

EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

STANDARDISED ASSESSMENTS

SUBMISSION FROM TERRY LANAGAN ON BEHALF OF ADES

The introduction of the Scottish National Standardised Assessments (SNSA) was broadly welcomed by ADES.

Its predecessor, the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN) had served its purpose of allowing the Scottish Government to track attainment levels over time in literacy and numeracy at a national level at key points in the Broad General Education (BGE). However, while the sample size was large enough to allow judgements to be made about attainment trends at a national level, the SSLN did not allow analysis to be made of trends at local or school levels. In several local authorities, elected members therefore complained that a lack of robust data on literacy and numeracy prevented them from fulfilling their scrutiny role in relation to attainment across the local authority area.

Consequently, over the last decade or so, the vast majority of local authorities have introduced some form of standardised assessments for all young people at key stages of the BGE. In general, these were commercially produced, externally marked packages which were seen as being additional to, but not a replacement for, teacher professional judgement, which remained the principal means of assessment of young people's progress. These standardised assessments allowed local authorities, schools and individual teachers to check the accuracy of professional judgement against the external tests. They also allowed local authorities to report to elected members on attainment trends over time.

However, different local authorities used a range of different standardised assessments and administered them at different stages of a young person's education, making it impossible to use the data generated to make national extrapolations about trends in attainment levels. Under these circumstances, and given the fact that almost all local authorities were already using some form of standardised assessment, it made sense to introduce a national scheme which would be administered at the same stages across the country.

Of course, it will take some time for the full benefits of the SNSA to be realised. The first year will allow a benchmark to be set against which future years can be compared. In the longer term, the assessments will facilitate the tracking of attainment levels in literacy and numeracy for whole cohorts of young people as they progress through the school system. The datasets generated will have benefits for local and national government and will provide new evidence to assist with policy development in pursuit of excellence and equity for Scotland's children. The intelligent use of data will be a key factor in effecting improvements in Scottish education.

However, there will also be immediate benefits for individual teachers and schools. The assessments will allow teachers to check the accuracy of their professional judgement against a national assessment. Reports generated by the administrators will also allow an analysis of which aspects of learning in literacy and numeracy individual young people have mastered and in which aspects they require further, targeted support. These reports should also facilitate informed professional dialogue between teachers and between schools.

It should be emphasised that teacher professional judgement remains paramount when it comes to assessment of children's work. The SNSA is merely a further check on that

judgement and, as with all assessment, should assist teachers in determining the next steps in a child's learning. The assessments should therefore be administered at the most appropriate point in the child's progress and not as "whole class" tests or examinations. Administering the assessments in this way, together with the adaptive nature of the assessments themselves, should ensure that no child is placed under undue pressure by being asked to take the assessments.

There has been some adverse publicity about the appropriateness of some of the questions in the assessments, with a suggestion that some questions are culturally inappropriate for Scottish children or do not sit comfortably with the experiences and outcomes of CfE. It should be stressed, however, that these criticisms apply to only a very small number of questions and, given the fact that the assessments were adapted to fit the CfE context from a model first developed in Australia, it is perhaps not surprising that the first iteration of the SNSA should contain a small number of such questions. However, ADES understands that ACER, the company which developed and which administers the assessments, has been very responsive to comments about specific questions and is committed to a process of improving the quality and cultural appropriateness of the assessments over the coming years.

Finally, it is noted that the well-publicised issues surrounding the P1 assessments fall outwith the scope of this call for evidence. ADES will be keen to contribute to any subsequent call for evidence in this subject at a later date.

In conclusion, ADES believes that the SNSA will become a useful tool for individual teachers and schools and will eventually generate data which will assist with policy development locally and nationally in relation to the excellence and equity agenda which ADES fully supports.