

# The Assessment of Key Competences: A Response

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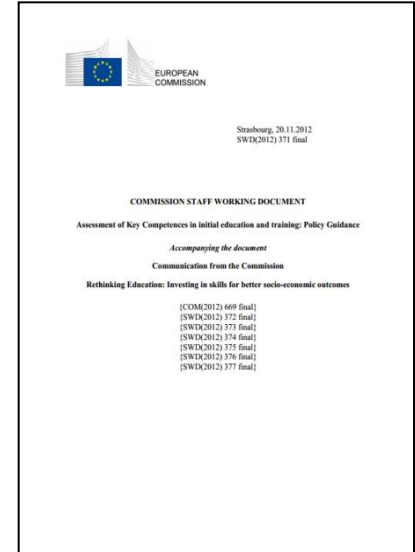
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# Contextual Backdrop

The **EU Commission Working Document (2012)** highlights a range of laudable curriculum initiatives and associated assessment approaches – aimed at broadening the learning outcomes of students. The document calls it a ***paradigm change***.

Not so much a paradigm shift – more a shift in balance - but a highly significant one nonetheless.

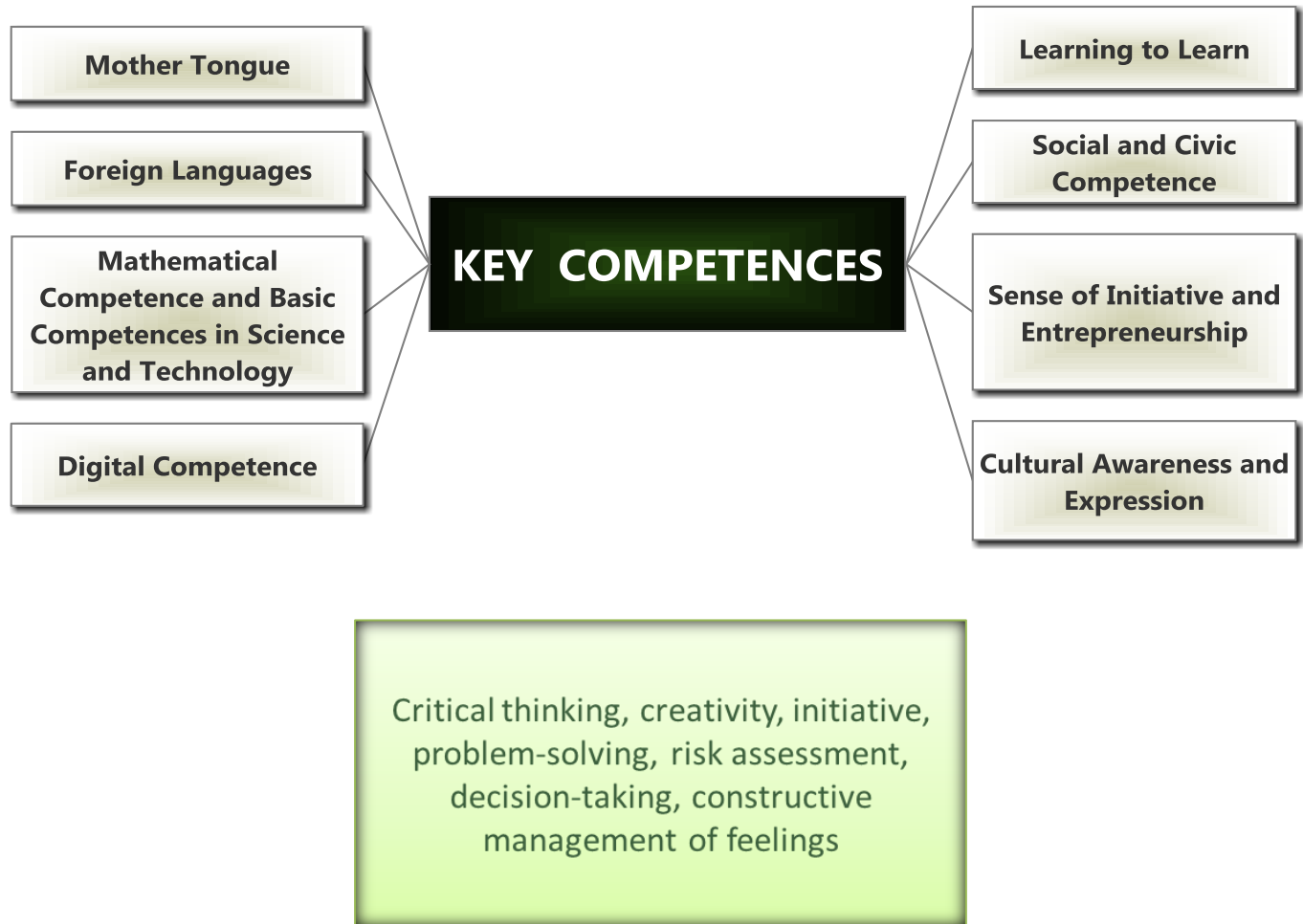




# Curriculum Reform

An ambitious agenda: *“to move from a static conception of curricular content to a dynamic combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the many and varied real-life context on which people need to use them.”* *Executive Summary*







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Potentially, this reform agenda could have  
a profoundly transformative impact on  
learning – and teaching.

Assessment is the linchpin to effecting  
this change.





# Curriculum–Assessment Alignment

*“If assessments do not reliably reveal the competences that are needed for success in study or work, if they do not fit the curricula that has been followed, then they distort and impede people’s life chances ..” (Page 8)*







# Curriculum–Assessment Alignment

It's more than that – the ambitious curriculum aims will not be realised if the assessment modes and approaches are not aligned and congruent with the curriculum. This is the essence of **measurement-driven instruction** – *‘what gets assessed, gets taught’* - especially in a high-stakes context.





# Curriculum–Assessment Alignment

Curriculum–Assessment **misalignment** and **mismatch** have been a historical feature of curriculum reform in many countries.

Curriculum change takes place.... but the assessment system fails to complement it.







# Where are we now?

Assessment reform has not been particularly successful to date – *EU Review in 2009* – “*not much has changed in the focus of national tests in four years*”.

***“Yet too little is done on assessment”***

*“Despite the awareness of the impacts of assessments, it still tends to focus only on a narrow part of key competences”.* (EU Commission, 2012)





# Where are we now?

The **EU Commission Working Document** (2012) provides an interesting, if not entirely convincing, conspectus of a range of promising 'alternative' assessment approaches that are in use in countries throughout the EU.

It is descriptive - but not evaluative.



# The Curriculum-Assessment Nexus

*“the nature and format of the assessments affects the depth of knowledge and types of skills developed by students...”*

*performance assessments are better suited to assessing high level, complex thinking skills”*

(Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2010)

Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education



**Beyond Basic Skills:  
The Role of Performance Assessment in  
Achieving 21st Century Standards of Learning**

Linda Darling-Hammond & Frank Adamson

In collaboration with Jamal Abedi, Stuart Kahl, Suzanne Lane, William Montague, John Olson, Margaret Owens, Raymond Pecheone, Lawrence O. Picus, Ed Roeber, Brian Stecher, Thomas Toch, and Barry Topol

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Stanford Center for  
Opportunity Policy in Education



# Performance Assessment

## Some Examples

Constructed-response test items

Science experiments

OSCEs (objective, structured, clinical examinations)

Technological design project

Computer simulation

Present a drama, make a video



# What is needed?

A movement away from a “*test culture*” to a “*broad assessment culture*”. (Page 11)

- More performance/authentic assessments
- A greater reliance on formative assessment





The proper (and limited) role for testing –  
progress monitoring and data analysis for  
school improvement

*“knowledgeable use of tests, with a full awareness of  
their technical limits”* (Elmore, 2003)

Enlightened test use – is this possible within a  
high-stakes system?

Low-stakes use of standardised tests





# CAVEAT

Using the same assessment instruments for instructional guidance purposes and for accountability purposes is fraught with risk (**test corruption practices**).

It runs the risk of rendering the data useless (or worse) for both purposes – **mutual contamination**.





# The Macro Policy Context

*“the effectiveness of formative assessment will be limited by the **nature of the larger system in which it is embedded** and, particularly, by the content, format, and design of the accountability test.” (Bennett, 2011)*

I would like to situate our considerations of assessment reform in the macro-debate around the purposes of assessment and in an understanding of the “*plate tectonics*” of educational policy making.





# Two Assessment Paradigms

## **Performance-based accountability**

(misnomer - it's actually test-based accountability)

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## **Improvement-oriented assessment**

(Authentic/Performance Assessment; Assessment *for* Learning)

The provenance and ideological roots of these two paradigms are radically different.





# The Theory of Action underlying Performance-Based Accountability

## **ACCOUNTABILITY**



IS ASSOCIATED WITH

## **STAKES**

**SANCTIONS and INCENTIVES**



WHICH DRIVE

Better teaching  
Better school management  
Higher pupil motivation



AND RESULT IN

**Improvement in Students'  
Performance**

## **Sanctions and Incentives:**

Performance-Related Pay  
Tenure  
Staff Replacement  
School closure



# The Elmore Paradox

Black Box approach to US school reform

Inadequate attention paid to **Capacity-Building** approaches to school improvement.





# Two Assessment Paradigms

(not used in the Kuhnian sense)

Globally, there is little doubt which is the dominant paradigm in many countries, which is the one that is more attuned to the prevailing *zeitgeist*.

And its influence is steadily spreading. Why?

Assessment becomes the servant of accountability - with its perceived power to leverage system-wide reform at relatively low cost.







# Performance-Based Educational Accountability

## Behaviourist Underpinnings

(not in the usually understood sense)

Performance-based accountability is only partly grounded in evidence about the efficacy of reform measures. (Lee, 2007)

It's also rooted in the strong conviction that **consequences need to follow action**; a system that does not punish underperformance is lax, even morally suspect.



# What are the challenges?

- Dealing with increased accountability headwinds
- Convincing sceptical teachers
- Enabling teachers to develop the necessary assessment competences
- Ensuring that assessments, particularly high-stakes assessments, meet the necessary psychometric standards





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# What are the challenges?

Assessment reform in the US was stunted because of the overhang of high-stakes accountability. Innovation in assessment “**squeezed out**”:-

*“mitigate their (schools and teachers) opportunities to explore alternative approaches to assessment.” (Flaitz, 2011)*

In the US, ***Race to the Top*** accountability requirements are now over-layered on ***NCLB***.

*“Staying instructionally afloat in a sea of accountability”*

(Popham, 2007)





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# Tough-to-Change Teachers?

*“if our typically tough-to-change teachers regard the formative assessment process as either too complicated or too time consuming, then our chances of getting them to adopt formative assessment evaporate.”*

(Popham, 2010)







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# Assessment Competences for Teachers

*“No matter how elegantly we formulate our ideas about formative assessment, they will be moot unless we can find ways of supporting teachers in incorporating more attention to assessment in their own practice.”* (William, 2006)





# Assessment Competences for Teachers

Assessment reform needs to be supported by intensive professional development for teachers.

Sustained opportunities for teachers to develop, implement, reflect and refine formative assessment practices.





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All good assessment instruments need to meet high psychometric standards (e.g. validity, reliability, fairness) – but these demands differ depending upon whether the assessment is for formative or summative purposes, and whether the assessment is high-stakes or low-stakes.





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If assessment information is to be used for instructional guidance and/or diagnostic purposes, then the standardisation demands will be much lower than if it's for accountability purposes.

The challenges of implementing system-wide curriculum-embedded performance assessments are greatly reduced within a low-stakes setting.







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A key question that needs to be answered (early on) is:

**To what extent, and at what points,  
is assessment information to be used  
for high-stakes accountability  
purposes?**





# High-Stakes Assessment?

It's ineluctable.

Where high-assessments are mandated,  
should they be performance assessments?

If performance assessments are to be used for high-stakes purposes, then it is essential that they be **standardised** to ensure comparability, fairness, validity, and reliability.





# Why Standardised Assessments?

Traditional standardised assessments place a strong premium on addressing issues of reliability and dependability.

Less haggling about the subjectivity of the measured outcomes (e.g. inter-rater reliability, frame of reference effects (Neumann, 2011), the interpretation of scoring rubrics).

Still, there's not much point in having a reliable assessment instrument if its validity is highly questionable or suspect.

**(The Validity-Reliability Trade-Off)**





# Is Performance Assessment compatible with high-stakes accountability?

**Possibly! And the possibilities are increasing.**

But do we want, or need, **highly standardised performance assessments** at primary school level (or mid-secondary school level) in order to serve accountability purposes?

What would be the side effects?

Would locally developed performance assessments (with lower reliability?) suffice?





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As we know from our experiences in this country over the past decade, it is very possible to diversify the forms/modes of assessments used in high-stakes examinations - but it does pose significant challenges in relation to **logistics, reliability and originality** – and of course, **cost** (time and money).





# Standardised Performance Assessment?

Validity

Reliability?

**poor reliability leads to flawed decision-making**

Manageability?

**time-consuming**

convincing teachers, it's worth it and not "time lost" to instruction

Costs







# Realistic Expectations

*“After five years of work, our euphoria devolved into a reality that formative assessment, like so many other education reforms, has a long way to go before it can be wielded masterfully by a majority of teachers to positive ends.”*

(Shavelson, 2008)

