

Teacher assessment and the dissolution of the 'exam factories'

The medical, social, economic and political fallout from the Coronavirus pandemic is still not fully clear. But as the *Financial Times* noted on 3rd April:

'The way we wage war on the virus benefits some at the expense of others. The victims of Covid-19 are overwhelmingly the old. But the biggest victims of the lockdowns are the young and active, who are asked to suspend their education and forgo precious income. Sacrifices are inevitable, but every society must demonstrate how it will offer restitution to those who bear the heaviest burden of national efforts'.¹

There has been sudden and dramatic change to education. The cancellation of SATs, GCSEs and A

level exams; the suspension of OFSTED inspections and the closure, or partial closure of most schools with a shift to 'remote' or online learning are dramatic changes. This will leave an indelible mark on the 2020 cohort, but it will also raise questions about how and why we educate our children in future. How do we offer 'restitution' and what do we do in the aftermath?

This article is focused on the issue of assessment: teacher assessment versus exam based assessment. The publication by OFQUAL² of its plans for 'teacher assessment' has attempted to resolve the matter but many questions remain. But whatever happens in 2020, are we really going to go back to 'normal'³?

Part 1: It's the system that has failed, not our students

Before government and OFQUAL released their plans for teacher assessment, the shock of cancelling exams had traumatised some students and teachers. We have invested so much effort and emotion in trying to do our best in high stakes tests that some feel bereft arguing a 'rite of passage' has been lost⁴.

Although some teachers and students may have been secretly relieved, the details⁵ released by OFQUAL are a makeshift solution. There is an element of teacher assessment but it is overshadowed by continuing insistence on fitting attainment to the 'normal distribution curve' and rank ordering of students. As the NEU

press release stated:

'Many teachers will be uncomfortable with the concept of rank-ordering students, especially if it amounts to a rationing of grades based on previous performance data. Moderation does not have to mean rank-ordering students nor rationing of success and in an ideal use of teacher judgements during awarding this would be possible'.⁶

The ugly truth is that whatever grades teachers give their students, OFQUAL and the exam boards will super-impose a formula (probably mainly based on prior-attainment) that distributes grades according to previous year's distribution curve. This process of 'norm-referencing'

means a fixed percentage will pass and a fixed percentage will fail.

OFQUAL seem to believe that this is fair so long as no judgements about schools or teachers are made on the 2020 data set. This is true, up to a point. But is it fair? How will it impact our most disadvantaged and vulnerable students? Does it offer them any restitution or hope for the future?

We will have to wait and see what happens at the end of the awarding process, but it seems certain that many students will be disappointed and possibly angry. Conveniently and rather cynically – by claiming that is 'teacher assessment' – the government, OFQUAL and exam boards will be able to shift the >>>

2 ■ Teacher assessment and the dissolution of the 'exam factories' (part 1)

>>> blame for any concerns on teachers and schools.

The 2020 cohort deserve much more: Now!

Our exam system was failing long before the Coronavirus exposed it so brutally. In much the same way that marketisation of the NHS has left it ill-equipped to deal with a predicted pandemic, so too has our exam factory system failed its students and teachers. It is simply not enough to cobble together a dubious process of 'teacher assessment' while keeping intact all the architecture of exam system that has helped bring our education to the brink of crisis.

We cannot expect students just to pick from where they left as if nothing has happened. We already know an epidemic of mental health problems in our schools. There is also a long term teacher retention crisis due in large part to the workload created by exam factory pressures. The Government are well aware of these problems. Indeed they have sought to address them, albeit ineffectively.

So Secretary of State for Education Gavin Williamson needs to offer much more now. What could he do? First, he could take clear and bold step to protect the interest of students and give them meaningful restitution for the anguish caused by this crisis. He could announce that:

● **Baseline tests for Reception in September are cancelled.** These are unproven and unnecessary.

● **The phonic s check and Yr2 and Yr6 SATS are scrapped and only teacher assessment will be made.** The SATS are deeply controversial with many teachers believing they are worthless.

● **At GCSE level – every student entered should receive a minimum of Grade 4** and teachers should be free to allocate higher grades wherever they have evidence to

support it. There should be no restrictions imposed by norm referencing and the distribution curve. The Secretary of State should trust his teachers.

● **Likewise at 'A level', every student should pass with Grade E** and higher grades should be allocated based on teacher assessment only.

We need to recognise the trauma caused by Coronavirus and the cancellation of exams and award grades that offer some recompense and relief. Our students need to hear loud and clear that it is the system that has failed not them. Nor should we have anything to fear about cancelling exams and using teacher assessment. In 1968, as a result of the revolutionary situation in Paris, the Sorbonne University cancelled exams and everyone passed. [Research](#)⁷ shows that these students went on to benefit from the experience. It concluded that *'The consequence of 1968 for the affected group was that it became easier to progress to a further stage of higher education and thus to obtain more years of higher education than would otherwise have been the case'*.

Teachers should be in control of teacher assessment

The second thing Gavin Williamson could do is to put teachers in control of teacher assessment. Most of the concerns around teacher assessment are based on vague notions of 'maintaining standards' or wild-eyed claims of cheating.

As [Sean Vernell](#)⁸ – UCU's Vice Chair in FE – points out; *'There are those within the sector who believe that we must maintain 'standards', even in a crisis. They argue that rigorous testing and predicted grades based on performance in exams is needed to ensure that students entering higher education have*

the skills and abilities appropriate to university. But does exam-based assessment really prepare our students with the skills and the intellectual rigour to study at university, or prepare them for the world of work?'

It is claimed that there is a risk of teachers wrongly assigning grades. For example, in 2012, OFQUAL intervened in the grading of English GCSE papers after it found *'unprecedented clustering around perceived grade boundaries'* for [English GCSEs](#)⁹. In 2013, they said they had found instances of 'A-level' Science teachers over-marking pupils' performance in ['A level Science practicals'](#)¹⁰.

But these problems are not the fault of teacher assessment but mainly of the system that grades schools in league tables and measures teachers with 'performance management' based on numerical targets. It is these 'market forces' that create competition between schools and teachers that in turn creates the environment in which cheating become a solution. Scrap these structural restraints and it would be possible to breathe new life into teacher assessment.

When it comes to real teacher assessment evidence suggests that it is actually very accurate. Research has shown that [teacher assessment is as accurate as examinations](#)¹¹. Professors Kaili Rimpfeld, Margherita Malanchini and Robert Plomin conducted [detailed research](#)¹² with a UK-representative sample of more than 10,000 children. They found that: *'teacher assessments and exam scores match very closely for English, mathematics and science. This is the case both for the same school year and for pupils' exam performance in later years: a teacher assessment of a seven-year-old could accurately predict how they would do in exams* >>>

3 ■ Teacher assessment and the dissolution of the 'exam factories' (part 1)

>>> when they were 11.

This also holds for other exams. We found that teacher assessments were as useful as past exam results for predicting what grades pupils would get at GCSE and A-level. For instance, a teacher assessment at age 11 was almost as accurate as exams held at 11 at indicating what GCSE grade a pupil would get.'

In what is otherwise a [very useful article](#)¹³ weighing up the pros and cons of teacher assessment, Catherine Lough writing in the TES suggests that;

'Teachers could still be biased because of a desire to help their pupils, in the knowledge that a pass grade in English or maths at grade 4 could make the difference between pupils attending the college or course of their choice or being forced to resit the qualification.'

So, what is teaching if not a desire to help their pupils?

The whole purpose of education is to help children. It would be so much better if we could remove the notion of education as a pass or fail process and replace it with notions of development and progression. That's why it is not acceptable to see 2020 as teacher assessment blip after which we will return to 'business as usual'. The exam factory is not normal: it is an educational disaster. We need to make teacher assessment the new normal.

Ensure social justice is at the heart of teacher assessment

A third decision Williamson could make is to establish a broad consultative process to ensure that all teacher assessment is rigorously moderated to eliminate any prejudice and misjudgements especially those made in relation to social class and race.

OFQUAL have already acknowledged there is problem.

There have been powerful declarations of concern by the [Runnymede Trust and other academics](#)¹⁴. The use of prior attainment data can be very unfair. Bi-lingual students who are still acquiring language skills or summer born children who may develop later often have lower prior attainment. Predicted grades are often nonsense. For example, in Art, Drama and other creative subjects the predicted grade is based on their performance in Maths and English!

Working class and BAME students are often under-predicted¹⁵. Prof Kalwant Bhopal, director of the Centre for Research in Race and Education at Birmingham University, argues that predicted grades are often wrong, to the detriment of some categories of student.

'There's a lot of evidence to show that there are stereotypes around particular types of students, so their predicted grades are lower, and when they do the exam, they do better than their predicted grade. Students who are from white, middle-class, affluent backgrounds will do very well from these predicted grades, especially those from private schools. Their parents would just go to the school and argue the case that "My child isn't a B, they're an A", and the teachers will take that on board. Those students will do better.'*

It is tempting to believe that exams are fairer because the anonymity means they are 'colour blind'. But this ignores the reality of institutional racism leading up to the exams. A 'colour blind' exam will not put right years of disadvantage. Only a rigorous system of moderation and sampling can begin to tackle these problems. This would mean trusting teachers but also training them to be better at assessment.

Invest in teaching and schools

This is not the place to chart the crisis in school funding. There is abundant evidence [elsewhere](#)¹⁶. But it should go without saying that if the Treasury can bail out businesses to the tune of [£350 billion](#)¹⁷ it can find the funds to eradicate funding cuts and boost spending on education.

Williamson should allow schools to keep money due to the exam boards. Schools will have already paid for exam entry. These fees pay the salaries of workers at the exam boards for development and thousands of examiners who set and mark exams. They will not now be needed, although they need recompense for loss of earnings. Perhaps there will be a windfall for schools due to the cancellation. The cost of exams to taxpayer is around £300 million a year. Edu-businesses like Pearson – who own the Edexcel exam board – dominate this lucrative market. These businesses will want to ensure their interests are protected but he should insist school that school funding is the priority.

But perhaps the most important thing Williamson could do now would be to send a clear signal that the exam factory system is finished. He could abandon the straight-jacket of norm-referencing and abolish 'failure'. This government has dithered over their response to Coronavirus adopting false theories (herd immunity) and ignoring good advice (the WHO: 'test, test, test'). The exam factory is a flawed model of education.

He should signify his intention to move, decisively, away from the 'exam factory' for the 2021 cohort and beyond. The current Year 10 and Year 12 will have lost significant time in school. Their confidence in the exam system will have been battered. They too need restitution.

The 2021 cohort and beyond deserve much more as will be discussed in Part 2.

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Part 2: Time to shut down the exam factories?

If teacher assessment is acceptable now, then it must also be in the future. Returning to 3rd April *Financial Times* again, the editorial went on to argue;

'Radical reforms – reversing the prevailing policy direction of the last four decades – will need to be put on the table. Governments will have to accept a more active role in the economy. They must see public services as investments rather than liabilities and look for ways to make labour markets less insecure. Redistribution will again be on the agenda; the privileges of the elderly and wealthy in question. Policies until recently considered eccentric, such as basic income and wealth taxes, will have to be in the mix'.

The Coronavirus is not a single isolated event that will pass, and life will return to normal. The scars will be much deeper, especially the economic wounds. We have just lived through a decade of austerity and now face an economic crisis potentially as bad as the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and the Great Depression. It is simply nonsense to believe that we can return to business as usual in our schools and colleges. It is time to put radical proposals on the table.

One such radical reform would be to abolish the entire exam factory system. Of course, our schools are much more than exam factories. There are so many wonderful things happening in schools despite austerity and despite the obsession with exams. But, as outlined above, we need to make a sharp break. There will be a permanent structural problem created by the loss of so many school days. If schools reopen in September, students will have lost more than third of a school year. Attempts at remote learning will

mitigate that – although inequality in home life means that the poorest, least well-resourced students are likely to be even more disadvantaged. How will they make up time to complete their course? Will there be even more revision classes after school? The system is already saturated with these types of intervention. The better off may pay for private tutoring. Either way will see a ramping up of pressure.

That's why we need to insist that there is no return to the exam factory. Crucially this means abandoning baseline testing in reception and abolishing SATs, GCSE and A levels for 2021 and onwards. It is hard to imagine an education system without these exams. Most teachers grew up doing them and all schools are structured around them. So, is it realistic to demand this?

Our culture of 'high stakes' exams is not necessary for a good education. The Finnish education system is a testament to that. There is a lot more to learning than passing an exam at the end of a course. There are other forms of assessment that are equally rigorous. Exams can play a part in effective assessment, but alongside other forms of assessment. It is the teacher who knows the student best. They know their abilities – their strengths and weaknesses.

There are probably other radical measures that Gavin Williamson could approve such as abolishing OFSTED – a measure that would be almost universally popular. However, to unleash real change in education it will need the abolition of the exam factory system. This would open space in schools to re-imagine the curriculum and pedagogy.

Let's make this happen now: It nearly happened in 2004!

The problems of our exam obsessed system are not new, even though Gove and his successors have made them much worse. In 2004 Mike Tomlinson produced a [detailed report](#)¹⁸ called **14-19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform – Final Report of the Working Group on 14-19 Reform.**

The outstanding feature of the report was to abolish GCSE and A levels and replace it with a diploma system. This would establish parity between academic and vocational education. It would include an 'extended project' and perhaps most importantly it would be dominated by teacher assessment. Indeed, Tomlinson and his working party argued that teacher assessment was essential to promote teacher professionalism.

It is worth quoting from the summary of recommendations at length:

"At entry, foundation and intermediate levels, in place of existing GCSE-style examinations, teacher-led assessment should be the predominant mode of assessment though an element of external testing should remain. The focus of external assessment and quality control should be on ensuring that teacher-led judgements are exercised reliably and fairly for all young people, through mechanisms such as:

- *inspection, monitoring and approval of institutions to carry out assessment;*
- *establishment of a network of Chartered Assessors to lead good assessment practice in each institution;*
- *teacher training and development;*
- *systems for monitoring, evaluation and professional >>>*

5 ■ Teacher assessment and the dissolution of the 'exam factories' (part 2)

>>> development at institutional level; and

- national sampling of learners' work to ensure consistent application of standards between institutions and over time.

At advanced level, assessment should remain a balance between external examinations and in-course assessment, drawing upon the new quality assurance arrangements to place greater weight on the professional judgement of teaching staff.

Assessment of the core should combine in-course and external assessment methods."

Mike Tomlinson was no radical. In November 2000 when the widely despised Chris Woodhead resigned from OFSTED, he became Chief Inspector of Schools, a post which he held until his retirement in 2002. In fact, he was a trusted establishment figure. The reason his report was buried had more to do with the political trajectory Tony Blair than a rejection of the merits of his argument.

But it did fly in the face of the neo-liberal orthodoxy. The report was very clear about why this would benefit the profession. It argued "Teachers, lecturers and trainers would benefit from:

- a reduced assessment burden and enhanced professional status as assessors as well as teachers in a system where assessment is recognised as an integral part of the teaching process, and teachers' professional judgements are valued;
- more time to do what they do best – to inspire learners by delivering a varied and interesting curriculum in ways that motivate and are relevant and exciting to learners. This includes opportunities to develop locally-relevant curricula recognised within the national framework;
- the opportunity to develop and

use their specialist expertise and professional judgement;

- training, guidance and support needed to make the most of this enhanced role; and
- earners who are motivated by the interesting and relevant curriculum options available to them and therefore less at risk of disengagement and/or disruptive behaviour.

And for students it would mean:

"Diplomas and components would be assessed in ways which support teaching and learning and greater intellectual and skills development, and are fit for purpose. Within open diplomas up to and including intermediate level, assessment of main learning and the extended project would be predominantly teacher-led. This does not mean the end of examinations and tests.

Assessment should be conducted through a range of different styles including time-limited tests and examinations, set assignments, and practical and written tests and observations, some of which should be externally assessed, both to reinforce teachers' own assessments and to aid national monitoring of standards."

It is important to understand why it was not implemented back in 2004. Prime Minister Tony Blair ducked the issue. His popularity had plummeted in the wake of his disastrous and illegal decision to go to war in Iraq in 2003. Blair needed allies and he was worried that abolishing the 'gold standard' of GCSE and A Levels would upset his friends in the *Daily Mail* and Murdoch press. Blair's callousness and opportunism not only cost him his job, but it froze any possibility of fundamental change. Indeed, it paved the way (along with other neo-liberal policies such as academisation) for Gove and his failed theory that making exams harder would drive standards up.

Implementing Tomlinson's agenda would set us on a path to radical reform. It is not perfect as some commentators noted at the time. For example, it oversimplifies the issues of vocational education. But it is a ready-made solution from which we could begin to establish a new culture of teacher assessment and teacher professionalism that puts the exam factory in the dustbin of history and works towards creating an education system fit for 21st century.

Change fatigue or a new optimism?

One credible concern is the issue of 'change fatigue'. Teachers have had to adjust to a new GCSE system from 2016. It was implemented without sufficient time and support. The absurd change to 1-9 grading, the massive extension of content and the strictures of end of course exams imposed huge new demands on teaching and learning. Teachers have had to re-write schemes of work, re-design slides and worksheets, and re-order new textbooks and revision guides. It has been exhausting. Are we seriously going to have to change again? It is a fair point, but the crux of the matter is that this change might actually improve our professional life. Teachers would control it. It would see a return of greater levels of teacher autonomy (the academy system only offered autonomy to CEO's) and hopefully a restoration of teacher professionalism like in Finland.

There are exciting possibilities too. It would open space in our curriculum to better address the needs of students and society in 21st century. Climate change and how to respond to the threat of pandemics in our interconnected world might feature heavily in this new curriculum! We could create a diploma that ensured every >>>

6 ■ Teacher assessment and the dissolution of the 'exam factories' (part 2)

>>> student had to do academic, vocational and cultural courses to prepare students for changes in work/life patterns of the future. We can save money by eliminating the costly bureaucracy of examinations and re-invest that money to launch a renaissance in education based on teacher assessment.

Finally, a word of warning: There are *some*¹⁹ who see the shift to 'remote learning' as new business opportunity. Even worse some argue that with AI on the horizon, we will not need schools and teachers at all. Already in the US, estimates suggest over one million students are permanently on remote learning courses. They attend 'virtual schools'.

No more GERM

The causes of the Coronavirus crisis will be analysed in great detail. But it is already clear that our

society was vulnerable due to globalisation and privatisation – two key pillars of neoliberalism. Analysts of neo-liberal education have often used the acronym GERM – the Global Education Reform Movement.

GERM is characterised by standardisation, privatisation and test based accountability. As Pasi Salberg writes on his blog to introduce his book *Finnish Lessons* (2012):

'The Finnish education system has remained quite uninfected to viruses of what is often called the global education reform movement or GERM. And the reason for that is clear: professional strength and moral health of Finnish schools.'

We need to protect our education system and assert our teacher professionalism. Our position as teachers, as essential public sector workers, and as trade

unionists gives us the power and moral authority to create a better education system. We need to work with parents and our communities to reimagine education beyond GERM. We should grasp the opportunity.

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Comments on this article are welcome: please email alasdairsmith@blueyonder.co.uk

Footnotes

¹ <https://www.ft.com/content/7eff769a-74dd-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gcse-as-and-a-level-awarding-summer-2020>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/apr/07/when-the-covid-19-crisis-finally-ends-uk-schools-must-never-return-to-normal>

⁴ <https://www.tes.com/news/gcse-rite-passage-has-been-taken-away>

⁵ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/877930/Summer_2020_grades_for_GCSE_AS_A_level_EPO_AEA_in_maths_-_guidance_for_heads_of_centres.pdf

⁶ <https://neu.org.uk/press-releases/summer-2020-grades-gcse-and-level>

⁷ <https://www.parisschoolofeconomics.eu/docs/maurineric/jole-1968.proof.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.tes.com/news/assessment-time-close-down-exam-factory>

⁹ <https://www.tes.com/news/pressure-builds-ofqual-after-leaked-letters-reveal-it-overruled-fair-gcse-grades>

¹⁰ <https://www.tes.com/news/practical-science-be-removed-levels-due-fears-cheating-and-over-marking>

¹¹ <http://theconversation.com/dont-worry-about-cancelled-exams-research-shows-we-should-switch-to-teacher-assessment-permanently-134709>

¹² <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jcpp.13070>

¹³ <https://www.tes.com/news/analysis-are-teacher-assessed-gcse-grades-good-idea>

¹⁴ <https://www.tes.com/news/coronavirus-williamson-warned-over-grading-injustice>

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/19/fears-that-cancelling-exams-will-hit-black-and-poor-pupils-worst>

¹⁶ <https://schoolcuts.org.uk/>

¹⁷ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8122523/Chancellor-Rishi-Sunak-unveils-huge-package-combat-coronavirus-fallout.html>

¹⁸ [https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/16343/7/14-19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform - final report_Redacted.pdf](https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/16343/7/14-19%20Curriculum%20and%20Qualifications%20Reform%20-%20final%20report_Redacted.pdf)

¹⁹ <https://www.ft.com/content/bc568336-6537-11ea-b3f3-fe4680ea68b5>