

Thoughts from the network: Teacher assessments and short course papers

Welcome to the first in a regular series of articles where we share the thoughts of SSAT members on national developments happening in education at the moment.

This week, our members offer their views on teacher assessments and the idea of short course papers.

If you are a headteacher or senior leader in an SSAT member school and would like to get actively involved and share your views on future policy developments, get in touch with Alex Galvin, Senior Education Lead, [via your school's Relationship Manager](#).

Ensuring fairness

School leaders in the network are concerned that it will be difficult to find an assessment arrangement that takes into account the huge range of experiences young people have had this year.

“Part of the problem is that year 11 have had a very mixed learning experience depending on whether they were in an area with a high incidence of COVID and so it may be necessary to provide a range of assessment tasks so that schools can select an assessment that is going to provide a fair and reliable indication of students' knowledge/skills.”

“I always thought the COVID-effect would be far greater on this cohort of GCSE and A-level students than the class of 2020 and so it is proving to be the case.”

“If they don't know what they are working towards we will lose some students especially the already disengaged with school, this will widen achievement gaps. We already have some students struggling to engage with remote learning as they don't see the point now exams have gone. This is especially true for our boys who need the structure and focus of a definite end point and might not always show this in every lesson.”

Thoughts on teacher assessment

There are mixed views about the use of teacher assessment. While many people feel that it was the only viable option this year, concerns remain about ensuring that schools apply consistent standards to their decision-making.

“The unprecedented situation in 2020-21 has generated significant discussion in the education sector about the nature of qualifications and assessment. We believe that teachers are best placed to assess what a student knows, understands and can do. We agree that ‘students need grades to continue to the next stage of their education or training, or into employment’. The primary purpose of qualification grades is to ensure that this progression is appropriate, credible and fair. We advocate a high trust/high accountability model. The emphasis should be on trusting teachers to make appropriate assessments,

with rigorous quality assurance procedures. More resources should be spent ensuring that the internal and external QA procedures are robust than in developing a wide range of assessment materials.”

“The term ‘centre assessed grade’ (CAG) is preferable to ‘teacher assessed grade’ (TAG) because the grade is the outcome of a process involving a range of colleagues and procedures within the centre, rather than a simple reflection of one teacher’s assessment.”

“Teacher assessment has the following problems:

- Subject to human bias as teachers have an innate and understandable desire for their students to do well!
- Impossible to moderate as we found out to our cost last summer
- Creates huge amount of extra work for school staff at all levels
- Can put schools in difficult positions with parents, (usually not those from disadvantaged backgrounds).”

“Teacher-based assessment given the circumstances and the huge disparity between students in different contexts (with regard to the impact of COVID on a particular setting) was the only viable option.”

“Good decision to go with teacher assessments, particularly as we had experience of a teacher assessment methodology last year.”

“Internal assessments lack validity, are subject to misuse and encourage teaching to the test.”

“... last year's model worked, and school could easily implement it again with minimum additional workload. There would need to be broad acceptance that performance tables/Ofsted judgements on this aspect of a school are impossible. This may remove a powerful stimulus for grade inflation. A simple plea to schools to be reasonable and fair with grades would be well received.”

Thoughts on the idea of short paper examinations

Many people welcome the idea of some kind of externally-set paper, but there are questions over how it will work in practice.

“I think a lot depends on when year 11 and 13 return to school. I agree that it would be useful to have some benchmarking assessment that could be used alongside schools' own data.”

“... we are very much in favour of externally set papers but there are several issues that need to be addressed (clarity will no doubt be provided in due course). Gavin Williamson’s letter states that the process will ‘allow students to be assessed based on what they have learnt, rather than against content they have not had a chance to study.’ As students will have studied/focused on particular aspects of a syllabus to varying depths and in differing sequences, how this will be taken into account in an externally set standardised paper?”

“My view is that we need GCSE exams to go ahead – this is the most valid and reliable method of assessment and is the only way of ensuring standardisation, consistency and fairness. Any system that relies on coursework is subject to influence from parents. There is no alternative to GCSE examinations that will not bring controversy, unfairness and extra stress and workload for school staff. GCSE examinations are clearly going to be

problematic given the disparities in attendance across the country but there is time to design an approach that is fair to all.”

“Imposing short papers seems to me an attempt to manage grade inflation issues and bring a focus on/'prove' accountability. How much would these assessments contribute to the final grade? When would they take place? The arguments about students having not been in school this year and perhaps in the months to come would all still be there. There would be claims that some are being disadvantaged and this would probably be true and impossible to resolve.”

“If they believe the exam route is providing the best evidence for schools, I do not see why they couldn't keep the exams (already written, markers organised and a strict standardisation process, plus a way to appeal marking fairly). If there is concern schools have covered different content, they could let us know the topics on each exam (they said they may do this) and we could ensure we have covered these areas in the time before the exams, at the time of the announcement still 18 school weeks away. This could be done remotely and/or on return to school. It would be fair and give the students a reason to engage knowing everything being covered is important. The exams don't cover the whole of a two-year curriculum and this is an extraordinary year.”

“My personal view is that if we're going to have access to externally set papers, they should be mandatory for all.”

“I think the idea of externally set papers is good, but internal marking will be time consuming and could lead to very different standards in a school let alone within the country (I have moderated before and know the wide variety of interpretations). If this is then externally standardised, more time will be needed, when they suggest they want us to still be teaching the students. If these exams are done at different times across the country the content will be shared, the modern technological world allows this very easily, especially if students feel there are advantages to be gained. If not, all schools do the same papers, so choose different topics, again would this be comparable nationally? We all know students find some areas of subjects more difficult than others.”

“The key is how these fit into the overall scheme of assessment; do they constitute a set proportion of the grading alongside other approved teacher-based evidence? Also, the question of who marks them, given that we'll be mad busy and there will be lots of examiners out of pocket with no exams to mark.”

Moderation and standardisation

Our policy group all feel that clear guidance is needed to ensure that schools have a shared understanding of how grades should be determined. They also agree that there needs to be a robust process of moderation between schools to ensure that grades are fair and valid.

“The balance between these standardised assessments and teacher assessment is crucial, as is the flexibility around what teachers will be permitted to us by way of evidence. I will also be interested to see how moderation will work for these tests as, presumably, it cannot be left entirely to the discretion of individual schools if they are to have sufficient value and credibility among various audiences. Maybe samples will be requested by the exam boards?”

“There is a need for some external quality assurance of the processes that schools might use to calculate a grade (depending obviously on what is decided).”

Managing appeals

There are concerns about the suggestion that every student will have the opportunity to appeal the grade they are awarded and the practicalities of how this would be managed.

“My concern would be that without a rigorous and yet limited appeals process that protects teachers and school leaders, the awarding of results for 2021 has the potential to take up an inordinate amount of time in autumn 2021, impacting yet further on another cohort.”

“My initial concerns are about the appeals process and the potential for completely unsubstantiated appeals and the workload and potential conflict this could create.”

“Last year the appeal was against the process not the decision. It was clear in the documents that the school was best placed to make decisions so couldn't appeal against itself. This year with less evidence – especially formal, as we tried to maximise teaching time, not examining time – we are worried that we will have to field lots of appeals without the amount of evidence we had last year.”

“My other comment would be around the need to manage information that is passed by the DfE/Secretary of State to the media. A lot of the information which was circulating in the summer was misleading/inaccurate (eg about students being able to use the mock exam grades) and added to the general confusion!”

Looking further ahead

The current situation has prompted wide-ranging discussion about the purpose of assessment and how students' achievements are most effectively measured.

“Is there any thinking that whatever is implemented this year has the potential to be sustained into the future, ie a model to replace GCSE exams? If so, consultation on that is much needed and may add weight to the benefits of short paper examinations of a sort.”

“This is an opportunity for the educational sector to regenerate its approach to assessment and qualifications. We strongly disagree with Simon Lebus that ‘it is important for all stakeholders that we return to normal practice for assessment as soon as we can’. This makes the assumption that current practice is best practice. We believe in the holistic development of every student's attitudes, skills and knowledge. Our assessment system should measure what we value, not value what we measure.”

Your opportunity to get involved

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