

Tables

Table 1: Comparing the stated purposes of assessment

Please note that this table refers to the stated purposes of assessment in policy documentation. This does not always map onto the reality of how assessment is used. Where possible we have highlighted notable divergences.

Stated purposes	England	Finland	Estonia	Poland	Republic of Ireland	The Netherlands	Hong Kong	Ontario	Japan	New Zealand	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Wales	France	Singapore
To improve teacher training and/or jurisdiction's curriculum	No May have some indirect impact though	No May have some impact though	No May have some impact though	No May have some indirect impact though	No Not a stated purpose, but the same body, NCCA, oversees curriculum & assessment, so likely some impact of assessment on curriculum planning	No May have some indirect impact though	Yes Particularly for TSA which acts as diagnostic tool to improve other system components	No Not stated as purpose, may have some impact as assessment agency EQAO (see below) can offer general policy advice	Yes NAAA used to inform curriculum planning	No May have some indirect impact though	No Not a stated purpose, but data feeds into Scotland's 'curriculum improvement cycle' and the broader 'National Improvement Framework'	No May have some indirect impact though	No May have some impact though	No May have some impact though	No May have some impact though
Regional and system accountability ¹	Yes Through league tables at GCSEs and A level and to target intervention, Ofsted considers results in inspection judgements etc. ²	No Not a stated purpose; regional performance data is generated but it doesn't appear to be intended to be used for accountability	No Not stated purpose, but can be a function due to media-generated league tables + school desire to improve	No Not stated purpose, but exam board publishes results broken down by region, inviting comparison – media can also focus on these.	No Not stated purpose, but can be a function due to media-generated league tables (via FOI) + school desire to improve	Yes Many accountability mechanisms, e.g., a 'compare schools' website w/ attainment data, Inspectorate focus on exam grades etc.	No TSA about providing 'support', but can have accountability function. Media generates HKDSE league tables.	Yes Standardised test data publicly available via Education Quality & Accountability Office, league tables produced by other orgs.	No NAAA is intended to be diagnostic, but can in practice have accountability function.	No Not a stated purpose, but govt makes data widely available, schools held to account via media generated league tables, inspections etc.	No Not a stated purpose, but govt makes data widely available, schools held to account via media generated league tables, inspections etc.	No Not a stated purpose & desire for less accountability focus versus England, but schools still held to account by media generated league tables etc.	No Not a stated purpose, but GCSE data widely available on 'My Local School' website that could have accountability function	No Not a stated purpose, but achievement data is published and sometimes turned into league tables by media in way that could have accountability function	No Not a stated purpose, and govt actively does not publish results to reduce accountability effect, though other orgs sometimes gather data and make league tables
School or regional improvement and informing resource allocation	No Not a stated purpose, but may impact on the decision to – 're-broker' a school – assign it to a new governing body	No May have an impact but not a stated purpose	No May have an impact but not a stated purpose	No May have an impact but not a stated purpose	No May have an impact but not a stated purpose	Yes Esp. if the Inspectorate considers a school under-performing	Yes TSA used to identify areas for intervention	Yes The EQAO (see below) can make improvement recs. on the basis of some results	Yes NAAA used to identify areas for intervention	No Not a stated purpose, but school results a factor in govt deciding if school needs intervention	No May have an impact but not a stated purpose	No May have an impact but not a stated purpose	No May have an impact but not a stated purpose	No May have an impact but not a stated purpose	No May have an impact but not a stated purpose
Progression (Lower Secondary): <i>i.e. is it used to determine progression to senior secondary courses/ routes /institutions</i>	No Not a stated purpose but GCSE results play a role in determining which options are available post-16	Yes Basic school education certificate required for progression; exemptions can be made	Yes Determines access to different post-16 schools (academic/vocational)	No Not a stated purpose, but in practice, eighth-grade exam used to determine school track (academic/technical/vocational)	No Not a stated purpose but results can be used by school to set students/ determine access to pathways	Sometimes End of primary assessment (12y) determines school track (vocational/general/academic) – if on vocational route (VMBO),	No The TSA is not used for progression. Internal school exams may be used to set students.	No Not a stated purpose but schools may use results to set students/ determine access to certain classes and pathways	No Not for NAAA. However, in practice, important regional & school based high school entrance exams (~15y) greatly impact progression	No Not a stated purpose but schools could use results to set students/ determine access to certain classes and pathways	No Not a stated purpose, but in practice results play a role in determining courses and pathways at upper level	No Not a stated purpose but GCSE results play a role in determining which options are available post-16	No Not a stated purpose but GCSE results play a role in determining which options are available post-16	No Not a stated purpose, but in reality may have some bearing on what kind of Bac students undertake (academic/vocational) ³	Yes Determines access to different post-16 schools (academic/vocational)

Stated purposes		England	Finland	Estonia	Poland	Republic of Ireland	The Netherlands	Hong Kong	Ontario	Japan	New Zealand	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Wales	France	Singapore
							lower sec exam determines pathway									
Progression (Upper Secondary): <i>i.e for further study</i>		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes ⁴	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Are the aggregated results published? (<i>applies to both lower and upper level stages of formal assessment unless otherwise noted</i>)	Jurisdictional level	✓	✓ (upper only)	✓	✓	✓ (upper only)	✓	✓	✓	✓ (lower only)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Regional level	✓	✓ (upper only)		✓		✓		✓ (at a school board level)	✓ (lower only)	✓	✓			✓	
	School level	✓					✓		✓ (lower only)	Sometimes (lower only) ⁵	✓	✓		✓ (lower only)	✓ (upper only)	

¹ We understand accountability here as about the jurisdictional government actively evaluating schools/groups of schools on the basis of assessment performance data, and subsequently using rewards or sanctions to maintain/improve performance (including the use of league tables to motivate improvement). There is sometimes a significant divergence between whether governments *state* assessment is for accountability and the extent to which this may be the case *in practice*; we have attempted to capture this here.

² It is worth noting the emphasis on assessment metrics within Ofsted inspections has been reduced in recent years

³ A government proposal to make passing the lower assessment, the DNB, a requirement for entering lycee (equivalent sixth form) was shelved in September 2024.

⁴ See below. No formal national assessment, but in practice the national university entrance exam is the de facto 'national exam' and has massive influence on progression. Individual universities' entrance exams are also important and have a similar effect.

⁵ For the NAAA, MEXT publishes national averages and mean subject scores for each of the seven regions of Japan, and ranks the 47 prefectures accordingly. Education policymakers in all 1,718 municipalities have the discretion to publish the results of individual school-mean test scores under their jurisdiction or not.

Table 2. Comparing the structure of assessment systems

		England	Finland	Estonia	Poland	Republic of Ireland	The Netherlands	Hong Kong	Ontario	Japan	New Zealand	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Wales	France	Singapore
Stages of formal assessment	Lower	GCSE / BTEC (14-16y)	Basic school education certificate (14-16y)	Basic School Graduation Certificate incl. Grade 9 national exams (up to 16y)	Eighth-grade exam (14-15y)	Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA) (12-15 y)	No formal assessment in academic (VWO) or general (HAVO) schools. Vocational (VMBO) schools = VMBO diploma (16y)	Territory-wide System Assessment (TSA), (14-15 y)	Grade 9 Assessment of Mathematics The Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) ¹	National Assessment of Academic Ability (NAAA) (15 y) + important regional high school entrance exams	National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) Level 1 (15-16y)	National 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 ² (14-16y)	GCSE/ BTEC (14-16y)	GCSE/BTEC (14-16y) ³ + Foundation or National Welsh Baccalaureate (Welsh Bacc)	National Brevet Diploma (DNB)/General Training Certificate (CFG) (14-15y)	O-levels / N-Levels – either N(A) (Academic) or N(T) (Technical) routes (15-16y)
	Upper	Academic: A-levels (17-18y) Vocational: various options	Academic: Matriculation Examination + General Upper Secondary School Leaving Certificate (17-18y) Vocational: various – awarded by provider	Academic: Upper secondary school leaving certificate inc. national exams (16-19y) Vocational: various options	Academic: 'Matura' exam (17-18y) Vocational: Vocational exams (Vocational students can also sit Matura)	Academic: Leaving Certificate (for most pupils) Vocational: various options	Academic: VWO diploma (17-18y) General: HAVO diploma (16-17y) Vocational: post-16 MBOs have institution-specific quals	Academic: Hong Kong Diploma or Secondary Education (HKDSE) (17-18 years) Vocational: Diploma of Vocational Education (DVE)	Academic: Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) Vocational: various options	None. However, in practice, the Common Test for University Admissions (CTUA), the national university entrance exam, is the de facto assessment. ⁴	NCEA Level 2 (16-17y) Level 3 (17-18y) – academic & vocational University Entrance (UE) – separate academic qual based on NCEA L2 & 3 performance	Academic: Scottish Higher (16-17y) & Advanced Higher (17-18y) + Scottish Baccalaureate Vocational: Various options	Academic: AS (16-17y) and A Level (17-18y) Vocational: various options	Academic: AS (16-17y) and A Level (17-18y); Advanced Skills Welsh Bacc Vocational: various options	Academic: Baccalauréat (Bacc) – either general or technological (16-18y) Vocational: Professional aptitude certificate (CAP)and/or Professional Bacc	Academic: A-levels Vocational: various options
Technical or vocational secondary-level pathway available?		Yes ⁵ Qualifications available in lower. Distinct pathways at upper	Yes Various assessments available via approved providers	Yes Post 16 Vocational education and training programmes	Yes Vocational exams available in vocational secondary schools	Yes Typically post 16, separate leaving certificate qualification available	Yes Separate schools post-12 with vocational exams	Yes Diploma of Vocational Education (DVE) post-16	Yes Three programmes available post-16	Yes Vocational qualifications available via Colleges of Technology post-15	Yes NCEA includes 'unit standards' alongside 'achievement standards' that align with vocational pathways	Yes Range of vocational qualifications and pathways available including 'Foundational Apprenticeships' & 'Skills for Work' courses	Yes Qualifications available in lower. Distinct pathways at upper	Yes Qualifications available in lower. Distinct pathways at upper	Yes Qualifications available in lower. Distinct pathways at upper	Yes Qualifications available in lower. Distinct pathways at upper
Last age of compulsory education		16 (full-time); 18 (education/training) ⁶	18 ⁷	17	18	16	16 ⁸	15	18	15	16	16	16 ⁹	16	16	15
Are subjects for formal assessment compulsory, elective, or a mix?	Lower Stage	Mix 3 core GCSEs (maths, English, and science). ~9 typically	Compulsory Up to 20 compulsory subjects assessed in school, plus at	Compulsory 3 core subjects assessed by Grade 9 exam (Estonian,	Compulsory 3 core subjects assessed by 8th-grade exam (Polish,	Mix 4 core subjects (English, Irish, mathematics, history) +	Mix No formal assessment for VWO and HAVO; VMBO terminal exam	Mix 3 compulsory subjects examined in TSA (Chinese, English, and	Mix Standardised mathematics and literacy assessments compulsory; 9	Compulsory 4 compulsory NAAA subjects: Japanese, mathematics,	Mix Compulsory literacy and numeracy assessments;	Elective Technically no compulsory subjects; in practice schools make	Mix 2 compulsory GCSEs (English language & maths), ~9 typically taken	Mix 4 core GCSEs (English, Welsh, Maths, Science), ~9 typically taken	Compulsory 8 components of the 'common core of knowledge skills and	Mix O & N(A)-Levels: = 5 compulsory (English, mother

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<i>(NB: this applies to academic rather than vocational track unless otherwise stated. 'Formal' refers to assessment that is required by jurisdiction & directly counts towards qualification at relevant level)</i>		taken, BTEC (vocational) options available	least one multidisciplinary learning module	maths, one student choice from language, science, social science). 15 other compulsory subjects assessed in school by teachers.	maths, foreign language). 12 other compulsory subjects not formally assessed.	schools may make others compulsory, then electives.	has 5 compulsory subjects (Dutch, English, maths, PE, arts) + ~5 other subjects	maths); ~8 other core subjects not formally assessed	core subjects compulsory but not formally assessed	science, English. 7 other compulsory subjects not nationally assessed (though will be assessed via important school entrance exams)	No compulsory subjects, but in practice many schools make English, maths, science compulsory	English & maths compulsory + often other subjects (e.g. science and languages); 8 subjects typically taken	in total; BTEC options available	in total; Welsh Bacc requires variety of practical & project-based tasks	culture' assessed for DNB; some schools offer further non-assessed subjects	tongue, maths, science, humanities) + up to 4 further subjects; N(T) levels = 4 compulsory (English, mother tongue, maths, computing) + up to 5 others
	Upper stage	Elective 3-4 subjects	Mostly compulsory 1 compulsory (mother tongue), then 4 'tests' must be taken from 3 groups: second national language; foreign language; maths; humanities & natural sciences – at least one of these must be at 'advanced' level	Mostly compulsory 3 compulsory (Estonian, maths, foreign language exams) + compulsory piece of teacher-assessed research or practical work 15 other subjects must be studied and assessed by teachers, some electives available	Mix 3 compulsory (Polish, foreign language, mathematics) + up to 5 electives	Mix 3 compulsory (English, Irish, mathematics) with some exceptions; + 3-4 electives	Mix VMBO & HAVO: 3 compulsory (Dutch, English, mathematics) + other compulsory subjects based on selected 'track' + electives. 8-10 total. MBO: varies by institution	Mix 4 compulsory (Chinese, English, maths, citizenship) and 2-3 electives	Mix Total of 30 'credits' required for OSSD, of which 18 are in 11 compulsory subjects /groups of subjects + community service + 2x online learning credits	Mostly compulsory CTUA = 3 compulsory (Japanese, mathematics, foreign language) + other compulsory subjects depend on preferred undergrad course; Schools assess 9 compulsory subjects; some electives possible.	Elective NCEA L2 and L3 have no compulsory subjects UE requires 10 'UE literacy credits' that can be gained from range of subjects + a certain number of credits in 'UE approved' subjects	Elective Highers = 5 subjects typically taken; Advanced Highers = 2-3 subjects typically taken; Scottish Baccalaureate = 2 Advanced Highers, 1 Higher, 1 Interdisciplinary Project (IP)	Elective Typically 4 subjects at AS Level and 3 at A Levels	Elective Typically 4 subjects at AS Levels and 3 at A Level; Welsh Bacc requires variety of practical & project-based tasks	Mix 7 compulsory subjects (French, philosophy, 2x foreign languages, history-geography, PE, Science); 3 optional 'specialty' subjects, which reduce to 2 in final year	Mix 3 compulsory (mother tongue ¹⁰ + a group project + a critical thinking skills paper) + at least 4 other electives, 1 of which must be 'contrasting' (e.g. from humanities if other subjects are in sciences).
What form does formal assessment take	Lower Stage	Mostly exams Largely exams, some practical in certain subjects (e.g. Science, Arts PE).	Mix Exams, project work, practical demonstrations	Exam Standardised national exam at Grade 9 + variety of in-school assessment also required	Exam	Mix Exams + 'Classroom-based assessments' (CBAs)	Exam VMBO diploma: school exam, which inc. practical component, and national exam.	Exam Standardised exam	Exam 2x standardised assessments mentioned above	Exam	Mix National lit & num tests; coursework inc. tests, projects etc. optional exams ¹¹	Mix Nationals 1-4: in-school coursework, projects, practical tasks National 5: typically exam + coursework	Mostly exams Largely exams, some practical in certain subjects (e.g. Science, Arts PE).	Mix Currently largely exams; new (2025) GCSEs will have more coursework, + practical & project-based Welsh Bacc	Mix 4 core exams + internal assessment of all common core components + oral exam on either history of art or an independent project	Mix All subjects assessed by exam, then often also by coursework/practical assessment/oral exam component
	Upper Stage	Mix Exams and some coursework	Mix Matriculation exam is national	Mix Grade 12 national exam; school-	Exam Features oral component +	Mix Exams + coursework	Exams VWO & HAVO = national exams +	Mix Exam + school-based	Mix Tests, exams, projects, portfolios, and	Exam CTUA is exam.	Mix Coursework including tests,	Mix Typically exams + coursework;	Mix Exams and some coursework +	Mix Exams and some coursework +	Mix Exams, inc. 1x oral exam that summarises	Mostly exams Mostly exam-based, though some

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			exam; wider range of in-school assessment used to award School Leaving Certificate	assessed exam on rest of national curriculum, 1x school-assessed research or practical project	written component	for some subjects	school-based exams	assessments (SBAs)	observations as determined by school/school board	In awarding 'credits' required for graduation, schools can use variety of assessments but tests and exams predominate	projects, presentations, etc.; semi-optional exams	some subjects can be one or the other; for Scottish Baccalaureate Interdisciplinary Project is included		practical & project based elements of Welsh Bacc	personal project + continuous in-school assessment ¹²	coursework & practical in select subjects + compulsory project-based assessment
What is the balance between normative and criteria based <i>(NB: This refers to academic assessment unless otherwise noted)</i>	Lower Stage	Criteria combined with normative 'comparable outcomes approach' to ensure grade boundaries consistent year-on-year	Criteria-based	Criteria-based	Criteria -based	Criteria-based	Criteria combined with use of the 'N-term' (normeringsterm) which ensures grade boundaries consistent year-on-year	Criteria-based	Criteria-based	Criteria-based	Mostly criteria based, with some norm referencing to keep external exam grade boundaries consistent each year	National 1-4: criteria-based National 5: criteria combined w/ annual grade boundary review to ensure year-on-year consistency	Criteria combined with use of 'Uniform Mark Scale' approach to ensure grade boundaries consistent year on year	Criteria combined with annual adjustment of grade boundaries to ensure year-on-year consistency	Criteria-based	Criteria-based
	Upper Stage	As above	Criteria combined with normative adjustment of grade boundaries to ensure they are consistent year-on-year	As above	As above	Criteria combined with normative adjustment of grade boundaries to ensure they are consistent year-on-year	As above	Criteria combined with normative adjustment of grade boundaries to ensure they are consistent year-on-year	As above	Criteria-based (both CTUA and in-school assessment for credits)	As above	As for National 5 above	As above	As above	As above	As above
Mode of assessment	Lower Stage	Mixed, but mostly paper-based	Mixed , determined by school	Currently paper , focus on transition to electronic	Paper-based	Mix of paper and electronic	Mix of paper and electronic	Paper-based	Mix of paper and electronic	Paper-based	Choice of either, transition to electronic being encouraged	Paper-based	Paper-based , transition to electronic being actively explored	Mixed , but mostly paper-based but desire to move to electronic	Paper-based + oral exam component	Mostly paper-based but transition to electronic in progress
	Upper stage	As above	Electronic Though in-school assessment to gain Leaving Certificate is mixed	As above	Paper based Plus oral component of Matura	Mainly paper	As above	As above	As above	As above	As above	As above	As above	As above	As above	As above
Standardised? If so, at what stages, and is it at the local/regional or national level?	Lower Stage	Mix Yes nationally for GCSE; No for BTECs	No Though national guidelines for assessment are followed	Mix National Grade 9 exams standardised nationally, various in-	Yes nationally	Mix National exam component standardised, coursework and other components	Mix VMBO national exam standardised nationally, in-school exam fairly	Yes nationally	Yes Province-wide	Yes NAAA is nationally standardised	Mix Standardised literacy and numeracy assessment; Internal assessment	Mix National guidelines in place for National 1-5, but National 4 and especially	Mix Yes for GCSE; No for BTECs	Mix No for BTECs, to some extent for GCSEs, but desire for	Mix No for exams, to some extent for continuous internal assessment	Yes

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				school assessment not standardised but follows guidelines		not but do follow guidelines	standardised due to careful monitoring				not very standardised, external (exam-based) assessment somewhat standardised	5 more standardised with more monitoring procedures in place		more local adaption		
	Upper Stage	Mix Nationally for A-levels, no for vocational routes	Mix Yes for matriculation exam, no for other assessments for Leaving Certificate or vocational routes, though they follow national guidelines	Mix National Grade 12 exams standardised, in-school assessment not standardised but follows guidelines	Mixed Matura, yes, nationally, but oral in-school component, not as much – though teacher assessors follow national guidelines	Yes Exams standardised, coursework not strictly, but is monitored by state	Mix VWO + HAVO: national exam standardised, in-school exam fairly standardised due to close monitoring MBO: no	Yes Exams standardised, SBAs run by school but are fairly standardised due to close monitoring	No Overall OSSD requirements are standardised but OSSD assessments not standardised, though guidelines are followed	Mix Yes for CTUA, not explicitly for in-school awarding of credits or for vocational routes, though for these guidelines are followed	Mix As above	Mix Nationally for Highers & advanced Highers, no for vocational routes	Mix Yes for AS & A level, no for vocational routes	Mix Yes for AS & A level, no for vocational routes	Mix Yes for exams and most continuous internal assessment; some awarding of internal grades up to teacher discretion	Yes
Who marks assessments? If in-school teachers, what is the moderation process?	Lower Stage	Exams = centrally (exam boards). Course work = teachers, then sample from each school moderated by exam boards. If issues detected, grades for all students at school adjusted.	Teachers; no moderation	Teachers; no moderation, though Harno may investigate if schools report results that appear anomalous	Centrally (Regional exam boards)	Exams = Centrally (SEC). CBAs = teachers. Each school has formal Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) process in place to ensure school-wide grading consistency.	School exams = teachers. National exams = centrally (CvTE). The final grade is the average of school & national exams – significant discrepancies can see schools investigated, but no routine moderation.	Centrally (HKEAA)	Centrally (EQAO)	Centrally (MEXT)	Exams = centrally (NZQA). Coursework = teachers, then 8 sample items moderated by NZQA per 'achievement standard'. If issues detected, feedback provided but grades not changed.	National 1-4: teachers National 5: mostly centrally (SQA), but teachers mark coursework in some practical subjects with a sample of their marking checked by SQA, with grade changes for all pupils in school if required	Exams = centrally (exam boards). Course work = teachers, then sample from each school moderated by exam boards. If issues detected, grades for all students at school adjusted.	Exams = centrally (exam boards). Course work = teachers, then sample from each school moderated by exam boards. If issues detected, grades for all students at school adjusted.	Exams (inc. oral exams) = centrally (regional education authorities - Académies); internal assessment = teachers; in-school moderation occurs but does not appear to be system-wide moderation	Exams = centrally (CIE for most subjects, SEAB for 'local' subjects like Malay); coursework etc. = teachers, then moderated by bodies as above
	Upper stage	As above.	Teachers provide initial grades. These then sent to central body (MEB) who determine final grades.	Centrally (Harno)	As above	Exams + coursework = centrally (SEC)	As above	As above	OSSD assessments marked by teachers; no moderation	CTUA = centrally (National Centre for University Entrance Examinations) ; individual universities mark own examinations	As above	As for National 5 above	As above	As above	Exams = as above. Continuous internal assessment = 75% is marked by Académies, 25% marked by teachers without moderation	As above + project-based assessment graded by teachers as either pass/fail

¹This is assessed at Grade 10 so has been placed in 'lower' category here, but is also a compulsory component in the OSSD. If students do not pass this assessment, they can complete the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course (OSSLC) at Grade 12 in order to meet the literacy requirements for the OSSD.

² Nationals 1-3 are alternative qualifications designed for students who need additional support in their learning. Nationals 4-5 are the most commonly taken qualifications, especially National 5 which is the more 'academic' qualification the most obviously leads to higher study. Students can study different subjects at different levels. For instance, a student might take maths at National 5 and English at National 4.

³ In Wales, BTECs will be replaced by Vocational Certificates of Secondary Education (VCSEs) by 2027.

⁴ To graduate from upper secondary school, students must obtain a certain number of credits, gained by attending and passing courses. Credits are awarded by schools, following guidance from the Ministry, with 'passing' determined with in-school assessments. This could be considered a 'national assessment system' in some way. However, in practice, the CTUA and other university entrance exams set by certain universities either individually or regionally dominate the Japanese schooling system and are the assessment(s) most schools are 'working towards'.

⁵ BTEC Level 1 and 2 (equivalent to GCSEs can be taken alongside or instead of them at age 16+). BTEC Level 3 (equivalent to A-levels and can be taken alongside or instead of them). Vocational qualifications can be taken but there is not a distinct pathway until upper secondary level. A new 'T-Level' was introduced in 2020 providing another vocational pathway.

⁶ This is the age of compulsory full-time education and is sometimes called the school-leaving age. Most children attend school until this age, but it is legal to get full-time education elsewhere (e.g. home schooling). It is compulsory for young people to be in education *or* training (including apprenticeships) until the age of 18.

⁷ Or once upper secondary qualification completed.

⁸ 16-18 year olds must secure basic qualification (HAVO or VWO) before leaving school.

⁹ In 2024, plans were announced to copy England's requirement for individuals to be in education/training up to age 18.

¹⁰ Students can sometimes be exempted from the mother tongue requirement, most commonly if they have scored sufficiently well in the mother tongue component of their O-level examinations.

¹¹ Exams are available in all academic subjects. However, students can pass all levels of NCEA by not sitting these exams and instead passing a wider range of 'internal' coursework-based assessments. This is increasingly common, though will likely change with NCEA reforms currently underway.

¹² Students must sit a compulsory exam in French in the second-to-last year of school, and a compulsory philosophy exam in their final year. 2 other final year exams are then sat in their chosen speciality subjects. With regards to continuous assessment, 30% of the overall grade for the Bac is awarded on the basis of nationally-set and marked tests completed in school, and 10% is awarded by teachers based on in-class work. The remaining 60% is awarded via examinations.

Table 3. Comparing the assessment policy process

	England	Finland	Estonia	Poland	Republic of Ireland	The Netherlands	Hong Kong	Ontario	Japan	New Zealand	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Wales	France	Singapore
Who makes assessment policy at jurisdictional level?	Department for Education	The Ministry of Education and Culture	Ministry of Education and Research	The Ministry for Education and Science	Department of Education	Ministry of Education, Culture and Science	Education Bureau (EDB)	Ontario Ministry of Education (MoE)	Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT)	The Ministry of Education (MoE)	The Learning Directorate (LD)	Department of Education (DoE)	Education and Welsh Language Division of Welsh Government	Ministry of National Education and Youth	Ministry of Education
Who writes and regulates assessments at jurisdictional level?	Ofqual Establishes qualification standards, regulates exams (which are run by multiple exam boards), and sets rules.	The Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI) Oversees core curriculum and assessment. Matriculation Examination Board (MEB) Responsible for matriculation exam.	Education and Youth Board (Harno) Sets and manages national exams, establishes rules & guidelines Estonian Qualifications Authority (EQA) (Kutsekoda) Oversees vocational and professional qualifications	The Central Examination Board (CEB) Sets and manages national exams, including overseeing various regional exam boards	The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) Develops curriculum, produces assessment guidance State Examinations Commission (SEC) Responsible for all aspects of exams, inc. quality assurance.	The Board of Tests and Exams (CvTE) Overall responsibility for exam regulation Central Institute for Test Development (CITO) Writes all national exams	Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA) Writes, sets, regulates TSA and HKDSE exams Vocational Training Council (VTC) oversees vocational assessments	Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), oversees the standardised literacy & numeracy assessments Ontario MoE Oversees the OSSD, but individual schools and school boards write assessments	MEXT Oversees NAAA National Centre for University Entrance Examinations (DNC) writes and regulates the Common Test for University Admissions NB: Prefectural govts also influential in setting regional high school entrance exams	New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) Regulates and writes exams, provides guidelines and models for internal assessments (coursework)	Scottish Qualification Authority (SQA) writes, sets and regulates national examinations ¹	Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) sets qualification standards and acts as regulator of exam boards (which set & mark exams) as well as acting as an exam board itself alongside other England-based exam boards	Qualifications Wales establishes qualification standards and regulates assessment process Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC) sets and grades assessments ²	Ministry of National Education and Youth has oversight over all aspects of assessment process, though with some input from regional education authorities (Académies)	Singapore Examinations and Assessment Board (SEAB) works alongside Cambridge International Education (CIE) to set and mark exams
Is there explicit encouragement of local adaptation?	No	Yes But not matriculation exam	Yes But not re: major Grade 9 & 12 exams	Some Not re: 8 th grade & Matura exam. Beyond this some flexibility, though not overly encouraged.	Yes JCPA in particular leaves much space for local adaption	Mix More so in vocational tracks, far less so in academic track	No Though teachers have some autonomy over SBA design	Yes	No	Yes	Yes Desire for assessment to reflect Curriculum for Excellence focus on local adaption	No	Yes Desire for assessment to reflect Curriculum for Wales focus on local adaption	No Generally not, though students have some ability to pursue individual interests in project presented on in DNB oral exam	No Though scope in A-level project-based assessment for students to pursue individual interests
Who is responsible for evaluation of the assessment system?	Ofqual	Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC)	Ministry of Education and Research, sometimes directing the	The Central Examination Board	NCCA	The Ministry + The Inspectorate of Education + Education Council	The EDB + the HKEAA + the Curriculum Development Council (CDC)	EQAO + The Ontario Auditor General +	MEXT + Central Council for Education	Ministry of Education + NZQA	LD + SQA with occasional input from Education Scotland	CCEA	Qualifications Wales	Ministry of National Education and Youth	Ministry of Education + SEAB

	England	Finland	Estonia	Poland	Republic of Ireland	The Netherlands	Hong Kong	Ontario	Japan	New Zealand	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Wales	France	Singapore
			Education & Youth Board					Ontario MoE							
What mechanisms are used to evaluate the assessment system?	Research and analysis; consultation; monitoring and oversight; standard-setting; and evaluation and review	Research reports; audits; international comparisons	Reviews; research; consultation	Research studies; reviews	No clear formal review process, but research and analysis, engagement with stakeholder groups and boards with sector representatives	All organisations: Reviews; research reports; stakeholder consultation Inspectorate: specific role in monitoring potential discrepancies between school & national exam results	EDB: Regular stakeholder review and consultation process; periodic system-wide reviews HKEAA: reviews and consultation CDC: reviews of curriculum & assessment settings	EQAO: reviews of standardised assessment(s) The Auditor General: Reviews EQAO, their assessments and processes The Ontario MoE: reviews OSSD	School and parent questionnaires ; system wide-reviews	NZQA: Formal quality assurance processes ³ MoE: Occasional system-wide reviews	LD: occasional system-wide reviews SQA: review components of system; consult with stakeholders Education Scotland: particular interest in assessment-curriculum alignment	Detailed reviews and evaluation, frequent comparison to England & Wales to ensure sufficient alignment	Comprehensive reviews, including stakeholder engagement, expert consultation, active effort to align assessment with new curriculum	Comprehensive reviews; liaising between national ministry and regional Académies	Comprehensive reviews; extensive stakeholder engagement; generation of advice on international 'best practice' via relationship with CIE

¹ In 2025, the SQA will be replaced by a new body, Qualifications Scotland

² WJEC is effectively the sole exam board in Wales, providing GCSEs and A Levels for this nation. However, for subjects with low uptake in Wales, schools can use English exam boards – the assessments they provide are categorised by Qualifications Wales as 'designated qualifications'.

³ NZQA reviews and quality assures the NCEA through a formal process known as the Managing National Assessment Review (MNA) which takes place at least once every 4 years. NZQA follows a standard consultation process for any changes to the NZQF, this process includes consultations with a range of educational professionals and stakeholders including those from the secondary schooling sector, university sector, Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics (ITP) sector and Private Training Establishment (PTE) sector.

Table 4. Comparing recent reforms to assessment systems

		England	Finland	Estonia	Poland	Republic of Ireland	The Netherlands	Hong Kong	Ontario	Japan	New Zealand	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Wales	France	Singapore
When were the most recent reforms introduced, and what did they focus on?	Lower	GCSE 2017, 1996 for BTECs Reforms to reduce or eliminate coursework, increase in challenge/content covered, new 1-9 grading system to reward high attainers	2016 Assessment guidelines aligned with new curriculum which heightened focus on skills, competencies & student-centred learning opportunities	Mid-1990s¹ Introduction of nationally standardised exams	2019 Eighth-grade exam introduced as standard national exam across the country	2017 JCPA introduced, centred on more flexible, modular approach to assessment with lots of CBAs	2011 Introduction of requirement to pass national exam to pass overall + tighter standardisation of school exams	2017 Reforms to reduce amount of content in TSA + further emphasis from govt that tool is diagnostic and should not lead to excess 'drilling' & pressure on students	2001-2002 Grade 9 Mathematics Assessment introduced (2001) and OSSLT introduced (2002)	2007 NAAA trialled; then first given to all students in 2013 , English added as compulsory subject in 2019	2023 Introduction of compulsory standardised numeracy & literacy assessment, reduction of internal assessment, more indigenous knowledge added	2013² Replacement of previous qualifications with Nationals 1-5, which are more skills-focused in-line with new national curriculum	2017³ GCSEs updated to better reflect NI context and skills-focused curriculum; allow English 1-9 grading system to be used in NI	2025⁴ New GCSEs that have more coursework, are more aligned to the flexible, skills-based Curriculum for Wales	2016 Reforms to bring DNB more in-line with the newest more skills and competency-focused prescribed 'common base of knowledge, skills and culture'	2006 Assessments 'delinked' from UK GCSEs, allowing Singapore power over its own syllabus, assessment style etc.
	Upper	A levels/ As Levels/BTECs 2017 T-Levels, 2020 Decoupling of 'AS levels' and reduction of coursework to focus more on final exam; increase in challenge/content covered	2016 As above + full digitisation of the exam	2013 Introduction of compulsory research or practical component; increase in choice of electives	2023 Increase in level of challenge/difficulty; increase in more open-ended questions; requirement to take at least one subject at 'advanced' level	2023 Significant increase in coursework weighting; new 'contemporary' subjects added like 'Climate Action and Sustainable Development'	2011 As above + requirement to pass Dutch, English & maths to pass overall	2012⁵ Introduction of HKDSE as single secondary school assessment (versus previous 16y & 18y assessments) with more coursework and electives	2025 Move to more flexibility in subject choices; more focus on financial literacy & 'life skills'	2021 More critical thinking & problem solving questions + introduction of some written responses in CTUA	2012⁶ Alignment with new (2007) curriculum that focused on student choice, flexibility & competencies	2014-15⁷ Updates to Scottish Highers (2014) and Advanced Highers (2015) to bring them more in line with skills-focused new curriculum	2016 AS and A levels updated to better reflect NI context and curriculum	2023 Introduction of Advanced Skills Baccalaureate to further develop skills focus of Curriculum for Wales	2021 Removal of 3x 'tracks' in the bac to make it more flexible, introduction of more continuous assessment, more student choice	2024⁸ Change project-based assessment to pass/fail, make it that 'contrasting' subject doesn't count for final grade unless it improves it
Internal drivers of policy (within the assessment/ curriculum policy process)	Lower	Grade inflation; validity of qualifications; desire to raise standards	Educational inequalities; desire for more flexible, student-centred approaches	National consistency; quality assurance ⁹	Improving educational outcomes; desire to raise standards; ensuring national standardisation	Improving educational outcomes; embedding 'holistic' student-centred approaches	Quality assurance; maintaining high standards; standardisation	Desire to decrease pressure on students while ensuring standardised data available to state	Transparency; accountability; high standards	Educational outcomes; ensure standardised data widely available	Ensure core knowledge & skills covered; increase indigenous knowledge representation	Student-centred learning; alignment with new, more flexible, skills-focused curriculum	Desire for more 'holistic' approaches; desire for more skills-based learning; balanced with need for alignment with English qualifications	Desire for skills-based, student-centred approaches in line with new curriculum; balanced with need to still have alignment with English qualifications	More continuous assessment; more personalisation; skills & competency focus	Content more directly relevant to Singapore; focus more on broader skills and competencies
	Upper	As above	As above, though balanced with ongoing belief in value of single high-stakes	Move towards more 'holistic' assessments; skills and competency focus, balanced with	As above, minus desire to introduce more standardisation (this already achieved in	As above, though balanced with recognition that upper stage assessment	As above, + ensuring that entry to HE is equitable	Move away from British 16y + 18y system; increase student choice and	Flexibility; student-centred approaches	Attempt to have exam be better measure of student ability rather than rote learning	Increase student choice; alignment with new more flexible,	As above	As above	As above	As above, though with recognition that terminal school exam still needs high degree of	Reduce focus on examinations; more space for student interest

		England	Finland	Estonia	Poland	Republic of Ireland	The Netherlands	Hong Kong	Ontario	Japan	New Zealand	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Wales	France	Singapore
			examination for validity of qualifications + high standards	ongoing commitment to national exams for validity of qualification	previous reforms)	results needs to maintain degree of validity to support competitive HE entry		ability to assess more holistically via coursework			skills-focused curriculum				validity for HE admissions + must maintain high standards	
External drivers of policy (outside the assessment/ curriculum policy process)	Lower	Competing in a global economy ¹⁰	Competing in a global economy; social justice culture; 21 st century skills focus	De-sovietisation; competing in new global economy; forming national identity	Broader change to school system with return of 8 grade primary schools; Competing in a global economy	Competing in a global economy; student stress & mental health concerns; 21 st century skills & lifelong learning focus	Competing in a global economy	Competing in a global economy; dealing with student stress and mental health concerns; desire for data for system-wide improvement	Competing in a global economy; desire for data for system-wide improvement	Competing in a global economy; desire for data for system-wide improvement; increase English language ability for global engagement (2019 reform)	Decline in PISA; competing in a global economy; desire to honour treaty w/ indigenous Māori influencing embedding of indigenous knowledge	Competing in a global economy; 21 st century skills and lifelong learning focus	Competing in a global economy; need for sufficient ongoing alignment with England	Competing in a global economy; 21 st century skills focus; need for sufficient ongoing alignment with England	Competing in a global economy; turn towards 21 st century skills focus	Ability to determine national priorities; focus on 21 st century skills
	Upper	As above	As above + specific interest in digital competence	Competing in global economy; 21 st century skills focus	Competing in a global economy	As above	As above	Competing in a global economy, move away from British-influenced system & increasing Sinicisation	Competing in a global economy; fostering relevant 'life ready; skills (e.g. financial literacy)	Competing in a global economy; 21 st century skills focus	Competing in a global economy; 21 st century skills focus;	As above	As above	As above	As above	Competing in a global economy; 21 st century skills focus; address student mental health concerns

¹ Estonia's Lifelong Learning 2020 strategy document, released in 2014, outlines a programme of reform where national assessments will move to focus much more competencies, skills and problem solving. However, no evidence has been located in of any significant reforms to Estonia's Grade 9 examinations. The most recent version of the national education strategy document, 'Estonian Education Strategy 2021–2035', again outlines aspirations for a much more flexible, student-centred, skills and competency-based approach, but as of late 2024 no major reforms to Grade 9 exams seem to be underway. As noted in the section below for 'upper level' assessments in Estonia, a compulsory piece of research or practical work was brought in at this level in 2013, which is tied to a desire for more skills-based approaches.

² In 2017, another smaller update was made to Nationals, where 'units' – assessments conducted by teachers during a course of study – were removed following industrial action which highlighted the impact of assessing these units on teachers' workload. This meant that grades were awarded just based on coursework and (for National 5) exams.

³ In NI students can take GCSEs from England's exam boards. This means that changes made in England which affect what exam boards offer also impact upon NI pupils. This is also the case for A Levels.

⁴ In Wales, students studying subjects with low uptake can take GCSEs from England's exam boards. This means that changes made in England which affect what exam boards offer also impact upon Welsh pupils. This is also the case for A Levels.

⁵ 2021 also saw a major shift in one subject for assessment – liberal studies became 'citizenship and social development', with a move away from liberal-democratic ideas about citizenship to ideas about patriotism & national identity from a Chinese perspective.

⁶ New versions of NCEA Level 2 and Level 3 are expected in 2027 and 2028 respectively, which are likely to mimic the kinds of reforms undertaken re: NCEA Level 1. However, this timeframe is subject to potential revision. At the moment, the 2012 reforms are still those that dictate the form of these upper level assessment.

⁷ As with nationals, in 2018 (for Highers) and 2019 (for Advanced Highers) another small update was made, where 'units' – assessments conducted by teachers during a course of study – were removed following industrial action which highlighted the impact of assessing these units on teachers' workload. This meant that grades were awarded just based on coursework and exams.

⁸ These changes may appear somewhat minor but are significant in an education system that tends to eschew any extremely dramatic policy shifts. The most recent really major policy shift for A Levels was the delinking with the UK, which also saw the introduction of novel components of Singaporean A Levels, such as the Project Work (PW) component.

⁹ See discussion of reforms in endnote 1 above. Although currently many other drivers of reform processes are in play, the most recent major reforms were driven by these forces.

¹⁰ For all jurisdictions where 'competing in a global economy' is mentioned, this was almost always accompanied by concern about PISA results, which are interpreted by governments as directly correlating with a jurisdiction's economic competitiveness.

Further details on drivers of policy

NB: These apply to reforms to both lower and upper stages of assessment, unless otherwise noted

England

Internal:

Concerns about the rigour and comparability of qualifications; the need to better prepare students for the demands of higher education and employment; emphasis on minimising the quantity of coursework and other forms of internal evaluation in favour of end-of-course tests to increase the reliability and validity of results and limit the possibility of cheating or gaming the system; desire to improve the use of technology in assessment to make tests more accessible to students with disabilities and lessen the administrative burden on instructors and examiners.

External:

Desire to be competitive in global economy; Conservative Party political priorities influencing content of assessments (e.g. greater focus on British history and literature)

Finland

Internal:

A growing concern over the 'increasing inequalities' in educational outcomes leading to a push for assessments that better consider students' individual needs and strengths; a greater emphasis on the development of '21st century skills'; increased attention to the use of technology in assessment, including the use of digital tools and platforms for assessment purposes. This is all balanced with an ongoing belief in retaining a rigorous national matriculation exam which maintains a high standard and prepares students well for university-level study (upper only).

External:

A strong national focus on equity and social justice; increasing commitment to 21st century skills (stronger influence on lower compared to upper); influence of EU education priorities around inclusivity, competencies for lifelong learning, digital learning; competing in a global economy

Estonia

Internal:

Ongoing desire to foster the development of core competencies, such as problem solving skills, digital competencies and so on (influence of this so far appears to be primarily via introduction of research/practical work in upper level assessment); national commitment to providing a high-quality equitable education for all students; desire for nationally standardised core assessments that maintain quality and prepare students for higher education and work (especially upper)

External:

Competing in a global economy; increasing commitment to 21st century skills; influence of EU education priorities around inclusivity, competencies for lifelong learning, digital learning

Poland

Internal:

Desire for more standardisation (more recently at lower level where there was previously more regional variation, as upper level already fairly standardised); a push for higher standards and more challenging content to better prepare students for further study and employment; particular interest in making English exam sufficiently challenging to ensure more widespread competency in English

External:

Competing in a global economy; some attention to EU education priorities around inclusivity, competencies for lifelong learning and digital learning – but less than in some other jurisdictions; desire for Poland to solidify status as ‘rising power’ in Europe

Republic of Ireland

Internal:

Increasing desire to promote student-centred learning; desire to improve inclusivity; an effort to offer more ‘holistic’ assessment opportunities via more classroom-based assessment/coursework that can capture wider range of student knowledge and skills; this all balanced with recognition at upper level that terminal qualifications need to be reliable and valid for higher education admissions

External:

Competing in a global economy; concern with student mental health due to pressures of examinations; influence of EU education priorities around inclusivity, competencies for lifelong learning, digital learning

Netherlands

Internal:

Quality assurance; increasing standardisation; reducing the ability to ‘game’ system via easier school examinations; high standards

External:

Competing in a global economy; ensuring broad education (though high achievement in compulsory subjects)

Hong Kong

Internal:

Ensuring widely available data that can serve diagnostic purpose but does not create school rankings & negatively affect mental health (primarily lower); increasing vocational pathways; desire to maintain high educational standards (primarily upper)

External:

Widespread concerns amongst students, parents and educational professionals about the intense pressure that assessment can place students are under; move away from British origins of education system towards priorities more in line with those of China; desire for data that informs system-wide decision making; concerns about low PISA scores on psychosocial factors compared to high academic performance.

Ontario

Internal:

Transparency, fairness, and performance-based accountability (lower level); supporting students from diverse backgrounds; allowing more choice and flexibility (upper level)

External:

Competing in a global economy; desire for data that informs system-wide decision making (lower level); increasing focus on STEM in society; desire to embed ‘real world skills’ in assessment programmes, like financial literacy and ‘life skills’ (upper level)

Japan

Internal:

Desire to have reliable, standardised diagnostic data; maintaining high standards; ensuring strong systemwide performance; slight move towards caring about competencies like problem solving (upper level); desire to avoid exams oriented purely to fact-based rote learning

External:

Huge social value placed on examinations; competing concern that society is too exam-focused and too focused in rote memorisation; related concern that cram schools (Juku) are too central in Japanese society and are harming mental health of students; desire to focus more on 21st century skills

Tests in Japan are seen as valuable for the development of student's self-discipline and determination, influenced by the context of Japan's Confucian heritage influence. Juku – after-school tutoring schools (also known as cram schools) - are attended by over half of all Japanese students. This has raised concerns about equity as attending juku is expensive; the Japanese government has tried several policy responses to limit attendance at juku but has not been successful in decreasing their influence. Covid pandemic accelerated plans to integrate technology into classrooms.

New Zealand

Internal:

Desire to maintain flexible assessment system that can cater to diverse student interests and proclivities; simultaneous concern that assessment system is too flexible and that students miss out on key knowledge (most recent lower reforms – will likely influence coming upper reforms); desire to better assess indigenous Māori knowledge and give it more prominent place in assessment system (may influence coming upper reforms)

External:

Concern about competing in a global economy; worry about declining society-wide literacy and numeracy; concern about declining PISA scores; engagement with indigenous Māori concerns about education system and debate about what it means to honour the treaty originally signed with them in 1840

Scotland

Internal:

Alignment with Scotland's 'Curriculum for Excellence' – including prioritisation of more skills-based content, student centred approaches and flexibility; some reduction of external assessment to reduce pressure on students (mainly for National 4, which replaced a qualification that had some external assessment)

External:

Completing in a global economy; 21st century skills focus; ongoing effort to make Scotland's education system more distinctively 'Scottish' within wider UK context

Northern Ireland

Internal:

Aligning assessment with Northern Irish context; further aligning assessment with Northern Ireland's more skills-based curriculum; ensuring sufficient ongoing alignment of assessment system with England and Wales (especially England) by not departing too much from English-style assessments, and ensuring English exam board assessments can still be taken in Northern Ireland

External:

Competing in a global economy; 21st century skills focus; ensuring sufficient alignment with England as dominant nation in the UK

Wales

Internal:

Aligning assessment with new more skills-focused Curriculum for Wales; desire for more holistic, student centred approaches to assessment; ongoing need to retain sufficient alignment of assessment system of England (and Northern Ireland), especially so that subjects with low-uptake in Wales can be examined via assessments produced by English exam boards

External:

Competing in a global economy; 21st century skills focus; desire for an education system that is more distinctively 'Welsh' in line with growing Welsh nationalism, balanced with sense that some alignment with English education system is still desirable

France

Internal:

Move towards more skill-based, student-centred approaches; desire for more 'holistic' ways of assessing students; desire for more choice; these newer foci balanced with ongoing commitment to rigorous qualifications that prepare students for further study (especially at upper level)

External:

Competing in a global economy; 21st century skills focus; EU priorities around inclusivity and competencies for lifelong learning and digital skills

Singapore

Internal:

Focus on content and assessment design more directly relevant to Singapore by delinking from the UK assessment system; still maintaining rigorous quality assurance and international comparability (through ongoing work with CIE to support design, marking and moderation of assessments); focus on skills and competencies

External:

Competing in a global economy; 21st century skills focus; slow shift away from the British origins of society-wide institutions towards models considered more appropriate for Singaporean context; concerns about mental health and exam-related stress; concerns about too much rote learning and an over-emphasis on assessment