Education and Skills Committee Chamber debate

Scottish Qualifications Authority, Education Scotland, Scottish Funding Council and Skills Development Scotland – performance and role

1. The Education and Skills Committee assessed the performance of Education Scotland, Scottish Qualifications Authority, the Scottish Funding Council and Skills Development Scotland in November 2016. Some of the evidence received was notable and raised issues that merit debate by Parliament as a whole. Perhaps the most notable evidence was concerns raised by teachers in relation to the SQA (see annexe A).

2. Such a debate is timely since all four bodies are currently part of the Enterprise and Skills Review (SDS and SFC) or the Governance Review (SQA and Education Scotland). The Committee therefore considers this to be an opportune time for the Parliament to debate whether there is justification for the role of some of these organisations to change, and also to highlight where these organisations are functioning well and are appreciated by stakeholders.

3. The intention is that the debate will:
   - highlight more widely to Parliament and the Government evidence on the performance of these bodies, and let non-Committee members share their views on performance;
   - highlight and discuss the associated Government reviews of these organisations, to inform work by this Committee and others on the future roles of these organisations; and
   - be relevant to the work of a number of other parliamentary committees currently looking at issues relating to some of these bodies.

Influential evidence

4. The Committee wishes to highlight to Parliament the impact and credibility of evidence where frontline staff can express themselves with candour. While the Committee's survey and its informal meeting with teachers on SQA and Education Scotland were not based on random samples, the themes from this work aligned with, and were further substantiated by, anonymous comments and submissions from teachers and evidence from academics and organisations. Such consistent themes across different forms of evidence demonstrated that the credibility of concerns. For example anonymous submissions and comments at a meeting with teachers substantiated the survey result on teacher trust in SQA. 67% of 648 respondents disagreed or disagreed strongly with the statement that “[SQA’s] customers and users trust it to get it right for them.” A snapshot of some of the concerns raised by teachers is contained in Annexe A.

SPICe survey results

5. The submissions pages below have links to the Committee papers for the evidence sessions with each body, including a SPICe issues paper for each session that summarises the evidence.
SQA evidence submissions

Education Scotland evidence submissions

SFC evidence submissions

SDS evidence submissions

Supplementary evidence
6. The Committee thanks the four bodies for their time and evidence, including their supplementary submissions that provide further information on issues raised by the Committee during evidence sessions.

SQA supplementary submission

Education Scotland supplementary submission

SFC supplementary submission

SDS supplementary submission

Key issues
7. Essentially the Committee’s scrutiny on general performance and role has centred around 7 fundamental questions and the Committee welcomes contributions during the debate on these issues:

1. Are their core functions correct or are there alternative approaches?

2. Are these bodies delivering on their core functions?

3. Should the roles of these organisations or their structures change as a result of the Governance Review or the Enterprise and Skills Review?

4. Can they demonstrate that performance, including reflecting best use of taxpayers’ money?

5. Are they sufficiently mindful of equalities when delivering their functions?

6. Are these bodies sufficiently independent of Government, acting as a sufficient advisory and challenge function to Government?

7. Do these bodies respond effectively to the needs of stakeholders and to constructive advice?

8. A brief summary of some of the key issues raised in evidence on each organisation is detailed in annexe B. These are extracts from published SPICe issues papers that informed the Committee’s scrutiny.
Material for debate

SPICE has also produced its standard format material for debates document which includes relevant reference material such as relevant reports, media coverage and written answers. This is available for Members and their staff here:

http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/21855.aspx

Terms of the debate

9. Please note that the debate is not intended to cover figures in the draft budget on proposed funding for these bodies in 2017-18. This is to ensure that the debate does not pre-empt the Finance and Constitution Committee’s scrutiny or the scrutiny by Parliament as a whole. The Committee’s findings in relation to the draft budget are yet to be published and therefore will not be mentioned during the debate.
Annexe A

Teachers’ submissions

The Committee received over thirty submissions from teachers, many of whom chose to remain anonymous. The Committee also received submissions from academics, and other stakeholders.

The main issues to come out of the submissions in relation to the SQA were: that SQA’s documentation is unclear; assessment standards are not well-understood; there are too many changes; marking is inconsistent; and there is a tendency towards box-ticking approaches. Some of the negative comments from teachers are set out below:

- I am afraid that my current experience of the SQA is almost entirely negative … Documentation is highly complex, repetitive and difficult to access (Anon 4)
- In the short term teachers are still struggling to keep up to date and make sense of the SQA documentation. SQA has not been able to communicate information in a clear concise manner. (Anon 13)
- Teachers have had to spend time on figuring out the over complicated administration of the course rather than the pedagogy of teaching only to be informed that things are to be changed for the next session. Every change the SQA make has a knock on effect. Old assessments have to be shredded, new ones printed. Prior learning needs to be adapted etc. (A Riddell)
- There have been so many mistakes – from the exam to the UASP and corrections and changes in information that we no longer trust anything that comes from them. We do not feel supported so we are spending time on paperwork checking instead of helping the students. (Anon 15)
- Good technique and good science loses marks if the correct hoops are not jumped through, a holistic marking system (such as that used by the [International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme] for practical work) would give a much fairer method of marking. (Anon 17)
- SQA has lost the respect and trust of Scottish teachers … people are perplexed by the marking … published materials are verbose and opaque. (Anon 19)
- The assessment of portfolio work is hugely inconsistent leading to wildly varying marks between candidates in any given year and from one year to the next. (Anon 20)
- I cannot communicate strongly enough how discouraging it is to see keen, talented, hardworking pupils walk away from my subject with a C when they deserved an A or decide not to continue with Art because they cannot deal with the physical workload. (Anon 21)
- It’s a lottery; not fit for purpose; very worrying; it’s a jumping through hoops exercise. (Comments collected by the Scottish Association of Geography Teachers)
The SQA was simply not for listening and six years on it has taken the threat of industrial action to alleviate these concerns … we still have a myriad of documents and an assignment process which is deeply flawed. (Anon 28)

The SQA has not appeared to be willing to listen to teachers’ concerns, nor to act upon them. (Anon 37)

The idea that teachers […] without significant experience of writing their own unit level assessments, would embrace the “opportunity” to write a sufficient number of their own assessments to meet unit reassessment needs was somewhat optimistic. (Anon 32)

Why should a teacher have to (and I have) be an SQA marker to truly understand what is expected? this information should be shared freely for the benefit of all our pupils. (Anon 39)

The purpose of listing the comments above is to provide a flavour of the depth and consistency of the concerns. Not all submissions from teachers were negative. One respondent, who works in an independent school and has experience working with examination boards from across the UK, suggested that the SQA was “by far the best of the major awarding bodies in the UK” (Anon 32). North East Scotland College wrote in favourable terms about the SQA and many (but not all) of the teachers’ had positive personal experience of speaking to or working with the SQA. However, negative comments predominated and were largely around the design, delivery, supporting documentation, and marking of national qualifications.
Annexe B

Scottish Qualifications Agency

The SPICe issues papers summarised issues raised in evidence on all 4 organisations – extracts of these papers are in italics below.

The Committee held an evidence session with Dr Janet Brown on 23 November 2016. One of the key themes in submissions was the impact on teachers of multiple changes being made to SQA requirements. This, together with the volume and complexity of information appear to underpin many of the negative comments about the organisation.

Janet Brown outlined plans to simplify arrangements:

“Our have committed to reviewing and streamlining our documentation. As we move into the revised assessment process for national qualifications, which we are just starting, that documentation will be completely revised and will be much simpler.”

However, the decision to remove unit assessments means that Curriculum for Excellence qualifications have not yet reached the ‘steady state’ that was expected by this year, and will require changes to documentation at fairly short notice for the start of 17/18 academic year. Janet Brown stated that introducing the changes required extra resources as well as the engagement of teachers:

“We are in the midst of that planning process, and we expect it to have finished by the end of November or the beginning of December.

“We fully expect to require additional resources. The people who help to develop and deliver the qualifications are the teachers of Scotland. We will be asking teachers to engage with us on that, which will be a challenge.”

She described the timetable as “hugely challenging”, particularly as “it is not appropriate for there to be any errors.”

The Committee discussed the structure of the Senior Phase with both the SQA and Education Scotland. On the question of whether National 4 should have an external assessment, Janet Brown said:

“That is one of the conversations that Scotland as a whole needs to have.”

Education Scotland

The Committee held an evidence session with Education Scotland on 30 November 2016. While Education Scotland did not attract the same volume of written submissions as the SQA, similar points were made about the volume and complexity of guidance. Another key theme was a perception of a conflict of interest in an organisation that both develops and inspects the curriculum.
Graeme Logan told the Committee that about 20,000 pages of examples and case studies have been built up, but that they were planning to remove around 90% of these.

“We are stripping that resource right back to the core materials as a result of the OECD directive on streamlining and clarifying, and that is a dramatic change.”

Asked about the issue of ‘conflict of interest’ Bill Maxwell referred to:

“synergies that we can get from picking up evaluation evidence from one part of our organisation, which operates under strict firewalls to ensure that it reports without fear or favour.”

Asked to give an example of where inspection evidence has prompted policy change, Bill Maxwell referred to:

- issuing their statement in May about transition from the Broad General Education to the Senior Phase
- changes to assessment materials and guidance, after they highlighted the amount of assessment
- heavy influence on the assessment model in the national improvement framework, and advice that “standardised assessment needed to be placed in the context of teachers’ professional judgment.”

In discussing the structure of the senior phase, both Graeme Logan and Bill Maxwell emphasised that it should be considered as a whole. Graeme Logan said:

“If you look at S4 in isolation, it could look as though the curriculum goes from broad to narrow, but that is not the design of CfE. It is a three-year experience, with lots of opportunities to make choices, to look at different pathways and to build up a wide portfolio of achievements and skills.”

Bill Maxwell also considered that internal assessment was appropriate for National 4:

“In my view, the answer is not necessarily to introduce an external exam to give it “credibility”.

On monitoring the progress of CfE, Bill Maxwell referred to evidence from inspections and a review of the level of bureaucracy in councils. He described the collective decision making in CfE and how each part of the system is taking action following the completion of the first full cohort of CfE from S1 to S6.

“To be perfectly straight with you, we have just gone through the first complete run of the new curriculum for excellence framework up to S6. We are all learning lessons from that. How we implemented CFE was a collective decision. Out of that first run is action on our side to reduce and clarify the guidance and to make it easier for teachers to access, which they appreciate. The SQA is taking action to cut the assessment burden. There are also
actions that are very much for local authorities and schools to take to make sure that they are fully embedding approaches that make it possible for schools to get the best value out of the new curricular framework.”

**Scottish Funding Council**

An issue that several members of the Committee pursued with the SFC when it gave oral evidence was whether – given that it is a public body at arms-length from government - there was sufficient distance between the SFC and the Scottish Government. The specific concern raised was whether the SFC was performing its role in challenging / giving advice to Scottish Ministers on matters relating to further and higher education. Relatedly there was discussion of the lack of transparency in the role that the SFC plays in giving advice to the Scottish Government; specifically on the occasions that it may wish to wish to challenge the policy direction taken by Scottish Ministers.

The enterprise and skills review that is currently in phase 2, led by the Cabinet Secretary for the Economy, Jobs and Fair Work Keith Brown MSP, was a central focus for discussion by the Committee when the SFC gave evidence. In light of the discussions with the SFC on this matter, the Committee held a follow up session with Keith Brown MSP on 7 December 2016 to find out more about the plans for phase 2 of the enterprise and skills review as these related to matters within its portfolio.

In *supplementary written evidence* for the meeting on 7 December 2016, Universities Scotland highlighted that the introduction of a new single board with a remit to oversee the governance of post-16 education bodies as well as enterprise and skills agencies was a significant issue for higher education institutions (HEIs).

In addition, a number of other specific concerns were raised by Committee members regarding the remit and actions surrounding the enterprise and skills review. These included:

- A need for greater clarity as to the rationale for replacing individual boards with one single board for all enterprise and skills activity.
- The perceived risk felt by universities of ONS reclassification, with all the accompanying risk to the autonomy of the sector, if it is a Scottish Minister that is appointed as chair of the new single skills board.
- The potential risk that within one single overarching board, specific concerns felt by individual bodies (e.g. those relating to post-16 education) may not get the attention or priority they would under current arrangements.

**Skills Development Scotland**

Administered by SDS, the Modern Apprenticeship programme delivers around 25,000 new apprenticeship starts each year. The Scottish Government is committed to delivering 30,000 MA starts by 2020, with a focus on increasing the number of highly skilled apprenticeships (see First Minister’s statement, 25 May 2016). Modern Apprenticeship *statistics for 2014/15* show the number of starts by framework, level, age-group, gender and local authority area.
During 2015/16 SDS helped fund 25,818 MA starts and spent £76.3 million on the programme.

One of the Developing the Young Workforce key performance indicators (KPI 7) sets a target “to reduce to 60 per cent the percentage of Modern Apprenticeship frameworks where the gender balance is 75:25 or worse by 2021”. At the time of the 1st Annual report (December 2015) the rate stood at 72%. The most recent figure, for 2015/16, is 74%. SDS published its MA Equalities action plan on 2 December 2015 setting out its long term approach to improving equal participation in the MA programme. The agency will report on this plan annually with the first report due in early 2017.

The issue of occupational segregation within the Modern Apprenticeship programme was raised during the Committee’s evidence session with SDS on 9 November. Damien Yeates, Chief Executive, highlighted the various actions SDS has been delivering over the years to address this; however: “I remind the committee—I think that you are all familiar with this—that much of the challenge is societal: it is deep seated, it is cultural and it is based on perceptions and views that are formed over many years.”

The Committee received seven submissions from Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce (AGCC), the Auditor General, SCVO, Colleges Scotland, Scottish Branch of the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (SOLACE Scotland), CBI Scotland and the Scottish Local Authorities Economic Development Group (SLAED).

The Convener’s post-evidence letter to SDS highlighted the evidence received on SDS’ engagement at a local level:

“The Committee noted that you were robust in your rebuttals of some of the criticism of SDS by Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce and the Committee has written to the Chamber to offer it the chance to respond. The Committee considered that some of the AGCC comments on SDS’ performance were not isolated remarks and were mirrored by some of the other bodies that submitted evidence to the Committee.

Scottish Local Authorities Economic Development Group (SLAED), the SCVO, SOLACE, Colleges Scotland and CBI Scotland responded to the Committee and made, at times, similar points to the AGCC…I particularly bring to your attention the submission from SLAED, which represents some of your key local partners.”