EDUCATION SCOTLAND’s WORK AND OUTCOMES: a response from the RSE Education Committee to the Scottish Parliament’s Education and Culture Committee

1. The Royal Society of Edinburgh’s Education Committee is pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Parliament’s Education and Culture Committee call for evidence on the work and outcomes of Education Scotland. We welcome the fact that the Parliamentary Committee is examining the operation of Education Scotland along with other key education bodies in Scotland. We hope this will become a regular feature of the Committee’s work programme. We would be pleased to discuss further any of the comments made in our response with members of the Parliamentary Committee.

Strategic Considerations

2. We recognise that Education Scotland has developed a corporate plan for the three years, 2013-2016. In doing so, Education Scotland has defined its key contributions in the form of the following six strategic objectives:

1: Build a world-class curriculum for all learners in Scotland.
2: Promote high-quality professional learning and leadership amongst education practitioners.
3: Build the capacity of education providers to improve their performance continuously.
4: Provide independent evaluation of education provision.
5: Influence national policy through evidence-based advice.
6: Improve our organisational capability and invest in our people.

3. While Education Scotland has published its strategies for objectives 1, 2, 3 and 5, at the time of preparing our response strategies for 4 and 6 would seem to be outstanding. We see the strategy papers as providing a detailed articulation of the strategic objectives in support of the implementation of the corporate plan. This is important both for Education Scotland staff in enabling them to deliver on the objectives and also for education providers and stakeholders with which Education Scotland is engaging and that it advises.

---

4. We are concerned that as we are nearing the final year of the current corporate plan, strategic documents have still to be published for two key objectives. The Committee might therefore enquire with Education Scotland as to the status of the outstanding strategy documents.

5. Strategic objective four makes reference to the generation of a strong body of external evidence which is produced independently from the providers of education services. This objective appears to focus on Education Scotland’s role in undertaking evaluative activities across Scottish education. Given the responsibilities of Education Scotland for curriculum development, it surely has to be considered to be itself an education provider. Therefore, its independence as an evaluator has to be questioned (this issue is further considered in paragraph 8 below). As an executive agency, Education Scotland is directly accountable to Scottish Ministers. In turn, Ministers are accountable to the Scottish Parliament for its work. It would, however, be useful if consideration were given to how Education Scotland determines and balances its priorities and how its own activities are independently evaluated.

6. In this context, key questions that the Committee might consider putting to Education Scotland include:

- How does it balance meeting the support needs of schools and teachers with its responsibilities for delivering Scottish Government priorities i.e. who does it see as being its main ‘customer’?
- How does it gather evidence of schools’ and teachers’ needs for support and how is the support that it provides evaluated?
- How does it ensure that Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) key messages and developments are communicated to schools, teachers, learners and parents? Does it have a communications strategy?
- How does it establish the extent to which schools and teachers value its services, particularly in relation to strategic objectives 1 and 2? Does it, for example, carry out customer satisfaction surveys?

7. Given that Education Scotland’s responsibilities span a diverse range of settings including early years, schools, colleges, community learning and development, and teacher education, it is important that it publishes its strategy on organisational capability as soon as possible. If it is to continue to have responsibilities relating to these areas, it needs to ensure that it has the capacity, capability and resource to do so. It also needs to consider how staff views are acted upon in support of organisational improvement. We note from Education Scotland’s employee survey of 2014 that staff were concerned about the way change is managed by the organisation. Only 28% of staff respondents felt that change is well managed and only 30% were of the view that when changes are made in Education Scotland that they are usually for the better.

---

Reviewing Education Scotland

8. The RSE expressed concern when it was announced that Learning and Teaching Scotland and HMIe would be brought together to form a single executive agency (Education Scotland) in 2011. There are inherent risks in a body that has both policy development and quality assurance responsibilities. This is the case where Education Scotland carries out the development work and has responsibility for evaluating those developments.

9. It is therefore very important that Education Scotland is subject to systematic and regular independent evaluation. In its Report, the Commission on School Reform recommended that Education Scotland should be independently reviewed no later than 2015. However, as far as we are aware, this recommendation has not been taken forward nor has there been any formal response to it. The Committee might therefore wish to explore the following questions with Education Scotland.

- How does it mitigate risk given its operating structure?
- What measures are in place to review its performance?
- To what extent does the HMIe part of Education Scotland evaluate the quality of the policies that have been developed as opposed to their implementation by schools?

Evaluation of the Curriculum for Excellence Reforms

10. One of Education Scotland’s key responsibilities has been leading the implementation of CfE. The Committee will be aware that the absence of a systematic programme of independent evaluation of the CfE reforms has been a long-standing concern of the RSE Education Committee. This is a challenge that extends beyond Education Scotland and encompasses the CfE Management Board. While there have been assertions of “success” in relation to the reforms, there is no proper evidence for this. The RSE has welcomed the Scottish Government’s decision to commission the OECD to undertake an independent review of CfE and we look forward to the publication of its findings later this year. However, it is important to make clear that the OECD review will not undertake an in-depth evaluation of the impact of CfE. Rather, it is adopting a broader, forward-looking perspective on how the CfE reforms have been implemented. It is very unfortunate that evaluation was not a central consideration at the outset of the reforms and that no dedicated baseline data were collected which would have enabled any effect of CfE to be assessed.

Curriculum, Learning, Teaching, Assessment and Support (CLTAS) forums

11. As a key strategic complement to the OECD review, the Scottish Government and Education Scotland are establishing CLTAS forums across curriculum areas and CfE stages. The purpose of these forums is “to secure, consolidate and embed improvements to the curriculum, learning, teaching, assessment and support, and maintain their relevance for all learners and ensure they are capable of delivering high-quality

---

4 Ibid.3
outcomes.” The underpinning rationale is to allow for continual evolution of the curriculum as opposed to having major educational reform every few years. The intention is that the CLTAS, which are led by Education Scotland senior education officers, include representatives from a range of backgrounds, including learners, teachers, parents, education authority staff, employers and industry, colleges and universities.

12. We have identified the following challenges in respect to the CLTAS:

- It will be important to ensure that the CLTAS provide a strong challenge function. Achieving consensus should not be their primary objective. How will the CLTAS ensure that they include and capture discordant views?

- In order that the forums are kept at a manageable size, we understand each one will comprise 15 to 20 people. How will the forums ensure that they are able to reflect the views of the much larger constituencies of education stakeholders? How will awareness of the forums’ work be made widely known to others?

- What body/organisation(s) will be responsible for systematically analysing the views of the forum representatives and who will have the final decision-making authority?

- Who will provide independent scrutiny of the forums?

3-18 Curriculum Impact Reports

13. Education Scotland has produced Curriculum Impact Reports for Literacy and English; RME; Creativity; Health and wellbeing; Social studies; Sciences; and Technologies. The RSE is most familiar with the latter two reports. These are intended to gauge the impact of changing curriculum on learners’ experiences and achievements. The reports seek to evaluate current practice in particular curricular areas, identify good practice and highlight key issues for discussion and further development.

14. We believe that the reports relating to the Sciences and Technologies provide a useful and detailed narrative, including the provision of good practice examples and guidance. However, we believe these reports would be strengthened if they were more strategic, providing greater direction on the actions that need to be taken to improve the delivery of learning in the sciences and the technologies.

15. The Sciences Update Report 5 contains 43 good practice examples, some of which demonstrate that very innovative practice is being adopted in schools. In order to increase their utility and conceptual clarity, we believe these reports would be strengthened if the examples were framed with reference to a set of criteria. For example, this could include the extent to which they are underpinned by disciplinary knowledge and skills, the applicability of the learning, the potential for transferring what has been learned into different learning areas and contexts, the extent to which the learning promotes higher order thinking skills and whether partnerships were developed in order to consolidate good practice.

5 http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/Sciences3to182013Update_tcm4-817013.pdf
How does Education Scotland ensure that the key messages and good practice examples in the curriculum impact reports are communicated to schools?

How does Education Scotland evaluate whether and to what extent teachers are acting on the reports?

16. The RSE is pleased that Education Scotland has committed to producing an aspect report on interdisciplinary learning (IDL) for publication in September 2016. While IDL has been recognised as an important curriculum element for many years, it requires better articulation, understanding and exemplification. We hope that Education Scotland will seize this opportunity to provide conceptual and practical clarification of what is to count as IDL. Along with the RSE, Education Scotland is one of the organisations represented on the IDL national action group. We therefore look forward to discussing with Education Scotland its plans for the IDL report.

Additional Information

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

Any enquiries about this Advice Paper should addressed to Mr William Hardie, Secretary to the RSE Education Committee (email: evidenceadvice@royalsoced.org.uk).

Responses are published on the RSE website (www.royalsoced.org.uk).

The Royal Society of Edinburgh, Scotland's National Academy, is Scottish Charity No. SC000470