

SSAT's response to the Department for Education's consultation on the implementation of the Ebacc

About this response

SSAT is the Schools, Students and Teachers network, an independent organisation and network of schools across England and internationally. SSAT currently has over 1200 secondary school members, working with thousands of school leaders and teachers over the year.

This response is based on surveys, discussion groups and informal feedback from our members. Since May 2015, SSAT has been collecting the views of school and subject leaders, leading to a report, *Ebacc for all?*, in June 2015, ahead of the formal consultation paper and questions in November.

The views here express the views of SSAT as informed by its member schools, though not necessarily the views of individual schools.

Sections of the response that pertain to specific questions in the consultation document have been cross-referenced.

Introduction

(With reference to consultation question 2)

SSAT has established a track record of working with schools to raise standards. SSAT believes that a rigorous, high-quality education should not be limited to the facilitating subjects. For almost 30 years SSAT has supported schools in establishing centres of excellence in the academic disciplines, the arts, the technologies and vocational learning.

When the last government announced the proposed new accountability measures for secondary schools, many felt that the move from 5 A*-C EM to Progress 8 was a good thing. Less focus on the C/D borderline, with more emphasis on progress for all young people was welcomed, as well as an aspiration for eight good GCSEs, rather than five. The previous headline performance measure with its narrow focus and its incentive to focus on the C/D borderline meant that some young people in some subjects were marginalised in some schools.

Progress 8 places a strong emphasis on academic, subjects, with schools incentivised to enter their students for English, maths, and at least three Ebacc subjects, whilst giving schools the flexibility to design curricula that meet the individual needs of their students, ensuring breadth and balance.

SSAT has the highest aspirations for all students, regardless of their backgrounds. Coupled with a more rigorous curriculum in key stage three, these reforms continue to present important opportunities for social justice.

The government was right to recognise that some students, in some schools, were not being stretched, and therefore not enjoying the same levels of success as some of their peers. Progress 8 helpfully incentivises schools to push even harder.

However, whereas Progress 8 places an emphasis on the Ebacc subjects, it is flexible enough for schools to make their own curriculum decisions. Ebacc is right for some students, but is evidently not right for all. Schools themselves are best-placed to make these decisions. SSAT firmly believes in a schools-led self-improving system, and works with schools to help them become, and remain, outstanding. The Department for Education's plans for the implementation of the Ebacc raises some serious concerns, against a backdrop of otherwise welcome reforms.

Which children?

(With reference to consultation questions 1, 9 and 10)

The government has articulated its aspiration that, in time, 90% of students will be entered for the Ebacc, recognising that the Ebacc will remain 'inappropriate for a small minority'. The decision about which students should, or should not, be entered for the Ebacc must rest with the school, and not be mandated by government. School leaders and teachers have the knowledge and understanding of young people's interests and talents, and are best placed to help them make informed choices about their educational options.

For some students, the Ebacc will not be appropriate because of complex special educational needs or because of a lack of proficiency in the English language. However, these should not be the defining characteristics of children not entered for the Ebacc; in part because of a lack of shared understanding as to what complex special educational needs means; in part because children and society need a broad range of opportunities, pathways, experiences, and outcomes.

There will be some students whose interests and aptitudes lie outside the Ebacc subjects – and who are better suited to a more diverse curriculum comprising of arts, technical or vocational subjects. This kind of nuanced information about students is hard to standardise in a table, and thus exemptions from the Ebacc must not be defined centrally.

The danger of forcing an unsuitable curriculum on some students is potential disengagement from not only humanities and MFL, but the wider curriculum. A lack of engagement is likely to have a negative impact on classroom behaviour, and a negative impact on students' results. In turn, a decline in results will directly affect the school's Ofsted rating. As such, an unintended consequence of expecting 90% of students to study the Ebacc will be a decline in the percentage of good and outstanding schools, due to the lack of an appropriate, engaging curriculum.

Although it must be schools that ultimately make the decision about which students not to enter for the Ebacc, it is helpful for the Department to publish some advice and guidance. Crucially, it must be stressed that socio-economic factors should never be an excuse for low aspirations, and that school leaders must exercise their professional judgement when offering options, taking into account the aptitude, interests and abilities of each student.

Which subjects?

(With reference to consultation questions 6 and 7)

SSAT is concerned that a near-compulsory Ebacc will result in a decline in the number of valuable subjects offered on the KS4 curriculum. This view has been challenged, but the fact remains that the implementation of the Ebacc would make it financially unviable to offer a full range of subject options.

Consider the following example of a timetable for a cohort of 200 students, based on 5 lessons per day, 5 days per week (25 lessons). For 200 students, you can feasibly run 8 classes per period, an average of 25 students per class. Look at the timetable implications without the Ebacc, and with the Ebacc:

Timetable without the Ebacc

Subject	Hours	Notes
English	4	More time as English + English language
Maths	4	More time as more content in new GCSEs
Science	5	More time as double or triple award
PE	1	Statutory
RE	1	Statutory
PSHE	1	
Option 1	3	Because you can run 8 classes per period, you can have up to 24 options (although you may have more than one class of some): history, geography, French, German, Spanish, RE, music, art, photography, drama, graphics, resistant materials, electronics, engineering, computer science, food technology, hair and beauty, health and social care, media studies, business studies, PE, dance, law, travel and tourism.
Option 2	3	
Option 3	3	

Timetable with the compulsory Ebacc

Subject	Hours	Notes
English	4	More time as English + English language
Maths	4	More time as more content in new GCSEs
Science	5	More time as double or triple award
PE	1	Statutory
RE	1	Statutory
PSHE	1	
MFL	3	
History/ Geography	3	
Option 1	3	Because you can run 8 classes per period, you have a maximum of 8 options, meaning you need to drop 16 from the list above.

In this example, a school would have to drop at least 16 of the options subjects, not taking into account that you might put history and / or geography or a language into the option block, so students can study both humanities, or two languages. School leaders will be forced to prioritise and will only be able to offer a reduced number of subjects. They will look to cut provision in arts, technologies and vocational subjects.

Cutting subjects at KS4 also has implications for the KS3 and KS5 curriculum. As detailed below, removing a subject at KS4, may make some subject teachers unsustainable, leading schools to remove these subjects from the KS3 curriculum. Similarly, not many A-levels can be taught ab initio, so those 16 subjects that have been cut from KS4 must also be removed from the A-level offer. This will mean a much narrower and less attractive offer; and the more fragile schools, perhaps with newly established sixth form provision, will be hit hard as their growth strategy is affected.

Few would argue in today's global economy of the importance of MFL on the curriculum, but we have to find a place for other valuable subjects. Creative and technical subjects are of great value, both to individual human flourishing, and to the UK economy; with creative industries the fastest-growing sector. By implementing the Ebacc as proposed, the government risks putting these valuable subjects at risk.

Which teachers?

(With reference to consultation questions 4, 5 and 7)

A key challenge of implementing the Ebacc will be the training and recruitment of high-quality history, geography and MFL teachers, at a time when many schools are already reporting a serious shortage in the supply of teachers.

We are increasingly aware of the importance of teachers' subject expertise, with the best teachers having a strong academic background in their discipline, coupled with sound pedagogic knowledge and a passion for teaching.

Before requiring schools to offer the Ebacc to 90% of its students, the government must consider where enough suitably skilled teachers will come from, and offer cost-effective and practical ways to support schools in their recruitment. This is particularly important in rural and coastal areas, where teacher supply and recruitment issues are felt even more acutely.

There is a particular concern with MFL teachers, as the number of MFL graduates has declined over the last decade, in line with MFL becoming non-compulsory in 2004. Fewer current MFL undergraduates and recent-graduates, makes the training of high-quality MFL teachers a particular challenge for the implementation of the Ebacc.

Furthermore, as suggested above, there are threats to the viability of existing staff structures. In the example given above, a school might choose to remove art and photography from the KS4 options. Consider the implications for an art teacher's timetable, assuming s/he teaches 21 periods a week:

Without Ebacc

Teaching group	Periods per week
7X1	2
7Y2	2
8X2	2
8Y4	2
9X1	2
9Y3	2
10 Art	3
11 Art	3
11 Photography	3
Total	21

With Ebacc

Teaching group	Periods per week
7X1	2
7Y2	2
8X2	2
8Y4	2
9X1	2
9Y3	2
10 Art	
11 Art	
11 Photography	
Total	12

The school now has an under-used art teacher. The choices the school must make are between:

1. Employing more part-time teachers.
2. Requiring teachers to teach subjects other than their specialism.
3. Removing art from the KS3 curriculum and thus making the teacher redundant.

The implications for staff training, recruitment, and structures are far-reaching, and need to be thought through strategically at both national and regional level.

Conclusion

(With reference to consultation question 2)

SSAT is supportive of the government's desire to give all children the best possible start in life, and to stretch and challenge students with a rich, rigorous, broad curriculum.

However, for a variety of reasons, the Ebacc is simply not appropriate for all students. We are concerned that the effect of this will be detrimental to both individuals and the country. Schools must have the autonomy to make decisions about what is an appropriate curriculum for individual students, taking into account a wide range of information and data.

Furthermore, the implementation of the Ebacc will mean, in real terms, a cutting of a number of valuable subjects from the curriculum; which will be damaging to individuals and to society as a whole.

The implementation also presents challenges for teacher training and recruitment, and is likely to affect remote and weak schools more greatly.

There are many ways of holding schools to account, SSAT has explored a range of these for its Redesigning Schooling publications. The government's commitment to Progress 8 should have a positive impact on the number of young people accessing a rigorous, academic curriculum at KS4. The earlier proposal to publish the percentage of students achieving the Ebacc, without making it a requirement, provided an intelligent incentive to challenge more students, whilst still ensuring schools have autonomy and flexibility. SSAT therefore recommends that the government allow its current reforms to become embedded, analysing the trends carefully, and we believe this will further the government's commitment to social justice in England.

SSAT welcomes the opportunity to work with the department on the ongoing opportunities and challenges presented by the implementation of the Ebacc. Please contact **Bill Watkin, Director of Policy and Public Affairs**, on **bill.watkin@ssatuk.co.uk** or **07834 367746**.