

Education Committee

Oral evidence: Curriculum and Assessment Review, HC 864

Tuesday 6 May 2025

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Members present: Helen Hayes (Chair); Jess Asato; Mrs Sureena Brackenridge; Darren Paffey; Manuela Perteghella; Mark Sowards; and Caroline Voaden.

Questions 1 to 48

Witnesses

I: Tom Middlehurst, Deputy Director of Policy, Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL); Darren Northcott, National Official, NASUWT The Teachers' Union; Tim Oates CBE, Group Director of Assessment Research and Development, Cambridge University Press and Assessment; and Jill Duffy, Chief Executive, UK exam board OCR (Oxford, Cambridge and RSA), Cambridge University Press and Assessment.

II: Charlynn Pullen, Principal Research Fellow, Sheffield Hallam University; Nick Chambers, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Education and Employers Charity; Robert West, Head of Education and Skills and part of the Future of Work Directorate, Confederation of British Industry (CBI); and Alex Veitch, Director of Policy and Insights, British Chambers of Commerce.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Tom Middlehurst, Darren Northcott, Tim Oates CBE and Jill Duffy.

Chair: We now begin the public proceedings. I welcome members and witnesses to our evidence session today on the curriculum and assessment review. Before I ask our witnesses to introduce themselves, can I invite members to put on record any interests that you would like to declare today? Serena.

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge: Thank you, Chair. Previously I have had paid memberships with the NASUWT and more recently ASCL.

Chair: Anybody else? No. In that case, I invite our witnesses to introduce themselves to us, starting with Jill Duffy.



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Jill Duffy: Good afternoon, everyone. I am the chief executive of OCR, one of the three main exam boards in England. We offer GCSEs, A-levels and vocational qualifications. We are part of Cambridge University Press and Assessment.

Tim Oates: I am Group Director of Assessment Research and Development at Cambridge University Press and Assessment. I do a great deal of international comparative work and a lot of four-nation studies looking at education. I chaired the national curriculum review in 2010, resulting in the new curriculum in 2014.

Tom Middlehurst: Good afternoon. I am Deputy Director of Policy at ASCL. I lead on curriculum, assessment, school systems and SEND. I contributed to the review.

Darren Northcott: Good afternoon. I am the National Official for Education at the NASUWT.

Q1 **Chair:** Thank you very much. I will begin our questioning this afternoon and my first question is for Tim Oates. As the chair of the last national curriculum review, how does the current review differ from the work that you undertook and why do we need another curriculum and assessment review now?

Tim Oates: Nations need to keep their national curriculum under review. A national curriculum can date for various reasons. We can find out more about learning; we can find issues or pent-up problems in the system; certain subjects age faster than others. Rationales for changing the curriculum differ, but it is right to keep it under review.

In some ways it does not differ at all from the review in 2010. Its focus is on equity and attainment and ensuring that we have a national curriculum that supports high-quality curriculum development in schools. It differs in a number of respects in terms of its focus. It also looks at qualifications and assessment, whereas the 2010 review was focused principally on the content of the national curriculum.

The interim report is interesting. The masthead objective is evolution, not revolution. The interim report acknowledges that the 2010-14 curriculum and allied measures like the numeracy, mathematics and literacy initiatives raised attainment. That increase in attainment was detectable in transnational surveys.

Q2 **Chair:** As we think about what makes for a successful curriculum and assessment framework, quite often attention is given to national and international indicators and the different measurements of how students fare under the assessment regime. How reliable are those measurements as measures of absolute change in knowledge and skills in the school population over time?

Tim Oates: For a long period we have worked with the organisations that provide these big international surveys. I have worked particularly with



the OECD, which provides the PISA survey—a cross-sectional study of 15-year-olds. Also TIMSS looks at grade 4 and grade 8 and PIRLS looks at literacy in the primary phase. They are pretty good. They are meticulously prepared. They focus on slightly different things in each case, but it is most important that the data that we collect as a nation on attainment through our national assessments and our national qualifications shows a high correlation between high attainment in our measures that we use within our system and the outcomes of the big transnational surveys.

The transnational surveys also collect quite interesting contextual evidence and information on classroom climate and background variables in relation to what kids have at home and their home environment. In some cases, the OECD surveys go more deeply than we do in terms of our regular data collection on children. We can be assured that while there are grounds to constantly critique the big transnational surveys, what we detect in terms of equity and attainment and what they detect have a strong relationship.

Q3 Chair: Would any other witnesses like to come in on that point? No. In that case, I will broaden out to ask all of you how important curriculum is in influencing educational improvement and outcomes relative to other factors that also have a bearing on how students do during their time at school. Jill, do you want to start?

Jill Duffy: As you say, a lot of other factors will lead to increased attainment—for example, making sure we have enough specialist teachers and making sure they are properly trained. The curriculum plays an incredibly important part in increasing attainment. It is important that the curriculum is relevant and engaging to all students. It is important that students look at themselves in the curriculum and see that they belong there. It is also important that the curriculum is not too overcrowded so that it gives the space for teachers to be able to develop the deeper understanding and skills within young people.

Tom Middlehurst: I completely agree with Jill. It is important that whatever the national curriculum is, it will ultimately be influenced by the assessment system at the end of that key stage. Whether that is key stage 2 SATs, GCSEs or A-levels, it will define essentially what the curriculum looks like. That in itself is influenced by the accountability measures that have been in place.

In terms of your question about how important the curriculum is in defining what schools do, it is absolutely crucial, but in practice assessment and accountability probably come before. I will put a fourth issue on there, which Jill alluded to, which is the recruitment and retention of teachers. We could have the best curriculum in the world, but if we do not have teachers that can teach it, quite frankly, there is no point in spending all this money on reviewing the curriculum.



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Yes, curriculum review is important, but it is probably about fourth on that list, because assessment, accountability, recruitment and retention of teachers probably has a greater influence on the mechanisms and vehicles that the Government have to influence what schools do than what is on that piece of paper or that PDF about the national curriculum.

Q4 **Chair:** A greater influence on the outcomes for children?

Tom Middlehurst: Yes. Tim will know this better than me, but good evidence shows that the biggest influence on the outcomes for young people are the teachers in the classroom, not the curriculum that is in front of them. Tim will know this better than I do from an international point of view.

Tim Oates: It is important to recognise—and this may sound quite controversial—that the national curriculum is not a curriculum; it is a list of outcomes. “Explain the properties of matter according to the particulate theory”—that is the kind of statement that you will find in the national curriculum. It is a goal; it is an aim; it is an objective. It doesn’t tell you how to teach and it doesn’t tell you how long you should spend on it. Those are real curriculum matters.

That is why in the literature that we have created on the national curriculum, in understanding the place of a national curriculum in a set of policy instruments in a nation, we contrast the national curriculum and the school curriculum. The national curriculum is a relatively succinct statement of a set of goals. That needs to then be turned into a specific curriculum in a specific setting for particular groups of children.

It is not that it is unimportant. You just have to understand its status. Of course it is important. The decisions about what should be in there and what is excluded do condition things, but of itself it has that status. It is a list of goals. It is not a curriculum in the sense the school curriculum is a lived, enacted process that children experience.

Darren Northcott: That is an important point. Tom is right: the curriculum is important, but it sits within a particular context. Things influence that curriculum. I agree entirely with the point around accountability and also with Tim’s point about the fact that you can have a curriculum, but teachers and leaders have to turn that into lived experiences for children and young people in schools. That is a process in and of itself, but it is extremely important. The curriculum and assessment review is critical because that is how schools will decide what those learning experiences look like.

Chair: Sorry, Tom, did you want to come in with a follow-up?

Tom Middlehurst: No, Darren made the point.

Tim Oates: One thing that I would like to emphasise to the Committee is that there is a lot of discussion, for example, on issues of curriculum overload. There has been a big discussion around the need for review,



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but often the comments around overload relate to qualifications, not to the national curriculum. These are important distinctions. Be clear about which policy instrument we are talking about or engaging with and its technical characteristics.

The best way of putting it is that if you have a terrible national curriculum full of the wrong things, it will be damaging to your education system, but if you have the right national curriculum full of the right things, it does not necessarily follow that that will be enacted in the classroom. Many other factors—accountability, assessment, inspection, targets and so on—will determine the priorities and the objectives of teachers and managers in particular educational settings.

Q5 **Caroline Voaden:** I will start with Tom and then maybe widen the question out. The ASCL has called for a clearer vision from the Government on the purpose of school education. Should other goals be set than those relating to qualifications, for example, wellbeing, communication skills, employability skills, health and happiness?

Tom Middlehurst: People use an oft-cited quote to say that we measure what we value and we value what we measure. I slightly disagree with that. Some things in education are valuable and should be part of the infrastructure of the curriculum that we should not value, we cannot value and, if we try to value, will be at the detriment of teaching those things. In terms of that broader picture of what should that look like, that means that we should not try to achieve a point where everything that we think is important in education is in some way measured. We cannot measure everything.

However, that said, we have to look carefully at how our accountability system encourages schools to act in certain ways. That might mean that they teach only things that are on the test. That is wrong and we know that. That is not because school leaders are acting with any bad faith; it is because they are worried about that high-stakes accountability system. When we talk about curriculum assessment, which is what this Committee is talking about today, we cannot disassociate that from accountability.

In terms of what that means for measurements, we could have an intelligent accountability system that looks at what it is like to be in this school. Does it foster certain values that we think are important as a society? Do we need to try to put a number on that? Absolutely not, and we are clear about that. We can have a narrative report that talks about what it is like to be in that school, the values of that school and how it implements those values meaningfully. Yes, we think accountability should go beyond what we currently have. Do we think it can be measured in the same way? Probably not, and it could be quite damaging if we try to do that.

Q6 **Caroline Voaden:** The question was not entirely about accountability. It was about the purpose of education. What are we trying to do? Are we



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trying to produce 16-year-olds who are healthy, happy, confident, ready to move on in the world, be employed and have successful, contented lives, or is the whole purpose of education just to get them through those GCSEs? Are you saying that because of our accountability measures, it has been reduced to that because we can't measure more nebulous things?

Tom Middlehurst: That is how a lot of schools would feel. There is a difference in your question between the purpose of education and the purpose of schools and we need to be clear about that. Given the current financial pressures that schools are under and the fact that that financial pressure will get more acute over the coming year, we have to be clear about what we expect schools to be able to do within that climate.

Clearly everyone around the table would agree that education is more than about qualifications and should be about children thriving and being able to find their element and doing what they care about. Are schools able to provide that themselves? Absolutely, in an ideal world they all would. I am sure no one—I am a former teacher—would go into education feeling that they don't want to do that. However, we have to be clear about the expectation of schools. Yes, absolutely, education more broadly should be exactly as you said, about children thriving. Is that possible in the current system? It is becoming increasingly difficult to do that.

Q7 **Chair:** Tim Oakes, you wanted to come in on this question.

Tim Oates: Thank you, yes. I will make a reference to law and also mention of what is done to survey and what should be done to certificate. I will clarify what I mean by those. UNESCO undertakes a periodic survey of wellbeing of young people across different nations and England does not do well on those league tables. We take that as a reference point.

Then let us think about the law. The current aims of education that are enshrined in law refer to the physical, intellectual, spiritual and social development of young children. Those aims have been in place since the 1944 Act and they are still a requirement in law of all state-funded schools. That is a nice broad set of aims. Of course there is huge contestation about how you deliver them, but they are there as a legal framework and it is nicely broad. It relates to specific outcomes in the form of subject attainment, attainment in subject disciplines, and it refers to the general goods of education that educationalists hold dear, such as the sense of agency that young people have and so on.

I will finish on certification assessment. We can and we do survey in the same way UNESCO do. We can survey schools and we can decide at what level we survey to see how kids are doing in general by sampling individuals. That is not assessing every child, but it gives us a sense of how things are going in our education system. If we sample at another level, we can tell how it is going on in particular types of schools and so on.



As an implication of what you said, should we be assessing each and every child and, if we assess them, what do we do with the information we get from those assessments? It should not automatically be an assumption that we should certificate it or issue some form of record at a particular age. There are all these different options for assessing children for their wellbeing, but it is all in the context of some quite coherently laid down overall goals that are still to be enacted in law. They are still a requirement.

Q8 **Chair:** Anybody else want to come in?

Jill Duffy: Yes, I will come in. No one on this Committee would disagree with you, Caroline, that we want to create happy children who are ready to go out there and progress in their lives. That is absolutely what everyone, as an educationalist, wants. Many factors, as you know, impact children's wellbeing today, including things like social media, anxiety about climate change and so on. If we hone it down to what we can do within the education system and within curriculum and assessment, we can do some things. As I said before, it is important we have a curriculum that everyone can see themselves in and that they find engaging and motivating.

We have reached a point with assessment—and you may think this is quite unusual for a head of an exam board to say—where we have too much assessment and too many exams going on at 16. We think we can do something about that. We think we can reduce that. If you look at England at the moment, on average a student takes 30 hours of exams. That is far more than almost every other country. The research that we have done has shown that we could reduce that level of assessment without impacting on reliability or impacting on standards.

One concrete thing you could do at GCSE would be to say that each GCSE could have a maximum of two papers—a lot of them have three at the moment—and those two papers could be a maximum of 90 minutes. Doing that would reduce the exam burden on average by about eight to 10 hours and you could do that without reducing the reliability of exams. Doing that concrete thing in the assessment system could have a positive impact on wellbeing but, as we all know, a multitude of factors impact young people's wellbeing today.

Darren Northcott: On the wellbeing and mental health of children and young people, provisions apply to schools in that respect around RSHE, for example. Those learning experiences give children the ability to develop skills and explore issues that relate to their health and wellbeing.

However, I go back to what Tom was driving at. I am not sure that starting to codify these things strictly in a curriculum that is set within a high-stakes accountability context and then trying to measure them rather crudely would encourage everyone to provide the opportunities that children and young people would want. But the aim of education—as Tim says, and as has been set out since 1944—to develop that spiritual



and moral dimension of children's education is important and schools take it extremely seriously.

Q9 Chair: Briefly, if that is okay, so that we can move on to the next questions.

Tim Oates: It is important to think about the issues of welfare while children are at school. That is the direct thrust of the question. It is also important to think about long-term progression and progression into the labour market and participation in society. There again we see strong links between attainment in things that are quite traditional and good life outcomes in health, employment, social dimensions and family life. Some analyses counterpoint and oppose academic attainment and wellbeing in terms of outcomes, but progression is facilitated by attainment. The two things are closely entwined.

Q10 Mrs Sureena Brackenridge: I would like to build on the points made earlier regarding the breadth and depth of the curriculum and the knowledge-rich approach. What effect has the adoption of the knowledge-rich approach or content-heavy approach had on schools in primary education and secondary education? I will start with Darren, if that is okay.

Darren Northcott: One key message from our members—and this might be different from the knowledge versus skills debate that has characterised discussions around the curriculum for the past decade or so—is that they report a sense that the curriculum is overcrowded. That can be through overspecification or it can be, as the curriculum and assessment review quite interestingly identified, through underspecification, where teachers are not sure what they should try to cover and so they try to cover everything. A sense of trying to fit too much into too small a space is real and teachers and leaders report that frequently.

The curriculum and assessment review rightly has been tasked with considering that. Is there too much content? Is there too much demand and too much pressure to cover too much? Does that create pressures on schools? What learning experiences does it result in for children and young people? That is an important point. Certainly there is a real sense, which needs to be addressed, that the curriculum, as it is experienced, as it is delivered and maybe as it is specified—Tom's point about exam specifications being important as well in this—there is too much to try to cover in too short a period of time. That leads to some potentially difficult questions around what the curriculum includes and what it excludes to make it more manageable, but also to make it broader and more balanced.

Q11 Mrs Sureena Brackenridge: Is that both primary and secondary education?

Darren Northcott: Certainly we hear it strongly from the secondary sector, but also it is true that we hear from our primary members that



the curriculum is difficult to navigate and is unwieldy. A useful exercise could be to look at that curriculum and see how it could be made more manageable. However, we also need to be careful that the solution is not just taking the curriculum we have and chopping bits out of it here and there. It requires something a bit more fundamental.

The curriculum and assessment review is probably right that evolution, not revolution, is the best place to start, but those debates and those concerns raise interesting questions around what our curriculum looks like, how manageable it is, how broad and balanced it is and how it contributes to children's engagement with learning. All of those are live and relevant questions.

Tom Middlehurst: I agree with everything Darren said. This Committee will often have people advocating for something that should be in the curriculum that is not already, and they will say, "Why is this not taught? Why we are not showing "Adolescence", for example?" This Committee could helpfully ask the question, "If you want that to be included, what are you taking out?" We always have to ask that question. When we come to Professor Francis's review in the autumn, we need to be clear. If we think things should be put into the curriculum, what are we taking out? As Tim has already said, the curriculum is already overcrowded. We always have to ask that question. A helpful role for this Committee would be to continually to ask that question, "If you want something in, what are you taking out?"

Q12 **Mrs Sureena Brackenridge:** My question was more specifically about the knowledge-rich approach, as opposed to the skills approach. How do you feel about that?

Tom Middlehurst: I will answer briefly, but Tim wants to come in on that. It is a non-debate. You cannot instil skills—problem-solving, collaboration or critical thinking—without doing that in a disciplinary way. We have to teach that disciplinary knowledge. With the curriculum and assessment review, we have an opportunity to think about how we present that differently to schools and teachers. If we can instil those sorts of skills that you are talking about, let's demonstrate that in the national curriculum. Let's not have a single PDF document that sets out what we need to do; let's say, "Here is an interesting way to talk about problem-solving within the maths curriculum, while still teaching mathematical knowledge".

There is a real opportunity here to not produce the national curriculum as a single document, but to do something much more interesting, which would end what I describe—with no disrespect—as a quite boring debate about knowledge versus skills. Finally, we can do something interesting about that.

Tim Oates: You associated two things: knowledge-rich and content-heavy. Separate those for a second. Reynolds and Farrell's work, "Worlds Apart?", way back in the late 1980s, was a brilliant study of high-



performing systems around the world. We used that work as a keystone of the 2010-14 review because that identified that the highest-performing systems tend to have fewer things in greater depth in primary.

This is important. It is about the overall shape of the curriculum. They tend to have less pace and less content coverage so that all children can access these difficult ideas and therefore be well-prepared for lower and upper secondary. That is a characteristic of high-performing systems. We largely delivered that in the 2014 curriculum, but certainly not exclusively. There were some areas of overload in the primary curriculum and it is right that that should be reviewed.

A knowledge-rich approach does not necessarily result in content-heavy. You have to exercise good decisions about what is in and what is not. A knowledge-rich approach, for example, would say that it is important to introduce ideas around density into primary school so that children have experienced some learning that enables them to get their heads around the idea of density, a difficult scientific principle, as preparation for a much more intensive study in secondary. Do we have the balance right between primary and secondary? No. It is right that the current review should look at that.

In terms of knowledge-rich, what is the direction of travel around the world? Quite a few countries that were committed to competence-based curricula and implemented them pretty rigorously over the last two decades have noticed that their standards have declined and not increased and are now looking at implementing knowledge-rich approaches. That is New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Poland, Sweden and now Scotland, interestingly. The First Minister has put in place a committee to look at the role of knowledge in the Scottish national curriculum. They do that in light of things like the overall shape having fewer things in greater depth to have preparedness among all kids at whatever attainment level in a much more intensive secondary period.

Jill Duffy: I agree with Becky Francis's view here that the knowledge-rich curriculum has meant that we have risen in international standards, which is positive, but it is a bit of a false binary to pitch knowledge against skills. You absolutely need both. Skills without any knowledge is just vacuous. You cannot do it. It is perfectly possible for an education system to deliver both, and we should absolutely aim for that.

Q13 Mrs Sureena Brackenridge: Would you agree with Francis's assessment of what works well in the current curriculum and assessment system, the architecture of key stages, the national assessments and qualifications, the breadth and the depth? Do you agree with those fundamentals currently being appropriate? Jill, we will start with you from an exam board point of view.

Jill Duffy: The interim report was right to say that the current curriculum and assessment system is successful and it performs well when we



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compare it with other jurisdictions and other countries. I definitely agree with that.

However, the key point we need to look at now is what does need to change. Although the curriculum and assessment system is working well for a lot of students, we know that it is suitable for too few. A lot of students, 30% of students—I am sure Tom will come on to say this—do not get a good pass, a grade 4, in maths and English. Far too many students are still left behind by that system. I agree with her analysis. The point now is the priorities that we need to focus on, which the second part of the review needs to focus on. They are around maths, English and reducing the intensity and volume of exams at 16.

Tim Oates: I will again introduce the distinction between the national curriculum and the school curriculum. Is our national curriculum, the list of goals, dramatically out of sync with the curricula of high-performing systems? No, it is not. Does that mean it should be left entirely alone? No. I have already hinted that some issues in certain subjects, both in terms of some dated content and some overload, need to be attended to. But in terms of international benchmarking, is our national curriculum out of sync with high-performing systems? No.

It is important to attend to the surveys that the curriculum and assessment review has undertaken, particularly with parents. We have quite reassuring data on whether parents agree or strongly agree with the extent to which their children were able to take the subjects they wanted to. This is reassuring stuff. It is important to look at those data coming up from communities and parents.

The sting, though, is in the tail of the equity data, which Becky is particularly concerned with because of her research background. The big transnational surveys look at within-school differences and between-school differences in attainment. For the same equivalent children, are the same outcomes achieved in different parts of the school and in different schools around the country? We don't do so well at all there. That is where the equity problems begin to arise and we saw those amplified in Covid and the Covid legacy.

Using benchmarking, we have a job to do with the national curriculum, but it is not dramatically out of sync. We have a massive job to do in supporting schools to get their school curricula to give access to deliver attainment to all.

Tom Middlehurst: I will pick up Jill's point that a third of young people do not get a grade 4 at the end of secondary school in English and maths. We call them the forgotten third at our school. At the moment the policy is that you have to continue to put them in for those qualifications that they have already failed. The pass rates of those are quite shocking.

From this September, all sixth forms or colleges will have to put those students in for 100 hours of English or maths if they don't have that



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grade 4—regardless of whether they have missed out on that grade 4 by a single mark or if they have a grade 1. Quite frankly, if they have a grade 1, we think they probably do need 100 hours of maths. That seems quite sensible. Should they be studying for the same qualification? They have already failed, so probably not. In terms of the immediate things that we agree with from Professor Francis's review, English and maths absolutely have to be the priority.

While I am talking about this—and we might come on to this later—it is worth saying that we are clear at our school that that has to be a universal assessment. The idea of introducing a new and separate qualification for students who did not get the grade 4 aged 16 at the end of secondary school automatically means that that qualification would not be valued and accepted by employers. We would have to say all young people must do it.

The last Government—and this has been continued by the current Government—had an expectation that 90% of young people will achieve the expected standard in English and maths by the end of primary school. It is entirely acceptable and entirely appropriate that we expect the same 90% to achieve an expected standard by the end of secondary school, otherwise we are saying that, as a society, we accept a 20% drop-off through secondary school. That seems odd. The idea of an assessment that we expect 90% of young people to achieve is appropriate. Of course 90% of primary school leavers are not achieving that at the moment, but it is an appropriate ambition.

The other concern we want to raise about the interim report is that some areas of the curriculum, particularly post-16—aside from that re-sit policy—need urgent attention. The main one is the defunding of applied general qualifications, typically called BTECs. We cannot wait until Becky publishes her review in the middle of the autumn term for that decision to be made.

Schools and colleges and sixth forms will be doing their open evenings in the autumn term. Last year they found it challenging, not knowing what qualifications they were able to offer the following September. We cannot be in that position again this September. We simply have to know and we cannot wait until the review reports to have an answer to that. The Government have to decide whether we are offering applied general qualifications or alternative academic qualifications, what that combination looks like and whether you can offer a combination—

Q14 Chair: I encourage a little more brevity in the answers so that we can get to all the topics we want to cover this morning.

Tom Middlehurst: This is an absolutely urgent point of the curriculum that needs to be assessed before the review.

Darren Northcott: I agree entirely on the point about AGQs. It is worth focusing on a couple of the positives of the curriculum and assessment



review. It is clear—and we touched on this point earlier—that you cannot break the connection between the curriculum you want children to experience and the recruitment and retention crisis that we have currently in our schools and colleges. That is a massive issue and that has to be addressed.

Also the review rightly picks up the extreme workload pressures under which teachers and leaders are currently working. That has to inform how we take forward reform. It does not mean that we cannot be bold if we need to be bold, but we need to make sure that we give schools and colleges the support that they need.

I have a couple of things that maybe are not criticisms, but are further questions for the review. This goes back to your point about the knowledge-rich approach and what that means and how that is translated in practice. Your question was correct, in the sense that that led to the subject overload that we have seen. Maybe it is about the interpretation of what we mean by a knowledge-rich curriculum. We can talk about a knowledge-rich curriculum, but what do you mean about skills? Teachers and leaders tend to talk, if they have a concern in that area, about application and about how education supports the application of knowledge and understanding. Again, the review picks that up and so that is a key point.

There is a point also about equity in the system. We need to think about how we define that, but clearly the review is right to recognise that we have a significant issue. We know that too often the education experience of all children and young people is determined by socioeconomic circumstances, by class, poverty, race and also still by gender. Addressing those things has to be at the heart of the reforms that we need to take forward. It is a difficult task in the current context, but we need to think hard about how we promote equity through the curriculum.

Q15 Jess Asato: Following on from that issue, when Michael Gove introduced his curriculum reforms under the coalition Government, he said the core knowledge required in each subject would benefit the poorest students the most, but over the last two decades the attainment gap affecting disadvantaged children has remained unchanged. Why is this and what improvements can the review realistically achieve in addressing this longstanding issue? I will come to Tim first.

Tim Oates: It is interesting. On average, you are right, but the data shows the gap was closing prior to Covid. Good research was done by EPI, David Laws's foundation. The gap was declining and then suddenly it began to open up a bit just before Covid. It cannot all be attributed to Covid. It is something that was occurring and we have seen Covid drive a coach and horses through what we were trying to achieve educationally.

One thing I want to pick up and link to this from the previous discussion is that it is important to look at the scripts of the kids doing maths and English and achieving grades below grade 4. At 16, they are failing to



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demonstrate attainment in the things that should have been achieved in the last couple of years of primary school. This is quite important. The system has failed to detect that this is occurring and also to look at the kind of provision that best suits those children. There is a lot of space between 11 and 16 to do something to address these gaps.

Disadvantage and low attainment don't have a universal relationship. Some schools buck the trend. This is to do with this between-school variation I am describing. Schools like Chesterton Community College in Cambridge have a mixed intake, are in top quintile of value added and have some distinctive curriculum practices. Deprived schools in Wigan worked closely with primary schools in that area and were able to introduce new practices that again dramatically changed the attainment profile and the wellbeing of children.

We have a problem in our system—a big system, a diverse system—of between-school variation. In a post-Covid world, we have seen an extraordinary opening up of these gaps and these regional differences. We desperately need to attend to them.

Jill Duffy: To follow on from that, we have seen it every year with exams since Covid. The exams highlight and they put up a mirror, if you like, to what is happening in the education system. They show regional differences and also differences between different socioeconomic groups. That is definitely there and it is a problem that, as an education system, we need to solve.

Following on from what Tim said, we are looking at what we can do to reduce some of the content in the subjects that are particularly overloaded at GCSE, which includes maths, to make sure that we are focusing on the fundamental maths skills that are needed for life and work. We look at scripts every year and we see that if you do not get a grade 4, you do not have those fundamental maths skills that you should have picked up at key stage 3, if not even primary.

We have proposed as a way forward introducing a GCSE short course that would be done in year 10. You would still do your full GCSE—all children would do that—but it would focus on the fundamental maths skills that you need for life and work. It could be recognised by employers in the way that a grade 4 in GCSE is recognised at the moment. We think spreading out that assessment a bit more and focusing on those fundamental skills will help that one third of children who are not getting a good pass in maths at the moment.

Tim mentioned there is a long gap between 11 and 16 without any assessment at the moment. Looking at some opportunities to spread the assessment so that it is not concentrated in a few weeks at age 16 would help that. That could help diagnose some of the issues that children are facing so that those can be addressed before they take their GCSEs at 16.



Tom Middlehurst: We have fought hard about the ongoing impact of Covid and what that means for disadvantage. We commissioned Tim to write a report on that, so I will give my time to Tim to talk about that, if that is okay, Chair.

Tim Oates: The Covid impact is still in the press. Teacher Tapp today reported this current cohort going into GCSE as particularly acutely affected. My own concerns are for those who were born and very young in the pandemic. Primary schools are having to tackle extraordinary problems—not only cognitive problems that these children face, but depressed language and socialisation, anxiety at being in school contexts, anxiety at being in large groups of young people and so on. If we think of those entering primary school now, this problem will go up through the education system and be with us for a long time.

There is some reassurance that young people coming through now from reception into primary who were born post-pandemic have had some restoration of the social processes that we usually associate with being a small child. But undoubtedly this significant problem marching up through the system with the years affected differently and therefore presenting school with a marching set of problems is faced by many schools, both primary and secondary. It has not been recognised fully in the policy process.

Q16 **Jess Asato:** Can the curriculum review currently realistically address any of this or do these things have to be addressed outside of a curriculum review process? I guess that was the question.

Tim Oates: The review will not be in the changes. If you think of the timeline for the implementation of the changes, these cohorts are walking through education now. They need attention right now. They need access to the content of the curriculum. These other collateral problems that they face of socialisation, depressed language and so on are presenting real challenges in accessing the curriculum.

Darren Northcott: Your question is interesting in terms of the grand claims that were made for the changes in the curriculum that the coalition Government introduced. If you opposed them, as I remember at the time, you were castigated as an enemy of promise. Experience teaches us that it is a much more complex situation than just making some changes to the curriculum and that will liberate children from the implications of poverty and disadvantage. You are right to be sceptical about those rather exaggerated claims that were made at the time.

However, the curriculum can make a difference. The Institute for Government published an interesting report recently about the link between the curriculum that is experienced—that important caveat—and disengagement, disaffection from education and also an attendance crisis, which we see at the moment. You can have a perfect curriculum, but if children are not in school to experience it, it will not make a difference to their lives.



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The curriculum makes a difference, no question about that, but there are so many other contributors to those gaps in attainment that you cannot just place all the weight and all the burden on the curriculum. You have to look at those other things. You have to look at the links between the curriculum, the attendance crisis and behaviour in schools. All those things are connected to each other, but you cannot just end poverty and disadvantage through changing the curriculum.

Chair: Thank you. I will need to move us on. I am afraid we will not get through all the topics that we need to cover. I will go to Mark.

- Q17 **Mark Sowards:** I will keep it brief. I have one short question for Tom and two follow-ups for Jill. Tom, ASCL's submission to the curriculum review said that the examination system itself was partly to blame for the attainment gap. Can you tell us more about this?

Tom Middlehurst: I have touched on this. In the interest of brevity, it is around the forgotten third. We have a system at the moment where if you do not achieve a grade 4 in English and maths, you are required to resit it endlessly until you might get to that grade 4 post-16. That does not seem like a sensible policy. We need to change that.

We also know that the examination system has a particular emphasis on certain subjects related to the accountability system. Again, that does not encourage all students to do what might let them thrive in later life. We need to look both at the accountability measures that relate to the exam system but also particularly that resit system.

- Q18 **Mark Sowards:** Thank you very much. Jill, do you agree with him?

Jill Duffy: I agree about the accountability system. I can see the thinking behind coming up with something like the EBacc measure. It is about encouraging core subjects and we want that, but the unintended consequence is that it has narrowed the curriculum for some students. The curriculum and assessment review should look at that because it is not straightforward.

In arts subjects we have seen the number of art entries hold up, whereas we have seen declines in things like drama and music. Less than 50% of state schools now enter even one student for GCSE music. We need to make sure that we encourage a curriculum and accountability measures that play to every individual's abilities, talents and strengths because that is how you get engagement in the curriculum.

- Q19 **Mark Sowards:** Absolutely. I have one final question. You mentioned drama there. Drama, food tech and other subjects are 60% coursework, with 40 to 60 hours of coursework or practical work and then 40% written exam, which is usually a one and a half hour paper. Is there any scope to review that balance, reduce the length of the exam or reduce the percentage that the examination contributes towards the final grade?



Jill Duffy: Absolutely. You have mentioned a couple, but also exams have been introduced into vocational qualifications at 16 and have been introduced into qualifications at 16 as well. This has contributed to the massive increase in exams that we see. There are absolutely opportunities to look at that and the balance of coursework and exams.

With coursework at the moment we are looking at the issue of AI, but we have to face into that. AI will not go back into its box. Students will use it. We know that NEA and coursework are important for a lot of subjects. We will have to face into that. In the future, it will be a case of not whether you used AI but how you used AI in this piece of coursework. It might be acceptable to use it, for example, for initial research, but not to pass off AI-generated coursework as your own work. That would be plagiarism and we would deal with it severely, as we do any other forms of plagiarism.

Mark Sowards: That makes sense, but I take away from that that we should look at whether that percentage should be reviewed. Thank you.

Q20 **Jess Asato:** The Secretary of State has said that building a system where more children with special educational needs and disabilities can attend mainstream schools is central, but we have heard a number of times that the current curriculum is too rigid and inflexible to meet the needs of SEND children. Is this fair? What needs to change in curriculum and assessment to make this a reality?

Darren Northcott: I have to start. That is absolutely fair. That is one test that the curriculum and assessment review will have to apply to whatever recommendations it sets out. The curriculum we have now—and we can debate its strengths and its weaknesses—was not designed for a policy agenda and a policy context where serious consideration is given to changing the proportion of children with special educational disabilities who are educated in mainstream settings.

A clear message from our members is that the curriculum is too rigid, too inflexible and does not allow for that tailoring and personalisation that you would need to meet the needs of many children with special educational needs and disabilities. One test that the curriculum and assessment review will need to apply, and then the Government in reviewing and reflecting on those recommendations, is whether the curriculum we have is fit for the purpose of meeting the needs of many children with SEND. Certainly the message from many of our members is that it is not and it would have to change to become more flexible to meet that test.

Tom Middlehurst: I will start with the first point that was made. Our current curriculum is good and works well for a lot of young people, but not for all. A lot of those are SEND pupils, as Darren has outlined. It is also worth remembering—and we have not commented on it so far—that the Bill that is currently going through Parliament will have a requirement to teach the national curriculum to all young people in all schools,



including academies and free schools. When we look at what the curriculum and assessment review recommends, we need to have in mind that every school will be required to teach that curriculum to every pupil under law. That will be an important test to think about. Will that curriculum work for every young person?

Tim Oates: SEND as a category of course covers an extraordinary spectrum of needs. It is not easy to imagine a national curriculum that could be designed of itself as a list of goals to be appropriate for each and every child in the SEND category. This is an area for adjuvant policy and guidance and it is an area for high-quality CPD for teachers and a look at the location and progression routes for the different categories of SEND young person. Early assessment is the most important. Here I am referring to assessment as a precise look at the challenges a particular individual faces. I am afraid in a system as big and diverse as ours, early and appropriate assessment is not always done. That is bad for the child, it is bad for the family and often bad for the institution and other children. But that is a practical look at the stark realities of how it is panning out for individuals.

Jill Duffy: I will focus on it from an assessment point of view because that is my expertise. We do what we can. We have a whole load of access arrangements and the intentions of those is to create a level playing field so that SEND students can take those assessments.

When I talk to parents of SEND students or to SENCOs, it is clear that a lot of what they are asking for would benefit not just SEND students but everyone. Some of the things they talk to me about are reducing that assessment at 16, having a wider range of assessment types, more coursework and having open-book exams and formula sheets, which were introduced during Covid and are still there and should still remain. A lot of the things that would make it more accessible for SEND students would benefit all students as well.

Q21 **Darren Paffey:** One comment that Jill Duffy made was that, as a country, we examine far more at the end of our compulsory schooling, but it is also true to say that we examine far more throughout our schooling with SATs, GCSEs and A-levels. We can compare that to other countries that are equally high in PISA tables, where some of them have one final exam aged 18. Thinking about the breadth and depth that leads into that, what would you consider to be the priorities for change in the curriculum and assessment at primary level? Let's go down this way in the line.

Darren Northcott: You are right that particularly towards the end of key stage 2 there seems to be a disproportionate focus on English and mathematics. That is not to say that they are not foundational subjects, they are and they are critical. This goes back to a theme we were exploring earlier. That is driven by the imperatives of the accountability regime. Thinking about that and looking at it might be a way to broaden and balance the curriculum in the primary sector.



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It is not just the fact that those assessments take place. It is the uses to which the outcomes of those assessments are put. It is set within a high-stakes context. You could plausibly run an argument that there is no problem in having a summative assessment at the end of key stage 2 as we do now, but what will you do with that information? The concern about the stakes then feeds back into behaviours in schools and incentives in respect of the breadth and balance of the curriculum. It is not just the tests themselves, it is the uses to which they are put.

Tom Middlehurst: Darren has made the exact point that I was going to make and so, in the interests of time, Chair, I will move on.

Tim Oates: Darren has made the invaluable point that there is a distinction between an assessment and the uses to which the outcomes are put. In terms of preserving measurement accuracy of qualifications and yet reducing the duration of the assessment, the reductions that Jill has described and which members of my research team have advised on that we have been discussing this afternoon would bring us into line with other jurisdictions. It is up to a one-third reduction. That is important.

Secondly, I challenge the idea that we are the most assessed system in the world. We are not. I have studied a large number of systems. The United States, for example, has high levels of standardised testing and also the implications and the outcomes of those tests felt quite hard. Finland is fascinating. It does a lot of testing in primary and a lot of testing of the lowest attainers. It tests the lower attainers because it is worried about them and wants to understand what they are struggling with. It wants to understand the misconceptions they have and their strengths and weaknesses so that it can better support them. It is important to think about the purposes of assessment. The volume is not so critical. It is the purposes and what you then do with it. If you do certain things, you can exacerbate equity and make it worse. If you do other things, you can improve it. That is important.

I want to mention the huge volume of research on stress and exams and the almost absence of research on stress and coursework. I do a lot of supervision in higher education of coursework and it is pretty stressful. It is a different sort of stress. When we look at the few studies that there have been—and we are trying to put that right now—of 16-year-olds and 18-year-olds, when the coursework goes up in volume and gets beyond a certain point, the stress kicks in. They talk about deadlines all falling at the same time and the difficulty of completing things in diverse subjects. We have to understand that any form of assessment, whether it is coursework or exams, comes with its own but different basket of stresses and pressures.

Q22 **Chair:** Before I go back to Darren, can I push on that point a little bit? Particularly for the youngest children, is it absolutely necessary always for a child to know that they are being assessed in a formal and objective way and to feel any direct pressure on them? I ask because I am not



convinced that it is necessary for children always to feel those pressures. We have a tension between the need to gather that information and the impact on the social and mental wellbeing of children who feel under that pressure at a young age.

Tim Oates: That is a great question. You can set tasks that are quite formal and allow us to make good inferences about what a child understands, knows and can do, or issues that they are suffering in terms of language development or socialisation. You can do it so they are not aware of any stress associated with the assessment. There are many clinical tests of that kind.

It is also true in the English system that anxiety is transferred from the teachers to the children. That is a big issue, particularly in the last couple of years of primary. We have picked that up strongly in research in England. It is characteristic of the system. In Finland, the teachers said, "I wish we did not have to use all these standardised tests, but we know we should because it is how we detect children at risk of falling behind". It is a good point you make.

Jill Duffy: The point I mentioned—and Tim alluded to it—is about the purpose of assessment. The purpose of assessment should be about helping the individual progress and seeing where they are at. It becomes problematic when it is also about school accountability measures. We see that with the end of key stage 2 SATs. We also see it with the GCSE. That can lead to the pressure on students and the awareness that they are in assessments. As you say, if teachers stress about that, it gets transferred to the parents. We need to be clear about the purpose of assessment and try to avoid too much assessment that is also linked to things like school accountability measures.

Q23 **Darren Paffey:** I have a quick supplementary on this to underpin. We have talked a lot about assessment, but there is the content as well in the curriculum. The interim report identifies a major problem with modern foreign languages teaching. I declare an interest: I am a former university lecturer of languages and I have my own views on what is going wrong at the start, but that is not what we are here to discuss. We may not get to all of you because of time, but what is your view on how we tackle that major problem through curriculum change?

Jill Duffy: If you look at what has happened with languages over the years, even though they are part of the EBacc measure, they have not increased in the way that say history and geography have. As always, it is a bit broader for children to say, "Why are we learning these languages?" It is about their motivation as well and deciding to do it.

One reason is we have a world where English is prevalent and so they do not have that same motivation to learn a foreign language that, if you were in other countries, you might have for learning English. There are wider issues than just education and what happens in the classroom in terms of this.



Tim Oates: Briefly, we have some of the best learning science going on in the acquisition of second languages, particularly in adult acquisition of second languages, and it is happening outside the traditional education research establishment. It is done by commercial organisations. They are capitalising on brilliant learning science, but we do not seem to have linked that to the structure and content of school language acquisition. We are missing a trick here.

There is a lot to do with social signals of the kind you describe. All the evidence is that if you want reasonable attainment fast, do it early. If you can get excitement around the acquisition of a foreign language early, it is of great benefit to children more generally and their cognitive development is enhanced. We are bringing the attention of the review to this gap between what we are doing in terms of the commercial provision of approaches to acquire a second language.

Q24 **Darren Paffey:** I will skip to the next question because Jill brought it up. The EBacc has been mentioned. ASCL has called for the scrapping of the EBacc. I wonder what the panel's view is on the advantages and the disadvantages of doing so. Maybe we will quickly start with Tom and then take any other comments from others within the time.

Tom Middlehurst: Quickly, progress 8 and attainment 8 already encourage the take-up of a majority of academic subjects. It is a more nuanced performance measure. The EBacc is a binary measure: either you have done that suite of qualifications or you have not.

When we have called for the scrapping of the EBacc, that has been our problem. Any measure that essentially you have either done or you have not will always be problematic. Progress 8 and therefore attainment 8 is more nuanced in terms of how you achieve it and that always allows for that degree of flexibility to meet the needs of different young people.

Darren Northcott: We share that view about the impact of the EBacc. It privileges certain subjects. That is the deliberate purpose that was set for it. You can see that it privileges some subjects because the objective of some of the groups associated with those subjects is to get it included in the EBacc because they see that as a way of enhancing the status of the subject. We need to think again about it. It is a broader accountability question, but the EBacc certainly has not helped to get the breadth and balance that the curriculum and assessment review is tasked with exploring and making recommendations about.

Tim Oates: Think about the EBacc as a particular sort of policy instrument. The national curriculum is one form; inspection is another; funding is another; professional development is another. At the time that the EBacc was created, of course the discourse was around the need to get more kids to take sciences for the purposes of progression and the economy. If we are not content with the drive from 6.8% doing triple science to 30% by using the EBacc, maybe we should not abandon the policy instrument but should finetune the policy instrument. It is quite a



remarkable policy instrument because you can change it and, if you do evaluation, you can finetune it and drive the system towards the desirable set of outcomes that you want.

I urge caution. It is an interesting approach. Just how effective it has been in changing behaviour is remarkable. If the behaviours are not quite right, then think about how you can fine-tune that measure to get the outcomes and the behaviours at schools that you do want. I urge caution in saying that the EBacc should be abandoned because it has done certain things to subject balance. Fine-tune the subject balance by fine-tuning the measure.

Jill Duffy: The only thing I will add to that is that the EBacc measure at the moment has stalled, so it is not working as a measure anyway because it is not promoting the take-up of those subjects in schools anymore.

Q25 Caroline Voaden: As a Committee, we recently visited Ontario to look at schools and how they work with pupils with special educational needs. They had programmes for students with varying levels of need and the focus was heavily on the preparation for adult life, travel training, food and nutrition. A wide range of vocational courses was run alongside local employers. Does the mainstream curriculum do enough here to prepare children with high levels of SEND for employability and independent living?

Darren Northcott: This goes back to a question we were exploring a little earlier, which is the degree to which the curriculum we have now allows for that. The perception within schools and colleges is that it would not. If that is the approach that we decide we want to see in respect of providing opportunities for pupils with SEND—bearing in mind Tim’s important point that that is not a homogenous group and that particular group has a wide range of need—we don’t quite have the flexibility available to institutions to do something along those lines.

That is one of the reasons why our members are concerned. If we place more of the responsibility on educating pupils with SEND in mainstream settings, we need to make sure that we have a curriculum that provides options like that and I am not sure we do currently.

Tom Middlehurst: On that point, as I said earlier, we can have a great curriculum, but there needs to be progression and qualifications for the young people who are undertaking that curriculum. We have a worry that historically some qualifications—which therefore informs the curriculum—have been seen as alternative and therefore seen as devalued. Part of the test for the review should be creating a suite of qualifications that are universally valued but are accessible to all young people.

Tim Oates: The Ontario programmes are interesting. A lot of important work is going on around the world on inclusivity of the kind that you describe, preparation for adult life and progression. That is absolutely the



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case. It is important to recognise that the 2010-14 review did not focus on those things and it did not focus on them for a couple of reasons. First, we were falling behind dramatically at that stage in mathematics and literacy. The international comparisons were not looking good, despite the massive investment in education that had been made.

Secondly, the rationale was that the ability to construct those programmes sensitively fell within something that at the time was described as school autonomy and that these general goods and these preparatory programmes are best determined by schools at school level. That was associated with the curriculum freedoms around the diversification of institutional forms of schooling that were occurring during the decade beginning in 2010.

If we feel that we need national instruments to encourage and make space for and better support the provision of those local programmes, indeed that should be in scope of the review, but it is the case that the 2010 review had a different focus, so the existing curriculum is not finely tuned to either promote or determine the content of those kinds of programmes.

Q26 Chair: Was that not a pretty major exclusion from that process? Effectively it says that some children are more important than others in terms of national guidance.

Tim Oates: No, it did not argue that some children are more important than others. It was focusing on, particularly in primary, the specification of fundamentals that all children should have access to and the importance of these in progression for all, including those who fall within the SEND population. The provision of these kinds of programmes requires a lot of sensitive curriculum development. They are brilliant programmes but they require highly sensitive local development that is well funded.

Q27 Chair: I am sorry to push on that point, but it can be argued that any area of the curriculum is hard to do, but we do it, and the Government says it is important because they regard it as important. Why is it different for life skills?

Tim Oates: It is a question of central specification. It can certainly be the case that some Governments feel that they want to take direct responsibility for the content and specification of these programmes at a level of detail. All I am saying is that the decision in 2010-14 was taken that the decisions for the form and structure and content of those kinds of programmes would fall within the school autonomy area and therefore the view was you opened up the opportunities for schools to design these programmes themselves. That was where that was. I am delineating a historical position.

Caroline Voaden: Can I come in quickly?

Chair: Yes, quickly. We are short on time. Sorry, I should let Jill come in.



Jill Duffy: As Tim said, SEND is not a homogenous group, but it is not true that there are not programmes out there. We do a curriculum and qualification that is called life and living skills. It is a national qualification and it tends to be done post-16 at the moment. Schools and colleges can look at and work with their students on programmes like that.

Q28 **Caroline Voaden:** Coming back to something that Tom said right at the beginning, if we are going to get this right for pupils with SEND, do you agree—maybe you could give a yes or no answer—that we need to look at how schools are held to account? That is what sets the curriculum. Sorry, I have lost my words. Let us move on.

Tom Middlehurst: Caroline, yes, inclusion should definitely be looked at as part of accountability, but we need to do that intelligently and what is proposed at the moment is not intelligent.

Q29 **Chair:** In Ontario we saw children with a high level of need at quite a young age learning basic tasks like sorting socks and folding shirts. One implication of children being taught things that are not only useful for them in life, but also that they can do, is that it reflected on their engagement with other areas of the curriculum. That is why I am struggling.

I understand that you are repeating and explaining what happened in the past, but that is quite difficult for us when we start to think about how schools can best serve every single child and the things that motivate and engage children within education, which is why we just wanted to focus on that for a moment or two.

We are running short on time and I have one final question before we wrap up this panel and move to the next panel of witnesses. Becky Francis's interim report states—and it is part of the Government's intention in commissioning the review—that the curriculum needs to adapt to reflect social and technological changes. It strikes us as a Committee that that will always be the case. I wondered whether keeping pace with society and technology can be built into the curriculum rather than requiring the comprehensive and perhaps slightly clunky process of a comprehensive review to be undertaken every decade or so to keep pace.

Jill Duffy: Yes, changes could be made as the curriculum goes along. You mentioned AI. GCSE in computer science was looked at recently, prompted by Ofqual, and was updated to include AI. That aside, it is important that the curriculum and assessment review looks at how we can keep the curriculum updated. This is important. Ten years is too long.

We need mechanisms in place to make sure that we keep it under review. That is not only about whether it is up to date and whether the content up to date; it is also about whether it is working. Are the parts of the curriculum working in the way that was intended? We think mechanisms do need to be put in place so that we can keep a continual watch on the curriculum.



Tim Oates: A lot of the teacher surveys also emphasise the extent to which teachers want periods of stability and value stability so that they can prepare good programmes, refine them and so on. Stability in the national curriculum is important for equity and attainment. We know that from countries like Japan. Subjects date differently. For example, in English literature you might want to change texts so that, as Jill says, all segments of society see themselves in the things that they are able to study. Gravity does not date much. In areas like physics, where you do not get fundamental paradigm changes, they do not need to be reflected in any reform.

Is a 10-year big bang done in every country? The OECD shows that on average the tendency across systems is to review the curriculum every 10 years, but an increasing number of countries are introducing a continual review process, but taking into account and being sensitive to these subject differences.

Tom Middlehurst: The word “mechanism” that Jill used is important here. We need to think about what that mechanism is. It is easy to say we should review the curriculum but what does that look like? It comes back to an earlier conversation around the purpose of education. We have put forward an idea about what that mechanism might look like. Chair, you may be relieved or quite angry to know that we have put this Committee as fairly central to that mechanism of reviewing the curriculum.

Darren Northcott: Our curriculum has a real story. In my first teaching role, I taught the first iteration of the curriculum. The idea was that it would path a learning journey for children from five to 16. I think I am right in saying—and I am happy to stand corrected—that since the national curriculum has been introduced, no child has gone through the same curriculum from the age of five to the age of 16 without it being chosen. There is an onus and an advantage to not having so many reviews. The idea of a continual review and refinement is probably worth exploring, but it is disruptive to change a curriculum that is supposed to be progressive and to build on prior learning when that changes due to various factors that mean that no child ever experiences it in its entirety.

Chair: Thank you all very much for coming to give your evidence to us this afternoon. If there were points that you did not feel you had adequate time to get across to us, please feel free to write to us after the evidence session. We welcome that very much. Thank you once again.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Charlynn Pullen, Nick Chambers, Robert West and Alex Veitch.

Q30 **Chair:** Welcome to our second session on the curriculum and assessment review. I invite all our witnesses to introduce themselves to us, please,



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starting with Alex.

Alex Veitch: Good afternoon, everybody. I am the Director of Policy and Insights at the British Chambers of Commerce.

Nick Chambers: Hello, I am the chief executive of Education and Employers Charity. I apologise in advance: I had an emergency extraction of a wisdom tooth about two hours ago and so I will make even less sense than normal.

Chair: We are sorry to hear that.

Robert West: I am the Head of Education and Skills at the CBI, sitting in the Future of Work Directorate.

Charlynn Pullen: Hi there. I am a principal research fellow at Sheffield Hallam University.

Q31 **Chair:** Thank you very much. My first question is to Alex Veitch and Robert West. What do you think the UK jobs market of the future will look like in terms of offering both high-skilled and lower-skilled employment opportunities?

Robert West: I would like to start on that. It will not surprise anyone if we say automation and AI will replace lower-skilled jobs, particularly in manufacturing, particularly in routine services as well. We have an ageing population and so the job market outlook will see the healthcare sector continue to expand and high demand for medical professionals and care professionals.

High-skilled workers, particularly in the technology and engineering fields, will be needed and roles such as AI, cybersecurity and data analysis are projected to all grow rapidly as well. The job market for both high-skilled and lower-skilled workers will evolve then because of technological advancements, demographic changes and economic shifts. Those shifts happen constantly. Five years ago we would be talking about Covid. Here we are talking about tariffs and there will be something else and something else. We need quite an adaptable system to do that. Lower-skilled workers will continue to find opportunities in the service sector, including retail and hospitality and customer services.

There will be a need for reskilling and upskilling far more than perhaps we have done in the past. If you think about our own way of buying groceries in a shop, we have gone away from the cash to the till, cash to the electric till, card to the till, to the self-service that we now do ourselves. The requirement is having people being able to reskill and upskill. The businesses that are members of the CBI are saying that reskilling and upskilling so that you can respond to these changing job requirements is the biggest game in town.

Alex Veitch: I echo much of that. Clearly rapid transformation in the skills landscape is not all about the tech, but about technical capability,



human skills, communication, adaptability and problem-solving. I am sure we will get into this, but the essential core skills that people need to learn on the job will always be important. There is a risk of reducing the number of lower-skilled roles due to automation, AI and increased tech. It was ever thus to some extent though. In high-skilled roles, there will be demand for technical expertise, digital competence, cognitive flexibility and the ability to think around different topics.

I want to draw the Committee's attention to a couple of things that we did not mention in our response that I thought were interesting. We did some work about skills of the future for a partner last year and took a sample of about 1,200 businesses. We said, "Over the next five years, what single skillset or job role would help the most to increase your productivity?" Of those that gave us a specific option, and that was about 60% of them, it fell into three buckets, which surprised me when I read them.

First was management and leadership; second was technical and digital skills; third was sales and customer engagement. What we can draw from that is it is not all about the tech—I am sure we will come back to this—and that the whole theme about management and leadership is important to productivity and growth in this country, so something that should be protected in skills policy is borne out by the evidence that we have. I will leave it there, thank you.

Q32 Caroline Voaden: The National Foundation for Education Research has said that the essential employment skills of the future are not specialist skills, but social and cognitive skills, such as communication, collaboration, problem-solving and creativity. Do you think that these skills are adequately taken account of in the current national curriculum and are they being adequately considered by the review? I will start with Charlynnne.

Charlynnne Pullen: We did some work on generic skills within the 14 to 19 curriculum across 10 jurisdictions¹, including England and Ontario as well. England is an outlier in that group because we do not include specifically generic skills or competencies, transversal skills, within our national curriculum. The only place that they are very specifically referenced are study programmes for 16 to 19-year-olds on vocational courses. Colleges have to provide non-qualification-based enrichment support as part of their study programme along with vocational qualifications and English and maths resits, if required.

In terms of setting it down within the curriculum, no, England is an outlier internationally. The other nine jurisdictions that we looked at all provided some form of generic skills within the curriculum. That does not necessarily mean that it was assessed; it does not necessarily mean there were specific teachers. In fact, it was only in Ontario that there

¹ <https://www.shu.ac.uk/sheffield-institute-education-research/projects/generic-skills-in-the-14-19-curriculum-an-international-review>



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were specific teachers of generic skills. One of the key freedoms, if you like, was teachers being able to interpret those generic skills themselves in terms of how they would teach different subjects. We talked earlier about skills within disciplines and it was the teachers who were able to do that internationally. Those was our findings.

Q33 Caroline Voaden: Does anyone else want to come in on that?

Robert West: It is true that transferable skills, as we called it in our written evidence, is very much on the agenda of a lot of our members. As Alex was talking about, communication and problem-solving skills were there. I think the honest answer is that the employers we work with certainly do not see it in terms of what is coming out from the other side. Whether it is there or not, the perception is very strong.

Five years ago, on our annual survey of members, we asked how many thought young people were work ready when they left education and 44% said they were not. On our same annual survey this year 44% said that they were not. Nothing has changed in terms of at least the perception of whether people are picking up the skills they regard as being important. It is taking into account what I said earlier about that changing landscape, that need for being adaptable and having a range of skills like problem-solving or critical thinking, or at least highlighting those within the curriculum, where they exist, is something that we are hearing there is a big demand for.

Q34 Jess Asato: You mentioned critical thinking. I was interested in the recommendation of the Commission into Countering Online Conspiracies in Schools, which is an interesting commission, which has said that it is important we embed critical thinking across the curriculum. To what extent is critical thinking important from an employer perspective?

Nick Chambers: I am not an employer, so I am not able to help.

Alex Veitch: Like I briefly touched on before, it comes through our surveys as something that is important because then you can turn people on to different tasks, regardless necessarily of having the “right” qualifications. Again, going back to the evidence we had from the specific survey about productivity, it was technical and digital skills in the round, but that included data analysis as something that came up, which can be linked to critical thinking.

More broadly, on the other end of the spectrum, there was an interesting project—you might have come across it—called Kickstart; it is a DWP project. The Chambers were involved in linking up Jobcentre Plus with employers. This is primarily people going through DWP, hence NEET young people or perhaps a little bit older. The whole work-ready thing came up strongly there. I think the programme had quite mixed reviews. There were challenges on the employer side and on the Jobcentre side.

I would encourage the Committee to see if it can find some evaluation evidence about that to inform your work, even though it is DWP, because



of the various practical measures I saw of taking people that are excluded from education and training and placing them in jobs. That is a very concrete example. There is an evaluation, but I think you might be able to find out a bit more in depth about what happened. We have some information about it too.

Robert West: I think a modern curriculum would embrace those things like critical thinking and focus on practical skills like financial literacy, project management and problem-solving, things that are directly applicable within the workplace. Also in terms of addressing a decline in students taking creative subjects like design and technology or music and art, that well-rounded skillset, again bearing in mind the fact that jobs are changing and changing faster. They will continue to change. There is still a bit of a myth in terms of careers, where I see careers advisers advising people about which career they want to do. We all know here we do not have a career now, we have a series of careers.

A modern curriculum would prepare people for the fact that throughout your working life you will have a number of different roles. What are the practical skills that will enable you to move across and work in various industries and work for various businesses?

Q35 **Caroline Voaden:** My question is to Alex and Robert. According to research comparing England against other OECD countries, it shows that England's 15 to 16-year-olds have below average levels of socioemotional skills, things like co-operation, emotional control and persistence and the greatest inequality among English 15 and 16-year-olds in these skills across the age group compared to other countries. How do you think employers respond or would respond to this finding?

Alex Veitch: I could kick off with a few thoughts on that. Thank you very much for the question. What we hear back from employers is many feel that the current secondary framework is too focused on working towards academic qualifications rather than—or perhaps to the detriment of—building other skills needed to be competent in life.

I was very interested hearing the first panel talk what the purpose of education is—those fundamental questions, which is for the specialists, not for me. It comes up all the time when we speak to employers. The problem statement is definitely there. What could we do about it? From our perspective, could there be more opportunities for applied learning through the curriculum or through the practical implementation of the curriculum, the interpretation of the curriculum by learning providers, by teachers? We think it is fundamental to promote vocational qualifications and have what we call a parity of esteem between them. I think that vocational, real-life, practical, applied knowledge would be good for young people who are that way inclined and brilliant for employers as well.

Robert West: I think the answer is they would not be surprised. That is the experience we hear back: that young people are lacking in those



particular areas. What can you do about it? It is about ensuring that there are flexible learning pathways. We still have a system that works as much on what people cannot do as well as what they can do. That shift in emphasis of saying, "These are the skills that somebody has, albeit to different levels, this is what somebody can do, albeit to different levels" is good.

We heard in the earlier session about that feeling the curriculum is too rigid. It is that ability of flexible learning and flexible ways of teaching. Not everything needs to be taught or assessed even in the same way. It does not all need to have an exam. It does not all need to be a certain length of time. It can be in shorter, bite-sized learning.

Again, to have—which is what we have been calling for—this modern education system requires that variety of approaches. You were talking earlier about modern foreign languages. A lot of people learn those in bite-sized pieces. We all have our Duolingos and ideas there. Looking at the world as it is and the way that people learn now, as opposed to trying to get them to fit into a system that has probably had its day, is where it is. In terms of how you get people to be that way, you make it a more inclusive and flexible system.

Charlynn Pullen: Can I just add a point around the variation? One of the speakers before talked about the between-school variation. One of the challenges of course is that if we do not write in some form of generic skills or support in terms of communication, collaboration and so on into the curriculum, then schools have the freedom to do essentially whatever they feel is best for their learners. You end up with variation, where the best schools are providing these things, and the worst schools—or the schools that have the most challenges and the greatest need, and maybe less finances and different challenges—end up not providing those generic skills. A way of ensuring that everyone is getting that same provision is to ensure that it is part of a national curriculum framework that everyone has to follow. That is what happens elsewhere in other countries.

Q36 **Caroline Voaden:** This question is to Charlynn. What lessons can the curriculum review apply from Sheffield University's International Review of Generic Skills in their 14 to 19 curriculum? I am sure you could say a lot on this.

Charlynn Pullen: One of the things is about that school variation. One of the lessons from some of the things that we looked at internationally, obviously you do not want to end up in a situation of policy borrowing. We need to create a policy and a curriculum that fits culturally.

One of the key issues is about the professionalism and the status of teachers. In most of these countries, generic skills is part of a national curriculum framework, but then teachers are enabled and provided with appropriate CPD, with the appropriate freedom, with the high levels of qualification to interpret that for their learners and for their subjects.



Although you are saying you have to teach generic skills within the curriculum, you are not mandating exactly how that works or prescribing exactly what that looks like and there is not necessarily an assessment. There is often some project-based learning and that is encouraged, but the teachers are provided with the autonomy to make some of those decisions.

The situation in England, because of the level of freedom that schools have, is that that freedom or autonomy often sits at school level, with teachers having to teach things in a particular way—particularly certain multi-academy trusts, if you are in a very prescriptive one that says you have to do everything in a particular way. One of the key lessons was about those different levels and the mechanisms that enable generic skills to be well-taught within the curriculum by well-qualified, high-status teachers.

Q37 **Caroline Voaden:** The review comments that many students are likely to be receiving informal support for generic skills because of the freedom for academies to depart from the national curriculum, as you said. Will the removal of that freedom through the Children's Wellbeing in Schools Bill make that more difficult, in your view?

Charlynn Pullen: If it is written into a national curriculum, there needs to be some provision of generic skills and every school needs to follow the national curriculum, then it provides an assurance that all schools have a responsibility to provide this. It reduces the variability. That is the intention, or I imagine that would be the intention.

As I said, because we looked at 14 to 19—colleges are doing this already—study programmes have a specific non-qualification aspect. There was a report on enrichment done by the Association of Colleges, NCFE and the University of Derby² that highlighted the value and the support for enrichment within colleges, but also highlighted that they would like a bit more guidance on what that looks like. Bearing that in mind, it is possible that putting generic skills in the curriculum just in general, without necessarily providing that guidance, might still not reduce the variability.

Q38 **Jess Asato:** We have already covered this a little. We know that some commentators have suggested the focus on the high level of knowledge in the curriculum has crowded out skills. What have the effects of the knowledge-rich or content-heavy approach been over the last 15 years from employers' perspectives? Can I come to Alex first?

Alex Veitch: It was interesting again listening to the debate last time about knowledge versus skills. Hopefully this will be an okay answer because it is not a direct answer, but what employers say is that they are very confused about level 3 qualifications. I do not know to what extent

²<https://www.aoc.co.uk/corporate-services/projects/the-role-of-enrichment-in-further-education-college-voices>



the spread of different types of level 3 quals has been caused by the knowledge-rich approach or not, but if we were looking for a problem to solve that would be the issue. It is not that the qualifications themselves lack merit, it is just that it is a confusing landscape. There is a discovery process the businesses have to go through to figure out what quals are out there, what is funded and what is not.

It is not for us to say which ones are right or wrong. I think one thing that did not help with the previous Government, though, was suddenly announcing defunding of some of them. FE colleges are very often in Chamber membership, and we heard this loud and clear. I suppose we might have a situation where we have a very academic route, schools in sixth forms, and then we have a vocational route, which could come across to employers as quite confusing and hard to engage with. The apprenticeship system then becomes the implementation of that, which is also viewed unfairly sometimes. It is very complicated.

I can see the outcome of education policy as being this increasingly almost divergent two tracks of much more academic, much less academic, vocational, but the vocational bit is just not working very well. I suppose the question is: is that because of this conscious policy choice at the time? It is not for me to say, but it is something that we would love to see brought back together and fixed and with much less of a two-tier perception about one being better than the other. I hope that is an okay answer but that is that is the way we see it.

Q39 Jess Asato: I am quite interested because I think you mentioned that we need to see more options for children who may not want to go into that very academic sphere. Should we be bringing more vocational education much earlier into GCSE levels or perhaps even earlier than that? I do not know, Robert, if you have a view on that.

Robert West: I would say yes, earlier than that is probably the answer. When we talk to our members about skills, we tend to identify there are three buckets they tend to fall into. One is that they have current skills needs—"I need someone with these skills now. I do not necessarily have time to train them".

You have your emerging skills needs, which are, "I do not need this today, but I will probably need it tomorrow. We are changing our fleet to electric vehicles, so we need someone who can do that". Then you have your future skills needs, which is, as it was described to me by one member, "I do not know what quantum is going to do to our business but it will do something at some point". That is the interesting bit, because can you look at those things like quantum and trace them back through the education system? Therefore, at the earliest point people are being made ready to be able to contribute when they leave the education system.

The example I often give is that in Estonia the majority of primary school children study robotics. In Estonia they have that commitment to robotics



and programming at the earliest stage, which was driven by a vision to be future ready, to be innovative and look ahead. Yes, I think vocational at the earliest stage is important. Very often the vocational aspects get picked up at the end. We still have this situation where vocational and technical is regarded as being for people who did not do well academically. We have to get rid of that.

Q40 **Manuela Perteghella:** My question is for Nick. Skills for adult life and employability are particularly important for those children with special educational needs. Do you work in a specialised way with these children?

Nick Chambers: No. Our focus is around role models for young people. In the SEND context, seeing people doing jobs is important, and that applies across the piece. The whole thing is you cannot be what you cannot see, so ours is—we have not done enough for them—to show them the pathways open to them. Sorry, I am not speaking very well with my tooth. It comes out very strongly in an interim review that we are not good at providing pathways. You have touched on it.

Whichever way we look at it, we have nearly 1 million young people currently unemployed. We have employers desperate to find people. There is something fundamentally wrong. I do not think it is the curriculum. From what I have seen so far in the interim review, it is a good piece of work. It is well-grounded, not surprisingly. It is evidence-based. I think you could have the most perfect curriculum in the world, but unless kids can see the meaning and relevance and the pathways to them, you are going to end up with kids going down certain routes. That applies to the vocational and the starting early. It is about understanding pathways for young people.

Q41 **Manuela Perteghella:** To Alex and Robert, do you focus on the abilities of this group and guiding employers on supported and inclusive employment?

Alex Veitch: We find that employers want inclusive workplaces—and we are talking about SEND in that regard now—but often lack the tools and support to make that a reality. I think that gets more challenging the smaller the business is. We would like to see better guidance and more flexible pathways, as Nick said.

A general theme for us is more comprehensive partnerships between the different players, so between employers and schools and education providers, specialist education providers. There has been a strong example of this called “local skills improvement plans” that you might have come across before, which is very simple. You link education providers and employers in a place and you get them to talk to each other. As Robert was saying, get your skills plan for the employers and match that against what colleges and schools are doing. That flow of interaction and planning could work just as well for SEND as it does for other people, because if you do not talk to each other, if you do not see



you cannot be, you will never make it happen. We think that could happen.

I also personally think there are good pockets of good practice in this space. I will just pick one, which is Network Rail. I have worked in the railways for a long time and they have a very strong apprenticeship and recruitment drive for neurodiverse people, young people. I feel that there are pockets of good practice. There is a lack of comprehensive guidance, which I think could help, but it is a very difficult situation.

Robert West: We have talked about inclusive and flexible learning pathways and how they are done. I do not know a business that does not want lots of people clamouring for the jobs that they offer. This idea of being more inclusive to enable people: we heard at the earlier session what a large group SEND is and what that covers—social disadvantages as well. We need as many people as possible being work ready and being able to take up those opportunities.

As Nick says—he is quite right—it is that experience of work. Work experience is very important within this. It is the importance of integrating work experience into the system as well, but also recognising the increasing pressure that is being put on businesses now by work experience. We have the two weeks' worth of work experience coming in at a time when there are T-level placements being asked for and apprenticeships and graduate schemes, which businesses are simply, particularly at the smaller level, under-resourced to deliver.

The answer to that is to get some genuine employer collaboration and employer engagement in there. I think businesses and employers tend to be engaged a bit like a tick list—"I talked to a group: tick, I have done that"—but how do you get businesses to provide real-world insights and opportunities in a way where they can see the return on investment? I do not mean financial; I just mean in terms of having skilled future employees lining up. That is the rationale for it, so involve businesses earlier in helping to inform what goes on within a school, within a college.

Q42 **Manuela Perteghella:** I want to now focus on the grade 4 in GCSEs, maths and English. Is that a gateway to employment? How useful is that to employers, the focus on achieving grade 4 in maths and English at GCSE level?

Robert West: I would say that at all qualification levels they lose their currency over time. Often qualifications are a stepping stone to something else. Your GCSE will get you where you are going with your A-levels or T-levels or vocationals, which will then get you either into higher education or further education or, as Nick has said, not. You drop off the list as well. It has a value. The point is: what is it useful for businesses to know? I think particularly in terms of GCSE, what is important is the literacy and numeracy, not necessarily the qualification at that level. Again, it is to what degree somebody can do this, not whether they failed it or passed that particular level.



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The thing I would add is also to do with digital skills. We have talked about the rise of digital technologies. ICT for a little while was up there with English and maths and has now faded back down again, but there is a strong need for students to develop digital literacy and technical skills as much as there is literacy in terms of English and maths.

I would say it is of some use. I think over time you need to realise this will lose its currency. What is it that the people need to know at what particular stage? What is the value of the qualification? In later life, we see people who have been doing a job for 30 years were being cut off from doing apprenticeships because they did not have the GCSE maths, which they have not required for 30 years of doing this job. That is what I mean by lost currency. If GCSE English and maths is relevant and has currency, then good, but I do not think it should be the be all and end all of whether somebody moves on or not.

Alex Veitch: My personal practical experience is in apprenticeship delivery: I was part of a group leading the apprenticeship standard for level 3 HGV driving before this role. All through the gateway process, corralling the employers to agree what a truck driver does took about two years. It was very hard and not necessarily the fault of IfATE. It was the employers trying to agree with each other and then the implementation of that. I did lots of webinars with learning providers about how you use it effectively.

The reason I am saying that is that I know—and our evidence in my job now in the Chambers backs this up—that not having that grade 4 pass at GCSE is a barrier to people taking up apprenticeships, as Robert said. That can be at jobs like driving an HGV, which is one I have experience of helping people through.

However, it is so important in any job role to have functional competency in English and maths. I think I would slightly resist the temptation to say this does not matter, but it is also true that it is a barrier. I hope this is right, but my understanding is there is now flexibility for employers to decide whether to apply the level 2 standard requirement for the adult, which is my experience of doing this. It is for adults rather than young people, so fair play.

I suppose the question would be: is it okay that we do not have any requirement on people undertaking apprenticeships doing it? Employers will have to think long and hard what else they could do if they need to have some requirement; the English and maths competencies. Maths, you must need that, but we are quite happy with that settlement for adults. There must be a way through for the education professionals to figure out how we can get over this hump.

I heard the first panel talking about endless research. It has been difficult and we agree with that, but at the same time, is there a different way of assessing it? Is there a way through it that still gets people through a decent level of competencies for future life? That is not our position, but



it is just an observation. I would not want to sit here and say it does not matter, we can just drive through it, because I do not think employers think that is right. There has to be some level of competence on it. I do not know if others on the panel agree with that.

Charlynn Pullen: On the provision for English and maths teaching, we have done a couple of CPD evaluations³ of teachers who are having to deliver the English and maths to 16 to 18-year-olds. As Tim mentioned in the previous session, one of the challenges is that learners miss something at primary school and the cumulative—particularly in maths—work throughout secondary school means that. But through some excellent CPD they have been able to find many different ways of explaining the same concepts to learners. Those things are of real benefit.

Although it is very difficult and it is of course demotivating to continue to sit an exam when you are hopefully progressing but not necessarily getting the right grade, it is true that there is increasing quality in the teaching of English and maths for 16 to 18-year-olds. It is a different kind of teaching than they get at school and one that is able to more appropriately meet their needs.

Q43 **Manuela Perteghella:** We know that a third of students do not achieve a grade 4 in English and maths by the age of 16. How would employers respond to the development of a lower qualification in literacy and numeracy for everyday life? A little bit what you were suggesting.

Robert West: I was looking at how you offer some certificate of attainment of where somebody is at, as opposed to you have passed or failed this particular aspect. What an employer wants to know is, "Where is this person at? What can this person do; what can't this person do?" That is the statement that you are looking for. Depending on what the job is, that will be different at different times, but we all know people that have qualifications that are not necessarily able to do the job because it is not based on the piece of paper. That is where we go into this broader area of character development and essential skills and that practical knowledge being just as important. If you just came up with another qualification, as I think Alex was saying earlier, adding to a confusing landscape is something to be treated with a little bit of caution.

Alex Veitch: Instinctively, another qualification is adding to a list of qualifications already. Not against it: it might be a starting point to think about all the ones that are already there and which ones should be retained and which ones should be streamlined.

Q44 **Manuela Perteghella:** We touched upon artificial intelligence and automation and its impact on jobs, often on entry-level jobs. What

³ [Evaluation of the Greater Than Network | Sheffield Hallam University](#) ; [Evaluation of Post-16 CPD by Mathematics in Education and Industry \(MEI\) | Sheffield Hallam University](#)



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priority should be given to digital skills and artificial intelligence in the curriculum review? Shall we start with Nick?

Nick Chambers: I was looking at the OECD's data on ICT, which I suppose is AI and digital, and the aspirations of young people have not changed over 20 years. It is quite interesting that despite us all talking about this, the thing has flat-levelled. It has gone up slightly for boys, but not for girls because they cannot relate to it; they cannot understand the roles in it. I think unless you can see it, you cannot believe it.

On ICT, there are lots of fantastic jobs. We have just done a report for the Northern Ireland Government of kids' aspirations where the jobs are and hardly anybody is interested in AI, cyber or ICT at all. That is where the growth is. They want to be footballers, influencers, teachers—I think there is a serious point to this—because they cannot see the relevance. I think something needs to change to show them those. Chair, you asked earlier about keeping pace, and the only way for schools to keep pace is to enable their young people to see people who do those jobs in person because how can any career system keep up with things changing so quickly?

Robert West: Nick is absolutely right again about this thing of employer engagement and work experience is crucial at the heart of it. But if you are going to have a modern curriculum and a modern education system, then digital has to be at the heart of that. Whether that is AI and digital technology, it is crucial to develop those digital literacy and technical skills.

Despite high demand and whatever is done within the school life of somebody or college life of somebody, what we do know is that continuous learning and upskilling is important. This needs to tie in some way with developing the culture of lifelong learning, which is something where we still have a system that says that once you have been educated up to the age of 21, that is that and you go off. We need to start blurring the lines much more and trying to get a culture of you are where you are, you develop where you develop, and that continuous culture of lifelong learning is something that needs to be developed. But enhanced digital skills has to be at the heart of it because that is the world that we live in now.

Charlynn Pullen: In terms of ICT-related generic skills, of the 10 jurisdictions that we looked at, five mentioned it very specifically. It is part of the computing curriculum, which I understand in the 14 to 16 phase is a foundational subject that should be delivered but is not necessarily assessed. That includes developing and applying analytical problem-solving design and computational thinking skills. There are ways that could be interpreted to include AI. There is a focus around critical skills within all of the interests around generic skills, which would relate to how digital skills might be applied more generally.



Alex Veitch: I agree with all that. What we hear from employees is that they have some people entering the workforce with very limited digital skills, ability to use fairly basic forms of tech, like Microsoft Office, to those who have a more advanced level of digital capability but perhaps do not know how to apply that in the workplace, so are not familiar with cyber-security protocols and so on.

We are tracking SME uptake of “AI” or people using AI. It went from a third to a half are using AI in some way, they think, over a year. But the way that AI is being rolled out is not quite what is said in the media. In any workplace now, all of the mainstream applications you see have AI built into them. If they do not already, they will have.

Microsoft Office has Copilot, for example. Others are available. You can choose to buy the licence to use it or not. Other applications integrate AI without an extra fee. There is a lot of talk about AI as “a separate entity”. What may happen instead is the tech that we use stays the same. The name of the software stays more or less the same, with the exception of people using ChatGPT in a functional way for their business, but it has got better and quicker and more productive.

That is the way we see it. I do not know how many jobs there will be in building large language models. That is probably the people who are doing computer science anyway. We have a little bit more of a real-world perspective, and the need for quality digital skills in computer science at school is still the same as it has been for the last 20 years. We need more of it.

Robert West: Again, we probably need to look at how things like AI are being used in skills, in things like assessments. Are there opportunities in how you do assessments to use AI that begins to go into Nick’s area of seeing people use it? If the school are not using it as part of their daily way of operating, again, why would a young person at that school learn it when they have not seen it that particular way? Again, are we being a modern enough education system, embracing the technologies that provide the models for young people to say, “Oh, there is a particular role and job now that did not exist when that teacher was at school”?

Nick Chambers: There is a point made in the interim review about more applied knowledge, and I think that is an important bit of that, showing people the relevance. I was with a group of civil servants in Birmingham—Aston, in fact—in a primary school last Thursday. We had them talking to the children, because I think starting early in primary is important. We had a lady who worked for the Department for Transport. She used AI to do with traffic lights out across the road. The kids were amazed. It is about simple things, but opening up those children’s horizons, whether you go on the whole breaking down barriers to opportunity for all, we need to do more to show kids the opportunities open to them. You can have the best curriculum in the world, but unless



those kids can see the opportunities of the curriculum, we are not going to make the progress we need to.

Q45 Jess Asato: This is to Nick. Research by your organisation suggests that young people's career aspirations at age 17 to 18 are similar to the aspirations of children age seven to eight. Are schools doing enough at primary school age to expose children to types of employment and challenge stereotypes?

Nick Chambers: I better get this right because it is our own research. All our research—we are doing work for the Canadian Government at the moment on this—around kids' aspirations is they are heavily based on their parents, their carers, where they live, who they know, and increasing social mobility. You are quite right: the aspirations of seven-year-olds are very similar to those of 17-year-olds.

On 20 May this year the OECD is going to publish its largest ever study of the career aspirations of 14 to 16-year-olds in eight countries. That is something I hope this Committee will look at because it has the biggest dataset of what kids—can you just repeat your question? Sorry, my tooth is affecting me. I lost my thought for a second.

Jess Asato: I was asking whether we should be doing more in primary school to expose children to different types of employment and to challenge stereotypes. I just wondered whether you had seen any good programmes that did help maybe in some cases tear children away from parents, carers and locality and decide to take a different track.

Nick Chambers: At the risk of being self-promotional, which I always try to avoid, the Primary Futures and Inspiring the Future, which was set up by the NHT and supported by the CBI and Chambers, that now has about 40% of primary schools getting people into schools, role models, and that is what has been replicated in Canada. Some great examples here that are now being replicated in other parts. I would like to see every young person in this country, wherever they live, gets a chance to meet role models starting at primary. Just seeing the variety, even around the room here.

Now with virtual we can be seen anywhere, but there is nothing stopping anyone connecting with anyone anywhere. Wherever you live, if you live in a coastal area, in a little place like Gorleston or somewhere like that, you will see the people around you. If you live in Kensington, you see a completely different set of people. There is nothing wrong with connecting the two on virtual, which we have done a lot of, and it enables that. I would like to see every young person given that opportunity.

Q46 Darren Paffey: Is that disconnect between the aspirations that 17 and 18-year-olds have and the likely jobs that are available to them the same across all groups or do they differ by sex, ethnicity or socioeconomic status?



Nick Chambers: The data is coming out on the 20th. I have seen the reports so I better not say too much about it, but there is no doubt that the social economic factors are one of the biggest determinants. Social economic background is probably one of the biggest determinants of your academic success still. Huge variations on social economic roles. I think it is about aspiration, isn't it?

Still some very strong gender issues. In Sweden, the top job in primary that kids aspire to for women was a hairdresser. Very surprised by that. That was followed by a teacher, which is normal. Across the OECD data, if you look globally, there are still very strong differences on gender and that is nearly in every country.

Even the ones we talk about doing brilliantly well on gender equality, they still have—you take a place like Iceland. As of recently, there are still real problems of finding enough girls to study science. Same in Finland, same in Estonia. The problems we are trying to tackle here are global issues. Yes, so gender, ethnicity, but that is more of a complex answer to that. Social economic background is hugely impactful.

Charlynn Pullen: Can I just add on aspirations? Some of the evidence using cohort studies suggests that misaligned aspirations⁴ are the most damaging. You could have relatively low aspirations but very high attainment at school and then you meet those low aspirations. Similarly, you could have very high aspirations but low attainment at school and no real understanding of how to get from where you are to where you want to be. Those are the real challenges, having the appropriate—for want of a better phrase—aspirations that match your level of attainment or level of interest or potential attainment is important.

I did some work using a cohort study looking particularly at learners who do not go to university and their aspirations⁵. That was at 13 and 14 and then the outcomes at 25. One of the key things there is that those young people aged 13 and 14 who do not end up going on to university are much more likely to want to be self-employed than those that do go to university. By 25, they are much more likely to be self-employed than the young people that go to university. Something about validating a series of different aspirations at school so that it is not just about saying everyone should follow a particular path and enabling people to have different levels of aspiration and those being equally successful is critical.

⁴ YATES, S., HARRIS, A., SABATES, R., & STAFF, J. (2011). Early Occupational Aspirations and Fractured Transitions: A Study of Entry into 'NEET' Status in the UK. *Journal of Social Policy*, 40(3), 513–534. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279410000656> ; Intifar Sadiq Chowdhury, Ben Edwards & Andrew Norton (2024) Youth education decisions and occupational misalignment and mismatch: evidence from a representative cohort study of Australian youth, *Oxford Review of Education*, 50:5, 727-747, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/03054985.2023.2282628?needAccess=true>

⁵ Presentation recording begins at 1:15:00
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhiwHIM2-8Q>



Q47 Darren Paffey: Do you know how much that research on the misaligned aspirations is feeding into how our careers advisers work? Obviously, our point here is on the curriculum and assessment review. I have long said if we tailored maths more towards, “Here is the maths you are going to need for running a small business, running your own business” rather than just being an excellent mathematician, Nobel Prize winner, we could make it more useful. But is that research feeding in, do you know? Because that sounds vital.

Charlynn Pullen: I do not know specifically. What I would say is that things like the Gatsby benchmarks⁶ make different careers and different pathways. They should make them more available, more understood by young people so that they can make those jumps. Just because you have low attainment at 14 does not mean you will always have low attainment. It does not mean you cannot meet those high aspirations. It just means you need a different pathway to get there.

What I would hope is that the careers advice is able to personalise that advice to enable people to get to a particular pathway, regardless of how long it takes. Some of the points that have been made around upskilling and reskilling suggest that this is not necessarily—although we have quite a high-stakes system at the moment, particularly in academic education—if we believe in lifelong learning, it is not necessarily a hard stop at 18, I would suggest.

Robert West: I think improved career guidance is a key outcome that we want to get, because you need to ensure those clear lines of sight, because again, building on what Nick was saying, you see what you see. Of course in relation to jobs, there are somewhere jobs and everywhere jobs, aren’t there? If you live in a particular area that is a fishing port, there are certain jobs that you would see that you would not necessarily see in Birmingham. There are other things that are digital as well.

Taking in that context of this is where we are, this is where we live, therefore this is what is aspirational and then trying to build in that guidance, it becomes a much more proactive thing. Again, it is another thing we are behind the curve on in terms of careers guidance. The careers advice young people get is basically what they would have had in the last century and probably quite a way back in that last century.

Nick Chambers: You are absolutely right on misalignment. It is what was talked about in the report about young people and parents not understanding the pathways open to them. We did a report with the CBI back with your predecessor in 2013 for Ministers about improving careers advice. One thing it said is we need to make the National Careers Service much more approachable, much more for young people and direct the money.

⁶ <https://www.gatsbybenchmarks.org.uk/>



Two years ago I was invited to another Select Committee—it's surprising I have been invited back—and I said, "If you are a constituency and you are a young person and you want to find about jobs in the green sector, go online and google it". I did it two years ago and I went to the National Careers Service and I googled careers in green. The top job is a Royal Marine. Why? Green beret. I did it yesterday and I got exactly the same answer. Since we published the report in 2013, we have had an entire group of people who started primary school who are about to finish and we still, in my view, are not much further on.

Part of it is getting people in. Organisations have been brilliant, but we need to do lots more, particularly to counter all the social media. We need much more investment generally on showing kids what is possible than we have at the moment.

Robert West: A point we made as part of that work in 2014 when we were at the Education Committee: we said that transferring responsibility of careers guidance to schools would lead to a different provision and quality of careers advice around that. I think that has been shown to be the case. We have a bit of a postcode lottery going on in terms of careers than we probably have in terms of curriculum.

Q48 Caroline Voaden: Do you see any discrepancy between private schools and state schools with what they are exposed to: speech days, visitors and people coming or is that evening out now? Because I know a lot of work has been done in the state sector about bringing more people into school to talk about careers.

Nick Chambers: It is about social capital, isn't it? It is huge. I was a design and technology teacher in a state school up in Lancashire and I moved to St Paul's School in London. The disparity then was massive and it still is because it is about the people they know, the connections and the ability to find work experience. Has the divide changed? It has got slightly better. We know with some of the programmes like Inspiring the Future and Speakers for Schools things have improved, but we need to go a lot further than we have done.

If you go to St Paul's, they will have a whole room of dedicated advice on different careers, different networks and tutors. If you want to go to an American university, it will have someone who can help you. I think your average—not "average", that is the wrong word. A lot of state schools just need a bit of help and need the support. They do not want to keep being told they are not doing well enough because most are doing brilliantly. But they need help and they need easy access to people to give the same access that some of those independent schools have, by right.

Chair: Thank you very much. That brings us to the end of our evidence session for today. I say the same to you as I did to the previous panel: if there were points that you did not feel you had time to get across to us adequately in this session, because we have been quite time constrained,



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please do write to us afterwards. We would welcome that very much. It has been very interesting to hear from all of you today. Thank you very much.