**Future of Qualifications and Assessment - Evidence submission**

**Part 1: Overall improvements needed**

1. **In your opinion what are the key things in our educational system that need improving for young people aged 14 to 19 (KS4/5) or perhaps another way to put this, what do you believe to be the ‘constraints’ in the educational system that hinder improvement?**

At Edge, we believe that a broad and balanced education should equip young people with the skills and knowledge they need to reach their full potential in their working and broader lives.

However, rather than a curriculum that is broad and balanced, education is characterised as one of polar opposites – between vocational and academic. For example, young people up to the age of 16 currently encounter an almost wholly academic curriculum through measures such as the EBacc (including 2 English, maths, 2 science, history or geography and a foreign language). This is squeezing out more creative and technical subjects – statistics highlight that between 2010- 2018, there was a fall of 154,000 (57%) in entries to Design and Technology GCSE and a reduction of 77,000 (20%) in entries into creative subjects. [[1]](#footnote-1) At 16, young people are then increasingly asked to make a binary choice between wholly academic (A-Level) and wholly technical (T-Level) with a phasing out of standalone Level 3 qualifications that offer opportunities for mixing these. Instead, we want education to blend together and celebrates a broader range of knowledge *as well as* technical and transferrable skills.

We also have a rigid set of high-stakes, cliff-edge exams at age 16, with all students expected to be ready for the same exam at the same age. In “[Our Plan for 14-19](https://www.edge.co.uk/documents/86/our_plan_for_14-19_education_updated_2019_0_QAINZ4L.pdf)” we found that this has led to a downward spiral of English and Maths resits for young people, leaving them demoralised. We should remove the stigma for young people who take longer to reach GCSE success, and encourage them to prepare fully for assessment when they are ready, rather than being forced into cycles of retakes.

This system of assessment drives towards a narrow form of pedagogy, encouraging teachers to work tightly within their subject discipline, focus on knowledge sharing and train to the test rather than instilling the broad competencies that young people and employers are looking for. It is perhaps no surprise that there are major issues with teacher retention. Currently, teachers are experiencing a huge workload crisis and are stretched to meet administrative burdens, compliance measures alongside the need to prepare students for high-stakes exams. Instead, teachers should be given the time to properly plan projects, and work with staff across departments to create exciting cross-curricular lessons. Our [Edge teacher externships](https://www.edge.co.uk/edge-future-learning/efl-training/an-introduction-to-teacher-externships-and-real-world-learning/) offer a model for teachers to engage with local employers and integrate key learnings into their curriculum design.

We also have a system that prioritises performance management and rewards institutional performance in a very narrow range of exams. However, exams don’t credit thoughtful team players, creative problem-solvers or excellent communicators, even though these are skills that help young people thrive, and that employers also call for. Our funding system also rewards schools solely for hanging on to their pupils, rather than incentivising broader careers advice and guidance for pupils. This is leading to a highly competitive, marketised system with institutions focused on retaining their students. Instead, we advocate for an education sector that incentives greater collaboration, one that focuses on successful student destinations as a key measure of success, rather than narrow exam results.

1. **To what extent do you feel the educational system for young people aged 14-19 is preparing them for the world of work and adult life? Should it be?**

Our education sector is not meeting the needs of our young people or industry – simply put, our 19th century curriculum is simply not fit to prepare young people for the 21st century workplace.

Employers frequently talk about the importance of ‘employability skills’ that school leavers need above and beyond qualifications. Our research in our [Joint Dialogue](https://www.edge.co.uk/research/projects/research-reports/joint-dialogue-how-are-schools-developing-real-employability-skills/) report found these key skills to be things like: problem solving, communication, self-management, teamwork, creativity, numeracy and digital skills.

However, in our latest [Skills Shortages Summary](https://www.edge.co.uk/documents/115/Skills_shortages_bulletin_summary.pdf) report we highlight that, despite the clear evidence from employers who are asking for a broad set of skills and attributes, in some cases, this is being actively deprioritised by current education policy. With cuts to education funding, an increasingly narrow curriculum and a focus on endless testing, our students are not gaining the skills needed to meet the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

In our Joint Dialogue report, when we asked teachers what they thought of the reformed GCSEs and A-Levels in 2014, we found that 38% of teachers stated changes to the Key Stage 3 curriculum have been detrimental to developing the skills and attitudes needed for work; 56% of respondents said they are limiting students’ chances to acquire creative thinking skills and 45% believe that young people have limited opportunities to develop their career development skills. Teachers have highlighted that the syllabus necessitates an increased focus on rote learning to the detriment of developing the skills and attitudes needed for work.

Our [Joint Dialogue](https://www.edge.co.uk/research/projects/research-reports/joint-dialogue-how-are-schools-developing-real-employability-skills/) report alsohighlights that creative and technical subjects – widely regarded as best for teaching key ‘employability skills’, are being squeezed out of the curriculum in favour of academic subjects assessed by exam.

We need education to support our students to develop a broader skillset. Despite the above, some schools, colleges, and universities are focusing very explicitly on developing the skills employers are asking for. [Cardiff University’s National Software Academy](https://www.edge.co.uk/research/projects/case-study-reports/A-contemporary-approach-to-employable-graduates-Cardiff-National-Software-Academy/), the [Edge Hotel School](https://www.edge.co.uk/grant-projects/edge-hotel-school/), [Ada the national college for digital skills](https://www.edge.co.uk/documents/82/Edge__SSB-8_web-1c.pdf), [School 21](https://www.edge.co.uk/edge-future-learning/edge-future-learning-leaders/school-21/) and [XP school in Doncaster](https://www.edge.co.uk/edge-future-learning/edge-future-learning-leaders/XP-School/), all provide robust examples of integrating rich employer engagement and workplace experience to prepare students for the world of work.

1. **Do we need to have some form of measurement of learning at key stages – KS4 (16) and KS5 (18/19) and if so, what should it be?**

Given that we have now raised the participation age to 18 it no longer makes sense to have two sets of high stakes exams at 16 and 18. We believe we should move away from the automatic assumption that young people should sit all their GCSEs at 16 (now that young people can’t leave education at 16 anyway). Instead, we would advocate that progress checks are used to assess student development, rather than enforcing a formal make or break point. Students could take this progress review assessment at any point in the 14- 19 phase of education when they are ready for them.

At Edge, we also support the [Rethinking Assessment movement](https://rethinkingassessment.com/about-us-ra/) which brings together a wide coalition of state and independent schools, Multi Academy Trusts, FE Colleges, academics and employers to push for change to our old-fashioned exam system. Working with a range of organisations is key to opening up a process for debate and consensus, but our view at Edge is that the 14-19 phase could culminate at age 19 with a graduation or baccalaureate-style award that contains different combinations of study and experience (e.g academic qualification, technical skills, employer interaction and extracurricular activities such as outdoor pursuits, creative and cultural activities) at different levels and span the full general-vocational range.

**Part 2: Evolution of Assessment & Qualifications**

**4. How should high-stakes assessments taken by 14–19 year olds in England evolve over the next decade?**

Question’s we’d like to address:

**What is the role of teachers in high-stakes assessment? Should the professional judgement of teachers be given more (or less) emphasis as part of the assessment process?**

Teachers should be given greater freedom and flexibility to teach in innovative and exciting ways, and we should trust their integrity and professional judgement.

As part of a broader assessment system, teacher’s professional judgement should be included as part of a wider portfolio of assessment options. By this, we believe that rather than just using written exams as a sole measure of performance, we should include a *range* of multi-modal assessment options across a learner’s portfolio including written assessment, but also oral presentations, group projects, extended projects, personal reflection and teacher assessment.

**What do you think about moving away from linear assessment and/or external assessment for academic qualifications? Are there impacts for specific groups of students in doing this?**

All learners learn differently and rather than enforcing a strict linear approach, we would advocate for 14-19 education to move from being determined by ‘age’ to ‘stage’. This allows a more flexible approach so learners have greater freedom to complete particular forms of study at their own pace.

In terms of equality, this could also support those from deprived and lower income backgrounds who may require more time and resource to realise their potential. Our present system is time-bound and, despite its rhetoric of choice, in fact offers remarkably little personal freedom. A more flexible approach would support more young people who learn and achieve at different paces.

**What is the role of high-stake assessments at age 16 and does it provide a good platform for progression to KS5? Should this system be reformed?**

In 2015, the participation age was raised to age 18, so we should now remove the artificial divide at 16 – this should not be the absolute make or break point that it once was, and instead we should encourage more freedom and flexibility for teachers and pupils.

We need to do more to smooth the cliff edge at 16. In a new longer period of 14-19 upper secondary education, assessments should become more of a progress check rather than a make or break point, that can be undertaken at the right point for each young person. This would enable students and learners to reflect on their progress and to take steps to address any gaps in their learning.

For young people who have found their talent and are ready to progress as far and fast as they can, school should not be a barrier to studying for and achieving higher levels of qualifications. Young people should be able to progress on to study Level 4 or even 5 units and qualifications whilst at school, which could be taught in collaboration with a local college or university, providing the most able with the stretch to keep them fully engaged.

**Should we assess learners ‘on-demand- i.e. when they are ready and not by age?**

Yes as highlighted previously, every learner is unique and we believe that thecurriculum and qualifications system should move from being determined by ‘age’ to ‘stage’, allowing a more flexible approach so that learners have greater freedom to complete particular forms of study at their own pace rather than having to jump artificial hurdles at 16.

**Should the measurement of pupils’ attainment be derived from a wider base of evidence than simply assessment results?**

Yes, we believe that 14-19 education should offer a richer curriculum and assessment offer so young people can develop relevant knowledge, skills and behaviours across a range of different learning experiences.

For assessment - this could translate into a relatively open upper secondary phase that normally spans four years, but allows five if need be. It would finish, as is the case in other successful examples, with a graduation or baccalaureate-style award that can contain different combinations of study and experience (including academic qualification, technical skills, employer interaction and extracurricular activities such as outdoor pursuits, creative and cultural activities) at different levels and span the full general-vocational range. For example, Universities have already recognised this, with UCAS forms having a box for the Duke of Edinburgh Award and encouraging applicants to share details of other achievements in scouting, youth leadership, the arts and sport. Examples such as the International Baccalaureate also include an extended practically-based project of their choice. For example, creating a digital product, developing an online exhibition or volunteering for local conservation. This takes a much more holistic view and through this, students develop a range of life skills such as risk management, presentation delivery and critical thinking - culminating in an internationally recognised qualification

**What is the future role of technology in assessments? E-marking and digital assessment? What’s your view – can onscreen assessment replace pen and paper exams? Can technology empower disadvantaged groups of learners?**

Yes, if used appropriately, technology should be encouraged and could also help to reduce the assessment time – for example, EDSK’s recently published “[Re-assessing the future](https://www.edsk.org/publications/reassessing-the-future-part-1/)” report estimates that online assessment could reduce the total duration of assessments by 4-5 hours compared to the current demands of GCSEs. EDSK’s report also outlines a number of countries such as Australia, Norway and Denmark who are successfully moving towards online testing.

In addition, the Mastery Transcript Consortium (a coalition of schools in the US) offers an alternative example. The consortium uses [digital high school transcripts](https://mastery.org/what-we-do/mastery-transcript/), as a form of certified school records. These capture students’ holistic learning experiences, unique strengths, abilities, interests and personal histories on a specially-designed software platform. The platform tracks everything from academic outcomes to leadership skills. Since credits are defined and certified by individual schools, the system is far from ‘one-size-fits-all’. What’s more, transcripts are recognised by university admissions, much like UCAS here in the UK.

1. [Skills\_shortages\_bulletin\_summary.pdf (edge.co.uk)](https://www.edge.co.uk/documents/115/Skills_shortages_bulletin_summary.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)