

Summary of the Final report of the Commission on Assessment without Levels. [PG Online, September 2015]

Guidance on how to cope without guidance.

This two-page document serves to summarise the findings of the recent report on assessment without levels for teachers, and to illustrate how the KS3 materials and assessment philosophy provided by PG Online are in complete agreement with the findings of the report.

Effective lessons should provide ample scope for “*high quality formative assessment that goes to the very heart of good teaching*”.ⁱ With over 15 years of Levels, any teacher (or parent) under the age of 40 is unlikely to have experienced any other system, including throughout their own education. The “*system has been so conditioned by levels that there is considerable challenge in moving away from them*”ⁱⁱ and there are concerns that some schools are trying to recreate levels based on the new national curriculum. Moving away from Levels therefore “*requires a radical cultural and pedagogical change*” where the focus needs to move away from constant and time-consuming attempts to marry up performance against ambiguous generic statements. A new system that relies on “*high quality, in-depth teaching, supported by in-class formative assessment*” is required.

The dominant use of Levels, and a ‘*best-fit model*’, crept into everyday teaching and was frequently used for all in-school assessments to track progress over time against expected performance targets. These Levels were also aggregated to offer pupils and parents an unrealistic and largely meaningless summary of progress and understanding. “***The commission believes that this has had a profoundly negative impact on teaching.***” and the pressure from teachers’ (often incorrect) perception of what OFSTED want to see has meant that “***time spent on creative teaching, investigation, play, practical work etc. has reduced considerably, and lessons more often have a standard format***”ⁱⁱⁱ. Too much time is taken up unnecessarily using complicated data management systems, and could better be spent planning and delivering better lessons to deepen pupils’ understanding.

The commission found that the “*expectation to collect data in efforts to track pupils’ progress towards target levels considerably increased teacher’s workload*”, and that “*recording summative data more frequently than three times a year is not likely to provide useful information.*” “*Over-frequent summative testing and recording is also likely to take time away from formative assessments which offer the potential not just to measure pupils’ learning, but to increase it.*” “*The burden of gathering and inputting summative judgements on such a comprehensive basis would undermine the focus on formative classroom practice.*”

It is recognised by the report and by OFSTED that schools will not be able or expected to implement a rigorous new assessment system overnight, and that over time, teachers “*should feel a growing confidence in using assessment to better inform their teaching practices and lesson planning*”. New forms of assessment will “*become an integral part of day-to-day teaching, avoiding the need for unnecessary tracking and recording*”. It is work in progress for schools and OFSTED are looking to ensure that schools are doing the best they can for their pupils. “*OFSTED does not expect to see any specific frequency, type or volume of marking and feedback; these are for the school to decide through its assessment policy.*”^{iv} “*Inspectors recognise that schools are at different stages in the development of assessment without levels, and will take this into account when considering how schools are monitoring the progress of pupils.*” David Brown (National Lead for ICT and Computer Science, OFSTED), said schools “*should be left to their own devices, to do what works best for each*

of them, individually, and that as long as they can justify a method of assessment... and show that progress is being made, OFSTED will find it difficult to disagree”.^v

In accordance and agreement with this report, the PG online KS3 units provide comprehensive in-school formative and summative assessment as *“an integral part of teaching and learning”* from the *“probing question put to a pupil as they think something through; quick recap questions at the opening of a lesson; scrutiny of the natural work of pupils; right through to formal tests”*. The Assessment Portfolio or multiple choice test provided with each unit is intended to support teachers’ own observations, Q&A and scanning work for pupil attainment and development in the minimum of time. This enables more time to be spent on giving quality feedback or preparation for the next lesson based on these observations. The assessment system offered with the KS3 units offers a comfortable departure from levels and is entirely editable allowing it to become *“one that works for pupils, with the sole aim of supporting their achievement”*. This *“gives schools the opportunity to develop their own approaches to assessment that focus on teaching and learning, and are tailored to the curriculum of the school”*.

Progress using generic statements such as Levels *“became synonymous with moving on to the next level, but progress can involve developing deeper or wider understanding, not just moving on to work of greater difficulty. Sometimes progress is simply about consolidation.”* The PG Online Assessment Portfolios allow pupils to demonstrate particular skills and measure themselves against specific, and relevant objectives, tailored to the material they have been studying throughout a unit of work. The commission report recognises that many schools may already use, or may be considering using, assessment systems provided by external providers. It advises that *“schools should consider any assessment system that goes beyond summative assessment and dictates formal assessment very carefully.”* The report advises that schools should not *“become distracted by superficially attractive features which might turn out to be unnecessary or inappropriate”*. PG Online units do not dictate or influence the way a school should best be assessing their own pupils. The units provide a credible assessment approach, ensuring that each unit captures the right curriculum knowledge and understanding and the questions that teachers are encouraged to ask within each lesson *“can be used effectively to inform teaching and learning”*.

ⁱ John McIntosh CBE, Chair of the Commission.

ⁱⁱ Final report of the Commission on Assessment without Levels, Sept 2015 (*All other quotes given are from this report unless otherwise stated.*)

ⁱⁱⁱ Exam factories, The impact of accountability measures on children and young people, Sept, 2015

^{iv} OFSTED Handbook, 2015

^v David Brown, Ofsted, Oct 2013