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Agency

# **Government response: Commission on Assessment without Levels**

**September 2015**

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## Introduction

We welcome the final report of the Commission on Assessment Without Levels and thank its Chair, John McIntosh, and other members for their hard work and commitment in producing their advice and recommendations. We are also grateful to the schools and other stakeholders who have engaged so positively with the Commission in order to inform their thinking and share good practice.

We took the decision to remove levels from the national curriculum because it was clear that they were no longer fit for purpose. Since their introduction in 1988, national curriculum levels came to dominate all forms of assessment, and were often having a negative impact on teaching.

In removing levels, we were clear that we wanted schools to have the freedom to develop their own approaches to assessment to align with their curriculum and to meet the needs of their pupils. We are aware, however, that many schools have sought support in order to help them develop new approaches. The Commission on Assessment Without Levels was therefore set up to provide information and advice to schools as they develop and implement new systems of assessment..

In this document we outline our high level response to the Commission's report and recommendations, including the next steps for taking these recommendations forward.

## **Government response**

### **The rationale for the removal of levels**

When we developed the new national curriculum, it became clear that levels were not sufficiently aligned with its content, aims and ethos. We are grateful to the Commission for setting out the problems generated by levels and for highlighting the improvements in practice that can be gained by schools developing their own approaches to assessment that are more closely tailored to meet the needs of their curriculum, pupils and staff.

We agree with the Commission that curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are, and should be, closely linked. Assessment of pupils' attainment and progress should be linked to the curriculum followed by the school and should be used in such a way as to support continuous improvement in teaching practice. We support the Commission's view that schools should place a high value on day-to-day formative assessment that does not rely heavily on the collection of data and hope this will lead to reductions in teacher workload.

The Commission's definition of mastery in assessment is particularly helpful and reflects an underpinning principle of the new curriculum that pupils should achieve a secure and deep understanding of the whole curriculum content before being moved on to new content. It is important that schools, and those who support schools, have a clear and singular definition of mastery.

### **The purposes and principles of assessment**

We recognise that schools may require varying degrees of support in order to adapt to assessment without levels. We are grateful to the Commission for their advice to schools on the fundamental purposes and principles of high quality assessment. It is important for schools to consider how they use assessment to support good teaching practice.

It is right that the Commission has not prescribed a specific model for in-school assessment. We believe that schools are best placed to determine what type of system will work for them. They have detailed knowledge of their pupils and the expertise to apply it. We encourage schools to make the most of the freedoms offered by the removal of levels and to use the Commission's advice to think carefully about the kind of system that would best meet the needs of their pupils, curriculum and staff when developing or reviewing their approach.

## **Guidance for assessment policies**

We are pleased that the Commission has created a very practical guide for schools to use when writing their assessment policies. The guidance covers all the essential elements of an effective policy without prescribing detailed content. We hope that the questions suggested in the guidance will engage schools in reflecting on how they can achieve best practice in assessment and use it to support the highest standards of teaching and the best outcomes for pupils.

## **Data collection and reporting**

We agree that it is crucial for school leaders to think carefully about why and how they collect and record assessment data. All information collected on pupil performance should have a clear rationale behind it and school leaders should ensure that the collection does not create unnecessary workload for teachers or other staff members. Neither we nor Ofsted prescribe the amount of data that should be recorded for in-school assessment. Schools should be free to implement a system that works for their pupils and staff.

We have already committed to establish a working group on school data management as part of our response to the Workload Challenge. This online consultation asked teachers what unnecessary and unproductive tasks they carry out, what strategies work in their schools to address them and what more the Government could do to help. In our response we committed to establish a group to come up with principles for good in-school data management, including how pupil progress is monitored.

We believe it is vital to ensure continuity between the work of the Commission and that of the data management group. The Commission's work provides a sound basis on which the group will be able to build.

## **Evaluating external assessment systems**

We support the Commission's views that schools should properly consider the merits of external assessment systems and ensure value for money before investing in any products. While we firmly believe that schools should have the freedom to choose their assessment systems, we endorse the Commission's view that these must be selected carefully to ensure they align with schools' policies and curricula and meet the needs of their pupils.

We encourage schools that are considering purchasing external assessments to use the advice provided by the Commission in order to help them consider the products available to ensure they implement the most suitable system for their curriculum and make best

use of public money. It is worth reiterating that neither the Department for Education nor Ofsted endorses any particular external provider or school-based approach.

## **Accountability and inspection**

We are grateful to Ofsted for contributing to the work of the Commission. It is reassuring to see so much alignment between the Commission's views on effective assessment and the approach taken by Ofsted in inspection. The relevant parts of the Ofsted handbook have helpfully been included in the Commission's report. These make it clear what is expected of schools in terms of: teaching, learning and assessment; leadership and management; and outcomes for pupils.

The Commission's report has served a valuable function in helping to combat the myths that surround accountability and inspection. In particular it should be noted that Ofsted do not require large amounts of assessment data in order to evaluate a school's performance. This is an important point which recurs throughout the Commission's report and which we hope will help to tackle workload concerns.

We would like to repeat here the important point in the Commission's report that school leaders should not seek to devise a system that they think inspectors will want to see; it should be one that works for their pupils, with the sole aim of supporting their achievement.

## **Ensuring a fully inclusive approach to assessment**

It is unquestionably the case that high quality assessment should: be inclusive of all abilities and that schools should apply high expectations equally to pupils with SEN and disabilities as to all other pupils. We are grateful to the Commission for emphasising these messages and for providing advice to support schools in upholding them.

We know that, like us, schools take their equalities duties seriously, but that getting it right can, at times, be challenging. We are pleased that the Commission has highlighted the importance of using assessment to contribute to the early and accurate identification of children and young people's special educational needs and any requirements for support and intervention.

We thank the Commission for the consideration it has given throughout its report to pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and for its commitment to ensuring that all pupils receive high quality assessment that meets their specific needs. This is a commitment that we share.

## Teacher education

We agree with the Commission that high quality initial teacher training (ITT) and continuing professional development are essential to help build expertise in assessment. We have already appointed Stephen Munday to lead an expert group to develop a framework of core ITT content to build a stronger understanding of the essential elements of ITT in England. We want to ensure that the systems we have in place for training and developing teachers are rigorous and evidenced based.

The Commission's report said that there should be greater continuity between ITT and professional development to ensure that early career development in particular is cohesive. We agree that high quality professional development, which continues after ITT is complete, is necessary to improve teachers' understanding and use of assessment and to ensure we achieve the highest standards of educational practice to compete with the most successful educational jurisdictions around the world.

## Next steps and recommendations

The Commission has made a number of recommendations to ensure its work is shared and embedded and that it leads to real change in the system. We will address them here in turn.

### Implementation and advocacy

1. The Commission recommends the appointment of a standing committee on assessment, supported by a panel of experts. The committee could call on the experts to provide advice when required, to oversee the next phase of implementation and to have continuing stewardship of assessment development.

We agree that it is very important that the expert advice provided by the Commission reaches all those schools and wider stakeholders who will benefit from it. There is a need for the Department to continue working with assessment experts to ensure that the profession has the support it needs to provide high quality assessment without levels. We agree that further work is needed to raise awareness of good practice in assessment and to ensure that there is a shared understanding of the purposes and principles of assessment without levels across all organisations involved in education. We are exploring the best ways to do so.

### Teacher education

2. The Commission recommends that any Government review of initial teacher training ensures that assessment is included in the core content for teacher training. It also recommends that the Government considers funding a suitable training course for one person within each Teaching School alliance, who will become a Specialist

Leader in Education on assessment to provide professional development on assessment more widely.

We agree with the recommendation that all initial teacher training (ITT) should include assessment in its core content. The Teachers' Standards, which define the framework which all ITT must cover, already require all trainees to demonstrate that they can "make accurate and productive use of assessment". Nevertheless, the recent review of ITT carried out by Sir Andrew Carter identified assessment as an area of potential weakness in some ITT programmes.

In response to Sir Andrew's recommendations we have set up an independent group, chaired by Stephen Munday, which is tasked with developing a core framework for the content of ITT; we will consider how best to ensure that assessment is appropriately covered as part of the core curriculum. We also acknowledge that training staff within Teaching School alliances would be an expedient way to start building expertise for cascading more widely. We will explore the best way to increase expertise within Teaching Schools, including exploring suitable options for training.

## **Shared information and resources**

3. The Commission recommends the establishment of a national item bank of assessment questions to be used both for formative assessment in the classroom, to help teachers evaluate understanding of a topic or concept, and for summative assessment, by enabling teachers to create bespoke tests for assessment at the end of a topic or teaching period. The Commission also recommends the creation of a dedicated online forum where teachers can share their ideas on assessment.

We recognise that schools will value any materials which help to support good practice in assessment without levels and acknowledge the valuable role that effective questioning can play in both formative and summative assessment. We will explore the best way to establish and implement a national item bank.

We agree that there is value in encouraging a constructive dialogue across schools about best practice in assessment. We will consider the best way to support the creation of an online forum.

## **Inspection and accountability**

4. The Commission recommends the development of a training module that can be used for both senior leaders in schools and Ofsted inspectors to ensure a shared understanding of the principles and purposes of assessment, what good practice looks like and how it can be demonstrated in schools. This training course should also be available to Regional School Commissioners and Local Authorities to ensure join up across the system.



We strongly endorse the Commission's view that schools and Ofsted inspectors should have a shared understanding of good practice in assessment and of what is required to demonstrate it. We will investigate the best options for providing a suitable training course for use by schools and Ofsted inspectors.

## **School data management**

5. The Commission welcomes the Department for Education's decision to establish a review group on school data management and recommends that this group helps to build the evidence base to understand what drives data management practices and provides further practical advice to schools on reducing the workload burden.

The review group will conduct its work with a careful view to helping reduce unnecessary workload. We will encourage the group to build on the excellent work of the Commission and will aim to ensure continuity between the two.

## **Assessment for all**

6. The Commission welcomes the Department for Education's plans to establish an expert group on assessment for pupils who are working below the level of the national curriculum tests. The Commission recommends this includes a review of P-Scales to ensure they remain fit for purpose.

We announced the expert group on assessment for pupils working below the level of the national curriculum tests on 13 July 2015. We are keen to ensure that there is also continuity between this group and the Commission.



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