

Pearson submission on Curriculum and Assessment Review to Education Select Committee (May 2025)

Effecting meaningful change

Pearson is pleased to have contributed to the Government's call for evidence as part of the Curriculum and Assessment Review, and to have joined the voices of other sector experts, educators, parents/carers and learners in sharing our research, experience and recommendations with the panel.

Since the Review was announced and the interim report published, it's been encouraging to see much consistency and agreement across these voices – highlighting where there are opportunities to effect meaningful change. As the world's lifelong learning company and a leading UK awarding organisation, our submission and recommendations draw on our experience, research and wide-ranging collaboration with educators, students and families, as well as sector experts.

In this short note, we provide the Committee with our thoughts on the Interim Report and set out our recommendations for how meaningful change can be brought about.

1. The Curriculum and Assessment Review interim report

The Curriculum and Assessment Review interim report published in March 2025 is an important step towards better preparing young people for the future. We are pleased to see recognition of many of the key areas that need to be addressed and encourage the government to go further during the next stage of the review in order to ensure high standards for all and drive the meaningful change young people deserve.

In particular, we are pleased to see support for core aspects of our recommendations (as set out in annex A, below), including:

- recognition that other level 3 qualifications should exist alongside T Levels and A levels to ensure provision meets the needs of all 16–19 learners
- a phased programme of reform by subject, which considers volume of content and assessment formats, with a structured timeline to ensure any change is manageable for the sector
- commitment to ensuring the assessment system captures the strengths of every young person, with the right balance of assessment methods, while maintaining the important role of examinations.

However, as the Curriculum and Assessment Review progresses, we believe it's critical that there's further emphasis on tackling the issues and seizing the opportunities that will have the biggest impact for teachers and learners – both now and into the future. In particular:

- Going further to address the cycle of resit failure and fatigue for thousands of post-16 learners in GCSE English and maths. We are calling for a rethink of how post-16 English and maths students achieve success, ending the requirement to resit the same content studied at school. Our well-supported [short, medium and long-term recommendations](#) can start making a difference from day one and build towards greater reform. See section 2 below for more detail.
- While we welcome the report's recognition that other level 3 qualifications should exist alongside T Levels and A levels, as well as the government changes to the level 3 reforms announced in December, we would like to see an urgent review of the decision to remove larger level 3 qualifications in critical areas such as Digital, Science, Health and Social Care, Engineering and Creatives.
- Applying the form of assessment most valid and authentic to the subject curriculum and to the fundamentals of what students and employers need. Alongside this, supporting a better understanding of the impact the existing assessment system has on learners facing disadvantage, and the use of technology in assessment, which could deliver benefits for both students and institutions. This includes providing onscreen assessment as a choice in subjects that lend themselves to this mode, paving the way for a longer-term shift towards more adaptive, 'digital first', flexible assessment models. See section 2 below for more detail.
- As part of the detailed subject work in the next phase of the review, progressing [urgent reform in GCSE English Literature and Language](#) in particular, to ensure these critical subjects are more relevant for today's world. By including a broader range of texts, more explicit inclusion of spoken language knowledge and skills, and new approaches to developing writing skills, GCSE English can better prepare students to be successful in their future lives. See section 2 below for more detail.
- Carefully considering a wide range of ways to best nurture creativity and creative skills in students. In our recent [‘Cultivating a Creative Curriculum’ report](#), we share a broad set of recommendations that could have a swift impact in classrooms and ensure students benefit more quickly from enhanced creativity in schools.

It is also clear from the interim report's focus on the importance of digital innovation that there is a critical need for investment in educational technology as a foundation for the review's recommendations and to enable much of what is being proposed. [Our recent](#)

[research with Cebr](#) showed the educational and economic benefits of investing in technology in schools, and without a clear commitment to technology investment we risk falling behind in providing our young people with the skills necessary to thrive in a modern workforce.

As the review is finalised, we encourage the UK government to be ambitious in its approach towards the key issues that need to be addressed, while recognising the strengths of the existing system, the hard work of those within it, and the need to ensure proposals are realistic and workable. There is much still to do, and as we move through the weeks and months ahead, we look forward to working with educators, partners, sector experts – and of course learners – to bring our review recommendations to life.

2. Proposed solutions in key areas

Resit rethink: post-16 English and maths

Thousands of post-16 learners are caught in a cycle of resit failure and fatigue for GCSE English and maths, chasing a Grade 4 that is supposed to signal the level of English language and mathematical skills they need to be successful in future study or the workplace. We believe a rethink is needed of how post-16 English and maths students achieve success, ending the requirement to re-sit exactly the same content studied at school, in exactly the same way.

We believe that changes should be made to develop trials of post-16 specific GCSEs immediately, rather than continuing with a problematic resit cycle. Qualification reform rightly takes time in order to enable full consultation, to action appropriate changes, and to allow school leaders and subject teachers to prepare and plan for the incoming changes. However, a trial of a post-16 specific GCSE – for both maths and English – could be rooted in the existing criteria and content. Moreover, in order to tackle exam anxiety and increase attendance, and to reflect the difference in teaching context and wider study of the post-16 cohort, it should be focused on reducing the exam burden. This would not only improve the current situation but also provide valuable and validated input into the future direction.

The immediate changes should also address challenges relating to motivation and engagement, and better recognise students' successes:

- For maths, we propose a trial of a unitised approach, where students are able to bank scores from units they have re-taken.
- For English, we propose a trial of amended subject content focusing on the most relevant content, and reducing repetition, assessed via two shorter exams.

In the longer term, we believe that a new GCSE is needed – one that is designed with post-16 students in mind from the outset. New post-16 GCSEs for maths and English should feel relevant to students and equip them with the essential skills for their further study and

work. Our proposed trialing of alternative post-16 approaches linked to the current GCSE subject criteria could offer valuable insights into how the content, delivery and assessment of these future post-16 specific GCSEs could operate. We also believe that alternative methods for awarding outcomes for a post-16 GCSE should be explored. There is a need with post-16 students to show more explicitly the level of literacy and numeracy that has been achieved, in order to support applications for further study and the workplace. It is important that the post-16 GCSE qualification has equal status and value, and that a post-16 GCSE grade indicates a comparable level of performance. We believe one such approach could be using grade-aligned criteria.

English to 16

English in secondary school is no longer the engaging, innovative and inclusive subject it truly can be, for teachers or for students. Only 1 in 5 secondary teachers of English say that the current GCSE is enjoyable to teach, with more than half saying it focuses on the wrong content and even more (68%) saying that it does not capture students' English skills (Teacher Tapp survey of 806 English teachers, Feb 2025).

English A levels are in significant decline, with entries falling over a third in a decade, with much of the reason for this being attributed to the lack of inspiration and motivation for further study that the GCSE provides.

English is therefore in need of urgent reform. This is necessary both to meet the needs of the future workforce (where skills such as analytical and creative thinking are projected to become increasingly necessary) and to turn around the decline in related areas, such as reading for pleasure. According to the National Literacy Trust's 2024 Annual Literacy Survey reading for pleasure is at its lowest level in two decades among children and young people, with the largest decline seen in the secondary age group. As highlighted by the Department for Education's own 2012 report, higher levels of reading for pleasure have been shown to improve reading attainment and writing ability, text comprehension and grammar, and breadth of vocabulary, as well as being reported as more important for children's educational success than their family's socio-economic status.

The focus on written texts, and the introduction of the spoken language endorsement in GCSE English Language in 2015, has led to a marginalisation of speaking as a skill, and a source of study within the English curriculum, despite its well recognised benefits in developing critical thinking and fostering well-being and confidence (Voice 21).

GCSE English reform offers an opportunity to inspire a generation of students to develop a love of reading, build their confidence and communication capabilities, and develop the skills which will ensure their future success in the workplace.

A reformed English GCSE curriculum should include:

- a broader range of literary text types, to include graphic novels and literary non-fiction alongside poetry, prose and drama
- a change to the prescribed time periods, to allow for the contemporary alongside the canonical, with a requirement for more diverse content
- a wider range of non-literary texts, to include multimodal, digital and media texts in both written and spoken modes – to enable students to build their critical interpretation skills in a world of fake news and ‘alternative facts’
- re-balancing the focus on written and spoken English with explicit teaching of, and recognition for, spoken language knowledge and skills
- a changed approach to developing writing skills (drafting, crafting and editing), to encourage greater focus on writing in authentic contexts
- removal of undue repetition and excessive content and/or assessment
- increased opportunities for creative engagement.

Digital in curriculum and assessment

The integration of Digital and AI into the curriculum offers transformative potential for teaching and learning, and are both essential to support students and teachers in an increasingly digital and AI-enabled world.

Curricula should support understanding of AI and digital solutions and applications, with clear underpinning frameworks that can be used in a cross-curricula capacity to plan and track learning opportunities in a variety of subject contexts. Students must be equipped with the skills they need to operate in an increasingly digital world. Alongside core operational and technical skills, they must also develop communication and information literacy, and be able to engage responsibly and effectively with AI. We believe these skills should be embedded across the entire curriculum.

Alongside skill-building, the curricula – including those employing any form of AI – should be explainable to teachers, students, and parents and based on the ethical use of data and an understanding of appropriate safeguarding

Within a sufficiently safeguarded environment, data insights from the learner journey across teaching, learning, and assessment provide opportunities to empower teachers to positively impact educational outcomes, while driving the personalisation of learning and assessment experiences tailored to individual needs, creating opportunities to improve engagement and attainment.

To successfully deliver the above, it is essential that schools and colleges are equipped to make effective use of digital in their teaching, learning and assessment. They need access to adequate infrastructure, including a sufficient number of devices and reliable broadband connectivity. Leadership and teaching staff also need training and guidance on how to use digital most effectively. Our research report, *The case for investment in digital transformation in schools*, created in partnership with Cebr, details the investment needed to ensure all schools are able to harness the full potential of digital technology.

3. Supporting Pearson links

- [Pearson Curriculum and Assessment Review - home page](#)
- [Pearson position on post-16 English and Maths resits](#)
- [Pearson: "Let's talk English"](#)
- [The case for investment in digital transformation in schools: A Cebr report for Pearson](#)
- [Pearson: Creating a creative curriculum](#)

Annex A

Pearson submission to Curriculum and Assessment Review in summary

Headline recommendations

- Embrace and embed the principle that the curriculum comes first and informs the assessment approach – rather than the other way round.
- Commit to a structured programme of review for the curriculum and assessment of each subject (qualification), with update or reform where it's needed. We believe that this structured review should take place in a planned manner (e.g. every seven years or sooner if needed – as may be the case for technical and vocational qualifications in particular). We also recommend that this review cadence makes sure content is up to date for the nature and progression purpose of the subject. This commitment will improve the currency of curriculum and assessment, ensuring areas that experience extraordinary change such as AI, the media/ fake news, the environment, and population demographics can be addressed more quickly. We recommend that this programme is carried out subject by subject, rather than by addressing all subjects at the same time. This approach will give a structured timeline and ensure the implementation of changes is manageable for the sector. Alongside this, it will also be important to look at current mechanisms for reviewing and approving awarding organisations' proposals for improvements and innovation. This is so that these processes can be made swifter to ensure the benefits reach schools, colleges and students more quickly. To enable a more data and evidence-led approach, we also believe in providing greater flexibility and space for awarding organisations to test and pilot assessment models before assessment objective requirements are set.
- Balance carefully what is right for a particular subject with any higher-level design principles (for example, features for a full suite of GCSEs or Tech Awards). We believe this will improve the authenticity of subject curricula and assessments (i.e. fit of content and assessment with the nature of the subject), to better support students' engagement and experiences.
- Embrace technology to play a stronger role in both curriculum and assessment. We believe this will facilitate meaningful change, including a shift to onscreen assessment as an option in subjects that lend themselves to this, and paving the way for a longer-term shift towards more adaptive, 'digital-first' flexible assessment models.

A closer look: specific areas of focus

Underpinning these overarching recommendations, we've identified specific areas for improvement that we believe will best support educational progress for children and young people.

14–16 curriculum

Recommendations:

- Rethink the purpose of subject curricula to make sure young people have strong foundations across a wide range of subjects. We believe this will help them to understand where their passions and interests lie, and ultimately better prepare them for life.
- Support breadth at Key Stage 3 and protect this time as an opportunity for students to experience subjects from specialist teachers ahead of making informed subject choices at Key Stage 4.
- Develop a broader skills passport based on a combination of teacher and external assessment, to aid better transition from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3. Pilot this with an initial project focused on English and maths SATs outcomes, but which moves beyond levels to a more detailed report. The goal of the passport should be to ensure more detailed knowledge of incoming students for Key Stage 3 teachers, and work should be started to decide on the most effective range of data to share. These data should be drawn from across a broad range of areas, including not only academic but also potentially life skills and/or social emotional skills.
- Address over-burdened GCSE curricula and reduce excessive content to help free up curriculum space and time. In particular, we believe there are opportunities to reduce excessive content in GCSE English, GCSE Sciences, GCSE Geography, GCSE History, GCSE Maths, and GCSE Design and Technology.
- Encourage the development of creative skills by reviewing and improving the curricula of creative subjects and some core subjects. More detail on our recommendations here can be found in our [*Cultivating a Creative Curriculum Report*](#).
- Continue to build the offer and awareness of 14–16 vocational pathways available in schools and colleges, which provide a route for young learners who value a hands-on, practical approach. It is important not to overlook 14–16 vocational pathways in colleges, which can provide meaningful opportunities to thrive for those not flourishing in mainstream education.
- Don't apply accountability measures alone to drive change. Our research identifies specific unintended consequences here for students and the need for a more multi-faceted approach to drive a broader and more balanced curriculum.

English and maths to 16

Recommendations:

- Reform GCSE English as a priority. Our research and insights from teachers and learners highlight ongoing challenges with the current GCSE English curriculum – and by association, the related curriculum at Key Stage 4 and earlier – which neither prepare students well for future study in the English disciplines nor for the workplace. Proposed solutions are:
 - a broader range of literary and non-literary text types and time periods
 - re-balancing the focus on both written and spoken English
 - a changed approach to developing writing skills, and increased opportunities for creative engagement.

See section 2 above for more detail on proposed solutions.

- Review the current maths curriculum at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 with a focus on:
 - foundational content that paves the way for higher-order mathematics knowledge and skills or general mathematics and data literacy that all students need for their future lives and careers
 - the maths knowledge and skills needed by employers now and to serve jobs in the future, and the higher-order knowledge and skills valued for higher education.
- Explore the potential for a separate numeracy strand in GCSE Maths with a test-when ready model.

Post-16 English and maths

Recommendations:

- Make changes now to develop trials of post-16 GCSEs. These trials should:
 - be rooted in the existing content and criteria
 - focus on addressing key challenges for post-16 students, particularly reducing exam anxiety and increasing motivation and engagement
 - reflect the difference in context for the post-16 cohort.
- In the longer term, we believe that a new GCSE is needed – one that is designed with post-16 students in mind from the outset. This should:
 - build on what we have learned from trialling
 - equip students with the skills they most need for future study and work
 - take an approach to awarding outcomes that ensures parity with GCSE at 16 but provides more detail on literacy and numeracy levels achieved to support with onward progression.

See section 2 above for more detail on proposed solutions.

16–19 level 3 qualification pathways

Recommendations:

- Ensure stability for 16–19 vocational and technical pathways at level 3 and that suitable diverse and progressive level 3 vocational provision continues to be available alongside T Levels and A levels. The understanding and articulation of the different purposes of T Levels, A levels, and level 3 vocational qualifications (such as BTEC Nationals) is critical in determining the range of level 3 qualifications that should be available to students to enable their progression to higher education and employment.
- Bring A level content up to date and reduce the content burden, thereby leaving space for developing creative skills and subject depth.
- Change the current AS model to encourage Year 12 students to take another subject for a further year.
- Continue to allow for the development of vocational qualifications equivalent to 1.5 A levels in the reformed level 3 landscape.
- Review the proposed policy to allow students to take only one vocational qualification equivalent to one A level within a study programme.
- Evolve the design and delivery of T Levels with specific improvements to make them work for more learners including by:
 - better aligning the design of the content with the purpose of ‘occupational entry competence’
 - reviewing the concept of a common core across T Level routes
 - removing the duplication of the content between core and occupational specialisms
 - introducing new flexibility for industry placements to support providers in overcoming the challenge of scaling T Level delivery
 - removing T Level specialisms that have low entries and are not appropriate for delivery in full-time classroom-based settings, for example Dental Nursing.
- Create a more dynamic and data-driven approach to the design and development of occupational standards upon which all technical qualifications, including T Levels, are based. This needs to bring together quantitative and qualitative data techniques to allow for the identification of a relatively stable set of knowledge, skills and behaviours that would form the core of a standard and the identification of newly trending and emerging skills.

16–19 level 2 and below vocational qualification pathways

Recommendations:

- Simplify the level 2 landscape by making qualifications pathways broader. Two broad qualification categories are needed to bring clarity and flexibility here and to allow students to alter their progression route if their career aspirations change:
 - Qualifications enabling progression to further study at level 3, whether technical or vocational.
 - Qualifications, including licence to practise qualifications, enabling direct progression to employment or further work-based learning, such as apprenticeships.
- Critically review the T Level Foundation Year, given that few students taking it currently progress to the T Level.
- Clarify the level 1 landscape and provide pathways that would help learners to progress to level 2 via a technical or vocational pathway alongside the current offer of two groups of pre-technical qualifications at level 1 and the single group at entry level. Further work also needs to be done to design and develop the right provision to support employability and skills for independent living at these levels.

Assessment

Recommendations:

- Implement a more balanced approach to both academic and vocational assessment, and reduce the assessment and exam burden for students:
 - Ensure exams continue to have a role, but as part of a more balanced system that includes methods such as continuous assessment.
 - Reduce the volume of exam-based assessments that a student will face and facilitate a shift to more subject and purpose-specific assessment methods.
- Move away from the expectation that ‘anything that can be assessed by an exam should be’, towards applying the form of assessment most valid and authentic to the subject curriculum and to the fundamentals of what students and employers need from the assessment.
- Embrace technology to play a stronger role in both curriculum and assessment, and in doing so, prioritise a shift to onscreen assessment as an option in subjects that lend themselves to this mode. We believe this will then pave the way for a longer-term shift towards more adaptive, flexible and ‘digital first’ assessment models.
- Consider alternative approaches to setting and maintaining standards for secondary qualifications to address some of the challenges, perceptions and impacts of the current approach. Despite the best efforts of Ofqual and awarding organisations to communicate the mechanics and nuances of the approach, there remains significant concern from many stakeholders – including teachers, students,

parents/carers and unions – about transparency and fairness of the system. Other jurisdictions employ greater use of psychometrics – as does the approach used by STA for Key Stage 2 tests – and there is an opportunity to consider such approaches in the context of qualifications in England. A shift in this direction has the potential to pave the way for more digital and adaptive forms of assessment (including more flexibility in the scheduling of assessments across multiple test versions and windows), with a further opportunity to build public trust and confidence in an approach that is perceived as fairer and more transparent.