BTL 30th Forum
House of Commons Event
Speech Transcript & Profiles

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Introduction

The following is a transcript of the presentations by speakers at the BTL 30th Anniversary Forum held at the House of Commons, June 24th 2015. The event was a celebration of BTL’s years in the learning and assessment sector and an opportunity to discuss the need for technology in enhancing the assessment and learning experience for all.

All the views expressed by the speakers are their own.

Video Links

Highlights: https://youtu.be/H6YLNAaeejY

Bob Gomersall Presentation: https://youtu.be/H6YLNAaeejY

Nicky Morgan Presentation: https://youtu.be/H6YLNAaeejY

Chris Jones Presentation: https://youtu.be/H6YLNAaeejY

Peter Twining Presentation: https://youtu.be/H6YLNAaeejY

Transcript

The following transcript has been recorded in order of speakers.

Bob Gomersall

Can I take the opportunity to welcome you all here to our 30th anniversary forum. We’re really proud to have made this progress and we’re really proud that you’ve all taken the time to come and be with us. And, I’m especially grateful to our speakers for coming along to speak this afternoon.

30 years ago, the dream was to dramatically improve learning through the judicious use of technology. Desktop computer had just appeared, I was Head of Physics at Bradford Grammar School at the time, and I thought that it would be 10 years, and the education scene would have been transformed. Now, everybody is smiling and I can see why, because we all know what actually happened; it’s pretty much the same as it was then, but it’s happening slowly.

Ten years ago, we thought that most qualifications would be delivered onscreen by now, same story really! Actually, it’s not quite the same story because City & Guilds took a very bold move over ten years ago and shot out in front of everybody else to do assessments onscreen; they showed the world how to do it, and they’ve been doing it ever since. Chris Jones from City & Guilds is going to talk to us a bit about that shortly. But what happened is that in vocational training and qualifications, things have really moved on, in general qualifications, not very much at all. There’s a little bit about that, and I hope that Peter Twining is going to talk about that after Chris.
So we’ve now realised it’s going to be evolution rather than revolution. E-assessment is our game and the spectrum of e-assessment, from multiple choice right through to essays typed by the candidate being marked onscreen by a traditional human marker, there’s a vast range in between. It could include audio, video, animation, simulation, and many responses are only possible onscreen. We all know this, but it’s taking time to get through and what we’ve learned is one has to do it gently, and slowly, and carefully. One of the things we’re thinking about very carefully is why can’t candidates go in, do their exam on paper, or alternatively do it on a tablet that they’re used to doing it on – and, by the way, most youngsters are used to working on tablets all the time – rather than on paper. So we’re working with partners, many awarding bodies are here today, and RM as well. We’re working with them on the possibility of that being the simple choice: go in, do it on a tablet, and it’s marked in the usual way by markers. That being the first stage, which might then develop into more complex e-assessment.

So, where do we go from here? No single organisation has all the answers, and I’m really keen that UK Plc works together, and we’ve been talking about this today. All of us here need to work together to think about if we don’t do it properly and effectively in the UK – we have got a lead in this area – then we’ll have it done to us by the Californians, and we’ve had it done to us in so many other areas: Facebook, Google, and so on. So I’m determined, and many of my friends here are, to do this to the world, and that is our hope and opportunity.

Can I thank our MP in Shipley, Philip Davies, for organising this event? He’s a great friend of our company and he’s a very nice guy as well. He’s standing here, so I can hardly say anything else! But there’s some of your constituents here Philip, so that’s good news. I’m really proud that the Secretary of State Nicky Morgan has come along to speak to us a bit, and Nicky I think has been in the role for about two years I would guess? (Nicky Morgan: No, not quite a year) Not quite a year? Anyway, we were absolutely delighted when you agreed to come and speak, we were even more delighted when you survived the election in post. So we’re glad to see you. Over to you, thank you.

**Nicky Morgan**

Well, good afternoon ladies and gentlemen and thank you very much Bob for that kind introduction. It’s a pleasure to be here for your 30th anniversary, many congratulations. When Philip invited me to speak I was impressed by both his confidence in what was going to be the election results and also the fact that I was going to be keeping this job. So, Philip, I don’t know what you knew but we definitely want you around on the next reshuffle day please. Can I just say that Philip is a fantastic constituency Member of Parliament. Those of you here who are his constituents, you are very lucky to have him.

Now as Bob said, exams are a bit of a rite of passage for young people, and we’ve just seen over the last few weeks it’s particularly been exam season, there’s been lots of stories about exams in the newspapers. I don’t know about you but it always brings back my time of doing exams, particularly the pictures of exam halls, long rows of tables. You remember those hours spent scribbling, and I think that as Bob was saying, people perhaps had thought that taking exams might have moved on, but it does still seem to be very traditional. But of course, that isn’t their natural environment, and as he said this is a generation of young people who’ve been brought up with interactive whiteboards, Minecraft – now if you don’t know what Minecraft is I suggest you go and find out, or you can borrow my seven-year-old son who will spend hours talking you through it – and of course things like digital textbooks. So for most of them, sitting down and writing for three hours isn’t
something they are going to do very often. The question that we have to ask ourselves and the exam boards and OFQUAL have to ask is whether or not our exam system is failing to keep pace with how and when student learn, and what they learn.

A major part of our efforts both under this current government and as part of the previous one have been focused on reforming the curriculum and qualification system so that we can all be confident that our young people are taking courses of study that are going to stretch them and inspire them, and of course are going to prepare them for life, competing not just with people in this country, but people overseas. As part of the programme reform, we have refreshed and modernised the way that we teach IT in schools. Our new computing curriculum contains rigorous academic learning, with the kind of creative thinking that leads to successes in so many modern tech careers, from app development to medical research to car design. One of the most fascinating things is when you go to a presentation and they talk about the ten careers or degrees that didn’t exist ten years ago, and a lot are related obviously to IT.

I’m delighted that some of our leading technology firms like O2 and Google are already working with our best universities including Oxford and Queen Mary University London to provide enhanced training to teachers in the new computing curriculum. And in January I was very pleased to visit the Betfair at ExCel in London, which if you haven’t been is truly inspirational, about the technology and the training that’s available in our schools and classrooms today. It showed that UK companies are leading the way, designing even more creative, innovative approaches to teaching and training. While I was there I was lucky enough to share a platform with Bob Geldof, the good news is that neither of us were singing. Bob Geldof is not only renowned for music and Live Aid, but he’s also a canny investor, and he’s invested in a company called Groupcall – in fact a company that he helped to found – which they were launching at Bet a new app to improve communication between parents and teachers, and Bet is just one of many events where it struck me how many opportunities there are for UK companies to be at the forefront of Ed Tech.

So I think that we’ve got to ensure that our approach to exams is equally current and creative, and that it meets the needs of those pupils, students, and teachers, and it’s got to give young people the option to sit exams in the way that best reflects the way that they learn and revise. But, I also want see us using technology to help to alleviate teachers’ workloads too, because I’ve talked to hundreds of teachers all over the country, and marking forms a huge part of their week-on-week workload. If we can ease that burden – that doesn’t mean not doing marking, that means finding new ways in which to do it and try to ease that workload – then I think we’ve got a duty to try. I visited one particular school in Thurrock where they have done that, and actually they’ve got people from around the world now downloading their technology.

All of our reforms within government, the last parliament and this one, will be about ensuring the quality of opportunity. We want the fairest possible education for all of our children, regardless of their start in life, and a big part of that must surely be making sure that they’re properly rewarded for their hard work, and the results they get are meaningful, well-deserved, and well-regarded by those such as yourselves as future employers that are going to be relying on them. Which means that our exam system has to have a reputation for fairness, and so that playing the system or cheating of any kind by anybody will not be tolerated, because I think that undermines the hard work and determination of school and teachers and pupils up and down the country. So again, if we can harness the power of technology to make sure that happens, then we will all benefit.
Let me finish by thanking BTL for all of your work so far. I know that you work with some of the major exam boards in the UK, and I’m sure that they are very grateful for your services and support. But I hope I’ve demonstrated that there’s definitely more that we can do in this area, and I want all of us to start thinking about the future of our exam system, what best practice looks like, and how we make the marking process work for teachers. There are untold benefits to online marking technologies, but there are also benefits to human marking too. Exam boards sharing information, experienced teachers coming together, and sharing their expertise, and helping to keep the system. So as we continue to modernise our exam system, I’m sure that BTL will be at the forefront of new developments, and in doing that you will be helping to assure that the world class qualifications and assessments we offer our young people truly do prepare for life both in modern Britain and for competing with the best in the world. Thank you and have a great afternoon.

Bob Gomersall
Thank you very much Nicky. And I forgot to mention in my speech that we’ve just passed 10 million tests worldwide, and 100 countries, so we’re actually in 100 countries using our technology. So that’s a great milestone for us, you didn’t give me chance to say so at the end but thank you. Thank you again very much for coming along.

Our next speaker is Chris Jones from City & Guilds. I mentioned City & Guilds earlier, Chris is an old friend of ours and we first met when he was chief executive at Harcourt, he now has the much more grand title of is it Director General of City & Guilds? You don’t get grander than that really. So, I’m looking forward to hearing what Chris has to tell us about City & Guilds and about assessment in general. Thank you, Chris.

Chris Jones
Bob, thank you very much indeed. I’m not so sure about the old, although given the fact that we’ve known each other for some 12 years we’ve probably shown much more age now given the amount of change that’s happened in the system over the past 12 years.

I mean I just want to first of all say a big congratulations to BTL. 30 years is no mean feat, and I’m sure we can all think of a number of technology businesses that launched some 30 years ago that certainly have not seen the light of day and rapidly burnt out. Particularly, given the amount of change that we’ve seen in the educational landscape over the past 30 years. I’ve known Bob and Keith for 12 years, and it really is great to be here to celebrate their achievements. It’s an important milestone, and obviously I’m delighted that our Secretary of State Nicky Morgan could be with us as well, and to share her views and thoughts on how important technology is in education.

I suppose when I thought about this speech and try give some perspectives around what City & Guilds have done, I thought more about where was technology when BTL was set up? Well, we didn’t have mobile phones, can you imagine that? We didn’t have home computers, if only! And we were light years away from even thinking about uploading everything onto things such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and the emergence of that real-time communication. It was just sort of unknown. I can remember my first job, looking forward to the sales order coming through on the fax machine in the morning; that was real breaking edge technology. That just seems like years and years ago. But technology is an industry that’s clearly based on innovation, and we constantly see headlines about the next big thing, the next new life-changing gadget. Yet often those advances in technology
are dismissed; critics claim it will never catch on, and I’m certainly guilty of that too. My son said to me, “Dad, I want an Apple Watch”. No son, that will never catch on. Take TV for example, who thought in 1939 the New York Times predicted that TV would never be a serious competitor for radio. And more recently, in 2013, the chief executive of Blackberry said tablets would be obsolete in five years. Perhaps his company might be, but tablets certainly won’t. To be fair though, I think it’s tough to anticipate what will be a game changer in life as in technology, and education is certainly no exception.

So the big question facing us in education generally is, “so, what is next?” In our world, from MOOCs to VOOCs, we’re constantly asking ourselves: what should we invest into, what should we expect to be just simply a passing fad, or what is going to be a genuinely sustainable development that really does have traction. We’ve seen this for a very long time in the City & Guilds group; in fact, for 137 years since we were established. And throughout our history, we have depended on innovation and new technology, it has been core to our success. It’s allowed us to help tens of millions of people get the skills they need to progress into a job, or more importantly progress onto the next job.

So, when e-assessments began to surface in 2002, naturally we started exploring the possibilities, and back then we had no idea that e-assessments would become very much the staple of what we do. It is our primary testing channel, and paper-based tests for us are very much the exception. We assess millions of exams over the year, and we award somewhere close to some 2 million qualifications across 80 different markets, internationally too.

If you think about an average exam script as being about ten pages long, in the vocational context, and an average of 350-500 test scripts in a box; you can just begin to imagine the logistical challenges that emerge, of tens of thousands of boxes travelling around the world, stacked up in storage rooms, all waiting to be marked by hand. It is not a pretty picture; it is a logistical nightmare, and arguably the people that it will probably let down the most are the learners at the end of the day. Fixed date paper-based exams introduce many chances for mistakes: illegible handwriting, postage delays, no back-up copies, just to name a few. I’m pleased to say that we’ve moved from stacks of paper exams to a slicker, more efficient system that’s better for everyone, and I hope that it won’t be much longer before we can genuinely say we have phased out paper-based tests entirely. The main reason to make that switch is very clear, it’s very simple; e-assessment provides a better service, pioneering new assessment methods just made sense, and while it was a risk back in 2002, it was one we felt then that was worth taking and I think we have been proven right.

Our intention was simple, we wanted our assessments to be as accessible to as many people as possible, so we became the first awarding organisation in the UK to offer large-scale online testing as an alternative to paper and pencil based exams. 13 years on, we’ve delivered and certificated some 16 million online tests around the world. So how did we do it? And what did we learn along the way?

Well our approach was to handle the risk with care, to let change have time to bed in; innovation is important, but it shouldn’t be pushed at the expense of quality, and reliability, and the integrity of the assessment itself. So to start, our focus was mostly on translating old to new. We worked to convert paper-based tests to digital formats; laying the foundations for some of the transformations to come. At the same time, it gave us experience to know what we were doing, because we were very much learning as we went alongside our centres and partners. And we didn’t do it alone; as we scaled up we knew we needed stable, reliable partners that met our needs and understood our values. 5 years ago, we started working with BTL and I think it’s fair to say that we have never looked back. In BTL we found a partner that understood education, which was critically important to us.
They understood training, and they really understood the role that assessment placed in that. And, importantly, they happened to get technology too. We found a partner that was genuinely flexible in working with us and the peculiarities of an organisation like City & Guilds.

BTL works with us to find the best models to suit our long-term needs, it isn’t about a one-size-fits-all solution. I think most importantly for us is we found a partner that recognises the importance of each and every individual that takes one of our tests; a partner that believes deeply in the transformative power of education, and in skills development, which is very much at the heart of our purpose for the organisation. For myself and all of us at City & Guilds, it has been a pleasure to work with BTL for so long, and I very much hope that our relationship will continue, and I know you very much hope it will too. The price could always be better, Bob, but there you go!

Today I’m proud that City & Guilds now does deliver 1.8 million tests each year, as I say covering 250 qualification areas, and more than 2,000 different types of tests. For example, in Saudi Arabia, we’re providing the assessment learning platforms and staff training as part of a major modernisation of the vocational education system. Saudi is aiming to increase the dissipation of vocational education from 10% to 40% by 2023, which is equivalent to some 400,000 students. It would be almost impossible to start that with a paper-based system. So along that journey, we have come a long way, but we cannot and must not be complacent.

So back to my original question, what’s the next big transformative technology, and what’s it got in store for FE? Well for one, and Bob alluded to it, we can expect to see much more multimedia in assessment, using to connect learning with real-world situations more often. We’re using video and audio files to capture performance, and witness testimonies in a range of fields; everything from hair and beauty, right the way through to mechatronics. Being able to see and hear someone demonstrate skill is a much more authentic and flexible way to validate their competence. For us, it’s not simply knowledge, you have to be able to demonstrate that real skill in a consistent number of times. And I expect to see assessments increasingly happening across many platforms; with so many tablets and smartphones out there, it’s important that assessment makes the most of it. Who knows, maybe we will even see assessments taking place via a smartwatch someday, my son may just prove me wrong.

I’m not saying this just to play to the Instagram generation, but because this is a logical way to provide a richer, more authentic assessment experience. For example, we’ve worked with Barclays to develop a range of games that are actually the assessments, helping people become more digitally literate. They’re freely available to anyone on the App Store. And these games help people develop a range of skills, from understanding the internet through to how coding works. If someone passes enough modules, they get their digital driving license, using open badges to prove their capability to others. Clearly, open badges is going to be another trend that is set to continue, and will be an important part of the assessment landscape. My point is though that it’s important to see technology as an opportunity, not a threat or indeed a risk. And my vision for City & Guilds group is for us to be at the forefront of the race to exploit the power of on-the-go technology so that one day all learning spaces are potential assessment opportunities, whether that is happening in an educational institution, or whether that is happening in a place of work.

It means an end to the fixed exam calendar, and the chance for learners to be accessed flexibly, when they’re ready. It means the possibility for on-demand adaptive tests for teachers to use as and when they choose; offering greater flexibility and precision to our assessment offer. We’re already seeing the development of adaptive algorithms, changing the nature and the frequency of test
delivery based on an individual’s level of understanding. It’s just not possible with paper and pencil. And we should all keep challenging the concept of what online assessment experience can be. For example, at City & Guilds, we have been exploring assessments in virtual reality, and the role that devices such as Oculus Rift can have in providing truly immersive and valid assessments of knowledge and of skill.

As with many of the anecdotes I shared earlier, some of my predications may indeed come true, and other may not. But what’s clear is that we are only at the tip of the iceberg in terms of how technology will impact and change assessment.

E-assessment opens up a range of opportunities that all of us here today need to grab hold of with both hands. It encourages better learning experiences, and more effective assessment of an individual’s skills. But for any of this to become a reality, there is one very important caveat: our policy-makers need to embrace the value of colleges and schools investing in digital infrastructure. The digital infrastructure in this country’s schools and colleges is patchy and inconsistent. It’s baffling to me that when the UK’s broadband speeds are more than twice as fast as the world’s average, this is not the case in the classroom; and I speak as a governor of five colleges, I know that this is a reality. The British Educational Suppliers Association reported that half of the UK’s state schools have slow broadband, or unreliable Wi-Fi. A third of secondary schools had inadequate broadband, and figures in 2013 suggested that 80% of colleges were dependent on just one broadband connection. We have to make connected classrooms the norm. We’ve got to give schools and colleges access speeds to rival the largest multi-national companies. We must make sure that educational establishments have access to laptops and tablets that they need to make every space a digital learning space, rather than relegating technology to a computer room with old-fashioned desktop PCs. We can’t simply hold up our hands and say there’s no money to invest in technology, it is too important and we all collectively have a role to play in it.

Encouragingly, I am seeing more and more people begin to understand this. I am proud that FE has been leading the way, and actually that general education is only just starting to catch up. In fact, everyone here today as an important role in embracing the power of technology to improve teaching and learning, and measuring teaching and learning. The future, I think, is very exciting, and there is so much opportunity for us to go after. And BTL is playing an incredibly important role in helping us unlock that potential.

So before I finish, I would just like to say congratulations again to BTL, to thank them for everything they’ve done to pioneer new ways of delivering and assessing learning, and for being a great partner to City & Guilds. Thank you very much, guys.

**Bob Gomersall**

Our next speaker is Professor Peter Twining of the Open University, who is also a member of ETAG, and I’ve just realised while I’ve been standing there that I’ve forgotten what ETAG stands for. Educational Technology Action Group which has done a lot of good work nationally in terms of warming up and interesting people in this whole area, so hopefully he’ll tell us a little bit more about that, Peter.
Peter Twining

I was really pleased to be invited to come and speak to you today, particularly to be the 4th speaker, because I know that none of you are thinking of filling your glasses or getting more nibbles, or even talking to the people next to you; I shall keep it fairly brief.

My interest is in the future of education and how we might make education systems fit for the 21st century, and I’m particularly interested in school-level education systems. As Bob hinted, I was one of the co-directors of one of the strands of ETAG looking at accountability and assessment, and I’ll tell you a bit more about ETAG in a minute. But I want to start by talking about the problem, and part of the problem has been flagged up to us already. I’m really sad Nicky left a couple of minutes ago, actually I really wanted to heckle her. We are in the Houses of Parliament, so feel free to heckle me, okay? It’s a tradition, we should uphold it.

I’m going on a sideline here, computer science is really important, Nicky, but it’s not nearly as important as embedding technology across the curriculum. Because for most teachers, computer science is not what they do, and for most kids, it’s not what they do, and for most adults. It’s like you don’t have to be able to build a car; some people do, but not everybody. But we do have to understand the impact of cars and how to use them effectively and safely.

Sorry, I rant, I was so controlled when she was speaking. But it was great to hear her say that she wanted schools to prepare kids for the real world, for living fulfilling lives, but unfortunately they don’t. They don’t prepare them for university, they don’t develop the sorts of independence and time management competence that universities expect. They don’t prepare them for work, they don’t give them the personal characteristics that allow time management, persistence, real problem-solving, communication, collaboration, teamwork, those things we know are so important in the real world. Schools are just too far disassociated with the real world, and this came home to me in a big way.

I was doing some research. Over the last couple of years I’ve led 22 case studies on schools in England and 13 in Australia looking at the use of digital technology and particularly mobile devices in schools. A small proportion of schools do it absolutely wonderful things with digital technology; things that really prepare kids and enthuse kids and get kids in a state where they’re really ready to make a contribution and be valuable members of society. They’re creative, they’re problem solvers, they’re communicators, they’re collaborators, they’re good at learning to learn. And then, three months before the national examinations, they stop doing all that stuff, and they get put away – the laptops and the tablets – they get out their biros and exercise books and they go back to didactic teacher-at-the-front teaching. And why do they do that? Because their kids have to get their handwriting muscles into shape so they can write for up to six hours a day without getting cramp; and perhaps, more worryingly, they have to learn how to write on paper, which is a weird and different experience for so many young people these days. Of course, that’s a major disincentive for schools to invest in digital technology; if your kit’s not going to be used for three months of the year, and it’s not going to help your kids do better in the assessment – because the assessment doesn’t actually measure the things your kids are really good at – then why the heck would you do it? So schools teach to the test, because they’re held accountable against the test. Now you might say they should teach to the test, but come on; you should do away to be held accountable against. The problem isn’t that they teach the test, it’s that the tests are rubbish. They don’t assess the things that really matter. A paper-based three-hour exam cannot measure some of the things that we think are really critical in the world today, they just can’t do it. So, we have a real problem here,
ETAG, the Educational Technology Action Group, was set up by Matthew Hancock, Michael Gove, and David Willetts to give advice to government about action they could take to try and change that situation so that digital technology really did enhance learning across the curriculum, and improve learning outcomes for learners. The sort of stuff that Nicky was talking about, about really preparing them for living in the real world and making a valuable contribution to the real world, and of course UK PLC and all that stuff. The remit we were given was really to be quite radical and think about – Michael Gove actually said in our launch meeting that (and this actually came as a bit of a shocker to me) not only did he actually say the word ‘fun’ three times, ‘school should be fun’, but he also said that he realised that standing back and letting schools decide how they were going to use new technology hadn’t worked, and that government needed to give some strategic direction, and he wanted some advice about what the government could do to really move the field forward. Now one of the most important aspects, and I’ve already hinted because it drives practice in schools, is assessment and why has e-assessment not caught on in schools when it has caught on so well in other sectors? Relatively speaking, because it’s almost non-existent in schools.

So, the problems, and of course there are some real problems. We have terminal assessment, I’m so wanting to make a bad pun about why it’s called terminal, but what it means is that you have to have, you know, in your typical exam centre you may have 300 kids all sitting down at the same time on the same day to do the same exam script, so if you’re going to go to e-assessment that means 300 machines have been moved into your sports hall. Most schools don’t have 300 machines and they sure as heck couldn’t move them all into their sports hall. Even if they had, they haven’t got the reliable and robust technology infrastructure; we mentioned problems with Wi-Fi and with internet accessibility. So, they haven’t got the robust systems you need for high-stakes assessments, because if it falls over in the middle of the exam, you’ve got a real problem. They also don’t have the technical expertise. Why am I hissing at myself? Don’t hiss at me! They also don’t have the technical expertise, the staff, to manage the systems, and that’s exacerbated in situations where they only have to use the system a couple of times a year. So in the intervening stage, they forget how to run it and the system probably needs a lot of work to get it working better again. Go away! Can you still hear me? Splendid.

We also have all the issues all around the concerns of security and cheating and all the pedagogical issues if you’re doing radical stuff with new assessment methods; what does that mean for how I teach and what I teach? For the majority of schools, that’s really scary stuff. And then you have the awarding bodies. The awarding bodies invested a lot of money in complex back-end systems to deal with our wonderful paper-based systems that we’ve got at the moment, and it’s a major risk and investment for them to change those, and they are commercial organisations competing for customers. So there’s a real commercial risk if they start moving to e-assessment, which puts the onus on schools to provide the resources to deliver those e-assessments, that they’ll lose market share. There’s a real disincentive to awarding bodies. This thing’s really bad news isn’t it? And of course, you’ve also got the problem of the regulatory system, which is highly risk-averse; you have a problem with one candidate, and you’re dragged over the coals to explain what’s gone wrong and what you’ve done about it and how you’re going to avoid it happening again in the future. There’s no incentive within the regulatory system for awarding bodies to be innovative with new technology.

So you’ve got these gold standard general qualifications, I know gold doesn’t tarnish but it may devalue, particularly in a context where other countries are moving rapidly to e-based assessments. Finland, North America, places like Lithuania and Georgia, completely e-based assessment systems. Places like Australia and Tasmania who are working with it. So you’ve got a real challenge about how do we overcome those problems?
So, some possible solutions. In the past what people have tended to do is say “E-assessment is great, it can allow you to do all these really exciting things with simulations and models and blah blah blah”, we heard some of that stuff in a quiet sort of way, but very carefully staged. But that’s scary; it’s too big a leap to go from this paper-based to radical assessment model, we need something that’s much more a change management process, that’s much safer. So ETAG was advocating a kind of evolutionary rather than revolutionary model. Dealing with the kind of capacity issues and logistical issues, before you start dealing with how can we do something radically different. So the model that ETAG was proposing was a paper replication model. A model in which, literally, you have the same exam in paper, and it may be the same paper, but you can either handwrite the answers or you can type them. As simple as that. Now, there’s a real danger with this, because that’s not where we want to end up, but it is a necessary first step because it allows you to deal with some of those issues about access to equipment and the infrastructure problems.

We’ve seen this happen in Tasmania with a system called the Exam System, and with their equivalent of our A-Level Computer Science exam, so the end of secondary school. They went from paper-based exams to open internet exams in three years, and what they did is that in the first year they use this e-exam system which allows you to bring in your own laptop, plug in a USB stick, it takes control of your environment (it boots up Linux in fact). It takes control of your laptop so everyone’s got the same environment, and it’s locked down and you can’t do anything with it. You do your exam on it, or you can do your exam on paper, and indeed if the system crashes you can revert to doing it on paper, and it will have saved what you have done up until the last three minutes. So they did that in the first year, only half the kids were doing it on laptops, half the kids were doing it on paper. The next year, they all did it on laptops. The next year, they didn’t go to the next stage which was to use some of the power of the computer they said, “We’ll go to an open internet exam”. You can email the questions to your mates, or your friends. Now, of course you’re asked difficult questions. In terms of preparing kids for the real world, and authentically assessing their ability to operate in computer science, I tell you what, most computer scientists do not lock themselves in a room with a piece of paper. They email their mates, they steal code off the internet, they leverage value out of their social networks, and this assessment allows you to see how good your kids are at doing that sort of thing. Moving to a bring your own technology approach as what Tasmania did, is probably one of the most likely strategies for dealing with that problem of having enough computers available for every child in terminal assessment to be using technology at one time.

So that’s part of the solution. We’ve then got companies like BTL doing a lot of work in the background about some of the other technological and infrastructure and procedural and risk management issues. And we already have a system in the UK where quite a large number of student every year actually use digital technology for their assessment. Kids labelled as having ‘special needs’ for whatever reason are allowed to sue digital technology to assist them, and indeed the regulations say that children should be assessed in a way that’s appropriate to the way that they’ve learnt. If you think about those kids who are in those schools I described who are doing radical stuff with new technology, who stopped for three months and went back to paper-based, I think they weren’t being assessed in a way that they were being taught initially, and they were being disadvantaged by the system.

How can we justify, how can we claim that our assessment is valid if it’s paper based, in a world where almost nothing else is? Now, I bet that you guys, some of the guys who were speaking had paper, but I bet they didn’t handwrite their speeches. They did it on these and then printed them out. Bob! Are you handwriting your… Bob! There’s always one, isn’t there? Okay, so what I’m saying
is that I think we have a lot of things in place that would allow us to move forward if we had the political will, and that’s the real killer. So the recommendations that ETAG came up with in relation to assessment was specifically that the DFE should put in place a strategic goal for general qualifications to move to being technology-enabled across the majority of subjects including the core subjects, that the DFE and OFQUAL should actively encourage and support awarding bodies in moving towards e-assessment for general qualifications, and that the JCQ should put in place a framework for how e-assessments could be carried out in general qualifications to try and make sure that it’s consistent and that it worked with other models across the piece. If these recommendations were implemented, we would make rapid progress, and the great work that BTL and others are doing could really have a major impact in schools. It could help us to get back up there as world leaders in education, and on education PLC, increase Bob’s profits. But more importantly, it could make schools more relevant to the real world and the learners within them.

So, my kind of call to action to you is go back to wherever you’ve come from, download the ETAG report, type ‘etag.report’ into your browser and the report will pop up, read through the recommendations (it’s only very short), and then really lobby to get them implemented. E-mail Nicky and say “Nicky, it’s such a shame you left. You really ought to have been here to hear about ETAG because you want schools to be doing the right thing, and ETAG has got the advice, follow the recommendations. It’ll happen”. But before you do that, go and fill your glasses and let’s have some more chat. Thank you.

Bob Gomersall
Just to avoid any further doubt, this is a handwritten speech. I had to write it last night when I didn’t have a printer with me, actually. There we are! So a big thank you to everyone involved. A big thank you to the Secretary of State for coming along, a big thank you to Chris for a very interesting talk, and to Peter also for talking about what ETAG are up to. Thank you to Philip for facilitating this event, and we’re very very grateful to him for this, and a big thank you to you for coming along for our special occasion, and making it such a great day. So, thank you, and perhaps we’ll applaud ourselves.

About the speakers

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Nicky Morgan – MP and Secretary of State for Education
http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-28317366

Chris Jones – CEO and Director General – City & Guilds
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