Making a fair and accurate assessment of students in PE has always been a difficult task due to the nature of the subject. The first question which has to be considered is exactly what PE is. It is not just the ability to play football well, be a competent swimmer, gymnast, netballer or athlete; it is the ability to succeed in all areas of the PE curriculum in terms of skills, techniques, adopting the principles of fair play and working effectively in a team. Because of the diverse nature of the subject it is impossible to prioritise specific areas over others – an excellent, successful games player may not be competent at gymnastics, so which activity is the most important in terms of assessment?

The table below sets out the National Curriculum expectations for the end of Key Stages 3 and 4:

**Key Stage Three:** Pupils should build on and embed the physical development and skills learned in key stages 1 and 2, become more competent, confident and expert in their techniques, and apply them across different sports and physical activities. They should understand what makes a performance effective and how to apply these principles to their own and others' work. They should develop the confidence and interest to get involved in exercise, sports and activities out of school and in later life, and understand and apply the long-term health benefits of physical activity.

**Key Stage Four:** Pupils should tackle complex and demanding physical activities. They should get involved in a range of activities that develops personal fitness and promotes an active, healthy lifestyle.


In addition to this, AfPE (the Association for Physical Education) has set out additional guidelines relating to identified 'key areas for assessment':

**Key Stage 3**
- Physically confident
- Physically skilful
- Breadth of experiences
- Health and enjoyment

**Key Stage 4**
- Self-Challenge
- Physical fitness
- Decision making

- Physically competent
- Expert techniques
- Apply across a broad range
- Effective performance
- Confident and interested
- Benefits of physical activity

- Complex
- Demanding
- Range of activities
- Personal fitness
- Health

(www.afpe.org.uk/images/stories/Physical_Education_Assessment_booklet_revised_June_2015.pdf)

The element missing from all of this guidance and information is exactly how a PE teacher is supposed to either come up with, or use, any form of assessment framework to record progress and feed back to students and parents.

In the past, PE teachers have been encouraged to use a ‘best fit’ framework linked to numerical National Curriculum levels. Many schools subdivided these levels, into for example 5a, 5b and 5c, to indicate whether or not a student was just in a specific level, firmly in that level or approaching the next level. This extra layer of assessment was not supposed to be used but many schools found it useful and it was never expressly discouraged or deemed unacceptable.

An additional complication in assessment, particularly in Key Stage 4, was that GCSE grades were assessed against letter grades, from G–A*, so teachers struggled to reconcile a number grade (often with additional sub-divisions) with a letter grade.

The ‘new’ GCSE format uses a numerical system, from 1–9, and it could open up an opportunity for PE teachers to re-think their approach to assessment and make far more use of the GCSE criteria and assessment framework when assessing PE more widely – an opportunity that has actually existed since the introduction of GCSE PE in 1988!

It is a fundamental principle that assessment must be fit for purpose and any GCSE in PE has had to provide a robust, accurate and manageable assessment framework that can be effectively moderated and then awarded. This means that the current GCSE specifications all contain a detailed, proven, fit-for-purpose set of assessment headings and criteria for physical education activities under two specific headings. These do vary in the three newly accredited specifications but detailed guidance and information is available for them all. If this is an assessment system that is used to provide a final summative assessment at Key Stage 4 (in the final grade awarded by the examination board in that series of examinations), why should it not also be used as a formative assessment tool at Key Stage 3? There is no logical reason for using one assessment framework for the first three years of a student’s secondary education and then introducing them to an entirely different one at the start of Key Stage 4. The argument has been put forward that this only happens for students who choose GCSE PE but if it is fit for purpose for them, surely it is fit for purpose for all students being assessed in PE?
It is probably worth mentioning at this stage that there are many schools that have already adopted this GCSE PE assessment model for all PE assessments, and they have been using it very successfully for several years.

So what criteria do the exam boards currently use? Below is the overview of the two categories three exam boards have introduced for first teaching in September 2016, with the mark weighting allocated to each category:

- **AQA**: skill 10 + full context 15
- **Edexcel**: performing 10 + applying 25
- **OCR**: skills and attributes 20 + decision making 20

One thing the three exam boards have in common is that they have identified two specific headings (in line with AfPE’s ‘key areas for assessment’ outlined above) to assess levels of attainment and achievement in performing in physical education activities. PE teachers also get detailed information regarding what skills, and full context application of those skills, are expected for each specific activity. This, in turn, is fully linked and correlated to detailed mark criteria tables which are sub-divided into specific levels and identified criteria, as the association football sample from the AQA GCSE specification shows:

(http://filestore.aqa.org.uk/resources/pe/specifications/AQA-BS82-SP-2016-V1-0.PDF)

The advantage of using this system of assessment is that students can be fully aware of what is expected of them within a PE lesson, they can set specific targets for improvement and they are fully prepared for specific assessment against the full GCSE criteria in three activities if they do go on to take GCSE PE at Key Stage 4. The core group of students will in no way be disadvantaged by being judged against this criteria model – on the contrary, it should make their PE experience more worthwhile and quantifiable.

**Key considerations**

If this system is to be adopted there are some key factors to be taken into account:

1. The system used must be the one for the chosen exam board studied at Key Stage 4.

2. The tasks that different key stages and year groups are given must be in line with their age group and expected ability level. This will mean that the challenge for each activity will increase as students make their way through the school and the key stages up to the full GCSE-level criteria at Key Stage 4. This should not be problematic as the current schemes of work that PE departments have will reflect this progression and increase of challenge anyway.

3. The PE curriculum in individual schools may well be undergoing a review at present because the number of activities available for assessment at GCSE has been reduced considerably. The ‘legacy’ specifications currently have 118 activities available for AQA, 76 for Edexcel and 60 for OCR, and these include opportunities to be assessed as a coach, official or even an organiser/leader. The ‘new’ specifications only allow the role of player/performer to be assessed in a greatly reduced list of 35 approved individual and team activities. Realistically, a student is only likely to be able to attain the required level at GCSE in year 11 if they have been taking part in that activity since year 7. Adding or introducing an activity at the start of Key Stage 4 means that it is unlikely an individual student will be able to attain the score they need to be on target for a higher grade.

4. Adopting this model gives an opportunity to enhance other areas of the PE curriculum. GCSE specifications expect students to be familiar with technical vocabulary but surely it can be an integral to all PE lessons? Body systems (such as the musculo-skeletal system and cardio-respiratory system) should be referred to in core lessons in Key Stage 3 and definitions of components of fitness (such as flexibility, agility, balance and reaction time) should be included as well. If you have a departmental policy that there may be a ‘non-performer’ in a PE lesson but never a ‘non-participant’, then full utilisation can be made of visual analysis apps on Android and Apple devices (such as Coachs’ Eye and Hudl) so that movement analysis can also be introduced and mastered at this very early stage. GCSE PE students need to be able to apply their knowledge but good PE teaching should equip all students with these skills.

The new GCSEs in Physical Education are clearly very challenging with the increase in theory and the decrease in practical/controlled assessment. However, perhaps this radical change can provide an opportunity to make assessment in PE more accurate, reliable and, finally, fit for purpose.

*Kirk Bizley*
Chartered Educational Assessor
Senior Lecturer – Bath Spa University

Find out more about Kirk’s work with Oxford and our new GCSE PE resources. Visit [www.oxfordssecondary.co.uk/pe](http://www.oxfordssecondary.co.uk/pe) for details.