

## Introduction

*Assessment in Education* has taken the opportunity of the advent of the millennium to invite distinguished scholars to contribute their views about the history and current state of assessment. We have asked historians as well as practitioners to think about assessment and to evaluate its importance at different times and in different societies.

Imperial China is widely regarded as having introduced the first systematic assessment system for civil service appointment (see Miyazaki, 1976, for a detailed description). Han Min and Yang Xiuwen briefly review this history and then discuss the evolution of assessment during the twentieth century, especially the period of the People's Republic from 1949. The resulting system was a highly centralised model, as in the Imperial tradition, which changed as political and economic circumstances dictated. The controversies that resulted, especially after the end of the Cultural Revolution, are discussed in terms that will be familiar to readers in other systems: concentration on test taking at the expense of wider education; excessive streaming and selection; performance league tables; a view that assessment reform is able to address underlying concerns with education in general.

Less well known are assessment practices in the Roman world. Here there was no formal system to match that of China, but assessment nevertheless was present within education. Rather than examinations, competitions between pupils (and others) served some of the same functions, allowing individual teachers to justify their achievements by pointing to their pupils' success in such competitions. Teresa Morgan discusses how this operated and how the criteria for success related to the cultural norms of the wider society.

Historians of educational provisions and structures have long debated the nature of the relationships between mechanisms for ordering, measuring and managing groups of pupils or students and the ideological frameworks within which these are set. In focusing on assessment, the issues associated with the use of oral examination seemed worthy of particular attention. Barbara Kehm gives an account of the continuing use of oral examinations in German higher education and the debates which surround this. In counterpoint, Chris Stray explores the gradual disappearance of oral examinations from the universities of Oxford and Cambridge in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the process he reflects on the complex relationship between the mechanics of the processes of assessment and changing, often conflicting, notions of the uses of education. He shows, too, as does Teresa Morgan, how fragmentary, messy and often imperfectly articulated are the sources with which historians, trying to recover both practice and intention in past societies, must work.

The relentless rise of the written examination in the Anglo-Saxon world is a theme carried forward by Gillian Sutherland. She uses an English case study to show how

the burgeoning professions used the instrument of formal examinations and embraced, embellished and reinforced the attack on patronage and the development of the ideology of meritocracy with which this instrument was inextricably linked.

Against such an historical background Paul Black explores the twentieth century and its aspirations for assessment. He traces the development of standardised tests and their use for certification and control of educational institutions. He reviews formative assessment and draws lessons from the psychology of learning to argue for new perspectives on assessment and new instruments for carrying it out. In particular, he argues that the 'trait' theory of competencies is outmoded and that more subtle procedures are required to uncover the true complexities of underlying competence and knowledge, and especially for ways of understanding these within social or group contexts.

Finally, Tom Kellaghan and Vince Greaney look at globalisation. They comment on the way in which general economic globalisation has encouraged attention to assessment in many systems and also how a common model of assessment has spread around the world. International comparative studies are one clear example of this, but even within purely national assessment systems a common concern with 'performance' and 'efficiency' can be seen. Although the discussion of oral examinations in Barbara Kehm's contribution serves as a reminder that behind, even concealed by, common discourse may lie powerful national idiosyncrasies.

Very little of this issue attempts to predict the futures(s) of assessment. This is, anyway, a hazardous and probably self-defeating pastime. However, historians' interest in the relationships between schemes of measurement, their expressed objectives and the larger social engineering enterprises which systems of formal education represent adds to our perspective as we look forward. We hope that the juxtaposition of discussions of the contemporary situation with historical papers will provoke new questions and additional ways of looking at assessment at the start of the third millennium.

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## REFERENCE

- MIYAZAKI, I. (1976) *China's Examination Hell: the civil service of imperial China*. (New York, Weatherill).