**Assessment – time for a re-think?**

**27th January 2021**

1. **Introduction**

When I say the word “assessment” what does that bring to mind?

Perhaps it takes you back to school days, and reminds you of the ProPlus that you took the night before exams?

Perhaps a job interview answering questions about your fitness for a role? A BTEC assessment showcasing your skills or your driving test?

In many respects, the way something is measured sends out a clear signal about its value.

Whilst exams are important, an age-old system that relies **only** on written exams signals that what matters *exclusively* is knowledge recall.

If this last year has taught us anything, it is that we need to start a debate about significant change to our education and assessment system to foster talent for the future.

Sadly, the Covid-19 pandemic has created disruption up and down the country and we weep for the 100,000 deaths we heard about yesterday.

It has exacerbated challenges across our education community. Schools, Colleges and Universities are doing their best to offer remote education for most students.

Teachers have become lab technicians, Covid testers, lunch packers and counsellors alongside their day jobs.

The divides and inequalities inherent in our system have widened.

Exams have now been cancelled for the second year in a row.

**So first, I want to reflect on the context and challenges of the current system.**

**Second, I will explore some examples of “what works” and see what lessons can be learned.**

**And third and finally, I just want to articulate what an alternative vision could look like.**

Of course, I don’t have all the answers. But if these things are not discussed, we will be stuck in an education system that lives in the past, rather than learns from it and changes what is necessary in order to conserve what is best.

1. **Current situation – the impact of Coronavirus**

There is widespread concern at the long-lasting impact that this period will have on the **‘corona cohort’** who are completing their education under the shadow of this awful disease.

Recent findings from the [Sutton Trust](https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/learning-in-lockdown/) highlight the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their better-off peers has widened with 55% of teachers in the least affluent state schools reporting a lower than normal standard of work returned by pupils. This compares to 41% at the most affluent state schools and 30% at private schools. [[1]](#footnote-1)

There is also the serious problem of too many children being on the wrong side of the digital divide.

The Government is trying to address this, by sending out more than a million laptops and free mobile data with the mobile companies.

But we have to be honest that even with all the laptops in the world, it doesn’t mean that every child would have the motivation to open it and study, nor a parent at home to oversee their learning.

Young people are also experiencing unprecedented social isolation.

Research from [YoungMinds](https://youngminds.org.uk/media/3708/coronavirus-report_march2020.pdf)[[2]](#footnote-2) revealed that 83% of students felt that the crisis has made their mental health worse.

There is no doubt that this is a challenging picture. But it would be wrong to assume that all was well and we lived in an education and skills paradise before Coronavirus – *BC*.

1. **Before Coronavirus (BC)**

[Edge’s skills shortages bulletin](https://www.edge.co.uk/sites/default/files/documents/edge_-_ssb-8_web-1c.pdf) published just last week highlights that many of these trends are not new.

Findings from the Department for Education’s own [Employer Skills Survey](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/955172/Employer_skills_survey_2019_research_report.pdf)[[3]](#footnote-3) show that in 2019, nearly a quarter of all vacancies – 214,000 roles - were skills shortage vacancies – where employers cannot find the right skills to fill a role. This was an increase of 2 percentage points since 2017.

At the same time, the latest figures from the [Office for National Statistics](https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/bulletins/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneet/november2020)[[4]](#footnote-4) estimate that 757,000 young people (aged 16 to 24 years) were not in education, employment or training in July to September 2020 - young people who should have been filling those jobs.

Building on foundations as far back as the Acland Report of 1911, GCSEs were introduced in the 1980s and have remained untouched since then.

So why do we still rely so heavily on this system?

Their original architect, Lord Baker, has said repeatedly that it is time for an overhaul.

There can be no doubt that a good grounding of knowledge is essential in all disciplines, but to focus on knowledge at the expense of all else cannot be the best way to create the flexible, resilient, multi-skilled workforce and society that is needed for the future.

Just last week, the Department for Education published the “[Skills for Jobs](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/skills-for-jobs-lifelong-learning-for-opportunity-and-growth)” white paper marking a sea-change in Government thinking around skills, apprenticeships and lifelong learning.

It signals a move towards an employer-led system for qualifications and training, as well as flexible learning through the Lifetime Skills Guarantee - offering adults the chance to “hop on and off” opportunities to fit around their busy lives.

In addition, since 2015, all students have been required to stay in education up to the age of 18.

So it is time for the curriculum and assessment to catch up.

Let’s take the advice of international experts like the OECD to blend together knowledge, skills and attitudes in our assessment system and in the teaching that underpins it – as we consider the world After Covid – *AC*.

1. **Now must be the time to act. After Coronavirus (AC) – A positive way forward**

For too long, this argument has been characterised as one of polar opposites.

Between traditionalists and progressives.

Between knowledge and skills.

Between vocational and academic.

I am a practical person and in support of a “What works” approach, not a one-size-fits-all system.

Longstanding examples like the Essex University [Edge Hotel School](https://www.edge.co.uk/sites/default/files/documents/edge_-_ehs_report_3b.pdf) enable students to combine the best of theory and practice.

To be clear, this is not (because I can see the twitter sphere already coming) an assault on knowledge-based schools.

I’m a huge admirer of Katherine Birbalsingh, founder of the Michaela schools. Her new book, *The Power of Culture,* should be required reading.

There is room for a range of high quality approaches in a world-class education system.

More Michaela schools. More Edge Hotel Schools.

I am by no means the only voice calling for change.

[Survey findings](https://www.edge.co.uk/news/edge-news/challenging-times-inspire-education-change-government-s-old-fashioned-approach-to) from the Edge Foundation found that 92% of parents and 95% of teachers want education to help their children develop a range of skills like critical thinking, creative problem solving and communication.

Amongst young people aged 14 to 19, 84% feel that schooling needs to be more flexible and adapt more quickly as a result of the pandemic.

Employers have been calling loudly for this change too.

When I meet with employers and business leaders in my constituency and ask them what they are looking for in their future workforce, their answer is simple: Absolutely they need individuals with the required knowledge. But they also need good communicators, excellent problem solvers, strong team players.

1. **What does this alternative vision look like?**

This is not simply about throwing out GCSEs because we know that teachers, students and policy-makers need to be confident that something will fill that gap.

For me, it is about a broad and balanced portfolio offering rigorous knowledge, intellectual breadth and the skills that students need to access jobs and opportunities.

So my vision is of an education and assessment system founded on three key principles:

A *skills and knowledge* based system

That is *aspirational* for all young people

And *relevant* to the world that we live in

**So let’s start with a skills and knowledge based system.**

This is not just empty rhetoric. This is something that employers consistently tell us they are looking for.

Findings from the Department for Education’s Employer Skills Survey, from the CBI and, internationally, from organisations like the World Economic Forum, all point to employers looking for skills such as problem-solving, communication, self-management, team working, creativity, numeracy and digital skills.

These are not ‘soft’ skills that come at the expense of knowledge. Indeed, knowledge is only useful where individuals have the skills to interpret and communicate it, and skills are only relevant where young people have a core knowledge to draw from.

**A surgeon cannot rely on their knowledge alone. They need skills like teamwork, good communication and the ability to sew to get the job done.**

Nor is this some kind of theoretical ‘mush’ – indeed it is the international standard.

For example, the [International Baccalaureate](https://ibo.org/) is already offered in more than 5,000 schools in over 150 countries.

To highlight how this already works in practice – students learn from a range of academic subjects such as English and Maths (and there is no one more keen on learning the multiplications timetable than me) but they also complete a practically-based project of their choice.

For example, creating a digital product, developing an online exhibition or volunteering for local conservation.

Through this, students develop a range of life skills such as risk management, presentation delivery and critical thinking - culminating in an internationally recognised qualification and if you look at countries around the world I don’t see their education system suffering or any worse than ours.

We need a similarly broad baccalaureate incorporating academic and vocational education that runs through to 18.

This would eliminate the false dichotomy between vocational and academic achievement that has dogged our system for decades.

**Second, a system that enables aspirational achievement for all young people.**

This means raising individual aspiration for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, *as well as* ensuring that young people focused on traditional academic routes also have the practical skills they need to succeed.

Let me point to the example of the [XP School](https://xpschool.org/) in Doncaster.

86% of students in their first GCSE cohort achieve grades 9-4 in English Language, in addition to all students successfully participating in the Duke of Edinburgh Award and National Citizen Service.

Importantly, the XP School is designed around a model of learning which is highly interactive and breaks down the conventional silos between individual subjects.

Students learn in ways which are brought to life through fieldwork in their local community.

Students then present their portfolio of work at the end of each project – from books that literally have become best-sellers in the local Waterstones to documentaries shown to the public in local cinemas.

**But don’t be fooled. Every exercise is linked rigorously back to the curriculum and standards that young people need to meet.**

**That’s why their students get strong GCSE exam results. That’s why Ofsted has rated the school outstanding. That’s why their CEO says proudly that they want to be ‘the best exam factory in the world – but so much more than that’.**

Something that is central to XP’s model - and to my own views - is personalisation, which I believe will help students reach the required standards.

This is absolutely not “all must have prizes”. Far from it.

It is just trying to ensure there is a level playing field, that everyone can climb the ladder of opportunity.

And this is where AI comes – although again I have been attacked on social media for supporting so called snake-oil salesmen.

I know that there are some who may be sceptical of AI.

But if we always remained stuck in the past, refusing to look at any advances in technology, where would we be?

We’d still have the steam train instead of the bullet train. The A-Z rather than Google Maps. And the penny farthing instead of the Peloton bike.

AI and one-to-one devices can understand a child’s individual learning on a micro-level and adapt assignments based on their individual skills and competencies.

To me, AI should just be like having a personal tutor at your desk.

As myself, David Davis, Sir Anthony Seldon and a host of other parliamentarians, academics and business leaders wrote in the [Sunday Times](https://twitter.com/halfon4harlowMP/status/1348230910160855051/photo/1) recently, the Government should establish a Special Royal Commission on AI to report within a number of months.

It should be made up of the finest experts and the Commission would help us to understand and prepare the nation for the impending changes that the fourth industrial revolution might have on education, our economy and our society. And everyone knows that when the fourth industrial revolution is finally upon us, the changes are going to be quite profound.

**Third, an assessment system must be relevant to the world we live in.**

Young people should be given the opportunity to learn and develop the full range of skills they need to succeed in later life and employment.

This should link to the real world and be assessed holistically, through a variety of methods such as oral presentations, projects, portfolio work, practicals and group assignments, in addition to written exams.

So let’s look at the superb example of [School 21](https://www.school21.org.uk/) in Stratford, again rated Outstanding by Ofsted – so don’t let anyone tell me that I am weak on standards and outcomes. The founders believed that education could be done differently, with every child finding their voice – metaphorically and literally.

The school’s core is their focus on ‘oracy’ – the spoken equivalent of literacy.

By supporting students to develop their speaking skills, School 21 helps every child to be confident, articulate and to express themselves fluently.

In primary schools, the focus is on pupils learning to contribute and the importance of how they communicate.

Moving into secondary school, the focus shifts to learning through talk and discussion using debates, interviews, discussion and group work.

While good grades might get you an interview, the CBI ranks verbal skills top of the ‘wish list’. Indeed, Nick Gibb – no slouch on standards, he - the Minister for schools, has himself said that ‘oracy can support the delivery of a knowledge-rich curriculum’.

1. **Conclusion**

So, to recap, what rethinking assessment is absolutely not.

It is not an assault on knowledge or on brilliant free schools like Michaela.

It is not a progressive attack on standards.

Nor does it undermine the important progress made in literacy and maths over the years and much more that of course needs to be done.

And given the inequalities that the pandemic has both highlighted and accelerated, I want to open this question to you all.

How can we at least start a debate to rethink assessment in our country?

This means questioning whether or not GCSEs should become SATs, **or** whether we establish a baccalaureate at 18, with a wide variety of skills-based and academic subjects.

Parents, teachers, employers and students would welcome Rethinking Assessment and a fundamental debate on our future education and exam system.

To quote Sir Nicholas Winton, one of my very favourite people, “If it’s not impossible, there must be a way to do it”.

1. Sutton Trust Learning in Lockdown full report.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [coronavirus-report\_march2020.pdf (youngminds.org.uk)](https://youngminds.org.uk/media/3708/coronavirus-report_march2020.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [Employer skills survey 2019 research report (publishing.service.gov.uk)](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/955172/Employer_skills_survey_2019_research_report.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)](https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/bulletins/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneet/november2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)