

Curriculum and Assessment Review Interim Report

March 2025

Extracts from the full report

Please see below the comments which directly relate to Modern Languages and wider concerns which are a current focus of NALA, particularly aspects of social justice and use of technology (AI).

A good number of the comments made by NALA in its submission to the Curriculum and Assessment Review are picked up on in the Interim Report. It is fair to assume that NALA's comments were also echoed elsewhere in other submissions. At this stage it is evident that Modern Languages have been highlighted as an area of concern.

Please refer to the full document to see the full context

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However, the Review Panel has identified four areas it will focus on in the next phase, where it sees the greatest opportunities and need for improvement:

The system is not working well for all

The socio-economic gap for educational attainment remains stubbornly large, and young people with SEND make less progress than their peers. While the explanations often lie outside curriculum and assessment, we shall take steps to ensure that the curriculum and assessment system reflects high expectations for all and properly supports the progress and achievement of all young people.

Challenges with specific subjects

Many submissions have argued for improvements in a range of curriculum subjects. Some of these are minor (for example, citations of specific dated content), and some are major (for example, suggestions of a lack of efficacy in Modern Foreign Language teaching in primary and transition to secondary).

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The curriculum needs to respond to social and technological change

Subject specific knowledge remains the best investment we have to secure the education young people need in a world of rapid technological and social change. Being secure in foundational subjects such as maths and science will remain pivotal, now and in the future; as will young people's understanding of human culture through the humanities, languages and arts. However, attention is needed to address opportunities and challenges created by our fast-changing world. The rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and trends in digital information demand heightened media literacy and critical thinking, as well as digital skills. Likewise, global social and environmental challenges require attention to scientific and cultural knowledge and skills that can equip young people to meet the challenges of the future.

Next steps

Particular areas of focus for the next stage of the Review include:

- considering questions that have been raised across different subjects about the specificity, relevance, volume and diversity of content.
- conducting deeper analysis to diagnose the specific issues affecting each subject and explore and test a range of solutions.
- continuing to consider the impact of current performance measures on young people's choices and outcomes, and their impact on institutional behaviours.
- continuing to consider how best to equip children and young people with the essential knowledge and skills which will enable them to adapt and thrive in a rapidly changing and AI-enabled world.
- exploring level 3 pathways, with the aim of building on the successes of existing academic.

We expect to recommend a phased programme of work in different subjects or subject areas. This will allow reforms to be made incrementally in a way that does not destabilise the system.

Subject take-up – key stage 4

Looking at GCSEs only, history and geography have strong uptake, potentially reflecting their inclusion in the EBacc measure, but the take-up of modern foreign languages has plateaued in recent years.

The current system is not working well for everyone

However, excellence is not yet provided for all: persistent attainment gaps remain. There remains a stubborn attainment gap between those that are socio-economically disadvantaged and their peers (Figure 5), and young people with SEND fail to make sufficient progress in comparison to their non-SEND peers.

From the perspectives of both social justice and economics, it is vital that we take the necessary steps to drive up standards for young people who are presently underserved by our education system.

Therefore, in addition to making sure that the curriculum and assessment system prepares young people for life and work, the Review applies a social justice lens throughout its work, applying high aspirations for all. It will consider the positive impact we can make on the outcomes for socio-economically disadvantaged young people and those with SEND with the levers that are at our disposal, while remaining aware of the wider challenges the sector faces.

Breadth at key stage 4

The previous government set an ambition for 75% of students to be studying the EBacc by 2022 (for 2024 examinations) and 90% by 2025. However, EBacc entry rates plateaued at around 40% between 2017 to 2024, and fewer than 15% of state-funded schools are meeting the 75% ambition.²³

Before the introduction of EBacc performance measures, take-up of MFL and geography was declining, and history uptake sat at just over 30% of pupils. The proportion of learners taking geography GCSE, history GCSE and MFL GCSEs all saw an increase in uptake of at least 5 percentage points²⁴ between 2012 and 2013, after the introduction of EBacc performance measures. This fell between 2014 and 2018, before remaining stable from 2018 onwards, with 44% of learners taking a MFL GCSE in 2024 (Figure 6). Of course, these patterns may also be explained, at least in part, by issues unrelated to performance measures, such as teacher supply.

It is worth noting that increases in the uptake of EBacc subjects have also not consistently translated into increased study at 16-19. While history and geography GCSE percentage uptake rose by over 10 percentage points between 2010 and 2024, history and geography A level entries as a proportion of all A level entries remain relatively consistent since 2010.²⁵ In addition, language A level entries as a percentage of all A level entries fell from 3.8% to 2.7% between 2010 and 2024, despite the modest rise at GCSE.²⁶

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Furthermore, while EBacc uptake has increased among socio-economically disadvantaged pupils since 2010, with 29% of disadvantaged learners taking the full suite of EBacc subjects in 2024 compared with 9% in 2011, this uptake remains lower compared to their non-disadvantaged peers, among whom EBacc uptake increased from 26% to 45% over the same period. There is also a growing socio-economic gap in *attainment* of the EBacc, for those young people that take this suite of subjects. This gap in attainment has grown from 18 percentage points in 2013 (when 67% of non-disadvantaged students achieved EBacc success compared to 49% of disadvantaged students) and increased to 21 percentage points in 2024 (66% of non-disadvantaged students compared to 45% of disadvantaged students).

Evidence suggests that a portfolio of academic subjects does aid access to A level and to university,²⁷ and that taking the full suite of EBacc subjects positively correlates with a learner applying to and attending university. However, there is little evidence to suggest that the EBacc combination *per se* has driven better attendance to Russell Group universities.²⁸ Responses from the Call for Evidence have highlighted that the EBacc performance measures may unnecessarily constrain student choice (and, consequently, their engagement and/or achievement). Respondents also maintained that in doing so, the EBacc measure limits students' access to and time for arts or vocational subjects, thus reducing breadth.

Addressing global and social change

Rapid social, environmental and technological change necessitates that the curriculum keep pace; including a renewed focus on digital and media literacy, and a greater focus on sustainability and climate science. Moreover, a repeated concern in responses to the Call for Evidence has been that curriculum content in several subject areas should be brought up to date where it has become redundant or less relevant.

Many schools already teach such areas of knowledge within curriculum subjects. For example, digital skills, media literacy, online relationships and safe and respectful use of technology are covered within the computing and RSHE curriculums, and there is alignment between both programmes of study. However, society is rapidly changing, and bringing new opportunities and challenges, including those presented by AI, and those relating to global political developments and climate change. These will require particular knowledge and skills to address, and to ensure that our young people can harness future opportunities and fend off threats to our democracy and cohesion.

Our ongoing work in this area will consider whether there is sufficient coverage of these (and other) areas of knowledge and skills within subjects, and how content can remain relevant and support young people to thrive in a fast-changing world. This could involve further embedding various knowledge and skills across different parts of the curriculum. For example, we must ensure that young people are equipped to shape an increasingly AI-powered world. They need to be able to navigate misinformation and other challenges, and they also need to be able to take the opportunities that will be available to those who can become the most skilful shapers and operators of AI. This requires a strong focus on maths, but also the development of sophisticated analytical skills, and higher order domain-specific problem-solving ability, rooted in secure knowledge.

Challenges with specific subjects

There is strong evidence that securing mastery in a subject is vital for raising standards and enabling future expertise. We have also heard consistently that in some subjects the current construction and balance of content appears to be inhibiting this, which may:

- impede mastery and young people obtaining an appropriate depth of understanding, hindering progress and undermining standards;
- reduce teachers' professional capacity to consolidate, tailor, adapt or extend material for their pupils; and
- reduce the time available for breadth of learning, with a knock-on impact on time for other subjects.

A restriction of opportunities for mastery (the process of ensuring students understand a particular foundational concept before moving to the next one)³⁵ has implications for progress: students need to be secure in core concepts and knowledge before moving forward to avoid gaps forming and growing (which are then hard to remedy). Moreover, mastery approaches are important from a social justice viewpoint as they have been shown to narrow the disadvantage gap when targeted support is given to students with gaps in understanding,³⁶ as well as because they incorporate high expectations that all students can successfully be supported to reach mastery of high-level content with the right support.

The causes of this apparent imbalance between breadth and depth are not always clear.

Many submissions have argued for improvements in a range of curriculum subjects. Some of these are minor (for example, citations of specific dated content), and some are major (for example, suggestions of a lack of efficacy in modern foreign language teaching in primary and transition to secondary).

In the next stage of the Review, we will conduct closer analysis to diagnose each subject's specific problems and explore and test a range of solutions.

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Diversity of content

Pupils told us that not being able to see themselves in the content they learn, or encountering negative portrayals, can be disempowering and demotivating, a point supported by wider evidence.³⁷ Ensuring that a diverse range of perspectives, experiences and representation are contained in set texts has also been seen to support student engagement and positive outcomes, alongside empathy and understanding of others.

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Academic pathway

Alongside A levels, newly reformed and titled 'Alternative Academic Qualifications' (AAQs) have been introduced, with small AAQs available in 'strategically important subjects'.⁵¹ They are designed for learners who want to progress through applied study and learners can choose to combine them with A levels, or technical qualifications, to make up a full study programme. They are distinct from A levels and, while their purpose is to support progression to higher education, they provide an opportunity for applied learning in vocational subjects. Further work is needed to consider the implications of introducing these qualifications, the different combinations of qualifications that can be studied together, and the outcomes they support for learners.

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Assessment

However, the Call for Evidence has highlighted areas where the system could work better for students and the education sector. A frequently raised concern is the impact of an intensive, high-stakes assessment system on wellbeing, due to the pressure that exams can place on students. Our polling of young people found that half of those who completed their key stage 4 exams or assessments in summer 2024 found it difficult (41%) or very difficult (10%) to cope with stress during the exam period. Similarly, for those who completed their 16 to 19 exams or assessments in summer 2024, over half of students found it difficult (39%) or very difficult (16%) to cope with the stress during that period.

As well as the volume of assessment, responses to the Call for Evidence have also focused on the weighting of exams relative to other forms of assessment (which can include written coursework, a performance or oral presentation). Previous reforms reduced the proportion of non-exam assessment at key stage 4. Some subjects saw reductions, such as modern foreign languages (from 60% non-exam assessment to 25%) and design and technology (from 60% to 50%), while others, including English literature, geography and history, saw non-exam assessment completely removed and are now wholly assessed by exams. This means that a student's grade is predominantly (or entirely) determined by a student's performance in exams 'on the

day', rather than being a reflection of their performance at different points across their course, which some respondents argued may not give all students the opportunity to fully demonstrate their capabilities. On the other hand, this approach mitigates against introductions of bias, and/or invalid means of help (especially given the prevalence of Generative AI).

We have also heard concerns that exams – coupled with the volume of content needing to be covered and their use in accountability measures – can lead to 'teaching to the test', with students spending too much curriculum time rote learning facts and model answer structures and revision at the expense of depth of understanding of the content. This squeezes out time spent developing the ability to synthesise and apply knowledge. As a result, some have called for greater diversity of assessment methods, both to better assess certain elements (in particular practical skills) and to allow more young people to demonstrate their skills and abilities.