DfE Curriculum & Assessment Review call for evidence

Response from the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) November 2024

Everything we do at ETF is about supporting the Further Education (FE) and Skills workforce on their professional journey, so that in partnership with the sector we can provide

inclusion of work experience and placements in BTECs and T levels offer essential hands-on experience and opportunities to develop practical knowledge and skills.

Our key recommendations to improve the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways are as follows:

- Policy commitment and investment in the quality of teaching and learning including clarity on the requirements of initial teacher education, a clear career progression framework supported by Continuous Professional Development and ongoing national recognition of ETF professional standards: curriculum change needs to ensure that the necessary pedagogic skills are developed in tandem to ensure that the desired positive learning outcomes are secured
- Promotion and support of an outcomes driven system focusing on impact and trust rather than a process driven system focusing on heavy regulation and continuous review. Simplification of regulation is key
- A system that recognises the importance of social value and

11. What aspects of the current a) curriculum, b) assessment system and c) qualification pathways should be targeted for improvements to better support and recognise educational progress for children and young people?

Currently, the design of the secondary education system is based on an assumption that young people will achieve and progress through GCSE and A level pathways at the same rate according to agerelated norms. However, this system does not work well for a significant minority of young people who do not progress according to such norms, whether this is related to socioeconomic disadvantage, SEND, their learning environment or an inflexible curriculum. Inequalities in education and skills for these groups (and more broadly) have been exacerbated by the COVID19 pandemic, as a result of disruptions to

Maintaining high standards of teaching and learning across the FE and Skills sector requires policy commitment and investment in initial teacher education, access to lifelong training opportunities, and a clear ongoing CPD commitment.

Sources: Department for Education (2024) GCSE English and maths results.
Ofsted (2021) Children and young people with SEND disproportionately affected by pandemic. Webpage [accessed 19/11/2024]
House of Lords (2021) Covid P X á Ù 1 U Í è e Ù : 2 Ù è + î Ù U : } ô X e … Ù Í 2 î Ù : 2 Ù … : j 2 health and wellbeing. Webpage [accessed 19/11/2024].

Section 3: Social justice and inclusion

12. In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation (class ceilings) for learners experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage?

A major barrier for learners experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage is that they may have caring responsibilities or need to work part time due to financial pressures, limiting the time they have available for study. The digital divide and digital poverty can further disadvantage these learners, who may not have access to the internet or IT resources they need outside of their provider. Furthermore, these learners may not have a safe and appropriate space to study where they live and may be restricted as to when they can use their college or provider facilities, due to limitations with public transport provision, especially in rural areas. In terms of accessing the FE sector, an additional barrier is that they may not be familiar with or understanding the FE system and how to enrol (see earlier comment regarding pathway to and through FE and Skills)

> X : 1 Ù Í Ù U X : } î ô X \ Ù U ô X \ U ô è e } ô à Ù j 2 î 2 à Ù \ e Í 2 î Í X î \ Ù Í 2 î Ù U ô X : X act as a barrier to supporting learners experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, as otherwise the system itself reinforces existing class ceilings and contribute to learners leaving education without achieving certain grades or qualifications.

13. In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation which may disproportionately impact pupils based on other characteristics (e.g. disability, sexual orientation, gender, race, religion or belief etc.)

In a report published in 2023, UCAS and Stonewall shared research from a survey of 3,000 school and college students who identified as LGBT+. The survey found that 12% of LGBT+ students said they did not have a good experience at school or college, and of those, 70% said this was because their identity was not reflected in the things they learnt. As discussed in our answer to Q23, the experiences of LGBTQ+ students could thus be

improved by ensuring the curriculum is representative of society and engages with the contributions of diverse groups including LGBTQ+ people.

A lack of representation in the current curriculum may also disproportionately impact disabled and learners from global majority, both being often minoritised. A 2020 report by ´a Ù 2e:Ù…:j2 Ù +Íè'ÙUô:U+ô \Ùô„UôXô2èô\Ùfound that e j e :2Í+Ù 49% of young Black people felt that racism was the biggest barrier to attaining success in school, while 50% said the biggest barrier was teacher perceptions of them, for example being seen as too aggressive. Tackling negative racial stereotypes and institutional racism within education are therefore imperative to breaking down barriers for young Black people accessing and progressing within education. Ensuring the curriculum is more representative is one means of tackling such stereotypes and racism. Please also see earlier comments in Q12 regarding socioeconomic barriers. Each of these factors are exacerbated by an ecosystem that has little understanding of and about the opportunities that FE and Skills provide.

Sources: UCAS and Stonewall (2023) Next Steps: What is the experience of LGBT+ students in education?
YMCA (2020) Young and Black: The young Black experience of institutional racism in the UK

14. In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers in continuing to improve attainment, progress, access or participation for learners with SEND?

Qualifications that are inflexible with high-stakes end-point assessments in the form of written exams may meet the needs of the few but are especially likely to fail learners with SEND, who may experience anxiety, challenges with concentration, or require additional processing time. A move away from purely exam-based models towards more practical assessments and multiple assessment points is likely to benefit the outcomes and wellbeing of many learners with SEND, and beyond.

In addition, a high proportion of learners taking resit GCSE exams are those with SEND, and there is a persistent grade gap between learners with SEND and non-SEND learners (DfE 2024). As such, if there are certain English and maths requirements for level 3 vocational qualifications (for example) then this may act as a barrier for learners with SEND progressing in education.

Many teachers in general education are not confident that they have the skills and knowledge to support SEND and/or neurodivergent learners. For example, Ambitious Íæ:jeÙ je \1 \Ù®ôÙbôôîÙ 2Ù(îjèÍe :2Ùèmany teachers do not feel \Ùe Íe confident to teach autistic learners, and fewer than one in four autistic young people access education or training beyond school, as the right support is not in place for them. Therefore, we need more investment to ensure teachers and trainers are equipped to

support SEND and neurodivergent learners at school, in general Further Education, and

Source: Department for Education (2024) Special educational needs in England Academic year 2023/24.

on exam questions in every lesson in some cases, does not serve learners nor their future employers well.

19. To what extent do the current maths and English qualifications at a) pre-16 and b) 16-19 support pupils and learners to gain, and adequately demonstrate that they have achieved, the skills and knowledge they need? Are there any changes you would suggest that would support these outcomes?

See answer to Q40.

20. How can we better support learners who do not achieve level 2 in English and maths by 16 to learn what they need to thrive as citizens in work and life? In particular, do we have the right qualifications at level 2 for these 16-19 learners (including the maths and English study requirement)?
-

21. Are there any particular challenges with regard to the English and maths a) curricula and b) assessment for learners in need of additional support (e.g. learners with SEND, socioeconomic disadvantage, English as an additional language (EAL))? Are there any changes you would suggest to overcome these challenges?

The annual cycle of GCSE exams may not effectively support the needs of learners in need of additional support, such as learners with SEND, as discussed in our answer to Q14. The Functional Skills (FS) model is more flexible and supports learners with SEND and socioeconomic disadvantage by allowing them to build up their skills in stages and be rewarded with qualifications at each stage. In addition, the FS curriculum and assessment is shorter and for English it is split into 2 sections which can be passed independently. However, the FS curriculum for maths would benefit from being adapted as the current content is not engaging and does not help learners to understand why they would need maths in their everyday life and work, as discussed in our answer to Q18. Learners with SEND may benefit from English and maths curricula that focuses on more realistic and practical scenarios that they are more likely to encounter in life and work.

We acknowledge the argument that controlled assessments may be less suitable for socioeconomically disadvantaged learners and those whose home circumstances prevent them from completing work at home (such as caring responsibilities or instability), hence the move towards exam-based models of assessment. However, the pressure of annual exams gives learners few chances to resit and so having some classroom-based assessment could provide a suitable alternative ó such as for the creative writing element of the English curriculum.

Section 5: Curriculum and qualification content

22. Are there particular curriculum or qualifications subjects where:
a. there is too much content; not enough content, or content is missing;
b. the content is out-of-date;
c. the content is unhelpfully sequenced (for example to support good curriculum design or pedagogy);
d. there is a need for greater flexibility (for example to provide the space for teachers to develop and adapt content)?
-

23. Are there particular changes that could be made to ensure the curriculum (including qualification content) is more diverse and representative of society?

The main change that is needed is to ensure a diverse range of perspectives and contributions are included in the teaching of all subjects. In subjects such as English and History, this would involve highlighting texts and contributions from women, LGBTQ+ people, disabled people and people from the global majority. Meanwhile, in subjects such as Geography it would involve encouraging learners to think critically about how

38. What can we do to ensure the assessment system at key stages 1 and 2 works well for all learners, including learners in need of additional support in their education (for example SEND, disadvantage, EAL)?

-

46. Should there be any changes to the current accountability system in order to better support progress and incentivise inclusion for young people with SEND and/or from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds? If so, what should those changes be?

Building on our answer to Q45, the move towards the accountability system focussing more on outcomes and social value could better support progress and incentivise inclusion for young people with SEND and/or from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, the new Ofsted report card could specifically look at how well learners from these groups are included and progressing. Importantly, this should not only consider numbers of SEND learners, but take a more holistic look of their experiences of inclusion and learning.

Section 8: Qualification pathways 16 -19

47. To what extent does the range of programmes and qualifications on offer at each level meet the needs and aspirations of learners? a. Level 3 b. Level 2 c. Level 1 and entry level

-

48. Are there particular changes that could be made to the following programmes and qualifications and/or their assessment that would be beneficial to learners: a. AS/A level qualifications b. T Level and T Level Foundation Year programmes c. Other applied or vocational qualifications at level 3 d. Other applied or vocational qualifications at level 2 and below

b. If T level numbers increase, then one major change that will be needed is additional flexibility around the industry placement requirements. Whilst this is an integral part of the course, and highly beneficial to learners in terms of developing hands-on experience and skills, the volume of placements required as T levels expand (especially in rural areas) is unfortunately not feasible. In some industries such as in digital, media and computing, an additional challenge to placements is that the workforce now tends to work from home or on a hybrid basis. If employers are not in the office for large portions of the week, it may not be possible to support work placements. An alternative would be to balance the placement requirements with a bigger focus on employers working with providers as part of the curriculum. In addition, there needs to be a focus on equipping young people with the digital skills required to work in a remote or hybrid manner, where relevant.

49. F : • Ù è Í 2 Ù • ô Ù 1 U X : } ô Ù + ô Í X 2 ô X \ Ù j 2 î ô X \ e Í 2 î 2 Ù : Ù : • Ù e ô Ù î and qualifications on offer will prepare them for university, employment (including apprenticeships) and/or further technical study?

The FE sector leaders and the members ETF consulted highlighted that we need to create clearer progression routes from T levels into university and/or further technical study, as this will support learners who aspire to undertake further academic or professional qualifications. Currently, not all universities understand T levels, and so we need to create X ô Í î 2 ô \ \ Ù Í è X : \ \ Ù e ô Ù \ … \ e ô 1 Ù æ ô : X ô Ù • ô Ù è Í 2 Ù e X j + … Ù 1 U X : } ô Ù possible progression pathways. Additionally, increasing the research capacity in FE and Skills through dedicated research funding may facilitate better collaboration between Further and Higher Education. This would help to ensure that universities see FE as an evidence-based, innovative sector, capable of advancing knowledge, transferring best practice, improving itself through research, and supporting learners to prepare for university. Other leaders felt that learners must be offered a choice of qualifications and pathways (including BTECs and Apprenticeships) to fulfil diverse learning needs.

To what extent is there enough scope and flexibility in the system to support learners who may need to change course?
-

50. Are there additional skills, subjects, or experiences that all learners should develop or study during 16-19 education, regardless of their chosen programmes and qualifications, to support them to be prepared for life and work?

See answer to Q27.

Section 9: Other issues on which we would welcome views

Transitions

51. How can the curriculum, assessment and wraparound support better enable transitions between key stages to ensure continuous learning and support attainment?
-

Technology

52. How could technology be used to improve how we deliver the curriculum, assessment and qualifications in England?

One of our members è : 2 \ j + e ô î Ù : 2 Ù e \ Ù e : U è Ù X ô 1 Í X ' ô î à Ù " ô è 2 : + : … Ù Í transform curriculum delivery, assessment, and qualifications in England, making ô î j è Í e : 2 Ù 1 : X ô Ù U ô X \ : 2 Í + \ ô î à Ù Í è è ô \ \ æ + ô à Ù Í 2 î Ù ô ô è e } ô ß

In curriculum delivery, digital tools can be used to give access to a variety of resources, interactive online content, and blended learning models. Furthermore, they allow teachers to be flexible in content delivery and tailor it to individual learning needs, supporting learners to progress at their own pace. As the member è : 2 e 2 j ô î à Ù I 2 e ô X Í è e } ô Ù + ô Í X 2 tools, such as virtual reality and simulations, could also enrich subjects like Science, Geography, and History, bringing abstract concepts to life in ways that enhance ô 2 Í ô 1 ô 2 e Ù Í 2 î Ù j 2 î ô X Furthermore, EdTech resources can help teachers to gamify and reimagine traditional resources to make them more engaging for learners.