AQA Evidence submission

Education Select Committee Further Education and Skills Consultation

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Executive summary

AQA is an independent education charity, providing high quality assessments that are fair, reliable, and support students in their educational journey. Our qualification expertise dates back to 1903, when our predecessor boards were founded by five leading universities. Today, we're the largest provider of academic qualifications taught in schools and colleges. We set and mark the papers for over half of all GCSEs and A-levels taken every year. But exams are only part of the story – we also make sure the content of our qualifications support great teaching. Our qualifications are designed to suit a range of abilities and include GCSEs, AS and A-levels, the Extended Project Qualification and Technical Awards.

Our qualifications are internationally recognised and taught in more than 40 countries around the world and they're highly valued by employers and universities.

This response builds on AQA's wide ranging experience of delivering qualifications and assessment For more than 120 years and focuses on the following questions in the Committee's inquiry:

AQA's submission responds to the following points in the inquiry:

- *The post-16 curriculum.*
- *The strengths and weaknesses of T Levels as the main qualification option for students wishing to pursue a technical route into further education.*
- *Post-16 numeracy and literacy, including GCSE resits.*
- *Workforce pressures, including college teachers' pay and the recruitment and retention of staff in all further education settings.*
- *How to resolve the skills shortage and narrow the gap between the skills that employers want and the skills that employees have.*

Key points from our submission

- It is clear areas of the curriculum have become crowded. We advocate for a trimming of content in relevant specifications to create room for broader skills to be developed that support future life, study and work. We believe to support this, we can make better use of different qualification types, such as on-demand digital assessments and project qualifications.

- We think there is over specialisation at A-level and that there should be broader options available for students, particularly in Year 12. This could include the addition of an EPQ or looking again at the AS to A2 model.

- We think that the vocational landscape is too complex and rigid. As with A- levels, there should be greater flexibility and choice built in, which could include breaking T-levels down into smaller constituent parts.

- We also note logistical challenges in terms of access arrangements. Centres where there are large cohorts, such as FE Colleges with large GCSE English and Maths cohorts, tell us they cannot manage the variety of access arrangements within the timeframes they have.

- Low numeracy, literacy and digital fluency skills are a problem in England and have been for a long time. AQA is proud to be creating a numeracy qualification that allows students to demonstrate their

‘real life’ numeracy in a way that would sit alongside Maths GCSE; we plan to develop similar products for literacy and digital fluency. At the same time, we can use digital methods such as AQA Stride to improve the way content in GCSE and A-level is taught and reduce inequalities.

Call for evidence: ***Curriculum and qualifications in further education***

- ***The post-16 curriculum.***
- ***The strengths and weaknesses of T Levels as the main qualification option for students wishing to pursue a technical route into further education.***

Broadening the post-16 curriculum

The A-level brand remains globally prestigious. However, if A-level content was reduced slightly, this could free up more time for 16 to 19-year-olds to access greater breadth, something which teachers we've spoken to have said they supported. This might look like the reintroduction of 'minors', akin to AS-levels. Thousands of students each year still sit AS-levels to achieve this breadth, but their popularity has waned since they were decoupled from A-levels. A new approach to minor subjects could be used to deliver broader or cross- disciplinary subjects, such as 'Public Understanding of Science' or 'Social Research Methods', or a taste of vocational and technical education.

We would also like to see a broader curriculum encompass T-levels; however, they need to be reformed. At current entry levels, our analysis suggests operating losses in relation to a single T-Level are likely to exceed £0.8m annually, and that a break-even point could only be achieved by charging entry fees at an unacceptably high level. Teachers we've spoken to admitted that T-levels had experienced a 'rocky start', but they said we should not feel the need to throw it all out, rather reform them to enhance their viability.

We believe the DfE should:

- Commit to the long-term future of the T-levels; this will give exam boards greater confidence in investing in their development. As they are structured today, they are undeliverable at the current scale and not an attractive proposition for awarding organisations to deliver.
- Explore ways to reduce or share high delivery costs to improve financial viability, especially but not only for low-entry T-levels.
- Break down the components so that parts of existing T-levels can be taken independently, to introduce a level of modularity. In any event, the equivalence to three A-levels should be abandoned, as it creates a cliff edge for those who drop out.
- Assessment design should be remodelled to work better for students and be simpler for exam boards to deliver.
- The way in which the industry placement operates should be reconsidered to make the qualification more deliverable.

Parity of esteem is not something qualification design can address. Instead, we argue that we need to focus on equivalent value, where vocational and academic qualifications are of high quality. By demonstrating equivalent value, we can create the conditions in which vocational qualifications acquire social, educational and employment esteem in their own right.

We should have mixed programmes of study for those who want them. Combining general and vocational qualifications not only allows cross-pollination of knowledge and skills but also means young people can keep their options open and try out a range of topics and experiences. In the general qualification space, we have development of critical thinking, problem solving, and research skills – as well as knowledge and conceptual schemes which underpin further learning. In the vocational qualification space we have communication, team working and other skills everyone needs, as well as specific industry skills developed over time in real settings. We believe the best education is one that broadens, not narrows, opportunity. One area of concern for us, however, is the proposal to change funding rules around mixed- study programmes, and the potential for this to undermine the ability for schools and colleges to offer these to our young people. But the principle

should recognise that some students will adopt a wholly vocational route, others a wholly academic route, and a significant proportion will benefit maximally from a mixture of the two.

Young people tell us they do not want enforced breadth. Unsurprisingly, 16-year-olds guard the autonomy they are given to choose what they go on to study at this age very closely, which is something the sector might like to consider before making breadth in subjects mandatory.

A relaxed workload in A-levels (and some vocational routes, T-levels in particular) would free up time for extracurricular activity. One slightly more pro-breadth young person told us:

"It would be good if it was encouraged to study perhaps a smaller qualification in a subject area different to the rest of what you are studying. I wouldn't oppose mandatory maths and English until 18. However, this wasn't so popular amongst my peers! My peers and I agree that extracurricular experiences are beneficial too; it is nice to spend time meeting people who study different subjects to you and learning something new, without the stress of being graded on performance.

Project qualifications

We also argue for an increase in the provision and uptake of project qualifications. AQA Project Qualifications (PQs) are stand-alone qualifications that help students develop broader study skills, offering a route into further and higher education and which can help support student to positively engage and be knowledgeable about and respect others. These qualifications allow young people to pursue a topic of interest about which they are passionate and document the journey through which they write either an academic essay or an artefact – ranging from longitudinal explorations of hen welfare to wellbeing-boosting community choirs. Research shows that Extended Project Qualifications (EPQs) offer solutions for many of the perceived deficits of the English post-16 curriculum and could also empower students to pursue a broad and diverse education. Research also shows that project qualifications can encourage independent learning, increase students' resilience and academic confidence, and build reflective students while preparing them for the added rigours of university study.

EPQs can potentially boost students' grades in Level 3 qualifications. They offer opportunities to keep a broader range of study in Year 12, before specialising in Year 13, addressing what we feel is an over-specialisation too soon at 16. Suitable for all levels and abilities, and academic or vocational pathways, PQs provide a robust and comparatively AI-proof way of diversifying assessment modes. A quick policy lever the DfE could pull in this area would be to make HPQs and EPQs eligible for the Large Programme Uplift given to FE colleges for students taking one alongside a full programme of study.

- ***Post-16 numeracy and literacy, including GCSE resits.***

Maths and English resits in post-16

GCSEs provide an established and respected means for understanding which candidates achieved better outcomes than others and are therefore suited for determining further study options, and some forms of employment. GCSE grades are, however, hard to use as a proxy for fundamental numeracy and literacy.

In 2024, only 27.74% of students who had not achieved a Level 2 pass (equivalent to GCSE Grade 4) in maths and English by age 16 were able to do so by age 19. In the interest of the large number of 19-year-olds who never achieve this pass, we need to have alternative routes to proving their literacy and numeracy competence. AQA internal analysis has also shown that out of the over 3000 Foundation students who took their last three GCSE exams with AQA, only about 10% of them passed in summer 2024, and less than 10% scored higher marks after each subsequent attempt.

For students who are operating significantly below Level 2, the qualification landscape is less attractive. Repeated GCSE resits can be demoralising for students. While Functional Skills Qualifications provide an alternative to GCSEs, Ofqual surveys show that they are not well-understood by employers and have struggled to establish a reputation for themselves. GCSEs are more attractive in performance tables, as centres can show improvement from a grade 1 to a grade 3, whereas the pass-fail dichotomy of an FSQ means it is less attractive. There are also significant overlaps between Foundation Tier GCSE Maths and FSQ Maths Level 2, meaning that there is often little to attract centres to put candidates forward for FSQs. Level 2 FSQs are also very demanding for candidates, meaning that they struggle to serve their role as a universal measure of competence. This has resulted in a substantial drop in entries for Level 2 FSQs.

One possible alternative to the current resit policy could be that the 30% who do not achieve Level 2 pass standards by 16 are required to sit a minimum number of retakes before being offered alternative pathways. This would need to be carefully balanced with the need for social mobility. While the Condition of Funding policy being tied to resits had some positive effect initially, more work needs to be done to ensure that students are given the greatest support to secure their passes. We acknowledge the requirement for colleges to offer a minimum number of hours for these students in maths and English, the impact of which may not be seen immediately.

We believe something else is required to help support this cohort of learners to develop their skills, knowledge and confidence to thrive in work and life. We are at the very advanced stage of delivering a numeracy assessment to test 'real-world' maths that would sit alongside Maths GCSE. We are creating something that would enable these learners to demonstrate their capabilities and move on to their next stage. It also includes a learning component to address some of the fundamental issues that stop students progressing. It will be available on demand to take and practise when students are ready. Our proposals have been covered in The Guardian and The Times.

We are also in the early phases of developing similar products for literacy/oracy and digital fluency. Looking to the future AQA also sees a time where this type of qualification could be developed and introduced for other areas, such as languages. Streamlining the number of GCSEs, content and/ or number of exams, and introducing a suite of digital on demand qualifications, could rebalance the scales.

An expansion of Core Maths could also help address the 'maths gap' between GCSE and A-levels, such as for social scientists, for those who have achieved a Grade 4 in GCSE Maths but cannot or do not wish to access A-level Maths.

- ***The assessment system.***

EBacc and Progress 8 Accountability Measures

There has been a significant decline in the number of students taking creative and design and technology courses of study up to 16; this has had a knock-on post-16 as well. Between 2011 and 2019, the proportion of all A-Level entries to subjects in the EBacc rose by six percentage points from 50% to 56%.

One reason for this is the EBacc suite of courses have encouraged a focus on a core suite of academic subjects, at the expense of others. We believe this decline should be reversed, as these creative subjects offer breadth and can enthuse and inspire students, particularly those who may struggle with school.

According to statistics published by Campaign for the Arts in August 2023, there has been a 47% decline in entries since 2010. While it was intended to increase equity in the system by giving students a strong

academic core, the EBacc has had a detrimental impact on the take-up of creative and arts subjects. (Harris et al, 2020; Neuman et al, 2020; Ashton and Ashton, 2023).

We believe the DfE should discontinue the EBacc as a measure given the sharp decline in take up of arts and creative GCSEs. While it was intended to increase equity in the system by giving students a strong academic core, it has stripped creative and arts subjects out of the curriculum, subjects that can often 'hook in' students who can otherwise disengage.

Progress 8 is a good measure for showing value-added. However, the constituent groups should be reformed to encourage greater uptake of a broad range of subjects, particularly creative and vocational subjects. Indeed, research has found that because of the way Progress 8 attainment is measured, it ends up weighted (70:30) in favour of the traditional academic subjects of the EBacc. This has led to knock-on effect in uptake at A-level. This is something teachers we spoke to in our focus group said:

'Progress 8 forces us to focus on academic subjects at the expense of creative and vocational options. It's limiting what we can offer, and some students are really missing out because of it.'

Progress 8 should be reformed to encourage greater breadth. The simplest way to remove the link with the EBacc would be to remove that bucket – so you would have a 'Progress 5' with two maths and English buckets and then the three 'free' buckets. If you accept the argument that the EBacc buckets have driven down numbers taking creative and arts subjects, then logic might suggest that reversing this would counter that effect.

Another option could be to change the relative sizes of the groups and remove the EBacc bucket to free up curriculum time for creative and vocational subjects. This would drive uptake in other subjects as they were no longer deprioritised and should be easy for students, parents and teachers to understand.

Call for evidence: *Delivering further education*

- ***Workforce pressures, including college teachers' pay and the recruitment and retention of staff in all further education settings.***

Workforce pressures

The resit model outlined in the previous section also has an impact on teacher workload and college space in the FE sector. That's why, in addition to AQA's new assessments in numeracy, literacy and digital fluency, we have developed AQA Stride to support the sector now.

Designed to help learners starting or retaking GCSEs, AQA Stride includes five 20-minute tests which quickly helps teachers see how strong students' understanding is of the fundamental mathematical concepts they will need for the course.

Each test is adaptive and personalised to the student so that as they take the test, the system uses the responses provided to select the next, most appropriate question. For students who are struggling, a key challenge they face is overcoming gaps in knowledge from much earlier in their education, but with the added difficulty of not knowing where these gaps occurred. With potentially key foundations missing from their knowledge, this makes learning new content significantly more difficult and, in some cases, impossible. AQA Stride helps teachers to tackle these gaps because it can identify them after the fact, even many years later, allowing the teacher to tailor a support package to that student. This approach could revolutionise the way we teach students who are struggling, including those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, who have interacted with the care system, young people with SEND and those taught in non-traditional settings.

Capital City College Group (CCCG) began using Stride in September 2024. CCCG has more than 3,600 maths resit learners, many enrolling low on confidence after their experience in school. However, CCCG teachers and curriculum leaders report a positive impact of AQA Stride on teacher workload. The group told us that on top of increasing student confidence, there is no longer need for GCSE Maths benchmarking that would usually require hours of marking. The instant analysis AQA Stride provides is used by the college to adapt their scheme of work, tailor lessons and trial different interventions with each class and sometimes individual learners.

As an independent charity, AQA is delighted to be fully funding this tool, so every school or college can access it regardless of whether they are an AQA customer or not.

Call for evidence: *Skills and apprenticeships*

- ***How to resolve the skills shortage and narrow the gap between the skills that employers want and the skills that employees have.***

Skills for work and life

AQA's new numeracy assessment will focus on day-to-day numeracy, particularly understanding money, so that employers and further education colleges will know that young people have numeracy skills they need for life. This is of paramount importance, as HEPI found 44% of students want more education on career pathways and 51% wish they had had the opportunity to 'learn more life skills'. The London Institute of Banking and Finance surveyed more than 2,000 15–18-year-olds across the UK for its 2021/22 Young Persons Money Index also found that 72% said they wanted to learn more about money and finance in school with just 15% citing school as their main source of financial education.

To ensure our new assessments work for young people and their teachers, AQA is conducting in depth testing. We want to know what users think about our assessment, so that it is fit for purpose. Early results show that students and teachers recognised the importance of numeracy as a key skill and there was much goodwill towards a potential product. 83.3% of teachers surveyed felt the assessment was very or extremely relevant for their students.

Many students valued the real-world relevance of the topics in the prototype products, particularly money management:

"It's stuff that you actually need when you leave school. It's showing you debt, your loans, budgets. You will need literally all of those things when you leave school … it's teaching you proper life skills."

Better careers information and guidance at earlier stages of the curriculum would also help highlight what careers paths are available and the educational requirements needed to reach them. Through having exposure earlier in the curriculum this allows students more time to consider the range of options available and whether a technical, general or mixed programme of study is the most appropriate course to follow. As we have argued in FE Week, there are substantial gains to be made from managing the perception of qualifications, rather than only focussing on their structure and design.

Careers advice itself still varies from school to school, college to college and locale to locale. While T-levels endeavoured to create a robust reputable vocational offer at Level 3, the workload means they are inflexible (they cannot be mixed and matched with other qualifications), and efforts to have all Level 2 qualifications lead to a T-level risks overcorrecting the confusingly wide past range of VTQs. Evidence suggests that a wide range of vocational options in fact motivates students to take up VTQs outside of key stage 5. (Rodeiro Vitello, 2023)

Call for evidence: ***Supporting young people, widening access, and narrowing the attainment gap***

- ***The specific barriers to accessing and pursuing further education for those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), and children and young people in care across specialist and mainstream settings.***
- ***Disparity in attainment, including by gender, area of the country in which a student lives, ethnicity, and between disadvantaged students and their peers.***

The future of assessment for SEND

Centres where there are large cohorts, such as FE Colleges where resits of GCSE English and Maths are happening, tell us they cannot manage the variety of access arrangements within the timeframes they have.

From discussions we have had, we also know that there are issues in gaining access arrangements for SEND students if they move institutions at 16 and need to resit. We know that this can be very difficult and time consuming for centres to obtain the relevant information (JCQ Form 8 and Form 9) from the previous centre in time for the November resit series, as a student can arrive at a new centre which knows little about them and their needs; this is particularly acute in FE colleges which tend to start their term later in September.

Designing a curriculum and assessment system which learners with SEND can fully access is important, though it does present challenges. Barriers to ensuring accessibility range from specific access requirements for SEND students, to more systemwide issues.

Some believe that the volume of written exams at the end of a two-year course, about thirty hours for a typical GCSE student, can be detrimental to the mental health and wellbeing of students with SEND. This is compounded by the fact that a typical access arrangement for students with SEND is extra time – pushing up the number of hours. The committee might like to consider the most appropriate volume of written exams at the end Year 11 and Year 13. There are trade-offs involved in this around the reliability and validity of grading in some subjects. Some specifications, for example in GCSE Maths, lend themselves better to the possibility of having fewer written papers at the end of the course. And, similarly, some subjects lend themselves better to traditional or innovative non examined assessments (NEA) than others.

There are well documented issues with the SEND system more broadly. The lack of SEND specialists mean some – particularly less affluent– families struggle to get a SEND diagnosis for their child, meaning they might be missing out on access arrangements they need.

Delivery of digital question papers would allow for greater inclusivity in assessment and most students can complete their exams independently with assistive technology (e.g. without a scribe, an interlocutor and a separate enclosed space). A 2022 Department for Education report (found that one of the key benefits of introducing EdTech in schools and colleges was increased engagement and confidence for students with SEND; findings from a study by AQA (2022) also reflect this. Many SENCOs were excited about the potential for digital exams to increase students' sense of independence; they felt that, in some cases, it would reduce the need for certain access arrangements.

Digital exams can also help with things like large print, audio readers, coloured backgrounds, changing colour-coded diagrams and other access needs. These are things we know cause significant administrative burden for exams officers now and that we could solve instantly with digital exams.

We are now planning a universal design approach to our digital assessments, embedding accessibility, in line with the good example of other organisations. Universal design could increase options for personalisation and reduce the demand for additional access arrangements, although it will not eradicate the need for them.

A diverse curriculum

A curriculum that encompasses identities of those disadvantaged is more accessible to the young people from those disadvantaged groups. To guarantee that all students benefit from a diverse curriculum, clearer guidance may need to be included explicitly in the National Curriculum and DfE qualification subject documents.

We know that students with protected characteristics are less likely to study certain subjects. For example, Black Caribbean students are less likely to pursue STEM subjects and report feeling their abilities are undervalued by their teachers as a reason for this.

Therefore, young people deserve a curriculum which reflects modern Britain, so young people can see themselves represented and learn about the lives of others regardless of background, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual orientation, belief or disability.