CURRICULUM
ON THE MOVE
UNESCO-IBE

THEMATIC NOTE N°18
THE NECESSITY TO BROADEN ASSESSMENT AND HOW WE CAN DO IT

Conrad Hughes

UNESCO-IBE Senior Fellow

The present crisis

For several years now, two parallel universes have co-existed in educational systems worldwide. The first is that of competence-based learning, the second that of assessment. The crisis is the waning gap between the two, the fact that there is very little dialogue between the two of them. This paper explores this crisis and then turns to one clear solution, which is to focus on reforming High School transcripts.

Competence-based learning

Competence-based learning is learning that is centred not just on knowledge retention and regurgitation and/or technical skills proficiency, but a unity of knowledge, skills and attitudes when deployed in a particular context. It is the conative value of this dimension of human activity that is the focus: what is done and what can be done rather than solely what is known or learnt. A clear, research-informed and compelling description of competences is the [2017 Future Competence and the Future of Curriculum](#) paper by UNESCO, IBE (Marope, Griffin & Gallagher, 2017).

Reams of studies describing "21st Century Skills", "Character education", "competencies" and "meta-learning" have been synthesised by authors such as Lucas (2019 & 2021), Taylor et al. (2020) and Care et al. (2016). It is not necessary to repeat here what has already been synthesised, so to cut to the quick, let us say that the thrust of the competence-based learning movement is towards the idea that what should be developed in schools and universities is less abstract, inert academic knowledge and more active skills, knowledge and attitudes for human flourishing (resilience, character, ethics, self-value, confidence, autonomous learning, entrepreneurship and critical thinking) and social capital (workplace skills, different forms of social collaboration, communication, creativity and problem solving).

Assessment

One would think that assessment systems follow this thrust, requiring students to show evidence of their competences in a broad range of domains, but this is where one parallel universe ends and a different one begins. While Primary School and some lower High School assessment systems do assess competences (for example, the [Montessori system](#) is a holistic appreciation of a child as they work through self-selected projects; the Primary School [Reggio Emilia approach](#) documents in flexible ways the way children express their thoughts and impressions of the world and the International Baccalaureate [Primary](#) and [Middle](#) Years Programmes assess project-based learning), Upper Secondary School assessment protocols are extremely narrow and high stakes, reflecting little, if at all, the development of competences.

In fact, in 2020, the Brookings Institute, scouring Secondary curriculum systems across the world, noticed around 200 articulations of competences in curriculum design but not a single assessment or example of pedagogy explicitly developing these competences (Taylor, et al., 2020).

The end of High School tends to be made up of written examinations and coursework focused on timed performances in essay and commentary writing, test taking and oral responses to certain questions and stimuli. The best known assessments include Advanced Placement (USA), A-levels (UK), the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR), French Baccalaureate, International Baccalaureate Diploma, Matura or Maturité (Switzerland), EGR (Russia) and the All India Secondary School Examination. All of these test students on their knowledge and understand-

ing of academic subjects, none of them offers students opportunities to display in any real depth their particular strengths and interests (if these are not academic and already described in the examination items).

The High School Transcript

Across the world, the manner in which the profile of the graduate is presented to universities is the High School transcript. This is a set of grades. Non-selective university admissions will request a set of passing grades, more competitive universities will request a certain grade average.

Performances in extra-curricular activities, the arts, sports and social impact work do not feature on the transcript. This is ironic given that many of the competences needed for flourishing in the workplace and the unpredictable environment of the 21st Century and the future are nurtured in such activities: sports develop resilience and confidence, teamwork and collaboration; the arts foster creativity and communication whereas social impact work, such as community service, encourages the development of environmental custodianship, interpersonal and intercultural sensitivity as well as citizenship.

University Admissions Tests

Tertiary education entry assessments are similar: they tend to be high-stakes, narrow, timed written assessments such as the Chinese National College Entrance Examination, Standardised Admissions Tests (SATs, used in North America), Indian Common University Entrance Test and "Vestibular" test in Brazil. There are some exceptions, such as Oxbridge interviews, which allow students the chance to elaborate more on who they are and what their thinking is, but the vast and overwhelming majority of university entrance tests are rigidly formatted and allow little scope for creativity or personal expression. This has been researched quite extensively by Stemler (2012) and Pretz & Kaufman (2017).

Saturation

A problem that occurs is when several students perform at the highest possible grade level (for example, an "A") across all subjects over several years. It becomes impossible to distinguish one candidate from the other using their High School transcripts.

A well-known university admissions test is the SAT. It is not uncommon for students to receive full marks (1600 points), and if these students also have straight As on their High School transcripts, admissions officers cycle back to the same problem of having to distinguish between perfect scores. This is where some qualitative evidence of learning becomes important. In the present system, at least in North America, this will be in the form of teacher recommendations and personal statements. It becomes in this case, a sorting exercise based on the valency and implications of different, anecdotal personal testimonies which have not gone through a rigorous, curated process and are therefore highly unreliable.

Social problems with the current assessment model

Iniquity

There are a host of problems with narrow high stakes assessments and university admissions tests. The main three, all of which are substantiated by studies are:

1. *Gender bias.* Whereas girls tend to outperform boys on more lengthy, complex discursive tasks, boys tend to do about a third better on tests than girls because, typically girls are less confident about

performing well on tests. This is part of the architecture of meta-stereotyping, whereby individuals interiorise prejudicial beliefs about their gender, race, social status or sexual orientation.

2. *Income disparity.* Wealthier students outperform poorer students on admissions tests owing to social advantage, parent levels of education and access to tutors.

3. *Racial bias.* White students tend to do better at standardised admissions tests than black and Hispanic students. This is essentially due to positive correlations between income and race and a historical legacy of systemic racism, making access to high levels of education more obstructed for some racial groups than others.

A 2021 study of the analytics behind SAT scores showed, quite shockingly, that:

- Male students are 42% more likely to have combined SAT test scores in the 1400 to 1600 range than female students.

- White students are three times more likely than Black or African-American students and twice as likely as Hispanic or Latino students to have combined SAT test scores of 1400 to 1600.

- Students with family income of $100,000 or more are more than twice as likely as students with a family income under $50,000 to have combined SAT test scores of 1400 to 1600 (Kantrowitz, 2021).

Lost talent

With the current narrow assessment system, much talent is lost since students with non-academic profiles are not recognised or celebrated. This happens at a number of levels. First, gifted students are often not screened and identified through standard academic testing. Myths that gifted students should perform well academically have been debunked since studies that are more than 20 years old. Some students are able to excel academically very easily, but many will be gifted in different ways and do not fit into the school regimen. This can lead to disengagement and even delinquency (Neihart, 2002).

Ken Robinson's 2006 TED Talk Do schools kill creativity?, the most watched of all time, makes a case for assessment and the culture of learning in schools progressively stifling creativity. In many ways this is true: the whole architecture of high stakes assessments and the zero-sum game of distributing results into a bell curve creates a hostile, competitive environment driven by fear of failure.

There are many examples of creative and gifted people who left school early, were expelled from school or did not do well in school because of the rigid systemic manner in which they were assessed and disciplined, which prevented them from exploring and following their passions. These include Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, Winston Churchill, Richard Branson, Rihanna, Steve Jobs, Lewis Hamilton and Cameron Diaz.

Efforts at reform

There are some efforts underway to rectify the situation and create assessments that are more inclusive and broad-based, personalised, contextualised and relevant. Some of these are at the level of university admissions, others at the level of mass testing and others still at the level of organisations. The purpose of this paper is not to attempt to list all of them but, at this point, to give an overview of a few well-established projects.

Universities

As mentioned earlier, Oxbridge interviews – and any university interview for that matter,

given the nature of the interview (open-ended, dialogic, organic, adaptive), tend to explore human potential in a much more dynamic and profound manner than a written test. This is not to say that interviews do not suffer from problems of bias, nor that they do not favour those more predisposed to interview technique. It should also be noted that these interviews are only granted to a very small percentage of candidates once they have performed well enough on a course prerequisite-specific examination.

Most North American universities will ask for a personal statement with evidence of a student's character, values and examples of learning experiences in and out of the classroom, allowing for a more rounded appreciation of their learning than a grade transcript only. A problem with this is that personal statements tend to be highly formatted, possibly aided by a third party and it becomes difficult if not impossible to verify the substance of claims.

Some universities are exploring technology-assisted, alternative evidence or non-test options to better understand a student's potential. These include:

- Portfolios, such as those requested by Arts Colleges;

- A commitment not to use standardised admissions tests, such as that taken by the University of California;

- Psychometric tests on logical thinking and learning efficiency, such as those administered by the Spanish IE University;

- A willingness (albeit often reluctant) to examine "supplemental materials" that a candidate may wish to submit such as recordings and films. A number of North American universities allow this.

Mass testing systems

Large international consortia, governments and testing centres have been exploring how to move from assessing subject specific literacies, as has been the case traditionally, to more dynamic explorations of character and creativity. Major projects underway include:

- The American College Board's SAT can be taken online and, in an effort to reduce inequities, students can be loaned devices to take the test;

- The OECD's PISA testing battery includes an assessment of creative thinking;

- In Singapore, mid-year examinations have been disbanded in an effort to move away from an assessment system too focused on examination grades.

Organisations

Examples of companies that are encouraging schools to join them in clusters that use a similar template to describe student competences include:

- The Mastery Transcript Consortium, which "accelerates equitable access to and widespread implementation of mastery learning models, empowering students to showcase competencies and share evidence of their learning" (MTC, 2021);

- The Character Collaborative, committed to a "common goal of elevating elements of student character in the admissions process" (Character Collaborative, 2023);

- The Global Citizen Diploma Consortium, a group of eight schools offering a Global Citizen Diploma (GCD) to their students: "through the GCD, students identify and validate the range of learning they have done, creating a platform for publication of these achievements with an audience

beyond their immediate context" (GCD, 2023);

- The Digital Promise, a group that has "built an ecosystem of micro-credentials in partnership with issuers, earners, and recognizers to personalize professional learning" (Digital Promise, 2023);

- The Enrollment Management Association, a testing platform that measures student preferences, attitudes, and beliefs toward intellectual engagement, initiative, social awareness, open-mindedness, resilience, teamwork and self-control (The Enrollment Management Association, 2022);

- Badgr, a digital badging system that allows students opportunities to collate credit in a number of areas linked to 21st Century skills.

It should be noted that all of these companies' services carry a price, meaning that access to such platforms is by no means a given for students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

Employers

The ways that employers recruit people into their organisations are interesting to investigate as many creative efforts are used in this process to explore and understand someone's potential and these could inform ideas for assessment reform in the education sector.

CVs represent a type of résumé, sometimes with examples - in the vein of a portfolio – that allow candidates to showcase who they are and what their stories are. Job searches tend to involve an interview process, often with several panels, allowing for the cross-referencing of impressions and it is not uncommon for there to be some form of personality or even psychometric testing to get an idea of

a candidates preferred working styles, examples include the CAPP, DISC or Myers-Briggs Type Indicator.

Transforming the High School Transcript

This paper argues that in order to broaden assessment genuinely and transformatively, it is the High School transcript that must be reformed at school level. Whilst attempts to tackle the problem directly at the level of university admissions or through mass testing protocols are welcome and certainly work in the right direction, they all miss a critical element, which is the journey that the student has taken over time.

One of the reasons why current assessment models fail to relay the full quality and fabric of student stories is because they are excessively decontextualized, compressed and standardised. Trying to account for a human being's unique strengths, preferences and capabilities in a multiple choice test, short interview or item response format, no matter how well enhanced by statistical modelling, will never be a satisfactory proxy for the depth of narrative that is needed to understand who a student really is. The High School transcript is meant to be a description of achievements over time (the North American styled High School transcript shows performances over four years), and, therefore, it is this longitudinal account that should be used as the basis for reform since its epistemology is sound (namely, sufficient time given to garner evidence) even if the format currently lacks, dramatically, the depth needed to describe learning fully.

A new, more inclusive and personalised manner of representing human gifts must be designed at school level so that learning and teaching are more relevant and representative of the extraordinary diversity of human gifts.

Rather than relying on a standardised, "one

size fits all" approach, reformed transcripts should allow different examples of learning from a host of different contexts to be recognised, including those garnered in informal and non-institutionalised settings:

There is increasing awareness that individuals have a basic right to have their learning recognized and validated, even in non-formal and informal educational settings. A sole focus on the qualification itself is insufficient. While it is important to think about outcomes, we should not lose sight of the social processes and interactions at the core of education. Qualifications are always only 'proxies' for what someone can do and work chiefly because of social trust, an evidence of the value of trust in educational purposes and activities. (UNESCO, 2021, p. 43)

The implications of such a reform process are considerable, most especially concerning the socioeconomic, racial and gender bias tied into traditional standardised achievement tests. By seeking to record learning wherever it has happened, student learning can be validated in a variety of settings: in the marketplace, the local community centre, a homestead, on a farm, in a start-up, through a self-initiated project.

Time

A simple pragmatic reason for the rigidity and narrowness of most assessment systems is the time and resources available to assess millions of students in bulked testing windows of time that leave decision-makers (test scorers and university admissions deans) very little time to spend on each candidate. Some estimates put the average amount of time available to look through a candidate's file for a top-tier university in North America at eight minutes.

The present grade distribution model, which reduces student learning to proxies that are easy to understand and quick to sort, allows for this very fast screening process.

It is important to reckon with this problem squarely, for it is a major factor in the problem of trying to broaden assessment. How can an assessment system relay the history of a student's achievements and the competences they have developed, in such a way that is relevant to the needs of universities and employers yet analysable in just a few minutes?

In the light of these complex issues, the paper now turns to a case study.

The Ecolint Learner Passport

Ecolint and UNESCO-IBE

Ecolint, short for Ecole Internationale de Genève, is a not-for-profit foundation and the world's oldest continually operating international school, established in 1924. The school is renowned for its long-standing tradition of curriculum innovation and has been at the forefront of educational development since its inception. In fact, it was the birthplace of the Model United Nations system in 1953, which teaches students the competencies of international diplomacy. Additionally, the school played a pivotal role, along with the United Nations International School of New York and the United World College of the Atlantic, in creating the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme in 1968 (this high school curriculum emphasizes community service, creativity, physical skills development, critical thinking, and independent research).

UNESCO-IBE (the International Bureau of Education) is the world's first international bureau of education, its mandate is to drive curriculum reform worldwide so as to meet the objectives of the 2030 Agenda and, more specifically, Sustainable Development Goal 4 (to ensure "inclusive and equitable quality

opportunities for all").

In 2018, the institutions collaborated on a curriculum framework called the Universal Learning Programme, used to conceptualise the overall learning objectives for students. Whilst today Ecolint offers several programmes to 4400 students, the Universal Learning Programme, is the School's own course, custom designed with UNESCO-IBE.

This curriculum framework is underpinned by seven global competences.

Seven Global Competences

UNESCO-IBE articulated 'A Framework for Future Global Competences' (Marope et al., 2017). This was

for member states to use as a reference point for their efforts at making their education and learning systems future-forward. The articulation of the Framework followed a collaborative, consultative process, to develop broad-based ownership and followership. Eminent thought leaders on the future of curriculum and learning served as peer reviewers of the Framework through its development stages. Once in advanced draft, the base of peer reviewers was extended to include the IBE-UNESCO Global Curriculum Network (GCN) comprising heads of curriculum and academics across 150 member states (Hughes, 2020, p.16).

The outcome of this work was the detailing of the following seven global competences:

1. Lifelong learning – involving curiosity, creativity and critical thinking;

2. Self-Agency – involving initiative, drive, motivation, grit, resilience and responsibility;

3. Interactively using diverse tools and resources – involving responsible consumption;

4. Interacting with others – involving teamwork, collaboration and negotiation;

5. Interacting in and with the world – balancing rights and privileges, freedom

and respect;

6. Transdisciplinarity – ways of thinking and acting across epistemic boundaries;

7. Multi-literateness – reading, writing, numeracy, digital literacy, health literacy, cultural literacy, epistemic literacies.

It is important to note that none of these competences is exclusively dependent on resources or suggest social advantage: they describe human gifts that can be developed in a multitude of different contextual settings and truly describe human talent without the accelerator of privilege. Equally important to recognise is that just under half of the competences are collaborative, not individualistic: they describe how students interact with elements and people around them. These two dimensions of the framework (access and collaboration) align strongly with UNESCO's imperatives to design education systems that address inequalities and social fragmentation.

The passport

In 2021, Ecolint reformed its High School transcript so as to allow students the opportunity to showcase their learning through these seven global competences. A large team of guidance counsellors, academic leaders, students and extracurricular learning leaders came together to design an assessment system which allows students to earn credit for work done in each of these areas.

The passport validates academic as well as non-academic achievement in the same competence catchment areas. For example, a student with high scores in the humanities will earn credit for "interacting with the world", but a student who has been involved, meaningfully, in sustainability projects will also earn credits in that area; a student with a strong language profile will earn credits in "interacting with others" but so will a student involved in social impact work or projects where interpersonal skills have been developed.

With the help of a mentor, each student compiles her/his/their passport based on evidence from the past four years of schooling. Some of the evidence comes from out of the classroom: it may be work done in the local community or through a club. This informa-

tion is arranged in a radial graph that allows anyone looking at the passport to understand the student's competence strengths in an overview that requires not more than a few seconds. The passport can be looked at in more detail too: evidence of activities that are described through competences is contained in a table below the radial graph (showing in which activities competence credits were gained) and students are able to upload a limited number of artefacts to showcase work they are proud of. Students have a space to articulate an aphoristic statement of intent. The passport allows student agency and breadth of expression.

Assessment validity and reliability are screened by the school mentor who oversees the attribution of credits to the student based on evidence. It is to be noted that this process of having a trusted adult better understand the whole picture of child's learning is healthy for the relationships between the school and its students too: schools know more about their students and students receive the message from the institution that everything they do, including work outside of the classroom, is of interest to the school.

After a trial, feedback and modifications to the prototype in 2021, over 300 students are carrying passports with them as they graduate in 2023 and beyond. University applications have been accompanied by the passport and several universities have shown great interest in it.

Ecolint's intention is to make the assessment criteria and design of the passport available to any school or learning organisation as part of our contribution to a world learning commons. If, through time, more universities and employers recognise the passport, more learners across the globe will be able to use it to describe who they are, in extreme cases, including those who have not been able to access a formal education. The vision for the future development of the passport is for it to substitute traditional, social advantage-affected assessment systems.

The Coalition to Honour all Learning

To share practice about alternative transcripts, including the Ecolint Learner Passport, and to stand together as a consortium of schools and universities dedicated to broadening assessment, a Coalition to Honour All Learning was formed in 2021. The group consists of over 70 organisations including the University of Toronto and Cornell University.

The Council of International Schools, an accrediting organisation, is part of the coalition and, over the next years, will be working on making a recognition platform of alternative transcripts globally visible, allowing more schools, universities and students to understand what the different measures of competence are and how student can have their competences recognised in non-traditional ways.

Conclusion

Education, or the transmission, acquisition, creation and adaptation of information, knowledge, skills and values, is a key lever of sustainable development. This is based on a vision of inclusive societies in which all citizens have equitable opportunities to access effective and relevant learning throughout life delivered through multiple formal, non-formal and informal settings (UNESCO, 2012).

The necessity to broaden assessment is clear and remains a critical lever for change. There are efforts across the globe to do this but none of them will mean anything concrete until fully operationalised all the way through to the level of the qualification that is requested for entry into educational or professional institutions. If this is not done, we will continue to live in two parallel universes: that of the rhetoric of competence-based learning, and that of the reality of narrow, high-stakes assessments. Assessment models need to align with curriculum imperatives urgently.

This paper is a call to all those involved in education to join the movement to reform High School transcripts so that the message we send out to students and the recognition of their skills, attitudes and knowledge is aligned with the need to make learning more inclusive, more relevant, more personal and more sustainable.

References

Character Collaborative. (2023). https://character-admission.org/

Digital Promise. (2023). https://digitalpromise.org/initiative/educator-micro-credentials/

GCD (Global Citizen Diploma). (2023). https://globalcitizendiploma.org/#:~:text=What%20is%20the%20Global%20Citizen,leading%20to%20a%20better%20future

Hughes, C. (2020). The Universal Learning Programme: educating future-ready citizens. UNESCO- IBE. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000372613

Kantrowitz, M. (2021). *Admissions Tests Discriminate Against College Admission of Minority and Low-Income Students at Selective Colleges*. http://studentaidpolicy.com/sat-and-selectivity/

Lucas, B (2019) Why We Need to Stop Talking About Twenty-first Century Skills, CSE Seminar Series Paper 283, April, *Centre for Strategic Education*, Melbourne.

Lucas, B. (2021). Rethinking assessment in education: The case for change. 02 CSE Leading Education Series.

Marope, M., Griffin, P., & Gallagher, C. (2017). Future Competence and the Future of Curriculum. UNESCO-IBE: Geneva.

MTC (Mastery Transcript Consortium). (2021). https://mastery.org/

Neihart, M. (2002). Delinquency and gifted children. In M. Neihart, S. M. Reis, N. M. Robinson, & S. M. Moon (Eds.), *The social and emotional development of gifted children: What do we know?* (pp. 103–112). Prufrock Press Inc.

Pretz, J.E., & Kaufman, J.C. (2017). Do Traditional Admissions Criteria Reflect Applicant Creativity? *Journal of Creative Behavior*, 51: 240-251. https://doi.org/10.1002/jocb.120

Taylor, R., Fadel, C., Kim, H., & Care, E. (2020). *Competencies for the 21st Century: Jurisdictional Progress*. Brookings Institution, Washington, DC.

The Enrollment Management Association. (2022). https://www.enrollment.org/tools/snapshot/character-skills-snapshot

Satell, G. (2018). Set the Conditions for Anyone on Your Team to Be Creative. Harvard Business Review. https://hbr.org/2018/12/set-the-conditions-for-anyone-on-your-team-to-be-creative

Stemler, S. (2012). What Should University Admissions Tests Predict? *Educational Psychologist*. 47. 5-17. 10.1080/00461520.2011.611444.

UNESCO. (2012). Education and skills for inclusive and sustainable development beyond 2015. New York : UN System Task team on the post-2015 UN development agenda, 2012.

UNESCO. (2021). *Reimagining our futures together: a new social contract for education*. Paris. ISBN: 978-92-3-100478-0

About the author

Conrad Hughes (PhD, EdD) is currently Campus and Secondary Principal at the International School of Geneva (Ecolint), La Grande Boissière, and will be the Director General of Ecolint from July 2023. He is also a Senior Fellow at UNESCO's International Bureau of Education, a member of the advisory board for the University of the People and research assistant at the University of Geneva's department of psychology and education. Conrad's most recent books are *Education and Elitism: Challenges and Opportunities* (2021, Routledge), *Understanding Prejudice and Education: The Challenge for Future Generations* (2017, Routledge) and *Educating for the 21st Century: Seven Global Challenges* (2018, Brill). He chairs the Coalition to Honor All Learning, a group of over 70 organizations dedicated to secondary school transcript reform.

#CurriculumOnTheMove

"Curriculum On The Move" is a UNESCO-IBE Series aiming at reflecting, debating, producing and disseminating knowledge and ways forward on emerging issues in curriculum-related aspects.

The Series emerges from a bottom-up approach, with teachers and students providing their perspectives and experiences on the curriculum.

The goal is to rethink the way curriculum is understood and practiced via Webinars, Concept Notes and Global Debates (via Blogs, Twitter, etc.) by involving in a participatory way youth and school practitioners.

UNESCO
unesco
International
Bureau of Education