One Step Beyond: How the school and college curriculum in England can prepare young people for higher education

Josh Freeman

Higher Education Policy Institute

University of Chester

HEPI Report 186

About the author

Josh Freeman has been Policy Manager at HEPI since July 2023. In that time, his research has included reports on foundation year courses and their role improving access to higher education, a minimum income standard for students, artificial intelligence and the experiences of trans and non-binary students. Before he worked for HEPI, he was a Maths and Politics teacher in London and subsequently completed a Master's degree in Global Governance and Diplomacy at the University of Oxford.

Contents

Foreword

Professor Jackie Potter, Dean of Academic Innovation, University of Chester

The Curriculum and Assessment Review by Professor Becky Francis reports in the summer of 2025, but has not elicited much public response from English universities. HEPI's Report by Josh Freeman is a critical examination of what we know about the Review, supplemented by data on home students' experiences of their school and college curriculum. It explores how the practical and academic features of the current school and college curriculum prepare students for their time at university and asks students about possible developments, aligned to the principles of the Review. It specifically asks students about their preparedness for academic study and for personal and social preparation for higher education. Together, these form the areas of focus of many academic and professional services staff in our universities. They will read much of interest here.

These features are embedded at the University of Chester within our holistic approach to students' personal growth and academic achievement, articulated in our Citizen Student Strategy. This enables every Chester student to personalise their learning journey by combining in-curricular opportunities for practical, context-rich learning within our broad range of subjects and professional courses. Students also benefit from award-winning student support (WhatUni Student Choice Awards, 2024) and extra-curricular opportunities such as our annual social capital conference and volunteering programmes.

The students in this report feel their school and college curriculum supported them well to continue into higher education. They share important majority views, or significant minority views, on ways to further improve their school and college curriculum, and assessment, as well as ways they would not like to see it develop.

There are some interesting insights. Students reported that they would welcome more vocational, digital and oracy skills but would not embrace the idea of extending the requirement to study English or Maths to the age of 18. A significant majority would support extending the delivery of PSHE

(the personal and social skills curriculum) to 18 and, within this, students would welcome more help with financial choices and career pathways. In relation to assessment, women and students with SEN were more likely to feel there was too much assessment and that it did not adequately prepare them for higher education.

The recommendations provided in the report will resonate with many in the higher education sector as they could have tangible benefits for the diverse students that choose to study in higher education and for the most disadvantaged to achieve their ambitions. There is support here to maintain BTECs, in the short term at least, as a vocational study route and an alternative to A Levels. There is a call for a rebalancing of creative subjects in the GCSE curriculum and a moderate broadening of the 16-to-19 curriculum. The suggestion of extending the delivery of PSHE to the age of 18, with an increased focus on financial planning and careers, could be hugely supportive for pupils and students alike.

The call for unbiased, one-to-one guidance for all pupils at 16 aligned to their chosen career pathway is particularly welcome. It aims to reduce disparities, such as higher education participation, by closing the knowledge gaps that disproportionately affect disadvantaged groups.

Universities will benefit from this timely report ahead of the Curriculum and Assessment Review. It can and should prompt us to pay close attention to our home student profiles, including prior qualifications and educational experiences, as they are supported through higher education. Also, it can and should encourage us to take a closer look at the 16-to-19 school and college curriculum, both as it is now and as it may develop through the 'evolutionary' approach promised by the Review that will be published later this year.

Executive Summary

More than one-third of 18-year-olds enter higher education. Whether they succeed there depends to a great extent on what they studied and learned in school. Prompted by the Curriculum and Assessment Review chaired by Professor Becky Francis, this Report considers how far the school and college curriculum prepares students for higher-level study and how it can do so better.

The primary source for this project is original polling of 1,105 higher education students, commissioned by HEPI and conducted by Savanta. These students are asked to reflect on their time in school or college and how well it positioned them for higher education. This Report also draws on historic versions of the HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey* and the Unite Students *Applicant Index*, as well as a wealth of academic and policy research.

In the first chapter, the Report considers whether students have the preparation and skills to succeed in higher education. It shows that students generally feel well-prepared and their fears they will not keep up are usually unsubstantiated. However, there are a few areas, such as academic writing and independent inquiry, where students appear to be underprepared. Many do not feel 'ready for life and ready for work' and students want more teaching of 'life skills' as well as more training on vocational, digital and oracy skills. Most students feel confident about their English and Maths skills and most would not support making these subjects compulsory to 18. A significant minority would like a broader curriculum at 16 to 19, especially when it comes to what would give them 'greatest satisfaction and fulfilment', whereas very few want the curriculum to be even narrower.

In the second chapter, the Report looks at the qualifications and assessments school and college pupils take. It finds that many students feel there are too many assessments and a sizeable minority, particularly female students and those with special educational needs (SEN), do not feel the assessments prepare them for higher education or allow them to fulfil their potential. The high number of assessments, and the large amount of content in them, harmfully encourage educators to 'teach to the test' at the expense of more useful knowledge and skills. Taking BTECs and A Levels

makes pupils more likely to enter low-tariff and high-tariff institutions respectively, so there is a real need to give pupils excellent advice and guidance before they choose their subjects.

In the third chapter, the Report considers students' personal and social preparation for higher education, especially the Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education curriculum. It shows that students most value the discussion of mental and emotional health and strongly want more teaching of financial choices and, to a lesser extent, career pathways. Students feel much more prepared for sex and relationships in higher education than they did in 2021. The majority of students would support PSHE being studied to age 18.

In the fourth chapter, the Report considers how the curriculum in school and college can open higher education to more people regardless of background. It finds that most students think their subjects at 16 helped them explore different options and take their desired route, but more than two-in-five students (41%) would have taken different subjects. Most do not regret their decision to enter higher education, but around a quarter would have taken a different course or studied at a different institution.

In the final section, the report makes recommendations for the Curriculum Review panel. It argues there should be a greater focus on developing pupils' academic skills, perhaps through an Extended Project Qualification (EPQ)-style project. More attention should be given to making sure each pupil has an excellent basis in literacy and numeracy, beyond making pupils resit GCSE English and Maths, as well as in oracy and digital skills. Creative skills should be reprioritised at GCSE. At age 16, the curriculum might be made broader than today, compared with the current situation, and pupils could take four or even five subjects as a default. The amount of content in assessments, and the number of them, should be reduced. In PSHE, there should be a greater focus on vocational skills and financial planning. To help everyone make informed choices, the curriculum should include a pathway mentor guarantee, where all pupils get a one-to-one conversation with an expert in careers pathways to help them choose the right subjects for them at 16.

Introduction

There is an enduringly close relationship between higher education and the school and college curriculum in England. The A Level was originally created to serve the relatively small number of students entering higher education, with the exam boards run by universities.[1] Since then, the proportion taking A Levels and entering higher education has ballooned. Students enter higher education with a wider range of qualifications, conducted by mainly independent exam boards. More than a third of 18-year-olds enter higher education and higher education is more popular than any other post-16 destination.[2] As a result, making sure students are prepared for that transition remains a central aim of the school and college curriculum.

The relationship between compulsory and higher education works both ways. What pupils learn in school and the experiences they have there can determine whether they will thrive in higher education. As a result, the higher education sector has sometimes sought to ensure the school and college curriculum provides the best possible preparation. Perhaps most famously, the Russell Group's list of facilitating subjects set out the best A Level subjects to study for students wanting to attend more prestigious universities. (Though the list was deemed a distraction and withdrawn in 2019.[3])

A growing number of students, the majority of whom have 'gold standard' A Levels developed with university entry in mind, continue to thrive in the UK's globally leading higher education system. As the now-Secretary of State for Education, Bridget Phillipson, said in 2023, higher education is 'one of Britain's greatest and most successful export industries'.

The Curriculum and Assessment Review, chaired by Professor Becky Francis, has been commissioned by the Department for Education to consider how well the English curriculum works for today's pupils and young people. It will report in the autumn of 2025. Within its remit are 'pathways' to higher education, the 'skills' students will need there and their subsequent progress into employment or further study. The review promises 'evolution' rather than 'revolution' in what young people are taught. But any changes to the curriculum and in assessment will affect how prepared pupils are for higher education. It is therefore important that the higher education sector engages meaningfully with the Review.

This Report considers whether, and how far, the English school and college curriculum currently prepares students for higher education:

- Does it give students the necessary academic preparation – the subject knowledge, academic skills, self-discipline and confidence?
- Does it prepare students for the assessments they will take there?
- Does it give them the wider social and personal preparation to navigate complex relationships, make sensible financial choices and look after their mental health?
- And does it do all of these things equitably so that no one is disadvantaged by their background?

Where the answer to each of these questions is not an unequivocal 'yes', this Report also proposes concrete policy proposals the Review might adopt to support those students taking one step beyond the current curriculum.

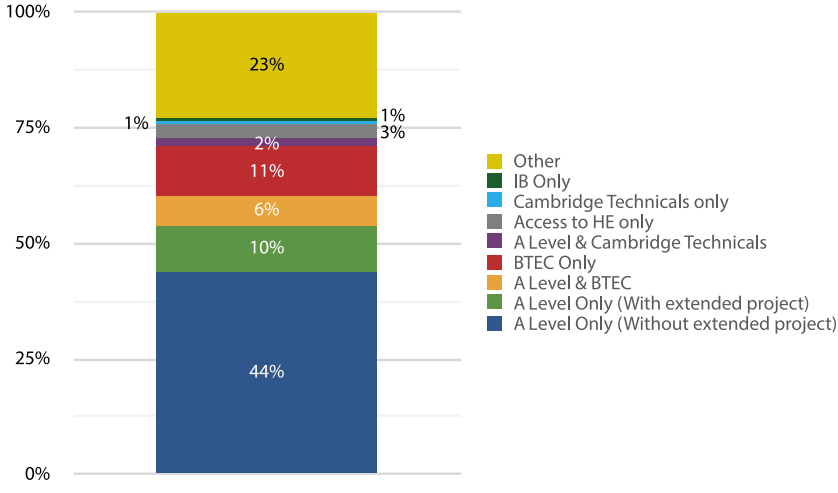
Who progresses to higher education?

Higher education has seen significant expansion in the last 25 years. The number of acceptances into full-time higher education rose from 336,000 in 1997 to 563,000 in 2022.[4] The entry rate for UK 18-year-olds increased from 24.7% in 2006 to a peak of 38.2% in 2021 (somewhat buoyed by the COVID-19 pandemic) before falling back to 36.4% by 2024.[5]

Taking A Levels remains the most typical route for young people to enter higher education. In 2024, the majority of England-domiciled entrants to higher education studied only A Levels, either with the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) (10%) or, more commonly, without (44%). While previously A Levels were integrated with AS Levels and a set of exams taken after a year of study, AS Levels have since been 'decoupled' and pupils now usually take all their exams at the end of two years of study. Most A Level entrants take three A Levels.

However, A Levels are far from the only route into higher education. A substantial minority (17%) have studied BTECs, either alone (11%) or with A Levels (6%) and some 50% of those who take BTECs enter higher education.[6] A wide variety of other qualifications and combinations are studied.

Figure 1 Entrants to higher education, by qualification



Source: UCAS, 28 days after Level 3 Results Day 2024

The International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma, which is broader than A Levels, has been suggested by some as an alternative Level 3 qualification. Unlike A Levels, where students now typically take only three subjects, students on the IB Diploma Programme take six plus a 'Core' of other modules, including an independent research project. The IB Diploma is popular internationally but is taken by only a tiny proportion (around 1%) of English entrants to UK higher education. Around 80 private schools and colleges offer the IB Diploma alongside around 20 state schools and colleges.[7]

The breadth of the IB Diploma may have inspired the Conservative Government's 2023 proposals for an Advanced British Standard (ABS), under which students would have taken a minimum of five subjects and would have studied Maths and English to 18.[8] The ABS will now not be implemented.

Degrees at English universities are unusual in comparison with other countries, being highly specialised and lasting only three years. Most students focus on their chosen subject 'from day one' with little time spent

on other subjects.[9] The high degree of specialisation at 16 to 18, including more in-depth subject knowledge than is covered in the IB, makes this possible, so we should consider carefully any changes to the breadth of 16 to 18 education for their implications for higher education.

The Curriculum and Assessment Review

In its 2024 Manifesto, the Labour Party committed to launch an 'expert-led review of curriculum and assessment'. It argued for a 'rich and broad, inclusive, and innovative' curriculum, with 'an excellent foundation in reading, writing and maths' and the chance to 'develop digital, speaking and creative skills'.[10] The Review was announced by the Secretary of State for Education, Bridget Phillipson, in July 2024.[11] It is due to publish an 'interim' report in spring 2025 and a full report in autumn 2025.[12]

The Review does not mention higher education specifically in its Terms of Reference, but does put heavy weight on ensuring 'meaningful, rigorous and high-value pathways for all at 16-19'. Mirroring the language of the Labour Manifesto, it lists five priority areas, as follows:

1. An 'excellent foundation' in reading, writing and maths.
2. A 'broader' curriculum – with a nod to creative and vocational subjects.
3. Ensuring young people leave compulsory education 'ready for life and ready for work', with a particular focus on 'digital, oracy and life skills'.
4. Ensuring the curriculum 'reflects the issues and diversities of our society'.
5. And a 'balanced' assessment system which captures the strengths of every child.

It is clear to see how these principles might serve to prepare young people for higher education. Every student in higher education should have a strong basis in literacy and numeracy, for example. And in the challenging environment of higher education, students should be expected to understand the issues and challenges facing the UK and the world today.

A major focus of the Curriculum and Assessment Review is on preparing young people for employment, rather than continuing education. Concerns

have been raised regarding rising rates of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). In mid-2024, more than 13% of UK 16 to 24-year-olds were NEET, up from 12% in mid-2023 and 11% in mid-2022.[13] Nothing in the Terms of Reference, nor its rhyming tenet 'evolution not revolution', suggest the Review is considering a sweeping transformation of the 16-to-18 qualifications system in the way the Advanced British Standard or the 2004 Tomlinson Report would have.[14]

Nonetheless to the extent that it is accepted by the Government, the Review has important implications for higher education. If the Review leads to a prioritisation of creative skills, as the Labour Manifesto argues for, degrees in creative subjects could see a boost a few years later. If there is a focus on spoken English, institutions may need to rethink their teaching and assessment methods to match. If the focus on a 'broader' curriculum comes at the expense of depth in A Levels, institutions may need to adapt their curricula to cover more subject content. Rather than accepting the Review whatever it concludes, higher education should be an active participant. Given the potential ramifications, it is surprising the higher education sector has not made a greater effort to contribute to the Curriculum and Assessment Review.

Readers should note that the Review focuses on the years of compulsory education, up to 18 (or 19 for some students). The Government does not directly determine the curricula of higher education institutions, which are partly determined by institutions and Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs). Some of the findings in this Report have implications for how higher education institutions teach and support their students, but such actions are outside its scope. That is not to excuse higher education institutions from their responsibility to support students in their transition between phases with information, training in academic skills, pastoral support and, sometimes, larger interventions such as foundation year courses.[15]

Methodology

This Report is based on the findings of a poll of 1,105 full-time undergraduate students domiciled in England. The fieldwork was conducted by Savanta in November and December 2024.

To ensure our results are representative of the undergraduate population, the sample was weighted in line with population sizes by gender, institution type and year of study. More than one-fifth of the sample took BTECs, which is broadly in line with the wider student population.[16] Data points may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Full details of the sample are available in the Appendix and the full survey results can be viewed on the HEPI website.

It is important to note that the sample consists only of those students who successfully applied to and entered higher education. It excludes those who, for whatever reason, did not apply to higher education or who did apply but did not ultimately take up their place. **Therefore, it will not be representative of the wider population of young people who experienced the school and college curriculum.** For simplicity, I use the term 'pupils' to refer to those in compulsory education and 'students' for those in higher education.

This Report is interested in the whole school and college curriculum to 19 ('the curriculum' for short), not just the National Curriculum, which only goes up to 16.

Today's students only have experience of one curriculum – the one they studied – and academic research on hypothetical polling questions suggests some people find such questions difficult to answer.[17] But the results give an important sense of students' priorities, what they value in the current system and how a future one might do better.

I also draw on two other major surveys. First, I use the *Student Academic Experience Survey* (SAES), an annual poll of full-time undergraduate students published by HEPI and Advance HE and conducted by Savanta. Each edition of the survey has more than 10,000 responses. Here I use mainly the 2024 *Student Academic Experience Survey*, which has a sample size of 10,319 students, a margin of error of +/- 1% and which is weighted on a range of factors in line with the most recently available data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).

Secondly, I use the 2024 Unite Students *Applicant Index* published in partnership with HEPI. The 2024 version is based on a survey of 2,190

respondents who were planning to start a full-time degree or degree apprenticeship course in the 2024/25 academic year. The margin of error is +/- 2% and the *Index* is weighted by gender and school type.

In addition, I also draw on the rich evidence base available online in recent years, particularly regarding reforms undertaken during the last Conservative governments. I also met with a number of sector experts, who generously gave their time and are acknowledged fully at the end of the report.

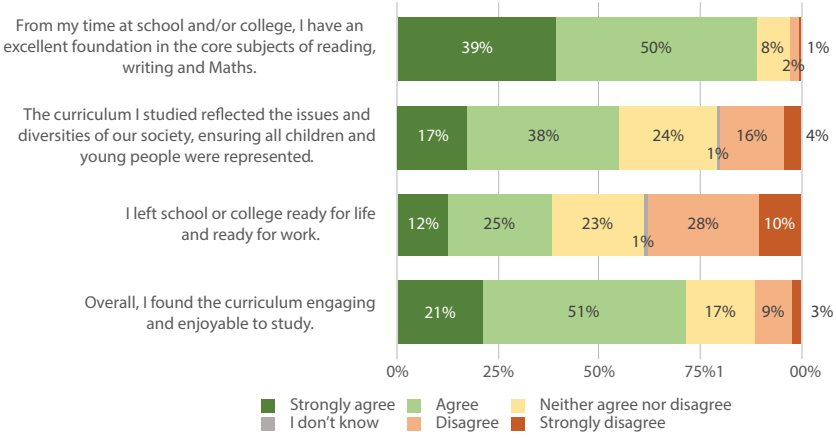
1. Academic preparation for higher education

General attitudes to the curriculum

We began by asking students for their broad attitudes to the school and college curriculum. The four statements use language borrowed from the Review's Terms of Reference.[18] The results show students overwhelmingly feel they have a good foundation in English and Maths (with 89% agreeing and only 3% disagreeing) and they found the curriculum 'engaging and enjoyable' (with 71% agreeing and 11% disagreeing).

However, a substantial minority (20%), particularly white students, women and those with disabilities, were more likely to disagree the curriculum reflects 'the issues and diversities of our society'. There may be more work to do to ensure the equal representation of these groups.

Figure 2 How students feel about the curriculum

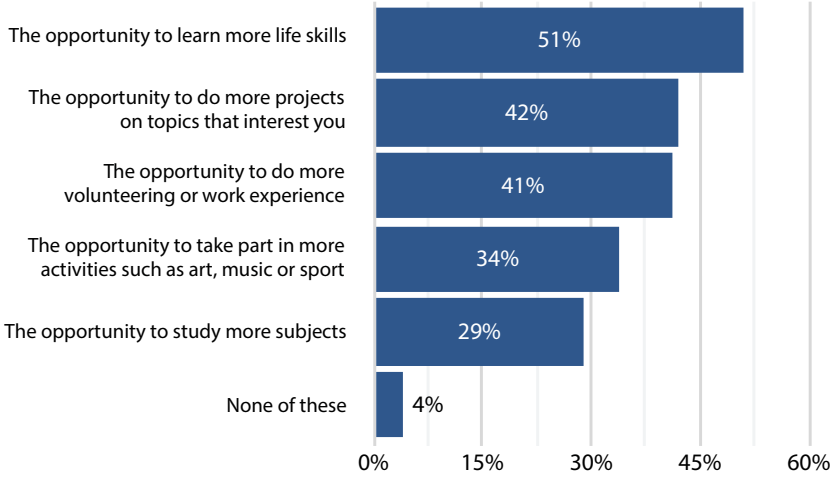


Source: Savanta, survey for this report

Students were split evenly on whether the curriculum left them 'ready for life and ready for work', with 38% agreeing and 38% disagreeing. Probably because BTECs are applied and vocational whereas A Levels are primarily academic, students with BTECs were more likely to agree.

In previously unpublished data, the *Applicant Index* also asks pupils what opportunities they would have liked over the last two years. In findings that match Figure 2, one-half of students (51%) want the opportunity to learn more 'life skills'. Many would like to have done more projects on areas of interest and more volunteering and work experience.

Figure 3 Thinking about your education over the past two years, which of the following opportunities would you have liked?

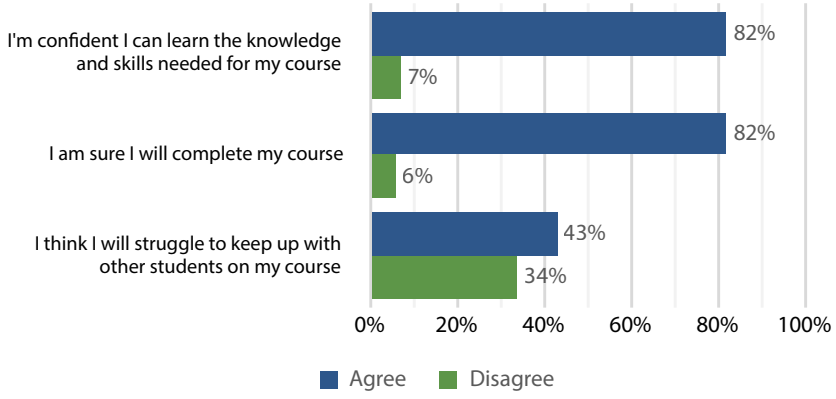


Source: Unite Students Applicant Index 2024

Are pupils prepared for studying in higher education?

Available data suggest the fear of not being prepared academically for higher education is, alongside the fear of not fitting in, students' central worry before they start. In her seminal work conducting and dissecting the results of pre-arrival questionnaires administered to students in 2019 and 2021, Michelle Morgan at the University of East London finds 'coping with the level of study' was consistently the top concern of students arriving at three 'post-92' universities.[19] The *Applicant Index* finds that applicants are generally confident they will complete their course and learn the required knowledge and skills, but are seriously concerned they will fall behind their peers, and the proportion concerned about their academic preparation has increased since 2022.[20]

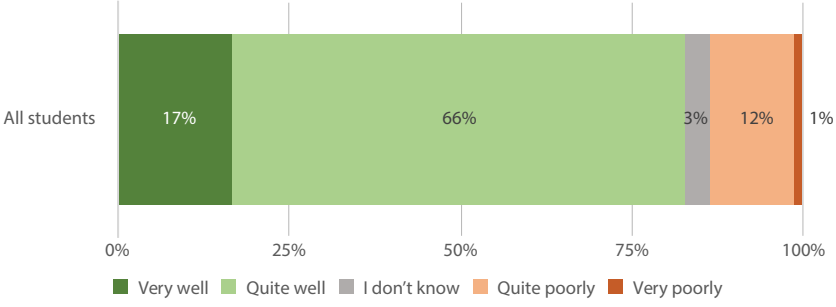
Figure 4 How prepared are applicants for higher education?



Source: Unite Students Applicant Index 2024

Our survey of current students suggests these pre-arrival nerves disappear quite quickly once students get going. We asked whether students feel well-prepared from their time and school in college and a very large majority say it prepared them 'Very well' or 'Quite well'. Only around one-in-eight say 'Quite poorly' and a negligible number say 'Very poorly'. Those who took BTECs feel just as prepared as those who took A Levels, though BTEC students had a wider range of views.

Figure 5 Overall, did your time in school and college prepare you well or poorly for your studies in higher education?



Source: Savanta, survey for this report

This finding that students are academically well prepared by compulsory education corroborates with other available data. In the *Student Academic Experience Survey*, respondents are asked whether the reality of their academic experience matches their expectations and why or why not. Only 9% of the overall sample say the course was too challenging, particularly those at Russell Group institutions and those with more contact hours. Some, around 5%, say the course was not challenging enough. By contrast, a quarter of the sample (24%) emphasise their course has the 'right level' of challenge. (The rest did not specify a particular attitude to the level of challenge, either positive or negative.)

These results suggest that, on the whole, there is a good alignment between the level of difficulty of compulsory and higher education. Elsewhere in the *Student Academic Experience Survey*, the number of students saying they are likely to drop out because of the difficulty of the course is negligible.[21]

Objective measures of students' performance in higher education also tell a positive story. As HEPI Director Nick Hillman notes in a recent Policy Note, as measured by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the UK has the lowest 'non-continuation' rate in the developed world.[22] However, success by these metrics varies significantly by students' innate characteristics, such as their level of deprivation (measured by Indices of Multiple Deprivation quintiles, or IMD). Among entrants in the four academic years up to 2018/19, only 84% of those in the two most deprived IMD quintiles completed their degree compared with nearly 91% of those in the least deprived quintiles.

Academic skills

In *Roadblocks or Roadmaps,* The Brilliant Club sets out the evidence showing that certain academic skills like planning, self-testing and managing tasks are important predictors of success in higher education.[23] But students have these skills to varying degrees. A 2012 survey of university lecturers found the typical strengths of undergraduates tended to be computer skills, teamwork, intellectual curiosity and presentation skills. Typical weaknesses tended to be academic writing, self-directed study, independent inquiry and research and critical thinking.[24] A 2016 survey of UK admissions officers

by ACS International Schools also found independent thinking is frequently missing among new undergraduates.[25]

Some explanations for these weaknesses, particularly around independent and critical thinking, are discussed in Chapter 2. One aspect may be that teachers of 16 to 18-year-olds see themselves as having a different role – imparting the curriculum – to teachers of undergraduates, who see their role as inculcating critical thinking and independence.[26] An important question for the Curriculum Review is how far students should be expected to learn these skills before higher education, or whether higher education is the main place for students to develop skills of independent inquiry.

Various challenges are disproportionately faced by students who take BTECs, who in general perform more poorly than students who take A Levels on outcomes measures in higher education.[27] BTECs are seen as valued and respected qualifications by institutions as well as businesses. In applications, they are most useful when the BTEC(s) a student took match their desired higher education subject. Taking BTECs reduces the chances of attending a Russell Group institution but increases the chance of attending an institution belonging to MillionPlus or University Alliance, which represent modern, professional and technical institutions.[28]

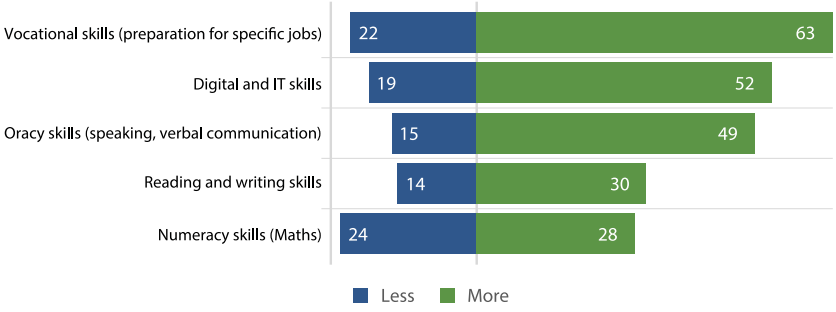
One way some students currently develop independent study skills is the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ), a Level 3 qualification equivalent to half an A Level, where students design, research and write a project of their choosing. A similar project, the Extended Essay, is compulsory in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP).[29] Evidence suggests the EPQ helps students build 'self-regulated learning', which includes autonomous planning, self-monitoring and self-reflecting.[30] A 2013 study showed that taking the EPQ increased students' likelihood of studying at a high-tariff institution and a 2022 study showed taking the EPQ made students more likely to get into university, less likely to drop out and more likely to get a First, controlling for relevant factors.[31]

Digital, oracy and vocational skills

The Review indicates its ambition to embed 'digital, oracy and life skills' into the curriculum. We asked students what skills, if any, they would like to be included more or less than today. Nearly two-thirds of students (63%)

want more vocational skills. Around half want more digital skills (52%) and similar numbers (49%) want more training in oracy, speaking and verbal communication skills. Students are much more lukewarm about reading and writing skills (30% want more, 14% want less) and numeracy skills (28% want more versus 24% who want less).

Figure 6 What skills do students more more or less of?



Source: Savanta, survey for this report. Those saying 'None of these' and 'I don't know' are excluded

Reforms in England after 2010, spearheaded by government ministers Michael Gove and Nick Gibb, fostered a 'knowledge-rich' curriculum focusing on knowledge above skills.[32] The shift, both in how subjects are taught and which subjects are prioritised, has been significant. Reforms encouraging the take-up of certain academic subjects via the English Baccalaureate, such as History, Geography and Modern Foreign Languages (MFL), led to a spike in entry rates for these subjects between 2010 and 2015 (though the uptake of languages has declined steadily since).[33]

By contrast, other subjects have seen interest from pupils go down. Since 2009, entry rates for the Design and Technology GCSE have halved from 44% to 22%.[34] A 2017 HEPI Report argued creative subjects were 'under attack'.[35] In its submission to the Curriculum Review, GuildHE, a mission group representing HEIs with a vocational and technical focus, laments the declining focus on creative, design and other skills for students' capabilities throughout life and for key industries important to the UK economy.[36]

The Curriculum Review praises the 'knowledge-rich' curriculum and promises an 'evolution not revolution' approach, so it seems likely that the knowledge-rich approach is here to stay. In many ways, such as the excellent English and Maths results pupils from England now get, these reforms have been a success. But the strong desire for more vocational skills – which holds across institution types and post-16 qualifications taken – suggests a real demand among students for tilting the balance back.

Oracy, the 'ability to articulate ideas, develop understanding and engage with others through spoken language', is a personal priority of the Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer.[37] It is also of growing importance to higher education, where the ability to engage with academic discourse is essential.[38] Teachers in higher education place importance on, for example, students referring to each other's ideas, justifying and supporting their own ideas and working as a group, but these are rarely if ever taught explicitly: students are expected to have these skills before they arrive.[39] Training in oracy may therefore prevent students from being locked out of essential aspects of higher education. The *Student Academic Experience Survey* suggests teachers in higher education are increasingly using debates and discussions in their teaching.[40]

Oracy skills may also serve to address other challenges facing the higher education sector. Concerns around 'no-platforming' speakers and an alleged lack of tolerance for views students disagree with led the previous Conservative Government to introduce the 2023 Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act, while institutions have spearheaded their own campaigns such as UCL's *Disagreeing Well*.[41] By giving students the tools and resilience to challenge ideas through dialogue, an explicit focus on debate and discussion may make students more open to engaging with ideas they disagree with.

There is also a student welfare aspect. Recent academic studies indicate many students are anxious about public speaking.[42] A focus on oracy skills may also help to address students' fears of public speaking at a younger age.

On digital skills, it is common to assume that students are digital natives, but while they are certainly often experts in some areas (such as social

media) many lack the requisite digital skills for academic study. Except for a brief period during the COVID-19 pandemic, students in higher education report using handwritten notes and course textbooks more than electronic sources.[43] In *Digitally Enhanced Blended Learning*, Policy Connect highlights that digital poverty and skills gaps persistently affect students' ability to participate fully in higher education.[44]

These gaps also extend to new technologies. The *Student Academic Experience Survey* shows that despite ChatGPT being barely two years old, a digital divide on grounds such as socio-economic group and gender has already opened up around generative AI use.[45] This matters because university exams are very often and increasingly digital and assessment at younger ages is also going in this direction.[46] Yet there is much variation between schools and teachers in their use of, for example, AI technologies.[47] It is easy to be complacent in this area and wrongly assume all students have the requisite digital skills for study.

English and Maths

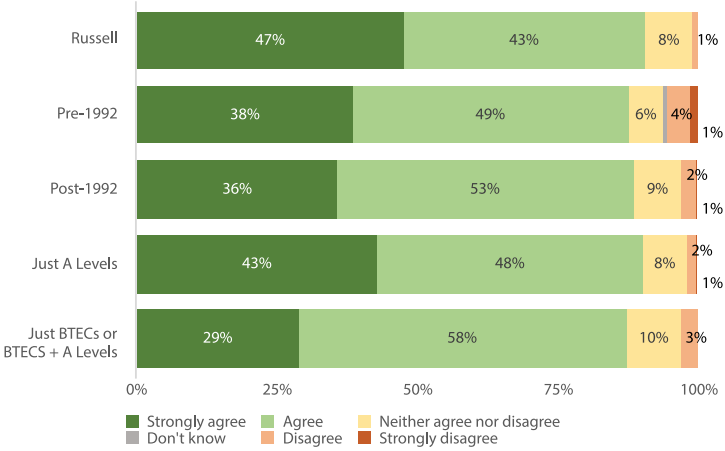
It is widely accepted that English and Mathematics, and the associated skills of numeracy, reading and writing, have special status as subjects at which everyone must meet a minimum competency. Achieving better grades in Maths is associated with the greatest increase in lifetime earnings.[48] The Review puts particular emphasis on them. In higher education, many of the academic skills discussed above require excellent reading and writing skills. There is also evidence that controlling for relevant factors, taking Mathematics A Level makes students more likely to attend higher ranking universities.[49]

We saw in Figure 2 that students overwhelmingly consider themselves to have an 'excellent' foundation in English and Maths. Scores from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) show that English pupils perform substantially above the average of OECD countries in Mathematics and reading and their performance has risen in international rankings since 2018.[50]

However, this strong performance at age 15 may be put at risk by the high degree of specialisation after 16. PISA tests are taken at 15-years-old

and England is unusual in the number of pupils who drop Maths and the national language at 16. Just 17% of 16 to 18-year-olds in England study Maths to 18, compared with 50% or more in most OECD countries.[51] A 2016 OECD report – though notably published before England's recent relative improvement in scores – found that one-in-10 university students, and a higher proportion of those on short courses, have numeracy or literacy levels below Level 2, equivalent to GCSE level.[52]

Figure 7 Students who feel they have an 'excellent foundation' in English and Maths



Source: Savanta, survey for this report. Students who took just BTECs are put in the same group as those who took a mixture of BTECs and A Levels due to comparably small sample sizes

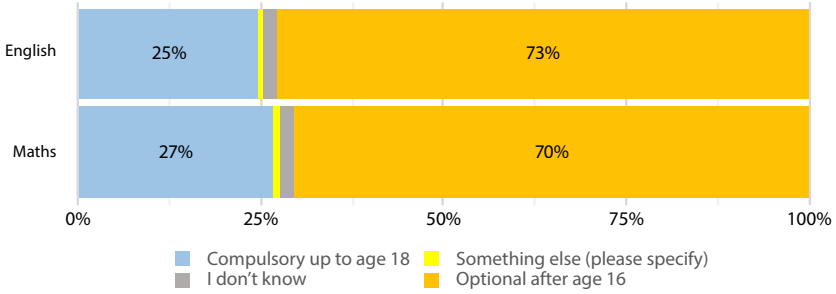
Figure 7 shows that cracks begin to emerge when comparing students by Level 3 qualification and HEI type, with those at Russell Group institutions and those who took only A Levels feeling significantly more confident than those at other institution types and those who took BTECs. Similarly, Michelle Morgan's pre-arrival questionnaire shows that A Level students perceive themselves as having better numeracy and literacy compared with students who took BTECs.[53]

The problem is accentuated because higher education in the UK is highly specialised, so students will usually continue with dedicated English or Maths provision only when it is the subject of their degree. On this basis,

the OECD recommends that students without the requisite level in English and Maths should attend colleges instead where they can receive tuition to meet this standard.[54] But as those who do not get a grade 5 in GCSE Maths are disproportionately from more disadvantaged backgrounds, such an approach could reverse progress on opening higher education to disadvantaged young people.[55]

Students who do not achieve a grade 4 in GCSE English and Maths must resit the papers each year until age 19, and most of those resitting do not pass on later attempts.[56] One way of increasing the overall competency of young people in English and Maths would be to make these subjects compulsory to age 18. In our survey, students were generally opposed to this idea. There is majority support for keeping these subjects optional in all demographic groups, though men and those from higher socio-economic groups are more favourable towards making Maths compulsory to 18. Students on Free School Meals want English to continue to 18 at greater rates than the overall population, though a majority are still opposed.

Figure 8 Should [subject] be compulsory to age 18, or optional after age 16?



Source: Savanta, survey for this report

It should also be noted that making both subjects compulsory to 18 would be extremely resource-intensive, particularly in the need to hire more teachers in these subjects, and there is currently a shortage of Maths teachers.[57]

Other solutions may therefore be preferable. The English Language GCSE, and to a lesser extent Maths, have been heavily criticised and may need

reform.[58] The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) has called for English and Mathematics 'passport' qualifications to be set at a fixed standard with the goal that all pupils pass, which focuses more on what it takes to be a literate and numerate adult, and which can be taken at different ages.[59] This may help to bring all students up to a minimum standard.

The students in our survey were probably thinking of the full Maths and English A Levels, but this need not be the only approach. To boost students' literacy and numeracy skills, as was suggested in discussions for the Advanced British Standard, there may be a role for less demanding Maths and English provision at 16-to-18.

Broader curriculum

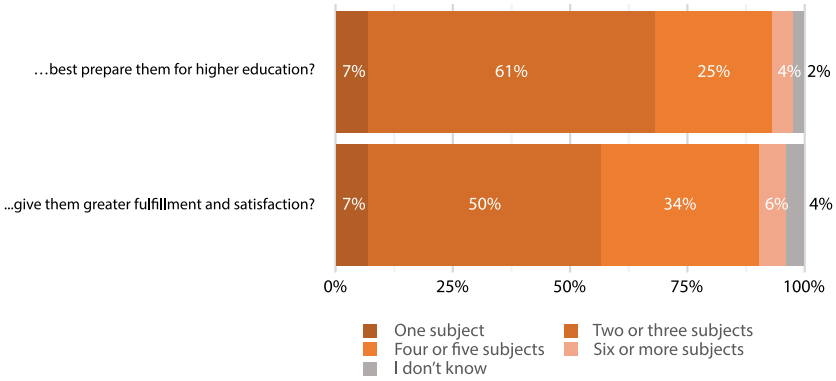
The curriculum in England is unusual, in that while students usually take a broad range of subjects at GCSE, this narrows significantly post-16 in what the EDSK think tank called a 'cliff edge'.[60] A Level students usually take only three subjects and BTECs may be even narrower. A report by the British Academy shows a third of A Level students take subjects from only one major subject group (such as STEM or Social Sciences) and the number of qualifications students take has, since 2015, decreased significantly. This is largely the result of the policy choice to 'decouple' AS Levels from A Levels, making it much harder to study a subject for only one year and therefore encouraging them to take only three courses.[61] Decoupling was motivated by a desire for more depth in A Levels as preparation for higher education and the view that the modular nature of AS Levels encouraged 'teaching to the test', rather than depth of understanding.[62]

Whether or not the problem was correctly identified, the solution was also flawed. A 2013 study found that students who took a broad *and* deep curriculum at A Level – taking two subjects each from two different subject groups – had the best prospects of attending a (high-tariff) Russell Group university, ahead of those students who specialised in just one subject area.[63] At least for students applying to certain institutions, there is a need to balance the depth of A Levels with their breadth.

We asked our survey respondents how many subjects pupils should take at 16, either to best prepare them for higher education or to give them

'greater fulfilment and satisfaction'. In both cases, the greatest number support the status quo (2 to 3 subjects). But many students feel that studying a broader range would leave them more fulfilled. Students taking BTECs were, perhaps unsurprisingly, much more likely to value taking a single subject for getting into higher education. Women were more likely to say they would be more fulfilled by taking a greater range of subjects.

Figure 9 How many subjects should pupils be able to study at 16 to…



Source: Savanta, survey for this report

Some have argued the UK should adopt the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) wholesale or reform A Levels to be more like it. A key feature of the IBDP is that pupils study many subjects – six plus a 'core' of other activities – throughout the programme. One study finds that the few pupils who take the IBDP in the UK are better prepared for higher education on every category except for depth of subject expertise.[64] But the comparison is possibly unfair as most schools offering the IBDP are private schools likely to have more resources than state schools, which overwhelmingly offer A Levels.

Consider now the GCSE curriculum. Under the current system, students are strongly encouraged to take the English Baccalaureate (or 'EBacc') of GCSE subjects, which consists of English Language and Literature, Mathematics, the sciences, Geography or History and a language. This list matches, and was strongly informed by, the Russell Group's list of

'facilitating subjects' at A Level which it considered key for university study.[65] The list was dropped in 2019, with the Russell Group saying that they were being seen as the only subjects students should take to get into university.

While there is a well-evidenced link between taking facilitating subjects at A Level and attending university, the relationship for doing so at GCSE is much weaker.[66] Research investigating the prospects of young people studying GCSE before the EBacc was introduced found that studying the facilitating subjects at GCSE did lead to a small but statistically significant improvement in an individual pupil's chances of attending university, controlling for other relevant factors. However, taking these subjects did not make students more likely to study at Russell Group institutions.[67]

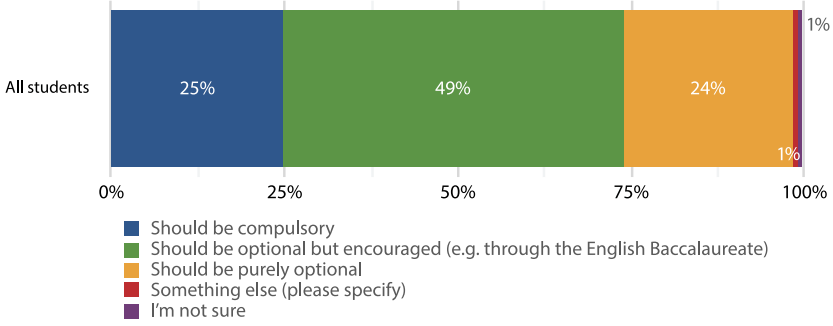
The EBacc does not include creative courses. As a result, subjects like Drama, Music and Media Studies have seen substantial declines in GCSE and A Level entry rates since 2010 (though Art and Design has remained largely stable at both levels).[68] At the same time, higher education institutions are cutting creative degree courses partly due to 'drops in student numbers', though other factors also play a role.[69] GuildHE reports that fewer students are applying with more than one creative A Level or BTEC, meaning they have less breadth of creative knowledge.[70] The Sutton Trust has recently argued that this 'collapse' of creative subjects in state schools has reduced the proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds studying these subjects in higher education and these groups are less likely to be employed in creative fields.[71]

Some consideration should also be given to those who drop out. The data on the outcomes for this group are very poor.[72] But highly specialised courses at 16-to-18 and degree level mean that if students do not finish their degree, they may be pigeonholed into a specialism with no qualification to show for it, with troubling implications for their employment prospects.

Despite their inclusion in the EBacc at GCSE, languages have seen a considerable decline in A Level entry rates in recent years.[73] One study found taking a language does not improve a student's chances of entering higher education, controlling for relevant factors.[74]

We asked students whether the policy on languages at GCSE should change: whether they should become compulsory, whether they should be optional but recommended as they are today through the EBacc, or whether they should be purely optional. The results are split, with half of students (49%) happy with the status quo and equal numbers supporting making it a requirement to learn a language (25%) and making it purely optional (24%).

Figure 10 Should students be required to take a language at GCSE?



Source: Savanta, survey for this report

Written responses

Our survey also set three questions that students could answer in their own words: what they would put into the curriculum, what they would remove, and their overall attitudes to it.

On what they would add, the most popular option – by a long way – related to finances, taxes and budgeting. Of the 1,105 responses, more than 200 mentioned financial education in some form. Sometimes this was in the context of 'life skills', a phrase which was mentioned nearly 70 times:

> *Basic life skills – finances, savings, taxes, insurance etc writing a CV, applying for jobs, potential career paths.*

Languages were mentioned by more than 50 students, often in the context of what languages students wish they had been able to learn (sign language, the most popular, was mentioned 15 times). Other subjects

which were frequently mentioned were Maths, 'health' (often referring to mental or sexual health) and comments on the theme of increasing cultural understanding and awareness.

Among the topics students would take out, Maths and English received the most criticism, perhaps reflecting the challenges mentioned previously. Almost as criticised as Maths was Religious Education (also called Religious Studies): students lamented that the subject was not useful or was too focused on Christianity. Languages, Art, Drama and Geography all came up frequently.

> *Religious education as it is currently taught – it should be changed to a multicultural, more diverse subject not just focusing on Christianity and one other religion.*

Finally, we asked students for their overall views on how well the curriculum prepared them for higher education. Those who answered positively most often said that the curriculum had given them the skills they needed, that higher education was a manageable step up from school or college and that the two were similar enough in approach that they felt sufficiently prepared:

> *I was used to working and doing independent study outside of school hours. This is very important for university.*
>
> *[It] helped with time management and exam prep … [it] helped with revising for multiple subjects at once.*
>
> *I did well enough in school. The assessments I took at college are similar to the ones in uni so I have a better understanding.*

Others mentioned extracurricular activities and the support they received when deciding whether to enter higher education:

> *I received really good advice from my teachers … [I] had already what I wanted to do in my mind that is a career pathway so I chose my subjects according to that.*
>
> *I have improved my public speaking skills by taking part in debating competitions organised by my school, which is very helpful for speeches and presentations at university.*

Where students felt the curriculum had not prepared them well, they tended to emphasise the mismatch in assessments between school and college, on the one hand, and higher education on the other. A number emphasised the detrimental impact of the COVID-19 pandemic:

> *We had lots of events, schemes promoted to us to help, work experiences, insight days. However, it did not prepare well for workload and types of assessments.*
>
> *GCSEs and A Levels are very orientated to regurgitating and memory, this does not necessarily prepare you for university which is very self-driven and a voyage of self discovery.*
>
> *I had a good foundation of knowledge but the jump to university was quite big, especially when doing a new subject.*
>
> *A lot of the assessments in school are very paper based and don't require much critical thinking. This is useful until it becomes much more critical thinking based in higher education, with little to no practice of this skill.*
>
> *I was not taught critical thinking skills; I was not taught how to evaluate an argument; I was not taught how to reference; and I was not taught how to establish boundaries within my relationships. All I was taught by most of my teachers, with some exceptions, was how to sit quietly and barely avoid being bullied.*

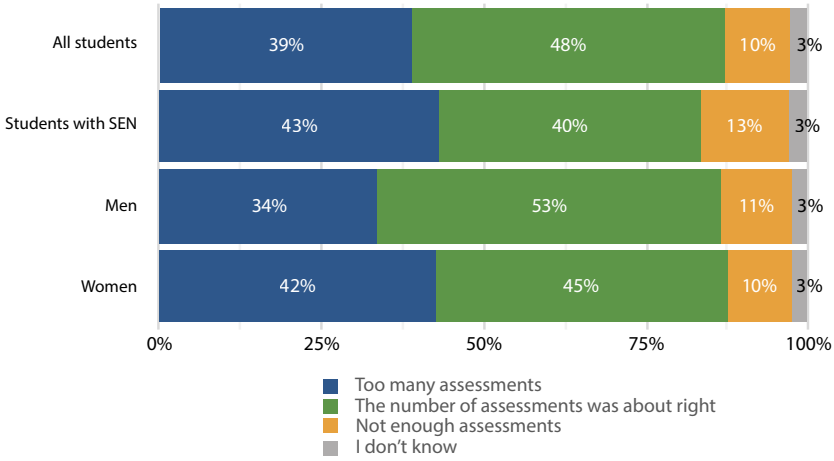
As above, a number also felt the curriculum had failed to give them essential life skills:

> *In terms of academia it was very well taught and useful for my degree but I had no idea how to rent, pay bills etc.*
>
> *Was not taught how to budget, use our time in university, how to buy groceries and rent houses.*

2. Qualification reform

The Curriculum Review explicitly raises concerns about the 'volume of assessment' in school and college and the need for summative assessments, such as GCSEs, A Levels and BTECs, to capture the 'strengths' of all pupils. Our survey explores the attitudes of students to assessments in detail, beginning with the overall volume of assessments (Figure 8). Almost half of current higher education students (48%) believe the number is about right, but many (39%) believe the number of assessments is too high. Only a small proportion (10%) say the number of assessments is not enough. Students with special education needs (SEN) are unhappier with the number of assessments, as are those with disabilities (including physical and mental health conditions), but are split between wanting more and wanting less. Women dislike the volume of assessments much more than men.

Figure 11 Were there too many assessments, not enough, or was the number about right?



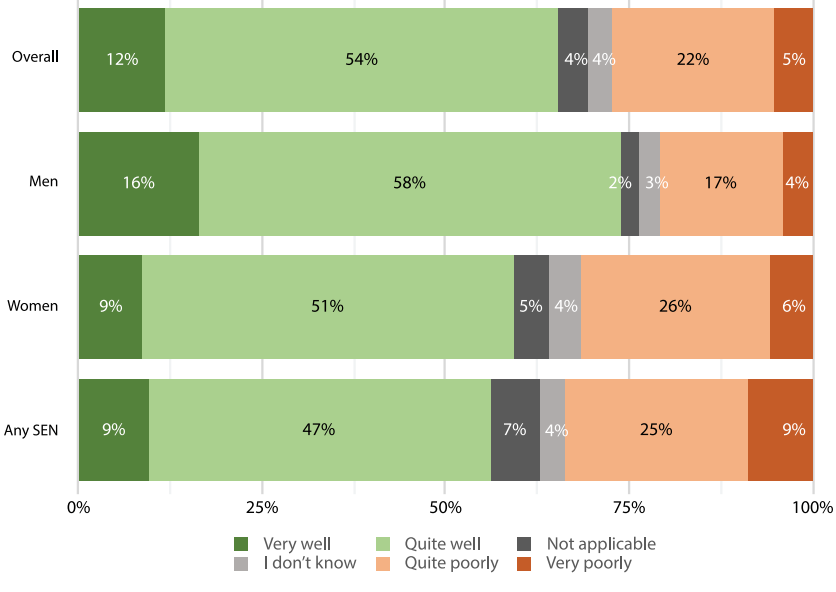
Source: Savanta, survey for this report

The high volume of assessments, and the large amount of content required for each one, encourages teachers to 'teach to the test': the intensive focus on preparing students for exams. This approach can have benefits in, for example, cementing the learning pupils have received, but can be

problematic if it comes at the exclusion of nurturing knowledge or skills not being assessed but that students will need in their lives.[75] It also reduces the validity of tests as a measure of students' abilities.[76] The practice may partially explain some of the academic skills gaps identified in Chapter 1. This problem has existed for a long time, but reducing either the number of assessments or the content in each assessment may help to address this issue.

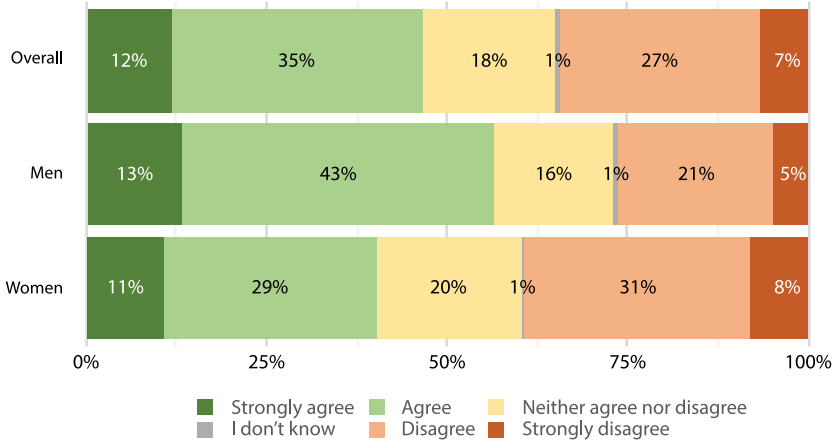
Secondly, we asked whether assessments prepared students well for higher education and whether they allowed students to demonstrate their full potential. There is a striking gender divide in both cases, with only 40% of women agreeing that assessments let them fulfil their potential versus some 57% of men. Students with SEN also found the assessments they had taken less useful as preparation for higher education than other students.

Figure 12 How well did school / college assessments prepare you for assessments in higher education?



Source: Savanta, survey for this report

Figure 13 School / college assessments allowed me to fulfil my full potential



Source: Savanta, survey for this report

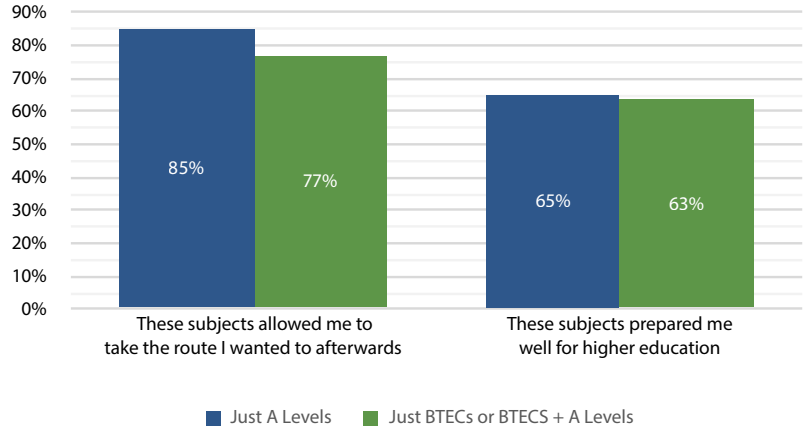
We saw in the Introduction that many students entering higher education have vocational or technical qualifications, most frequently BTECs. BTECs are a powerful tool for access into higher education: the qualifications are disproportionately taken by more disadvantaged students and 50% of those who take BTECs enter higher education.[77] Proposals made by the previous Conservative Government would have defunded many BTEC courses, but in a December 2024 announcement, the Department for Education confirmed it will extend the funding of many of these courses to at least 2026 or 2027.[78] The extension of funding for BTECs is a good thing, as without a clear vocational route to higher education, some young people might have been shut out.

BTECs were due to be replaced by new T Levels, technical qualifications which include a work placement. T Levels were not originally intended to be pathways to higher education but are increasingly being used in this way.[79] There are no outcomes data yet for the few T Level students who have entered higher education, so it is difficult to know how effective they are for this purpose.

But there are plenty of data on BTECs, and concerns have been raised that BTECs do not prepare students for higher education as well as A Levels do.

Some 80% of BTEC students continue to the second year of their degree and 60% get a 2:1 or above, high rates but lower than for students who take A Levels.[80] However there were no greater differences in reported rates of preparedness for higher education.

Figure 14 How well BTECs or A Levels prepare students for higher education



Source: Savanta, survey for this report. Proportion saying 'Agree' or 'Strongly agree'

In our sample, as in the wider population, those with BTECs entered post-92 universities in much greater numbers; very few students with BTECs go on to study at Russell Group institutions.[81] BTECs have a wider range of assessment methods than A Levels, which are primarily assessed through exams. Because of this, they prepare pupils for certain assessment types, such as coursework, better than others, such as exams or essays, which are used most by high-tariff institutions.[82] Perhaps as a result, as shown in Figure 14, BTEC students in our survey were less likely to be able to take the route they wanted than A Level students.[83]

There is a need to ensure the BTEC route to higher education is protected without locking BTEC students out of high-tariff institutions. In his 2017 report for HEPI, Scott Kelly argues qualifications tend to be 'academicised' (that is, made more academically challenging) when there is a lack of clarity about their purpose. This would likely be counterproductive as it would put off students taking BTECs as vocational alternatives to A Levels.

But particular effort might be given to preparing BTEC students for higher education in other ways, for example, by making clear which BTEC subjects best facilitate progression to higher education beyond those directly related to degree subject areas and by embedding transferable skills into the curriculum.

Finally, we asked students an open question on how their assessments could be improved. Several themes emerged. A greater number of students criticised the exam-based nature of assessments, saying they would prefer to be assessed over the whole year through coursework and essays to reflect how they are assessed in higher education. Many criticised 'knowledge recall' in exams, calling for them to be open book, and others wanted exams to embed academic skills that students will need at university. Others wanted more practical or vocationally based exams, to reflect the strengths of different students:

> *English Literature exams should be open book – they're just a memory game as it is.*
>
> *Start students off learning how to cite and undertake their own research. Give students the chance to study independently before the age of 18.*
>
> *Not just be test / exam based. At my uni, I'm assessed across multiple things, such as essays, OBAs, and poster work. It relieves the anxiety that occurs during time constrained exams. It also allows people who need extra time to do so more easily than they would in normal exams.*
>
> *Abolish them [exams]. The real world and university is full of coursework. Why have silly exams when we have the whole internet.*

A number disagreed with the high-stakes nature of exams, noting the stress they caused. Many raised issues with the structure of the exam period, where students might have multiple exams on the same day. Others said the content in exams is too high:

> *Assessments should be throughout the year, rather than at the end of the academic year all together. It adds stress and prevents students*

from showing their abilities. It also becomes a memory game rather than actually understanding and comprehending. It would allow for people to still get good grades even if they mess up once or twice.

Assessment timetabling needs to be fixed so there aren't multiple exams crammed into the same day multiple days in a row – the exam period is 2 months, there's no need for that.

Halving the number of topic areas per GCSE (e.g. for Sciences from 6 to 3) to make workloads more realistic and encourage deeper knowledge (rather than knowledge spread thin).

Reduce the pressure of GCSEs and A Levels. Your whole school life should not be based on one exam result. It's not fair or accurate.

And some others made different arguments:

Switch to digitally assessed exams on a computer. I have not had to hand-write an essay or anything of the sort since leaving school. All exams at my university are typed, and I work an office job at a law firm where nobody needs to handwrite anything.

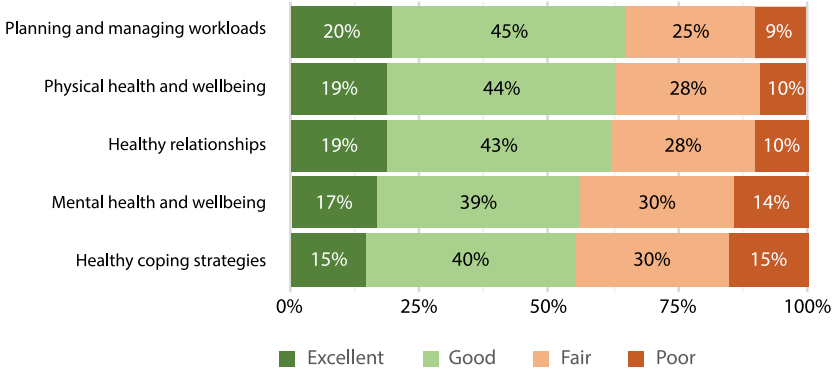
Creative subjects cannot be assessed by a written exam; Picasso wasn't brilliant because he explained why he painted what he painted.

3. Personal and social preparation for higher education

In Chapter 1, we saw that students want to be taught more 'life skills'. The Curriculum and Assessment Review mentions embedding them into the curriculum, but exactly what skills should be included and how they are to be embedded is up for debate. Personal, Social, Health and Economic education (PSHE) is a non-statutory subject: that is, schools are not legally required to offer it. They must offer relationships and sex education, but other areas, including careers, budgeting, drugs and alcohol, and social media, are optional.

The Unite Students *Applicant Index* asks a number of questions about respondents' personal and social preparation for higher education. On some questions, such as 'helping a friend in distress', 'managing a conflict with housemates' or 'cooking a meal', most applicants feel confident. However, other questions get more mixed answers (see Figure 12). Significant numbers say they were not well prepared by their school or college with healthy coping strategies for mental health and wellbeing.[84]

Figure 15 How effectively has your school or college prepared you in the following areas?

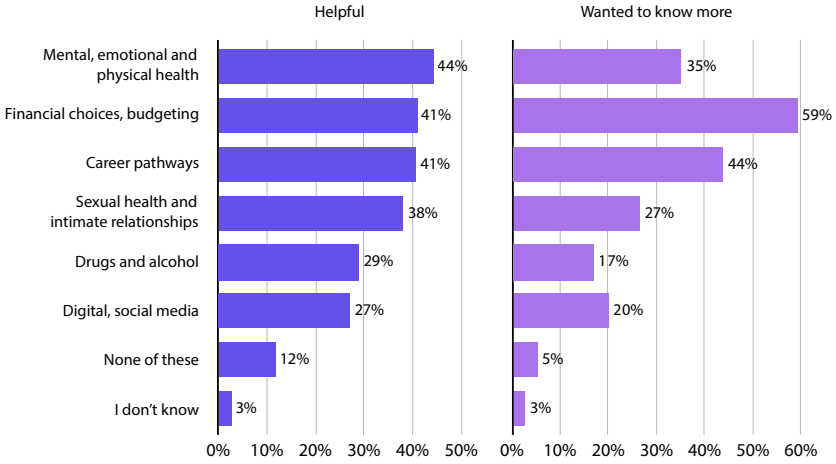


Source: Unite Students Applicant Index 2024

Just 6% say the 'main' way they learned practical life skills like 'cooking, cleaning and laundry' was from their school or college; this is higher among those in fee-paying schools, those with experience of care and applicants who are estranged from their families.

We asked pupils about the value of different aspects of their PSHE curriculum, which areas they found helpful and what they wanted more of. There is no area which a majority find helpful, but moderate support for several areas, and the vast majority (86%) found at least one aspect helpful. Students show relatively little appetite for education on drugs and alcohol or on digital and social media, either in what they had already received or in receiving more.

Figure 16 Which aspects of the PSHE curriculum did you find helpful, and which did you want to know more about?



Source: Savanta, survey for this report

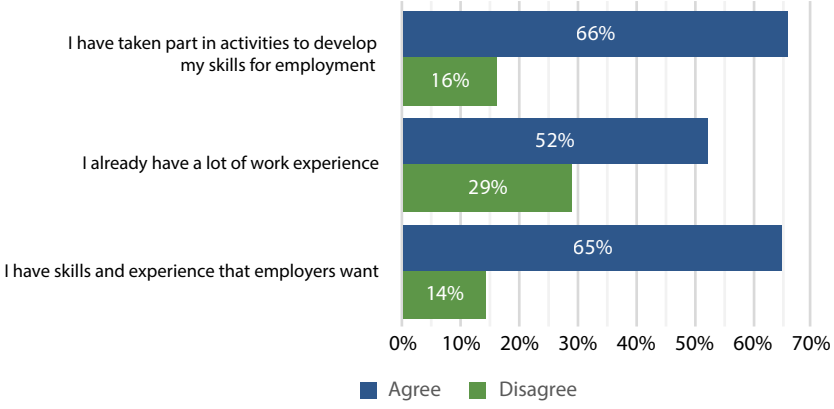
By contrast, a large majority – nearly three-fifths (59%) – want more education in financial choices and more than two-fifths (44%) want more support with career pathways. Those in receipt of Free School Meals consistently found PSHE more valuable than others.

Budgeting and financial choices have emerged as priority areas in recent research. A survey by BlackBullion, which provides financial education for students, found that 49% of students want financial education from their university. In a London Higher report, there was considerable variation in what students expected to spend on different areas while at university, showing the limits of many students' knowledge on this topic.[85]

This may be more pressing because of the financial challenges students increasingly face while studying in higher education.[86] Some 56% of students now work part-time during term. Of those who do not work, a third say it is because they cannot find a job.[87] They may therefore benefit from more careers experience and education in school.

In the Unite Students *Applicant Index* questions about employment, most say they already have some experience. But a substantial minority do not, including three-in-10 who disagree they have 'a lot' of work experience before arriving in higher education. Students without much work experience may struggle to find the employment they need to support themselves through higher education.

Figure 17 Work experience before entering higher education



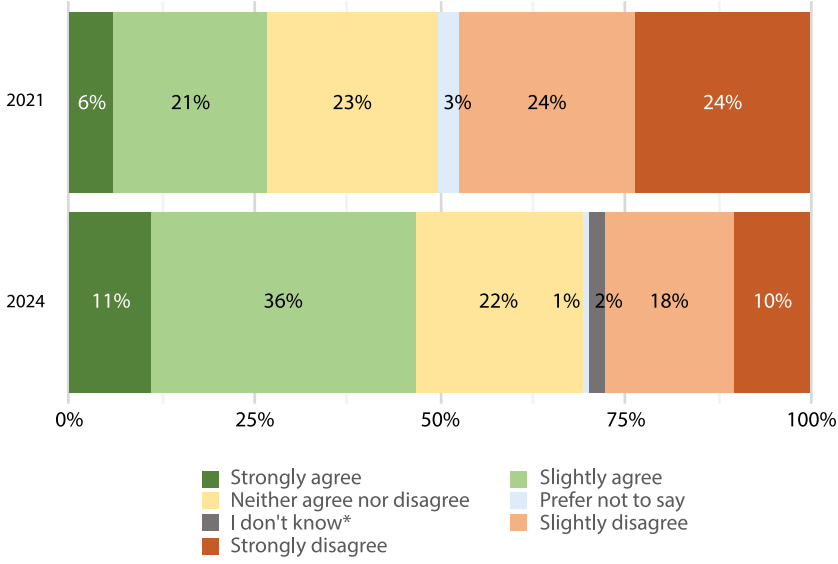
Source: Unite Students Applicant Index 2024

In 2020, it became compulsory to offer Relationships and Sex Education in all secondary schools in England (though parents can opt their children out of some aspects).[88] Shortly after, in 2021, HEPI asked whether students felt prepared by their school or college for sex and relationships in higher education. We found, worryingly, that only a quarter of students (27%) felt well-prepared while nearly half (48%) felt underprepared.[89]

More than three years later, in this current study, we asked a similar question and find a resounding improvement (Figure 18): close to a majority (47%)

feel prepared and less than a third (28%) feel underprepared. This suggests the updated curriculum has had a positive impact. But the findings still show many students, particularly female students, did not find the preparation for sex and relationships they received in school or college to be helpful.

Figure 18 The education I received before entering higher education helped prepare me for sex and relationships while studying in higher education

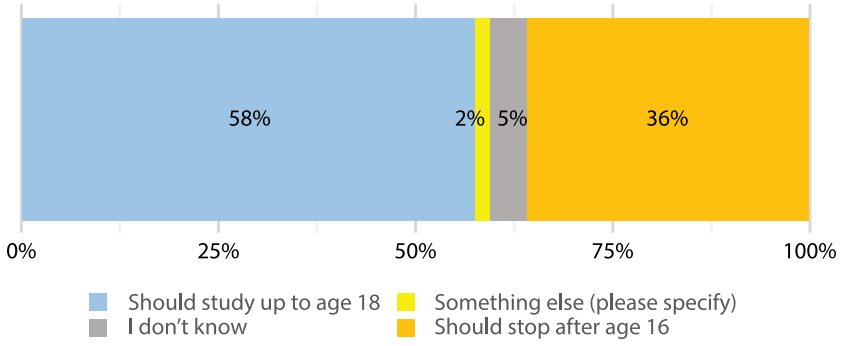


*Source: HEPI, survey of 1,004 higher education students (2021); Savanta, survey for this report (2024). *'I don't know' option was only available in 2024*

One way to improve students' overall personal and social preparation for higher education, which the Review panel is said to be considering, is by extending PSHE to 18. Currently, PSHE is only taught up to 16.

We asked students for their views on this. A majority of students (58%) would support the move, with about a third (36%) opposed.

Figure 19 Should students study personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) up to the age of 18, or should it stop after age 16 as it does now?



Source: Savanta, survey for this report

Resources permitting, there is an argument to extend PSHE to 18. It would be an opportunity to discuss sensitive topics that would not be age-appropriate through most of secondary school, and to discuss careers at a time when students are making critically important decisions. But we should also be cautious about depending on the PSHE curriculum too much: it is taught by non-specialists, usually for no more than an hour a week, and some schools do not teach it as a separate subject at all.

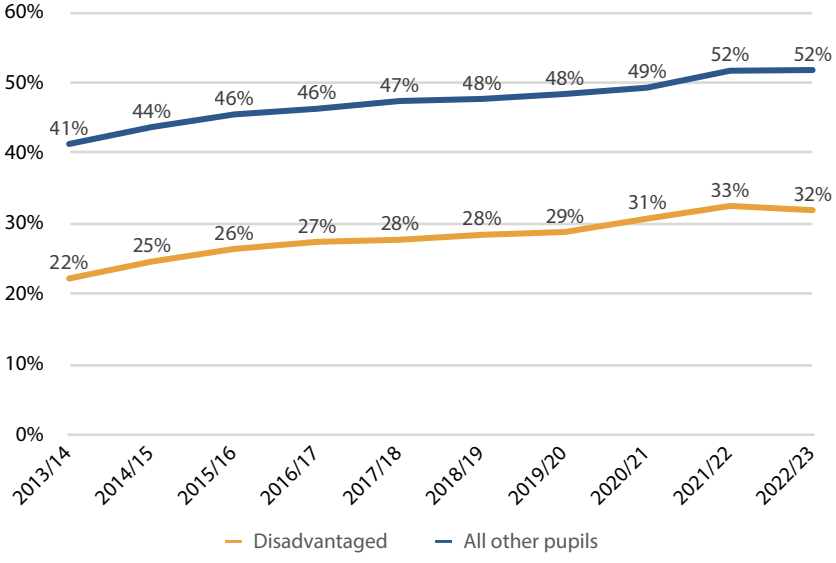
Pupils should have a variety of sources of personal development, including extracurricular activities, which present a wide range of opportunities to develop skills relevant to higher education. Sadly, engagement in these declined substantially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly among disadvantaged students.[90] Alongside the important work done to improve the curriculum, greater attention must be given to encouraging students to attend and empowering teachers to run extracurricular activities well.

4. Pathways open to all

The Curriculum and Assessment Review tasks itself with ensuring 'meaningful, rigorous and high-value pathways for all at 16-19'. Similarly, one of the Secretary of State for Education's five priorities for higher education is 'expanding access and improving outcomes for disadvantaged students'.[91] Much of the burden of improving access should fall on the higher education sector, alongside the curriculum.

Data from the Department for Education (DfE) show that while the proportion of 18-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds entering higher education has increased consistently over time, the gap between these students and their peers has persisted and is now 'the highest on record'.[92] This is despite a wealth of initiatives to improve access among these groups.

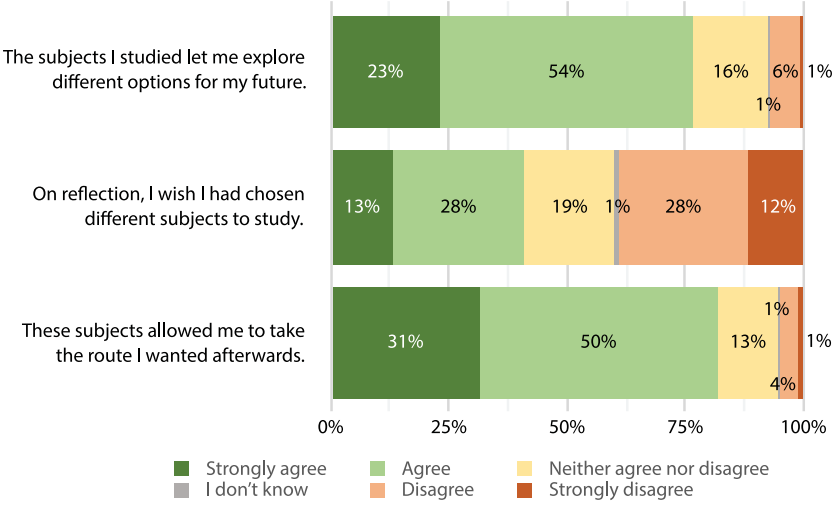
Figure 20 Progression to higher education by disadvantaged status



Source: Department for Education. Disadvantaged is defined as those pupils eligible to receive Free School Meals or who had been eligible at any point within the previous six years.

We asked students several statements about whether the qualifications they took at 16-to-19 helped them explore options for their future (Figure 21). They were broadly satisfied their subjects helped them explore different options and take their desired route. But more than two-in-five students (41%) would have taken different subjects, including 46% of men and some 51% of mature students (aged over 21).

Figure 21 How subjects studied affected future options

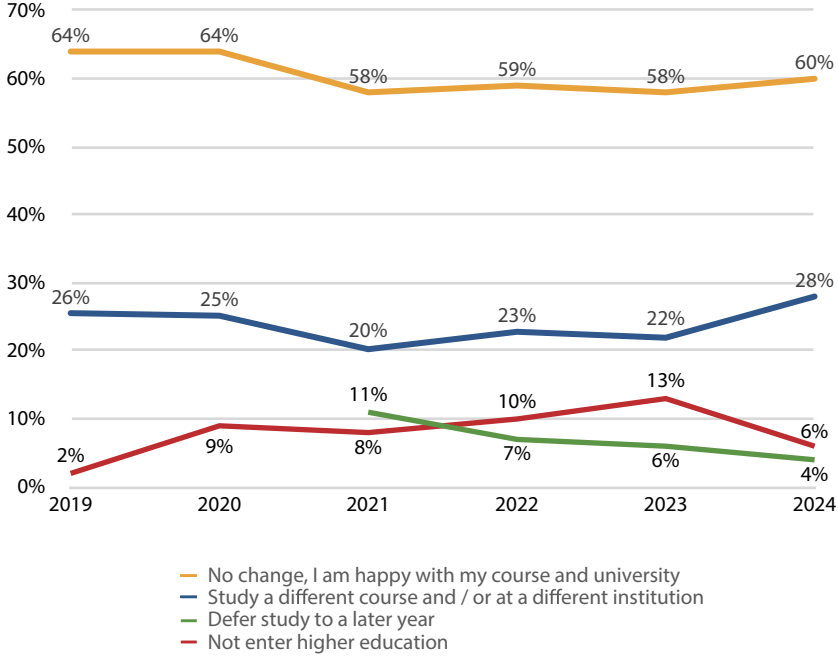


Source: Savanta, survey for this report

These findings, that most students in higher education are happy with the path they took, corroborate with other data. Several years of *Student Academic Experience Survey* data show very few students regret their decision to enter higher education – only 6% in 2024.

However, consistently around a quarter of students would have chosen a different course or institution or both. This suggests that students are not being given the opportunity to try out different options or lack full information about what to expect.

Figure 22 If you had a second chance to start again, would you do any of the following?



Source: HEPI / Advance HE Student Academic Experience Surveys 2019 to 2024. The options contained within each label shown vary somewhat by year

Part of the challenge is that students must make important decisions at a young age. Some A Levels, for example, are preferred by HEIs much more than others.[93] That means students must, at the age of 15 when post-16 subjects are chosen, have some idea both of what degree they want to do and of what subjects to take to get there. But research from UCAS suggests that only 54% of students were certain about their degree choice before they took their post-16 subjects, with many choosing their degree based on how much they enjoy those subjects. UCAS also finds that a fifth of students could not study a higher education subject that interested them because they did not have the relevant subjects for entry.[94]

Incomplete information may affect the most disadvantaged students more. UCAS finds that while only 27% of the most disadvantaged students thought about higher education in primary school, this rises to 39% of the most advantaged students.[95] In *Things Worth Knowing,* researchers at the Social Market Foundation document the 'assumed knowledge' many disadvantaged pupils lack which may lead them to make inadvisable decisions around pathways: for example, one-half of pupils eligible for Free School Meals incorrectly believe that Critical Thinking – which no longer exists as a standalone subject – is one of the most useful A Levels to study for university.[96] Lacking full information, there is a risk students lock themselves into a route they come to regret.

Legislation on 'provider access' requires all schools and academies to provide information about a variety of post-18 options, including higher education and apprenticeships. The requirements were strengthened in 2023.[97] Despite this, my interviews suggest these are often seen as a 'tick box' exercise. The requirements also do not apply to colleges.

Conclusion and recommendations

Students in England are generally academically well-prepared for UK higher education. For a great many students, the system works well. This provides some support for the 'evolution not revolution' approach adopted by the Curriculum and Assessment Review panel. In the spirit of that approach, I use this final chapter to propose focused and evidence-informed reforms to make the curriculum work well for even more young people.

The successes of the curriculum mask significant variation among entrants to higher education. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to have the academic skills to succeed there than their peers from more advantaged backgrounds. The school and college curriculum should put a wider focus on fostering critical thinking and independent inquiry. More students should be encouraged to take the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ), which has a strong evidence base for developing pupils' academic skills.

Most students in higher education feel confident about their Maths and English abilities and oppose these subjects being compulsory to 18. This idea may therefore be too strong, though there may still be a place for some Maths and English that is less demanding than the full A Levels. The most pressing issue remains the high proportion of pupils who do not meet the minimum requirement in these subjects. The Association of School and College Leavers' (ASCL) 'passport' model may help ensure every young person reaches minimum standards of literacy and numeracy. A greater focus on independent inquiry and originality in A Level subjects would also help students be better prepared for higher education.

Every young person should have the tools to engage with academic classroom discourse. Like academic writing, oracy should be integrated into the curriculum and students should be supported to develop their verbal communication skills in a safe environment. School debating clubs, and the structured environment they offer for students to develop spoken skills, resilience and confidence, may serve as a template.

We should not assume students are digital natives and there are significant inequalities in the digital skills students arrive with in higher education. Each pupil should meet a minimum standard of digital competency. Schools should integrate digital skills with academic studies at 16-to-18.

Rather than avoiding the topic of AI or instigate a blanket ban on its use, as some schools currently do, they should set clear policies and update them regularly.

Most students will do paid employment during their studies, but many students have limited work experience when they arrive in higher education. I am aware of the challenges finding employers willing to host school pupils for short periods, including for T Level placements.[98] But a short period of compulsory work experience from 16-to-18 would have a big impact enhancing pupils' preparedness for employment.

The English Baccalaureate (EBacc) does not include creative subjects, and this is one reason why applications to creative degrees have decreased, with knock-on effects for the creative industries as well as students' breadth of skills. Creative skills should be reprioritised at GCSE, which might include including a creative subject in the EBacc. A push for more pupils to take creative subjects would be in line th the Government's recent support for the creative industries.[99]

There are mixed views on the merits of a broader curriculum at 16-to-18. Many believe studying more subjects will leave them more fulfilled but are cautious about whether it will leave them less prepared for higher education. The evidence suggests many HEIs prefer both a broad and deep curriculum to one that is primarily deep, so moderate increases to the breadth of the curriculum may make applicants better prepared, not less so.[100] Strategies to broaden the curriculum might include taking four or even five A Levels as a default, rather than three, with appropriate adjustments to the content of A Levels as necessary.

Taking BTECs is an important and oft-used route into higher education and serves as high-quality preparation for many courses and institutions. The defunding of BTECs poses a risk to the vocational route to higher education. Until there is a clear plan for how T Levels (or another alternative) can prepare students better for higher education, BTECs with high progression rates to higher education should continue to be funded over the 2026/27 academic years.

Many students have doubts about whether assessments measure their 'true potential', but they agree they are generally good preparation

for higher education. The review panel should be very cautious about proposing to change the system of assessing mainly via exams, which have a strong evidence base in benefitting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.[101] But many young people, particularly women and students with special educational needs (SEN), agree there are too many assessments. The high volume of assessments encourages teachers to 'teach to the test' at the exclusion of useful content and skills that students would benefit from having in higher education. The number and volume of content of assessments should be reduced, particularly at GCSE level where the volume is highest, but also potentially at Level 3.

Students want more discussion of financial planning, career pathways and mental and emotional health in PSHE classes, but found the discussions of drugs and alcohol and of social media less useful. There has been a significant and welcome rise in the proportion of students saying PSHE prepared them for sex and relationships in higher education, but a substantial minority, and higher numbers of women, did not find it helpful. There should be a greater focus on financial planning and budgeting in the curriculum, either in PSHE or elsewhere, such as the Mathematics curriculum. Most students want to study PSHE to 18, and the Curriculum and Assessment Review should also consider extending PSHE to older age groups, particularly if that would allow a more mature discussion of topics such as mental and emotional health, careers and relationships that are not appropriate at younger ages.

But PSHE must not be the dumping ground for content which does not fit elsewhere. The curriculum should take a rounded approach to pupils' personal development. They should have a wide variety of opportunities, within and beyond the curriculum, to develop personal and social skills.

Despite an extensive focus on access and participation in recent years, the participation gap between the most disadvantaged and other groups has remained mostly unchanged. Most students are happy that they were able to take the route they wanted after 18, but the majority would have taken different subjects at 16, suggesting a need for better information alongside, potentially, more flexibility or breadth in Level 3 qualifications. The knowledge gaps are most prevalent among disadvantaged students.

To address this, I propose a new **pathways mentor guarantee**. Before every pupil chooses their post-16 options, they should be introduced to the full suite of post-16 and post-18 options; unlike some of today's provision, each option should be given a fair outing. What students do after 18 depends heavily on their post-16 qualifications, so the two must be considered together. Pupils should be guaranteed a one-to-one conversation with an expert in careers pathways who can advise the pupil on the best subjects to take at 16 to help them achieve their pathway goal.

Lastly, policymakers should recommit to widening access to higher education, in line with the Robbins principle:

> *That courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so.*[102]

Appendix: Survey sample

Demographic		*Number*	*Proportion*
Total		1,105	100.0%
Gender			
	Man	458	41.4%
	Woman	615	55.7%
	Non-binary	23	2.1%
	In another way	2	0.2%
	Prefer not to say	7	0.6%
Ethnicity			
	NET: White	668	60.5%
	NET: Mixed / Multiple	103	9.3%
	NET: Asian	198	17.9%
	NET: Black	115	1.4%
	NET: Other	7	0.6%
	Prefer not to say	11	1.0%
Chief earner occupation, parental household			
	A: Professional / higher managerial	163	14.8%
	B: Manager / senior administrator	265	24.0%
	C1: Supervisor / clerical / non-manual	243	22.0%
	C2: Skilled manual	152	13.8%
	D: Semi-skilled / unskilled manual	143	12.9%
	E: Receiving state benefits	30	2.7%
	Other	31	2.8%
	Don't know	35	3.2%
	Prefer not to say	43	3.9%
Ever received / been eligible for free school meals			
	Yes	328	29.7%
	No	710	64.3%
	Don't know	30	3.6%
	Prefer not to say	27	2.4%

University group			
	Russell	334	30.2%
	Pre-1992	206	18.6%
	Post-1992	520	47.1%
	Special institutions	45	4.1%
Qualifications			
	Just A Levels	728	65.9%
	Just the IBDP	50	4.5%
	Just BTECs	101	9.1%
	Just an Access Course	23	2.1%
	Just T Levels	12	1.1%
	Both A Levels and BTECs	147	13.3%
	Other	21	1.9%
	Any other combination	18	1.6%
	Don't know	5	0.5%
Special Educational Needs (SEN)			
	None	882	79.8%
	Communication / interaction needs	87	7.9%
	Cognitive and learning needs	47	4.3%
	Social / emotional / mental health	128	11.6%
	Sensory / physical needs	17	1.5%
	Other	16	1.4%

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the HEPI Advisory Board and Trustees, particularly Andy Forbes, for their thoughtful comments; and the whole HEPI team, Carole Cox, Lucy Haire, Nick Hillman, Emma Ma and Rose Stephenson, for their support throughout the writing process.

I am particularly thankful to the following contributors, whose comments and guidance made this report possible:

- Anne-Marie Canning, Dr Lauren Bellaera and Angie Baker, The Brilliant Club
- Jon Datta and Rebecca Montacute, The Sutton Trust
- Sarra Jenkins, Loughborough Grammar School
- Tom Middlehurst, Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)
- Michelle Morgan, University of East London
- Tom Richmond, EDSK think tank
- Jayne Taylor, The Elephant Group
- Reka Ratkaine Jablonkai and Dr Gail Forey, University of Bath
- James Robson, SKOPE, University of Oxford
- Jenny Shaw, Unite Students
- Kate Wicklow, GuildHE

Endnotes

1 Which School Advisor, *Why are UK Schools Switching to the IB?*, 5 July 2023 https://whichschooladvisor.com/uk/school-news/why-are-uk-schools-switching-to-the-ib

2 Paul Bolton, *Higher education student numbers,* House of Commons Library, October 2024 https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7857/

Department for Education, *Progression to higher education or training,* Explore education statistics, Gov.uk, October 2024 https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/progression-to-higher-education-or-training

3 Sally Weale, 'Russell Group scraps preferred A-levels list after arts subjects hit', *Guardian*, 23 May 2019 https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/may/23/russell-group-scraps-preferred-a-levels-list-after-arts-subjects-hit

4 Rebecca Montacute and Carl Cullinane, *25 Years of University Access*, The Sutton Trust, October 2023 https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/25-years-of-university-access/

5 Paul Bolton, *Higher education student numbers,* House of Commons Library, October 2024 https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7857/

UCAS, *UCAS releases undergraduate end of cycle data for 2024*, December 2024 https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/ucas-releases-undergraduate-end-cycle-data-2024

6 UCAS, *2023 cycle applicant figures – 30 June deadline,* July 2023 https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-releases/ucas-undergraduate-applicant-releases-2023-cycle/2023-cycle-applicant-figures-30-june-deadline

Nicole Gicheva and Kathryn Petrie, *Vocation, Vocation, Vocation,* Social Market Foundation, January 2018 https://www.smf.co.uk/publications/the-role-of-vocational-routes-into-higher-education/

7 Best-Schools, *The IB in the UK,* 2024 https://www.best-schools.co.uk/ib-schools

Carli Allan, *Which UK State Schools Offer the IB?,* Which School Advisor, August 2024 https://whichschooladvisor.com/uk/guides/which-uk-state-schools-offer-the-ib

8 Department for Education, *The Advanced British Standard: Everything you need to know*, The Education Hub, Gov.uk, 14 December 2023 https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2023/12/14/the-advanced-british-standard-everything-you-need-to-know/

9 UCAS, Why study in the UK?, 2024 https://www.ucas.com/international/international-students/applying-university-international-student/why-study-uk

10 The Labour Party, *Labour Party Manifesto 2024: Our plan to change Britain,* 13 June 2024 https://labour.org.uk/updates/stories/labour-manifesto-2024-sign-up/

11 Department for Education and Bridget Phillipson MP, Government launches Curriculum and Assessment Review, Gov.uk, 19 July 2024 https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-launches-curriculum-and-assessment-review

12 Department for Education, *What is the Curriculum and Assessment Review and how will it impact my child's education?* , The Education Hub, Gov.uk, 6 November 2024 https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2024/11/06/what-is-the-national-curriculum-and-why-is-it-being-reviewed/

13 Office for National Statistics, Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK: November 2024, Census21, November 2024 https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/bulletins/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneet/november2024

Department for Education, Michael Gove MP and Matt Hancock MP, *Lowest rate of young people NEET for 20 years,* Gov.uk, June 2014 https://www.gov.uk/government/news/lowest-rate-of-young-people-neet-for-20-years

14 Select Committee on Education and Skills, *Fifth Report: Introduction,* Parliament.uk, May 2007 https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmeduski/249/24905.htm

15 Josh Freeman, *Cracks in our foundations: evaluating foundation years as a tool for access and success,* HEPI Report 170, March 2024 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/HEPI-Report-170_Cracks-in-our-foundations_final.pdf

16 UCAS, *2023 cycle applicant figures – 30 June deadline*, July 2023 https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-releases/ucas-undergraduate-applicant-releases-2023-cycle/2023-cycle-applicant-figures-30-june-deadline

17 Adam Kaderabek and Jennifer Sinibaldi, *Assessing Measurement Error in Hypothetical Questions,* Survey Practice, October 2022 https://www.surveypractice.org/article/38280-assessing-measurement-error-in-hypothetical-questions

18 Department for Education, *Curriculum and Assessment Review: Review Aims, Terms of Reference and Working Principles*, 2024 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6699698f49b9c0597fdb0010/Curriculum_and_assessment_review_-_aims_terms_of_reference_and_working_principles.pdf

19 Michelle Morgan, *Prior learning experience, study expectations of A-Level and BTEC students on entry to university and the impact of Covid19,* Office for Institutional Equity and University of East London, November 2023 https://documents.advance-he.ac.uk/download/file/document/10683

20 Unite Students, *Applicant Index 2024,* July 2024 https://www.unitegroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Unite-Applicant-Index-Report-2024.pdf

Unite Students *Applicant Index 2022,* July 2022 https://www.unitegroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Applicant-Index-2022-Final.pdf

21 Jonathan Neves et al, HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey 2024,* June 2024 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/06/13/student-academic-experience-survey-2024/

22 Nick Hillman, *'Dropouts or stopouts or comebackers or potential completers?': Non-continuation of students in the UK*, HEPI Policy Note 53, April 2024 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Dropouts-or-stopouts-or-comebackers-or-potential-completers-Non-continuation-of-students-in-the-UK.pdf

23 Charlotte Hallahan et al, *Roadblocks or Roadmaps: Navigating the University Journey,* The Brilliant Club, October 2024 https://thebrilliantclub.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Roadblocks-or-Roadmaps.pdf

24 Irenka Suto, *How well prepared are new undergraduates for university study? An investigation of lecturers' perceptions and experiences,* Society for Research into Higher Education, 2012 https://srhe.ac.uk/arc/12/0274.pdf

25 ACS International Schools, *The University Admissions Officers report 2016,* 2016 https://www.ibo.org/contentassets/0c457777b6804d8eafdb6f2e4024f7b3/uk-2016-university-admissions-officers-report-en.pdf

26 Irenka Suto et al, 'A Level reform: Is the Government in tune with its stakeholders?', *Research Matters,* June 2013 https://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/Images/466352-a-level-reform-is-the-government-in-tune-with-its-stakeholders-.pdf

27 Michelle Morgan, *Prior learning experience, study expectations of A-Level and BTEC students on entry to university and the impact of Covid19,* Office for Institutional Equity and University of East London, November 2023 https://documents.advance-he.ac.uk/download/file/document/10683

28 Carmen Vidal Rodeiro et al, *Prior learning of undergraduates in UK higher education institutions,* Cambridge Assessment, University of Cambridge, June 2013 https://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/Images/230030-prior-learning-of-undergraduates-in-uk-higher-education-institutions.pdf

29 International Baccalaureate, *Extended essay*, June 2024 https://www.ibo.org/programmes/diploma-programme/curriculum/dp-core/extended-essay/

30 Charlotte Stephenson, 'The role of the Extended Project Qualification in developing self-regulated learners: exploring students' and teachers' experiences', *The Curriculum Journal*, October 2019 https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09585176.2019.1646665

31 Carmen Vidal Rodeiro et al, *Prior learning of undergraduates in UK higher education institutions,* Cambridge Assessment, University of Cambridge, June 2013 https://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/Images/230030-prior-learning-of-undergraduates-in-uk-higher-education-institutions.pdf

Tom Gill, *Are students who take the Extended Project Qualification better prepared for higher education?,* Cambridge University Press and Assessment, October 2022

32 Saskia Giraud-Reeves, *The facts of the matter: England is shifting to a 'knowledge-rich curriculum',* Social Market Foundation, July 2021 https://www.smf.co.uk/commentary_podcasts/the-facts-of-the-matter-england-is-shifting-to-a-knowledge-rich-curriculum/

33 Department for Education, *Key stage 4 performance,* Explore Education Statistics, Gov.uk, 17 December 2024 https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-performance#dataBlock-ed780f99-9ad1-4feb-b400-35fdad763bc1-charts

34 Sam Tuckett, *A spotlight on Design and Technology study in England,* Education Policy Institute, March 2022 https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Spotlight-on-DT-report_EPI-March-2022.pdf

35 John Last, *A crisis in the creative arts in the UK?*, HEPI Policy Note 2, September 2017 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2017/09/07/crisis-creative-arts-uk/

36 GuildHE submission to Curriculum and Assessment Review: to be published

37 Voice21, *What is oracy,* 2024 https://voice21.org/what-is-oracy/

BBC News, *Speaking skills key to break class barriers, says Keir Starmer*, 6 July 2023 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-66113585

38 Anna Mauranen, *Exploring ELF: Academic English Shaped by non-Native Speakers,* Cambridge University Press, August 2012 https://www.academia.edu/32118830/Exploring_ELF_Academic_English_Shaped_by_Non_native_Speakers_Anna_Mauranen_Cambridge_Cambridge_University_Press_2012_Pp_x_271

39 Lewis Baker and Marion Heron, 'Advocating for oracy: supporting student success in foundation year study', *Journal of Further and Higher Education,* Volume 47, Issue 10, August 2023 https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0309877X.2023.2241397

40 Jonathan Neves et al, HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey 2024,* June 2024 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/06/13/student-academic-experience-survey-2024/

41 UCL, *Disagreeing Well,* 2024 https://www.ucl.ac.uk/about/disagreeing-well

42 Rob Grieve et al, 'Student fears of oral presentations and public speaking in higher education: a qualitative survey', *Journal of Further and Higher Education,* Volume 45, Issue 9, July 2021 https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1948509

Graham Russell and Phil Topham, 'The impact of social anxiety on student learning and well-being in higher education', *Journal of Mental Health,* Volume 21, Issue 4, July 2012 https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.3109/09638237.2012.694505

43 Michelle Morgan, *Prior learning experience, study expectations of A-Level and BTEC students on entry to university and the impact of Covid19,* Office for Institutional Equity and University of East London, November 2023 https://documents.advance-he.ac.uk/download/file/document/10683

44 Alyson Hwang, *Digitally enhanced blended learning: leveraging the benefits of technology in Higher Education* Policy Connect, April 2024 https://www.policyconnect.org.uk/research/digitally-enhanced-blended-learning-leveraging-benefits-technology-higher-education

45 Jonathan Neves et al, HEPI / Advance HE, *Student Academic Experience Survey 2024,* June 2024 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/06/13/student-academic-experience-survey-2024/

46 Charles Clarke, *Striking the balance: A review of 11–16 curriculum and assessment in England,* OCR, 2024 https://teach.ocr.org.uk/striking-the-balance

47 Teachertapp, *AI teachers, school exclusions and cutting workload*, August 2024 https://teachertapp.com/uk/articles/ai-teachers-school-exclusions-and-cutting-workload/

48 Louis Hodge et al, *GCSE attainment and lifetime earnings,* Department for Education, June 2021 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60c36f0cd3bf7f4bd11a2326/GCSE_Attainment_and_Lifetime_Earnings_PDF3A.pdf

49 Catherine Dilnot, *The relationship between A-level subject choice and league table score of university attended: the 'facilitating', the 'less suitable' and the counter-intuitive,* Centre for Longitudinal Studies, UCL, July 2017 https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/CLS-WP-20177-The-relationship-between-A-level-subject-choice-and-league-table-score-of-university-attended.pdf

50 Jenni Ingram et al, *PISA 2022: National Report for England,* Department for Education, December 2023 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pisa-2022-national-report-for-england

51 Billy Camden, *Replace GCSE maths resits with new foundation course, says OECD*, Schools Week, 5 November 2024 https://schoolsweek.co.uk/replace-gcse-maths-resits-with-new-foundation-course-says-oecd/

52 Malgorzata Kuczera et al, *Building Skills for All: A Review of England*, OECD, 2016 https://epale.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/building-skills-for-all-review-of-england.pdf

53 Michelle Morgan, *Prior learning experience, study expectations of A-Level and BTEC students on entry to university and the impact of Covid19,* Office for Institutional Equity and University of East London, November 2023 https://documents.advance-he.ac.uk/download/file/document/10683

54 Malgorzata Kuczera et al, *Building Skills for All: A Review of England*, OECD, 2016 https://epale.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/building-skills-for-all-review-of-england.pdf

55 Social Mobility Commission, *Attainment at age 16*, 11 September 2024 https://social-mobility.data.gov.uk/intermediate_outcomes/compulsory_school_age_(5_to_16_years)/attainment_at_age_16/latest - by-disadvantage-status-over-time

56 Hazel Shearing, 'Pass rate falls for GCSE maths resits in England', *BBC News*, 11 January 2024 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-67937273

57 Branwen Jeffreys, 'PE teachers retraining in maths to fill school gaps', *BBC News*, 20 March 2024 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-68602435

58 Charles Clarke, *Striking the balance: A review of 11–16 curriculum and assessment in England,* OCR, 2024 https://teach.ocr.org.uk/striking-the-balance

59 Association of School and College Leaders, *Proposals for the 2022 schools white paper,* March 2022 https://www.ascl.org.uk/ASCL/media/ASCL/Our%20view/Campaigns/ASCL-proposals-for-the-2022-schools-white-paper-curriculum-March-22.pdf

60 Tom Richmond and Eleanor Regan, *Evolution and Revolution: A 10-year plan to reform the curriculum and assessment system in England,* May 2024 https://www.edsk.org/publications/evolution-and-revolution/

61 Michael Scott et al, *Subject choice trends in post-16 education in England,* British Academy, August 2024 https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/5468/British-Academy-report-Subject-choice-trends-post-16-education-England.pdf

62 John Higton et al, *Fit for Purpose? The view of the higher education sector, teachers and employers on the suitability of A Levels,* Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute, April 2012 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/605406/2012-04-03-fit-for-purpose-a-levels.pdf

63 Carmen Vidal Rodeiro et al, *Prior learning of undergraduates in UK higher education institutions,* Cambridge Assessment, University of Cambridge, June 2013 https://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/Images/230030-prior-learning-of-undergraduates-in-uk-higher-education-institutions.pdf

64 ACS International Schools, *The University Admissions Officers report 2016,* 2016 https://www.ibo.org/contentassets/0c457777b6804d8eafdb6f2e4024f7b3/uk-2016-university-admissions-officers-report-en.pdf

65 Department for Education and Nick Gibb MP, *Nick Gibb: debating the national curriculum,* Gov.uk, 23 November 2011 https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/nick-gibb-to-the-specialist-schools-and-academies-trust

66 Catherine Dilnot, *The relationship between A-level subject choice and league table score of university attended: the 'facilitating', the 'less suitable' and the counter-intuitive,* Centre for Longitudinal Studies, UCL, July 2017 https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/CLS-WP-20177-The-relationship-between-A-level-subject-choice-and-league-table-score-of-university-attended.pdf

67 Jake Anders et al, *Incentivising specific combinations of subjects: does it make any difference to university access?,* Centre for Longitudinal Studies, UCL Institute of Education, July 2017 https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/CLS-WP-201711-Incentivising-specific-combinations-of-subjects-does-it-make-any-difference-to-university-access.pdf

68 Campaign for the Arts, *Huge decline in arts subjects worsens at GCSE and A-level*, 24 August 2023 https://www.campaignforthearts.org/news/huge-decline-in-arts-subjects-worsens-at-gcse-and-a-level/

69 Patrick Jowett, *Full scale of university arts cuts emerges*, Arts Professional, 1 May 2024 https://www-artsprofessional-co-uk.ezproxy-b.deakin.edu.au/news/full-scale-university-arts-cuts-emerges Richard Adams, 'Creative arts courses at English universities face funding cut, *The Guardian,* 4 April 2024 https://www.theguardian.com/education/2024/apr/04/ministers-to-cut-funding-for-performing-and-creative-arts-courses-in-england

70 Interview with GuildHE conducted for this report

71 Erica Holt-White et al, *A Class Act: Social mobility and the creative industries,* The Sutton Trust, November 2024 https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/A-Class-Act.pdf

72 Nick Hillman, *'Dropouts or stopouts or comebackers or potential completers?': Non-continuation of students in the UK,* HEPI Policy Note 53, April 2024 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Dropouts-or-stopouts-or-comebackers-or-potential-completers-Non-continuation-of-students-in-the-UK.pdf

73 British Council, *British Council statement on modern foreign languages A-level results*, 17 August 2023 https://www.britishcouncil.org/about/press/british-council-statement-modern-foreign-languages-level-results-0

74 Jake Anders et al, *Incentivising specific combinations of subjects: does it make any difference to university access?,* Centre for Longitudinal Studies, UCL Institute of Education, July 2017 https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/CLS-WP-201711-Incentivising-specific-combinations-of-subjects-does-it-make-any-difference-to-university-access.pdf

75 Tom Richmond and Eleanor Regan, *Evolution and Revolution: A 10-year plan to reform the curriculum and assessment system in England,* May 2024 https://www.edsk.org/publications/evolution-and-revolution/

Charles Clarke, *Striking the balance: A review of 11–16 curriculum and assessment in England,* OCR, 2024 https://teach.ocr.org.uk/striking-the-balance

76 Daisy Christodolou, 'Why teaching to the test is so bad', January 2014 https://daisychristodoulou.com/2014/01/why-teaching-to-the-test-is-so-bad/

77 Graeme Atherton, *Will abolishing BTECs mean reversing widening access to higher education?*, NEON, February 2021 https://www.educationopportunities.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/BTEC-report-FINAL.pdf

Nicole Gicheva and Kathryn Petrie, *Vocation, Vocation, Vocation,* Social Market Foundation, January 2018 https://www.smf.co.uk/publications/the-role-of-vocational-routes-into-higher-education/

Pearson, *Publication of BTEC Results Data for 2022 23*, October 2023 https://qualifications.pearson.com/en/news-policy/qualifications/publication-of-BTEC-results-data-for-202223.html

78 Vanessa Clarke, 'BTecs: What are they and how are they graded?', *BBC News*, 13 December 2024 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-49279219

79 Nick Hillman, *Mixed messaging: Why are universities under fire for their response to T-Level students?*, HEPI Blog, 24 October 2022 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2022/10/24/mixed-messages-why-are-universities-under-fire-for-their-response-to-t-level-students/

80 Catherine Dilnot et al, *Educational Choices at 16-19 and university outcomes,* Oxford Brookes Business School & the Nuffield Foundation, January 2022 https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/news/students-with-btecs-university-success

81 Scott Kelly, *Reforming BTECs: Applied General qualifications as a route to higher education*, HEPI Report 94, February 2017 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Hepi_Reforming-BTECs-Report-94-09_02_17-Web.pdf

82 Catherine Dilnot et al, *Educational Choices at 16-19 and university outcomes,* Oxford Brookes Business School & the Nuffield Foundation, January 2022 https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/news/students-with-btecs-university-success

Michelle Morgan, *Bridging the gap between secondary and tertiary education,* February 2020 https://www.improvingthestudentexperience.com/library/UG_documents/Bridging_the_gap_between_secondary_and_tertiary_education-Morgan_2020.pdf

83 Rose Stephenson, *Degree apprenticeships and the lifelong learning entitlement; The HE general election issues, Day 6,* HEPI Blog, 10 June 2024 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/06/10/degree-apprenticeships-and-the-lifelong-learning-entitlement-the-he-general-election-issues-day-6/

84 Unite Students, *Applicant Index 2024*, July 2024 https://www.unitegroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Unite-Applicant-Index-Report-2024.pdf

85 Richard Boffey and Mair Lawrence-Matthews, *Opportunity Cost: Access to HE and the cost of living crisis in London*, London Higher, June 2024 https://londonhigher.ac.uk/resource/opportunity-cost-access-to-he-and-the-cost-of-living-crisis-in-london/

86 Josh Freeman, *HEPI polling shows only a third of students think England's system of maintenance support is fair – and most are financially worse off than a year ago*, HEPI, 2 May 2024 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/05/02/new-polling-shows-students-consider-the-welsh-system-of-maintenance-support-the-most-fair-and-englands-the-least/

87 Jonathan Neves et al, HEPI / Advance HE, *Student Academic Experience Survey 2024,* June 2024 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/06/13/student-academic-experience-survey-2024/

88 Department for Education, *New RSHE guidance: What it means for sex education lessons in schools*, Gov.uk, 16 May 2024 https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2024/05/16/new-rshe-guidance-what-it-means-for-sex-education-lessons-in-schools/

89 Michael Natzler, *Student Relationships, Sex and Sexual Health Survey,* HEPI Report 139, July 2021 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/07/22/student-relationships-sex-and-sexual-health-survey-2/

90 Alice de Gennaro, *Young people's engagement with extra-curricular activities following the pandemic*, COSMO, June 2023 https://cosmostudy.uk/latest/young-people-s-engagement-with-extra-curricular-activities-following-the-pandemic

91 Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP, Letter to vice-chancellors, 4 November 2024 https://wonkhe.com/wp-content/wonkhe-uploads/2024/11/Letter-from-the-Education-Secretary-4.11.24.pdf

92 Department for Education, *Widening participation in higher education,* Gov.uk, 24 Ocober 2024 https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education/2022-23#dataBlock-a3906c42-7714-4f10-b22a-906c11f36684-tables

Department for Education and Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP, *Higher education reform to back opportunity and protect students,* Gov.uk, 4 November 2024 https://www.gov.uk/government/news/higher-education-reform-to-back-opportunity-and-protect-students

93 Catherine Dilnot, *The relationship between A-level subject choice and league table score of university attended: the 'facilitating', the 'less suitable' and the counter-intuitive,* Centre for Longitudinal Studies, UCL, July 2017 https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/CLS-WP-20177-The-relationship-between-A-level-subject-choice-and-league-table-score-of-university-attended.pdf

94 UCAS, *Where Next?,* 2021 https://www.ucas.com/file/435551/download?token=VUdlDVFh

95 UCAS, *Where Next?,* 2021 https://www.ucas.com/file/435551/download?token=VUdlDVFh

96 Dani Payne and Jamie Gollings, *Things worth knowing: The role of assumed knowledge in youth transitions from education to employment*, Social Market Foundation, October 2024 https://www.speakersforschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Things-worth-knowing-Oct-2024.pdf

97 Department for Education, *Careers guidance and access for education and training providers,* January 2023 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63b69f3fe90e077246c83323/Careers_guidance_and_access_for_education_and_training_providers_.pdf

98 Jessica Hill, 'Red tape and cost pressures leave firms struggling to offer T Level work placements', *FE Week*, 7 March 2023 https://feweek.co.uk/red-tape-and-cost-pressures-leave-firms-struggling-to-offer-t-level-work-placements/

99 Department for Culture, Media and Support, '£60 million boost for creative industries to turbocharge growth', Press release, 17 January 2025 https://www.gov.uk/government/news/60-million-boost-for-creative-industries-to-turbocharge-growth)

100 Carmen Vidal Rodeiro et al, *Prior learning of undergraduates in UK higher education institutions*, Cambridge Assessment, University of Cambridge, June 2013 https://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/Images/230030-prior-learning-of-undergraduates-in-uk-higher-education-institutions.pdf

101 Ryan Frost, *Priorities for the Curriculum and Assessment Review*, The Sutton Trust, December 2024 https://www.suttontrust.com/news-opinion/all-news-opinion/priorities-for-the-curriculum-and-assessment-review/

102 Nick Hillman, *The Robbins Report at 60: Essential facts for policymakers today,* HEPI Policy Note 49, October 2023 https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/10/12/the-robbins-report-at-60-essential-facts-for-policymakers-today/

The school and college curriculum plays a crucial role in preparing students for higher education, but does it always leave them well-equipped? This report, drawing on fresh student polling and extensive research, finds that while most students feel academically prepared, gaps remain in critical thinking, independent inquiry and essential life skills. It explores how assessments, subject choices and personal development can better equip young people for university and beyond, offering practical recommendations for the 'evolution' of the curriculum.

Higher Education Policy Institute

HEPI was established in 2002 to influence the higher education debate with evidence.
We are UK-wide, independent and non-partisan.
February 2025 978-1-915744-40-1
Higher Education Policy Institute
99 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6JX
www.hepi.ac.uk

Printed by BCQ, Buckingham
Typesetting: Steve Billington, www.jarmanassociates.co.uk