

British Academy response to the Department for Education's consultation on Key Stage 4 performance measures

May 2026

Background

In spring 2026, the Department for Education conducted [a consultation](#) on key stage 4 performance measures and targeted RISE extension. The British Academy has responded to the first three questions of this consultation, related to proposed changes to the Progress 8 performance measure model. 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. The positions and recommendations outlined in our below answers stem from our responses ([General](#) and [Languages-focussed](#)) to the Department for Education's 2024 Call for Evidence to the Curriculum and Assessment Review.

Question 11: How far do you agree that these changes to the Progress 8 model strike a better balance between breadth and flexibility compared with the current P8? Please explain your views.

The British Academy has consistently argued that all young people should enjoy a broad and balanced curriculum in practice, not just in theory, across each stage of the education system.¹ The rapid pace at which society is developing requires a broad and dynamic curriculum that is better aligned with, and responsive to, society's complex and changing needs. Exposure to skills and knowledge bases from a wide variety of disciplines – both STEM and SHAPE (Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts for People and the Economy) – is vital for equipping young people with the tools needed to face the future, and for creating a highly qualified and versatile labour force for productivity and economic growth.² The British Academy agrees that the proposed changes to the Progress 8 model have the potential to strike a better balance between breadth and flexibility, and to work towards a genuinely broad and balanced curriculum. We welcome the addition of the breadth slots in particular, where students will choose two of the three

¹ The British Academy (2024), [Response to the Department for Education's Curriculum and Assessment Review Call for Evidence: General Response](#), p. 3.; The British Academy (2024), [Response to the Department for Education's Curriculum and Assessment Review Call for Evidence: Languages Subjects](#) (p. 3).

² The British Academy (2020), [Qualified for the Future](#), p.4.

available subject categories (Humanities, Creative, and Languages), as this will ensure SHAPE subjects are protected and incentivised within the curriculum alongside STEM subjects.

We welcome the inclusion of creative subjects as a category, as previous curricular reforms and performance measures have excluded arts subjects, and consequently, GCSE entries in arts subjects have declined by 47% since 2010.³ We anticipate that this new model will result in an uptake in arts and creative subjects, which would be a positive development.⁴

However, the Academy is concerned about the uptake of languages subjects under the new Progress 8 model. Previously, the inclusion of languages as a core subject within the EBacc provided incentive for students to study languages in a context of declining uptake. We are aware that the EBacc was not a silver bullet: the level of EBacc pupil entries for GCSE in languages subjects saw no significant increase, and of pupils who entered four out of the five EBacc components in 2024, 88.4% were missing the languages component.⁵ However, the introduction of the EBacc in 2010 did stabilise the decline in uptake of languages subjects seen since 2004 when languages stopped being compulsory at GCSE. With the EBacc no longer in place, we worry that there is little incentive for students to take languages subjects within their ‘breadth’ and ‘choice’ slots in the proposed Progress 8 model, and whether we will see further decline in entries as a result. Furthermore, we are concerned that schools no longer have a clear accountability incentive to offer languages at all, as the breadth buckets can be satisfied with humanities or arts subjects instead. The British Academy has long highlighted the severe and ongoing decline in language learning in England’s schools, and the acute consequences this has for the UK’s capacity in diplomacy, cross-cultural dialogue, community cohesion, and economic growth.⁶

Therefore while the British Academy supports the proposed changes to the Progress 8 model itself, we strongly recommend that its introduction is coupled with actions that strongly and credibly incentivise and promote the learning of languages at KS4 and beyond. The following points stem from the recommendations of the British Academy and partners made in *Towards a National Languages Strategy*, the report that steers our languages programme of work, as well as from our languages-specific response to the government’s Curriculum and Assessment Review:^{7 8}

³ Campaign for the Arts & University of Warwick (2024), *The State of the Arts*, p. 9.

⁴ Thomson, D. (2026), ‘[How will qualification entry patterns change as a result of changes to Attainment 8?](#)’, FFT Data Education Lab [accessed April 2026]

⁵ Department for Education. Key Stage 4 Performance 2024/2025. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-performance/2024-25>

⁶ 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*, p. 6.

⁷ 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*.

⁸ The British Academy (2024) [Response to the Department for Education’s Curriculum and Assessment Review Call for Evidence: Languages Subjects](#).

- There are longstanding issues of severe grading of modern languages subjects at GCSE, and this is a disincentivising factor for both students and schools which contributes significantly to the low uptake of languages subjects. We welcomed the changes announced by Ofqual in 2024 which require exam boards to make positive adjustments to the grades awarded in French and German. However, despite this development, the problem remains largely unsolved. The Academy continues to argue that there should be a greater adjustment across all languages subjects so that pupils' grades in modern languages GCSEs are comparable on average with the grades in other humanities subjects for pupils of the same prior attainment.⁹
- In our response to the Curriculum and Assessment Review, we outlined our suggestions to improve the languages curriculum at KS2, and raised our concerns about the lack of consistency in the transition from KS2 to KS3.¹⁰ Solving issues that exist within the languages curriculum at KS2 and KS3 would create a more sustained and inclusive pathways into studying languages through to KS4 and would consequently increase students' attainment in, enjoyment of, and confidence in language learning, thus incentivising further study of these subjects. We will continue to work with the Department for Education on our proposals for the languages curriculum at KS2.
- Research shows that the positioning of languages in school-level curriculum policy is the strongest indicator of GCSE languages uptake. Schools that actively integrated the EBacc, including the core languages element, into their curriculum structures had significantly higher uptake in languages subject without associated decreases in attainment.¹¹ The removal of compulsory languages at the level of national policy need not mean that schools should not aim and be encouraged to include languages in their core offer. The British Academy recommends that schools should receive guidance and support to actively integrate languages into their core curriculum.
- Provision of languages subjects is unequal, particularly when it comes to socioeconomic disadvantage. Availability of languages subjects varies greatly by region, and areas and schools with higher levels of disadvantage have significantly less access, or no access at all, to languages subjects and languages teaching.¹² Research has shown the emergence of 'cold spots' in provision of languages at the level of further and higher education, which exacerbates the problem of access and participation across the entire pipeline including at KS4, especially since

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.18

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-11

¹¹ Forbes, K. (2025) 'Promoting modern language beyond the compulsory stage: exploring the relationship between school-level curriculum policy, GCSE uptake and attainment in England', *The Language Learning Journal*, 54(1), pp.103-115.

¹² See for example: British Council (2025) [Language Trends England 2025](#); British Council (2023) [Language Trends England 2023](#); British Council (2021) [Language Trends England 2021](#); see also: Hunter, A., Arfon, E., and Z. Hua (2024) 'Opportunity for all? Which pupils are studying languages in England and why?' 7 Nov 2024, UCL Institute of Education Blog.

universities train the next generation of languages teachers.¹³ This is a social justice issue, and we call for a minimum languages offer for all students in all localities, to be delivered through schools or through local or regional consortia, so that students do have the genuine opportunity to choose between the three breadth buckets instead of their choices being de facto pre-determined by their school or region's limited offer.

- While more languages subject entries at GCSE are to be encouraged and celebrated, our main priority is that all students have an opportunity to develop language and intercultural skills, and we recognise that a one-size-fits-all approach may not always be the best way to provide this opportunity. Therefore we advocate for a system-wide, joined-up approach that empowers learners and offers more flexible and varied opportunities and contexts to develop their skills and knowledge of languages. We will continue to work with the Department for Education on exploring alternative qualifications, such as a stepped languages qualification.

Question 12: What are your views on the inclusion of a fourth category (science) for breadth slots 5 and 6?

Position: Do not support inclusion of a fourth category

Since the creation of the national curriculum in England, breadth has remained a key priority at Key Stage 4. The British Academy supports the Department for Education's reassertion of this commitment, as set out in the consultation document, but is concerned that the introduction of science as a fourth breadth category would undermine this commitment. The breadth slots in Progress 8 are one of the few structural mechanisms available to incentivise and ensure student exposure to both STEM and SHAPE subjects, and the inclusion of science as a category would weaken this mechanism. The British Academy is therefore firmly opposed to any measure that would reduce the space available to arts, humanities, languages, and creative subjects within those slots.

Science already benefits from two dedicated slots within the Progress 8 framework, as well as further opportunity to include sciences in the choice slots, giving it a level of structural protection that SHAPE subjects do not enjoy. Arts, humanities, and languages subjects have no equivalent safeguard, and will depend on the breadth slots to maintain a foothold in the curriculum. As mentioned in our response to Q11, languages are a particular concern. Formalising sciences as an option for the breadth slots would further reduce incentive for students to take languages subjects or for schools to provide them. This would further marginalise languages, creating perverse incentives for schools to

¹³ The British Academy (2025) [Cold spots: Mapping inequality in SHAPE provision in UK higher education](#).

weight their timetables towards STEM and away from the disciplines that are already most at risk.

As the British Academy set out in its response to the Curriculum and Assessment Review call for evidence (November 2024), there is strong evidence that the commitment to a broad and balanced national curriculum on paper does not reflect the education many young people receive in classrooms across the country.¹⁴ For example, GCSE and A level entries in arts subjects have declined since 2010, and there has been a sharp decline in teaching hours in arts subjects in state secondary schools, particularly at Key Stage 3.¹⁵ Provision of languages subjects is also diminished and unequal, as mentioned in our answer to Q11. Therefore, the British Academy also draws attention to the equity dimension of this proposal. Evidence consistently shows that declining access to arts, humanities, and languages subjects disproportionately affects students from disadvantaged backgrounds, compounding existing inequalities in educational experience.¹⁶ A measure that further crowds these subjects out of the curriculum would widen that gap.

The breadth slots should preserve genuine choice and space for the full range of disciplines. The British Academy urges the Government not to pursue the proposal of a fourth science category, and instead to use the performance framework to incentivise the genuine curricular breadth that all young people deserve.

Question 13: Do you agree that Progress 8 should allow technical awards in the breadth and choice slots, with a maximum of two across all slots?

Position: Agree

The British Academy agrees that Progress 8 should allow up to two technical awards in the breadth and choice slots.

The British Academy recognises the value of combining academic and technical or vocational qualifications, and has identified this flexibility as a genuine strength of the current qualifications system that ought to be retained and built upon. Technical and vocational qualifications provide meaningful and legitimate pathways for pupils whose strengths and ambitions are well-suited to applied learning, and it is right that the performance framework reflects this. Excluding technical awards from Progress 8 breadth slots would risk penalising schools – particularly those serving more

¹⁴ The British Academy (2024), [Response to the Department for Education's Curriculum and Assessment Review Call for Evidence: Languages Subjects](#), p. 3.

¹⁵ The British Academy (2024), [Response to the Department for Education's Curriculum and Assessment Review Call for Evidence: General Response](#), p. 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

disadvantaged communities – that offer applied and creative qualifications alongside GCSEs, and could inadvertently deepen existing inequalities in educational experience.

This position is particularly informed by evidence on trends in arts participation. The proportion of students studying at least one arts subject who are taking only vocational Level 3 qualifications rose from 17% in 2007/08 to 31% in 2021/22, reflecting a real and growing role for vocational routes within arts education.¹⁷ For many pupils, technical awards in creative and performing arts subjects represent not a departure from a broad education, but an important gateway into it. A performance framework that fails to recognise such qualifications risks further marginalising arts provision in schools. However, we stress the importance of inclusion of technical qualifications in creative subjects not being provided at the expense of languages subjects.

¹⁷ Scott, M., Julius, J., Tang, S., and Lucas, M. (2024), [*Subject Choice Trends in Post-16 Education in England: Investigating Subject Choice Over the Past 20 Years*](#), National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), commissioned by the British Academy.