

Political Studies Association (PSA) Response to the call for evidence on the Curriculum & Assessment Review

[Curriculum and Assessment Review - About this call for evidence - Department for Education - Citizen Space](#)

We have engaged the PSA membership of students, teachers and academic researchers including experts in young people's politics and political literacy. Our findings are covered in the following **five main inter-related areas**:

- 1. A-level Government & Politics is a robust qualification which prepares students for work, active citizenship and further study, but can be improved to be even more effective.**
- 2. We need to provide more opportunities for pupils to study Government, Politics and Democracy at school, especially in less privileged areas in England.**
- 3. Many within the Political Studies community and beyond see the UK's lack of compulsory citizenship/political education a disservice to our young people. And young people are calling for this too!**
- 4. Bolstering political, media and citizenship education in the national curriculum will help equip young people for future study, employment and citizenship. And doing so will help the Government achieve its five missions for a better Britain.**
- 5. Achieving the Government's mission of breaking down barriers at every stage, and raising educational standards, means investing in social science teaching and teacher training.**

Evidence and Analysis of these five main areas

- 1. A-level Government & Politics is a robust qualification which prepares students for work, citizenship and further study but can be improved to be even more effective**

In terms of post-16 education, the current Government & Politics A-level curriculum is viewed as being broadly robust; providing students with opportunities to develop both a wide set of critical thinking skills and knowledge base. However, there is room for improvement:

- Most teachers appear to plump for the 'British Politics' modules. The focus on British Politics provides students with a strong foundation in the workings of the UK's political system, which is



valuable for civic understanding and national engagement. However, this may not be entirely desirable for undergraduate study in Politics and related fields which is often more international in scope: i.e. covering global political systems, organisations and theories that extend beyond the UK. Therefore, for students aiming to study Politics or related fields at university, an **A-level curriculum that balances British and international perspectives** might better prepare them for the broader context of global politics they'll encounter. We would like to see schools and teachers being able to teach the available global politics modules more often and are keen to support them in overcoming barriers to doing so. This will especially help bridge the transition between A-level and university studies for those from historically underrepresented communities as well as ensuring that students enter with both a strong foundation in UK politics and an understanding of global political dynamics.

- Teachers who responded to our consultation expressed **concern on the size of the Politics A Level specification**. A-Level specifications, in theory, prioritise higher-order thinking skills but because there is so much content required to lay the foundations, teachers can find it difficult to spend enough time really developing those higher-order skills. It is their view that this is particularly evident in more culturally deprived areas where pupils are generally less practiced and skilled in discussing ideas or the wider 'Politics' syllabus.
- Some of the **modules could be reviewed and combined**: i.e. so that media is seen through the lens of the democracy and participation topic.
- Teachers also wondered whether the **requirement for source questions should be reviewed** as it is perhaps superfluous and over-complicated compared to the rest of the assessment.

The lived experience of teachers and other emerging research has shown that post-16 students enjoy and want to learn more about:

- The UK constitutional arrangements - and how democracy, elections/voting and government work in the UK
- Exploring the origins and development of a range of philosophical ideas
- The role of power
- The consequence of actions and events
- How citizens act to bring about change
- Studying global politics and governance

Any future specification for A-level should be co-designed with teachers and informed by Political Studies Association research and expertise.

2. We need to provide more opportunities for pupils to study Government, Politics and Democracy at school - especially in less privileged areas in England

The PSA's position is that having **greater opportunity to gain political and media literacy** is key to providing a truly broad and balanced curriculum and offers pathways to raising educational standards and employment opportunities especially for those in less privileged communities.

We have found there are two elements to this:

- Addressing the trend of a narrowing of subject choice and educational opportunity post-16
- Increasing the number of settings that offer A level Government and Politics.

Narrowing subject choice

There is compelling and recent evidence of this including the work by NFER commissioned by the British Academy (2024): [Subject choice trends in post-16 education in England](#).

The general thrust of discourse on this matter is that the narrowing of subject choice post-16 may not be in the best interest of the student or wider society and puts England as an outlier compared to peer OECD countries. This may be dictated by structural factors: i.e. what subjects students believe they should be taking to get into university, what schools are equipped to offer, etc.

Interestingly, some of the teachers we consulted told us that the A-Level results of their students indicated that, for mid-range to less accomplished students, taking a range of subjects may not be ideal. They are seeing evidence that less able students may not be able to grasp differing skills sets and so may be better sticking to a disciplinary area i.e. mathematical, scientific or essay-based work. This may also indicate systemic issues with the A-level curricula.

The other factor in narrowing subject choice is curricula design in not providing a clear pathway or opportunity for advanced study in certain subjects, such as the qualification pathway from GCSE History or Citizenship to A level Government and Politics, or there being a lack of exposure to related topics in PSHE or other extra-curricular provision. In short, effective change needs to be made in early key stages as well as in key stage 5.

Removing the barriers to the opportunity to study Government and Politics

Achieving a Politics related degree and the skills and knowledge it provides has been shown to be highly desirable by employers and in providing great career prospects:

The British Academy, 2020. [Qualified for the Future: Quantifying demand for arts, humanities and social science skills](#).

A high proportion of Politics and related discipline undergraduates have gained an A-level in Government and Politics - therefore demonstrating the qualification is a pathway to future success.

However, recent studies have shown that only 50% of educational settings in the UK offer A-level Government & Politics: [A level Government & Politics: in good health but ripe for growth | The Political Studies Association \(PSA\)](#).

The number of students taking this A-level has grown from 1.6% in 2010 to 2.6% in 2023 (with more girls than boys now taking the qualification).

Anecdotally, it appears that A-level Government and Politics is more likely to be offered at 'academic' schools, or those in the private sector, which may correlate with pupils being more politically socialised outside of school and having better quality citizenship education overall. This would indicate a social justice issue and a need to **increase the number of settings so that students from all backgrounds are able to benefit from a Politics education** through substantially increasing the number of schools and further education colleges able to offer A-level Government and Politics or equivalent qualifications. This would also help make the Political Studies community, including its future teachers and researchers, more diverse and representative.

We are keen to investigate the structural issues which are creating this barrier to opportunity: is this due to issues of supply of suitably qualified and interested teachers or are other dynamics at play? What is the interplay with other related subjects such as Citizenship, History, Media Studies and Sociology? How can school and non-school based provision be connected at each stage of the educational journey to provide clear pathways to support political literacy and engagement?

3. Many within the Political Studies community and beyond see the UK's lack of compulsory citizenship/political education (especially post-16) a disservice to our young people. And young people are calling for this too!

Society and our climate are changing rapidly, and we owe it to young people to educate and equip them so they can meet the challenge and thrive. And our having a curriculum and assessment framework which supports this goal.

Citizenship and Politics education is important for youth, civic and political engagement and social cohesion. This is especially important at a time when lowering the voting age to 16 may be introduced in England for the first time (<https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/lowering-voting-age>). It is felt that robust and universal education in these areas will help counteract disillusionment with democracy, ward against misinformation, raise awareness of current affairs and increase civic participation.

Our consultation raised a number of interesting considerations on wider Political education:

- **Citizenship Education** was introduced into the National Curriculum in 2002 but, although highly valued by teachers, schools and pupils who are actively engaged, it is not thriving as a subject

overall. The Association of Citizenship Teaching (ACT) will prepare a detailed response on GCSE Citizenship and how wider citizenship education can be delivered effectively - informed by their community of teachers: [Short summary of DfE response and answer guidance](#). ACT is calling for a universal, statutory national curriculum for Citizenship as a subject from key stages 1 to 4 and a statutory requirement for Citizenship Post 16

- **Better education in democracy and citizenship is welcomed** by many sectors and by young people themselves.

There have been some interesting research findings by the five-year longitudinal research project at Kings College London known as *Young Lives, Young Futures*. Many of the young people who participated felt that there should be an improved citizenship curriculum, and a greater role for schools in supporting young people to get involved in democracy and in promoting opportunities for youth participation. [Publications | Young Lives, Young Futures](#)

- Many are concerned about our education system being too focussed on ‘teaching to the test’ and how this may squeeze out broader learning opportunities. And while preparing students for their examinations is, of course, important, some respondents to our consultation would like the ‘space’ to be able to **increase political and news literacy by covering current events and contemporary issues** with their students in class; making learning more relevant and engaging, which could lead to more debate and critical thinking. Professor Guy Claxton’s work on Building Learning Power ([Media | Guy Claxton](#)) also supports the idea that creating resilient, curious learners requires a shift away from purely test-focused curricula and toward approaches that build students’ sense of agency and enjoyment in the learning process. The PISA report, [PISA: Programme for International Student Assessment | OECD](#), provides some interesting insight into countries like Finland which tend to show higher intrinsic motivation and critical thinking skills from students.
- The British Academy 2020 report, [Qualified for the Future: Quantifying demand for arts, humanities and social science skills](#), emphasises a need to teach young people to think critically, speak clearly and persuasively, exercise creativity, follow curiosity, collaborate with others and solve problems, to prepare them for the complex socioeconomic, technological and ecological demands of the future. This also requires a curriculum with greater space to explore cross-cutting topics, which empower young people to develop future-facing skills, such as digital and data literacy. From securing economic growth, to making Britain a clean energy superpower, building the NHS and increasing opportunities for all, these skills will be needed to achieve the **Government’s 5 missions for a better Britain: [Mission-driven government: What has Labour committed to? | Institute for Government](#)**

4. Bolstering political, media and citizenship education in the national curriculum will help equip young people for future study, employment and citizenship. And doing so will help the Government achieve its 5 missions for a better Britain.

As well as the aspirations and preferences expressed above, respondents to our consultation also raised concerns about the current education system not producing prospective undergraduates with good writing or oracy skills or an appetite to debate, able to think critically, keep abreast of current affairs or seemingly enjoy learning!

This is a concern that needs addressing including within the content set out in the government's central **mission 5**, [breaking down the barriers to opportunity](#) which states '*the need to develop life skills, like communication, teamwork, and digital skills, which are essential for their futures.*'

Many organisations are reflecting on the pros and cons of bolstering political, media and citizenship education through standalone courses and in a wider general curriculum. There are already considerable elements within the existing A level Government and Politics which help equip students for future study and work. So as well as encouraging more students to take up this A level, the curriculum could be bolstered further to allow teachers to cover topics more creatively and encourage greater student skill and confidence in:

- Communication skills, oracy and debating
- Research and enquiry
- Critical thinking
- Sustainability awareness and competencies
- Digital, analytical and numeracy skills
- Problem solving skills
- Project and team working.

Oracy is clearly a topic of great interest to the Department for Education and other stakeholders. In the recent [We need to talk: the report of the Commission on the Future of Oracy Education in England](#). (Oracy Education Commission, 2024) contributor James Mannion said: 'for a democratic society to function...the population needs to be educated...and able to assert its voice.' The report concludes that there needs to be a whole-school approach to oracy grounded in schools acting as a civic space promoting a democratic culture and fostering civic literacy.

Professor Arlene Holmes-Henderson's work in this area showed a high demand from business leaders in the development of young people's speaking and listening skills: <https://www.durham.ac.uk/research/current/research-news/2024/03/-supporting-the-next-generation-through-oracy-development/>



5. Achieving the government's mission of breaking down barriers at every stage, and raising educational standards, means investing in social science teaching and teacher training

Capacity to change and improve depends upon a healthy Social Sciences ecosystem where there is opportunity to study throughout school, provision to take up undergraduate study and opportunities to train and work as an expert teacher in a specific discipline. This virtuous cycle would also be helped by Politics, Media and Citizenship education not being reliant on the interest of individual teachers, and by providing CPD opportunities so that more teachers can widen their own knowledge and skills in new disciplines.

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