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Rethinking assessment: in praise of ePortfolios

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The long-term impact on education systems caused by the Great Pandemic of 2020/21 will take many years to play out. Emergency remote teaching became the mode through which education systems tried to overcome the impacts of school closures, and most schools turned to EdTech for solutions.

As the weeks turned into months, educators' online expertise developed rapidly and the early coping strategies evolved into more systematic and reliable ways to learn and teach online.

The scramble to rescue examination and assessment systems around the world has provided teacher and student angst and political chaos. Few policymakers have yet taken this once-in-a-generation opportunity to ask the more radical questions about the purpose and validity of student assessment.

In most education systems across the world, huge decisions are made, affecting the life-chances of millions of young people, based on a simple definition, a grade or a number, of what constitutes student achievement. This very slender foundation, relying on timed knowledge checks, hardly constitutes the basis on which to confirm the success or failure of learners in contemporary education systems which should be providing the knowledge workers of tomorrow.

Indeed, the key questions as to *what* we are assessing and the broader underlying purposes of assessment are consistently dodged by the decision and policymakers.

In so many places, despite the overwhelming evidence about the limitations of traditional examinations, traditionalists have resisted moves to abandon exams, or make them modular, or to balance them with continuous teacher assessment. They want the children in exam halls, all together on the same day around the world, sweating to perform in a fixed, two- or three- hour stretch.

We need to do differently, and capitalise on the lessons of recent months.

One of the best and simplest ways to begin using EdTech to improve assessments is through the introduction of a system of ePortfolios as a way of tracking the evidence from student achievements. ePortfolios are digital representations of a student's experiences, their learning journey, their academic achievements and their capacity to integrate the critical transversal skills for employability into their learning.

They provide a means through which students' progress and achievements can be recorded, evaluated and, where necessary, assessed and accredited. ePortfolios are already in widespread use for professional or vocational education training, where it is important to capture performance evidence for example in medical training, but their current application in mainstream schooling is less common.

An ePortfolio enables a dynamic record of achievement to be maintained in education award systems that require the tracking of a student's development alongside the academic curriculum, such as the [Learner Profile](#) within the International Baccalaureate system or the [The Cambridge Learner Attributes](#) from Cambridge International Examinations.

ePortfolios are especially useful to provide performance evidence of students' application of skills and competencies, such as practical skills in science; as an assessment vehicle for [vocational qualifications](#) they have been used for many years and the UK awarding body, the City and Guilds of London have developed their own ePortfolio tool in the form of their [Learning Assistant](#).

ePortfolios are the digital equivalent of a paper portfolio but with the added advantages of enabling the incorporation of real-time and multi-media performance data alongside secure storage and access online. The ePortfolio provides a powerful medium for students to demonstrate their wide range of talents and skills in a way that exceeds a conventional academic profile.

Aside from their value as a summative, yet dynamic, record of a student's all round achievement, it is within the creation and the development of ePortfolios that lie the most important educational value. Creating an e-portfolio involves skills essential for 21st century learning: self-determination, organising and planning material, giving and receiving feedback, reflecting, selecting and arranging content to communicate with a particular audience in the most effective way.

During the past twelve months online learning has become commonplace, indeed indispensable, yet embedding EdTech into assessment systems has yet to gain the same degree of common acceptance. The fall-out from the pandemic will be with us for some time, but the impact on the education sector has provided an opportunity to revisit modalities of learning and to reflect upon the nature and purpose of student assessment.

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