



Counterblasts

ASSESSING ASSESSMENT Politics or progress?

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Foreword

This paper arises out of a seminar jointly convened by the National Education Trust (NET) and the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL). The subtitle of the seminar – *Politics or Progress?* - highlights the tensions faced by both policy makers and teachers as they strive for improved educational outcomes.

Those charged with financing, directing and guiding the education system on behalf of the taxpayer need evidence of the effectiveness of the service provided. Teachers need evidence of the progress their students are making in order to maximise the effectiveness of their teaching. Students need evidence of what they have learned to access the next stage of education and gain employment. Universities and employers need evidence of candidates' attainment for selection purposes.

Tensions arise because whilst all value achievement, the requirement for evidence to satisfy a multitude of purposes compromises the value of that evidence. Worse still, the requirement for evidence at a particular time and in a particular form may inhibit achievement of that which is to be measured.

Published as part of the **Counterblasts** series, the paper seeks to challenge current orthodoxy, champion best practice and stimulate debate. The paper does not necessarily represent the views of either NET or ASCL, but does seek to shape our responses to current issues.

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Executive Summary

High stakes external assessment has come to dominate the educational experience of students in our schools and colleges. Assessment is important. It is an everyday tool used by teachers to determine what students know and can do, and to plan their teaching. Students need evidence of their attainments for entry to higher education and employment. Schools and Colleges are rightly held accountable for the service they provide and Government needs evidence to develop policy.

However, the amount of assessment has increased, its purposes have become confused and in some instances counterproductive. The curriculum has become narrowed and teaching has been diminished as a profession. Too much time and money that could otherwise be used for productive learning is wasted on external assessments.

Prime responsibility for assessment should be restored to schools and colleges through initial and continuing professional development of teachers. A cadre of Chartered Assessors – teachers in schools and colleges with enhanced expertise in, and responsibility for, assessment - should be established. Qualifications awarded to students at the end of compulsory education should continue to be externally verified.

The assessment industry (awarding bodies) should refocus its activities on applied research and development in assessment methodology. The industry should produce assessment tools and professional development for teachers and a much slimmed down external verification service.

A Trust in Numbers

As a nation we like assessment. We place trust in the results of assessments and the instruments used to carry out them out. We particularly favour grading systems that allow who or what is being assessed to be ranked. Where a range of attributes is assessed, we develop a way of reducing complexity to a single grade to facilitate comparison. That the difference in scores may be less than the margin of error of the instrument used is rarely seen as a reason to distrust the consequent ranking.

In education, numbers are particularly useful because they allow us to indulge our fascination for norm referencing. We can test, rank, calculate an average and then expect schools to educate our children so that they are all above average. Thus it was that level 4 was first the average attainment for 11 year olds, then the target level and now the expected level.

Schools, colleges and those that teach within them are rightly accountable for the quality of education provided and the progress their students make. Institutions and individuals respond to what they are accountable for, focus their efforts, and students respond accordingly. Learning for the test, rather than learning for understanding and pleasure, becomes the goal.

We value what we assess but don't assess all that we value. So whilst we strive to enhance and measure the value that has been added, that which is not assessed becomes devalued.

A Powerful Driver

Assessment drives many things:

- the curriculum - the assessment identifies those aspects that are deemed important, focussing teaching and learning;
- improvement methods - where a need for improvement is identified, new assessments are introduced and behaviour adjusts accordingly;
- self belief – the outcome of assessment shapes lives, irrespective of the appropriateness of its content, method and timing.

A Consumer of Time and Money

Assessment is a part of learning – students need to know what they know and can do, and what they don't yet know or can't yet do, as does their teacher. When a student leaves a school or college, the receiving teacher/institution/employer also needs to know and to have confidence in the judgements made, and for this, external verification is important.

External Assessment has become very time consuming. For those students who proceed to A level, schools and colleges devote the last two months of Years 11, 12 and 13, as well as almost all of the preceding Januarys to examinations. Whilst GCSE and GCE programmes each last a notional 2 years, in practice they are much shorter. So by the end of Year 13, students will have spent the equivalent of nearly a whole academic year being examined.

It is also expensive. In 2008 the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority estimated the cost of examination fees and additional support staff in schools to be £700m per annum. In a

large secondary school, external examining costs are second only to staff costs, ahead of books and equipment, in the annual budget.

Redirection of at least some of this time and money towards learning would surely not only provide better value but improve learning outcomes.

A Disaster Wrought?

Not entirely. Assessment has been the key driver of the educational reforms begun in the 1980s. These have led to a common curriculum entitlement, greater opportunity, increased attainment (as measured by external assessment), greater accountability of teachers and institutions.

However, having driven change, a radical review of assessment is long overdue. In England, the total number of examination papers sat by young people each year – in national curriculum tests at ages 7 and 11; in GCSE examinations at 16; GNVQs; AS and A2 examinations – is around 30 million. In no other country do young people take so many examinations.

An Assessment Industry

A thriving assessment industry has grown up, fuelled largely by public funds intended for education. It is becoming increasingly allied to commercial publishing with examiners publishing text books based on their awarding bodies' specifications, further encouraging teaching and learning to the test. Schools and colleges, and their teachers, are taking the role of delivery agents for commercial publishing and certifying organisations.

Institutional improvement comes from supporting and enhancing the skills of the professionals working within them. Reserving responsibility for major aspects of course planning, assessment, moderation and judgement to external agencies weakens schools and colleges, and diminishes the professionalism of those that teach within them.

Nevertheless, awarding bodies are repositories of considerable expertise in assessment which, if the industry were to be remodelled, could be used for the benefit of teaching and learning. The assessment industry should:

- carry out applied research and development in assessment methodologies;
- produce a sophisticated range of assessment tools for teachers to use;
- provide professional development to teachers in assessment methodologies;
- provide a much slimmed down external verification service.

A Confusion of Purpose

Students are assessed for a range of purposes, only some of which are beneficial to them. A given assessment, often a test, may be used for the purposes of:

- formative assessment, to check on learning to date, to diagnose problems and to inform teaching;
- summative assessment, to grade students and award qualifications;

- institutional accountability, to measure and rank institutional performance;
- sifting young people, notably for entry to higher education;
- developing public policy, setting and measuring national standards and performance.

Each of these uses of assessment is necessary and valid in its own right. The challenge is to devise assessment protocols that promote learning and that are appropriate for the purpose.

The Way Forward

There are considerable challenges for policy makers in disentangling the current confusion of purposes if we are to move from where we are to assessment that promotes learning across the full range of the curriculum *and* meets the other legitimate objectives outlined above.

Teacher as Assessor

The first of these concerns the education system's most valuable (and expensive) resource, the teacher. As we discover more about how students learn, initial teacher training, and professional development for those already in service, should enhance practitioners' understanding of learning processes, how and when to use assessments to measure progress and diagnose learners' needs.

Some teachers should be enabled to become experts in assessment and recognised as such through the award of the Chartered Assessor designation of the Chartered Institute of Educational Assessors (CIEA). Large primaries and all secondary schools and colleges would be expected to have one or more Chartered Assessors on their staff; smaller primary schools should have at least one within their cluster. Their role would be to promote good practice, quality assuring assessments within their institution. Thus, we place the emphasis upon accrediting the individual rather than the school, as assessment requires judgement and judgements are made by people, not institutions.

Chartered Assessors would also form a cadre of assessment professionals who would conduct external verification of assessments carried out in other institutions.

With these enhancements to teacher professionalism, assessment becomes largely an internal process, *supported by* the tools and training available from the assessment industry, rather than *driven by* it.

Stage not Age

Social norms and practicalities determine that our educational institutions are structured by age. The national curriculum defines levels of attainment which can be helpful benchmarks for measuring student progress irrespective of age. Then, unhelpfully, programmes of study are split into age specific key stages which, with compulsory education and training extending to age 18, are now largely arbitrary. With exceptions that we shall come to later, assessment should be related to a child's stage of educational development rather than their age.

Assessment for Learning and Progress

Teachers have always used assessments as an integral part of teaching and learning. Rolling back the constraints of high stakes external testing would enable teachers to use

assessment to promote learning, using their judgement on when and how to assess their students in accordance with their institution's quality assurance processes.

Key to the whole learning process are basic skills in literacy and numeracy. Without these children cannot access the rest of the curriculum and are destined to failure, with manifold consequent problems within and beyond school. Efforts to increase attainment in these basic skills should continue to be accorded high priority with schools verifying students' progress against external benchmarks. For example as a first step on the attainment ladder, a minimum acceptable level of competence could be defined around the current national curriculum level 3. When a teacher considers that a child has reached this level, their school could use an externally verified assessment to assure itself that this is the case. Whilst stressing that the assessment should be carried out when the child has reached the appropriate stage in their learning, for the very large majority of children this should be by age 8.

Assessment for Qualification

When students move between institutions (eg primary to secondary, school/college to university) they should take with them a record of their achievements, a graduation certificate. This would be a summary profile of their academic and other achievements. This document would be fairly brief – one to two pages - but not so short that achievement in every subject or activity would need to be distilled down to a single grade. A single grade is, of necessity, an average and as such is a compromise between high achievement in some areas and low in others, neither of which should be masked.

The certificate would be accompanied by a "Graduation Guide". This would be along the lines of the diploma supplement used in higher education to explain to the layman the significance of the studies and activities undertaken by the student, and the achievements recorded.

With all young people remaining in compulsory education or training to age 18, this would be the main point at which external verification of achievement would be carried out. The hiatus of GCSE at age 16 will become increasingly unnecessary. Where a student continues studying in the same subject area, stopping between May and September for external examination, it is at best a waste of time. At whatever age a student stops studying a major area of the curriculum, there should be an externally verified assessment and recording of achievement.

External verification could use the tried and tested BTEC model. In addition to their own internal methods, institutions would have available to them assessment tools produced by awarding bodies. Internal quality assurance systems and achievements recorded would be verified by a Chartered Assessor external to the institution.

At the end of compulsory education and training, the young person would have a graduation certificate setting out their activities, studies and achievements for presentation to a prospective employer, or as evidence to support applications to higher education. The major attainments recorded on the certificate would have been externally verified during or at the end of the student's studies.

Application for entry to university should be post qualification. A feasibility study should be carried out to determine whether, with this change to a different model of external verification of assessment, the admissions process could be completed by the autumn. Whatever the outcome of the study, universities should not be the major determinant of the timing and manner of assessing students in schools and colleges.

Assessment for Accountability

Schools and Colleges provide a vital service and should be publicly accountable.

Performance management and capability processes within institutions are the appropriate means of dealing with issues relating to the effectiveness of individual teachers, and should be rigorously applied.

In respect of institutions, published league tables and Ofsted inspections have sharpened internal self evaluation and self improvement. Notwithstanding efforts with 'value added' measures, current accountability methods fail to take proper account of the context in which the institution works and its contribution to broader social policy imperatives. Indeed both league tables and the current inspection model are so focussed on specific aspects of student attainment that they militate against major aspects of the 'Every Child Matters' agenda. In short, current accountability methods frustrate major aspects of public policy.

Schools and Colleges should be held accountable through inspection. The model should be more holistic, shaped significantly by a school's or college's stated aims, and be based upon that used by the Independent Schools Inspectorate.

Assessment for Public Policy

Government has an ongoing need for information and data that form the evidential basis for policy, including the setting and measuring of national standards. Much of this evidence is generated as part of the day to day assessment of students and inspection of institutions. Where additional evidence is required policy makers should commission targeted HMI led reviews and institute sample testing regimes. The former Assessment of Performance Unit's approach provides a model for the latter.

Challenges for Policy Makers

This 'Counterblast' concludes with a *must do* list for policy makers:

1. Disentangle the purposes of assessment into

- *formative assessment*, to check on learning to date, to diagnose problems and to inform teaching;
- *summative assessment*, to grade students and award qualifications;
- *institutional accountability*, to measure and inform institutional development;
- *sifting young people*, notably for entry to higher education;
- *public policy development*, setting and measuring national standards and performance.

2. Establish a system whereby assessment of students is internally driven within the institution

3. Focus external verification of assessment

- on assuring basic numeracy and literacy during the primary phase;

- away from GCSE to attainment and achievement at the end school/college education and training (soon to be age 18).

4. Enhance the professionalism of the teaching force through initial and continuous training on how students learn, how to assess learning and how to diagnose learning needs.

5. Establish a cadre of Chartered Assessors – teachers who are experts in assessment – to lead assessment within their own schools and to act as external verifiers in other institutions.

6. Remodel the assessment industry to

- carry out applied research and development in assessment methodologies;
- produce a sophisticated range of assessment tools for teachers to use;
- provide professional development to teachers in assessment methodologies;
- provide an external verification service that is much slimmer than the current external examining approach.

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