Verdict on Assessment without Levels

The Final report of the Commission on Assessment without Levels, by John McIntosh CBE has been published. In his forward, the chairman of the commission said that while few would dispute the need for a robust accountability framework, there was no doubt that the measurement of the performance of schools and of the system as a whole had exerted undue influence on the assessment of individual pupils.

He pointed out that the changes to the National Curriculum and its assessment went “well beyond” mere changes of content as they invoked very different day-to-day approaches to assessment and signalled fundamental shifts in ideas about learning and assessment. Mr McIntosh explained how consultations and discussions had highlighted the extent to which teachers were subject to conflicting pressures: trying to make appropriate use of assessment as part of the day-to-day task of classroom teaching, while at the same time collecting assessment data which would be used in very high stakes evaluation of individual and institutional performance.

The conflicted purposes too often affected adversely the fundamental aims of the curriculum, particularly regarding breadth of content and depth of learning. The report explains how successful implementation of the new national curriculum will require a radical cultural and pedagogical change, from one which had been too dominated by the requirements of the national assessment framework and testing regime to one where the focus would need to be on high-quality, in-depth teaching, supported by in-class formative assessment.

The report cites overwhelming evidence that levels need to go and the Commission strongly endorses the decision to remove them. But it warns that the system has been so conditioned by levels that there will be considerable challenge in moving away from them. The report stresses that the Commission has been concerned by evidence that some schools were trying to recreate levels based on the new national curriculum. It warns that unless this is addressed, there will be a risk to putting in place the right conditions for a higher-attaining, higher-equity system.

But the report pointed out that changing the culture of levels would not only be the key to implementing the new curriculum, but to raising standards by enriching learning and pupil motivation and enabling teachers to grow professionally and make better use of their time, knowledge and skills. The report stressed that the Commission had been impressed by the way teacher associations and unions had already responded to the challenge of the new assessment regime and the opportunity it presented to re-focus assessment as part of sound classroom practice and the Commission believed that they had a very important part to play in its implementation. While the report does not provide schools with a template for assessment without levels, it offers guidance and support to help schools in designing their own assessment policies, in parallel with their curriculum policies.

The Commission recommended:

- The appointment of a standing committee on assessment, supported by a panel of experts. The committee could call on the experts to provide advice when required, to oversee the next phase of implementation and to have continuing stewardship of assessment development.
- That any government review of initial teacher training should ensure that assessment was included in the core content for teacher training. It also recommended that the Government should require a suitable training course for one person within each Teaching School alliance, who would become a Specialist Leader in Education on assessment to provide professional development on assessment more widely.
- The establishment of a national item bank of assessment questions to be used both for formative assessment in the classroom, to help teachers evaluate understanding of a topic or concept, and for summative assessment, by enabling teachers to create bespoke tests for assessment at the end of a topic or teaching period. The Commission also recommended the creation of a dedicated online forum where teachers could share their ideas on assessment.
- The development of a training module that could be used for both senior leaders in schools and Ofsted inspectors to ensure a shared understanding of the principles and purposes of assessment, what good practice looked like and how it could be demonstrated in schools.