BCS' Response to the Department for Education's consultation on Key stage 4 performance measures and Targeted RISE extension

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Executive Summary

BCS welcomes the overall direction of Key Stage 4 performance measure reforms, particularly the aim to balance academic core, breadth and flexibility. However, it warns that the proposals risk undermining computing unless adjustments are made.

BCS's key recommendations are to:

- recognise computing in both science and creative categories;
- combine English language and literature into a single double-weighted slot to increase curriculum flexibility; and
- remove the cap on technical awards, which it argues devalues applied qualifications.

It also raises concerns that some changes, especially the "best-fit" progress measure, could narrow subject choice, disproportionately affecting computing uptake and reinforcing existing inequalities.

Overall, BCS supports reform but stresses that accountability measures must protect breadth, promote digital skills, and prioritise pupil choice and wellbeing.

Improving Progress 8 and Attainment 8 measures

1 How far do you agree that these changes to the Progress 8 model strike a better balance between breadth and flexibility compared with the current P8?

The redesign is welcome. The proposal's goals (academic core, breadth, choice) are sound, and the slot structure broadly supports them. BCS's main focus is on insuring that the introduction of the new GCSE in Computing is not unintentionally sabotaged through the proposed changes to the accountability measure. We believe three changes would strengthen the position of computing without undermining the proposal's goals.
These are:

- include computing within the creative breadth category as well as the science category;
- consider combining English language and literature into a single double-weighted Slot 1 with averaged points; and
- remove the cap on technical awards in slots 5–8.

Firstly, the future GCSE Computing will be broader and more applied, recognising its role as both a scientific and creative subject, sharing characteristics with design and technology as a creative-engineering discipline, including it within both science and creative breadth slots (5 and 6) would recognise its practical nature, improve its status in accountability measures and support diversity.

Secondly, English language and literature should form a single double-weighted Slot 1 with averaged points. The current model effectively consumes two slots and limits choice.

Combining them aligns English with maths, removes perverse incentives, and frees space. Thirdly, the cap of two technical awards should be removed. Slots 5–8 already constrain entries, and the cap signals that applied qualifications are second-tier, which is inconsistent with curriculum aims. It also disincentives awarding bodies from developing innovative technical awards that recognise how digital technology is transforming the workplace in areas as diverse as music technology and biotechnology

2 What are your views on the inclusion of a fourth category (science) for breadth slots 5 and 6

BCS does not support the inclusion of a science fourth category as the sciences are strongly positioned in schools and this would undermine the aim of increasing breadth. However, serious consideration could be given to the creation of a specific technology category within breadth slots 5 and 6, including computing and design and technology.

This preserves breadth while reflecting their nature and giving schools a viable route to include computing meaningfully.

3 Do you agree that Progress 8 should allow technical awards in the breadth and choice slots, with a maximum of two across all slots?

BCS supports the inclusion of technical awards, but we do not support this specific proposal. The cap adds little operationally, as slots 5–8 already limit entries. It instead reinforces a perception that technical qualifications are inferior, undermining parity of esteem. Technical awards should be allowed in the breadth and choice slots, but the cap of two should be removed, either totally, or with the specific restriction that a third technical award should focus on digital technology in some form to recognise transformation within the workplace.

Approved technical awards have been strengthened and should not be artificially restricted. Additionally, digital technical qualifications (e.g. iMedia, digital IT) should be explicitly included in the creative category alongside arts-based technical awards. This would support a coherent digital pathway. In summary: retain technical awards in these slots, remove the cap, and include digital technology in the approved creative list.

4 Do you have any other comments on the proposed changes?

BCS has three further points to make: classify computing within the creative category reflecting the core nature of the discipline; express the model in terms of goals rather than slot mechanics; and recognise that current proposals are unlikely to increase computing uptake without these changes.

Firstly, the shift to GCSE Computing implies a broader, more applied subject focussed candidates' ability to produce solutions to computational problems by creating programs and other digital artefacts. It should be recognised in both science and creative categories to avoid repeating current diversity issues seen in computer science.

Secondly, the model would be clearer if framed as constraints rather than slots: eight qualifications including English (double-weighted), maths (double-weighted), at least two sciences, and at least two from different non-science categories (humanities, languages, creative). This makes the policy easier to understand and evaluate.

Thirdly, as drafted, the model is unlikely to increase computing uptake. The key lever is inclusion in the creative category and removal of the cap on technical awards.
We recognise that the policy is primarily about breadth and that advocacy for the needs of a single subject can be seen as special pleading. However, increasing the digital skills of all school leavers, including specialists and generalists) is a government policy that will both improve national productivity and growth, while enhancing the life chances of our young people. It is essential that the way schools' performance is measured does not undermine this aim.

Wider academic performance measures

5 What are your views on introducing a 'best-fit' progress measure for pupils with low prior attainment?

The best-fit measure is reasonable but risks encouraging curriculum narrowing for low prior attainers, with computing likely to be affected. Because the measure rewards best-performing subjects without penalising empty slots, schools may reduce entries for some pupils.

Computing is vulnerable, as it already has lower uptake among this group. To mitigate this, entry data should be published alongside the measure to detect narrowing, and the measure should initially be shared as internal data before public use. While intended to support pupil strengths, it may unintentionally reduce opportunities in subjects like computing unless carefully implemented.

6 The government's ambition is that the vast majority of pupils will take at least 8 qualifications at KS4, but what considerations would be important in deciding which pupils would be likely to study fewer than 8 qualifications?

The prime consideration should be the needs of the child. At present the requirements for English and mathematics limit breadth and dissuade schools from offering wider choice to students who might struggle to get the grades in mathematics and English required for the school's performance measures.

English and mathematics are important, but their importance shouldn't preclude pupils from studying subjects that match their talents and interests purely because these are deemed less important for the purposes of the measure.

7 Do you think there is merit in an adaptation to this proposal that includes science as a required subject for pupils entered for 5 or more GCSEs/other approved qualifications?

This potentially further disadvantages pupils whose talents and interests lie elsewhere. Schools and the pupil should make these decisions based on the pupil's needs rather than the needs of a school performance measure.

8 Do you believe the proposed changes (any or all) will have a specific impact on particular groups of learners or staff because of their protected characteristics?

In the case of computing, the impact will potentially be to reinforce the existing gender imbalance as schools may think they are 'playing safe' by not encouraging more take up of the subject by girls

9 Do you have any suggestions for how we can minimise any negative impacts on wellbeing ?

Young people's wellbeing suffers when they believe schools are acting in the institution’s best interests (as driven by performance measures) rather than those of the young person.

We have commented earlier on the pressures schools may find themselves in leading to them reducing young people's access to subjects they enjoy and succeed at in order to make the student focus on things the performance measure deems important. All performance measures are blunt instruments, if they are imposed without consideration of individual pupils' needs a negative impact on wellbeing will follow.

Who we are

BCS is the UK’s Chartered Institute for Information Technology. The purpose of BCS as defined by its Royal Charter is to promote and advance the education and practice of computing for the benefit of the public.

We bring together industry, academics, practitioners, and government to share knowledge, promote new thinking, inform the design of new curricula, shape public policy and inform the public.

As the professional membership and accreditation body for Information Technology we serve over 70,000 members including practitioners, businesses, academics, and students, in the UK and internationally. We also have over fifty specialist groups

We also accredit the computing degree courses in over ninety universities around the UK. As a leading information technology qualification body, we offer a range of widely recognised professional and end-user qualifications.

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