

Report of the *Assessment Systems for the Future* conference for policy-makers in England

Held at the Nuffield Foundation, 28, Bedford Square, London,

May 17th, 2006, 9.30 – 13.00

This was one of two dissemination conferences held in London. Delegates were from the DfEs, OfSTED, the GTC England, QCA, examination boards, the National Education Research Forum, local authorities and universities. Four members of the Assessment Reform Group and three other members of the Assessment Systems for the Future project's Core Group attended. Unfortunately those invited from the Teaching Development Agency, the National Assessment Agency and the National Strategies were unable to attend. The list of those attending is in Appendix A. The second conference, for delegates from teachers' unions and professional bodies, was held in June.

Delegates were welcomed to the Nuffield Foundation by Dr. Catrin Roberts, Assistant Director. The conference was chaired by Sue Hackman, Chief Adviser on School Standards at the DfES. The programme is given in Appendix B. After the presentation of the key messages from the project (see Appendix C) by Wynne Harlen, the project director, there was a brief opportunity for questions to be raised. These mainly concerned the feasibility of a bank of tasks and how schools could remain accountable to parents and others if assessment was based on teachers' judgments. Attention was drawn to work in progress at QCA on monitoring pupils' progress. It was also considered that more time than the suggested two years would be needed for teachers to adjust to a change in assessment procedures.

Group discussions were held in five groups of people from different backgrounds. Each group focused initially on one of the following five questions:

1. What needs to be done to increase the confidence of teachers and of others in teachers' judgments of their pupils' achievement?
2. What are the chief system-related obstacles to improving the quality and use of teachers' assessment of achievement?
3. How can we ensure that teachers' summative assessment enhances the use of assessment for learning?
4. What obstacles are there to extending the use of teachers' assessment for purposes external to the school?
5. What is the appropriate link between teachers' summative assessment for uses within the school and its uses external to the school?

Outcome of group discussions

The main points reported in feedback were:

Question 1

- A key point of principle needs to be established, that taking part in summative assessment of pupils is part of a teachers' professional job, not an option.

- There is evidence of lack of confidence in teachers' assessment, particularly across key stages boundaries, but there is also evidence that confidence can be increased.
- Existing work in progress provides examples of good practice (eg moderation work in Newham and the Monitoring Pupil Progress project of QCA).
- Although it is the case that some teachers lack some skills of assessing their pupils, there never was a 'golden age' to return to, and it has to be recognised that giving more responsibility to teachers is not an easy option, but is in the interests of the pupils.
- It is not unreasonable to expect teachers to know their pupils.
- Teachers must have ownership of any new system.

Question 2

- It is relatively easy to make waves on the surface, but more difficult to penetrate further down.
- Demonstrating that pupils benefit would lead to evolutionary rather than revolutionary change.
- Teachers have too few opportunities to see each others' practice; good examples of teaching and assessment would be a strong impetus to change.
- The scale and cost of moderation and indeed what it means (eg reviewing every pupil's work or a sample) need to be carefully considered.
- The nature of the national curriculum has to be part of the change; are levels (and key stages) useful?

Question 3

- Protecting the use of assessment for learning is essential to equity, whereas constant testing disadvantages the less well achieving pupils.
- The level of generality of the criteria used for summative assessment needs to be carefully considered. Detailed criteria are needed for formative assessment, but too much detail at the summative stage leads to a tick-list approach and undermines teachers' attempts to reach overall goals.
- There is often a lack of evidence of independent work for making judgements about individuals; but it's also necessary to find out if pupils can work in groups.
- Parents need to know about where their children are in general terms, but not necessarily in levels; there is a need to improve reporting to parents.

Question 4

- Teachers themselves are a big obstacle to change; their view of teaching and learning had been eroded by over-emphasis on targets and they lack understanding of moderation.
- The limitations of current uses of summative assessment results need to be recognised.
- Monitoring of national standards would be better conducted through a national monitoring programme than through using individual pupils' test and examination results.
- Accountability is a major stumbling block. Experience in other countries is useful – e.g. Finland (which heads the PISA league table) does not collect national data for monitoring or comparing institutions.

- Other obstacles discussed were the need for better ITT preparation, professional development, teachers' work load and the time needed for change.

Question 5

- The needs of different user groups, internal and external to the school, have to be mapped.
- Information at different levels should be available to suit different user groups.
- The different values and beliefs of external users have to be considered.
- There are some under-used systems such as ASDAN, with a strong focus on student voice, and also awards UCAS points, which provide useful examples.
- Good teachers' assessment may help to identify good pedagogic practice; examples ought to be stored in a database for access by local authority staff, for example.

Implications of the project for Scotland

Carolyn Hutchinson, head of Assessment Branch, Scottish Executive Education Department, described briefly the development of the programme '*Assessment is for Learning*' (AiFL) in Scotland, which had been in progress at the same time as the ASF project. She spoke to the presentation given in Appendix D, indicating how the main assessment procedures can be describe by a combination of two dimensions – formative-summative and internal-external. Ten characteristics of a school using assessment effectively to help learning were described in terms of the three-way relationships between the curriculum, learning and teaching, and assessment. An important aim was to reduce the burden of summative assessment on pupils. National monitoring is conducted through the Scottish Survey of Achievement (SSA), which tests a sample of students in P4, P6 and S4 each year in one of four subjects. She concluded by reporting the six main messages that had come from an ASF dissemination conference, held in Glasgow, a few weeks earlier. (See Report of Glasgow conference on ARG web site).

Response

Professor Andrew Pollard began by noting that the ASF and other outcomes of the work of the ARG were powerful products of collaboration between researchers and practitioners working together. He responded to the discussion by suggesting that there were three tests to apply to the propositions in the pamphlet, relating to the knowledge base, practicality and policy.

In relation to the knowledge base, Prof Pollard pointed to the evidence, revealed through the ARG work, that assessment can be used in constructive ways to enhance students' learning. At the same time there is a need to reconsider the role that assessment can take in a curriculum that is suited to advancing personal learning and developing skills needed by a confident workforce. Further, changes in assessment must take notice of social justice and must work to ensure that education is equitable and inclusive. A careful review of the evidence is needed to ensure that teachers' assessment can be, and are seen to be, providing fair and just information about all groups.

On practicality Prof Pollard referred to the list of pros and cons of teachers' summative assessment in the ASF pamphlet. This list points to the action needed and the difficulty of taking action on the scale needed for large-scale implementation. Teacher assessment needs to be built into recruitment and ITT; just providing resources or a bank of tasks will not be sufficient. From teachers' viewpoint, workload is an issue not just in terms of time but because good teacher assessment is hard to do.

Turning to policy matters Prof Pollard referred to the need for robust models of systems where teachers' assessment is used. In Scotland, different stakeholders are aligned in their view of the need to change assessment policy. Similarly, in Wales, the support is widespread. In England, there is still a need to make the case, based on placing the learner at the centre and working how to ensure that policies work towards this. Competition among schools, fuelling a particular form of assessment, is a major policy issue. Prof Pollard urged us to 'hang on', since history shows that changes do happen and already there are signs in the KS1 assessment and the QCA work in English. As more people in the system become informed, changes are more likely to happen.

Final comments

The concluding comments from participants and the Chair noted that while the principles seemed to be agreed, giving teachers' more responsibility for summative assessment was not an easy option. As well as change, teachers want stability and what is already in place has to be considered. At present the ministerial view is to hold on to tests at KS2 and 3; it is essential that teachers make a good job of assessment if change is to be worthwhile and accepted. The good practice in some schools needs to be shared. Work should continue on the detail and particularly in identifying progression, which is the key to ensuring that assessment can help learning. The information that employers of higher education want has been understated and there was need for more linking across DfES, agencies, and work in other parts of the UK. In particular there was interest in how the Scottish AiFL system will be extended to the 14-19 range. It was anticipated that several of these matters would be raised again in the conference for practitioners and representatives of unions and professional bodies to be held in June.

List of participants

Ms. Kathy Baker	GTCEngland
Professor Paul Black	King's College, London, ARG member
Dr. Jacky Burnett	QCA
Dr. Kathryn Ecclestone	University of Nottingham, ARG member
Ms. Janet English	Head, Malvern Way Infant & Nursery School
Dr. Sylvia Green	Head of research, Cambridge Assessment
Ms. Sue Hackman	Chief Advisor on School Standards, DfES
Professor Wynne Harlen	University of Bristol, ASF director, ARG member
Ms. Sue Horner	Curriculum Division, QCA
Ms. Carolyn Hutchinson	Scottish Executive Education Department
Ms. Tina Isaacs	Curriculum Division, QCA
Mr. Michael Johns	Portsmouth LEA
Ms. Elizabeth Lewin	Northamptonshire County Council
Dr. Christine Merrell	The CEM Centre, University of Durham
Mr. Andrew Morris	Director, NERF
Ms. Sally Pickles	DfES
Professor Andrew Pollard	Director, TLRP, Institute of Education, Univ of London
Dr. Richard Rice	Assessment Advisor, Credon Centre, London
Dr. Catrin Roberts	The Nuffield Foundation
Mr. Stephen Saunders	Edexcel
Professor Judy Sebba	University of Sussex, ARG member
Mr. Fred Sharrock	DfES
Dr. Jeremy Tafler	Curriculum Division, QCA
Mr. Parag Vaghjiana	DfES
Mr. Keith Wheeldon	OfSTED
Ms. Victoria White	DfES

Programme

Chaired by Ms Sue Hackman, Chief Adviser on School Standards, DfES

9.00	<i>Coffee</i>
9.30	Welcome from the Nuffield Foundation Dr. Catrin Roberts, Assistant Director, Nuffield Foundation
9.35	Key messages from the ASF project Professor Wynne Harlen, Project Director
10.05	Discussion
10.15	Comments from the Chair and questions for discussion
10.25	Group discussions
11.25	<i>Coffee</i>
11.45	Feedback from groups
12.15	Implications of the project for Scotland Carolyn Hutchinson, Head of Assessment Branch, SEED
12.30	Respondent: Professor Andrew Pollard, Director, TLRP
12.45	Concluding discussion and final comments from the Chair
1.00pm	<i>Lunch</i>

Key messages from the ASF project

Implications of the ASF project for Scotland