

Improving transitions into further study and work

The Confederation of British Industry's response to the Advanced British Standard (ABS) consultation

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department for Education's Advanced British Standard (ABS) consultation. The CBI is the UK's leading business organisation speaking on behalf of 170,000 businesses, of all sizes and sectors, and across every region of the UK. This includes 1,100 corporate members, who alone employ 2.3m private sector workers, alongside nearly 150 Trade Associations and educational providers covering Further Education (FE) colleges, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Independent Training Providers (ITPs). This means the CBI is in a unique position to comment on the education system from a business and delivery perspective.

With 850,000 16–24-year-olds falling out of education, training, and employment (NEET)¹ and growing concern around graduates and school leavers' preparedness for work,² the government is right to explore how the 16-19 education system could be reformed to support smoother transitions into further study and the labour market.

The Advanced British Standard (ABS) has the potential to positively transform learning outcomes by putting student and business needs at the heart of the education system. The CBI's members agreed with the core principles of course quality, parity of esteem and curriculum breadth, but felt they would need to be delivered differently if policymakers are to meet their overarching objective of improving transitions into further study and work. Other considerations were felt to have been missed entirely, such as opportunities to develop new work experience frameworks that offer students' meaningful insights into industry and are workable for a wider range of businesses.

The following submission highlights feedback on the key principles and barriers that CBI members would like to see reflected in the ABS.

Our submission focuses on the following areas:

- Policymakers must be bolder in their ambition for curriculum breadth and support employers to assume a more active role in making young people 'work ready'.
- A broader definition of quality will keep more options to progress open to learners.
- Addressing delivery barriers will be key to making the ABS a workable reality.

¹ Office for National Statistics, Young people not in employment, education, or training (NEET), February 2024

² CBI, Education & Skills Survey, 2022

Policymakers must be bolder in their ambition for curriculum breadth and support employers to assume a more active role in making young people ‘work ready’.

When asked what the ABS would ideally achieve, the most cited answer was parity of esteem and exposing a wider range of students to the benefits of technical study. But it was broadly felt that proposals for a two-tracked approach worked against this objective and the lack of breadth, for the ABS (occupational) pathway in particular, was a missed opportunity to explore how students can be encouraged to participate in technical study without forcing students to prematurely specialise into a particular occupational area. While members felt maintaining an occupationally specialist pathway was important for students decided on their future career, it was highlighted low exposure to, and knowledge of, working in specific industries means many decisions to occupationally specialise are ill-informed and offer poor value for the student and general taxpayer. For example, one educational provider based in the Northeast explained that 50% of their first T Level cohort dropped out after the first year. Therefore, breadth must not only be reserved for the main ABS pathway as is currently proposed, given its wider importance in supporting informed decision-making for all 16–19-year-olds.

One workaround to this would be introducing a third flexible pathway that allows students to study smaller components of the ABS’ (occupational) offer alongside majors and minors from the main ABS pathway. This would still enable students to study the ABS and ABS (occupational) as outlined in its current form, while also permitting students who are undecided on their career to participate in academic and technical study simultaneously by removing unnecessary siloes between the two pathways.

Recommendation: Create a third flexible ABS pathway to support learners to study a broader range of subjects and make more informed educational and employability decisions.

It was agreed that breadth should not work at the expense of the depth of learning and an over-focus on breadth would be damaging for students applying to HEIs or employers with specific depth of study requirements, such as in the fields of engineering or medicine. But in those cases where students are working towards careers without specific depth requirements, members felt breadth could be positive and even improve further study and labour market prospects. To account for these differences, there should be majors and minors for each subject and the requirements for studying at least three ‘majors’ should be removed. HEI and industry ‘breadth versus depth’ requirements should also be clearly communicated to students through updated careers guidance, which clearly specifies whether students need to complete specific subjects and at which level (major or minor) to access their educational and career-related goals. Together, this will help embed a personalised approach to learning that meets learner interests while also supporting progression onto further study and employment.

Recommendation: Introduce majors and minors for each subject and remove minimum requirements of selecting three ‘majors’ to support curriculum breadth and account for differences in ‘depth versus breadth’ requirements across Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and employers.

Recommendation: Industry and HEIs' 'depth versus breadth' requirements should be clearly communicated through improved careers guidance. This should clearly specify the subjects that students must study and at which level (major or minor) to access their individual educational and career-related goals.

The idea of a certificate or statement of achievement was supported by many employers as a step that could move the focus away from subject studied (e.g., 'English Literature A Level') towards another priority, which is whether a student has completed a sufficient size of study and to a sufficient standard. Members also agreed that minimum attainment conditions attached to receiving the award would be necessary alongside a full transcript. This would send a meaningful signal to employers and HEIs that students have met benchmark standards, while also providing more detailed data to meaningfully compare students' scores in the admissions process.

Recommendation: Introduce a Certificate of Achievement that includes minimum attainment conditions and a full transcript to support employers and educational providers to make meaningful insights and comparisons on students' performance.

Alongside breadth, members felt enhancing student exposure to the workplace, and empowering employers to play a more active role in education, should be a priority for the ABS. Regulatory and capacity constraints make specific forms of engagement, such as 45-day industry placements, unattractive or completely unworkable for many employers. There must be a focus on identifying other ways that businesses can support employability for every student; not just those taking apprenticeships or technical qualifications with a core work experience component. Members also agreed that creating a student-wide offer to connect them with employers on an ongoing basis would be a worthwhile use of allocated Employability, Enrichment and Pastoral (EEP) time, providing students with a flavour of what the workplace entails while also developing core transferrable skills, such as collaborative working.

Recommendation: Use Employability, Enrichment and Pastoral (EEP) time to support students' ongoing exposure to businesses and develop their employability skills.

Conversations highlighted that the education system can be incredibly complex for businesses of all sizes to navigate, and members felt that a positive outcome of the ABS would be making the system simpler to support business engagement with education and training delivery. Members were particularly keen to understand the business benefits of different forms of post-18 education training, and the government incentives on offer to support them with delivery.

Recommendation: The Department for Education should update guidance to incorporate the business benefits of engaging with different forms of training for 16-19 year olds. All information explaining how employers can get involved in training and the business case for engaging in training should be collated and published in one place on the *gov.uk* website.

A broader definition of quality will keep more options to progress open to learners.

The government is right to explore how subject content can be improved to support student outcomes and meet business' skills needs. But members stressed that the academic rigour of a course must not be treated as the only benchmark of a course's quality or a student's capabilities, given the wider range of skills that employers value in young people entering the workforce. Aptitudes and attitudes to work has constantly ranked as the top consideration for employers recruiting school leavers and graduates, above subject studied and overall attainment.³ A balance must therefore be struck when designing ABS' subject content to ensure that a focus on academically rigorous content does not lead to young people becoming under-skilled in essential skills, such as communication and teamwork.

Recommendation: Academically rigorous content should not work at the expense of students learning key transferrable skills, such as communication and critical thinking.

Members agreed with proposals to take a proportionate approach to the design of maths and English majors and minors that ensures subject content is tailored to the needs and capabilities of the learner and is not excessively stretching. For example, an educational provider based in the Midlands highlighted that 48% of 16–18-year-olds in the region do not have a Level 2 maths or English qualification and focusing on academic content risked English and maths requirements becoming an unnecessary progression barrier, fuelling levels of youth inactivity. Therefore, subject content targeted at students with no or low Level 2 passes should be tailored to focus on core, transferrable numeracy and literacy skills that have a strong workplace and everyday relevance. This will help ensure English and maths requirements are meaningful additions to the curriculum which support, rather than obstruct, progression onto further study and work.

Recommendation: English and maths subject content for students with low or no Level 2 passes should be focused on core literacy and numeracy skills with a strong workplace/everyday relevance.

An over-focus on academic rigour was felt to have carried over into proposals to maintain exam-based assessments given this has been the preferred method of assessing theory-based knowledge. Educational providers felt that this was a missed opportunity to explore different approaches to assessment that recognise the competencies of students who excel in applying skills and knowledge in practical settings, but struggle in recording this to pen and paper. For example, an educational provider based in the Southeast explained that the addition of the exam component to BTECs and Cambridge Nationals had resulted in their pass rates declining from 90% to 67%. They attributed this to students struggling with the demands of high stakes testing rather than their demonstrable ability to meet key course criteria.

³ CBI, Education & Skills Survey, 2022

Therefore, the CBI encourages the Department for Education to explore opportunities to embed non-examination forms of assessment beyond the current criteria that it cannot validly be assessed by exam. This should be discussed in collaboration with employers, providers, and examination boards to identify where new modes of testing could add value and support student outcomes without compromising the reliability of grading.

Recommendation: The Department for Education should explore opportunities to introduce non-examination assessment where it can support progression and positive outcomes.

Overall, members agreed that academically rigorous content had a place in preparing students for successful transitions, but it was not the appropriate route for every student or every employer. Several educational providers highlighted that streamlining an academically rigorous qualification like the ABS to be the primary qualification for every Level 3 student would have devastating knock-on effects for overall student progression. The risk of academisation was seen as elevated in the case of technical and vocational subjects because many related courses, such as BTECs, do not subscribe to the government's definition of being 'academically rigorous' in terms of having significant theory-based subject content. For example, an educational provider based in London anticipates that 13% of their students would be unable to access Level 3 should the defunding of Applied General Qualifications (AGQs), including BTECs, go ahead. An educational provider based in the Midlands calculated the impact to be larger, preventing 600 of their 900 students from studying beyond Level 2.

If the government is to meet its objectives of reforming the education system to improve student progression, it is critical that the government adopts an evidence-led approach. This approach should be focused on maintaining courses that are established with grade users and can be proven to support positive outcomes, even where their content is not described as being 'academically rigorous'. A commitment to delivering high-quality data that provides a more detailed breakdown between course studied and educational outcomes for different student groups will be key to delivering this evidence-led approach.

Recommendation: The Department for Education should publish annual data on 16–19-year-olds progression that links qualification studied to educational outcomes, including further study and occupational destinations.

Secondly, the government should delay changing qualifications where concerns regarding their quality is untested or widely disputed. With skills gaps ranking as the top threat to business' international competitiveness,⁴ it is critical that any changes to qualifications are carefully considered. As a first step, the government should delay the defunding of Applied General Qualifications (AGQs) and commit to a second review of AGQs eligible for defunding using new performance data. This will help minimise the risk of defunding qualifications where there is a progression value and ensure there is a varied enough qualification offer that can support every young person onto positive destinations in education or work.

⁴ CBI, Employer Trends Survey, 2022

Recommendation: The Department for Education should postpone current AGQ defunding timelines and commission a new review into course funding that accounts for updated progression data.

Addressing delivery barriers will be key to making the ABS a workable reality.

Educational providers highlighted there are several barriers which will make ABS delivery challenging. This includes the financial implications of FE colleges' reclassification back into the public sector and the nation-wide struggle to recruit and retain teacher talent. For example, an educational provider based in the Northeast explained construction workers could take home £1,200 through sub-contracted work on the weekend; over double what they would make for five days work in a FE college as a tutor.

There was also concern that using T Levels to underscore the technical offer would lead the ABS to inherit the same problems that T Levels are currently experiencing, such as mixed or unmanageable levels of student uptake and employer engagement. For example, a Southeast based education provider said that delays to individual T-Level pathways have resulted in their turnover shrinking by £1m, and the majority of their 300 T-Level students have pulled out. An educational provider located in the Northwest also highlighted there needs to be careful management of T Level targets to ensure demand does not outpace supply; doubling their T Level numbers would be impossible because of the local availability of employers. Thirdly, there was concern around the signals that the ABS sent on the longevity of T Levels, and the concomitant risk of disadvantaging students with the qualification in recruitment and admissions processes.

It is critical that challenges such as these are addressed in a national strategy if the ABS is to become a nationally offered qualification. Given barriers encompass numerous factors, ranging from salaries to the role of business in supporting provision, this should be a cross-departmental strategy that is co-delivered by the Department for Education, alongside the Department for Business and Trade and the Treasury. Finally, this strategy should be delivered irrespective of the ABS' future in the next Parliament, given its relevance outside of the ABS to broader post-16 provision.

Recommendation: The government should publish a cross-departmental strategy that addresses specific delivery challenges confronting ABS plans and wider training delivery. This must include developing the FE workforce; embedding the T Level offer and supporting providers to adapt their training facilities to offer mixed provision. This strategy should be actioned in the next Parliament, irrespective of the ABS' future.