Confederation
of School Trusts

Coherence and Systemness: The Future of Assessment and Qualifications

Part of the CST 'A Bridge to the Future' series

About CST – The voice of School Trusts

CST is the national organisation and sector body for academy and multi-academy trusts - advocating for, connecting and supporting executive and governance leaders in School Trusts.

We are a charitable company, registered with the Charity Commission. Our charitable purpose, as set out in our Articles of Association, is "the advancement of education for public benefit."

We are governed by a Board of Trustees and are subject to the regulations of the Charity Commission and accountable to our members.

We are strictly apolitical. We work with the government of the day, political parties and politicians across the spectrum to advance education for public benefit.

CST's mission is to build an excellent education system in England, with every school part of a strong and sustainable group in which every child is a powerful learner and adults learn and develop together as teachers and leaders.

Our vision is a system which holds trust on behalf of children.

Our values:

Selflessness
Integrity
Objectivity
Accountability
Openness
Honesty
Leadership

Published March 2021
By Steve Rollett

Confederation of
School Trusts (CST)
Suite 10,
Whiteley Mill Offices,
39 Nottingham Road,
Nottingham NG9 8AD

cstuk.org.uk

Charitable Company Limited by Guarantee,
Registered in England, Charity Number
1107640, Company Number 05303883
VAT Registration Number 270 0880 18

Introduction - A Bridge to the Future

A key challenge for educational reform is how to leverage the best outcomes for children, in the most efficient way, while avoiding unintended consequences. This is often easier said than done because individual problems and proposed solutions don't sit in isolation from each other or the many other constituent parts of education.

A recent **blog** from Cambridge Assessment makes a similar case.[1] It highlights that as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic there are increasing calls for reform of education, including assessment and awarding of qualifications. However, "it is often not possible to discuss one aspect of an education system without considering the potential implications for other parts" (Cambridge Assessment, 2021). It is vital that policy reforms emerging from the global pandemic overcome such limitations.

CST set out in **'A Bridge to the Future'**[2] four key considerations for policy makers which are designed to support policy making:

- **'Systemness.'** Policy should be located within systems-thinking so that interactions within parts of the system are brought into view.
- **Coherence.** Policy should consider possible unintended consequences in order that they can be mitigated, or the proposal abandoned if not intentionally building coherence.
- **Robustness.** Policy should be designed to create robustness by developing the capacity to cope with future perturbations.
- **Ambition.** Policy should draw on best evidence we have to set a clear ambition for the system with a sense of urgency.

This short paper seeks to explore how coherence and systemness in particular might be applied to policy in this important area. In keeping with CST's commitment to evidence informed policy, we draw on relevant evidence and theory.

CST believes that reforms must draw on the best available evidence of effective assessment and awarding practices.

1 Nassé, S. and Oates, T. (2021) **Outline principles for the future of education.** Cambridge Assessment.
2 Cruddas, L. and Rollett, S. (2021) **A Bridge to the Future.** CST.

Coherence: starting from the curriculum

Schmidt and Prawat (2006) argue persuasively that there must be alignment between the various facets of an education system, including between curriculum and assessment.[3] This notion of 'curriculum coherence' was found to be key in making sure that what pupils are being taught, how they are being taught, the materials used, and the assessments they undertake are mutually supportive through their careful alignment.

Reforms which target assessment but fail to take account of the curriculum can create a range of unintended consequences, including:

- Lack of alignment. The curriculum does not adequately prepare pupils for the assessment activities.
- Washback into the curriculum. What is assessed can distort what is taught, sometimes unhelpfully so.
- Weak progression modelling. Assessments sit separately to learning the content of the curriculum so that progression is not built coherently over time.
- Undermining progression routes. Qualifications which fail to provide pupils with access to subsequent learning and qualifications. Low confidence in assessments and qualifications which are not seen to reflect how well the students have learned the curriculum.

A key aspect of coherence in this area is about considering the extent of specialisation that is deemed appropriate at each stage of education and understanding how the decisions we make impact on progression at subsequent stages. For example, an argument could be made to maintain a broader curriculum until age 16. Benefits might include delaying specialisation until pupils achieve a greater level of maturity or establishing a more common knowledge base in the interests of social justice.

However, we would also need to consider that without increased teaching time, teaching a broader curriculum until age 16 is likely to mean some or all subjects would be explored in less depth.

3 Schmidt, W. and Prawat, R. (2006) Curriculum coherence and national control of education: issue or non-issue? Journal of Curriculum Studies vol 38 no 6, pp641-658.

The result would likely be that students entering post-16 education would be doing so from a position of having mastered less specialised knowledge. This could impact on pupils' ability to tackle more sophisticated content in post-16 education, or at least mean that the period of study might need to be extended. This, in turn, could have a similar knock-on effect on higher education and entry to the workplace.

This is not offered as an argument against broadening the curriculum at 16; there are some compelling arguments as to why that might be desirable. Rather, the point here is to illustrate the interaction between curriculum and assessment and the need for them to be coherently aligned.

It is, therefore, hard to talk meaningfully about substantial reforms to assessment and qualifications without also talking about the curriculum. These two aspects must be coherently aligned, as should other aspects of the system. Indeed, Oates (2011) argues, "all elements of the system (content, assessment, pedagogy, teacher training, teaching materials, incentives and drivers etc.) should all line up and act in a concerted way to deliver public goods." [4]

It is also worth noting that the principle of 'curriculum coherence' is one of Cambridge Assessment's twelve 'principles for the future of teaching, learning and assessment', which it envisages should shape education reforms. [5]

It is important to ensure that calls for assessment reform are not dislocated from the curriculum. Policy makers must ensure that the interaction between curriculum and assessment is deliberately ordered. So, even where policy reform is motivated by concerns about assessment, it is helpful to start from the curriculum.

CST believes that curriculum and assessment reform must be viewed together, and we must start with from the position of what we want pupils to learn: the curriculum.

4 Oates, T. (2011) Could do better: using international comparisons to refine the National Curriculum in England, Curriculum Journal, 22:2, pp121-150.

5 Nassé, S. and Oates, T. (2021) **Outline principles for the future of education** Cambridge Assessment.

Systemness: understanding awarding as capital

Another aspect of assessment reform we need to consider carefully is the awarding of qualifications. It is sometimes asserted that reforming assessment, such as by broadening the evidence base of assessments, or even removing assessment altogether, can unlock positive outcomes for more, or all, pupils. But alongside the benefits proponents suggest, we must also consider the risks. Significantly changing what, how and when we assess can have profound effects on qualifications young people attain.

Pierre Bourdieu's theorisation of 'forms of capital' is a useful reference point when considering qualifications reform. In summary, Bourdieu argued that common explanations of social strata, which often tended only to explore economic capital, provided insufficient explanatory power of how social classes are formed and maintained. He argued that symbolic forms of capital, including social and cultural capital, are also significant in explaining the structuring of society: "*It is in fact impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognized by economic theory*" (1986, p15).[6]

Bourdieu's analysis identified three distinct types of cultural capital: *embodied, objectified and institutionalized*. He explains them as follows:

- **Embodied** – *"long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body."*
- **Objectified** – *"cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.)"*
- **Institutionalized** – *"a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as will be seen in the case of educational qualifications" (note, this is where qualifications sit)*

Bourdieu's work is important because it theorises a sort of exchange rate that takes place between types of capital. Economic capital tends to be the underlying force, but it can be converted into cultural capital through choices that are made, with certain choices being open to people on the basis of their economic capital. For example, being able to afford a house in the catchment of the 'best' school or paying for private education might be seen to give children a better chance of accumulating certain types of cultural capital which are held to be signifiers of middle class or elite status.

6 Bourdieu, P. (1986) The Forms of Capital. In Richardson, J.G. (Ed) Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education. Greenwood Press. New York. pp241-258.

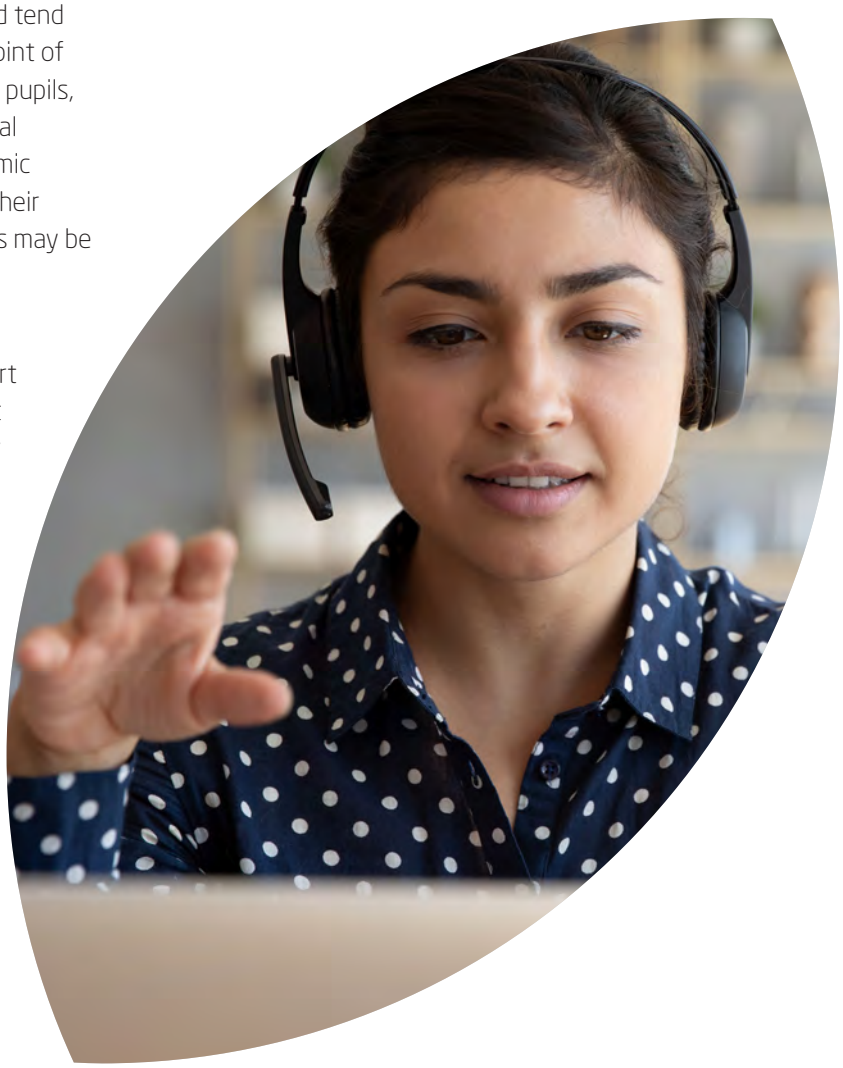
Bourdieu argues that conversion of capital through its different forms is the means through which society is structured. But it is worth noting what Bourdieu says about institutionalized cultural capital, such as education qualifications: *"With the academic qualification, a certificate of cultural competence which confers on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to culture, social alchemy produces a form of cultural capital which has a relative autonomy vis-à-vis its bearer and even vis-à-vis the cultural capital he effectively possesses at a given moment in time."* (1986, p20).

This insight might be useful to us when considering qualifications reform. Firstly, it suggests that institutional cultural capital (such as qualifications) has a longevity which stays with its owner, in a way that is not necessarily shared by other types of capital; once you have those qualifications, they are yours and tend to convey meaning that lasts way beyond the point of their origin. This is potentially very important for pupils, particularly those for whom other types of capital might be more vulnerable to loss, such as economic capital. In short, money might come and go but their institutionalised cultural capital may endure. This may be especially significant for disadvantaged pupils.

Secondly, although its important to note that institutionalised cultural capital does not sit apart from the conversion system Bourdieu outlines, it does have, as he describes it, '*relative autonomy vis-à-vis its bearer*' – which indicates it may have more independence from the individual's socio-economic circumstances than other types of capital (note, this is relative rather than absolute).

This suggests that more people have a chance of developing institutionalised cultural capital, such as formal qualifications, than they do of acquiring other forms of capital. The accumulation of institutionalised cultural capital can then be converted into social and economic capital via access to particular parts of the job market which may otherwise have been out of reach.

Bourdieu's work suggests that if we reform our system of qualifications, we must also consider how such capital could be affected. It is plausible that well-meaning policy in this area could be counterproductive if the unintended outcome is that social and economic capital play an even greater role in determining young people's futures.



The 2017 report from Cambridge Assessment illustrated that this sort of complexity is too frequently ignored when formulating policy: "Social systems such as education and finance differ from natural systems in a fundamental respect – the operation of a social system is determined in part by the ideas which are held by people within those systems – the behaviour of financial systems is affected by ideas of confidence and risk, the behaviour of education systems is affected by ideas of the value of education." [7]

Accordingly, the report argued policy makers must adopt the following perspectives:

1. "Educational improvement cannot be directed towards a static ideal state, but requires constant monitoring, fine-tuning and 'shepherding' in order to secure outcomes such as high equity and high attainment."
2. "While attention to the detail of each element of an education system is important, the 'coherence' research suggests that the interaction and alignment of a system should be a deliberate and constant focus of monitoring activity and policy attention – the complex and constant interaction of factors in the system determines the outcomes which it provides."

Of course, one might argue that the system as it stands does not adequately provide institutionalised capital for groups of young people, or that it does not adequately allow for its conversion into economic and social capital. This paper does not seek to argue otherwise. However, it does make the case that it is precisely because of the need to improve equity that we need to carefully consider the impact, including potential unintended consequences, of changes to qualifications. In its 'principles for the future of teaching, learning and assessment', Cambridge Assessment (2021) states that "dependable assessment is vital for social justice, learning support and equitable progression." [8]

Crato (2020) observes that internationally, education policy has broadly shifted from a focus on absolute performance of a system to a preoccupation with equity within it.[9] If education is to be a vehicle for social justice, as many would argue, this change of emphasis is desirable. Yet he also warns of adverse unintended consequences if the net result of policy is that "inequality can be reduced at the expense of lowering everybody's attainment." [10]

Crato argues that performance and equity are not in conflict, but that policy must account for improvements in both. In terms of 'systemness' this is likely to require policy makers to recognise that differences in the performance of disadvantaged pupils can't be overcome simply by changing assessment and awarding practices, unless our objective is to obscure such issues – which it cannot be. Equity is contingent upon a range of interrelated facets, including curriculum and pedagogy.

Crato also observes that there is tendency for commentators to valorise low stakes assessment over high stakes assessment, or vice-versa. Drawing on a wide range of international evidence, he argues that both are necessary:

"Both monitor the education system, both provide feedback to students, teachers, schools, principals, and parents. Low-stakes tests are valuable for giving frequent feedback to students, helping them regularly in improving their knowledge and skills. Indeed, one of the most solid results of modern cognitive psychology indicates that testing is one of the most efficient tools for improving knowledge retention and consolidation.

High-stakes tests or exams are essential to nudge students progresses, to make sure different levels of learning are attained at each step, and to increase greater transparency and efficiency of the educational system as a whole."

7 Cambridge Assessment (2017) **A Cambridge approach to improving education.** Cambridge Education.
8 Nassé, S. and Oates, T. (2021) **Outline principles for the future of education.** Cambridge Assessment.
9 Crato, N. (2020) Setting up the Scene: Lessons Learned from PISA 2018 Statistics and Other International Student Assessments. In Crato, N. (Ed) Improving a Country's Education. PISA results in 10 Countries. Springer.
10 Ibid. p. 10.

This speaks once again to the complexity of interrelations at play. This paper takes the position outlined by Cambridge Assessment that before embarking on reform we must first fully analyse the problem(s) in detail if we are to avoid the risk of worsening the situation or giving rise to new problems: a 'cycle of planned failure.' "Research indeed needs to 'drill down' into specifics, to examine how something causes improvement, not just that it tends to be associated with it. This requires focus – with researchers understandably concentrating on specifics which hold the greatest potential."[11]

One further aspect of 'systemness' we ought to consider is one of timing. As a result of the disruption to education caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly the resultant use of teacher assessment in 2020 and 2021, some commentators have made the case that now should be the moment for radical reform. Certainly, researchers and policy makers must reflect on what we might learn from the pandemic. However, if reforms are taken forward by government it is also important to consider timing. Cambridge Assessment points out that "Reform and transformation of education reduces capacity in the system during the time of change. As teachers and leaders work to understand and adopt new working processes, this uses time and resources re-directed from existing practices into new processes." Given we already know that schools will be working hard to support the academic, social and wellbeing impacts of Covid-19, policy makers would need to consider carefully whether imminent reform of assessment and qualifications might drain capacity required to meet this challenge.

CST believes that reforms should take account of the complexity of the education system, being appropriately cautious about simple solutions to complex problems.

11 Cambridge Assessment (2017) A Cambridge approach to improving education. Cambridge Education.

Conclusion

That there are calls for assessment reform in a system with such well-established assessment and awarding practice as in England speaks to the reality that there will always be tensions and trade-offs in this area. This is not a defeatist position, it is one that recognises complexity so that it can be dealt with responsibly and intelligently on behalf of young people, particularly the most disadvantaged.

The evidence we have drawn on in this paper illustrates the complexity involved in reforming our assessment and qualifications system. This complexity is not a reason to preserve the status quo but it does speak to the need for policy makers to ensure reforms take account of the principles of 'systemness' and 'coherence.' In order to achieve this, policy makers must go beyond broad-brush reform narratives and focus instead on specific aspects, drawing on evidence to explore how existing practice can be improved.

Accordingly, we believe there are three specific areas of assessment that should be the focus of research, both in relation to their individual potential but also the interactions between them:

1. **The pros and cons of our current cohort-referenced system of grading, and how it can be improved without driving deleterious unintended consequences, especially for disadvantaged children.**
2. **How technology might be used to support valid and reliable assessment in subjects.**
3. **How well schools and pupils, particularly the most disadvantaged, would be served by assessments which go beyond terminal exams.**

By approaching assessment reform in this way, we believe policy makers can build from the present into the future, drawing on evidence to improve assessment for children and young people and minimising the risk of unintended consequences.