

APPG for Schools, Learning and Assessment inquiry into assessment reform: Written evidence from the Edge Foundation

The Edge Foundation is the independent education charity dedicated to shaping the future of education to meet the demands of the twenty-first century global economy and ensure that every young person has the skills they need to succeed in work and life. For this to be achieved, we believe that our curriculum and assessment system must work together to celebrate a broader range of knowledge as well as technical and transferrable skills.

Assessment: the case for change

Our nineteenth century assessment and curriculum system is not fit to prepare young people for the twenty-first century workplace. Our current assessment system was introduced in the 1980s (based on roots as far back as 1911) and has remained largely untouched since then. GCSEs in particular leave us as a global outlier, with only five other countries in the OECD setting national/regional examinations at age 16. It is not helpful to students, teachers, or employers.

We currently have a system which prioritises a rigid set of high-stakes, cliff-edge exams, with young people finding the exam system increasingly stressful. The cliff-edge at 16 means that all students are expected to be ready for the same exam at the same age. In "[Our Plan for 14-19](#)" we found that this has led to a downward spiral of English and Maths resits for young people, leaving them demoralised. Young people are telling us that the assessment system is not fit for purpose. In our March 2022 [youth roundtable](#), young people shared with us their frustrations at the exam system, with the majority finding exams excessive in number, too narrow, unfair, and unhelpful in motivating them to learn. As one young person put it,

"With greater awareness around mental health, exams carry huge pressure because even if you might know everything, it's hard to put it down on paper on one day. A lot of our future depends on that one day and it shouldn't be that way."

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This view is shared by many young people, with 49.1% stating that assessments impact their mental health negatively, according to the most recent [Youth Voice Census 2022](#), co-sponsored by Edge. Our use of 'comparable outcomes' to mark GCSEs, rather than on absolute ability, means that around one third of students are destined to fail every year. This has a detrimental effects on young people's futures, with the Education Policy Institute highlighting in its 2019 [report](#) the long-term impact on employment prospects for those who fail their GCSEs, most of whom are from disadvantaged backgrounds. Pen and paper exams are also inconsistent with the wide range of digital modes of learning that students are now comfortable using.

Our teachers are experiencing a significant workload crisis, spending hours preparing students for high-stakes exams rather than teaching for the joy of teaching and supporting learning. Teachers are currently working tightly within their subject discipline, given the emphasis on knowledge acquisition and teaching to the test. There isn't enough time within the curriculum to encourage the development of essential skills such as team-working and collaboration that employers are looking for. In our [report](#) on teachers' perspectives on employability skills in schools, nearly half (47%) of teachers surveyed believed that they have fewer opportunities to develop employability skills since the introduction of reformed GCSEs and A-Levels in 2014. As a result, there is little surprise that there are major issues with teacher retention. There is an appetite for change among educators. As a founding partner of [Rethinking Assessment](#), the Edge Foundation commissioned a YouGov [poll](#) of 1,000 teachers on the assessment system. It found overwhelming support for reform. 92% agreed that exams and league tables distort priorities of schools and stops educators from providing a well-rounded education. 92% of teachers also agreed that the assessment system needs to recognise the full range of a young person's strengths and skills, through more than just written exams; and a massive 97% believed that a rich and broad curriculum should underpin the design of any future assessment.

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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. There is also very little interdisciplinary assessment and so students are not encouraged to develop skills across subject areas. In our recent [report](#) on learners' perspectives on employability skills, 22.4% of learners reported that digital skills in particular were underdeveloped in schools. This was followed by confidence (20.2%), and creativity (17.1%). Learners also struggled to point to specific examples of how employability skills are developed within the subject-based curriculum. The report found that exams post-16 exacerbate this problem as they limit opportunities for extra-curricular activities, which are widely acknowledged amongst learners as being important in the development of employability skills. Employers have also [voiced concern](#) that qualifications alone do not give enough information about the broader skillset of potential employees. As a result, many employers, including large companies such as Apple and the BBC, no longer take qualifications into account when reviewing applications. Accountability measures like the EBacc and Progress 8 also encourage schools to prioritise academic subjects over creative and technical subjects, leading to a sharp fall in the uptake of GCSEs in these areas. Between 2010 and 2022, there has been a fall of 40% in GCSE arts entries. Design and technology GCSE had 71% fewer entries in 2022 than 2010.

Edge's vision for assessments

The question of **how** we assess is inextricably linked with **what** we assess. Currently, the assessment system dictates what teachers prioritise in the classroom. Our curriculum and assessment systems should work together to celebrate a broader range of knowledge as well as technical and transferrable skills such as: problem solving, communication, self-management, teamwork, creativity, numeracy and digital skills. Assessment should be a method to help students recognise and develop their skills and capabilities, rather than a judgement of academic merit.

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Below we lay out the changes we would like to see to assessments and the wider education system to achieve this vision.

- 1. Create a broad baccalaureate and learner profile at age 18 to truly reflect young people's wider talents** - This should be complemented by a digital learner profile which highlights learner's formal qualifications, but also their personal interests, independent projects, work experience, evidence of creativity and collaboration, and achievements outside of school. Successful examples such as the digital [Mastery Transcript](#) already exist in the USA. Meanwhile colleagues at Rethinking Assessment are piloting examples of a [learner profile](#) in the UK.
- 2. Remove the cliff-edge at 16** - All learners learn differently and rather than enforcing a strict linear approach, we would advocate for the system to move from being determined by 'age' to 'stage'. Progress checks would be 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. This could support those from deprived and lower income backgrounds who may require more time and resources to realise their potential.
- 3. Introduce multimodal assessment** - Progress does not have to be measured primarily through time-bound written exams. While we don't want to scrap written exams, we would like to see them supplemented by a greater variety of assessment modes, including coursework, oral presentations, extended investigations, group projects, teacher assessments, and multiple-choice assessment. This could make assessments exciting and engaging. [Livingstone Academy Bournemouth](#), for example, created a transdisciplinary learning and assessment pilot where students worked in groups to produce a video game. These changes would need to be incorporated into teacher Continuing Professional Development and Initial Teacher Training so that educators feel equipped to own and drive these shifts.

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4. **Less summative, more formative** - Not everything needs to be summative high-stakes assessment. Formative assessment can instead offer a touchpoint for students and teachers to reflect on learning and build on feedback.

5. **Review accountability measures for schools** – Instead of judging schools primarily on their exam results, we should develop and make full use of destination measures - building on existing underused data to help schools and colleges understand the long-term destinations of their students. We would abolish the EBacc and Progress 8 and in their place, review the National Curriculum to ensure that it is broader and more balanced. There should be a national review of the role of Ofsted to ensure that the inspection and accountability regime moves from an adversarial to a performance improvement role – [similar to inspectorates in the other three nations](#).

6. **Better support for teachers** – as this new system will rely on teachers being given greater freedom and flexibility to teach in innovative and exciting ways, it is vital that they are given proper support. Teachers should be given the time and space to work with staff across departments and with employers to create exciting cross-curricular lessons. We are supporting teachers to do this through our [Edge teacher externships](#) which involves teachers visiting a local employer, observing how their subject is used in business, and then planning a project in school linked to real-life examples.

Case study: XP School

One model that we at Edge think should be championed, is that set by [XP School](#) in Doncaster. The school is a leader in our [Edge Future Learning](#) network, a coalition of schools and colleges in the UK that can act as role models for effective, high quality practice in Project Based Learning, Real World Learning, and Community Connected Learning. It delivers its curriculum through cross-disciplinary, academically rigorous learning expeditions. These are standards-based projects that are specifically designed to make connections between subjects and encourage deep and purposeful learning experiences that develop student agency. Students are compelled to craft beautiful work, as a result of XP's approach, that connects to the wider world and has a positive social impact.

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In terms of academic learning, the students are assessed against long-term learning targets, of which there are four or six per expedition. These learning targets are aligned with standards from the National Curriculum and consider assessment criteria from GCSEs. There are at least two assessments of learning for each learning target. Assessments can take a variety of forms such as a test, presentation, experiment, speech, or a piece of writing. The final grade is decided by professional judgement, rather than by calculating an average of previous assessments, which allows a student's progress to be recognised.

Importantly, students are also assessed on Habits of Work and Learning (HOWLs), the wider skills that support their learning. The three main categories that students are assessed on are how hard they work (e.g. punctuality, attendance), how kind they are (e.g. cooperation, teamwork), and what strategies they have to get smart (e.g. self-assessment, response to feedback). Students are assessed on one or more HOWLs per term for each expedition. They are graded using the same 4-point system as academic grades but are always reported separately. Progress in these areas is taken very seriously and students are expected to take remedial action if they are not demonstrating HOWLs to an acceptable standard.

Every student is assessed holistically by all staff, with their progress monitored across curriculum areas. This allows for staff-wide appraisals of individual student performance and learning needs. Students are also given the opportunity to evaluate their work and respond to feedback on it once a week at Jump On Learning Targets (JOLT) sessions. At these sessions, students may also receive extra work to improve their learning.

XP is proof that innovative and unconventional methods do not need to come at the expense of academic excellence. At its most recent [Ofsted inspection](#), the trust was found to be outstanding in all areas. The inspection found that students are making outstanding academic progress, staff morale is high, and parents are overwhelmingly supportive of the school's work. As the school's CEO [explained](#),

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"It's the best exam factory in the world, because kids see exams as a consequence of their work, rather than the purpose."

Students also agree with the school's approach, with one student [commenting](#) that,

"At XP - the way we learn - we don't just remember facts, we create memories."

Alternative forms of assessment

We need a wider variety of assessments to capture the wider variety of skills needed for the twenty-first century. In his 2021 report, [Rethinking assessment in education: The case for change](#), Bill Lucas sets out alternative forms of assessments that may be considered for use in conjunction with written exams. We have summarised these below in the hope that they may guide the development of policy in this area.

1. **Psychometric tests** – these are self-reported online tests to measure a person's ability and aptitude. These are often favoured by employers in the recruitment process over traditional qualifications.
2. **Smart multiple-choice tests** – these can be used to measure a wider set of constructs beyond just memory recall, such as critical thinking skills.
3. **Performance-based assessment** – these allow students to showcase how they apply their learning in a meaningful way. A good example is the online test developed by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), that has effectively been able to assess collaborative problem solving and creative thinking.
4. **Extended investigations** – these allow students to be assessed over a longer period of time, removing the added stress of time-bound exams. They are already available in England through the Extended Project Qualification and the extended essay element of the International Baccalaureate.

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5. **Micro-credentialling** – assessments can provide students with digital badges upon completion, which will allow them to track their progress and recognise the 'soft' skills that they may not be aware that they have developed.

6. **On-demand and online testing** – these allow students to have their assessments when they are ready, rather than at a set time, giving them a better chance of success. Online testing also gives them the opportunity to deepen their learning by applying their knowledge rather than summarising it. This model of assessment has been championed by the EDSK think tank, who recommended in its [2021 report](#) replacing GCSEs with national computer-based assessments in almost all National Curriculum subjects at age 15. Standardised online assessments are already being used in Australia, Norway, and Denmark.

7. **Games-based assessment** – these offer an engaging way to assess students' abilities.

8. **Comparative judgement** – this allows teachers to assess students' work by comparing it to others rather than making absolute judgements.

9. **Profiling** – digital learners' profiles allow students to showcase a wider portfolio of achievements beyond academic qualifications. One example is the IB Learner Profile, which showcases attributes like knowledge and thought, alongside care and open-mindedness. Rethinking Assessment's [learner profile](#), which is being tested in schools in the UK, is another good example of this.