initiative is a really high bar, because, frankly, they have had a lot of them, and they do not like a lot of what they have had, but you cannot keep something just because you have it, particularly when it is so destructive of the life chances of a third of the pupils who do not achieve in the system and the middle set who get through it but do not enjoy it.

We have a very poor record in this country of lifelong learning, and we have a particularly poor record of lifelong learning for the most disadvantaged students. At the moment, they are in schools where they are most likely to be taught by a teacher who is not an expert in the subject they are teaching and schools that lost disproportionately more money in the austerity years than schools in the leafy suburbs. They are more likely to be in schools that very unfairly get poor Ofsted grades. Disadvantages are heaped upon them. They could do with a bit of a break, and they could do with enjoying their learning in school and being assessed in a way that gives them credit for what they have achieved. That would have huge benefits for our society in terms of skill levels, particularly if we get employers to engage in skills training rather than walk away from it, particularly if they did not expect students to come out of school completely ready for work. All those are big ifs.

Then there is the crisis in teacher supply. You have to work with the profession. I would recreate a separate curriculum and assessment body. The demise of the National Curriculum Council was a big mistake. Ofqual is far too closely linked with government. You should be able to have a linked but expert and more independent authority for curriculum or assessment, and although I do not really see how you have the two without joining them together there could be an argument for keeping the curriculum and assessment separate. Then you work with the profession in a graduated way to achieve that.

Teachers will need confidence that they can do it, with really good continuing professional development, informative assessments and the time to do it well. We probably need to do less assessment but do it better. At the moment, we overassess hugely, which is why teachers in England complain so vociferously about their marking load.

Tom Middlehurst: I was going to make exactly the same points as Mary about the amount of assessment.

Dr Mary Bousted: Good.

Tom Middlehurst: You asked, Lord Aberdare, what teachers would welcome about this. Any reform that allows teachers to teach more and students to learn more will be welcome, because at the moment a lot of teachers, particularly at GCSE, feel that they are doing revision so much. No teacher gets into teaching because they want to help kids to revise for an exam. They get into teaching because they want to impart knowledge and a love of their subject. Any reform needs to reflect that if it is to be welcomed by teachers. That is key.

Is it working for all pupils? Clearly not. We know that. A third of young people every year do not get a so-called pass in English and maths at age 16, and then they have to re-sit them. This is the other thing, and we have not talked about it. It is about 18% of pupils—around that number.

Dr Mary Bousted: You know that better than me, Tom.

Tom Middlehurst: It is ridiculous. The percentage of pupils who then go on to get a grade 4 post-16 is pitiful. That is not a fault of the exams, or of the schools or the colleges. It is the system we are working in, so clearly something is not working. We are doing those people a disservice. In our written evidence, we talk about the forgotten third. When we say forgotten we mean that they are forgotten in policy terms. There is no policy design for those young people. Essentially, you are saying to those young people after over a decade of academic study and time in school: "You have now failed". That is the language we use.

There was an opportunity back in 2016, when qualifications were reformed, when we could have moved away from the language of "pass" and "fail". We could have had a grade 1-9 system and just talked about that. Unfortunately, the then Secretary of State chose to talk about grade 4 being a standard pass and grade 5 being a good pass. That is now cemented into the system and we cannot remove it. That opportunity was lost. We could have just talked about different grades, and instead we had that threshold of a grade 4 being a pass. Although government language does not use the word "fail", what is not a pass is a fail. We need to think carefully about that and about what we do for the third of young people who, by government definitions, fail.

Lord Aberdare: One of the most depressing things is that we have a system that nobody seems to be enjoying. It is not just the bottom third, but the middle third and indeed the top third, and the teachers—it is not doing the right things for them either, which are the excitement and the motivation. I found Mary's couple of suggestions about things we might do to tackle this really helpful. Maybe the forgotten third is part of the route to a solution. I met somebody the other day who had been in the bottom third and had somehow got herself into a UTC and has become a real role model for learning. I suppose the big question is "How?" It was helpful to have a couple of great ideas. Do you have any more ideas that we can work on to bring some fun back into it all?

Tom Middlehurst: Developing the idea of an assessment—we are using the word very carefully: assessment, not qualification—in literacy and numeracy would go a long way towards that. It can be a bit like a driving test: you can take it at any time; there is no quotient on how many people can pass it; and you can take it at age 18, at age 65, or whatever age you want to take it. As a former English teacher, I think the study of “The Merchant of Venice” is brilliant. It is a great play to study; we can talk about it, and it brings in a lot of excitement. It does not become a thing that you absolutely have to learn because you have to pass English GCSE so that we as a school can get a certain percentage up. Suddenly, it becomes really quite fun.

I am not a mathematician, and I do not find maths fun, but I am sure that maths teachers would say the same about their subject. Suddenly, it opens it up and makes it more interesting. It all comes back to the accountability mechanisms that drive so much of the curriculum and the assessment in the phase that we are talking about. As soon as you remove those and make them more sensible, you can bring the love of learning back to some of those subjects.

Dr Mary Bousted: That is true, but there is also complete content overload on all the GCSEs. Another reason why the curriculum has narrowed is that as soon as schools saw the content involved in the new GCSEs they cut out an option choice. Everybody will tell you that.

Q65 **Baroness Garden of Frognal:** One theme that we keep returning to is that learning should be fun, and that a love of learning seems to have disappeared. My question is about the benefits and drawbacks of making the national curriculum compulsory for all state schools at key stage 3. Forgive my ignorance, but how many state schools do not offer the national curriculum at key stage 3? What do they offer if they are not offering that?

Tom Middlehurst: In the phase that we are talking about, a majority do not have to follow the national curriculum because they are academies. In reality and in practice, most do to some degree.

That said, there is something I feel really quite passionately about. We still have a White Paper in play at the moment that has an ambition that all schools will be in strong trusts by 2030. Let us assume for a moment that that is the direction of travel, notwithstanding any elections in the meantime. If, increasingly, all schools are academies, we at ASCL feel passionately that there should be a common entitlement for all young people and that it should be set out by a national curriculum that every state-funded school should have to follow. It should be slimmed down.

As Mary said, when you look at some of the specifications and some of the national curriculum content, it is very full. We would advocate a slimmed-down, mandatory national curriculum for all schools. We proposed this in our blueprint for a fairer education system, and we thought we were going to get massive kickback from the academy sector, which does not have to follow the national curriculum. We thought they

would say, "This is one of our autonomies as academies that we hold very dear". We had no kickback whatever, which we were really surprised about. If this committee were to suggest a mandated national curriculum for all state-funded schools, including academies and free schools, it would be very welcome as a common entitlement for young people. Then you get on to the question of who makes those decisions about the national curriculum.

When the reforms were made in the last decade by the former Education Secretary, there was lots of kickback. People felt that it was a personal agenda and that his personal interests were informing it. At ASCL, we are looking at the idea—I am not the first person to say this—that the curriculum is too important for government to be involved but too important for government not to be involved, so how do you balance that? It is very early days, but we are keen to explore that.

We are exploring the idea of a regulatory body that would be appointed and commissioned by government to make recommendations on the curriculum. Ultimately, any Secretary of State would take those recommendations and choose whether to accept them or not. Clearly, if there was a group of experts involved, there would have to be very good reasons for the Secretary of State not to take up those recommendations. When we talk about an independent body, we do not mean something entirely separate from government. We think of it as a body that is commissioned by government, reports to government, is scrutinised by Parliament through committees like these, and makes recommendations. Ultimately, it has to be a political decision, because it is too important not to be. I feel very strongly that there should be a mandated national curriculum for all state-funded schools and that we should have a much better regulatory system to agree the content in that curriculum.

Baroness Garden of Frognal: And it should be driven by professionals and teachers and people who actually know.

Tom Middlehurst: Exactly, but ultimately commissioned by government.

Baroness Garden of Frognal: Yes, okay.

Dr Mary Bousted: I agree.

Baroness Blower: I do not know whether part of the implication behind the question was the fact that key stage 4 has strayed extensively into key stage 3. We all know that the key stages are not at all balanced. Key stage 1 is relatively short. Key stage 2 is the longest. Then we have key stage 3, and then we have the two-year key stage 4. There is now a move in lots of secondary schools to the GCSE curriculum starting in year 9. There is a question about the curriculum—very good answer, thank you very much—but there is also a question about the time balance, and we all know that there is a narrowing once you get on to the GCSE track. There is probably a question about what the entitlement should be in key stage 3, which should be not entirely connected to the syllabus for GCSE.

Dr Mary Bousted: It was always nonsense that academies and free schools do not have to follow the national curriculum, because as soon as you say what the accountability system is and the subjects and qualifications that are based on it, that is what they will teach. I think there absolutely should be a national curriculum at key stage 3, and so does the NEU, because the problem at the moment—I keep going back to this—is that the most disadvantaged students in the most challenging schools are most likely to have key stage 4 seep into key stage 3, and that is how we end up being the rote-learning capital of the world. Teachers are under so much pressure but they have a body of content to deliver; as Andreas Schleicher says, if you have to deliver such a big body of content knowledge, of course you resort to rote learning. That is reported by pupils and by teachers and leaders.

What we have at the moment is grinding to a halt, because we do not have enough teachers to teach it. The work is not sufficiently attractive to get graduates wanting to come into the profession in enough numbers. It is not just pay. Pay is one element. The other issue is excessive and intensive overwork, the work not being sufficiently challenging and attractive, and the fact that in too many schools you cannot have flexible working. The reality is that lots of teachers now work four days. They do a four-day week. They have one day a week when they are not meant to be working when they do all their schoolwork so that they can see their children at the weekend. This profession is 75% women. It is not surprising that 40% leave within 10 years. We absolutely have to root the curriculum and assessment in the state of the profession, and the teaching profession at the moment is very poorly.

Tom Middlehurst: I have one note of caution about the national curriculum. We see in this phase that teachers look at the national curriculum for key stage 3, and that is what they teach. We know—Dylan Wiliam has some very good evidence on this—that they do not look back at the previous key stage to see what is in there.

Baroness Blower: In year 7 they are quite often deskilled from year 6.

Tom Middlehurst: Exactly. Quite frankly, if a child cannot read and therefore cannot access the key stage 3 curriculum, teachers need to go back to the key stage 1 curriculum or earlier years to look at phonics and how you can teach that.

Dr Mary Bousted: And you are not trained to do that.

Tom Middlehurst: No. If we are thinking about a new mandated compulsory national curriculum for all state-funded schools, it is also with the idea that there is much more flex in it. It is not that at year 7 you start with 1066 and that sort of thing. That is just a note of caution: that we need to have balance.

Baroness Blower: Does it imply a different approach to teacher training in education from what we have now? If you only learn in the school that you are teaching in, you will not know anything about what happened

previously. If you are only teaching in key stage 3, you may not know much about key stage 4 either, so there is a big question there.

- Q66 **Lord Lexden:** Our final general question almost inevitably contains points on which you have commented already very usefully, so could I ask you to sum up for us your views on the following? Would reducing the amount of content covered and allowing more flexibility in what is taught in the key stage 3 and key stage 4 curriculum be welcomed by schools and teachers? Mary, I see you nodding vigorously.

Dr Mary Bousted: When the new content came in, in 2016 and 2017, the NEU did a survey of secondary teachers on the new GCSE syllabuses, and the overwhelming response was that there was too much content. The reaction of many schools in order to create more time was to drop an option in all subjects, but particularly in maths where the content really increased. They are overfull of content, which leads to rote memorisation.

It goes back to a fundamental way of looking at teaching. What are the key concepts, key ideas and key areas of knowledge that are central to the subject? What content is needed to explore those, to be able to understand them, and to use that knowledge to transform it? The rewriting was done too quickly, and the subject expert groups wanted to put everything into their subject. They always do. Whenever you rewrite a national curriculum, it is always overstuffed with content. Then you always have to go back and see how you can slim it down.

Of course, the other thing that did not happen was looking at subjects to see what content was in them and asking, "Do we need to do this, because it's being taught in another subject in a different way? How do you do cross-curriculum links between them?" Those sorts of things did not happen. In a very short, simple answer, yes, we are overstuffed with content, and that leads to rote learning.

Tom Middlehurst: It also depends on the subjects in question. The English key stage 3 national curriculum list is less than two pages. It is very slim. I suppose it is difficult to give an answer generally; it very much depends on the subject we are talking about in this phase. I come back to the idea of a common entitlement. By the way, I completely agree with Mary; it is too stuffed and it is too big. There is a danger that if you reduce the content and allow for greater flexibility, some students will have more knowledge and skills than others as a result of the school curriculum, not as a result of their abilities. You have to be very careful about the amount of flexibility that is given. It is a very difficult balance.

That is why we come back to the idea of an independent body. As part of deciding the content, it would also decide on the balance between nationally defined content—"This is a common entitlement that we think all young people should know by the age of 11, 16 and so on"—and a degree of flexibility. Would it be welcomed by schools and teachers? Definitely.

Dr Mary Bousted: Definitely.

Tom Middlehurst: But there is also a degree of workload. The greater flexibility you have, in a slightly perverse way the greater workload you bring into that, because teachers have to do more of their own worksheet production and creating their own lessons. If you have a more centrally defined curriculum, there is less of that. It is all about balances. At the moment, there is too much content, so I completely agree with Mary there. Mine is just a note of caution, I suppose. I do not disagree with anything that Mary said, but it is worth being aware of.

Dr Mary Bousted: One thing I would say to the committee is that we are a real outlier. The International Summit on the Teaching Profession, which I have been to a lot, is unique, because the Minister cannot go if the trade union leaders do not go. It is me and Nick Gibb sitting next to each other. We could not go this year, and everybody missed us having a row—in the best possible way; I like Nick Gibb personally.

If you listen to what is happening around the world in China and Singapore and in the high-performing nations, they are on a different trajectory from us. There is a notion of transferable skills and skills development. You cannot teach skills in a vacuum; you teach skills through content knowledge, but being aware of the skills that you are developing and absolutely focused on information technology and adaptive technology. A deputy Minister from China talked about adaptive technology to educate the Chinese nation, particularly those living in rural areas where they cannot get teachers of physics for every school. We are the only country in the OECD at the moment—Andreas Schleicher is quite clear about this—that is wedded to such a 1950s model. In the end, it will have to change.

The Chair: Which countries in the OECD can we learn most from?

Dr Mary Bousted: You can learn different things from different places. Singapore is us on speed when it comes to high-stakes testing. You could learn a lot from the way it is moving away from that to different career routes for teachers and a more widely based curriculum with a wider range of qualifications. If you want somewhere that has gone further than we have but started to move away from it, that is one.

Another country where what is happening at the moment is very interesting—I was reading about it last night—is Estonia, which has a real emphasis on information technology and the use of a skills-based curriculum. It scores very highly in the OECD league tables. Another very interesting one is Norway, which makes much greater use of sample testing. It is mostly teacher assessment. Students are told 48 hours before the exam which subject they will be examined in, so there are no high stakes. They get national sampling about what the standards are really like. We need to develop national sampling much better.

There is lots that we can learn from around the world. One thing I might do when I finish being joint general secretary of the NEU is look a bit more at all that. There are also lots of different things we could do on

accountability, because we need accountability. No one is arguing about accountability. The question is: does it measure the right things?

The Chair: Tom, do you want to say anything on that?

Tom Middlehurst: I wrote down Singapore and Estonia.

The Chair: We are in agreement, then.

Q67 **Lord Aberdare:** Can I ask our witnesses about a subject we have not covered at all, which is the role of employer engagement in schools, the whole careers thing, and work experience? From your perspective, where should that fit in? Should it be entirely separate from the curriculum or part of the curriculum and the assessment and accountability process?

Tom Middlehurst: It should absolutely be part of the curriculum. It needs to be embedded in it. The idea of treating careers separately is nonsense and does not work. That said, you need someone in a school to co-ordinate it and make sense of it. Interestingly, it is one of the few key takeaways from lockdown that we want to keep. Another is people doing parents' evening remotely. I spoke to staff at a school the other day who said, "During lockdown, we couldn't do visits to career sites, so we just went remotely. They showed us around their offices and talked about what they did". They said, "Actually, we can do that every week, rather than having to do it once a year". There was a much greater opportunity to do that. One of the really positive things that has come out of remote education is the ability to show students far more careers, but it has to be deeply embedded in the curriculum, not an add-on.

Dr Mary Bousted: There is a fantastic film of a primary school year 6 where the children were asked to draw a fire person, a police officer and a pilot. Ninety-nine per cent of the drawings were of males. Then a policewoman, a woman fighter pilot and a woman engineer—something like that—came in. One of the children said, "They're dressing up". One of the shocking things is the very narrow range of careers that are known to schoolchildren. They do not know what is available for them. Employers are spending less on training. There needs to be much greater employer engagement in schools, but we have to make it easier for employers to know what to do. We make it very hard.

Lord Aberdare: If you are going to have it in the curriculum, you probably need to have it somehow in the assessment and accountability measures too.

Tom Middlehurst: I was about to address that point. There is a narrative that the curriculum should be much more closely aligned to the needs of careers education and to industry. I feel very uncomfortable about that. The curriculum should be for the love of the subject and for the discipline itself, and the merit in studying topics and subjects. I would find it rather depressing if the dominant narrative became, "We should only do this because it's going to lead to a job".

Dr Mary Bousted: Surely there is a balance. Many students need to understand that a subject they may find very difficult has a real-world application, and they need to be able to explore that in what they are doing. If it is just esoteric and for love of the subject, students who do not like it but have middle-class parents who tell them that it is very important will get through. Lots of students will not. You need to have a real-life application for what you are doing. That does not mean that everything has to be vocational, but you have to have enough in the subject so that you can say, "This is important because", particularly for students who are not necessarily going to see its importance. They will see that it will help them live a better life, be more skilled and do a more interesting job.

Tom Middlehurst: I do not disagree. It is always a balance, but I would find it depressing if that became the reason for the curriculum. Dylan Wiliam expressed it in a useful way. He talks about the "need to know" and the "neat to know". What does every young person need to know, and what is the exciting bit around and after that?

The Chair: Great. Thank you both very much. We are very grateful for your contributions. It has been a fascinating session. Thank you again.