Introduction and background

School-level assessments, especially GCSEs and A levels and their vocational equivalents, have significant stakes for candidates and for wider society. These include school accountability purposes and selection to higher and further education.

Since the early 2010s which saw the introduction of new curriculum content and the removal of modularity in most qualifications, there has been little major intentional assessment reform. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown previous certainties about assessment into doubt, and several think tanks have produced reports suggesting how things might be done differently in the future. In this article, Tony Leech, a Research Officer at Cambridge University Press and Assessment, provides a comprehensive overview of these reports and the policy changes they recommend.

Key points and findings

Reports under discussion

- The reports which are analysed are listed below.
  - Qualifications for a New Era: Equitable, Reliable Assessment, was published in 2022. It outlined 5 principles which the assessment system should meet, and 10 recommendations for how it should be designed in order to achieve those aims.
  - The 22 member Education Commission was set up by Times columnist Rachel Sylvester to examine the education system and consider its future in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Its final report presented a 12 point plan for education, which included recommendations for the qualifications system.
  - Pearson, the publisher and major qualifications provider carried out a Future of Qualifications & Assessment project, resulting in a report, Qualified to succeed: Building a 14-19 education system of choice, diversity and opportunity. It outlined 4 “guiding principles for reform” – empowerment, coherence, adaptability, and innovation – and made 7 specific recommendations for reform in qualifications and assessment.
  - The education think tank EDSK produced 2 reports under the overarching title of Re-assessing the future. Focusing on four major objectives – rigour, coherence, value, and aspiration, these reports set out a vision for a wide-ranging reform of secondary assessment, and of the education system as a whole.
  - The Tony Blair Institute for Global Change recently published a report called Ending the Big Squeeze on Skills: How to Futureproof Education in England. In the light of what it calls a ‘Fourth Industrial Revolution’, it calls for a move away from passive learning and direct instruction towards new performance and accountability measures, the development of a baccalaureate-style qualification featuring multimodal assessments, changes to inspection methods and national curriculum reform.
  - The National Baccalaureate Trust has proposed a national baccalaureate for England which would include core learning modules and compulsory personal development and extended project elements.
  - The 2021 report Blueprint for a Fairer Education System from the Association of School and College Leaders highlights 5 building blocks, one of which is assessment and qualifications. It does not propose radical changes to assessment, but focuses on a review of assessment methods, streamlining GCSEs, and the close integration of assessment and curriculum.

Main themes of the reports

- In this section, the content of the reports is discussed within the framework of 4 key themes – high stakes assessment at 16, the use of online or digital assessment, the number of subjects studied in each phase, and the relationship of academic to vocational study.

High stakes assessment at age 16

- There is a consensus across the reports that GCSEs should change in some way. The National Baccalaureate Trust proposals appear to be largely compatible with existing GCSEs, while Pearson suggests that GCSEs could be made to work better. The Independent Assessment Commission, however, argues that GCSEs need to “change fundamentally” or be abolished.
- Different approaches are proposed. Some reports argue for a streamlined selection of exams in “core subjects”. This could mean having exams in fewer subjects, having fewer exams in the same number of subjects, or both. Different arguments must be made for each of these options.
- The desire to assess fewer subjects is an understandable one, especially since at Key Stage 2, national assessment in England focuses only on English language, mathematics, and science. However, deciding what should count as a “core” subject at Key Stage 4 and what should not, is fraught with difficulty, particularly when school accountability is involved. The EBacc performance measure (whereby
schools are measured on how many pupils take a specific set of GCSEs, and how well they do in them), contains English language and literature, maths, the sciences, geography, or history and an ancient or modern language, on the basis that these are considered vital to many degrees and open many doors. However, the performance-measure focus on these subjects has led to more schools devoting more teaching time to these specific subjects, to the detriment of creative arts or design subjects. It is difficult to see how such curriculum narrowing could be avoided if the subjects on which accountability mechanisms were based were further limited.

- For some report writers, part of the solution is ensuring that assessment at 16 has lower stakes. The report from the Tony Blair Institute argues that while GCSEs should be abolished, there is a role for “low-stakes assessments at 16 to inform pupil choice and hold schools to account”. Similarly, EDSK proposes online low-stakes assessment at the end of the lower secondary phase of education.

- However, for proposals to make low stakes assessment at 16 meaningful, it would need to be impossible to use the assessments for selection or accountability purposes. It is essential that all the different elements of the system (assessment, accountability, and teaching, in particular) are properly aligned.

Subject breadth

- Subject breadth in England post-16 is lower than in many similar countries. The average number of qualifications taken post-16 has fallen significantly since 2016, largely as a result of the decision to make AS levels standalone qualifications. The average number of A levels taken has stood at just over 2.6 for the last 5 years. By contrast, in many European countries, baccalaureate structures mean it is common for more subjects to be studied to 18. The same general approach is taken in the International Baccalaureate (IB) which is taken by some pupils in the UK.

- The National Baccalaureate Trust proposals for England echo this model, though with some flexibility, in that their proposed baccalaureate wraps around existing qualifications. Both the Times commission and EDSK recommend a baccalaureate-like form, with specific detail about which subjects should be studied. The Independent Assessment Commission argues for a coherent 14-19 package which integrates academic and vocational subjects, an extended project, and community work. The Tony Blair Institute argues for a new structure built on principles of IB with continuous assessment from 16 to 18.

- Research has demonstrated benefits to increasing post-16 subject breadth. Education Policy Institute and Royal Society research found that students who took post-16 qualifications from more than one subject group had higher average earnings than those who didn’t, by the time they were 26.

- However, any substantial changes towards an IB model would have major costs. A greater number of teachers would be required, and teachers would have to adjust to significant changes in post-16 courses. There would be an impact on university study, as the necessary slimming down of content in each subject at A level would mean that students would be less prepared for university study in specific subjects.

Academic and vocational study

- In England, while A levels have been the main academic post-16 qualification of choice since the 1950s, recent decades have seen many short-term attempts to build new vocational qualifications including NVQs and Diplomas, a proliferation of short-term funding solutions for further education colleges and a diffusion of responsibility for vocational education.

- Many of the future of assessment reports argue for giving vocational qualifications parity of esteem with academic ones. For example, the Times commission suggests that both academic and vocational qualifications should be integrated within its proposed Baccalaureate “under the same umbrella. EDSK proposes a system of different, equally prestigious, routes through the upper secondary education system (academic, applied, and technical).

- Ewart Keep (2020) has highlighted how a key characteristic of the vocational training system in England which separates it from higher-performing systems such as that of Germany is the general unwillingness of employers to sufficiently train their own employees. As a result, this task has mostly fallen to state education. Keep argues that approaches to the development of vocational qualifications based on a state-led top-down reform are likely to fail without much greater focus on the employer’s role.

- A recent government attempt to largely eliminate Applied General qualifications and reinforce a binary of academic A levels and vocational T levels and apprenticeships for post-16 students was largely defeated by a wide coalition of stakeholders. Any attempts to integrate academic and vocational qualifications in candidates’ programmes of study would be vulnerable to attack.

The role of digital assessment

- Since the COVID-19 pandemic, digital assessment is seen by many as an important next step. Benefits include ensuring that assessment is relevant to the ways of working which learners will experience in the workplace, enabling candidates to take assessments at different points, and enabling the personalisation of assessment. Digital assessment could also enable streamlining, particularly at GCSE. This would ensure more efficient and reliable grading while reducing the burden of assessment on candidates.

- However, rolling out a mass digital assessment system has many barriers. The issue of reliable access to the internet in order to conduct assessments, whether at schools or candidates’ homes, is at the heart of equity concerns in this area. It is also likely that a single national procurement for the technology would be necessary for reasons of consistency and simplicity at centre level. At present, in the absence of this, each awarding organisation is developing its own approach to digital assessment.

- Greater use of digital assessment requires considerable work on comparability of assessments before considering the technology, not only in relation to comparability between digital and paper systems in general, but in relation to candidates from particular identity groups, socioeconomic groups, or ability groups.

The full documents can be downloaded from: