About ACCA
The Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) is the global body for professional accountants. We offer business-relevant qualifications to those who are seeking a rewarding career in accountancy, finance and management.

ACCA has 188,000 members and 480,000 students in 181 countries. We work through a network of 100 offices and centres and more than 7,110 Approved Employers worldwide, who provide high standards of employee learning and development.

Much of the work we do as a chartered body is around equipping students with the skills they need to access the accountancy profession, this includes the promotion of STEM skills at an early stage to broaden opportunities for students of all socio-economic backgrounds, ultimately promoting greater inclusion and equality within the sector.

Working with students globally, the expertise of our in-house Education and Learning teams gives ACCA direct insight in to the routes in to the profession on offer and the skills that are required at every stage of students’ development.

Executive Summary
It is worth prefacing the contents of this submission with an acknowledgement that STEM skills may be acquired inside or outside courses of study and are applicable in various professions not traditionally categorised as STEM, such as accountancy.

While the professional accountancy qualifications that ACCA provides are not categorised in their own right as STEM, there are essential STEM skills embedded at all stages of the qualification, including IT capabilities as well as numeracy and analytical skills.

From the beginning of the student journey, ACCA qualifications identify and bridge gaps in existing skills, including but not limited to STEM skills. As a STEM associated profession, we have identified ways in which we can promote access to the profession and address some of the challenges faced across the STEM sector and these are detailed in this submission.

We know from our members, many of whom are employers, that they often struggle to recruit for highly specialist roles, such as risk analysis. This is particularly so outside of London and the South East. This has been a long-standing issue and something that could be exacerbated by the UK leaving the EU and any resulting restrictions placed upon freedom of movement as this could shrink the talent pool from which our UK members are able to recruit.

Our approach, to date, has focussed on three core areas:

1. **Access to the profession** - For 110 years ACCA has sought to provide access to accountancy for people from all walks of life. We are committed to removing
artificial barriers, raising awareness of the routes into the profession and addressing the social mobility challenges our society faces today.

a. **Creating new routes in**- Access accountancy/ Trailblazer Apprenticeships

b. **Attracting students to STEM skills at earlier stages**- Embedding professional qualifications within school and college curriculum allows students to gain the attractive, transferable, STEM skills educational institutions have found lacking. Working directly with schools and learning providers to attract and subsequently support students’ commitment has allowed ACCA to provide additional educational routes that also develop STEM skills.

2. **Developing Digital Capabilities**- Accountancy professionals are increasingly required to possess new skills including STEM related capabilities such as digital and technological competencies. As an education provider, ACCA is working to address these skills, including STEM, during the initial learning stages.

3. **Addressing Gender Diversity**- There can be a number of barriers to female students taking up STEM subjects, including perceptions around the types of careers they can lead to and the opportunities for women within these fields. ACCA leads on a number on initiatives globally that seek to improve the representation of women in the accountancy profession, including projects to bridge gaps in knowledge and necessary skills.

**Evidence**

1. **Access to the profession**

ACCA has found that providing a varied range of study routes also make the profession more accessible for a wider range of people from different backgrounds. This includes offering options to those not suited to academic learning such as vocational training routes.

As a direct result of this ACCA has formed an extremely diverse membership base with an even gender split and representation from a broad range of educational backgrounds (including many non-graduates).

Today we are engaged in the following activities in order to ensure that we maintain both open access and the diversity of our membership base.

a. **Creating new routes in**

Trailblazer Apprenticeships is the Government’s flagship apprenticeship initiative. Transferable skills, including English and Maths, are to be embedded into apprenticeship programmes.

Professional bodies have been drawn in to work alongside employers to help design the apprenticeship standards and assessment approaches specific to each sector. As an organisation committed to a social mobility agenda and addressing barriers to entry to the profession, ACCA has identified apprenticeships as a
Written evidence submitted by the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) (GAP0046)

priority route for attracting more students to the profession and has taken a key role in developing the Level 4 Accounting and Taxation Apprenticeship.

The benefits of apprenticeships for young people are clear in terms of closing the STEM skills gap; these additional routes can broaden opportunities in STEM related careers to those who aren’t suited to purely academic qualifications or may struggle to meet the financial requirements of a graduate route. Currently ACCA is working towards establishing an Accountancy/Taxation Technician Apprenticeship standard at Level 4 to students in England who are aged 16 and above and wish to gain the Apprenticeship while working in a relevant accountancy role. The course will offer young people an opportunity to develop the skills required by businesses without the burden of tuition fees. ACCA believes that broadening the available education routes, many which will feature STEM skills, can attract all types of students and ultimately draw greater numbers to STEM and STEM related professions.

ACCA will also examine ways to support employers in the accountancy profession with apprenticeships – in terms of opening apprenticeship opportunities and offering on-going guidance to employers - and we will analyse the progression and completion rates as the first apprenticeships get underway.

Access Accountancy:
Another social mobility initiative that ACCA is a part of is Access Accountancy, a collaboration of employers and professional bodies. The initiative offers work placements to allow young people from all backgrounds insight in to the profession, create new networks and develop employability skills.

Through structured work placements, the initiative aims to develop technical, mathematical and problem solving skills in a ‘real world’ setting.

While in its early years, ACCA would be keen to further discuss the success of Access Accountancy as an initiative seeking to boost levels of entry in to STEM related professions as the project continues.

Removing geographical barriers:
Finally, ACCA has always pioneered distance learning and e-learning as a means of broadening access to the profession. As part of this agenda we launched ACCA-X in 2015 (further detail provided in Section 2 of this submission) which offers a free introductory module to accountancy. It also offers an entry route into the profession for those wishing to pursue the course.

We are working with a number of UK schools and colleges to signpost students to ACCA-X at earlier stages.

Careers advice:
Careers advice on STEM related careers will be critical in attracting new talent and addressing the skills gaps that currently exist. However, ACCA has gathered evidence which suggests that current levels of careers advice across the UK are deficient when it comes to promoting STEM careers and routes to entry.

On apprenticeships for example, ACCA research undertaken in 2016 found that one-third of 16-18yo had not received any careers advice whatsoever on apprenticeship pathways. If apprenticeships are to realise their potential on opening up access to STEM careers then careers advice on such routes to entry must be greatly improved.

b. Attracting students at earlier stages

Scotland:
The Government in Scotland has committed that every 16-19 year old will be offered learning or training place if they are not already in a job, Modern Apprenticeship or education course and among other funding £6.8m has been earmarked for Foundation Apprenticeships.

In Scotland, ACCA is currently working with educational institutions to embed ACCA qualification within Accountancy Foundation Apprenticeships in the final two years of school education. ACCA is currently working with a College with the aim of embedding our Level 3 qualification into the syllabus, which would include ACCA’s Intermediate Certificate taught through our online learning portal ACCA-X.

ACCA is also talking with prospective employers that may be able to offer the work experience based element of the Apprenticeship and the response has been very positive with a majority indicating they would take on apprentices.

ACCA noted Foundation Apprenticeships as a priority area as many schools do not teach accountancy as a subject at all, resulting in subdued appetite for Modern Apprenticeships in accountancy. Consequently employers struggle to recruit school leavers into their organisation.

After discussions in schools it seems likely that employers will recruit students for one day a week while they continue their studies with a natural progression on to ACCA’s Level 4 Apprenticeship to develop their skills further.

India:
ACCA’s commitment to addressing barriers to access globally has driven initiatives to reach out to students at earlier stages to address issues such as perceptions of the profession and visibility of opportunities early on in students’ career pathways.
In order to reach students earlier in the process, ACCA set out to examine ways to raise brand awareness and embed qualifications in the learning process in academic institutions:

- maximising how ACCA engages with universities and colleges
- exploring how ACCA can develop a more cohesive strategy concerning engagement with schools, which involves building financial literacy

Since 2014 ACCA has complemented school engagement programmes through work with Univarity in India. Univarity engage with students studying their “O” and “A” levels and encouraging them to take the Diploma in Accounting & Business in parallel. Originally in 2014 registration was free and we had 1500 registrations, however the commitment of students was inconsistent. Consequently a compulsory registration fee was introduced – numbers fell to 600-700, but students were more committed and completions rose.

One of the on-going challenges ACCA faces is keeping students engaged through their studies. The approach in India has helped to tackle this issues and it is, therefore, something that we will be seeking to replicate in the UK with a view to promoting early stage awareness of which STEM skills can provide routes in to related careers.

2. Developing Digital Capabilities
ACCA’s recent report, Professional Accountants – the Future: Drivers of change and future skills provided a comprehensive look at the skills that would need to be developed by accountancy professionals up to 2025. One of the key professional capabilities identified was digital competencies shaped by rapid technological developments. These include skills inherent in the STEM subjects such as digital and technical (including mathematical) skills.

ACCA is working to introduce these competencies early on in the learning process. Launched in 2015, ACCA-X is an online learning programme to support learners around to world interested in accountancy and business, offered in collaboration with edX and Epigeum. The platform is designed to offer free online learning modules to prepare those interested in a career in accountancy and finance to develop the digital and mathematical skills to begin a more technical programme of study. The introductory module has also been used as ‘financial training for non-financial managers’.

The platform offers an easily accessible, free English and Mathematics diagnostic tool to help students check their level of ability; ACCA is currently the only industry body to offer a resource of this kind for prospective students. Those that receive an unsatisfactory result in the tests are directed to online ACCA maths modules and external providers English learning materials.

ACCA-X’s first free courses are available to anyone, anywhere in the world:
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- Introduction to Financial and Management Accounting
- Intermediate Financial and Management Accounting

After its first year ACCA-X has attracted an impressive 94,000 students globally, with a median age of 20. Learners on the platform went on to surpass the global ACCA average attainment with an 80% pass rate.

On top of this, ACCA-X won last year’s Society of Association Executives 2016 award for Best eLearning and Online Education at the International and European Associations Awards in Berlin.

Re-launch of the ACCA Qualification:
ACCA is continually adapting its qualification and member offering to the ever-evolving skills requirements of the 21st Century, including the challenge posed by the STEM skills gap in the UK.

On 10 October 2016 ACCA re-launched the ACCA qualification by introducing new Strategic Professional level exams which will replace the existing Professional level exams in September 2018 and a new Ethics and Professional Skills module, which will be introduced in October 2017.

The redesign enhances the breadth and depth of the qualification, with greater focus on employability and the practical application of core skills in the contemporary workplace. This includes exam modules focusing on the technical and mathematical skills needed for data analysis as well as the communication skills needed for sound finance and business reporting.

The renewed ACCA qualification will enable students to develop the professional technical skills required by the businesses of the future. Many of these skills fall within the category of STEM in terms of their technical, numerical and digital nature.

Added to these developments, while continuing to focus on embedding these skills within traditional education routes, ACCA also offers the world’s first Master’s degree integrated with a professional accountancy qualification, delivered in partnership with the University of London.

ACCA is actively taking steps to introduce opportunities to build STEM skills within the new qualification, offering skills for students to advance careers in finance and accountancy and develop the skills that will enable successful and flexible careers in the future.

3. Addressing Gender Diversity
STEM subjects and related careers have historically attracted lower numbers of female students. By working to address any barriers to entry that could level the disparity in uptake between genders, institutions can reach a broader pool of
students and ultimately increase student numbers in STEM subjects and related professions.

ACCA is committed to remaining vigilant to issues for existing female members as well as ensuring the profession remains an attractive option for women. Highlighting routes in to the profession and addressing barriers to entry such as learning development opportunities or perceptions of a ‘closed shop profession’ can attract greater numbers of female students who may not have otherwise considered STEM subjects and routes in to the profession.

Helen Brand OBE, Chief Executive at ACCA, is a member of the Advisory Board of the UK branch of the Women’s Executive Network. The network provides development and networking opportunities to help women reach executive and leadership positions. The Women’s Executive Network will complement existing business initiatives as well as offering an outlet for its leaders and board members to nurture and mentor prospective candidates.

Within this agenda, in Malaysia we have supported an initiative to get more women onto boards and into senior roles. Whilst this is underpinned by a target of women comprising 30% of PLC boards, the approach is focused on preparing talented women for positions through training and coaching overseen by ACCA and our learning providers. This is a very hands-on, practical method that can help give women the skills they need to enter and succeed in such roles.

Broadly results in Malaysia have been encouraging. Malaysia as a whole remains on track for hitting its target female labour participation rate of 55%, which rose from 46% in 2009 to 53.6% in 2014.

In a similar vein, in the United Arab Emirates we have developed a ‘Women in Finance’ initiative. Again, the aim of this is to provide a platform from which women can share their successes and challenges. This will help to provide practical advice and support for women to help them succeed and break through any glass ceilings that might exist.

ACCA is also a supporting member of the Global Board-Ready Women Initiative, which aims to link companies with women who hold the relevant skills to take on board positions.

ACCA works consistently with members to highlight why gender diversity can boost performance, drawing upon market data and global member feedback to mark high priority areas for improvement and showcase examples of best practice, one example being our 2015 report ‘Increasing Gender Diversity to Boost Performance’. ACCA regularly seeks to make the business case for an active approach to gender parity.

Through projects that shine a light on best practice examples, such as members actively working toward parity on boards and taking a transparent approach to pay
gap issues, ACCA has been able to filter these equal opportunity messages down to potential students to foster a welcoming learning environment.

As of 2016, ACCA boasts the highest percentage of female members (46%, up 2 percentage points in the past five years) and the second highest proportion of students at a quarter of a million women worldwide (54%, up 5 percentage points in the past five years) of any major accountancy body in the UK.

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