

## NCFE – Written evidence (EDU0104)

NCFE is an educational charity and leader in vocational and technical learning. We combine over 170 years of education experience with deep insight, working with a network of expert collaborators to galvanise the technical and vocational education sector around the greatest learning needs and to shape smarter solutions.

We work with over 1,500 schools in the UK every year to support them with delivering high quality qualifications to young people.

We have 11 V Cert technical awards approved for performance tables, making up 23% of all technical awards available to learners at KS4. In 2022/23, we supported almost 900 schools with delivering V Cert technical awards to over 32,000 KS4 pupils.

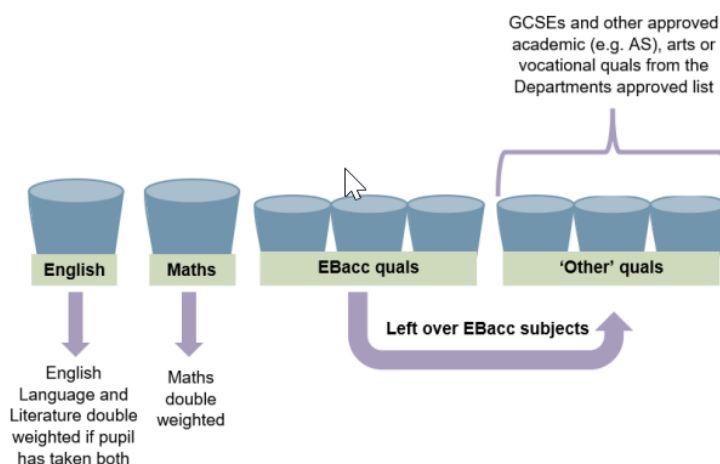
We welcome this opportunity to comment on the Lords Education for 11–16 Year Olds Committee inquiry into education for 11- to 16-year-olds with reference to the skills necessary for the digital and green economy.

### What are the barriers to more students taking Technical Awards at 14-16 and how can these be overcome?

A huge barrier to students taking technical awards at key stage 4 (KS4) is the schools' appetite to run these qualifications – largely due to the KS4 curriculum being built around Progress 8:

- Schools are under pressure to deliver against the Progress 8 metric which over-emphasises academic achievement, narrowing the curriculum and pushing technical qualifications down the priority list.

Figure 1: Progress 8 and Attainment 8 buckets



- The maximum grade available to vocational learners studying technical awards is 8.5 (vs. GCSE 9), reducing the overall performance point potential for these subjects over academic alternatives. This in turn

negatively affects perception of technical education as a “lesser” alternative to the academic curriculum, despite similarities in assessments:

- **Non-exam assessments (NEA):** although weightings differ (in GCSEs this counts towards a maximum of 40% of the overall grade, whereas Technical Awards are maximum 60%), these are rigorous assessments consisting of project work conducted under controlled conditions, marked and moderated. These assessment types prominently assess skills.
- **Examined assessments (EA):** again, weightings differ (GCSE 60% exam, Technical Awards 40% exam) – however the Department for Education (DfE) has stipulated that these must now take place at the end of the qualification for technical awards (terminal assessment) and have changed the resit rule from “best attempt” to “final attempt” counts. This increases exam pressure for vocational learners and makes Technical Awards look and feel much more like a GCSE.
- Progress 8 incentivises schools to run an academic curriculum, with a **minimum** of 70% of the school’s overall score being calculated based on academic achievement alone. In practice, it is likely to be even greater than this.

Progress 8 Bucket and Qualification Type	Count of Qualifications Approved for 2025 Performance Tables
EBacc	100
Academic	100
English	21
Academic	21
Maths	12
Academic	12
Open Group	239
Academic	191
Technical Award	48
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>372</b>

- As a consequence, teachers are under too much pressure to deliver Progress 8 results, and attitudes have moved away from “what’s best for the learner” towards “what’s going to achieve the best Progress 8”.
- The importance of Progress 8 as a school accountability measure is imbalanced – if a school’s overall Progress 8 score is below -0.5 the school will fall below the new floor standard, which could trigger a visit from Ofsted and the school will be flagged as failing. Schools with poor Progress 8 scores are nine times more likely to be given a poor Ofsted rating (source: <https://www.tes.com/magazine/archive/strong-link-between-progress-8-and-ofsted-ratings>)
- There are currently 3,884 Entry Level, Level 1 and Level 2 qualifications funded for 14-16 year olds, but just 10% of these count towards KS4

performance tables (324 academic quals, 48 technical quals)

Source: <https://www.qualifications.education.gov.uk/Home/Downloads>

- English and Maths subject areas are double-weighted for Progress 8, and the only qualifications which count are GCSEs. Whilst we welcome a strong focus on GCSE literacy and numeracy, there are strong alternatives such as functional skills, which may be suitable alternatives for the approximately third of learners who fail to achieve the GCSE standard in English and maths every year (sometimes referred to as [the Forgotten Third](#))

### **Key features of Technical Awards below, as stipulated by the DfE:**

- The qualification size must be at least 120 Guided Learning Hours (GLH)
- At least 40% of the total marks are available through an assessment by examination
- Terminal assessment rule: the assessment by examination must be taken at the end of a pupil's course of study
- Up to 60% of the total marks available through non-exam assessment
- Non-exam assessment to be numerically marked and moderated by awarding organisation.

Historically, non-exam assessments were externally quality assured rather than moderated, and the exam could be taken before the non-exam assessment, and resat (best attempt counts).

*Note – technical awards were recently reformed to meet these rules, with reformed qualifications launched in September 2022 for first awarding summer 2024.*

### **What changes would we like to see?**

- If we keep Progress 8 as a concept:
  - Emphasis on English and Maths is important, however this needs to include functional skills qualifications to make it fair for learners who are not suited to academic learning styles.
  - Allow the focus on the numeracy and literacy skills needed in employment and more practical skilled courses rather than high end academic subject content. This would allow those learners who have no realistic chance of gaining a GCSE “pass” to work on a qualification that will support them if they go down a vocational route at 16-19 or apprenticeship.
  - With GCSE English and maths the learner's grade contributes to the overall performance point score, whereas Functional Skills adopt a pass/fail model that does not allow for performance point equivalency. There could be an argument to create a

numeracy/literacy functional skills qualification that supports a pass/merit/distinction model to allow vocational learning in these core subjects with performance points.

- Currently, the only digital qualifications which count towards Progress 8 are in Computer Science and Digital Technologies, which are advanced digital proficiencies. Digital Skills should be made available – potentially mandatory – for all pupils to allow them to access the *essential* digital skills to function safely and responsibly in what is an increasingly digital world.
- EBacc and Open Group buckets could be combined to allow learners more choice.
- Parity of achievement on Technical Awards vs GCSEs needs to be considered.
- Do we need to keep Progress 8 as a concept? Are there other ways to measure a school's performance? Would England consider radical change?
  - There are some interesting international models in place – particularly Scandinavian countries which have adopted a vocational-focused curriculum.

*12 October 2023*