

Evidence submission

APPG for Schools, Learning and Assessment inquiry into assessment reform

February 2023

AQA sets and marks over half of GCSEs and A-levels taken in the UK every year. As an independent education charity, our income is reinvested back into our charitable activities and the education system. It funds our cutting-edge research, which sits at the heart of our assessments.

We recently welcomed leading education service AlphaPlus, AI-powered maths platform Blutick, EPQ management system Project Q and innovative VTQ provider Training Qualifications UK to the AQA Group family as part of our work to support the skills agenda, harness digital technology and help teachers and students realise their potential.

Executive summary

AQA is excited about the potential for reform to further improve assessment and qualifications in the UK, and welcomes the opportunity to feed in evidence and insight into this inquiry. We are also delighted that the inquiry has asked to hear from the student chair of our Student Advisory Group.

Our evidence submission focuses both on areas in need of change, as well as defending the role of some existing aspects of the system. We support the growing consensus calling for considered reform of the system, rather than revolutionary change – which isn't what students or busy teachers want, and for which little evidence exists that it would make things better.

We focus on the following key themes as part of our evidence:

- The potential role for on-screen assessment to improve the experience of students;
- The importance of combining a knowledge-rich curriculum with an assessment of core life skills;
- The need to keep assessment fair and equitable, which evidence suggests is most easily achieved through the use of externally assessed examinations;
- The need to listen directly to the voice of students, whose views on exams are not what you might expect.

On-screen assessment

We believe any inquiry looking into the future of assessment should consider the importance of digital technology – and what role traditional pen and paper exams will have in the future. Research shows that there is considerable consensus among [school leaders, teachers, students](#) and the [public](#) that, while there are some obstacles, moving towards on-screen examination (OSE) is the future.

In our first pilot of OSE in 21 state funded schools we undertook focus groups with teachers and students afterwards to gauge their views. There was support for OSE across all types of centre; and, interestingly, this support was strongest among lower performing schools.

We believe OSE has the potential to boost accessibility in the exam system – mitigating hesitation from some SEND pupils who are entitled to use a computer but don't do so for fear of standing out, allowing for coloured backgrounds for candidates with dyslexia, and facilitating large fonts, text-to-speech and speech-to-text for those who need it.

Today's young people are digital natives, entering a workforce where computer use is ubiquitous. Innovative assessment methodologies can bring assessments up to date with the wider world and deliver benefits to both students and teachers. Far from simply moving existing exams 'behind glass', OSE could allow students to interact with their test and simulate what they will encounter in higher education and the world of work. A move towards OSE allows for new types of questions to come to the fore, making better use of multimedia: from manipulatable 3D models of molecules in chemistry to video sources of the Berlin wall falling in history.

Furthermore, challenging problems could be presented to students in order to test complex skills such as decision making and problem solving. It has been argued that these skills will be [increasingly important in the future of work as technology becomes more embedded in the workforce.](#)

OSE have the potential to provide rich data and insights for teachers, schools and nationally. In the formative assessment realm, OSE can support teachers to ensure students have learnt core concepts before moving on, in doing so saving teacher time. At a national level, OSE can also generate insights, helping policymakers to, for example, understand specific topics that students struggle with and adapt curricula and policies accordingly.

All of these factors will play a role in ensuring that OSE better prepares students for the real world.

From a sustainability perspective, OSE would also save an enormous amount of paper – and the trees used to print millions of exams booklets every year – not to mention the fuel used in vehicles which transport the scripts to schools and colleges and back off for marking. This has a [strong support](#) with almost [two thirds of people believing that OSE could be better for the environment.](#)

While some might say it would lead to a decline in penmanship and spelling, these are in reality assessment design choices. We believe handwritten components should be kept in certain specifications; and if encouraging or assessing spelling without spellcheck remains important, this feature can be switched off.

Of course, there are obstacles to OSE that need to be overcome. The pandemic highlighted another socioeconomic disparity in the UK – the digital divide. Not all young people have equal access to technology. [YouGov research](#) suggests that while 70% of 16-year-olds have their own laptop and 24% have access to a family laptop, 5% do not. The pandemic also demonstrated however that, with concerted effort, electronic devices can be put into the [hands of those who need them.](#) Greater use of technology in the classroom throughout secondary school will also be important – AQA's Student Advisory Group told us they would like to be examined by the same

medium they use in the secondary school classroom. Connectivity improvement may be needed in some schools, but in fact space is a bigger issue for most. Examples from overseas confirm that these [obstacles can be overcome](#).

We can also learn from expertise within the wider AQA Group. TQUK already has a successful track record of using technology to deliver assessments across both its regulated and apprenticeship provision. They pioneered a 'record and review' approach to invigilation even before lockdown and deliver onscreen assessments including MCQ, professional discussion and written exams. This allows candidates to fit assessments around work and life commitments without compromising on quality of assessment experience or validity of outcome. TQUK sets itself an ambitious target of 70% of assessments being conducted online. Latest figures suggest a rate of 85%, a testament to educators and candidates' desire to utilise these flexible and modern modes of assessment.

OSE will not, of course, be achieved through an overnight revolution, rather through thoughtful and pragmatic evolution. It will not be achieved right away – but rather the right way.

Skills

Across the political divide, there is a clear focus in education policy circles on ensuring that even more young people have the knowledge and skills they need to thrive. Government announcements on the English Baccalaureate and more maths provision post-16 have set a clear statement of intent in that space.

As we [set out](#) earlier this year, there is no agreed definition of what is meant by a baccalaureate. One thing common to baccalaureates tends to be their encouragement of curriculum breadth, but on the other hand, 'baccalaureate' models do not typically have a joint academic-vocational route. For example, the French Baccalaureate has an academic and a vocational stream, which do not mix. We are excited about the potential for reform in this space, but the challenge as we see it is really getting to grips with what it all means in practice

Literacy and numeracy

We wholeheartedly support a greater focus on the core skills of numeracy and literacy: skills that everyone needs in life. In our view it is important that we avoid linking maths and numeracy together as if they were interchangeable, when [numeracy is not the same as maths](#).

Numeracy skills include: counting and conversions; routine calculations; budgeting; and measurement and data analysis. Maths, however, is more traditionally seen as giving learners access to mathematical ideas and knowledge, for example algebra or differentiation, that feature strongly in specific industries such as computing, economic analysis or insurance. While there is, of course, a link between these things – too often the debate around the PM's announcement has conflated studying maths with building numeracy skills. The same goes for English and literacy; there are links between them, but they are not the same.

We believe that the heart of the PM's announcement was actually about numeracy – ensuring that all school and college leavers have the skills they need to work and live fulfilling lives. For us, this is not a second-tier consideration only for those who do not achieve a grade 4 in their GCSE English and Maths – it is for all students, to ensure that they can both understand academic concepts around mathematics but also quickly work out how much more expensive filling up their car will be if petrol prices increase by 10%. It is equally important for everyone to enjoy reading – whether newspapers, magazines or books – to be more informed about the world and to be exposed to the best of what has been written.

There is a suite of courses available for young people to develop their skills. For the majority of people, GCSEs offer the main route to learning and developing literacy and numeracy through GCSE English and Maths. There are also Functional Skills Qualifications, A-levels, and Core Maths, to help people develop their skills and competence at their appropriate level. These courses are not simply for school students – anyone can do one.

At level 2, we believe there is scope to adapt and reform the current model of re-sits for GCSE English and Maths, partly to boost numeracy and literacy skills, but also to encourage more young people to pursue apprenticeships and other qualifications where re-sits are currently a barrier to them. We see three credible options to resolve this:

1. reforming Functional Skills as a qualification;
2. changing GCSE English and Maths themselves to introduce a greater skills-based element of numeracy and literacy; and
3. creating new qualifications for work-oriented numeracy and literacy that are more applied than GCSE Maths but are not Functional Skills qualifications.

We believe there is value in looking further at all these options, but particularly option 3, introducing an assessment of numeracy and literacy that can be taken separately from the relevant GCSE. One advantage of this would be that it would remove the cycle of continual re-sits for students who will not achieve a Grade 4, and who would benefit from a different form of assessment. We would be happy to provide more information on this to the committee if helpful.

The thinking could be similar at level 3, though there may be more of an argument here to evolve and develop Core Maths as a solution, rather than create something brand new. This is an area where we've already had helpful conversations with officials, and again would be delighted to discuss further with the committee if that would be of interest.

We stand ready to work with parliamentarians and government to develop assessments that work alongside GCSEs, building on our expertise in assessment as one of the largest awarding organisations in the country and through our wider AQA family.

Other life skills

In addition to being a robust assessment of knowledge, GCSEs and A-levels assess a number of skills. The knowledge *and* skills set out in different Assessment Objectives varies by subject, but in addition to demonstrating knowledge, candidates are also required to demonstrate a range of other

things – including their communication, organisation and understanding of this knowledge, as well as their analysis and evaluation skills. This is true even of subjects which are mostly or wholly assessed by examination – whether reasoning skills in mathematics or analytical skills in history, to take two examples at A-level. Both the skills and knowledge assessed by GCSEs and A-levels can be useful for employment and transferable to the workplace.

Nevertheless, AQA remains open to playing a full role in better understanding how vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs), micro-credentialing platforms and other routes can help ensure young people can go even further in demonstrating and certifying their skills.

On apprenticeships and VTQs more generally, AQA has just acquired Training Qualifications UK (TQUK) an award-winning Awarding and End-Point Assessment Organisation focused on providing a dynamic range of vocational services from levels 1-6, including apprenticeships and work-based learning. It provides a first-class service to training providers, colleges and centres worldwide.

TQUK's Design, Engineer Construct! Suite of qualifications was designed with partner Class of Your Own to introduce school-age students to the vocational opportunities within the construction industry: a concerted effort to move perception away from construction as a career path for 'naughty kids' and boys, and highlight the myriad skilled roles that go into urban planning and construction. With a curriculum combining traditional learning tested through examination with project-based assessment, supported by industry 'sponsors' such as Mott MacDonald and Balfour Beatty, students emerge with a unique skillset that sees them secure coveted work experience or apprenticeship places at high-profile companies.

We are also proud of our Extended Project Qualifications, which allow students to undertake a self-directed project and develop their time-management, independence and organisation. Project qualifications are also available at Level 1 (Foundation Project Qualification) and Level 2 (Higher Project Qualification). The EPQ provides a unique opportunity for students to engage in an independent research project within the framework and support of a recognised qualification, and to focus their time on a topic about which they are passionate. The taught skills element of the projects equip students with the skills to plan, research, synthesise resources, and realise a project outcome – either a hands-on 'artefact' or a more academic written report. These range from exploring the wellbeing benefits of singing by establishing a community choir to an analysis of hen welfare practices in the UK. The aspiring vet who undertook the latter was the winner of the AQA and Association of College's inaugural project qualifications award, given a reduced university place offer because of her EPQ, and has written about both [her findings and the skills developed during a project qualification for AQi](#).

Opportunity and fair assessment

From the ancient Chinese civil service to the European Enlightenment, [assessment has played a crucial role in advancing societies](#) – from ones where job and wealth distribution was based on inheritance and corruption to ones based on talent and effort. While they are not without flaws nor the only way to measure merit, examinations make institutions less reliant on patronage and polish when awarding study and work opportunities – to the benefit of individuals and wider society.

While teachers, students and the wider education system did a fantastic job in difficult circumstances during the pandemic, [controversies surrounding teacher-assessed grades](#) also showed the robust external examinations are needed for a system which is both fair and perceived as such. Data shows that proportion achieving the highest grades in Independent schools from 2019 to 2021 [expanded at almost double the rate](#) of those in Secondary Comprehensive and Middle schools. At the same time the attainment gap between the two extended 7 percentage points. What these statistics seem to reveal is that when exams were suspended the playing field did not appear so level.

[GCSEs also serve two key functions](#). Firstly, GCSEs assess learning levels, certify achievement, and ensure reliability and comparability across different institutions - state and independent schools or FE colleges. They are the students' passport to progression. Secondly, the awards data is vital for parents or pupils choosing a school, sixth form or FE College. It shows how well individual institutions perform for their students and allows targeted support for struggling schools. Of course it is always valid to debate [the role and future of GCSEs](#), and we welcome that debate, but any discussion should be informed by the knowledge of what this multi-faceted assessment brings to the table, and a clear plan to fill the void if it were to go.

In addition, accessible assessment is a key foundation for fairness. There are many ways in which we currently adapt exams to ensure they are accessible for students with particular needs, many of which are well-known. Allowing extra time, or providing an exam script with large print, are common ways exams are tailored to support students. There are also rest breaks, readers, coloured overlays, enlarged papers, Braille, or 3D models.

The Unit Award Scheme (UAS) is a unique way to record learner achievement. Its 'can do' approach is used to boost student confidence, engagement and motivation. Students are rewarded with a certificate each time they successfully complete a unit of learning. They can build up a portfolio of certificates to evidence their skills, knowledge and experience. The scheme boosts confidence, increases engagement and improves motivation, helping students to make progress on their lifelong learning journey.

TQUK has utilised the Qualifications Credit Framework to develop a multi-unit award that enables its centres to select units from a range of regulated qualifications and 'build their own' bespoke course to suit the needs of particular learner groups. This allows for contextualisation of offer, for example where an education and training unit is combined with a selection of marketing units to deliver to aspiring tutors in the marketing sector. Each unit is assessed discreetly, against its own learning outcomes, in bitesize assessments. This approach has a part to play in meeting the evolving training and assessment needs of our society which are fast outpacing evolution in assessment methodology.

Also key to boosting opportunity for all is nurturing life skills such as resilience, communication and confidence through extracurriculars – and especially those targeted at the young people who most need them. The [AQA Unlocking Potential](#) project we run with the Dame Kelly Holmes Trust takes disadvantaged young people, often from schools or areas with fewer opportunities, and pairs with

retired athletes who mentor them through character-building workshops until they are able to run their own social action projects in their local community.

Student voice

The education sector is increasingly – and rightly – placing greater emphasis on elevating the voices of those currently undertaking their education: students. AQA is playing its role in this. Our [Student Advisory Group](#), made up of 15 engaged young people from across the country meets termly for four hours. It is co-chaired by a student and members canvass their peers' views at school and elsewhere. They are [consulted](#) by AQA's internal colleagues from research and other teams, as well as by external organisations such as the NEU and your APPG. Now entering its fourth year, its insights and minutes are shared with and considered seriously by both our executive team and our board of trustees, who are asking 'What do the students think?'

Consulting less engaged students is important too. AQA has held focus groups in schools with students of deliberately mixed ability and mixed engagement on how they would best like to engage with exam boards over social media. This method (shorter sessions with no pre-reading, and going to the student rather than them coming to you) works best for this.

We also poll young people more broadly to inform our research at AQA and our [research and insights hub AQi](#), where findings show that [most students feel GCSEs fulfil their roles of measuring attainment and empowering progression](#) – with 68% saying GCSEs helped them move forward in their career, 58% say they informed their decisions on what to do next, and 59% say they helped them prepare for future examinations.

This is all part of AQA's gathering of evidence and expert analysis for policymakers – which increasingly suggests that exams still have an important role to play in the gradual reform needed to facilitate greater social mobility and ensure young people get both the knowledge *and* the skills they need for the workforce and wider society.