**ASSESSMENT WITHOUT LEVELS: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

**Has the new curriculum changed much with regard to assessment?**

Yes and no. The level descriptors have disappeared but doing no assessment is not really an option. Good assessment is inextricably linked with good teaching and learning so, even if there is no requirement statutorily to assess and report using levels, some reliable system is needed to ensure the effective monitoring of student progress.

**What are the main assessment requirements in the new National Curriculum?**

None are made very explicit but the Key Stage 3 programmes of study do list some progression statements comprising: extending and deepening chronologically secure understanding; identifying significant events and making connections, contrasts and identifying trends; using terminology and concepts (change/continuity, cause/consequence; similarity/difference; significance); pursuing valid enquiries (asking questions, thinking critically, weighing evidence, connecting evidence, sifting arguments, developing perspective, creating structured and coherent narrative and analysis) and understanding how sources are used to make historical claims and interpretations. Any good assessment should help monitor such progress.

**I am in an Academy/Free School. Should I do things differently?**

Only in the sense that there is no specific requirement to follow the National Curriculum. However, both GCSEs and A-levels assume progression from the National Curriculum, the progression statements in the curriculum relate closely to effective practice and children may arrive at the school having studied the National Curriculum in Key Stages 1 and 2. While there may be scope to deviate from the National Curriculum, too much deviation would require considerable thought and liaison and any replacement would still need some form of assessment.

**What is the minimum I have to do regarding assessment?**

Very little statutorily. Yet there is a need to gather information about performance by individuals and classes to assess progress and identify learning strengths and needs. There is also the need for reliable information to report to parents.

**Is there any place for the ‘can do’ statements that seem to characterise some of the published schemes?**

Many schools are investing in packages that allow performance to be recorded against a list of ‘can do’ statements. These often amount to no more than unpicking of levels – to extract discrete statements in relation to particular concepts or processes – but they can be dressed up to appear as an answer to all assessment challenges. These statements may have some use in helping to develop useful tasks and questions and provide some evidence of achievement. But there are reasons to be very cautious about such an approach. History is more than a list of hoops to jump through and such statements usually fail to allow for the developing and embedding of substantive knowledge and understanding. A long list of ‘can do’ statements can be difficult for students and their parents to interpret and make sense of.

**What features should our system of assessment include?**

The essential features of any assessment system – based on thinking carefully about the purpose it needs to serve – are listed below:

* Your methods of assessment should provide clear evidence of individual performance to inform future learning;
* They should also provide you with data about whole classes and groups that allow you to judge the progress made and so inform subsequent planning and teaching. Assessment should be systematically planned in relation to your schemes of work, not something that happens sporadically.
* You should seek to assess the learning for which you have planned – rather than teaching so that students perform specific assessment tasks well.
* Assessment needs to recognise the interplay between substantive knowledge and conceptual understanding – giving adequate weight to both, linked closely to progression statements;
* The marking system should ensure that students understand and can use the feedback they receive;
* Assessment should provide manageable data that can be easily understood by all users;
* It should generate reliable information that provides an accurate picture of students’ current levels of achievement and allows you to monitor the progress that they have made.

**What do I do with a whole school assessment system that seems unworkable?**

It is difficult when the whole-school system flies in the face of recognised good assessment practice for the subject – as happens when levels and sub-levels are used regularly to mark individual pieces of work. While you obviously have to meet the requirements of your school, you can still ensure that the approaches that you use within history provide you with more meaningful data. Focus first on the kinds of assessment that you need in history to reflect your curriculum and plans for progression and therefore to provide effective feedback to students and teachers – and **then** work out how to convert marks from history-specific assessment tasks into the kind of format required by the school. (Two experienced heads of department, Geraint Brown and Sally Burnham explain how they do this in their article in *Teaching History* 157).

**Why does my school insist in using the old levels structure when it is no longer a requirement?**

Schools do it for different reasons but rarely is it to spite the history department. Sometimes there is not enough awareness of how students progress in different subject areas. Sometimes, there is a desire for a clear, uniform structure that can be easily explained to parents and others. Some have a natural wish to compare subjects within the school and across schools. Some prefer to stick with something that has emerged over many years and to keep this in place until something better comes along. Schools are obviously wary about jumping from one system to another without things being properly thought through.

**Can I still use the previous level descriptions?**

Many schools seem to be doing this, at least in the short term, but there are some serious risks associated with this. The old level descriptors and predecessor statements of attainment did have the advantage of being seen by some as a national model of progression cutting across schools and key stages. But using them as a regular mark-scheme rather than as a guide for teaching and learning has always been fraught with difficulties. Good assessment often requires task-specific mark schemes (specifically created to guide the marking of individual pieces of work) and it is unlikely that the old level descriptors fit these – even more so if they are atomised further (Indeed Ofsted made it quite clear, in its subject report of 2011 ‘History for All’ that the system of National Curriculum levels was never intended to be applied to individual pieces of work.) When the old level descriptions were in place, it was not expected that students would progress from level to level very quickly – (the suggested average was less than one level a year). It will be obvious, therefore, that they are not an appropriate tool for regular marking intended to check student’s learning and progress over the course of a particular unit of work. Any attempt to use them to show progress at frequent intervals by individual students is likely to compromise reliability.

**What valid assessment can I do in a department with myself as the only specialist and where the rest of the teaching is done by non-specialist teachers?**

Students have just as much right to good teaching whatever the school context. Good assessment should be comprehensible and relatively straightforward in every school. Reducing the burden or simplifying the requirements to accommodate ignorance is not justifiable. It is important that all those teaching students history understand the key features of getting better at history and how this can be detected and recorded.

**Should I have an assessment policy?**

While not advocating paperwork for the sake of it, there probably need to be clear procedures that explain:

* How and when assessment takes place;
* The range of contexts for assessing students, which might include for example, extended written tasks, informal tests (perhaps of specific items of factual knowledge, or the construction of a timeline to encapsulate key developments)’ student presentations .
* How work is marked and students’ achievements are recorded and how this links to other purposes such as revised teaching plans and report writing;
* How standardisation is ensured within the department and also against other schools.

**Should I have a portfolio of assessment tasks?**

This is always a good idea in two senses – a bank of assessment material focused on key objectives (particularly useful if there are non-specialists in the department) and examples of work at different standards to allow benchmarking.

**Are there any particular tips for assessing GCSE and A-level?**

Teachers are often more used to task-specific mark schemes with levels related to the particular focus of the question. Assessment is often limited to the use of similar kinds of task (practice exam questions) but there can be benefit in some other approaches, such as testing of specific factual knowledge (of key people, dates and events). Approaches to assessment that help to support students’ retention and recall (as well as those that support the effective deployment of knowledge in relation to particular kinds of question) are likely to prove more important with the move to terminal examinations.

**I have a chance to influence what assessment takes place for history. Any thoughts?**

The short answer is something that works – something that looks at performance in relation to history’s component parts (substantive knowledge as well as understanding in relation to the key second-order concepts of history), but also more holistically as well. Plan a range of assessment activities in different contexts – short written tasks, extended responses, oral presentations, group tasks – and provide scope for self and peer assessment and the chance for students to respond to the feedback that they receive. The planning needs to consider the clarity and ease of the system including the transfer and use of the information. Likewise you need to ensure that there are appropriate mechanisms for ensuring reliability, such as making sure that all teachers assess to a common standard and provide constructive feedback and that recorded data actually allows meaningful comparisons to be made.

**How should I plan for assessment with this new curriculum?**

Obviously start by considering the policies laid down by the school, since you will need to work within them, but focus on finding ways to operate them effectively in relation to the specific demands of history.

There are two separate but inter-connected aspects to address – planning the strategy for assessment (see above) and the assessment opportunities. This means tackling a range of questions: What assessment tasks should be given to students and when. Should they be differentiated for different students? What should be the balance between focused assessment activities and holistic review of students’ work over a period of time? How should we reward and comment on non-history elements such as spelling, punctuation and grammar? How should we ensure that we all teachers mark to the same standard? What types of feedback are we giving to the students? What scope do we give them to respond to that feedback?

**Should I give marks for assessed work?**

There are mixed views about this. While there is powerful research evidence warning of the dangers of students focusing on the mark with little interest in and understanding of the particular strengths or aspects for development within the work, school policies and engrained practices mean that students who are expecting to receive some kind of mark or grade and find it difficult to adapt **quickly** to alternative approaches. If marks are awarded, it remains extremely important to ensure that students understand how the mark has been earned and ways in which the work could be improved.

**What is Ofsted looking for with regard to history assessment?**

Ofsted do not work to a tick list although all their guidance and reports indicate they expect student progress to be measured. Their supplementary subject guidance (December 2013) also makes it clear that good history departments should be able to measure student progress effectively. Ofsted basically seek evidence that student performance has been monitored, that students and others, such as parents understand their achievement in history (as opposed to just generic performance), with reference to their own progress and other measures, and that that they understand how improvement can be effected. Ofsted are also concerned that all recording of achievement is reliable.

**Shouldn’t the assessment scheme go hand in hand with progression in the subject?**

Yes. Assessment is of little value without a clear conception of what getting better in history involves? All teachers involved in the subject throughout the school should have a reasonable understanding of how students are expected to progress, especially in terms of their understanding and effective use of both first and second order concepts. Teachers’ understanding of recognised features of progression in school history such as the fact that students need to practise and reinforce their knowledge in different contexts and their awareness that they have to address a number of misconceptions is likely to influence what is assessed and how.

**Should effort and learning skills be rewarded as well as achievement?**

There is no harm in this unless it is the only focus of monitoring and feedback. Social skills such as concentration, perseverance, collaboration and initiative can all affect students’ performance in history so some feedback to students to encourage these positive learning traits can be beneficial. However, this does not replace the need for assessment against specific history objectives. It is history-specific objectives that should also form the basis of any goals or targets. It would be insufficient to feed back to a student that they need to try harder or to improve their spelling.

**Where can I get some ideas about assessing history?**

While there are many sources of advice (as a quick ‘Google’ search for history assessment would reveal), the more important question is to ask where good advice can be obtained? There are plenty of assessment schemes and record keeping systems, often designed to appeal by their uniformity across subjects and their easy translation into charts and tables which can give the appearance of spurious objectivity, but it is much more important to consider how adequately they reflect what it means to get better at history.

The Historical Association is not prepared to endorse any single system. It is committed to making available a range of effective approaches along with practitioners’ explanations of how and they have developed these particular systems. *Teaching History 157* (December 2014) and the supplement *Curriculum (R)evolution* (December 2013) both include a number of these examples. Others examples are available on the website and though the HA’s conferences and CPD programmes.

**DOs and DON'Ts**

**We would urge all history departments to work in the following ways in developing their assessment policies and practices.**

**DO:**

1. Start by defining what counts as good history and plan your teaching to achieve this. Develop your assessment strategy in relation to what you have planned rather than allowing assessment structures to determine what you teach.
2. Try to influence the school assessment policy by articulating the particular challenges that the previous use of levels and sub-levels created in history.
3. Plan assessment opportunities carefully, recognising that good questions and tasks are needed to demonstrate accurately what the students know, understand and can do.
4. Assess students’ historical knowledge and understanding in a range of contexts (using different kinds of tasks) to gain a rounded view of student progress.
5. Encourage the use of task-specific markschemes based on valid objectives.
6. Remember that history is more than a one-off demonstration of a particular skill – surety comes with assessing over time and in a range of contexts.
7. Use forms of assessment that check how well new ideas come to be embedded and applied, rather than simply testing them once when they are still new.
8. Identify common student misconceptions and develop assessment tasks that will alert you to them and help you to check that they have been addressed.
9. Ensure that students can learn from the marking and feedback that teachers provide, so that they understand how well they have performed, why and what they can do to improve further. The feedback (including reports) should be accessible to students and to their parents/carers.
10. Devise systems of recording that are appropriate for the purposes that they need to serve including reviewing the attainment of individuals and detecting trends in the performance of particular types of student, as well as making comparisons with other subjects in the school;
11. Use evidence from assessment to inform future planning and teaching.
12. Go to considerable lengths to ensure reliability and consistency of assessment in terms of tasks and measuring achievement using, for example, by using common tasks, departmental standardisation sessions, standardisation sessions with other schools, keeping a portfolio of assessed work at particular standards.
13. Try to ensure some continuity of assessment with feeder primary schools;
14. Avoid self-fulfilling prophesies – students can perform unevenly in history. Overall, be realistically optimistic about what the students can achieve.

**On the other hand, history departments should definitely avoid doing the following.   
  
DON'T** :

1. Ignore assessment completely. There is a responsibility to monitor student progress and use this to bring about improvements.
2. Just play lip service to assessment. Make it count for something useful.
3. Assess against a narrow range of assessment objectives.
4. Bore students silly by too much assessment at the expenses of exciting teaching and learning.
5. Assess only the things that can be easily measured.
6. Rely too much on gut feeling.
7. Over-assess non-history-specific matters such as students’ effort or grammar.
8. Simply gather information because they have to and never use it.
9. Allow students to see assessment simply as something done **to** them.
10. Rely on assessing against a list of “can do” statements – there is a need to check that the historical understanding is embedded and can be applied in different contexts.
11. Assess in splendid isolation – involve others including the students themselves, and other teachers, maybe even from feeder schools.
12. Ignore issues of consistency and reliability.
13. Assume that you are required to report in terms of levels and or to demonstrate progress from one level to another within every assessment cycle.
14. Provide feedback that is tokenistic or not sincerely meant.
15. Fall into the trap of creating self-fulfilling prophecies through your marking and assessment.