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SATs would be 'son of gold standard'

School assessment system is under pressure to turn students into exam scores for university admissions, says new think tank report

Universities are being forced to face up to life after A-levels, which has created a rare opportunity for fundamental reform of school qualifications, according to a new Demos report called **Beyond Measure: Why educational assessment is failing the test.**

The 14-19 qualification reforms are at a critical point, as the government tries to balance assessment *for* learning with assessment *of* learning. The Demos report, produced in association with awarding body **Edexcel**, argues that linking new methods of assessment to 14-19 reform is central to raising school standards.

But Demos is concerned that attempts to develop assessment for learning could be blocked by political pressure to create the 'son of the gold standard'. It is becoming obvious that schools that have become skilled at playing the A-level system will oppose any admissions system which takes learning context into account.

'What we are seeing is the steady devaluation of a qualifications system which has served the requirements of university admissions better than the educational needs of pupils,' says **Paul Skidmore**, author of *Beyond Measure*. 'The question now is whether it is replaced by assessment for learning, or another system which reduces pupils to the sum of their test scores.'

Promotion of American-style SAT tests by the new universities regulator would simply perpetuate an automated approach to admissions. Some universities are starting to recognise the limitations of the information they have on pupils, but most still rely on A-levels as their sole admission criteria.

The university sector as a whole has been a 'free rider' on the school assessment system, according to the report. The unsustainable pressure on the system resulted in last year's A-level crisis, and has now sparked the controversy of 'positive discrimination' in university admissions.

By clinging on to the tarnished gold standard idea, universities have encouraged schools to narrow their educational focus and teach to the test. Attempting to re-establish a gold standard, which ignored the context of learning, would simply replace one automated admissions system with another.

‘There is a danger that universities perpetuate the myth of scientific objectivity in testing,’ says Skidmore. ‘We should be moving towards a more personalised form of assessment which focuses on improving pupils’ ability to learn. Assessment for learning also means recognising that how pupils are assessed has a big impact on their motivation and self-esteem.’

Beyond Measure sets out principles for the reform of the assessment system. The new approach centres on the idea of a **‘learning licence’**, which qualifies students to continue their education in a variety of contexts. This approach would also end the false division between academic and vocational qualifications by combining the best of both assessment systems.

‘We are pleased that Demos has produced such a thought-provoking report,’ said **John Kerr**, chief executive of Edexcel. ‘We need to think more carefully about the type of assessment we have in this country and this report provides a very good starting point.’

Other principles for reforming assessment contained in *Beyond Measure* include:

- **Testing-on-demand** to end the seasonal nature of mass assessment and marking which mainly caters for the ‘free riders’ on the system such as universities, not students;
- **More classroom-based assessment** to enable a more tailored approach to assessment and restore the importance of teachers’ professional judgement. It would also free up resources tied up in complying with external assessment regimes;
- **Ending the academic closed shop** to allow employers to become direct users of assessment services to validate students’ performance in vocational contexts.

Notes for editors

1. *Beyond Measure: Why educational assessment is failing the test* is published by Demos on 7 March 2003.
2. Paul Skidmore is a researcher at Demos.

Contacts

Eddie Gibb
Demos
020 7401 5347 or 07966 496357

Frank Wingate
Edexcel
020 7758 5500

