

The place of public examinations in future school assessment

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In 2021, most public examinations for GCSEs, A-levels and vocational qualifications have been cancelled for the second year running, meaning that teachers will decide what grade students receive. In place of exams, teachers will design their own summative assessment tasks, which may include questions and short papers set by examination boards. It is quite likely that when we emerge from lockdown and school closures, the assessment and qualification system will be different. Here, we explore the positives and negatives of the current role of exams in the school system. Below, we make a key distinction between the educational value of exams and their misuse for wider school accountability purposes. We recognise that exams have their limitations and we propose ways in which they can be improved. However, we make a case that public exams need to be retained as part of the post-lockdown assessment and qualification system because they play an important role in young people's education and they contribute towards a more meritocratic society.

What is the educational value and role of exams for students?

Motivation and focus on key aspects of the curriculum

Teachers draw upon a range of ways to motivate students to learn, which vary with age and educational stage. Younger children can be motivated with gold stars, badges or a game as a reward for hard work. With more mature students, teachers have to be more sophisticated, making connections to real-world events or to skills that they might need in the outside world. Ultimately, we want students to also be motivated by an intrinsic love of learning. The desire to continue education (formally or informally) beyond school will be a key aim of most teachers. While most students are driven by an interest in the subject matter at some point in their schooling, they are unlikely to be equally motivated for all subjects and at all times. The social significance of qualifications (for opportunities post-school) means that students understand that exams matter for their future. Exams, as the culmination of a course of study, also provide clear goals and purpose for students and teachers to work towards, as well as incentives and rewards – validation and a of learning.

There is also a body of research about the effects of testing on learning, rather than the evaluation of learning (Roediger and Karpicke, 2006; McDaniel et al., 2007; Dunlosky et al., 2013). Much of this research explores the relationship between practice tests and a final test. This is not to suggest that exams are simply about memory recall, as most exams test a range of intellectual skills. Researchers have found testing to have both direct

effects and mediated effects on students' learning: 'Direct effects refer to changes in learning that arise from the act of taking a test itself, whereas mediated effects refer to changes in learning that arise from an influence of testing on the amount or kind of encoding that takes place after the test.' (Dunlosky et al., 2013, p. 30) In an exam, the student must present and explain what they know to an outsider. To do this well, they need to be able to conceptualise knowledge from different points of view and express themselves with clarity.

As teachers know, performance in exams is largely determined by preparation. Sitting the examination forces everyone to complete their preparations and ensures that the content covered is understood in relation to external criteria. It is the teacher's responsibility to make sure that the content of the examination syllabus has been well-taught, comprehended and revised, and that students have practised skills and question types that will be asked of them in the exam. However, preparation, especially revision, practice and memorisation, is also the responsibility of students. Taking responsibility for one's own learning and achievement is also an important developmental lesson that schools teach. This is fostered through an external exam system because it provides students with the opportunity to prove what they know and can do to an independent adjudicator.

For exams to be of benefit to students' education, they need to assess breadth and depth of knowledge and discipline-specific skills, as outlined in the National Curriculum and other subject content documents. While it is important to distinguish between the exam specification and the school curriculum,

the specification ensures that schools focus their teaching on key aspects of knowledge and disciplinary skills in order for students to achieve a basic level of competence and understanding in each subject area. Certifying the completion of secondary education is one of the key reasons why education systems in both high- and middle-income countries have established a national examination system (Kellaghan and Greaney, 2020). In England, Scotland and Wales, the National Curriculum finishes in Year 11 (age 15 to 16), after which time students can choose from a range of academic and vocational options. GCSE exams hold all students to

a general standard of education up to 16 – the knowledge that we expect all citizens to acquire as a starting point, rather than a proliferation of routes and segregation of pupils into categories too early in their academic career.

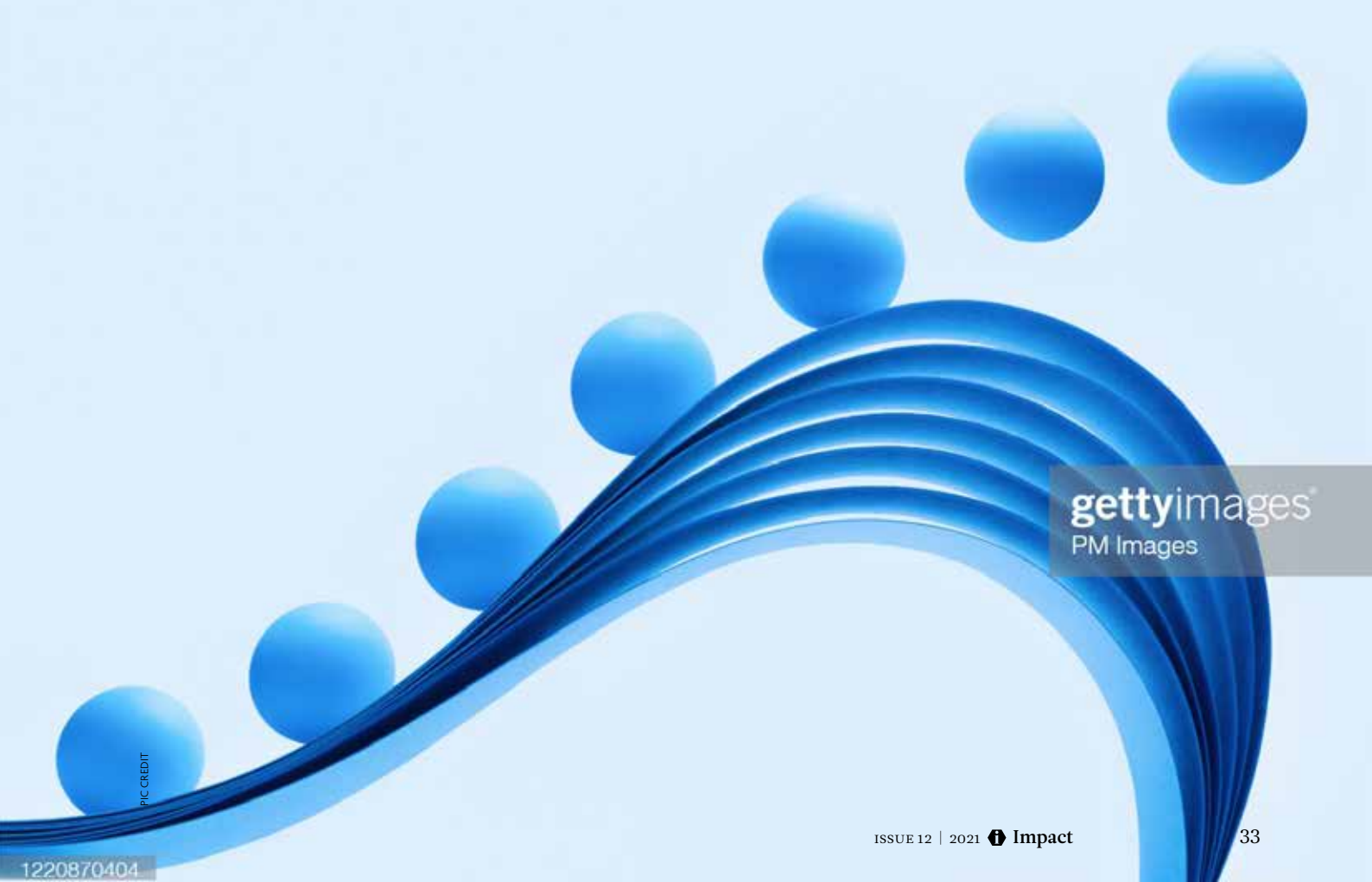
Fairest way to validate and certify learning

The separation of teaching and the awarding of qualifications is an important principle protected through an external examination system. The setting of standards and certification by independent bodies is practised throughout society, such as learning to drive, learning to master a musical instrument or becoming

a lawyer. A wonderful aspect to schooling is the pedagogical relationships that are established between teachers and students. Through the study of a subject, teachers and students together explore an aspect of our world and humanity, sharing something of themselves. However, it is the very nature of these subjective relationships, which are not always positive, that means that teachers are not well-placed to make objective judgements about achievement. It is in the interests of both teachers and students that this task is independent from teaching.

Examination boards have their own job: to validate learning, maintain standards >

Exams have replaced the curriculum as the central organising principle in some schools



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› and certification. They also have a wealth of professional experience and data from which to draw upon in writing of specification and assessment objectives, as well as the setting and marking of exams. For the student, it means that their achievement can be judged against objective standards rather than by a teacher who may or may not look upon them favourably. For the teacher, it alleviates responsibility for this task, meaning that they can focus on teaching and do not have to make judgements about their students that potentially have life-changing consequences. When a student feels that a grade has been unfairly awarded they can take this up with the exam board, who have an official appeals system, rather than thinking that they have been harshly treated by their teacher and their school, which was the case with some students in 2020.

A national examination system also ensures that students studying in different schools are being judged by common standards. As noted above, this ensures some commonality of student access to knowledge and cultural goods, but also that teachers and students are working towards some common standards (Creswell, 2000). While there will be differences in expectation between schools, the examination system provides schools with a measure of how their students are doing nationally. For students, external exams give them the opportunity to compete with other students, even when they are from different backgrounds and have differential starting points and access to cultural capital. Again, this is a motivating factor for many students as they seek to gain access to social goods in further education and employment.

Access to higher education, training and jobs

Schools must also prepare young people for their next step in life. As a pluralist society with diverse economic and social needs, schools (and society) need to

do a better job of valuing the range of professional opportunities that contribute to society and provide individual fulfilment. As David Goodhart (2020) notes, the narrative that education is the only path to good jobs in the so-called 'knowledge economy' disregards the contribution of those who work in manual and caring professions. Equality of opportunity and meritocracy are two more important principles supported by the national exam systems, although of course, not all children start out in life with the same opportunities. While historically independent schools and schools in areas of higher income have achieved better exam results, public exams offer others the opportunity to compete and to catch up. Two examples of this would be the increased proportion of students from state schools gaining access to Oxbridge (62 per cent at Oxford in 2019 – University of Oxford, 2021) and the 'London Effect' – schools in London outperforming other regions, for a combination of reasons (Thompson, 2015).

Historically, exams have been used to award access to jobs and further education based on merit rather than social position and favouritism. For hundreds of years, Chinese dynasties set exams to award job opportunities in the civil service, reducing nepotism and patronage and decreasing social stratification (Kellaghan and Greaney, 2020). In the 19th and 20th centuries, European countries introduced exams as a way to award access to higher education and training, thus disrupting an otherwise classist education system. Alison Wolf's (2002) study of the relationship between education and the economy highlights how employers regard educational goods as a proxy measure for general intelligence, concrete skills and dispositions such as motivation and perseverance. GCSEs in core subjects such as English and maths also provide employers with a baseline measure of skills that will be needed in many jobs. Without independent verification by an examination board, qualifications awarded

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by the school will be viewed as more subjective and less reliable. University admissions and employers will thus be forced to draw upon other indicators of the capabilities of students, which may well include the school that they attended. In all likelihood, a subjective grading system not only leads to grade inflation but also accentuates inequality of opportunity (Baird, 2020).

What lessons can we learn to improve public exams?

We believe that there is a need to learn from mistakes, and in particular the misuse of exams for school and teacher accountability, which has changed the role of exams in the education system. Instead of being viewed as important to students and their future, they have replaced the curriculum as the central organising principle of some schools, elevating the stakes and adding to the pressure on the performance of students. In response, we have noted that some schools effectively 'coach' students to pass exams, rather than teaching the content and encouraging the students to revise and prepare themselves for the exam. This takes responsibility for performance away from the students. Ofsted (2019) found other forms of malpractice associated with the narrowing of the curriculum to focus on assessment objectives, such as focusing exam preparation on students who are at grade boundaries or discouraging students from taking GCSE subjects that are perceived to be 'harder', because this might lower the school's Progress 8 score. As Gert Biesta (2010, p. 12) has noted, many schools have drifted towards 'valuing what we measure' rather than valuing education in its own terms.

We propose an end to the practice of using public exams to hold schools and teachers to account. Results vary from year to year for a variety of reasons and it is wrong to expect they will always improve. While schools should be free to share results if they choose, the abolition of league tables and the de-prioritisation of exam data in school assessment are essential. Under the direction of Amanda Spielman (2017), Ofsted has already encouraged schools to focus on their curriculum over results. This is a good start, but there is long way to go for schools to see exams in educational terms rather than as a performance measure.

In terms of the current exams, we would like to see more emphasis placed on rewarding independent thought and creativity and less on measuring practical skills. Especially at GCSE level, many teachers report that they find the mark schemes restrictive – that only certain ‘right’ answers are awarded marks where there needs to be scope to reward lateral thinking and insight that deviates from the mark scheme. We would also like to see more questions that encourage deeper thinking and allow scope for creativity in answers. These would most likely be longer, essay-type answers.


We do not think that the assessment of practical skills, such as lab work in

science and fieldwork in geography, in examinations is working well. Schools and exam boards need to recognise the limitations of exams in terms of the types of thinking and skills for which they are and are not well-suited. And if schools make a clearer distinction between the curriculum and the exam specification, it will be easier to accept that there are some learning experiences that will not be examined. However, this does not mean that other forms of summative assessment do not have a role to play, especially where subjects require skills or forms of presentation that are better evaluated in alternative settings, such as performance in music or a portfolio of artwork.

Conclusion

At a time of unprecedented disruption in schools, the examination and qualification system is under pressure and is in danger of losing its legitimacy. For some, exams are seen as too difficult for schools to deliver fairly or too stressful an experience for pupils to sit. However, despite their limitations, exams remain the fairest way to validate learning and achievement for most subjects. They are an important rite of passage that students should be encouraged to embrace. If we do not highlight and defend the educational value of public examinations now, they will

dissolve and disappear, and be replaced by a more subjective and inequitable assessment system. The change that we are advocating is not a technical one, but rather a shift to prioritise educational aims and the curriculum over exam results. We recognise that it is unlikely to be the case that schools view exams in terms of either educational value or accountability, as schools are likely to value both.

The sound judgement provided by public examination is what every child needs as they go through the school system to allow them to understand their own future and the value of education. The knowledge that they learn is made real by the judgement placed upon it. When they ask ‘Why do I need to know this?’, they are asking why we teach them. If we fail to answer that question, we will have told them very clearly that we do not believe they can be educated and that the value of education is not for them but only for a privileged few, who are born with the advantages that make this an easy journey where their status in life is already guaranteed. Public examinations are a means to allowing every child to have the chance to change themselves and learn the value of education and transform their lives. 

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