



Rethinking Resits in English

The conversation so far...

Through our *Let's Talk English* conversations, we've gathered insights from over 800 secondary English teachers, 1000 secondary students, 1000 college students and 1000 college tutors. Alongside this research, we've hosted 10 national forums, taken part in key industry events and brought teachers and school students together through regional events and visits across the country.

This report reflects the voices of those educators, students and sector leaders, capturing what they've told us about the current post-16 English landscape, where there is broad agreement and where the discussion needs to go next. Together, these conversations are helping to shape the national debate on post-16 English and the direction it might take next.

It is heartening to be part of constructive conversations about ways forward for English provision in terms of curriculum and assessment, informed as they are by purposeful discussion with teachers from secondary and the post-16 sector.

There is a consensus in our communities of educators in the English discipline that change has to happen to ensure there is a future facing experience of our subject. A subject that builds confidence in today's world; motivates and inspires young people to express themselves using their own words in spoken and written English; enables them to read (multimodal) texts that engage with their lives, with empathy, pleasure and humanity; explores human connection, relationships, creativity. Where young people can develop their capacity for independence and interdependence and where they learn to critically evaluate the dynamic and challenging communication systems, processes and mediums they are up against.

There are important points made here in response to the GCSE resit, the need for young people to be given a 'fresh start' and opportunity with our subject where their school experience (GCSE curriculum and assessment) has, for them, fallen short. Sorting out the 'basics' through a 'stepping stone' qualification makes sense where appropriate. But there is a need to provide a further 'step change' through a curriculum and assessment process that is more equipped for the 21st century needs of post-16 young people, and those opting for vocational pathways, the world of employment and training.

In fact such considerations should be included in secondary school English curriculum and assessment, addressing skills, knowledge and understanding needed for their futures.

**Elizabeth Draper, English specialist in post-16 Education
Deputy Chair, Trustee & Fellow of The English Association**

What we know

From college tutors:

- **Over half** of resit tutors feel the current GCSE English assessment format makes it harder for students to succeed:
 - **Reducing exam pressure** is a priority for **almost nine in ten** resit tutors (89%).
 - **76%** would prioritise **reducing the overall assessment time**.
 - **78%** would prioritise **digital or tech-based** assessment options.

- When it comes to wider skills, **just a third** (32%) say the current qualifications:
 - prepare students** for workplace demands.
 - help students feel more **independent** and **prepared** for adulthood.
 - build wider life skills**, such as managing information, problem solving and communication.

College tutors told us that both the format and volume of GCSE English assessment can act as barriers to success. Many said they would like to see change – calling for a curriculum that is more relevant to real life and work, helping students build the communication, problem-solving and independence they need for adulthood.

From secondary English teachers:

When thinking about GCSE English:

- Over half** (53%) say GCSE English **doesn't prepare students** for post-16 study.
- 45%** say their specification **doesn't provide skills for work**... a figure that rises to **55%** in the most disadvantaged schools.
- 58%** want to see **less curriculum content**.



"To improve curriculum and assessment, I would prioritise two things: making the GCSE English curriculum more relevant to young people and their futures, and reducing the knowledge-rich element and focus on practical application of skills instead."

Secondary Middle Leader, The Pearson School Report 2025

From students:

Having recently completed GCSE English, **16–18 year-old college students told us**:

- 60%** of resit students say the **pressure to achieve a grade 4** in GCSE English is too high.
- 65%** say the need to 'pass' exams **takes the enjoyment out** of learning.
- Over half** say resitting the same GCSE content makes them feel like **they are going backwards**, not forwards.
- Just 29% feel English prepared them for **workplace communication**.
- The majority (86%)** want GCSE English to include **content that feels relevant** to their lives and future careers.

"I'd change how stressful it can be and it feels like our whole future depends on our results when it doesn't. A piece of paper with some numbers on it doesn't define how good the person could be at something that isn't academic related, for example football or dancing or singing."

College student response, The Pearson School Report 2025

"A lot of students struggle with traditional exam formats, especially when they have to retake them."

College student response, The Pearson School Report 2025

As has been acknowledged in the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper, there's a recognition that the resit process for pupils feels pressurised and demoralising, with repeated content making them feel they're going backwards. They want English to feel relevant and future-focused, better preparing them for work and life beyond school.

And from secondary school students:



- **1 in 5** feel **anxious** about their learning.¹
- **37%** feel that topics such as how to get a job and workplace skills/interview skills are **missing from their learning**.

"I need to learn specific things for the ability to be confident in getting a job. The pathway is unclear at the moment."
Secondary student response, The Pearson School Report 2025

From the education community:

"The GCSEs must better prepare young people for the future and ensure every student can see themselves reflected in what they read, write and learn."

Dr. Rebecca Fisher, CEO of the English Association

The education sector wants post-16 English to feel practical, relevant and clearly connected to what comes next. Rather than being treated as a standalone qualification, English should be recognised as the foundation of employability - developing students' ability to express ideas, think critically and engage thoughtfully with the world around them.

While there is still progress to be made, momentum is building - with growing emphasis on the need for creativity and ensuring every student can see the value of English in life beyond school.

¹When thinking about the last week of school they attended.

What we've learned so far...

The government's Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper rightly recognises the need for stronger foundational skills. The introduction of a new "stepping stone" qualification for students working at grade 2 or below before progressing to a GCSE resit intends to provide more time to consolidate core knowledge and build confidence before reattempting the exam.

While this shift marks welcome progress, contributors across our discussions noted that it does not yet address some of the underlying challenges associated with the current resit experience.

We need to rethink the resit experience

"All those years of hard work and dedication and sacrifice comes down to that two-hour exam which will determine the rest of their life."

Anis Boakline, Student at King's College London

There has been **real progress** made in recent years, with many colleges and tutors working hard to re-engage students and improve outcomes for those resitting English. **Inspiring practice** is already taking place in colleges and post-16 settings across the country, **helping students rebuild confidence and achieve success**.

Looking ahead, this progress is set to continue as the introduction of the new "stepping stone" qualification changes the pathway for some students. This shift provides an additional starting point for students working at grade 2 and below.

Yet for many, particularly those working at grade 3 who will continue to enter the GCSE resit directly, the wider challenges remain unchanged. The current resit model can still feel repetitive and demoralising, with repeated content and exam format leaving some students feeling stuck. For these young people, contributors to our discussions emphasised the need to ensure the wider resit journey is motivating, more relevant and genuinely supportive of progress.

We need to change the pass / fail narrative

"The current system is very much based on experiences of failure for many learners, particularly those with special educational needs. If you don't achieve a grade 4, it typically feels like you've failed."

Ffion Robinson, Education Officer, nasen

For many students, the **pressure to achieve a grade 4** in English defines their sense of success or failure. Tutors, teachers and sector leaders emphasised that reframing this narrative is essential. Changing how we talk about – and value – progress is **key to rebuilding confidence** and motivation among post-16 students. Too often, missing a grade 4 is seen as closing off future opportunities in work, study or future possibilities, and leaves students questioning their potential rather than recognising how far they've come.

"I'm scared I will fail and that I don't have the right grades to get the job or course that I dream of."

College student response, The Pearson School Report 2025

We need to act now while planning for the future

"The longer we wait, the more learners are disadvantaged at post-16."

Jonny Diamond, Head of Maths and English at Luminate Education Group

While system-wide change will take time, there was strong agreement that **post-16 English cannot wait**. This urgency is echoed in the recent release of the government's **Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper**, which acknowledges the urgent need to rethink how resits can better support students.

In the meantime, sector voices emphasised that students in the current cycle need support now. Interim improvements – however small – could start shifting the system towards one that builds confidence, rewards progress and opens up more opportunities to succeed.

Areas that need further discussion...

Should we reform GCSE English, develop alternatives – or both?

"Whatever the alternative pathway is, it has to have equity with GCSE – in terms of how it's viewed and valued by others."

Forum participant

Across the discussions, there was broad agreement that **the current post-16 English resit system doesn't meet the needs of every student**, and that how success is measured and valued needs to better reflect the full spectrum of students' abilities. Many support **reforming the existing GCSE to make it more relevant, flexible and inclusive**. Contributors also emphasised the importance of maintaining a strong commitment to a high-quality English qualification. Since then, the proposed introduction of the new "stepping stone" qualification for those working below grade 2 provides an additional route in the post-16 resit landscape, but it does not resolve some of the underlying challenges associated with the current resit experiences or some of the concerns expressed about those resitting the GCSE.

How do we make English meaningful for vocational students' futures?

"For many vocational students, English is low on their priority list – they'll chance their resits as their main focus is on sport, business or other courses."

Rebecca White, Oriel High School

Throughout our conversations, college tutors and students on vocational pathways described a clear need for **English to feel relevant**. For students studying areas like sport, business, health and social care and beauty, **GCSE English feels disconnected from their studies and ambitions**. Repeated exam preparation and archaic literature can feel irrelevant compared to the real-life skills required for their future careers.

Tutors, students and voices from across the community called for **more flexible and accessible ways to demonstrate achievement** – approaches that connect English to vocational contexts, while also recognising that those with additional needs or for whom English is an additional language may require even more tailored approaches.

Where we go next



While there is no single answer to how post-16 GCSE should evolve, the time to rethink the post-16 experience has never been more important.

As we look ahead to the changes in the 2027–2028 academic year, particularly in light of the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper, there is still a need to consider the bigger picture – ensuring English assessment supports every student, whatever their starting point.

Together, we can reimagine English as a subject that rebuilds confidence, rewards progress and equips every student for the future – whether that's further study, work or life beyond the classroom.

Follow the discussions at go.pearson.com/letstalkenglish as we continue to explore how to create English qualifications that are relevant and inspiring for all.

*GCSE English refers to both the GCSE English Language and Literature specifications across all awarding bodies