

Edge Foundation's response to the House of Lords Education for 11–16 Year Olds Select Committee inquiry

1. Introduction

The Edge Foundation is an independent, politically impartial foundation dedicated to improving our education and skills sector to ensure it equips learners with the skills they need to succeed in work and life. We work [across the UK](#) and with international partners to develop good policy in this space. We would like to see the schools system equip young people with the skills they will need for wider life, the workplace, and for life-long learning. For this to be achieved we need a truly broad and balanced curriculum, a strong focus on employability through work experience and careers guidance, and an assessment system that is both rigorous and fit for purpose.

2. The case for change

Our current curriculum and assessment system is not working for many young people, teachers, and employers. Our recent report, [Schools for All? Young people's experiences of alienation in the English secondary school system](#), laid bare the problems facing our schools. Drawing on data from the [Young Lives, Young Futures](#) study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, the report highlighted that nearly half of 15–16-year-olds do not find school to be an enjoyable or meaningful experience. This was attributed to teaching methods that left them feeling disengaged, the pressure to take subjects that didn't interest them, and the emphasis on high-stakes exams.

Many young people feel disengaged because of the narrowness of the curriculum. The current accountability system encourages schools to offer a narrow range of subjects at GCSE level. Progress 8 measures for example, gives significant weight to EBacc subjects (English language and literature, maths, the sciences, geography or history, a language), which has led many schools to narrow their GCSE offer at the expense of non-EBacc subjects. There has been a dramatic fall in those taking creative and technical subjects at GCSE, with the uptake of Design and Technology GCSEs falling by 70% from 2010-22 and Art GCSEs falling by 40% in the same period.[1] The decline in arts in state secondary schools is having a disproportionate impact on those on the lowest incomes. Research by Onward shows that young people in the wealthiest decile are almost three times more likely to sing in a choir or play in a band or orchestra weekly, compared to those in the most deprived decile.[2]

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	Through classwork	Through homework	Through assessment	In other lessons	Through extra-curricular activities	In other activities throughout the day	Through interaction with peers	Not developed in school	Don't know
Problem solving	27.7%	16.4%	12.6%	3.8%	13.2%	3.8%	13.8%	5%	3.8%
Communication	23%	4.1%	1.4%	16.9%	13.5%	4.7%	33.8%	2%	0.7%
Self-management	15.9%	25.8%	15.2%	10.6%	9.8%	3%	4.5%	12.1%	3%
Teamwork	28.5%	4.2%	0.7%	9.7%	16%	9.7%	27.8%	2.8%	0.7%
Creativity	23.1%	18.8%	6.8%	6%	13.7%	2.6%	8.5%	17.1%	3.4%
Numeracy	38.2%	21.5%	18.1%	4.9%	6.3%	2.1%	2.8%	2.8%	3.5%
Digital skills	21.5%	20.6%	6.5%	5.6%	5.6%	4.7%	6.5%	22.4%	6.5%
Being informed	12.3%	4.6%	4.6%	24.6%	12.3%	18.5%	12.3%	9.2%	1.5%
Confidence	15.5%	5.4%	3.9%	13.2%	10.9%	5.4%	2.4%	20.2%	1.6%
Ambition/ motivation	13.1%	8.8%	13.9%	9.5%	13.1%	8%	15.3%	14.6%	3.6%
Resilience	14.5%	15.3%	17.7%	6.5%	8.1%	5.6%	8.9%	15.3%	8.1%
Reflection	12.6%	15.7%	26.8%	10.2%	3.1%	9.4%	8.7%	11%	2.4%

Table displaying survey results in response to: 'Please select where you believe you are developing each skill/competency. Responses indicate that skills such as numeracy, team-working, and problem solving were the skills most developed through classwork, however skills such as being informed, reflection, and motivation were least developed (source: [The Edge Foundation](#))

In our recent [report](#) on learners' perspectives on employability skills in schools, learners reported that creativity was the skill least developed in school after digital skills.

This is concerning given the need for more creative skills in our economy. Our [Skills Shortages Summary Bulletin](#) raises concerns that the jobs of the future, such as information technology and telecommunication directors, will demand both creative and technical skills.

The desire for accountability reform is growing and cannot be underestimated. Alongside ourselves, a number of organisations including ASCL, the NEU, and the [NASWUT](#) are calling for reform. At [Edge](#) we have called for the development of a new "school report card" reporting on a broader range of factors such as wellbeing, school culture, and inclusion; unleashing the potential of schools. We would strongly encourage the committee to consider the implications of accountability reform further.

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Mentimeter responses showing young people's attitudes towards exams (source: [The Edge Foundation](#))

The pressure of exams is a particular source of strain for learners. In our March 2022 [youth roundtable](#), young people shared with us their frustrations at the exam system, with the majority finding exams excessive in number, too narrow, unfair, and unhelpful in motivating them to learn.

According to the most recent [Youth Voice Census 2022](#), co-sponsored by Edge, 49.1% of respondents stated that assessments have a negative impact on their mental health. As our [Schools for All](#) report highlighted, the strain of exams particularly impacts those who are predicted low attainment. Of those surveyed who were predicted a 7 or higher in Maths and English GCSEs, 67% reported that they enjoy school on the whole, but this dropped to 42% among those predicted a 3 or lower in those subjects. The report also highlighted that pressure on teachers to get students through exams has limited the pastoral support they can offer, at a further cost to students' wellbeing, particularly SEND students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The focus of exams for those taking GCSEs and A-Levels has also contributed to the narrowing of the curriculum. Changes to GCSEs and A Levels in 2014, which emphasise written exams over coursework, incentivise schools to focus on 'teaching to the test' rather than encouraging deeper learning and developing wider skills. In our 2018 report, [Joint Dialogue: How are schools developing real employability skills?](#), 47% of teachers surveyed found that these changes resulted in fewer opportunities to develop the skills and competencies demanded by employers. A third of these respondents attributed this to the need to focus on rote learning.

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In the [second phase](#) of our Joint Dialogue series, learners reported that exams post-16 limit opportunities for extra-curricular activities, which are widely acknowledged amongst learners as being important in the development of employability skills. Again, a [growing number of organisations](#) are calling for assessment reform and we cannot underestimate the desire for change here.

3. Our vision for 11-16 education

In response to these concerns, we would like to see a school system that is engaging for all students and develops a wide portfolio of skills, underpinned by a rigorous assessment system. To achieve this, we must re-examine our approach to the curriculum, accountability, and assessment.

Recommendation 1: Develop a long-term strategy for the education sector

The education sector has experienced significant policy churn in recent years, with a revolving door of secretaries of state and ministers at the Department for Education. There has also been an absence of policy memory at the Department, as outlined in our [Learning from the Past](#) work. The [Schools White Paper](#) published last year does not go far enough to address the structural issues in our education system outlined above. The Government must develop a long-term plan for the education sector to address how schools can deliver the skills needed for the future of work and promote pupil wellbeing. It is essential that this strategy has cross-party support and engages with the lessons learned from past policies and international best practice. The strategy could be developed by taking the approach of Scotland's ongoing [National Discussion on Education](#), which aims to develop a 20-year vision for education. Most notably, Scotland's Discussion provided an opportunity for key stakeholders such as children, young people, parents, and educators to share their views.

Recommendation 2: Launch a review of the National Curriculum

As part of this strategy, we would like to see a systems-wide review to design an engaging curriculum that incorporates a truly broad spectrum of knowledge, skills and behaviour and links this to relevant real-world examples. The review should consider bold approaches from across the UK such as the [Curriculum for Wales](#), which takes a holistic approach to learners to ensure that they leave school as ambitious, capable learners, enterprising, creative contributors, ethical, informed citizens, and healthy, confident individuals.

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All learning under the curriculum is underpinned by the mandatory cross-curricular skills of literacy, numeracy and digital competence. With regards to developing wider skills, the review can learn from examples closer to home through the bold approaches pioneered in schools in our [Edge Future Learning Network](#). For example, [Livingstone Academy Bournemouth](#) combines the knowledge prescribed by the National Curriculum with the development of 11 critical 'future skills', such as entrepreneurialism and media literacy.

Schools have also taken great strides in linking the curriculum to the world of work. In the Isle of Wight, [Cowes Enterprise College](#) has developed an integrated curriculum approach at Key Stage 3, designed in partnership with local maritime employers, teaching national curriculum content through a maritime lens, applying the knowledge and skills learned to real-world problems such as the mechanics of a boat. The programme has seen increased engagement and attainment particularly amongst its most disadvantaged students. Find out more about Maritime Futures, co-sponsored by the Edge Foundation, [here](#). Support for schools to deliver essential skills is also available from organisations such as [Skills Builder Partnership](#). The Skills Builder Universal Framework takes eight essential skills (Listening and Speaking; Problem Solving and Creativity; Staying Positive and Aiming High; and Leadership and Teamwork) and breaks them down into a sequence of 16 measurable, teachable steps, taking individuals from being an absolute beginner through to mastery. Skills Builder's [research](#) estimates that a shortage of these essential skills cost the UK economy £22.2bn in 2022.

The Government should consider how these approaches can be scaled up to be embedded in the National Curriculum. It has an opportunity here to [learn from past policies](#), such as [14-19 Diplomas](#), which combined general and vocational qualifications to create qualifications which contained the knowledge and skills needed for employment or higher level study in a particular sector. Another past policy it can learn from is the [Young Apprenticeships Programme](#), which offered Key Stage 4 students access to vocational education and training alongside their core curriculum in school, including a significant offer of 50 days of work placement over the two years of study. Any Government programme should focus on delivering the skills needed for the future needed for the future, particularly broad employability skills, digital skills, and green skills, as highlighted in our [skills shortages work](#). The Government should also re-commit to the Arts Premium to allow schools to invest in arts activities.

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Recommendation 3: Launch a review of school accountability measures

The Government should review accountability measures such as Progress 8 and the EBacc to explore their impact on the breadth of subjects taken at GCSE. The Edge Foundation is calling for this in our [Save Our Subjects](#) campaign that we have launched in partnership with the Independent Society of Musicians.

The campaign aims to halt the decline in arts and technology subjects at GCSE. The role of Ofsted should also be reviewed to ensure that the inspection and accountability regime moves from an adversarial to a performance improvement role, similar to inspectorates in the other three nations.^[3]

Recommendation 4: Launch a review of assessment methods in schools

In addition to reviewing accountability measures, the Government should also look at how the current assessment system can be improved to ensure that it is fit for purposes. Any review must take into account the [various roles that assessment plays](#) in our education system to ensure that the system remains functional. Broad changes should be introduced gradually, giving the system and the education workforce time to adjust. The review should consider a number of alternative methods of assessment to be introduced alongside written exams, such as coursework, oral presentations, extended investigations, group projects, teacher assessments, and multiple-choice assessments. These examination methods should be suited to the subject they are assessing. Allowing some assessment to be formative rather than summative can also reduce the pressure on students, while testing their understanding of the curriculum. Existing qualifications that encourage project-based learning, such as Foundation, Higher, and Extended Project Qualifications, should also be promoted in schools (with appropriate government support). Assessment can be used to recognise a broader range of skills, such as micro-credentials or learner profiles, [such as the one designed by Rethinking Assessment](#). Some schools have already cut down on the number of GCSEs they take. Schools in the [School Directed Courses Consortium](#) develop and deliver their own curricular offerings at Key Stage 4 so that students can take fewer GCSEs and experience deeper learning and a broader range of assessment methods. Bedales, which is a co-educational day and boarding school, has developed its own [Bedales Assessed Courses](#), which are two-year courses across a range of 14 subjects which combine continuous assessment with a final written exam.

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Lessons can also be learned from the approach taken across the four nations. In Scotland, [Professor Louise Hayward's interim report on the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment](#) made a number of suggestions that we think should be considered in England.

These include a significant reduction in external assessment, better integration of academic and vocational qualifications, recognition of a broader range of competencies and skills, a greater focus on digital assessments, and the introduction of a Senior Phase Leaving Certificate.

Recommendation 5: Better support for teachers

Teachers are facing an extremely taxing workload, with the [Government's own research](#) finding that 72% of teachers and leaders disagreed that their workload was acceptable. Any structural changes must therefore take into account teachers' workloads and would need to be incorporated into teacher Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and Initial Teacher Training (ITT) so that educators feel equipped to own and drive these shifts. The review of the curriculum should consider teacher workload and options to free up teacher time and autonomy. We would like to see more freedom for teachers to plan and collaborate. This should include clear career development, more training in new teaching approaches, and opportunities to work directly with employers. The Edge Foundation has supported [Teacher Externships](#) whereby teachers visit local employers to see first-hand how their subject is used in the workplace and discussing different career pathways relevant to that subject. They then integrate this into the classroom by planning a project linked to the curriculum, or developing curriculum-based resources, using the business they have visited as the context and setting. Of those that we surveyed about the programme, 100% of employers and 93% of teachers agreed that they would recommend it to others. We currently offer training for schools, colleges, Multi-Academy Trusts and Local Enterprise Partnerships to execute externships themselves. Programmes such as these should be considered when developing teacher career progression. We would also like to see pedagogical approaches such as [Real World Learning](#), [Project Based Learning](#), and [Community Connected Learning](#), embedded into teachers' ITT and CPD to encourage more engaging teaching practices.

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Recommendation 6: More workplace experiences in schools

Careers advice should be embedded as part of the curriculum by building on the Gatsby Benchmarks and work of the Careers Enterprise Company to create a statutory entitlement for all young people to workplace experience and a range of pathways. Particular focus should be given to benchmark 4 of the Gatsby benchmarks – integrating careers into the curriculum, where we need to place careers at the centre of curriculum, through real examples that help bring learning to life. Excellent work is already being done on this in [School 21](#), a member of the Big Education MAT. Its Real World Learning programme for students in Year 10 and 12 offers students the opportunity to spend half a day each week working on a live project with a local employer. This allows them to put their learning into practice and explore different career pathways. Careers education should focus on young people's passions and existing skills to guide them onto a pathway that they will find rewarding and fulfilling.

4. Conclusion

There are many things that work well in our schools system and it is heartening to see the many wonderful examples set by the schools mentioned here. However broader structural changes are needed to ensure that schools are capable of delivering the skills needed for our economy while securing the wellbeing of all learners. Piecemeal changes will no longer suffice in the absence of a long-term strategy. We hope to see secondary schools and the education system more generally become a core priority for this and any future government.

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[1] Cultural Learning Alliance, Arts GCSE and A Level entries 2022, <https://www.culturallearningalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/CLA-GCSE-A-level-entries-2022.pdf>

[2] Onward (2022), Beyond School: Why we need a new approach to school enrichment, <https://www.ukonward.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Beyond-school-enrichment-onward.pdf>

[3] UCL and Edge Foundation (2021) - Inspection across the UK: how the four nations intend to contribute to school improvement - <https://www.edge.co.uk/research/projects/research-reports/Inspection-across-the-UK-how-the-four-nations-intend-to-contribute-to-school-improvement/>