



Broadening Curriculum

Research Report

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The Royal Society commissioned Kantar Public to conduct research to understand how parents might respond to the idea of a broad and balanced curriculum. The overall aim of the research was to explore parents' views on greater curriculum breadth and identify the kinds of narratives that will most resonate with this group. The research sought to explore parents' views of the current system, their views on the role of maths and science, and their ideal future system.

This study used a mixed-method, iterative research design, with an initial qualitative stage of 24 in-home friendship triads (72 parents in total) feeding into an online survey of 1,000 parents of 11-24-year olds. The triads – mini focus groups of three people – were recruited as 'friendship' triads so the respondents knew each other, creating a more natural environment. The online survey was carried out using Kantar's Lightspeed Panel with quotas set to ensure a good cross-section of parents were included in the survey. The data were weighted to population estimates to make the survey findings representative of UK parents.

This piece of research fits into the wider society vision for the future of education. The Royal Society has set an ambition to raise the general level of mathematical and scientific knowledge and confidence among the UK population. One way to realise this is by increasing the breadth and balance in the current secondary education system. It is the Royal Society's view that a broader curriculum, building stronger numeracy and problem-solving skills, will provide young people with a wider skillset that better prepares them for the world of work and makes them more resilient to anticipated changes in the job market.

A broader and more balanced curriculum from ages 14-18 could take many forms, though options include:

- Compulsory or advised balance in the subjects that students take at A-level or BTEC
- The inclusion of core skills or 'softer skills' that students take post-14 or post-16
- Adopting a baccalaureate or major-minor approach, with a broader range of skills on offer
- Blending academic with technical learning.

Realising a broad and balanced curriculum will require engagement, debate and consensus building across a diverse range of stakeholders, including parents.

Key findings

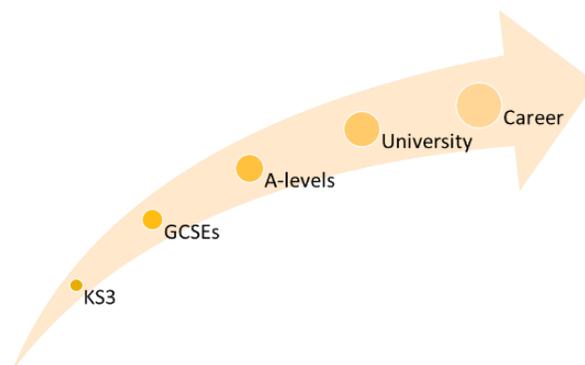
Knowledge of and attitudes towards the current secondary school system

Parents' knowledge of the current curriculum varied. Most parents were aware of the basic structure of the secondary school system, but as their children got older parents' involvement tended to become more passive, meaning they were less engaged with the specifics. A quarter (27%) of all parents surveyed said they did not feel well informed about the secondary education system. Though parents were aware of recent changes to the secondary system (e.g. mandatory education up to age 18), they saw the system as broadly the same as when they were at school. In the qualitative triads, it was clear that parents had never really questioned the current

*4 in 10 parents
felt that the
current system
does not
prepare
children for
adult life*

system or considered it in great depth. Their general lack of knowledge about and engagement with the current curriculum underpinned a sense of deference to the status quo – and parents were not automatically responsive to the idea of reforming the system.

Despite somewhat limited engagement, parents did have some concerns about the current system. More than four in ten parents (41%) surveyed felt the system does not prepare children well for adult life. Views became more negative among parents with children aged 18 or older (i.e. who have left secondary school): 50% of these parents felt the education system did not prepare children well for adult life.



In the qualitative triads, parents raised concerns about the limited opportunities for work experience in schools.

Employability was a key concern for parents across the groups, and strongly influenced how they viewed the education system and the value they placed on it. As a result, parents often characterised secondary education as a 'trajectory', seeing each assessment stage as a 'stepping stone' necessary to reach the next phase - culminating in employment. Alongside this, a key concern for parents related to the amount of pressure the current secondary system places on students, particularly related to exams and workload. Their priority was to maximise their child's attainment, to achieve the best possible employment outcome, while minimising stress and negative impacts on wellbeing.

Parents' attitudes towards choice

Parents were highly supportive of choice in the education system - most parents agreed that it is a good thing young people can drop subjects and focus on what they enjoy (71%) or get good grades in (75%). Parents said that their child's decisions about what to study after age 14 were based on their child's preferences and abilities. Parents were mostly unsupportive of removing this flexibility from a future system, as they wanted their children to obtain the best grades they could and to enjoy school.

Though parents valued choice and tended to defer to their child's preferences, there was some recognition among parents that the timing of this choice was too early, and some children do not make sound choices. Nearly half of parents (45%) think that young people should not have complete freedom to choose the subjects they study until 17 or 18 (30% think this should wait until 18 or older).

While the majority of parents (62%) felt confident that young people can make informed decisions about which subjects to study, this still leaves more than a third of parents (37%) who felt that young people are not capable of making informed choices.

Parents views on alternatives to the current system

Parents had limited awareness of curriculums outside the UK, which is not surprising given their limited engagement with the current system. Only four in ten (39%) of parents had heard of education systems in other countries based on a broad and balanced curriculum, though parents who had a degree or higher level of education were more likely to have heard of other education systems (54% compared with 33% of parents who do not have a university education). Parents from higher socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to be aware of the International Baccalaureate (IB), though it was often regarded as an intensive programme and associated with gifted children. Parents had a reasonably positive response to the French Baccalaureate because grades could be weighted towards a specialism, meaning children's overall attainment would not be affected if they struggled in a particular subject.

Parents' views on broad and balanced

Initially parents responded somewhat negatively to the concept of a broader curriculum and had automatically assumed that more subjects would mean a larger workload and more stress for their children. In particular, maths and science were seen as challenging subjects (especially as currently taught at age 16-18) that students often struggled with and, for this reason, parents disliked the idea of these subjects being compulsory up to age 18.

Though English, and, to a lesser extent, maths were considered core subjects broadly relevant to many careers, science was regarded as a more specialist subject linked to specific careers. Parents struggled to make the connection between studying science and gaining broader skills (e.g. problem-solving skills) that could be transferrable to personal or professional lives, and thus were sceptical of a broader curriculum with compulsory science up to age 18. While it was easier for parents to recognise numeracy skills that could be gained from studying maths, they still felt that A-level maths as currently taught was too abstract and difficult to be open to all students.

Parents also questioned whether breadth was appropriate for all students, such as those already certain about their future career. Parents felt that students should not be forced to continue with subjects they are not interested in, or that are not relevant to their career, linking back to their 'trajectory' mindset. In the qualitative research it was clear that parents did not automatically see the value in studying a broader range of subjects.

Despite these concerns, parents were not against the idea of a broad and balanced curriculum in the future. Though some parents had concerns a new secondary education might stop young people achieving the best results they could (30% agreed) and stop young people enjoying education (28% agreed), more disagreed (38% disagreed) with both statements.

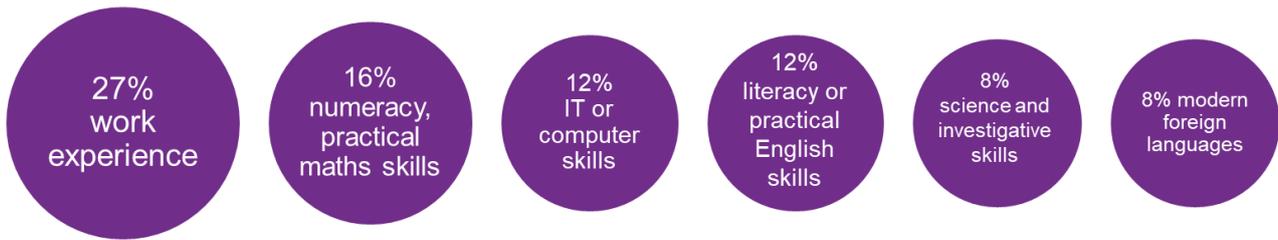
Parents were much more receptive to the idea of compulsory core skills than compulsory core subjects (for example, being more positive about 'literacy skills' than 'English'). Core skills resonated with parents as it responded to their concerns about the lack of practical skills and work experience in the current curriculum. Notably, parents did not associate 'core skills' with a higher workload or increased assessment and felt opportunities for applied or vocational work would lead to better employment outcomes. In particular, parents responded positively to numeracy and practical applications of maths like budgeting.

The ideal curriculum

When asked about the elements they would like to include in a future curriculum, parents were strongly in favour of work experience placements: more than half (54%) of all parents selected this in their top three and more than a quarter (27%) selected it as their number one priority. Numeracy and practical maths skills, and IT and computer skills also featured very strongly – with around one in four parents selecting either within their top 3. This underscores parents' preference for skills they regard as practical and more directly relevant beyond education.

54% of parents said that work experience placements should be a priority

Parents' priorities for elements to include in a broad and balanced curriculum:



Given concerns about employability, parents were highly motivated by the idea of addressing a 'skills gap', but they saw this more in terms of work experience skills rather than increasing maths and science skills. Because science continues to be associated with specialist careers, there was relatively low support for studying science in its current form post-16. However, when science was framed in a more practical way and connected to a broader range of careers and skills, parents were more positive.

Drivers of support for breadth

Though parents had not considered changing the current post-16 curriculum, there was more appetite for change where they believed a broad and balanced curriculum might address some of the concerns they raised about the current system. Given parents' concern that the secondary education system isn't preparing young people for adult life, work experience and practical, core skills were a priority for a future system. A broad and balanced curriculum would attract more support from parents if it addressed concerns about pressure and workload, for example moving away from a strong focus on assessment and results, weighting assessment to specialisms, and making very clear that more subjects will not translate into higher workload, leading to more pressure. Though parents supported the idea of breadth of theory, they still desired an element of choice and their child's ability to personalise their experience by focussing on preferred subjects or strength areas.

Parents' were most influenced by the following issues:



1. Background and methodology

1.1 Background

In 2014, The Royal Society set out its vision for the future of science and maths education: to raise the general level of mathematical and scientific knowledge and confidence among the UK population. This goal underpins a number of related outcomes:

- a scientifically informed population will be better empowered to engage meaningfully in the technological and ethical debates facing society as scientific solutions are proposed to problems of climate change, food security and energy needs.¹
- the UK labour market is undergoing significant transformation in response to increasing and projected automation, globalisation, and demands on productivity - meaning that young people now are likely to enter a job market that demands resilience, adaptability, and lifelong learning.²

Stronger numeracy and problem-solving skills conferred by studying science and maths will help to prepare young people for the future of work, along with a broader mix of skills.³ Increasingly, educators and stakeholders are considering different approaches to education that value breadth instead of depth up to age 18, are less narrowly focussed on university entrance, and provide a rounded skillset that will prepare young people for jobs that do not yet exist.⁴

Though there is more work to be done to scope and refine what a broad and balanced curriculum from ages 14-18 might look like, The Royal Society has already begun to explore the impacts of various educational reforms to secondary education. Conceptions of a broad and balanced curriculum could include:

- Compulsory or advised balance in the subjects that students take at A-level or BTEC
- The inclusion of core skills or 'softer skills' that students take post-14 or post-16
- Adopting a baccalaureate or major-minor approach, with a broader range of skills on offer
- Blending academic with technical learning.

Realising a broad and balanced curriculum is an ambitious goal that will require engagement, debate and consensus-building across a diverse range of stakeholders including government, educators, businesses and citizens. Parents are a key stakeholder group, yet little research has been done to engage parents on the curriculum. The Royal Society commissioned Kantar Public to conduct research with parents to understand how they might respond to the idea of moving to a broad and balanced curriculum in the future.

1.2 Aims and Objectives

The overall aim of the research was to explore the factors that are likely to influence parents' views of curriculum change – in terms of breadth and the inclusion of more maths and science up to age 18. Specifically,

¹ Vision for science and mathematics education, The Royal Society, 2014

² Future of Skills & Lifelong Learning, Government Office for Science, 2017

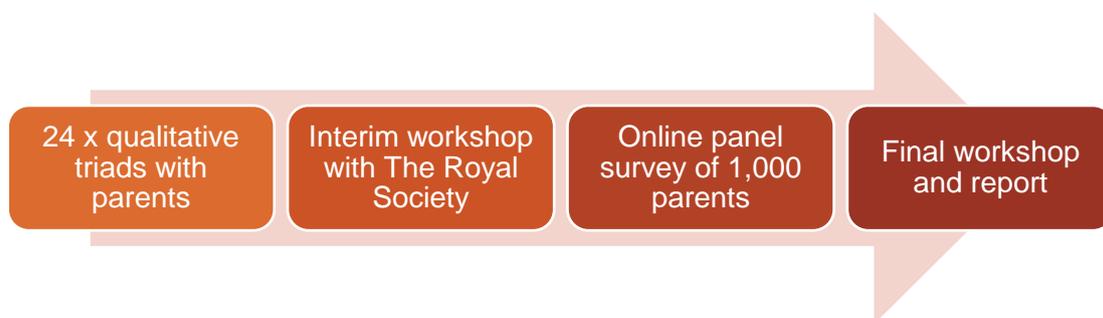
³ The Growing Importance of Social Skills in the Labor Market ... *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 132:4, Nov 2017

⁴ Vision for science and mathematics education, The Royal Society, 2014

the research sought to determine the kinds of narratives that parents are likely to be receptive to, and how this differs among different groups. The research aims were to:

- Understand awareness, understanding and perceptions of the curriculum now – to explore the levels of engagement in the content of the curriculum, whether parents and carers are broadly satisfied or dissatisfied with the status quo of post-16 and post-18 options, and the drivers of this
- Understand parents' attitudes towards maths and science education and learning up to age 18, in terms of the link they make with future earnings/employability, whether these subjects are believed to have intrinsic value outside of employment/careers, and whether these are subjects that are 'open to all' at a post-16 level
- Explore parents' reactions to the idea of a broad and balanced curriculum, and the idea of including more maths and science in the curriculum, in terms of:
 - Feelings about this being compulsory, advisory, or encouraged
 - Views about this being subject based, or about the development of 'core skills'
 - Attitudes towards more radical reform to the system – moving towards a baccalaureate style or major-minor approach, using other countries as examples.
- Explore the kinds of framing and narratives about broadening the curriculum that parents and carers will be most receptive to, and those that they may find less convincing – uncovering which are the most effective and motivating narrative territories for parents
- Across all objectives, understand how views differ by parents' socio-economic background, the age and gender of their child, ethnicity, and their own educational / professional background – to indicate the kinds of messages and framings that may be more attractive to particular groups.

1.3 Overview of methodology



This study used a mixed-method, iterative approach to research, with each stage of research building on emerging insight and developing hypotheses. Kantar Public first conducted qualitative 'friendship' triads with parents to discuss the issues in a naturalised environment. Following the qualitative stage, Kantar Public held an interim workshop with The Royal Society team to agree the questionnaire content. Finally, Kantar Public conducted a survey with 1,000 parents of 11-24-year olds.

1.3.1 Qualitative triads

The qualitative stage of this research comprised of 24 in-home triads with parents and carers (72 parents in total). Triads are mini-focus groups of three people and offer the same generative group dynamics of a focus group in a more intimate setting. Triads were recruited as 'friendship' triads, meaning that respondents knew and were comfortable with one another and shared things in common, which helped to generate a

naturalistic dynamic. This also allowed for more openness from parents and encouraged conversations about children’s attainment (as well as challenges), abilities and futures.

Each triad was conducted in one of the respondents’ homes and lasted for approximately 90 minutes, using a semi-structured topic guide (see Appendix A) and stimulus materials illustrating early ideas of what a broad and balanced curriculum could look like (see Appendix B). All triads were audio recorded, and (with consent) some of the triads were filmed by researchers and developed into a short video to bring the research findings to life.

Qualitative fieldwork took place between October and November 2018 in Greater London, Newcastle, Manchester, and Birmingham. An overview of the qualitative sample can be found in Table 1.1 below.

Table 1.1: Qualitative Sample breakdown: achieved figures

PRIMARY QUOTAS	SEG		SECONDARY QUOTAS	Parental gender		
	AB(C1)	24		Male	20	
	C1C2	24		Female	52	
	DE	24		Single parents	25	
	Gender of child			BAME parents	12	
	Boys Group (Boys)	27		Private school	3	
	Girls Group (Girls)	27		Another child aged over 18	12	
	Mixed Group (Boys)	8		Intended / actual route after age 18	Intention (under 18)	Route (over 18)
	Mixed Group (Girls)	10		University	28	8
	Age range of child			Vocational / apprenticeship	8	1
	11-14	27		Work (not going to university)	2	7
	14-18	27		Undecided	16	n/a
	18-24	18		Other		2
Total:	72 parents					

1.4 Analysis

Qualitative interviews were digitally recorded, with participant consent. The material was thematically organised and analysed using a ‘Matrix Mapping’ approach. This involved summarising all the recorded material into an analytical framework, allowing systematic thematic analysis. This robust analytical method allows researchers to draw out the diversity of opinions expressed by participants, as well as identifying common themes across interviews. Two analysis sessions were attended by the research team, after each phase of research, to discuss emerging themes from the interviews and explore how they integrated with the survey findings.

Throughout the report, verbatim quotes are used to illustrate findings. To provide additional detail, quotes are labelled with parental gender, ethnicity and socio-economic grade (SEG).

For example:

“Quote.” (Mum, White British, C1C2)

1.4.1 Interim Workshop

Following analysis of the qualitative triads, Kantar Public held an interim workshop with the Royal Society to present emerging findings and discuss the implications for the survey. It was decided that the questionnaire would focus on measuring attitudes towards the broad idea of this curriculum change i.e. whether parents support the principles and explore what subjects / type of learning parents would value the most if the curriculum was changed.

Using the qualitative findings, Kantar Public in collaboration with the Royal Society developed a brief description of a broad and balanced curriculum to be used in the survey. This description was based on parents' current concerns and areas of potential confusion. This description is provided below:

“We are interested in parents' views on introducing a new type of secondary education in this country. Young people would still have choice over what they learn and be able to specialise in areas they enjoy or excel in. However, they would need to continue a wider range of subjects and learning experiences to ensure they develop a broad range of skills up to age 18. This might include compulsory work experience, elements of numeracy, practical maths and problem solving, languages, IT, or science and technology. The overall number of tests and assessments and the total amount of study time would be kept to the same level as it is now - they would not be doing more work overall.”

1.4.2 Online panel survey of parents

An online survey of 1,000 parents of 11-24-year olds in England was carried out using Kantar's Lightspeed Panel. Members of the panel (pre-selected based on having children) were invited to take part by email. Parents qualified to take part if they confirmed that had at least one child aged between 11 and 24 that they were responsible for. To ensure a good cross-section of parents were surveyed, quotas were set on parent gender and age of children.

All surveys were completed between 28 November and 5 December 2018. On average it took parents five minutes to complete. A copy of the questionnaire is provided in Appendix C. Data were weighted to population estimates derived from the ONS Labour Force Survey – to further ensure the findings were representative by parent gender, parent education level, government office region (GOR), and age of children.

The table below provides a summary of the profile of the interviewed sample and the profile of the final weighted population figures.

Table 1.2. Sample profile and weighted population statistics

		Interviewed sample (n)	Weighted population
Parent gender	Male	400	442
	Female	598	556
Parent age	29 or younger	15	12
	30-34 years	65	54
	35-39 years	132	118
	40-44 years	184	168
	45-49 years	206	206
	50-54 years	175	191
	55-59 years	141	159
	60 or older	76	87
Parent ethnicity	White	871	874
	BAME	114	110
Parent highest qualification	First Degree, or higher	303	290
	Higher National Certificates (HNC), Diplomas (HND) or equivalent	103	107
	Certificates of Higher Education or equivalent	57	59
	A-levels, Vocational Level 3 qualifications or equivalent	202	199
	5 GCSEs A*-C, Vocational Level 2 qualifications or equivalent	191	201
	GCSEs - grades D-G, Vocational Level 1 qualifications or equivalent	102	105
	Entry Level qualifications (including functional skills and foundation learning)	15	14
	No formal qualifications	27	26
Social grade	A	154	155
	B	258	257
	C1	207	204
	C2	167	171
	D	112	113
	E	102	100
Region	London	125	151
	South East	160	168
	South West	73	94
	East of England	132	116
	Midlands	214	195
	North West	146	136
	North East/Yorkshire/The Humber	150	140
Key Stage of children	KS3 - 11-14	411	361
	KS4-5- 14-18	429	417
	Older children - 19-24	444	535

2. Knowledge of and attitudes towards the current secondary school system

This section explores parents' understanding of the current secondary education system, awareness of recent changes, and their attitudes towards the current curriculum.

2.1 Current knowledge

Parents' knowledge of the current curriculum varied. Though they were aware of the 'basics' of how secondary education was structured, parents were relatively disengaged from the detail. Information about the curriculum was primarily received through children, rather than as a result of direct engagement with the school. Parents remarked on the difference between secondary and primary school; where parents felt teachers were more inclined to keep them updated on their child's progress and curriculum developments. Some parents were more knowledgeable however: in the qualitative triads, parents with older children demonstrated greater familiarity with the system; and mothers tended to know more than fathers.

How much parents felt they knew varied by parental gender and socio-economic grade (SEG). The qualitative research showed that while men were not as well informed as women, they expressed more confidence in their understanding. The survey reflected this gender bias in perceived levels of knowledge: men were more likely than women to say they felt well informed about their child's secondary education. Based on findings from the qualitative research, this is likely to be an over-claim rather than genuinely higher levels of knowledge.

Table 2.1. How well-informed parents feel children's secondary education

		Well informed (very / quite well informed)	Not well informed (not very well / not well informed at all)
Parental gender	Male	81%	18%
	Female	65%	34%
Parental education level	Degree level or higher	77%	22%
	Lower level	70%	29%
Ethnicity	White	72%	27%
	BAME	79%	20%

Q_inform. How well-informed do/did you feel about your child's/children's secondary education? All respondents (1,000).
Note: Figures sum to 99% due to rounding and because a small proportion of parents (generally 1% in all groups) said they didn't know.

The survey also showed that parents with lower than a degree level of education felt less informed (29%) compared to parents with a degree or higher (22%). BAME parents tended to feel slightly better informed about their children's secondary education than White parents. Parents from lower SEGs appeared to have lower levels of knowledge about their child's secondary education and were less confident about how much they knew.

2.2 Awareness of changes to the curriculum

Lack of knowledge about the curriculum in part contributed to parents' lack of interest in questioning the current secondary education system. The current system was familiar – parents felt it had not changed much from what they experienced when they were at school – and parents had not thought to question it before. This was in spite of being aware of recent changes to the curriculum. For example, parents generally knew about the introduction of mandatory education until age 18. Some, but not all, parents from lower SEGs regarded the extension of mandatory education as a 'waste of time' if they did not think their child was particularly academic or their child had planned to work in a trade profession at age 16. On the other hand, some parents supported the extension of mandatory education as they believed it would ensure children left school with a better understanding of their chosen career path, or with more qualifications. Views differed based on parents' understanding of the individual capabilities of the child in question; they recognised what works for one child might not suit another, particularly if they had more than one child.

"The situation you want to avoid is that anyone who doesn't go on to do A-levels feels like they've failed. You want to be able to celebrate whatever they've achieved...there's too much focus on everyone going to university, and it's not for everyone." (Mum, White British, C1C2)

"If they are choosing to stay in education that is good for them because they want to be in education and want to learn. But if you don't want to be in education you are not going to learn." (Mum, White British, C1C2)

Parents were also aware of the new GCSE grading system, although some were bewildered by the change and felt that there had been little explanation of the rationale behind it. These parents were uneasy about whether employers would understand it and be able to recognise good grades.

"Find something that works well and stop chopping and changing. Everyone was happy with A-Cs and this 1-9 doesn't work and the kids don't react well to it and mainly because they don't understand because it is new" (Mum, White British, AB(C1))

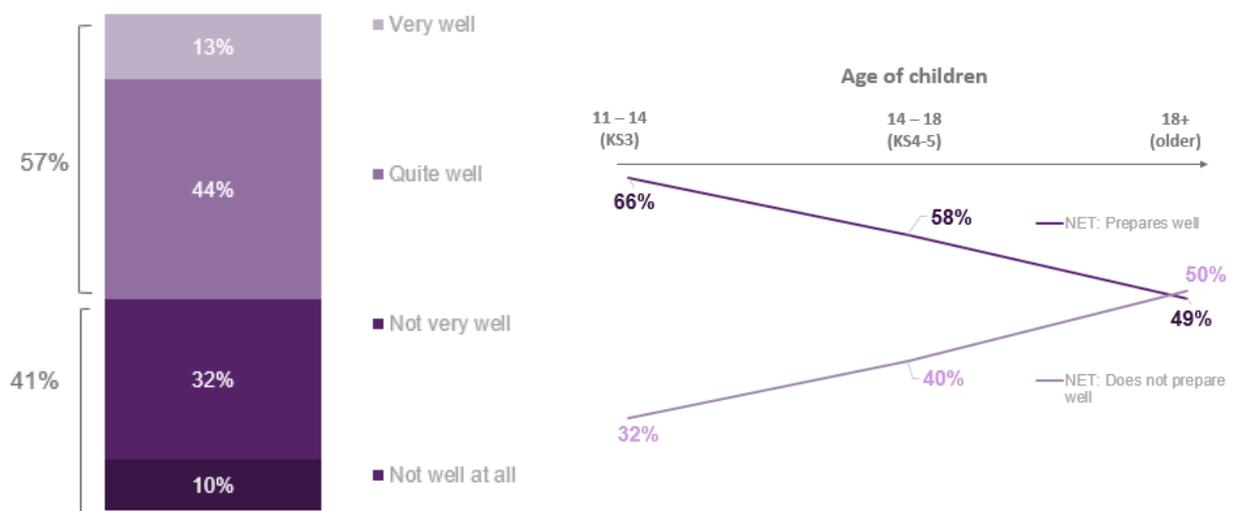
2.3 Perceptions of the system

Some parents appeared to have concerns about how well the current system prepares children for adult life. As shown in Figure 2.1, more than half (57%) of parents believed the current system prepares children 'well' for adult life, but only one in eight (13%) felt the system prepares them 'very well'. Strikingly, four in ten parents (41%) surveyed felt the system did not prepare children well for adult life.

"I don't think school does prepare you for work. I don't think children these days are prepared to work." (Dad, Black British, AB1)

This suggests parents were dissatisfied with the status quo, despite the fact that they had not really questioned or challenged the secondary education system.

Figure 2.1. How well parents feel the education system prepares children for adult life



Q_adult. 'Overall, how well do you think the education system prepares children for adult life when they leave school/college or training?' All respondents (1,000).

Parents with at least one adult child (aged 18 or older) were the most negative about the system: half (50%) felt the education system did not prepare children well for adult life (equal to the proportion who felt it did). The decline of support in the system as children get older could be interpreted in a number of ways: while initially optimistic, perhaps as parents observe their children struggling with exams, the reality of the system and the transition into adult life they may become more negative about the education system.

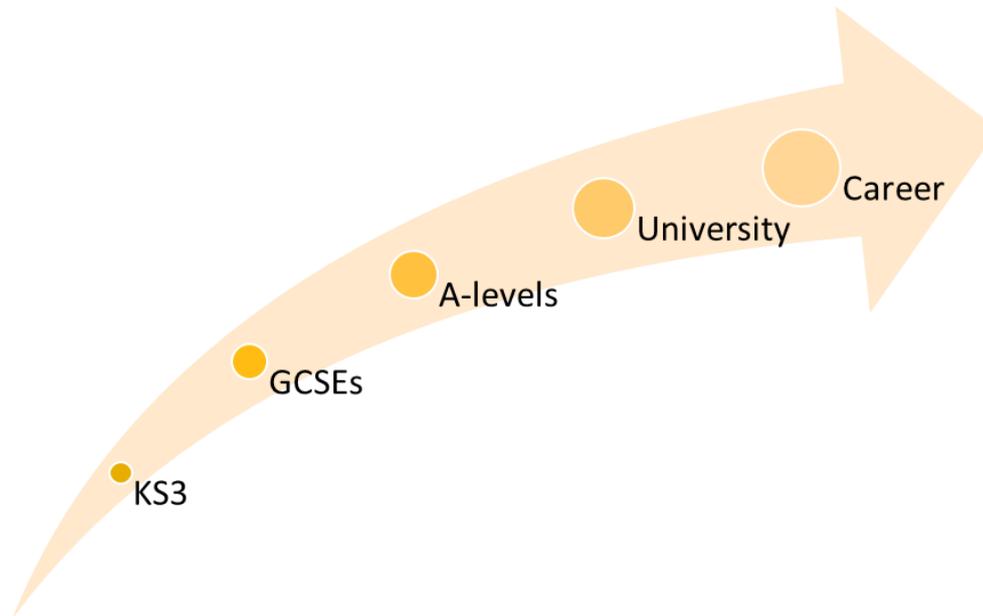
Views about the system also varied by social grade with parents from higher SEGs being more positive, suggesting that parents from lower SEGs did not feel the curriculum prepares their child for the type of work they envisage their child will do. The qualitative research found that parents from lower SEGs did not always expect their child to continue to higher education post 18 but expected their child would work in retail or the service industry. This could perhaps suggest that parents from higher social grades expect less from schools in relation to preparing their child for adult and work life and take on more responsibility themselves because they expect their child to continue to higher education.

In the quantitative survey the majority of AB parents (61%) felt the current system did prepare children well for adult life, this dropped to 56% of C1C2 parents and just 49% of DE parents. There are various possible explanations for this. In the qualitative triads, DE parents often were thinking about a future where their children would progress straight into work rather than continuing post-18 education and could regard the education system as more geared towards university preparation. Employability was a key concern for parents across groups. They saw the education system as a pathway to the labour market and each assessment stage a 'stepping stone' to the next phase before employment. Parents who expected their child to attend university had employment in mind as the ultimate goal of education

"If [my child] talks about [their post 16 options], I will say you have to work hard and get your head down at school if you want a good job at the end of it." (Mum, White British, C1C2)

"We've had many conversations my husband, son and I together. We've also taken him to meetings at school and other places to try to think about the steps... You know you've got to get this for your GCSEs if you want to do this, and then you need to get that to do that. We explained to him that all of these things are little stepping stones to get to the bigger picture at the end. (Mum, White British, ABC1)

Figure 2.2: Education perceived as a 'stepping stone'



There are a range of concerns about the current system. These included:

- a lack of work experience
- large workloads putting pressure on students to pass exams
- little flexibility within the curriculum.

The removal of work experience placements from some schools or limited duration of work experience in others contributed to parents feeling that their child was not adequately prepared for the workplace. Parents felt the current education system was too disconnected from the world of work and thus did not provide young people with relevant skills for entering the workforce. There was a strong desire for more practical, workplace-based experience across groups.

In the triads parents often raised concerns about the amount of pressure secondary school students are under. This was a particularly strong sentiment among DE parents who might describe their child as 'less academic' so wanted them to 'get through' the education system while minimising any stress or anxiety it may cause. Minimising stress was a common theme across the triads. All parents were concerned about their child's mental health and the pressure students face under the current system, particularly related to assessments and workload. Parents often spoke about the balance between their child maximising attainment while managing pressure. This attitude sometimes led parents to support their child to focus on subjects they excelled in or found easy, to ensure that they would get good grades with less pressure. The implications of this for a broad and balanced curriculum are discussed in chapter five.

Parents also highlighted a perceived lack of flexibility in the current curriculum. Flexibility was particularly important to them because they recognised the diversity of learning styles and academic abilities among young people and how this influenced attainment. Parents with more than one child particularly felt this way. Further, parents with children with special educational needs felt that elements of the current system do not always fully respond to their child's needs, i.e., staying in education until age 18 when they would rather leave school and begin working. Parents commonly felt that schools often made choices in their own interests – to get good results – rather than act in the interest of students.

"They aspire for the Ofsted. They're trying to tick the boxes. And really, they're missing the whole point of everything." (Dad, White British, DE)

"The school had already segmented those children. There are 3 or 4 pathways and I personally think it is all done on ability to get the results and targets for the school." (Mum, White British, DE)

When asked initially, parents did not feel strongly about curriculum change because they had not spent much time considering an alternative system or their role in shaping it. But through exploration parents revealed that there are elements of the current system they are dissatisfied with, such as the pressure it puts on students and a lack of personalisation to individuals. Additionally, parents were concerned about how well the curriculum prepares their child for adult life and the world of work. Consequently, they would like to see a system that allows for a degree of flexibility, giving young people the chance to personalise the curriculum based on their interests and abilities. This is explored in the following section.

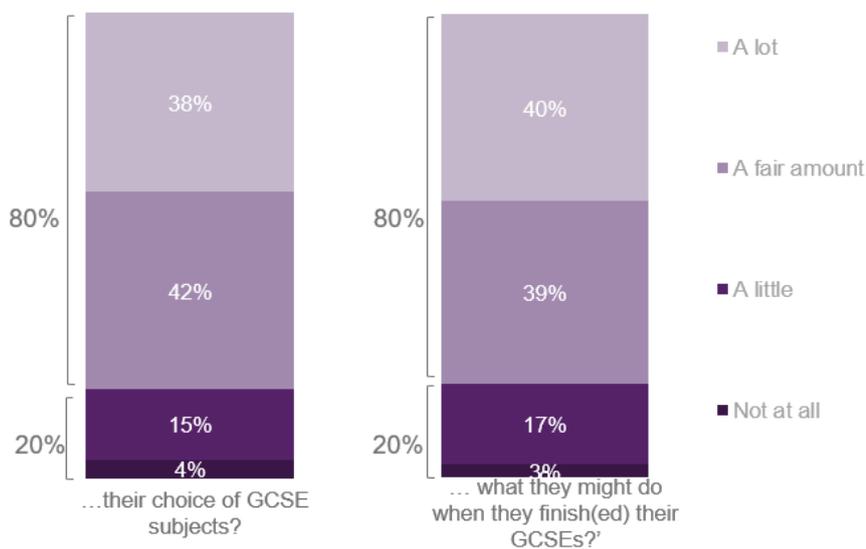
3. Parents' attitudes towards choice

This section explores parents' engagement with their child's secondary education choices and parents' perceptions of choice.

3.1 Engagement with children's education choices

The quantitative and qualitative research showed that while most parents talked to their child about their post 16 and 18 options, parents from higher SEGs are more likely to do so.

Figure 3.1. How much parents have talked to their children about their choices



Q_Y10 'How much have you talked or did you talk with your children about their choice of GCSE subjects?' All respondents (1000).

Q_Y12 'How much have you talked or did you talk with your children about what they might do when they finish(ed) their GCSEs?' All respondents (1,000).

As shown in Figure 3.1, the majority of parents had talked to their children about their choice of GCSE subjects and what they might do when they had finished their GCSEs. Eight in ten parents said they had talked 'a lot' or 'a fair amount' about this. With only very few parents (4% and 3% respectively) stating they had not talked with their children 'at all' about these choices.

There were pronounced differences in responses by social grade. AB parents were more likely to say they had talked to their children 'a lot' about their choices, whereas DE parents were least likely to have talked 'a lot' to their children about their choices.

- Over four in ten AB parents (44% compared with 35% C1C2 and 30% DE) said they talked 'a lot' about their children's GCSE subject choices
- Nearly half of AB parents (47% compared with 38% C1C2 and 32% DE) talked 'a lot' about their choices after they finished GCSEs.

It may be that some parents from lower social grades feel less equipped to talk to their children about their choices. In the qualitative triads, parents from lower SEGs acknowledged that they did not always understand the secondary school education system and were less likely to have experience with Higher Education, thus they were less confident in guiding their child's decisions.

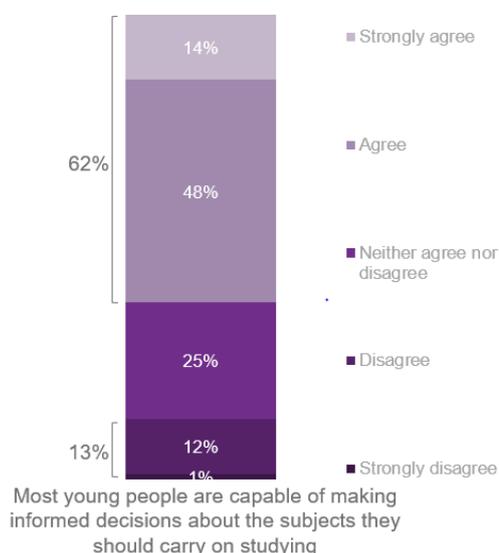
"I don't have a clue, they send me the reports home and I don't understand. It doesn't mean anything to me about what grades he's got." (Dad, White British, C1C2)

When discussing how their children choose subjects (and careers), parents in the triads said they provide advice rather than try to influence their child's decisions. Conversations tended not to be directive but were more child-led; decisions were based on the individual preferences of the child and their perception of what was attainable. Parents felt that their children were usually realistic about what they could achieve and were comfortable being led by their child when discussing which subjects to choose for GCSE or A-level.

3.2 Perceived capability of young people to make informed decisions

The survey suggests that, on the whole, parents were confident that young people can make informed choices about which subjects to study. Nearly two thirds (62%) of surveyed parents agreed that young people are capable of making informed decisions about the subjects they should carry on studying (see Figure 3.2), leaving more than a third (37%) of respondents believing that most young people are not capable making these informed decisions.

Figure 3.2. Parental view of how capable young people are in making informed decisions about their subjects they study



Q._choice_attitude_4 How much do you agree or disagree: Most young people are capable of making informed decisions about the subjects they should carry on studying. All respondents (1,000).

Both strands of research showed that BAME parents were less likely to agree with the statement that young people should have freedom to choose the subjects they study. BAME parents were also more likely to disagree that young people were capable of making informed decisions about the subjects they carry on studying (19% disagreed compared with 13% of White parents).⁵ Similarly, BAME parents were more likely to disagree that it is a good thing young people can drop subjects and focus on what they enjoy (15% disagreed compared with 7% of White parents). This is illustrated by some of the discussions from the qualitative triads.

“My son wanted to do drama, but that is not very practical. So he is doing business studies and he can do drama as an extra-curricular”. (Dad, Black British, ABC1).

The triads confirmed this as White British parents felt they did not have much influence over their child's decisions about what to study. Rather, parents felt their children were influenced by friends, interest, natural aptitude, and teachers. Meanwhile, BAME parents said they were more likely to try to influence their child's subject choices, steering them towards subjects they regarded as practical, such as maths and science, sometimes irrespective of their child's preferences. The subjects chosen were linked to professional career pathways such as medicine or law. Meanwhile, White British parents tended to emphasise the importance of their child being able to drop subjects they disliked or were not good at in an effort to focus on subjects that would give their child the best grades. This view fits with the wider narrative among parents that the current system is considered a stepping stone to enter higher education and employment, where there is little value placed on other aspects of learning.

3.3 Perceptions of choice

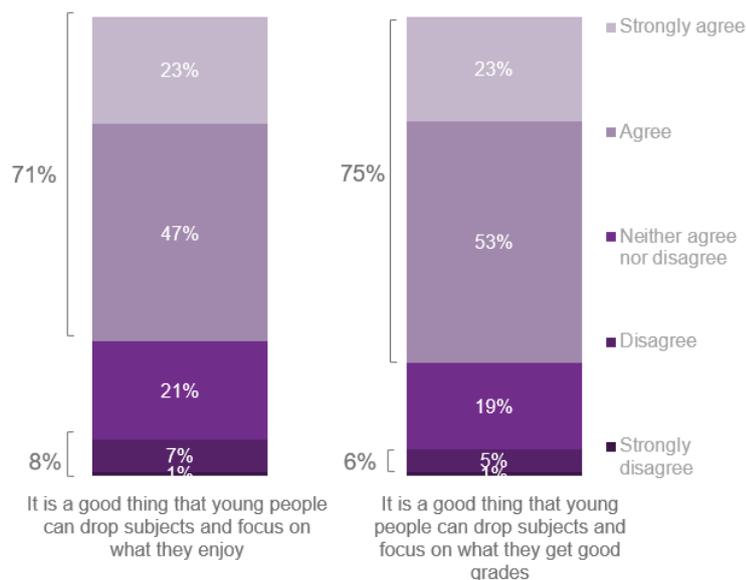
Views about choice were underpinned by parents' dual interests in their child's current happiness and mental health and building chances of success in the future which they linked to good GCSE attainment. Parents valued choice because it:

- gives their child the opportunity to only study subjects that interest them and drop subjects they are not good at or do not enjoy;
- allows for a degree of flexibility within the curriculum and was linked to pursuing their child's strengths and discarding subjects where their child was perceived to be weaker;
- promotes specialising in a subject or specific discipline, reducing time spent on 'irrelevant' subjects.

The survey findings reinforced parents' support for choice. The majority of parents agreed that it is a good thing young people can drop subjects and focus on subjects they are good at or enjoy – as seen below in Figure 3.3. Parents recognised a number of additional benefits to young people being able to drop subjects at age 16, as allowed in the current education system. Most notably, three quarters (75%) agreed it was good that young people could drop subjects and focus on what they get good grades in (as shown in Figure 3.3). Seven in ten (71%) also agreed it was good that young people can drop subjects to focus on what they enjoy. Both the qualitative interviews and survey found that parents valued choice as it was seen to facilitate educational success and enjoyment.

⁵ This difference was not quite significant at the conventional $p < 0.05$ level, but is consistent with findings from the qualitative research.

Figure 3.3. Parents' views on children dropping subjects



Q._choice_attitude_1 How much do you agree or disagree: - It is a good thing that young people can drop subjects and focus on what they get good grades in. All respondents (1,000).

Q._choice_attitude_2 How much do you agree or disagree: - It is a good thing that young people can drop subjects and focus on what they enjoy. All respondents (1,000).

The research findings suggest that there is an engrained expectation of choice in the current secondary school education system. However, while parents valued choice, they could also see that breadth offered students choice in the longer term, allowing young people to make more informed decisions later. Notably, choice was still important to parents and this was particularly resonant for parents of children who were unsure about what they wanted to do in the future or had changed their mind.

3.4 Perceptions about when choices should be made

Even though parents valued choice and most of them trusted their child to make these decisions for themselves, parents also felt that choice came too early. When parents were asked at what age they believed young people should have total freedom to choose what they learn, almost a third (30%) said 18 or older.

This was a common theme in the qualitative triads - though parents generally trusted their child to choose subjects that were right for them, there was some recognition among parents in the triads that young people do not always have the ability to make sound decisions at age 14 – 16. Parents cited a range of factors, including that their child might:

- follow their friends' choices
- change their minds or not understand what the course involves until they start it
- make impractical choices
- be unsure about what they want to do in the future.

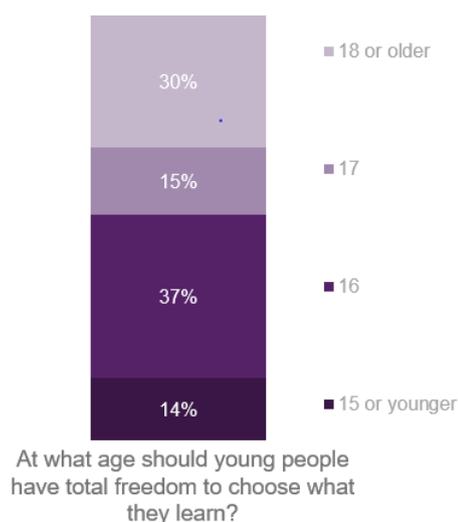
In the qualitative triads, parents often said that choice suited some children better than others – especially if they had more than one child. Parents recognised that children have different needs and while some are ready to choose, others may be less able to make decisions about their future at age 16.

"From 14 to 18 is a million miles away...I don't want to ruin his childhood by getting him to think too much about what he wants to do. I want him to enjoy the here and now." (Mum, White British, DE)

"I think he'll just follow his friends...They do just kind of follow their friends [when they make GCSE choices]." (Mum, White British, C1C2)

"It's all dead confusing. I think if they've dropped lessons and things, you're limited again in the future, when it comes to choosing post-GCSE subjects, because of choices you made when you really didn't know what you were making. You just didn't take that lesson because you didn't like it." (Mum, White British, C1C2)

Figure 3.4. What age should young people have total freedom to choose what they study



Q_age_choice. At what age do you think young people should have total freedom to choose what they learn? All respondents (1,000).

The survey asked parents what they thought might be the right age for choice. As shown in Figure 3.4, there were two distinct spikes in responses – at age 16 (37%) and at age 18 (30%). This reflects two points in the current education system where young people have opportunity to choose what they study⁶, so it may be that parents responded with that in mind. Very few parents felt that young people should choose at 15 or younger (14%). Given that some secondary schools now require students to choose their GCSE subjects in Year 8 at 13 years old, this finding suggests that parents are unsatisfied with this aspect of the system.

"What I wanted to do at 14 isn't what I ended up doing, so I think the wider your options are at that stage the better." (Dad, White British, DE)

"[My daughter] picked subjects in line with becoming a nursery nurse, but when she left school she changed her mind straight away and went to work on trains instead. Other GCSE subjects would have been more suitable, like geography." (Mum, White British, C1C2)

"Sixteen is a very young age to make lifelong decisions, decisions that are going to be your full future, your lifestyle for ever." (Mum, White British, DE)

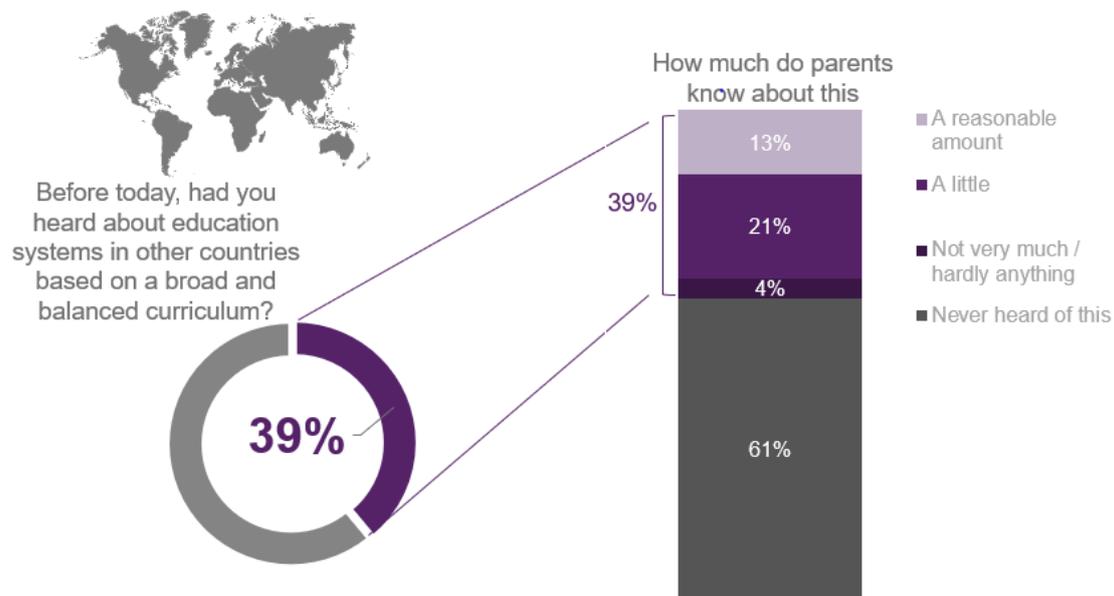
⁶ Not in terms of when pupils make the decision, but in terms of when they begin studying their chosen subjects.

4. Alternative curriculums

4.1 Awareness of international curriculums

Parents had very limited awareness of other education systems outside the UK. This reinforces the finding that parents have not really considered alternatives to the current UK system before.

Figure 4.1. Parental awareness of other education systems



Q_aware1 'Before today, had you heard about education systems in other countries based on a broad and balanced curriculum?' All respondents (1,000)

Q_aware2 'And how much would you say you knew about this?' All respondents (1,000)

As shown in Figure 4.1, the majority (61%) of parents had never heard of education systems in other countries based on a broad and balanced curriculum. While four in ten (39%) said they had heard of such systems, only around one in seven of parents (13%) felt they knew 'a reasonable amount' about other curriculums.

Parents who had a degree or higher level of education were more likely to have heard of other education systems (54% compared with 33% of parents whose highest level of education was lower than degree). BAME parents were also more likely to be aware of other education systems (45% compared with 38% of white parents). In addition, parents of compulsory school age children (KS3-5 or age 11-18) were more likely to be aware of other education systems (43% compared with 34% of parents with older children).

4.2 Reactions to alternative curriculums

While awareness was low, spontaneous reactions to international systems were captured in the triads by introducing participants to three systems: The International Baccalaureate (IB), the Australian education system and the French Baccalaureate. When considering these systems parents in the triads began to explore the idea of breadth.

Figure 4.2. From stimulus presented to parents during qualitative triads

How does the UK compare to other approaches for study options at age 16?



Reflecting the quantitative results, parents had low awareness of these systems, though some higher to mid-SEG parents were familiar with the International Baccalaureate (IB). Among those somewhat aware, there was a perception that the IB system was very complicated and that it was reserved for the most intelligent children. This was confirmed when parents read the stimulus materials (Figure 4.2). Parents described the system as 'rigid', 'hardcore', 'structured' and 'extreme'. Their main concern was that children were required to study six core subjects – they felt this was too much – it was spontaneously read as doubling what is required from students at A-Level in the UK and reducing choice.

"[The International Baccalaureate] doesn't give you the choice, whereas I think if you're studying subjects in depth they should be subjects that you have an interest in. Because to study subjects that you don't like, or you find boring is miserable." (Mum, White British, AB(C1))

"6 core subjects would be [my child's] worst nightmare because they are the subjects he didn't like at school. If he was forced to do them after the age of 16 he would lose the will." (Mum, White British, DE)

In response to learning about the Australian education system, parents were surprised that the curriculum did not include maths as a core subject and that the only compulsory subject was English. This indicates that maths is regarded as a core subject, alongside English. Parents found the type of breadth offered in the Australian education system appealing because students could choose subjects they enjoyed or were good at, again highlighting the importance of choice and flexibility.

"They can do what they want there, as far as I can see. They can excel there and then they move on." (Dad, White British, DE)

Parents were more positive about the French Baccalaureate due to the breadth offered and the way grades were weighted towards a chosen specialism. Parents liked the fact that students were able to take a range of subjects but were not penalised for being 'bad' at a subject. This links to parents' concerns about exams and

assessments, and their ultimate interest in overall attainment. However, it also demonstrates an appetite for breadth – if parents feel that students can have the benefits of breadth but will not be punished if they 'fail', they could support the idea of a broader curriculum.

"[The French Baccalaureate is] almost geared up to what do you want to do. What career you want to do. It doesn't mean you can only go through the one door, you have a variety of things to choose from."
(Mum, White British, C1C2).

5. Parents views of a new curriculum

This section explores how parents initially reacted to the idea of curriculum breadth, revealing some of their top-of-mind concerns. It then explores more in-depth reactions to a broader curriculum, an exploration of the subjects and skills they regard as 'core', and finally describes the 'ideal' curriculum parents wanted to see.

5.1 Initial reactions to breadth

Parents did not automatically think subject breadth would be a significant improvement on the current system. Initial responses to the idea of a broader curriculum were somewhat negative because breadth was spontaneously associated with a higher volume of work for children, and to a lesser extent less time specialising in a specific subject and wasted time.

When introduced to the idea of breadth, parents inferred an increased workload and more assessment which added to their concerns about their child's mental health. Given the difficulty parents had thinking outside of the current system, they perhaps assumed that 6 subjects would be the equivalent of 6 A-levels.

"The workload is immense, so I think 'no! Why do you want a workload of all them?' Bearing in mind...my (daughter) did two things in college and was stressed when it came to exams and deadlines...Now imagine how much the workload will be with all them!" (Dad, White British, DE)

On the whole, parents disliked the idea of young people studying compulsory subjects until age 18. In part, this was driven by the widespread perception that certain subjects are very difficult, and only suitable for 'very gifted' children. Specifically, maths and science were cited as subjects that children could struggle with. Additionally, parents felt that the nature of teaching these subjects shifted after age 16 to become highly specialist, abstract, and theoretical – and thus not applicable to everyday life.

Parents disagreed with the concept of compulsory subjects as they felt that young people should not be forced to study things they did not like. Some parents (across SEGs) felt that there was no need to continue studying 'core' subjects, believing that by age 16 young people had grasped enough of the 'basics'.

"After 16 you should get to a certain standard and then it should be a choice. It shouldn't be forced on them by someone in government who did their exams 50 years ago and it's nothing like the same." (Mum, White British, C1C2)

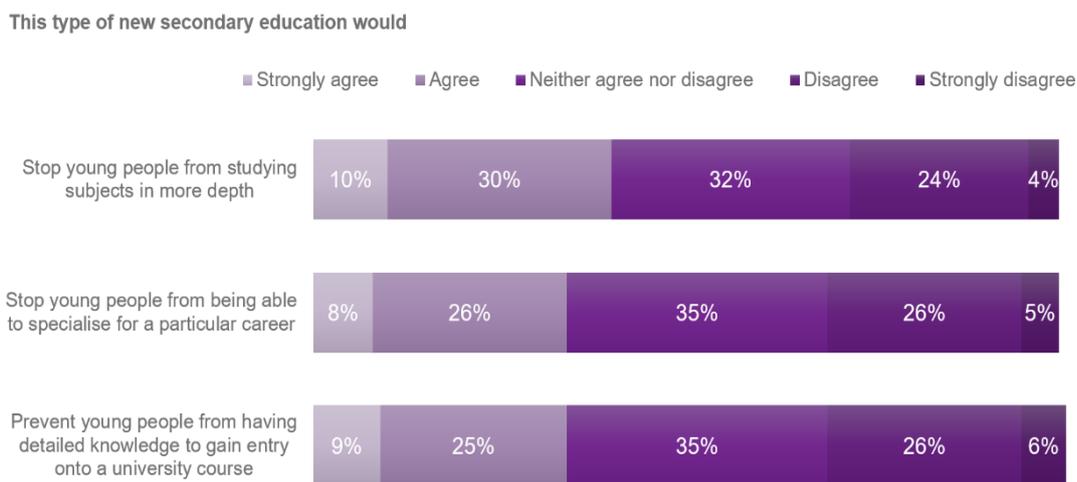
"I think by the time they get to 16 they should have and will have [the skills] already but making them study science is pushing them to do things they might not want to do." (Mum, black British, ABC1)

In the survey, parents were given a description of what a new type of secondary education based on broad and balanced principles could look like (based on the findings from the exploratory qualitative research). They were then asked a series of statements to collect their views on a new type of secondary education based on the description given. The wording presented to parents in the survey is provided below:

“We are interested in parents’ views on introducing a new type of secondary education in this country. Young people would still have choice over what they learn and be able to specialise in areas they enjoy or excel in. However, they would need to continue a wider range of subjects and learning experiences to ensure they develop a broad range of skills up to age 18. This might include compulsory work experience, elements of numeracy, practical maths and problem solving, languages, IT, or science and technology. The overall number of tests and assessments and the total amount of study time would be kept to the same level as it is now - they would not be doing more work overall.”

In line with the qualitative findings, parents in the survey had concerns this new broader type of secondary education could have negative impacts on young people, as shown in Figure 5.1. There were particular concerns a new type of secondary education might put too much pressure on young people to study subjects they do not enjoy: nearly half of parents agreed (47%). Whilst some parents had concerns the new type of secondary education might stop young people achieving the best results they could (30% agreed) and stop young people enjoying education (28% agreed), more disagreed (38% disagreed with both statements) and around a third said neither agree nor disagree (32% and 34% to each statement respectively). This suggests around two thirds of parents do not feel a new type of secondary education would impact young people’s exam results or enjoyment.

Figure 5.1. Parents’ views on the impact a new type of secondary system based would have on young people’s ability to specialise



Q_broad_support. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? All respondents (1,000)

Figure 5.1 shows responses to a series of statements asked in the survey around specialisation, relating to careers, university entrance and depth of study. Parents had mixed views about whether a new type of secondary education would stop young people from specialising in a particular career (34% agreed; 35% neither agree nor disagreed; 32% disagreed). Again, views were mixed about whether a move towards a broad and balanced curriculum would stop young people gaining a detailed knowledge to gain entry onto a university course (34% agreed; 35% neither agreed nor disagreed; 31% disagreed). There was slightly more concern about whether breadth would mean sacrificing depth: 40% of parents agreed that a new curriculum would stop people from studying subjects in more depth. However, specialisation did not emerge as an important issue among parents in the qualitative triads. Taken with the quantitative results, this suggests it is not a top-of-mind issue for most parents.

Specialisation was more important to certain types of parents. AB parents, in particular, were most likely to agree that a new type of secondary education might stop young people from studying subjects in more depth

(46% compared with 38% C1C2 and 34% DE) and that it might stop young people from being able to access a particular career (40% agreed compared with 30% C1C2 and 29% DE). This suggests that AB parents had specific concerns around young people's ability to specialise and potential impacts this could have on their long-term career prospects. AB parents were also almost as concerned about the effect on ability to specialise as they were about the additional pressure or stress a new curriculum might create.

5.2 What parents regard as 'core' subjects

Certain subjects were commonly regarded as 'core' by parents in the qualitative triads – reflecting the current curriculum up to age 16. However, there were mixed views about which subjects could still be regarded as 'core' after age 16 in the context of a broad curriculum. Generally, parents expected to see English as part of a core curriculum, and to some extent, maths.

Parents whose children were taking a vocational route questioned the value of studying English after age 16, but in general parents regarded English as a core subject with wide applicability. Similarly to English, maths was considered a core subject, yet as discussed it was not regarded as an appropriate subject for everyone after age 16. Despite this, parents recognised the value of maths – as a subject associated with higher paid careers. BAME parents in the triads were more supportive of their children taking maths as a result.

"I do think Maths because there are a lot of high paid jobs out there that do involve maths." (Mum, White British, C1C2)

Views differed in relation to science which was regarded as a particularly specialist subject, connected to careers requiring specific qualifications. Parents felt that the sciences were only for students who had an interest in and aptitude for them – with physics and chemistry felt to be particularly challenging. Even more than maths, science after age 16 was seen as very abstract, and parents did not immediately recognise the broader skills gained as part of studying science (whereas there was recognition that basic numeracy has been useful in their personal and professional life).

"I think you need maths, I don't think you need science. You need maths, simple maths, basic maths to do daily things." (Mum, black British, C1C2)

In the qualitative triads there was mixed resonance with the idea that studying maths or science equips young people with problem-solving skills. While motivating for some parents, it contradicted existing views for others, who wanted more information about how skills were transferable from these subjects.

Overall, reactions to the idea of a compulsory curriculum including core subjects was met with scepticism among parents – in part because they did not think that studying English, maths, and science would build transferrable skills for use in the future. This was a sentiment that extended to other subjects like Modern Foreign Languages, which some parents felt was irrelevant if their child did not plan to work in a career that required an additional language. Given the association with specialist careers, parents might actually see studying maths and science for longer as a form of specialisation. More importantly, parents were not convinced that maths and science - as currently taught – are open to all students.

5.3 Parents views on ‘core’ skills

As discussed in Chapter 4, parents’ initial reactions to breadth reflected their concerns about the current system, i.e. wary that breadth would be more work and more exams, that it could have a detrimental effect on mental health, or that compulsory subjects would mean students would be unable to follow their interests. However, parents were receptive to the idea of compulsory core skills – particularly DE parents who expected their child would enter the workforce at 18 rather than continue to higher education. This idea resonated their current concerns about the lack of practical skills and work experience provided in the current system.

Notably, parents did not associate ‘core skills’ with more work or increased assessment for students, which we know from earlier findings is a key influence in their acceptance of a broader curriculum. Instead, parents related ‘core skills’ to applied vocational work which they believe would lead to better employment options. Parents perceived skills to be ‘more transferable’ than subjects, both in terms of the workplace but also in terms of being prepared for adult life.

“I want them to learn about living life, paying bills, what does that look like? Because that’s the reality for all children... they’re more likely to stay engaged with it rather than cut off” (Mum, White British, DE)

Parents were pleased to see numeracy as part of the core skills offered⁷, in part as they regarded maths as a core skill, but also as they were supportive of children developing practical skills such as budgeting. Likewise, they were keen for digital skills to be included as they recognised this had value in the labour market. Some of the dads in the triads mentioned the positives of schools teaching practical skills like coding in schools, positively linking this to employability. Other parents talked about the importance of confidence building at this age, something they recognised was often difficult as young people made the transition from school to employment of university.

Figure 5.2. Ideal core skills mix from the qualitative triads

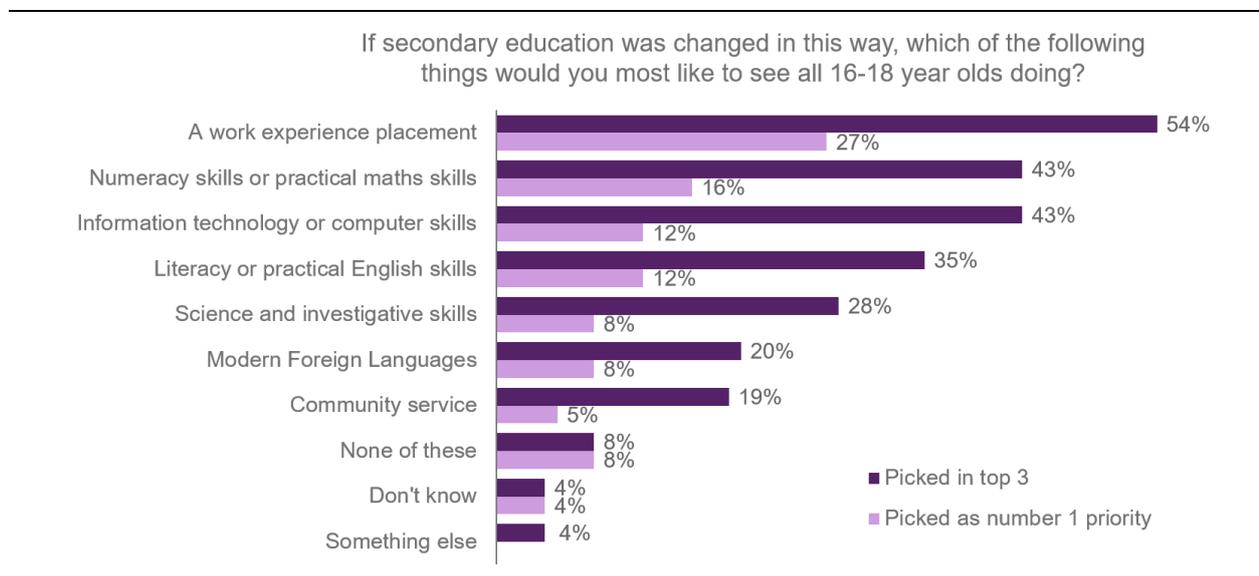


⁷ See Appendix B for the stimulus materials used with parents in the triads.

5.4 What parents would like to see in a broad and balanced curriculum

Surveyed parents were asked to select the top three things (in order of preference) they would like to see included, if education was changed to a broad and balanced system. The findings are summarised in Figure 5.3.

Figure 5.3. Preferences for the things parents would you most like to see all 16-18-year olds doing



Q_newcurr. If secondary education was changed in this way, which of the following things would you most like to see all 16-18-year olds doing? All respondents (1,000)

Many parents liked the idea of work experience placements. More than half (54%) of all parents selected this in their top three and more than a quarter (27%) selected it as their number one priority, making this the clear front-runner and supports findings from the qualitative triads. Numeracy, skills or practical maths skills and IT and computer skills also featured very strongly – with around one in four parents selecting either within their top 3. In addition, a little more than a third (35%) of parents selected literacy or practical English in their top 3 (with 12% selecting it as their number one priority). The findings, therefore, seem very consistent with the qualitative interviews – parents favouring things that they regarded as ‘practical’ and that had at least some direct relevance to working and life more generally.

There are some differences by respondent gender. Men were slightly more likely than women to favour practical maths skills (47% picked this in their top 3 compared with 40% of women). Furthermore, men were more likely to favour IT and computer skills than women (49% vs. 39%) and science and investigative skills (32% vs. 26%). Information technology and computer skills were also seen as important by many parents (43% picked this in their top 3). This could be in line with findings from the qualitative interviews where parents suggested future employment will be based around comfort and familiarity with technology. Based on the view that their children’s current use of technology was more advanced than their own, some parents said they believed their children were already highly capable and would not need specialist digital training. However, the survey results revealed a relatively high level of support for science as a core subject among BAME parents, dads and ABs.

There were some clear and consistent differences in the views of parents by social grade (see table 5.1.) Specifically, DE parents were the most likely to favour work experience placements – six in ten (58%) picked this in their top 3 and 30% picked the work experience placement as their top priority. Based on discussions in the qualitative interviews, this relates to parents from lower social grades being more likely to assume their children will go straight into work after leaving school at 18.

In contrast ABs and C1C2s were slightly more likely to favour the inclusion of practical maths skills and IT and computer skills compared with DEs. And, AB parents were slightly more likely to favour science and investigative skills compared with those from lower social grades. That said, none of these differences by social grade should be overstated. The broad patterns of response were quite consistent, and the order of preferences was similar to parents regardless of their socio-economic status. Nevertheless, both the qualitative and quantitative findings indicate that there was relatively low support for studying science in its current form post 16 because as it stands it is associated with specific carers – rather than with learning transferable, everyday skills.

Table 2. Differences in parents' preferences for a broadened curriculum by social grade

		AB	C1C2	DE
Work experience placements	Picked in top 3	52%	53%	58%
	Number 1	24%	28%	30%
Practical maths skills	Picked in top 3	45%	45%	37%
	Number 1	15%	20%	10%
IT and computer skills	Picked in top 3	45%	45%	38%
	Number 1	14%	10%	12%
Science and investigative skills	Picked in top 3	33%	24%	25%
	Number 1	10%	7%	7%

Q_inform. How well-informed do/did you feel about your child's/children's secondary education? All respondents (1,000).

Despite this, when science skills were framed as being applied, rather than 'pure science', some parents made the connection between science and a broader range of career options, making it more acceptable.

"[Science] does feel like it is taking you more down a specialist route." (Mum, White British, AB (C1))

5.5 Drivers of support for breadth

Parents still had some reservations about breadth, including whether a broader curriculum was appropriate for all students (e.g. those who were already certain about a future career). Concerns about a higher workload remained, while BAME parents and parents from higher SEGs felt breadth could dilute subjects, reducing depth and slowing down specialisation for their child.

In summary, curriculum breadth was most acceptable to parents when:

- it was linked to improving employability and transferability;
- it was associated with flexibility;
- it was not linked to increased workload;
- it was framed as practical applied core skills rather than subject specific.

Parents were broadly supportive of the concept that a broader curriculum might help to address 'skills gaps' and tended to focus on the value of work experience rather than specific subjects such as maths and science. They were also interested in systems that would help to build links with employers. While no one mentioned it spontaneously, parents in the qualitative triads were responsive to the idea of changes to the labour market in future. Parents acknowledged rapid advancement in technology and labour market uncertainty and were motivated by wanting their children to be adaptable to the changing world around them.

Parents believed strongly in the individual aptitudes and needs of their children – so wanted a degree of flexibility in the curriculum and wish to retain an element of choice. Parents also felt that breadth might address concerns about young people choosing subjects too early - so broad and balanced could actually translate into longer-term flexibility, allowing students to specialise later and giving more choice in the future.

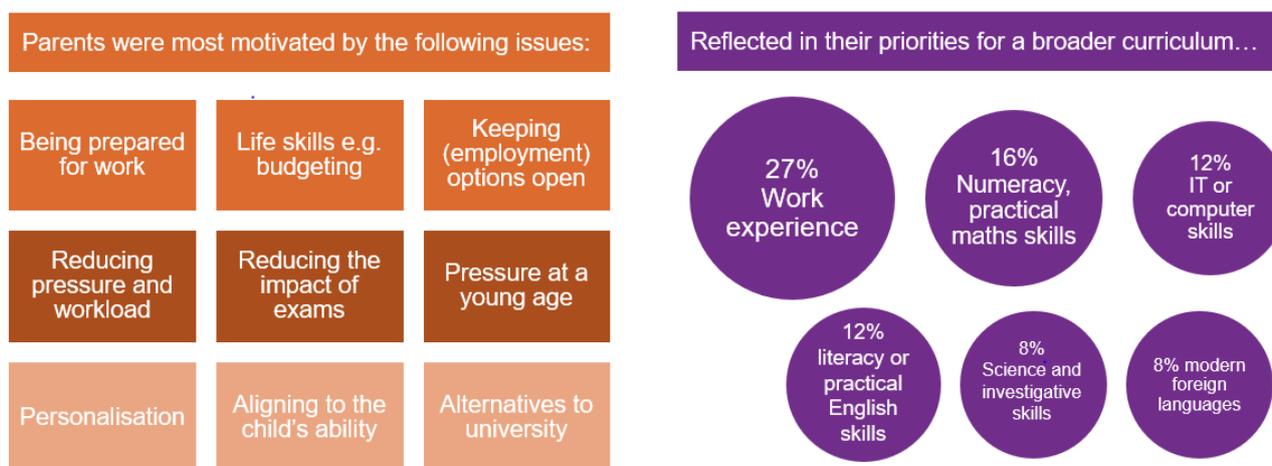
When breadth was framed as practical, applied core skills rather than core subjects, parents were less likely to associate a broader curriculum with more assessments which addressed their concerns about pressure on young people in relation to assessments. Parents also supported the development of practical and applicable skills and keeping this in the curriculum at age 16-18.

"A broad range of skills is not always in a classroom. It should be more focused on teaching people how to get out in the world of work." (Mum, White British, C1C2)

6. Conclusions

Curriculum reform at 16-18 was not a priority for parents or a concept they had considered before in much depth. Yet they felt positively about the idea of change when they thought a new system would prepare young people for employment, reduce stress related to workload and exams, and allow for flexibility based on child's ability.

Figure 6.1. Resonant frames and skills for parents



Parents were most motivated by their children developing a set of transferable skills that will be applicable to life and the changing world of work. The skills they most valued were work experience, numeracy, computing and literacy. The importance of science skills, even when framed as 'investigative skills' was less clear to parents, particularly those from lower SEGs. Parents could be more supportive of science-based learning at 16-18 if it is divorced from the current Key Stage 5 science curriculum, with links made between kinds of skills gained, and how these are attractive to employers and applicable to a wide range of jobs.

Parents seemed more motivated by a narrative of skills and skills development rather than subjects and subject choice. This was particularly the case for those who did not expect their children to go on to university. Bearing in mind the strong status quo bias revealed in this research, where imaginations are firmly entrenched in the current system, reform to education, including future changes to the curriculum, will require a persuasive narrative that moves away from a simple skills versus knowledge discourse.

A key concern for parents was balancing pressure with the desire to maximise attainment, which has led to parents supporting their children to take the subjects they will find easiest (though with university entrance requirements in mind). This risk-averse approach was highlighted by their support for the French Baccalaureate, which allows for breadth without penalising children for being less strong in some subjects. A broad and balanced curriculum might attract more support from parents if it were designed with these concerns in mind. This might include moving away from a focus on assessment, being able to weight assessment towards subjects in which children are strongest and making it very clear that more subjects would not increase overall workload.

Parents were supportive of breadth in theory but wanted to retain an element of choice in the system. Parents know that choice is expected, and when their child has been able to drop subjects they disliked at GCSE, they have seen the benefits. Yet, there are other narrative framings that parents responded to related to choice, namely: that 16 may be too young to make decisions; that young people might change their minds, or; that breadth for longer will translate into more choice in future.. This research suggests that parents would be receptive to guidance about how best to build future resilience into their children's education.