



**A NEW ERA**

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Equitable Reliable Assessment

# **QUALIFICATIONS FOR A NEW ERA: EQUITABLE, RELIABLE ASSESSMENT**

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**FINAL REPORT**



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# FOREWORD FROM THE CHAIR

There are few terms internationally in education that elicit a stronger reaction than assessment and qualifications. There are also few terms that are more divisive. Positions for or against examinations or for or against teacher assessment seem entrenched and can lead to endless debates that commonly bring more heat than light.

In November 2020, in the midst of the Covid pandemic, I was asked by the National Education Union to lead an Independent Assessment Commission (IAC) on assessment and qualifications for 14 to 19-year-olds. In January 2021, the IAC began investigating assessment and qualifications in England, bringing together commissioners from different communities: students, parents, teachers, employers, colleges and universities, policy makers, researchers and examination boards.

The IAC built on previous high-quality work in assessment and qualifications in England, across the rest of the UK and internationally. Each commission member also gathered evidence from their community exploring views about whether the assessment and qualification system should be retained or revised. The case for change was powerful. Qualifications should recognise the achievements of every student. Assessment should be equitable and reliable. There was a need for a new assessment ERA.

This report offers a framework for a national conversation that will lead to a new assessment ERA. A conversation

that should begin, not from the type of assessment used, exams or teacher assessment, but from a broader vision of the purposes that assessment and qualifications should serve if they are to support individuals and the nation.

It has been a pleasure to work with the IAC. I am deeply grateful to the commission members for the contribution that each made to the thinking of the group. They gave more to the commission than was reasonable to expect and worked together with commitment, enthusiasm and compassion. The perspectives they brought from diverse communities allowed us all to see the world through different eyes. At times it may have made for lively discussion, but there was always firm, common ground: a shared concern to create a system that works for every citizen.

Each community within the IAC has a crucial role to play in making a success of any change in assessment and qualifications. The conversations started in the IAC must now continue.

Finally, I would like to thank the National Education Union, which funded the commission and which valued its independence. My particular thanks to Nansi Ellis, Andy Case and Candy Akomfrah who provided great support throughout the process. Their commitment to the work of the IAC was inspirational.

**Louise Hayward**  
Chair of the Independent Assessment  
Commission

# CHAPTER 1

## BACKGROUND TO THE WORK OF THE COMMISSION

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

England has had an internationally highly regarded system for qualifications. These qualifications, heavily dependent on examinations, have provided opportunities for many young people as they have transitioned from school to the next phase of their lives in college, employment or university.

Louise Hayward, professor of educational assessment and innovation at the University of Glasgow, was invited by the National Education Union (NEU) to chair an independent review of assessment and qualifications in the later years of secondary education in England. The Independent Assessment Commission (IAC) set out to explore the extent to which the current system of assessment and qualifications would be able to respond to the demands of a fast-changing society and a fast-changing economy. The NEU recognised that in recent years in England the debate about the future of assessment and qualifications had become artificially polarised. If those with an interest in education were to be able to engage in honest debate about the future of assessment and qualifications, that debate would have to be carried out in an independent context.

The experience of the 2020 and 2021 qualifications cycles brought into sharp relief problems with the system for qualifications in England that were already perceived to exist. This shone a spotlight on a number of fundamental and often challenging questions about the purposes and processes of qualifications systems; questions that were already beginning to be asked before the pandemic.

### 1.2 THE CONTEXT FOR THE REVIEW

Concerns about the efficacy of the current qualification system in England are long-standing. The need to build a system that works for every learner has been recognised for some time. Calls for change have come from both research and policy communities. The 2004 Tomlinson report<sup>1</sup> recommended a unified framework for 14-19 learning, with achievement certified by diplomas and including functional skills, an extended project, development of common knowledge, skills and attributes, an entitlement to wider activities, and guidance on learning and careers. In 2009, the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training England and Wales which was led by professor Richard Pring et al<sup>2</sup>, made five demands of the education system. The review argued for a broader vision for education, for system level indicators

that would support the education system to develop in ways consistent with its vision, for the redistribution of power and decision-making, for building a more collaborative culture locally and nationally and for the development of a system of qualifications that was unified. In 2018/19, the Parliamentary Education Select Committee recognised the significance of global changes in its inquiry on the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the Role of Education Examined (2018/19)<sup>3</sup>. Consistent themes emerged from the evidence presented to the committee. For example, CBI chief UK policy director Matthew Fell argued that nearly 80 per cent of employers expected to need more staff with higher levels of skills in the years ahead and that future qualification systems should reflect the competencies needed by young people to succeed in the workplace. Learning, he contended, would be lifelong and those in work would be involved in continuous professional learning to keep pace with the fast-changing world<sup>4</sup>.

Covid-19 has brought concerns about the qualification system in England into sharp relief. The IAC undertook this review in the context of major, unanticipated changes in the approach taken to the assessment and grading of qualifications as part of the country's response to major Covid-related educational disruptions. These disruptions were significant and their impact on students, teachers and parents profound. The International Educational Assessment Network (IEAN, 2021)<sup>5</sup> highlighted four major educational disruptors internationally, precipitated by Covid. Education in England faced all four of these challenges.

In many contexts there was disruption to traditional classroom-based learning. Schools closed to most pupils, classroom

learning swiftly moved to online learning and then, when schools began to re-open, there was a return to classroom learning. The different access that students had 'exposed educational disadvantage that has hitherto remained largely hidden. It has also undermined the school as community for learning, and sanctuary for student wellbeing.' (ibid, p.3)

As educational establishments closed, the online learning environment necessitated changes to learning and teaching approaches and forced schools and colleges to rethink curricular and assessment priorities. The abilities of students to be able to work independently and collaboratively with peers in online environments became crucial skills; those young people who had developed these skills were at a significant advantage compared with those who had remained heavily reliant on teacher support.

Large-scale examinations were cancelled in many countries. Questions were raised across countries about the reliability of alternative measures, including the use of statistical algorithms to control standards. Concerns such as these led to calls for greater reliance to be placed on teachers' professional judgements and for the increased use of classroom-based assessment to support, monitor, and promote students' learning.

The pandemic highlighted existing equity challenges within education systems. The pandemic also stressed the centrality of student health and wellbeing, the importance of community and how critical a factor resilience was in determining how students were able to cope with a crisis.

The degree of change that proved necessary to qualification systems as a result of Covid restrictions varied

significantly across countries. Those countries whose approaches were heavily dependent on national examinations were impacted most heavily. The IEAN reported that:

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“These terminal assessments happen within school, as final course or year-end examinations, or take place at national levels, with the latter benefitting from superior resources and security arrangements. Yet the disruptions to large-scale examinations raise questions about the sustainability of this approach and the capacity of systems to put alternative arrangements in place at speed.”

(ibid, p.3).

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The IAC review followed the sudden, dramatic and contentious changes in qualifications that were necessary as a response to the global pandemic and that demonstrated the system in England - notwithstanding the exceptional efforts of educators - was not sufficiently robust to cope with a crisis such as that related to Covid.

### 1.3 THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TASK

Assessment and qualifications matter to young people, to parents, to employers, to universities and colleges and to the nation. Qualifications in England had been held in high regard, nationally and globally. However, the IAC review was established in the recognition that if this high regard is to be maintained, in a fast-changing world, the education system must look to the future and identify how assessment and qualifications in England might be developed to respond to the demands of Industry 4: a more uncertain social and economic environment where the future is less easy to predict.

The global pandemic has led many people to question the assessment and qualification system in England (see chapters 2 and 3). As the country moves forward from this crisis, it is timely to ask if the qualifications system is fit for the range of purposes needed to serve the future needs of all young people, the economy and wider society. However, it is important to differentiate between the experiences in schools and colleges of changes to qualifications over the past two years and proposals for the future of qualifications. What happened in 2020 and in 2021 were changes that were responses to a pandemic. The education system in England sought to protect young people living through this global pandemic and acted to try to ensure that they were not further disadvantaged by the disruption to the examination system. Change that is a reaction to crisis cannot be thought through. It cannot be planned, prepared for and appropriately supported. It cannot be truly inclusive in its design, nor seek to improve its progress through calm and constructive reflection. Yet these

are all characteristics of change that seeks to become deeply embedded and sustainable. The experience of the past two years illustrate that change is possible but it does not provide a model for the future.

Real change takes clarity of purpose, vision, engagement, targeted resources and time. Yet it is not morally defensible to ignore the needs of one generation of students for the benefit of the next. The proposals emerging from this commission in chapters 5 and 6 are thus intended to:

- stimulate a conversation about the longer-term future of assessment and qualifications in England
- identify a vision, principles and recommendations to create a structural design that will provide more equitable and reliable qualifications for all of England's young people.

However, these proposals cannot be considered in isolation. They have implications for assessment and its relationship with the curriculum throughout school and college education. There are also implications for wider educational issues, for example, the role of the teacher and how this new vision of what it is to be an education professional is reflected in roles and responsibilities and in the management of time. This concern to look to the future is reflected in the remits of the reviews of school qualifications already underway in other countries in the UK (Scotland and Wales) and in a number of countries internationally.

The task of the IAC was to identify principles to inform a shared vision for a successful future for assessment and qualifications in England, one that would reflect the changing nature of work and society. The principles developed by the

IAC would be designed to stimulate a national conversation, one that would inform the design of an assessment and qualification system to most effectively position England to respond positively, creatively and sustainably to the personal, social and economic opportunities and challenges posed by the new and on-going industrial and technological revolution.

**“This commission will look to develop a vision for the future and principles which would underpin an equitable, reliable assessment system – one fit for purpose for the 21st century.”**

(Louise Hayward, Professor of Educational Assessment and Innovation, University of Glasgow and Chair of IAC).

## 1.4 MEMBERSHIP OF THE INDEPENDENT ASSESSMENT COMMISSION

The membership of the IAC was selected by the chair to reflect the wide range of constituents who are concerned with the future of assessment and qualifications in England. Each commission member brought depth of experience from their field and a knowledge of their community. This allowed them to gather evidence widely from participants in these communities, each of which had a stake in qualifications, to inform the work of the commission. Although commissioners were able to contribute to the work of more than one strand of activity, each took on a leadership role in relation to one community.

- Professor Louise Hayward (chair), professor of educational assessment and innovation at the University of Glasgow. Louise had been a member of the internationally-renowned Assessment Reform Group and had worked with practitioners, policy makers and researchers nationally in Scotland and Wales and in a number of countries internationally. She founded the International Educational Assessment Network in 2018. Louise also worked with OECD on the Learning 2030 programme and UNESCO on assessment in STEM education.
- Salsabil Elmegri, vice president, further education, of the National Union of Students (NUS), where she was elected to represent the views of further education learners across the UK. Previously, Salsabil studied access to higher education in biology and chemistry and was vice president, education and welfare, at Bradford College Students' Union.
- Kerry-Jane Packman, executive director of programmes, membership and charitable services for Parentkind – a national charity representing the voice of those with a parenting role to local, regional and national governments and agencies. Kerry-Jane has 20 years' experience of working within the charity sector and has worked closely with parents and families on what they want to see from assessment, qualifications and education more widely.
- John Jolly, chief executive, of Parentkind. John has over 30 years' experience in operational and strategic leadership roles within public, charity and partnership development roles. He has extensive experience of developing and supporting coalitions of charities and public sector bodies to campaign for and influence changes in Government policy and funding.

The commissioners serving on the IAC were selected to engage with:

### Those most directly concerned – students and parents

### Those immediately responsible for delivering courses leading to qualifications – teachers, lecturers and school leaders

- Dr Robin Bevan, a serving head teacher with national influence, who has worked in a number of roles within education. He began as a classroom teacher in the 1980s and has worked in senior leadership for the past 25 years. Robin has extensive academic research experience in curriculum and assessment, including an MEd and PhD from Cambridge University. He served on an OCR panel to explore the reliability of examination outcomes and on AQA's Curriculum and Assessment Quality Committee. He was also NEU national president for the 2020/21 academic year.

### Those who use these qualifications as young people transition from school – higher education, further education, employers

- Matthew Percival, people and skills policy director at the Confederation of British Industry (CBI). The CBI speaks on behalf of 190,000 businesses which together employ about one-third of the private sector workforce. Matthew has significant experience working with businesses on what they think of the current education system and what they would like assessment and qualifications to provide.

### Those responsible for designing policy and providing such qualifications: politicians and policy makers, examinations boards and organisations and regulatory authorities

- Professor Jo-Anne Baird, director of the Department of Education, University of Oxford. Her research covers educational assessment, examination standards,

marking and assessment design. Jo-Anne advises governments and international bodies on assessment and qualifications issues; she has worked for and with awarding organisations in a number of roles, is a member of Ofqual's Standing Advisory Group and is chair of AQA's Research Committee.

- Olly Newton, executive director of the Edge Foundation, oversees research, and runs the Edge Future Learning delivery programme for schools and colleges. In this role, and previously, Olly has extensive experience working with policy makers from across the education sector and political spectrum. This includes 12 years in the Department for Education (DfE) working on policies including 14-19 diplomas, raising the participation age and, finally, as head of apprenticeship strategy.

### Researchers in the fields of curriculum, assessment and qualifications, accountability and of national and international assessment systems

- Professor Dominic Wyse, professor of early childhood and primary education at University College London (UCL), Institute of Education (IOE). The main focus of Dominic's research is curriculum and pedagogy and his work includes significant attention to national curriculum and assessment policies. He was president of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) during the life of the IAC.

### Organisations and individuals with expertise in promoting sustainable change

- Professor Dame Alison Peacock, chief executive of the Chartered College of Teaching, a professional body connecting teachers to provide expert teaching and

leadership. Prior to joining the Chartered College, Dame Alison was executive head teacher of The Wroxham School in Hertfordshire and her career to date has spanned primary, secondary and advisory roles in education.

### Organisations and individuals with expertise in promoting equality and social justice

- Professor Vini Lander, professor of race and education and director of the centre for race, education and decoloniality in the Carnegie School of Education. Vini has worked for many years researching the inequalities that persist in education, including in teacher education, and has extensive experience of where and how inequity exists, can appear and can be addressed.

Day-to-day organisation of the IAC was supported by NEU professional colleagues: Nansi Ellis, assistant general secretary, education policy and research and Andy Case, senior policy adviser education policy and; administrative support was provided by Candy Akomfrah from the NEU. Additional analysis of evidence was carried out by Estelia Bórquez - Sánchez, research assistant at the University of Glasgow. The IAC media strategy has been led by Tommy Kane and Michael Sharpe of Unity Consulting.

## 1.5 WAYS OF WORKING

The IAC, through its commission members, engaged with a wide range of communities with an interest in assessment and qualifications. Meetings were held online, which enabled evidence-gathering from a wide range of participants, nationally and internationally. The areas to be deliberated by the IAC, and on which evidence was sought, were determined by the commission and its members.

The IAC drew on several main sources of evidence:

- research and policy
- interviews and focus groups
- meetings with policy leaders and from fringe events at each of the four main political party conferences in England (Conservative, Green, Labour and Liberal Democrat)
- expert seminars focussed on three themes identified by the IAC:
  - equity, diversity, inclusion, health and wellbeing
  - international models of qualifications (Australia, New Zealand, Norway and Singapore)
  - research on change processes.

In addition to being prepared to share insights from their own perspective at IAC meetings, members of the IAC were central to the process of evidence collection. The depth of knowledge that each member brought about their community to the commission enabled them to offer crucial advice on who to involve in consultation and on how to generate the highest quality of evidence from that community to inform the commission's thinking. Strategies for evidence collection were designed by commission members and were tailored

to meet the needs of individual groups. Methods included surveys, focus groups, individual interviews and structured online events. Given the time-limited nature of the commission's task, this approach allowed the IAC to maximise the quality of illustrative evidence gathered.

To be consistent with the aspiration of the IAC to work respectfully with others to design and develop a reformed assessment and qualifications system in England, the work of the IAC has sought to:

- respect individuals
- respect evidence
- listen with care to all participants
- be sensitive and attend to structural issues of equality, diversity, inclusion and mental health (EDIH).

## **1.6 A NEW ASSESSMENT ERA: EQUITABLE, RELIABLE ASSESSMENT.**

From the outset, IAC members were concerned that the qualification system in England is not equitable. They were determined to work towards the design of an assessment system that would reflect and contribute to the development of a more just society; any future system of qualifications should be inclusive.

Rapid changes in society and the desire across the country for every young person, no matter their abilities, race or gender, to have qualifications that open doors to future learning or employment opportunities mean that England's current approach to qualifications needs to change in order to become a world leader in 21st century qualifications. The status quo is not an option.

Qualifications obtained in the final years of schools and colleges have one major focus, the provision of an evidence base to allow young people to transition to the next phase of their lives, whether that be in college, employment or university. The evidence described in chapter 2 of this report demonstrates clearly that this is not true of the current examination system which may be seen to serve the needs of some young people as they transition into university but in which, for many, examinations provide either too little information to show what a young person has achieved in up to 13 years of education or provide partial information, omitting much of what users of qualifications need, eg, the soft skills identified as essential by employers that need to be modelled, practised and learned in a variety of collaborative contexts.

The high-stakes examination system used for qualifications does have some advantages for some young people who prefer this method of approach. However, for many young people, evidence suggests (see section 2.1 Students' wellbeing, motivation and engagement), that the one-off event can cause undue stress and anxiety with a negative impact on their health and wellbeing and their performance. Their anxiety may interfere with their ability to demonstrate their achievements. These impacts were often reported to have wider impact on a young person's self-confidence and self-esteem. As such, the outcomes of high-stakes examinations are disproportionately a measure of 'point in time' performativity, rather than breadth and depth of learning.

A new qualification system also needs to be sufficiently flexible and responsive to address issues of diversity and equity. Here, the current system also falls short. There is a perception that it is too close to a model designed to make one size fit all, rather than one that seeks ways to tackle deep-seated diversity challenges. The system results in inequitable outcomes for some groups of learners. It is insufficiently diverse in the choices it offers to best serve a diverse student population (see chapter 2). Many schools and colleges recognise that the system is not diverse. McKinsey (2020)<sup>6</sup> reports the need for and advantages of having an ethnically diverse workforce, one that provides different cultural and social perspectives within a company or workplace. Diverse workforces, the report argues, make business sense since they are more productive. Schools and colleges also argue that examinations have not served young people with special educational needs or disabilities well. A new qualification system should be equitable, should recognise all young people's talents

and should be built on an understanding of diversity. This should be the most important principle to drive reforms in the assessment and qualifications system.

The IAC also sought to reconsider traditional definitions of reliability. Reliability, in assessment terms, is commonly concerned with the extent to which an assessment method, such as examinations, measures the performance of a student consistently. Reliable assessments are expected to lead to comparable outcomes where standards are consistent in a range of ways, eg between different learners, different examiners and different cohorts. Reliability matters but the IAC believes that it matters in ways that go beyond the original definition. It matters that learners have information on their achievements on which each learner can rely to support them into the next phase of their life. It matters that the information is reliable in providing information about what is crucial in the curriculum. It matters that users of qualifications have reliable information on knowledge, skills, attitudes and competences from which they can build. Examinations are one method of collecting evidence: for some aspects of the curriculum, they serve that function well; for other aspects other ways of gathering evidence are more reliable and offer the potential for greater validity.

The title of the commission reflects its focus: its concern to build qualifications for the future that are more equitable and more reliable. A New Assessment ERA – equitable, reliable assessment.

## 1.7 THE STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

The initial remit of the IAC was to develop a set of principles that would underpin future thinking on assessment and qualifications in England. This first chapter of the report has provided the background to the work of the Independent Assessment Commission, its rationale, membership and ways of working. The remaining chapters in this report track the thinking of the IAC, share the evidence that was gathered and make clear the links between evidence and the principles and the recommendations offered in the final chapter of this report.

Chapter 2, *The Case for Change*, analyses evidence gathered in response to the initial question posed by the IAC: to what extent is there a case for change in the current qualification system in England? The chapter begins by reflecting on evidence from research and policy on perceptions of the current qualifications system. The second section presents evidence gathered from the communities of the IAC to illustrate the issues raised by those most affected by qualifications (eg students and parents), those involved in offering qualifications (eg teachers, lecturers, examination organisations) and those who use qualifications (eg colleges, employers and universities). The conclusion is that there is a powerful case for changing England's current qualification system.

The case for change having been clearly established, chapter 3 explores how other countries beyond and within the UK are tackling the challenges of equitable, reliable assessment to serve the future needs of individuals, society and the economy. This chapter explores thinking from leading assessment

experts and policy documentation in different nations. The IAC recognised the importance of context and that it is neither desirable nor possible to import systems from one nation to another. Approaches to qualifications have to be designed recognising different contexts. Even within the nations of the UK, there are historical and contextual differences. However, countries can learn with one another and reflecting on different approaches in different countries was perceived to be a helpful strategy to stimulate debate.

Recognising that many innovations fail not because of inherent problems in the design of the content, but because insufficient attention has been paid to the process of change, chapter 4 focuses on evidence related to change. The chapter reviews evidence from leading national and international researchers in the field and identifies characteristics crucial to innovation design if change is to be sustainable.

Chapter 5 turns to the future. It offers a structure to inform a national conversation about the future of assessment and qualifications in England. As a starting point for that conversation, the IAC offers:

- a vision statement
- principles to inform the design of a more Equitable, Reliable Assessment system for qualifications in England: an initial set of principles was published in the interim report from the IAC and those were the basis of consultation.
- recommendations for next steps; a number of possible options that are consistent with the New Era Principles for the future.

# CHAPTER 2

## IS THERE A CASE FOR CHANGE?

### 2.1 EVIDENCE FROM RESEARCH AND POLICY

The IAC began by considering the features of the current system, what it achieves and some reported disadvantages. Assessment and qualifications in England have been under review in research, the media and the wider community. Commission members also contributed information from a wide range of sources to represent the experiences of the communities with which they are involved.

### REFLECTIONS ON THE CURRENT SYSTEM

#### End of course examinations

Examinations are a major feature of qualifications in England. The qualifications with the largest entries in England, particularly GCSEs and A-levels, use end-of-course examinations as the sole or main source of evidence for awarding grades. Applied General Qualifications (AGQs) such as BTECs have, in recent years, also been reformed to increase the reliance on terminal, external examinations. This move was justified by suggesting that it allows more time in the course<sup>7</sup> to deepen and develop knowledge and that other assessment methods, such as coursework, can be misused<sup>8</sup>.

Other features of a system relying on end-of-course examinations are highlighted by Baird et al<sup>9</sup> (2019). Their

research suggests that using this form of assessment makes it more straightforward to maintain standards over time and across examination boards.

#### Avoiding bias

Many of the policy makers in the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) and the DfE argue that the assessment methods used for qualifications in England are 'the best and fairest'<sup>10 11</sup> way to assess students. They argue that examinations avoid bias against students from disadvantaged backgrounds or with protected characteristics, including race and special educational needs or disabilities<sup>12</sup>.

Minimising bias is indeed vital in a qualifications system. However, the commission noted that caution should be taken when considering the potential advantage of an exam-based system not to conflate predicted grades with grades that have been awarded as a part of formal summative assessment: there is a significant difference between the two. Assessing the standard of, and grading, a piece of work produced by a student – a piece of evidence of the student's learning – is a process which can be quality assured and moderated to increase consistency and objectivity. Providing a grade as a prediction of future performance in an examination is an attempt to guess the standard of work a student might produce on a given day, without the benefit of moderation.

### Subject expertise

There is evidence that A-levels are better than other courses at helping students develop in-depth subject expertise. For example, a survey<sup>13</sup> of university admissions officers found that 94 per cent agreed that students who had taken A-levels had in-depth subject expertise, whereas only 56 per cent thought the same of students who had taken the International Baccalaureate.

### Vocational and academic learning

Learning and qualifications in vocational and academic pathways are often kept separate. However, this feature of the system is not one which has been intentionally designed but rather seems to be a remaining by-product of historical educational structures which divided students into separate pathways.

While support for the continuation of this historical separation does not seem to be an explicit policy of the government, the T-levels policy advocated by ministers arguably further separates technical and vocational learning from the academic. This, therefore, could be viewed as tacit support from government for the separation and delineation of vocational and academic pathways.

### Impact of performance measures

Assessment and qualifications in England feed into the measures used for holding schools and colleges to account. The headline measure of secondary accountability is Progress 8, which is calculated at the end of year 11. Undoubtedly Progress 8 and the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), which forms a part of it, have narrowed the range of qualifications students take at 16. This trend is one Ofqual has acknowledged in its release of entry data for 2019<sup>14</sup>:

“This decline [of entries in non-EBacc subjects] indicates that schools/colleges are continuing to focus more on EBacc subjects than those subjects which do not count towards the EBacc. Progress 8 and Attainment 8 measures are also likely to be influencing these patterns as their calculation can only include a maximum of three non-EBacc GCSEs.”

(Ofqual, 2019, p.4)

The 2016-2020 figures for GCSE entries<sup>15</sup> indeed confirm that non-EBacc subjects, which include, creative and technical subjects, the arts and physical education, are declining year-on-year, despite overall entries increasing. These data are presented as proportions of the total entries in the table below.

	EBacc subjects	Non-EBacc subjects
2016	71.6%	28.4%
2017	75.5%	24.5%
2018	78.9%	21.1%
2019	81.1%	18.9%
2020	81.4%	18.6%

Table 1: Proportions of entries to EBacc and non-EBacc subjects, data from Ofqual annual reports.

The DfE states that the performance measures “are designed to encourage schools to offer a broad and balanced curriculum with a focus on an academic core at key stage 4”.<sup>16</sup> The Ofqual entry data demonstrate that, while it could be argued that more students are indeed focusing on an ‘academic core’, fewer are participating in those subjects that provide breadth and balance in the curriculum. In fact, the entry data may

be highlighting a tension intrinsic to the stated aims of the performance measures: if entries increase in the subjects that form the 'academic core', that will cause, and has caused, decreases elsewhere.

Goldstein and Leckie (2018) also identify concerns with using the results of qualifications to rank schools, in the way Progress 8 does: "Key concerns are that the tests fail to measure many important aspects of teaching (eg, pupil engagement, curiosity, an eagerness to learn), lead to a narrowing of the curriculum (eg, they typically ignore arts, music, drama, and other non-traditional academic subjects), result in teaching to the test, induce excessive pupil and teacher stress, create a culture of fear, tend to drive teachers out of the profession, lead to various gaming behaviours (eg, excluding pupils from tests and cheating), and that the published scores are often presented with insufficient guidance, caveats, or quantification of statistical uncertainty."<sup>17</sup>

### Students' wellbeing, motivation and engagement

The heavy reliance on examinations for qualifications is perceived to adversely affect students' wellbeing. The former head of the civil service, Gus O'Donnell, who has served under Labour and Conservative governments, claimed that the UK is "addicted" to examinations and that "measuring success by exam results is fuelling stress, anxiety and failure among pupils, teachers, and schools" (in Marsh, 2018).<sup>18</sup>

Parents are also concerned about the impact of the examination system on their children's mental health and wellbeing, and on the ways in which its demands restrict young people's engagement<sup>19</sup>. The

Royal Society (2019) reports<sup>20</sup> that "for many parents, education is seen only as a sequence of progressively more difficult examinations to be passed" and that "parents expressed concerns over the effect of the current system on their children's mental health".

One reason for the move to linear examinations was to reduce the number of times students had to sit papers to reduce these stress points and free up more time for teaching and learning. However, research, including Baird et al (2019)<sup>21</sup>, has found that, while removing modular examinations has meant fewer live papers are sat during the course, they have been replaced by an increased number of internal and/or 'mock' papers.

With little, if any, reduction in the number of papers sat and everything now depending on the end of the course examination, teachers have also reported worsening mental health in their students. In August 2019, 73 per cent of NEU members surveyed<sup>22</sup> said that the assessment method of reformed GCSEs had made student mental health worse and 55 per cent said the same for A-levels<sup>23</sup>(NEU, 2019).

The same survey demonstrated that student engagement, as well as mental health, was being severely affected by the current qualifications: over 60 per cent of GCSE teachers said the courses had decreased student engagement.

Research carried out by Hutchings<sup>24</sup> (2015) highlighted similar findings. This work found that the accountability measures which incentivise entry to certain courses over others, Progress 8 and the EBacc, were "contributing to disaffection and poor behaviour among some pupils" and that "these effects have been exacerbated

by changes to the curriculum, making it more demanding; and by changes to the exam system, including the scrapping of coursework and the switch to linear exams". (Hutchings, 2015, p.5)

MPs who have called for a rethink of the current system include Flick Drummond and Cheryl Mackrory. In their paper *The Future of Education* (Drummond & Mackrory, 2020)<sup>25</sup> they highlight a variety of reasons why changes to the current system are needed, including: worsening wellbeing among students; the narrowing of the curriculum that GCSEs and the EBacc cause at age 16; and time lost to examination revision which could be better used for learning.

### Key skills and understanding for the real world in the 21st Century

Businesses report that qualifications need to give a better indication of the employability skills they value in young people. In business these are commonly described as soft skills, while in other contexts terms such as core skills are used. In 2019 the Confederation of British Industry (CBI, 2019), which is represented on the commission, called for a rethink<sup>26</sup> of qualifications, including GCSEs. They reported that businesses have noticed a narrowing of the curriculum in recent years and stated that "we need to provide a curriculum that instead of narrowing horizons, broadens them, and fosters skills such as creativity, resilience, communication, and problem-solving." (CBI, 2019, pp. 32-33)

The challenge, when it comes to key skills and understanding for the 21st century, has also been recognised by the Education Select Committee. Its chair Robert Halfon MP (2021)<sup>27</sup> has called for

an end to written examinations as the only form of assessment. He says the system is failing to meet the needs of employers and that as its foundations stretch back as far as 1911 the current system needs to "catch up". (Edge Foundation, 2021.)

That which the system appears to be good for does not seem to provide what will be most relevant for the 21st Century. Director of education and skills at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Andreas Schleicher says that "educational success is no longer about reproducing content knowledge"<sup>28</sup>. (Schleicher, 2014). The same survey of university admissions tutors which suggested A-levels are better at developing in-depth subject knowledge also demonstrated<sup>29</sup> that they fare worse at developing workplace skills (ACS, 2017, p.10), a positive approach to risk taking, creativity and communication skills - all attributes which Schleicher says education today needs to focus on in order to prepare young people effectively for work and life in the mid- to late- 21st century.

Other work from Schleicher and the OECD (Schleicher et al, 2012)<sup>30</sup>, on the topic of "Preparing teachers and developing school leaders for the 21st century", highlights that the types of and uses for knowledge which may have been helpful in the past may well not be as relevant in the 21st century, which has implications for the way you might teach, learn or test that which will be relevant. However, when giving evidence to the UK Parliament's Education Select Committee in 2019, Schleicher commented that the type of tasks students in upper secondary education in England are best at are those "more associated with the past than the future" (House of Commons Education Committee, 2019, p.2)<sup>31</sup>.

The OECD's 2012 paper suggests that around the world, to shift towards that which is relevant for the 21st century, there is a move away from the idea that education is about 'stacking up' knowledge. However, the system in England does not seem to be following this shift. A recent survey of educators by the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference (HMC, 2021)<sup>32</sup> reported that the current system encourages the acquisition of knowledge over other attributes such as critical thinking or the skills that help you continue to learn throughout life. This was one element which contributed towards their conclusion that curriculum and assessment in England is no longer fit for purpose<sup>33</sup>.

This evidence would suggest that educators and the OECD also believe that the system in England, which is shaped by qualifications and assessment, does not demonstrate features which will be most relevant for the 21st century.

### Issues relating to validity and reliability of grades and fitness for purpose

Torrance (2018)<sup>34</sup> argues that the system has a narrower and less valid evidence base for results because of the return to wholly end-of-course testing. He argues that to increase validity and better assess skills more necessary for the 21st century a wider range of assessment methods than is used in the current system would be necessary.

Torrance also suggests that the validity of results is called into question because they are directly linked to school and college accountability and that there is need to decouple these two things.

One of the originators of GCSEs, Lord Kenneth Baker, argues that to be fit for purpose the current system needs to

change. Like many others, Baker points to the fact that education or training is compulsory until 18 now - which makes GCSEs an "arbitrary, competitive process... that means very little in terms of them [students] getting to the next stage"<sup>35</sup>(in Lough, 2020).

There is more than one way to grade a qualification: grades, and the number of grade points, in GCSEs and A-levels, for example, are different to those in other qualifications, such as AGQs like BTECs. Research from Rhead, Black and Pinot de Moira (2016)<sup>36</sup>, on marking metrics for GCSE, AS and A-level qualifications, demonstrates how marking subjectivity and the nature of different subject disciplines can lead to a student not always obtaining the "definitive" grade – that is, roughly speaking, the grade they would receive if their assessment had been marked in the way senior examiners determine it should be.

This has led a number of commentators (for example, former consultant to Ofqual, Dennis Sherwood) to question the way in which grades for GCSEs, AS and A-levels are awarded, and to ask if there is a better way. Sherwood (Jan 2019)<sup>37</sup> uses Rhead, Black and Pinot de Moira's research to suggest that on average across GCSE, AS and A-level subjects, one in four grades each year could 'legitimately' be one grade higher or lower, bringing into question the reliability of grades.

In doing so, he echoes findings from Bramley and Dhawan (2010)<sup>38</sup> whose detailed analysis of GCSE and AS chemistry examination components – even with multiple papers – demonstrated that marginal unreliability in marking could lead to a probability of a different grade being assigned (than the one awarded), to

any one candidate, which is as high as, or higher than, 50 per cent.

However, Rhead, Black and Pinot de Moira highlight that while some slight improvements could be made, marking is effectively as consistent as it can be without altering the way mark schemes are designed to the point where it could have other negative impacts: "These differing features of an assessment [the ones which lead to different levels of consistency] are in place for reasons of validity". Sherwood agrees with and reiterates this point. In a later blog (July 2019)<sup>39</sup> he suggests that "Tighter mark schemes, so that even essays are given the same mark by different examiners" would be a "non-starter" given potentially problematic consequences.

Meadows and Billington (2005)<sup>40</sup> highlight one such problematic consequence of attempting to make the marking of essays, in particular, more reliable. If a mark scheme is so prescriptive that markers can only reward specific things, students who produce good answers which haven't been predicted and accounted for in the mark scheme in advance, cannot be given high marks. This can lead to students' responses becoming too formulaic, so that they ensure they do gain the marks, to the point where the assessments are no longer testing the knowledge or skills intended.

There remains, therefore, an unresolved – and potentially unresolvable – tension between the design of authentic and worthwhile assessments, marking consistency, the desire for reliable outcomes, the assignment of grades and the ultimate trustworthiness of those outcomes. These various elements will always have to be balanced. However, the impacts of where this balance is struck can be magnified for individual students – their

progression can depend critically on slight variations in the grades they are awarded – and there are already examples in England of how different approaches to grading can still lead to the same employment or further study opportunities (for example, A-level grades and AGQ grades can both lead to higher education courses). As such, questions exist as to whether any alterations to grading, or perhaps the way in which grades are used, could lead to a better, fairer system.

## 2.2 OTHERS CONSIDERING THE ISSUES

The breadth of stakeholders and policy makers considering 14-19 assessment and qualifications in England is demonstrated by the membership of the Independent Assessment Commission. However, concern about the issues explored extends beyond the commission itself, as the number of groups researching in this area indicates. Since the initial 'horizon scan' carried out by the commission, these groups have also produced findings which reinforce some of the commission members' findings and raise further issues.

The Times newspaper has set up its own Education Commission. Assessment is one of the ten areas in which it will draw up proposals for reform citing "the Covid-19 crisis, declining social mobility, new technology and the changing nature of work"<sup>41</sup> as reasons for doing so.

The Times Commission has taken evidence from general secretaries<sup>42</sup> of education trade unions<sup>43</sup>, former prime minister Sir John Major<sup>44</sup>, former education secretaries and a former Financial Times journalist turned teacher<sup>45</sup>, among others. Across

these sessions those giving evidence have reported that the qualification system simply judges children, teachers and leaders and does not focus on what matters or what students have or have not achieved; the system drives teachers out of the profession; oracy has wrongly been marginalised; all students taking GCSEs at 16 is not a fit for purpose approach, imposes stress and strain on students and assessment needs an overhaul; teachers are too often not treated as professionals or involved in professional decision-making about assessment, curriculum, teaching and learning; the system forces students and teachers to spend too much time on examination preparation at the expense of curiosity, exploration of broader issues and deeper learning.

These concerns are echoed across a variety of education communities. The Rethinking Assessment (RA) movement has written an open letter<sup>46</sup>, signed by a broad coalition of educators and academics. The letter highlights the lack of recognition qualifications give to a wider range of skills; an “over-crammed” curriculum that drives teaching to the test rather than a love of the subject; and the rationing of success caused by the way in which grades are awarded.

Following on from this letter, the group sought views about the system from a wide range of organisations. Some of the problems highlighted in their report<sup>47</sup> include: lack of relevance for the 21st century; neurodiverse learners being disadvantaged; students’ interests and preferences being overlooked; persistence of rankings (league tables) and associated competitiveness, lack of collaboration and focus on individualism; not being able adequately to assess important, core skills deemed to be vital to future life and

work; and reliance mainly or entirely on examinations, a limited method of assessing learning, with an emphasis on factual recall over anything else.

Pearson, owner of the awarding organisation Edexcel, is another body conducting a review of qualifications and assessment in England. Its interim report<sup>48</sup> has identified many features of the system which would not be resolved by continuing with the status quo. Such features include: purely academic or vocational routes which can be too binary; too much weight placed on examinations; the need for a debate about how grades are awarded; the role of digitisation in making assessment more relevant and inclusive; and most teachers’ belief that they should play a role in continuous assessments that ultimately contribute to a qualification grade.

The NCFE (formerly the Northern Council for Further Education) is also considering the future of assessment. It has described the formal assessment approaches in England as “dated, disconnected and transactional” and says assessment “goes far beyond just “examinations” (in Oliver, June 2021)<sup>49</sup>. It has questioned<sup>50</sup> whether the assessment system is designed in a way which meets modern needs, and it advocates that assessment should not only support academic attainment but should also empower learners to fulfil their potential in terms of wellbeing, mental health and happiness. (Oliver, July 2021). The report says “looking at the future of assessment and identifying the key ingredients required to create a system that is truly transformational for learners” is integral to the future success of the economy and society. It has therefore initiated a fund<sup>51</sup> to support pilots in assessment that aim to be innovative, reliable, robust and inherently fair.

Finally, awarding organisation AQA (formerly known as the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance) has also recently launched a platform<sup>52</sup> dedicated to facilitating debate, research and insight on the future of assessment and qualifications. It has produced a report<sup>53</sup> on the future of GCSEs, warning that issues which are not directly a feature of GCSEs may have become entwined with the qualifications in such a way that they are the cause of reported problems. Examples of issues which AQA argues should not be conflated with the qualifications themselves are: the use of GCSEs in accountability measures; the purposes of GCSEs; and debates about whether they achieve their purposes or whether these purposes are the right ones.

### 2.3 EVIDENCE EMERGING FROM THE COMMISSION

While there are features of the system regarded by some as beneficial, the evidence considered by the commission and the findings emerging from the work of others have highlighted significant and fundamental concerns from a wide range of stakeholders. In these circumstances, the next step for the commission was to gather evidence from the wide range of communities it represented, obtaining expert input where required, to illustrate the issues raised by those most affected by qualifications, those involved in offering them and those who use them.

This evidence came from expert seminars, focus groups, surveys and individual interviews. Politicians and policy makers from across the political spectrum were also engaged, for example in fringe events at the political party conferences.

### Outcomes of the expert webinar - issues of equity, diversity, inclusion and mental health

The commission held an expert webinar to explore how the system works for particular groups of pupils. Those invited were:

- Professor Louise Archer, Karl Mannheim professor of sociology of education at the Institute of Education, University College, London, and co-chair of the Centre for Sociology of Education and Equity. Louise's research focuses on educational identities and inequalities, particularly in relation to gender, ethnicity and social class.
- Professor Mhairi Beaton, professor at the Carnegie School of Education, Leeds Beckett University. Her research interests are inclusion, assessment, teacher education and student voice.
- Professor David Gillborn, professor of critical race studies at the School of Education, University of Birmingham, and editor-in-chief of the journal *Race Ethnicity and Education*.
- Professor Jonathan Glazzard, professor of inclusive education, director of the Centre for LGBTQ+ Inclusion in Education and principal researcher in the Carnegie Centre of Excellence for Mental Health in Schools in the Carnegie School of Education at Leeds Beckett University. His research focuses include mental health, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and special educational needs and disability.
- Professor Ingrid Schoon, professor of social policy at the social research institute, Institute of Education, University College London. Her

research focuses on the study of risk and resilience, in particular during the transition from dependent childhood to independent adulthood and looking particularly at socio-economic adversity.

The webinar explored a number of themes. Participants were broadly in agreement about the following points.

- Within the system, what is measured is valued, and the content knowledge aspects of the curriculum are more likely to be measured (and so valued) than the practical. The system assesses knowledge rather than the skills and capacities which are developed by high quality processes of learning.
  - It is impossible to talk about assessment and qualifications without also reflecting on the curriculum and the knowledge necessary before students leave school; whose knowledge is privileged within the curriculum; and who makes these decisions. It is also difficult to establish a view about curriculum without agreement about the purpose of schooling. While the Education Select Committee held hearings, published evidence and held a conference about the purpose of education in 2016, it has not issued any reports and no clear purposes have been articulated.<sup>54</sup>
  - Inequalities are everywhere throughout the system, making it hard to find one single place to focus. There are inequalities in the numbers of students from different groups entered for and achieving good grades in different subjects: for example fewer women than men take A-level physics and chemistry. At every decision-making point in education, there is a systematic likelihood of disadvantage for minority groups.
- The assessment and qualifications system in England is structured specifically to produce differentiation; it has become a 'sorting hat' and that is a political choice. It is questionable whether it is possible to retain differentiation within an elitist system while also dismantling prejudice. There are questions to address about possible ways of carrying out summative assessment that are fairer and more equitable, and about what is assessed and who decides what is assessed.
- The system negatively affects some students' mental health. Assessment is something that is 'done to' students rather a process in which they are involved. It is a judgement on them rather than a learning process, and increasingly students view it as a once-only opportunity to gain qualifications that will affect the rest of their lives. This can cause stress and anxiety.
- Not only does the system adversely affect students' mental health, it also has an undesirable effect on their learning: students view learning as something to be done in order to pass examinations and they are often 'spoon fed' responses to assessment tasks.

### What kind of change is needed?

The webinar concluded that the assessment and qualification system needs to change to be more equitable and inclusive, to promote diversity and to be more mindful of students' mental health. No system will be entirely without bias, but society cannot afford a system which allows particular groups to be excluded from qualifications or to fail them and to view that as normal. Naming

the problem is a first step: it must be foregrounded in the development and implementation of a new system.

The changing nature of work needs lifelong learning and engagement. A new assessment approach should allow students to transfer across levels, types of qualification and different institutions over time. This requires better joining up of schools and skills policy at government level, as well as better funding and support for further education. The system needs to encourage people to continue to be involved in education beyond 18, and that needs a broad and flexible curriculum pre-16, which encourages school engagement and motivation for lifelong learning, as well as providing strong guidance and information about careers and qualifications. The system also needs -to develop authentic assessment in 'real world' contexts that help prepare students for work. Students need to be properly involved in decisions about qualifications and the curriculum. They should be seen as co-creators of assessment.

While examinations have their place, a multi-modal system would be more equitable than one focussed solely on examinations. This could include flexibility for students to be involved in decisions about the ways in which they want to be assessed, or even in designing their own assessment tasks. It would allow all students to show what they have learnt and can do.

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## EVIDENCE FROM SURVEYS, FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS

### Surveys

The IAC conducted two surveys on its website, at different times, to gather views from the public. These surveys existed as open opportunities for anyone who wished to have their say. As these were self-selecting surveys, there is no suggestion that responses are representative of the views of wider society. The commission felt it was important to allow an opportunity for anyone who wanted to comment to be able to do so, and the responses have raised points which the commission has considered.

The first survey asked for views on the purposes of qualifications, whether change is needed and, if so, what kind of change.

When asked about what qualifications should be used for, 45 per cent said attempting to signal what a student knows and what they can do. Marking personal development or progress of a student (14 per cent) and showing readiness for work or information for employers (13 per cent) were the next. The least important were comparing students in England to students internationally (0 per cent) and creating national or regional league tables for schools and colleges (one per cent).

**Respondents were asked to identify the strengths of the system. These included:**

- objectivity and consistency
- maintaining standards year on year
- links between vocational assessments, work experience and employment
- assessment of academic ability for traditional university places
- revision, which reinforces learning and encourages pupil discipline.

**Respondents also identified aspects that need to change, including:**

- an overemphasis on examinations, performance and league tables
- focus on memory and repetition at the expense of deep learning
- focus on academic attainment limiting opportunities for practical, technical and vocational learning.
- age-specific, rather than stage- or level-specific assessment
- focus on single subjects rather than interdisciplinary learning and assessment.

There were concerns about the role of teacher assessment during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly possibilities of unconscious bias, although other respondents suggested that the increasing attainment gap was more about young people's differing experiences and access to resources. There were concerns too about the impact on teacher workload of moving to teacher assessment, while recognising that the speed of change during a pandemic will have exacerbated that.

Many respondents suggested that examinations have a clear place in any qualifications system, but that they should be part of a broader range of assessments. A number also suggested that there was little need for a qualification at 16, and that GCSEs should be removed.

The second survey invited views on the commission's interim report. Respondents agreed that assessment and qualifications need to change, because while they serve the needs of some students they do not serve the needs of all. They agreed overwhelmingly with the five principles outlined in the report. There were clear concerns about the equity and reliability of the system and the need for it be more even-handed.

Suggestions for change included a wide range of qualifications, a broader curriculum and more holistic assessment methods, with students leaving school with a portfolio rather than a list of grades. Those working in special schools and the pupil referral units were clear that the system needs to meet individual students 'where they are' without disenfranchising them from the mainstream. Comments on reliability offered suggestions of changes that could be made within the current system, as well as proposals for thorough trialling of any long-term changes. There were suggestions about removing the link between qualifications and school accountability through performance tables.

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## FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS

To understand the needs and experiences of different stakeholders of the assessment and qualification system, the commission established focus groups and conducted interviews drawing

on commission members' depth of knowledge about their communities and their understanding of the best ways to obtain views of the system and ideas for the future. Strategies for the collection of this evidence were designed by commission members, targeted at the needs of each group. For some communities, this meant organising focus groups, for others individual interviews. The commission also drew on surveys carried out by some of its members.

The following groups were engaged:

- students aged between 15-19 with current or recent experience of the qualifications and assessment system, recruited with the help of The Student Room and AQA
- parents of pupils currently or recently involved in a range of different qualifications, run by Parentkind
- the teaching profession, including teachers, lecturers, and leaders involved in teaching and administering examinations, with support from the Chartered College of Teaching
- senior leaders in awarding organisations and bodies representing awarding organisations, as well as Ofqual, whose views were sought through individual conversations
- policy makers, through discussions with policy leads from organisations in the public and voluntary sectors, including awarding organisations and trade unions
- researchers in assessment and qualifications, through both group discussions and individual conversations
- experts in equality, diversity, inclusion and mental health, through in-depth conversations with those who spoke at the expert webinar
- Employers, colleges, and universities, through two separate focus groups led by CBI representatives.

Commission members provided reports from their communities which drew out the issues raised. Groups were not asked to come to a consensus and not every participant agreed with every idea. This method allowed for open exploration of a range of ideas. Reports from each group can be found in the online appendix.

### Key points from focus groups, surveys and interviews

Within the discussions, some common themes emerged.

- Employers and those responsible for university admissions, parents, and those concerned with equality, diversity, inclusion and mental health (EDIH) noted that examination grades do not give information about soft skills, and do not help to further develop the growth mindset of young people. They do not encourage access to technology, or the technical and creative subjects that employers are looking for, and they give a limited picture of students to recruiters. There is too little connection between qualifications and employers.
- Parents, students, the teaching profession, employers and those concerned with EDIH pointed to the difficulties for the system to meet the needs of all pupils in all contexts. They suggested that many of the most well-recognised qualifications do not serve SEND pupils

well, and more can be done to support neurodiverse talent

- There were clear concerns that the system distorts students' education and narrows the curriculum. Employers, researchers, policy makers and parents said that the system encourages disconnect between subjects, which connect in the real world, and sets pupils on a relatively narrow path at 16. There is a focus on academic outcomes and on knowledge that can be retained and retrieved and a corresponding neglect of vocational education and lack of value for vocational qualifications. Students were concerned that the system has no space for learning life skills, interpersonal or emotional skills.
- Overuse of written examinations, and the large number of terminal examinations at 16, were considered by policy makers, parents and those concerned with EDIH to be outdated and to have a detrimental impact on student mental health. Parents and professionals also pointed to the system setting some pupils up to fail and giving little support or progression opportunities to those who do fail. Those responsible for qualifications, along with teachers, leaders and students, said that terminal exams, particularly GCSEs, led to drilling and impacted on student motivation to learn.
- There were concerns, from parents and the profession that the system does not give sufficient information about students' capabilities or the progression they are making. Students were almost unanimous in their opinion that a key purpose of qualifications should be to highlight each individual's overall strengths and weaknesses, while the

current grading system acts only as a relative judgement.

- The profession, students, those responsible for qualifications and researchers pointed to the problems that are related to the link between qualifications and the accountability system. The system is too much about judgement and categorisation rather than improving learning, with the accountability system undermining assessment for students' learning.

### Key ideas suggested for developing a better system included the following.

- Any new system needs to have wide currency and to be broadly understood by all who teach and take qualifications, those who use the outcomes, such as employers, colleges and universities, as well as parents, policy makers and politicians. For this to happen, all of these groups must be fully engaged in designing and implementing the new system. Change must be planned over a long time-frame and must be manageable for teachers.
- The system needs to enable students to demonstrate employability and interpersonal skills, and give diverse types of information about students, aligning qualifications better with the world of work. This needs close collaboration between educators and employers.
- It should allow all pupils to flourish, to evidence their skills and knowledge, and the full range of talents, recognising that academic achievement is not the only pinnacle and rewarding physical activity, skills for real-world change, and contribution to society.

- It should ensure there is a better understanding and promotion of vocational and other qualifications (eg, the International Baccalaureate) early in secondary education.
- It should move away from a focus on end-point written examinations, but not to a system of only teacher assessment; there needs to be a balance of examinations and other forms of assessment throughout the course. There must be better links between schools and colleges, so that assessments and qualifications can be easily transferred, even mid-course.
- There needs to be a comprehensive range of approaches to assessment, with more focus on skills and understanding. This needs a blend of teacher assessments, assessment of group work, functional language and mathematics assessment, and 'stage not age' assessments of core skills, in a system which also includes examinations where needed. Suggestions for achieving this included using a scorecard, with reflections on soft skills; developing a portfolio of work; multimodal assessments including for example presentations and oral assessments; continuous assessment with multiple opportunities for students to perform.
- It should move away from high-stakes examinations taking place at both 16 and 18.
- There were suggestions about the use of technology, including digital assessment and AI, in examinations and assessment.
- New developments must be underpinned by equity and diversity, including systems to identify and interrupt bias, systematic addressing of inequities, opportunities for second chances for students, and recognition that equality is not a zero-sum game. The system will need to be able to identify national performance trends, in order to address systemic problems. There must be better representation and diversity on committees and bodies that determine, write and validate assessments.
- Initial Teacher Education and Continuing Professional Development need to change in order to develop skills in assessment both for student learning and to evidence qualifications; and to address cultures of low expectations.
- The accountability system needs to change, separating accountability from assessing young people's learning, broadening what we mean by school success and ending the use of examination results in league tables.

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## 2.4 EVIDENCE FROM POLITICAL PARTIES

The commission has also met with members of political parties online and at fringe events at the Liberal Democrats, Labour, Conservatives and Green Party Conferences this autumn. These allowed the commission to explore issues from a political perspective. Views were sought from them on findings reported in the commission's Interim Report<sup>55</sup> relating to the evidence produced by other stakeholders, the principles emerging from that evidence and a possible future system of qualifications and assessment. There was a great deal of consensus across political parties that we need a qualification system that:

- is designed to support the future of young people and of the nation
- provides evidence of achievement for every student that is linked to their future pathway
- offers opportunities for study and qualifications across a broad curriculum (eg, science and the arts)
- recognises the inter-relationship of academic and vocational qualifications, knowledge, skills (including soft skills) and understanding
- encourages a commitment to lifelong learning
- includes examinations but is not based exclusively on examinations
- pays attention to the health and wellbeing of young people.

Each fringe event was well attended, suggesting that this issue is an area of interest in each party. Sessions were attended by a wide range of participants, eg, students, parents, teachers, employers, policy makers and politicians. The level of participation during each event suggested a willingness among party members to be involved in thinking through the characteristics of a better qualification system in England.

This section of the report identifies and reflects on key issues that emerged in discussion in more than one meeting or fringe event. Issues raised are not linked to individual fringe events.

### Standards and rigour

Politicians are concerned with standards in education. However, it was clear from discussions that there were different understandings of standards and different

emphases on what mattered. Some equated standards with examination 'standards', where what mattered was to maintain standards over time. Having a concern for 'comparable outcomes' meant there should be approximately similar proportions of students achieving each grade year on year. There were debates in meetings about whether this approach was or was not fair. Others were concerned with international comparisons, where standards were related to the nation's position in international league tables (PISA and TIMSS for example). There was also reference to the relative performance in these surveys of different nations within the UK.

A few participants expressed concern that if England moved away from examinations, attainment would decline. However, more common was a desire that student performance should be assessed against a standard. If a student met the standard, the student should be awarded the grade. Some participants argued that England does not have a system where a student's knowledge and skills are measured against criteria, and where reaching certain criteria would mean attaining a particular standard. It was argued that this offered an explanation as to why it had been difficult for teachers to award grades when exams were cancelled.

There were discussions in some fringe events about alternative ways of defining standards. If a system were inclusive, then every young person would have opportunities opened up to them as they transitioned beyond school. Thus, schools and colleges should be encouraged to pay attention to opportunity standards.

A further issue explored in a number of fringe events was the idea of rigour. There

was a view expressed in a number of meetings that the way in which rigour was currently conceptualised in qualifications was too restrictive. Rigour was important but could be achieved in broader ways than by testing everyone in the same way at the same time, and by testing everyone in (almost) every subject using pencil and paper tests. In several meetings, the merit of using the same method, i.e. pencil and paper examinations, to test different areas of the curriculum was challenged. It could be argued for example that to test mathematics in the same way as English is not particularly rigorous, ie, what matters in the subject is currently less important than the subject fitting in to a pre-determined model of testing or examination.

At all four fringe events, the importance of having a system to support young people in disadvantaged circumstances was identified as crucial. The language used in different fringe events was different; in some it was described as 'closing the gap' while in others as 'levelling up'. However, the issue was a concern for everyone. There was a strong view that any new qualification system must ensure that disadvantaged students receive the support they need. It would also be important to consider how progress might best be identified to ensure that gaps could be identified and issues addressed at classroom, school and system level.

### Meeting the needs of the workplace

At all fringe events, points were raised to emphasise the view that the purposes of education are broader than ensuring that young people are ready for work. However, even in the 'ready for work' space, the message among politicians and political parties was that current qualifications do not provide a good basis for recruitment.

It was argued that qualifications do not provide sufficient information about progress in practical, technical skills, nor the 'soft' skills of collaboration, teamwork, creativity and entrepreneurship. Several participants expressed concerns that the system does not encourage the development of skills needed for the future. Specific examples included care, digital and green technologies. More fundamentally, concerns were raised to suggest that the system discourages the development of the kinds of skills and qualities needed for a broad range of employment. For example, it deters young people from learning to take risks, to value learning from failures, and to think for themselves.

### Having a broad range of qualifications to suit a broad curriculum

At each fringe event, participants raised concerns about curriculum specialisation at too early an age. Although it is important for young people to have the opportunity to specialise, the major problem identified was that the system encourages young people down a narrow pathway very early, forcing them to choose whether to focus on sciences or arts, for example, rather than encouraging them to build a broad range of skills and interests. A number of participants raised experiences from their own education or from the education of their children. For example, how valuable it is for those with demanding jobs in medicine to have developed skills and knowledge in art or music to be able to support their mental health.

## Meeting the needs of neurodiverse students and those with special needs

A number of participants, reflecting on their own experiences of the qualifications system, explained how having examinations only and taking them at a single point had disadvantaged them or those they know because of their particular needs. Employers, at a number of the events, were clear that they value neurodiversity, a range of talent and ways of thinking, as that was perceived to improve creativity and innovation. They suggested that the system does not sufficiently embrace difference.

## 2.5 CONCLUSIONS

It is the view of the commission that the evidence points to four major areas where the qualification system needs to change.

### The system should include knowledge, skills and competences for the future

The assessment and qualification system in England does not support the development of the kinds of knowledge, skills and competences regarded internationally (eg, by major international organisations such as the OECD and UNESCO) as crucial for future life, work and citizenship. Nor is the system perceived to support all students' future progression. Employers and parents argue that the labour market needs a broader skillset than that currently examined. The qualification system does not provide sufficient information about students' skills and abilities, nor their progress, in the subjects assessed. Further, it is perceived to limit the development of the competences that employers need, such as nimble decision-making, collaboration and innovation.

The increasing pace of change in society and work means that lifelong learning will be essential. The high-stakes system encourages students to regard learning predominantly as a way to pass examinations rather than to build the capacities and dispositions necessary to continue independent and deep learning. Students' horizons are therefore narrowed.

### The system needs to be reliable, authentic and fair

Parents, students and wider society have realised that a particular grade does not necessarily show what has been learned or to what standard. Instead, it indicates where a student sits in comparison with others who took the examination. A reliable system should provide evidence that forms the basis for students' next steps. The system gives little information to support progress.

Many subjects are hard to assess with a written exam in ways that authentically reflect how the knowledge will be used in life beyond education, the level to which skills have been developed, the competences that have been demonstrated or the soft skills employers identify as crucial to future success. For example, a GCSE in computing can be awarded without students demonstrating their coding skills on a computer; and history is assessed by examination with limited access to pre-selected printed source material, in tasks that no adult historian would ever face.

Even for those subjects or attributes which can be assessed authentically via examination, to choose to assess only via one method when others are available, whatever that method is, skews the system in favour of those who best perform in

those specific conditions and prevents those who do not from being able to show the best of their capabilities.

The system is perceived to be unfair<sup>56</sup>. In a normal exam year, a system of 'comparable outcomes' is used to determine the percentage of students achieving each GCSE grade, by looking at the achievements of previous cohorts with similar key stage 2 results. This means that, because of the system, around a third of pupils are denied the opportunity to attain what is deemed to be a 'standard' pass<sup>57</sup> in English and mathematics at GCSE.

### **The system should support all young people in their future education or employment**

The approach to examinations encourages a curriculum, teaching and learning focussed exclusively on what the final examination contains. Yet, although examinations are a valuable mode of assessment, they cannot measure all that matters. A more rigorous system would promote the teaching and assessment of all that matters. Evidence presented to the commission suggests that in many schools and colleges there is extensive teaching and learning to the test and that this leads to student disaffection with learning and what has been described as an 'exam factory' culture.

The accountability system is perceived to encourage an educational focus on a narrow range of academic subjects that does not encourage interdisciplinary thinking, separates vocational and academic pathways and devalues the vocational. This is perceived to damage the educational experiences of students, who may achieve good examination results but have few opportunities to explore topics

in depth or to expand the breadth of their learning. It is also perceived to impact negatively on those who have aptitude in practical, technical and vocational ways of learning and assessment. These issues have serious implications for equity.

Examinations, as constructed, are perceived to be largely a test of memory rather than of understanding and the ability to use knowledge in new and creative ways. Teachers are eager to do their best for students. They report that examination questions can often be predicted and, aware that examination performance improves by rehearsal, they devote significant time to preparation for examination-style questions at the expense of deep study of a subject. Students commonly report that they feel ill-prepared for further independent study.

### **The system should pay attention to student and teacher mental health**

While revising for examinations can be an effective means to consolidate knowledge, many students and their parents report that the pressure of having to focus everything they know into a short examination window is damaging to their mental health. This is compounded by the number of papers taken, often in quick succession. These pressures are reported to be even harder to manage for many pupils with SEND and those with difficult and disruptive home lives.

Linking qualifications and accountability so closely is reported by teachers and policy makers to do little to improve outcomes for all, either at classroom level or nationally. There is a perception that a concern for accountability takes the focus away from student learning, increases teacher workload and impacts negatively on both

teachers' and students' wellbeing. Teachers reported this to be a major factor behind the statistics that demonstrate the number of teachers leaving the profession<sup>58</sup>. The accountability system penalises schools for factors outside their control, such as prior attainment of the cohort and the percentage of students on Free School Meals<sup>59</sup>. As such, this negative impact is more keenly felt in areas of poverty<sup>60</sup>

### The case for change

The IAC is one of a number of bodies arguing for change. People from across education, the business sector and wider society are raising concerns, including MPs and peers from across the political spectrum. Several highly influential groups are also looking closely at assessment and qualifications from different perspectives, including NCFE, Pearson, Rethinking Assessment, and the Times Education Commission.

The evidence gathered by the IAC suggests that qualifications in England are inequitable and unreliable; they do not provide young people and wider society with information on the range of skills and competences needed to thrive in a global, 21st century environment.

There can be no more powerful case for change than a system which does not meet the needs of those concerned.

# CHAPTER 3

## WHAT COULD CHANGE LOOK LIKE? ALTERNATIVES IN ACTION

To consider what kind of change is possible, the commission looked at examples of assessment and qualification systems and practices both internationally and within the UK. It is neither desirable nor possible to pick up systems from one place and drop them into another, as cultures in education and in broader society are different even within the nations of the UK. However, as a way of stimulating and informing thinking beyond the system in England, it is helpful to start from ideas that are already a reality elsewhere.

This chapter begins with an account of an expert webinar which provided information on assessment and qualification systems and practices in Singapore, Queensland Australia, Norway and New Zealand. This is followed by a review of developments of assessment and qualification systems and practices in the other three nations of the United Kingdom which differ in varying and thought-provoking ways from those in England. Next is a description of a number of initiatives within England itself which provide further food for thought. The chapter closes with questions that arise from these reviews.

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### THE ENGLISH SYSTEM IN THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

In the past, education in England was seen as a global leader. Evidence was presented to the IAC from researchers and practitioners who argued that England is now regarded as an outlier. For example, one member of the commission reported that 20 years ago international visitors commonly came to England to learn from practice. However, recently, as a visitor to Denmark, it was clear that international perceptions had changed. On this visit, England was used as an example of a nation with policies and practices that others should seek to avoid; a country where many students are left behind.<sup>61</sup>

In making comparisons across different countries, Gordon Stobart<sup>62</sup> has clustered systems as:

- those within the historic British tradition, typified by a reliance on external examinations, national testing at 16 and using results for selection, certification (particularly for university entrance) and setting standards;
- those which put teacher assessment at the centre of a high trust system;
- those which have developed to assess a broad curriculum.

Singapore is seen as particularly close to the British tradition. In their recent report Suto and Oates (2021)<sup>63</sup> identified Singapore as a system which uses external

assessments at 16, just as in England, and which lies within the top tens (and sometimes the top threes) of all seven international comparisons of the Repeatedly High Performing Jurisdictions (RPHPJs)<sup>64</sup>.

The system in Queensland is one that has moved away from the British traditional system.

Norway is a high trust system in terms of teacher assessment, with most of the grades given by teachers. Every student sits a national examination in Norwegian language; in other subjects examinations are administered to a sample of students chosen by lot. Every student will take one other examination (around 20 per cent sit each subject) but they will not find out which subject they are sitting until 48 hours before the exam. Teacher assessment is used to give marks in other subjects. There is an increasing use of technology in examinations in Norway, where school examinations are now often computer based, and some require access to online resources during centrally held examinations.

Norway is also rolling out a forward-looking curriculum. Stobart<sup>65</sup> explains that curriculum reforms underway in Norway emphasise being creative, committed and inquisitive, thinking critically, acting ethically and having environmental awareness. Its assessment approach emphasises competency – the ability to acquire and use knowledge and skills in order to overcome challenges and solve problems. (Stobart, 2021, p.14)

Over half of students take a vocational track at 16.

New Zealand has also moved away from the British system and is developing a new

assessment and qualification system in response to new curricula prioritising broader skills and competences.

Not only do different countries currently use different approaches to qualifications and assessment, but they are also adapting in different ways to global change: a desire to reflect the skills and competencies needed for a new world of work, leisure and citizenship; the opportunities presented by new technologies; the incremental raising of school leaving ages; and the increasing understanding of the need to improve equity and minimise bias in assessment. Stobart<sup>66</sup> reflects that student assessment systems are social rather than scientific systems, and it is difficult, if not impossible, to transfer models from one culture to another.

### 3.1 INTERNATIONAL MODELS

#### EXPERT WEBINAR

The IAC took expert evidence from these countries, to provide a challenge to the idea that the system in England is the only way and to prompt reflection on the ways in which different countries and jurisdictions are rising to the challenge of change. The participants are listed below.

- Pak Tee Ng, associate professor in policy, curriculum and leadership at the National Institute of Education (NIE), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.
- Professor Claire Wyatt-Smith, professor of educational assessment and literacy and director of the Learning Sciences Institute Australia at the ACU (Australian Catholic University).

- Professor Siv Gamlen, professor in pedagogy at Volda University College, Norway, with research interests in assessment, learning, and systematic observation.
- Professor Kari Smith, professor of education and head of the National Research School in Teacher Education at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway, with research interests in assessment, teacher education and professional learning.
- Associate professor Jenny Poskitt of the Institute of Education at Massey University in New Zealand.

The commission was also informed by a presentation from Bill Lucas, professor of learning and director of the Centre for Real-World Learning, University of Winchester, and a member of the Advisory Group of the Rethinking Assessment project, who gave an overview of a range of assessment and qualifications practices.

## Singapore (Pak Tee Ng)

Singapore makes use of national standardised examinations at age 12 (end of primary school) and at the end of secondary. Students sit O-levels at 16 and A-levels at 18. Singapore has moved away from a system of school level publication of results which had been based on the belief that competition is the means of improving school quality. Instead, the current philosophy recognises that there is one united public school system for the whole country and attempts to decrease competitiveness between schools and students. The system in Singapore is moving towards an emphasis on quality rather than quantity, moving away

from an emphasis on key performance indicators (KPIs) and examination results towards an emphasis on the quality of teaching and learning and interaction in the classroom. There is a growing understanding of the importance of developing a system where children appreciate what they learn rather than what they score in the examination. This is a long journey, however; parents and society are used to a system of intense competition to get into 'the best' school and to a belief in intense hard work to achieve excellent qualifications as the way to a good life.

Changes to the qualifications system in Singapore must be understood in the light of changes in the entire education system: curriculum, quality of teachers, mindsets of society and the beliefs of other stakeholders. Changes in assessment must lead to changes in higher education and in a whole country nation-building journey. In a system where parents and society have accepted the status quo for a very long time, it is a long journey to recognising that the nation is too preoccupied with examination results. Professor Ng suggested that pressure comes because everyone is forced through a narrow gate; Singapore is trying to provide more pathways.

Commissioners were informed about some of the changes that are underway in Singapore to reduce the focus on examination results and reduce the competition between students and schools. These include learning from other systems, adapting practices, using performance bands instead of scores, and broadening the understanding of success through introducing different pathways. There have also been moves to increase the proportion of questions within examinations which

test higher order skills and application and to provide questions which invite students to use knowledge from a range of sources to solve problems, rather than relying on memory and recall.

### Queensland, Australia (Claire Wyatt-Smith)

There has been a recent rethinking of the contribution of high-stakes external examinations, including the adequacy of measures and test conditions to assess creativity, the capacity to work in teams and the transferability of skills to new contexts. The challenges to the system include, for example:

- examinations are seen as no longer viable and are less respected – particularly because of the controlled conditions in which young people sit assessments
- the pandemic and advances in technology raise questions about the adequacy of traditional schooling outcomes assessed in high-stakes assessments
- employers are concerned about the employability and work readiness of young people – they are looking for problem-solvers, global thinkers, nimble decision-makers
- while there are possibilities for the use of technology, including AI, in the development of assessment, these raise equality concerns as well as concerns about the rise of edu-businesses and private testing companies.

Project work was core to assessment for 45 years in Queensland and teachers were valued as key contributors to assessment. Teachers are best placed to carry out assessment when they can

design the system and the curriculum and could reflect with young people as they developed portfolios. This is hard to maintain when the system stops investing in the profession. In the absence of this investment and upskilling, it cannot be assumed that the teaching workforce will welcome a new generation of assessments where the profession plays a key part in tracking, monitoring and judging young people's learning. Teachers in different disciplines will view change differently. In Queensland, resistance to moves away from traditional assessment came most strongly from those who taught mathematics and science.

The development of qualifications in Queensland must be considered in the context of significant thinking about education from early years to higher education. It is clear that assessment is not value neutral.

### Norway (Siv Gamlen and Kari Smith)

All young people aged 16 -19 have the right to attend upper secondary school and the right to achieve a diploma. Final grades provide entry to different programmes, to the labour market or to higher education. There are opportunities to cross between vocational and general study specialisation within the two years of upper secondary education. The purpose of final assessments is certification of students' competences, ranking of applications to higher education and support for teacher moderation.

The Covid pandemic meant that examinations were cancelled in Norway and students given teacher grades. Evidence suggests that students felt

less stressed and more motivated to learn; they believed that there was less teaching to the test and more focus on the subject but that without the examination there was less opportunity to show competence. Teachers felt they were able to provide broader and deeper assessment and had more time to work with weaker students. However, research shows that teachers were using other features as well as student attainment to award grades. Politicians supported cancellation but considered that teachers missed out on practising external assessment which strengthens assessment competence.

In Norway, there is a desire to continue the practice of teachers setting grades and to build teachers' assessment competencies. The challenge is to balance the role of teacher as coach and as assessor. There is also an understanding that examinations have value as an added assessment tool, providing practice for students' higher education skills and for strengthening teachers' assessment competence. When developing a new framework for examinations it is important to consider validity, reliability, justice, fairness, manageability and equal access for students.

### New Zealand (Jenny Poskitt)

The qualifications framework has ten levels, intended to promote lifelong learning through multiple choices and pathways, with a range of providers, varied learning, learner flexibility and mixed assessments. The system is valued by many for its flexibility and its promotion of lifelong learning, but deemed to be complex, not accessible to all and mono-cultural. Parents and employers are generally positive about the system; Universities are concerned

that while knowledge is transferrable, skills, particularly of assessment, are not. In New Zealand, vocational courses can contribute alongside academic ones to the upper-secondary national certificate of educational achievement.

The system in New Zealand is also responding to increasing awareness of the importance of cultural equity, as it is clear that Māori and Pacific Islanders do not fare as well in the current system. This raises questions such as:

- whose knowledge and skills are valued (theoretical, cultural, practical/work-based, digital)? Is theory more highly valued?
- who does the counting - how involved are students in assessing their learning - what about employers, families or communities?

In order to take cultural issues seriously, it is vital for the whole education system in New Zealand to consider Māori world-views and what is important, which includes the importance of valuing the whole person - spiritual, family, and links to the land.

The process of change in New Zealand is focused on:

- fewer but larger or more important standards
- strengthening literacy and numeracy requirements
- simplifying the structure, so all young people have access
- showing clearer pathways to university and employment.

## An overview (Bill Lucas)

The commission was further informed by a recorded presentation which explored a variety of assessment methods and systems being trialled around the world. These included the use of credit profiles through a mastery transcript in the USA, which allows for a measure of all student capabilities; the development of tests of creative thinking, both in Victoria (Australia) and for PISA; and the work of Fullan, Quinn & McEachen (2017)<sup>67</sup> in Canada within *New Pedagogies for Deeper Learning*, which is developing criteria for progression across a range of skills including collaboration, communication and critical thinking.

### Key ideas

Each of these systems has recognised that there is a need to change, because of incremental raising of school leaving ages; the changing needs of employment and global citizenship; the challenges of technology and of the climate crisis; and the importance of reducing student stress and poor mental health, improving equity, and minimising bias so that education serves all young people and their families and communities. In its discussions of international assessment systems, the IAC identified some key ideas.

- There is a growing understanding that relying on a single method of assessment is not robust in times of crisis and provides a narrow view of young people's achievements and progress.
- A system in which young people compete against each other for a limited supply of grades leads to a focus on test scores rather than on what is learnt, and does not encourage the lifelong

learning needed in a rapidly changing world.

- A system in which grades are high-stakes for schools and teachers leads to increasing test-preparation, which leaves too little time for developing skills for life and employment.
- A focus on paper and pencil tests values theory over practice, memory and recall over thinking, individual effort over collaboration and is not an authentic way of measuring everything that matters.
- Moving away from a reliance on examinations as the only method of assessment can involve teachers in professional conversations about curriculum, pedagogy and assessment criteria and practices. This requires a change in the role, responsibilities and working practices of teachers, in order to make assessment central to teaching rather than an added extra.

## 3.2 QUALIFICATIONS AND ASSESSMENT IN WALES, NORTHERN IRELAND AND SCOTLAND

It might have been expected that the introduction of compulsory elementary education in the four nations of the UK at different dates in the latter part of the 19th century would lead to a common education system across the UK. In fact, Scotland maintained its own distinct system, including assessment and qualifications policies and practice. Provision in Wales and Northern Ireland was strongly influenced by developments in England. Following the devolution settlements of the late 1990s, the assessment and qualifications systems of

all three of these nations have evolved independently of provision in England.

The systems in Wales and Northern Ireland appear, on the surface, still to be quite similar to that in England, particularly as the name of key qualifications and the timing of them within the secondary education structure are in common. Nevertheless, many key differences now exist. The education system in Scotland, including the assessment and qualifications system, has further developed its own distinctive nature.

### Wales and Northern Ireland

In Wales and Northern Ireland GCSEs, AS and A-levels form the basis of the upper secondary qualification systems. However, content, assessment and grading systems are not necessarily identical to the corresponding GCSE, AS or A-level qualifications in England. While 'non-exam assessment' (NEA) in both nations is limited to 'the minimum necessary in each subject'<sup>68</sup> – the same policy as that adopted in England – how the regulators in these nations determine the 'minimum' is not always the same. This leads to some GCSEs, AS and A-level courses in Wales and Northern Ireland making greater use of NEA than the corresponding GCSEs, AS and A-levels in England.

Wales and Northern Ireland have both retained modularity for some GCSEs; this option no longer exists in England where all GCSEs are linear and examinations for these must be taken at the end of the course. The modular nature of some GCSEs in these countries means that re-sitting individual modules is still possible, albeit capped at once per module. This is a useful distinction to note as one motive of the 2010 UK Government's switch back to

linear GCSEs for England was to eliminate the culture of re-sitting on multiple occasions that had accompanied the existence of the legacy modular GCSEs. The approaches taken in Wales and Northern Ireland have addressed the re-sit issue in a different way to England without making all GCSEs linear.

In Wales, GCSEs have retained the A\*-G grading scale, with eight possible grades, which was used previously in England. In Northern Ireland a hybrid approach has been taken. The grades remain labelled as letters from A\*-G; however an additional C\* grade has been introduced to replicate the additional grade added to GCSEs in England when they were changed to a 9-1 scale. The aim is that GCSEs across the two nations will be of approximately the same demand and at the same level (that which is defined by Ofqual as level 2)<sup>69</sup> as in England; however, assessment objectives and content requirements differ in most subjects<sup>70</sup>.

At AS and A-level, assessment objectives, content specification and grading scales used are broadly similar in most subjects across these three nations. However, there is a significant difference in the assessment structure. Wales and Northern Ireland have retained the connection between AS and A-levels that England eliminated in the reforms initiated by the 2010 UK Government. In these two nations, the AS-level contributes 40 per cent towards the final A-level grade; AS unit assessments can be undertaken either at the end of the AS course or at the end of the A-Level course at the same time as the A-level unit assessments.

This gives more flexibility to students taking AS and A-levels in Wales and Northern Ireland when compared to their

peers in England: they can effectively take their qualifications either modularly or linearly. As with GCSEs in these nations, each individual AS or A-level unit can be retaken once, whereas a retake in England would require retaking the entire qualification and all units at once. This feature reduces the stakes for students in Northern Ireland and Wales in comparison to their peers in England who have just one be-all-and-end-all opportunity to show what they know and can do.

It is important to note that qualifications designed for England, including Ofqual-regulated A-levels and the 9-1 graded GCSEs, are also available to students in Wales and Northern Ireland and are therefore taken by some. Some students take a mixture of qualifications specific to their nation and Ofqual-regulated ones designed for England. As such, some students in Northern Ireland and Wales will have a more similar experience to their peers in England than others.

Vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs) in Wales and Northern Ireland are as varied in type, content and assessment method as those in England. Qualifications exist parallel to those taken in England at level 2 and 3 and, similarly to those, tend to employ more mixed methods of assessment than the GCSEs, AS or A-levels at the same level. Flexibility of opportunity to mix qualification types varies across all nations and is influenced by the size of the nation in question and the skills and economic policies of the devolved administrations. Regional variation within nations of factors such as institution size and public transport means the ability for students to mix qualification types is more local and unique than can be generalised to make national level comparisons.

What is similar across the nations of England, Wales and Northern Ireland though is that there is no over-arching, holistic qualification route, structure or policy objective designed to facilitate a blended approach to general and vocational qualifications.

In England there is an English Baccalaureate (EBacc), an accountability measure which is a collection of other subjects, and in Wales a Welsh Baccalaureate (Welsh Bacc), which is a group award; there are significant differences between the purposes for which these 'Baccalaureates' were created. A key difference between the two is the provision of a 'Skills Challenge Certificate' (SCC) at level 2 and Advanced Skills Challenge Certificate (ASCC) at level 3 which sit at the heart of the Welsh Bacc. In contrast to the EBacc, the achievement of an SCC or ASCC alongside other selected qualifications<sup>71</sup> leads respectively to the award of the Welsh Bacc or the Advanced Welsh Bacc: a student is not awarded an EBacc as it is not a qualification in and of itself, and the EBacc does not contain the 'Skills Challenge' element that the Welsh Bacc does. The ASCC is considered equivalent in demand to an A-level and carries UCAS tariff points, so can be used for access to higher education. The Welsh Bacc is intended to prepare students across the full range of 14-19 for employability, further study and life. The SCC and ASCC contain one project and three challenges<sup>72</sup> which are all internally assessed by designated assessors<sup>73</sup> and externally moderated with evidence of performance against specified learning outcomes. These qualifications, their design, content and assessment methods and their place as a part of the mainstream qualifications offer, particularly at key stage 4 where all students take the SCC, represent a significant difference from the system in England.

A significant wide-ranging consultation about the purpose, range and content of curriculum in Wales has led to the passage of the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 introducing a new approach – Curriculum for Wales<sup>74</sup>. This legislation introduces a different approach to curriculum in that it is structured in terms of progression in six broad areas of learning and experience, which are underpinned by four purposes, rather than in terms of standards in narrowly defined subjects.

Such a different approach raises questions about how well the qualifications system, with its traditional, distinct subject disciplines, curriculum and assessment as the basis of GCSE, AS and A-level qualifications, aligns with the design of the new Curriculum for Wales. A consultation – Qualified for the future<sup>75</sup> has therefore taken place on how qualifications and assessment should support the new curriculum and this could mean the approach currently taken in Wales, at least at 16, could change significantly.

The initial decisions published after consultation have confirmed that the name GCSEs will remain, as the value and identity of GCSEs is known and respected across England, Wales and Northern Ireland; however, what sits behind the name might well look quite different:

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**“We will align the qualifications with the new curriculum... This means rethinking how we expect learners to show their knowledge.”**

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**“We will look at how the assessment of these new qualifications can be reimaged to give learners a more positive experience. This includes looking at different types of assessment, how many assessments learners take and have more flexible assessments, where possible.”**

(Qualifications Wales, no date, p. 3)<sup>76</sup>

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This consultation has also covered the SCC and ASCC and, although there may be structural changes, particularly for the ASCC which it has been proposed<sup>77</sup> will be replaced by an Advanced Skills Baccalaureate Wales, it appears that the underlying purpose of these qualifications will remain similar.

## Scotland

In Scotland the main qualifications (National Qualifications<sup>78</sup>) used in 14-19 education have a different structure from those of the other UK nations; this is reflected in their different names, which relate to the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)<sup>79</sup>. National 3, National 4 and National 5 qualifications may be considered equivalent to GCSEs in that many students take these at 15 or 16; unlike GCSEs they are also regularly taken by older students. Highers (SCQF Level 6) and Advanced Highers (SCQF Level 7) are taken usually at age 17 or 18 and may be considered together as equivalent to AS and A-levels elsewhere in the UK (like these, one follows from the other). Courses leading to all of these qualifications are typically one year in length in contrast to GCSEs and AS and A-levels.

Typically, though not universally, students in Scotland take five Highers at 17, which allows a broader range of subjects than students elsewhere in the UK, who may be studying three or four equivalent courses at 17. Highers typically provide direct access to higher education in Scotland (equivalent AS-levels elsewhere in the UK can be used for UCAS tariff points, often to supplement A-level grades on HE applications, but many courses or institutions do not accept students who have attained only AS-levels). Some students in Scotland, albeit fewer than has been the case in the past, move on to HE courses using Highers attained at 17 rather than staying on in school or college until 18 as is the case for almost all HE applicants in other nations of the UK.

Another distinctive aspect of Scotland's qualification system is that some vocational courses are incorporated in the National Qualifications Framework. There are National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses and qualifications in some vocational disciplines, whereas in other nations of the UK such qualifications have a different name and therefore different recognition and potentially different currency. National 3 and 4 qualifications include an even broader range of vocational and technical courses within this national framework. As such they carry the same banner and recognition at the respective level as their more traditional, academically focussed equivalents.

Despite some recent changes made to the National Qualifications, which have reduced the role of non-examination assessment, Scotland's qualifications remain less reliant on terminal assessments and examinations than England's. National 3 courses are made up of units which are assessed as pass or fail by a teacher. National 4 courses comprise units,

including an added value unit (which assesses learners' performance across the course); the units are assessed by a teacher. For the majority of National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses assessment involves both course work and a final examination, in contrast with England's equivalent GCSEs, AS and A-levels.

The qualifications suite includes a Scottish Baccalaureate, group qualifications available at Higher and Advanced Higher in expressive arts, languages, science and Social Sciences; this is similar to the Welsh Bacc in that it comprises both relevant subject qualifications and an Interdisciplinary Project which allows learners to develop and show evidence of skills which support the transition into higher education or employment.

There are also various other occupationally focussed qualifications, which can lead to specific jobs or industries, apprenticeships or further study at foundation, degree or diploma level. Such qualifications often have an element of occupational competency which must be observed and attained and, as such, the assessment methods are more varied. This approach is similar across the nations of the UK: with vocational and technical qualifications variance in the assessment methods used across different disciplines is accepted. Whereas with qualifications primarily focussed on providing access to further study and used more often in mainstream settings, a more uniform, one-size-fits-all approach is taken, where examinations are the default and are only not used if a significant case is made for not doing so.

Scotland has over the last decade significantly overhauled its curriculum offer with the aim of focusing on more global skills for the 21st century<sup>80</sup>. This resulted in

Scotland's 'Curriculum for Excellence' (CfE), intended as a framework for education from ages three to 16. Scotland's journey started earlier so it is further along the path of reform than Wales and offers some potential lessons for any attempt to reconsider qualifications and assessment in England.

As Stobart points out<sup>81</sup>, in order to meet the aims of this new curriculum, the assessment methods used in National Qualifications in Scotland had to be taken into account. He says:

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**“ Many jurisdictions around the world found challenges in how to translate these aspirations [such as those of CfE] into their upper-secondary school assessment policies. The new curriculum intentions are often hard to align with historic assessment practices that are embedded in that society.”**

(Stobart, 2021, p.10)

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He states that although the new iterations of the National Qualifications had initially been created as modular qualifications, incorporating both terminal assessment (usually written examinations) and internally assessed coursework in order to align with the aims of CfE more closely, they now at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher depend more on end of course examinations. As is often the case when a more varied approach to assessment is introduced, the workload of the education workforce is cited as the reason for the subsequent reduction in coursework and removal of the requirement for qualifications to be modular.

It would be sensible to ensure that any consideration of the future of assessment and qualifications in England - the purpose of this commission's work - is cognisant of this. That said, there are questions in Scotland, according to Stobart, as to whether these new qualifications are warping the curriculum – with examination specifications becoming the de-facto curriculum rather than the intended CfE. Research in England, for example 'A Curriculum For All?'<sup>82</sup>, found that the reforms there had led to teaching and learning to the test that affected the curriculum in a similar way, so the concern in Scotland seems understandable.

Stobart later highlights<sup>83</sup> that evidence from the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and OECD, although limited, suggests that students value elements of continuous assessment by their teachers and that the teaching to the test which occurs in the context of the current qualifications and assessment is a concern. He also notes that the flexibility given to schools which allows them to take a more 'stage not age' approach to when different levels of qualifications are taken by students, can be problematic logistically. These are all matters which could be helpful for informing the debate when considering the future of qualifications and assessment in England.

The similarities and differences between Scotland's and England's systems, the fact a 21st century curriculum review has already taken place in Scotland and that SQA, and the fact the Scottish government and the OECD are all undertaking various research and reviews of the system, coalesce to create interesting foresight for considering similar policy in England.

### 3.3 ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES WITHIN ENGLAND

Even within England, there are examples of alternative approaches to assessment and qualifications.

There are schools and colleges within England which use other courses or qualifications as well as or instead of those which form the route to future destinations for most students (GCSEs, A-levels and Applied Generals). These different qualifications also offer comparisons for the approaches to assessment that are currently taken by the majority in England.

The International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) runs programmes aimed at varying ages of students. The International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) is a well-known and globally recognised qualification aimed at students aged 16-19, which may be considered as an alternative to A-levels and Level 3 Applied Generals. Many independent schools in England offer the IBDP to their students and, although not as many, an increasing number of state schools and colleges also do so.

The assessment methods used for the IBDP are different from those of the mainstream routes in England. The IBDP uses both internal and external assessment – examinations and teacher assessment in the form of coursework, performances and investigations. This, the IBO claims<sup>84</sup>, allows the IBDP to assess not just what they call 'basic skills', such as retaining knowledge, understanding key concepts and applying standard methods but also 'advanced academic skills', such as analysing and presenting information, evaluating and constructing arguments and solving problems creatively. The approach

to grading is also different. Students' results in the IBDP are determined against set standards, with no relation to where they sit in a rank order comparison with their peers.

The content and structure of the IBDP also makes for quite a different experience for students taking it. While students might typically take 3 of a combination of A-levels and/or Applied Generals all the way through to the end, the IBDP covers a broader range of disciplines<sup>85</sup>.

There is an IBDP core which is designed to broaden students' educational experience and focus on application of knowledge and skills. This core includes independent research culminating in an extended essay, reflecting on the theory of knowledge and a project related to creativity, activity and service. In addition to the core, students must then choose six further subjects to study – one each from six subject groupings (studies in language and literature; language acquisition; individuals and societies; sciences; mathematics; and the arts). Of these six subjects, three or four are taken at a higher level than the remaining two or three.

In contrast, as well as typically studying only three subjects, students following A-level courses are able to take all of these subjects in similar disciplines – for example three sciences or three arts.

The Extended Project Qualification<sup>86</sup> (EPQ) is a course which is being taken by larger numbers of students in England alongside other Level 3 qualifications, including in mainstream school and college settings. Entry numbers in the UK have been around 40,000 in each of the past few years and in the last non-pandemic series (2019) the EPQ was taken by approximately the same number of students as A-level physics (across the UK).

The Level 3 EPQ<sup>87</sup> is equivalent to half an A-level or Applied General Qualification. It is a stand-alone project which is devised by the student on a topic of their choosing. The outcome – a report, performance or design among other options – is entirely teacher-assessed with standardisation and moderation from the awarding organisation. It aims to help students experience a research project similar to the type of task they would see on many further study courses, particularly those in higher education, or perhaps employment.

The nature of the task, expected final product and the logging by the student of refinement and evaluation of the work as it progresses aims to help the learner develop broader skills such as planning, project management and critical thinking. It also aims to develop student autonomy and agency, giving students a choice in what they explore in more depth and some freedom of expression, leading to greater engagement in learning.

Although both the IBO and Extended Projects include courses aimed at Level 2 and below, there is generally less divergence before post-16 study from the mainstream in England. That being said, there are schools and colleges attempting to offer different styles of learning and assessment to their students.

One example is Bedales School. It offers courses to students which it says are 'richer' and 'more expansive' than GCSEs and which 'encourage creativity, autonomy, and enjoyment of learning'<sup>88</sup>. On Bedales Assessed Courses (BACs) students are assessed not only on their written work via exams, as is the case for most GCSEs, but also on their presentation skills, depth of understanding, class participation and collaborative skills via presentations,

'defences' of their projects akin to a university style viva and the creation of poems, films or other physical outputs. Bedales says that this has led to an increase in both engagement and outcomes for its students.

Another example is XP School. Although it has not reached the same point as Bedales with regard to UCAS and Ofqual recognised courses, the 'expeditions' at XP represent a very different approach<sup>89</sup> to teaching, learning and assessment from the mainstream. Rather than lessons in separately defined subjects, expeditions are interdisciplinary and, as such, demonstrating and assessing what has been learnt takes different forms, including presentations to parents and the wider community. In contrast to GCSEs, assessment at XP<sup>90</sup> means measuring work on its own merit, rather than in comparison to the work of others.

Like most students in England, those at XP do have to end up being assessed to attain GCSE qualifications and, therefore, their final expedition is geared towards passing examinations. Prior to that, expeditions are assessed and graded using a range of methods, not just via written tests, in a way which still enables students to know how they are progressing and working towards GCSE standards. Testing of knowledge, and academic grades coming from that, form part of the process, but how students learn, their 'HOWLs' (Habits of Work and Learning), and what they have done with the knowledge they have gained are also graded and reported on, affording these skills and dispositions equal status to repetition of knowledge.

An article in the Times<sup>91</sup> quotes one of the founders of the school recognising that

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“You can’t get a job passing tests’ and ‘Knowledge is really important and qualifications open doors, but it’s who you are and the quality of the work that will get you the job or the university place or the start-up business loan.”

(Sylvester, 2021)

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XP aims to empower students with subject-specific knowledge or skills, while then going further and developing the capacity to use the knowledge and skills gained and to articulate to others what the student knows and can do; this is crucial and gives relevance to what they have learnt. The expedition approach allows them to do this and to broaden out beyond the usual knowledge or subject-specific skills focus, which forms part of a more conventional curriculum, and on to more of the matters employers and society need in the 21st century: collaborative working and creative problem solving.

There are also interesting ideas emerging from higher education, which could offer models for change. The IAC discussions on equality, diversity, inclusion and mental health highlighted the idea of Patchwork Assessment<sup>92</sup>, where students are engaged in a variety of assessment tasks that are brought together to determine the final outcome. These could include group projects alongside individual work. There is an understanding that learning outcomes can be met through a variety of different modes, for example video, presentation or a product, and students could choose how to be assessed, developing their agency as learners. This idea offers some autonomy to students, within a pre-agreed range. On some courses, students are also involved in constructing assessment tasks and criteria.

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### 3.4 CONCLUSION

The IAC is not suggesting that any single one of these ideas and models could or should be at the heart of a new system for England. Each of these models will have benefits, risks and possible unintended consequences. However, these varied ideas and models of assessment, from around the world, around the UK and within England already, show that the current model of end-of course, high-stakes exams is not the only way to assess students and award qualifications.

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### 3.5 QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

These different systems raise, directly and indirectly, important questions and ideas about the kinds of changes that might be worthy of consideration, desirable and/or possible and about the processes of change.

- Is it important to measure everything that is taught, or everything that is considered important, for example creativity or teamwork? Will the act of measuring, or creating proxies, destroy the thing that is being assessed?
- What is the appropriate balance between innovating in assessment and traditional certification?
- What are the risks in using grades to indicate the quality of students’ work, and what are the risks to students’ and teachers’ understanding of quality, of not using grades?

- How far can assessment drive equity of opportunity – cultural, linguistic, differently abled - and how can the system ensure that all students are assessed fairly?
- How will society regard a move away from the safety, sanctity and apparent reliability of grades that an examination can produce?
- What evidence matters to understand young people’s progression, and what is the diversity of data needed to track young people’s learning?
- How should teachers’ professional knowledge and skills in assessment be developed?
- What is the appropriate balance of validity, reliability, manageability and authenticity?
- How can the system minimise bias and improve equity?

# CHAPTER 4

## HOW DOES CHANGE HAPPEN?

Educational change often falters because too little attention is paid to the process of change itself. The commission held a webinar to explore the challenges of substantial sustainable educational change. Those invited to contribute are listed below.

- Professor Mel Ainscow, emeritus professor of education at the University of Manchester, professor in education at the University of Glasgow and a long-term consultant to UNESCO. His work focuses on ways of making schools effective for all children and young people and he emphasises carrying out research collaboratively with schools and education systems to promote improvements.
- Jenny Langley, head teacher of Kingsway Park High School in Rochdale, Greater Manchester. Jenny has worked with Chris Chapman (see below) and a range of partners on projects designed to improve the reliability of teacher assessment within and across schools, while a senior leader in schools in the North West. She has been a head teacher for ten years.
- Professor Chris Chapman, chair of educational policy and practice at the University of Glasgow and the founding director of the Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change (ROC). From 2016-21 Chris was director of Policy Scotland, the University's Centre for public policy research and knowledge exchange.

### 4.1 KEY THEMES FROM THE CHANGE SEMINAR

Mel Ainscow began from the key principle that every learner matters and matters equally. Drawing on his experience in leading firstly the Greater Manchester Challenge (involving partnership between national government, ten local authorities, 1,150 schools and many other stakeholders) and then Schools Challenge Cymru (a programme to accelerate the rate of improvement across schools in Wales, focusing on the progress of students from disadvantaged backgrounds), he identified five levers for change that might move the system.

1. **Clarity of purpose**, including shared ideas of the purposes of education and what is meant by inclusion and equity.
2. **Use of evidence** as a catalyst to think about where the system is currently and where it needs to go. In England, it has become easy to value what can be easily measured, instead of measuring what is valued.
3. **What happens in schools** and especially in classrooms. There must be investment in teacher professional development and an increase in the capacity of schools to engage with the barriers children experience. Schools that make progress become enquiry schools, constantly asking questions about how to improve.

4. **Co-ordination** at local level, through a reinvented middle tier based on collaboration, horizontal movement, expertise and sharing of responsibility. This is a system that has responsibility for every child in a local area, making sure no child is overlooked.
5. **Community** including everyone who has a stake in children and young people's lives, in particular parents and carers and learners themselves. Evidence includes not just statistics but the intelligence of teachers, families, other education experts and learners.

In summary, **change is technically simple, but socially complex**. It needs people to pull in the same direction.

Jenny Langley spoke about how provision of education in schools is structured and the ways in which this reflects, or results in, fundamental issues being addressed the wrong way round.

She also set out her view that policy in England values only what is measured instead of measuring what is valued. In practical terms, she suggested, assessment leads curriculum, content, timetables, sequencing of learning – indeed all aspects of life in schools. It is the hinge point for accountability systems in which teachers are held accountable in terms of a narrow range of standards. Examination boards largely dictate the curriculum students follow from 11 to 18, with washback possibly affecting even younger learners. Teachers teach what will be examined, so that huge swathes of the curriculum are not taught, and there is no opportunity to extend curriculum breadth or depth. Clarifying understanding of assessment and of what should be assessed will give opportunities to think practically about inclusivity in the curriculum and teaching.

She argued that the UK is still a heavily class-based society. Assessment policy and practice dictates that students believe only a certain number of subjects and qualifications are valuable – and these are based on a class system. The system, particularly comparable outcomes, is designed to actively maintain the status quo. This means that children and young people cannot be judged on their own merits and may never know what their strengths are.

Assessment is afforded low priority in initial teacher education. The system does not properly embed the notion that assessing should be designed primarily to support the child's learning rather than award a qualification.

She argued that a by-product of the narrow accountability system is that some teachers and those in leadership roles in schools may be encouraged to focus on improving data at the expense of focusing on building a learning environment that encourages every young person to make best progress in their learning. This is even more important to address the impact of the pandemic, to identify gaps in learning that have arisen due to inconsistent access to home learning for example. Teachers have been taught to focus on data and tracking rather than on the child.

Chris Chapman focussed on approaches to culture change, and change of structures and processes.

He introduced and discussed Michael Barber's map of delivery (92015).<sup>93</sup>

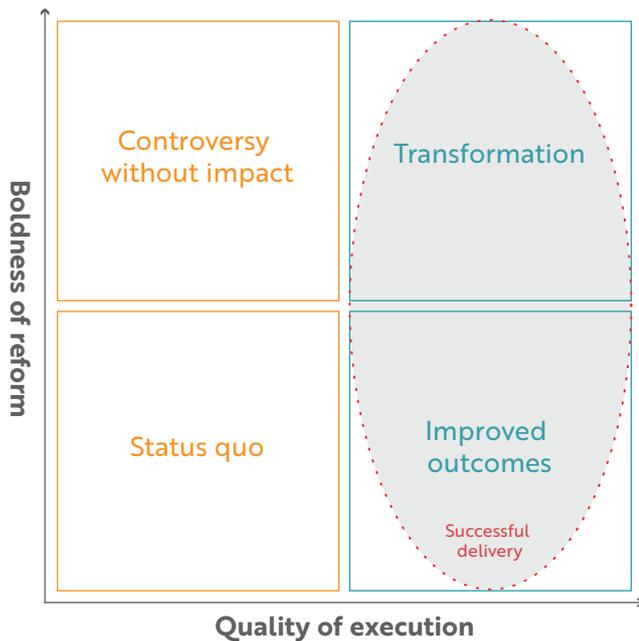


Figure 1: Barber's map of delivery (Barber, 2015)

The commission's aspiration must be in the top right quadrant – looking for reforms that are new, innovative, bold and that work.

Barber also developed the concept of 'deliverology' – a delivery chain from ministers to classrooms.<sup>94</sup> This is too linear, hierarchical and top down. Government and policy makers cannot control delivery – it is the teacher who is the policy-maker for children in the classroom, not the minister.

Ideas for change must be underpinned by evidence, not romantic ideas or ideology.

To make change that is real in classrooms, certain types of structures and processes need to be in place, particularly support within the system for those tasked with implementing the change. Teachers must be skilled and equipped with knowledge, expertise, capacity and capability to work with and implement a new assessment system.

Change requires a high degree of engagement, including from parents. The wider community, including employers, must equally value this system, or they will reject it and continue to invest and value the previous system. To build sustainable change, the system should mutually reinforce and learn through evidence, finding ways to move knowledge around the system, through an authentic networked learning system. This is true for assessment, curriculum and other forms of education change.

A key part of the argument is breaking down hierarchies that exist in bureaucratic cultures and breaking down the individualistic culture, building a sense of collaboration, along with structures and processes that allow people to interact and support each other and learn from each other.

**The commission was convinced that vision for assessment is closely tied to vision for the education system as a whole, which inevitably raises questions about the kind of society that is needed in the 21st century, and the knowledge, skills, values and competences young people will need.**

## 4.2 ETHICAL, SUSTAINABLE CHANGE

The commission considered how to build change that is ethical and sustainable. A new system that is designed by experts on the edges and imposed from above may lead to rapid change but will be implemented in classrooms with varying degrees of understanding, ownership, and commitment and, thus, with limited or fragmented success. Changes that begin locally, in individual schools or across local areas, may enjoy deep commitment but prove difficult to maintain as they grow; whole system change is hard to build solely from the ground up. It is clear too that sustained change in assessment, as in education more broadly, also needs a change in the perceptions and attitudes of society.

Stobart (2021)<sup>95</sup> uses the model of a paradigm shift as developed by Isaacs and Gorgen (2018)<sup>96</sup>, to consider how change might happen. They identify three stages:

- widespread dissatisfaction with the currently accepted model or paradigm
- development of an alternative, agreed model (paradigm) that better fits the current needs
- the advocates of the new paradigm outweigh those supporting the old.

Even then, change will not necessarily happen and it is more likely that adaptations will be made than a complete paradigm shift take place.

OECD (2020)<sup>97</sup> notes that:

“Effective education change requires recognising that implementation is as important as the policy design itself and is in fact a key aspect of the policy success in reaching schools and classrooms.”

(OECD, 2020. P2)

Its implementation framework for effective change in schools offers three dimensions that must be aligned, communicated and put into action coherently.

- **Smart policy design** needs a clear vision agreed by multiple stakeholders; well-chosen, evidenced and trialled policy tools (the levers that will make change); and sufficient resources – funding, equipment and time.
- **Inclusive stakeholder engagement** needs effective communication which builds agreement, encourages public support and fosters ownership of the policy; involvement, which means opportunities to shape the policy and its implementation; and transparent responsibilities and accountability alongside effective monitoring, in ways that foster trust.
- A **conducive environment** includes the existing institutions, capacity and policies and the progressive shaping of those in the change process. Institutions include school and college level, ‘middle tier’ and system leadership; capacity includes the skills, knowledge and competences of those who will implement change – teachers, learners, school and system leaders, policy makers and experts – as well as alignment of beliefs and practices; and policy alignment means reviewing policies and

the resourcing and funding strategies so that there is coherence.

Ethical and sustainable change grows from a shared vision. It is not enough to understand the problems of the current system nor even to identify what needs to change; what is needed is a shared vision of what change might look like, based on defined and aligned values.

Vision on its own is not enough to bring about change. Change that is sustainable needs to pay attention to:

- **educational integrity** - a clear focus on improving learning, and evidence that the planned approach will improve learning;
- **personal and professional integrity** - alignment with what matters to the individual teacher and learner as well as the school or college, alongside a significant role for all participants in the construction of the programme, rather than being passive recipients of policy directives;
- **systemic integrity** - coherence in development at all levels of the education system, where all policies drive in the same direction, and all communities have a shared vision (Hayward, 2015; Hayward & Spencer, 2010)<sup>98</sup>

The challenge of making serious changes to assessment and qualifications and the time it will take should not be underestimated. Serious change calls for a re-evaluation of what matters in education and for society and employment. It requires collaboration between educators, policy makers, employers and the wider community. It will need changes in curriculum, pedagogy, accountability and teacher education. More than that, it requires

rethinking the roles of teachers and learners, giving them agency and voices in the process of change and in their learning, teaching and assessment.

As Fullan<sup>99</sup> has argued, effective theories of change must simultaneously focus on changing individuals and the culture or system in which they work (Fullan, 2006, p. 7).

The OECD Future of Education and Skill 2030<sup>100</sup> project has considered how change is managed, through its work on the curriculum. Its analysis is helpful for considering assessment change.

- At an **individual** level, change requires teachers' commitment, alignment of their beliefs about teaching and learning to assessment reform, and clear understanding of the processes. Change will be hindered by misunderstanding, high teacher workload and lack of time to implement new practices.
- At a **school and college** level, change requires effective leadership, with clear implementation plans and communication, sufficient resourcing including time for professional development and agency, and a strong collaborative culture which allows teachers and learners to develop agency.
- Effective change also needs **good policy and external supports**, including clear guidance, sustained and expert professional development, funding, shared vocabulary, and alignment across all policies and practices, including accountability, professional development, and curriculum.
- Change also requires an alignment of **educational beliefs and values across society**. As has been the case for centuries, it will be difficult to build an

assessment system which values the practical and vocational as highly as the academic unless society is serious about what Peter Hyman calls head, hands and heart in education<sup>101</sup> (Hyman 2017).

- And there needs to be sufficient **time** both to implement reforms gradually, and to reflect, trial, evaluate and continually renew practice until change is properly embedded.

Change therefore calls for:

1. ongoing teacher professional learning
2. systems of accountability that emphasise capacity-building of individual educators and collective capabilities of schools
3. coherence and communication across different levels of the education system, and
4. an incremental timeline for implementing reforms and expecting results (OECD, 2019).<sup>102</sup>

Failure to produce the desired policy outcomes may come from the gap between the attention given to the policy while it is being designed and the lack of attention given when it comes to implementing it, as well as any resistance to the reforms or any lack of capacity to put them in place.

Change is often stimulated because of a growing belief that something is not fit for purpose. Sometimes, this belief can be manufactured by a single organisation calling for change; politically this can happen when a new party in power denigrates all that has gone before in order to make a case for change. Alternatively, dissatisfaction can grow separately in many communities which then come together to set out a comprehensive case for

change that embraces the views of many constituencies. This can raise fundamental questions about what is important to society.

Change that has **educational integrity** will focus on supporting students to progress, within school and college, and beyond into a life of learning. Radical transformation also requires a secure evidence base and ongoing evaluation against the agreed purposes.

Change that has **personal and professional integrity** will start from the premise that every learner matters and every learner matters equally. It will ensure that learners have agency in their learning. It will value equity and inclusion as the pathway to overall improvement.

Transformative change requires both bold ideas and successful implementation. However, Michael Barber's 'deliverology', with its talk of the delivery chain, is too top down and each link in the chain changes or reduces the integrity of the reform.

**Systemic integrity involves considering every part of the process**, in particular but not limited to the knowledge, expertise, capability and capacity that every teacher will need in order to make change in the classroom.

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### 4.3 CONCLUSION

Change requires long-term aims and a pathway that offers opportunities to support short-term progress to show that change is possible and to create momentum.

The current system does allow for some innovation but is often seen as working against the intentions of the system rather than taking forward its aspirations. For an education system to change, policy, practice and research need to be well aligned. Within such a framework, teachers can become advocates for a changed system that is equitable, reliable and inclusive.

Change is neither only bottom up nor top down. Every person in every community has a role to play in making change real for every student in every classroom. Unless everyone changes, nothing changes. Rather than think about change as hierarchical, it might be more helpful to conceptualise change as being like a pebble in a pond, where more and more people become involved over time. Change becomes sustainable when there are mechanisms to keep the ripples moving to engage everyone.

**Change is a long process to be nurtured.**

# CHAPTER 5

## A NEW ASSESSMENT ERA: STIMULATING A NATIONAL CONVERSATION

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

The remit of the IAC was to develop a set of principles that could be used to inform the future design and development of assessment and qualifications in England. From the first meeting of the commission, members were clear that England needed a national conversation about the future of assessment and qualifications and that this conversation had to be inclusive. It had to involve all those who had a stake in the future of education and the young people who would progress from education into college, employment or university.

The evidence gathered from these groups has been presented in chapters 2 – 4 of this report. Remarkably similar themes emerged, and these themes have influenced both the principles first presented in the IAC interim report and the principles as they emerge following consultation in this final report.

This chapter turns to the future. It offers a structure to inform a national conversation about the future of assessment and qualifications in England. As a starting point for that conversation, the IAC offers:

- a vision statement
- five New ERA principles to inform the design of a more Equitable, Reliable Assessment system for qualifications in England.

However, principles are most useful when there is a clear and shared understanding of their essence. To facilitate discussion, after each principle statement, there is an exploration of ideas that lie behind the principle. Finally, it is important to consider the evidence that might be available if the principle were part of practice. Examples of kinds of evidence that would suggest that a principle was part of practice are offered for each principle.

### 5.2 VISION FOR A NEW ASSESSMENT ERA

Although curriculum is beyond the scope of the work of the IAC, the need for curriculum reform was a common theme in many of the evidence-gathering sessions. Assessment and qualifications can only serve the individual, society and the economy in the late 21st century if the curriculum is designed to be future facing and assessment and qualifications are well aligned with the curriculum.

Having a clear vision for future assessment and qualifications in England is a crucial first step towards a New Assessment ERA. This vision is the position statement from which principles are derived. The evidence that has emerged from the work of the IAC suggests that there is considerable consensus around a vision that could form the basis for discussion in a broader national conversation.

## VISION STATEMENT

**Assessment and qualifications in England should recognise the achievements of every young person, to allow every student to thrive in the next stage of their life, be that in college, employment or university, and to thrive socially, culturally and economically.**

A qualification system that is equitable and reliable would encourage young people to respond positively, creatively and sustainably to the personal, social and economic opportunities and challenges posed by the new and ongoing industrial, technological and environmental revolution. The qualification system would afford every student enhanced and fair opportunities to demonstrate the breadth, depth and relevance of their learning. It would offer an educational experience that encourages students to become lifelong learners, to build careers, and enable active citizenship beyond education.

We would be able to rely on qualifications not only to ensure that achievements are recognised consistently, within and between different cohorts, but also to tell us something relevant about what the holder of any given qualification knows, understands and is able to do, and to support their future progression.

Qualifications would be highly regarded by students, parents, teachers, universities, colleges and employers. All students would study a broad curriculum and have a well-rounded educational experience in school and college, including in qualification years, and this broad curriculum and learning experience would be the focus for assessment.

This would be a new ERA for assessment.

## 5.3 FROM VISION TO PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE

Developing a shared vision is only a first step. It is how the vision emerges in practice that really matters. Principles set out the characteristics of the vision as it should emerge in practice. They should be used as the basis for the design of the new qualification system: is what is planned consistent with the principles? They should also act as touchstones against which planned actions or actions in practice over time can be compared: do the actions being taken remain consistent with the principles? What might this principle look like if it were in practice in individual schools and across the country?

Evidence on innovation internationally suggests that many countries begin to innovate with good ideas but over time practice begins to diverge from the original aspiration. In time, this lack of alignment becomes so significant that further major innovation is required. To promote innovation that is sustainable, where there remains close alignment between ideas and practice, the design should build in opportunities for regular discussion among those involved in qualifications of the relationship between vision, principles and emerging practices.

The next section of this report identifies five New ERA principles, expands on the ideas contained within each principle and offers examples of features that would suggest close alignment between principles and practices. As progress is evaluated, evidence would be gathered in response to each feature to identify where progress is strong and what, if any, action might be necessary to bring principle and practice into closer alignment.

It is important that all those involved in putting principles into practice discuss features that would suggest the principle was becoming practice in, for example, their classroom, their school, their academy trust, their inspection process. As the basis for those discussions, following each principle the IAC offers examples of the kinds of characteristics that might be present if the principle were emerging in practice.

## **PRINCIPLE 1: QUALIFICATIONS SHOULD SERVE THE INDIVIDUAL**

- Qualifications should provide information to all young people, to their parents/carers and to users of qualifications about the knowledge, skills and competences young people have achieved to allow them to flourish, to participate in the community and to make good progress in the next stage of their lives, in employment, college or university.
- Making the curriculum in England reflect what will matter for young people in the late 21st century will require longer term consideration. To make the system more equitable, changes should be made to the current qualification system to ensure that all young people leave school/college with evidence of what they have achieved that will be useful to them, to society, to the wider economy and to users of the qualification system (employing organisations and further and higher education).
- No society can afford morally or economically to have young people leave school with little evidence of what they have achieved. It is crucial that the qualification system reflects the achievements of all young people at

school and college as a springboard for future progression, not only for higher achievers whom it may appear to serve well.

- There should be greater flexibility in assessment and qualifications to focus on progression and development, with schools and colleges integrated into processes of lifelong learning. Assessment and qualifications should inform future learning as much as they provide evidence of past learning.

### **Examples of the kinds of evidence available if this principle were being practised**

- Every young person leaves school/college with evidence of what they have achieved and how and why these achievements will inform their future learning.
- Evidence includes information on the knowledge, skills and competences that each young person needs to thrive in the next phase of their learning journey.
- Evidence is different for different students, and includes evidence from examinations and other formal assessments, as well as contributions made by them within and beyond school.
- Evidence provides students with a basis for informed discussion with their parents/carers, colleges, universities or employers.
- Evidence is used by colleges, universities or employers as the starting point for further learning and development.

## **PRINCIPLE 2: QUALIFICATIONS AND ASSESSMENT SHOULD BE RECOGNISED AS PART OF A WIDER EDUCATION SYSTEM INCLUDING CURRICULUM, PEDAGOGY AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

- The purposes that the assessment and qualifications system in England is intended to serve should be made explicit, focussed clearly on improving progression. For example,
  - evidence gathered on student learning should be used for more than simply selection. It should also serve as the basis for future learning – from school to college, from school to university, from college to university, from school to employer, from college to employer, from university to employer
  - evidence gathered at a local or national level should be focussed on improving schools individually and collectively, rather than judging or categorising schools. Accountability should be intelligent
  - inspection systems should primarily be focussed on supporting learning within and across schools, gathering evidence with schools to identify where greatest progress might be made and agreeing a practical strategy to support future action.
- Care should be taken to ensure that approaches to accountability do not distort qualifications.
- Evidence from assessment and qualifications can be used to encourage future learning or to judge and to categorise individuals or systems. When an assessment system tries to do both simultaneously, judgement and categorisation prevail. This often leads to unintended consequences. Centrally, opportunities to use evidence to make progress and to improve will be diminished.
- The potential for unintended consequences arising from the assessment and qualification system should be a central consideration in its design. Evidence to improve education can come from a variety of sources, from classrooms to international surveys. There is a need to review the range of evidence sources currently in use and to evaluate their impact on learning, from students to the nation.
- The central purpose of an assessment and qualification system should be to provide evidence to inform learning, teaching and progression for a variety of purposes. These purposes differ for an individual, a school, a cluster of schools or a nation.
- The assessment and qualification system should be well aligned with the curriculum and the curriculum should be well aligned with what is important for young people to be able to play a full part in society in England, socially, culturally and economically. The curriculum should determine what matters. To promote alignment between curriculum and assessment over time, those who are involved in practice (students, teachers and parents) and those who use the qualifications (employing organisations, colleges and universities) should refer back to the principles and use those to reflect on their current practices to ensure that the focus on learning and progression is maintained.

- Changes to the assessment and qualifications system will impact on the roles of teachers and other professionals within the system. This has implications for the type of initial and continuing professional education required as well as for the kinds of tasks which professionals will undertake and for the use of time within and outside the classroom. Authentic assessment practice will take time and the roles of education professionals will need to change in order to reflect the time required for different expectations.

### Examples of the kinds of evidence available if this principle were being practised

- Progress in learning in schools pays attention to all of what matters in the curriculum, ie, knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes. Assessment and qualifications are aligned with these priorities.
- Assessment practices in classrooms are primarily focussed on progress, identifying with students what they are currently achieving and what they might focus on as next steps. Teachers support student learning through a balance of open and guided inquiry and explicit instruction.
- Students are able to describe their learning progress and future direction. Students work individually and collaboratively with a concern for one another's learning. Grades are used rarely.
- Assessment within schools and of schools is primarily focussed on learning. Teachers and head teachers identify what they do well and what future priorities might be. Schools work collaboratively with a concern for one another's development. Grades are used rarely.
- Schools and education staff welcome visits from, and discussions with, those responsible for evaluation and accountability. Schools and colleges are not categorised, and areas identified for further development are linked to resources to support development. Evaluation and accountability processes are viewed by all as an opportunity to share expertise and improve by learning collaboratively with peers.
- Evidence at a national level is principally gathered to improve policy and inform future resource priorities. Systems are designed to minimise negative washback. For example, sample surveys are used to provide 'deep dive' insights into areas identified for improvement, eg, underachievement patterns in particular communities (poverty, race, gender).
- Teachers understand assessment as a core part of their practice, not an added burden, and have time within the school day to develop, collaboratively, assessment approaches. Teachers are encouraged to share, build on and refine approaches to assessment. Assessment is a core part of initial and continuing teacher education.

**PRINCIPLE 3:  
QUALIFICATIONS AND  
ASSESSMENT SHOULD SERVE  
THE FUTURE NEEDS OF SOCIETY,  
CULTURE AND THE ECONOMY  
TO ENABLE THE NATION AND  
YOUNG PEOPLE TO THRIVE IN LESS  
PREDICTABLE TIMES, SOCIALLY  
AND ECONOMICALLY, NATIONALLY  
AND INTERNATIONALLY**

- The world is changing and education has to ensure that future citizens have the knowledge, skills (including soft skills), competences and attributes necessary for both individuals and society and the economy in England. Existing qualifications, in England, stress the importance of knowledge retention which is, to a degree, commendable; but assessment that preferences only this must be recognised as inadequate.
- Following the UK's decision to leave the EU and the resultant changes in the labour market, there may need to be a re-focus to ensure both the skills and the immigration systems address the needs of the economy. Reliance on technology has grown through lockdowns, and, as a society, we are becoming ever more aware of the potential of robotics, machine learning and artificial intelligence to affect our lives. An increasing awareness of the impact of climate change has made the need for a transition to a greener economy and technology much more obvious. The pandemic has demonstrated the importance of key workers particularly in health and social care and education. Further, there have been major shifts in society's thinking about equity, diversity, health and wellbeing. As a nation, we have become much more aware of our global connectedness.
- Education has a key role to play in the creation of a society that serves the nation and its citizens well. This includes the need to pay attention to culture, the economy and society. Education has to change to respond to both global and local imperatives to support the nation and all of its young people to thrive in less predictable times economically and socially.
- Technology has the potential to play a major role in the New Assessment ERA, not as a substitute for student and teacher decision-making but as a support for it.
- Assessment should include evidence to support the development of soft skills and attributes, eg, confidence building, motivation, collaboration, initiative, problem solving. Approaches to evidence gathering should allow opportunities for all students to demonstrate the best of what they know, understand and are able to do.
- In uncertain times, such as those experienced through the pandemic, the reliance on end of year examinations proved to be high risk. To be better positioned to respond to uncertainty, assessment should be designed to be more flexible both in method and in timing.
- Decisions on what assessment approaches are used, and how they are balanced, should be informed by the curriculum area – not all areas of the curriculum will be assessed in the same way.

### Examples of the kinds of evidence available if this principle were being practised

- Planning for learning ensures that the curriculum represents the knowledge, skills, attributes and competences that young people need to thrive in future. Conversations about the curriculum at a national level are held with young people, their parents/carers, communities, colleges, universities and employers; a parallel process is undertaken at local levels.
- Technology is used to offer alternative approaches to assessment according to student preference in ways that make it manageable for teachers. The appropriate use of technology is discussed and developed with teachers and students from different contexts and communities.
- Technology is used to support desirable assessment practices in manageable ways, eg, 'just in time' feedback
- Technology is used to offer assessment opportunities that are close to real life in a subject or where subjects are brought together across disciplines as would be the case in life, employment or further study.
- Technology is used to support learners to develop broader skills relevant for the future and to connect their subject/s to the real world in a way that is relevant and meaningful.

### PRINCIPLE 4: QUALIFICATIONS AND ASSESSMENT SHOULD BE INCLUSIVE BOTH IN PURPOSE AND IN THE DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE SYSTEM

- For all young people in England to be supported appropriately, assessment and qualifications must shift from a system that was described to IAC as 'a disqualification system' that seeks to open doors only to a limited number of young people, to a system that seeks to qualify all individuals for the next stage of life and work.
- Educated citizens in England need to acquire the knowledge, skills, competences and attributes that will allow them to become confident, independent, adaptable learners: learners who are able to work collaboratively to care for themselves, their communities, their society and their world. The assessment and qualifications system, therefore, needs to be designed to identify and to recognise the achievements of every young person.
- To make this vision a reality for every young person in England, the new ERA must be designed and developed collaboratively, inclusively, with students, parents, teachers, employing organisations, policy makers and researchers. There needs to be sustained dialogue between schools (students, teachers and parents) and qualifications users (employers, colleges and universities and policy makers).
- If the qualification system is to support the progress of every learner, then all communities must have a voice in the process of change and ways must

be found to engage all communities. Equitable assessment can only exist if the system is sufficiently flexible to recognise and respond to the needs and aspirations of different communities. Young people from all communities, including those commonly marginalised, should have a central role to play in this process. Individuals or groups with a deep understanding of issues of marginalisation should be consulted on how all students can best be supported.

- Teachers are fundamental agents in driving change. Teachers in this New Assessment ERA will increase their expertise in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, being regarded as professionals whose autonomy, choice and voice are used in the service of learners and their communities. Teachers must be fully involved in the design of the system and plans for the transition to this New Assessment ERA. This will require a shift in the ways in which professional work and the use of time are managed.
- Countries can learn with one another to tackle shared challenges. Because contexts in individual countries are very different, simply attempting to import solutions from one country into another is unlikely to be successful. There is, however, interesting practice across the world that can be shared as a stimulus to generate new ideas and innovative ways of working.
- Assessment and qualifications that are more equitable and reliable will require attention to be paid both to the design of the system and to how such a system might become practice in every school and every college in ways that remain consistent with the vision. Designing and

implementing the process of change is just as important as designing what will change.

Equitable, reliable assessment that is inclusive is unlikely to be uniform. Within an agreed national framework, the system should have sufficient flexibility to allow for local circumstances and local adaptation.

### Examples of the kinds of evidence available if this principle were being practised

- There is a clear national statement of policy direction that has been informed by the national consultation.
- A research informed model of change is integral to the design of new approaches to qualifications.
- Students are at the heart of the change process. Their views are listened to and inform decisions about how assessment can be most responsive to their needs.
- Teachers play a central role in the change process. This responsibility is recognised in their work profile where time for collaborative development is built into workload.
- Nationally, there is close collaboration with a number of key international partners who work collaboratively to tackle common assessment challenges.
- Locally, students, teachers, parents, communities, colleges and employers are involved in identifying how the assessment and qualification system will best meet the needs of their community.
- Locally, discussions are held about the vision and principles from the IAC and what these might look like in practice

in their community. Care is taken to ensure that every young person and all communities are part of that process.

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**PRINCIPLE FIVE:  
QUALIFICATIONS AND  
ASSESSMENT SHOULD SUPPORT  
PROGRESSION FOR ALL YOUNG  
PEOPLE, BUT SHOULD NOT EXIST  
ONLY TO ACT AS A MECHANISM  
FOR DETERMINING THE NEXT  
QUALIFICATIONS OR FOR  
PURPOSES OF SELECTION**

- To identify progress in all that matters, a range of approaches to assessment will be required. Examinations remain one important way of gathering evidence but the current system is too heavily reliant on a single assessment method with a heavy bias towards written papers. This single method cannot provide evidence of all that is important for young people as they move to the next stage of their lives.
- The system is perceived to act as an impediment to many young people and to create undue pressure and anxiety on too many young people including those who do well in examinations.

**Examples of the kinds of evidence available if this principle were being practised**

- Qualifications are obtained in a range of ways, one of which is by examination. Students have a degree of choice of mode of assessment.
- Quality of achievement relates to standards and due consideration is given to building shared understandings among students, teachers and others.
- Every young person leaves school with a profile of achievements.
- Employers report that young people are able to discuss their achievements and are ready to build their learning further in the workplace.
- Colleges and universities report better learning progression from young people entering further and higher education.
- Student surveys report higher levels of motivation for further learning and decreased levels of stress.

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**5.4 CONCLUSION**

IAC consulted widely with the communities involved in the commission. From students to politicians, there was strong support for the principles presented in this chapter as the basis for the future development of assessment and qualifications in England. That is a good basis from which to build a better future for all students.

In the next chapter, the IAC offers a number of recommendations to support the creation of a New Assessment ERA.

# CHAPTER 6

## TRANSFORMING ASSESSMENT FOR A NEW ERA

### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

Education in England needs to change. The curriculum is too heavily weighted towards knowledge acquisition. Knowledge is important but students need more. They need to be able to demonstrate that they can use knowledge, eg, to explore how ideas work in practice or to draw together ideas from across disciplines.

The curriculum in schools and colleges should encourage breadth, depth and application in learning. What matters in the curriculum should then be reflected in assessment and qualifications. Transforming assessment and qualifications is a crucial part of making sure that every student in the country has the life chance they deserve. However, assessment and qualifications should not continue to drive the curriculum; they should serve the curriculum. The extent to which future students in England are successful, socially, culturally and economically, will depend largely on the curricular and assessment opportunities available to them.

Education remains a public good in England. It has many strengths and the IAC recognises those. The education system has a significant number of outstanding professionals; inspirational people who work tirelessly for their students. Students, commonly, are supported by strong positive relationships with teachers and for some young people, schools represent the one safe, constant place in their lives. Parents

report increasingly strong relationships between home and school. There are examples of innovation in schools that would compare favourably with the best of global practice. The challenge for the system is how to encourage evidence-informed innovation to become part of the practice of every school.

It is time to renew education in England. Without curriculum and assessment reform, young people will continue to be disadvantaged. Some students leave school or college with little to show for their time, and not as well prepared as they could be to participate in a global economy. Countries around the world are seeking to design qualifications that are more closely aligned to the anticipated demands of late 21st century societies (see chapter 4). England must do the same. England as a society is global and its diversity of cultures offers opportunities for young people to become truly global citizens.

The qualification system in England needs to change if it is to meet the vision and principles presented in chapter 5 of this report. Qualifications do not **'recognise and reward the achievements of every young person'**. The New Assessment ERA must be informed by a clear and shared vision and principles. Actions taken should be consistent with both. As one example, GCSEs were designed for a world that has changed beyond recognition. As it stands, GCSE qualifications meet neither vision nor principles.

There is a growing consensus that change is necessary. An increasing number of committees and commissions have been established to debate the nature of change necessary in education in England, a country where, traditionally, education has been transformational. It has been a vehicle for social mobility. It can be again.

## 6.2 TEN RECOMMENDATIONS TO BEGIN THE JOURNEY TO A NEW ASSESSMENT ERA

The recommendations that follow suggest a series of actions that will begin the journey towards education in England once again becoming a beacon for education internationally; an education system where assessment and qualifications are equitable and reliable and where all students thrive.

**Recommendation 1:** recognise every student's achievements. Create a more equitable and reliable assessment system that optimises the potential and protects the health and wellbeing of all England's young people.

**Recommendation 2:** use the broad consensus for change that exists to initiate a national conversation on education with a particular focus on equitable, reliable assessment. Use the vision and principles in this report to stimulate that conversation.

**Recommendation 3:** design learning experiences and qualifications that encourage students to become critical, inquisitive, creative, autonomous and problem-solving learners, that better support their progression into employment, further and higher education and inspire lifelong and inter-disciplinary learning.

**Recommendation 4:** identify reliable, alternative, blended approaches to assessment that rigorously gather evidence

of student achievement and competence. End high-stakes examinations as the only mode of assessing student achievement. Alternative approaches should be developed and trialled with schools to ensure that any new approach takes teacher capacity into consideration.

**Recommendation 5:** deploy existing and emergent technologies to support high quality student experiences in assessment and qualifications.

**Recommendation 6:** plan coherent pathways for all of England's young people between school, college, university and employment that include a coherent 14-19 assessment and qualification experience. GCSEs in their present form, where the qualification is based solely on high-stakes examinations, need to change fundamentally.

**Recommendation 7:** focus on qualifications as outcomes. Assessment should not be based around a fixed age of 16. Students should have opportunities to demonstrate achievements when ready throughout education 14-19.

**Recommendation 8:** design an integrated qualifications system that offers every student opportunities to include 'academic' and 'vocational' elements seamlessly alongside accreditation for skill development, extended inter-disciplinary study and community contribution.

**Recommendation 9:** build a system of accountability that uses evidence to inform improvement and ends judgemental categorisation of schools.

**Recommendation 10:** recognise that successful, sustainable change requires genuine stakeholder engagement including all the communities which have been part of this commission.

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