

British Academy response to the Department for Education's consultation on the Advanced British Standard

20 March 2024

Background

In December 2023, the Department for Education opened a consultation on the Advanced British Standard, which is a proposal for a new Baccalaureate-style qualification framework for 16-19 year-olds that intends to replace the current A-level and T-level qualification system. This document comprises the response of the British Academy to this consultation. As the UK's national academy for the arts, humanities and social sciences, we have focused on the questions that have most direct impact on and pertinence to our disciplines. Our response has been informed by our existing higher education and research policy work, as well as input from some of our Fellowship.

Chapter 1: Aims and purposes of reform to 16-19 education

11. We propose several overarching aims and principles that should underpin the introduction and design of the Advanced British Standard. To what extent do you support these proposed aims and principles?

Somewhat Support

The British Academy may support the aims and principles behind the Advanced British Standard as a way of introducing a broader, more balanced, interconnected and equitable school curriculum, which allows and encourages all students, in all areas, to study a range of disciplines, including the arts, humanities and social sciences alongside science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

The rapid pace at which society is developing creates an imperative to design a dynamic system that is better aligned with and responsive to society's complex and changing needs. The Advanced British Standard, if planned and implemented carefully, collaboratively and sustainably with the sector, could be an opportunity to meet this demand and provide young people with the [connected knowledge](#) and broad set of skills needed to meet the complex socioeconomic, technological and ecological demands of the future.

The Academy also endorses a post-16 core programme of maths and English. We have previously jointly advocated with the Royal Society for increasing uptake of post-16 maths through an accessible Core Maths programme.¹ We believe that mathematical and quantitative skills, as well as the cultural knowledge and skills such as communication, critical thinking and problem solving that are taught through English, are central for encouraging social mobility and driving economic growth.² It is key, however, that these subjects are delivered in a flexible, equitable and accessible way that take into account students' varying needs and previous attainment.

We also see potential for the revival of post-16 languages education. The ABS might be an opportunity to increase and make equitable languages education and provision at the upper secondary level and close the UK's languages skills gap. In line with our languages programme, and in particular [Towards a National Languages Strategy](#),³ we recommend that a strategy to increase languages uptake in 16-19 education is built into the core aims and designs of the ABS, and reiterate our call for statutory entitlement for all students to learn a language as part of the curriculum, and as part of all routes.

12. What do you think is the most important thing that the Advanced British Standard could achieve?

Preliminary findings from an upcoming research project (report forthcoming summer 2024) that we are conducting with the National Foundation for Educational Research show a distinct longitudinal trend in the patterns of subject choice taken in 16-19 education: over the past 20 years, and the past 10 in particular, the number and range of subjects studied by students at A-level and AS-level has become smaller and more narrow.

These changes have had a particularly negative effect on uptake of humanities and arts subjects. This trend is a disadvantage to students and to society more broadly. Research has shown that students who study a broader range of subjects go on to have higher earnings.⁴ Further, as [the British Academy's Skills programme](#) has shown, valuable and beneficial skills are gained through studying SHAPE subjects, such as communication, research and analysis, creative and digital skills.^{5 6 7} The UK's world-leading sectors of the economy – such as the creative industries, financial services, legal and professional services, and the university and research sector - all rely predominantly on SHAPE skills. Therefore, reversing the decline in uptake of arts and humanities subjects is important to ensure students are gaining the full range of skills that are vital to a modern economy.

We welcome reforms that work towards reversing the trend of student subject choices being increasingly narrowed into one disciplinary area, and instead provide students, in all areas and of all backgrounds, with a broader curriculum that in turn provides them with a broad

¹ "Core Maths qualifications are 'practical and valuable' to students of all disciplines, say British Academy and Royal Society" The British Academy, 26 January 2022

² The British Academy (2017) [The Right Skills: Celebrating Skills in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences](#).

³ The British Academy, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Association of School and College Leaders, the British Council and Universities UK (2020) [Towards a National Languages Strategy: Education and Skills](#).

⁴ Robinson, D. and Bunting, F. (2021) [A Narrowing Path to Success: 16-19 curriculum breadth and employment outcomes](#).

⁵ The British Academy (2017) [The Right Skills: Celebrating Skills in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences](#).

⁶ The British Academy (2020) [Qualified for the Future: Quantifying demand for arts, humanities and social science skills](#).

⁷ The British Academy (2022) [SHAPE Skills at Work](#).

knowledge base and skillset that both widens participation in further and higher education and prepares them for a complex and rapidly changing economy and future.

13. If you have further views on the aims, principles and purposes of the Advanced British Standard, or anything else covered in Chapter 1, please share below.

The British Academy would like to stress the importance of avoiding a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics)/SHAPE (Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts for People and the Economy) dichotomy, as well as an academic/vocational dichotomy, in the subject choice of learners, and instead encourage an approach to post-16 education that centres connected knowledge across the disciplines and the associated benefits to society and the economy in doing so. Collaboration between STEM and SHAPE is increasingly visible and necessary across all spheres of research and the economy, and particularly in finding solutions to the complex challenges that face societies. If the ABS were to encourage a connected knowledge approach, this would work to reverse some of the trends that we have observed in our Subject Pathways work, where student choice has become more narrowed and grouped within one discipline. Instead, students would leave post-16 education – whichever route or pathways they choose – with a more rounded educational experience and a more multifaceted skillset.

Chapter 2: What students will study in the Advanced British Standard

Section 1: ABS programmes that students will study

14. We propose two main programmes at Level 3: Advanced British Standard and Advanced British Standard (occupational). Each will contain a range of separate components to support students. To what extent do you support the proposed design for the Level 3 Advanced British Standard programmes?

Somewhat support

Preliminary findings from upcoming research that we are conducting with the National Foundation for Educational Research on 16-19 subject choice suggests that AS and A level decoupling – where AS levels became separate, standalone qualifications rather than counting towards the A-level – has led to students studying fewer subjects and qualifications on average, and the range of subjects studied by students has narrowed as a result. These changes have had a particularly negative effect on uptake of humanities and arts subjects, including what have traditionally been large humanities subjects such as English, History, Religious Studies and Modern Languages. We worry that students are missing out on the opportunities provided by these subjects, including the acquisition of key cultural knowledge and skills as well as the fostering of creativity and critical thinking.

The major/minor system, as proposed in the programme design, might help reverse the trend of narrowing subject choice and allow students to broaden their curriculums and study a range of disciplines, which opens up more opportunities for potential employment paths and higher earnings.⁸ The minor subject option in particular could improve the take-up and health

⁸ Robinson, D. and Bunting, F. (2021) *A Narrowing Path to Success: 16-19 curriculum breadth and employment outcomes*.

of subjects that have suffered most as a result of the narrowing of subject choice, such as humanities and arts subjects. We stress that the broadened curriculum should also apply to students in occupational routes, and that students within these pathways have the same breadth of options and flexibility as those in more academic routes rather than being relegated to a narrower choice of subjects labelled as vocational. It is crucial however to ensure that the broadened curriculum does not result in unreasonable or unmanageable burden to students or to providers in the process.

Section 2: Design of ABS Components

21. Once rolled out, we anticipate that the Advanced British Standard qualification framework will supersede the varied Level 3 qualification landscape for 16–19 year-olds (including A levels and T Levels etc.).

We welcome the ambition to “remove the artificial separation between technical and academic qualification”, however we worry that the current proposals might not sufficiently address the problem of such a divide. We suggest it might not be necessary to label the occupational programme as such – instead of risking the entrenchment of a two-track system, the focus could be on creating a framework that is sufficiently flexible and well-resourced to accommodate students’ varying and multifaceted choices and needs, with a focus on ensuring access and participation for all young people. The important factors to consider here are financial sustainability, long-term planning and clear communication to and with students, parents and teachers, in order to deliver a system that everyone has confidence in and that offers clear opportunity to all students, with delineated routes into and through education.

We also note that T-levels have only recently been introduced, and are still yet to fully be rolled out. This means there might not be sufficient time for them to embed into the education system before the qualification landscape is reformed again. We therefore express some hesitancy at pushing through policy reforms before this previous reform has fully had the chance to embed and take shape, and before their effectiveness can be fully assessed.

22. To what extent do you support the proposal for how subjects will be selected to be included in the Level 3 Advanced British Standard programmes?

Somewhat support

The Academy welcomes the commitment to “work closely with employers, HE providers and subject experts to ensure that subject content is fit for purpose and supports progression”. We encourage the government to draw on the expertise of our Fellowship in this regard, in particular our Education section.

We have a number of recommendations that relate to Languages subjects specifically and are based on our extensive work and engagement in this space as joint leaders of the *Towards a National Languages Strategy* work previously mentioned.⁹ We suggest that students should continue to be encouraged to engage with languages at major level while the minor subject option should permit them to acquire a language from the beginning (*ab initio*) as well as continuing engagement with languages previously studied at GCSE. Differential levels of attainment in languages could be described in relation to the Common European Framework of Reference for languages. We also advise that Home, Heritage and Community languages should be available as an option as part of a broader commitment to supporting the multiple

⁹ The British Academy, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Association of School and College Leaders, the British Council and Universities UK (2020) *Towards a National Languages Strategy: Education and Skills*.

languages spoken in the UK. To that end, we recommend caution around the presentation of English as the only ‘native language’ of the UK. English is indeed spoken across the UK, but it is not the country’s only native official language. Finally, we recommend that students who take the occupational route could have the option to study a language with a relevant vocational focus in the subject curriculum.

We caution that the proposal of a “simpler menu” of subjects does not lead to any decrease in the variety, flexibility or portability of subjects students can study. It is vital that all students, in all areas, can study a broad curriculum that includes a variety of both SHAPE and STEM subjects. We stress that this should apply to students in all pathways, so that students taking vocational pathways have the same breadth of options and flexibility as those taking academic pathways. Therefore, we suggest careful consideration of what the minimum offer is that should be available to all students, ensuring that offer includes sufficient breadth whilst still being feasible to deliver.

25. To what extent do you support the proposal for increased teaching time relative to self-directed study? We particularly welcome any evidence of how this is balanced currently.

Somewhat support

We recognise that students in 16-19 education in England have less teaching time than students enrolled in comparable education systems in other countries^{10,11}, and we recognise that a broader curriculum would necessarily require more teaching time to provide adequate breadth and depth.

We are aware however that this would require a significant amount of funding in a sector already experiencing funding shortfalls, which raises questions about feasibility. Research from London Economics indicates that the funding rate per student per year would have to be raised by £1,760 to provide the additional teaching time proposed.¹² Crucially, there are issues surrounding recruitment and retention of teachers that already exist in the current system, especially in certain subjects such as Modern Languages. We are therefore concerned that pushing through major reforms, without significant support, in what is already a challenging time for teachers, providers, and the education sector more widely could lead to an exacerbation of current problems in the sector and to a continued fall in both the recruitment and retention of teachers. We raised similar concerns in our response to the Initial Teacher Training Market Review in 2021.¹³ In the case of post-16 reform, we continue to support a broader and more balanced curriculum, as we do not necessarily believe that these problems are unsurmountable. We do suggest however that issues of teacher recruitment and retention need to be seriously listened to and addressed with adequate resourcing, and we encourage the government to work closely with relevant stakeholders on sustainable solutions.

Section 3: A strong core of maths and English

29. We propose that we develop the English and maths offer within these reforms around certain principles. To what extent do you support these principles?

Fully Support

¹⁰ UCL IoE (2016) *Tuition time in upper secondary education (16-19): Comparing six national education systems*.

¹¹ Department for Education (2023), *A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard*.

¹² London Economics (2024) *The Funding Shortfall in Sixth Form Education*.

¹³ The British Academy (2021) *Initial teacher training (ITT) market review: Response from the British Academy*.

The British Academy has previously expressed the position of being supportive of a post-16 core maths to be included in the curriculum, and we are similarly supportive of core English.¹⁴ We believe that all young people should have the opportunity to study these subjects in some capacity, as they provide young people with a crucial set of skills that encourage economic and social mobility as well as drive economic growth. We would welcome in particular the principle of providing students with options, wherein there will be a variety of flexible options available to students to suit the diverse needs, pathways and previous educational experiences of the 16-19 cohort. This is crucial to ensuring that the provision of core English and maths is an opportunity and advantage for young people, rather than a deterrence that hinders participation and progression.

35. If you have further views on what students will study as part of the Advanced British Standard, or anything else covered in Chapter 2, please share below.

Languages are key facilitating subjects that improve students' literacy and oracy skills.¹⁵ They are also strategically vital and economically beneficial to the UK – a 2022 report by RAND and the University of Cambridge showed that an increase in secondary school students learning one of four different languages could increase UK GDP by billions of pounds over 30 years.¹⁶ Yet Languages have observed a decline in study,¹⁷ and this is concerning for the UK's already low linguistic capacity. Further, we have seen that the decline in take-up has also had a disproportionately large effect on socio-economically and regionally disadvantaged groups. We therefore recommend non-statutory guidance that encourages students to include a language in their subject combinations, at major or minor level, with the option to study a language *ab initio* in the minor route. While we see the minor route as an opportunity to creatively expand provision of languages, we strongly caution against a situation where languages are only encouraged or provided at minor level. Further, resources should be prioritised to ensure equal languages provision across all providers and areas, therefore consideration of the supply of language teachers and language assistants as well as the adequacy of provision pre-16 is also vital. We have previously recommended the introduction of an Advanced Modern Languages Premium for study of modern languages at Level 3 as a levelling-up incentive to schools in England that have low levels of provision and take-up (see our joint response on the future of languages to the Comprehensive Spending Review 2021).¹⁸

Chapter 4: Supporting 16-19 providers

43. What strengths in the current approach to 16-19 education should we aim to preserve under the Advanced British Standard?

The current A-level programme has observed increasingly good outcomes in terms of progression into higher education and training. The depth and early specialisation of the current A-level programme, as well as the emphasis on self-directed study, prepares many students well for higher education and specialised degree programmes. These are strengths that might be preserved to ensure smooth progression into higher education for those who choose this pathway. We might encourage that within the new qualification system, students easily have the flexibility and opportunity to increase their number of majors at the expense of

¹⁴ The British Academy's *English Studies Provision in UK Higher Education* report, while generally focusing on HE, also provides an overview of English Studies provision in further education as well as an evidence-based discussion of key skills students gain from studying English.

¹⁵ The British Academy, "[The Cognitive Benefits of Language Learning](#)"

¹⁶ Ayres-Bennett, Wendy, Marco Hafner, Eliane Dufresne, and Erez Yerushalmi, [The economic value to the UK of speaking other languages](#), RAND Corporation

¹⁷ The British Academy: [SHAPE Observatory](#)

¹⁸ The British Academy, ASCL and the APPG on Modern Languages (2021) [Submissions to the Comprehensive Spending Review 2021](#)

a minor subject if they choose, in order to increase subject breadth while still maintaining the same depth and specialisation of the A-level programme. We also note that EPQs have been positive in providing students with independent research skills, and therefore see the benefit of retaining these within the reforms. Finally, the combination of A-levels and BTECs has offered learners flexibility of choice, with qualifications that offer portability to different tertiary pathways. This has served those considering progression to HE well, enabling access and widening participation over recent decades. This ability to provide clear pathways to further study for a range of learners should be retained in the new system.

Overall, we acknowledge that the current system has worked well for those who progress to higher education – and in particular those from less disadvantaged backgrounds and who have higher previous attainment. It has not worked as well for the other half of young people who do not take this path. If the ABS, or any post-16 reform, is to be successful, it should focus on how the 16-18 framework supports these learners who have not been able to benefit from the system, while still protecting the strengths that encourage progression to higher education as mentioned above.

46. We are interested in the changes that may need to be made to deliver the Advanced British Standard for all students, regardless of where they live. What changes do you think may be required in the following areas:

46c. Provider landscape?

At the Academy, we advocate for equity in provision and right to access: every young person should have access to options to study a broad variety of subjects – including social sciences, humanities and arts subjects– at all levels in their own locality. This right to access and equity in provision should be implemented and protected in any reforms or changes that are made to the curriculum, qualification system and/or provider landscape. This will require substantial local area and cross-institutional planning, as well as substantial amounts of resourcing and funding given the funding shortfalls observed in schools and colleges in the past years which have led to loss of provision across certain areas.

47. If you have further views on how the Advanced British Standard could impact 16-19 providers, or anything else covered in Chapter 4, please share below.

There is a risk of unintended consequences of providers needing to rationalise provision through a new framework. For example, with the rollout of compulsory maths and English, providers might need to focus more resources into these areas at the expense of other, non-core subjects. This was observed in secondary providers in some localities with the introduction of the EBacc.¹⁹ The result of this might be an exacerbation of funding shortfalls currently faced in sixth form and further education.²⁰ This might then lead to the emergence of geographic inequalities of choice – we have seen this previously within languages, where there are regional disparities in provision. This may in particular affect provision of humanities, arts and creative subjects, where we have observed declines in provision and uptake. Such disparities would disproportionately affect students living in disadvantaged areas, and risk limiting their opportunities rather than expanding them.

¹⁹ Coulter, S., Josad, A. and Scales, J. (2023) *Ending the Big Squeeze on Skills: How to Futureproof Education in England*. Tony Blair Institute for Social Change.

²⁰ London Economics (2024) *The Funding Shortfall in Sixth Form Education*.

Chapter 5: Maximising the benefits of the ABS for students and the wider system

48. What changes to pre-16 education do you think will be needed to create effective pathways into the Advanced British Standard?

The Academy welcomes the commitment to curriculum breadth implicit in the ABS proposals. However, we anticipate some challenges with how the ABS docks into Level 2 qualifications. We are mindful that without reforms at GCSE, many of the decisions about post-16 study will have already been made by students much earlier in the system. We would urge that clear consideration is given as to how the GCSE subject choice, requirements and incentives on schools intersect with the aims and possibilities of the ABS.

52. If you have views on how to ensure the Advanced British Standard provides effective pathways into post-18 education or study, please share below.

The British Academy encourages close engagement with the higher education sector to make sure transitions in programmes of study, assessments and admissions criteria are managed smoothly. It is important that all potential effects and questions around entry requirements, admissions and student experience across disciplines, are communicated effectively to providers, with adequate time to prepare and adapt. We note that previously there have been problems in this regard – for example, a 2018 paper based on a British Academy funded study found that a majority of surveyed undergraduate English course providers reported that they had not been involved in recent A level reforms, and, more concerningly, that changes to content and assessment of A level English had not been communicated effectively.²¹

53. If you have views on how to ensure the Advanced British Standard reforms meet the needs of employers, please share below.

The British Academy's Skills programme has published a series of reports that show how SHAPE (Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts for People and the Economy) skillsets are in high demand across work sectors, given that employers value and need the skills learned through studying SHAPE subjects such as communication, collaboration, problem-solving, research and analysis, and adaptivity.²² SHAPE subjects, and the core skills that they provide, prepare students for a range of pathways and roles that provide value to society and the economy in sectors as diverse as trade, education, creative industries and healthcare.²³ Therefore, reversing the decline in uptake of arts and humanities subjects, and making sure students include SHAPE in their curriculum, is important to ensure students are gaining the full range of skills that are vital to employers.

By broadening students' curricula and emphasising the connectedness between subjects and disciplines, while simultaneously providing clear routes into specific careers or further specialised study, the ABS reforms should provide all students, no matter their chosen pathway, with a core knowledge base and flexible skillset, featuring a combination of hard and soft skills. This in turn will provide employers with a workforce that is sufficiently specialised

²¹ Marcello Giovanelli, Billy Clark & Andrea Macrae (2018) Responding to reform: how aware are higher education English providers of A level reforms and how have they responded to them?, *English in Education*, 52:3, 248-262. DOI: 10.1080/04250494.2018.1527178

²² The British Academy (2022) *SHAPE Skills at Work*.

²³ The British Academy (2020) *Qualified for the Future: Quantifying demand for arts, humanities and social science skills*.

but also highly adaptable, innovative and capable of finding creative solutions to complex challenges. Such qualities will be increasingly important to employers in an economic and social context that is rapidly changing and increasingly multidisciplinary.

57. If you have further views on the wider implications of the Advanced British Standard, or anything else covered in Chapter 5, please share below.

The feasibility and success of the ABS, and any post-16 reform, will be largely dependent on resourcing, funding and long-term financial sustainability. We note with concern the most recent Institute for Fiscal Studies report, which outlines how ‘even with the additional funding set out in recent spending reviews, college spending, which includes spending on both sixth-form colleges and FE colleges, will still be around 10% lower per student in 2024–25 than in 2010–11, while school sixth-form spending per sixth-form student will be 23% below 2010–11 levels’.²⁴ This, in addition to uncertainty about future costs and student numbers as well as concerns about staffing, creates a difficult financial environment that requires consideration and addressing before any significant qualification or curriculum reforms might feasibly be undertaken. We are concerned that insufficient addressing of these problems while undertaking reform would lead to negative consequences for student opportunities, experiences and outcomes, with students from disadvantaged backgrounds being disproportionately affected.

58. If you have further views on anything else associated with the Advanced British Standard not covered in the questions throughout the consultation, please share below.

As referenced throughout our response, the British Academy has commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research to conduct research on post-16 subject choice in England in the past 20 years. This research uses data from the National Pupil Database to explore how various factors, especially student characteristics and changes in educational policy, have affected what subjects – and combination of subjects – students choose to study at Level 3. We have mentioned some of our relevant early findings throughout our response to this consultation. The full report and data analysis is due to be published in summer 2024, and the findings will be pertinent to the sector and to policymakers working at all stages of the education pipeline. We will be sharing our findings widely, and we are looking forward to working with the government and with policymakers to ensure that this research can inform future educational policy decisions, in particular those around 16-19 reform.

²⁴ Institute for Fiscal Studies (2023) *Annual Report on Education Spending in England: 2023*, p.70