



Testing the Water

**How assessment can underpin,
not undermine, great teaching**

Summary Version – November 2017
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LKMco works across the education, youth and policy sectors. We help organisations develop and evaluate projects for young people and carry out academic and policy research and campaigning about the issues that experience tells us matter.

Find out more at www.lkmco.org, or get in touch at info@lkmco.org.



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1. Executive summary

The consultation objectives and research design

Teachers and parents have voiced widespread concerns about how statutory tests and exams can distract schools from their core job: supporting excellent teaching and learning.¹ Tests and exams are blamed for: the narrowing of the curriculum and teaching to the test; disproportionate and destructive levels of stress among teachers and pupils, and; only valuing 'certain' sorts of achievement to the detriment of broader conceptions of success.

LKMco and Pearson therefore launched 'Testing the Water', a national consultation on the future of assessment, in late 2016. The consultation defined 'assessment' broadly, taking into account impromptu verbal feedback during lessons through to statutory tests and exams, and everything in between. The project progressed in two phases:

- **Phase 1** involved focus groups and an online consultation, which enabled us to speak to and hear from hundreds of teachers, school leaders, parents, governors and young people. This led to the publication of our Interim Report in May 2017,² which presented an overview of the main challenges facing assessment.
- **Phase 2** has tackled the challenges from phase 1 head on, drawing on: a national poll of over 1,000 teachers in England; domestic and international case studies; a literature review, and; a series of think pieces from leading global experts in assessment.

What would make teachers feel more confident and skilled when conducting assessment?

Understanding and using assessment should be a "fundamental competency for all educators".³ However, we find that:

- **Only one third of classroom teachers feel 'very confident' conducting assessment** as part of their day-to-day teaching.
- **One in five classroom teachers would not know where to look for information on assessment** if they needed it.
- **Under half of teachers received training in assessment as part of their initial teacher training**, and teachers' access to assessment training over the course of their careers is far too limited.
- **The need for training is greatest at the chalkface**; classroom teachers are less likely than their more experienced colleagues to have access to ongoing professional development in assessment.

A lack of time and money severely curtails schools' abilities to provide assessment training, and most of the available training is regarded by teachers as being low in quality. As a result, **assessment training for teachers only has a very limited impact on day-to-day practice.**

A **Central Assessment Bank should therefore be created** to give teachers free access to high quality assessments that serve a wide range of purposes. The Bank could build on the resources already available to teachers through websites such 'Diagnostic Questions'.

New teachers must be better supported in developing their understanding of assessment while training, and **trainee teachers should be expected to pass a test in assessment at the end of their training year, before qualifying.** This should be part of a broader assessment of the initial teacher training curriculum. Assessment organisations and universities should provide greater **access to in-person and online training in assessment to support teachers and school governors.**



How can assessment get the right information to the right people, at the right time?

Far too much of classroom teachers' work is geared towards summative assessment.

Lesson time is wasted attempting to grade pupils' performance, rather than conducting assessments and providing feedback that identify and support next steps in learning. A lack of technical understanding of assessment and pressure to produce data for reporting and accountability swamps teachers' ability to use diagnostic formative assessment.

Communication between schools and parents about assessments is poor, and many parents feel the summative judgements their children receive from tests and exams are too vague (including in relation to age-related expectations at primary and the new numbered GCSE grades at secondary). **There is also a lack of understanding and communication about assessment reliability** among teachers, governors and parents. Without an understanding of how reliable their assessments are, teachers "can't use those assessments to make smart decisions", argued Professor Dylan Wiliam.

Schools should therefore strictly limit the number of summative assessments they conduct so that teachers can focus on diagnostic formative assessments. **Schools should also make greater use of standardised tests**, to benchmark how their pupils compare with others nationally while also shifting some of the burden of summative assessment away from classroom teachers. **Teachers need to understand assessment reliability better** so that decisions they take based on assessments are appropriate and proportionate. Better training, access to quality resources, and more accessible information from assessment providers would facilitate this.

How can the accountability system change to enable teachers to shift emphasis back on to assessment that supports learning?

The accountability system exerts a powerful and often negative influence on day-to-day classroom assessment because teachers feel compelled to produce data for the purposes of reporting on and tracking pupils' progress, rather than uncovering what pupils have and have not remembered and understood and planning next steps accordingly. **Teachers have often felt unsupported during periods of accountability, curriculum and assessment reform.** Sometimes, though, **teachers and parents' understanding of the purposes of statutory tests and exams is inaccurate.**

In addition to supporting access to quality assessment training and resources, **the Department for Education must ensure schools receive appropriate time and support to implement curriculum and assessment reforms.** We also recommend that **the Department for Education should develop a system of matrix sampling for assessing more of the National Curriculum** (while minimising the number or length of tests pupils need to sit) to monitor standards and identify where teachers need additional support in delivering subject content. In assessing more of the curriculum, such a system has the potential to reduce the incentive for teachers to teach to the test.

While statutory assessments form the bedrock of the school accountability system, **the evidence is unclear about how statutory tests and exams can best support school- and system-level improvement.** **The Department for Education should therefore build experimentation and evaluation into assessment and accountability reform**, to better understand how its reforms impact upon standards. **Schools' headline data should be published as a three-year rolling average**, to present a more rounded picture of performance and reduce the impact of year-on-year volatility.

How can the workload associated with assessment be reduced?

The workload associated with assessment is **enormous**, and unrealistic and unsustainable expectations are often placed on classroom teachers.

Schools often have inefficient assessment practices, and in particular an over-reliance on:

- Heavy marking, and;
- Mock tests and exams.

High quality training and resources for teachers and school leaders would increase their knowledge and understanding of alternative assessment strategies. **New technology could also be used to cut teachers' workload** and improve the accuracy, reliability and validity of classroom assessment.

How can statutory assessments and tests help all young people demonstrate their academic abilities, while providing trustworthy results?

Many teachers, parents, governors, and young people feel that **statutory assessments do not adequately capture pupils' achievements**. This is in part because the **accountability system incentivises schools to pick certain qualifications over others**.

The Department for Education should therefore stop reporting schools' performance using the 'EBacc' performance measure, and instead focus on Attainment and Progress 8. Attainment and Progress 8 incorporate the EBacc subjects, but strike a balance between these and other valuable options, including arts subjects, and technical qualifications.

How can unnecessary stress about assessment be reduced?

Statutory assessments cause considerable and unnecessary stress for pupils, teachers and parents. This is because of their high stakes nature, but also because they are directly linked to judgements about teachers' and schools' performance. Stress is often 'passed down', from school leaders to teachers, and from teachers to their pupils.

This report suggests **schools should completely decouple pupils' test results from teachers' formal performance evaluations**. Results can be a useful starting point for developmental conversations about where teachers need additional support, but are not a reliable or fair way to measure one teacher's performance. **Pupils should also take a greater number of low stakes assessments** such as weekly multiple-choice quizzes, which provide significant educational benefit and could increase pupils' confidence.



1.2 Summary of the problems and challenges, and ways forward

| Question | What are the problems and challenges? | What are the ways forward? |
|--|--|---|
| What would make teachers feel more confident and skilled when conducting assessment in the classroom? | <p>Access to assessment training is inadequate and curtailed by schools' lack of spare time and money. This means:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Class teachers lack confidence in conducting assessment as part of their day-to-day work.• Class teachers are less likely than their more senior colleagues to know where to access support in assessment.• Governors lack knowledge and confidence in assessment. <hr/> <p>The quality of assessment training is inadequate, and generally only of limited help to teachers.</p> | <p>The Department for Education alongside other organisations should develop a Central Assessment Bank.</p> <p>Trainee teachers should pass an assessment test before qualifying.</p> <p>Assessment organisations and universities should provide in-person and online training to share their expertise with practitioners.</p> <hr/> <p>The Department for Education alongside other organisations should use their websites to signpost towards quality assessment resources, products, and training.</p> <p>Training must cover both the theory and practice of assessment. Training must cater to the needs of professionals working in different roles, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Senior leaders;• Middle leaders;• Class teachers;• Teaching assistants, and;• Governors and parents. |
| How can assessment get the right information to the right people, at the right time? | <p>Teachers, parents, governors, the government, employers, and young people, all need and want different things from assessment.</p> | <p>Teachers must be clear on the purpose of their assessments, identifying what information is needed, and by whom. They can then select different assessments based on this.</p> |

How can assessment get the right information to the right people, at the right time? *(continued)*

Assessments too often focus on providing information for reporting and accountability purposes, meaning:

- Teachers spend more time conducting summative assessments than they would like.
- Schools produce lots of poor quality summative data, which can distract from – and reduce the quality of – diagnostic formative assessments.

Communication about assessment between teachers, and between teachers, governors and parents, is too limited and, in particular:

- Assessments often do not provide parents with meaningful information.
- No assessment is perfectly reliable and not enough people realise this.

Schools must cut the time class teachers spend conducting summative assessments so that they can focus on conducting diagnostic, formative assessments.

Schools should use standardised tests to benchmark and report pupils' achievements.

Everyone – but especially teachers – should know how reliable assessments are.

Assessment providers should provide easily accessible and digestible information about the reliability of their assessments.

How can the accountability system change to enable teachers to shift emphasis back on to assessment that supports learning?

The accountability system often has a damaging influence on teachers' day-to-day assessment practices, because:

- Statutory tests and exams can dictate what and how pupils learn.
- Teachers face undue strain during accountability, curriculum, and assessment reforms.

The evidence is not clear on how assessment can best support school- and system-level performance.

The Department for Education should develop a system of matrix sampling for assessing more of the National Curriculum (while minimising the number and length of tests pupils need to sit).

Teachers must be given a sensible timeframe in which to implement curriculum and assessment reforms.

The Department for Education should build experimentation and evaluation into assessment and accountability reform, to better understand how its reforms impact upon standards in schools.

Ofsted should enhance assessment training for its inspectors.

The Department for Education should present schools' performance data as three-year rolling averages.

How can the accountability system change to enable teachers to shift emphasis back on to assessment that supports learning?
(continued)

Teachers and parents have misperceptions about the purposes of statutory assessments.

The Department for Education and other organisations (including schools) must ensure teachers can access high quality assessment training and resources.

The Department for Education must work with stakeholders including teachers' unions to 'myth-bust' statutory assessments.

How can the workload associated with assessment be reduced?

Schools often have inefficient assessment practices, and in particular an over-reliance on:

- Heavy marking, and;
- Mock tests and exams.

Improved access to quality training and resources could shift schools towards more efficient assessment practices, specifically:

- Reduced use of marking;
- Keeping the number of mock tests and exams to a minimum, and;
- Using technology effectively.

How can statutory assessments and tests help all young people demonstrate their academic abilities, while providing trustworthy results?

Statutory assessments and qualifications do not adequately capture all pupils' achievements, because:

- They are based upon age-related expectations.
- The accountability system incentivises schools to select certain qualifications over others.

The Department for Education should stop reporting schools' performance using the 'EBacc' performance measure, and instead focus on Attainment 8 and Progress 8.

How can unnecessary stress about assessment be reduced for young people and their teachers?

Statutory assessments result in significant and unhelpfully high levels of stress.

Linking test results to teachers' performance management can be counter-productive.

Schools should use more low stakes assessments.

Schools must decouple pupils' test results from teachers' performance evaluations.

Testing the Water – Pearson’s Response

Rod Bristow

Education must be an essentially collaborative endeavour if it is to achieve the best outcomes for learners. That’s perhaps one reason it attracts such controversy and debate, and it’s also why we sponsored this report, on which we are proud to have collaborated with colleagues at LKMco.

Testing and assessment are controversial, but often stakeholders seem to be talking at cross purposes and with varying levels of understanding about what is after all a highly technical, but incredibly high-impact, activity. Given the undoubted impact of assessment on learning and on teachers, we wanted to provide a platform for a collaborative debate; a debate which would inform our own actions as well as, perhaps, the actions of others.

The report makes a number of recommendations and suggestions for how assessment in the UK can be improved. Some may be directed more toward some education stakeholders than others, but all are relevant to us at Pearson as one of the UK’s exam boards and a worldwide education company. We take our role in assessment seriously and so we are responding to this report with energy and commitment.

At a system level, we need to reassess the purpose and nature of assessment, to separate out what is there to enable good teaching and learning and what is there to hold schools to account.

Accountability measures are important, but we expect too many different things of individual assessments – a student’s performance in a GCSE exam for example, is expected to communicate different kinds of information to students, parents, teachers, schools, regulators, government, universities and employers. If we’re to continuously improve the quality of assessments (as we should) each needs designing for a singular purpose. And if we’re to reduce distracting pressures on teachers (as we surely must) it should be clear how that purpose serves the higher goal of improving teaching and learning.

To meet that higher goal we need much more than clarity of purpose. Teachers should also be provided with better support, training and resources founded on well-researched pedagogy, equipping them with a deeper and more technical understanding of assessment, as well as the tools to plan their curriculum, deliver high quality formative assessments, mark them, and use the insights to inform their teaching.

Our commitment, as part of what we hope will be a collaborative effort, is to do our utmost to help provide that support for deeper understanding. To start with, we’ll act in four areas:

- Improve transparency and training about assessment and its relationship to effective teaching and learning by developing the Pearson Assessment Charter
- Establish an assessment bank with supporting tools for building and using assessments that encourage and enable teaching beyond the requirements of high stakes exams
- Free Access To Scripts: we will extend indefinitely our popular (free) access to scripts service and add analytical tools to support better teaching
- Publish an Annual Monitoring Review on the reliability of assessments and comparability across subjects

(A full version of the Pearson response to Testing the Water is published in the full report)



References

- ¹ Pearson (2016) *Assessments Attitudes of UK Teachers and Parents*. In June 2016 Pearson commissioned BritainThinks to conduct a survey of 506 teachers, headteachers and parents. The random sample had good spread across the country and comprised: 256 parents, all with children aged between 4 and 18; 200 fulltime teachers, and; 50 headteachers.
- ² Millard, W. and Menzies, L. (2017) *Testing the Water: Exploring the Role of Assessment in Teaching - Interim Report*, London: Pearson/LKMco.
- ³ DeLuca, C. and Johnson, S. (2017) 'Developing assessment capable teachers in this age of accountability', *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 24:2, 121-126.

“Society should ensure that all young people receive the support they need in order to make a fulfilling transition to adulthood.”



This report was written by the education and youth development ‘think and action tank’ LKMco. LKMco is a social enterprise - we believe that society has a duty to ensure children and young people receive the support they need in order to make a fulfilling transition to adulthood.

We work towards this vision by helping education and youth organisations develop, evaluate and improve their work with young people. We then carry out academic and policy research and advocacy that is grounded in our experience.

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