

EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

STANDARDISED ASSESSMENTS INQUIRY

NASUWT

1. The NASUWT welcomes the opportunity to provide information to the Education and Skills Committee on the evidence base for the recently introduced Scottish National Standardised Assessments (SNSAs) and notes that the inquiry is specifically focusing on:
 - the evidence base for moving away from the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN) and introducing standardised assessments at P1, P4, P7, s3;
 - international comparisons to understand similar and differing approaches used elsewhere; and
 - what information the Government's assessments can provide that contribute to improving the educational outcomes of children and young people.

2. The NASUWT is the fastest growing teachers' union in Scotland, representing teachers and school leaders in all sectors of education.

GENERAL COMMENTS

3. The NASUWT does not object in principle to the use of standardised assessments, such as the SNSAs: a nationally managed and regulated system of assessment can provide a common entitlement for all learners and promote clear national expectations in relation to assessment and learning.

4. The NASUWT believes that the following broad principles should be considered in any review of assessment:
 - a. assessment should support pupil engagement and empower them to take responsibility for their own learning;
 - b. assessment should support a broad and balanced curriculum and should not drive or limit the curriculum offer;
 - c. assessment should be reliable, valid and comparable;
 - d. assessment should be fair and equitable and should recognise the impact of social and cultural assumptions;

The fastest growing teachers' union in Scotland

- e. assessment practice should respect and promote the notion of teachers' professional autonomy and judgement;
 - f. collaboration and cooperation should be at the heart of assessment practice;
 - g. assessment practice should be efficient and effective, placing minimal workload burdens on teachers and avoiding unnecessary bureaucracy;
 - h. assessment practice should be reviewed regularly for its impact and effectiveness on pupil outcomes.
5. Assessment should be used by teachers to enable them to form valid and reliable judgements of pupils' progress for the development of the curriculum. In that way, assessment is key to effective approaches to teaching and learning. The forms that assessment take, the uses to which assessment data is put, and the context within which assessment is undertaken are therefore critical aspects of educational policy and practice at national, local and school level.

SPECIFIC COMMENTS

VALIDITY

6. Firstly, it is important that the Education and Skills Committee considers the question of validity: the process of determining whether the right factors are being assessed in the right way to deliver accurate and useful assessment results. Validity cannot be measured or determined by the outcome of a single study but should be based on evidence from a wide variety of sources and analyses of empirical evidence (e.g. reliability studies, response process studies) and some more logical studies (e.g. validation studies, aggregation model analyses). Dr Paul Newton states that, [October 2017]:
- 'validation argument is not clerical exercise, involving little more than box-ticking. It is a professional exercise, involving insight, judgement and understanding'*. (1)
7. As Dr Newton sets out, validity can be a central value but other criteria such as acceptability, credibility, cost, and burdens on teachers and candidates are also important. Further, Dr Newton notes that validity and values are

intimately entwined and that sufficient validity is an ethical judgement that requires a full range of views to be taken into account as people/groups may have different value bases. This last point is significant because it highlights the political nature of assessment and that interpretations of 'validity' are influenced by ideological starting points.

8. One method of assessing validity, as outlined by Dr Newton, is to consider the following four criterion: purpose, measurement, validity, and assessment procedure. The Education and Skills Committee may also wish to note that:

(1) Paul E. Newton, An Approach to understanding validation arguments (Ofqual, October 2017), P.6.

'The validity chapters from each of the six editions the North American Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing (AERA, et al, 2014) have strongly influenced international thinking on sources of evidence and analysis for validation research. The current edition identifies five major sources:

- 1. test content;*
- 2. response processes;*
- 3. internal structure;*
- 4. relations to other variables; and*
- 5. consequences of testing.*

For each source, the basic research question concerns the degree to which the evidence or analysis that is collated is consistent with the overarching measurement claim (that it is possible to measure the target proficiency accurately using assessment results).' (2)

9. Validity should be considered as one criterion within a multiplicity of concerns, which can be grouped under the heading 'acceptability': resource availability, legal compliance, educational alignment, policy alignment, moral reputability, and public credibility.
10. Prior to consideration of the evidence base for the (SNSAs), the Education Committee must first agree the appropriate criterion against which educational assessments are being reviewed.

11.

SCOTTISH SURVEY OF LITERACY AND NUMERACY (SSLN)

12. The SSLN was an annual sample survey which monitored national performance in literacy and numeracy in alternate years, for school pupils at P1, P4, P7 and S2, and as such must be distinguished from the current SNSAs which apply across all schools in Scotland. While findings from the SSLN were useful to inform resources for practitioners to facilitate improvements in learning, teaching and assessment at classroom level,

(2) Paul E. Newton, P.34.

they did not provide individual practitioners with an assessment tool to consider their own class, school or local authority context. Due to the fundamentally different nature of these two assessments, it is difficult to compare and contrast their outcomes.

13. Given the impossibility of comparing results between the SSLN and the SNSAs, it will be a few years before we are able to identify trends or comment on educational impact and indeed it will be challenging to compare any progress with the pre-SNSA data. Equally, any improvement could simply result from schools and teachers becoming more familiar with the SNSAs and getting better at rehearsing pupils for them.

14. Considering the merit and impact of the SNSA should be one facet in an overarching research and evaluation framework for Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence, as was highlighted by the report of the initial findings of the International Council of Education Advisers in July 2017:

'Identify a systematic, sequenced and selective plan for literacy and numeracy, including a research based approach to improving learning and development, that ensures they can both achieve targeted academic goals while being responsive to the unique needs of each learner'.

UK COMPARISONS

15. Schools are often driven to test and assess pupils irrespective of the educational merits of doing so. In England, where tests are still used for the purposes of high-stakes accountability, this approach to school accountability has a distorting effect on curriculum delivery in schools and has generated substantial pressures to teach to the test.
16. While concerns, particularly those related to the use of assessment in the context of high-stakes accountability regimes, have tended to focus on the situation in England, the NASUWT's experience has highlighted the fact that assessment policy and practice remains an issue of concern in other education systems in the UK. In Wales, where statutory assessment remains in place, the use of teacher assessment instead of tests has led to significant increases in teacher workload. In Northern Ireland, the use of assessments, whether externally marked or conducted by teachers, for the purposes of post-primary selection remains an issue of concern and significant debate in terms of its impact on teachers in the primary sector.

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

17. It is important that the inherent limitations of tests as a form of assessment are recognised. All assessments, tests included, are subject to limitations in terms of their validity and reliability. In short, a test cannot tell you everything about what a learner knows and can do in a subject area. Problems arise when too much weight is placed on test outcomes to reach judgements about the performance of the system as a whole, or that of local authorities and schools. The SNSA results can only ever form a small part of the evidential framework determining how the educational outcomes of children and young people have been affected.
18. Education is about much more than what an assessment can test, so the Scottish Government must be vocal in ensuring schools do not adopt strategies simply to improve test scores. Scotland's focus should remain on agreed education priorities and on ensuring that policy is consistent with and contributes to the aims, purposes and values that underpin the education system. Policy should be based on a wide and rich range of evidence,

including evidence from teachers and school leaders about effective practice and the issues that impact on learning and teaching.

MOVING FORWARD

19. Schools need to be clear on what is expected of them as well as the SNSAs' relationship with accountability. It is also critical that approaches to assessment should minimise the workload and bureaucratic burdens of teachers and headteachers and should be organised in schools to enable teachers and headteachers to focus on their core responsibilities for teaching and leading teaching and learning. (Please see paragraph 4 above for greater detail).

20. There must be a clear narrative around the evidence base and the principles that inform that evidence base: what is the purpose of the assessment and is it impacting on the curriculum in practice, by narrowing the curricular content and driving school and classroom priorities? (Please see paragraphs 6-10 above).

21. Finally, and fundamentally, the Scottish Government needs to listen and respond to the views of practitioners who have been undertaking the assessments to date. As such, the Independent Review of P1 Assessments is warmly welcomed to ensure the experiences of the teaching profession are heeded and teachers' professional judgement remains paramount.

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General Secretary

For further information on the Union's response, contact:

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