WE Position Paper II: What’s next for assessment? Finding a balanced solution for summer 2021

Report created with Whole Education trust leaders participating in Leading a Whole Education in Trusts series

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Executive summary

What are trust leaders’ reflections on the 2021 assessment debate?

The government is still fully committed to exams taking place as normal because they believe this is the fairest approach. The debate has exposed the extent to which the English model of education is dependent on high-stakes testing.

The debate has also highlighted the status of teachers: the government does not appear to trust teachers - and leaders felt that as a sector, we did not take the opportunity of summer 2020 to rebut this narrative.

What underpinning principles should guide our approach to assessment for 2021?

There is a positive and widely-shared agreement in the system about what our aim should be: to provide fairness. More difficult, however, is finding a fair solution that provides fairness between the various, different groups and interests.

This year is an opportunity for assessment to return to its original purpose - finding out what children have learned.

So how should we do it? Priorities for summer 2021

Above all, schools and students urgently need clarity on (realistic) plans for summer 2021.

Government and regulators should adopt a balanced model combining internal and external assessments.

Given the disruption caused by Covid is unequal, we should get serious about collecting and considering evidence of missed learning.

Schools should pragmatically find ways to collect evidence of learning throughout the year to support a strengthened centre-assessed grade.

Schools should start a professional discourse around teacher assessment, bias and validity to demonstrate that they are engaging with the issue.

Educators should demonstrate this rigour and professionalism by investing in accreditation for a lead assessor in each school and creating departmental and whole school frameworks for assessment.

Looking to the future: how assessment in 2021 can point towards a better way

In the future assessments could focus on identifying and supporting learning, and assess a broad set of knowledge, skills and qualities.

Accountability serves a crucial purpose in education - but the same assessments can’t do it all. Separating accountability from high-stakes assessments could improve the quality of both.

Let’s use this year to challenge our lack of trust in each other and build a model based on collaboration

Background:

Whole Education is a national network of schools and trusts collaborating to providing a high-quality whole education for all their young people.

Leading a Whole Education in Trusts supports leaders across trusts to share and learn from each others practice and explore what leading a whole education across a group of schools looks like.

 Leaders in the LAWET group support and inspire each other to take a sustainable, long-term approach to leadership that challenges the short-termism we see in the English education system.

The WE Trust Influence Forums are roundtable events that provide trust leaders with the space and time to collectively influence each other and the system and become a powerful, positive voice for the change they want to see in education.

Further info:

Are you curious to find out more?

If have any thoughts or comments, we would love to hear from you.

Get in touch trust@wholeeducation.org
What are trust leaders reflections on the current debate around assessment?

Trust leaders felt that the chaos and confusion last summer was a product of the English system’s disproportionate focus on terminal assessments. Our high-stakes assessments are used to fulfill a number of sometimes competing or contradictory objectives. They reflect the model of competition, rather than cooperation, baked in to the heart of education policy. The current moment is forcing the system to confront some of these tensions - which may be positive in the long-term.

1. The government is still fully committed to exams taking place as normal because they believe this is the fairest approach for young people.
2. The English model of education is highly dependent on high-stakes testing which is why the government has struggled with how to approach assessment during Covid-19.
3. The debate has highlighted the status of teachers: the government does not appear to trust teachers. As a consequence, policy decisions - both from government but also decisions we have made in schools - have de-professionalised teachers in response.
4. Leaders felt that to some extent, as a profession, educators had not taken the opportunity of summer 2020 to rebut this narrative about teacher credibility. There was a feeling that perhaps we had fallen into the traps of becoming defensive in response.

“How fair were our center-assessed grades in 2020 and how much better can we do? This is the moment to grasp the opportunity to do something different - otherwise we will be stuck with old habits.”

In detail:

(1) Trust leaders understood the government’s commitment to exams taking place as normal, but thought it was very unrealistic. They also argued that even if it was possible, it risked increasing existing inequalities and creating new ones. Relying on terminal exams would not be fair for many students, because the impact of Covid-19 on learning has varied widely due to local lockdowns and regional outbreaks.

(2) Trust leaders identified that the key challenge in finding an alternative approach was not so much the English system’s use of assessments generally - a valuable tool for learning - but of using the same high-stakes tests for multiple, competing purposes. The Covid-19 disruption had highlighted the flaws using the same assessments to sort students, determine their future destinations, and compare and judge school performance.

(3) The current debate showed that trust in teachers has been eroded to the extent that teacher/centre assessed grades were not viewed as a viable option. That lack of trust has meant we have not invested time or money in training and opportunities to develop more accurate teacher assessment competence.

(4) One leader asked if educators had ‘shot ourselves in the foot’ during the algorithm chaos. Teacher-assessed grades were seen as validating the narrative that teachers couldn’t be trusted or were too generous. Leaders felt a need to show leadership and make the the case for credible teacher judgement.
What underpinning principles should guide our approach to assessment for 2021?

Trust leaders were keen to respond to this tricky context with a positive, widely-supported alternative, that unpicked some of the contradictions in the current assessment system. This alternative should provide - and balance - fairness for all students (individually and as groups), and show the teaching profession working in a collaborative, constructive and credible way.

Summary:

1. **There is a positive level of agreement from everyone in the system about what our aim should be with assessment: to provide fairness.**

   Almost all stakeholders and groups share the starting position and guiding principle for the difficult question of how to approach assessment in 2021. This gives a constructive and collaborative starting point to the debate.

2. **More difficult, however, is balancing a fair solution for all the different, competing interests involved.**

   Leaders struggled with how we could resolve the tensions between different types of fairness. There needs to be fairness at an individual student level - that students get a good grade that reflects their ability and individual circumstances over the past year, and doesn’t unfairly close doors to them. However there also needs to be fairness between students in different regions (as we know Covid has led to a much greater loss of learning in some places than others), between different groups of students (more affluent students in general are likely to have been less affected by school closures) and between different cohorts (a solution should also provide fairness for past and future cohorts of learners).

3. **This year is an opportunity for assessment to return to its original purpose - finding out what children have learned, and giving them an opportunity to demonstrate what they know and can do.**

   This is what matters most in assessment - whether at classroom, department, school, trust or system level: creating data on how children are doing with their learning. Returning to these fundamental principles can make the case in future years that this is what assessment is all about - not judging institutions. This is an opportunity for schools - and we should take it.

“This is an opportunity to look at why we assess and whether we are assessing the right things - and to put our WE principles into practice”
So how should we do it? Outlining some **system** priorities for assessment in summer 2021

Trust leaders outlined an agenda, informed by Sir John Dunford, Gwyn Ap Hari’s TES article and provocations from Liz Robinson and Martin Said to enhance the evidence of exams that take place with rigorous internal evidence from centres which is supported and supplemented with a portfolio of evidence.

This can be a form of teacher-led assessment that demonstrates itself to be credible and rigorous and makes the case for the learners most impacted by the consequences of Covid, supporting the government’s commitment to fairness and a levelling up agenda that supports students right across the country.

1. **Government and regulators should adopt the most balanced model we can, combining a range of internal and external assessments to create validity.**

   There should be multiple opportunities for children to demonstrate what they can do. In such unusual times, no "single method of assessment can [judge learning] well" so combining multiple types of assessment and approaches is the best way to get a more rounded picture of learning.

2. **Given the disruption caused by Covid is unequal, evidence of learning that couldn’t take place is just as important as collecting evidence of learning that has taken place.**

   Where certain areas, schools or classes have been particularly hard hit by staff absence, student illness, or having to be sent home, this should be centrally recorded - along with mitigating circumstances like family illness or bereavement. The evidence of children that have received less learning, and the impact that has had, should be ready in advance of exams.

3. **Above all, schools and students need clarity on (realistic) plans for summer 2021, including how planned exams could be supplemented, urgently.**

   One leader highlighted the impact that the current situation was having on students’ wellbeing and mental health. They know there are a range of reasons they may not be able to take summer exams, so believe there is a chance that any other work they do could end up being submitted as evidence for their grade. This means they worry ‘everything counts’ so have the feeling of taking high-stakes assessment, every single day!
Some of the key suggestions, particularly based on Sir John Dunford’s ten point plan, that trust leaders endorsed were:

1. **Schools should pragmatically find ways to collect evidence throughout the year about students’ learning in order to support a strengthened centre-assessed grade.**

   Schools should do this even while preparing for terminal exams. This means being hard-headed about what we are collecting evidence of.

2. **Schools should start a professional discourse around teacher assessment, bias and validity to demonstrate that they are engaging with the issue.**

   The best way to counter the erosion of professional trust in teachers is to demonstrate the values that the public admires so much in teachers (85% trusted, 4th most trusted profession) by having open and honest conversations about assessment.

   *Educators should demonstrate the rigour and professionalism with which they approach assessment. They could do so by...*

3. **Investing in accreditation for a lead assessor in school.**

   Identify lead assessors who make assessment judgements in their institutions and ensure standards across schools and trusts. Schools and trusts should ensure this person is trained in the area and supported to develop their skills.

   This lead assessor could then be accredited by the Chartered Institute of Educational Assessors.

4. **Create departmental and whole school frameworks for assessment and sharing them with local schools to provide some standardisation and external challenge**

   Discuss these frameworks and ensure they are consistent within departments and across school. These should be saved for future years to create a foundation to build on, fairly, with future cohorts. Share them with local schools - working collaboratively can build consistency.
Looking to the future: how assessment in 2021 can point towards a better way

After the provocations from Liz Robinson (Big Education) and Martin Said (XP) the discussion moved towards how this year’s assessment debate can point the way to a brighter future for assessment - a model of assessment focused on the things that really matter for young people.

This will be picked up in a future Trust Influence Forum. Themes for discussion will include...

1. **This year is a chance to demonstrate there is an alternative to narrow, high-stakes tests. In the future assessments could focus on identifying and supporting learning, and assess a broad set of knowledge, skills and qualities.**

   Trust leaders felt that, given the tensions in the exam system between a wide set of contradicting priorities, this year was a chance to show that we don’t have to rely on exams to do it all.

   If schools took the opportunity to demonstrate again that internal forms of assessment can be rigorous and credible, that evidence will be harder to ignore in the future. Perhaps it is a chance to show that the education system won’t cave in if we return assessment to its original purpose instead of using it as a tool for rationing access to HE/FE and sorting schools. If we do, teachers won’t stop teaching and learners won’t stop learning.

   In the future, Liz Robinson argued, assessment that was focused on the young people would also be much broader. If we returned assessment to its core purpose of identifying what children know and can do, we would measure a wider set of skills and qualities. These are the skills that we look for in the early years, then don’t assess again until graduate scheme aptitude tests.

   *Look out for our forthcoming Trust Influence Forum on the future of assessment.*

2. **Accountability serves a crucial purpose in education - but the same assessments can’t do it all. Separating accountability from high-stakes assessments could improve the quality of both.**

   Accountability is crucial. All the trust leaders at the Trust Influence Forum value having a strong and trusted accountability system.

   As a public service, they expect to be held account for the work they do, to give parents and communities confidence that their children are being given the best possible support and care.

   They also would feel that a more appreciative form of accountability could play a positive role in system improvement, unearthing and spreading good practice, isolating and identifying bad practice, and supporting all schools to make positive change.

   *Our Trust Influence Forum on the future of accountability is taking place on January 28th - available for all Leading a Whole Education in Trusts participants. Contact us to find out more.*

3. **Let’s use this year to challenge our lack of trust in each other and build a model based on collaboration**

   WE Trust leaders all share a desire to see a system guided by collaboration, not competition. The appreciative inquiry model at the heart of Leading a Whole Education in trusts demonstrates this positive alternative is possible. To get there, we have to value the judgement, professionalism and intrinsic motivation of schools, teachers and leaders a lot more.

   By calling out the perverse incentives of our current assessment system and demonstrating our rigorous approach to assessment, we can start to challenge that narrative. To do that, though, we also need to trust each other more - as a profession trying to do the right thing for the right reasons. If we focus on our shared values - and collaborate with them in mind - we can truly start to move the English education system forward.