**Case Study 3: Testing Solutions**



As the senior leader in charge of the curriculum and assessment, Scott introduced a significant reform two years ago to his school’s assessment approach. This reform had been prompted by the following problems:

1. The school did not have a good understanding of whether students were making progress.
2. The teaching of younger students (before they began studying for their examined courses) did not focus on whether students remembered what they had been taught.
3. In many subjects, the curriculum was organised into stand-alone topics which had no clear links between them. It was unclear how the curriculum built over time.

Scott had introduced end of year exams in all subjects to help address these problems. He believed that these exams would provide robust information on students’ learning, would incentivise teachers to ensure students remembered what they had been taught, and would encourage subject teachers to think about the ‘end points’ to which the curriculum was building.

Two years later, Scott was noticing some unintended consequences of his decisions.

Scott had recently carried out a review of the art curriculum. The subject leader for art had expressed concerns two years ago that the new end of year exams would only capture some of the learning outcomes for students in art. The exam format would enable them to test whether students retained knowledge of the artistic movements and periods they had studied, but not whether there had been development in students’ artistic ability. Consequently, the art department had developed their own approach to assessing students using a portfolio of artwork which students collated over time. Scott found that both teachers and students had come to see this portfolio as the primary means of assessment and the end of year exams as ‘something that the school wanted’ (as one teacher said).

Following this experience, Scott decided to find out if other subjects had responded in the same way to the end of year tests.

In Geography, Scott found quite a different response. The geography team had really liked the introduction of end of year exams and had increasingly geared their curriculum towards them. This meant that their curriculum had become increasingly ‘knowledge focussed’, at the expense of some of the geographical skills which could not be assessed well through a controlled test. Geography teachers had moved away from some of the project work they did previously to focus more on recall activities and core knowledge. A greater focus on knowledge retention was, Scott reflected, one of the outcomes he had hoped for. However, Scott noticed that the number of students deciding to continue to study Geography had declined in the last two years. Were these two factors linked, he wondered?

In science, Scott found that teachers had taken the opportunity to cut some content from their curriculum and focus on the core knowledge that students would need to make progress. Teachers appeared to be taking more time to secure students’ understanding. Two years ago, some students were reporting that the pace of lessons were too fast, and they couldn’t keep up. This had been reflected in the outcomes of topic tests, which showed large gaps in attainment between the highest and lowest achieving students. Exam outcomes now showed a much smaller gap in outcomes.

Scott reflected on his observations and wondered why the response to his innovation had been so different in each subject. Was he wrong to have introduced the end of year tests? Should he scrap the tests, or adapt them to better achieve the outcomes he was looking for?

**Questions**

Consider whether the solution had worked in the way Scott had hoped. These questions may help structure your thinking:

1. To what extent does Scott identify the underlying problem as opposed to the superficial features of the problem?
2. What other possible solutions might Scott have adopted?
3. What assumptions underpin Scott’s beliefs about how the end of year exams would solve the school’s problems?
4. What might explain the differing responses of teachers in the various subjects?
5. If the end of year exams are scrapped, will teachers undo the changes they have made? If not, why not?