

London Higher response to A world-class education system: The Advanced British Standard consultation

11. We propose several overarching aims and principles that should underpin the introduction and design of the Advanced British Standard. To what extent do you support these proposed aims and principles? If you have further views on this, please share below.

Somewhat support.

Our members support the aims and principles: raising the attainment floor, ensuring preparedness for higher education (HE), employment and life, and parity of esteem between academic and technical routes. However, clarity is needed from the DfE on how the underlying principles translate into practice, and whether the proposals achieve the stated aims.

Do the Advanced British Standard (ABS) and Advanced British Standard (occupational) meet the aim of ensuring parity of esteem between academic and technical routes?

How will government ensure there will be enough well-trained and appropriately qualified teachers to deliver the ABS, particularly where there are already significant shortages? London HE institutions (HEIs) are concerned about the availability of teachers to serve the large and diverse population in the capital, and with some HEIs nationally having their Initial Teacher Training (ITT) accreditation withdrawn, this will be a serious and long-term challenge for the sector.

With HE increasingly using authentic and real-world assessment methods to better equip students for life in the workforce (including the development of soft skills), how is the proposal to retain primarily exam-based assessment at Level 3 compatible with ensuring preparedness for HE and working life? We reiterate our support for the stated aims and principles, and welcome dialogue with DfE to see how it will achieve its objectives for all areas and value of the education landscape.

Chapter 2 - Section 1

14. We propose two main programmes at Level 3: Advanced British Standard and Advanced British Standard (occupational). Each will contain a range of separate components to support students. To what extent do you support the proposed design for the Level 3 Advanced British Standard programmes? If you have further views on this, please share below.

Somewhat support.

DfE rationale states “the traditional parallel structures of A levels and technical qualifications has constraints: it limits the breadth of young people’s education and prevents full parity between technical and academic routes”. It is important that any stratification between the two routes does not create hierarchy or preclude entry into HE.

Capacity to provide a wide range of components (e.g. a double occupational specialism with a complementary major/minor) may vary, as (i) not all schools will be able to offer all options or combinations, (ii) there may be a lack of well-trained and appropriately qualified teachers in those subject areas, (iii) sufficient industry placements at Level 3 might not be available locally.

The ABS (occupational)’s subject offering is unclear. It is important this does not preclude entry into HE. Clarity is needed on admissions and how the ABS (occupational) would serve entry into competitive subjects e.g. engineering. With maths/English only available as minors under the occupational route, would this present a barrier to further study which requires (or favourably views) these subjects as a major?

If the ABS requires choice between entirely academic or occupational tracks, it would strip diversity from the system and make life harder for students currently accessing HE through BTEC or combined A-level/BTEC routes. Student choice is crucial, and premature specialisation may have consequences for future career paths.

Chapter 2 - Section 2

14. We propose two main programmes at Level 3: Advanced British Standard and Advanced British Standard (occupational). Each will contain a range of separate components to support students. To what extent do you support the proposed design for the Level 3 Advanced British Standard programmes? If you have further views on this, please share below.

The ABS framework, if it intends to replace all the components of the Level 3 qualification landscape, should ensure it replaces the full breadth and diversity of the current system. In particular, this should involve being able to study the same subjects at a variety of levels and styles. Where students had a choice between A-levels and BTECs, they were able to choose between more academic and more vocational versions of the same subject to fit their plans, and to mix academic and vocational subjects according to their interest. If the aim of the ABS is to create parity of esteem between academic and vocational education, it should prioritise maintaining students’ ability to choose combinations of subjects that serve their goals.

If the ABS forced students to choose between entirely academic or entirely occupational tracks, it would strip diversity out of the system and make life harder for students currently accessing HE through BTEC or combined A-level/BTEC routes. Students most likely to be affected by this may be from lower income families, have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), or want to pursue less traditional academic routes, such as studying creative subjects where admissions is more likely to be based on portfolios or auditions than grade portfolios. The new system should ensure students have more high-quality options than previously, not fewer.

27. If you have views or evidence on how time for employability, enrichment and pastoral (EEP) can best be used, please share below. We particularly welcome views and evidence about how to support students with additional challenges, e.g. lower prior attainment or the most disadvantaged.

Because the ABS is such a major shift, both careful attention and sufficient financial resources will be required to make sure students understand their options after compulsory education. A new system will mean teachers, charities, community organisations and HEIs will risk their support systems going out of date while the most disadvantaged students need support planning their futures. Students with SEND, students choosing less common pathways, and students who would be the first in their family to attend HE, risk being unsupported during the transition. During this embedding period, but also on an ongoing basis, we must ensure there are sufficient resources to support all students to navigate the range of available pathways.

Implementing new EEP structures will be a challenge and require careful planning. The current EEP landscape is fragmented and funding for the national collaborative HE outreach programme is precarious. Stronger and better-funded infrastructure is required to create the high-quality, comprehensive and consistent EEP that the ABS intends to deliver.

One potential strength of the ABS system is its enhanced ability to deliver EEP support inside and outside the classroom. The government should make the most of the ABS's capacity to provide support and guidance on the full range of post-compulsory-education pathways. The Uni Connect programme should play an important role in providing this guidance and should be factored into delivery plans.

Chapter 2 - Section 3

31. We propose that there will be a range of English and maths majors and minors at Levels 3. To what extent do you support this proposal?

Fully support.

We support this proposal, but urge clarity regarding admissions and how the ABS (occupational) would serve entry into competitive subjects such as engineering – with maths/English only available as minors under the occupational route, would this present a barrier to studying subjects which require (or favourably view) maths/English as a major?

35. If you have further views on what students will study as part of the Advanced British Standard, or anything else covered in Chapter 2, please share below.

We support the proposal to have a range of English and maths majors and minors at Level 3, but urge clarity regarding admissions and how the ABS (occupational) would serve entry into competitive subjects such as engineering – with maths/English only available as minors under the occupational route, would this present a barrier to studying subjects which require (or favourably view) maths/English as a major?

Chapter 3

36. We have proposed assessment principles to underpin the ABS. To what extent do you support these assessment principles? If you have further views on this, please share below.

Don't know.

The sector should be involved in further conversations about how assessment will work across subjects at major and minor level. Exam assessment 'where possible' prompts questions about which areas will be able to be assessed by exam. Authentic and skills-based assessment methods have been introduced in HE following conversations with employers about what benefits graduates entering the world of work (such as creative thinking, teamwork and other skills that aid work-readiness).

Students currently taking BTECs or T-levels (disproportionately from underrepresented groups) may choose these pathways because of desire for more skills-based assessment to fit their needs and strengths. The planning for the ABS should ensure these students are still able to demonstrate their skills and are not left behind.

It would be damaging for both schools and HEIs to have disconnect between aims of assessments at level three and higher levels. To ensure the ABS system benefits students in all subjects and enables good transitions into graduate employment, schools and HE institutions must have detailed conversations on how their assessment principles sit alongside each other.

38. To what extent do you support the proposal that students will receive individual grades/marks for each major and minor (or equivalents) studied within the Advanced British Standard?

Fully support.

39. Do you agree that students should receive some type of overall Advanced British Standard award? If yes, what value could an 'ABS award' add on top of individual component grades, particularly for higher education providers and/or employers?

Don't know.

If there is an overall award given for the ABS, it should be of secondary importance to the individual subject grades. HEIs and other bodies looking at students' qualifications will need to see how students have performed in different subjects, and different subjects will have different amounts of significance for admissions teams. Two students could have an identical overall award grade, but be suitable for different HE courses. London's institutions will primarily be interested in individual subject marks.

40. What minimum attainment conditions, if any, should a student need to achieve to receive a Level 3 Advanced British Standard award?

No minimum attainment conditions.

There should be no minimum attainment conditions for the ABS. Where a student passes some subjects and not others, they should be able to have those qualifications that they have passed even if this is a small proportion of the overall ABS. It would not benefit students to have a system like that of the USA where lower-achieving students are prevented from graduating with a high school diploma and have their grades 'rounded down' to no qualifications. Students with SEND would be disproportionately more at risk of finishing school with no qualifications, and studying a higher number of subjects may not be suitable for students with all disability and access needs. Where a student has achieved grades in one or a small number of subjects, these marks should be allowed to stand on their own.

For degrees that do not currently require maths and English A-level, students should not be put in a position where they cannot access courses that they would be highly qualified for under the current system.

42. If you have further views on how students will be assessed and graded under these reforms, or anything else covered in Chapter 3, please share below.

It is very important that students receive grades for individual subjects.

Some courses require strong performance in specific subjects and admission teams need to be able to judge subjects separately. For example, a student with a high average mark but lower chemistry and maths grades would be less suitable for a competitive medicine course than a student with strong maths and chemistry but lower English.

With a single overall mark, we risk students being labelled less competent due to relatively poorer performance in compulsory subjects that are not relevant to their pathway. For students going on to study creative subjects who perform less well in maths it would be counter-productive to the aims of the ABS for them to be unable to progress because of a lower grade in a compulsory subject. Giving students grades in each major and minor would enable them to prove their proficiency in their areas of specialism and give university admissions teams the ability to see students' achievements in particular subject areas relevant to their courses.

In London, the centre of much of the UK's performing arts and creative subjects education, HE admissions would be damaged by having only one overall grade. Admissions officers looking at applicants for a fine art or music performance programme will need to be able to differentiate how students have performed in creative or practical subjects and compulsory subjects.

Chapter 4

44. What opportunities and challenges do you see for the recruitment, retention and deployment of staff as a result of implementing the Advanced British Standard?

Having sufficient well-trained and appropriately qualified teachers to deliver the ABS will be a serious and long-term challenge for the sector, particularly in English and maths where there are already significant teacher shortages. London institutions are concerned about the availability of teachers to serve the large and diverse population in the capital.

Chapter 5

50. If you have views or evidence on the additional support that may be needed to enable students with SEND to access the Advanced British Standard, please share below.

Students with SEND, particularly students with specific learning disabilities, are likely to be negatively impacted by these changes as described in the consultation documents. Some disabled students may have difficulty studying a greater number of subjects simultaneously, and may have been well-served by the current system where they could focus on a smaller number of subjects that are accessible to them. Some students with specific learning disabilities may struggle in English and maths but excel in other subjects.

Planning to support these students should be a key and early consideration for implementing the ABS with the aim of ensuring disabled learners are not left out in the cold. Representatives of schools, HEIs, and disability-led groups should be involved at these early stages of implementation planning.

51. If you have views or evidence on the additional support that may be needed to enable other groups of students to access the Advanced British Standard, please share them below. Examples of these groups include disadvantaged students and students with caring responsibilities.

Students from lower socio-economic groups, students who would be the first in their family to go to university, students in local authority care, and students whose parents and carers do not have experience of the English school system may be more likely to rely on external support to plan their subject choices and post-18 options. A rich infrastructure of support for these students currently exists, including charities, community groups, university and college outreach departments, and the Uni Connect programme. One risk that may arise during the changeover period from the old system to the ABS could be that the third parties currently able to help students with their choices and applications find their resources and programme plans are out of date, and students lack support while the system adjusts to the ABS.

The groups and agencies that currently work with students to plan their pathways and support with HE applications should be brought onboard at an early stage to be part of planning and to complement EEP delivery as part of the ABS. The agencies currently supporting students into HE (including the Uni Connect programme) should be supported to effectively help the students who need it most as soon as the new system comes into effect to make sure no students slip through the cracks in the transition period.

52. If you have views on how to ensure the Advanced British Standard provides effective pathways into post-18 education or study, please share below.

The ABS will have significant knock-on effects for HE admissions procedures. The HE sector should be involved as early as possible in advance planning to make the ABS and admissions processes link up as seamlessly as possible, and include involvement from the Uni Connect programme.

HE admissions under the current system are a diverse landscape. Providers of different types, particularly specialist and creative institutions, have highly developed and individualised processes for assessing the most relevant skills for different courses. Individualised and contextual admissions systems make access to courses as equitable as possible at the same time as ensuring universities find the most suitable students for competitive courses. This is particularly the case for creative and performing arts courses, where achievement in English and maths is less important than other areas of a student's application. London contains a wide range of providers of all sizes, specialisms and tariff levels, and each institution has procedures under the current system to evaluate the parts of a student's education that matter most to individual courses.

The HE sector (including representatives of diverse providers) should work closely with government to make sure the depth and diversity of HE admissions approaches is maintained rather than limited.

53. If you have views on how to ensure the Advanced British Standard reforms meet the needs of employers, please share below.

London Higher is deeply engaged with local skills agendas through the Greater London Authority and the London Anchors Institutions' Network, and initiatives like the Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs). There is substantial dialogue between HEIs and industry, who increasingly mention a desire for skills-based curricula that prepare students of all ages for the workforce. Emphasis on a 'knowledge-rich' curriculum may result in friction between schools and universities, which would negatively impact transitions, especially where a broader focus on skills has intended to widen access and benefit all students.

As stated, HE is increasingly trending towards authentic and real-world assessment methods to ensure that students can evidence skills needed by employers, including 'soft' skills (e.g. communication). The proposed focus on knowledge-based assessments may diverge from assessing the competencies and needs of employers, particularly for students anticipating direct entry into the workforce upon completion of the ABS.

DfE and schools should also appropriately support the transition between Levels 2 and 3, providing robust careers information, advice and guidance to facilitate student choice and ensuring that learners are building skills in line with their pathways and future careers aspirations.

55. If you have views on the impacts (positive or negative) of the Advanced British Standard reforms on any group with a protected characteristic, please share below.

Because the ABS will change progression into post-18 education, planning should consider how mature students will fare in the new landscape. London has many mature students aged over 25 at the start of their course. Plans for the future of HE admissions and the ABS should consider the situations of mature entrants holding A-levels, BTECs, T-levels and level three qualifications and ensure they are not disadvantaged entering HE later in life, following the principles of the lifelong learning agenda. Where mature students have not studied English and/or maths to age eighteen because it was not required when they were at school, support and guidance should be available for them. Pre-entry support programmes for students with A-level, BTEC, and T-level qualifications will also need more resources to help them appropriately.

Students with SEND, particularly specific learning disabilities, are likely to be negatively impacted by these changes. Some disabled students may struggle to study this many subjects simultaneously, and benefit from focusing on a smaller number of accessible subjects. Some may struggle in English and maths but excel in other subjects.

Planning to support these students should be an early priority for implementing the ABS with the aim of ensuring disabled learners are not left out in the cold. Representatives of schools, HEIs, and disability-led groups should be involved at these early stages of implementation planning.