



Department  
for Education

# Education for 11 to 16 year olds

Government response to the report of the  
House of Lords Committee

February 2024





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House of Lords Committee**

**Presented to Parliament  
by the Secretary of State for Education  
by Command of His Majesty**

**February 2024**



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## Introduction

1. The Government is grateful for the work and report of the House of Lords Education for 11-16 Year Olds Committee,<sup>1</sup> and has considered carefully its findings and recommendations in this important area.
2. High-quality education plays a vital role in spreading opportunity and levelling up, preparing young people for successful careers and contributing to society. 11-16 education is particularly important because of the role it has in ensuring young people study a breadth of subjects before taking their GCSEs and their subsequent specialisation, post-16, in further and higher education or training. We want to provide every child with a broad, balanced and ambitious curriculum. As detailed in our written evidence, we consider that a knowledge-rich approach is the right way to achieve this, and reformed the national curriculum accordingly.<sup>2</sup> In preparing our response to the Committee's report, we have taken that evidence, and our oral evidence,<sup>3</sup> as assumed background.
3. In this context, we welcome the Committee's report and respond to its recommendations in detail below. We include the report's conclusions, which are in bold text, and recommendations, which are in bold italic text, with our responses preceded by 'Government response'.

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<sup>1</sup> [Education for 11-16 Year Olds Committee](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Department for Education written evidence: Education for 11-16 year olds](#) (May 2023) paragraphs 61 to 68 and 200 to 205

<sup>3</sup> [Department for Education oral evidence: Education for 11-16 year olds](#) (July 2023)

## The national curriculum

**[1] It is vital that pupils experience a wide range of subjects and curriculum content up to the age of 14 to keep their future options open, inform their subsequent choices and ensure they receive a broad and balanced education. Although it is helpful for schools to have some flexibility over their curriculum, this should not extend to ‘squeezing’ key stage 3 into two years or dropping foundation subjects entirely. The growing number of academies in 11–16 provision brings into question the appropriateness of the current national curriculum’s status, as it is no longer mandatory for the vast majority of schools. (Paragraph 43)**

***[2] The Government should conduct a review of the national curriculum’s status, with the aim of ensuring that all mainstream, state-funded schools are teaching a genuinely broad and balanced curriculum throughout a three-year key stage 3. The proposal for a mandatory national curriculum that ensures a common entitlement for all pupils should be considered in this context. The review should consider the impact of any curriculum changes on specialist schools, to ensure that innovative approaches are not undermined where they are to the benefit of pupils. (Paragraph 44)***

**[3] The Government’s emphasis on a knowledge-rich approach has led to an 11–16 curriculum which is overloaded with content, particularly at key stage 4. The extent of the material to be covered hampers pupils’ understanding of core concepts and stifles engagement. (Paragraph 51)**

***[4] The Government should reduce the overall content load of the 11–16 curriculum, focusing particularly on GCSE subject curricula. It should undertake a review to establish how this can be achieved, and publish its findings. (Paragraph 52)***



## Government response

4. We consider the status, content and expectations of the national curriculum, and the requirement for all schools to deliver a broad and balanced curriculum, to meet the needs of pupils appropriately. Further, we have committed not to make any changes to the national curriculum for the remainder of this Parliament, to give schools stability and to help them to focus on post-pandemic recovery as well as continuing to raise literacy and numeracy standards.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the Government does not accept these recommendations. However, in the next Parliament, as we make progress on the Advanced British Standard (ABS), we will consider the impact this will have on the wider curriculum.<sup>5</sup>
5. However, as the Committee notes,<sup>6</sup> we strongly disagree with key stage 3 (KS3) being delivered over two years rather than three, as this removes the sustained breadth young people need and are entitled to receive. Where a school has shortened its KS3, Ofsted inspectors will look for evidence that the school has made provision to ensure that pupils still have the opportunity to study a broad range of subjects, commensurate with the national curriculum, in years 7 to 9. We are also clear that young people should be able to access a broad and balanced, knowledge-rich curriculum up until the age of 16, with GCSEs providing the basis for that curriculum from 14-16.
6. With this broad grounding, all students – regardless of background – are then prepared to fulfil their aspirations post-16. As we begin to lay the groundwork for the introduction of the ABS for 16- to 19-year-olds, we have made a downpayment of over £600 million across the next two years to improve the recruitment and retention of teachers in key STEM and technical shortage subjects, support students who do not pass maths and English GCSE at 16, and improve the quality of maths teaching.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> [Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child](#) (March 2022) Department for Education, paragraph 66

<sup>5</sup> See paragraphs 10 and 79

<sup>6</sup> [Requires improvement: urgent change for 11–16 education](#) (December 2023) Education for 11-16 Year Olds Committee, paragraph 38

<sup>7</sup> [A world-class education system - The Advanced British Standard](#) (October 2023) Department for Education, pages 37 to 38

7. Since 2010, we have backed our best headteachers, enabling them to establish and expand academy trusts, bringing their proven leadership and management skills to more schools and pupils. We consider academy autonomy to be a strength of a flexible system, underpinned by a clear framework for the key knowledge students need to progress and succeed. Academy trusts may develop their own curricula, tailored to meet the particular needs of their pupils or their local area or the particular ethos of the trust.<sup>8</sup> However, we – and Ofsted – still expect them to provide a broad, balanced and ambitious curriculum for all pupils, and many teach the full national curriculum to achieve this. All state schools, including academies and free schools, are held accountable for their performance in tests and exams.
8. Through the academy programme, we have intervened in many previously poorly-performing schools and have seen their performance improve subsequently. Evidence shows that more than 7 out of 10 sponsored academies which had poor Ofsted ratings as local authority (LA) maintained schools in their previous inspection now have a Good or Outstanding rating.<sup>9</sup> Pupil attainment in sponsored academies has also improved. We made a careful comparison of groups of sponsored academies that opened each year with otherwise similar LA maintained schools and found that, on average, attainment in the sponsored academies improved faster. Before joining their trusts, they performed significantly less well than the similar LA maintained schools but, after joining, the performance of the sponsored academies improved to match (sometimes overtake) the LA maintained comparators.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Academy funding agreements require mainstream academies to teach English, maths, science and religious education, and academies are required by [legislation](#) to teach relationships education (primary), relationships and sex education (secondary), and Health Education

<sup>9</sup> [Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child](#) (March 2022) Department for Education

<sup>10</sup> [An analysis of the performance of sponsored academies](#) (January 2019) Department for Education

9. The present suite of GCSEs is the result of an extensive process of reforming GCSEs, since 2011, to address concerns that the previous qualifications did not adequately prepare young people for the demands of the workplace and higher study. We consulted widely with schools, colleges, universities and employers, both on the principles for reform and the detail of the content of individual subjects, to help them prepare for their introduction. The reformed GCSEs rigorously assess the knowledge acquired by pupils during KS4 and are in line with expected standards in countries with high-performing education systems. While GCSE subject content may be challenging for some students, we do not consider it to be excessive or in need of fundamental review – GCSEs are widely recognised and trusted, with support from 74% of those surveyed as part of Ofqual’s most recent public perceptions and confidence study.<sup>11</sup>
10. On 4 October 2023, the Prime Minister announced plans to introduce the ABS for 16- to 19-year-olds in England over the next decade.<sup>12</sup> As part of this, our ambition is for every student to have a coherent and aspirational pathway from age 11 through to their ABS qualifications, and we will ensure that GCSEs continue to prepare students for post-16 education.<sup>13</sup> However, we have no plans for wholesale reform of GCSEs – these are internationally respected and enjoy high levels of public support, and will remain an integral part of secondary education following the introduction of the ABS.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> [Perceptions of A levels, GCSEs and Applied General qualifications in England – Wave 21](#) (May 2023) Ofqual

<sup>12</sup> [New qualifications to deliver world class education for all](#) (October 2023) Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street

<sup>13</sup> [A world-class education system - The Advanced British Standard](#) (October 2023) Department for Education, pages 38 to 39

<sup>14</sup> For more on the ABS and GCSE assessment, see paragraph 79

## Literacy and numeracy

**[5] Supporting pupils to achieve a basic standard of literacy and numeracy should remain a core purpose of the 11–16 system. These skills are essential for young people to progress in their education and to succeed in life and work. The stubbornly high proportion of pupils who do not achieve a grade 4 or above in GCSE English and maths each year must be addressed. (Paragraph 69)**

**[6] *The Government should determine why around a third of pupils do not secure a grade 4 or above in GCSE English and maths each year, and publish its findings. (Paragraph 70)***

## Government response

11. The Government partially accepts this recommendation. We agree that literacy and numeracy should remain a central focus of the 11-16 system in order to raise standards overall. However, we disagree that further work is needed to investigate this issue, as we already routinely investigate and address factors leading to underperformance in literacy and numeracy among GCSE students. We will continue to target any issues that limit students' opportunities to achieve.
12. Literacy and numeracy are the keys to unlocking a successful education, enabling access to subjects across the curriculum and beyond, and supporting children to progress into further training and employment. We have taken action to raise standards so that pupils develop the strong foundations they need before the 11-16 phase, and can leave school with the skills they need to succeed.
13. In the Schools White Paper,<sup>15</sup> we committed to an ambition that, by 2030, 90% of children will achieve expected standards in English reading, writing and maths by the end of primary school. In 2023, 60% of students achieved the expected standard in reading, writing and maths, up from 59% in 2022.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> [Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child](#) (March 2022) Department for Education

<sup>16</sup> [Key stage 2 attainment, Academic year 2022/23](#) (December 2023) GOV.UK: Explore education statistics

14. Building on this, we have also set a stretching ambition to increase the average grade in English language and maths GCSEs from 4.5 in 2019 to 5 by 2030, which represents a 'strong pass'. In 2023, 45.0% of pupils sitting GCSEs achieved a grade 5 or higher in both English and maths – an increase of 1.8 percentage points (from 43.2%) compared with 2019.<sup>17,18</sup>
15. The quality of teaching is the single most important in-school factor in improving outcomes for children. Being taught by a high-quality teacher can add almost half a GCSE grade, per subject, to a given student.<sup>19</sup> We also know that high-quality professional development for teachers can lead to improved children's attainment.<sup>20</sup> Evidence from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) shows that high-quality teaching is particularly important for the most disadvantaged pupils and for pupils with SEND.<sup>21</sup> That is why the work of our Maths and English Hubs continues to support schools in driving improvements in literacy and numeracy standards.
16. We have already taken action to improve attainment in literacy. Recognising the positive correlation between an individual's KS1 literacy score and attainment in GCSE English Language,<sup>22</sup> much of our intervention has focused on early literacy development. There is sound evidence that systematic phonics is a highly effective method for teaching early reading, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>23</sup> Since 2010, we have turbo-charged the effective teaching of phonics by placing it at the heart of the curriculum, providing additional funding for eligible schools to buy validated phonics schemes, and by introducing the annual phonics screening check in 2012.

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<sup>17</sup> Comparing 2023 results with 2019 is more meaningful than with those awarded in 2021 and 2022, as 2019 was the last year summer exams were taken before the pandemic. 2023 saw a return to pre-pandemic grading, albeit with some protections.

<sup>18</sup> [Key stage 4 performance, Academic year 2022/23](#) (October 2023) GOV.UK: Explore education statistics

<sup>19</sup> [Do teachers matter? Measuring the variation in teacher effectiveness in England](#) (January 2009) The Centre for Market and Public Organisation

<sup>20</sup> [The effects of high-quality professional development on teachers and students](#) (February 2020) Education Policy Institute

<sup>21</sup> [High-quality teaching](#) and [Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools](#) Education Endowment Foundation

<sup>22</sup> [The relationship between early literacy and GCSE English attainment](#) (November 2020) FFT Education Datalab

<sup>23</sup> [Independent review of the teaching of early reading](#) (March 2006) Jim Rose

17. We launched our English Hubs Programme in 2018 to improve the teaching of reading, with a focus on phonics, early language development and reading for pleasure. Since its launch, the programme has provided targeted support to more than 5,000 schools across England. The programme has been well received, with an impact analysis on 2022 PSC results showing that schools supported intensively by our English Hubs outperformed other schools by around 7 percentage points in the phonics screening check, when comparing the change in phonics screening check results between pre-pandemic and 2022.<sup>24</sup>
18. In July 2021, we published the Reading Framework: *teaching the foundations of literacy*,<sup>25</sup> non-statutory guidance aimed at improving the teaching of reading in primary schools, by defining pedagogy and best practice. We published an expanded Reading Framework in July 2023, which builds on the original Framework and also covers the teaching of reading in KS2 and KS3, including guidance on how to help pupils who need more support to learn to read proficiently. We are also developing a short course on reading for all secondary teachers, which will likely be released in September 2024, to support teachers with the implementation of the Reading Framework.
19. The impact of these reforms is visible in England's success in international assessments. England came fourth out of the 43 countries that tested children of the same age in the 2021 Progress in International Literacy Study (PIRLS), with an average score of 558. This was significantly above the international median score of 520 and significantly higher than all countries except Singapore, Hong Kong and Russia.
20. We have also taken action to increase attainment in numeracy. Learning from international evidence and best practice, we reformed the mathematics curriculum from 2014 and, subsequently, mathematics qualifications, moving to a system informed by East Asian teaching methods that placed increased focus on pupils acquiring a deep and long-term understanding of mathematics. This was accompanied by the introduction of a Maths Hubs network made up of 40 local hubs to help local schools improve the quality of their teaching. The Maths Hubs programme is supported by the National Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics and focuses on improving attainment gaps, which may be associated with disadvantage, gender, or other factors.

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<sup>24</sup> [Early analysis of English Hubs phonics attainment: 2021/22 data](#) (May 2023) Department for Education

<sup>25</sup> [The reading framework](#) (July 2021) Department for Education

21. One of the key initiatives delivered by Maths Hubs is the Teaching for Mastery programme. Mastery teaching focusses on depth of understanding and is based on best practice from East Asian countries that perform highly on international mathematics tests. A recent randomised controlled trial of the Centres for Excellence in Mathematics Programme, which provided mastery teaching support for GCSE resits, found that support led to increases in GCSE scores – with disadvantaged students being the biggest beneficiaries.<sup>26</sup> In April 2023, the Secretary of State announced a plan to extend the Teaching for Mastery programme to reach 65% of secondary schools by 2025.<sup>27</sup>
22. The recent Ofsted subject report on mathematics celebrates the improvements in mathematics education in recent years, including “a resounding, positive shift” at primary level and “notable improvements” at secondary level.<sup>28</sup> Pre-pandemic, England achieved its highest ever maths score in the 2019 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) international test for year 5 pupils, and the score for year 9 pupils remained above the international average. In 2023, although affected by the pandemic, analysis of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 results for 15-year-olds showed that England had risen in the rankings from 17<sup>th</sup> for maths in 2018 to 11<sup>th</sup>.<sup>29</sup>

**[7] We recommend that high-quality level 2 literacy and numeracy qualifications should be available for pupils to take during key stage 4, and that attainment in these should be recognised in school performance measures. Such qualifications should be genuinely distinct from the discipline-based English and maths GCSEs and should focus on the application of essential skills. We invite the Government to launch a consultation to assess whether the existing English and maths functional skills qualifications could fulfil this purpose, or whether the development of new qualifications is required. (Paragraph 71)**

## Government response

23. The Government does not accept this recommendation. The rigour of our qualifications ensures high aspirations for all students, and our existing GCSEs include the essential literacy and numeracy skills the committee identifies. We also do not consider our performance measures to be in need of amendment.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> [Centres for Excellence in Maths Teaching for Mastery Randomised Controlled Trial: Evaluation Report](#) (March 2023) University of Nottingham

<sup>27</sup> Written Ministerial Statement: [Maths update](#) (17 April 2023)

<sup>28</sup> [Coordinating mathematical success: the mathematics subject report](#) (July 2023) Ofsted

<sup>29</sup> [PISA 2022: national report for England](#) (December 2023) Department for Education

<sup>30</sup> See paragraphs 101 to 105 and 106 to 109



24. The latest evidence about how the brain works is clear that knowledge and skills are not in conflict, but rather that students have to build knowledge to give them the material through which to develop skills: skills cannot be developed in the abstract, but only by applying relevant knowledge, so that is where an effective curriculum has to start. This perspective is backed up by looking at the curriculum approaches of jurisdictions that tend to do well in international tests such as PISA. Our knowledge-rich curriculum helps students build knowledge acquisition as opposed to alternative, 'soft skills', approaches, which focus too much on practising behaviours or competencies, neglecting to build the sophisticated knowledge required.<sup>31</sup>
25. The current suite of GCSEs was the result of an extensive process of reform from 2011 to address concerns that the previous qualifications did not adequately prepare young people for the demands of the workplace and higher study. The reformed GCSEs rigorously assess the knowledge and skills acquired by pupils during KS4 and are in line with expected standards in countries with high-performing education systems. They are suitable for the vast majority of KS4 students and, in the small minority of cases where schools decide that GCSEs aren't right for a student, functional skills qualifications are already available. Consequently, we do not consider that there is a need for any further literacy or numeracy qualifications to be developed for pupils at KS4, which could distract from existing qualifications and add to the overall assessment burden.
26. Our performance measures are designed to encourage schools to enter as many pupils as possible for GCSEs in English and maths, given the importance of these qualifications for pupils' progression. Consequently, we have no plans to approve other level 2 qualifications in literacy and numeracy for inclusion in performance measures at KS4.

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<sup>31</sup> For further detail, see: [Department for Education written evidence: Education for 11-16 year olds](#) (May 2023) paragraphs 61 to 68; [Department for Education oral evidence: Education for 11-16 year olds](#) (July 2023) Q159; and [A world-class education system - The Advanced British Standard](#) (October 2023) Department for Education, page 15



## Oracy

**[8] Oracy is an essential skill for pupils to develop in preparation for their future life and work, but it may not be being consistently prioritised by schools in the 11–16 phase. (Paragraph 75)**

**[9] *As part of a wider review of the key stage 3 and GCSE curricula, the Government should embed opportunities for oracy and communication skills development. (Paragraph 76)***

## Government response

27. The Government partially accepts this recommendation. We agree that oracy skills are essential for pupils' development, not only in English but across the curriculum – cognitively, socially and linguistically. Opportunities for spoken language and communication skills are already embedded in the national curriculum for English for 11- to 16-year-olds and are delivered in a number of different ways. Spoken language continues to underpin the development of pupils' reading and writing during KS3 and KS4. English programmes of study for KS3 and KS4 describe the expectation that pupils should be taught to speak confidently and effectively, including through classroom discussions, speeches, debates, and rehearsal and performance of playscripts and poetry. Moreover, we do not currently plan to undertake wider reform of the national curriculum.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> See paragraph 4

## Digital skills

**[10] We heard persuasive evidence that an applied computing GCSE should be introduced, to provide an alternative to the more academically focused computer science GCSE. This could help to address the declining uptake of digital qualifications at key stage 4 and support us to meet the growing demand for a wide range of digital skills across the economy. (Paragraph 89)**

**[11] *Working closely with stakeholders, the Government should take steps to develop and introduce a new GCSE in applied computing as soon as possible. (Paragraph 90)***

## Government response

28. The Government does not accept this recommendation. The current range of high-quality digital qualifications available to young people at KS4 equip them with the relevant skills and knowledge to support the future economy.
29. In addition to the reformed computer science GCSE, there are rigorous ICT-related vocational qualifications which are included in school performance measures such as Progress 8, collectively providing clear routes towards further specialist study and careers in shortage sectors such as cybersecurity and artificial intelligence (AI).
30. We have no plans to add to the number of GCSEs offered currently, beyond proposals already announced for new GCSEs in British Sign Language and natural history.
31. In 2015, we consulted widely with ICT specialists on whether the ICT GCSE should be redeveloped as part of the wider GCSE reforms. In the end, we concluded that it should not. With the introduction of the computer science GCSE in 2013, this decision avoided there being two GCSEs in a similar space, alongside relevant vocational and technical qualifications, and ensured that schools focussed on the digital knowledge that would best prepare young people for further study, and employment in the digital careers of the future.
32. We consider that the teaching of computing is best served through the computer science GCSE. Entries for the computer science GCSE in England have increased by 12% in 2023, compared to 2022, making it one of the fastest growing subjects included within the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) accountability measure.

33. However, there is still the opportunity for additional qualifications to be created where sufficient demand is identified. The current guidance allows for Awarding Organisations (AOs) to develop high-quality vocational qualifications that are distinct from the computer science GCSE.<sup>33</sup>
34. Skills and knowledge are not separate entities; both combined are what help young people to achieve in a wide range of academic or vocational interests at school and beyond. Solid foundational computing knowledge supports young people to innovate and adapt to new technologies and acquire new skills. Teachers are also able to use their professional judgement to teach around the computing curriculum and suggest qualifications in a way that best fits the needs and interests of their pupils.

**[12] All pupils should have the option of taking a digital literacy qualification in the 14–16 phase. This would support the development of core digital skills, particularly for those who do not choose to take a computing qualification at key stage 4. (Paragraph 93)**

***[13] The Government should explore introducing a basic digital literacy qualification that can be taken at key stage 4, to ensure that all pupils have an opportunity to develop the basic digital skills needed to participate effectively in post-16 education and training, employment and wider life. (Paragraph 94)***

## Government response

35. The Government does not accept this recommendation. The national curriculum computing programme of study is designed to ensure that pupils are taught to use, express themselves, and develop their ideas through digital technology, across all key stages. While we are always looking to make improvements to subject teaching and pupil attainment, we are not convinced that a digital literacy qualification would address any potential issues around the teaching of digital skills, particularly at KS4, as there would be limited incentive for schools to offer such a qualification.

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<sup>33</sup> [Technical qualifications for 14- to 16-year olds: 2024 key stage 4 performance tables](#) (September 2020)  
Department for Education

36. However, we acknowledge that there are barriers to teaching digital skills through the computing curriculum at KS4, such as teaching time available and concerns about the impact on the computer science elements of the curriculum, which are necessary for onwards study. We are working with the computing education sector to better understand what digital skills are taught through the computing curriculum at KS3. Based on the barriers identified so far, our initial assessment is that such a qualification might be better suited outside of KS4. We will continue to work with schools and other experts on this important matter.

## Climate and sustainability education

**[14] Secondary education must support young people to develop the knowledge, skills and agency they will need to live in a world affected by the impacts of climate change. We welcome the actions relating to climate education set out in the Sustainability and climate change strategy published by the DfE, particularly the recognition that providing effective support, training and resources for teachers will be critical to the delivery of high-quality climate and sustainability education to all pupils. It is essential that the Government meets the commitments detailed in this strategy. (Paragraph 103)**

**[15] We also welcome the new natural history GCSE and the opportunities it will afford for pupils to learn about the natural world as part of their key stage 4 studies. However, without reform to embed nature, climate and sustainability education more widely across the 11–16 curriculum, particularly at key stage 3, the qualification risks becoming a ‘subject silo’. It could also see low take-up, as pupils may be less likely to select a GCSE in a subject to which they have previously had limited exposure, and not all schools will have the necessary resources to deliver it. (Paragraph 104)**

**[16] *The Government must ensure that a core purpose of future reviews of the key stage 3 and 4 curricula, and GCSE content specifications, is to identify and incorporate opportunities to educate pupils about climate change and sustainability across a wider range of subjects. This is necessary to avoid the persistence of ‘subject silos’ and to ensure that teaching on such topics is available to all. (Paragraph 105)***

## Government response

37. The Government does not accept this recommendation. As set out earlier,<sup>34</sup> we do not agree that a review of the National Curriculum or GCSE content is required. However, we agree that learning about sustainability and climate change is important, and we welcome the Committee’s support of the Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy for the Education and Children’s Services Systems.<sup>35</sup> We continue to implement the Strategy’s actions and recently published the first annual progress update on its delivery.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> See paragraph 4

<sup>35</sup> [Sustainability and climate change: a strategy for the education and children’s services systems](#) (April 2022) Department for Education

<sup>36</sup> [Sustainability and climate change strategy: our progress so far](#) (December 2023) Department for Education

38. Key elements on climate change are already covered in existing curricula and GCSEs, and schools can also choose to teach these matters where they feel relevant in other subjects. In both science and geography, this is largely covered across KS1-KS4, including their various GCSEs. Examples of relevant topics within science and geography include:
- a. In primary science and geography, pupils are given a firm foundation for the further study of climate science in secondary school. During KS1, they are taught about the seasons and habitats, including content about daily weather patterns in the UK. KS2 geography includes teaching on climate zones.
  - b. At KS3, pupils are taught about the 'change in the climate from the Ice Age to the present' and 'how human and physical processes interact to influence, and change landscapes, environments and the climate'. This ensures that pupils are taught about the temporal and spatial aspects of climate.
  - c. As part of secondary teaching, geography pupils look at how human and physical processes interact to influence and change landscapes, environments and the climate.
  - d. As part of GCSE geography pupils look at the causes and consequences of and responses to extreme weather conditions and natural weather hazards.
  - e. In GCSE science, pupils consider the evidence for anthropogenic causes of climate change. They study the impact of increased levels of carbon dioxide and methane and how this can be mitigated. Pupils also learn about renewable and non-renewable energy sources.
39. The new natural history GCSE will enable pupils to build on learning in other subjects and make links between sustainability and climate change. In order to introduce it by September 2025, we are working with exam boards, experts and stakeholders to develop the subject content. We aim to launch a public consultation in the coming months to seek views on the content. We are confident that there will be broad support for this GCSE from a wide range of stakeholders who will be able to support schools and colleges in teaching this qualification.
40. This qualification is focused on young people learning about organisms and environments, and their conservation, and gaining a deeper knowledge of the natural world around them. Aspects of how wildlife responds to the effects of changes to climate will be covered in this GCSE, but will not be the primary focus of the qualification, as this is already included in science and geography.

## Languages

**[17] Proficiency in modern languages is an important asset, both in individual relationships and for career pathways. The low take-up of GCSEs in modern foreign languages, despite the inclusion of languages within the EBacc subject combination, is therefore concerning. We heard that a number of different factors contribute to this. (Paragraph 112)**

**[18] *The Government should explore innovative ways to encourage schools to promote language learning, whether or not as a GCSE subject, and to address practical barriers, including the limited supply of suitably qualified teachers. (Paragraph 113)***

## Government response

41. The Government accepts this recommendation, and we are already undertaking activities in these areas. We remain committed to increasing the proportion of pupils who choose to study a language at GCSE and beyond, as well as to improving the quality of language teaching at both primary and secondary phases.
42. Studying a language can be extremely rewarding and exciting, broadening pupils' horizons and opening the door to travel and employment opportunities. Research shows that students who study a second language perform better across a range of academic subjects when compared with those who do not, and language study can support learning in other subjects.
43. We are already delivering innovative programmes to encourage uptake in modern languages. Since 2016, we have provided more than £20 million for the flagship Mandarin Excellence Programme (MEP) which aims to improve the pipeline of fluent Mandarin speakers from state-funded schools to meet the future business and economic needs of the country. So far, more than 11,000 pupils from over 80 schools have benefitted from the programme.

44. In response to the evidence that language GCSEs and A levels were graded more harshly, in 2019, Ofqual made a one percentage point adjustment at grade 4, and a three percentage point adjustment at grade 7, for both French and German GCSE.<sup>37</sup> There will also likely be a positive consequential effect on grades 5, 6, 8 and 9 following Ofqual's shifts.<sup>38</sup> These changes, in conjunction with the removal of the expectation that students engage with unfamiliar and abstract material in languages GCSEs, and the introduction of the revised subject content for French, German, and Spanish GCSEs from September 2024, will make modern language GCSEs more accessible to all pupils.
45. Our Language Hubs programme will involve up to 25 lead hubs supporting other schools across the country to improve standards of language teaching in line with the Teaching Schools Council's 2016 Modern Foreign Languages Pedagogy Review. The programme will offer intensive, bespoke support for up to seven named partner schools in each hub, universal continuing professional development (CPD) for all teachers nationally, support for transition from KS2 to KS3, and support for home, heritage, and community languages. The programme includes a distinct German promotion project aimed at reversing the decline in entries into German in England that has become a trend in recent years.
46. The German promotion project feeds into a wider UK-wide programme – called GIMAGINE – that seeks to address the decline in German and that is being led by the Goethe-Institut.<sup>39</sup> A key element of GIMAGINE has been the development of a 'Gimagine Award', which offers recognition for pupils who engage with German language and cultural modules via a self-learning platform.
47. With regard to teach numbers, we are analysing the supply of languages teachers in England, to better understand how and where we can support the sector in recruiting excellent languages teachers. For academic year (AY) 2024/25, we are offering languages bursaries at £25,000 – extending eligibility to all non-UK trainees – and are continuing to offer a prestigious scholarship worth £27,000 for French, German and Spanish trainees.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> [Inter-subject comparability in GCSE modern foreign languages](#) (November 2019) Ofqual

<sup>38</sup> The impact of these changes, which were due to come into effect during the summer 2020 series, is not yet known. Teacher Assessed Grades (TAGs) were provided in place of terminal exams in 2020 and 2021, and additional support was provided in 2022.

<sup>39</sup> [GIMAGINE - Teaching and Learning German](#) Goethe Institut

<sup>40</sup> [Teacher training bursaries](#) Get Into Teaching



48. We are also piloting an international relocation payment (IRP) – a one-off payment of £10,000 available to non-UK trainees and teachers of languages in academic years 2023/24 and 2024/25.<sup>41</sup> The payment is a contribution towards costs they may face in moving to England to teach or train, including visas, the immigration health surcharge and other relocation expenses.
49. Further, we continue to develop awareness and experience among undergraduates, including through the Teaching Internships programme,<sup>42</sup> which gives university students in certain subjects the opportunity to experience teaching. From 2023, this programme has been open nationally to modern foreign language students, and is part of the Get into Teaching service, supporting prospective teachers through their journey into the profession.<sup>43</sup> Get into Teaching also works closely with the British Council to provide dedicated teacher training application support for their language students based in the UK and from overseas.

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<sup>41</sup> [Fees and financial support for non-UK trainee teachers](#) Get Into Teaching

<sup>42</sup> [Teaching internships](#) Get Into Teaching

<sup>43</sup> [Help and support getting into teaching](#) Get Into Teaching

## Creative and artistic subjects

**[19] Pupils must have genuine, substantive opportunities to study creative and artistic subjects at key stages 3 and 4. This is vital to enable them to develop creative skills and to support a diverse talent pipeline for our creative industries, which are a key sector of the UK economy, and the many other businesses that are crying out for creative skills. We have heard that the delivery of these opportunities is increasingly difficult in the current context due to funding constraints and the deprioritisation of creative subjects due to accountability measures. (Paragraph 127)**

**[20] A principal aim of future adjustments to key stage 4 school accountability measures, including those called for in this report, should be to reverse the impact of the current measures on the take-up of creative subjects at GCSE. (Paragraph 128)**

## Government response

50. The Government does not accept this recommendation. While we agree that creative and artistic subjects are an important part of a broad and balanced curriculum, we do not agree that our accountability measures need to change.<sup>44</sup> The best schools in the country already combine a high-quality cultural education with excellence in core academic subjects. We remain committed to ensuring that all pupils have access to both, and do not believe a change in accountability measures is necessary to achieve this.
51. The requirement on all state-funded schools to teach a broad and balanced, knowledge-rich curriculum encompasses the arts. Alongside drama as part of the English curriculum and dance as part of the physical education curriculum, music, and art and design, remain important pillars of the national curriculum. This is also reflected in the reformed GCSEs in music, art and design, dance, drama, and film studies, which were introduced for first teaching from 2016, and the parallel reforms to Technical Awards at level 2 to ensure these were high-quality and fit-for-purpose.
52. The opportunity to study these subjects is vital for all children and young people. As discussed further below,<sup>45</sup> we are committed to the EBacc for the majority of pupils because this is the best preparation for a pupil's post-16 education. The EBacc was designed with the intention of being limited in size, to allow pupils to study other subjects, such as music, art and design and drama.

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<sup>44</sup> See paragraphs 101 to 105 and 106 to 109

<sup>45</sup> See paragraphs 101 to 105

53. KS4 accountability measures are designed to encourage schools to teach a broad and balanced curriculum, with a focus on an academic core, giving pupils a strong foundation for future study. Two of our six headline KS4 performance measures, Progress 8 and Attainment 8, measure success in eight subjects, including English and maths (double weighted to reflect their importance), three other EBacc subjects and three 'open' subjects. The latter provides scope for pupils to study any GCSE subjects or other approved, high-value qualifications. These include GCSEs and equivalent qualifications in creative subjects.
54. In 2017, the Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS) considered whether subject choice at 14-16 influences post-16 transitions. The study found that students pursuing an EBacc-eligible curriculum at 14-16 had a greater probability of progression to all post-16 educational outcomes. It also found that studying an EBacc-eligible curriculum at age 14-16 increased the chances of studying subjects that have traditionally been considered preferable by Russell Group universities at A level.<sup>46</sup>
55. We acknowledge that there has been a gradual decline in the number of entries in some GCSE subjects such as music and drama, as set out in the Committee's report. This does not, however, provide a comprehensive picture of the study of creative subjects at KS4, nor does it reflect the change in pupil population over the period reported. It is more helpful to consider the full range of approved qualifications studied in creative subjects and the proportion of the cohort entered for such qualifications.
56. Reflecting comments by Amanda Spielman, His Majesty's former Chief Inspector, to the Committee,<sup>47</sup> art and design GCSE remains popular and there has been a change in mix of other qualifications studied. The statistics also show a gradual increase in the proportion of pupils taking a wide range of Technical Awards in creative subjects, including in music and creative digital media. Over the past five years, between 2019 and 2023, around half of pupils have taken at least one approved arts qualification, which includes GCSEs, Technical Awards or graded music examinations from grade 6.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> [Continuing education post-16: does what you study at GCSE matter?](#) (August 2017) Centre for Longitudinal Studies

<sup>47</sup> [Ofsted oral evidence: Education for 11-16 year olds](#) (June 2023) paragraph 108

<sup>48</sup> ['National data' from 'Key stage 4 performance'](#) (February 2024) GOV.UK: Explore education statistics – The number and proportion of pupils entered for any recognised arts qualification (including any GCSE arts subject) and the number and proportion entered for any GCSE arts subject between AY18/19 and AY22/23

57. Across all key stages, creative subjects are an important part of a broad and balanced curriculum. Alongside looking at the quality of education provided for pupils, Ofsted inspectors also make a judgement on the schools' support for pupil's personal development. Inspectors will evaluate the extent to which the curriculum goes beyond the academic, technical, or vocational and provides for pupils' broader development, enabling them to develop and discover their interests and talents.
58. Our National Plan for Music Education sets out a vision for music education, in which all children and young people should be taught to sing, play an instrument, and create music together.<sup>49</sup> They should also have the opportunity to progress their musical interests and talent, including to a professional level. Since September, all schools are expected to teach music to 5- to 14-year-olds for at least an hour a week, as well as providing instrumental tuition, choirs, and ensembles outside the classroom.
59. Our reformed Music Hubs programme is supporting schools with a £79 million investment over AY23/24 and AY24/25 and £25 million of additional capital funding for musical instruments.<sup>50</sup> To help meet teacher supply needs arising from the new teaching expectation in music, we recently announced a new tax-free bursary of £10,000 in music for AY24/25. We have also introduced a bursary of £10,000 for art and design.<sup>51</sup>
60. We agree with the Committee's assessment that the creative industries contribute substantially to the country's economy, and that this is well documented. This is why we published the Creative Industries Sector Vision,<sup>52</sup> which will see this contribution grow by an extra £50 billion while creating a million extra jobs by 2030. We have also announced that a second Brit School will open in Bradford, establishing a new hub for creative talent in the north of England. The school will specialise in dance, music and theatre and will inspire a new generation of young people.
61. In contributing to this vision, we will seek to further support arts subjects through the development of our Cultural Education Plan, to articulate and highlight the importance of high-quality cultural education in schools. This will promote the social value of cultural and creative education, outline and support career progression pathways, address skills gaps, and tackle disparities in opportunity and outcome. The Cultural Education Plan will be published in the coming months.

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<sup>49</sup> [The power of music to change lives: a national plan for music education](#) (June 2022) Department for Education

<sup>50</sup> [Sport and music education championed with new investment](#) (June 2022) Department for Education, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Department of Health and Social Care

<sup>51</sup> [How to fund your teacher training](#) Get Into Teaching

<sup>52</sup> [Creative industries sector vision](#) (June 2023) Department for Culture, Media and Sport

## Technical and vocational education

**[21] There has been a significant decline in recent years in the number of pupils taking up technical subjects during key stage 4. This is coupled with a wider decline in the opportunities available throughout 11–16 education for pupils to develop practical skills. The current system is overly focused on academic pathways and changes are needed to ensure that there are clear and coherent routes from key stage 4 into post-16 technical education. (Paragraph 146)**

**[22] The collapse in take-up of design and technology requires the urgent attention of the Government. The expansion of technology and engineering learning at key stage 4 is essential to opening up opportunities for young people and nurturing core talent for the future economy. (Paragraph 147)**

**[23] We support the ambition of the MBacc and UTC sleeve proposals in seeking to promote the status and availability of technical education in the 11–16 phase of education. We recognise, however, that careful consideration is needed to ensure that any changes of this nature can be effectively and equitably delivered within the current system. (Paragraph 148)**

***[24] The Government should set out how technical and vocational education opportunities can be promoted to a greater number of pupils during the 11–16 phase, with the aim of enabling all pupils to study at least one technical or vocational subject should they wish. The Government should engage closely with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority’s proposal to offer, as an alternative to the EBacc, a key stage 4 subject combination focused on technical careers, and the Baker Dearing Educational Trust’s proposal for a “UTC sleeve”, and publish its response to these suggestions. (Paragraph 149)***

## Government response

62. The Government partially accepts the recommendation. We agree that a key route to promoting technical and vocational options to pupils aged 11-16 is through careers information, advice and guidance.<sup>53</sup> However, schools are already able to make decisions about the technical qualifications they offer their pupils.
63. We want to ensure pupils are equipped with the vital knowledge and skills they need to contribute to society and for their future careers. Therefore, it is right for pupils to be able to access a broad and balanced curriculum with academic subjects at its core. This broad and strong grounding ensures all pupils, regardless of background, can specialise and fulfil their aspirations post-16.

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<sup>53</sup> See paragraphs 70 to 75

64. We have taken steps to ensure a greater number of pupils can access high-quality vocational and technical qualifications from 14-16. Our revised approval process for Technical Awards, introduced in 2020, has improved the quality of technical qualifications at KS4, with only those which meet our high standards being recognised in KS4 performance tables alongside academic qualifications. This process not only provides greater confidence in the quality of Technical Awards but also elevates their status alongside academic qualifications, encouraging more pupils to study technical qualifications.
65. There are currently 46 Technical Awards approved for inclusion in 2024 performance tables, with most sector subject areas covered – including Health and Social Care, Engineering, and Building and Construction – helping to develop both technical and practical skills. Between 2020 (when the revised process was introduced) and 2023, the number of Technical Awards entries increased by 8% to almost 400,000 entries.<sup>54</sup>
66. Our consultation on the ABS proposes that academic and technical subjects are given equal status in a single ‘menu’ for 16- to 19-year-old students to choose from.<sup>55</sup> Building on our post-16 reforms to date, including the introduction of T Levels, this will further enhance the prestige of technical options post-16 and should positively impact take up of technical subjects (as above) in KS4. However, as is the case now, although students could choose to study the same vocational subjects pre- and post-16, we are not proposing that study of a subject in KS4 should be a pre-requisite for study of the subject post-16.
67. While we remain committed to the ambition for 90% of KS4 pupils to take the EBacc, pupils are able to study technical and vocational qualifications alongside the EBacc's academic core. Consequently, the introduction of a separate measure like the ‘MBacc’ is unnecessary.
68. We are considering the Baker Dearing Educational Trust’s proposal for a DfE funded pilot for the ‘UTC sleeve’ model in some secondary academies and will respond on this shortly.
69. Beyond teaching subjects required by either the national curriculum (for maintained schools) or funding agreements (for academies), schools are free to offer additional subjects and adopt pathways such as the MBacc or UTC sleeve proposals where they think it is appropriate for their pupils. Genuine employer involvement in the model will be critical, as we have seen with UTCs.

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<sup>54</sup> [Key stage 4 performance, Academic year 2022/23](#) (October 2023) GOV.UK: Explore education statistics

<sup>55</sup> [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard consultation](#) (December 2023) Department for Education

## Careers education and employment engagement

**[25] We are encouraged by the House of Commons Education Committee’s conclusion that reasonable progress towards improving careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) in secondary schools has been made over the past decade. We heard that an even greater emphasis on CEIAG is needed in the 11–16 phase, and that this can be enhanced through meaningful engagement between schools and employers. (Paragraph 157)**

**[26] *Careers education, information, advice and guidance in the 11–16 phase must give equal status to the full range of post-16 pathways, including technical and vocational qualifications, such as BTECs, and apprenticeships. We support the House of Commons Education Committee’s call for the Government to develop potential solutions to the problem of schools being overly incentivised to encourage pupils to follow academic routes. (Paragraph 158)***

## Government response

70. The Government agrees with this recommendation. Careers education, advice and guidance must give equal status to technical and academic pathways to raise aspirations and ensure exposure to a wide range of opportunities. As set out in our response to the House of Commons Education Committee, we have prioritised this issue in recent years.<sup>56</sup> We have extended the legislative framework and expanded the duty on schools to secure independent careers guidance to include all academies and year 7 pupils, recognising the importance of a consistent, early message regarding the full range of high-quality education and training options that are available.

71. These changes have been bolstered by our continued investment in Careers Hubs – with 92% of schools and colleges now enrolled – which have already trained over 3,000 Careers Leaders, empowering them to design and deliver impactful careers programmes in their institutions. The enrichment of these programmes, and resulting attainment of the Gatsby Benchmarks, has tangible impact on young people, with the strongest provision doubling pupils’ awareness of apprenticeships and quadrupling their understanding of T Levels between years 7 and 11.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> [Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance: Government response to the Committee’s Fourth Report of Session 2022–23](#) (September 2023)

<sup>57</sup> [Insight briefing: Student career readiness in 2022/23](#) (December 2023) The Careers & Enterprise Company



72. Provider access legislation (PAL),<sup>58</sup> previously known as the Baker Clause, was strengthened in January 2023,<sup>59</sup> requiring schools to offer at least six opportunities for pupils to meet providers of technical education or apprenticeships during years 8 to 13. In AY22/23, 69% of schools reported that the majority of their pupils had a ‘meaningful encounter’ with an Independent Training Provider, a nine percentage point increase on the previous year.<sup>60</sup> Careers Hubs are supporting schools and colleges to fulfil this statutory responsibility through the provision of training and resources, with a clear mechanism to intervene in any cases of persistent non-compliance. The Ofsted inspection process underlines the legislation’s importance, requiring inspectors to assess destination data and the proportion of pupils moving on to education, employment or apprenticeships, the implementation of PAL, and the overall quality of the careers programme within a school. If any of these elements is judged insufficient, this will be stated in the report and reflected in the personal development grade.<sup>61</sup>
73. To further support schools and colleges in developing their careers programme and meeting their statutory duties, we continue to fund the Apprenticeship Support and Knowledge (ASK) Programme, which leads interventions to promote understanding of apprenticeships and T Levels and develop pupils’ career readiness. In AY22/23, the programme engaged over 2,400 establishments and led over 625,000 student interactions.<sup>62</sup> Additionally, we have worked with UCAS to ensure that, from this academic year, pupils can explore thousands of live apprenticeships vacancies alongside university courses in one place, helping dismantle the perceived division between academic and technical options and allow pupils to pursue both routes when considering their options after leaving school.

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<sup>58</sup> [Education Act 1997](#)

<sup>59</sup> [Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022](#). See also [Careers guidance and access for education and training providers](#) (January 2023) Department for Education

<sup>60</sup> [Insight briefing: Gatsby Benchmark results for 2022/23](#) (2023) The Careers & Enterprise Company

<sup>61</sup> [School inspection handbook](#) (December 2023) Ofsted

<sup>62</sup> [Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance: Government response to the Committee’s Fourth Report of Session 2022–23](#) (September 2023) paragraph 26



74. Employer engagement is a crucial component of a high-quality careers programme, with a lack of work experience and industry awareness being consistently cited as one of the key barriers for young people. This is why we have continued investing in Careers Hubs, which are a key junction between education and local industry. The hubs coordinate employer encounters – ranging from career talks, mock interviews to networking events – with 93% of students in AY21/22 having had at least one interaction with an employer, compared to 82% in AY18/19. This positive trend is also seen in work experience, which returned to pre-pandemic levels in AY21/22 with 65% of schools reporting that most of their students secured a placement.<sup>63</sup>
75. We recognise that there is still more progress to make, and will continue to invest in our all-age careers provision, including over £90 million in financial year 2023-24. This investment will provide a ladder of opportunity to develop schools and colleges where all achievements – be they technical or academic – are celebrated equally, and support pupils to take their first steps in recognising their skills and maximising their future potential. Beyond this, we have launched Skills for Careers,<sup>64</sup> to simplify the navigation of careers information and opportunities and help users to discover the right path for them, and a new Skills for Life campaign,<sup>65</sup> emphasising users' agency to take up training or roles available to them. Looking to capture the progress that has already been made, and deliver on aspirations for the future, we have committed to publish a Strategic Action Plan for Careers during 2024. This will inform our all-age national careers offer to seamlessly support young people and adults through their careers journey, so that everyone – regardless of background – can make the most of their talents and progress towards a rewarding and fulfilling career.

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<sup>63</sup> [Ready for the Future: A review of Careers Education in England 2021/22](#) (October 2022) The Careers & Enterprise Company

<sup>64</sup> [Skills for Careers](#) Department for Education

<sup>65</sup> [Skills for Life: it all starts with skills](#) Department for Education

## Assessment reform

**[27] We have heard that the high-stakes nature of key stage 4 assessment in England necessitates an emphasis on terminal, exam-based testing. Witnesses have suggested that the current focus on exam-based assessment places considerable pressure on pupils and can have a detrimental impact on their learning experiences in the 11–16 phase. While there remains a need for some kind of formal assessment at 16, given the number of pupils who change institutions at this age, the current exam burden is disproportionate, since pupils must now remain in education or training up to 18. (Paragraph 177)**

**[28] We recognise that radical reform of GCSEs would constitute a major shift in the current secondary assessment system. This transition would need to be made as part of a long-term programme, alongside changes to the post-16 phase, and extensive consultation would be critical. This clearly goes beyond the Committee’s remit for this inquiry and so we have not made detailed recommendations in this area. We do, however, support recent proposals to move towards a slimmed-down form of assessment at 16, with externally validated assessment used across a smaller set of subjects. (Paragraph 178)**

***[29] We urge the Government to consider proposals to reduce more dramatically the amount of external assessment undertaken at age 16, as it reviews options for a less onerous GCSE assessment model. The Government should set out further details of its proposed review of GCSEs in its response to this report. (Paragraph 179)***

## Government response

76. The Government partially accepts this recommendation. GCSEs are longstanding, credible and well-respected. They are designed to reflect the knowledge and skills pupils need to progress, assessing a knowledge-rich curriculum, which we know is particularly important for supporting disadvantaged pupils. We do not consider a full review appropriate at this time. However, we agree that we should consider the burden of assessment and the possibilities for streamlining.
77. We reformed GCSEs and A levels from 2011 to be in line with the highest-performing education systems. We consulted widely on the principles for our reforms and individual subject content, including with schools, colleges, universities, and employers, to help them prepare for the new qualifications. At GCSE, we wanted to make sure that young people had access to qualifications that set expectations that match those in the highest-performing countries.

78. We made the move to a linear exams system to encourage deeper subject understanding and readiness for further study, instead of focusing on module resits. Testing how much a student knows at the end of – rather than partway through – a course is also fairer, giving them the opportunity to show their accumulated knowledge and understanding across all topics. It also means more time is spent on teaching and holistic learning. We address non-exam assessment (NEA) more fully below,<sup>66</sup> but note that Ofqual research shows there is little evidence that coursework has any impact on outcomes for students of different socio-economic statuses (SES) or for students with special educational needs.<sup>67</sup>
79. Despite this, and not planning to overhaul the GCSE system,<sup>68</sup> we recognise that introducing the ABS will mean we need to reconsider how GCSEs best prepare students for their post-16 education. As we move to the new system, all students will gain a clear record of their achievements at 18. In the context of this new system, it will be important that we continue to maximise teaching and learning time pre-16. In the ABS consultation,<sup>69</sup> we have therefore committed to work with Ofqual, schools, experts, parents and students to look at the type and format of GCSE examinations to identify if there are ways to reduce the burdens of assessment, while retaining the breadth and rigour of pre-16 education. This work will be informed by the final design of the ABS and seek to maintain the rigour of our GCSEs and continue our drive for high aspirations for all students.
80. Any change to GCSEs will protect the principle that rigorous teaching and externally assessed, linear examinations are, overall, the best and fairest way to ensure children learn and retain knowledge. We agree that GCSEs allow students to move onto their next stage at 16; they are also important to accountability, enabling us to understand how well a school is performing, so we can celebrate success and drive improvement.

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<sup>66</sup> See paragraphs 81 to 85

<sup>67</sup> [The impact of coursework on attainment dependent on student characteristics](#) (June 2020) Ofqual

<sup>68</sup> See paragraph 10

<sup>69</sup> [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard consultation](#) (December 2023) Department for Education

## Non-exam assessment

**[30] There is some evidence to suggest that non-exam assessment produces less reliable grades than traditional exams. However, we heard that non-exam assessment supports the development of knowledge and skills that are more difficult to assess in an exam context. Witnesses suggested that, used alongside exams, it can lessen the pressure of assessment for pupils, by reducing the significance of terminal exams to their overall grade, and help to capture the full range of their achievements. We are persuaded that an increase in the use of non-exam assessment at GCSE would bring benefits for pupils. (Paragraph 196)**

**[31] Concerns about reliability, plagiarism and the impact on teacher workload mean that an increase in the use of non-exam assessment should be approached cautiously. Careful consultation with teachers and schools will be vital to ensure that any increase in the use of non-exam assessment at GCSE is manageable to deliver. Increasing take-up of the Higher Project Qualification would enable more pupils to experience the benefits of non-exam assessment at key stage 4, without requiring any significant changes to the current suite of GCSEs. (Paragraph 197)**

***[32] As part of a longer-term review of qualifications at 16, the Government should introduce a greater proportion of non-exam assessment at key stage 4. In the short term, the Government should set out how greater take-up of the Higher Project Qualification at key stage 4 could be encouraged, to enable more pupils to undertake an extended project qualification alongside their GCSEs. (Paragraph 198)***

## Government response

81. The Government does not accept this recommendation. One of the main features of our GCSE, AS and A level reforms was a reduction in NEA and coursework in some subjects, and a principle that it should only be used where knowledge, skills and understanding could not be tested validly by an exam.
82. Exams are a great leveller, whatever a pupil's origin or level of disadvantage. They are impartial in a way that other forms of assessment are not: everyone is asked the same question at the same time and answers are marked anonymously. We also know that exams, and the preparation leading up to them, can be motivating for students and lead to improved learning. We recognise that examinations, like other things in life such as job interviews, moving house or having your first child, are by their very nature, stressful. But when students receive the right support, for very many of them, the level of stress from exams should be manageable.

83. NEA continues to play an important role in assessing some aspects of subject content. For example, NEA is still used in GCSE modern foreign languages (speaking assessment), GCSE design and technology, and in GCSE and A level art and design, where relevant subject content cannot be validly assessed by an exam. We are clear, however, that NEA should only be used by exception and exams remain the best and fairest form of assessment. We also note that earlier NEA-heavy forms of assessment such as controlled assessments impacted significantly on teaching time.
84. We agree that we should be mindful of growing concerns around plagiarism, especially in the context of generative AI. Exam boards have put strict rules in place to ensure pupils' work is their own. Sanctions for cheating are serious, including being disqualified from a qualification. Schools and teachers know their pupils best and are experienced in identifying their individual pupils' work. The Joint Council for Qualifications has published guidance reminding teachers and assessors of best practice in preventing and identifying potential malpractice, applying it in the context of AI use.<sup>70</sup> It will keep this guidance under review as AI tools develop.
85. As noted above, following the ABS announcement, we will be looking at where assessments can be streamlined while retaining their inherent rigour and recognising the important role they play in our system.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> [AI Use in Assessments: Protecting the Integrity of Qualifications](#) (March 2023) Joint Council for Qualifications

<sup>71</sup> See paragraphs 79 to 80

## Onscreen assessment

**[33] Paper-based exams that require pupils to write for extended periods are increasingly out of alignment with the experiences and tasks young people will encounter in their education, life and work. On-screen testing represents a more modern approach and offers huge potential to enhance the assessment experience for learners. We welcome Ofqual’s initial investigatory work in this area and support its future vision of a mixed model combining on-screen and paper-based assessment. (Paragraph 216)**

**[34] We recognise that there are numerous barriers to delivering a greater proportion of on-screen assessment within national exams at the end of key stage 4, including the need to develop school infrastructure and ensure pupils are equipped with the necessary digital skills. It is imperative that the transition towards on-screen assessment at GCSE is managed in a way that ensures fair treatment of all learners. (Paragraph 217)**

**[35] *The Government should lead on ensuring that the transition towards on-screen assessment at GCSE is implemented successfully. In its response to this report, the Government should summarise the steps it is taking to support progress towards a greater proportion of GCSE assessments being undertaken on-screen in future. (Paragraph 218)***

## Government response

86. The Government does not accept this recommendation, as we have yet to decide whether we should transition to onscreen assessments (OSAs) in the long term. However, as stated in the ABS command paper and at the BETT show,<sup>72,73</sup> we are committed to exploring digital solutions, such as OSAs, to support innovative and less onerous assessments. We agree that moving high-stakes qualifications onscreen has the potential to bring considerable opportunities and risks, and therefore it is vital that we ensure any transition to OSA is managed effectively and fairly.

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<sup>72</sup> [A world-class education system - The Advanced British Standard](#) (October 2023) Department for Education

<sup>73</sup> [Education Secretary addresses BETT 2023](#) (March 2023) Department for Education

87. While there is a growing body of research looking at the potential benefits and challenges around OSAs, there are still some evidence gaps. We are working closely with Ofqual on a jointly funded research study to build its evidence base and understand the implications of OSAs on schools and different cohorts of pupils, including benefits and disadvantages, risks, and costs. The research will inform our decisions about the future of onscreen assessments and Ofqual's role in ensuring any transition to OSAs is implemented effectively and fairly for all pupils. Consequently, we currently cannot commit to moving to OSAs in the long term.
88. The main AOs in England are running pilots to move some components of their GCSE exams onscreen, and some already offer onscreen international GCSE and international A level exams alongside paper-based exams. In addition, we understand that some AOs are also seeking agreement to move some components of their GCSE exams onscreen. Ofqual, as the independent regulator of qualifications, requires that any GCSE or A level component moving onscreen be subject to regulatory approval before it can be launched.
89. In the meantime, we are running two programmes to help schools make wider improvements to their digital infrastructure. These are vital to enabling schools to effectively harness technology in their teaching, regardless of whether we decide to move to OSAs.
- a. The school fibre broadband programme will help connect rural schools not likely to be connected by commercial rollout and currently stuck on outdated copper cables.<sup>74</sup>
  - b. The connect the classroom programme will help upgrade school Wi-Fi connectivity in priority areas to allow teachers and schools to make the most of the benefits that digital technology can deliver in the classroom.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> [Thousands of rural primary schools to get huge broadband upgrade](#) (July 2022) Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, Department for Education

<sup>75</sup> [Connect the classroom](#) (June 2023) Department for Education

## Grading and marking

[36] It has been suggested that the system for determining GCSE grade boundaries requires a fixed proportion of pupils to ‘fail’ their English and maths GCSEs each year. However, we are persuaded that it does not set quotas for the number of pupils who can be awarded each grade. (Paragraph 225)

[37] Where external assessment is used, it is vital that GCSE grades are, and are perceived to be, accurate reflections of a pupil’s performance. This is particularly important given that, at present, a pupil’s GCSE results can have a direct impact on the post-16 options they are able to pursue. Robust processes must be in place to assure the reliability of grading. These should be kept under review, including in light of the potential enhancements that emerging technologies such as AI may bring to marking. (Paragraph 232)

[38] We heard that taking steps to increase the reliability of GCSE assessment would be likely to entail more extensive testing of pupils, or moving to a more limited set of question types. Such changes could have a detrimental impact on learners and would run counter to efforts to transition to a more varied and less onerous assessment system at key stage 4. (Paragraph 233)

[39] *The Government should instead prioritise lowering the stakes of assessment at 16, to ease the pressure for testing at this age to meet such high reliability standards, and reduce the present emphasis on exam-based assessment at the end of key stage 4. (Paragraph 234)*

## Government response

90. The Government does not accept this recommendation. While this is principally a matter for Ofqual, we consider that current assessment arrangements are appropriate and that, with support, the associated pressure can be manageable.<sup>76</sup>
91. GCSEs and A levels are neither norm-referenced nor criterion-referenced. As the committee has concluded, there is no quota of grades, or cap on the number of students who can achieve each grade.

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<sup>76</sup> See paragraph 82



92. The policy for grading in English and maths (and all other) GCSEs is carried out by Ofqual, the regulator for qualifications in England, which is independent of Government and separately accountable to Parliament. Ofqual has robust systems and processes in place to ensure that exam boards deliver reliable grading, including setting of grade boundaries, to ensure that those grades reliably represent students' actual knowledge, understanding and skills.
93. As noted above,<sup>77</sup> exams have a level of impartiality that other forms of assessment don't have. Everyone is asked the same question, at the same time and they are marked in the same way, and, crucially, they are marked anonymously. Ofqual has put in place a set of principles establishing that NEA should only be used when it is the only valid way to assess essential elements of the subject.<sup>78</sup> GCSEs serve a critical function as a measure of attainment and vehicle for progression. We know around half of students change institution at age 16, and it is because they have a shared and recognised qualification that they are able to transition easily post-16.<sup>79</sup>
94. As we noted above,<sup>80</sup> we will work with Ofqual, schools, experts, parents and students to look at the type and format of GCSE examinations to identify ways to reduce the burdens of assessment, while retaining the breadth and rigour of pre-16 education.

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<sup>77</sup> See paragraph 82

<sup>78</sup> See paragraphs 81 to 85 for more on NEA

<sup>79</sup> [What Next for GCSEs?](#) (November 2021) AQA

<sup>80</sup> See paragraph 79

## Performance measures

[40] The interplay between Ofsted’s inspection regime and the collection and publication of school performance data relating to the 11–16 phase results in an accountability system that places intense pressure on schools. Its overreliance on key stage 4 attainment figures disproportionately raises the stakes of assessment in this phase and also pressurises teachers and pupils. (Paragraph 246)

[41] *The Government must ensure that the type and volume of school and college performance data it publishes balances the needs of users against the risk of undesirable outcomes, such as disproportionate pressure on schools and pupils. Taking forward the recommended reforms to specific key stage 4 accountability measures set out in this report presents an opportunity for the Government to conduct a wider review of the data it publishes for this phase, to ensure that an appropriate balance is being struck. (Paragraph 247)*

## Government response

95. The Government accepts this recommendation. We agree that balancing the benefits and risks of performance measures is important, and believe our existing approach strikes that balance appropriately, providing necessary information without undue burden. We also note our other responses to the Committee’s recommendations for accountability reform.<sup>81</sup>
96. Ofsted inspection plays an important role in the accountability system, alongside performance data. Inspections plays an important role in providing a regular, independent and rounded assessment of all schools, identifying and recognising strengths and highlighting areas that need to be improved. Inspection also provides assurance to parents, the wider community and Government that pupils are receiving the high quality of education they deserve and are being kept safe.

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<sup>81</sup> See paragraphs 50, 101 to 105 and 106 to 109

97. School performance data, including test, assessment and exam results data, are an important consideration during inspections, but they do not determine an inspection outcome. Inspectors take a wide range of factors into account when considering school performance, including nationally published school performance data, where it is available. National assessments and examinations are useful indicators of pupils' outcomes, but they only represent a sample of what pupils have learned. Inspectors will consider any outcomes data, where this is available in nationally published data, but it does not constitute a substitute for inspectors' first-hand inspection activity. Inspectors will evaluate evidence of the intent, implementation, and impact of the curriculum to reach a holistic assessment of the quality of education that a school provides to all its pupils.
98. It is also important we have publicly available data about exam results in a school or college for transparency, and as a starting point to support parents and students when choosing schools or post-16 institutions. Our suite of headline accountability measures is designed to encourage schools to offer a broad and balanced curriculum, with a focus on an academic core, giving pupils a strong foundation for future study.
99. There is no target associated with Progress 8. It is a relative measure, and the national average for mainstream schools is zero. Progress 8 is designed to reward schools for the progress made by all pupils across the ability range, moving away from an emphasis on threshold measures (for example, 5A\*-C including English and maths). Unlike threshold and other attainment measures, Progress 8 takes the prior attainment of pupils into account.
100. Data triggered floor and coasting standards were removed from September 2019. This was an important step in creating a clearer, simpler accountability system, helping to reduce undue pressure on school leaders. We will continue to ensure that the type and volume of school and college performance data we publish balances the needs of users against the risk of undesirable outcomes.

## The English Baccalaureate

**[42] The Government's ambition that 90% of pupils in state-funded schools should enter for the EBacc sends a strong message as to which subjects should be prioritised, which is echoed by the references to the EBacc in Ofsted's handbook and recent school inspection reports. Faced with the pressures of a high-stakes accountability system and stretched resources, schools have understandably organised their curricula in line with the EBacc's requirements, often deprioritising creative, artistic and technical subjects as a result. (Paragraph 268)**

**[43] Core subjects such as English, maths and science should form a central part of the key stage 4 curriculum, and all pupils should have the opportunity to pursue traditionally academic subjects at key stage 4 should they wish. Nonetheless, the EBacc subject combination is overly restrictive and demotes to second-tier status subjects that bring breadth and balance and enable the development of essential skills. (Paragraph 269)**

**[44] There is a continued connection between the EBacc's composition and the facilitating subjects list previously used to designate the A-level subjects most often required for entry to high-tariff universities. This gives undue prominence to the university route and is no longer justifiable given the Russell Group's withdrawal of this classification. (Paragraph 270)**

***[45] The Government must immediately abandon the national ambition for 90% of pupils in state-funded mainstream schools to be taking the EBacc subject combination. The EBacc subject categorisation, and the EBacc entry and EBacc average point score accountability measures, should also be withdrawn in their entirety, and all references to the EBacc in the Ofsted school inspection handbook removed. (Paragraph 271)***

## Government response

101. The Government does not accept this recommendation. The EBacc encourages pupils to take an academic core of subjects that they may otherwise not be given the opportunity to take. We have no plans to abandon or amend the EBacc or our ambition for high levels of take-up.

102. The EBacc plays an important part in removing barriers to success and ensuring that all young people are given similar opportunities regardless of their background. It is important that the EBacc is studied as part of a broad and balanced curriculum and that every child experiences a high-quality arts, cultural, and technical education throughout their time at school.<sup>82</sup>
103. The EBacc subjects are essential for many degrees and provide a sound basis for a variety of careers beyond the age of 16. Enabling more disadvantaged pupils to follow a curriculum with the EBacc at its centre gives them the same post-16 options as their non-disadvantaged peers, supporting social mobility. In 2016, a Sutton Trust study found that pupils in a set of 300 schools that increased their EBacc entry, from 8% to 48%, were more likely to achieve good English and mathematics GCSEs, more likely to take an A level or an equivalent level 3 qualification, and more likely to stay in post-16 education.<sup>83</sup>
104. Studying the EBacc subjects up to the age of 16 is right for most pupils. However, there will be a small minority of pupils for whom taking all the EBacc subjects at GCSE will not be appropriate, and it is for schools to decide which pupils are not entered for it.
105. It is important to note that, when inspecting the quality of education of a secondary school, Ofsted does not just focus on the EBacc. Inspectors will evaluate evidence of the intent, implementation and impact of the curriculum to reach a holistic assessment of the quality of education that a school provides to all its pupils. Ofsted also looks at the school's support for pupils' personal development, behaviour and attitudes and the leadership and management of the school, so inspectors can reach a rounded judgement of the school. In line with our ambition, inspectors will also look at whether the school's aim is to have the EBacc at the heart of its curriculum and that good progress has been made towards the ambition.

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<sup>82</sup> See also paragraphs 50 to 61 and 62 to 69

<sup>83</sup> [Changing the Subject](#) (July 2016) Sutton Trust

## Progress 8

[46] Progress 8 is an improvement on the previous headline accountability measure and was introduced with the valuable aim of capturing the average level of progress pupils in a school make during key stages 3 and 4 across a range of subjects. We welcome the emphasis it places on supporting pupils of all abilities to increase their attainment. (Paragraph 287)

[47] The dominance of EBacc subjects within the Progress 8 measure limits flexibility around subject choice and incentivises schools to focus their resources on a narrow set of academic subjects. This constricts in particular the take-up of creative and technical qualifications, and compounds the impacts of the EBacc described earlier. Withdrawing the EBacc subject classification would change the composition of Progress 8 by removing the requirement for pupils to take three additional EBacc subjects, alongside English and maths. This presents an opportunity for further refinement of the measure. (Paragraph 288)

[48] In the short term, we favour adjustments to Progress 8 that would enhance the flexibility and choice it offers, while reducing the disruption and risk of unintended consequences that changing the number of subject slots which comprise it might cause. A reformed Progress 8 could be structured around the core subjects of English, maths and science, complemented by up to four open slots. It should give schools greater flexibility to offer the subjects and qualifications that would best serve their pupils, based on a balanced curriculum that includes scope for creative, technical and vocational subjects. (Paragraph 289)

[49] A revised Progress 8 should also record results gained in English and maths functional skills qualifications, to ensure that even if pupils do not take English and maths GCSEs, their attainment in literacy and numeracy is recognised. (Paragraph 290)

[50] *We call on the Government to review the current set of headline accountability measures, particularly Progress 8, in light of evidence that the existing measures are failing to support schools to deliver a broad and balanced curriculum. The review should examine how, following the withdrawal of the EBacc, Progress 8 can be further refined to ensure that schools maintain an appropriate level of focus on the core subjects of maths, English and science, while enabling them to promote a broader range of subjects to pupils at key stage 4. Consideration should also be given to how results achieved in functional skills qualifications in English and maths would be incorporated into the measure.* (Paragraph 291)

## Government response

106. The Government does not accept this recommendation. We believe our current accountability measures, particularly Progress 8, encourage schools to offer an appropriately broad and balanced curriculum with a focus on an academic core based around the EBacc. We do not agree that Progress 8 should record results gained in English and maths functional skills qualifications. We also note our responses above on the quality of our reformed GCSEs and on the importance of the EBacc, which we do not intend to withdraw.<sup>84</sup>
107. The Progress 8 measure is designed to ensure a focus on an academic core that gives pupils a strong foundation for future study. It allows scope for schools to ensure pupils pursue other qualifications by including up to three further GCSEs or other approved qualifications. These include GCSEs in non-EBacc subjects such as citizenship, design and technology, and music. They also include a wide range of technical awards from an approved list, such as level 1 and 2 qualifications in digital information technology, that equip pupils with applied knowledge and practical skills not usually acquired through general education. They are designed to ensure pupils have a strong foundation for future study and keep their options open to follow any path post-16.
108. The great majority of pupils at KS4 should be entered for GCSEs in English and maths, and our performance measures are designed to encourage this, to help ensure high aspirations for all students. We have a strong system in place to support pupils who do not gain a grade 4 in GCSE English and maths at age 16. Pupils are required to continue the study of maths and English post-16 if they do not already hold a GCSE grade 9-4 in maths and/or English. Pupils starting a new or continuing an existing study programme with a GCSE grade 2 or below can study towards a pass in Functional Skills Level 2, or they can still study towards a GCSE grade 4 to 9. Those with a grade 3 must still study GCSE only.
109. While we do not consider the Performance 8 measure to require updating at this time, we will continue to consider opportunities to review the current set of headline measures.

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<sup>84</sup> See paragraphs 76 to 80 and 101 to 105

## Other key stage 4 accountability measures

[51] Although we are sympathetic to the idea of increasing the prominence of destination data in the key stage 4 accountability system, further investigation is necessary to determine the benefits of doing so and the best approach by which to achieve this. As with any adjustment to performance measures, changes should be approached cautiously to avoid increasing pressure on schools and inappropriately driving behaviour. A consistent approach to school performance measurement across key stages 3, 4 and 5 is essential to ensuring that efforts made to promote technical qualifications and apprenticeships in the 11–16 phase are not undermined by the impact of performance metrics used at key stage 5. (Paragraph 297)

[52] *The remaining headline accountability measures, including the percentage of pupils staying in education or entering employment, should be re-evaluated as part of a wider review of the key stage 4 school performance measures published by the Government. The Government should also review the key stage 5 destinations measures, including the entry to Russell Group universities metric, and adjust or withdraw these as required to ensure that performance incentives for schools and colleges are coherent across the 11–16 and 16–19 phases. (Paragraph 298)*

## Government response

110. The Government partially accepts this recommendation. While we do not plan to undertake a specific review for KS4, we keep all performance measures under ongoing review, including the Russell Group destination measure.
111. For KS4 and 16-18, destination measures receive prominence as headline measures. They are broadly aligned, which ensures a consistent focus on the importance of sustained destinations at both stages as part of a range of performance measures.
112. The inclusion of the proportion of students progressing to a Russell Group university as a performance measure is due to the term 'Russell Group' being generally understood as a reference to high-tariff universities. We also include as a performance measure the proportion of students progressing to universities that are in the top third based on UCAS tariff. Given this destination measure, we will review if a separate Russell Group destination measure is still required.



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