

## [Assessment for learning or accountability?](#)

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This article provides some background information ahead of the Cabinet Secretary for Education's statement in Plenary on Wednesday (24 May 2017), titled 'Assessment for Learning – A distinct Welsh approach'.

Assessment for learning refers to the **ongoing use of assessment as a core element of teaching**, also known as formative assessment, rather than assessing pupils at the end of a period of learning, for example a Key Stage, which is known as summative assessment. Assessment for learning techniques are therefore used **throughout** a programme of study rather than simply at its conclusion.

Their use in education in Wales is not new.

Back in 2010, the then Welsh Government published [guidance on How to develop thinking and assessment for learning in the classroom](#) (PDF 2.19MB), which described Assessment for learning as follows:

Assessment for learning tools can be used to find the learner's current position, move the learner on towards his/her next step, act as checks on the journey to reaching the next step, and to discover if the next steps have been reached.

The use of assessment primarily to inform teaching and directly benefit the learner being assessed, rather than contributing to system-wide evaluation of school by school performance and accountability measures, has increasingly **gained policy traction** over the past few years.



## The OECD and Donaldson

Assessment is currently undergoing reform in Wales. It was the subject of [Professor Graham Donaldson's review, Successful Futures](#) (PDF 1.64MB) (March 2015), alongside, to a greater extent, the curriculum. Of the 68 recommendations in Professor Donaldson's report, **19 related to assessment** (these can be found on pages 116–117 of *Successful Futures*).

As with the curriculum, Professor Donaldson was clear about the need for change, reporting that 'dissatisfaction with current assessment arrangements was one of the strongest messages' the Review received. The Welsh Government had already acknowledged that **assessment arrangements are confusing and no longer fit for purpose**.

In total, Professor Donaldson made 19 recommendations on assessment in 9 areas of change. These included **assessing what matters** and being clear about the reasons for doing so, closely aligning assessment with the purposes of the curriculum. See our [blog article from March 2015](#) for more detail of what Professor Donaldson had to say about assessment.

The Donaldson Review concurred with the OECD's conclusion (in its [2014 Review](#) (PDF 3.57MB)) that assessment should be **primarily used to inform learning and directed towards school improvement rather than accountability** and comparisons of school performance. Professor Donaldson recommended that teacher assessments should no longer be reported to the Welsh Government, which he said should instead monitor performance in key aspects of the curriculum through annual testing on a sampling basis.

Professor Donaldson's recommendations included:

- Assessment arrangements should give **priority to their formative role** in teaching and learning (Rec 37).
- **Teacher assessment**, which allows a wide range of learning to be covered, should **remain as the main vehicle for assessment** before qualifications (Rec 39).
- The Welsh Government should establish a **comprehensive assessment and evaluation framework** in line with the recommendations of this report (Rec 53).



The Welsh Government accepted all recommendations in full with the previous Minister for Education and Skills, Huw Lewis, [responding on 30 June 2015](#). Its [implementation plan](#), published in October 2015, said the Welsh Government would publish a National Assessment and Evaluation Framework by **September 2018**.

The OECD carried out a further review of the Welsh Government's education reforms in Autumn 2016. The report of the OECD's ['Rapid Policy Assessment'](#) (PDF 2.91 MB) was published in February 2017 and highlighted the importance of assessment to the Welsh Government's reforms, calling for further policy attention as follows:

**Moving forward with the development of the new assessment and evaluation framework.** Continue investing in the formative assessment and data-handling skills of teachers and school leaders. Ensure greater synergies between the national school categorisation system and the new inspection framework under development. As part of the evaluation and assessment framework, consider including a national approach to identifying and celebrating good practices, driven by school self-evaluations.

## National reading and numeracy tests

The Cabinet Secretary has recently reiterated ([statement, 2 May 2017](#)) that the national reading and numeracy tests, which are taken annually by pupils in Years 2 to 9, are to be **used to strengthen individual pupils' learning** and the approach taken by teachers, rather than for school accountability purposes. Kirsty Williams said:

In Wales we do not use National Test results to make judgements on school performance. Our tests, now and as we move forward to a new generation of innovative assessments, are for formative use by schools. These are tools which enable teachers to support all our learners to develop the skills that they need to thrive in their years at school and throughout their lives.

## National school categorisation

The Welsh Government uses the outcomes of assessment as part of a matrix of measures to [colour-categorise schools](#) according to the level of challenge and support they require. The Welsh Government describes the system as follows:



The system is about providing support and encouraging collaborative improvement by putting schools into a position that enables them to identify the factors that contribute to their progress and achievement, or what areas to focus on to achieve further development. It is not about labelling or creating league tables.

However, the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT) believe there is an ‘over reliance by national, regional and local government on accountability measures that focus purely on pupil outcomes’. The [NAHT has told the Children, Young People and Education Committee](#):

School leaders believe that there is a need to disconnect accountability from an **outcome-only obsessed assessment framework** and, instead, fully implement a system that adheres to the key principles in the [Donaldson] review recommendations. We want a system which enables all schools, and those working directly with our children and young people, to focus upon their core purpose, maximising pupil progress and, as a result, achieving the best possible outcomes.

The [Association of School and College Leaders \(ASCL\)](#) also warned of ‘a danger that constraints imposed by the qualifications framework, hard line accountability models, including the narrow Estyn judgements, are **stifling [an] agenda of innovation**’.

The Cabinet Secretary’s statement and the subsequent questions from Members are scheduled for approximately 3.25 pm on Wednesday 24 May 2017. The Plenary session will be broadcast on [Senedd TV](#) and a transcript will be available on the Assembly’s [Record of Proceedings](#).

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