



AELP Submission: #123

**AELP's response to the Curriculum and
Assessment Review (CAR)**

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Summary

Following the announcement of the Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR) in the summer which will consider Key 1 through to post 16 education (Key Stage 5). In September, Dr Becky Francis launched a consultation exercise to gain sector feedback as part of the CAR on a wide range of topics. On 17 October 2024, the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) held a roundtable session gain input from members on key aspects of the CAR consultation. Following the roundtable discussion, AELP incorporated members views into the submission below to as part of consultation which closed on 22 November 2024.

We would like to thank members who took part in the session for their contributions.

Section 2: General views on curriculum, assessment, and qualifications pathways

What aspects of the current a) curriculum, b) assessment system and c) qualification pathways are working well to support and recognise educational progress for children and young people?

In the main, the current curriculum and assessment system works well if students are comfortable taking an academic route, particularly those who want to progress onto higher education via a “traditional” university route. The pre-16 system is structured in a way that means learners are naturally funnelled into this approach. This type of student is more able to cope with more summative methods of assessment (exams). Whilst there are some opportunities for alternative routes (i.e. vocational) there is often a ‘post-code lottery’ approach only with availability in some schools being limited, which we feel should be expanded across the country.

A more joined up and standardised approach is needed to ensure all learners are able to study towards their chosen careers in the most suitable way for them, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach to secondary and post-16 education.

What aspects of the current a) curriculum, b) assessment system and c) qualification pathways should be targeted for improvements to better support and recognise educational progress for children and young people?

The system is 'working' as well as it could be and should be given its design but if it only works for a narrow pathway/ group of 'customers' then it isn't the right system. The key is to review what is taught and why, and then how it is assessed. Some educational environments can be more confident in this (for example Independent Schools, high-performing schools) with some offering varied curriculum, but is existential for those in more challenging circumstances, such as those with Additional Learning Needs forced into mainstream education with no alternative options. Sadly, this exacerbates the social and cultural capital deficit that exists more in these types of establishments, where crucially education can and should be the key to addressing this.

There must be more consideration for students for whom exams-based assessment is a challenge either due to their ability, or that their current personal circumstances hinders their ability to achieve when assessed in this way. Any future system needs to take account of learners who have Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) more specifically and enable them to progress effectively. It is well documented how exams are very 'high stakes' and are reliant on an individual's performance on the day. Meaning what is going on in a student's life at that time can have a massive impact on their results, and on their future life choices.

AELP's members believe there should be more and better alternative options available between the ages of 14 and 16, including a recalibration of the assessment system to enable it to support a broader range of learners more effectively by introducing more flexibility within qualifications. This approach would allow for more opportunities for formative assessment points so that following an initial assessment, learners are supported via check points and personalised/individual learning rather than the current 'one size fits all' approach of GCSEs. The approach of learning for exams appears to limit students' ability to develop skills in other areas, including critical thinking skills, active listening, preparation for work.

Upon leaving secondary school, learners are presented with a huge amount of choice on their next steps (apprenticeships, study programmes etc.) but the accessibility and knowledge of this choice is very poor and often provided too late for students, staff and parents to make meaningful decisions. This review presents an opportunity to formalise and standardise the opportunities for learners to study Vocational Technical Education routes in year 9 with mandated vocational elements (at Level 1), to introduce those vocational routes and connect them, to provide a more meaningful learning experiences and prepare them for work. Formative assessment, leading to an End Point Assessment in apprenticeships, provide a project based, multi-skilled approach with up-to-date trends and advances in technology. There should be no reason why this can't be an option within secondary education.

We appreciate that this would require more collaboration between schools, Awarding Organisations and training providers/colleges so that the stages are connected, rather than the current disconnect between school, post-16 education and work, incorporating skills, closing the gaps, and preparing students for lifelong learning and work, in addition to academic studies. However, there is a massive gap between secondary school and post-secondary education, what options are available and how that is linked together.

The accountability system must also be updated to alleviate further problems with teacher retention and recruitment. Hearing first-hand from ex secondary school teachers about how they have left the profession owing to accountability and performance tables was quite disheartening. The pressure that teachers are under to 'perform' to ensure a student progresses from start to finish over their five-year secondary journey. The progress 8 measures do not take into account those students whose line is not always straight, and the measures do not take into account of the different ways in which students actually learn. Unless this pressure is removed this won't change.

And it's not just at secondary school - more breadth of options needs to be opened up for younger children during primary school. For example, pushing learners through the whole of their time during primary and secondary school English, with the aim of a grade 3, is unachievable for some, but then picking this up again once they leave school and progress to FE, is both cruel and ineffective. They not only feel like a failure though school but have to go through it all again in post-16 and it is often the FE and Skills providers' role to pick this up with limited time and funding. More of a connection and

detailed record of what this looks like for them in school, how many attempts they made and how this looks as they continue into post-16 education and work is needed.

This then links back to FSQ accountability and the disparity with secondary curriculum. There is a focus on academic levels but breaking down the curriculum for secondary education there's a lot of assessment criteria that doesn't necessarily help with preparation for life and work. Increasing functionality makes it more relatable to the student gives them more of a focus on their future.

Finally, towards year 11 students have to make sure they are prepared to make a choice on their next steps but no they have had no real introduction into the world of work, with the focus being more on bridging skills gaps. More opportunities for this, with more vocational routes from Year 9 would go some way to alleviate this.

To what extent does the content of the a) English and b) maths national curriculum at secondary level (key stages 3 and 4) equip pupils with the knowledge and skills they need for life and further study? Are there ways in which the content could change to better support this aim?

There is a big disconnect between Key Stage 3 and 4 and the content of the curriculum which needs to be reviewed as some of it has become a little outdated with no relevant life skills or cultural breadth to ensure all students remain engaged. This was picked up during our focus group when we discussed the focus on post-16 providers to ensure that the content of teaching and assessment is valid, current and linked to local skills plans; with tutors in the FE world also being strongly encouraged to take a holistic approach to curriculum however there is no pressure in secondary education to do the same meaning content can become dated particularly in digital subjects.

The curriculum changes which were introduced during Michael Gove's period as the Secretary of State have been seen as a backwards step. There was a feeling that there should also be a more diverse range of authors and genres explored with in the English curriculum which would better engage students and reflect current real-world contexts to take with them into future studies and work. Depicted interactions and tensions between different cultures, religions and ethnicities, and sometimes highlighted prejudices and misunderstanding that arose from these differences (lost through the removal of compulsory Religious Education) would allow students to analyse and debate a range of information alongside the standard secondary curriculum thus enhancing their communication skills in more up to date ways.

To what extent do the current maths and English qualifications at a) pre-16 and b) 16-19 support pupils and learners to gain, and adequately demonstrate that they have achieved, the skills and knowledge they need? Are there any changes you would suggest that would support these outcomes?

AELP's view is that the current policy of forcing a large majority of students, year on year, to re-sit GCSE exams needs to change particularly these learners are most likely to fail (again and again) is not getting any better. In August 2024, around 40% of students left secondary education without one of either English or Maths at grade 4. The changes to 16-19 conditions of funding have increased the impact on learners' ability to progress within further education. It may be that for some learners they would be more suited to taking Functional Skills Qualifications as the functional element would make

more sense to them. However, currently this isn't an option under the currently conditions of funding that require GCSE resits instead.

AELP believes that English and maths are fundamentally important in developing skills for life and further study such as critical thinking, percentages and statistics. However, this could be achieved by using existing employer developed apprenticeship standards and integrating the applied use of literacy and numeracy into the occupational environment. There could also be an argument to mirror the pass, merit and distinction grading system of end-point assessment to stop the cruel policy of resitting exams over and over again leading people to seeing themselves as failures which can also negatively impact their mental health.

How can we better support learners who do not achieve level 2 in English and maths by 16 to learn what they need to thrive as citizens in work and life? In particular, do we have the right qualifications at level 2 for these 16-19 learners (including the maths and English study requirement)?

Allowing students the option to complete Functional Skills Qualifications **or** GCSEs could alleviate some of the stress caused by the mandated GCSE route. This could be offered in Year 9, (at least to Level 1) to prepare learners to move onto GCSEs but continue with FSQs if this was felt to be the better option for that learner. The post-16 FE sector sees on a daily basis the implications for students who move from school into study programme provision or apprenticeships without a Grade 4 at GCSE and who are then required to continue studying maths and English to enable them to progress into another form of education. The current resit policy is putting young people off post-16 study due to the barrier of another 'exam' to pass. This is compounded in the apprenticeship arena by the exit requirement for level 3 apprentices to have achieved maths and English to pass their apprenticeship. Additionally, there is also the impact that this has on their mental health and wellbeing and the providers with reduced completions impacting Qualification Achievement Rates (QAR) and the Apprenticeship Accountability Framework (AAF).

Proposals announced in February 2024 to remove the 5% tolerance and increase the hours for maths in line with maths to 18 already raises issues around FE pay, recruitment and retention of maths and English specialist tutors. An unintended consequence of this is a risk that providers choose not to enrol students with the lowest levels of attainment which then leads to more NEETs. We know this is an issue for recruitment to apprenticeships following research for our mini commission into FSQs within apprenticeships where it was highlighted that a high number of providers and employers now impose entry criteria restrictions. The Find an Apprenticeship Service website also shows that 5,440 currently live apprenticeship vacancies (all apprenticeship levels) and found that (as of 25 September 2024) **72% of adverts require learners to have a minimum of grade 4/C and above, with a further 4% requiring Grade 5 and above.**

Only the **remaining 24%** of adverts either have no specific maths and English requirement or they accept grade 3/D and below. We also drilled down further to consider those advertising prior qualifications as 'essential' or 'desirable' and found that **55% of the Grade 4/C qualification requirements are advertised as 'essential'.**

This compares to just **19% for adverts where the grade requirement is lower or not required.**

Are there any particular challenges with regard to the English and maths a) curricula and b) assessment for learners in need of additional support (e.g. learners with SEND, socioeconomic disadvantage, English as an additional language (EAL))? Are there any changes you would suggest to overcome these challenges?

AELP has heard from our members that a high number of colleges are now applying to become recognised 'Trauma Informed Colleges' because of the high numbers of learners with SEND and the particularly the high numbers of mental health related issues being experienced by some students which is having a huge impact on their learning. In mainstream secondary schooling there is very limited support available for learners with SEND with diagnostic assessments and Education Health Care Plans being implemented too slowly to limit the impact on learners and improve their experiences and ability to cope within a mainstream educational setting.

Section 8: Qualification pathways 16-19

To what extent does the range of programmes and qualifications on offer at each level meet the needs and aspirations of learners?

a. Level 3

b. Level 2

c. Level 1 and entry level

This question is difficult to answer at present as the qualification market is uncertain due to the defunding of level 2 and 3 qualifications as part of the qualification reform process. Without the outcomes of the Level 3 Pause and Review exercise it is hard to determine where learner needs will be met. The Impact of defunding of some Level 3 qualifications will affect some learners more than others – we need evolution rather than revolution. Under the current plans there will be a narrowing of available qualifications and routeways. We must also highlight here that the range of programmes also needs to link to employer needs.

Whilst we understand that T Levels are an alternative to A levels and Diplomas they still in their infancy and do not have the same level of recognition and trust amongst learners and their parents. T Levels also do not support the needs of all learners as they are still quite academic and also can lead to issues with progression onto apprenticeships post completion. Despite being based off the same occupational map they do not always enable recognition of prior learning sufficiently for the apprenticeship standard. For example, AELP have heard of challenges within the Digital T Levels of learners not having fully met the Level 3 Apprenticeship Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours but having completed the T-Level. But the close alignment of the two programmes means that there isn't sufficient learning required by the learner to be able to RPL into the apprenticeship as they will not meet the minimum duration required.

Are there particular changes that could be made to the following programmes and qualifications and/or their assessment that would be beneficial to learners:

a. AS/A level qualifications

Comments in section 2 cover this with regards to progression for those wanting an academic route which is not suitable for all learners. The focus within A Levels on summative assessment means that the exams are high stakes and may not accurately reflect a learner's ability. The removal of coursework from these qualifications will have led to some learners being disadvantaged particularly if they have additional learning needs that makes time limit assessment difficult.

b. T Level and T Level Foundation Year programmes

Whilst the intent of T Levels is positive in terms of the mix of vocational and academic study there is concern that the summative assessments (exams) are pitched more towards level 4.

This means that the qualification can be unobtainable for some particularly as not only are they hard to get onto (providers are often very selective in which students they will accept), the step up in terms of knowledge and understanding is high. Removing barriers like these are needed to see this as a viable post-16 option for all.

There is an issue of partial completion of T Levels as currently there is no ability to recognise partial completion and so learners may leave with nothing. This means they are a higher stakes option particularly if someone changes their mind as to their career options part way through. As the T Level core can be quite challenging students sometimes drop out after year 1, therefore we need to ensure we don't take away the safety net of alternative qualifications which can be studied before we get T Levels right.

An additional challenge for T Level programmes is the work placement expectations. Whilst AELP supports their inclusion due to the huge benefits they can provide there needs to be recognition that they can provide a significant challenge. With an ever growing demand on employers to provide placement/work experience at all levels there needs to be consideration as to how employers can be supported to offer a range of opportunities and how they can be incentivised to offer the placements.

c. Other applied or vocational qualifications at level 3

It is difficult to provide a response to this question as some qualifications being delivered are at risk of defunding, and providers are awaiting the outcome of the Level 3 Pause and Review exercise which is due to be release following the closure of the consultation. At present providers believe that there will be gaps in provision if the plans to defund the proposed qualifications go through. Consideration must also be given to progression routes; learners with lower levels need progression routes to Level 3 that are alternatives to A Levels or T Levels. Some learners benefit from being able to take a combination of smaller qualifications at Level 3. As a result there is a need for qualifications that do not require a full academic year to complete, accommodating those with non-traditional routes into work for example those who are waiting to join the armed forces. The impending DfE review of Level 3 needs to be considered in line with this review to ensure there is breadth and depth to the post-16 Level 3 offer as there is a concern of rising Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) figures. It is difficult to say, at this stage, what is good about the post-16 landscape when in the middle of another reform with different timescales. One point to note, however, is there has been no policy

stability in technical and vocational - T levels, Diplomas and GNVQs, whilst A-Levels have remained a constant.

d. Other applied or vocational qualifications at level 2 and below

The offer here is very limited, more choice and breadth of qualifications are needed. As covered in section 2, there is a need to formalise and standardise other options in year 9 with mandated Level 1 vocational elements to introduce vocational routes and connect them to provide a more meaningful learning experience and prepare students for work. Formative assessment, leading to an End Point Assessment in apprenticeships provide a project based, multi-skilled approach with up to date trends and advances in technology.

Where Technical Awards offered at Key Stage 4, and who it is offered to, should be broadened out with more collaboration between different organisations to bridge the gap between vocational and academic. There is a limited choice and availability which steers students into the wrong subject area for them. A loosening up of the performance measures so they are opened up more would give a dual curriculum to start the vocational route earlier as a method of 'test and trial' – the framework is already there.

It is also important that there is availability of Level 2 and below qualifications available for post 16 learners as for some this is the appropriate level for them to study. AELP members have expressed that they are still unclear as to whether Level 2 reform will continue as planned or if it will be reviewed as part of the Curriculum and Assessment review especially as it does not form part of the Pause and Review. It is important that providers have the opportunity to have the full picture as to what qualifications are available for learners to ensure that the choice is the right one for that learner.

How can we improve learners' understanding of how the different programmes and qualifications on offer will prepare them for university, employment (including apprenticeships) and/or further technical study?

There is a clear disconnect between the Baker Clause (PAL - Provider Access Legislation) and the requirement of schools for careers advice. Schools tend to have a preference for promoting academic pathways, particularly if there is a sixth form attached to the school, and this is also often due to the teachers' own experiences of taking an academic route, but it is also hard for them to keep up to date and provide adequate independent careers advice. More information and upskilling is required to ensure adequate careers advice to prepare students for alternative routes other than university. Apprenticeships are often overlooked, and teachers/careers advisors are not knowledgeable enough to advise students on this option.

The introduction of the PAL in theory has improved encounters however it is clear from providers that it is difficult to support the demand from schools and also that the most popular years to support with PAL encounters are years 10 and above which is too late in some cases as students have already made subject choices which may impact their progression opportunities.

To what extent is there enough scope and flexibility in the system to support learners who may need to change course?

There is not enough portability within the system, often with little or no information recorded in terms of what the learner has already learned and how this information is recorded when/if the learner moves onto a course with a different provider.

In some cases (i.e. T-Levels and apprenticeships) partial completion isn't available, and it is higher stakes in terms of not getting recognition of learning and skills they have gained.

The introduction of foundation apprenticeships and shorter duration apprenticeships will improve the scope and flexibility, but learners often lose out if they enrol on a course but only complete part of it.

Are there additional skills, subjects, or experiences that all learners should develop or study during 16-19 education, regardless of their chosen programmes and qualifications, to support them to be prepared for life and work?

There is a distinct lack of enrichment in the curriculum – funding has disappeared too and its partly due to budgets being stretched and timetabling makes it difficult. This is particularly apparent for Employability, Enrichment, and Pastoral hours (i.e. non-qualification hours) within study programmes of which the importance and value of such activities is underappreciated as it is often this support that the learner benefits most from, alongside their qualifications.

Additional Questions:

Technology

There needs to be more opportunities to embed technology into the curriculum with content related to real life and the world of work. There were some good examples of this during the pandemic, but it seems to have quickly reverted back. One example from an Awarding Organisation is:

“During the pandemic the FE and Skills sector very quickly switched to remote invigilation and assessment in apprenticeship End Point Assessments and this brought a lot of benefits with no issues (Ofqual) with validity. This has now reversed back to do it the old way but we have proved we can do this in an effective way so we would want to see more technology in curriculum and assessment to alleviate some of the time pressures and costs”

There also needs to be additional guidance as to how AI can be used within assessment provided and ways for it to be incorporated into teaching this is a skill that is going to be needed by learners and so they need to be taught how to use it ethically.

About the Association of Employment and Learning Providers

The Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) is a national membership body, proudly representing its many member organisations operating in the skills sector. AELP members deliver a range of training and vocational learning – including the majority of apprenticeships as well as Skills Bootcamps, 16-19 Study Programme, Adult Skills Fund and more.



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