

# Towards a fairer, more useful, and fit-for-purpose way to assess children and young people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

## Introduction and background

The APPG for Schools, Learning and Assessment (the APPG), chaired by Flick Drummond MP (Conservative) and Emma Hardy MP (Labour), launched its inquiry into assessment reform on 30 November 2022. It considered a vast range of evidence from university-based academics who reported on their recent findings on England's assessment systems as well as education campaign groups, think tanks, and education consultants. Evidence was also heard from academics with expertise in assessment reform taking place in Australia, Norway, and Singapore. Oral and written submissions were received from primary and secondary school heads and teachers, parents, and post-16 students.

### The impact of high stakes testing

- Jerrim (2021:507)<sup>1</sup> defines high-stakes tests as those that “comprise assessments which cover key academic competencies with results potentially having material consequences for themselves and their schools”. Citing Amoako et al (2019),<sup>2</sup> Jerrim explains that such tests “go hand-in-hand with school and teacher accountability”, with the results used to make judgements about pupil, school, and teacher performance.
- All the evidence received by the APPG made clear the belief that assessment in its current forms has resulted in the narrowing of the curriculum and ‘teaching to the test’, as well as contributing to high levels of stress amongst pupils.
- At secondary level, the higher value attached to subjects which make up the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) and boost Progress 8 scores has resulted in schools dropping lower-valued, creative, and applied subjects and modern foreign languages. In 2018, only five per cent of the formal exams sat by 16-year-olds were Technical Awards (approved vocational qualifications for 14- to 16-year-olds). Furthermore, the number of 16- to 18-year-olds starting an apprenticeship today is roughly the same now as it was in 2002.
- At primary, concerns were raised over the excessive testing of children. There was particular concern over the stultifying effect of being taught little else but English and maths in preparation for the key stage 2 (KS2) Standardised Assessment Tests, or SATs, for year 6 pupils.
- Both the Mathematical Association (MA) and the Association of Teachers of Mathematics (ATM) expressed concerns about the recently introduced Year 4 times tables, stating that they lead to a disproportionate focus on just one area of mathematics.
- Proposals for a broad curriculum, usually described as a ‘type of baccalaureate’ through which learners could develop a wide set of academic, applied, and ‘soft’ skills were made for both primary and secondary level in written submissions to the APPG made by a range of schools and organisations including the Edge Foundation. Edge argues for a more formative assessment system which is designed to help students recognise and develop their skills and capabilities, rather than a judgement of academic merit. In his presentation to the APPG, Al McConville quoted from an Edge report which found that 92 per cent of employers surveyed said soft skills were as or more important than hard skills.
- Presentations from students highlighted the problems with the current ‘one size fits all’ approach. For example, one young person, although well-equipped in academic subjects to study at university, described her frustration that her choices meant she lacked “evidence for vocational skills and professional qualities to show employers” when applying for a longed-for internship in film production.
- Several stakeholders criticised the current practice of making learners without a minimum pass (grade 4) in English and maths resit as a condition of funding for all full-time post-16 programmes. The exam board Pearson agrees, stating in their written submission that ‘a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach fails too many learners with respect to Mathematics and English. The board argues for new ‘passport qualifications’ in these subjects.
- Some stakeholders were critical of the Year 4 multiplication times tables tests, stating that they lead to a disproportionate focus on just one area of mathematics.
- Stakeholders pointed out that the comparison of children’s Baseline tests, taken in reception, with the results for their KS2 SATs taken in the final term of primary, is done for the sole purpose of judging a school’s performance. EDSK argues that the results “come too late to provide useful feedback to schools on how to improve literacy and numeracy standards”. Many secondary schools do not use SATs grades, preferring the CAT tests.

### Accountability

- In England, assessment and academic performance are inextricably linked to school accountability. The Association of School and College Lecturers (ASCL) highlights the problems which such a system causes (ASCL 2021:13)<sup>3</sup>: ‘Our accountability system actively rewards teachers and leaders working in more

<sup>1</sup> Jerrim J (2021). National tests and the wellbeing of primary school pupils: new evidence from the UK. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 28:5-6, 507-544

<sup>2</sup> Amoako I, Quainoo E and Adams F (2019). High-stakes test accountability: A controversial issue in educational measurement.

*International Journal of Latest Research in Humanities Science*, 2:10, 94-96.

<sup>3</sup> Association of College and School Leaders (2021). *A Great Education For Every Child*. Retrieved from: [ascl.org.uk/Microsites/ASCL-Blueprint/Home](https://ascl.org.uk/Microsites/ASCL-Blueprint/Home)

advantaged areas and penalises those working in more deprived areas. This makes it harder to recruit teachers and leaders in disadvantaged areas, meaning that disadvantaged children are more likely to be taught by less experienced teachers, or teachers who aren't specialists in the subject taught, or in larger classes'.

- Edge points out that a system reliant on formal exams overlooks the range of skills which pupils need after school. Edge's written submission to the inquiry also proposes a "review of the role of Ofsted to ensure that the inspection and accountability regime moves from an adversarial to a performance improvement role".

### Alternative approaches to assessment

- The inquiry dedicated one meeting to evidence from academics with expertise in international education systems.
- Norway places a high degree of trust in teachers to carry out a large amount of formative assessment. There are no formal examinations for children between the ages of 6 and 12. In the end of school diploma, 20 per cent of the result is based on exams, and 78 per cent on teacher assessment.
- Similarly, Singapore is reducing its focus on exams and creating more pathways for different types of students to find success in their own way.
- Professor Bill Lucas of Winchester University, a co-founder of Rethinking Assessment,<sup>4</sup> presented evidence based on his research of systems. He stated that there is now "global interest" in reducing end-point assessments and in adopting digital learner profiles. For example, it is now policy for every student in Australia to have "an end leaver digital profile". Rethinking Assessment has developed its own version of a digital learner profile which is being piloted in schools in Doncaster and Hertfordshire.

### National perspectives on reform

- The inquiry received several constructive proposals for assessment reform.
- Edge, Rethinking Assessment, and EDSK supported a baccalaureate qualification which would include a combination of academic and applied subjects to allow for the development of broad skills. These would be assessed by multi-modal assessment recorded in a digital learner profile.
- All evidence submitted to the inquiry which included proposals for assessment reform at secondary level supported the inclusion of formal examinations, provided this part of a broader holistic assessment model. A minority position, supported by 2 written submissions in favour of online examinations, was presented in oral evidence given by Tim Oates, director of assessment and research at Cambridge Assessment. In his presentation, Mr Oates argued that exams are the only form of assessment which offer "reliability, validity, and utility".
- The digital learner profile, as summarised by Al McConville, would be populated throughout lower and upper secondary, and record a range of academic, technical, and 'soft' skills right up to the end of schooling. The Edge model would include work

experience and evidence of achievements within and outside school.

- Professor Lucas's proposals in Rethinking Assessment include a range of alternative ways in which students could be tested. These include on demand online testing, performance-based testing such as that which already exists in PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), and comparative assessment, where teachers assess pupils' work by comparing it to others.

### Key recommendations

- At primary level, an alternative to SATs should be looked at. This could be based on pupil sample data with national standards but not high stakes tests. School heads and teachers should be trained to evaluate pupil sample data so that they understand the areas in which their school is doing well compared to other local schools and schools nationally, and where their school may need additional support to improve.
- At secondary level, there should be a consultation with the aim of launching a new baccalaureate. The baccalaureate should include academic, vocational/technical, and creative subjects. Different methods of assessment should be considered.
- There should be a new qualification in English and maths designed for pupils not taking these as main subjects. The new qualifications should be designed to qualify all learners, up to the age of 18 and who are not otherwise studying for a qualification in English and maths, in essential literacy and numeracy skills in preparation for further study or employment.
- School league tables should be replaced by a new system of school accountability to include broader information about a school, including its strengths and areas for improvement.
- There should be further research into the potential benefits and risks of the use of technology for assessment to ensure that newly emerging assessment methods are equitable, valid, and reliable.
- A study of digital learner profiles should be conducted to evaluate their use at both primary and secondary level. Populated throughout the learner's school journey, digital learner profiles should be transferable.

<sup>4</sup> Lucas B (2021). Rethinking Assessment in Education: The case for change. CSE Leading Education Series. Melbourne: Centre for Strategic Education.

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