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## Assessment in England at a crossroads: which way should we go?

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### Abstract:

Assessment policy in England is often of public significance. Assessments, especially GCSEs, A levels and their vocational equivalents, have significant stakes for candidates and wider society (including for school accountability and for selection to higher education). Such assessments are frequently critiqued. There has been little major (intended) assessment reform since early 2010s developments under Michael Gove. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has upended previous certainties about assessment. Consequently, a number of reports from educationalists and think tanks into how things might be done differently in the future have been published since 2020. In this article, I overview these reports, explore similarities and differences, and assess the policy changes they recommend. The ideas are explored in relation to four overarching themes: high stakes assessment at 16, the use of online or digital assessment, the number of subjects studied in each phase, and the relationship of academic to vocational study.

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# Assessment in England at a crossroads: which way should we go?

Tony Leech (Research Division)

## Introduction

Assessment policy in England is closely scrutinised at public and political levels. School-level assessments, especially GCSEs and A levels and their vocational equivalents, have significant stakes for candidates and for wider society. These include school accountability purposes and selection to higher and further education. Such assessments, particularly given their high stakes, are frequently critiqued for, among other things, perceived unfairness in outcomes, deleterious effects on candidate wellbeing and other problems. In addition, assessment policy closely connects to politics at the level of ideology. GCSEs and A levels have a major cultural position and are often discussed in the media, especially around the time of the publication of their results every August.

A significant reform of many aspects of England's assessment policy, including curriculum content changes and the removal of modularity in most qualifications, occurred in the early 2010s while Michael Gove was Secretary of State for Education. This reform, which resulted in new A levels and GCSEs being studied in the years from 2015, was controversial and substantial. Little major change in assessment policy has taken place since, particularly for general qualifications, except as required to deal with the emergency circumstances brought about by the pandemic. Partly as a result of this limited change, and as a consequence of the fact that the Covid-19 pandemic has upended previous certainties about assessment and education, a number of stakeholders have since 2020 published reports into how things might be done differently in the future. This article will briefly review these reports, and explore similarities and differences between them and the policy changes they recommend.

## Reports under discussion

A total of seven different reports (two of which are a series from the same organisation) will be analysed. They have different remits and areas of interest. Some explore the education system (or systems – a number of the reports cover all four nations of the United Kingdom, despite their different education systems) more widely, rather than focusing on assessment.

The Independent Assessment Commission, funded by the National Education Union trade union, was chaired by Professor Louise Hayward and conducted a review of assessment and qualifications in England for learners aged 14–19. Its

final report, entitled *Qualifications for a New Era: Equitable, Reliable Assessment*, was published in 2022. It delineated five principles that the assessment system should meet, and 10 recommendations for how it should be designed in order to achieve those aims.

At the suggestion of Sir Anthony Seldon, *The Times* newspaper set up a 22-member Education Commission in 2021 led by its columnist Rachel Sylvester. According to the introduction to the Commission's report, written by the paper's then editor John Witherow, its aim was to "examine Britain's whole education system and consider its future in the light of the Covid-19 crisis, declining social mobility, new technology and the changing nature of work". Its final report presented a 12 point plan for education, with recommendations for the qualifications system as well as for school inspection, school technology, curriculum, universities, teacher training and other areas of the education system more generally.

Pearson, the publisher and provider of qualifications such as GCSEs, A levels and BTECs, undertook a Future of Qualifications & Assessment project, resulting in a report, *Qualified to succeed: Building a 14-19 education system of choice, diversity and opportunity*. The expert panel which advised the project included high-profile educationalists and former education secretaries. It explored the opinions of over 6000 stakeholders across the education system via surveys and built on these findings, through literature review and focus groups, to develop recommendations. It agreed four "guiding principles for reform" – empowerment, coherence, adaptability and innovation – and following these principles, made seven specific recommendations for reform in qualifications and assessment. This work sat beside more specific research on issues including standard maintaining, curriculum flexibility and mathematics and English post-16 resit policy, as part of a broader programme.

The education think tank EDSK, led by former Department for Education adviser Tom Richmond, has also contributed to this discussion. In two reports under the overarching title of *Re-assessing the future* (Richmond, 2021; Richmond & Regan, 2021), the organisation set out a vision for a wide-ranging reform of secondary assessment. Focusing on four major objectives – rigour, coherence, value and aspiration – it outlined a series of far-reaching proposed changes to the education system, including in relation to digital assessment, the institutions that deliver secondary education, accountability metrics and much else. Its approach is considerably more prescriptive and directive.

Another radical new vision for the qualifications system is given by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, *Ending the Big Squeeze on Skills: How to Futureproof Education in England* (Coulter et al., 2022). Given what it describes as a situation in which "the new technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution are profoundly altering society, the economy and the labour market", it argues for a major rebalancing of English education away from "passive forms of learning focused on direct instruction and memorisation" towards the greater development of transferable skills. It suggests that "at the core of a reformed system should

be a revised curriculum, more sophisticated modes of assessment and a new, rigorous accountability framework” as well as a “comprehensive edtech strategy” (pp. 3–4). The policy recommendations it makes include new performance and accountability measures, the development of a baccalaureate-style qualification featuring multimodal assessments, changes to inspection methods and a national curriculum reform.

The National Baccalaureate Trust has also made, unsurprisingly, proposals for a national baccalaureate for England to replace (or better organise) existing qualifications into one framework for upper secondary education. The approach it recommends is evocative of the International Baccalaureate. It contains core learning modules and compulsory personal development and extended project elements. This structure must be, it argues, universal for all learners, deliverable in existing institutions and reflective of current models of learning and subjects. Issues of credit and assessment structures are also explored in detail.

Finally, there are a number of other organisations devoted to change, such as Rethinking Assessment, a coalition of teachers and others, which has explored a variety of the themes that will be considered here in various short reports and blogs. Other stakeholders have also contributed to online and media discussions on similar assessment reform themes. For example, the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) also in 2021 published a *Blueprint for a Fairer Education System*. Drawing on research evidence and expert opinion, it proposes that the essential aim of the education system should be that: “All children and young people receive a high-quality, broad and challenging education. No child or young person receives a lower standard of education as a result of their background or where they live. Schools and colleges are supported to do everything they can to counteract the socio-economic disadvantages faced by some children and young people.” To institute this, it highlights five building blocks, one being assessment and qualifications. It does not propose radical changes to assessment systems, but focuses on streamlining GCSEs, a review of assessment methods, and the close integration of assessment and curriculum.

Some individuals have contributed to or consulted on more than one of the above-mentioned reports, and indeed some of the reports refer to others of those considered. Some ideas expressed are therefore common within the community of English educationalists.

## Main themes of the reports

Some significant ideas are common to many of the reports. Most of the reports start from the premise that the present system is flawed in some major ways, including in relation to the volume of assessment and its alleged waning connection to the world of work, though the extent to which they argue that it requires *radical* reform varies. This article will focus on four specific areas as these are covered, to some degree at least, in all the reports. These are:

- whether high stakes assessment at age 16 is necessary, and if so to what degree

- the issue of how many subjects should be studied at what age
- whether digital assessments should be used more substantially
- the relationship between academic and vocational study.

Presenting what the reports say on these issues devoid of the specific contexts to which they respond provides only a partial view of the logic underpinning the recommendations offered. Each report, when read in full, can be seen to respond to particular issues to different degrees. For example, the Tony Blair Institute report is specifically animated by the question of reforming the education system to be able to provide learners with the skills they will need, it argues, to deal with “the new technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution” and to “thrive in a world increasingly shaped by automation and artificial intelligence”. Meanwhile, Pearson’s report exists in the context of it already being a major provider of qualifications, while the National Baccalaureate Trust seeks directly to propose a specific new system.

For readers to gain a stronger understanding of the logic of the specific reports, they are recommended to read them individually, as restating such logic is not the purpose of this article. Instead, it draws out and discusses general themes, and concludes by highlighting, with Freedman (2022), that the best way forward for policy in this area would be one based on “incremental” improvement and evidence-led reform.

**Table 1: References in each report to specific issues.**

Issue	<i>High stakes assessment at age 16?</i>	<i>Use of online and/or digital assessment</i>	<i>Breadth of study across subjects (especially post-16)</i>	<i>Academic/vocational relationship</i>
Report				
<b>Times Education Commission</b>	Exams in five core subjects (including maths and English) at 16. Continuous teacher assessment, online tests, presumably in other subjects	Use in core exams at 16 and in Digital Learner Profile, and in other contexts where possible, integrated into learning	British Baccalaureate at 18: academic and vocational, humanities/sciences, communication, critical thinking, extended project, community service, literacy, numeracy	Include academic and vocational options within Baccalaureate
<b>Pearson</b>	“Make GCSEs work better”; e.g. reintroduce varied types of assessment. Unnecessary to abolish GCSEs	Accelerate digital transformation. Technology can add value to assessment, but there are issues	Highlights pathway inflexibility and narrow curriculum in present system, but direct suggestions for change not offered	Notes that stakeholders say purely academic or vocational is not appropriate
<b>EDSK</b>	New online low-stakes exams one year earlier at age 15 in most curriculum subjects to replace GCSEs	Online assessment at 15. For upper secondary also considers it possible, but challenges	Baccalaureate from 15 to 18 with subject options at 3 difficulty levels (Foundation, Standard, Higher). English and maths to be compulsory	Three pathways (Academic, Applied and Technical)
<b>Independent Assessment Commission</b>	Assessment when ready (14–19). GCSEs in “present form ... need to change fundamentally”	“Deploy existing and emergent technologies to support high quality ... experiences in assessment”	Assessment when ready (14–19). Integrate academic and vocational subjects, extended project, community work into coherent 14–19 package	Academic and vocational subject options should be integrated into one package
<b>Tony Blair Institute</b>	Replace GCSE; some low stakes assessment at 16 to inform pupil choice and for school accountability	Build digital infrastructure (learner ID and digital profile) but no reference to digital exams	(Eventually) build a new qualification based on principles of IB. Continuous assessment from 16 to 18	General support for idea of greater esteem for vocational
<b>National Baccalaureate Trust</b>	Maintain assessment at 16 in a lower stakes context. Broadly retain existing qualifications	<i>No particular reference</i>	More subjects (less content). Extended project, PE, arts, community service, leadership, work experience. Could require study across subject groups	Proposed programmes can include existing vocational qualifications in the Baccalaureate

## High stakes assessment at age 16

The question of the continued necessity of high stakes assessment at 16 is one which particularly animates discussion and is a significant feature of most of the reports mentioned here. In the wider media, this is often phrased as a binary question – should we scrap GCSEs or not? The majority of the reports discussed here engage with this argument more subtly, by focusing on the question of what high stakes assessment at 16 should achieve. This is in the context of young people in England being required since 2014 to attend full-time education in some form (which could include technical study or an apprenticeship) until they are 18; consequently GCSEs are no longer a point at which one's school career can finish. GCSEs remain important as a mechanism of assessing what has been learned in the 14–16 phase, and certificating the wider range of subjects studied in secondary education before learners specialise in fewer areas. However, the necessity of them, given the other uses to which they (and their results) are put, including school accountability and selection for post-16 study, is perhaps more contestable. Many of the reports discussed are more sceptical of the need for them.

There is a general consensus across the reports (and other recent work from organisations including Rethinking Assessment) that GCSEs should change, though opinions as to what the extent of this change should be vary significantly. The National Baccalaureate Trust proposals appear to be largely compatible with existing GCSEs, while Pearson suggests that GCSEs could be made to work better. The Independent Assessment Commission, however, argues that GCSEs need to “change fundamentally” or be abolished. Different approaches are proposed. A number of the reports argue for a streamlined selection of exams in “core subjects” (with the smaller number of exams perceived to be beneficial for candidate wellbeing and efficiency, but still able to fulfil the functions of a wider suite). This is valuable, though it should be noted that streamlining in this respect could be viewed as describing having exams in fewer subjects, having fewer exams in the same number of subjects, or indeed doing both. Different arguments must be made for each of these options.

The desire to assess fewer subjects is an understandable one, especially given that, at younger ages, national assessment in England focuses only on English language, mathematics and science. At Key Stage 4, these are the core subjects in the national curriculum, though there are other compulsory subjects. However, deciding what should count as a “core” subject, and what should not, is fraught with controversy, especially when this contributes to school accountability. The EBacc performance measure (wherein schools are measured on both how many pupils take a specific set of GCSEs, and how well they do in them), contains English language and literature, maths, the sciences, geography or history and an ancient or modern language, on the basis that these are “considered essential to many degrees and open up lots of doors” (Department for Education, 2019). However, as Ashton & Ashton (2022) have found, the performance-measure focus on these subjects led to a narrowing of the curriculum: more schools spending more of their teaching time on these specific subjects, and consequently less on others such as

creative arts or design subjects. It is difficult to see how such curriculum narrowing would not also occur if the subjects on which accountability mechanisms were based were further limited (unless other ways in which it could be demanded that teaching time be set aside for other subjects were implemented, perhaps through inspection, or other accountability reforms).

Most of the writers of the reports we have considered are aware of this issue, and that of candidate wellbeing during exams, and therefore approach the question of the necessity of high stakes assessment at 16 as part of a wider reform package. For some, part of the solution is ensuring that assessment at 16 has lower stakes. For example, for Coulter et al. (2022), while GCSEs should be abolished, there is a role for “low-stakes assessments at 16 to inform pupil choice and hold schools to account”. EDSK proposes online low-stakes assessment at the end of the lower secondary phase of education.

One might reasonably question, however, the extent to which the stakes of an assessment can simply be *declared*. An assessment’s stakes for users are a function of the decisions which will be made using its outcomes, and the impact of these decisions on candidates’ lives. If an assessment at 16, for instance, restricts access to particular post-16 courses of study or the results are used in the allocation of funding to schools, then it will be over time taken more seriously (by candidates or teachers or both) and hence will take on greater stakes. For proposals to make assessment at 16 low in stakes to be meaningful, it would need to be more or less impossible to use those assessments for selection or accountability purposes (say, for example, if all post-16 students were able to study whatever they wanted regardless of results). There are certainly systems in the world which successfully use assessment at 16 for very different purposes and stakes can therefore be lower (Suto & Oates, 2021). What is critical is that all these different elements of the system (assessment, accountability and teaching, in particular) are aligned – not only in design, but in reality.

## Subject breadth

Many of the reports argue that, particularly at post-16, too few subjects are studied by learners in England. While “too few” is a subjective statement, it is true that subject breadth in England post-16 is lower than in many similar countries. The average number of qualifications taken post-16 has fallen significantly since 2016, largely as a result of the decision to make AS levels standalone qualifications (thus meaning that, where previously, students were likely to start around four qualifications in Year 12, do AS levels in all of them and then drop one, but retaining the AS level as the exit qualification in that subject and proceeding to A level in the others, now students tend to start fewer qualifications). The average number of A levels taken has remained static at just over 2.6 for the last five years (Ofqual, 2022).

In many European countries, baccalaureate structures, by contrast, mean it is common for more subjects to be studied to 18. The same general approach is taken in the International Baccalaureate, whose Diploma Programme involves

study in six subjects (generally across six different subject groups), plus additional requirements around essay writing, community service and action, and study of the theory of knowledge. The National Baccalaureate Trust proposals for England (unsurprisingly) approximate this model, though with some flexibility to allow their baccalaureate to wrap around existing qualifications. In addition, however, both the *Times* commission and EDSK offer recommendations in a baccalaureate-like form, with quite specific detail offered about which subjects should be studied, while both the Independent Assessment Commission and the Tony Blair Institute argue for a new structure built more as a baccalaureate (with less explicit focus on what should be included, however).

Others have noted benefits to increasing post-16 subject breadth. Education Policy Institute and Royal Society research (Robinson & Bunting, 2021) found that students who took post-16 qualifications from more than one subject group had higher average earnings than those who didn't, by the time they were 26. The flexibility offered by study across subject groups is valuable for the workplace, in that transferable skills are increasingly cited as essential by employers (e.g., Hofman et al., 2022). There are cultural and social benefits to avoiding the bifurcation of skills, experiences and interests associated with a binary funnelling of individuals at 16 into primarily either STEM-only or humanities-only routes.

However, any substantial changes of this form would have major costs. A greater number of teachers would be required (where there are already challenges in teacher recruitment and retention), and those that remained would have to adjust to considerable changes in the structure and content of post-16 courses. There would likely also be knock-on effects to university study, as the slimming down of content in each subject at A level that would be necessary to allow students to study more courses in the same period of time would mean that they would be less well prepared for university in specific subjects. Also, students may not appreciate more constraints on what they can study.

There are options available to policymakers that would suit the goals of those seeking greater subject breadth without a radical transformation of the system. For example, the Core Maths qualification, which provides a basis for learners who want to use mathematical and statistical skills in everyday contexts, is designed to support mathematical skills required in other A levels and is equal in size and UCAS tariff points to an AS level, could be promoted more strongly as a fourth option for post-16 students. The Extended Project Qualification similarly provides a strong foundation in the kinds of writing, research and problem-solving skills necessary for success in further study. Embedding an expectation that both STEM and humanities subjects be continued post-16 for most students could be achieved using better careers and university application guidance. Approaches to ensuring that candidates are assessed more holistically, including on their community service and action, for example, could be built into "simple baccalaureate" schemes that wrap around existing post-16 qualifications and activities but present an overall score. Overall, the extent to which a new proposal would achieve the aim of increasing subject breadth in a meaningful and relevant way would likely depend on how much it was developed as part of a

coherent package co-produced by awarding organisations, schools and colleges, universities, workplaces and other stakeholders, not to mention potential students themselves.

## Academic and vocational study

Another significant question concerning subject breadth is that of the relationship between the “academic” and “vocational” in learners’ programmes of study, and the assessment systems for them. It is a longstanding feature of the English education system that “vocational” education – that is, qualifications which are intended to prepare learners for the world of work, rather than further study, have suffered relatively to academic qualifications in terms of funding, esteem and support from government (Relly, 2021). For example, while A levels have been the main academic post-16 qualification of choice since the 1950s, recent decades have seen many short-term, not long-lasting, attempts to build new vocational qualifications including NVQs and Diplomas, a proliferation of short-term funding solutions for further education colleges and a diffusion of responsibility for vocational education.

Many of the future of assessment reports argue for giving vocational qualifications parity of esteem with academic ones. For example, the *Times* commission suggests that both academic and vocational qualifications should be integrated within its proposed Baccalaureate “under the same umbrella”, with further prestige also given to vocational education by the creation of “high-quality technical and vocational sixth forms” and the ability for post-18 funding to support students in colleges as well as universities. EDSK proposes a system of different, equally prestigious, routes through the upper secondary education system (academic, applied and technical). In a different way, respondents to Pearson research rejected the idea of a false binary (or trinary) between the different routes, arguing instead for an approach that recognises choice at the subject level, with students to take a mixture of academic, vocational and applied subjects.

However, as Ewart Keep has long argued, “without active commitment and participation by a critical mass of employers” (Keep, 2020, p. 500), vocational education and training will struggle to reach its potential. Keep has highlighted how a key characteristic of the vocational training system in England which separates it from higher-performing systems such as that of Germany is the general unwillingness of employers to contribute as much as is needed to the training of their own employees (Keep, 2020). As a result, this task has mostly fallen to state education. In Germany, vocational education and training policy has been consistent for decades, as a result of being built on an established system of social partnership between governments, firms and workers, as represented through their trade unions. In England, no such partnership can be said to exist. Approaches to the development of vocational qualifications premised chiefly on a state-based top-down reform are likely to fail without much greater focus being placed on the employer’s role in training than has hitherto been the case, even within apprenticeships. Other described weaknesses in the UK apprenticeship

system include the short terms of many apprenticeships, the fact they tend to be largely classroom-based and a weak alignment between apprenticeships and labour market need. If implemented as part of a wider skills strategy, the gradual reform of vocational qualifications to meet these challenges would likely be generally commended.

In relation to Applied General qualifications such as OCR's Cambridge Technicals and Pearson's BTECs, a recent (2020–21) government attempt to largely eliminate them and reinforce a binary of academic A levels and vocational T levels and apprenticeships for post-16 students was largely defeated by a wide coalition of stakeholders. This highlights the extent to which student choice is regarded as a strength of the English system. Proposals to *forcibly* redesign the relationship between academic and vocational qualifications in candidates' programmes of study that do not take account of the value of student choice would be similarly vulnerable to attack. However, ensuring that Applied General and similar qualifications are popular with future candidates, are appropriate preparation for work in their subjects and recognised as such, are comparable in terms of difficulty to A levels and utilise a strong breadth of assessment types, such that they can be justifiably esteemed alongside A levels, are all valuable areas for further investigation.

## Role of digital assessment

Finally, most of the reports highlight the many affordances of digital and/or online technology for improving the English assessment system. Particularly given the disruptions to education and assessment caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, digital assessment is seen by many as an important next step. Perceived benefits are varied, but are seen to include the following:

- personalisation of assessment (including for example the use of adaptive technology to ensure that questions are more appropriately targeted at candidates' ability)
- resilience of assessment (as assessments could be taken at different times throughout a course of study, rather than all at the end thereof)
- assessment of different skills (using technology to do things in assessment that are not possible with pen and paper, and ensuring that assessment is more relevant to the ways of working learners will experience in the workplace or further study)
- feedback through assessment (using digital assessment to demonstrate more directly to learners than in exams their areas of strength and weakness)
- wellbeing during assessment (as the use of adaptivity or other online assessment affordances could result in assessments of similar reliability being undertaken in less candidate time, and therefore potentially support candidates' mental health).

There would also likely be financial savings on the printing and the administration of pen-and-paper exams, if properly rolled out as part of a national system. Countries including New Zealand have in the last few years converted their assessment systems to digital, with significant benefits. In England, the most immediately relevant benefits for higher stakes assessments from the list above

may be those relating to system resilience, wellbeing and the ability to assess different skills, which may have important strengths in terms of validity.

However, rolling out a mass digital assessment system has many barriers. The issue of reliable access to the internet in order to conduct assessments, whether at schools or candidates' homes, is at the heart of equity concerns in this area. It would be necessary not only for candidates to have access to the digital assessment technologies during the assessments themselves, but also throughout teaching and learning periods related to them, so they can become familiar with the processes and requirements, and how to use the technology. The use of digital assessment in higher stakes contexts than hitherto would also require extensive testing and development. It is also likely that a single national procurement for the technology would be necessary for reasons of consistency and simplicity at centre level. At present, in the absence of this, each awarding organisation (including Cambridge University Press & Assessment's OCR exam board) is developing its own approach to digital assessment, which is challenging in terms of the ability to develop national standards.

Moreover, it should not be forgotten that digital assessment changes the constructs being assessed, even in a situation where pre-existing pen-and-paper assessments are merely "lifted and shifted" to a digital delivery system (Puhan & Kim, 2022). Thus, the greater use of digital assessment implies and requires considerable work on comparability of assessments before considering the technology ready to use, not only in relation to comparability between digital and paper systems *in general*, but in relation to candidates from particular identity groups, socioeconomic groups or ability groups (Hughes & Elliott, 2022).

An approach to the digital transformation that appropriately took account of these issues, and therefore had a clear focus, was devoted to equitable access and had a national development and testing model, would be a positive step for England. Areas of further thinking in this regard with particular relevance to formal assessments would include the possibility of streamlining assessments, especially at GCSE, to ensure more efficient and reliable grading while reducing the burden of assessment on candidates. There are also a number of significant affordances of greater digital *formative* assessment.

## Conclusion

It is heartening that educational assessment in England is the subject of profound, broad, impassioned and often well-evidenced discussion and debate. It is right that the areas covered above are brought to the attention of policymakers in education, and debates within them supported by the best evidence and expertise. The most satisfying elements of these reports are those which start from clear premises – statements of what should be achieved by the education system, and particularly assessment within it – and consequently argue for a coherent but parsimonious set of reforms that can best achieve those aims.

As Freedman (2022) has argued, many of the more radical approaches set out do not necessarily have the strongest base of evidence behind them. In many cases

the perceived benefits of radical changes would have considerable costs and would themselves provoke further costly changes (e.g. to university admissions processes). The English education system would therefore benefit more from a model of “incremental improvement around assessment” (Freedman, 2022). As part of a wider expert-led and evidence-based strategy, there are valuable changes that could be made in terms of streamlining, updating and digitising assessment, as well as considering the breadth and depth of the curriculum and the relationship between different subjects. A model of evolution, not revolution, would allow policymakers and stakeholders the benefit of being able to carefully reflect on what works and what does not from the present system, and ensure that changes proposed have real value in making education and assessment better for all learners.

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