

# Refocusing Assessment

**ssat** the schools, students  
and teachers network

**ASCL** Association  
of School and  
College Leaders



Evidence for  
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Education

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# Introduction

**This resource came about following discussions between the Schools, Students and Teachers network (SSAT), the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and the schools that we work with. It was clear that the move from a single national assessment system (levels) to a more flexible, school-determined approach has provided new opportunities but has also created some uncertainty.**

In the period following the removal of levels, some schools have tried to implement an externally produced assessment system, while others have tried to continue with levels. However, we believe that the most effective school assessment systems are those designed by practitioners to suit their particular context.

We worked with expert panels made up of heads of department and representatives from key subject organisations, to shape this resource and explore how assessment works best in different subject areas. This resource will not tell you how you should assess your students. Instead it will aim to provide clarity on some key issues and support you and your team in asking the right questions to ensure that you have an approach that works for your students.

### **In our view, the best and most effective school assessment systems:**

- › are clear, consistent and coherent – and can be readily understood by students, staff and parents/carers
- › are shaped through structured dialogue with the whole school community
- › maintain consistency across the school, whilst allowing sufficient flexibility for subject variance

### **and that:**

- › effective formative assessment is rooted in good pedagogy
- › focusing on staff training in formative assessment and engaging all staff in assessment design has more impact than top-down approaches
- › one-size-fits-all approaches tend to be limited in their effectiveness
- › approaches to teacher assessment should be determined by school leaders and practitioners – enabling schools to develop an approach that works effectively in their context.

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# How to use this resource

This resource provides an outline structure to support conversations about assessment within and between different departments in your school. You may wish to use the resource to support the design of a new system or to review current practice.

## **Suggested process:**

1. Share your ambitions for assessment with staff at all levels. You may wish to use some of the information in this resource.
2. Ask each of your departments to dedicate a department meeting to discussing the five key questions – this will require them to consider the approach to assessment within their subject.
3. Where applicable, ask your departments to compare their responses to those of the expert panels (responses are provided for English, mathematics, science, geography, history and modern foreign languages at [ssatuk.co.uk/refocusing-assessment](https://ssatuk.co.uk/refocusing-assessment)).
4. Review the responses from your departments as a senior leadership team:
  - › How do the needs of different subject areas vary?
  - › How can your approach ensure best practice in different subject areas whilst also maintaining consistency across the whole school?
5. Use the outcomes to modify and shape your chosen assessment approach/policy.
6. Produce an action plan for the implementation of the approach.
7. Review and evaluate.

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# Overview – The need to ‘refocus assessment’

## Understanding the purpose of assessment

This resource provides a framework for school leaders and department heads to plan a coherent whole school approach to assessment that will support the learning of each and every student. Refocusing assessment is about focusing on the needs of students and the ways in which assessment can best support good pedagogy and practice. It is about ensuring that there is a deep, shared understanding of what is being assessed and why.

## Drivers for change

The context for a re-evaluation of assessment practice follows the abolition of reportable national curriculum levels from September 2014. The removal of levels aimed to “allow teachers greater flexibility in the way that they plan and assess pupils’ learning” and the opportunity to develop “an assessment system which enables schools to check what pupils have learned and whether they are on track to meet expectations” (DfE, 2014a). This policy change places a significant emphasis on embedding the use of formative assessment. Many schools have already started this process and there is now the opportunity for school leaders to refocus assessment and develop a bespoke model that meets the needs of their learners.

The following definitions may provide useful clarification:

### **Assessment for Learning**

The overarching principle that the purpose of assessment should always be to support students’ learning. Any activity that provides evidence that can be used to help modify the teaching and learning is considered to be Assessment for Learning (AfL).

### **Formative assessment**

As an integral part of AfL, this is the use of information from ongoing assessment of what students currently know and understand to support learning and to inform future teaching (Black and William, 1998).

### **Summative assessment**

These are assessments used to determine students’ knowledge and understanding at the end of a specified period of study. This is often for the purpose of accountability, reporting (to parents, governors, etc), ranking or certifying competence. As such, these are often also referred to as assessment of learning.

### The aims of this guidance

Both formative and summative assessments have important roles to play in ensuring effective assessment for learning. However, for the purposes of this resource, the focus is on effective formative assessment approaches. These are positioned firmly within the wider context of high quality teaching and learning so that teachers feel confident in making judgements about the progress of their students. This is important because:

› ***Formative assessment has the needs of the students at its core***

It aims to use evidence of students’ understanding and learning to make decisions, minute-by-minute and day-by-day, about the next steps in teaching and learning.

› ***Embedding formative assessment requires careful consideration***

It has significant implications for the classroom practice of teachers: from designing relevant and informative opportunities to assess the understanding of key topics and principles; to managing the feedback and response cycle with students; and modifying learning activities in real time.

This resource supports both senior and middle leaders in implementing a coherent approach to formative assessment to support teaching and learning across a school or group of schools. It supports the principle of a school-led system, and defines some broad principles of subject-specific and whole-school assessment. Some principles will be applicable across the school; other aspects will be rooted in the knowledge, skills and pedagogy of different subjects.



## The whole school approach

At the whole-school level there needs to be a coherent approach to sharing the progress made by students. Crucially, this information needs to be easily understood by the students themselves, as well as by parents/carers and other stakeholders.

As the assessment model will be different for each school, it is also important that there is clear communication about the mechanisms for determining and tracking student progress as well as the ways in which assessment will be used to inform future learning.

An example of how the senior managers can help this process is through the construction of an ‘assessment map’ detailing the purposes of and information provided by a range of assessment strategies. On a whole-school level, students will become familiar with the assessment strategies, whilst individual departments can adapt them to reflect the specific curriculum and teaching requirements of their subject.

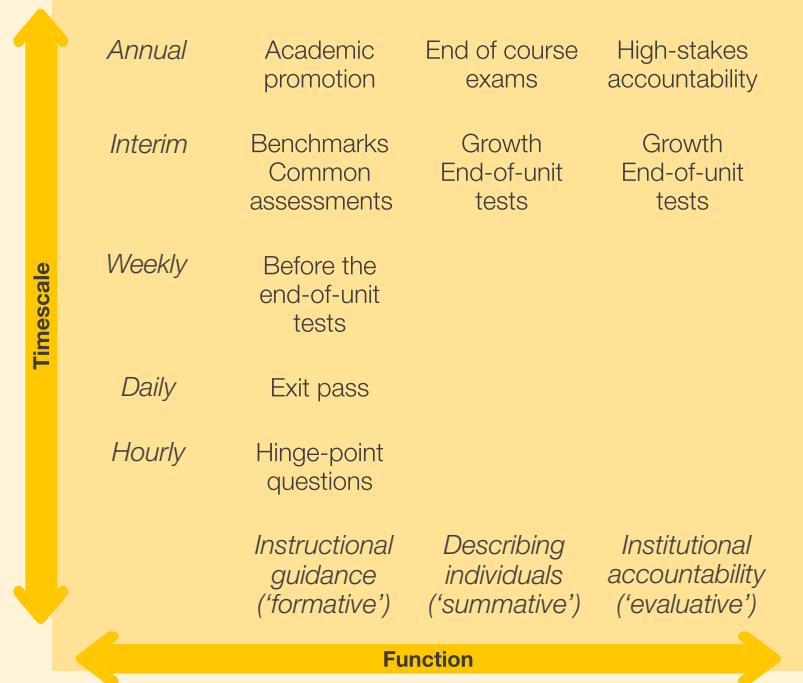
## Overview – The need to ‘refocus assessment’

“Because different schools will have different assessment needs, the ‘assessment map’ will vary considerably from one school to another so it is impossible to say in advance what the map should look like. However it is likely to be useful for each school to try to portray the school’s assessment map in some way, in order to provide an overview of assessment within the school.”

(William, 2014).

### An example of an assessment map

(William, D. et al, 2013)



## The departmental approach

For formative assessment to aid students’ progression through a subject, it is important to be clear about progression signposts. This guidance provides a framework for departments to critically reflect on the ‘big ideas’ of their subject, allowing identification of tasks likely to provide the best evidence of the students’ progress and how the evidence can be used to plan teaching and learning.

The process of devising a bespoke and coherent formative assessment framework across a school will help to:

- › identify the central learning points relevant to each subject
- › devise the best means of effectively assessing what is important for progression
- › plan how the progression model informs learning opportunities.

Through this you can truly refocus assessment for the benefit of your learners.

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# Assessment – some myths dispelled

## **National curriculum levels have been banned**

Levels have not been banned, but they have been removed from the national curriculum framework. It is for schools to decide how they assess the achievement of their students. Whether they then continue to use letters, numbers, grades or levels is up to them. However, the old levels and level descriptors do not match the new national curriculum programmes of study, so continuing to use them unchanged is not an option (DfE, 2014b).

## **We will still need to be able to show expected progress**

Expected progress – the notion that students should make two, three, four or more levels of progress over a key stage – disappeared with the removal of national curriculum levels. Data on expected progress is no longer published in

RAISEonline or the performance tables and it is no longer appropriate to use it as a measure for progress during a key stage (DfE, 2017a). Schools may, of course, choose to devise their own metrics for age-related expectations to determine whether their students are on track.

## **Ofsted will expect to see a particular approach to assessment but they are not telling us what it is**

As with any other aspect of teaching and learning, Ofsted has no preferred approach. It is the impact of school practice they are interested in. Inspectors will want to see that a school's assessment policy is being followed by all staff and that it is having a positive impact on students' learning (DfE, 2014b).

### **We need to have an assessment model that shows that students are making regular, linear progress towards their targets**

Generally speaking, not all students make continuous, linear progress towards their goals. Many of them might make progress but then find a new concept harder and perhaps slip back a little until they gain a deeper understanding. The old model of expected progress encouraged the notion of an “ever upward” flight path which put pressure on teachers not to record any temporary setbacks in learning. However, progress can involve developing deeper or wider understanding, not just moving on to work of greater difficulty. Sometimes progress is simply about consolidation (Commission on Assessment Without Levels, 2015). It is important to have a system that genuinely records both what students can and cannot do well so that the appropriate support can be given.

### **We need a one-size-fits-all approach to assessment to ensure consistency**

The nature and pace of learning varies from subject to subject, as does what can easily and usefully be measured. While it is important that schools have an agreed, shared understanding of the purposes of assessment, it is quite possible for flexibility to be built into the systems to allow for variations between subjects, provided that the overall quality of the process is maintained (Commission on Assessment Without Levels, 2015). Since effective assessment is intrinsically linked to curriculum and pedagogy it may be advisable to allow for some flexibility in approach between departments.

## Assessment – some myths dispelled

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### **Assessments have to take place at least half-termly/termly**

There is no set requirement for the frequency of assessment or “data drops”. Again, this is a matter for a school’s assessment policy. The required frequency is likely to be based on an overall judgement that takes into account how teaching is structured in different subjects, how students learn within those subjects, the optimum time that allows progress to be evidenced and the need to have an effective tracking system that can provide timely intervention (Commission on Assessment Without Levels, 2015).

However, school leaders need to be able to justify what is collected, why and when - and what impact this data has.

### **Ofsted will expect to see everything marked in exercise books**

The school’s assessment policy should indicate the amount, frequency and nature of marking and feedback. Inspectors will judge whether it is effective in raising students’

achievement (Harford, 2016). It is up to schools to decide on their assessment policy. Ofsted inspectors will only look to see how consistently it is being applied by all staff. They will make no judgements or comments on the frequency or type of marking or on the effectiveness of marking and feedback. So, if your school policy is, for example, that classwork is not marked, Ofsted will accept that, provided that your school can explain the rationale behind the policy and demonstrate that the overall approach to assessment is rigorous and effective.

### **We need to record evidence of oral feedback given to students**

No evidence of oral feedback given to students is needed by inspectors, although this might be part of a school’s overall assessment policy (Ofsted, 2016).

### **We have to measure everything in terms of Progress 8 now, from year 7 onwards**

Progress 8 is a school accountability measure, not a student-level score for an individual subject or groups of subjects. It can only be calculated once all key stage 4 results nationally have been collected. Trying to do so in advance is not possible because no-one knows what performance in other schools is going to look like, so any guestimates made using the previous year's data are not going to be accurate (DfE, 2017b).

### **We need to be able to show that we are on track for a positive Progress 8 score**

As explained above, although you can use the previous year's national figures to calculate what your Progress 8 score would have been then, this will not provide an accurate prediction for the current year because it takes no account of how students in other schools are currently performing. Instead, you could use your tracking to show how your students are performing against their targets, assuming that these are suitably challenging but realistic (DfE, 2017b).

### **We have to set targets and assess students against GCSE grades from year 7 onwards**

Schools can choose to do so if they wish, although the phased introduction of new GCSEs might make this a less reliable approach than in the past. Whilst there are no national benchmarks to use in key stage 3, schools are free to assess students against their own criteria and report progress to parents against those expectations.

### **If we assess that a student is “exceeding expectations” at every assessment period, this suggests that (s)he is not making progress, merely standing still**

This could be the case if the expectations were not set high enough to start with and if nothing is being done to challenge the student beyond the minimum expectations. But, if (s)he is genuinely being stretched with new content and skills and continually achieving a mastery level, this could be evidence that (s)he has both made and is maintaining exceptional progress.

# Key strategies of effective formative assessment – in action

## 1 Clarifying, sharing, and understanding learning intentions and criteria for success

### Establish and share learning goals with the students

- › explore what students already know and what they need to find out
- › ask students to look at samples of work for a particular task to promote discussion and co-construct success criteria or rubric for the task
- › ask students to design questions with correct answers based on what they have been learning to assess their understanding of the learning intentions
- › use exemplar work to help students to identify excellence.

## 2 Engineering effective classroom discussions, activities, and learning tasks that elicit evidence of learning

### Establish a classroom culture that encourages interaction and the use of assessment tools

- › try 'basketball discussions', bouncing the question around the classroom. Does the second student agree with the first? Ask a third student to comment on why an answer is or isn't correct. This can continue with questions like 'How? When? How long? Who else was involved? What else could have happened?' depending on the subject
- › allow wait time - increase the time students are allowed to consider a question before asking for answers and evaluating responses
- › use 'no hands up' questioning and random selection of students to respond, to promote different perspectives in a discussion
- › try all-student response systems, for example, white boards, ABCD cards and exit passes.

## 3 Providing feedback that moves learning forward

### Provide frequent feedback on student performance and adapt instruction to meet student needs

- › take time to review progress as a whole class. Use a visualiser or a document camera to share examples of good practice and analyse what makes responses successful
- › ask students to match comments to work - write feedback about students' work on strips of paper without names. Sit students in groups of four. Each group of four students gets back their four pieces of work and their four comments. The group needs to decide which comment goes with which piece of work
- › try margin marking - instead of marking each spelling or grammar mistake, place a mark in the margin. Students then find their own mistakes, and correct them. Alternatively put a symbol next to a frequently made mistake, then ask students to find others who have the same symbol and work out what they need to correct.



### 4 Activating learners as instructional resources for one another

#### Use varied approaches to assessing student understanding

- › peer assess using traffic lights / rating system - after being taught how to provide feedback, students assess a peer's work to identify his/her level of understanding (green/1 = understand; amber/2 = not sure; red/3 = do not understand). Ensure that time is allowed for students to correct/get help with the things they do not understand
- › use a round-robin to provide feedback - working in a group, students circulate their work to other members of the group and each adds a sticky note with suggestions for how to improve the work
- › invite students to identify questions they struggled with and put them on a question wall. Students then work together to solve them.

### 5 Activating learners as owners of their own learning

#### Help students understand their own learning and develop appropriate strategies for 'learning to learn'

- › use 'gots and needs' - students write something they understood (got) about the lesson and/or something they still do not understand or wish to know (need) on sticky notes or cards
- › ask students to indicate their level of understanding of key concepts using 'traffic lights/rating' to show whether they understood them well, need a little help, or need a lot of help
- › ask students to complete a learning log at the end of the lesson, responding to prompts e.g. Today I learned... One thing I am not sure about...

#### Classroom activities

Further suggestions for applying these strategies in the classroom are provided in the subject specific sections. Evidence about the effectiveness of formative assessment approaches in the classroom can be found via the Education Endowment Foundation Teaching and Learning Toolkit (e.g. references to feedback, collaborative learning, peer tutoring and mastery learning).

Adapted from (William, 2011), (Leahy and William, 2009) and (Leahy et al., 2005).

# Five key questions for all departments

Use these questions as a starting point to discuss your department's approach to assessment and how this contributes to the whole school assessment policy.

## **1 What does it mean to be a successful student in this subject?**

- › What is the purpose of our subject?
- › What does it mean to be a good mathematician/musician/historian etc? Is this what we are preparing students for?
- › What are the core knowledge and skills required for success?

## **2 What is the purpose of assessment in our subject?**

- › Why do we assess?
- › Who is assessment for?

## **3 What does progress look like in our subject?**

- › How do we know when a student is making progress?
- › How might progress vary over time?

## **4 How can progress be assessed most effectively in our subject?**

- › Which assessment techniques work best in our subject?
- › How successfully do we use formative assessment approaches?
- › How can formative and summative assessment work together to ensure effective assessment for learning?
- › How do we benchmark/quality assure our assessment practices?

## **5 How do the assessment practices in our department contribute to/work with whole school policy?**

## Recording your discussions

You may wish to use the templates available at [ssatuk.co.uk/refocusing-assessment](https://ssatuk.co.uk/refocusing-assessment) to help record your discussions.

## Thoughts on the key questions from our expert panels

SSAT, ASCL and NFER convened expert panels in English, mathematics, science, history, geography and modern foreign languages (MFL), made up of heads of department from Leading Edge schools and representatives from subject organisations. The panels discussed the first four of the key questions; the outcomes of the discussions are summarised for each subject and downloadable from [ssatuk.co.uk/refocusing-assessment](https://ssatuk.co.uk/refocusing-assessment). The responses are not intended to provide a definitive answer to the questions, but may help to support, challenge or structure your own discussions.

Conclusions and recommendations from the expert panels are provided on the next page.

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# Conclusions and recommendations

Invest time in engaging and training your team in formative assessment techniques and ensuring that everyone has a shared understanding of what good practice in this area looks like.

All departments should be clear on the key skills and content for their subject as a whole and also for particular units of work.

Encourage creativity in assessment design – written tasks are not the only (or best) way to assess progress. Allow departments the flexibility to decide the most appropriate means of determining whether students have achieved the desired outcomes.

Allow flexibility in the timing of data collection – ensure that timing of key assessments is determined by curriculum structure and when the assessment will be most beneficial to students rather than to suit whole school data collection patterns.

Focus on marking and feedback, ensuring that there is sufficient time for meaningful feedback and for students to act on advice.

Ensure that departments have sufficient time for careful moderation and standardisation to support accuracy of assessment.

Be cautious with aggregated judgements – most students have uneven patterns of progress and so these can only ever be a ‘best-fit’.

Trust your teachers – they are effective at assessing student’s learning as it is happening in the classroom.

Allow time for your new/revised assessment approach to embed.

Review and evaluate the approach.

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