

Rethinking Assessment



Ben Mason has taught in both the State and Independent sector and was Director of Sport and Rugby at Durham School. He is the founder and CEO of Global Bridge.

As the education system settles down after the disruptions of Covid, noise from the dissatisfaction of the assessment process still resonates. Will the recent percentage drop in performances from this year's A-Level results be the last of the negative influence caused by the global pandemic or are there some positive changes that can be made? Education has been Rethinking Assessment for years, along with how education can embrace digital approaches more effectively. Covid has accelerated both these issues and we are now at a point where we can move forward positively or go back to 'the good old days'.

In the change process, we are seeing many members of SLT and teachers wanting to incorporate the best of technology and go digital. Covid has accelerated this as students connect with resources, it has become part of the school learning and teachers need to keep up to speed. One outstanding area which has not yet been addressed is how digital evidence can support assessment and a learner's journey through and beyond education. Namely, how we can more successfully transition evidence of student achievements and talent between preparatory and senior schools.

Having taught across the state and independent sectors, I was always

frustrated by the limitations when it came to helping students evidence their talents, either via their 4,000 character UCAS application, 'knowledge only' based forms of assessment, or senior school applications. Most parties involved also felt frustrated with the student being unable to show their breadth of talents via the relevant media. In many cases, even as a teacher writing a student reference, further evidence to support an application is much needed, for example, a video or audio clip. But this frustration isn't only felt by students and staff, it is on the brink of hindering the advancement of British industry and therefore our entire economy! It's a very big statement, I agree, but the thin end of the wedge is as follows – British industry has been very clear in its request from education for more evidence relating to skills. Not only this, but many leading multinationals have stated that their priority in the application process is not GCSE or A-level results, but the demonstration and evidence of skills and experience. PwC as an example, have just removed their 2:1 degree requirements from applications in order to access a greater pool of talent with the right skills. Admittedly there are some sectors where pure academic evidence is key, but there is change everywhere, even in sectors where we have made this assumption. In a recent

conversation with a consultant surgeon (social conversation, I wasn't under the knife!), they were frustrated with the inability to view video evidence of applying surgeons to demonstrate their surgical skills. At that level, it goes even more beyond a written application and more into 'demonstrating skills' as lives are at stake!

The world is evolving around us and social media has 'blown the roof off' our ability to demonstrate talent. Interestingly, A-levels were established in 1951, 32 years before the internet started in 1983. Young people are born into a digital, multimedia sharing capable era, yet A-Levels still dominate learner outcomes as evidence from their seven years in secondary school! Even reading back on those last three sentences settles the argument on the need for change and advancements in how we evidence talent and skills. But still, regardless of the industries' cry for help to reduce the skills gap, and the advances in technology to broaden our ability to evidence skills, the outcome of 13 years in education comes down to the ability to regurgitate 'knowledge'! 'I (Industry) would like to see a demonstration of skills, however you, (Education) give me a certificate of grades. Could it be a square peg and round hole situation that is contributing to our skills gap?

“Changes in the economy, fuelled by digitisation and automation, will dramatically change the skills sought by employers. CBI reports have estimated 21 million people will need basic digital skills and 16 million people will need critical thinking and information processing skills. Ensuring people therefore not only leave education with the best grades, but also the ability to adapt to a changing world of work, will be vital for the UK.”

Robert West, Head of Education and Skills, CBI

Is this article taking a shot at schools and colleges? Absolutely not. As a teacher, like those reading this, I know the work we all put in to change the lives of young people. I also know that over 13 years we teach them a lot more than to regurgitate knowledge. This article is looking at the system which is limiting the ability for schools to maximise their support for young people.

According to the DfE Working Future report, 35% of young people in the UK will achieve no significant academic record and only 30% will attend university. A more recent report through the Government's Skills and Productivity Board identified that there are core transferable skills in demand across many occupations, notably, communications skills, mental processes, and people skills. During their school years, young people are taught a range of life skills, for example, communication, teamwork, resilience, leadership, but they have no opportunity to evidence these skills meaningfully, often relying on antiquated CV and application processes that do not engage GenZ, the tech generation. Although the education system is stuck in its ways, industry also has a role to play in moving away from these antiquated processes.

The current education system focuses on competition and not creativity and methods of assessment are quite frankly, too narrow!

“In order to help recognise the talent of every young person, education needs to include a digital learner profile passport that will support their pathway and preparation for the modern workplace in our rapidly-changing technological world.”

Natalie Bone, Headmistress, Sherborne Prep School, England

So, do we need to Rethink Assessment by changing the system, or is it a more simple case of broadening the ways that we assess and demonstrate skills and talents to be more inclusive? Every other aspect of life is being more inclusive, why should the education system assume that all young people have skills which can be evidenced via an exam grade! T-Levels are a fantastic introduction, however, will the assessment of technical skills be dominated by a certificate of grades?

“Pupils cannot be merely defined by their grades, there is a great deal more that defines them and it is important that this is recognised, whether that be leadership, service, sports, performing arts, environmental sustainability etc”

Peter Goodyer, Headmaster, Bede's School, England

What if we could match a grade with relevant media evidence? For example, click on the A* music grade and hear an audio clip or view a composition. What if we could weigh skills such as resilience, debating and leadership based on experience and view video evidence of such skills being demonstrated, alongside a teacher reference or validation of the skill demonstration? Does this not instantly innovate the ability to be more inclusive, motivating GenZ over a system that was designed to suit the needs of their parents, if not, grandparents?! These same adults benefit from LinkedIn, yet the digital natives have nothing! I can't help but think there are a few timelines being crossed and flipped upside down in a 'back to the future' style twist!!

“Learner profiles are likely to be increasingly valued and valid as more research and understanding about neurodiversity and how children and young people develop multiple intelligences grow. A one-size-fits-all learner approach is already outdated and differentiation is key to modern education already. This is only going to become more nuanced and important as we develop future tertiary education/training/vocational courses and equip the workforce for 2030 and beyond with more of what they need”.

Mark Lauder, Headmaster, Strathallan School, Scotland

If we can access digital media in a way that is sharable and 'safe' for the students, does this relieve the reluctance of schools to engage with social media? Are we protecting our students by limiting their access to this form of media in education or simply just prolonging the inevitable direction of travel with our heads in the sand, until someone takes the plunge? If the aspect of safety can be addressed, should we make integrating media evidence more accessible? You could have your A* in music grade on a digital certificate sitting alongside the audio clip of your grade 8 exam piece, or a B-Tech in agricultural studies with a video of a student helping with lambing, tagged with a reference from the farmer. With the advances in technology, the future will be driven by links to evidence beyond a certificate of grades. It is not a question of if, more when and who. That said, this is already happening in many independent schools we at globalbridge are working with, which is exciting for the future of education. School leaders are recognising that in order to prepare their students for a world of work that is not driven by grade certificates, we cannot just give them knowledge, we need to give them life skills and a way to evidence these. This is a perfect opportunity for the independent sector to capture the breadth of curricular and extracurricular talents which it instils into students.

“Through our work with young people we get to benchmark the UK’s skills system with other countries around the world and we know that we are not as competitive as we should be. The earlier we can embed the development and recognition of a broader range of skills into our education system the better chance we have to develop the right skills for employers and attract more investment into the UK”.

Ben Blackledge, Deputy CEO, WorldSkills UK

Maybe the glue which brings it all together is the inspectorate criteria and how we deliver our personal development programmes. How can your school better evidence student outcomes and support your next inspection? At globalbridge we were fortunate enough to host an event for Ofsted last term with over 450 UK school leaders registering to hear more about how they can improve their provision of personal development. Is there an opportunity to not only future proof your inspections, but most importantly, evidence the life skills you are instilling in your students and helping them prepare for future industry.

Surely young people deserve a better system than a one size fits all assessment process and I’d like

to challenge anyone who is reading this, to consider what the advance of change looks like in your school when supporting the evidence of talent, pathways and opportunities for young people? Is there more that can be done and is now the time, whilst change is afoot, to make a difference?

“It is important to develop a system of learner profiles which is easily accessible for those wishing to understand more about the learner, a place where all the information can be held in one place across all facets of the individual’s academic, and co-curricular activities. There is certainly a need to draw this together, for ease of reference and as a dynamic CV/personal record”

Peter Goodyer, Headmaster, Bede’s School

I would love to speak with anyone who is passionate to innovate and see change in their school, in order to not only support the life chances of young people, but in turn to support British industry by evidencing and connecting emerging talent. Education is not just about the next lesson or getting through the syllabus, it’s about creating a sustainable future for our students and our industry. The end point is not the exam, but drawing out the gold from each student in your charge and ensuring safe passage of

talent through your school to college, T-Level, apprenticeship, employment or university. We believe a life long learner profile evidencing skills and talents at key stages in a students journey, for example preparatory school to secondary, secondary school to university or employment, is part of the solution to a stronger future.

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