

We need to talk about assessment

As the new political administration takes office, it is clear from the Labour Manifesto (2024) that the world of education is destined for change including a "...broader and richer curriculum and a full review of how it's assessed". On taking up office as Secretary of State for Education, Bridget Phillipson announced a Curriculum and Assessment Review. On completion of the Review, all state-maintained schools will be required to teach the National Curriculum to students up to the age of 16: in other words, the National Curriculum will once again become a statutory requirement for all schools (DfE, 2024).

Curriculum design and assessment are of course under continuous scrutiny be that at national or local level, but educational assessment, the focus of this paper, appears to be a domain of contrasting viewpoints and almost constant controversy, be those questions over the relationship with accountability, dissatisfaction with marking quality, or grades inflation. Discourse around assessment outcomes and accountability is also driven by the regime of Ofsted inspections and Office for Students regulations, whilst issues regarding assessment gain considerable mass media coverage only seasonally when reporting on results of tests and public examinations and their now inextricable connection to school performance tables. The outcomes of qualifications are clearly linked to the life chances of students, but since the publication of school performance data in 1992, the outcomes are of equal interest to schools and colleges as their relative performances are gauged on a national scale.

As a result, we do hear a lot of discussions around assessment, but do we really get to the bottom of the issues? And does the focus on assessment outcomes in qualifications overshadow the place of assessment in the teaching and learning process? The extent to how much of this is subjected to dispassionate, objective discourse and how well informed the various discussants are in terms of their knowledge and understanding of what might be described as the uses and abuses of educational assessment is open to question.

"Educational assessment is the process of gathering, interpreting, recording and using information about pupils' responses to educational tasks" (Cambridge Assessment Network, 2024, p.3). By this we mean to include all contexts and institutions in which judgements are made on the knowledge, skills, attitude or performance of individuals or groups based on evidence. This includes the assessment of learners in schools, colleges and universities, informal education, or workplace.

Definitions of educational assessment are manifold. Areas of shared agreement include: "... the process of gathering, interpreting, recording and using information about pupils' responses to educational tasks" (Harlen, Gipps, Broadfoot & Nuttall, 1992, p.217); involves the "... use of empirical data on student learning to refine programs and improve student learning" (Allen, 2004); uses "... multiple and diverse sources in order to develop a deep understanding of what students know, understand, and can do with their knowledge as a result of their educational experiences" (Huba & Freed, 2000); is the "... systematic basis for making inferences about the learning and development of students" (Erwin, 1991); is the "... systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development" (Palomba & Banta, 1999).

To maintain a broad perspective, a helpful umbrella definition offered by James (2010) is embraced here as an initial starting point.: “all those activities that involve eliciting evidence of student learning and drawing inferences as the basis for decisions” (James, 2010, p. 163).

Many purposes have been identified for assessment, for example monitoring, certification, formative, screening, diagnostic, eligibility, segregation, and placement (Newton, 2007). These purposes can be broadly grouped into three subgroups which can be distinguished from the purposes related to qualifications:

- The classic formative use of assessment at a fixed point in time – to support the teaching and learning of students by describing what they have learned, identifying strengths and gaps and guiding them and their teachers in what to do next
- Checking what individual students know or can do to compare them against benchmarks such as standards or competencies
- The use of assessment outcomes for evaluation, often for the further purpose of accountability. The evaluation may be of the level of learning or performance attained in a school, region, or country.

Educational assessment theoreticians, practitioners and commentators have argued persuasively for the importance of ‘curriculum coherence’ as an underpinning element of any high-performing education system (Cambridge Assessment, 2017; Schmidt & Prawat, 2006). Despite differing and disparate conceptualisations of what constitutes the terms ‘curriculum’ and ‘pedagogy’, there exists broad professional agreement that it is important to decide what learners need to learn before deciding how they should be taught and assessed (Wyse, Hayward & Pandya, 2015). The alignment of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment ensures that a direct relationship exists between what the curriculum suggests should be taught, how the curriculum is taught, the materials used, and the learner’s performance on summative and formative assessments (Schmidt et al., 2001). Therefore, the link between curriculum, assessment and pedagogy must not be ignored (Stinson & Henden, 2021). An effective assessment framework embedded within the curriculum will inform classroom practice and help improve teaching and learning (NAHT, 2014). Key to deliberate and effective alignment is that assessments are mutually supportive, carefully planned to support progression, accessible to all students, and that they reinforce both curriculum and pedagogy (Pellegrino, 2006; Pellegrino et al., 2001; Achtenhagen, 2012).

Educational assessment plays a key role in our society be that in the early years of education through to tertiary education and the workplace. Assessment is highly significant for students, their teachers, parents, educational institutions, and policy makers. If done well, assessment can provide insights into teaching and learning and give foundation to more accurate, meaningful and informed decisions that improve learning outcomes and life chances. Researchers place assessment at the heart of effective learning: “one of the best ways of improving student learning is by altering student assessment” (Trotter, 2006, p.505) and this indicates clearly why all educators need to concern themselves with assessment issues.

Educational assessment is therefore pivotal to the teaching and learning process and used widely in our society to measure system performance, award qualifications and hold institutions to account. These uses go well beyond mainstream education and cover vocational

and technical contexts and include professional qualifications and license to practice amongst other uses. Yet arguably educational assessment is the poor relation of pedagogy and practice and the Achilles heel of teacher education and professional development. And despite recognition of the lack of expertise or ‘assessment literacy’ found within the various contexts in which it is applied, there has been little in terms of a concerted effort to raise the quality of educational assessment wherever it takes place.

Assessment literacy across the educational profession has long been an area of discussion and concern (Stiggins, 1991; Gardner, 2007; Klenowski, 2012; Walker, 2020), yet little has been done to raise the understanding and efficacy of educational assessment within our teaching and training institutions from the early years of education through to the higher education phase and workplace. Research into experiences of Newly Qualified Teachers (Hobson et al., 2007) found that only 5% described the principles of assessment as a strength of their teaching and by the end of their NQT year, this had fallen to 2%. According to participants, assessment and marking were one of their top five professional development needs. In the review of initial teacher training, Carter concluded that the quality of assessment at the time was remarkably weak and “Of all areas of ITT content, we believe the most significant improvements are needed for training in assessment” (Carter, 2015, p. 9). While assessment appeared as one of the standards in the documents identifying requisite areas of teacher education - Initial teacher training: core content framework (DfE, 2019) and Initial teacher training and early career framework (DfE, 2024a), the introduction of the new framework missed the opportunity to review what students are taught in relation to assessment.

Furthermore, concern has been raised about the level of assessment expertise amongst fully qualified teachers in England and amongst those responsible for educating teachers (Gardner, 2007; Carter, 2015). The Office for Students National Student Survey suggest that students are less satisfied with Assessment and Feedback versus other dimensions of the NSS in Higher Education Institutions (Harkin et al, 2022; NSS, 2024), while in the most recent 2024 NSS, students’ responses (73%) to question: *How often does feedback help you to improve your work?* were the second lowest of all questions (OfS, 2024).

Educational assessment can also be contentious in areas such as accountability, the reliability and validity of assessment approaches, and the maintenance of standards over time. Moral and ethical issues have been raised about the use and consequences of educational assessment outcomes. For example, in a speech to the NUT Conference in 2018, delegate Katharine Lindenberg stated in reference to baseline assessments used at the start of the primary phase of education: “They are unnecessary, they are pointless, they are expensive and above all they are damaging, and they are immoral” (Turner, 2018. In Walker, 2020).

There are sound arguments for improving the quality of educational assessment as it plays a pivotal role in the teaching and learning process and has the potential to increase the validity of educational assessments (Harlen, 2004). Involving teachers in summative assessment promotes teacher professionalism and expertise more broadly (Harlen, 2004) and such a move would help to address what Prime Minister Kier Starmer noted as “possibly the biggest pressure [for teachers] is not being treated with respect” (TES, 2024).

However, the involvement of teachers in high stakes assessment raises further issues in relation to reliability and validity. Walker (2020) noted that within the academic literature on educational assessment, there is a concern over the level of assessment expertise in the teaching profession. This was further voiced by the NAHT Commission on Assessment (2014) concluding that there are tensions within the profession itself and that between the majority of those submitting evidence had little confidence in reliability of teacher assessment at the present time: “There is a worrying lack of trust in individual teacher-based assessment, which emanates from within the profession itself” (p. 15).

The numerous debates on educational assessment and its relationship with accountability are dominated by the discourse around the unintended consequences of a high-stakes assessment system. Calls for a decrease in the number of high stakes external assessments raise issues such as the pressure exerted by the publication of performance tables which have created a perverse incentive to inflate assessments (Lightman, 2015). The NAHT Commission on Assessment (2014) highlighted the challenges of multiple purposes of assessments and a possible conflict between ascertaining accountability and assessment that supports learning. Despite fundamental reforms in the education sector, most notably, the new Ofsted Education Inspection Framework (2019) and the Initial Teacher Training Core Content Framework (2019), matters of contention around assessment are not being addressed. The NAHT report (2014) appealed for a more coherent, rounded approach to assessment overall and an accountability system that does not raise the stakes and distort outcomes unnecessarily in any one area, while too restrictive assessment system leading to the narrowing of the curriculum was raised again in the report by the Independent Assessment Commission (2022).

At the same time, much of this discourse elevates the role of educators, especially when considering assessing the wider skills and attributes that should be developed and recognised in young people as they prepare for life in an ever-changing world. The national research into qualifications and assessment undertaken by Pearson (2022) offered seven final recommendations and proposed that: “Where teachers had control over elements of curriculum or assessment, they felt they could make positive impacts on their learners.” (Pearson, 2022, p9). This very much aligns with the earlier call from NAHT (2014): “Teachers need the opportunity to develop trust and confidence in their own and colleagues’ ability to assess pupils accurately”.

However, despite the centrality of the role of assessment in teaching and learning and in our system of accountability, it is clear that initial teacher education, as well as other forms of preparation for educators, for example Advance HE Fellowship Programme still lack any real focus on educational assessment (Walker, 2020). If teachers and other educational assessment specialists working in schools, universities and the workplace are to be recognised for their expertise, it is imperative that their knowledge and skills in the theory and practice of educational assessment are fully developed, their continuous professional development supported and their qualifications in these aspects publicly recognised by an accredited body, a situation that sparked the creation of the Chartered Institute of Educational Assessors in 2002 (<https://www.herts.ac.uk/ciea/chartered-institute-of-educational-assessors>). By working together, the University of Hertfordshire and CIEA believe that some of the failures found in the theory and practice of educational assessment can be addressed.

The CIEA is an independent charitable membership organisation, incorporated by Royal Charter (2007) with the purpose of promoting excellence in all aspects of educational assessment. CIEA members include teachers, examiners, school and college leaders, academics, awarding organisation personnel and people responsible for professional development in diverse sectors including finance, health and land management. The aim of the CIEA is to improve standards of educational assessment for the advancement of education and training for the public's benefit. It promotes high standards of educational assessment wherever it takes place. The CIEA has no political affiliations and does not hold a brief to represent members over contractual obligations.

The move to establish the Institute was in response to widely held concern and a major public outcry over the grading of newly introduced GCE A Level examinations in 2001/2, the level of assessment expertise in the education sector and the lack of recognised qualifications for those involved in assessment. The problems arose against a backdrop of growing unease about the complexity of the assessment used in schools and colleges and worries over the supply of people qualified to mark papers. The concern was perhaps best summed up by Dr. Ken Boston, the then head of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, who likened the English assessment system to a 'cottage industry' (BBC, 2002). At the time, the furore was widely reported and resulted in resignations at the highest level of public office.

The CIEA was established as a small independent not for profit charity with government support in 2008 with the aim of improving educational assessment in high stakes examinations be that in general, technical or vocational fields and to improve teaching and learning and provide a set of recognisable qualifications. However, subsequent administrations have not shown the same level of support for the CIEA. Following the closure of the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA) in 2011, the CIEA lost direct support from central government. It was only through an agreement to work with the University of Hertfordshire that the CIEA has been able to continue to seek its goals.

Setting and carrying out educational assessments requires particular skill, expertise and experience. The CIEA supports educational assessors by:

- Accrediting individuals against the CIEA's Professional Development Framework, with a route of progression through the CIEA professional membership grades - Associate, Member, and Fellow - for those who meet the professional standards
- Setting standards of professional conduct through a binding [Code of Practice](#)
- Offering three levels of qualifications - Certificate, Diploma, and accrediting the most experienced assessors as [Chartered Educational Assessors](#)
- Providing specialist, high quality training for individuals and organisations
- Supporting members with advice, information and professional services.

The University of Hertfordshire (UH) and CIEA, united in their quest to improve educational opportunity and fair assessment through a memorandum of understanding are currently in the process of developing a joint strategy to strengthen their work in the field of education and assessment through qualification design and delivery and research. Given a new political administration and the DfE initiated Curriculum and Assessment Review, this is a timely review

of their work. The unique combination of the extensive expertise in educational assessment within the CIEA and the breadth of qualifications across all educational sectors with the UH capacity to provide credited programmes leading to exit awards ranging from Postgraduate Certificate, through a Diploma, to a full Master's degree, and to undertake high quality educational research, places CIAE in a unique position to respond to several of the recommendations from NAHT (2014) and Pearson (2022) reports, as well as to one of the aims of the current Curriculum and Assessment Review (DfE, 2024b).

***To assist** schools in developing a robust framework for assessment, backed by appropriate professional development (NAHT, 2014); **Assess the right skills in the right way**, enabling learners to highlight their strengths and successes. - we should aim to foster a culture of innovation in assessment, ensuring we work in real time to build on new evidence and the best practice (Pearson, 2022); make qualifications and assessments **more diverse and inclusive** (Pearson, 2022) - **CIAE** provides a set of professional development for practitioners from across all levels of education, from Early Years, to Further Education and allows building expertise in educational assessment through progression of qualifications.*

***A system wide** review of assessment should be undertaken. This would help to repair the disjointed nature of assessment through all ages, 2-19 (NAHT, 2014) – by working with the University of Hertfordshire and its educational research unit, as well as having a wide network of collaborators from other organisations related to educational assessment, **CIAE** is well prepared to coordinate undertaking such review.*

*Where **valid, different types of assessment** should be re-introduced into the qualification design (Pearson, 2022) – with experience of working at QCDA, Ofqual, AQA, NAA, Cambridge Assessment, members of **CIAE** have previously advised on qualification design and are keen to offer their expertise to support this discourse.*

Reform of qualification and assessment systems should **shift to an ongoing cycle** of continuous change supported by strong data, impact studies, or evaluation (Pearson, 2022) – the University of Hertfordshire has recently developed a level 7 (MA) module in educational evaluation which can be refocused towards applying evaluative skills in assessment. As such, the module can be an individual professional development opportunity, or can contribute to accruing credits towards PG Certificate, PG Diploma, or full Masters award.

Lastly, as the current Review of Curriculum and Assessment (DfE, 2024b) aims to deliver “an assessment system that captures: the strengths of every child and young person the breadth of the curriculum”, we believe that CIAE training for lead assessors is a perfect vehicle with the capacity of developing lead assessors for every school. While undertaking professional development by individual teachers can be costly and time consuming, introducing a role of a lead assessor who can provide guidance and training on assessment, develop school assessment framework, as well as assure robust assessment infrastructure would allow individual schools or clusters immediate access to expertise and strongly support the above aim. We would be delighted to provide further information and undertake conversations about how CIEA could strengthen educational assessment under the new political administration.

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