

Nuffield Foundation response to the call for evidence for the Curriculum and Assessment Review

The Nuffield Foundation is a charitable trust and we fund rigorous research that seeks to open up opportunities and improve lives for individuals, families and communities within a just and inclusive society. Our work addresses the inequalities, disadvantage, discrimination and vulnerabilities people face in education, justice and welfare. We span the breadth of the Education portfolio from early years, through school, to further and higher education, and skills and training. We believe that much of the research we fund can inform the Government's ambitions to realise opportunity through education.

We are independent, but we often bring together all relevant stakeholders to support the use of sound evidence to improve people's lives. In this response, we have summarised key insights and findings from recent and upcoming projects we have funded and included links to project pages so more information can be accessed easily if needed.

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

10. 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?

Useful background to this question can be found in [work](#) the Nuffield Foundation has funded by Luke Sibbets, providing a detailed summary of how school policy has changed since 1999 across the four UK nations. He notes a clear divide in curriculum approaches. Namely, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have each adopted a curriculum that emphasises cross-cutting areas of learning and leaves significant autonomy to schools and teachers to shape the precise content. In contrast, England has maintained traditional subjects and specific guidance on the minimum amount of material expected to be covered at each stage, though schools are clearly still free to go beyond this. The author concludes that studies such as PISA provide an opportunity to assess the impact of these changes, although they note that the usefulness of this information is limited as it is only available every three years.

Subsequent [IFS analysis](#) of declines in PISA results in Wales may provide evidence about how these policy changes are having an impact which, in turn, may have important lessons for the curriculum and assessment reform in England. Their report explains that the new Curriculum for Wales is partly based on the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence, with both having noble aims to broaden the curriculum, improve well-being and focus on skills. However, there is now evidence arguing that these quite general skills-based curricula might not be effective ways to develop those skills. New GCSEs are due to be taught in Wales from 2025, including greater use of continuous assessment, a broader range of

subjects, and the removal of triple science as an option. The author suggests that these reforms run the risk of widening inequalities, increasing teacher workload, and limiting future education opportunities.

A different area of research that Nuffield has funded, highlighting an area of provision which works well, relates to vocational provision and its role in improving outcomes, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Nuffield-funded research has shown that BTECs offer a route into HE, and widen participation for disadvantaged groups. This study, led by Catherine Dilnot at Oxford Brooks, found differences in university outcomes between those students entering with just BTECs rather than just A levels, even when comparing students with similar backgrounds and prior achievement, on the same course and at the same university. However, it is very important to note that the overwhelming majority of students entering with BTECs or combinations do not drop out or repeat, and the majority of those graduating do so with at least a 2:1. These are considerable successes for these students, who without the availability of BTECs might not have had the opportunity to attend university at all.

A second study providing evidence about the benefits of existing vocational provision for disadvantaged students looks at college education for 14-16 year olds. This project is exploring the experiences of 14 to 16-year-olds who attend further education colleges in England, including students who have been excluded from school, electively home-educated (EHE) learners who attend FE for up to 16 hours a week, non-attenders, and those with special educational needs. These young people are at a higher risk of dropping out and becoming not in education, employment or training (NEET). Little is known about these learners, who are often invisible in government policy due to falling between school and FE.

The final report was published on 12 November 2024. Considering that many of the students have previously had disrupted education experiences, the research finds that progression rates for the cohort are positive, with 75% or more learners transitioning to post-16 education between 2016/17 and 2020/21. Most students progress into Level 2 post-16 education, with around 20% of students consistently progressing into Level 3 or higher.

Although much more detail is included in the report, the following section provides some important findings and recommendations about how increased flexibility for this group of students may be set up to lead to positive impacts.

For students who struggle in mainstream school, college provision can be transformative in terms of engagement, attendance, and attitude. Unlike secondary school, colleges have

a flexible curriculum offer, individualised to needs and interests, with an emphasis on vocational learning, employability skills, and wider enrichment activities. Smaller class sizes are more common, and a more relaxed college environment – including approaches to rules, uniform, being allowed off-site, and use of first names – enables young people to feel more at home in college than in a secondary school. Given the vulnerability of many of these learners, pastoral and mental health support is central to provision success, with strong relationships built on care and understanding in place. However, the research finds that while this provision is widely recognised by students, parents, staff, colleges, and local authorities as essential for students' progression and life chances, there are a number of barriers to delivery and expansion. The report makes the following recommendations:

- Working with schools and colleges, all LAs should assess the suitability of 14 to 16 provision to meet the needs of all young people within their communities to ensure they are given the opportunity to thrive and progress into adult life and work.
- The key stage 3 and key stage 4 curriculum should be reviewed to allow students the option of studying fewer subjects at greater depth, including a wide range of vocational and technical qualifications at a range of levels to meet each student's starting point.
- There should be clear guidance covering all types of 14 to 16 provision, not just direct entry. This guidance shouldn't in any way limit flexibility, but rather create a framework for it to be embedded within the local offer at 14.
- College-based 14 to 16 provision should be funded at least in line with school funding for this age group. Alternative provision should be planned and funded for groups to allow for delivery to be financially viable from the start of the college year. EHE students should be able to access additional learning support in line with their needs.
- Financial support for transport and free school meals should be extended to ensure equal access to college provision.
- Providing funded opportunities for young people to attend college for vocational options during the school week could mean that some young people would remain in school, but also benefit from the broader options colleges offer. This could also support transition at 16.
- DfE should provide clear guidance on how to code 14 to 16 students who study at colleges. Aligning system terminology more closely with the language used by colleges could help this process and support better tracking of student outcomes.

- Providing a national tracking system for student progression and outcomes would provide a better understanding of how colleges support young people's post-16 transitions and their future development. Enhanced data collection and analysis can offer insights into the effectiveness of college provision and inform future support strategies.

11. 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?

There is a need to think about how the education system can better equip young people with the essential employment skills needed now and in the future. The [Skills Imperative 2035 programme](#), is a five-year research project led by NFER and funded by the Nuffield Foundation, which aims to help government, business, and other stakeholders address future skills shortages by identifying the skills that will be most vital across the labour market, estimating future gaps in these skills, examining the determinants of skill development, and identifying the groups most at risk of changes in employment and skills requirements between now and 2035. They have identified the most in-demand skills as collaboration; communication; creative thinking; information literacy; organising, planning and prioritising; and problem solving and decision making. The analysis shows how the shortage of essential employment skills undermines the ability of young people to take advantage of the growing opportunities in the labour market in professional occupations. The next stage of the programme is focusing on how these skills can be developed better across different education pathways.

It is also worth considering the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) in Scotland for awareness of the strengths and limitations of a different approach. This [project](#), by researchers from the University of Stirling and funded by the Nuffield Foundation, explored how curriculum narrowing in secondary schools in Scotland, under CfE, is linked to socioeconomic characteristics (i.e. students from disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to experience greater curriculum narrowing in terms of fewer exam entries and a narrower range of subjects), producing robust evidence on the factors influencing curriculum decisions made by pupils and their families, teachers, schools and Local Authorities. The authors found that curriculum narrowing is associated with negative consequences for young people's attainment, transitions to subsequent study in school, and destinations beyond school.

A second area that should be targeted for improvement is support for children with special educational needs and disabilities. One particular aspect of this is the need to do more to refine assessment methods for children with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD). Many students with SpLD leave school with poorer grades than their peers. Given the challenges that many of these students face in producing written text, current assessment methods

that rely on writing are a barrier to performance. Research has shown that extra time leads to generally improved outcomes in reading comprehension and maths. However, it is not clear whether this translates to improvements in written tasks. This [research project](#) is investigating school practices and policies around access arrangements for these students to inform evidence-based practice on secondary students who present with literacy difficulties. A guidance document containing information on how to better implement access arrangements will help schools support students seeking the most effective form of access arrangements. The project is due to report by the end of 2024

More evidence about education for learners with SEND is given in the response to question 14 below.

Section 3: Social justice and inclusion

12. In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation (class ceilings) for learners experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage?

Access and participation for learners experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage is a core area of research for the Nuffield Foundation. This ongoing [Nuffield-funded project](#) is comparing post-16 education and training systems across the UK. Whilst the final report is not due until April 2025, the project is exploring the UK policy implications of consolidating further and higher education. It will provide policy recommendations on tertiary educational structuring and practice in the face of evolving policy developments, skill demands, and labour market opportunities.

It is claimed that this approach of consolidating further and higher education reduces barriers, diversifies pathways, and democratises access to post-16 education and training. However, the blurred boundary between further and higher education hides vertical stratification. This results in within-system inequalities and institutional tension as different organisations compete over students, funds, and prestige.

Evidence suggests that for young people, this stratification can entrench inequalities of access, retention, educational outcomes, and long-term labour market outcomes based on class, gender, age, and ethnicity. This interim report from the above project starts to [map](#) the relationship between different systems, policy landscapes, and changing responses to skills demand within post-16 education and training across the UK.

The interim report came up with a number of initial recommendations, including:

- That a period of stability is needed in the sector (possibly after initial reforms) to allow it to recover
- Data on this sector should be better, more comparable, and more focused on inequalities

- Equipped with better data, policymakers should increase the focus on inequalities in post-16 access and outcomes
- Policymakers in Wales should take urgent action to understand and improve post-16 outcomes and inequalities

Other evidence has shown that disadvantaged young people are over-represented among lower attainers at GCSE, and post-16 transitions and pathways are not currently supporting positive outcomes. [This project](#) explored the post-16 educational pathways taken by learners who achieve grade 3 (D) or below in Maths and/or English at Key Stage 4 (KS4).

Despite many initiatives aiming to support learners gaining the qualifications they need to progress to Level 3 study, in 2018 55% of disadvantaged young people achieved only a grade 3 (D) or below in Maths and/or English GCSE at KS4. This sets them on a very different path from more advantaged peers. Young people with lower attainment face a greater variety of post-16 options, and evidence suggests they have difficulty accessing support to make informed educational decisions. This study describes the pathways taken by young people and their subsequent labour market outcomes up to the age of 30. Current Technical Education policy focuses on the quality of learning opportunities at Level 3 and above. Less attention is paid to improving access, and to the potential of Further Education provision to offer ‘second chance’ learning opportunities at Levels 1 and 2.

The authors conclude in their final report that there is a clear need for policy that ensures high-quality Technical Education pathways to rival HE, and that these need to be appropriately funded. However, this policy focus is necessarily on pupils who are close to GCSE threshold grades at KS4, as it is the achievement of these thresholds that would allow them to take pathways to HE. The government’s plans for post-16 qualifications at level 2 and below from spring 2023, and the current Advanced British Standard consultation may have some potential to support lower-attaining young people further below GCSE thresholds at KS4, to progress to higher levels of post-16 study.

However, to develop appropriate policy for the 50,000 to 80,000 pupils in each cohort in England who require post-16 study that recognises their challenge in achieving Level 2, greater understanding and empathy is required. Policy solutions needed for the lowest attaining are different from those who are closer to GCSE thresholds, and failure to recognise this can result in unintended consequences.

An [ongoing project](#) is investigating the long-term social, health, and labour market outcomes of disadvantaged children who were high-achieving at the end of primary school. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds who excel academically have the potential to become upwardly socially mobile and obtain the benefits that this brings. However, many do not fulfil their early potential and it is crucial to understand why

high-attaining disadvantaged young people don't retain their early advantages. The project is ongoing to March 2026, but in an interim publication, the authors state that:

“..the cognitive skills of bright 5-year-olds from low-income families keep pace with those of children from high-income families through to the end of primary school. However, the transition into secondary is a critical period, with high-achieving children from poor families experiencing a particularly sharp relative decline in their attitudes towards school, behaviour, mental health and academic achievement between age 11 and 14. The failure to fully capitalise on the early potential of this group is likely to be a key reason why the UK is failing to become a more socially fluid society.”

The transition from primary to secondary school is an area where barriers continue to exist for disadvantaged learners.

13. In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation which may disproportionately impact pupils based on other characteristics (e.g. disability, sexual orientation, gender, race, religion or belief etc.)

The Nuffield Foundation funded a [project](#) exploring female participation in computer science in English schools. Research into computing education has shown that females are poorly represented in CS qualifications including the recently introduced Computer Science GCSE. Data also shows females underperform compared to male counterparts when attainment in other subjects is taken into account. Nonetheless, the reasons for this phenomenon and its impact on their future academic and career choices remain unclear. The [final report](#) makes six recommendations to inform the development of policy and education interventions to reduce the participation and attainment gaps between male and female students in computing.

The six recommendations are:

- Curriculum reform
- Enhanced teacher training and professional development
- Fostering a supportive and inclusive school ecosystem
- Reframing the computing narrative
- Showcasing diverse digital opportunities
- Increasing access to informal digital making

14. In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers in continuing to improve attainment, progress, access or participation for learners with SEND?

This [project](#) investigated different interventions to support the learning of pupils with special education needs and disabilities and produced a database of evidence-based interventions for children with SEND. The project addresses a knowledge gap among teachers about which interventions work best for which children, one issue that is a barrier to continuing improvements for learners with SEND. A systematic review of the evidence highlighted research gaps about some types of SEND and phases of education, while interviews with teachers highlighted barriers to implementing the best-evidenced interventions. The authors conclude that:

- The existing research evidence is skewed towards certain types of SEND, and more work is required in specific areas and stages of education
- A national database of interventions and their impacts should be created
- There should be increased collaboration between researchers and practitioners
- Practitioners should be trained in evaluating evidence about what works and what does not

Inconsistent identification of SEND is also a potential barrier to learners' participation and progress. The first report from [this project](#) found considerable variation from school to school. The final report will be published early in 2025. [This complementary project](#) is looking at the strengths and challenges underlying SEND labels, to improve identification and target of interventions.

[This review](#) of SEND policy and practice across nine countries, currently underway, has a focus on identifying common denominators of good practice, including on assessment. The project will report in 2026.

Funding for SEND support is a further potential barrier. [This project, which will report in 2025](#), is examining how the Treasury's control of public expenditure impacts service delivery, using SEND as one of its case studies.

Section 4: Ensuring an excellent foundation in maths and English

16. To what extent does the content of the national curriculum at primary level (key stages 1 and 2) enable pupils to gain an excellent foundation in a) English and b) maths? Are there ways in which the content could change to better support this aim? [Please note, we invite views specifically on transitions between key stages in section 9.]

This [project](#) investigated the prevalence and use of maths textbooks in primary school teaching in England. It found that school leaders and class teachers put a *considerable*

amount of time into curriculum planning, and although 90% of schools took their curriculum map from a maths scheme, 59% of those schools found a need to adapt it in some way (e.g. to better meet pupil's needs). This was particularly true for schools operating mixed-age teaching. The research found that the DfE initiative to support schools with the purchase of DfE-approved textbooks (based on Teaching for Mastery) had been limited in its success due to a lack of awareness and prohibitive ongoing costs. It recommended that DfE consider fewer, full or majority-funded, strategically targeted initiatives. Some of the curriculum resources schools used were of questionable quality, and more work is needed to ensure that educational resources are quality assured. In addition, there is potential to reduce teacher workload through improving resources and support for schools – allowing them to minimise the time spent creating, curating, and adapting curriculum resources.

This RCT assessed the [efficacy of Englicious](#), a set of web-based resources designed to support the teaching of English grammar, on the writing skills of children aged 6-7. It found some evidence that the grammar content of England's national curriculum can be taught in a more beneficial way. However, the main report led to questions about whether the type and amount of grammar content in the national curriculum is the most appropriate focus to help pupils learn to write. The findings from this research, and previous research on grammar and writing, conclude that the lack of robust research evidence to underpin the grammar requirements in England's national curriculum is a concern. The researchers argue that a review of the requirements for grammar in England's national curriculum is needed to evaluate the programmes of study on robust research evidence on how primary pupils can be best taught to write.

Reading motivation is a key antecedent to reading engagement, as motivated readers exert more cognitive effort while reading and read more often, both of which are crucial for developing reading skills. The [Love to Read](#) research synthesised a rich and complex body of research and isolated six key principles that underpin reading motivation: access, choice, time, connection, social, and success. Embedding these principles in practice to support reading motivation should therefore be an important component of efforts to improve reading skills. A Love to Read programme has been codesigned to show how these principles might feasibly be embedded in practice.

17. To what extent do the English and maths primary assessments* support pupils to gain an excellent foundation in these key subjects? Are there any changes you would suggest that would support this aim? *These include SATs at the end of key stage 2, the phonics screening check and the multiplication tables check.

Research [findings](#) by a team led by Dr Melanie Ehman indicate that changes in the 2016 Key Stage mathematics test have caused a shift in teaching with an emphasis from conceptual knowledge towards procedural knowledge. They expect this shift to strengthen students' instrumental understanding of mathematics, and their use of written methods for calculating and following procedures to solve calculations using, for example, column methods of division and multiplication. However, the test in its current form suggests a reduced emphasis on a relational and conceptual understanding of Number and Calculation and of 'mental strategies' advocated under the National Numeracy Strategy. Given the important role of the Key Stage 2 test in prioritising what is taught, they suggest that Key Stage 2 mathematics tests need to be scrutinised for items which explicitly support the development of mental and flexible problem-solving, while also ensuring teachers are supported in teaching mental strategies for problem-solving.

18. 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?

This [study](#), which will publish in April 2025 is exploring linguistic challenges when learning maths and ways to overcome them in the classroom. Maths, as a qualification and as a body of knowledge and skills, is essential for pupils' life and further study. Ways of minimising the impact of language skills on learning maths, although not a new issue, continues to demand further investigation.

Learning maths involves reasoning about abstract ideas, making connections between ideas and their representations, developing arguments and justifications, and solving a range of problems. These skills are essential. However, reliance on language and communication makes the learning process difficult for students experiencing linguistic challenges. Existing research has tended to focus on the nature, sources, and educational implications of these challenges.

This project is designing and piloting a set of materials to support teachers and students to overcome linguistic challenges associated with learning linear equations (algebra), angle properties (geometry), and probability (statistics).

Previous calls for maths to be compulsory until age 18 were explicitly informed by Nuffield-funded [research](#) which shows that by international standards England, Wales and Northern Ireland have the lowest levels of maths participation. While maths is the most popular A Level subject, it is taken by just 15% of students - reflecting the extremely challenging nature of the curriculum. Although [evidence](#) shows those who study A Level maths typically earn more, it is beyond the reach of many students. Demand for numerical skills is increasing, as technological advances have become embedded across

occupations, making a strong case for considering alternative ways to increase maths participation.

Core Maths, equivalent to half an A Level, has been offered since 2017 to enable students to apply mathematical and statistical skills to real-world situations. An [evaluation](#) found students, schools, employers, and higher education institutions were positive about its role in boosting applied numeracy skills. However, the current system does not incentivise its take-up which remains low at approximately 12,000 students per year.

20. 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)?

In 2020 Nuffield funded Mathematics in Education and Industry (MEI) to undertake a [project](#) to develop an alternate mathematics GCSE better suited to the needs of the majority of students who have not achieved a level 2 pass in GCSE Mathematics by age 16. The project has shown that a new mathematics GCSE qualification could be developed for post-16 students that would focus on the maths needed for everyday life and work, while retaining the currency and rigour of foundation tier GCSE Mathematics. It would have the same level of demand as foundation tier GCSE Mathematics and so would be limited to GCSE grades 1 to 5.

The project showed that the proposed new GCSE has the potential to improve mathematics learning for resit students and to recognise this through a rigorous, credible post-16 mathematics GCSE qualification. The proposed stepping stone, Paper 1, would improve student confidence, and the contextualised content would increase student motivation and resilience, leading to higher success rates. Success in this qualification would give young people the competence and confidence in the fundamental mathematics they need to function as effective citizens. It would also prepare young people for further programmes of study, including Core Maths and vocational courses, that do not require prior learning of abstract mathematics. The proposed qualification is suitable for the government to adopt as a means for young people to achieve the level 2 maths requirement of 16–19 study programmes and T level programmes. In order to make a success of an alternative GCSE, employers and HEIs would need to understand its purpose so that parents, teachers, schools and colleges could be confident in choosing it as an option for students.

Section 5: Curriculum and qualification content

24. To what extent does the current curriculum (including qualification content) support students to positively engage with, be knowledgeable about, and respect, others? Are there elements that could be improved?

The Fundamental British Values policy instructs schools to promote: democracy, rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect, and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs. However, concerns have been raised about the overall effectiveness of the FBV policy and its potential for alienating minorities, especially Muslim communities. No research to date has systematically evaluated the policy's long-term intended and unintended consequences so this [project](#) by researchers at University College London, IoE will investigate whether the FBV initiative affects (a) the values of individuals educated under the policy, (b) identification as British, and (c) awareness for the risks of violent extremism. It will also consider whether promoting the targeted fundamental values causes an increased sense of Britishness and awareness of the risks for violent extremism; whether effects vary between members of different ethnic/religious/age groups; and whether the FBV initiative has any unintended or counterproductive consequences, such as increasing ethnic segregation or perceived discrimination. Although in its early stages and reporting after the end of the term of this consultation, the project will provide valuable evidence in this area.

25. In which ways does the current primary curriculum support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for life and further study, and what could we change to better support this?

Fake news and misinformation undermine democracy, which relies on a well-informed citizenry that can evaluate the validity of news and information. However, children often cannot distinguish truth from fiction online, lacking the skills to critically evaluate a source. For example, less than half of nine to 11-year-olds know how to spot fake news, and only three in 10 are interested in the news. This Nuffield-funded [project](#) evaluated the impact of NewsWise, a news and digital literacy programme, on UK primary school children's news and digital literacy and civic engagement. It found that the programme improved nine to 11-year-olds' ability to detect fake news and this improvement was sustained over time.

Since statutory assessment of primary science was abolished in 2009, there has been evidence that science teaching has been deprioritised and attainment has suffered. There are also concerns about low uptake of science qualifications, underrepresentation of minority groups, and inequity in STEM education and the workforce. Research suggests that the purposeful use of practical work is important to support effective science teaching, but that teachers across the UK lack confidence and clarity about the role and aims of practical activities. This [project](#) seeks to answer how purposeful and effective practical work is understood and enacted in primary school science in the UK. It will report in spring 2025.

26. In which ways do the current secondary curriculum and qualification pathways support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for future study, life and work, and what could we change to better support this?

Nuffield is currently funding a team at Oxford Brookes to [investigate access to, and outcomes for, those taking the Extended Project Qualification \(EPQ\)](#). The EPQ is an independent project, equivalent to half an A-Level, undertaken by approximately 45,000 sixth form students in England annually. It was introduced in 2004 to support students to develop skills that would be useful in their future studies, supported by one-to-one teacher mentoring.

The EPQ has become associated with academic success in A-Level and degree outcomes, which is attributed to the development of learner agency, self-awareness, and academic engagement. However, the extent to which the EPQ has affected the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged learners, for example through access to the qualification in different types of schools and colleges, is less clear.

The project is investigating inequalities in access, participation, and outcomes and the “levelling-up” potential of the EPQ. The research will provide evidence-based recommendations for schools on using the EPQ to support the employability skills and progression of students from different backgrounds.

27. In which ways do the current qualification pathways and content at 16-19 support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for future study, life and work, and what could we change to better support this?

[The Skills Imperative 2035: Essential skills for tomorrow’s workforce](#) is clear there is a need for greater emphasis on essential employment skills. The next phase of their project will focus on investigating how demand and supply of essential employment skills is likely to change over the next 15 years, and how these skills can be developed through the education system.

There is more information about this project in the response to question 11.

Section 6: A broad and balanced curriculum

33. To what extent and how do pupils benefit from being able to take vocational or applied qualifications in secondary schools alongside more academically focused GCSEs?

The influential [Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training, which reported in 2009](#), and more [recent research](#), supports greater alignment between academic and vocational pathways. Our response to question 10 above also describes how access to vocational

courses in further education colleges for 14-16 year olds can support those learners who are at risk of becoming NEET.

This [Nuffield-funded project](#) underway in Scotland will provide useful evidence, as it is investigating school-college partnerships (SCPs) which offer the opportunity for students in Scotland aged 14-18 to undertake this phase of education across both a school and a college. The [University of Aberdeen](#) will deliver this project in partnership with the [College Development Network](#).

In Scotland, school-college partnerships have been in place since the introduction of [Curriculum for Excellence](#) (CfE) in 2011. SCPs have grown year-on-year since 2016 and now include around 20% of young people in Scotland. They offer opportunities for learners to combine academic and vocational study and to explore whether further education and/or apprenticeship may be a suitable next step.

However, because each school has its own arrangement with its local college, there is a huge variety in both structure and content. Furthermore, SCPs often change, meaning that there can be a sudden withdrawal of course/qualifications options. There is limited evidence on how the SCP route supports young people's transitions.

Section 7: Assessment and accountability

44. To what extent, and in what ways, does the accountability system influence curriculum and assessment decisions in schools and colleges?

The Nuffield Foundation is funding a [proof of concept](#) for the Centre for Education Systems (CES). This new organisation will be the first to co-ordinate international research on macro policy to inform policymaking. It will strive to provide a deep understanding of each policy area; offer alternative approaches to individual policy initiatives; explain how policy instruments interact, and develop an overall architecture to help build system coherence and identify intervention priorities. To achieve this goal, the first component of work will undertake international evidence synthesis across ten jurisdictions to compare with the four UK nations. These will focus on the topics of accountability and curriculum.

45. How well does the current accountability system support and recognise progress for all pupils and learners? What works well and what could be improved?

Nuffield support the scrapping of the single-word Ofsted ratings and is pleased to see proposals for an 'inclusion' criterion in the new report format to look at how schools are supporting children from under-resourced backgrounds. In a recent [blog](#), we outlined how Ofsted should also seek to meaningfully support school improvement and positive teacher well-being. There is a [recruitment and retention crisis](#) in teaching and a recognised [link between accountability mechanisms and teacher stress](#). We also know that good leaders

have a measurable [positive impact on their schools](#), particularly once they have acquired more leadership experience. The cost of losing experienced leaders is high and it is important that changes to the system support them to remain in the profession.