



The Future of Qualifications and Assessment for 14-19 year olds

Interim Report, June 2021

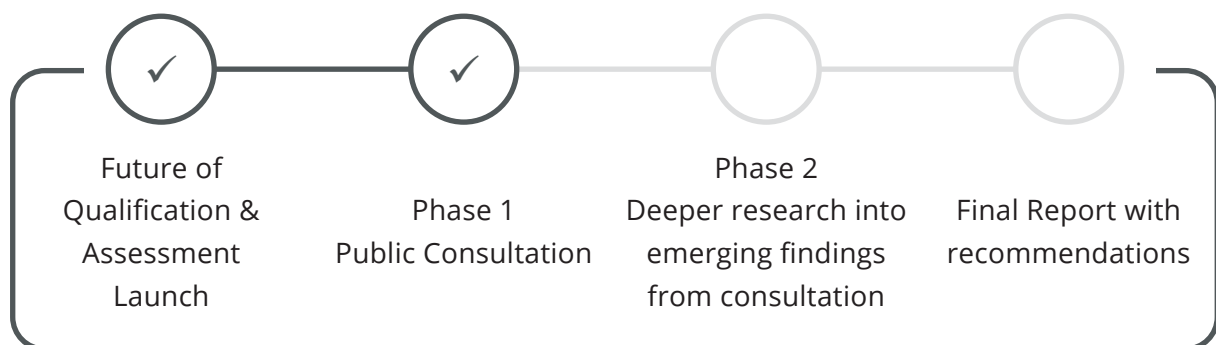


Pearson

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Foreword

The impact of COVID-19 on exams has sharpened the discussion about the role of qualifications and assessment in our education system.

Questions of how, when, and why we assess the educational progress of young people have so far focussed primarily on whether GCSEs are still worthwhile and have attracted a wide range of impassioned voices. In parallel to this, the debate about whether our education system is fair has taken centre stage as the uneven impact of the pandemic has highlighted pre-existing inequalities.

Pearson has a significant role in the education system in England, so it is right that we contribute to the debate. It is also right to use a lens with a wider angle – looking at the purpose of qualifications and assessments, including perspectives on what sort of outcomes we are trying to assess.

What we discovered was in some ways surprising, but also encouraging. Far from seeing education as in need of radical transformation, most people see our education system as an improving platform to be modified and built upon - the glass is at least half full. But they do want education to be more inclusive, more empowering and more relevant to people's lives. That will require some degree of change.

This is an ambitious project and we do not have all the answers even after listening to thousands of educators, employers, parents, and learners. However, the findings have given us a steer and line of sight to a second phase of research on which we will report later this year. I am thankful for the contributions of our expert panel of esteemed voices to help guide the project and to test and challenge us.

Finally, there is good reason for thoroughly debating the implications of these findings because education is in its very nature a complex endeavour. We should heed Albert Einstein's advice: "Everything should be as simple as possible, but no simpler".

Rod Bristow, President Pearson UK

Executive summary

This interim report synthesises the views of over 6,000 people and we are grateful to everyone who contributed to this first stage of the research.

The interim report is comprehensive and high level. It provides a strategic perspective on what people want this phase of learning to deliver and we have used that to define the next stage of work which will result in more detailed recommendations. We acknowledge that education inevitably involves uncomfortable trade-offs between what's wanted and what can be delivered, but that does not blunt our aspiration for perfection.

The decisions that young people make within the 14-19 phase will impact and resonate throughout their lives. That is why our research chose to start with a public consultation, starting with first principles - what is the purpose of education within this phase, and does it currently meet the needs of young people?

The research focused on three broad areas:

- **Purpose and Value:** considering the role that education within the 14-19 phase should play in helping develop confident and well-rounded learners and supporting their life aspirations.
- **Conditions and Environment:** exploring how wider economic, technological, and societal trends are changing what people need to know and need to be able to do.
- **Trust and Equity:** exploring issues around fairness and coherence in the system to maintain public confidence in qualifications and assessment, and to ensure that the system serves diversity, equity and inclusion.

Summary of consultation responses

The consultation revealed the breadth of opinion across students, parents, teachers, academics, employers, policymakers and parliamentarians, but a number of consistent themes emerged among the opinions expressed:

1. **Qualifications are valuable.** Young people want something to show for their years of learning and they want it assessed objectively and fairly.

2. **Knowledge and skills are equally important** and shouldn't be artificially separated. Knowing and doing are essential pre-requisites for individuals to progress in their lives.
3. **Curriculum should be empowering.** Young people should have access to powerful knowledge, relevant to the world around them.
4. **People value choice.** Flexible routes through study, with options of a varied curriculum are seen as very important. There are differences of opinion though about how broad this choice should be and at what age specialisation should happen.
5. **A purely academic or vocational route can be too binary.** There is broad agreement that the combination of practical and academic skills is increasingly valuable.
6. **There is too much weight on exams.** Although important, an over-emphasis of summative high-stakes assessment is sometimes to the detriment of broader learning. On the other hand, formative assessment for learning is very valuable.
7. **There are mixed views on school accountability.** While some believe that school accountability contributes to an over-emphasis on exams, others see it as important in driving up schools' performance. These views are not mutually exclusive. School accountability should also encourage broader learning for success in life.
8. **There are mixed views on how grades are awarded.** There needs to be a debate about what method is best.
9. **Teachers want more involvement in assessment.** Most teachers believe they should play a role in continuous assessments that ultimately contribute to a qualification grade.
10. **Digital innovation needs more emphasis.** Digitisation can make assessment more relevant and inclusive but significant effort is required to make this a reality.

Initial Conclusions: Four Guiding Principles

We have synthesised the findings under four guiding principles that reflect what most people are asking of the education system and to inform the next research phase of this project.

Empowering: An education is a preparation for life and work and should inspire a lifelong love of learning achieved through the acquisition of a core of knowledge plus broader, deeper knowledge including problem-solving, creativity, resilience, leadership and respect for others.

Coherent: Curriculum, qualifications, assessment and teaching should work together in harmony. Furthermore, the 14-19 phase itself should be coherent with later pathways through higher education and apprenticeships.

Adaptable: The 14-19 phase should offer flexibility and choice of academic, applied and technical pathways in an inclusive system more akin to bridges and ladders than rigid tracks.

Innovative: The delivery of assessment and teaching within the 14-19 phase should unleash the power of technology to improve adaptability, inclusion, empowerment and coherence.

Next Steps and further research

The second phase of this research will test these principles by exploring two research questions:

What outcomes should the post-14 curriculum deliver for young people?

We will consider: What choices should be offered at each stage? How do we ensure that curriculum pathways are defined by objective outcomes data rather than perceptions and bias? How are employer voices best expressed? How do we ensure equity and inclusion? What are the implications for existing qualifications?

How should assessment best serve learning, and support these outcomes?

We will consider: What role can technology play? How do we ensure validity and reliability of assessments? How can we better define what knowledge and skill matters and therefore what should be assessed? The purposes and behavioural consequences of assessment.

The research will begin in summer 2021 and we expect to publish our final report by the end of 2021.

Consultation findings

This section provides a detailed overview of the consultation responses. For this research project, data was gathered from targeted surveys to 5000 young people, parents, teachers and employers. We also opened an online public consultation which received over 900 responses as well as several additional written responses. We polled 104 MPs and interviewed Expert Panel members and other experts who responded to the public consultation. The findings in this report should be read alongside the accompanying Technical Annex document for a full breakdown of the methodology, and quantitative data.

What should be taught within the 14-19 phase?

Young people, parents, teachers and employers view education as being a lot more than passing exams and gaining qualifications.

In our public consultation, we found that most stakeholders (75%) agree that qualifications are important, but they need to be balanced with the provision of a broad education that enables young people to play an active part in civil society and prepare them for adult life. In the employer survey, 61% agreed with this position.

“Education is a journey of exploration.”

Expert Panel Member

Our Expert Panel shared this view of education as preparing children for adult and working life. Whilst there was general agreement that what is considered ‘worth knowing’ is based on time-honoured beliefs – beliefs that needs to refreshed and reformulated for the 21st century – there were some differences about what the curriculum should look like for 14-19 education.

Several expressed the view about the importance of a clear pathway through the 14-19 phases, including core subjects in numeracy, literacy and ICT, but also progression into further and higher learning or training provision.

I think the most difficult challenge is about the pathways. We do have to get more 16 year olds more equipped for some parts of the workforce but we can't meet the needs of the Industrial Strategy just by some practical workshop type skills. We also need the higher order skills that doctors, and lawyers need. There is this problem of early specialisation that we have in England. But then if you get everyone to do a bit of both then we go too far the other way.

Expert Panel Member

Others stressed the importance of providing all young people with common knowledge across a wide range of disciplines, warning against early specialisation and the narrowing of learning, and the implications it has on future opportunities. This was viewed as important when considering that subjects like art, sport, drama, history, geography and modern foreign languages can be dropped at 14 and Maths and English dropped at 16. 32% of MPs polled agreed and felt that students should specialise later while 39% had no clear opinion.

We are one of the countries in the advanced world where we can give up Maths at 16 or a second language. This leads to poor national productivity in our industry – why do we have so few leading scientists? Because many can't speak a second language.

Expert Panel Member

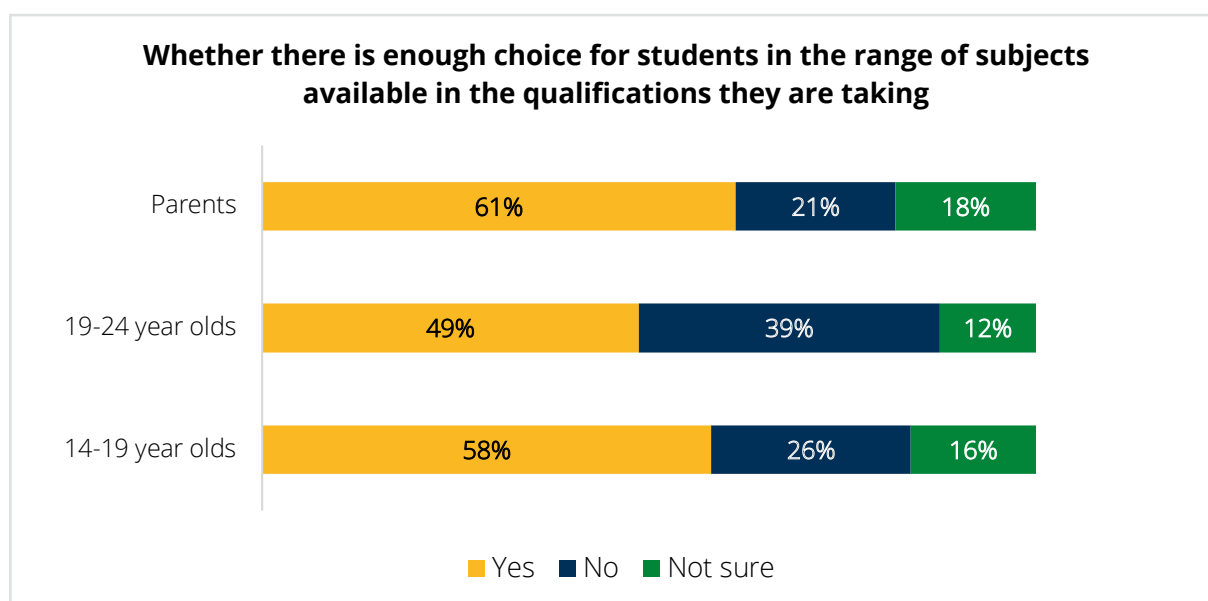
Respondents to the consultation were united in a strong belief in the role of schools and colleges in equipping young people with the general knowledge, skills and attributes needed to succeed in adult life and employment.

"In every child there is a flint, the role of education is to create the spark."

Expert Panel Member

Does the curriculum support good progression choices?

A broad education is what the public want (75% felt this was most important). A sizeable minority of parents and learners in our consultation felt there isn't enough choice for students in the range of subjects available to study or the qualifications available with a quarter of young people aged 14 to 19 see their choices as limited in these areas.



Source: online survey of 14-19 year olds, 19-24 year olds and parents, 2021

"When I was 14, I didn't feel I had enough options, maybe ten subjects to choose from for GCSEs – just the 'bog-standard' ones. And then at 16, when it came to doing A Levels, I feel I was forced to choose the subjects I did well in at GCSE, not necessarily the ones I really enjoyed. Again, I don't think there's a lot of choice with A Levels; what about options for careers or other pathways? I feel like choice is even more narrow at 16."

21 year old student, video interview

Many teachers (65%) also feel the range of subjects they can offer their students at KS4 and KS5 is limited, stemming from funding and accountability pressures.

"We spend far too long teaching students how to hit the assessment objectives for each exam and don't have time to do engaging activities. There is also too much content to fit in the time available and so you feel that you are always racing through it without time to pause and let students explore. There is just no time to make it engaging because we are having to race to that GCSE line with so much pressure to get good grades."

Secondary school teacher, public survey

"The way in which students are examined and the weight that is put on the school to achieve those expectations for them to be a 'good' school is ludicrous. The content for the GCSEs is in some subjects outdated and the skills students need to learn to succeed in life and the workplace have been totally disregarded over higher grades and knowledge retention. We need more vocational-style assessment and more emphasis on development of life skills. We need to change the premise of Ofsted from assessing and testing to supporting and nurturing. Education should not be treated as a business with a factory business model. It's hurting all students and they are not receiving the education they deserve or need".

Secondary school teacher, public survey

Results from the public survey of 14–19-year-olds and parents of 14–19-year-olds reveal the extent to which subject choice is driven by a consideration of future careers options.

| Factors that influenced qualification options | 14-19 year olds | Parents |
|-------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------|
| Needed to pursue career choice | 43% | 43% |
| Needed to go onto college or university | 33% | 35% |
| Needed to get a good job | 31% | 26% |
| Feel employers place more value on this qualification | 19% | 20% |
| Recommended by my/their teacher/my school | 18% | 15% |
| Recommended by parents/family members | 18% | 13% |
| Followed what friends did | 10% | 10% |
| Followed my/their interests | 5% | 5% |

Source: online surveys of 14-19 year olds and parents, 2021

As well as the choice of qualifications, open responses in the online surveys indicated that students and parents welcome more support from schools with careers advice, work preparation (e.g. writing CVs and preparing for interviews) and work experience from age 14 years onwards.

"[We] should think about helping children to put a CV together to prepare them for when applying for jobs and apprenticeships. When my son was asked to send a CV when applying for an apprenticeship, he didn't know what a CV was or how to put one together. I was very surprised he wasn't taught this at school."

Parent, public survey

The binary split of academic and vocational as separate pathways

In the open responses to the consultation, 16-19 education was sometimes characterised as having divergent vocational and academic pathways "pushing" young people into making decisions they may not be ready for, and in some cases regretted with hindsight. Some members of the Expert Panel saw this as inhibiting the realisation of a broad and balanced curriculum for all.

"I think when you channel people very early on you are shutting off the other routes and it is difficult to change. In my generation you had a job for life and that's not true anymore. What we are now doing is educating people for a portfolio of careers."

Expert Panel Member

The majority of MPs polled advocated a blended approach with 71% in favour of students doing more practical, career-related qualifications as part of their education.

Many of the young people in our video surveys reflected some dissatisfaction in the choices they had made at an earlier stage and the limited options they felt they had.

"If I knew then (at 14) what I know now, I definitely would have chosen more practical subjects, things that are more hands-on and learning by doing. I should have really gone down the apprenticeship route, learning a skill, like plumbing or electronics. But instead I did academic stuff, was stuck in the classroom and that didn't suit me."

18 year old student, video interview

"I definitely think there's a lack of support for students that don't want to go to university. And that was me – I wanted to go straight to work after my A Levels. At my school, I felt that there was a real lack of provision for people that didn't want to choose [the] university route. I basically just got put in a classroom and was told write my CV and that was OK because I knew what I wanted. But I think young people definitely need support in terms of going straight from Sixth Form into work – it's becoming a more popular option and university isn't necessarily always the correct route for everyone. Also, for a lot of jobs now, you don't need a degree and you can progress quicker through an apprenticeship."

20 year old employee, video interview

Issues relating to a lack of choice were echoed by the parents and teachers in the surveys. This was both in respect of the subjects that were available in their institutions, and their perception of pathways available to young people.

"I'd like to see schools offer a wider range of subjects studied to 18, so students aren't pigeonholed into either academic or vocational routes."

Secondary school teacher, public survey

"Young people need to be encouraged to seek out post-16 options that are more suited to their capabilities, rather than based on whether they're academic or not."

Student, 14-19 years old, public survey

I think we need to offer young people more pathways to achievement – they need core skills such as maths and language but not a 'one size fits all' curricula."

Parent, public survey

Which skills should be taught?

The importance of skills such as problem-solving, creativity, and analytical decision-making was made by several stakeholder groups. Three-quarters of current students (14-19-year-olds) and young people aged 19-24 – and all but a small minority of parents – feel these skills are a very important part of learning at school and college.

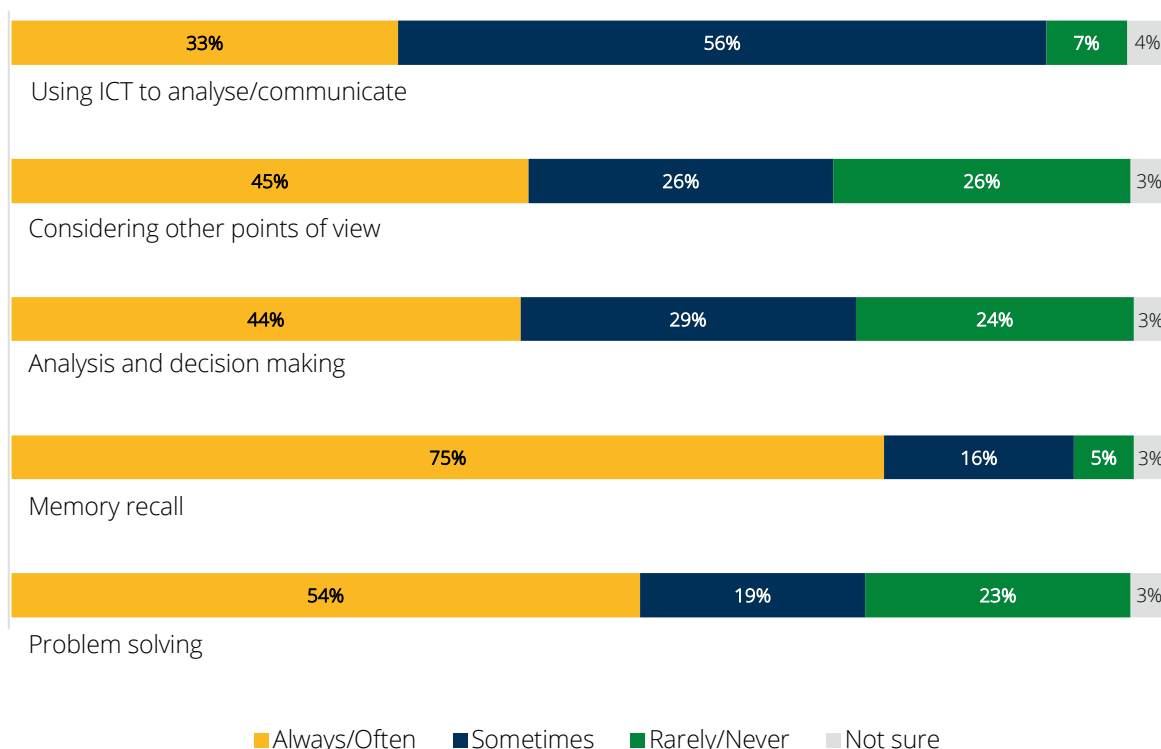
| Skills rated as important to very important | 14-19 year olds | 19-24 year olds | Parents |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|---------|
| Being able to see things in different ways to find solutions to problems | 79% | 77% | 94% |
| Being able to consider and analyse what they've heard, so they can make their own judgement | 78% | 77% | 93% |
| Being able to remember things from memory | 72% | 68% | 86% |
| Understanding others' thoughts and feelings and considering their points of view | 75% | 78% | 91% |
| Being able to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create and communicate information | 74% | 76% | 93% |

Source: online surveys of 14-19 year olds, 19-24 year olds and parents, 2021

Traditional pedagogical practices and forms of assessment around recall and memory were also considered important amongst these groups with over two thirds of 14-19 and 19-24 year olds seeing the recalling of facts as important in the survey, 86% of parents surveyed saw this as important too.

Whilst a high premium is placed on all of these skills, the young people in our survey perceived that they are assessed more often on memory recall than on problem solving, judgement, empathy and communication.

How often young people feel they are being assessed on their skills



Source: online survey of 14-19 year olds, 2021

In open responses to the survey questions, parents and teachers surveyed highlighted the importance of teaching and assessment of these skills in the curriculum. The MP polling also reflected this, with 69% agreeing that a better balance of skills should be delivered.

"I'd like to see schools measuring a broader range of skills/capabilities (critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, independent learning) rather than pure academics."

Parent, public survey

"We need an education system that fosters innovation, creativity, resilience, enquiry - the skills that will benefit young people. They should underpin academic and vocational education."

Parent, public survey

"There should be more focus on understanding and skills and less focus on mere rote learning and regurgitation. We need a broader curriculum focus in KS4, with the creative arts not side-lined."

Secondary school teacher, public survey

"The syllabus/curriculum is too prescribed on knowledge which is outdated. We need to update the knowledge and focus more on skills and competencies required for the 21st century."

Secondary school teacher, public survey

"Pupils need a broader curriculum that allows them to develop more transferable skills for the future whilst also giving them the opportunity to study particular topics in depth."

College lecturer, public survey

To get a sense of how important these skills are in personal development we asked young people aged 19-24 who are either in work or higher education what they found most useful from their secondary and further education regarding their current role. Social skills associated with personal effectiveness came out ahead of general academic knowledge.

Most useful learning from 14-19 education

| | |
|---------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Social skills like communication, time-management, etc | 50% |
| General intellectual knowledge from a range of subjects | 36% |
| Ability to cope with stress | 35% |
| Confidence to face challenges | 30% |
| Ability to memorise important information | 25% |
| Specific, workplace-related skills and knowledge | 23% |

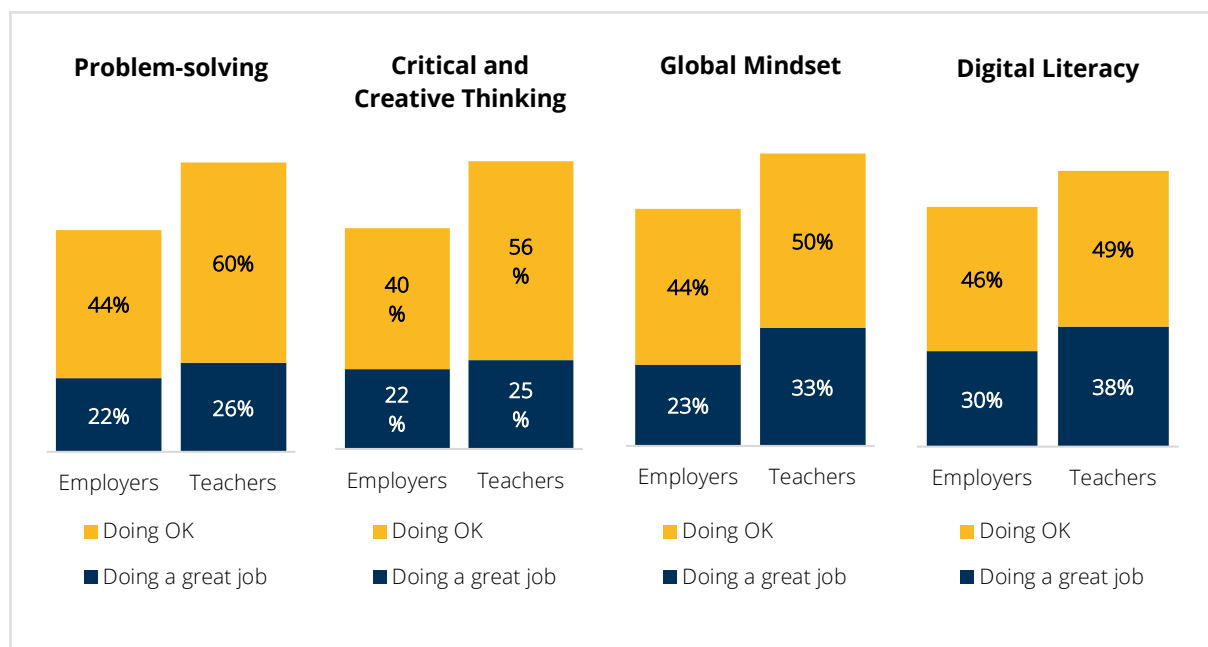
Source: Online survey of 19-24 year olds, 2021

The consultation also sought the views of employers about the skills they see lacking in young people who apply for jobs. We found that only a fifth of employers felt schools and colleges were developing these skills effectively in young people, 4 in 10 felt they were doing 'OK'.

"When I hire people, I want to see evidence of autonomy, curiosity, resilience. These things are by far more important to me than being booksmart. I will teach them all the things knowledge-wise things they need to know - but I can't teach them curiosity, or autonomy, or taking the initiative. They need to show emotional intelligence too. These skills for me are far, far more important than whether they have an NVQ / apprenticeship / work experience or a degree"

Employer, online employer survey

Establishing good connections between employers and students early on in their education was seen as critical by our Expert Panel. They acknowledged that engagement between education providers and the workplace is central to inspiring a pipeline of young people ready for work.



Source: online surveys of employers and teachers, 2021

"I think one area we should consider focusing on is guiding students to be critical thinkers and exactly what that means. I'm not sure that as educators we have truly hit the mark when it comes to modelling what it means to be a critical thinker. We may give them projects or ask them questions on a test believing that we are doing critical thinking activities, but do we truly walk them through the process and ask them questions along the way to help them down the path? I think we could be doing more."

Secondary school teacher, public survey

Through the open questions, a significant number of students and parents agreed about the importance of equipping young people with a set of practical life skills, like cooking, personal health and financial management.

"Less value seems to be attributed to many life skills, like being able to cook healthy food. It's not seen as a good skill."

Parent, public survey

"They need to learn about money/credit and interest rates. And how to cook!"

Parent, public survey

"I believe that young people should learn real life skills and valuable lessons. I want to know what a mortgage is, how to pay taxes, how to manage money, I want to know real world problems."

Student, 14-19 years old, public survey

"Add a new subject for key life skills e.g. how to pay tax, how to get a mortgage etc should be compulsory. As a 16 year old teenager I have no idea how to do any of these, in two years' time I will become an adult and have no knowledge how to do any of these key life skills."

Student, 14-19 years old, public survey

This view was also echoed by some teachers keen on introducing these skills into the curriculum:

"Healthy living should be a part of the national curriculum, mixed with PE or biology - too many students do not understand the effects of poor diet, sleep and so on which in turn will impact future generations in terms of their health. A few PSHE sessions on this is insufficient to teach students about how to ensure long term health".

Teacher, public survey

35% of employers also agreed about the need to build skills relating to personal-effectiveness such as time management, budgets/managing money, and how to network with others and how to take responsibility.

The expert panel generally agreed with the need for education to record more than just qualification achievement.

“We should give young people a portfolio of evidence of what they have achieved. They can say “This is what I have done – I’ve not only done well in English and Maths but I’ve also been a school prefect, a member of the debate club, I have also done work experience and by the way, my attendance is fantastic”. Then they can push themselves forward. We don’t do any of that at the moment. If you listen to employers, they will say they are not interested in whether they have this and that [qualification], what they are interested in is will they turn up on time?”

Expert Panel Member

Some members of our Expert Panel were keen to point out that knowledge and skills are not directly interchangeable in all contexts. Knowing how to read music is an important skill that is acquired on the way to becoming a musician, but to be proficient requires lots of practice too.

How much does the curriculum reflect modern life?

The consultation revealed that young people want to learn more about the contemporary world they live in, particularly around social issues. Frequent comments referred to the incorporation of learning about popular political movements or social justice:

“Make the specification relate to the times we live in. e.g. not just acknowledge Black History Month or Pride Month but have a unit specifically on black history and pride history that we study throughout our school years.”

Student, 14-19 years old, public survey

“We need more environmental education focused on climate change and social justice.”

Student, 14-19 years old, public survey

What matters to young people is seeing what they learn “come to life” by applying that knowledge in real world examples or contexts.

"Just doing lots of exams won't help us when we get into the real world. In Maths, schools should focus on teaching us Maths about the real world (such as finance, mortgages and etc).

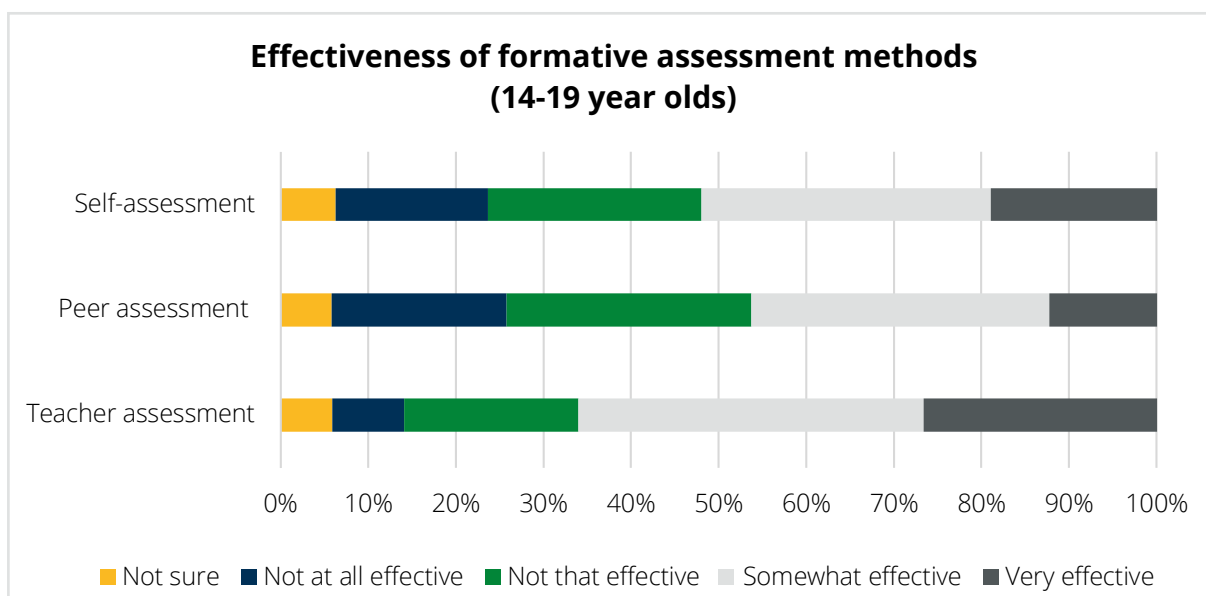
Student, 14-19 years old, public survey

"In Maths, we should have a module based around mathematical applications in the real world – students would really be fascinated by that."

Student, 14-19 years old, public survey

Stakeholder views on assessment methods

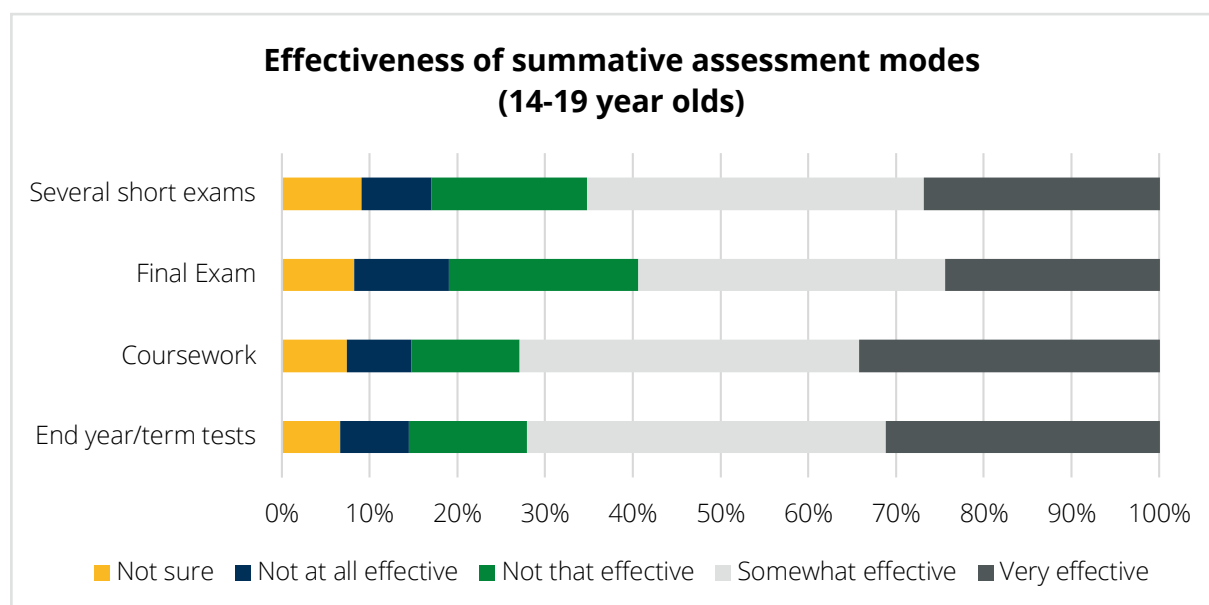
From our survey of 14–19 year old students, we found that when it comes to types of formative assessment, teacher assessment is considered most effective in assessing what they have learned, but they are also open to peer and self-assessment. Peer assessment was considered the least effective overall, but 46% still felt it was somewhat effective to very effective.



Source online survey of 14-19 year olds, 2021

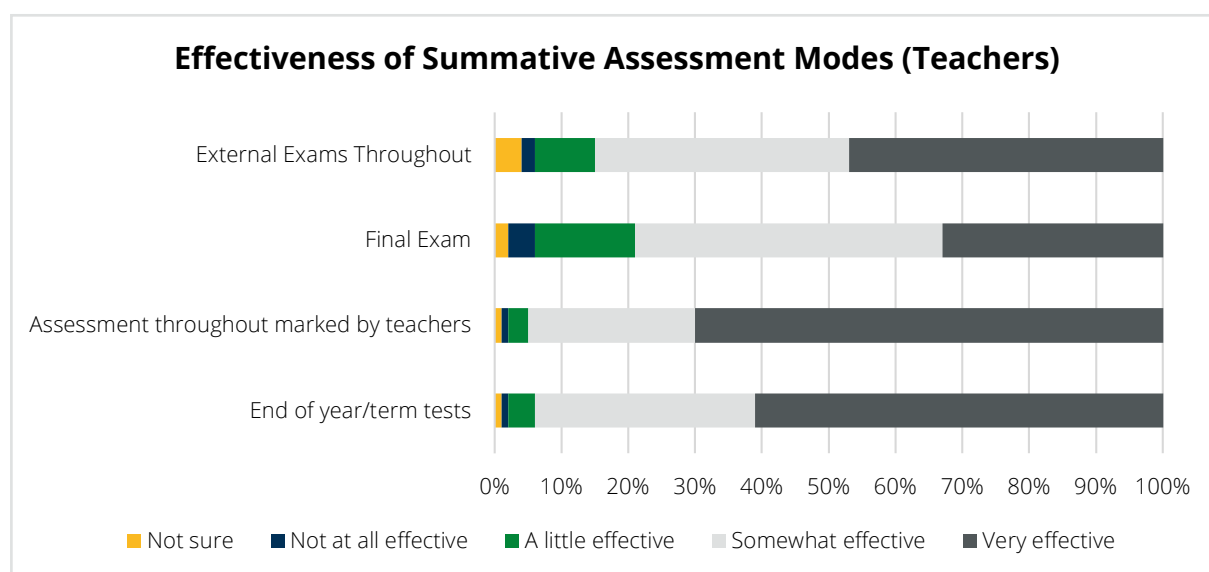
Regarding assessment modes that are likely to be associated with summative assessment, learners felt the range of assessment types were all generally effective in assessing what they had learned. A single final exam was considered the least effective but was

still considered effective by 59% of respondents. Regarding the option of several short exams, we did not specify when these took place nor use the term ‘modular’, avoiding any association with retaking or grade aggregation in qualifications.



Source online survey of 14-19 year olds, 2021

Teachers generally feel all assessment types are effective, but with a strong preference for more regular assessments throughout the year, and assessments that are marked by themselves. These methods received far greater ‘very effective’ scores. 70% believe regular assessments of a student’s coursework throughout the year marked by their teachers is very effective, compared to 33% who rate one final high stakes exam in the subject with the same level of effectiveness.



Source: online survey of teachers, 2021

There was some consensus amongst the Expert Panel that nationally recognised assessment plays an important role for learners.

“Exams and tests are still very useful. If you just relied on a rich curriculum and had no exam to show for all your learning, then the Etons of this world would churn out young people with great learning and poor children going to poor schools would have a less enriching curriculum and no qualifications to show for their time at school.”

Expert Panel Member

Many of our Expert Panel members raised the issue of the ‘forgotten third’ referencing the third of 16 year olds each year who fail to secure a standard pass (grade 4) in English and Maths, and research that indicates this is predominately from disadvantaged backgrounds. Whilst there was broad support for a mechanism for providing feedback on attainment at age 16, there was a strong feeling that achieving enough ‘good passes’ at GCSE was a cliff edge for many, and often difficult to recover from if you fall short.

“We are predisposing young people to fail, and that’s what you see up and down the country. So any assessment system we have has got to be inclusive. That’s not being soft, it is simply saying we’ve got to have an assessment system which recognises the skills and talent of all our young people.”

Expert Panel Member

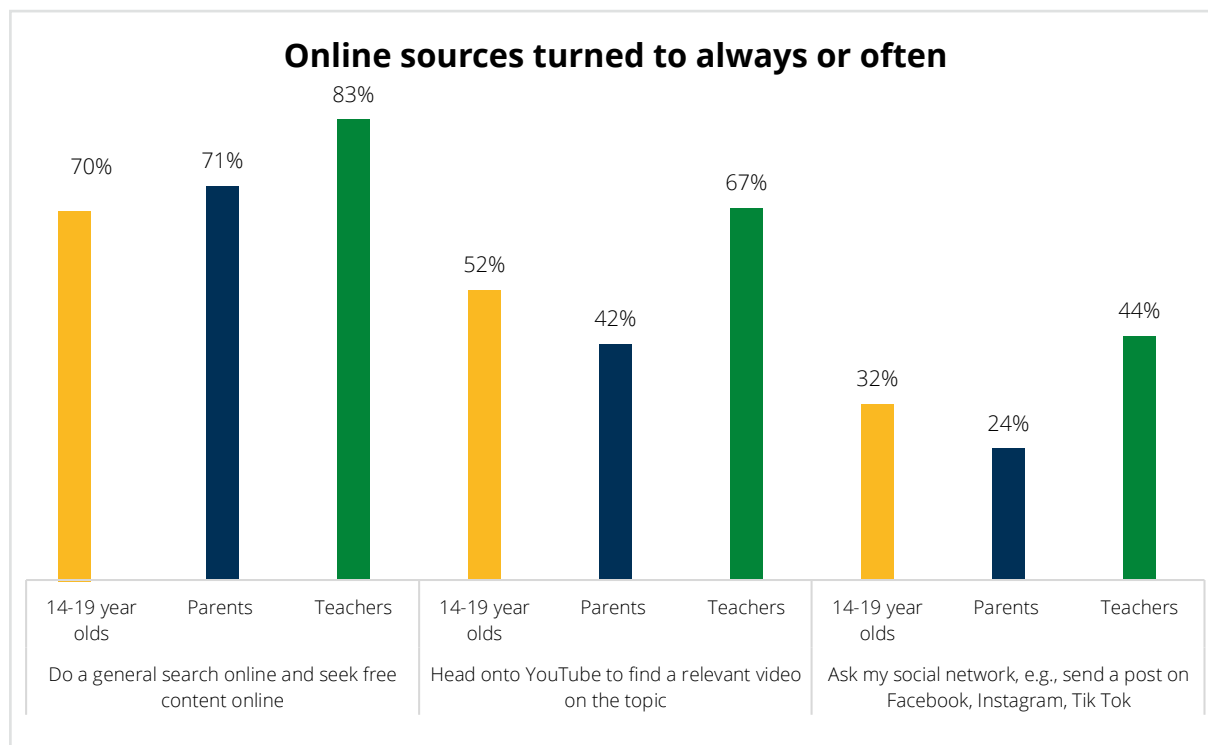
Balancing digital and traditional learning

The pandemic has radically changed how we work, and our Expert Panel felt education must keep pace with the digital transformation. Covid has accelerated digital change in teaching and learning, but assessment lags behind.

Results from our survey of 14–19 year olds reveals that young people use online sources for learning a lot of the time. However, they are not turning to online sources as much as teachers assume they do.

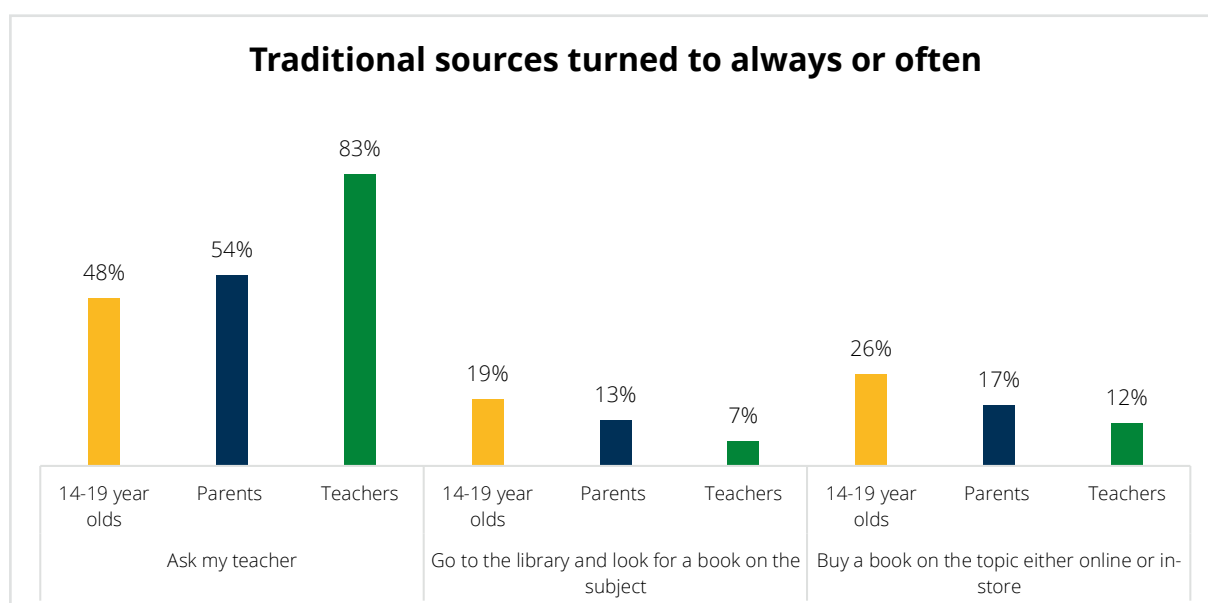
83% of teachers surveyed perceive that their students look for content online for school/college work by carrying out online searches always or often, which is higher than the 70% of 14–19 year olds who reported they do this. Similarly, two-thirds of teachers perceive their students turn to YouTube always or often, compared to the half of 14–19 year olds who said they do.

Interestingly, most teachers (83%) said they believe their students turn to them for information and advice with regard to completing school/college work always or often; a perception that differs with 48% of students and 54% of their parents selecting the teacher as a regular source.



Source: online survey of 14-19 year olds, parents and teachers, 2021

How often do you turn to the following sources, if at all, for information and advice with regard to completing school/college work?



Source: online survey of 14-19 year olds, parents and teachers, 2021

How often do you turn to the following sources, if at all, for information and advice with regard to completing school/college work?

How do learners feel about digital assessment?

A quarter of young people said they would prefer to sit their final exams onscreen whilst more – 4 in 10 – would prefer a pen and paper approach. The remaining quarter prefer the option of both, depending on the subject.

| | Formative assessments | | | Summative assessments | | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|---------|----------|-----------------------|---------|----------|
| | 14-19 year olds | Parents | Teachers | 14-19 year olds | Parents | Teachers |
| On a computer | 29% | 42% | 27% | 27% | 37% | 23% |
| Pen and Paper | 39% | 28% | 32% | 40% | 31% | 36% |
| Option of both | 25% | 22% | 41% | 26% | 23% | 42% |
| No preference/ Not sure | 7% | 8% | 0% | 7% | 9% | 0% |

Source: Online surveys of 14-19 year olds, Parents and Teachers, 2021

When we split the results between students currently taking GCSE/A Levels and vocational qualifications, we found that the latter were keener on both onscreen formative and summative assessments, possibly reflecting a higher level of exposure to this assessment method. Teachers were keener to see students being offered the option and highly supportive of technology in teaching and learning.

We found from the public consultation that three quarters of school and college leaders and classroom teachers feel more teaching and assessment should be delivered through technological solutions. Teachers in the targeted survey agreed, with 77% of them agreeing that teaching and assessment should reflect the technology that students engage with elsewhere in their lives.

We found that whilst teachers are generally keen on the use of technology in education, 95% of them feel they need more support such as regular continuous professional development (CPD) to make the most of these solutions and increase their confidence in its use.

The role of teachers in summative assessment

Our Expert Panel agreed that good-quality teaching is the key to an effective school and a successful education system. A few stressed that with the national debate firmly centred on assessment, we are at risk of losing sight of the fact that what makes a real, long-term difference to raising standards for all children is improving the quality of the teaching and learning.

Our Expert Panel were mixed, however, in their views on the role of teachers in high stakes assessment. Some felt that teachers generally know their students better than anyone else and are therefore best placed to make judgements about their achievement. It was suggested that teachers should have access to training to build expertise in assessment, which may also help to mitigate the risk of (or perception of) undue influences and pressures on teachers from parents and school leaders.

In the survey, teachers felt strongly that they should be given more responsibility for assessment. When asked, 78% of teachers said they wanted more autonomy for conducting summative assessment of their learners.

These views were balanced with just over half (57%) of those responding to the public survey, recognising that there were some limitations to teacher-led assessment in that any perceptions of unreliability would need to be overcome. This sentiment appeared throughout the qualitative interviews with the Expert Panel and our surveys, expressing the need for some objectivity and assessments from external sources to promote consistency across different education institutions and confidence in the grades issued.

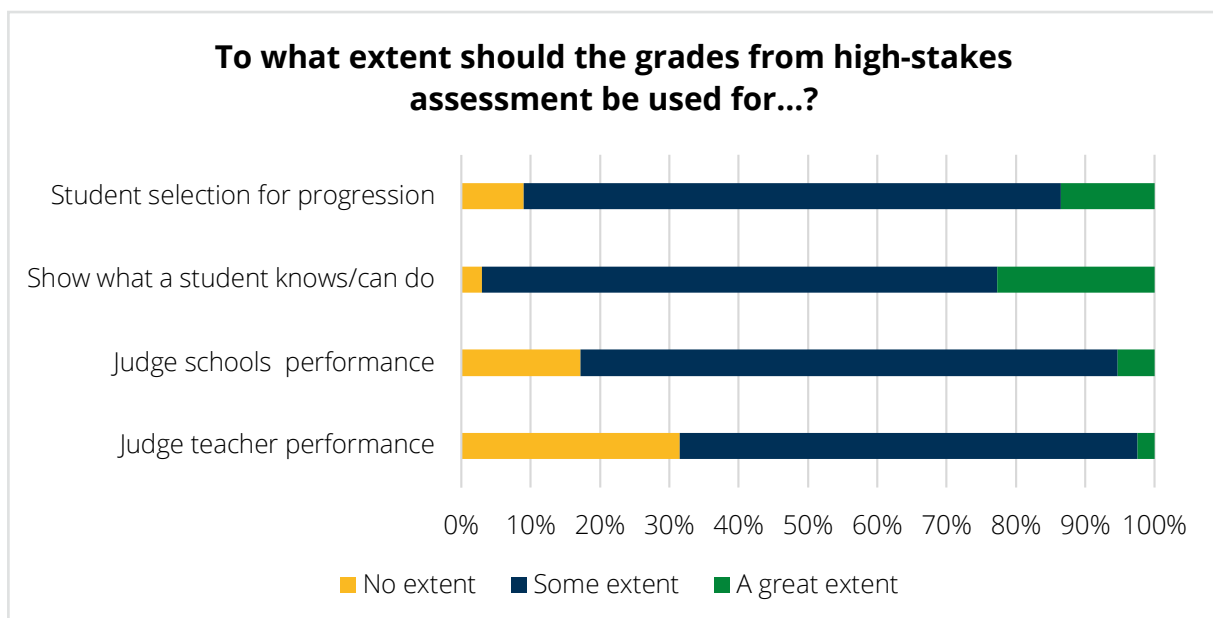
A tension between high stakes assessment and school accountability

Members of the expert panel referenced some of the constraints that the accountability system puts on the qualifications and assessment decisions taken by schools and colleges. It was also felt that the accountability system does not adequately encourage recognition of the bottom third of learners who fail to meet a 'pass' standard in their GCSEs.

Schools are shaped by performance tables from DfE and Inspection from Ofsted. What happens is that young people are shaped to take courses and qualifications that are based on the need to show accountability. That's how DfE uses data to judge schools. At the moment [GCSEs] are really being used to judge schools.

Expert Panel Member

We asked teachers for their views on how the results of high stakes assessments should be used. Most teachers feel that using grades to judge performance of either schools or teachers is valid, but only to a certain extent. Even when considering more learner-centred purposes of providing feedback or supporting progression, most felt that grades should not dominate.



Source: online survey of secondary and FE teachers 2021

Students, parents, employers, and teachers want a 14-19 education system that opens opportunities for young people for success in their adult lives. Many of those taking part in the consultation were keen to point out that qualifications form an important part of a broader, balanced curriculum offer. Our Expert Panel felt that the role of qualifications and assessments were critical in determining next steps for young people in their lives.

Are qualifications important?

The consultation did not find evidence of a strong desire to remove GCSEs or replace our current assessment system with an entirely new one.

“They give people something to show when applying for a job that proves they are capable of the job that they’re applying for.”

17 year old college student, online video interview

“Qualifications were very important right from secondary school. I knew they’d be important because I wanted to go to university to train to be a teacher... So once my teachers were aware of that, they always supported me and my parents were always supportive. I ensured I revised and worked hard because I needed to get the grades in order to achieve my dream.”

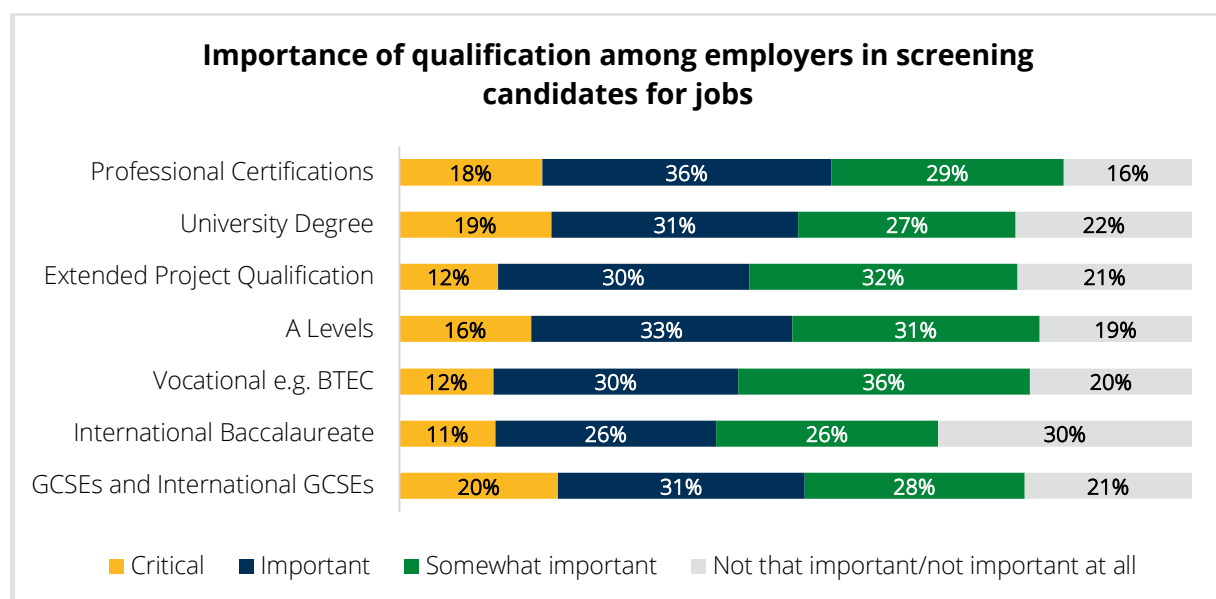
20 year old university student, online video interview

“GCSEs, A Levels and BTEC qualifications are very important, to get into university or to get a new job, just because they provide the base and they also provide you with the fundamental skills you do need.”

20 year old university student, online video interview

The consultation revealed that young people and their parents place equal value on academic and vocational qualifications in employment outcomes. In the surveys, 44% of students, 43% of young people aged 19-24, and 62% of parents agree to strongly agree that all qualifications taken at school are equal in helping you achieve a successful and prosperous career.

Some job roles demand specific qualifications and are seen as ‘critical’ by employers. Survey responses suggest qualifications are only part of a screening process for jobs, with most employers seeing them as either important or somewhat important.



Source: online survey of employers, 2021

It is worth noting that of the employers surveyed, 65% were from small and micro-businesses and may be less familiar with qualification types given the irregularity of recruitment.

High stakes assessment and mental health

When asked about key educational improvements, in the public consultation, a fifth of young people highlighted mental health as being important in the context of exam stress; they emphasised the need for better support to cope with exam pressures and/or scaling back high stakes exams. Some teachers highlighted this as a concern too.

“There should not be so much weight put on one exam at the end of the year. This causes stress and anxiety and damages kid’s mental health. If they mess up one exam, they could destroy life chances. The exams have become all about memory, rewarding the people who can remember the most and punishing people who can’t.”

Student, 14-19 years old, public survey

“Mental health support should be compulsory and as common as a subject as English and maths. Then you’d have confident a happy and positive generation ready to face life.”

Student, 14-19 years old, public survey

“The current pandemic has highlighted the already present issues surrounding teenage mental health. Each year, as summative exams approach, many 14-19 year old pupils experience high levels of negative stress.”

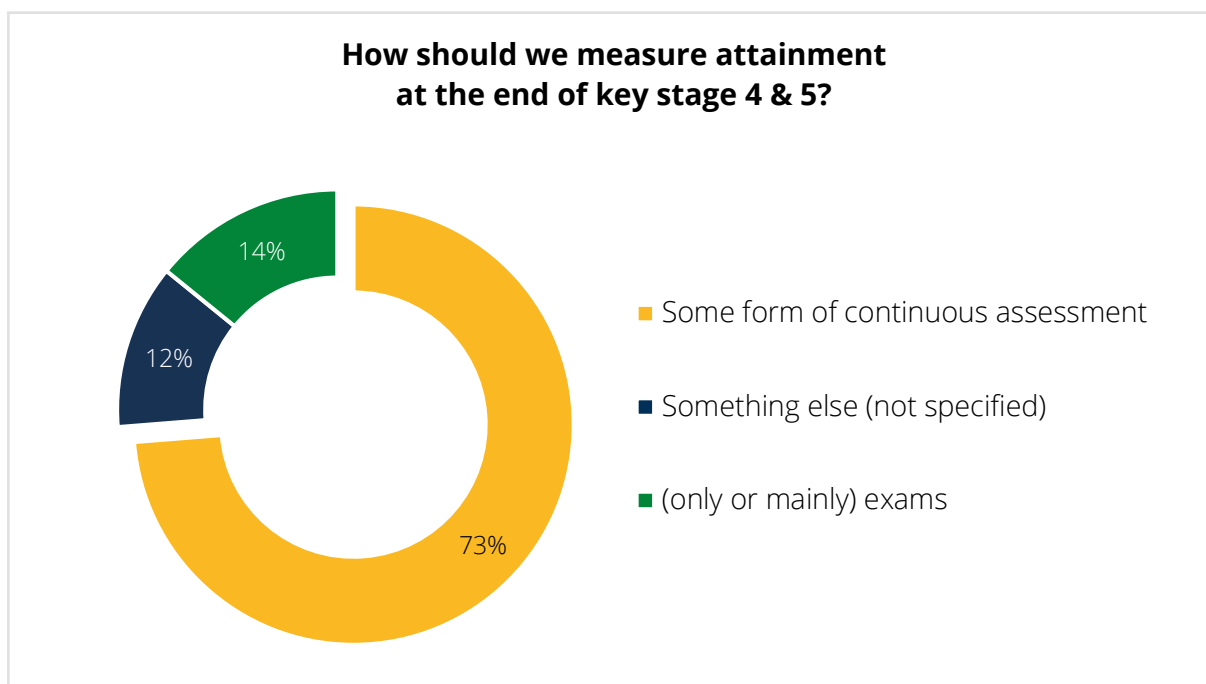
School teacher, public survey

Appetite for assessment reform amongst wider public

Our surveys found that young people, parents and teachers see regular assessment of learning as somewhat preferable to one end of year terminal exam.

In the public survey we asked if some form of measurement at the end of KS4 and KS5 was required, and – if so – what should it be? Of the 753 responses we received to this

question, 614 expressed an opinion; of these 450 (73%) favoured some form of continuous assessment or coursework over exams.



Source: online public survey, 2021 (n=614)

Looking at the open responses in some detail, there was majority support for a mixed economy approach to assessment. The language used varied. Some talked of “part coursework, part exam”, or replacing exams with “teacher assessment”. Others favoured “modular assessment” or adding “practical tests”. Some suggested we should replace the current system with “shorter, more frequent exams”.

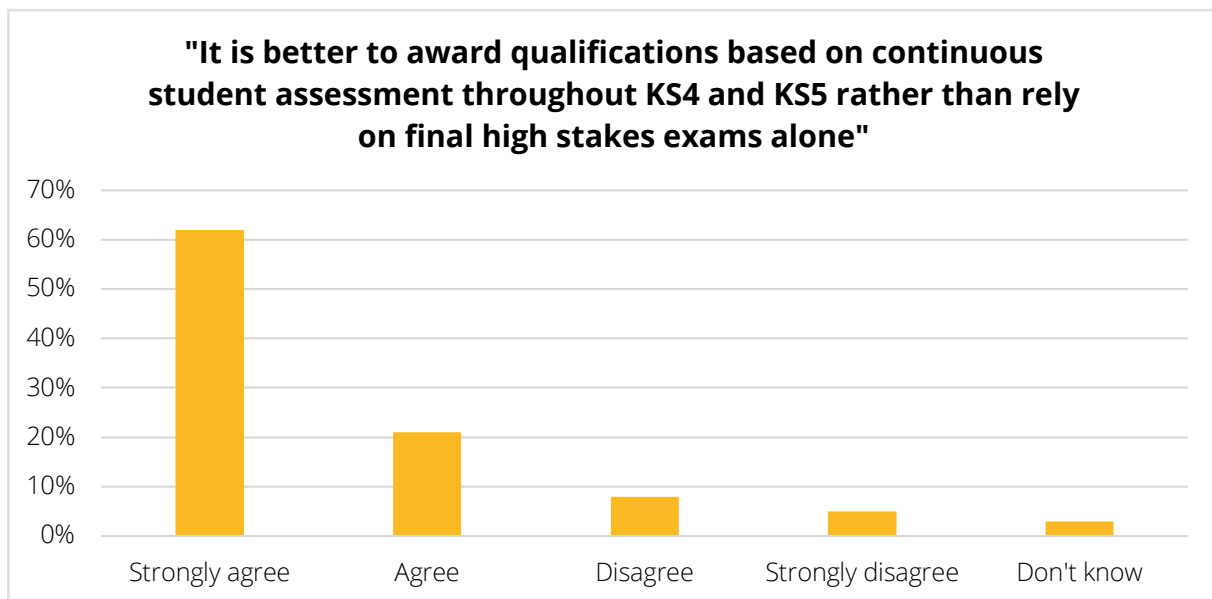
“There’s too much emphasis on end of year exams. Coursework and ongoing ‘mini exams’ throughout the year would have certainly helped my son who struggles with the recall of information learnt over the course of a year, the challenge of hours of revising with a busy lifestyle, and the pressure that an exam brings.”

Parent, public survey

“Yes, make the exams modular so that all the tests do not have to be taken in one go, but spread out throughout the course.”

Student, 14-19 years old, public survey

Support for continuous assessment was further endorsed when we asked the public how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statement that it is better to award qualifications based on continuous student assessment throughout KS4 and KS5 rather than rely on final year high stake exams.



Source: online public survey; (n=822)

In total, 84% of the 939 people who responded to the online public survey agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. All groups – learners, parents, teachers, school/college leaders, and employers – who took part in the public survey were strong advocates of continuous assessment. In a separate survey of 1000 secondary and FE teachers, over 80% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.

“The biggest mistake was to divorce learning and assessment – the future will see a closer integration of the two.”

Expert Interviewee

“Assessment needs to be tied up with curriculum. It’s when we have a demarcation between the two that things go horribly wrong. Assessment needs to be in service of curriculum.”

Expert Panel Member

Most members of our Expert Panel cautiously welcomed a return to some form of continuous assessment – cautious because they were mindful of the reasons why continuous assessment was removed from general qualifications following the 2012 reforms. This included the additional assessment burden for students and teachers and unintended pressure for teachers to meet grade thresholds for accountability measures. Members of the panel felt that to integrate some form of continuous assessment based on teacher judgment would require decoupling school accountability measures from student assessment in some way. There was generally strong support for the curriculum to drive assessment and that continuous assessment is better placed to do this.

Standards setting methods

Whilst not directly part of the survey, some Expert Panel members made clear reference to the need for a better public understanding of the implications of how we set standards in the English education system and think about the future of qualifications and assessment. It was interesting to see in response to the teacher survey that 60% of teachers thought that the distribution of grades nationally remaining consistent overtime was important. With 40% not seeing this as important it would be useful to tease out what underpins some of this thinking given this emphasis placed on standards setting regimes in England.

“We don’t do a great job at explaining how it works – the events of summer 2020 exposed how much people don’t know how standards are set in any other year.”

Expert Panel Member

“It is crucial that we don’t go back to the norm referencing grade boundaries and examinations which fail to acknowledge the actual achievement of young people as individuals and the improvement in their teaching and learning.”

Expert Panel Member

Home schooling and remote leaning

Many on our Expert Panel saw the pandemic as affording the opportunity to think more radically about the future role of schools and colleges and how learning and assessment can take place outside of these traditional structures.

The fluidity of learning during the pandemic – both in school, and online – put a spotlight on home education and the role of technology to facilitate remote, independent learning.

While the disruption to learning has been enormously challenging for young people, longer-term, remote and independent working offers an opportunity to build new ways of delivering the curriculum.

“Evidence [of pupils skills and experiences] can be built up digitally. Every school must get involved in digital assessment through apps. Or a teacher could contact pupils to say ‘I noticed in class today you didn’t quite get that, here is a resource that might help’.”

Expert Panel Member

Some of our Expert Panel – as well as feedback from the public consultation – stressed the importance of embedding within the curriculum the development of ‘learning attributes’ that enable students to become independent learners. Panel members believed there are key lessons from the experience of remote schooling during the pandemic that can be used to develop confident, self-motivated learners of the future.

Next Steps and further research

The second phase of this research will test these principles by exploring two research questions:

What outcomes should the post-14 curriculum deliver for young people? We will consider: What choices should be offered at each stage? How do we ensure that curriculum pathways are defined by objective outcomes data rather than perceptions and bias? How are employer voices best expressed? How do we ensure equity and inclusion? What are the implications for existing qualifications?

How should assessment best serve learning, and support these outcomes? We will consider: What role can technology play? How do we ensure validity and reliability of assessments? How can we better define what knowledge and skill matters and therefore what should be assessed? The purposes and behavioural consequences of assessment.

The research will begin in summer 2021 and we expect to publish our final report by the end of 2021.