

SCOTTISH NATIONAL STANDARDISED ASSESSMENTS: A RESPONSE TO THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT'S EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

Introduction

1 The RSE Education Committee welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Parliament Education and Skills Committee's call for evidence on the Scottish National Standardised Assessments (SNSAs).¹ The Parliament's review is timely since it allows the education system to reflect on the first year of the SNSAs following their introduction in schools from August 2017. The RSE is supportive of developments in Scottish education that support the provision of more reliable data to underpin education policy. We do not have any principled objection to the use of standardised assessments in Scotland. Rather, our comments focus on the rationale for their introduction, the way they have been implemented and the usefulness of the data generated. The RSE would be pleased to discuss our comments with the Education and Skills Committee should members consider this helpful.

The evidence base for moving away from the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy and introducing standardised assessments

2 When the Scottish Government consulted on the National Improvement Framework in 2015, it recognised that while almost all local authorities used some form of standardised assessment, they used different approaches which made it difficult to collect, share and analyse consistent and comparable data and information, thereby limiting the ability to develop a national level picture.² The need to address this seemed to be the primary basis for the introduction of the SNSAs.

3 Notwithstanding these observations, when they were proposed there seemed to be a lack of clarity over the primary purpose of the SNSAs, particularly whether they were meant to evaluate the performance of the school education system or if they were to provide a diagnostic assessment at the level of the individual child, or perhaps even a combination of these two potential aims.³ We return to this point in the next section.

4 While the Scottish Government stated that the SNSAs should replace the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN), the rationale underpinning this decision is unclear. The SNSAs and the SSLN are very different so the SNSA cannot and should not be considered a direct replacement for the SSLN. Whereas the SNSAs provide individual level data on learners' attainment that can be tracked over time, the SSLN was a sample survey of both learners and teachers which gathered a wider range of information than that generated by the SSNA, and which was able to provide a system level analysis of attainment. The SSLN collected a wider range of information related to attainment, including information about a learner's home background. This provided scope to investigate the effects of poverty on educational attainment, for example. The introduction of the SNSAs need not have come at the expense of the SSLN. The respective strengths of both means that they could co-exist and complement one another very well, particularly with a view to enabling a more detailed analysis of the effects of poverty on learners' progress.

1 Scottish Parliament Education and Skills Committee call for evidence: <http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/110246.aspx>

2 A draft National Improvement Framework for Scottish Education, Scottish Government, 2015 <https://www2.gov.scot/Resource/0048/00484452.pdf>

3 See, for example, the report of a roundtable discussion on the National Improvement Framework which the RSE hosted in November 2015: https://www.rse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/AP15_25.pdf

What information the Government's assessments can provide that contribute to improving the educational outcomes of children and young people

- 5 As they have been introduced, the Scottish Government has clarified that the primary purpose of the SNSAs is to provide 'real time' diagnostic information to support teachers' professional judgement. For learners to benefit in this way requires that teachers use the results of the assessments to set realistic targets for each pupil and to explain to the pupil what progress they are making.
- 6 It also requires there to be a clear and consistent understanding of the role of assessment among teachers, schools and local authorities to avoid the SNSAs being used in ways that distort learning and teaching practices, for example 'teaching to the test' and/or being viewed and used as an accountability mechanism. However, the role of the SNSAs in helping to inform teacher professional judgement and, in turn, the connection to the annual publication of the extent to which learners are achieving the expected CfE levels in literacy and numeracy for their relevant stage, may mean that the SNSAs are perceived by teachers and schools as an accountability measure rather than as a learning and development tool.
- 7 This suggests that there is not yet a collective understanding of how the SNSAs should be used to support the learning and development process. Teachers also need to be able to access training and support in how to use the data generated by the SNSAs to inform their teaching practice. Consideration needs to be given to the initial and continuing professional learning and development requirements of teachers so that they can be equipped to support improvement.
- 8 SNSAs cover only literacy and numeracy and there is a risk that too much emphasis on assessing literacy and numeracy creates a dynamic which values these areas disproportionately compared to, for instance, higher order cognitive skills that young people are expected to develop.
- 9 Given that the SNSAs are intended to provide a diagnostic, formative approach to assessment, there is a question as to whether comparable assessments need to be undertaken more frequently than the current three-year cycle (P1, P4, P7 and S3) to provide more reliable diagnostic data for supporting learner performance. To be clear, the RSE is not advocating more frequent assessment but it raises the question in the context of the SNSAs as a diagnostic tool for teachers.
- 10 At present, the SNSAs collect data from learners at publicly funded schools only. This is in contrast to the SSLN which provided information about the whole school system, including independent schools. This matters if there is to be a proper understanding of the 'attainment gap'. For example, entry to university cannot properly be analysed without data from the whole cohort of pupils, including those in independent schools.
- 11 The Scottish Government does not have access to the data generated by the SNSAs as this resides with schools and local authorities. Scottish Government has access only to the national level data generated by the assessments. However, clarity about the range of SNSA data that Scottish Government would access came relatively late during the introduction of the assessments, indicating that Scottish Government was for some time unclear on how it intended to access and use the data.⁴ This may have contributed to the lack of consensus on the purpose of the SNSAs.
- 12 The Scottish Government uses teacher judgement data on the achievement of CfE levels to show performance in literacy and numeracy in the Broad General Education. However, there are large discrepancies between teachers' subjective judgements and attainment measured by standardised assessments, with evidence showing that teachers are too optimistic about their own pupils' attainment. An important methodological task is to understand the extent to which teacher judgements diverge from the SNSAs, and why. Research of this kind can contribute to development of teachers' capacity to make accurate judgements. Without consistent data, there is a risk that the National Improvement Framework will become implausible and, even worse, it will be impossible for anyone to know whether it is working.

⁴ See, for example, Scottish Government response (9 August 2017) to FOI request 17/01652 <https://www.gov.scot/publications/foi-17-01652/>

- 13** We recognise that the Scottish Government plans to commission an independent review of P1 assessments. An important component of this will be to consider the extent to which the SNSAs are compatible with the play-based approach to learning encountered in P1.
- 14** As far as we are aware, the data from the SNSAs are not made available to independent researchers so they cannot be used for more sophisticated analyses to address policy relevant issues in education, including the attainment gap. It is desirable that independent researchers should have access to the data from the SNSAs. These data can be suitably anonymised. Consideration also needs to be given to how the Scottish Government’s Education Research Strategy⁵ can be used to support and inform developments in this area.

Additional Information

This Advice Paper has been signed off by the General Secretary of the RSE.

Any enquiries about this Advice Paper should be addressed to Mr William Hardie (email: whardie@theRSE.org.uk)

All responses are published on the RSE website (www.rse.org.uk).

⁵ A research strategy for Scottish education, Scottish Government, April 2017 <https://www.gov.scot/publications/research-strategy-scottish-education/>



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