

# AQA submission

## Numeracy for Life Committee Inquiry

### Executive summary

AQA is an independent education charity, providing high quality assessments that are fair, reliable and support students. Today, we're the largest provider of academic qualifications taught in schools and colleges. We set and mark exam 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.

AQA is also developing a new digital numeracy qualification for 14–19-year-olds that combines teaching and learning with an on-demand assessment that can be taken when students are ready. The assessment is designed to sit alongside GCSE Maths and to recognise practical competence in 'real life' numeracy, using familiar contexts such as understanding a monthly payslip, how credit cards work, and the numeracy involved in starting a business. Students are not graded; instead, the assessment operates like a driving test, providing a clear pass/fail outcome and feedback to support improvement.

### Summary of submission

- **Many young people leave education without the numeracy skills and confidence needed for everyday life**, despite high participation in maths qualifications.
- **The current system is weighted towards academic mathematics and exam performance**, which sometimes does not work for learners and can contribute towards disengagement.
- **Student voice shows a clear demand for applied, real-world numeracy**, particularly in areas such as financial decision-making, data interpretation and understanding risk.
- **To improve numeracy, there needs to be a more flexible approach**, including greater emphasis on applied numeracy and assessment models that recognise practical competence alongside traditional qualifications.
- **AQA is developing a digital numeracy qualification which responds directly to these needs**, supporting learners to develop practical numeracy while keeping GCSE Maths as a distinct and valuable academic route.

### Question 3. What are the essential numeracy skills and knowledge needed throughout life?

AQA conducted research to capture student voice (October 2024) on numeracy skills. This consisted of focus groups and interviews with 39 students aged 14-19 across 7 different educational settings.

Students were asked questions about what they felt they needed to learn to be numerate after they finish school.

Themes in students' motivation were grouped into three categories:

1. Gaining independence and growing wealth;
2. Fear of consequences e.g. getting into debt;
3. Previous experience/exposure.

The topics that students were most engaged with related to money and managing this independently, such as credit cards, debt and interest. Students wanted to know their possible paths to independence such as budgeting, saving for big purchases and different types of bank accounts and financial products.

Students were asked where they get information in relation to numeracy and finances. AI and social media sites, such as TikTok, were trusted by some students, while others said they would use it, but only for low stakes advice. Students raised the cost-of-living crisis and feelings that money was of the utmost importance.

AQA also conducted [research](#) to capture student voice, gaining insight from student groups in alternative provisions and further education settings. Some of our key findings showed:

- Students' attitudes towards maths were mixed. They were confident in everyday numeracy but reported low attainment in maths at school.
- Students would welcome a qualification that is flexible, on-demand and modular.

In response to the findings, AQA is now developing a new digital numeracy qualification for 14–19-year-olds that combines teaching and learning with an on-demand assessment that can be taken when students are ready. The assessment is designed to sit alongside GCSE Maths and to recognise practical competence in 'real life' numeracy, using familiar contexts such as understanding a monthly payslip, how credit cards work, and the numeracy involved in starting a business. Students are not graded; instead, the assessment operates like a driving test, providing a clear pass/fail outcome and feedback to support improvement.

**Question 8. How effective is the maths education system, both in terms of curriculum and teaching, in providing students with numeracy skills? What are the key barriers to gaining a strong foundation in numeracy at school?**

The maths education system in England provides most students with a basic level of numeracy, but too many experience stalled progress in secondary school and leave education without the strong, confident numeracy they need for adult life. A key issue is that attainment in maths does not automatically equate to numeracy confidence. The Government's focus on raising GCSE outcomes is important, but academic success alone does not ensure that young people can use maths fluently in real-world situations.

A numeracy qualification alongside GCSE Maths can help address these challenges by prioritising applied competence, building confidence through authentic scenarios, and supporting learners to retain and use

essential numeracy beyond age 16. AQA is now developing a new digital numeracy qualification for 14–19-year-olds that combines teaching and learning with an on-demand assessment that can be taken when students are ready. The assessment is designed to sit alongside GCSE Maths and to recognise practical competence in ‘real life’ numeracy, using familiar contexts such as understanding a monthly payslip, how credit cards work, and the numeracy involved in starting a business. Students are not graded; instead, the assessment operates like a driving test, providing a clear pass/fail outcome and feedback to support improvement.

To strengthen numeracy outcomes, schools and colleges need flexible curriculum and assessment options, and teachers need support to integrate numeracy into wider programmes. Embedding numeracy across subjects, supported by qualifications that recognise real-world competence, offers the best chance of ensuring all young people leave education with the numeracy skills they need.

**Question 10. Are the Government priorities for maths education the right ones to embed numeracy, and what steps would you like to see the Government make to improve numeracy?**

The Government’s focus on strong attainment in maths is important, but it will not, on its own, ensure that young people can use maths confidently in everyday life. Practical numeracy should be embedded across subjects, not just within maths, to reinforce numeracy as a cross-curricular life skill.

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