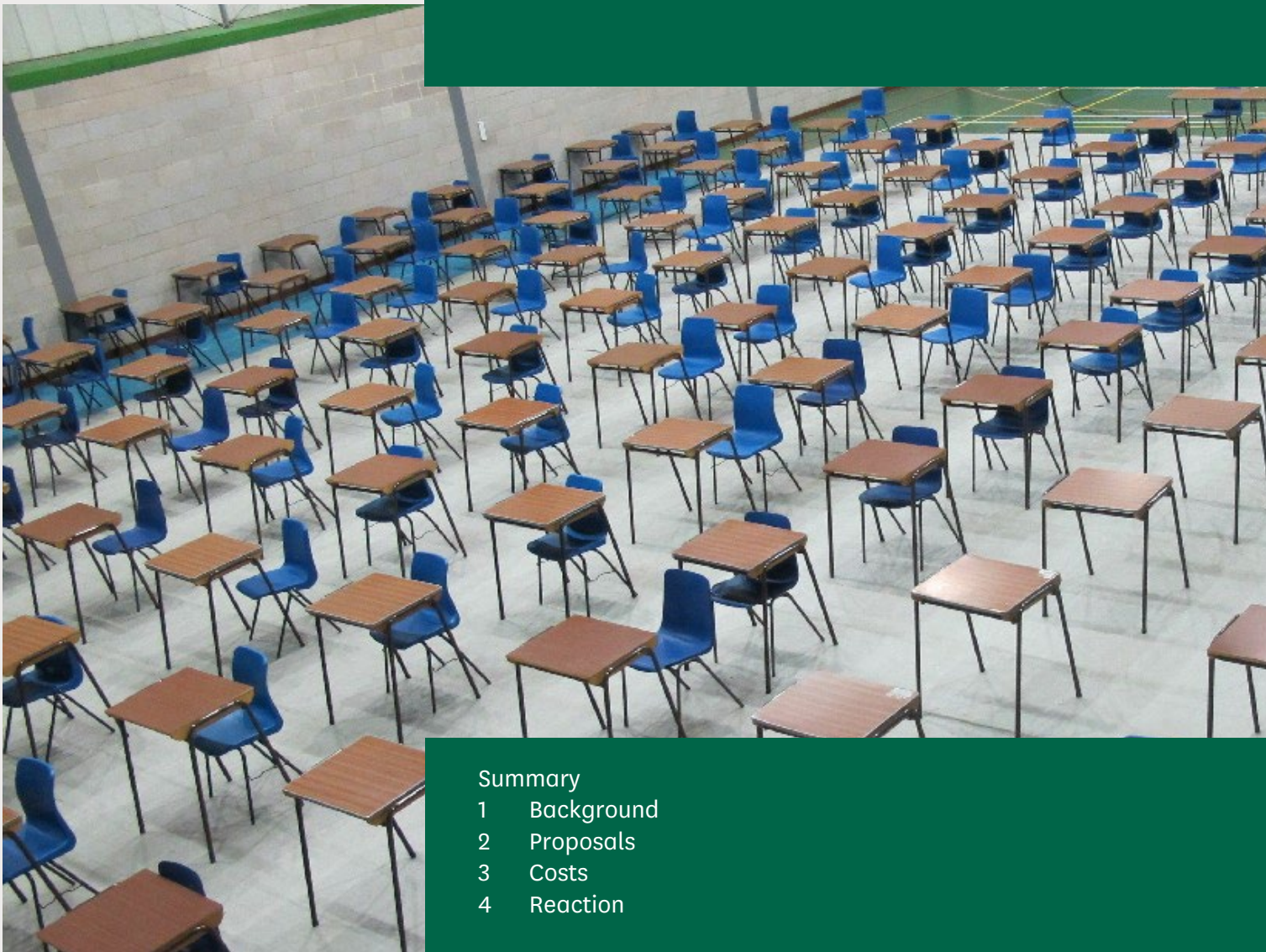


Research Briefing

19 February 2024

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# The Advanced British Standard



## Summary

- 1 Background
- 2 Proposals
- 3 Costs
- 4 Reaction

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## Summary

Over the next decade, the Government plans to introduce a new qualification framework for 16- to 19-year-olds in England called the Advanced British Standard (ABS). It has [launched a consultation on its proposals](#) that will inform a White Paper due to be published in summer 2024.

## Consultation proposals

### What will students study?

The Government's intention is for the Advanced British Standard to combine and replace A Levels and T Levels with a new, single [level 3 qualification](#) at age 16. Apprenticeships will continue to be available for those looking to enter the workforce through 'on-the-job' training.

The Advanced British Standard would consist of:

- All students studying English and maths at an appropriate level and depth.
- A choice of academic and technical subjects that come in different sizes. These will be called 'majors' and 'minors', with most students studying three of the former and two of the latter. Students preparing for a technical occupation may also do an industry placement.
- Non-qualification time, which would include employability, enrichment, and pastoral (EEP) activities.

Teaching time will be increased by 15% for most students (equivalent to an extra two and half hours per week) compared to a typical three-subject A Level study programme. Academic options will be based on A Levels while technical options will be based on both the content of T Levels and occupational standards designed by employers and the [Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education](#).

Under the Advanced British Standard, students not able to progress straight into a level 3 programme might undertake a level 2 programme (equivalent to GCSE grades 3, 2, 1), such as a one-year transition programme.

### How will students be assessed and graded?

Most subjects will be assessed through exams at the end of the course, but some non-examined assessment will be used where appropriate.

Students will receive individual grades for each major and minor (or equivalent) component they take at levels 2 and 3. The Government is also proposing an overall certificate or statement of achievement to be awarded to students who meet minimum attainment conditions by the end of their course of study.

## Costs

The Government is providing funding of £600 million over the next two years, largely focussed on boosting teacher recruitment and retention, to support the eventual introduction of the Advanced British Standard. This includes:

- An investment of around £100 million a year to provide a tax-free bonus of up to £6,000 a year to all teachers in the first five years of their career teaching ‘key shortage subjects’ (such as maths, science, engineering, and digital subjects) in further education colleges and disadvantaged schools.
- An additional £150 million will be made available each year to increase investment for students retaking English and maths GCSEs as part of their current 16 to 19 study programmes.
- An additional £40 million will be invested in the [Education Endowment Foundation](#).
- Around £60 million of funding will be made available for maths education over the next two years.

The Government has not published a financial impact assessment of the Advanced British Standard, or any estimates of future additional costs of the reformed system.

Teacher salaries and recruitment are the most obvious extra costs needed to meet the expanded curriculum and increased teaching time. Additional costs could also relate to the introduction of a new curriculum, and costs linked to the increased number of students at school/college at any one time, such as more non-teaching staff and capital costs of new classrooms and other facilities.

## Reaction

In December 2023, Labour’s Shadow Education Secretary, Bridget Phillipson, said current teacher shortages made the Government’s plans for the Advanced British Standard unworkable. Phillipson said, if she was Education Secretary, [reforming 16 to 19 education would not be a priority](#), and her focus would instead be on improving primary school provision.

The announcement of the Advanced British Standard has attracted a [mix of praise and criticism from the education sector](#), with many commending the principles of the proposed reforms, but suggesting current issues, particularly with regards to teacher shortages, make it unrealistic.

## Further reading

- Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard](#), 4 October 2023
- Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard consultation](#), 14 December 2023
- Department for Education, [Interim Equalities Impact Assessment](#) (PDF), December 2023
- Department for Education, [Analytical Annex](#) (PDF), December 2023
- House of Commons Library, CBP 9858 [The reform of level 3 qualifications in England](#)
- House of Commons Library, CBP 7951 [Technical education in England: T Levels](#)

# 1 Background

## 1.1 Participation in further education and training

Of all the 16- and 17-year-olds in England in 2022:

- 89.6% were in education or on an apprenticeship.
- 3.2% were in training or other types of education.
- 2.7% were in employment (without training).
- 4.6% were not in education, employment or training.

The proportion in education/apprenticeships is well above the 79% figure from two decades earlier in 2002, but around two percentage points below the peak rates from the mid-2010s.<sup>1</sup>

### What do qualification levels mean?

In England, Wales, and Northern Ireland there are [nine qualification levels](#), ranging from entry level (which has three sub-levels) to level 8. The higher the level, the more difficult the qualification.

- Level 1 qualifications include GCSE grades 3 to 1 (previously D to G)
- Level 2 qualifications include GCSE grades 9 to 4 (previously A\* to C)
- Level 3 qualifications include A Levels, T Levels, and applied general qualifications, like BTECs

The following table looks at the level and type of qualifications 16- and 17-year-olds were studying in 2021/22. Around 70% were studying level 3 qualifications such as A levels, T levels and advanced apprenticeships. Most of this group were taking academic rather than vocational qualifications at this level. 20% of 16-year-olds and 12% of 17-year-olds were on level 2 courses such as GCSEs, intermediate apprenticeships, and other equivalent qualifications.

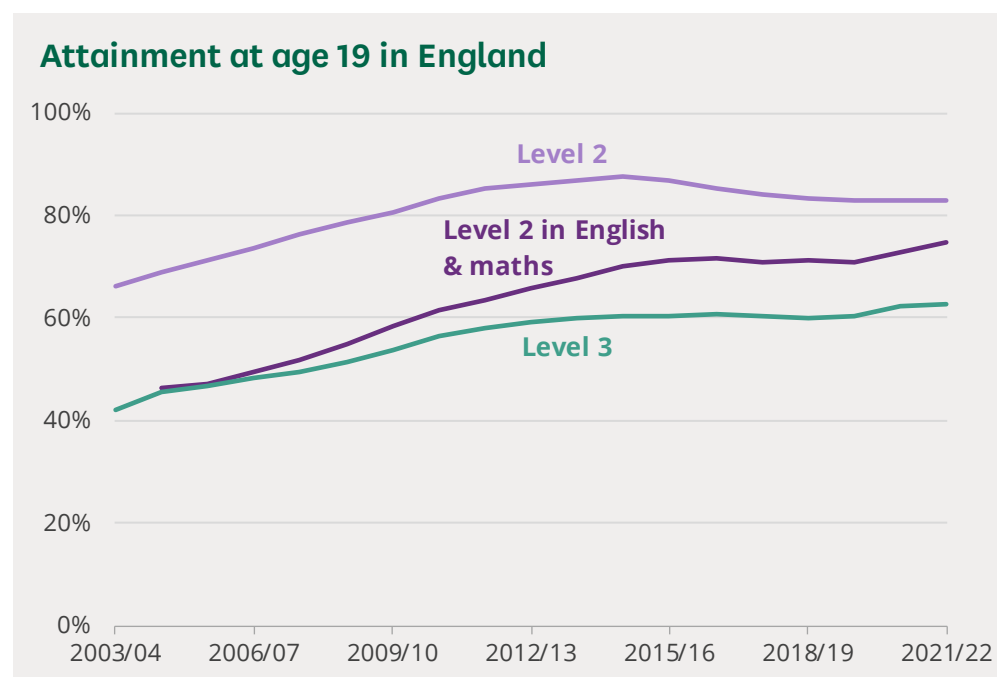
<sup>1</sup> Department for Education, [Participation in education, training and employment age 16 to 18 2022](#)

	16 year olds	17 year olds
<b>Level 3</b>		
Academic	47%	44%
Apprenticeship	2%	3%
Vocational	20%	25%
<b>Level 2</b>		
Academic	18%	9%
Apprenticeship	2%	3%
Below level 2	6%	4%
Not participating in 16-19 education	5%	11%

Source: DfE, [The Advanced British Standard: interim equalities impact assessment](#), table 1

## Qualification levels of 19-year-olds

62.9% of 19-year-olds from England in 2021/22 had achieved level 3 (two or more A levels or equivalent), 82.9% had achieved level 2 (five GCSEs at grades 9-4 or equivalent) and 74.9% had achieved English and maths qualifications at level 2.<sup>2</sup> Trends in these measures are shown below.

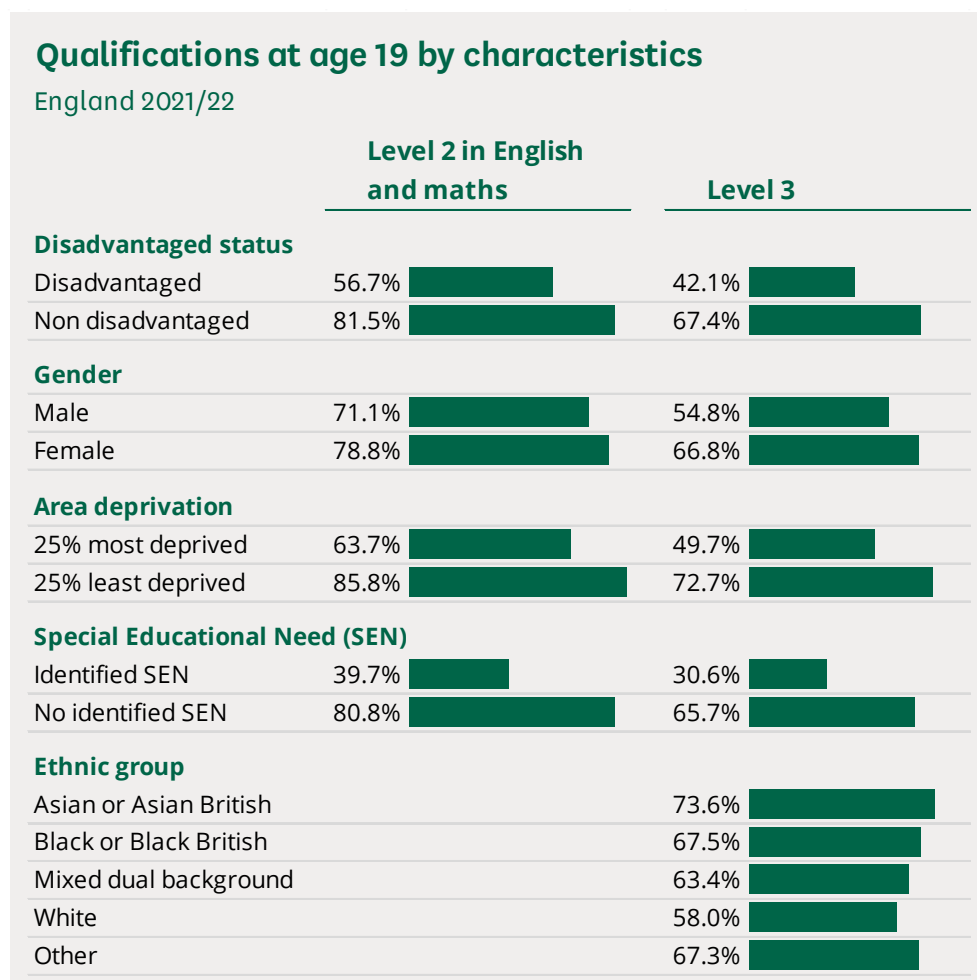


Source: Department for Education, [Level 2 and 3 attainment age 16 to 25 2012/22](#)

<sup>2</sup> Department for Education, [Level 2 and 3 attainment age 16 to 25 2012/22](#)



The Advanced British Standard is intended to narrow the disadvantage gap at ages 16-19 and to “[h]elp every young person, especially the most disadvantaged, reach their full potential”.<sup>3</sup> The following charts look at how level 3 and level 2 attainment in English and maths varies by different characteristics.



Source: Department for Education, [Level 2 and 3 attainment age 16 to 25 2012/22](#)

There were substantial gaps in both measures of attainment by disadvantaged and Special Education Need Status and the level of deprivation in the area the young people live in.<sup>4</sup> There were smaller gaps by gender and ethnic group.

<sup>3</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard consultation](#), 14 December 2023, p18

<sup>4</sup> To count as disadvantaged someone has to have met one of the following criteria at age 15: i) eligible for free school meals at any point in the previous six years, ii) be looked after at any point during the academic year, or iii) be part of a Post looked After Arrangement through adoption, a guardianship order or a child arrangement. Deprivation as measured by the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index.

## 1.2

## Current reforms to level 3 qualifications

The Department for Education is currently reforming level 3 qualifications to make A Levels and their new technical alternative T Levels the main further education qualification options at age 16 in England. Following a reformed approvals process, they will sit alongside complementary level 3 academic and technical qualifications deemed to meet new quality criteria. Apprenticeships will remain available as an alternative post-16 option.

These reforms are summarised here in section 1.1, but more information is available in the Commons Library briefing [The reform of level 3 qualifications in England](#).<sup>5</sup>

### What are level 3 qualifications?

In England, Wales, and Northern Ireland there are [nine qualification levels](#), ranging from entry level (which has three sub-levels) to level 8. The higher the level, the more difficult the qualification. Level 3 qualifications are mainly taken by young people after their GCSEs (level 2).

Most young people pursuing a level 3 qualification in England are studying for AS/A Levels. Students interested in studying technical or vocational qualifications have generally taken Applied General qualifications, which include qualifications commonly known by their brand name, such as BTECs and Cambridge Technicals. Since September 2020, the Government has also begun rolling out [T Levels](#), which are two-year technical qualifications equivalent in size to three A Levels.<sup>6</sup>

The Government now hopes that within ten years, the Advanced British Standard, a new baccalaureate-style qualification framework for 16–19-year-olds, will be the primary level 3 qualification in England.

The Department for Education (DfE) approves level 3 qualifications submitted by awarding bodies/organisations for public funding if they meet certain criteria. These are then included on the [Education and Skills Funding Agency's \(ESFA\) approved qualifications list](#). Further education providers receive funding from the ESFA to deliver level 3 qualifications on this list to their students as part of study programmes.

Following a [consultation on post-16 qualifications at level 3](#) in 2020/21, the Government [published a policy statement in July 2021](#) saying it wanted to create “clearly defined academic and technical routes” for post-16

<sup>5</sup> House of Commons Library, CBP 9858 [The reform of level 3 qualifications in England](#)

<sup>6</sup> For more information, see House of Commons Library, CBP 7951 [Technical education in England: T Levels](#)

progression that sit alongside apprenticeships.<sup>7</sup> The Government hopes the reforms will remove “[low-quality qualifications](#)” from the system, and ensure students have confidence in the outcomes of their choices.<sup>8</sup>

A Levels will be central to the academic route, which is intended to lead to higher education study at university. T Levels will become the main qualification option for the technical route and are intended to support progression into skilled employment (requiring specialist training or expertise), further technical study or apprenticeships, and potentially higher education courses.

Other level 3 qualifications, including applied general qualifications, will sit alongside A Levels and T Levels, but they will [need to demonstrate their quality and distinct purpose](#) to continue to be eligible for public funding.<sup>9</sup> Qualifications that overlap with T Level subjects, including BTECs, and those that do not meet the quality criteria for academic and technical qualifications set by the Department for Education and the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education respectively, will no longer receive public funding.

## When will changes happen?

### Phase 1: Defunding qualifications with low and no enrolments

The Department for Education has published a [list of the 5,500 qualifications at level 3 and below with low and no enrolments](#) for which funding was removed from August 2022 for new starts.<sup>10</sup>

### Phase 2: Defunding qualifications that overlap with T Levels

T Levels are expected to be fully available across England by 2025. Under the current timetable, funding will be removed from overlapping qualifications in waves from August 2024. An overlapping qualification is a technical qualification with similar outcomes to a T Level.

In October 2022, the Department for Education published a [list of the 134 qualifications](#) that will have funding withdrawn from 2024 because they overlap with T Levels launched in waves one and two (digital; construction; education and childcare).<sup>11</sup>

In October 2023, it published a [list of the 85 qualifications](#) that will lose funding from 2025 because they overlap with wave three T Levels (business

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<sup>7</sup> Department for Education, [Review of post-16 qualifications at Level 3 in England: Second Stage. Government consultation](#), 23 October 2020; Department for Education, [Review of post-16 qualifications at Level 3 in England: Policy statement](#), 14 July 2021, p4

<sup>8</sup> Department for Education, [Clearer choice of high-quality post-16 qualifications](#), 14 July 2021

<sup>9</sup> Department for Education, [Guide to the post-16 qualifications landscape at level 3 and below for 2025 and beyond](#), April 2023

<sup>10</sup> Department for Education, [Withdrawal of funding approval from qualifications with low and no publicly funded enrolments for the funding year 2022 to 2023](#), updated August 2022

<sup>11</sup> Department for Education, [Qualifications that overlap with T Levels](#), 11 May 2022.

and administration; engineering and manufacturing; finance and accounting).<sup>12</sup>

In January 2024, the Department for Education published a [provisional list of the 71 qualifications](#) that will lose funding for new starts from 2025 because they overlap with wave four T Levels (agriculture, environmental and animal care; craft and design; legal; media, broadcast and production).

### Phase 3: Quality review of remaining qualifications

The Department for Education has [published guidance on the third phase of its reforms](#), which explains the new funding approval process that most level 3 qualifications will need to go through in order to receive public funding alongside A Levels and T Levels.<sup>13</sup>

In cycle 1, the Department for Education will approve level 3 ‘alternative academic qualifications’ in strategically important subjects, such as STEM and those supporting entry into NHS careers, and technical qualifications in subjects that complement wave one and two T Levels. These will be taught from September 2025. In May 2024, a list of qualifications approved for funding will be published. Awarding organisations will then be able to appeal, with a final list published in July 2024.

Cycle 2 will then cover all other level 3 qualifications to be funded and taught from September 2026, with a list of approved qualifications published in May 2025. Again, there will be an opportunity to appeal any decisions.

## 1.3

## What are Baccalaureate qualifications?

A baccalaureate refers to a qualification model with a broad set of required subjects and an emphasis on holistic, extracurricular learning, so students can develop skills and knowledge across a wide range of disciplines.<sup>14</sup> A number of countries have post-16 curricula that could be broadly described as baccalaureate-style, including the [Leaving Certificate in Ireland](#).

In 2021, the education think tanks EDSK and the Education Policy Institute both published reports arguing there had been a significant narrowing of subject knowledge at level 3.<sup>15</sup> The EDSK report called for, among other things, a ‘baccalaureate’ style qualification for all learners in state-funded schools and colleges in England at ages 15 to 18.<sup>16</sup> A ‘British Baccalaureate’

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<sup>12</sup> Department for Education, [Wave 3 T Levels: overlapping qualifications](#), updated 19 October 2023

<sup>13</sup> Department for Education, [Guide to the post-16 qualifications landscape at level 3 and below for 2025 and beyond](#), April 2023

<sup>14</sup> House of Commons Education Committee, [The future of post-16 qualifications](#), 28 April 2023, HC 55 Third Report of Session 2022–23, para. 159, 179

<sup>15</sup> EDSK, [Re-assessing the future \(part 2\)](#), April 2021; Education Policy Institute, [A narrowing path to success? 16-19 curriculum breadth and employment outcomes](#), September 2021

<sup>16</sup> EDSK, [Re-assessing the future \(part 2\)](#), April 2021

was also one of the central recommendations of the 2022 Times Education Commission.<sup>17</sup>

## The International Baccalaureate (IB)

The International Baccalaureate (IB) was developed in the 1960s and 70s and is now taught in 143 countries around the world. There are two programmes of study for students aged 16 to 19. While the Diploma Programme is popular in independent schools in the UK as an alternative to A Levels, it has generally had little take up in state schools and colleges.<sup>18</sup>

### The IB Diploma Programme

The Diploma Programme comprises a [‘core’ element](#) and [six subject groups](#).

The core is made up of three required components (theory of knowledge, an extended essay, and ‘creativity, activity, and service’, which is informal learning done outside of the classroom). These “aim to broaden students’ educational experience and challenge them to apply their knowledge and skills”.

Students then choose one subject from five groups, including language and literature; language acquisition; social sciences; experimental sciences; and maths. They can then also choose an arts subject from a sixth group, or an additional subject from the other five groups.

### The IB Career-related Programme

The career-related programme allows students to take at least two Diploma Programme courses in any of that programme’s subject groups, alongside a [core element](#), which includes personal and professional skills development, an extended project, and language development.

It also comprises [‘career-related studies’](#), which allows students to take a career-related qualification – typically an Applied General Qualification in England – that “provides the opportunity for students to learn about theories and concepts through application and practice while developing broad-based skills in authentic and meaningful contexts.”

The Education Committee’s 2023 inquiry on post-16 qualifications considered the merits of a post-16 baccalaureate model, noting it offered opportunities for curriculum breadth, continued study of maths and English, and an

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<sup>17</sup> Times Education Commission, [Bringing out the Best: How to transform education and unleash the potential of every child](#) (PDF), 2022

<sup>18</sup> There were around 3,500 entries for the IB Diploma Programme in England in summer 2021: House of Commons Education Committee, [The future of post-16 qualifications](#), 28 April 2023, HC 55 Third Report of Session 2022–23, para. 160

emphasis on developing key employability skills, such as “communication, critical thinking and interdisciplinary thinking”.<sup>19</sup>

While the report said there was little appetite for more reform of the post-16 system in the short-term, given recent and ongoing changes to qualifications and standards, it called for the Department for Education to establish “an independent expert panel, reflecting a wide range of educational perspectives, to conduct a full and considered review into the possibility of adopting a baccalaureate model in England.”<sup>20</sup>

## 1.4

### The announcement of a new 16 to 19 qualification

Rishi Sunak first signalled his ambition to overhaul 16 to 19 education as part of his unsuccessful bid for the Conservative Party leadership in 2022. During the campaign he outlined plans for a ‘British baccalaureate’, which would involve students studying English and maths up to the age of 18.<sup>21</sup>

In October 2022, an article in the Times said the now Prime Minister Rishi Sunak was planning “a radical set of reforms to transform the nation’s education system”, which would include a new baccalaureate-style model of education at 16.<sup>22</sup>

A year later, on 4 October 2023, Rishi Sunak announced the ‘Advanced British Standard’ (ABS) at the Conservative Party Conference.<sup>23</sup> On the same day, the Department for Education published a policy paper on the ABS.<sup>24</sup>

The policy paper set out the reforms the Government had made to the post-16 education system so far, and explained the ABS would be “a new Baccalaureate-style qualification that takes the best of A levels and T levels and brings them together into a single qualification.”<sup>25</sup> It argued this was necessary because:

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<sup>19</sup> House of Commons Education Committee, [The future of post-16 qualifications](#), 28 April 2023, HC 55 Third Report of Session 2022–23, para. 159

<sup>20</sup> House of Commons Education Committee, [The future of post-16 qualifications](#), 28 April 2023, HC 55 Third Report of Session 2022–23, para. 179

<sup>21</sup> “[Rishi Sunak as prime minister: What will it mean for schools?](#)”, TES, 24 October 2022

<sup>22</sup> “[British baccalaureate among Sunak education policy reforms](#)”, The Times, 26 October 2022

<sup>23</sup> “[Advanced British Standard: Sunak qualification will replace A-levels and T-levels](#)”, BBC News, 4 October

<sup>24</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard](#), 4 October 2023. See also Department for Education Hub blog, [The Advanced British Standard: Everything you need to know](#), 5 October 2023

<sup>25</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard](#), 4 October 2023, p7

- Academic and technical routes still lack parity of esteem, with technical routes less well-understood than traditional academic options.
- 16- to 19-year-olds in England have fewer teaching hours than those in other countries, which particularly affects the most disadvantaged students who have fewer resources for independent study.
- 16- to 19-year-olds in England also study a much narrower range of subjects than their international counterparts.
- Too many students leave education and training without the basic maths and English skills needed to succeed in life.<sup>26</sup>

On 14 December 2023, the Department for Education launched a three-month consultation on its plans to introduce the ABS.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard](#), 4 October 2023, pp6-7

<sup>27</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard consultation](#), 14 December 2023

## 2 Proposals

Following its October 2023 policy paper outlining what a new post-16 qualification would look like, the Department for Education [launched a consultation between 14 December 2023 and 20 March 2024](#) that sought feedback on more detailed proposals for the Advanced British Standard.<sup>28</sup>

Alongside the consultation document, the Department for Education published an [Interim Equalities Impact Assessment](#) (PDF) and an [Analytical Annex](#) (PDF), which provided statistics and analysis on the current 16 to 19 education system.<sup>29</sup>

Responses to the consultation will inform a White Paper due to be published in summer 2024.

### 2.1 Summary

Over the next decade, the Government wants to introduce the Advanced British Standard (ABS), a new Baccalaureate-style qualification framework for 16- to 19-year-olds.

#### What will students study?

The Government's intention is for the Advanced British Standard to combine and replace A Levels and T Levels with a new, single qualification framework at age 16.<sup>30</sup> Apprenticeships will continue to be available for those looking to enter the workforce through 'on-the-job' training.

The Advanced British Standard would consist of:

- A common core in which all students would study English and maths at an appropriate level and depth.
- A choice of academic and technical subjects that come in different sizes (called 'majors' and 'minors'), as well as a relevant industry placement for those students preparing for a technical occupation.

<sup>28</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard consultation](#), 14 December 2023

<sup>29</sup> Department for Education, [Interim Equalities Impact Assessment](#) (PDF), December 2023; [Analytical Annex](#) (PDF), December 2023

<sup>30</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard](#), 4 October 2023, p29



- Non-qualification time which would include employability, enrichment, and pastoral (EEP) activities.

Within the same qualification framework, students will take either predominantly academic options, predominately technical options (including through an occupational specialist route), or a combination of both.

Academic options will be based on the content and academic rigour of A Levels so they support progression to higher education. Technical options will be based on the content of T Levels and occupational standards designed by employers and the [Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education](#). These will support progression into higher technical education, apprenticeships, and employment.

In addition to replacing current options for 16 to 19 year-old students at level 3 (for example, A Levels and T Levels), the Government is considering what options would also be available through the Advanced British Standard at [level 2](#) (equivalent to GCSE grades 3, 2, 1) for students not ready to progress directly to a level 3 ABS programme following their GCSEs.

## How will students be assessed and graded?

The Advanced British Standard will bring together ‘academic’ and ‘technical’ options under one qualification framework, and so the Government has said all level 3 majors, minors, and double majors will need to follow a “single set of design and assessment criteria” to ensure consistency in standards between subjects.<sup>31</sup>

Most subjects will be assessed through exams, but some non-examined assessment will be used where appropriate.<sup>32</sup> Assessments will generally be done at the end of the course or period of study.<sup>33</sup>

Students will receive individual grades for each major and minor (or equivalent) component they take at levels 2 and 3. The Government has also suggested an overall certificate or statement of achievement will be awarded at the end of their course of study to students who meet minimum attainment conditions.

## What are the main changes to the current system?

The major ways the ABS would change the current system include:

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<sup>31</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard consultation](#), 14 December 2023, p47

<sup>32</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard consultation](#), 14 December 2023, p47

<sup>33</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard consultation](#), 14 December 2023, p48

- Technical and academic routes would be brought together into a single qualification framework.
- While most A Level students currently take only three subjects, most students doing the ABS would study five subjects. This would be a mix of bigger and smaller subjects, called ‘majors’ and ‘minors’, with students typically doing three major subjects and two minor subjects. Students wishing to specialise will be able to take a major in their chosen sector alongside a ‘double major’ in their occupational specialism (for example, a major in health and a double major in adult nursing).
- Students would be required to study maths and English to age 18. This will be done by ensuring two of a student’s ABS subjects include maths and English, to at least minor level.
- Teaching time will be increased by 15% for most students (equivalent to an extra two and half hours per week) compared to a typical three-subject A Level study programme. This would mean at least 1,475 teaching hours over two years, moving the time spent in the classroom for students in England closer to international standards. This will be achieved through more funded teaching hours.<sup>34</sup>

## 2.2 Study options

The Department for Education has said through the Advanced British Standard, students will be able to follow different study programmes, “depending on their aspirations, progression goals and readiness to access the subject content”.<sup>35</sup>

Students who would have previously taken level 3 qualifications, such as A Levels, T Levels, or Alternative Academic Qualifications like BTECs, would take the Advanced British Standard programme, and pursue some combination of ‘major’ and ‘minor’ academic and technical subjects, including English and maths, as well as non-qualification activities.

Level 3 students who want to prepare for direct employment in an occupational specialist area, or who want to do an apprenticeship or further study at levels 4 to 6, would complete the Advanced British Standard (occupational) programme. This would similarly comprise major and minor subjects, including maths and English, and non-qualification activities, but also include a ‘double major’ related to their future employment sector, and potentially an industry placement.

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<sup>34</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard](#), 4 October 2023, pp28-34

<sup>35</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard consultation](#), 14 December 2023, p21

While the new qualification will mostly be taken by 16 to 19-year-old students at level 3, the Department for Education has said it is also exploring what options might look like for students at level 2 and below.<sup>36</sup>

The ABS will not cover 16 to 19-year-olds who are undertaking an apprenticeship. The apprenticeship route will continue as an option for those interested in on-the-job training.

## Level 3 programmes

Level 3 Advanced British Standard programmes will be for students who currently move straight from GCSEs into A Levels, T Levels, and equivalent study programmes, including applied general qualifications.

Once fully rolled out, the ABS qualification framework of the Advanced British Standard programme and the Advanced British Standard (occupational) programme would replace all other qualifications currently available at level 3 for 16- to 19-year-old learners.

ABS programmes would take two years to complete, with students then transitioning to further study at level 4 and above, including higher education, as well as skilled employment and apprenticeships.

## Advanced British Standard

The Advanced British Standard programme will be for students “who want to develop the knowledge and skills that will leave a range of future progression options open to them.”<sup>37</sup> The Department for Education believes most level 3 students will choose this programme. It will comprise:

- A minimum of three ‘majors’ and two ‘minors’ at level 3. Where appropriate, these will be based on subject content drawn from A Levels, T Levels, and subjects currently approved to be offered as Alternative Academic Qualifications.
- Within a student’s chosen subjects, they must study maths and English at either major or minor level.
- Non-qualification employability, enrichment, and pastoral activities designed to support students’ personal growth and wider skill development.

Stretch will be built into the programme for the most able students by allowing them to take an additional minor subject or replace one of their minors with another major.

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Alternative Academic Qualifications are qualifications in strategically important subjects approved in the [third phase of the Government’s reforms to level 3 qualifications](#).

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<sup>36</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard consultation](#), 14 December 2023, p21

<sup>37</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard consultation](#), 14 December 2023, p22

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Technical Occupational Qualifications are qualifications in areas not served by T Levels that aim to support a student to enter or progress within a role. They were approved in the [third phase of the Government's reforms to level 3 qualifications](#).

### Advanced British Standard (occupational)

The Advanced British Standard (occupational) programme will be for students “who are clear that they want to specialise in one subject area, and are preparing for direct employment in an occupational specialist area, apprenticeships or further study at Levels 4-6.”<sup>38</sup> It will comprise:

- One ‘major’ in a core subject directly focused on their chosen sector (for example, a major in health for someone specialising in adult nursing). These subjects will be based on subjects covered by T Levels or approved to be offered as Alternative Academic Qualifications.
- One ‘double major’ in a specialism related to the core subject. For the most part, they will be based on subjects covered by T Levels and subjects approved to be offered as large Alternative Academic Qualifications and Technical Occupational Qualifications.
- Two ‘minors’ in maths and English. Students will be supported to work towards a level 3 standard but there will be flexibility for those for whom attaining or consolidating level 2 standard would be more appropriate.
- An industry placement in the relevant employment sector for some students who do a double major.
- Non-qualification employability, enrichment, and pastoral activities designed to support students’ personal growth and wider skill development.

### Level 2 programmes

For those 16- to 19-year-old students not able to progress straight into a level 3 programme, they may undertake a level 2 programme. Most will study a one-year qualification, before moving on to an apprenticeship, a level 3 programme, or another level 2 qualification, while some will also drop out of education after a year.<sup>39</sup>

The Government has said it wants to design level 2 programmes that support students “to achieve their maximum potential and benefit from great progression opportunities”.<sup>40</sup> Under the Advanced British Standard, the Government has said all students at level 2 will:

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<sup>38</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard consultation](#), 14 December 2023, p23

<sup>39</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard consultation](#), 14 December 2023, p26. Young people in England are required to continue in education or training until they are at least 18: Department for Education, [Statutory guidance: Participation of young people: education, employment and training](#), updated October 2016.

<sup>40</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard consultation](#), 14 December 2023, p26

- Receive the same number of hours as level 3 students (at least 1,475 hours, over two years, or equivalent period).
- Be required to study English and maths. Students at 16 are already required to continue studying either towards GCSE or functional skills qualification in English and maths if they do not have a GCSE pass at grades 9-4.
- Study subjects at “an appropriate breadth and depth”, but, because of the need for flexibility with this group of students, subjects will not be structured or sized as majors and minors.
- Undertake non-qualification employability, enrichment, and pastoral activities.<sup>41</sup>

In order to allow some flexibility to meet the progression needs of all level 2 students, the Government has proposed the duration of level 2 programmes will vary to a greater degree than level 3 programmes.

### **Level 2 occupational programme**

This will be intended to support progression into work, or work-based training such as an apprenticeship, in a student’s chosen occupation. The qualifications taken will be based on employer-led standards, and the programme could take one or two years, depending on the occupation.

### **One-year transition programme**

This will be intended to support progression onto a level 3 ABS programme within one year. They would then complete the level 3 programme by age 19.

## **2.3**

## **Assessment and grading**

Several organisations play a role in the assessment and awarding of qualifications in England.

- The Department for Education sets the policy and subject content for qualifications taken by students aged 16 to 19.
- Ofqual is the independent regulator of qualifications and is responsible for securing standards and promoting public confidence.
- The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) works with employers and professional associations to ensure certain technical qualifications meet their needs and those of the wider economy.

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<sup>41</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard consultation](#), 14 December 2023, pp24-25.

One of the key principles of the Advanced British Standard is to bring together ‘academic’ and ‘technical’ options under one qualification framework, and so the Government has said all level 3 majors, minors, and double majors will need to follow a “single set of design and assessment criteria” to ensure consistency in standards between subjects.<sup>42</sup>

As with current approaches to qualifications, most subjects will be assessed through exams. The Government has said the criteria will need to allow for some non-examined assessment, but “only where it is the most appropriate and valid way to assess the skills and knowledge students need to demonstrate.”<sup>43</sup> Assessments will be summative, which means they will generally be done at the end of the course or period of study.<sup>44</sup>

## Approach to grading

While some international examples of baccalaureate-style qualification systems only provide grades, marks, or scores for individual subjects, such as the [Leaving Certificate](#) in Ireland, others, including the International Baccalaureate, create an overall/aggregated grade based on the scores a student achieves across all the individual components.

Under the Advanced British Standard, students will have individual grades for each major and minor (or equivalent) component they take at levels 2 and 3. In addition to these individual grades or marks, the Government is proposing an overall Advanced British Standard award at the end of their course of study. This would be a certificate or statement of achievement, that would be given to students who meet the minimum attainment conditions to receive an overall award.

While the certificate/statement would note the marks or grade received in individual components, the Government favours not calculating an overall aggregate score, because of the “significant complexities” this could introduce into the system.<sup>45</sup>

In any approach to the grading of the Advanced British Standard, at both levels 3 and 2, the Government has said it will be guided by the following principles. Grading will:

- Be fair to all students, regardless of individual background.
- Have a scale that is simple to understand and consistent across subjects.

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<sup>42</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard consultation](#), 14 December 2023, p47

<sup>43</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard consultation](#), 14 December 2023, p47

<sup>44</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard consultation](#), 14 December 2023, p48

<sup>45</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard consultation](#), 14 December 2023, p51

- Allow for performance and the level of knowledge and skills obtained to be accurately reflected.
- Be recognised and have currency with employers and further and higher education providers, as well as enabling student progression.
- Mean student performance is comparable over time as well as between awarding organisations each year.<sup>46</sup>

## 2.4 Equalities impact assessment

The Department for Education published an [interim equalities impact assessment](#) alongside the ABS consultation in December 2023.<sup>47</sup> It did not assess the impacts of the proposed reform in full as detailed policy proposals have not yet been made.

The Government expects the ABS will benefit learners with protected characteristics including disability and race/ethnicity, but “much will depend on what changes are implemented and how they are implemented.”<sup>48</sup>

The impact assessment presented data on the qualification levels/types undertaken by 16- to 18-year-old learners with different characteristics. Some of the main findings were:

- Learners with Special Educational Needs were more likely to be studying qualifications at or below level 2 (including apprenticeships), especially those learners who need more support.<sup>49</sup>
- Learners from an Asian background were more likely to be studying at level 3. Those from a White background were less likely to be on an academic course at level 3 and more likely to be on an apprenticeship at level 2 or level 3. All minority ethnic groups were underrepresented on apprenticeships.
- Female learners were more likely to be on academic level 3 courses. Male learners were more likely to be studying at or below level 3 or on apprenticeships.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard consultation](#), 14 December 2023, p49

<sup>47</sup> Department for Education, [The Advanced British Standard: interim equalities impact assessment](#) (PDF), 14 December 2023

<sup>48</sup> Department for Education, [The Advanced British Standard: interim equalities impact assessment](#) (PDF), 14 December 2023, p5

<sup>49</sup> Learners with Education, Health and Care Plans

<sup>50</sup> Department for Education, [The Advanced British Standard: interim equalities impact assessment](#) (PDF), 14 December 2023, p7-19

The impact assessment links the key aim of the ABS of closing the disadvantage gap at age 16 to 19 with improving the outcomes for some ethnic groups which are disadvantaged and/or attain lower standards.

It also states that as the ABS plans to break down the divide between technical and academic qualifications, it could help learners who are more likely to study vocational qualifications or undertake apprenticeships, including learners with Special Educational Needs and male learners. A similar case is made for the positive impact of the level 2 pathways on those who are more likely to study at this level at age 16 to 19 (male learners and those with Special Educational Needs).<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Department for Education, [The Advanced British Standard: interim equalities impact assessment](#) (PDF), 14 December 2023, p7-19



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## 3 Costs

### 3.1 £600 million upfront funding

To achieve the aims of the Advanced British Standard, the Advanced British Standard policy paper set out associated funding of £600 million over two years, largely focussed on boosting teacher recruitment and retention.<sup>52</sup> This includes:

- An investment of around £100 million a year to provide a tax-free bonus of up to £6,000 a year to all teachers in the first five years of their career, amounting to a total bonus of £30,000. This will be available for teachers who are teaching “key shortage subjects” (such as maths, science, engineering, and digital subjects) and working in disadvantaged schools and all further education colleges.
- An additional £150 million will be made available each year to increase investment for students retaking English and maths GCSE, as well as for apprentices who have not gained their level 2 qualification in these subjects.
- An additional £40 million will be invested in the [Education Endowment Foundation](#), so it can create and share evidence for teachers and leaders on what works to support outcomes for 16- to 19 year-olds, with a particular focus on approaches that work best to narrow gaps in attainment.
- An additional £60 million of funding will be made available for maths education over the next two years. Some of this funding will be used to expand the reach of Maths Hubs to train more teachers in ‘[mastery in maths](#)’ techniques for post-16 education. The rest of the funding will be used to increase the Core Maths and Advanced Maths Premium and invest in a digital platform for tutoring in Core Maths, so colleges and schools can deliver maths to more students aged over 16.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard](#), 4 October 2023, pp37-38

<sup>53</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard](#), 4 October 2023, pp37-38

## 3.2

# Additional costs of the ABS

The Government has not published a financial impact assessment of the ABS or any estimates of the additional costs of the reformed system. It has said the additional taught hours will require more funding. The £600 million it has allocated over the next two years is a ‘downpayment’ on this to help recruit and retain teachers and improve English and maths attainment.<sup>54</sup> This funding is in preparation for the ABS and additional preparatory funding is likely to be needed over the rest of the decade before the planned introduction of the ABS. For instance, recruitment and training of the additional teachers required for the ABS would need to begin well before it is introduced.

Most of the additional costs of the ABS are likely to be the salaries of extra teachers. The Government has said the minimum guided learning hours under the ABS would be 1,475 over a two-year programme, or around 15% higher than the current 1,280 hours.<sup>55</sup> The National Education Union has said there is an existing shortfall of 4,300 maths and 2,600 English teachers and the increased teaching hours under the ABS implies a further 5,300 teachers would be needed.<sup>56</sup>

The Institute for Fiscal Studies have pointed out the difficulties of recruiting substantial numbers of extra teachers when salaries of school and college teachers have fallen in real terms by 10% and 18% respectively.<sup>57</sup> Recruitment to secondary Initial Teacher Training Courses in England has only met the target in one of the last nine years. In 2023/24 it fell to 50% of the target, although the shortfall was below average in English (26%) and maths (37%).<sup>58</sup> Any recruitment incentives needed to boost teacher numbers would add to the costs of the ABS.

While teacher salaries and recruitment are the most obvious extra costs of the ABS, there might be other additional costs. These could include the training and administrative costs of introducing the new curricula, and costs linked to the increased number of students at school/college at any one time, such as more non-teaching staff and capital costs of new classrooms and other facilities.

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<sup>54</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard](#), 4 October 2023, pp6-7

<sup>55</sup> Department for Education, [A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard](#), 4 October 2023, p22

<sup>56</sup> National Education Union, [Rishi Sunak Speech](#), 4 October 2023

<sup>57</sup> Institute for Fiscal Studies, [IFS response to the Prime Minister's proposed Advanced British Standard education reform](#), 4 October 2023

<sup>58</sup> Department for Education, [Initial Teacher Training Census 2023/24](#) (ITT new entrants and targets by subject time series)

## 4 Reaction

### 4.1 Opposition parties

#### Labour

Following the initial announcement of the Advanced British Standard, Labour’s Shadow Schools Minister, Catherine McKinnell, criticised the decision to undertake more reforms to 16 to 19 education in light of the current issues facing the sector, including school building safety and maths teacher shortages.<sup>59</sup>

Speaking at a fringe event at the Labour party conference in October 2023, the Shadow Education Secretary, Bridget Phillipson, said the decision to replace T Levels was “staggering”, and described the ABS as “undeliverable in its current form”.<sup>60</sup>

In December 2023, Bridget Phillipson told the Financial Times that, if she was Education Secretary, reforming 16 to 19 education would not be a priority, and her focus would instead be on improving primary school provision.<sup>61</sup> She said:

If I was secretary of state now, reform in the 16 to 18 space along the lines of the Advanced British Standard would not be a priority [...] My priority would be setting up children to succeed much earlier on in their lives, and how we use that as the basis to deliver high and rising standards right throughout our school system

She also said current teacher shortages made the Government’s plans for the Advanced British Standard unworkable, and Labour would “take a view as and when they [the Government] bring forward any legislation.”<sup>62</sup>

#### Liberal Democrats

At its party conference in September 2023, prior to the announcement of the Advanced British Standard, the Liberal Democrats agreed 23 policies on schools. One of these policies was a commitment to a commission that would investigate broadening the curriculum at 16 to 19 and consider other possible

<sup>59</sup> [“School leaders criticise Sunak post-16 ABS reforms”](#), Schools Week, 5 October 2023

<sup>60</sup> [“Labour: Sunak’s Advanced British Standard plans ‘careless’ and ‘undeliverable’”](#), FE Week, 9 October 2023

<sup>61</sup> [“Labour could abandon Rishi Sunak’s maths reforms to focus on primary school provision”](#), Financial Times, 3 December 2023

<sup>62</sup> [“Labour could abandon Rishi Sunak’s maths reforms to focus on primary school provision”](#), Financial Times, 3 December 2023

policy approaches, such as the International Baccalaureate.<sup>63</sup> The full policy agreed by the party was:

Urgently establish a standing commission to build a long-term consensus across parties and teachers to broaden the curriculum and make qualifications at 16 and 18 fit for the 21st century, drawing on best practice such as the International Baccalaureate.

## 4.2 Education sector

The announcement of the Advanced British Standard has attracted a mix of praise and criticism from the education sector, with many commending the principles of the proposed reforms, but suggesting current issues, particularly with regards to shortages of maths teachers, make it unrealistic.

The General Secretary of the Association of School & College Leaders (ASCL), Geoff Barton, praised the proposed breadth of subject choice and the ambition to place equal importance on studying academic and vocational qualifications.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, some academics have cautiously welcomed the proposals, stating they will place academic and technical qualifications on an equal footing, ending the “unnecessarily divisive” current system where students must choose between one or the other to the detriment of future educational and career options.<sup>65</sup>

However, school and college leaders have also criticised the policy for failing to address the immediate issues of financial sustainability of schools and colleges, teacher shortages, and student re-engagement with learning post-Covid.<sup>66</sup> The deputy chief executive of the Sixth Form Colleges Association, James Kewin, argued the announcement of the Advanced British Standard was an electoral ploy, and instead called for a “genuine, inclusive and wide-ranging consultation about the long-term future of 16-19 education, starting from first principles”.<sup>67</sup>

The Alliance for Inclusive Education, which campaigns for the right of all disabled pupils and students to be fully included in mainstream education and training, published a post on its website that considered how the Advanced British Standard might affect disabled children and young people. Its Policy and Research Officer, Edmore Masendeke, argued reforms were needed to the Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) system, including the provision of more funding for support and accommodations in

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<sup>63</sup> [“The 23 schools policies signed off at Lib Dem conference”](#), Schools Week, 24 September 2023

<sup>64</sup> [“Teacher shortages make Rishi Sunak’s Advanced British Standard a pipedream”](#), TES, 5 October 2023

<sup>65</sup> [“Advanced British Standard: Sunak’s proposed replacement for A-levels and T-levels could make education less divisive”](#), The Conversation, 5 October 2023; [“Colleges should cautiously embrace the Advanced British Standard”](#), FE Week, 5 October 2023

<sup>66</sup> [“School leaders criticise Sunak post-16 ABS reforms”](#), Schools Week, 5 October 2023; [“Qualifications reform can’t put politicians’ interests above learners”](#), FE Week, 12 October 2023

<sup>67</sup> [“Qualifications reform can’t put politicians’ interests above learners”](#), FE Week, 12 October 2023

schools, otherwise the Advanced British Standard, and its maths and English requirements in particular, will “continue the legacy of a discriminatory education system”.<sup>68</sup>

## Teacher recruitment and retention

College chief executive Jackie Grubb, writing in FE Week, said the increase in teaching time through the ABS will amount to a 315-hour increase in curriculum time for further education colleges, which would require a significant increase in the amount of teaching staff.<sup>69</sup> While praising the announcement of a £30,000 bonus for some new teachers, Grubb said retaining existing teachers was equally important and only achievable through a significant pay rise.<sup>70</sup> She went on to say the announcements to continue maths until 18 similarly necessitated more maths teachers, as well as more physical space in colleges, both of which therefore require more investment in further education.<sup>71</sup>

These views were echoed by the ASCL secretary Geoff Barton, who, in October 2023, highlighted the current teacher shortage and said the announcement of a £30,000 bonus is a “piecemeal initiative”.<sup>72</sup> He argued there instead needed to be substantial policy and investment in teacher pay, conditions, and school funding to make the ABS viable in terms of teaching.<sup>73</sup> Responding to the launch of the consultation in December 2023, Barton described a “severe and deepening funding and teacher shortage crisis”, and likened the Advanced British Standard to “headless chicken policymaking”.<sup>74</sup>

While welcoming the additional pay for new teachers, the behavioural science academic Joshua Fullard suggested the bonus may create issues with the retention of more experienced teachers by making them feel undervalued and underappreciated.<sup>75</sup> Fullard’s research found reducing teacher working hours and improving the quality of school leaders would be the most effective strategies for improving recruitment and retention.

Similarly, Luke Sibieta, a Research Fellow at the Institute for Fiscal Studies, noted only around 1-2% of all teachers would receive the full bonus, and

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<sup>68</sup> Alliance for Inclusive Education, [Will introducing the Advanced British Standard ensure that no child is left behind?](#), 20 December 2023

<sup>69</sup> [“Colleges should cautiously embrace the Advanced British Standard”](#), FE Week, 5 October 2023

<sup>70</sup> [“Colleges should cautiously embrace the Advanced British Standard”](#), FE Week, 5 October 2023

<sup>71</sup> [“Colleges should cautiously embrace the Advanced British Standard”](#), FE Week, 5 October 2023

<sup>72</sup> [“Teacher shortages make Rishi Sunak’s Advanced British Standard a pipedream”](#), TES, 5 October 2023

<sup>73</sup> [“Teacher shortages make Rishi Sunak’s Advanced British Standard a pipedream”](#), TES, 5 October 2023

<sup>74</sup> Association of School & College Leaders, [Advanced British Standard is ‘headless chicken policymaking’](#), 14 December 2023

<sup>75</sup> [“Advanced British Standard: A-level replacement will require more teachers – but bonuses may not be the way to get them”](#), The Conversation, 5 October 2023

recruiting the large numbers of extra teachers necessary for a wider post-16 curriculum might require “more ambitious policy changes.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Institute for Fiscal Studies, [IFS response to the Prime Minister's proposed Advanced British Standard education reform](#), 4 October 2023

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