Advice Paper 16-27
November 2016

The Performance of Education Scotland: Comments to the Scottish Parliament Education and Skills Committee

Summary

• Given its functions relating to curriculum development, Education Scotland has to be considered to be itself an education provider. Its independence as an evaluator needs therefore to be questioned. This reinforces the importance of ensuring that Education Scotland is subject to systematic and regular independent evaluation.

• A crucial question that needs to be addressed is how does Education Scotland balance meeting the needs of schools and teachers with its responsibilities for delivering Scottish Government priorities i.e. who does it see as being its main ‘customer’?

• It is clear that there has been an intense level of activity recently, particularly around the implementation of the Scottish Government’s Delivery Plan for Education. However, it is not clear to what extent Education Scotland has shaped the Plan or whether its primary role is that of delivery agent.

• Education Scotland’s responsibilities span a diverse range of settings and stages. If it is to continue to have these wide-ranging responsibilities, the Committee might wish to explore whether it has the required capacity, capability and resource.

Introduction

1. The Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) welcomes the invitation from the Scottish Parliament Education and Skills Committee to submit comments on the performance of Education Scotland. Given that the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) reforms have been led by Scottish Government, Education Scotland and the SQA, the comments we recently made in relation to the performance of the SQA\(^1\) are also relevant to the consideration of Education Scotland. We should be pleased to discuss our response with the Committee.

2. It is also worth considering the wider context of Scotland’s educational reforms. The RSE has had a long-standing concern about the absence of independent evaluation of the CfE reforms as the means by which we develop a proper understanding of their impact. The OECD report\(^2\) re-

\(^1\) RSE response on the performance of the SQA; November 2016

\(^2\) Improving Schools in Scotland; An OECD Perspective; December 2015
affirmed the RSE view that the evidence required to undertake an evaluation of CfE needed to be gathered to inform future developments. The OECD also emphasised the need to make explicit the connection between the stated ambitions for CfE and how they are to be achieved i.e. the strategy to be adopted. The RSE has been clear on the need for a coherent strategy for the CfE reforms, particularly with a view to avoiding fragmented approaches. This calls for careful attention to be paid to using appropriate processes for bringing about change. Expertise, views, experiences and critiques that extend beyond the national agencies and the CfE Management Board, and are independent of it, need to be taken into account. In particular, there needs to be widespread engagement of teachers in the process.

Reviewing Education Scotland

3. Education Scotland has defined its key contributions in the form of six strategic objectives. The fourth of these relates to Education Scotland’s role in providing independent evaluation of education provision. Its corporate plan expands upon this, referring as it does to Education Scotland’s responsibilities for generating 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 its own functions relating to curriculum development, Education Scotland has to be considered to be itself an education provider. Its independence as an evaluator needs therefore to be questioned.

4. This conflict was clearly in evidence when Education Scotland was tasked by Government with reviewing the CfE-related demands placed on schools by local authorities. It is clear that the volume and lack of clarity of national guidance from Education Scotland has contributed to unnecessary workload. The points made here also raise questions about the quality of advice available to Government. It is disconcerting that Education Scotland has been tasked with remediying problems to which its actions were a contributory factor.

5. Prior to its formation in 2011 (and at various points since then) the RSE raised concern about establishing Education Scotland as a single agency through the merger of Learning and Teaching Scotland and HMIe. 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.

6. In its submission, Education Scotland refers to its unique combination of roles and capabilities, with the ability to blend guidance, support and constructive challenge. However, the combination of different roles and blending of a variety of functions could lead to uncertainty, confusion and unease on the part of those who encounter Education Scotland’s services.

7. These points make clear the importance of ensuring that Education Scotland is subject to systematic and regular independent evaluation. In its Report in 2013, 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.

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3 Education Scotland Strategic Objectives: http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/about/remitandframework/strategicgoals.asp
5 Review of local authorities’ actions to tackle unnecessary bureaucracy and undue workload in schools; Education Scotland; September 2016 http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/27501/1/Review-of-Local-Authorities.pdf
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 independently evaluate its activities?
- 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?

8. The Scottish Government’s review of school governance provides a timely opportunity to consider the role and functions of Education Scotland. Among the review’s proposals, the creation of new education regions to ensure best practice is shared more systematically and to ensure improvement is driven collaboratively, could have significant implications for the future of Education Scotland.

**Determining Education Scotland’s Priorities**

9. A crucial question that needs to be addressed is how does Education Scotland balance meeting the needs of schools and teachers with its responsibilities for delivering Scottish Government priorities i.e. who does it see as being its main ‘customer’?

10. It is clear that there has been an intense level of activity recently, particularly around the implementation of the Scottish Government’s Delivery Plan for Education⁷. However, it is not clear to what extent Education Scotland, in its position of being able to ascertain the support needs of teachers, has influenced the actions set out within the Plan. Has Education Scotland been central to shaping the Plan or has it been tasked with delivering actions which have been devised by Government?

11. The RSE has been clear on the need to ensure that realistic timescales are set that enable widespread engagement of teachers and others in progressing the Plan. We have expressed concern that the very short timescales for some of the actions militates against wide consultation. An overarching criticism of the implementation of CfE and the national qualifications is that there has been too much guidance material and not enough time for practitioners to reflect upon the key developments to inform their own practice. In order to guard against repeating past mistakes, it will be important to ensure that the Delivery Plan is able to find a balance between unreasonable delay and over-rapid introduction that does not have appropriate resources and preparation.

12. The questions posed in paragraphs nine and ten raise issues not only in relation to the setting of original priorities but also the changing nature of priorities and the implications this has for Education Scotland (and those it works with) in terms of balancing and resourcing its activities. For example, as a strategic complement to the OECD review, in 2014 Education Scotland committed to establishing Curriculum, Learning, Teaching, Assessment and Support (CLTAS) forums across curriculum areas and CfE stages. The underpinning rationale for their establishment was to allow for continual evolution of the curriculum as opposed to having disruptive educational reform every few years. While we understand that a number of the forums have been established, others remain outstanding and it is not clear when or indeed if they will be created. Even for those that have been set up, there seems to be very little

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⁷ Scottish Government Delivery Plan for Education; June 2016 
information in the public domain about how they are operating. It would appear that Education Scotland has had to shift resource away from this strategic development in order to address new and additional priorities.

**Resourcing**

13. Education Scotland’s responsibilities span a diverse range of settings including the early years, schools, colleges, community learning and development, teacher and prison education. However, we understand that Education Scotland’s staff complement has reduced in recent times. If Education Scotland is to continue to have these wide-ranging responsibilities, the Committee might wish to explore whether it has the required capacity, capability and resource.

14. We note from Education Scotland’s employee survey of 2015⁸ that staff are concerned about the way change is managed by the organisation. Only 21% of staff respondents felt that change is well managed and only 26% were of the view that when changes are made in Education Scotland that they are usually for the better. Staff have also expressed concern about how they view the management of Education Scotland. It is of concern that the staff perspective has worsened compared to the previous survey year.

**Breadth of course choice**

15. The RSE has consistently highlighted the potential for narrowing of the curriculum in the senior phase, particularly in relation to the number of qualification courses that can be taken by learners in S4. In recent guidance⁹ Education Scotland has sought to address this issue by setting out that schools should be planning for young people to follow between six and eight qualification courses from S4. However, continued vigilance will be required here as it relies on schools striking a balance between preparing learners for qualifications in S3 without compromising learners’ entitlement to a broad general education up to the end of S3. This will be important in ensuring that learners are not disadvantaged in terms of the course options and pathways which are available to them.

**Additional Information**

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

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

Responses are published on the RSE website (https://www.rse.org.uk/)

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⁸ Education Scotland People Survey; 2015

⁹ Letter and Guidance to Secondary Schools; Education Scotland; May 2016