



APPG for
Schools,
Learning and
Assessment

October 2023



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

Contents

Recommendations	4
Introduction	6
The structure of the report	7
1. The impact of high stakes assessment	9
Narrowing of the curriculum	9
Secondary – the damaging effects of the EBacc and Progress 8	9
Students’ experiences – one size doesn’t fit all	11
Recommendation: consultation for a secondary baccalaureate	12
Failure of the GCSE English and maths resit policy	12
Primary – the damaging effects of SATs	14
Recommendation: a pilot study for an alternative to SATs	14
The impact of assessment on mental wellbeing	16
2. Accountability	19
Ofsted – an adversarial approach to school inspection	20
SATs – measuring for accountability, not for learning	20
Recommendation: a new system of school accountability	22
3. Alternative approaches to assessment	23
International perspectives	23
Singapore – reducing the focus on exams	23
Norway – assessment for learning	23
Global interest in digital learner profiles	24

By Dr Nuala Burgess, King's College London

This is not an official publication of the House of Commons or the House of Lords. It has not been approved by either House or its committees. All-Party Parliamentary Groups are informal groups of Members of both Houses with a common interest in particular issues. The views expressed in this report are those of the group

National perspectives on reform	25
Baccalaureates and digital learner profiles for secondary students	25
The role played by formal exams	26
Stage not age	27
A new qualification in English and maths	28
Recommendation: a new post-16 qualification in English and maths	29
Greater use of technology	29
Recommendation: further research into the use of adaptive testing	30
Assessment to develop learning for primary children	30
Recommendation: a study to evaluate the use of digital learner profiles	32
References	33

Appendices booklet

Evidence considered	2
APPG meetings	2
Written submissions	2
The outliers	3
The current context	4
Appendices	5

Recommendations

The APPG for School Learning and Assessment considered a wide range of written and oral evidence from those concerned with assessment reform. Submissions came from leading academics, educational think tanks, consultants and educationalists (school heads and teachers), as well as a sample of post-16 students and parents. Based on the evidence, we are able to make the following recommendations. Of these, the following three recommendations are considered urgent:

At primary level:

- **An alternative to SATs should be looked at.**

This could be based on pupil sample data with national standards but not high stakes tests. School heads and teachers should be trained to evaluate pupil sample data so that they understand the areas in which their school is doing well compared to other local schools and schools nationally, and where their school may need additional support to improve.

At secondary level:

- **A consultation is launched with the objective of designing a secondary baccalaureate.**

The baccalaureate should include academic, vocational/technical and creative subjects. The consultation should also consider different methods of assessment best suited to the new baccalaureate.

- **A new qualification in English and maths designed for those not taking maths and English as main subjects.**

The new qualifications should be designed to qualify all learners, up to the age of 18 and who are not otherwise studying for a qualification in English and maths, in essential literacy and numeracy skills in preparation for further study or employment.

In addition, we recommend that:

- [School league tables](#) should be replaced by a new system of school accountability to include broader information about a school, including its strengths and areas for improvement.
- Further research should be undertaken into the potential benefits and risks of the use of [technology for assessment](#) to ensure that newly emerging assessment methods are equitable, valid and reliable.
- [A study of digital learner profiles](#) is conducted to evaluate their use at both primary and secondary level. Populated throughout the learner's school journey, digital learner profiles should be transferable.

Educational assessment has become divorced from learning, and the huge contribution that assessment can make to learning has been largely lost. Furthermore, as a result of this separation, formal assessment has focused just on the outcomes of learning, and because of the limited amount of time that can be justified for assessments that do not contribute to learning, this formal assessment has assessed only a narrow part of those outcomes. The *predictability* of these assessments allows teachers and learners to focus on only what is assessed, and the high stakes attached to the results create an incentive to do so. This creates a vicious spiral in which only those aspects of learning that are easily measured are regarded as important, and even these narrow outcomes are not achieved as easily as they could be, or by as many learners, were assessment to be regarded as an integral part of teaching.

(Dylan Wiliam, Paper presented at the 9th International Congress on Mathematics Education in Tokyo 2000; Wiliam's italics).

Introduction

The APPG for Schools, Learning and Assessment (the APPG), chaired by Flick Drummond MP (Conservative) and Emma Hardy MP (Labour), launched its inquiry into assessment reform on 30 November 2022. The group currently has seven officers.¹ It considered a vast range of evidence for its inquiry into assessment reform with submissions from university-based academics who reported on their recent findings on England's assessment systems as well as education campaign groups, think tanks and education consultants. Evidence was also heard from academics with expertise in assessment reform taking place in Australia, Norway and Singapore. The inquiry also received oral and written submissions from primary and secondary school heads and teachers, parents, and post-16 students, all with first-hand experience of current assessment systems in England.

In her opening words at the group's first meeting in January 2023, Flick Drummond stressed the importance of the cross-party character of the APPG, explaining that its key aim was to produce a report that could be used by every political party to guide their thinking on assessment ahead of a forthcoming general election.

This report provides an overview of the evidence gathered by the APPG and concludes with a set of recommendations drawn up in consultation with the officers of the APPG.

¹ See Appendix 1 for the members of the APPG for Schools Learning and Assessment.

The structure of the report

The report is structured around the key areas of concern which emerged from the oral and written submissions of evidence to the inquiry. There are three sections:

- **The first section**

focuses on evidence submitted to the inquiry concerning the impact of the high-stakes testing. This section is divided into two key sections: (I) the narrowing of the curriculum, with further sub-sections devoted to i) secondary, ii) students' experiences, iii) post-16 English and maths, and iv) primary; and (II) the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people.

- **The second section**

discusses the evidence submitted concerning the role assessment should play in school accountability. This section is divided into three sub-sections which discuss the evidence submitted on (I) the role of exams, (II) Ofsted and (III) SATs.

- **The third section**

focuses on alternative approaches to assessment and is divided into two major sections: (I) international perspectives and (II) national perspectives, each with the following sub-sections:

- (I) **International perspectives**

- i) Professor Ng Pak Tee's evidence on Singapore's post-Covid reforms aimed at reducing the focus on exams and competition between students.
- ii) Evidence heard from Professor Siv Gamlem on Norway's use of assessment for learning and the role of teachers' reports in formal assessments.
- iii) Professor Bill Lucas's evidence on the global movement away from end-point assessments towards digital learner profiles.

- (II) **National perspectives**

- i) Secondary – proposals for a baccalaureate-type qualification and digital learner profiles.
- ii) A new qualification in English and maths.
- iii) Greater use of technology.
- iv) Primary – assessment to develop learning and pupil sampling.

High stakes – a note on terminology

The term high stakes in relation to testing and assessment is now ubiquitous in educational debates and was used in many of the submissions to the inquiry. Jerrim (2021) offers a uniquely comprehensive definition of what is meant by high-stakes testing and why it is used in England as in countries around the world.

Jerrim defines high-stakes tests as those that “comprise assessments which cover key academic competencies with results potentially having material consequences for themselves and their schools”. Citing Amoako et al (2019), Jerrim explains that such tests “go hand-in-hand with school and teacher accountability”, with the results used to make judgements about pupil, school and teacher performance. High-stakes tests also play a key role by providing information to key education stakeholders and providing data for school league tables said to help school choice.

(Jerrim 2021:507)



1

The impact of high stakes assessment

Narrowing of the curriculum

All the evidence received by the APPG made clear the belief that assessment in its current forms causes widespread damage to the curriculum at both primary and secondary. Anxiety was also expressed over the way in which assessment and its inextricable link to school performance has resulted in the narrowing of the curriculum and 'teaching to the test'. At secondary level, the higher value attached to subjects which make up the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) and boost Progress 8 scores has resulted in schools dropping lower-valued, creative and applied subjects and modern foreign languages.³ At primary, concerns were raised over the excessive testing of children. There was particular concern over the stultifying effect of being taught little else but English and maths in preparation for the key stage 2 (KS2) Standardised Assessment Tests, or SATs, for year 6 pupils.

Secondary – the damaging effects of the EBacc and Progress 8

In her presentation to the first APPG meeting, Siân Lewis, head of parent participation of the charity Parentkind, drew on a 2022 Parentkind report based on a survey of 3,750 parents. Ms Lewis told the meeting that only half of the number of parents surveyed felt that GCSEs were "a meaningful measure of young peoples' skills, knowledge and capabilities", and that most felt there was too much focus on academic rather than vocational qualifications. Parents surveyed said they wanted their children to leave secondary school with skills and competencies such as self-confidence, resilience and problem-solving as well as preparedness for the world of work and future study. Seventy-five per cent of parents supported the idea of a learner profile, described by others who submitted to the APPG as a digital learner profile which records a young person's wider skills, academic qualifications and other

³ The EBacc comprises five GCSEs – English language and literature, maths, the sciences, geography or history, a language which every student must take. Secondary schools are measured on the number of pupils that take GCSEs in these core subjects. Schools are also measured on how well their pupils do in these subjects (gov.uk/government/publications/english-baccalaureate-ebacc/english-baccalaureate-ebacc). Progress 8 is a type of 'value-added' measure that indicates how much a secondary school has helped pupils improve (or progress) over a five-year period. It is calculated by adding together pupils' highest scores across eight GCSEs. While these numbers are not made publicly available on a pupil-by-pupil basis, scores taken from across a school year group are averaged to produce a school's overall score (goodschoolsguide.co.uk/curricula-and-exams/progress-8-attainment-8).

achievements and travels with them as they move through school. Ms Lewis explained:

Parents feel that current assessment is not capturing all the important skills children and young people require. They want to see assessment reflect their child's growth as a well-rounded and balanced human being.

Proposals for a broad curriculum, usually described as a 'type of baccalaureate' through which learners could develop a wide set of academic, applied and 'soft' skills (eg problem-solving, teamwork, creative thinking and communication skills) were made for learning at both primary and secondary level in written submissions to the APPG made by Bedales independent school, the Edge Foundation, the educational think tank EDSK, More Than A Score, the New School, Pearson, the Royal Society and by Al McConville, co-founder of Rethinking Assessment.⁴

Edge argues that the method used to assess young people should be designed to help students recognise and develop their skills and capabilities, rather than a judgement of academic merit. In its written submission, Edge points out that a system into which we build more opportunities for formative assessment would offer learners opportunities to reflect on their learning and build on feedback.

Formative assessment does not have a tightly defined and widely accepted meaning... it encompass[es] all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged.

(Black and William 1998:7)

In his presentation to the APPG, Al McConville quoted from an Edge report which found that 75 per cent of employers say they prefer a mix of academic and technical qualifications. A further 92 per cent of those surveyed said soft skills were as or more important than hard skills.⁵ Mr McConville argued that "contrary to employers' needs, our current curriculum and assessment system test only knowledge retention and obedience to fixed rubrics in timed conditions". He added:

Most schools do not feel free to offer a broad and balanced curriculum in case it damages their EBacc and Progress 8 scores with a particular emphasis on certain subjects in the Progress 8 and the EBacc 'buckets'. This has led to a dramatic decline in the breadth of the curriculum being pursued. There has been a 50 per cent decline in [students studying] Design and Technology and 20 per cent decline in creative subjects since 2010.

*(Al McConville,
Rethinking Assessment)*

In their written submission to the inquiry, EDSK points out that academic GCSE subjects are being "explicitly prioritised" over subjects such as art, music and design and technology. Citing research carried out by the Department for Education (DfE), EDSK describes how rises in exam entries for academic GCSEs appeared to have been achieved in some schools by downgrading non-academic subjects. In some cases, these subjects were being taught as 'as optional extras' after the school day. EDSK makes a point of highlighting the diminishing value attributed to vocational qualifications in particular, and the

⁴ Rethinking Assessment – a coalition of state and independent sector school leaders who have joined academic researchers, policy-makers, employers and higher education representatives in order "to broaden and modernise assessment to fully and fairly prepare young people for a dynamic world (rethinkingassessment.com/about-us/). ⁵ See Skills Shortage Bulletin in the UK Economy (2023) (edge.co.uk/research/projects/skills-shortages-uk-economy/Skills-Shortages-Bulletin-Summary/)

⁵ See Skills Shortage Bulletin in the UK Economy (2023) (edge.co.uk/research/projects/skills-shortages-uk-economy/Skills-Shortages-Bulletin-Summary/)

problematic consequences of removing them from school league tables: in 2018, only five per cent of the formal exams sat by 16-year-olds were Technical Awards (approved vocational qualifications for 14- to 16-year-olds). A particularly worrying fact highlighted by EDSK is that the number of 16- to 18-year-olds starting an apprenticeship today is roughly the same now as it was in 2002 (ibid), suggesting a lack of impartial careers advice in schools.

Students' experiences – one size doesn't fit all

The inquiry received overwhelming evidence of the negative impact of assessment on the secondary curriculum. As the Independent Assessment Commission (IAC) argues in its 2022 report, accountability measures such as Progress 8 and the EBacc have “undoubtedly” narrowed the range of qualifications students take at 16 (IAC 2022: 16). The domination of GCSEs at 14-16 years was felt to exclude those students whose aptitudes and interests lie elsewhere. Rylie, a young apprentice construction manager addressed the second meeting of the APPG which considered evidence on the kind of knowledge and skills young people need for the 21st century. Her moving account told of her experiences in mainstream secondary school followed by two years in a university technical college (UTC):

Before joining UTC my educational journey was very different. I struggled massively and I found school a really negative environment. I was expected to fit into a mould the school wanted me to fit rather than be who I wanted to be. I was failed in that I was not supported, and I failed to engage, and then I was labelled 'troubled'.

Everything changed for Rylie when she moved to a UTC where the focus was on STEM subjects – science, technology, engineering and maths – and career education. She flourished in a 'career-

focused' learning environment which nurtured her interest in applied subjects:

My time at UTC was filled with employer engagements and [learning] with a focus on six core skills – communication, collaboration, respect, reflect, organisation and perseverance – which were embedded into everything I did. We worked with lots of different business partners who helped us develop these skills which are vital for the world of work... I was given great opportunities. I took part in industry projects with a local company, which was my first real taste of working with an employer. I also took part in thirteen different work experience programmes. During my two years at UTC, I also created a student leaver profile [which I completed] as I gained experience and skills that would equip me with everything I needed once I left school. It looked great when applying for apprenticeships, because I had real working examples of applying the six core skills.

Rylie went on to land an apprenticeship with a construction company and is living proof of the kind of success young people can find when given access to a broad curriculum and the choice of academic or technical/vocational routes. Finding an alternative post-16 route transformed Rylie from a 'troubled' GCSE student to one visibly happy and proud of her status as an apprentice.

Alison, an A-level student, also presented to the APPG. Although a young woman who enjoyed academic work, Alison believed that the secondary curriculum was failing young people and that it needed to be broader, to include the kind of experience and skills which Rylie described having at her UTC. Alison told the meeting:

I believe curricula and modes of assessment should be reflecting the world of work. Ensuring that students are equipped and assessed on numerical, digital and financial

literacy, along with being literate, will ensure my generation and future ones are at the minimum standards for employability and have the skills needed for life... The conventional system doesn't teach qualities students need [for] the future.

Alison went on to describe the limitations of the kind of learning encouraged by an exam-focused curriculum. She argued that the majority of her GCSEs and A-levels “are largely assessments that pursue rote-learning”. She explained that there “was no room for creativity... the stakes of examinations are so high, memorising and regurgitating has to take precedence”. Alison also pointed out that the kind of in-depth learning undertaken for A-levels is advantageous only for those who are confident about the area in which they want to specialise:

However, for the vast majority of us who have no clue what we want to pursue at 15/16 years of age, whittling down to three or four options is daunting and cuts off bounds of potential.

Although well-equipped in academic subjects to study at university, Alison was frustrated that her choices meant she lacked “evidence for vocational skills and professional qualities to show employers” when applying for a longed-for internship in film production.

Failure of the GCSE English and maths resit policy

A number of the submissions to the APPG called for a review of the GCSE resit policy whereby learners without a minimum pass (grade 4) in English and maths are required to resit as a condition of funding for all full-time post-16 programmes.⁶ In its written evidence, the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) points out the

The APPG's recommendation: a consultation is launched with the objective of designing a secondary baccalaureate

An education system which forces students into narrow pathways is failing a very large number of students whose aptitudes and interests include a much broader range of interests than the current secondary curriculum allows. The experiences of post-16 students Rylie and Alison point to the limitations of both the current assessment system and its failure to accommodate the diverse ways in which students learn. Evidence submitted to the APPG suggests the need for a consultation to investigate the design of a new baccalaureate-type qualification at secondary level to include academic, vocational/technical and creative subjects. The consultation should also investigate the use of multi-modal assessments which evidence also submitted to the APPG suggests would be a better way to assess the new secondary baccalaureate.

The APPG therefore recommends that a consultation is launched with the objective of designing a secondary baccalaureate which includes academic, vocational/technical and creative subjects. The consultation should also consider methods of assessment best suited to the new baccalaureate.

⁶ All students under 19 who have not achieved a GCSE pass (grade 4) in English and/or maths are required to resit. This is also a condition of funding for post-16 programmes, although those with GCSE grade 2 may study for Functional Skills level 2 (gov.uk/guidance/16-to-19-funding-maths-and-english-condition-of-funding).

importance attributed to GCSE English and maths as 'passport' qualifications and a requirement for future study, funding or employment. Nonetheless, the ASCL does not believe GCSE English and maths in their current form are fit-for-purpose:

The fact that roughly a third of candidates do not achieve a 'pass' (in the government's own language) in these crucial subjects says less about the quality of teaching and learning, and more about the content of these GCSEs, and whether they really tell us whether young people are literate or numerate.

(ASCL, written submission to the inquiry)

In addition, Edge warns of the "downward spiral" of post-16 English and maths resits for young people, with repeated failure leaving learners "demoralised". Referring to its report on 14-19 education (Newton 2020), Edge points out that even Ofsted's Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman, described the GCSE resit policy as causing "significant problems" and questioned whether it is the "right way forward" (Spielman 2017, cited in Newton 2020: 29). In 2018, Ofsted's annual report expressed concern "over the effectiveness of the government's policy" on GCSE resits, adding that "the impact of repeated 'failure' on students should not be underestimated" (Ofsted 2018:10-11). EDSK draws attention to a Cambridge Assessment report which describes "concerns that the mandatory requirement to study English and mathematics creates resentment and demotivates students" as well as impacting students' mental health (Ireland 2019: 27). As EDSK points out, all stakeholders accept the importance of young people achieving a good standard of literacy and numeracy. However, making thousands of students repeatedly fail GCSEs achieves very little.

Pearson also expresses concerns about the failure of post-16 English and maths. Based on a recent survey it conducted of 6,000 stakeholders (learners, parents, teachers, employers, policymakers, and politicians) about the future of qualifications and assessments for 14- to 19-year-olds, Pearson concludes:

A 'one-size-fits-all' approach fails too many learners with respect to Mathematics and English. Learners need to acquire the numeracy and literacy skills required to access higher technical education, and beyond that, into work. GCSEs are only one lens through which numeracy and literacy can be judged... a significant number of life chances are impacted by the belief that only a GCSE qualification can evidence the Mathematics and English capabilities needed to progress.

(Pearson, written submission to the inquiry)

Pearson argues that there is a need for new 'passport' qualifications in English and maths. These should signal proficiency in numeracy and literacy, and be recognised by further and higher education institutions and employers.

Owing to pressure of time and the vast range of issues covered, the APPG was unable to hear oral evidence on the issue of post-16 English and maths. Nonetheless, the sample of written submissions discussed is indicative of the very real concerns. In addition to the written evidence submitted to the inquiry, the Association of Colleges and the educational press have also raised concerns over the failure of the GCSE resit policy and called for a review of post-16 English and maths.⁷

⁷ Eg Belgutay (TES 2018); Sezen (TES 2019); Hazell (iNews.co.uk 2022); Noble (FEWeek 2022).

Primary – the damaging effects of SATs

SATs are standardised assessment tests taken by children in year 2 and year 6 which are used by the Government to assess the quality of the education at a school. The setting and marking of SATs are carried out in UK schools by the Standards & Testing Agency.

- KS1 SATs in year 2 – tests taken in reading and maths (KS1 SATs will be non-statutory from the 2023/24 academic year).⁸
- KS2 SATs are a more formal process of testing. Children sit tests under formal exam conditions in: English reading; English grammar punctuation and spelling; maths.

The SATs pass mark, or expected standard, is 100. If a child scores below 85 (KS1) or 80 (KS2), it means they have not reached the expected standard.

(thirdspacelearning.com)

The overwhelming consensus of those who provided evidence to the inquiry is that the intensity with which primary schools prepared children for KS1 and KS2 SATs coupled with the impact of SATs on the primary curriculum is damaging pupils' learning. The More Than a Score (MTAS) coalition reports that primary school heads and teachers have

significant concerns about the impact on the curriculum being narrowed to focus on English and maths in preparation for the tests at the cost of the opportunity for children to access subjects such as history, geography and arts subjects in any real depth.

Evidence submitted by MTAS makes clear teachers' concern that seven-year-olds are being taught a severely scaled-down version of English and maths in preparation for their KS1 SATs. For example, in her presentation at an APPG meeting which heard evidence on the narrowness of primary school testing, Alison Ali of MTAS described the "absurdity" of teaching children of seven to identify aspects of technical grammar such as fronted adverbials for their KS1 SATs.⁹

The need to ensure children are 'exam ready' for the four days in the summer term when they take KS2 SATs means that much of year 6 is also spent focused on a restricted diet of English and maths and sitting SATs practice papers. MTAS's conclusive findings on the many problems with SATs are based on a number of surveys. Of these, a 2022 YouGov survey of 1,059 parents found that 83 per cent did not believe that SATs captured all that their children are capable of achieving, while a survey of 230 school heads showed that 95 per cent believed too much time was spent preparing for SATs. In his presentation to the APPG, Matt Morden, head of a south London primary school, expressed serious misgivings over the amount of time lost learning as a result of preparing children for statutory tests. He pointed out that children currently sit five statutory tests during their

⁸ Although no longer statutory, guidance on KS1 SATs for the academic years 2023/24 from the Standards and Testing Agency reads: "It is recommended that the key stage 1 tests (optional) are administered during May 2024"; and for 2024/25, the guidance reads: "Key stage 1 test recommended period (optional)". (gov.uk/guidance/primary-assessments-future-dates#academic-year-1) and KS1 SATs tests will continue to be authored, published, printed and distributed by the Standards and Testing Agency (STA). The website, SATs-papers.co.uk states: "It is likely (following STA recommendation) that all schools across England will continue to administer these tests" (sats-papers.co.uk/2024-sats-papers/#2024-ks1-sats).

⁹ In July 2022, the DfE announced that KS1 assessments would become non-statutory from the 2023/24 academic year (Standards and Testing Agency 2023).

seven years of primary education and that they did very little to develop children's learning in any meaningful way.

MTAS also questions the value of the multiplication tables check (MTC) test taken by year 4 children (ages 8-9). To support its concerns, MTAS cites the joint response made by the Mathematical Association (MA) and the Association of Teachers of Mathematics (ATM) to the Government Consultation on Primary Assessment in England (June 2017). Highlighting the limitations of the MTC test, the two maths associations argue it "emphasises rote learning and rapid recall over understanding of mathematical structures". They argue further that subjecting children to a test focused on "multiplication facts" risks highlighting one aspect of mathematics "over many other important ones". Both associations had serious misgivings about a test devoted to multiplication skills in isolation.

Many who contributed to the inquiry pointed out that the purpose of current assessments is to generate data for measuring school performance and that testing at primary level did not develop children's learning. For example, the comparison carried out of children's Baseline tests, taken in reception, with the results for their KS2 SATs taken in the final term of primary, is done for the express purpose of judging a school's performance. As EDSK argues, the results "come too late to provide useful feedback to schools on how to improve literacy and numeracy standards". Further evidence that SATs are of little use except as instruments of accountability, is the fact that many secondary schools do not use SATs grades,

preferring to retest children using CAT tests to set initial academic grouping and targets.^{10 11}

The APPG's recommendation: an alternative to SATs should be looked at

The strength of feeling about the negative impact of SATs expressed by academics, parent groups and educationalists, suggests that finding an alternative way to hold schools accountable is a matter of urgency. Such an alternative should be designed to avoid negatively impacting on the primary curriculum and children's experience of learning and without increasing teacher workload. The APPG recommends that an alternative to SATs be piloted that is based on a system of pupil sampling recommended by Moss et al (2021) in their report *High Standards Not High Stakes*.

The APPG therefore recommends that alternative to SATs should be looked at. This could be based on pupil sample data with national standards but not high-stakes tests. School heads and teachers should be trained to evaluate pupil sample data so that they understand the areas in which their school is doing well compared to other local schools and schools nationally, and where their school may need additional support to improve.

10 CAT stands for cognitive abilities test. CATs assess pupils in four areas: i) verbal reasoning (thinking and problem-solving with words); ii) non-verbal reasoning (thinking and problem-solving with shapes and space); iii) quantitative reasoning (thinking and problem-solving with numbers); iv) spatial reasoning (visualising, picturing and moving shapes around) (Pretest Plus pretestplus.co.uk/about/).

11 The problems with using learners' academic attainment to hold primary and secondary schools to account is discussed more fully in the section devoted to accountability (Section 2).

The impact of assessment on mental wellbeing

Professor Alice Bradbury, chair of the Independent Commission on Assessment in Primary Education (ICAPE), told the APPG that responses to surveys conducted as part of the commission's research "were notable in the strength of feeling relating to stress for children". Outlining the findings of the ICAPE report, Professor Bradbury described as "a worrying finding" that over three quarters of the 1,124 teachers and 536 parents surveyed felt the current system adds to children's stress (Wyse, Bradbury and Trollope 2022:24). The level of concern expressed by parents and educators indicates that "reducing children's stress [is] a priority for reforms" (Wyse, Bradbury and Trollope 2022:26). A similar finding appears in the widely-applauded 2022 Times Education Commission's report which found that parents "overwhelmingly prioritise their child's wellbeing over academic attainment – by ten to one – and they feel that schools focus too narrowly on exams" (Times Education Commission 2022:8).¹²

MTAS draws on numerous surveys of parents and teachers to illustrate the level of concern about the stress and anxiety caused in particular by SATs. Citing a 2022 Parentkind survey, MTAS write that 95 per cent of the 1,756 parents of school-age children surveyed felt that SATs have a negative impact on their children's wellbeing. In another 2022 survey of year 6 pupils conducted for MTAS by YouGov, 60 per cent of the children surveyed reported being "worried about SATs". In yet another report, members of the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) describe some primary school children being "very stressed" when sitting SATs

tests while some "panicked" (NAHT 2019). MTAS's extensive review of studies into the impact of SATs on children's wellbeing leads them to conclude:

Unnecessary pressure is created by school performance being based on the results of a narrow set of tests taken by 10- and 11-year-olds under exam conditions. This is leading to an unprecedented rise in mental health issues of not only headteachers and teachers but also young children, who struggle to cope with the stress.

Exam-related stress is also a major concern raised by secondary students. Edge describes the findings of a youth roundtable meeting hosted in March 2022 during which teenagers said they felt that there were "too many exams" and that they were "unfair" and "too narrow". The current exam system is also felt to be "unhelpful in providing motivation to learn" (Edge 2022). A 2022 Youth Voice Census showed that 49 per cent of the 4,000 young people (11–30 years) thought that exams and assessments impacted their mental health negatively (Youth Voice Census 2022: 10). In her foreword to the Youth Census report, Laura-Jane Rawlings, CEO of Youth Employment UK, describes the "escalating mental health emergency" among young people. In his own foreword, Olly Newton, executive director of the Edge Foundation, refers to the "growing mental health crisis" and highlights the fact that 49.1 per cent of those who took part in the Youth Census felt "that exams impact their mental health negatively". Mr Newton said that an additional stress for many young people is that they "feel underprepared for the world of work" (Youth Voice Census 2022:6).

ASCL also highlights the stress of national assessments, arguing that the current system puts teachers and leaders, as well as young people, "under considerable

¹² 2022 Times Education Commission's report *Bringing out the Best* was the result of a year-long project chaired by the renowned Times journalist Rachel Sylvester and supported by a team of 22 commissioners with backgrounds in business, education, science, the arts and government.

stress". ASCL explains "the sheer weight of assessment" felt by 16-year-olds who can find themselves undergoing over 30 hours of assessment for their GCSEs over a four-week period. ASCL argues that the root cause of such stress is:

The emphasis placed on national assessments and qualifications in our accountability system, with its reliance on performance tables which are heavily weighted towards students' performance in these assessments.

The kinds of pressures teachers felt by teachers are described in Education Support's (2023) report *1970s working conditions in the 2020s*. This teacher's first-hand account graphically illustrates the stress of preparing students for their GCSEs:

At the moment, we've been marking mock exams... for Year 11s you teach biology, chemistry and physics, you've got about 90 papers. My school wants you to write down exactly how many marks each student has got for every single question. So, just marking a set of papers will take about three hours. But then the QLA analysis, where you're writing down how many marks students have got in every single question... Each question has got another five sub questions. It adds an extra two hours on! That's five hours marking biology. Five hours marking chemistry. Five hours marking physics. I only have three [free periods] a week. So, I was never going to get that done on top of [other] marking... And some of the deadlines they gave us for most of these papers was about two days. So, it was about six hours after school each day.

(Education Support 2023:35)

ASCL points out that preparation for formal qualifications also impacts negatively on the mental health of teachers and heads. Research commissioned by Education Support, which describes itself as "the only UK charity dedicated to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of teachers" found that 78 per cent of 1,004 teachers surveyed said they were likely to leave the profession if offered a job which promised a better work/life balance (Education Support 2023:29).

Sara Tomlinson, teacher member of MTAS, also links issues of children's mental wellbeing and teacher stress to testing and school accountability:

Parents want to be reassured about the quality of their children's education. They want a broad curriculum and inspiring teaching. They do not want their children to be subjected to unnecessary testing purely for the purposes of gathering data to create league tables.

Even before the pandemic, experts in child psychology and mental health expressed their concerns. In its evidence submitted to a House of Commons Education and Health Committees Inquiry, the Association of Directors of Public Health (ADPH) warned:

If the pressure to promote academic excellence is detrimentally affecting pupils, it becomes self-defeating. Government and schools must be conscious of the stress and anxiety that they are placing on pupils and ensure that sufficient time is allowed for activities which develop life-long skills for well-being.

(House of Commons Education and Health Committees 2017:8)

This report cannot stress strongly enough the level of concern expressed to the inquiry about the impact of what Professor Pak Tee (see above) describes as the “high stakes high pressure” character of competitive education systems on the mental health of young people. Calls for assessment reform, both to the inquiry and beyond, come from a very large cross section of people including school heads, teachers, parents, child and educational psychologists, all of whom deal with children and young people on an everyday basis, and who witness the impact of our current assessment systems on their mental health and wellbeing. Last, but not least, is the evidence, from Youth Surveys and Edge roundtables where young people themselves describe the detrimental impact of formal exams on their motivation to study and performance.



2

Accountability

In England, assessment and academic performance are inextricably linked to school accountability with pupils' academic attainment, reflected in grades awarded for SATs and GCSEs, determining the position of every primary and secondary school in school league tables.¹³ League tables, designed to hold schools publicly accountable and to facilitate parental choice (Burgess et al 2019), are published by the Government and in the national media.¹⁴ Several of the contributions to APPG meetings and submissions of written evidence expressed concerns that institutional accountability now supersedes children and young people's educational needs. What follows considers the challenges of using assessment – specifically the grades achieved by children and young people in formal tests – as a means of assessing school performance.

The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) argue that results in national assessments should play only “a proportionate role” in how schools and colleges are held to account. Referring to its report *A Great Education for Every Child* (ASCL 2021), ASCL points out the intrinsic unfairness of England's accountability system:

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

(ASCL 2021:13)

Equally unfair is an accountability system which rewards institutional performance in some subjects but not others. Edge argues that accountability measures such as the EBacc and Progress 8 encourage schools to prioritise academic subjects over creative and technical ones. As evidence of this, Edge cites the 40 per cent decline in students studying GCSE art and a 71 per cent decline in students of GCSE design and technology over the last decade. As Edge points out, the effects of the EBacc and Progress 8 mean that students who learn differently are

¹³ Scotland and Wales have their own type of leagues tables. In Scotland, it is the Scottish media who collate exam data and publish school league tables. In Wales, league tables are compiled using a range of indicators and contextual information as well as exam results (see Bhattacharya 2021).

¹⁴ League tables are published by Gov.UK (<https://www.gov.uk/school-performance-tables>).

disadvantaged, and that an accountability system reliant on formal exams overlooks the range of important skills many young people need post-school:

Exams don't credit thoughtful team players, creative problem-solvers or excellent communicators, even though these are skills that help young people thrive, and that employers also call for.

Ofsted

Edge's written submission to the inquiry also proposes a "review of the role of Ofsted to ensure that the inspection and accountability regime moves from an adversarial to a performance improvement role". In a study commissioned by Edge, conducted by academics based at University of London's Institute of Education (UCL IoE) (Munoz and Erhen 2021), Ofsted's policies and procedures are compared with those of Education Scotland (ES), the inspectorate system in Scotland, Estyn in Wales and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) in Northern Ireland.¹⁵ The research found significant differences in approach:

Whilst Ofsted appeared to be more oriented to promote social mobility, the other regimes put more emphasis on equity of all learners. Regarding the intended mechanisms for school improvement, Ofsted put more emphasis on the feedback provided to schools derived from inspection, whereas Estyn, ETI and ES put a stronger emphasis on the alignment between inspection and self-evaluation.

(Munoz and Erhen 2021: 21)

The report concludes by proposing a review of Ofsted with arguments in favour of an alternative, more collaborative and supportive approach to school accountability and inspection. Edge's submission to the inquiry came at a time when educators' feelings towards Ofsted's 'adversarial' approach to school inspection were especially high and Ofsted's refusal to review its one-word grading system for school performance widely criticised.¹⁶

In addition to Edge's arguments for an inspection system which encourages improvement rather than casting judgement, the Times Education Commission's (2021) 12-point plan for education calls for:

A reformed Ofsted that works collaboratively with schools to secure sustained improvement, rather than operating through fear, and a new "school report card" with a wider range of metrics including wellbeing, school culture, inclusion and attendance to unleash the potential of schools.

(Times Education Commission 2021:5)¹⁷

SATs – measuring for accountability, not for learning

There was great strength of feeling about the way that primary education has become dominated by SATs, and hard-to-find evidence of wide support for the Government's claim "that statutory assessments give teachers, parents and

¹⁵ Estyn is Welsh for both 'to reach out' and 'to stretch'.

¹⁶ Ofsted's refusal to review its one-word grading system was publicly criticised in the national media by its former Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw (Adams, 2023) and Paul Whiteman, the general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers (Wadley & PA Media, BBC News). Ofsted's decision also prompted a Commons Education Select Committee inquiry into the impact of inspection on teacher workload and wellbeing (UK Parliament, Committees, 13 June 2023).

¹⁷ For more on attitudes towards Ofsted and "an almost total breakdown of trust between Ofsted and the schools it is supposed to be holding to account" see The Times Education Commission 2002:44.

pupils vital information on pupil attainment and progression” (Standards and Testing Agency, Gov.UK 2023). MTAS’s extensive research into SATs draws on an academic report on the attitudes of parents, primary school heads and teachers on primary school testing (Clark et al 2020), surveys of 1,059 primary school parents conducted by YouGov and 1,756 primary and secondary school children parents conducted by Parentkind. Based on their data, MTAS is able to conclude that only one in ten parents believe government tests are an accurate measure of school performance.

In addition to the wealth of statistics provided by MTAS which show that parents do not believe SATs “capture all that their children are capable of”, a 2022 Parentkind survey of 1,727 parents found that 80 per cent disagreed that “SATs provide parents with useful information about their child’s achievement/progress in school” (Parentkind 2022). A recent survey conducted by the NAHT of 230 school heads found that only eight per cent believe SATs results “provide meaningful data about a school’s performance”. Likewise, written submissions challenged claims that SATs results and school league tables are essential for helping parents choose a school for their child. A 2022 Parentkind survey of 1,756 parents revealed that 86 per cent “did not consider SATs results [an] important factor when choosing a school” and that “70 per cent said they did not take into account a prospective school’s SATs results” when making their school choice (Parentkind 2022).

Addressing one of the two APPG meetings which examined evidence on the impact of high-stakes testing on primary education

and children’s learning, Professor Bradbury explained that research undertaken as part of the ICAPE study into primary assessment showed that:

The high stakes nature of the tests, particularly SATs, means that practice responds to the priorities designated by the tests, so that the results are often a reflection of how well the school has learnt to prepare.

As one school head told the ICAPE research team, SATs “are a test of how well the school games the system, not what the children can do”. Professor Bradbury said that there is a need to return to thinking about why we assess children and what assessment is for. She argued that assessment “should be for children, and their learning, not for government”. One of the key recommendations to come out of the ICAPE study, which included responses from both educators and parents, is that the assessment of pupils should be “clearly separated from the means to hold schools and teachers to account”.¹⁸

Professor Gemma Moss, who chaired the British Educational Research Association (BERA) expert panel on primary assessment from 2017-22, submitted both written and oral evidence to the APPG.¹⁹ Basing her evidence on the expert panel’s report *High Standards, Not High Stakes*, Professor Moss proposes a new system of testing and accountability using nationally representative samples of pupils within schools, recruited and followed up at regular intervals. The approach would involve “collecting richer information from a smaller number of pupils, for the express purpose of building knowledge for intelligent and democratic accountability” (Moss et al, 2021: 5). Instead of annual tests

¹⁸ ICAPE involved collaboration between teachers and researchers and analysed responses from 1,124 educators and 536 responses from parents (Wyse et al 2022).

¹⁹ The British Educational Research Association (BERA) is the leading authority on educational research in the UK, supporting and representing the community of scholars, practitioners and everyone engaged in and with educational research both nationally and internationally. BERA is a membership association and learned society committed to advancing research quality, building research capacity and fostering research engagement. We aim to inform the development of policy and practice by promoting the best quality evidence produced by educational research (Moss et al 2021:2).

for all pupils, the nationally representative sample would be tested using...

new and broader types of assessment designed to capture a wider range of competencies and understand pupils' educational development over time.

In addition to the data gathered from this new type of assessment, data from pupil, teacher and parent surveys would collect information on a wider range of contextual factors that may be related to student outcomes; for example, factors such as pupil wellbeing, parental engagement, teaching environment and other indicators of education quality. Professor Moss and her colleagues argue that their approach would allow schools to be held accountable while also avoiding “the unintended impacts that high stakes assessment has had on English primary schools”. As Professor Moss explains, the new approach would allow for an “integrated accountability system” using quantitative pupil assessment data taken from nationally representative samples of pupils, as well as a school inspection system linked to school-based self-evaluation and peer-review. As Professor Moss and her colleagues argue, a combination of data would provide “a richer exploration of educational processes and outcomes than the current system allows (Moss et al 2021:5).

Our proposal would improve understanding of a broader range of factors that impact on pupils' attainment and wellbeing, and system equity, while continuing to inform the general public and policymakers about the strengths and limitations of the education system as a whole.

(Moss et al 2021:5)

Much of the evidence submitted to the inquiry concerning primary assessment focused on the inherent wrongs using primary school tests for the purposes of school accountability. The BERA research led by Professor Moss is significant because it tempers criticism of SATs with a constructive suggestion for an alternative approach to holding schools to account. As well as an approach which would move our accountability system away “from simplistic retrospective comparisons and narrow, performance-driven league tables of schools” towards more nuanced reporting (Moss et al 2021:11), she and her colleagues offer a kinder and fairer way to assess children's learning and development.

The APPG's recommendation: a new system of school accountability

The detrimental impact that SATs is having on teaching and learning at primary level emerged as a key area of concern. The inquiry received a wealth of evidence to show widespread concern from school heads, teachers, parents and leading academics over the use of children's test results as a measure of primary school performance. Similarly, the inquiry heard from numerous bodies concerned with the impact that the EBacc and Progress 8 were having on GCSE subject choice and who called for the end of the use of GCSE results as a measure of secondary school performance.

The APPG therefore recommends that school league tables should be replaced by a new system of school accountability to include broader information about a school, including its strengths and areas for improvement.

3

Alternative approaches to assessment

International perspectives

Singapore – reducing the focus on exams

The inquiry dedicated one meeting to evidence from academics with expertise in international education systems and heard evidence of approaches to assessment reform being developed or implemented in countries such as Singapore, Norway and Australia. Professor Ng Pak Tee of Nanyang Technological University in Singapore explained that in his country, the Covid pandemic was a “wake-up call”:

Covid showed us that qualifications are no guarantee of a job and that lifelong learning and adaptability – real skills – are much more important in the long run.

Professor Pak Tee explained that one of the key functions of Singapore’s national examination system was as “a sort of quality control point for learning and a sorting mechanism of young people’s future education pathways”. Post Covid, however, efforts were being made to reduce the focus on exams and the “high stakes high pressure” of an assessment system characterised by competition between students. In order to do this, he explained:

Singapore has created more pathways for different types of students to find success in their own way,

and [we are] broadening the definition and understanding of ‘success’. We try hard to highlight students’ success in areas beyond the traditional mathematics, science and languages.

Professor Pak Tee warned that successful change takes time, and that a long and patient strategy of ‘push and nudge’ was needed in order to change the mindset of a general public used to an education system validated by exams grades. Once public opinion has changed, however, he felt that politicians and policy-makers would follow.

Norway – assessment for learning

Assessment for learning is any assessment for which the first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting pupils’ learning. It thus differs from assessment designed primarily to serve the purposes of accountability, or of ranking, or of verifying competence. An assessment activity can help learning if it provides information to be used as feedback, by teachers, and their pupils, in assessing themselves and each other, to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. Such assessment becomes ‘formative assessment’ when the evidence is actually designed to adapt the teaching work to meet learning needs.

In her presentation on assessment reform in Norway, Professor Siv Gamlem, of Volda University College, explained her country's focus on encouraging students to become active learners rather than passive recipients of grades. Professor Gamlem stressed "good assessment means for learning not only of learning". She pointed out that "teachers are really trusted in Norway" and explained that assessment for learning, where the focus is on constructive teacher feedback, is now mandatory. Professor Gamlem explained that Norway's assessment system is under constant review since teachers were found to need regular support to fully understand and implement what assessment for learning involves. Outlining Norway's formal assessment systems, Professor Gamlem explained that teachers provide regular summative assessments of every student's learning and wellbeing and report twice a year on achievement and improvement with recommendations for further work. At primary (ages 6-12), no work is graded, while at lower secondary (ages 13-15), teachers only give final grades at the end of tenth year (15 years). Students are also given a final report, based on 'holistic judgements', for every subject. In addition, lower secondary students sit only one or two external exams in subjects chosen by the district. At upper secondary (16-18 years), students follow either a vocational or academic route. Teachers award final grades accompanied by a holistic report, based on a range of achievements, for every student and a small number of mandatory exams are sat by all students. In addition, 20 per cent of students are blindly selected to sit an additional set of exams. Significantly, exams form only 20 per cent of a student's end-of-school diploma with teacher assessments forming 80 per cent.

Global interest in digital learner profiles

Professor Bill Lucas of Winchester University and a co-founder of Rethinking

Assessment, presented evidence based on his extensive research of international education and assessment systems. He told the meeting that there is now "global interest" in reducing end-point assessments and in adopting digital learner profiles. It is now policy for every student in Australia to have "an end-leaver digital profile". Outlining their research in this area, Professor Lucas told the meeting that Rethinking Assessment had developed its own version of a digital learner profile which was being piloted in schools in Doncaster and Hertfordshire. He referred the meeting to the Times Education Commission's strong support for digital learner profiles. Based on the Rethinking Assessment's model, these would include:

Academic qualifications alongside a record of other achievements: video footage of a pupil playing a musical instrument, photographs of projects they have worked on or details of expeditions, volunteering and work experience.

(Times Education Commission 2022:40)

The commission's report *Bringing Out the Best* enthusiasm for digital learner profiles is reflected in the fact that they are now being considered as a part of students' Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) applications, with UCAS believing that in a few years learner profiles will replace personal statements: "a digital portfolio is absolutely the way to go" (Times Education Commission 2022:40).

As the next section makes clear, the international perspectives on assessment reform presented to the APPG echo proposals made to the inquiry by educators, academic researchers and think tanks working within England's education system. It seems clear that those who press for an alternative approach to assessment are part of an international movement away from a one-size-fits-all approach.

As Professor Lucas reminds us:

There is a glorious bio-diversity out there of testing, and we don't need to do them all, but there are so many different opportunities – and we have ended up with a mono-culture largely of end-point paper and pencil tests... I think we can do better at being more multi-modal.

National perspectives on reform

The point was made in several oral and written contributions to the inquiry that England's assessment system, because it relies on examined end-point assessments, failed during the Covid-19 pandemic. England was not alone in this. As the International Educational Assessment Network argue:

Perhaps the greatest obstacle within education for developing more nimble and versatile learners is our historic and continued reliance on testing and examination, which, in itself, requires and perpetuates controlled conditions, replicability, and certainty... 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.

(DuLuca et al 2022: 3)

Last minute decisions and confusing advice on the administration of Centre and Teacher Assessed Grades (CAGs and TAGs, respectively) meant that schools, teachers and students were ill-prepared when the decision was made to use CAGs and TAGs in lieu of formal tests and examinations. During the first APPG meeting, Ms Lewis of Parentkind explained that although TAGs “had their problems, Covid showed us things could be done differently,

and the world didn't fall apart”. She added that Parentkind surveys showed that the option of “going back” to a system of formal end-point assessments “was not welcomed by parents” with many preferring the idea of teachers assessing children and young people.

The inquiry received several constructive proposals for assessment reform. The majority of these expressed a strong desire for a broader curriculum and for less emphasis on formal tests and examinations. Contributions to APPG meetings pointed out that England is the only country in Europe to have high-stakes testing at primary and at 16. The overall consensus to emerge from the evidence submitted is that England's education system should offer a broader curriculum of academic, creative and technical/vocational subjects, coupled with multi-modal assessment. Such an education system would better prepare young people with the necessary academic, applied and creative skills to equip them for further and higher education, and the world of work. The sections that follow outline the specific proposals for assessment reform, all of which are research informed. They include proposals of alternative approaches to assessment which are both well-established or being currently piloted in schools, as well as proposals based on academic research and/or informed by findings from surveys conducted by reputable organisations and/or as part of academic research.

Baccalaureates and digital learner profiles for secondary students

At secondary level, there was strong support for a baccalaureate-type qualification and multi-modal assessment. Although bodies such as Edge, Rethinking Assessment and EDSK had different ideas about how this baccalaureate might look, their proposals had in common a qualification which would include:

- a combination of academic and applied subjects to *allow for*
- the development of broad range skills *assessed by*
- multi-modal assessment *recorded in*
- a digital learner profile.

Rethinking Assessment's digital learner profile, summarised by Al McConville, would be populated throughout lower and upper secondary, and record a range of academic, technical and 'soft' skills right up to the end of schooling. Edge proposes a slightly richer digital learner profile: as well as formal qualifications, personal interests and independent projects. The Edge model would include work experience, and evidence of creativity, collaboration and achievements both within and *outside of school*.

Bedales independent school also favours a type of baccalaureate. In its written submission it outlines its offer of Bedales Assessed Courses (BACs), the school's in-house, post-16 baccalaureate-type qualification. Developed with Southampton University, BACs have a grading system with 'rough equivalence' to GCSE grading. However, BACs offer a much deeper type of learning than is possible with the GCSE curriculum, as well as the opportunity to develop critical and creative thinking and applied skills. Students study five out of 14 BAC programmes in areas ranging from outdoor work and digital game design to global awareness and philosophy, religion and ethics, art or sports science.²⁰ As well being formally examined, BACs are assessed using a combination of any of the following:

- controlled assessment
- coursework essay
- sketchbook/portfolio/social media portfolio
- artefact (artwork; garment; furniture; building; short story; collection of poetry; computer program; website; blog etc)

- performance
- viva voce/presentation
- composition
- collaborative project-based learning.

Bedales explains that all the BAC courses involve collaboration, research, creative thought and problem-solving, and are a natural progression to A-level study. BACs are externally moderated and recognised by UCAS, universities and employers.

EDSK's proposal for a three-year baccalaureate-type qualification with courses at foundation, standard and higher level is designed to promote progression for all learners throughout upper secondary. Students would be able to complete each level at their own pace with the help of online adaptive assessments. Subjects with a significant practical element (eg art, PE) would continue to use practical assessments alongside the new computer-based tests, and levels reached for individual subjects logged in a record of achievement. EDSK points out that lower-stakes tests would reduce the number of hours of assessments required compared to GCSEs. In addition, each pupil would earn two scores, rather than a single letter or number-based grade: i) an overall score in a subject, expressed as a percentage score; and ii) a 'percentile rank' that shows the proportion of pupils who achieved a lower overall percentage score. As EDSK explains:

These new assessments are low-stakes and designed to help guide pupils' decisions about their future pathway through secondary education instead of passing judgement on their abilities at age 15 when almost half of their secondary education journey is yet to come.

(Richmond 2021: 37-8)

20 For a full list of the 14 BACs courses, see Appendix 4.

The role played by formal exams

All evidence submitted to the inquiry which included proposals for assessment reform at secondary level were in favour of the inclusion of formal examinations, provided these formed part of a broader holistic assessment model. Nonetheless, a minority position, supported by two written submissions in favour of online examinations, was presented in oral evidence given by Tim Oates, director of assessment and research at Cambridge Assessment. In his presentation to the APPG, Mr Oates argued that exams are the only form of assessment which offer “reliability, validity and utility”. In written evidence sent in support of his oral contribution, Mr Oates explained that formal tests and examinations are “a fair and dependable form of assessment (reliability) which assess what we want to assess (validity) for progression”; in addition, formal assessments are also “efficient, cost-effective, easy to administer and complete (utility)”. He added that continuous assessments “mean a lot of extra work for teachers”. Although a strong advocate of formal tests and exams, Mr Oates’s presentation to the APPG suggested that he did not believe exam preparation should be prioritised over the development of learning. He stressed that he is in favour of formative assessment; for example, when preparing children and young people for their summative assessments.

Stage not age?

Arguing that all learners learn differently, Edge proposes an approach which would reduce the high stakes nature of formal exams. In a report for Edge, Newton (2020) explains that this approach moves away from one determined by age to one that is more responsive to the ‘stage’ that individual learners have reached. Newton argues for the

need “to smooth the unnecessary cliff edge at 16” so that those who are ready may “press on with level 4 qualifications and those who require additional support [able] to take more time without feeling like they have failed” (Newton 2020: 25). Using online adaptive assessments, GCSEs would be taken at any point during the 14-19 phase of education. In this way, rather than formal ‘make or break points’, GCSE /level 2 assessments would serve as progress checks of learning development with students acquiring different levels for their various subjects as they travel through upper secondary. As Newton explains, this kind of system means there would be no pass/fail assessment. Every student would leave education with a digital learner profile comprising a holistic record of their academic levels and wider achievements.²¹ As Edge argues in its written submission, a ‘stage not age’ approach to assessment would also support those from deprived and lower income backgrounds who may need more time and resources to realise their potential.²²

Edge’s proposals for other ways to assess students’ learning, which could be used in conjunction with progress check-style GCSEs, are based on Professor Bill Lucas’s report *Rethinking Assessment in Education: The case for change (2021)*. As well as digital learner profiles (see earlier, International Perspectives) which would allow students to showcase a portfolio of achievements beyond but also including, academic qualifications, Professor Lucas’s proposals include a host of imaginative ways to assess learning. For example:

- Performance-based assessment – to allow students to show how they apply their learning in a meaningful way. An example is the online test developed by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) which assesses collaborative problem-solving and creative thinking.

21 A discussion with Newton during the writing of the report helped to clarify aspects of the ‘stage not age’ approach.

22 Many of the recommendations made by Newton (2020) for 14-19 education are echoed in the final report produced by the Independent Assessment Commission (IAC) based on its review of assessment and qualifications in England for learners aged 14-19 (Independent Assessment Commission 2022).

- Extended investigations – to allow students to be assessed over a length of time, removing the stress of time-bound exams. Examples include the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) and the extended essay element of the International Baccalaureate.
- On-demand and online testing – to allow students to take assessments when ready, and which provide the opportunity to deepen learning by applying rather than summarising knowledge. Standardised online assessments are already being used in Australia, Norway and Denmark.
- Psychometric tests – often favoured by employers in the recruitment process over traditional qualifications, these comprise self-reported online tests which measure ability, aptitude and metacognition.
- Smart multiple-choice tests – to allow for the measuring of a wider set of constructs beyond just memory recall, such as critical thinking skills.
- Comparative judgement – to allow teachers to assess students' work by comparing it to others, rather than making absolute judgements.

As Professor Lucas stressed in his presentation to the APPG, these proposals are only a part of a 'bio-diversity' of testing and should be thought of in terms of 'and' options, not 'either/or choices'. In addition, they may be used as well as or, where appropriate, instead of formal tests and exams.

A new qualification in English and maths

As Edge argues, the assumption "that everyone should be ready for the same

exam at the same age" coupled with the requirement to stay on in education or training until 18 has led to a "downward spiral of English and maths resits" (Newton 2020: 29). ASCL's proposal is a reform of the GCSE resit policy (see earlier) and for a new type of universal, high quality 'passport' qualification in English and maths. As well as allowing all learners to demonstrate competence in literacy and numeracy, this new qualification would ensure all students, regardless of future study, leave school with a high quality, well-understood standard. ASCL explains that its proposal for a 'passport' qualification in literacy and numeracy would not comprise pass/fail examinations but would "assess a basic standard of performance through a range of different assessment methodologies... undertaken at the point of readiness" (ASCL 2019:6).²⁴ The qualifications would be "certificated by a body with international standing, with employer approval and branding" (ASCL 2019:7). Outlining what a 'passport' English and maths qualifications might include, ASCL argues that they should be based on teaching which uses contextualised English and maths, so that they are

grounded in real-world application, to ensure it reflects the need for the literacy and numeracy which most people will come across in their day-to-day lives and employment.

Edge also advocates greater use of contextualisation "so that young people can see the relevance and practical application of English and maths" (Newton 2020: 29). Similarly, Pearson is in favour of contextualised learning, although its submission focuses exclusively on English. Pearson explains that its GCSE English language 2.0, which is offered alongside GCSE English, uses question styles, text types and "a real-world focus". Arguing that a one-size-fits-all approach leaves many learners at a disadvantage, Pearson says

²⁴ EDSK also favour a 'passport' qualification in 'core' English and maths (i.e. literacy and numeracy skills) alongside a three-year baccalaureate-type qualification. This would be studied irrespective of students' subject choices and qualifications and assessed using online adaptive testing.

that its English language 2.0 provides “a different experience of the subject, enabling learners to engage and feel motivated”. Pearson does not offer a maths 2.0 but suggests that new ways to test in maths would come with the use of technology and flexible assessment approaches.

As well as echoing research findings on the many advantages of teaching contextualised and embedded English and maths (eg Casey et al 2006; Dalby and Noyes 2015; Education and Training Foundation 2015; Ireland 2019), ASCL and Edge’s proposals, and Pearson’s English language 2.0, suggest more inclusive approaches to post-16 English and maths qualifications. ASCL stresses that there would still be a role for GCSE English and maths but that these, as with other GCSEs, would “demonstrate mastery in the discipline – rather than also trying to act as a proxy for literacy and numeracy”.

Greater use of technology

ASCL, Edge, EDSK and Pearson all argue for greater use of technology in the testing of learners, at both secondary and primary level, and particularly adaptive testing, where online testing adjusts to suit a student’s ability. Although the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) does not specify adaptive testing, its written submission outlines the many benefits of online onscreen examinations (OSE), including students with additional needs. For example, students with dyslexia can be supported with the aid of speech-to-text and coloured backgrounds.

Andreas Schleicher, director for education and skills at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), however, adds a note of caution to temper the enthusiasm for technology as an expedient approach to assessment:

The APPG’s recommendation: a new post-16 qualification in English and maths

Evidence submitted to the APPG suggests there is an urgent need for a new type of post-16 qualification in English and maths. It welcomes Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s recent announcement outlining his ambition that every young person studies some form of maths up to the age of 18 (Sunak 2023), and fully supports the plan for an advisory group of experts in maths, education and business to advise on the type of maths and numeracy skills that young people need to succeed in future. The APPG recommends a similar advisory group for English and literacy skills. The APPG feels strongly that every young person should leave school or college with the necessary functional skills and knowledge in both English and maths to equip them for employment or further study.

The APPG therefore recommends that a new qualification in English and maths is designed for those not taking maths and English as main subjects. The new qualifications should be designed to qualify all learners, up the age of 18 and who are not otherwise studying for a qualification in English and maths, in essential literacy and numeracy skills in preparation for further study or employment.

Technology can make learning more interactive, more granular, more adaptive to different learning styles, more interesting but it's not a magic power. It depends on the teacher. Technology can amplify great teaching but it will not replace poor teaching. Education is not a transactional business, it's a social and relational enterprise so great teachers and great technology, that's the right combination.

(Andreas Schleicher, cited in the Times Education Commission report 2022:58)

As Schleicher's words make clear, technology may be used to support learning but it is not a substitute for teachers' decision-making and student engagement. Nonetheless, as part of multi-modal assessment, adaptive testing has its supporters and, because it involves an approach which is encouraging rather than discouraging, would be less stressful for many students, especially those with additional learning needs. It would also seem a kinder approach to assess primary school learning, discussed next.

Assessment to develop learning for primary children

Proposals for assessment reform at primary level produced overwhelming support for the abolition of SATs. There was great concern over the number of tests taken by children and the unimaginative and unproductive ways in which children are tested. Educators who contributed to the APPG meetings pointed out that most teachers have no objection to testing children, and that tests are essential for checking comprehension and progress. However, the overwhelming objection to

The APPG's recommendation: further research into the use of adaptive testing

Proposals for the use of online adaptive assessment suggest some forms of online assessment could be helpful for some learners. However, in view of the uncertainties of the role artificial intelligence (AI) should play in education, the APPG feels further research needs to be done into this form of assessment and its use of AI.

The APPG therefore recommends that further research should be undertaken into the potential benefits and risks of the use of online technology for assessment to ensure that newly emerging assessment methods are equitable, valid and reliable.

SATs is that they are of little educational value and are used only to produce data to judge school performance.

ASCL's written submission proposes replacing SATs with two tests at two key points during primary: a phonics check in year 1 and an end-of-primary assessment to replace KS2 SATs using online adaptive assessments.²⁵ Not only would such tests be relatively easy to administer and therefore cost-effective, but the use of technology, ASCL argues, would ensure "tests are more intelligent and personalised, to enable all children to demonstrate what they can do".

EDSK argues that teaching and learning at primary level are being challenged by the many assessments currently taken by children. It is also in favour of adaptive testing and propose a move from one-off

²⁵ The computerised adaptive testing (CAT) (also referred to as personalised learning) involves modifying the assessment to take account of a pupil's ability. As pupils do well, the questions get harder; if they do less well, the questions get easier. At some point, the pupil's level settles out, and a test outcome is decided. One of the advantages of this type of testing is that it can potentially measure a very broad range of skills (e-assessment.com/news/adaptive-testing/).

high-stakes tests to a system of regular, shorter assessments in three subjects: reading; mathematics; and spelling, punctuation and grammar (SPAG) approximately once every two years. The value of these lower-stakes tests is that they would provide regular updates on how pupils are performing, and therefore provide better diagnostic information for teachers and parents (see Richmond and Regan 2021a). EDSK also points out that because adaptive tests are personalised, using easier or harder questions depending on how a pupil performs, they provide a more accurate reflection of a pupil's performance and are more motivating for pupils.

Primary school head Matt Morden told the APPG that although children in his school will take the SATs tests for the foreseeable future, his school wanted to mitigate some of the negative impacts of year 6 SATs by offering an enriched curriculum using the Primary Extended Project Award (PEPA).²⁶ His enthusiasm for this new way to assess children was because it promises to help develop skills for life and to help children to become intellectually curious in a way that is exciting and rewarding. As Matt explained, the disproportionate influence of SATs means that much of year 6 is spent focused on literacy and numeracy. This leaves little opportunity for pupils to undertake in-depth learning in other areas, to develop a range of other dispositions or to identify and pursue individual talents and passions. The intensive training for SATs means that children are also denied opportunities for collaborative work.

Explaining that his school will be piloting the PEPA in the next academic year, Matt said:

We feel that this is a critical award which will give all pupils an opportunity to learn and build skills that SATs do

not develop or measure. They will be able to delve into a real-world topic that they feel passionate about, developing independence and reflection. The PEPA will enable them to learn what successful collaboration looks like as well as developing presentation and oracy skills. These are all the kind of skills that we know will help children to thrive in the world, whatever path they choose for themselves.

Professor Bradbury's presentation to the inquiry proposed a complete rethink of how we assess primary school children, and one without SATs. Outlining the recommendations made in the ICAPE report (2022), Professor Bradbury explained ICAPE's proposals for an alternative assessment system would be based on a set of key principles, the most important of which separates how children are assessed from school accountability. ICAPE's proposals for school accountability draw on Moss et al's (2021) model, which uses a combination of information from sampling scores, teacher, pupil and parent questionnaires, and information from the National Pupil Database.²⁷ Professor Bradbury explained that such a system would be more nuanced, take contextual variables into account and provide richer data (see Wyse et al 2022:18).²⁸

Explaining ICAPE's proposals for assessment reform, Professor Bradbury said their recommendations are based on the premise that "the main purpose of primary school assessments is to improve pupils' learning and progress during their primary school years" and that for this, the emphasis should be on formative assessment (Wyse et al 2022:34). Key summative assessments would occur in years 1 and 4 to allow more time for

²⁶ The Primary Extended Project Award (PEPA) was co-designed by think tank CfEY and Big Education Academy Trust, with support from NCFE, and in collaboration with a group of primary school teachers and leaders from seven schools across England and Wales.

²⁷ For ICAPE's proposals for making schools accountable, see earlier, Section 2 on SATs.

²⁸ Professor Bradbury's comments are expanded on in the ICAPE report (2023) *Assessment for Children's Learning: A new future for primary education*, to which all the citations refer.

teachers to use the diagnostic information provided by testing to support children's learning prior to year 6 (Wyse et al 2022: 35). Echoing proposals made for assessment reform at secondary level, Professor Bradbury and her ICAPE colleagues also recommend an approach to assessment to provide "a holistic picture" of pupils' learning, with achievements for every aspect of the curriculum captured in a digital learner profile (Wyse et al 2022:34). Professor Bradbury concluded by stressing that changes to national curriculum and assessment policies must be given sufficient time to be developed properly. As the ICAPE report states, changes should also be "carried out democratically and collaboratively including through sustained involvement of educators, educational researchers and policy-makers" (Wyse et al 2022:34).

The APPG's recommendation: a study to evaluate the use of digital learner profiles

A consultation into types of digital learner profiles suitable for use at both primary and secondary level should be carried out. The design of learner profiles should serve as a record of children's and young people's achievements in academic, applied and creative subjects as well as a record of transferable skills. Populated throughout the school journey, learner profiles should be designed to travel with pupils and young people to their next stage of learning, be this secondary school, further or higher education, or work.

The design of learner profiles should be done in consultation with Rethinking Assessment, whose own design of digital learner profiles is currently being piloted in schools in Doncaster and Hertfordshire.

The APPG therefore recommends that further research should be undertaken into the use of digital learner profiles and should be conducted in consultation with Rethinking Assessment which has established expertise in digital learner profile design. Building on the work of Rethinking Assessment, the piloting of learner profiles should be extended to include a diverse range of school types and geographical areas.

References

Adams R (2023). Former Ofsted chief: school inspections should change after headteacher's death. *The Guardian* 16 June 2023. Retrieved from:

theguardian.com/education/2023/jun/16/former-ofsted-chief-school-inspections-should-change-after-headteacher-death

Amoako I, Quainoo E and Adams F (2019). High-stakes test accountability: A controversial issue in educational measurement. *International Journal of Latest Research in Humanities Science*, 2:10, 94–96.

Association of College and School Leaders (2019). *The Forgotten Third*. Retrieved from:

ascl.org.uk/Our-view/Campaigns/The-Forgotten-Third

Association of College and School Leaders (2021). *A Great Education For Every Child*.

Retrieved from: ascl.org.uk/Microsites/ASCL-Blueprint/Home

Belgutay J (2018). AoC calls for GCSE resit policy review. *TES* 24 May 2018. Retrieved from:

tes.com/magazine/archive/aoc-calls-gcse-resit-policy-review

Black P and Wiliam D (1998). Assessment and Classroom Learning. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 5:1, 7-74.

Bloom B S, Hastings J T and Madaus G F (Eds) (1971). *Handbook on the formative and summative evaluation of student learning*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Burgess S, Greaves E and Vignoles A (2019). School choice in England: evidence from national administrative data. *Oxford Review of Education*, 45:5, 690-710.

Case N, Brylka A and Holmes S (2022). *Teacher Assessed Grades in summer 2021: Surveys*.

The Standards, Research and Analysis Directorate, Ofqual. Retrieved from: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1089191/22-6933-1_Teacher_Assessed_Grades_in_summer_2021_-_Surveys.pdf

Casey H, Cara O, Eldred J et al (2006). *You wouldn't expect a maths lecturer to teach plastering... Embedding literacy, language and numeracy in post-16 vocational*

programmes – the impact on learning and achievement. National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC), former department of the Institute of Education (IoE). Retrieved from: nrdc.org.uk/?p=429

Dalby D and Noyes A (2015). Connecting mathematics teaching with vocational learning. *Adults Learning Mathematics: An International Journal*, 10:11, 40-49.

DeLuca C, Donaldson G, Hayward L, Kelvin Tan K and Wyatt-Smith C (2022). *Imperatives for a Better Assessment Future During and Post Covid*. Retrieved from the International Educational Assessment Network: iean.network/gallery/iean-assessment-imperatives-covid-may2021.pdf

Donnelly M, Lazetic P, Sandoval-Hernández A, Kameshwara K K and Whewall S (2019). *An Unequal Playing Field: Extra-Curricular Activities, Soft Skills and Social Mobility*. Social Mobility Commission. Retrieved from: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/818679/An_Unequal_Playing_Field_report.pdf

Edge Foundation (2023). *Skills Shortage Bulletin in the UK Economy – Evidence Summary*. Retrieved from Edge Foundation: edge.co.uk/research/projects/skills-shortages-uk-economy/Skills-Shortages-Bulletin-Summary/

Edge Foundation (March 2022). *Young people's vision for education – in conversation with Stephen Morgan MP*. Retrieved from Edge Foundation: edge.co.uk/news-and-events/news/young-peoples-vision-for-education-in-discussion-with-stephen-morgan-mp/

Education Support (2023). *1970s working conditions in the 2020s*. Education Support in partnership with Public First. Retrieved from Education Support: educationsupport.org.uk/media/bn2bk5a3/1970s-working-conditions-in-the-2020s.pdf

Education and Training Foundation (ETF) (2015). *Making maths and English work for all*. Retrieved from the Education and Training Foundations website: et-foundation.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Making-maths-and-English-work-for-all-25_03_2015001.pdf

Gibb N (2021). The importance of a knowledge-rich curriculum. The Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP in a speech to a Social Market Foundation panel event on raising school standards. Retrieved from: gov.uk/government/speeches/the-importance-of-a-knowledge-rich-curriculum

Hazell W (2022). GCSEs 2022: Scrap mandatory maths and English resits and offer job-focused courses instead, exam board says. *iNews.co.uk*, 21 March 2022. Retrieved from: inews.co.uk/news/gcses-2022-resits-maths-english-courses-exam-board-1528698

House of Commons Education and Health Committees (2017). *Children and young people's mental health – the role of education*. First Joint Report of the Education and Health Committees of Session 2016–17. Retrieved from: publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmhealth/849/849.pdf

Independent Assessment Commission (IAC) (2022). *Qualifications For A New Era; Equitable,*

Reliable Assessment. Retrieved from: neu-era.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/downloadable/BJsJE4HobiNYRd7QUSNbyiraxtbFSCWu6eahtU7Q.pdf

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

Lucas B (2021). *Rethinking Assessment in Education: The case for change*. CSE Leading Education Series. Melbourne: Centre for Strategic Education. Retrieved from: rethinkingassessment.com/rethinking-blogs/its-time-to-rethink-assessment/

Moss G, Goldstein H, Hayes S, Munoz-Chereau B, Sammons P, Sinnott G and Stobart G (2021). *High standards, not high stakes*. Retrieved from BERA: bera.ac.uk/publication/high-standards-not-high-stakes-an-alternative-to-sats

Munoz B and Ehren M (2021). Inspection Across the UK: how the four nations intend to contribute to school improvement. Retrieved from Edge Foundation: <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10124721/1/Inspectionacross-the-UK-report-FINAL.pdf>

Newton O (2020). *Our Plan for Schools and 14-19 Education*. Retrieved from Edge Foundation: edge.co.uk/documents/86/our_plan_for_14-19_education_updated_2019_0_QAINZ4L.pdf

Noble J (2022). GCSE results 2022: Maths and English resits pass rate takes big drop. Retrieved from *FE Week* 25 August 2022: feweek.co.uk/gcse-results-2022-maths-and-english-resits-pass-rate-takes-big-drop/#:~:text=That's%2013.9%20percentage%20points%20lower,percentage%20point%20down%20on%202019

OECD (2019). Transformative Competencies for 2030. Retrieved from: oecd.org/education/2030-project/teaching-and-learning/learning/transformative-competencies/Transformative_Competencies_for_2030_concept_note.pdf

Ofqual (2022). *Teacher assessed grades in 2021 – student and teacher experiences*. Retrieved from: GOV. UK: gov.uk/government/news/teacher-assessed-grades-in-2021-student-and-teacher-experiences

Ofsted (2018). *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2017/18*. Retrieved from: gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-annual-report-201718-education-childrens-services-and-skills

Parentkind (2022). SATs poll – March 2022. Retrieved from Parentkind: parentkind.org.uk/research-and-policy/parent-research/research-library/exams-and-assessment/sats-poll?utm_source=parentkind.org.uk&utm_medium=301#heading284541

Pearson (2022). *Qualified to succeed: Building a 14-19 education system of choice, diversity and opportunity*. Retrieved from Pearson: pearson.com/content/dam/one-dot-com/one-dot-com/uk/documents/future-of-assessment/pearson-report-future-qualifications-assessment-england.pdf

Richmond T (2021). *Re-assessing the future. Part 1 – how to move beyond GCSEs*. Retrieved from EDSK: edsk.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/EDSK-Re-assessing-the-future-part-1.pdf

Richmond T and Regan E (2021a). *Making Progress. The future of assessment and accountability in primary schools*. Retrieved from EDSK: edsk.org/publications/making-progress/

Sezen C (2019). GCSE results: Why it's time to review the resits policy. TES 22 August 2019. Retrieved from: tes.com/magazine/archive/gcse-results-why-its-time-review-resits-policy

Sunak R (2023). Prime Minister outlines his vision for Maths to 18. Press release. Retrieved from: gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-outlines-his-vision-for-maths-to-18

Times Education Commission (2022). *'Bringing out the best'*. Retrieved from: lordslibrary.parliament.uk/times-education-commission-bringing-out-the-best/

UK Parliament (2023). Can Ofsted inspections be improved? Education Committee launches new inquiry, 13 June 2023. Retrieved from UK Parliament: committees.parliament.uk/committee/203/education-committee/news/195673/can-ofsted-inspections-be-improved-education-committee-launches-new-inquiry/

Wadey T and PA Media. Ruth Perry: Union chief slams 'simplistic' Ofsted after head's death. Retrieved from BBC News: bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-berkshire-65940939

William D (2000). Integrating formative and summative functions of assessment. In paper presented to Working Group 10 of the 9th International Congress on Mathematics Education (ICME 9) in Tokyo. Retrieved from: dylanwilliam.org/Dylan_Williams_website/Papers_files/ICME9%20WGA10%20paper.doc

William D (2009). *Assessment for learning: why, what and how?* Inaugural professorial lecture. First published by the Institute of Education, University of London.

Wyse D, Bradbury A and Trollope R (2022). *Assessment for Children's Learning: A new future for primary education*. The Independent Commission on Assessment in Primary Education (ICAPE). Final report. Retrieved From: icape.org.uk/reports/NEU2762_ICAPE_final_report_A4_web_version.pdf

Youth Voice Census 2022, supported by Amazing Apprenticeships, Edge Foundation, Pearson and Ignite. Retrieved from: youthemployment.org.uk/dev/wp-content/themes/yeuk/files/youth-voice-census-report-2022.pdf

Further reading

Kashefpakdel Elnaz, Rehill J, Haskins M, Newton O, Laczik A, Emms K, Clark J, Taylor J (2018). *Joint dialogue: How are schools developing real employability skills?* Retrieved from Edge Foundation: edge.co.uk/documents/93/joint_dialogue_-_final_report_update-2_De4kkxs.pdf

More Than A Score (2017). *Beyond the Exam Factory*. Nottingham: Russell Press Ltd.

Rethinking Assessment (rethinkingassessment.com) *A Blueprint For Change – Creating an assessment system that values the breadth of strengths of every child*. Retrieved from: drive.google.com/file/d/1NoyUc3P-wFi_LCJS0SlzzUrQxkLC2WsG/view

Richmond T (2019) *A Step Backward: Analysing the Impact of the 'English Baccalaureate' Performance Measure*. London: EDSK. Retrieved from EDSK: edsk.org/publications/a-step-backward/

Richmond T and Regan E (2021). *Re-assessing the future. Part 1 – how to move beyond GCSEs*. Retrieved from EDSK: edsk.org/publications/reassessing-the-future-part-1/

Richmond T and Regan E (2021). *Re-assessing the future. Part 2 – the final years of secondary education*. Retrieved from EDSK: edsk.org/publications/reassessing-the-future-part-2/

Sainsbury D (2016). *Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education* (The Sainsbury Review): Retrieved from: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/536046/Report_of_the_Independent_Panel_on_Technical_Education.pdf

Sherwood D (2022). *Missing the Mark*. Kingston upon Thames, Surrey: Canbury Press

Types of evidence considered

Interested parties were invited to submit written evidence over a period of four months ending in March 2023. Seventeen submissions of written evidence were made to the APPG. In addition, a series of five meetings, during which oral presentations were heard, was held between January and June 2023.

APPG meetings

Each of the five APPG meetings was addressed by a panel of speakers with expertise in educational assessment systems or first-hand experience of assessment at primary or secondary level. As well as national and internationally renowned academics, contributions were made by school heads, post-16 school and college students, an apprentice, representatives of both national and local parent-led campaign groups, a university admissions and outreach officer, and a successful businessman with experiencing of working with schools and young people on work experience.¹

Attendance at the meetings suggested a very high level of interest in the area of assessment reform. Each of the meetings addressed specific areas of interest relating to assessment reform including:

i) the impact of assessment; ii) the types of knowledge, skills and competencies considered to be the most important for life and work in the 21st century; iii) international perspectives on assessment reform; iv) the role of statutory assessment in primary education and a final meeting which considered v) whether it is possible to maintain high standards without high stakes assessment in primary education.

Written submissions

There were 17 submissions of written evidence. These came from a wide range of interested parties which included education think tanks and consultancies, and awarding bodies, among others. Contributions reflected a wide range of expertise and interest, ranging from those with first-hand experience of the education system to those whose evidence on assessment reform was informed by extensive research. While most of the submissions offered a critique of current modes of formal assessment, some also provided proposals for alternative ways to assess the learning and wider achievements of children and young people.²

¹ See Appendix 2 for a list of panel members for each of the five APPG meetings.

² See Appendix 3 for details of interested parties who submitted written evidence to the APPG.

The outliers

The report is intended to be as inclusive as possible to reflect the very broad range of presentations made at meetings and written submissions to the APPG. Less attention has been paid to obvious outliers. For example, two of the 17 written submissions were strongly in favour of maintaining end-point exams at 16 and 18 years as the sole means of assessment. One written submission focused on the inaccuracy of exam grades and another exclusively on the importance of oracy in education and oral assessments. These contributions were out of step with a widespread desire to see formal tests and examinations included in multi-modal assessment, and for assessment to cover a range of academic, applied and soft skills (eg oral communication, team working, problem solving and presentation skills (Donnelly et al 2019)) at both primary and secondary level. Contributions supported by academic research and/or supported by statistical evidence from parent and other education stakeholder surveys carried more weight with the APPG than anecdotal evidence, and the report reflects this. Exceptions have been made for the contributions made by post-16 students who spoke at two of the APPG meetings and whose experiences of academic and technical education were felt to represent an important type of evidence.

The current context

Several contributions at the APPG meetings pointed out that the cancellation of formal examinations and the use of teacher assessed grades during the Covid pandemic years 2020 and 2021, showed that alternative ways of assessing at primary and secondary were possible. While an Ofqual survey of teachers and students' experiences of Teacher Assessed Grades (TAGs) found concerns about the lack of consistency in approach used by different schools and colleges (Case et al 2022: 69 -70), follow-up interviews revealed that concerns were largely attributable to confusion over the employment of TAGs. For example, concerns were raised over the delays in the decision-making about how to implement TAGs with teachers feeling there was insufficient support and guidance from external agencies (Holmes et al 2022: 146).

Contributions made to the APPG point to a widespread desire that assessment reform should be the one good thing to emerge from the pandemic. The single issue on which all the written submissions and presentations were agreed was that change in how we assess children and young people is desperately needed. Even outliers who advocated the retention of exams as the sole means of assessment wanted change, proposing reforms to make the examination system fairer.



APPG for
Schools,
Learning and
Assessment

