

The School of Education at the University of Strathclyde welcomes this opportunity to assist the Education and Skills Committee by providing evidence in relation to the open call for views on standardised assessment in Scotland. We are pleased to provide both oral and written evidence, and Professor Sue Ellis would be available to give oral evidence to the Committee on either 9th January or the 30th January.

The University of Strathclyde is the biggest Teacher Education faculty in Scotland. The university prides itself on being a 'Place of Useful Learning' and we are committed to research that generates actionable knowledge and that helps to make a practical and positive difference to the children and teachers of Scotland.

We believe that many forms of assessment are important and useful for teachers. In this submission we make the following broad points:

- Standardised assessment data are just data. What matters is how the data are understood, who uses them, how and for which purposes. It is the *use* of data (including how multiple assessment measures are combined) that determines whether the impact of a standardised assessment process has positive or negative implications for teaching and attainment.
- Many local authorities and schools use a mix of summative assessment data, which may be age-standardised, standardised or non-standardised. Qualitative data can be used to make summative judgements. At present, how any data are interpreted and put to use by local authorities, schools and teachers is untracked and unexamined. Education professionals need clear national guidance to inform local understandings of ethical and unethical data use.
- Where standardised assessments focus on narrow, atomistic aspects of learning, and where attainment data are treated as 'high stakes', the use of data may have unintended, negative consequences for teachers, schools and learners. Both assessment design and the checks and balances within the system, as well as judicious external monitoring of impacts, can minimise this risk. Part of such system design includes a system for providing teachers, HMIE, policy makers and local authority/RICs staff with professional support to understand and interpret data appropriately.
- Scotland has a national policy of scaling up successful reform. To do this, educators and policy makers need a measure of what works, for whom, in which circumstances. A single standardised measure across all local authorities would enable researchers, educators and the policy community to ensure that taxpayers' money is invested in those reforms likely to show best impact in particular circumstances.
- In the past, under the old 5-14 curriculum, attainment was based on teacher judgement, but target-setting meant that there were numerous reports of teachers under pressure to massage their attainment judgements upwards. A computerised standardised assessment may protect teachers and provide ballast that prevents such pressure. Also, it seems very unfair to ask teachers to close the attainment gap between rich and poor whilst offering them no support in determining what that gap might be.

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The Committee is particularly interested in views about:

- **the evidence base for moving away from the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN) and introducing standardised assessments at P1, P4, P7, S3;**

The SSLN is premised on national sampling measures that were designed to minimise the assessment burden on teachers and pupils. However, whilst the sample size is sufficient to build a national picture of pupil performance across Scotland, it is too small to provide useful data for individual local authorities and schools. Too few pupils are assessed to produce results that could reliably inform specific policy or teaching recommendations or allow any insight into how attainment varies by rurality or school composition. Furthermore, the SSLN measures attainment against broad and lightly specified curriculum levels. It is not clear, when the publication of survey results shows that attainment has gone up or down or shows that there is an attainment gap linked to poverty or gender, which particular understandings or skills in the bundle as a whole have contributed to the difference. These circumstances mean that educators are not clear what the SSLN reports have to say that could inform their own, specific practices or contexts. Although it is *about* them, it is not particularly helpful *to* them.

In terms of teacher understandings, the SSLN reports teacher confidence rather than teacher knowledge or agency. Confidence is not necessarily a measure of competence (Kruger and Dunning 1999).

- **what information the Government's assessments can provide that contribute to improving the educational outcomes of children and young people.**

Assessments can be used for different purposes, particularly to inform learning and teaching, and help schools monitor their impact.

Use of Data for Learning and Teaching

Children do not make linear, consistent progress in their learning. Research by the Education Datalab (Datalab 2015) on England's attainment scores showed that only 9% of children actually follow the expected progression pathways through Key Stages 1-4. In primary schools, just 55% of children attained the KS 2 score that was predicted from their KS 1 results; 45% either over- or under-performed. In secondary schools, the numbers are even lower: only 45% of children made the expected progress between KS 2 and 3 and just 33% made the expected progress between KS3 and 4. Children in P1 with very low initial attainment have particularly unpredictable future attainment. The authors comment "Providing pupils with the curriculum diet that is deemed suitable for the 'Level' they are working at may be doing them a profound disservice, if in reality their trajectories are much more varied."(p.13).

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This does not mean that standardised assessment is not worthwhile. The above understanding of how learners progress in unpredictable ways would be impossible without the data, for example. It also gives a snapshot of what children can and cannot do at any one point in time, it allows an overview of the cohort so that teachers can reflect on the adequacy of the curriculum mix and can monitor the impact of their teaching. However, the Datalab research raises questions about tracking and differentiation systems (including those in Scotland) that are rooted in assumptions of linear and consistent learning progress. It raises ethical questions about practices which routinely prescribe differentiated curriculum activities according to 'ability'. This is an issue about data use, but not solely about standardised assessment data. In some Scottish schools, for example, qualitative data from the nursery are used to set or stream children in P1 and some popular commercial literacy programmes actively recommend this. In some Scottish local authorities, non-standardised locally-devised tests are administered at the end of P1 and the bottom 20% of children automatically assigned to an 'intervention' program, with no detailed analysis about whether it meets their needs. Given the above points about progression, there are serious ethical questions about such practices, which reify the status quo, enshrine disadvantage and actively work against equitable teaching. Scrutiny of standardised assessment data can expose such practices and could become the prompt for national guidance around the ethics of interpreting and responding to data.

Use of Data to Monitor Impact

Standardised assessment can, under specific circumstances, raise pupil attainment. The evidence is from the USA where researchers investigated attainment rises across different states as they adopted standardised assessment policies at different times (e.g. Wong et al 2015). Polikoff, Korn and McFall (2018) indicate that a productive system requires assessments that generate data across a breadth of desired outcomes (which the SNSA does; in fact, the SNSA literacy outcome measures are far broader, and the results are given to the class teachers more quickly, than those of the other popular standardised assessments previously bought by local authorities.) Polikoff et al. also suggest that inferences need to be carefully drawn from the data, need to be transparent, fair, make sense to stakeholder groups and that the consequences need to be carefully monitored. This indicates the need for careful system design to regulate how this is done in Scotland. It would be helpful were attention paid to this.

There is a large literature on unintended negative impacts of standardised assessment, where schools or local authorities begin to 'game' the system by narrowing the curriculum, target all support at those sitting just below the threshold whilst ignoring those who are considerably below it, teach to the test, provide inordinate amounts of 'practice' (see Jennings and Sohn 2014 for an overview), or directly falsify results (Jacob and Levitt 2003). Scotland needs to be aware of these pitfalls in designing its system of standardised assessment, but it does not mean that a standardised assessment system is to be avoided. The issues that were originally raised in the Joseph Rowntree Report (Sosu and Ellis 2014) remain: we need a data-rich, knowledge rich educational

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community at every policy and practitioner level and in every stakeholder group that is involved in Scottish Education.

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