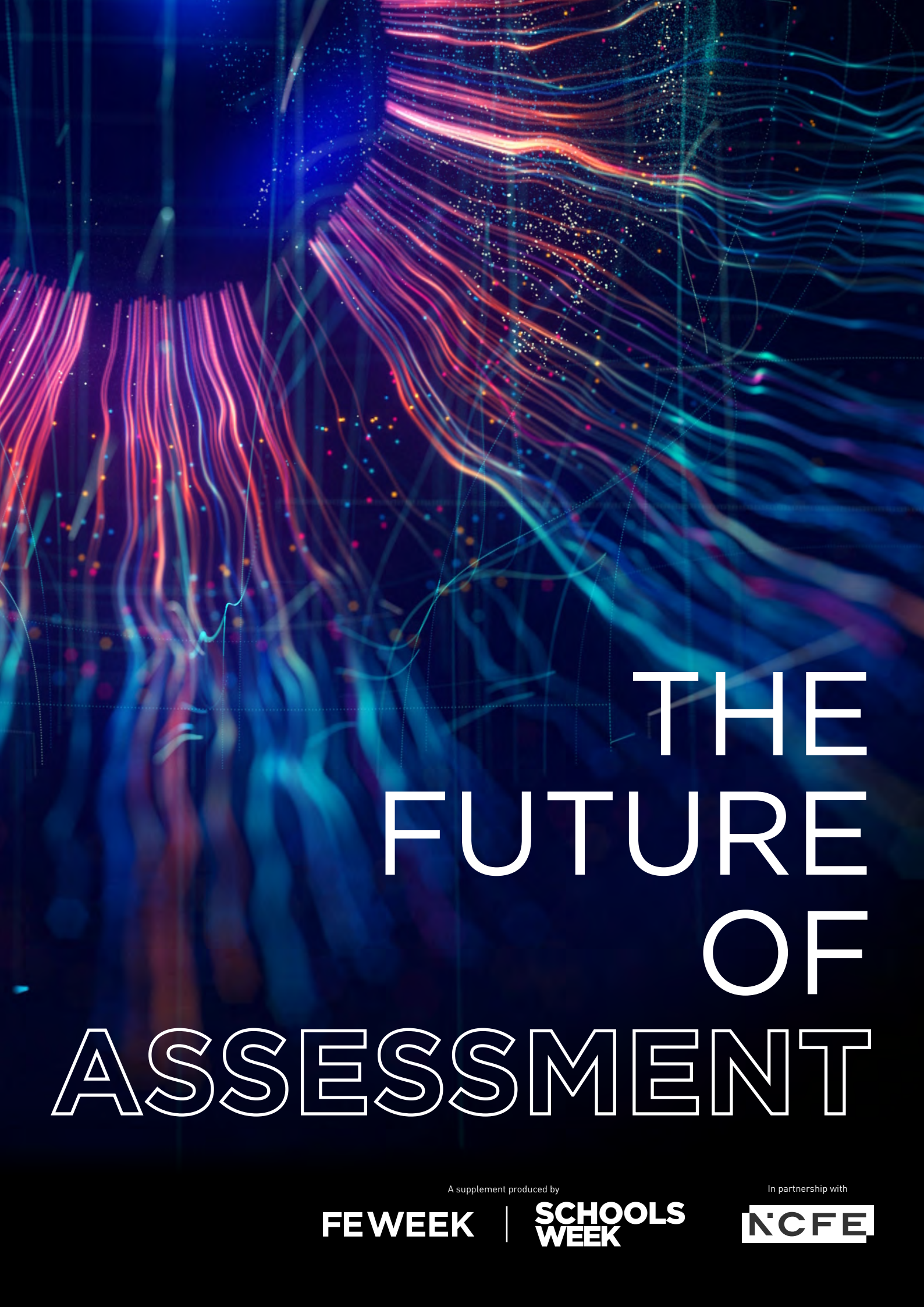

THE FUTURE OF ASSESSMENT

A supplement produced by

FE WEEK | SCHOOLS WEEK

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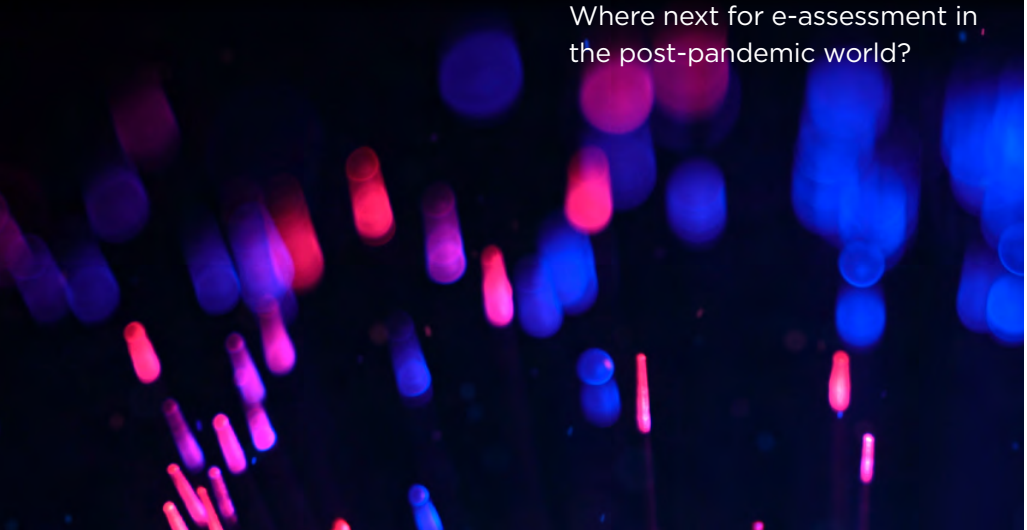

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JESSICA BLAKEY
Head of assessment innovation, NCFE

Assessment should be a constructive tool to release potential

New approaches to assessment are needed in the new academic year if more learners are to engage with education, writes Jessica Blakey

Earlier this month, thousands of learners picked up their exam results and embarked on their next steps. While it's natural to focus on success, we know that this kind of high stakes assessment method isn't suited to everyone.

A practical example is learners who are graded one and two in GCSE English and maths.

What we see when this group goes on to do functional skills is that they are often already less engaged.

Engagement was recently identified as one of the biggest challenges to delivery of English and maths, and learners that have achieved lower grades often enter further education with a sense of failure or being inadequate in these subject areas.

By repeating the same content in the same approach that produced poor results, the learner becomes even more disengaged and reluctant to commit to their studies.

However, if educators can identify the needs of the learner and adapt the learning journey on a personal level, they can build the confidence to help them achieve better results.

As education evolves, so must how we quantify achievement.

Learners and educators need the best tools possible to deliver the greatest possible experience and outcomes.

Things are already changing. In May, Ofqual announced it would be investigating computerised or adaptive tests.

It's hoped this could help end tiered GCSEs that often limit pupil potential and leave

schools in difficult positions.

With adaptive assessment, questions get harder or easier in real time as the learner progresses through the test. This can support informed decisions around the level of vocational qualification and identify where a learner might gain most value.

> **"We currently have four live research projects testing new concepts"**

This is just one example but highlights why we have a duty to explore new and potentially radical alternatives to assessment if we're serious about ensuring no learner is ever left behind.

At NCFE, we want to be at the forefront of sector-leading advancements that create great change for education.

In 2021, we launched the Assessment Innovation Fund to support and investigate new solutions and deliver the best experience for all learners. Investing over £1 million, we currently have four live research projects testing concepts in a collaborative space.

The Really NEET Project based in Rotherham, for example, is running a pilot with 90 students who don't respond to mainstream education and assessment. The project aims to change perceptions by using modern technology to engage learners in a more personalised assessment.

Another example is Sheffield College, which is looking at the effects of how virtual reality (VR) can be used effectively in summative and formative assessment.

Focusing on catering, animal care and construction initially, the aim is to build experiences that enable learners to go into a fully immersive VR setting and practice their skills.

This will then give learners more practice time when the physical spaces for work experience are limited and increase learners' opportunities to work with teachers and get constructive feedback.

The fourth funding window of the Assessment Innovation Fund is now open and offers up to £25,000 to help new concepts get off the ground.

Whether you're a small training provider with an inkling of an idea, or a world-leading institution that wants to take a project to the next level, we'd love to hear from you.

We all want to see learners being empowered to reach their full potential and inspired to pursue their ambitions. Assessment doesn't and shouldn't define who you are. It should be the constructive tool that helps you become who you want to be.

Results round up: GCSEs and A-levels

Huge drop in top grades needed next year to wipe grade inflation

SCHOOLS WEEK REPORTER
@SCHOOLSWEEK

The number of top grades issued next year will have to fall dramatically if the government goes ahead with returning to pre-pandemic exam standards next year.

Regulator Ofqual wants to erase the grade inflation recorded in the previous two years when teacher grades replaced exams.

At A-level last year, 44.3 per cent of all grades awarded in England were an A or above, compared with 25.2 per cent in 2019.

This year's results – the first since 2019 to be based on exams – were supposed to be a "midway point" between 2021 and pre-pandemic.

But, in GCSEs, just 37 per cent of the post-2019 inflation was wiped out at grades 7 and above.

Meanwhile, Schools Week analysis showed only 26.9 per cent of the post-2019 inflation at the grade 5 pass rate – which government calls a "strong pass" – has been tackled.

The more generous grades than expected may provide relief for students and staff, but it risks storing up a more drastic, controversial cut in grades in many subjects next year.

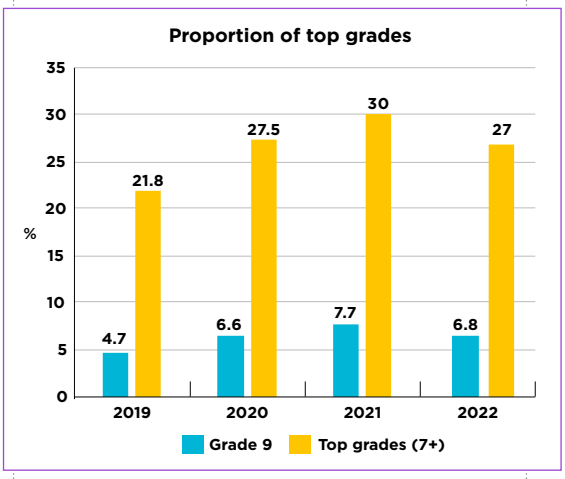
Policy experts suggested the government could extend its "glidepath" to return to pre-pandemic grades – to avoid such a big drop in one go.

But Ofqual Chief Regulator Dr Jo Saxton said this year was "always intended to be a staging post back to normality, and I want to help teachers and students get back as soon as they possibly can to the standards that they're more familiar with.

"Front and centre to our decision-making about next year will be the interests of students – they will always be my compass."

A decision on grading standards will be made in the autumn. Ofqual will also advise government on whether exam adaptions such as equation sheets and spacing out of exams are required again.

However other adaptions brought in this year – such as a reduction in content – have already been ruled out next year.



Several popular subjects saw just a quarter of recent GCSE grade inflation clawed back this year.

At grades 5 and above, results in GCSE English literature and art and design are less than 20 per cent of the way back to pre-pandemic levels.

Maths saw just over a quarter of the grade inflation reversed. This came despite this year's national reference test – taken by a sample of students each year to monitor pupil performance over time and inform GCSE grading – showing a "statistically significant downward change" when compared to 2020.

However Ofqual "decided not to implement a downward change [in grades] because this would be counter to the wider policy intent of more generous grading to reflect the disruption caused by the pandemic".

The NRT found no statistically significant difference at any key grades in English when compared to 2020 results.

Education secretary James Cleverly said pupils should be "incredibly proud", especially given the "unprecedented disruption" they have faced.

He also thanked the "brilliant teaching profession", parents and carers for their support for young people.

Saxton added students can be "so proud of their achievements – a testament to their hard work and resilience over the past two years".

London pulls ahead as north-south gap widens

Ministers have been urged to act as the attainment gap between London and other regions widens – growing fastest in the east Midlands.

The gap between the north east and London – the areas with the lowest and highest number of 7 and above grades, respectively – was 9.3 percentage points in 2019. It grew to 10 in 2021 and widened slightly again this year to 10.2 percentage points.

But this year, Yorkshire and the Humber has joined the north east with the fewest grade 7s and above – at 22.4 per cent. The proportion of top grades in London was 32.6 per cent.

At A-level, London saw the biggest increase in A and A*s between 2019 and 2021, rising from 26.9 to 39 per cent.

The north east saw the lowest rise, from 23 to 30.8 per cent.

Chris Zarraga, director of Schools North East, said: "It won't do to fall back on the old tropes that the north east's schools provide a lesser education ... All schools urgently need a properly thought-through and resourced 'recovery' plan."


Chris Zarraga

He stressed the importance of "taking a long-term view in devising it and of the regional contexts schools operate in for delivering it".

However, Schools Week analysis actually shows the London gap widened the least in the north east. The areas with the largest widening were the east Midlands, north west and Yorkshire and the Humber (see table).

Henri Murison, chief executive of the Northern Powerhouse Partnership, said existing long-term disadvantage, Covid learning loss and government catch-up failures had all affected the north disproportionately.

"Our young people cannot go on paying the price for DfE failure, nor can our economy. As they will consider study in the future, the most competitive routes such as future university entry or degree and wider apprenticeships have young people competing from across the UK."

A letter from Murison, alongside Schools North East and education charity Shine, urged the Conservative leadership candidates to commit to fixing the regional disparities.

Analysis by Education Datalab found that schools with the lowest rates of year 11 absence tended to improve their results the most.

Earlier analysis found northern regions – the north east, north west and Yorkshire and the Humber – had more schools where year 11s were persistently absent.

Labour has also zoned in on the issue, with analysis showing top A-level grades fell a third faster in the north east than the south east.

Shadow schools minister Stephen Morgan claimed that "12 years of Conservative governments has left a legacy of unequal outcomes that are holding back kids and holding back communities".

The DfE said it had a "range of measures to help level up education across England, including targeted support both for individual pupils who fall behind and whole areas of the country where standards are weakest".

This is alongside £5 billion recovery cash, including £1.5 billion for tutoring.

Results round up: GCSEs and A-levels

Did private schools over-egg their grades?

JOHN DICKENS
@JOHNDICKENSSW

Top grades at private schools plunged this year when exams returned – despite results for grammar schools, which also have more higher-attaining students, hardly falling.

While some experts suggested the data may support arguments that independent schools inflated last year's grades – which were awarded by teachers – others urged caution on drawing conclusions.

The proportion of 7 to 9 grades issued at GCSE rose from 21.8 per cent in 2019, to 30 per cent last year.

Ofqual planned to haul back grades this year to a "midway point" between those two years, before returning to pre-pandemic standards next year.

Overall, 37 per cent of the post-2019 inflation of grades at 7 and above was wiped out this year.

But analysis by Schools Week shows that private schools saw 57 per cent of their post-2019 grade inflation reversed.

Dave Thomson, chief statistician at Education Datalab which also analysed the data, said previous studies suggested that private schools dished out "more generous GCSE grades than might be expected. The [GCSE] results seem to support that."

The rise in top grades at private schools in 2020 and 2021 closely mirrored the rise in grammar schools – which select pupils based on their ability at age 11 so are also likely to have more pupils on the boundaries of top grades. (This was used to explain why private schools saw larger rises in top grades when exams were cancelled).

However, grammar schools saw just a 22.1 per cent drop in the post-2019 inflation of their 7 and above grades.

Professor John Jerrim, from the UCL Institute of Education, said the new findings were "interesting", but called for more analysis to see "how this looks at other grade boundaries and also when subject mix is taken into account".

For instance, around 500 independent schools in the UK sat Cambridge IGCSEs – rather than GCSEs that state schools favour. They are also much more likely to study subjects such as Latin.

And analysis looking at the grade 4 "standard" pass rate – rather than top grades – shows the difference is less stark.

Jerrim added:

"The other thing we may want to ask is how selective schools have managed to do so well this time around compared to other centre types – have they managed to make particularly good use of the forward guidance?"

Jerrim had previously warned against concluding private schools "fiddled" their teacher grades after A-level results saw a similarly large drop in top grades for the institutions.

When he looked at the relative difference of top A-level grades issued – private school pupils were around 20 per cent more likely to receive an A/A* grade at A-level in 2021 than this year.

But this was similar for academies, comprehensive schools and secondary moderns, too.

Comparative analysis for GCSEs also shows a similar picture.

Private schools saw a bigger drop in top grades than academies and secondary comprehensives, but similar to that of free schools – and less than secondary moderns and sixth form colleges.

Barnaby Lenon, chairman of the Independent Schools Council, said that "trying to make comparisons with last year's results is not advised given the unique nature of the assessment system".

Ralph Lucas, Editor-in-Chief of The Good Schools Guide which reviews independent schools, added "this is certainly not the data in this to accuse anyone of cheating. But there is enough to say teacher assessments are not acceptable for judging children – we need something independent of that."

But Robert Halfon, chair of the education select committee, was more forthright – suggesting the issue might be set for closer political scrutiny.

Commenting after the Sunday Times reported single-sex private schools recorded among the biggest drops in grades, he said: "Clearly private schools milked the teacher assessed grades system because there was a huge amount of grade inflation last year compared to most state schools."

But the data shows further education colleges and secondary modern schools – those that share areas with grammars – saw huge drops, too. So, does it suggest those school types also cheated?

Ian Widdows, founder of the National Association of Secondary Moderns, said: "If you're using a term like 'fiddling', you have to make sure the data is robust. And Ofqual's isn't."

The data is from the National Centre Number (NCN) Register, managed by exam board OCR.

The NCN is self-reported – so schools get to choose which category they fit into, and some fit in to multiple categories. It means the centre numbers in the data do not match the actual national numbers.

For instance, the Ofqual-published data lists just 83 grammar schools (there are actually 163) and just 64 secondary moderns (there are at least 220, depending on how you categorise them).

The categories of schools are also strange. For instance, private schools are recorded in the same category as "city technology colleges".

Whereas further education colleges are "lumped" into an "amorphous FE establishment group comprising 314 centres," says Julian Gravatt, deputy chief executive of the Association of Colleges.

"It's worth looking at the detail before hurtling towards conclusions," he added.

An Ofqual spokesperson said variation in results among different schools "will be complex, including changes in cohorts, changing in teaching staff or teaching time, and the impact of the pandemic".

They added heads of schools had to submit a "formal declaration on the accuracy and integrity of grades and processes supporting them" in the past two years.

FALL IN POST-2019 TOP GRADE INFLATION

CENTRE TYPE	NUMBER OF SCHOOLS	2019	2020	2021	2022	ANNUAL DECLINE (PERCENTAGE POINTS)	% OF POST-2019 INFLATION REVERSED
FE establishments	314	1.0%	1.5%	2.2%	1.5%	0.80	66.7%
Private schools and city technology colleges	799	47.0%	57.3%	61.2%	53.0%	8.20	57.7%
Secondary moderns/high schools	64	13.6%	17.5%	20.0%	16.7%	3.20	50.0%
Sixth form colleges	96	1.4%	2.1%	3.3%	2.4%	0.90	47.4%
Other	760	7.2%	10.1%	12.7%	10.3%	2.40	43.6%
Free schools	113	20.6%	25.6%	29.2%	25.5%	3.70	43.0%
Tertiary colleges	50	1.9%	2.4%	3.5%	2.9%	0.60	37.5%
Secondary comprehensive or middle school	1003	18.5%	23.8%	26.0%	23.3%	2.80	37.3%
Academies	2009	20.7%	25.8%	28.0%	25.6%	2.40	32.9%
Grammar schools	83	58.1%	65.7%	68.5%	66.2%	2.30	22.1%

Results round up: T Levels

Over a third get top grades in first ever T Level results

BILLY CAMDEN
BILLY@FEWEEK.CO.UK

Just over a thousand students were the first to receive results for the government's flagship new technical qualification, T Levels, this summer. This debut cohort begun their studies in September 2020 in one of three subject areas as the first year of the T Level national rollout; construction, digital and education & childcare.

So how did the first cohort of T Level students get on? Here are six key points from the first set of results:

1. Overall performance

The total number of T Level students receiving results was 1,029 with a pass rate of 92.2 per cent. The proportion of students receiving a Distinction or Distinction* was 34.6 per cent, while Merit was 39.8 per cent and Pass was 17.8 per cent.

However 7.4 per cent (76 students) only "partially achieved" which means they didn't complete at least one of the three components. These students will only receive a "statement of achievement" listing what has been achieved.

The remaining 0.4 per cent (four students) have been marked as "unclassified" because they have attempted at least one at least one component but not yet achieved any.

So as of today, there are 949 people with a T Level.

2. Digital was the toughest subject

Results data shows that 89.7 per cent of the 340 students on the digital pathway passed, compared to 93.4 per cent of the 482 learners on education and childcare, and 93.7 per cent of the 207 students on construction.

The proportion receiving top grades – Distinction or Distinction* – in digital was 25.9 per cent, compared to 35.8 per cent for construction and 40.2 per cent for education and childcare.

3. Uneven gender split

Of the 1,029 T Level students receiving results, 523 were women and 506 were men. But the figures show participation was skewed by gender stereotypes.

A huge 97 per cent of education and childcare students were women, while men made up 90 per cent and 89 per cent of construction and digital T Level learners respectively.

Overall, across all three subjects, 93.5 per cent of women achieved at least a Pass compared to 90.9 per cent for men.

Women also out-performed men in achieving the top grades, with 41.1 per cent of women getting a Distinction* or Distinction compared to 27.9 per cent of men.

4. 6% didn't complete an industry placement

A 45-day industry placement must be completed by each student in order to achieve a T Level. This first cohort of students were, however, allowed to spend up to 40 per cent of their placement hours remotely after the Department for Education temporarily watered down the policy to reflect the impact of Covid-19.

The data shows that 62, or 6 per cent, of the 1,029 T Level students did not complete an industry placement.

Construction had the highest rate of industry placement completion at 94.2 per cent, followed closely by education and childcare at 94 per cent. In digital, 93.8 per cent of students completed an industry placement.

5. A fifth appear to have dropped out

The DfE previously said that around 1,300 students started a T Level in autumn 2020.

But results data shows that 1,029 students received T Level results – suggesting that a fifth dropped out.

The DfE refused to share the exact drop-out figure.

6. Over a quarter that applied for uni got rejected

UCAS said 370 T Level students have been accepted onto a university course following their results. This is 71 per cent of all T Level learners that applied for a higher education place.

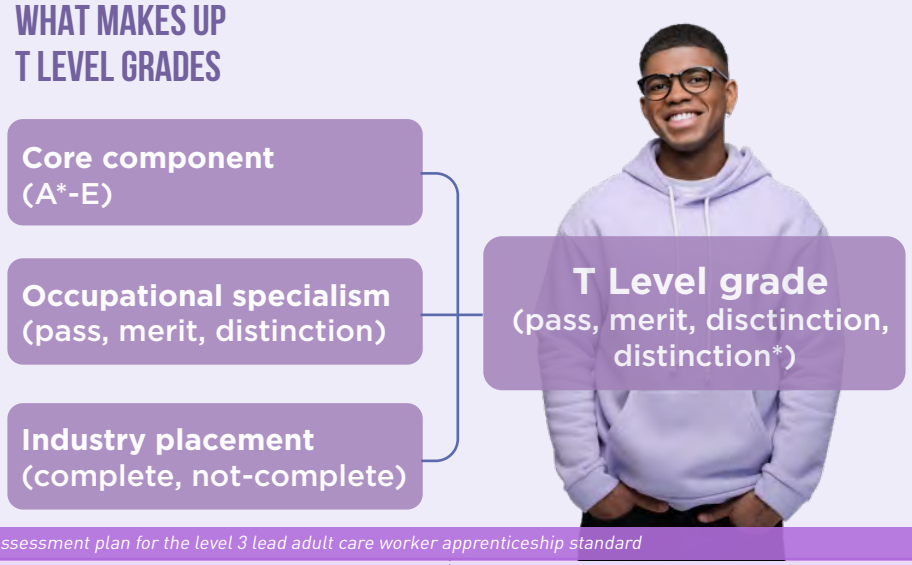
It means that more than a third (36 per cent) of the T Level students receiving results will be going to university.

How do students get a T Level?

T Levels are broadly equivalent to three A levels. Unlike A levels however, students must pass three essential components to achieve the full T Level:

- A 'core component' which covers high-level underpinning knowledge for the subject, rather than for a specific occupational specialism. Assessed by one of more exams and an employer-set project.
- An occupational specialism qualification which is more specific. For example, under the 'education and childcare' area, this could be 'early years educator'. Usually assessed through assignments and practical projects.
- An industry placement of around 45 days is mandatory.

WHAT MAKES UP T LEVEL GRADES



Assessment plan for the level 3 lead adult care worker apprenticeship standard

Dr Jo Saxton

Chief regulator, Ofqual

The future is digital – but not exclusively so

Technology will help us improve assessment for certain courses and groups of pupils, writes Jo Saxton, but we won't be drinking the digital Kool-Aid

I'm always telling my teenage children to get off their phones. Yet, however determined I might be that they actually talk in person to one another and their friends, I also know I couldn't be a working mum without my mobile constantly by my side.

I too am torn. However necessary and handy technology is, you'll find me dashing to the post box with handwritten Christmas cards to catch the final posting date. Sometimes, it's just better to do things the traditional way. So I'm not a technology evangelist, but I am evangelical about anything that can demonstrably improve the life chances of students and apprentices. They are and always will be my compass.

In my first year in post, my priority has been the reintroduction of exams. In August, we achieved that. Teachers, parents, exam boards, Ofqual and most of all students working together saw the safe return to students getting grades for work produced in an exam hall. It's a familiar sight, and may not appear modern, but it is the tried and tested way that we ensure all students are assessed by the same rules.

Now it's time to look to the future. It's what we committed to do in our three-year plan. Greater use of technology in GCSEs, A levels and other high-stakes exams is coming down the track. But we must be led by the evidence and do only what is right for students. It would not be right for an evidence-based regulator to determine the future of children's assessment based on a gulp of the technology Kool-Aid, and the latest bright and shiny, but ultimately untried-at-scale technology.,

That's why we have committed to careful, considered and thorough work to look at the opportunities, challenges, risks and benefits of technology in assessment. Our regulatory role is unique – affording us both the powers and the expertise to put in place the protections students need as exam boards start to trial new approaches to assessment.

It will not be Ofqual that develops onscreen assessment platforms, nor will it be Ofqual that secures the reliable broadband connection that each school will need. But we will use all our capabilities to make sure that awarding organisations adopt technology cautiously and always with students' interests and valid assessment at the forefront of our decision-making.

I do not envisage a world where students sit exams solely onscreen. Handwriting is an essential part of our education and is best assessed with pen and paper. Many maths capabilities are assessed better when students can show their workings. Computer programming, however, is both an essential skill for the future economy and one we can all agree is better assessed on a computer. There will be others too where onscreen assessment enables more valid, lifelike and engaging assessment.

I am determined too that we explore fully the opportunities for technology to improve assessment for those with disabilities. The opportunities are there for the taking to provide easy adjustments for screen reading, font size changes and many others.

In my view, technology could play an important role in bringing an end to the necessary evil of tiering we are forced to accept in exams today. That won't happen overnight, but the potential gains are substantial and worth time and careful consideration.

I am pleased that exam boards have announced a range of pilots and tests to begin to develop and refine their approach. Ofqual will be working with the Department for Education to play our part in assessing the options for safe adoption of onscreen assessment over the coming years. It's two years since Ofqual published a report looking at the barriers and opportunities to high stakes assessment. Now it's time to look seriously and carefully at how we overcome those barriers.

The move to digital assessment can only come about through joint endeavour. It will take schools, teachers, parents, exam boards, Department for Education, Ofqual and others to work together.

And as the successful return of pen-and-paper exams this summer has shown, that's well within our grasp.

TOM SHERRINGTON
Trustee, National Baccalaureate Trust

A better system is not too distant – and we're already on our way

A 'dream system' doesn't have to stay in the realm of imagination if we build on what we have and plan an orderly transition, writes Tom Sherrington

Sometimes, implementation hurdles inhibit us from imagining a possible future system. The reform of our tightly coupled curriculum and assessment systems is a classic example. I accept that schools need some stability after Covid - but let's not let that halt the conversation about what a better future system could be.

My 'dream system' would be built around the concept that every student without exception would have the opportunity to complete the National Baccalaureate - an overarching qualification representing a holistic assessment of their achievements across the final years of education up to 18. This would include three major types of learning:

- Core learning: academic study in a range of subjects, akin to the progression through KS4 and KS5 programmes of study and/or specialised technical areas of learning including apprenticeship routes.
- Personal Development: a structured programme ensuring all learners have opportunities to demonstrate leadership, community service, creativity and physical development.
- An Extended Personal Project: an in-depth enquiry into an area of personal interest leading to a product or report appropriate to the subject .

The core learning units would evolve from our current GCSEs, A levels, BTECs and other qualifications, but the volume of study and weight of assessment would shift towards more flexible, broader routes all the way from Year 10 to Year 13.

Some units would require formal final external examinations. Others could be assessed through moderated portfolios as appropriate to the subjects or via online 'when-ready' assessments. Others still would simply have to be completed. Crucially, all would contribute to one overarching qualification, so there would be no need to impose false parity between disparate subjects. Students might undertake extended units in some subjects and shorter units in others, using a credit weighting system to give structure to the overall programme. Technical and academic routes would co-exist without false equivalences muddying the water. The Bacc is for everyone.

"We can plot our way there from where we are now"

The personal development programme borrows from the 'creativity, activity and service' element of the International Baccalaureate. Each centre would offer all learners a breadth of opportunities, complementing provision in the local area and national schemes like The Duke of Edinburgh Awards and National Citizen Service. All learners would thereby complete a diverse range of challenging endeavours from which they will develop valuable skills, knowledge and personal attributes.

Creativity, collaboration and communication cannot be measured meaningfully on a scale. But we can certainly record what our students do and give them value without spurious measures. Because all students should have access to these opportunities, not just those in leafy sixth forms.

Together with the personal project (not dissimilar to our existing extended project qualification) all this would be wrapped up into the Baccalaureate Award, tiered from 'entry' to 'higher' level so that it is universally accessible in every setting but also challenging for every learner.

A common digital transcript would capture the assessments allowing universities and employers to see detailed data alongside samples of work and information about the student's project and personal development endeavours. And all these elements can be portioned into a section for pre-16 and another for post-16 attainment so that learners can move between 11-16 schools, sixth-forms and FE colleges, passporting their achievements to enable them to complete their Baccalaureate in any centre.

What's not to like?

- A structurally balanced system focused on completion at 18
- Breadth and coherence in curriculum pathways
- Subject-appropriate diversity of assessment modes
- Bridging the technical-academic divide
- Formal recognition for personal development
- A vehicle for gradual reform of assessment and qualifications

With this as the vision, we can plot our way from where we are now. The National Baccalaureate Trust will soon launch an accreditation scheme for schools to issue bacc-style awards, where they meet the criteria for their personal development and projects alongside existing subjects.

Further on, we hope policy makers will work on the more technical elements to move us from our disparate qualifications into one coherent Baccalaureate framework over time.

Having exams back this summer is comforting, but future students can't afford for inertia to define our system any longer.

Putting assessment reform into practice: Lessons from T Levels

JESS STAUFENBERG | @STAUFENBERGJ

Providers share their insights on delivering the first three T Levels - design, surveying and planning for construction; digital production, design and development; and education and childcare.

1. 'GO IN WITH YOUR EYES OPEN – PREPARATION IS HARD WORK'

Setting up the T Levels is a lot of work, we heard. This covers preparing the new curriculum, understanding the new resources (such as from the awarding organisation), and setting up the industry placement with employers. There's a 315 hour placement requirement for each T Level, but some have even more: for instance, the education and childcare T Level requires 750 hours.

Make sure the awarding organisations get you the correct resources well ahead of September, say providers.

Go out and talk to local authorities, public sector employers, universities accepting T Levels, and private businesses to find out what industry placement opportunities are out there, spread the word about T Levels, and answer any questions about them.

Send out your staff to their industry specialism so they are up to date with the latest trends and can teach the T Level to the highest level.

You may need to establish a way of selecting the students who want to do the T Level, to ensure they can cope with its rigorous demands. An interview-and-matching process is also recommended for industry placements, to ensure students and employers both get the most out of it.

Ensure lots of fiddly processes are in place well in advance, like transportation to placements, how and what students can expense while on placement, emergency contact numbers and safeguarding arrangements. Make sure families have the information and guidance they need well ahead of the programme.

2. 'MAKE THE INDUSTRY PLACEMENT WORK BETTER'

The government should rethink the traditional 9-to-5 in-person experience in the office for the industry placement, providers warn. This is especially true for the digital T Level, where many employees now work entirely, or mostly, remotely from home. The DfE should allow remote supervision of T Level students in these companies, staff say.

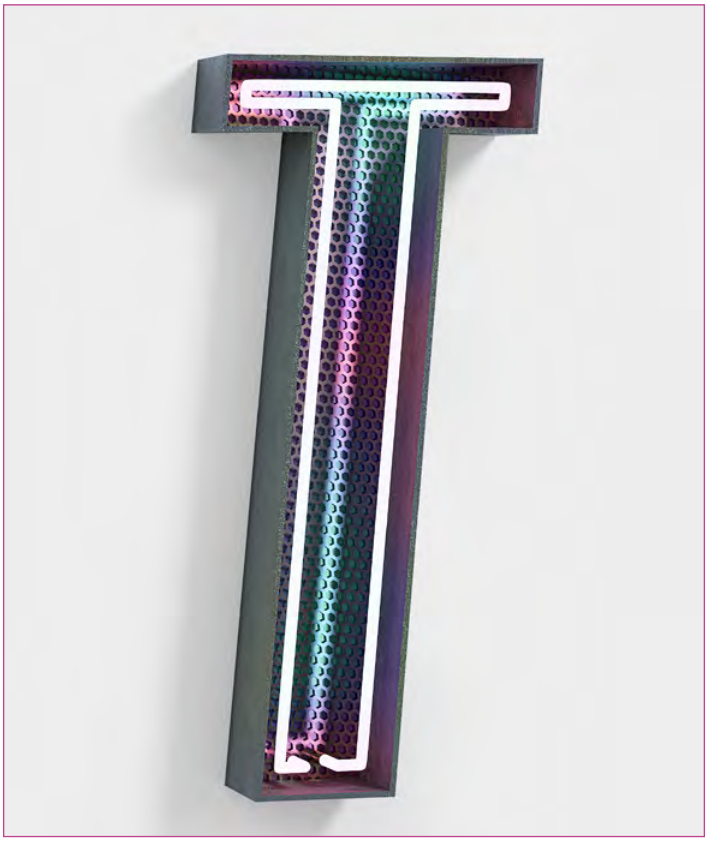
It would also be helpful if providers can choose three or four placements per student, rather than just two placements as is currently the case, they add. This is because it can be difficult to get enough placement hours booked in at each employer.

But the biggest issue is that many employers don't have a main point of contact to discuss T Levels and don't have an industry placement programme set up for students to slot into.

Some are doing existing voluntary programmes, such as the 'befriending a patient' volunteer NHS scheme, rather than proper work placements.

This means education providers must spend exhausting hours 'banging on employers' doors' to let them in, they say.

It also means providers need funding to employ expert employer engagement staff who know how develop employer relations. Some providers say it's too much work for one or two members of staff to add to their other responsibilities.



3. 'RETHINK THE EMPLOYER-SET PROJECT'

The employer-set project "duplicates" the occupational specialism pathway on the T Level, some providers claim. The T Level is already huge and doesn't need to be made any bigger than necessary, they explain.

The employer-set project is not directly set by an employer, but by the awarding organisation (albeit with employer feedback).

One student told us it would be better to do a project set directly by the employer on their placement rather than the project be just another assessment module (although workload for employers could be the barrier here).

4. 'LAUNCH A BIG GOVERNMENT-BACKED MARKETING CAMPAIGN'

The overall issue for government to tackle is that employers either don't know enough about T Levels or aren't clearly incentivised or expected to take on T Level students, say providers.

A major national marketing campaign is needed, with all employers given guidance about preparing to admit T Level students on placements.

Some providers also called for a financial incentive to remain for employers who take students on.

Movements need collaborators

We look to continually invest in, and partner with, organisations who share our desire to be positive disruptors in the sector.

Assessment Innovation Fund

We're investing £1m in developing ideas for better assessment

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19,187 members make this the fastest growing membership organisation in care, health and education

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GOOD FOR ME

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fika Mental Fitness

Learners and staff in FE have completed **29,391 hours** of mental fitness training

GMLPN Greater Manchester Learning Provider Network

31 autistic people are being supported through a training and mentoring programme with additional access to free online resources on CACHE Alumni

worldskills uk

82% participating in the Centre of Excellence programme say it's had a positive impact on their motivation

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JEFF GREENIDGE
Director for diversity, Association of Colleges

A one-size-fits-all approach to assessment undermines equity and diversity

We need assessment settings and systems that give students what they need based on a careful and methodical attention to their circumstances, writes Jeff Greenidge

When students come from various origins, experiences, and perspectives, it is impossible for them to all have the same needs.

Equality has not worked. On the surface it appears to be the right thing to do, but offering everyone the same things results in a standardised and homogenous set of circumstances and resources.

A level playing field has never been and may not be achievable – but we can still have fair play.

I call this equity, rather than equality. Perhaps instead of trying to "even the playing field" or "catch up," we should try to move to a new playing field, one based on equity and fairness.

So how can we develop assessment systems to achieve this?

How can we improve our assessment practices to better support student growth and make the most of their diverse talents?

We can start by focussing on equity.

This will require us to think differently, and work differently. It requires more thought and effort.

It calls for us to create settings and systems that give students what they need based on careful and methodical attention to the specifics of their circumstance.

Let's look at the mode of assessment first. If an awarding body was looking to have a complete picture of a student's achievements at the end of a programme, why wouldn't they use multiple different ways of assessing that student?

First, we could use continuous assessment measures, done by the teacher face-to-face with the student.

Then we could assess examples of coursework that the student had done on their own. Thirdly we could use evidence from an end-of-year examination. And finally, we could assess the student on a piece of oral work like a viva at university.

"Why do we stick to one mode of assessment – the written exam?"

With those assessment approaches, you've got four ways of really understanding to what extent the student has acquired knowledge and applied that knowledge using various key skills.

Why do we stick to only one mode of assessment for GCSEs – the written exam – when it does not provide a full picture?

Such a varied approach makes even more sense now that students are learning and working in a hybrid fashion. It should not be limited to technical and vocational qualifications like BTECs, Cambridge Technicals and T Levels.

Now let's look at the content of what's assessed.

Sometimes we can see representations of different ethnic minorities in exam papers.

But if most of the questions are about content relating to white male scientists and authors and so on, then these pictures of black faces in the exam paper just come across as tokenistic.

Instead, the STEM curriculum itself should include underrepresented and important scientific figures – the African-American female mathematicians, for example, who worked at NASA during the space race (if you've never heard of them, watch the 2016 film Hidden Figures).

Or the history curriculum, for instance, which might reveal to students that some Roman emperors were black.

So the exam system should mirror the equitable content being taught – not include tokenistic references to diversity only in the exam paper.

The main message is that we will need to really understand our students and not just be aware of their marks.

If we are to achieve lasting results for all, regardless of their socio-economic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds, we will need to empower students by creating the best possible learning and assessment environment for them.

We need to know: Are our students anxious about assessment? Or do they see it as an opportunity to get a snapshot of where they are and what they need to do next to grow?

Our challenge is to do better in using our assessments to support equity, as opposed to equality or standardisation.

In a crowded curriculum our aim should not be for our students to complete tasks so we can enter grades for them.

We should be looking to develop and maintain a growth mindset in our students.

Consider discussing these questions at your next curriculum and quality meeting.

Try to come to a common understanding around assessment in your organisations – or at least answer them individually, to understand your own beliefs.

Rachel Macfarlane

Director of education services, Herts for Learning

Schools and colleges can take control of assessment reform

Rachel MacFarlane offers three ways schools and colleges can help build an assessment system that better reflects the strengths of each young person

As a teacher, there's nothing more rewarding than celebrating with triumphant students on results day. When they achieve the necessary results to proceed to the next stage of their education, progress to a training opportunity or secure employment, it's wonderful to share that moment with them.

Sadly, it's just as heart-breaking to stand with a young person as their hopes for the future are dashed. Those that have been unable to secure the grades they needed for their planned next step are unclear as to what their future holds for them and their self-esteem is severely dented.

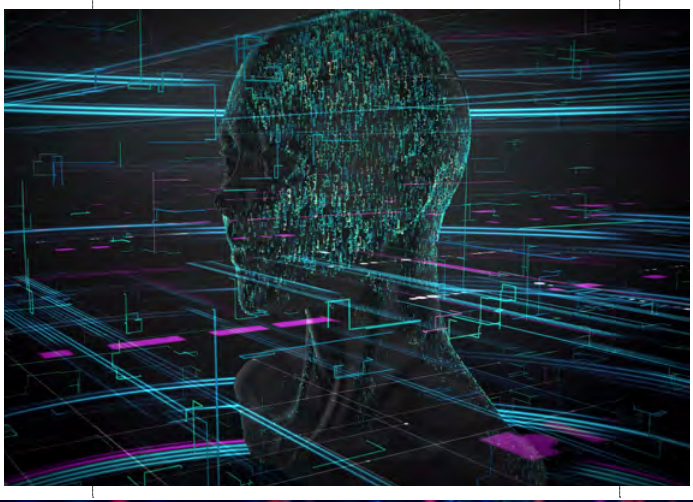
But the saddest part is that, in so many cases, it isn't the young person that's failed. Instead, they've been let down by an assessment system that reduces 12 or 14 years of schooling to just a series of letters and numbers. And it is students from more disadvantaged backgrounds that are most likely to miss out under the current system, as this recent report from the IFS shows.

For the past two years, the Rethinking Assessment coalition has been setting out a workable roadmap toward designing an assessment system that helps every young person thrive. Much of what we are calling for needs to be activated at a policy level. However, there are things that schools and further education colleges can start doing now to make assessments fairer, more accurate and, frankly, more useful to future employers and to young people themselves.

Across the country, schools and colleges are already taking this task in hand. And the results have helped transform the learning experience for young people. Three examples of what schools and colleges are doing best show what's possible without waiting for policy makers.

Digital profiles

Schools and colleges are beginning to work with local employers to create a relevant learner profile for each student. These profiles typically contain a breadth of information on their achievements and skills, including the "three Cs" – collaboration, communication and creativity – which are so essential to today's workforce. Because a range of achievements are presented in a variety of different ways, the employer gets a much better sense of what a young person knows and can do.



Alternative assessment formats

Once young people can display their achievements in a profile, it gives scope to enable a variety of assessment formats to evidence learning. Sometimes it might be appropriate for a learner to take a test to show what they've learnt. But much of the time it is more relevant for them to present their learning through a video/orally, or a visual presentation, which is much more reflective of what they will be asked to do in the workplace, and indeed higher education.

Real world learning opportunities

Too many young people have been let down by an outdated assumption that all learning happens in the same way and in the classroom. But when educators are able to provide a range of learning methods and styles, it opens new possibilities.

> "We can make assessments fairer, more accurate and more useful now"

A growing number of schools and colleges are introducing inquiry-based learning into the curriculum, which enables students to take a real-world issue or challenge and study it from an interdisciplinary perspective. This allows for learning to be assessed in a variety of different ways.

These changes are all geared towards giving young people the ability to showcase a breadth of their strengths and achievements, and the development of a system to display achievements in a digital portfolio is crucial to making good use of these alternative assessment formats.

Rethinking Assessment has recently put forward a proposal for a digital learner profile. Such a concept is already used in schools around the world and offers an opportunity to create an assessment system which values the breadth of strengths of each young person. This approach must be at the heart of helping young people truly reflect what they have learnt during their school career.

The big names in the game of the future of assessment

Jess Staufenberg talks to the groups, commissions and reports making waves in the debate about reforming assessment. But will an enthusiasm for digital transformation lead to bigger things?

Ever since the pandemic closed down exam halls, assessment has been a hot topic. The algorithm used by Ofqual in 2020 resulted in unacceptable outcomes for GCSE, A level and BTEC students, and was quickly scrapped in favour of centre assessed grades – which themselves were not perfect – and these were used again in 2021.

The result of this unprecedented national experiment in assessment has been a plethora of organisations arguing for reform – while for others it has only proved exams are the most reliable approach.

The debate piled on top of existing concerns around assessment in England, in particular around the "forgotten third" of students who fail their English and maths GCSEs (and usually don't improve on a resit) due to the use of comparable outcomes.

So two commissions were launched last year: the Independent Assessment Commission, hosted by the National Education Union, and the Times Education Commission, hosted by the newspaper. Awarding body Pearson also launched a research project on the 'future of qualifications and assessment for 14-19 year olds' and the Rethinking Assessment group, spearheaded by former Tony Blair adviser Peter Hyman, has also put forward proposals.

Big moves in FE

At the same time, FE has been busy responding to and implementing some of the biggest changes to vocational and technical assessment in a generation.

Apprenticeship frameworks were phased out and replaced by new apprenticeship standards in 2020. At the same time, the first T Level students were enrolled and got their results this summer. Meanwhile, a DfE review of level 3 qualifications has earmarked over 150 courses for the chop from 2024 that overlap with T Levels, including dozens of BTECs, on the grounds of 'low quality'.


Lucy Heller

The sector has been handed reform after reform, and has been mainly trying to respond to and implement these.

But new ideas are also being trialled: last year technical and vocational awarding body NCFE launched the Assessment Innovation Fund, with pilot projects in progress, and the second window of funding now open. The idea is to give the best assessment design ideas trial funding.

And it's a good idea, since the calls for reform just keep coming.

Time for change?

Over summer, the Tony Blair Institute published a report called 'Ending the Big Squeeze on Skills'. It accuses "summative, closed-book exams" of being a "very poor way of measuring talent", and says "high-stakes exams at 16" no longer make sense because today students leave education at age 18.

As an alternative, the report proposes scrapping the EBacc and using OECD tests to evaluate the "four Cs" of communication, collaboration, critical thinking and creativity". It also calls for the replacement of GCSEs and A levels with a new qualification age 18 similar to the International Baccalaureate, and low-stakes assessment at age 16.

But despite these renewed calls, 2022 has been an exhausting year for staff and "there's not a lot of capacity in the system to welcome grand new ideas," warns Lucy Heller, chief executive at Ark multi-academy trust. Educators are still busy making up the Covid learning loss, she says.

It could mean the findings of the various recommendations fall on infertile ground.

"What we really need is a well-resourced body to look at this carefully," continues Heller, who also sat on the Times Education Commission and whose director of secondary, Rebecca Boomer-Clark, sat on Pearson's assessment expert panel. "I'm hoping this year will be the year we start looking up above the immediate horizon of recovery and start thinking exciting thoughts."

So what did the various groups conclude? And has it prompted change?

The main voices

The Independent Assessment Commission, which consulted academics, parents, students, the Chartered College of Teaching, the Edge Foundation thinktank and the CBI, published 10 recommendations in February.

The most eye-catching included that

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"GCSEs need to change fundamentally" and a call to introduce an "integrated qualifications system" whereby students study both academic and vocational subjects and can get "accreditation for skill development, extended interdisciplinary study and community contribution".

There is also a call for "alternative, blended approaches to assessment".

Details on this are a little vague in the report, but it does say "existing and emerging technologies" should be used to create a "high quality" student experience of assessment.

Next up is the Times Education Commission, which published its 12-point report in June this year. Its 23 commissioners included Heller, Dame Sally Coates at United Learning academy trust, Amanda Melton, principal at Nelson and Colne College in Lancashire and "international adviser" Andreas Schleicher from the OECD.

Its first recommendation is for a "British Baccalaureate" at age 18 which would mirror the International Baccalaureate but "customised to the UK". There would be an "academic diploma programme" in three major subjects and three minor subjects. Those on the "career related programme" would combine learning including BTECs or a T Level with work experience. Students could mix and match between the two programmes.

At age 16, the Times Education Commission called for a "slimmed-down set of exams" in five core subjects, and use of continuous, low-stakes assessment – mirroring the International Baccalaureate middle school programme and the French brevet exams in three papers.

Then there is Rethinking Assessment, led by Hyman, co-founder of School 21 in east London. The advisory group includes private school staff members, including from Eton, St Paul's Girls School, Bedales School, King Alfred's School and Latymer Upper School, as well as Sally Dicketts, former chief executive at college group Activate Learning and professor Louise Hayward, who also chairs the Independent Assessment Commission.

In June, Rethinking Assessment published a prototype for its 'learner profile'.

According to its website, this is a framework that "recognises and evidences young people's breadth of strengths across knowledge, skills and dispositions" in four areas: first, literacy, numeracy, oracy and digital skills; second, single subjects or interdisciplinary courses; third, an extended project; and fourth, a dispositions wheel covering creative thinking, communication and collaboration.

The next step is to pilot the learner profile among stakeholders and schools, says the website.

Finally, Pearson's report published in March brought in experts from former education secretaries Lord Baker and Lord Blunkett, to assessment expert Daisy Christodoulou, David Hughes at the Association of Colleges and Natalie Perera at the Education Policy Institute.

Its first recommendation is that alternative qualifications to GCSEs are needed in English and maths to prevent a third of students from failing.

So Pearson has designed an "English GCSE 2.0" which has a "real world, less traditional" approach to the study of English, according to Hayley White, assessment director at Pearson. Students sat the qualification for the first time this summer.

The report also argues that the assessment system "needs to dramatically improve how we are assessing skills", saying this could benefit SEND pupils too.

Finally, a key recommendation is to "accelerate digital transformation" of assessment.

Challenges to reform

All the commissions and groups clearly call for real changes.

However White says Pearson is in favour of a "more intuitive model of continuous evidence-based improvement" rather than wholescale assessment reform.

And Tim Oates, a former assessment policy adviser to government, is outrightly critical of some calls for change. He says exams are being wrongly blamed for attainment gaps.

"Of course rightly, we can see that exams do not suit some people and the stress of a high load can affect performance [...]

"But so often the talk from some people and organisations is that exams are the sole reason for the gap, which is just not true."

In some cases the "more significant, structural reasons" behind attainment gap are being "ignored", he says.

In addition, all high-performing nations have high stakes assessment at 16, and 14 of 21 have exams, Oates says.

But there does appear to be one reform everyone agrees is gaining traction - and that's digital assessment and online adaptive testing.

Looking ahead

Last year, Tom Richmond, former advisor to the Department for Education and founder of the

Tim Oates

Daisy Christodoulou

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EDSK thinktank, published two reports on assessment, both of which emphasised the need for more computer-based assessment. In Making Progress, Richmond calls for "the full range" of primary school tests to be replaced with "adaptive, online testing" by 2026.

And in his second report, Reassessing the Future on secondary education, he recommended scrapping GCSEs, and then running national computer-based assessments in year 10.

Then in May this year Ofqual published its three-year corporate plan which promised to investigate adaptive testing (a computerised test that adjusts the difficulty of questions as students answer).

Ofqual boss Jo Saxton also seemed enthusiastic, saying adaptive testing could replace tiered exams which currently limit the grade students can achieve.

Her words came despite a report by Ofqual in 2020 finding that large-scale standardised tests could not be moved online in the "immediate future" because of inconsistencies in school IT provision.

But Ofqual's more recent analysis of online assessment is "an important signal as it showed that the regulator was actively interested in this discussion", says Richmond.

He adds that adaptive online testing "can track pupils more accurately over time than pen and paper assessments", allowing for less emphasis on "one-off high stakes end-of-course assessment".

Adaptive testing also offers the "tantalising prospect of students [...] not having to set a test or exam at the same time" while still being rigorous – meaning supply of computers across the nation shouldn't be a problem, Richmond adds.

Nevertheless, the National Foundation for Educational Research has sounded a note of caution on adaptive testing, warning that

entering "uncharacteristic" responses to earlier questions could impact the rest of a student's test.

But an enthusiasm for online assessment has also been picked up by the awarding bodies.

In May Pearson published a new report called 'Spotlight on Onscreen Assessment' with results from a trial in which the Edexcel International GCSE in English Language was assessed online for the first time in eight schools across 600 students.

"The feedback we got from students was mindblowing," says White. "They said it was easier for them to write an extended essay on the computer than handwritten because it reflects how they work and live." Pearson has taken the feedback as "an impetus to move faster", she adds.

And in January, AQA chief executive Colin Hughes announced a major pilot of online GCSEs, and adaptive testing for key stage 3 tests and GCSEs. He said a move to digital assessment was "only a matter of time" with the pandemic highlighting the need for "resilience in the system".

The trial has involved up to 2,500 secondary school students from between 60 and 100 schools.

And finally exam board OCR, owned by Cambridge Assessment, has also run trials of a "digital mocks service" of GCSE and AS assessments in nine countries for three subjects. Next the exam board will run about 10,000 such tests in 100 schools internationally between January and March 2023. It will also make high-stakes exams available on-screen by 2025.

However, not everyone is convinced.

Daisy Christodoulou, director of education at No More Marking, a provider of comparative judgment assessment software to schools, says "there's a genuine debate to be had about on-screen assessment".

"I think the biggest thing we've got to be wary of is that handwriting matters. We know that when kids learn to read, for example, handwriting the letters can help with learning to read.

"We're not brains in a jar. You can move some things on screen but not everything on screen."

Real reform?

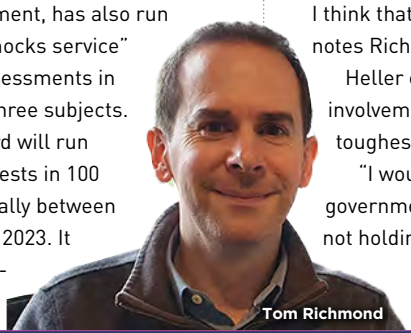
The question is, will online testing lead to the more major reforms many educators want to see in the future?

There is still no answer from ministers, for instance, on the problems with comparable outcomes – even as a third of students are left without the qualifications they need each year. Nor on suggestions for a 'British Baccalaureate'.

"If all that changes as a result of these recent initiatives by exam boards and Ofqual is that we simply cut and paste the existing GCSEs onto a computer instead, I think that would be a terrible shame," notes Richmond.

Heller concludes that high-level involvement is needed to look at the toughest issues.

"I would like to see a high-quality government commission," she says. "I'm not holding my breath, though."



Tom Richmond

ASFA SOHAIL

Executive principal and chief learning officer, London South East Colleges

The future of assessment must be a more level playing field

Our system relies too heavily on colleges to make adjustments for students with SEND and does too little to support them in the effort, writes Asfa Sohail

The return of public exams for the first time since 2019 has been difficult period for all young people – particularly as many have never been through the examination process before, but also because mitigation and marking arrangements have meant a level of uncertainty has persisted.

For those with special educational needs and disabilities – and for the staff who work with them – these challenges have been even greater.

Exam accessibility issues are wide-ranging and can be complex. We want to ensure no student is disadvantaged due to a specific disability when sitting exams, but this is not always easy – not least when students move from school to college.

Students and their families are often unaware when they arrive at college that their exam arrangements are not simply rolled over from school. In fact, there is no guarantee that they will qualify for the same arrangements.

In addition, our SEND teams have to start from scratch in terms of assessing and establishing specific needs. These are needs that are likely to have been known and understood throughout the student's time at school – but must be completely reassessed when joining further education.

With different awarding bodies having different requirements, this assessment can be a complex process. Evidence needs to be gathered and submitted, which takes time and runs the risk of delayed exam access arrangements. This can result in a frustrating and indeed unfair disadvantage for the student, which we must avoid.

And even once access arrangements are in place, for example if extra time is granted, some young people with ASD will still not be able to finish in the given time frame. This could mean they don't succeed, even though they may be technically capable of understanding and correctly responding to the question being asked.

So how can we ensure that no young person is disadvantaged when it comes to exams?

In terms of practical, on-the-ground solutions, our staff carry out comprehensive assessments of students and apply for a range of access arrangement adjustments as soon as possible. It's essential to have access to curriculum exam dates so specific planning can be done – but this can be challenging with more 'on-demand' vocational exams.

Giving students opportunities to practice adjustments to ensure best outcomes in exams is also important – whether that's how to use extra time, a reader and/or a scribe. Lessons must be planned carefully and a careful choice of papers is required to meet the needs of ASD students.

We support with resources such as adjustable tables, enlarged fonts and easels as well as providing quiet 'chill-out' areas on exam days to help anxious students relax.

We also ensure we have an emergency overflow room for any student experiencing unexpected anxiety episodes prior to exams.

Our Learning Support Assistants provide extra help, especially if students don't have access to a parent or carer at home. We also ensure new staff across the college are supported to work consistently and collaboratively with our learning support team and exams department.

> **"Delays can result in a frustrating and unfair disadvantage"**

Crucially, this support has to start at application and enrolment stage. We need to encourage students to declare any need from day one so that we can get the right support in place promptly. Staff have to be well-trained to understand the information and evidence that is needed for exam boards.

Presently, all of this relies too heavily on colleges and their staff. The future of assessment must take accessibility as a core tenet, and that means providing more consistency centrally to help our students access exams fairly and efficiently. A JCQ/DfE database containing information about every student's access arrangement in school – accessible to any young person's educational provider – would be a great start.

This would enable our specialists and our exam teams to see every student's history of need from day one. We could then ensure the right arrangements are in place from the very start, which would go some way to levelling the playing field for SEND students taking exams.

Assessment Innovation Fund

Bringing ideas for innovation to life

The Assessment Innovation Fund has been designed to support a shift in the disconnected and transactional approaches to assessment.

Our vision is to break the boundaries of assessment and promote innovation by working with organisations to test new ideas within a supportive environment.

Who we're working with

The University of Newcastle, Australia

Testing the process of moving from a grade-based system to digital badges in courses. The 12-month pilot involves 1,000 learners and will evaluate the impact on learners, staff, systems, policies and processes.

The Sheffield College

Building virtual reality (VR) experiences that enable learners in animal care, catering and construction to have more practice time when physical spaces are limited; testing how VR can be used effectively in summative and formative assessment.

The Really Neet Project

90 students who don't respond to mainstream education and assessment are helping test the effects of interactive story-based assessments; aiming to change perceptions by using modern technology to engage learners in a personalised assessment.

Bolton College

Using a system called FirstPass, teachers across six institutions are testing the efficacy of using artificial intelligence to set and mark formative assessments. FirstPass offers real-time feedback to learners allowing them to reflect upon their answers before submitting them.

Have your own idea for the future of assessment?

Find out more about upcoming application phases and how to apply.

Find out more

International models: The Q&A

Policy analyst Hannah Kitchen from the education directorate at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development sits down with Jess Staufenberg to chat global assessment models

Which country do you think has a particularly interesting assessment model?

Norway is interesting. There's an exam at the end of school which counts for only 20 per cent of marks and then teacher assessment from the classroom makes up the rest. It's higher teacher assessment than many other countries.

But what's really interesting is that there's an exam lottery. Students must study for everything but they only sit one exam. So 24 hours before, their name is essentially pulled out of a hat and they find out which exam they're sitting.

In Norway lots of students perceive it as stressful, because they're still having to prepare broadly. But it reduces the stress of having lots of different exams.

Which other countries use a lot of teacher assessment for final grades?

The UK and other countries with historic connections to the UK such as Ireland, Singapore, Hong Kong, Korea and other Asian systems all have a big role for exams.

But there are other countries where more than 50 per cent of final marks come from teacher assessment. In Sweden its 100 per cent from teacher assessment. In Canada, each state has its own model for assessing students. In one state, for example, its 75 per cent teacher assessment.

Which country has the most high-stake exams?

South Korea stands out. The whole world stops the day students are doing their examination at the end of upper secondary. It's so high-stakes because it's also the entrance exam to tertiary education.

The shops open later and they reduce the traffic on the roads so that it's not a distraction.

Sometimes students will spend an extra year after school just preparing for the exam, delaying their entrance into tertiary education just to give them a better chance of getting in.

How does the UK's assessment system compare with the rest the OECD?

In few other countries in the world do you see such a narrow diet of subjects at age 18 as A levels in the UK.

Pretty much everywhere else in the OECD, they have a full diet of the curriculum to 18. They do a bit less in New Zealand, but still more subjects at the end of school than in the UK.

What you also don't see in most other countries is such high-stakes exams at age 16, even though education continues to age 18. GCSEs are odd, in that they're called high-stakes, but there aren't really that high stakes attached to them – there's an expectation that everyone continues on afterwards.

But there's a whole industry around GCSE prep with students and staff spending enormous amounts of time on them, and it's whether that's really time best used.

How does primary school assessment vary across the OECD?

There's less high-stakes assessment in primary education and it tends to be far more formative. Most countries do have external assessments at some point – like the SATs in England – but these are designed for system monitoring purposes or for diagnostic purposes for individual students.

But just because they're not high stakes doesn't prevent them being a big issue for teachers, schools, and societies. Some countries only test a representative sample of students, don't assess every year, and don't publish results for individual schools, to reduce media and societal focus on results (and stakes for teachers and schools).

The only countries where assessment in primary education is really associated with any stakes are those used to select students into different schools or programmes in secondary education.

This includes those countries with very developed vocational systems where students are selected into general and vocational programmes at an early age. This includes Austria, Germany and the Netherlands. There is clearly a big debate about early selection, inequities and whether assessment in primary education is a valid predictor of later academic success.

Where could the UK look for inspiration around assessment?

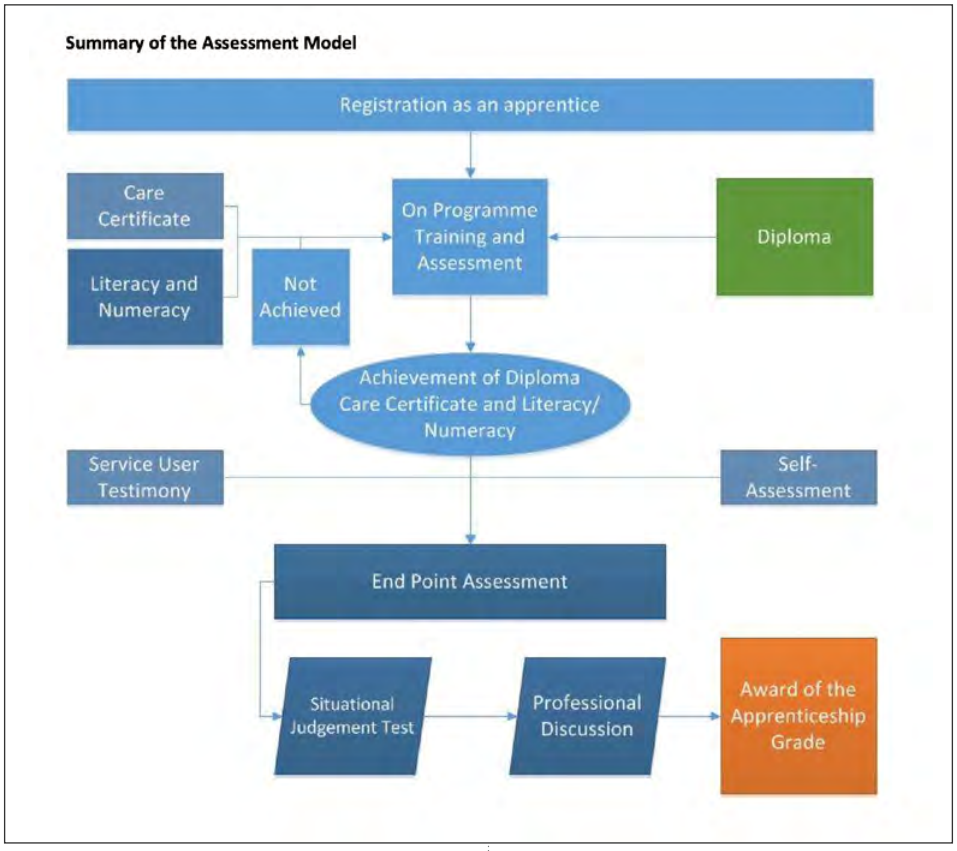
New Zealand is a nice model. It uses 50-50 teacher-assessed content and examinations, and there are cultural similarities with the UK there too.

I think it will also be interesting to see what's happening in Ireland. They have a leaving certificate age 18, and there's huge cultural and social significance attached to it.

But in March this year, the education minister announced there would be a move away from outcomes based entirely on written examinations and towards a 40 per cent teacher assessment model. They're trying to pilot it so that will be an interesting to see.

Assessment in apprenticeships: Is it working?

JASON NOBLE
@JASON_NOBLE89



On the face of it, apprenticeships should be simple – a post-16 pathway which marries the best of education and employment into a single route, leading to a qualified, career-ready worker.

Underneath the surface, the mechanics of an apprenticeship are more complicated. For classroom-based students, there are clear lines of responsibility and accountability between the learner, the education provider and the state (with all of its agencies and regulators).

Listen to anyone from the government over the past ten-plus years and they'll tell you that employers are at the heart of apprenticeships; setting the standards and, importantly, providing the jobs.

But just like all other learning routes, apprenticeships need a method of assessment that stands up to scrutiny.

How do training providers know that apprentices are learning everything that's required of them? How do employers know that their apprentices are on track?

And how do apprentices know that their training is adding value to their longer-term career goals?

These are questions answered five years ago; the latest "skills revolution" resulted in a shift from the old 'frameworks' system to 'standards' and the introduction of the end point assessment (EPA) model for apprenticeships.

The shift brought about a big change in apprenticeship assessment and introduced a new marketplace of independent end point assessment companies vying for a slice of apprenticeship funding.

So is the new system working?

How does an EPA work?

Under the old frameworks system, assessments occurred continually through an apprentice's course with learners often being assessed for the knowledge, skills and behaviours (KSBs) needed in their career as they completed each module.

Apprentices now complete an EPA at the end of their course to demonstrate to an independent assessor they can demonstrate the requirements set out in their apprenticeship standard's assessment plan.

Those assessment plans are developed for each standard by employer-led trailblazer bodies to ensure the standards are right for their industry and the KSBs are correct. An end point assessment organisation (EPAO) is enlisted to evaluate the apprentice.

Apprentices take their EPA once they have completed their learning, requisite number of off-the-job training hours and any specific industry qualification needed.

Does it work?

Most in the training industry agree that standards and EPAs create a more robust system than frameworks, but there are still room for improvements.


Sacha Finkle

Sacha Finkle, head of EPA at NCFE – an award-winning EPAO for 30 standards in areas such as health, social care and digital – said the frameworks system meant learners could frequently forget work already completed and assessed early on in their apprenticeship.

"It wasn't being maintained, and reinforced, and embedded," Finkle said. "What end point assessment does is it makes sure that right to the end of that apprenticeship the apprentice has got the knowledge, skills and behaviours, and they are being demonstrated to an adequate standard. So employers can be really confident the apprentice has gained what they set out to do, whereas the previous format that wasn't always the case."

Government data reported the achievement rate on old-style frameworks for 2020/21 was 68.9 per cent compared to 51.8 per cent for those on standards. That may be an indication that rigorous standards are working.

But some issues remain. Apprentices, providers and EPAOs all agree that communication from the outset so that learners know exactly when and what to

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expect from their EPA early on in their journey is not always prevalent enough.

Emily Austin, chief executive of the Association of Apprentices, said: "The most viewed pages on our website, the most talked about things on our community platform are assessment and EPA. Generally, one of the main things that comes through on the news feed is 'I am undertaking an assessment, I am undertaking an EPA – has anyone got any advice?'"

Dexter Hutchings, co-founder of the Apprentice Voice, has been working towards a level 3 degree apprenticeship in digital marketing. He said the importance of the EPA wasn't communicated well enough from the start.

He said: "We were told right near the end that you have to do a project from your workplace, so I had to go back through the last three years and think what project fits best. Whereas if you have got that on your mind through your whole apprenticeship, you can take notes, have a folder somewhere where you are picking up that evidence and getting ready for that EPA final project."

Research by Bud Systems, the training management software developer used by more than 70 training providers, found that 45 per cent of apprentices felt their employer should have more responsibility for them completing the EPA.

Emma Nolan, a level 6 degree apprentice in digital and technology solutions at Manchester MET University who is also chair of the Association of Apprentices' council of apprentices, said she sought reassurance from an apprentice who was a year older. "Just in my own head I needed to know I was on the right track," she said.

For many apprentices, their course includes an industry qualification, like a diploma, that is completed before an EPA, but leaves some not knowing how significant the EPA is.

Linda Martin, managing director at Professional Assessments Ltd, an EPAO largely covering the leisure and hospitality sector, said: "I think most EPAOs really do try and ensure that they have got the resources there and encourage that relationship early on. But the big thing is actually what we have all got to be better at doing is checking each other's understanding, and really being quite clear about the roles and responsibilities."

However, for EPAOs it is a tricky balance to strike. Martin said EPAOs must be "impartial and objective" but also "empathetic" and "work collaboratively".

For training providers delivering multiple standards and courses, the web of different course requirements and EPA structures – including EPA durations - is "challenging but manageable" according to Wayne Hunt, centre manager at Estio Training - a provider for IT and digital programmes.

Some can involve a project and discussion; others will have interviews or more practical exam-based requirements.

Elsewhere, funding remains an issue.

Liam Sammon, director of learning and innovation at JTL which delivers training for electrical, plumbing and gas engineers, said that when rules confirmed that EPAOs can charge up to 20 per cent of the standard for the cost of an EPA, "prices changed notably for some EPAs when compared to others and it was difficult to see why this was so".

Logistics for some of the practical EPAs can also be a challenge. Sammon said for courses like those delivered by JTL, sealed off spaces must be used for EPAs but there are not enough test centres. It leaves providers being approached to provide a sealed off workshop space, but some may not be able to provide that if it disrupts learning.

What works well?

Despite some of the lingering issues, examples of good practice shine through.

Hunt said Estio uses a dedicated EPA team who conduct practice interviews with learners, so they know what to expect. Apprentices are also put at ease by reframing interviews as just a chat about work.

Interestingly, Nolan said the EPA itself was much more relaxed than expected – feedback she says is common from apprentices after they have completed it but little is known before heading into it.

At NCFE, assessors are paid to complete a certain number of working hours in workplaces every year to ensure they are up to date on their own industry knowledge.

What should change?

With the widespread recognition that communication early on is important, most would like to ensure that employers and apprentices know what the EPA entails from the outset. Similarly, examples of best practice to ensure that learners know they are on the right track will also help.

Hutchings meanwhile would like to see a wider range of KSBs which can be narrowed down depending on the course and apprenticeship. He said the nature of his employment meant some KSBs were more relevant than others, but the EPA requires him to meet all regardless.

That has been ruled out by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE), which said that it wants KSBs to be transferable from employer to employer.

Elsewhere, a review of fees is an area Sammon and Finkle would like to see progress. Sammon also says that when standards are reviewed or new ones established, employers, training providers and EPAOs developing them should "not be constrained to the dogma that it must be an EPA".

Sammon said that apprenticeships like electrical lend themselves to EPAs in a way others may not, where a portfolio approach may be more suitable.

He added: "You have employer led groups determining what is taught - surely they should determine the assessment strategy? They do to an extent, but they are confined that it must come into an EPA."

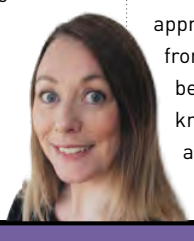
But could new technology also be incorporated into future assessments? Finkle said some standards which have a small pool of assessors can cause lots of travel.

She said: "I think it is about really looking in the 21st Century at all the tools we have at hand, thinking about AI, virtual reality, thinking about digital solutions that is going to get the same rigour without having these logistical and resource challenges, and meeting the green agenda."

And it's an area IfATE says it is exploring. "These considerations are built into all new EPAs and there is a flexibility framework to cover older EPAs, where these up-to-date methods are workable," a spokesperson said.

They added: "The system, by including the voices of thousands of real employers, is by its very nature self-improving.

"But of course, we are always open to change – and that is why over the coming months we are conducting a 'big conversation' to learn from those right across the skills system what is working well and what isn't."



Emily Austin

Dexter Hutchings

TIM OATES

Group director, assessment research and development, Cambridge University Press & Assessment

How to reform assessment (and how not to)

Calls for assessment reform are de rigueur, writes Tim Oates, but none yet charts a safe course to a better system

I've lost count of 'reports on the future of assessment'. And if, like me, you HAVE been counting them, and reading them (All of them, cover to cover. And many of the references.), then another comment on the matter may feel like one too many. Bear with me. I don't intend to add to the list of 'things we need to do'. Rather, to suggest how we should (and shouldn't) respond to this trend.

The future is what we make it

We should focus on robust, responsible, evidence-driven policy. But many of the reports include unduly fatalistic assumptions about 'the way things are going'. They fail to recognise that past education policy was bold in asserting things which would benefit children and young people.

We stopped child labour and established universal entitlement; we raised the school leaving age; we have geared up early years. These shaped society and young lives for the better. Well-evidenced education policy can run against the 'tide of events', and should.

Reveal the hidden agenda

Educational policy must be carefully constructed from aspirations, research and accumulated truths; Hidden agendas or lack of transparency make for very bad policy. Yet I've traced the arguments and there's a lot of selective fitting of facts to reinforce pre-existing assumptions.

Nowhere is this more evident than with calls to 'get rid of GCSEs because no other nation has them'. This is just not true. Our 2021 review of 21 high-performing systems showed that all had high stakes assessment at 16. Two-thirds had examinations at 16.

An accompanying bad habit is that of assuming that things are terrible here and better everywhere else. In fact, PISA and TIMSS show that prior to pandemic we were closing the disadvantage gap and improving our already-high national standing in maths and reading. Sorry gloom merchants.

> "Our reform history is littered with casualties of poor design"

Yes, Covid knocked us back terribly. But things we were doing were working. Research tells us assessment can be improved – born-digital qualifications, adaptive testing, formative assessment. We can reduce load, and improve accuracy and fairness. And teachers prefer this to be done without wholesale upheaval.

A theory of change

Tempo and technical details really matter in assessment reform. We need to pay attention to Sam Freedman's arguments in his Institute for Government paper and my own emphasis on open, sophisticated policy formation and well-conceived and managed change.

An education commission? A new agency? All worthy of full discussion. But always remember that England's reform history is littered with casualties of poor design. The Youth Training Scheme. Individual Learning Accounts. There's a very long list.

To avoid this 'cycle of planned failure' with massive disruption and massive cost for no good end, HOW we embark on developing and refining the system is as important as constructing a robust view of WHAT we should do. Sadly, current debate tends to neglect this important detail.

Unconnected thinking

There's huge, necessary complexity and interdependence in curriculum, assessment, accountability, funding, recruitment and retention, and more. Remove assessment and curriculum priorities change overnight. Reduce specialism in the 16-18 phase and degree programmes need to lengthen. That's why the evident contradictions in the latest paper from Tony Blair's Institute for Global Change are a big problem: get a few key facts wrong and the whole edifice becomes a house of cards.

A good example is the idea of 'assessment when ready'. Simple, surely. Only it's been done before. And it tends to lead to a lot more assessment. Often A GREAT DEAL more assessment. In modular and credit-based systems it can lead to a 'race through that... and now forget it' approach to learning. And who decides 'when ready'? Females tend to hold off while boys wade in early... and so on. Each building block of new arrangements must be sound, and the whole building needs to be assembled with care.

None of which is to say that assessment can't or shouldn't be reformed. But like Rossini said of Wagner's operas, many of these reports offer 'some wonderful moments but terrible half-hours'. They provide raw material for discussion of the future of assessment, not yet a blueprint.

DAVID PHILLIPS

Managing director, City & Guilds

Where next for e-assessment in the post-pandemic world?

We are still establishing the accuracy of some of the new technological tools for assessment, writes David Phillips

Digital technology has clearly played a growing role in education for decades, but the pandemic served as a catalyst to demonstrate its potential to truly revolutionise the sector.

Despite the widespread ramifications of the virus, we have been reminded of the power of technology to provide us with the means to communicate, share information, do business and to learn.

During the course of the coronavirus, many schools, colleges and training providers across the country shut their doors, shifting teaching online. Virtual assessment became more important than ever before.

At City and Guilds, we worked with other organisations to find ways to adapt and digitalise.

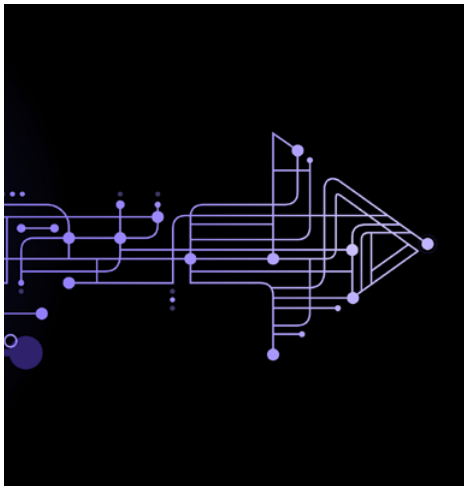
The question now becomes which aspects of digitisation will be retained by the sector, and to what extent, if any, the pre-pandemic status quo will be re-established.

For testing and exams, the model of online delivery of multiple-choice style knowledge assessment is now well established, having been used extensively during the pandemic.

The challenge we now face is around security and advances made in remote invigilation solutions. But experience gained over the last two years has allowed us to better appreciate the risks and solutions that are now available.

It is a mode of delivery that is already adopted in other areas of industry training. Certification and will increasingly find its place into mainstream education now that the solutions have been tried on a wider scale.

Other forms of assessment like short response and essay-style questions are still important to judge certain qualities of



intelligence and aptitude, and there is no reason these can't coincide with multiple-choice tests, creating a "mixed economy" of assessment.

E-assessment also has the advantage of removing many barriers faced by learners, businesses, colleges and awarding bodies.

For learners engaging in distance learning, e-assessments can remove the need to travel to test centres or simply make the choice of test location and time more flexible. Geography and availability are eliminated as obstacles to assessment, offering greater flexibility.

Digital assessment can be especially

"The challenge we now face is around security and remote invigilation"

beneficial for apprentices, where learners and employers lack spare time to travel to test centres.

However, it's important to acknowledge that not everyone has the same access to technology. This may be due to a lack of funds to purchase sufficient data contracts, through to not having good enough broadband coverage - something that must be a priority for government as more of our lives take place online.

Digital and remote testing will undoubtedly form an ever-growing part of the future of education, being part of a flexible blended training and assessment solution, depending on the outcomes needed.

Other technologies, such as artificial intelligence certainly present exciting possibilities, and these are already being explored in automating elements of assessment of short answers and extended response questions.

However, we are still in the process of exploring its accuracy and building confidence in its ability to adapt to the unusual responses that humans can make.

The next steps in the evolution of e-assessment will be a much tighter partnership between the learning and assessment process, as instruction and judgement become better aligned with learner performance and progress.

Aligning these processes creates a valuable opportunity to tailor interventions and guidance for learners and create a more balanced way to recognise their ability and skills.

The pandemic represented a seismic shock to the way we work and learn, with many changes having to be implemented at short notice and new technologies adopted or rolled out with limited time to prepare.

However, the way different industries adapted has provided us with valuable opportunities to learn from the experience and the education sector is no exception.

Building on those lessons is vital if the education sector is to rise to the challenges of the future and create opportunities for people to develop the urgently needed skills to grow our economy and create a future-proof workforce.

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