



**The Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP**  
Minister for Schools

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Rt. Hon the Lord Johnson of Marylebone  
House of Lords  
London  
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8 August 2023

Dear Jo

Thank you for inviting me to give evidence to the Education for 11-16 Year Olds Committee on 13 July. Following that oral evidence session, you have forwarded a few questions of interest to the committee, to which this letter responds. I also wanted to add some information to clarify elements of the discussion, which I hope you will consider as part of the evidence.

### **Follow up questions**

**Following the move to a 9-1 grading system, why was a pass boundary introduced, resulting in those who achieve grades 1 to 3 effectively “failing”?**

The new 9-1 grading scale, introduced from 2017, was designed to signal that the standard of the qualifications had changed and allow greater differentiation of performance at the top end. There were three key “anchor points” between the old and new scales, so that a grade 4 is equivalent to the former grade C. All grades from 1 represent a pass grade.

**Would allowing alternative qualifications to GCSEs in English and maths (such as Functional Skills Level 2) to be taken at key stage 4 result in more pupils achieving the expected standard in literacy and numeracy?**

The Department reformed GCSEs and A levels from 2011 to ensure that young people had access to qualifications that set expectations that match those in the highest performing countries. The great majority of pupils at KS4 should be entered for GCSEs in English and mathematics.

The Department has put in place a strong system to support pupils who do not gain a grade 4. Pupils without a GCSE 4+ in English or maths must continue to study in post-16 education and training and can also sit a Functional Skills qualification (if they receive a GCSE grade 2 or below). We encourage providers to work with pupils on the most appropriate qualification for them and the timing of assessments to give them the best opportunity to improve their numeracy and literacy. The Department is also reviewing post-16 options to ensure all students can progress to high quality

study pathways.

**Is the Department for Education planning to include Natural History GCSE in the EBacc as a humanity?**

There are no plans to amend, or add to, the subjects that make up the English Baccalaureate (EBacc). The EBacc should be studied as part of a school's broad and balanced curriculum, and it is important that every child is given the opportunity to study other subjects alongside it, should they wish to.

**Evidence to the committee has called for the introduction of new digital skills qualifications at key stage 4, including potentially an applied computing GCSE. Do you support this approach and, if not, how will the Government ensure that the digital skills of all pupils are sufficiently developed by the end of key stage 4?**

The Department has made a range of high quality qualifications available to students at Key Stage 4 that can equip them with the foundational knowledge and skills they need to access further education, and employment, in digital fields. The computer science GCSE covers a broad range of academic knowledge, such as understanding digital systems, the purposes and functions of software, cyber security, and the impacts of digital technology, alongside the development of programming skills. Entries to the GCSE have risen significantly since its introduction, with provisional 2022/23 entry data suggesting a strong increase of over 11% compared to the last academic year.

In addition, there are other high quality vocational and technical qualifications that are also counted within the Key Stage 4 performance tables, which provide alternative pathways towards digital careers. This includes a new vocational award in ICT, which covers how information technology is used in a range of contexts and includes knowledge of databases and spreadsheets.

The computing curriculum, introduced in 2014, ensures that pupils become digitally literate so that they are able to use, express themselves and develop their ideas through information and communication technology, at a level suitable for the future workplace and as active participants in a digital world. The computing curriculum is compulsory for local authority maintained schools across Key Stages 1 to 4, and academies and free schools must teach a broad and balanced curriculum.

To support the teaching of computing and improve participation in the computer science GCSE and A level, the Department has invested over £100 million in the National Centre for Computing Education (NCCE). To date, the NCCE has provided subject knowledge training to over 8,000 teachers, equipping them with the subject expertise they need to teach the computer science GCSE. The NCCE also provides the free Teach Computing Curriculum, consisting of over 500 hours of high quality teaching resources.

## **Points of clarification**

1. In response to question 145, when discussing the debate about the inclusion of religious education (RE) in the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), I said that “RE is compulsory right through to 16”.
  - a. I want to clarify that RE is, in fact, compulsory for all pupils in each Key Stage, up to the age of 18, unless withdrawn. I would be grateful if my statement in the transcript could therefore be corrected to “RE is compulsory right through to 18, unless withdrawn, in state-funded schools”.
2. In response to question 145, I stated that ‘Alison Wolf is a great exponent of vocational education and wants the highest-quality vocational qualifications to be taken by young people. We asked her to conduct a review, if you remember, in 2011. She removed a whole swathe—thousands, actually—of vocational qualifications pre 16 because of their low market value. The ones that she kept in are very high value and command the respect of the labour market.’ Similarly, in response to question 151, I stated that ‘We have ensured that when a young person takes a technical or vocational subject before the age of 16, it will be of a high quality, whether it is level 1, 2 or 3. That is what Alison Wolf did in her review.’
  - a. I want to clarify that as part of her review Alison Wolf made several recommendations to improve the landscape of vocational qualifications pre-16. In response to this review, the Department introduced a rigorous new approvals process for vocational qualifications to provide greater confidence in these qualifications. This led to the fall in vocational qualifications approved for inclusion in performance tables I described above. I would therefore be grateful if my statements in the transcript could be corrected to: “On the back of the review’s recommendations, DfE removed a whole swathe – thousands actually – of vocational qualifications pre 16...”, “The ones that the department kept in are very high value...” and “That is what we did following Alison Wolf’s review”.
3. In response to question 146 about the inclusion of the proportion of students progressing to a Russell Group university as a performance measure, and the disincentives on schools on sending their best pupils to non-Russell Group universities, I explained that the term Russell Group is generally understood as a reference to high-tariff universities.
  - a. I want to add that we also include as a performance measure the proportion of students progressing to universities that are in the top third based on UCAS tariff, as well as reporting on the proportion progressing to Russell Group universities.
4. In response to question 149, I stated, ‘we have introduced a national centre of excellence for teaching computing.’
  - a. I was referring to the National Centre of Computing Education and would therefore be grateful if my statement in the transcript could be corrected to ‘we have introduced a National Centre for Computing Education.’

5. In response to question 149, I stated, with regard to computer science GCSE, that 'In 2013, 4,000 young people took it. By 2022, that had increased to 79,000.'
  - a. I want to clarify that there were over 4,000 entries to the GCSE in 2013 and nearly 78,500 in 2022. I would therefore like to correct my statement to say 'In 2013, just over 4,000 young people took it. By 2022, that had increased to nearly 78,500.'
6. In response to question 149, I stated with regard to GCSE entries that, "They had risen by 12% in one year to over 88,000, so we are seeing, year on year, very significant increases in the number of young people taking computer science".
  - a. I want to clarify that, prior to this year's significant increase in entries, which was 11.9%, there had been a gradual increase in the number of young people taking computer science since 2020, following a slight decline in 2020 of 1.7%. I would therefore like to correct my statement to 'They had risen by 12% in one year to over 88,000, so we are seeing a very significant increase in the number of young people taking computer science'.
7. In response to question 149, I stated 'We were worried in opposition that we were declining in the international PISA league tables. We went from seventh in reading in the year 2000 down to 17th and then down to 25th by 2009. Since then, we have been rising in international league tables and are now fourth in the world in the reading ability of our nine year-olds, out of 43 countries that tested children of the same age.'
  - a. I want to clarify that England's 2000 and 2003 PISA results have been found to be statistically unreliable because of low school and pupil response rates and can therefore not be compared to subsequent studies. I would also like to clarify that the PIRLS test of reading covers year 5 students who are 9 or 10 years old and is separate from PISA. I would therefore like to correct my statement to 'We were worried in opposition that we were declining in the international PISA league tables. We went from 17<sup>th</sup> in reading in 2006 down to 25<sup>th</sup> in 2009. Since then, we have been rising in international league tables, including PIRLS, where we are now fourth for the reading ability of our year 5 pupils (nine and ten-year-olds), out of 43 countries that tested children of the same age.'
8. In response to question 149, I stated, 'we were the first country in the G20 to introduce a coding curriculum and a computer science curriculum' and then later stated 'we were one of the first countries in the G20 to do this.'
  - a. I want to clarify that we were one of the first G20 countries to introduce coding into the primary curriculum. I would be grateful if my statement in the transcript could therefore be corrected to: 'We were one of the first countries in the G20 to introduce coding into the curriculum through the subject of computing'.
9. In response to question 150 on Progress 8. My official, Juliet Chua, indicated that 'If the score is above zero, that school is achieving higher than equivalent schools in moving that pupil from their key stage 4 outcomes to where they are at 16'.

- a. I want to clarify that Progress 8 measures the academic progress pupils make between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4. The transcript could therefore be corrected to 'If the score is above zero, that school is achieving higher than equivalent schools in moving that pupil from their key stage 2 outcomes to where they are at 16'.

10. On question 152 about the Cultural Education Plan and the associated Expert Advisory Panel chaired by Baroness Bull. This work was incorrectly referred to as a review of cultural education by Baroness Bull, and I then inadvertently referred to it as a 'cultural curriculum review'. For clarity:

- a. The Cultural Education Plan will be a Government plan, led by the Department for Education and Department for Culture, Media and Sport. The Panel established in early July and chaired by Baroness Bull is advisory in its capacity, and the role of the Panel is to provide expert input into the Government's development of the Cultural Education Plan. The remit of the Panel and scope of the Plan is set out in the Terms of Reference<sup>1</sup>. I would therefore recommend my reference to 'cultural curriculum review' is corrected to 'Cultural Education Plan'.

Again, thank you for inviting me to give evidence to the committee.

Yours sincerely,



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<sup>1</sup> [Cultural Education Plan Expert Advisory Panel Terms of Reference \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)