



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 26 April 2017

Session 5



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EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

12th Meeting 2017, Session 5

CONVENER

*James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)

*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

*Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP)

*Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)

*Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP)

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)

*Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD)

*Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*Ross Thomson (North East Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Alan Armstrong (Education Scotland)

Alastair Delaney (Education Scotland)

Dr Bill Maxwell (Education Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Roz Thomson

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament
Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 26 April 2017

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

**Decision on Taking Business in
 Private**

The Convener (James Dornan): I welcome everyone to the 12th meeting in 2017 of the Education and Skills Committee, and I remind everyone—including myself—to turn their mobile phones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

The first item of business is a decision on whether to take item 3, which is consideration of the work programme up to the summer recess, in private. Are members content to take item 3 in private?

Members indicated agreement.

**“Performance and Role of Key
 Education and Skills Bodies”
 (Education Scotland Response)**

10:01

The Convener: Item 2 is an evidence session with Education Scotland on its response to the committee’s report on the “Performance and Role of Key Education and Skills Bodies”. I welcome to the meeting Dr Bill Maxwell, chief executive; Alan Armstrong, strategic director; and Alastair Delaney, chief operating officer. I understand that Dr Maxwell wishes to make a short opening statement.

Dr Bill Maxwell (Education Scotland): Thank you, convener. We welcome very much this opportunity to discuss the work of Education Scotland further with the committee. We have given detailed consideration to the report that the committee published in January on the performance and role of the national education bodies, and I start by saying that we are committed to taking its conclusions and recommendations fully into account as we plan to increase our impact and effectiveness in the years ahead.

We provided a written response to the committee’s report, and I am sure that there are areas of that response that you will want to explore further. However, it might be helpful for me to open the session by illustrating how we are continuing to develop the range of our work, and to do that by picking out three different pieces of work from our current activities that have come to fruition since our last appearance in front of the committee. They illustrate three distinct but complementary aspects of the role and functions that we undertake to promote improvement in the education system.

First, in our curricular and pedagogical support role, we are taking forward a strong programme of activity to help local authorities and their teachers to improve their understanding of standards within the new curriculum, particularly in broad general education. That has involved the production of the well-received new benchmarks for curriculum for excellence levels across the curriculum and, equally, if not more importantly, a programme of support for the use of those benchmarks and the moderation of standards across teachers and across schools. We now have a team of development officers who are working directly with designated local authority officers to build capacity consistently across the country, with a particular focus on assessing literacy and numeracy, and we are gathering and disseminating exemplars of good practice.

Secondly, in our inspection role, we published “Quality and improvement in Scottish education 2012-2016” last month. That report draws out trends and highlights common strengths and weaknesses in the quality of professional practice and provision, looking across all the areas in which we undertake inspection and evaluation work ranging from the early years to adult learning. The report clearly illustrates how we use the unique evidence base that we build up through first-hand observation of what is happening in education establishments across the country to provide feedback to practitioners that is designed to feed into their planning for their next steps in the improvement journey. Over the next few months, our staff will be very actively promoting dialogue about how practitioners can best address the improvement themes that the report identifies. I had the pleasure of launching the report in an exemplar of a secondary school that is showing how that can be, and is being, done on the ground.

Thirdly, in the first part of the year, we have been developing further our central role in providing professional support for an intensive and highly targeted national improvement programme—the Scottish attainment challenge. As the pupil equity fund phase of the challenge was launched, for example, we worked with policy colleagues to provide a series of conferences that engaged directly with almost every headteacher in the country. Our team has provided professional advice to support the design and implementation of the programme and we are playing a key role in ensuring that headteachers are supported to make evidence-based decisions about how they use the funding that is coming to them. That involves direct support from our attainment adviser team and other staff, the development of the interventions for equity online resource, which is a pathfinder area for our national improvement hub, and the work that we are now taking forward with the Education Endowment Foundation to develop a customised Scottish version of its internationally renowned evidence toolkit.

That is a brief snapshot of three dimensions in which we continue to strive to apply our role and functions to drive improvement for the benefit of Scottish learners. We would be pleased to elaborate further on those developments if the committee so wishes but, equally, I am conscious that members will already have other specific issues that they wish to pursue. With that in mind, I conclude my opening remarks. We stand ready to respond and discuss any aspect that the committee wishes to explore.

The Convener: Thank you, Dr Maxwell. In your response to the committee, you highlight the recently published “Quality and improvement in Scottish education 2012-2016”, which summarises

the themes that arose from inspections in that period. What does that tell us about how well and consistently curriculum for excellence is being adopted throughout the country and what is being achieved?

Dr Maxwell: That is the report that I mentioned in my opening remarks. We see it very much as a form of feedback to the system about what is going well and what needs more work to improve it. It is a mixed picture. We certainly see evidence of some strengths. For example, we increasingly see evidence of increased motivation and engagement of young people in their learning and more active learning going on in schools throughout the country. Such evidence comes only through inspection.

We have also picked out five key themes that we feel schools and local authorities need to take further with national support to get the full benefits of curriculum for excellence.

Alastair Delaney oversaw the programme for pulling together the QISE report in his director of inspection role and may want to elaborate.

Alastair Delaney (Education Scotland): It is important that we understand the basis for the report. It is a gathering together of all our inspection evidence over the 2012 to 2016 period, as well as other evaluative activity and other engagements that we have with the system. It is primarily aimed at a professional audience because the detail in it is meant to help that audience to engage with particular strengths and weaknesses across all sectors in all parts of the education firmament.

The five key themes address the current situation but the evidence that is in the report has been fed into a variety of sources over the period. We have stood back at the end and looked for the bigger, strategic direction things that we wanted to put into the system. It is an overview rather than the continuous feedback that we have provided to relevant bodies and the system as a whole during the period of the report.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Dr Maxwell, I will ask you about the response that you gave to the committee following our unanimous report on the evidence that we heard. In that response, you made it clear that you were addressing our concerns about Education Scotland’s role and its relationship with the Scottish Government and about the implementation and evaluation of CFE. In sections 1 and 3 of that response, you make clear what should happen. In other words, you state in those sections six different things that ought to happen. Why did you not address what has happened and the committee’s concerns?

Dr Maxwell: In our response, we aimed to address the committee's concerns and explain what has happened. If you wish to highlight a specific point on which that has not occurred, I would be happy to pick up on it.

Liz Smith: Absolutely. Section 1 is about the relationship.

Dr Maxwell: There are six bullet points in section 1.

Liz Smith: Yes—they are statements of fact about the way in which the relationship should work. In section 3, there are similar statements about how Education Scotland ought to interact with curriculum for excellence.

I have a specific question for you. Why did you give us statements of fact, rather than explaining what had actually happened and addressing the deep-seated concerns that you acknowledged in your previous appearance before the committee, on 30 November 2016?

Dr Maxwell: Those statements of fact reflect what has happened over a period of time in terms of the way in which the relationship between Education Scotland, Government and the CFE management board has operated, and how it was set up to operate.

Liz Smith: If that is the case, do you feel, given that some of the recent educational results have been very disappointing, that that relationship, and the way in which Education Scotland has been operating, is satisfactory?

Dr Maxwell: I am satisfied that we continue to play a productive and positive role in helping to improve the system by following the structure that is outlined in our response to the committee.

As we described in referring to the QISE report, one of our key roles is to gather evidence from the front line and feed that back to the management board and to our partners in Government and local government with a view to identifying where improvements most need to be made. We can then work with partners to generate activity such as the work that we are doing on the moderation of standards in literacy and numeracy. In that way, we will address the areas in which there is uncomfortable feedback and evidence of weaknesses, and we need to keep on doing that. I do not think that everything will be perfectly resolved; there will be a constant on-going process of improvement—

Liz Smith: I want to address the very point that you have made, and in particular your comment that you do not think that the situation will ever be resolved—if I was a parent, I would be very concerned about that.

I remind you of some of the considerable changes that have taken place under Education Scotland. There has been a huge volume of guidance over the period in which curriculum for excellence has been in place. Guidance has changed—in fact, a large quantity of guidance has now been discarded. Unit assessments were removed and have now been reinstated. We saw the publication of what I thought were very worrying statistics in *The Herald* last week in relation to the concerns around national 4 and national 5. In your own report, which was published a few weeks ago, you raised considerable concerns about broad general education.

Are you not embarrassed about that situation, and about the fact that, in your reply to the genuine concerns that were raised unanimously by the committee, all that we got was a statement of the facts and of how the system is supposed to work?

Dr Maxwell: As I said, I am happy to describe some more specific actions in the context of issues that have arisen and have required action, where things have not gone as one might have wished from the start.

One example is the tackling bureaucracy agenda, in which issues appeared over a period of time. The management board became aware of that when we began to see, in evidence from inspections and so on, that assessment overload was occurring to some degree. We fed that back, which resulted in the management board setting up the assessment and national qualifications group. We then mounted an inspection process, based on the recommendations in the “Curriculum for Excellence Working Group on Tackling Bureaucracy” report, to identify which local authorities were making the most impact on reducing bureaucracy and which were not, and we took action as a result of that. What I am trying to describe is a process of continuous feedback and improvement that helps to address those issues.

Liz Smith: The bottom line is that parents, teachers and pupils across Scotland see that we are currently not doing nearly as well as we should be and that many of the results—not all of them, but many—are not nearly good enough. That is a concern.

In our report, we highlighted the fact that we found it very difficult indeed to get to a level at which we could understand what decisions have been taken by the curriculum for excellence management board and who was responsible for making them. Can you explain today, on the record, where you think that things have gone wrong in the decision-making process for curriculum for excellence, and assure us that you are addressing those issues rather than simply

giving us, as I said, a blueprint for how things ought to be working?

10:15

Dr Maxwell: We play our part as a member of the curriculum for excellence management board which, as you know, was set up by ministers as a vehicle for promoting collective responsibility and development of decision making around policy issues relating to the development of curriculum for excellence. We do not take decisions unilaterally, any more than other partners on the board do. We contribute—

Liz Smith: Are you embarrassed about the delivery of curriculum for excellence?

Dr Maxwell: No. I point to the assessment by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development which, in referring to the development process for curriculum for excellence, described the management board as “fit for purpose” in taking forward a collective commitment across the education system to move from high-level policy to practice in the curriculum. That does not mean that every decision will have been perfectly formed the first time round, but it is important that the board and all the partners in it take collective responsibility for addressing, and responding vigorously to, issues where they appear. We are very keen to see that the board does that.

Liz Smith: I will finish on that point. You are not embarrassed, and you feel that you have done a very good job in the circumstances.

Dr Maxwell: I feel that, although nothing is perfect, the curriculum for excellence management board has been a good vehicle for developing curriculum for excellence thus far. There is more work to be done to realise fully the benefits of curriculum for excellence, which—as I am sure the committee is well aware—is a major reform programme.

The Convener: I have a question, but I will let Tavish Scott in first.

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): We take the point about the development of curriculum for excellence, but the criticism that many have expressed concerns its implementation and the management board’s ability to carry that out.

I want to follow up on Liz Smith’s point. Dr Maxwell, you said in your opening remarks that Education Scotland would now have the key role—I think that you used that phrase—in providing guidance to headteachers to enable them to make decisions on the pupil equity fund. Did I get that right? Was that what you said?

Dr Maxwell: We have a key role, yes—a leadership role.

Tavish Scott: Has that been discussed with the curriculum for excellence management board?

Dr Maxwell: There is a governing mechanism for the Scottish attainment challenge.

Tavish Scott: Has it been discussed with the curriculum for excellence management board?

Dr Maxwell: The pupil equity fund and the Scottish attainment challenge?

Tavish Scott: Yes, and—

Dr Maxwell: The Scottish attainment challenge has.

Tavish Scott: Education Scotland is going to play a role in giving guidance to schools. Is that correct?

Dr Maxwell: We are helping schools to access appropriate guidance.

Tavish Scott: What does that mean?

Dr Maxwell: I am sure that you are familiar with the Scottish attainment challenge, which quite deliberately asks headteachers to make decisions that suit the needs of their pupils in the way that they use the equity funding that comes to them. We are very keen that they do that on the basis of evidence of what works. Of course, there is no one single solution that every school across Scotland should be using. We provide access to that evidence.

Tavish Scott: What is that evidence?

Dr Maxwell: If—

Tavish Scott: How many pages of evidence are headteachers now getting before they are meant to make an assessment of what is best for their school?

Dr Maxwell: The word “pages” is entirely misleading. We have an online—

Tavish Scott: What are they getting, then? Tell us exactly.

Dr Maxwell: We have an online resource called interventions for equity.

Tavish Scott: How big is that online resource?

Dr Maxwell: Any individual headteacher can go in and explore an aspect of that resource to find useful information. We are getting very good feedback on that from headteachers who are looking for guidance.

As I mentioned in my opening remarks, we are seeking to contract with the Education Endowment Foundation, which was set up by the Sutton Trust and provides access to an internationally

renowned assessment of different interventions that can be used to improve performance.

Tavish Scott: You have told the committee that a range of information is now available to headteachers. Was that range of information carefully considered by the curriculum for excellence management board so that there would be a clear understanding across all the agencies—chaired, of course, by a civil servant of the Scottish Government—of what would be available for headteachers? Was that discussed in detail prior to what you have just described being made available to headteachers?

Dr Maxwell: The forum for that discussion has primarily been the governance mechanism for the Scottish attainment challenge, which involves local authorities, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers Scotland, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and so on. There is an advisory committee for that—

Tavish Scott: Now I am totally confused. Is it correct that the range of information has not been discussed at the curriculum for excellence management board? Was it discussed at a different board, or a different meeting?

Dr Maxwell: Both things are true. The Scottish attainment challenge has its own governance mechanism, which gives detailed consideration to how it goes forward, but cross-references are undoubtedly made and the management board is fully aware of what is happening in the Scottish attainment challenge.

Tavish Scott: The committee's previous criticisms were about the lack of joined-up work between all the different agencies, including your own. The joined-up work would mean that, when information is provided to schools, it has been thought through by all the agencies in whatever forum is appropriate. Has that happened in this case?

Dr Maxwell: It has, in the appropriate forum, which is the Scottish attainment challenge governing mechanism.

Tavish Scott: So we can be very clear that, if the committee were to come back to this, the Scottish Qualifications Authority, local authorities, Education Scotland and all the others know about, and have agreed to, exactly what is being presented to headteachers as the resource that will allow them to make decisions about the pupil equity fund.

Dr Maxwell: Indeed—for all those things, those bodies have been involved in the governing mechanism that is appropriate for the Scottish attainment challenge. Local authorities and COSLA are full members of that process. I should add that an academic adviser has been appointed

to the Scottish attainment challenge to ensure the quality of that evidence.

Tavish Scott: So, on Liz Smith's point that we do not want the same confusion again that we have seen in the past, we can be sure that headteachers will be able to come and sit in the chair that you are in now and tell us that the resource has been helpful because it has been agreed and understood across all the agencies. There has been no duplication and 1,820 pages of this, that and the next thing—that has been sorted out.

Dr Maxwell: As I said, we have taken the point—the committee has raised it a few times—that it used to be simple for teachers to find good-quality evidence from a one-stop shop. That is absolutely what we are seeking to do.

Tavish Scott: Okay. Thank you.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): On that point, can you explain why headteachers have to gather all the evidence themselves? Is it not one of Education Scotland's roles to provide examples of good practice? Headteachers should be choosing what they are going to spend the money on, rather than having to research new means and processes by which they can deliver in various areas.

Dr Maxwell: I am sorry if I have not been clear; that is exactly what we are trying to do. We are giving headteachers easy access to a one-stop-shop online resource that will enable them to look at examples.

Johann Lamont: With respect, it is not Education Scotland that is doing the research.

Dr Maxwell: We provide the portal for headteachers so that they do not have to hunt for evidence in many different places or dig around in research journals.

Johann Lamont: I am sceptical about the idea that simply parcelling up some money and giving it to headteachers gives them a sense of autonomy and control. The system would be more likely to work if headteachers had access to resources and advice on how they could spend that money, not through a one-stop shop but from Scotland's education agency. Is it not the job of Education Scotland, as the education agency, to say, "These things work—we will not give you examples of things that do not work"?

Dr Maxwell: We are doing that by giving headteachers quality-assured evidence. The Education Endowment Foundation resource, in which interventions are tested thoroughly against evidence of their impact, is very helpful. We point headteachers towards quality-assured interventions and invite them to select from those,

while pointing out other interventions of which they should steer clear.

Johann Lamont: I do not want to labour the point, but is not it the job of Education Scotland, as the education agency in Scotland, to identify interventions that work, and to work with local authorities and schools to implement those interventions?

Dr Maxwell: Yes.

The Convener: That is what Dr Maxwell is saying.

Dr Maxwell: Exactly—that is our job. We take very seriously our full responsibility to provide the guidance for which Johann Lamont is asking. We provide access to a range of quality-assured interventions from which headteachers can select to suit their local circumstances, given that—as I am sure that the committee is well aware—there is no single magic bullet that will cure inequity.

The Convener: It seems that, in reality, the information that Johann Lamont and Tavish Scott are seeking is there, but there appears to be some confusion about exactly what is available.

At the committee's previous meeting with Education Scotland, we discussed the need for clarity; the same points are being raised today. The answers may well lie in the information that has been mentioned, although that is not the case with some of the points that Liz Smith raised. Nonetheless, it has taken us forever to get to the point at which we can say to headteachers, "Yes—the information that you are seeking is there." There should be more clarity on where the responsibility for implementation lies. We should not have to ask questions about the attainment challenge fund, for example—that information should be readily and easily available.

If we struggle to figure out where the responsibility for implementation lies, how can others do it? We must ensure that the information is clearer, transparent and available to everybody who wants it. It is clear that—to go back to Johann Lamont's question—Education Scotland is doing what an education agency should be doing, but it has taken us a long time to get to the point at which that is evident.

Dr Maxwell: We make great efforts to ensure that headteachers, as the people who really matter, are clear about what is available. We ran a series of conferences with the Scottish Government that gave almost every headteacher in the country—all those who receive pupil equity funding—access to face-to-face contact with our teams for a day. Those headteachers were shown exactly what support is in place to help them to make decisions and to network, given that some of

that work involves collaboration between schools at a local level.

The Convener: Before I bring in Colin Beattie, who has some questions on school inspections, I return to what Liz Smith said. Things are clearly not as bad as the tone of some members' comments would suggest. However, we raised a number of issues in our report, and all members thought that Education Scotland's response on those points was not satisfactory. I hope that we will get more clarity as today's meeting progresses.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): I want to explore some of the issues around the new inspection model of shorter visits that Education Scotland has brought in. My first question is simple. On page 8 of your response of 17 March, you state that the model was introduced

"As part of the suite of inspections".

That implies that shorter visits do not apply across the board. Can you explain more about that?

Dr Maxwell: We now have a suite of proportionate inspection models to suit different circumstances. Alastair Delaney is the best person to elaborate on that.

Alastair Delaney: Over the past two years, as part of the review, we undertook a lot of consultation with stakeholders. As a result, we agreed that, instead of a single inspection model for schools, we needed a suite of models with different approaches to suit different circumstances and to allow us to do different things. As you would anticipate, there is a core full-inspection model at establishment level. In addition, we have been developing the shorter model, the neighbourhood model and the local thematic model, which make up our suite. We have also been exploring short-notice inspections, which are entirely different and simply involve turning up at short notice.

Colin Beattie: Do you have descriptions of those models?

Alastair Delaney: Yes—they are on our website. We explore the options in a special area of the website that relates to the inspection review; it has been up and running for the full review period. As we have developed and revised the models, and finished certain aspects of the review, the full material has been placed online to enable everybody in the country to have a look at it.

Colin Beattie: A shorter inspection model implies that some things would not be done in such an inspection. What would and would not be done in a shorter visit in comparison with a full inspection?

Alastair Delaney: The full inspection model covers five quality indicator areas, whereas the shorter model clearly cannot achieve that coverage within its timescale. Under the national improvement framework, we are committed to providing a statistically valid sample of schools, based on three of the five quality indicator gradings, and a certain number of full inspections are required to achieve that. The shorter model allows us to focus over one term, for example, on themes that emerge during the year—we are providing a core health check, if I can put it that way. We do a series of shorter inspections across a larger sample so that we can find things out more quickly and feed them back into the system. The shorter model is more fluid, but every inspection model that we use has at its core self-evaluation, self-improvement, and raising attainment and achievement.

Colin Beattie: Obviously, Education Scotland relies on inspections to gather information. What are the implications for your improvement function if you carry out shorter inspections in which you do not gather as much information?

10:30

Alastair Delaney: There is a balance between getting a sample that is large enough to provide coverage across the country and considering a smaller sample in more depth. We take a menu approach—those are just two options—so that we can get broad coverage plus some more in-depth inspections in certain areas to back that up. That gives us a better picture of how the system is performing across the piece.

Colin Beattie: So you believe that moving to a shorter inspection model does not compromise in any way your data collection or, by implication, your improvement function.

Alastair Delaney: It does not compromise our data collection, because our statisticians have come up with a statistically valid sample—the method was peer reviewed by the Scottish Government's statistical department, which is comfortable with it—to provide evidence for the national improvement framework.

Colin Beattie: You mentioned that you have spoken to stakeholders. Which stakeholders did you involve before you made the change?

Alastair Delaney: We had two means of doing that. First, there is the external reference group that I mentioned, which meets again next week. It involves every key stakeholder that one can think of, from national parents' bodies through young people's organisations to professional associations, plus local government and COSLA. It covers the full suite. The group has been really supportive and helpful in that it allows us to get a

quick idea of feedback and how people are reacting to different ideas, and it has helped to guide us as we move forward.

Secondly, in order to consult on proposals and ideas, we held events throughout the country for teachers and young people; hundreds and hundreds of teachers attended those events. We also ran workshops in professional association conferences to gather information. All that information was collated and fed back to the external reference group, as were our proposals for how we take things forward.

Colin Beattie: There has been some discussion about the number of inspections that you have been doing. On page 8 of your response to the committee, you mention that Education Scotland is "committed to increasing the number of school inspections."

The first thing that people think when they see that you have introduced a new system of shorter inspection visits is that it is just a way to get the numbers of inspections up in order to tick a box.

Alastair Delaney: That is genuinely not where the idea came from. It came from consultation as part of the inspection review over the past two and a half years. There was a feeling that we needed to take a more mixed approach. The biggest focus was not the shorter model but the localised thematic model—in other words, how we examine matters from the point of view of the learner rather than the establishment. Perhaps we will come back to that.

To answer your question directly, the biggest issue in respect of our commitment to increase inspection numbers is that we lost a number of staff due to retirement and people moving on. As I said when I appeared before the committee previously, we had new people coming in around May last year. It takes about nine months for them to be fully trained to do their first managing inspector role and, when they reach that point, our numbers start to increase. Yesterday, I was at an inspection with one of those new colleagues, who was undertaking their first managing inspector role.

Having those new staff come in, in addition to using a shorter model, allows us to increase the number of inspections. However, given the complications of planning around people, the shorter model is not short enough that it alone would allow us to increase the number dramatically.

Colin Beattie: But you are—

The Convener: Thank you, Mr Beattie—I will have to cut you off there.

Liz Smith: Can we get clarity about the numbers of inspections and inspectors? When you

last met the committee, Mr Delaney, there was considerable doubt as to whether the statistics with which we had been provided were accurate. Is it correct that as of 31 March the total number of primary plus secondary inspections stands at 119?

Alastair Delaney: No—well, it depends on whether you include special education in that, which we do as schools.

Liz Smith: No—I am talking about the total number of primary and secondary inspections. My understanding from the Scottish Parliament information centre and from what you said in your recent statement, as mentioned in paragraph 204 of the committee's report, is that it is 119. Is that right?

Alastair Delaney: No, it is actually 123 or in that ballpark. It is 123 if we are talking about only primary and secondary inspections.

Liz Smith: So that is the number of inspections that were completed by 31 March.

Alastair Delaney: Yes.

Liz Smith: On 30 November, you also told us that nine additional inspectors were being trained. Are they through the training, or not quite?

Alastair Delaney: They are coming through the training right now. As I have said, one of them undertook their first managing inspector role yesterday, and the others have been doing that at different times.

Liz Smith: So we now have 66 plus nine, which makes 75 inspectors. Is that correct?

Alastair Delaney: We lost four in early years over the autumn—I was interviewing just last week to fill those posts.

Liz Smith: So we now have 71.

Alastair Delaney: I would have to double check the figures, but that is roughly the right number.

Liz Smith: I will ask again for clarity: has the number of school inspections since 2012-13 gone down? Has the number of primary and secondary school inspections fallen?

Alastair Delaney: Yes, it has.

Liz Smith: Even if it is now 66—plus nine, eventually—has the number of school inspectors, too, gone down since 2010?

Alastair Delaney: The overall number of inspectors went down. I do not know which period that covers, but I think that we previously had those figures available for you.

Liz Smith: That is the case according to the statistics that SPICe has updated. Do you agree?

Alastair Delaney: I am sure that that is the case—I do not have the figure in front of me. The number of inspectors did go down, although it is now increasing again.

Liz Smith: My colleagues will come on to the issue of inspection and Education Scotland's dual role. Why is the number of school inspections falling?

Alastair Delaney: There are a number of reasons for that. Primarily, there was a period in which inspectors were redeployed from establishment inspection to support the implementation of curriculum for excellence. However, you should not take that to mean that they were not doing evaluative activity, because a lot of their time was spent, for example, doing much larger, shorter-scale visits to secondary schools to check where they were in redesigning their curriculum in the light of curriculum for excellence. We need to be clear about the distinction between the number of establishments that we inspected versus the other evaluative activity that inspectors undertook.

The Convener: This will have to be your last question, Ms Smith.

Liz Smith: How many of the inspectors who were seconded to local authorities or wherever to do the very job that you have just described were not engaged in full school inspections?

Alastair Delaney: They were not seconded anywhere—they were working for us. It is just that their deployment—

Liz Smith: They were working in local authorities, according to some of the inspectors whom I spoke to.

Alastair Delaney: They were working with local authorities, but they were not seconded to a local authority.

Liz Smith: Okay. How many of them were not involved in full school inspections?

Alastair Delaney: It is not quite that simple. It is not that a full-time person was deployed to do that work for 100 per cent of their time. An inspector's time is broken down into a number of days, with a number of core days for establishment inspection. Some of that time would have been diverted, but that would have varied among individuals depending on what the particular issue was, so I cannot give you a full-time equivalent.

The Convener: Is there some way in which that information could be made available to the committee?

Alastair Delaney: That would be very difficult.

Dr Maxwell: You would need to define the terms precisely.

The Convener: In Education Scotland's view, given the comments that have just been made, was there a drop in the number of official inspections—that is, the evaluative inspections that you referred to? Is there any evidence to suggest that that level of inspection continued to take place?

Alastair Delaney: In my view, the overall level of evaluative activity remained relatively unchanged over that period.

The Convener: Is there any evidence of that?

Alastair Delaney: We would have to try to identify the scope of that—a distinction would have to be made. People focus on the establishment inspections and the number of schools we visited for a full inspection.

The Convener: I accept that.

Alastair Delaney: It is more difficult when we look at what else is classified as evaluative activity. There was an awful lot of work on other projects. With someone assigned to a project or a key piece of work to evaluate the implementation of the curriculum at secondary level over a period of time, it would be difficult to say how much of their time was spent in schools doing that actual work versus writing up a report or whatever.

Dr Maxwell: We could certainly quantify what some of those other activities look like. A classic example is our relatively recent exercise to evaluate the activity in tackling bureaucracy in each of the 32 local authorities. Inspectors from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education undertook that work, and naturally that had a knock-on impact on their availability for other work; however, that piece of work was intensive and short term in nature. There are other examples, such as the fieldwork visits that were undertaken at key points, and it might be helpful if we tried to quantify those.

The Convener: It would be helpful if you could send such examples to us. Ross Greer has a supplementary.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): With regard to Alastair Delaney's remarks about feedback on the inspections, our committee report welcomed the fact that Education Scotland was going to try to tackle some of the misconceptions around inspections. However, we also urged you to engage directly with schools, and your response has been a media campaign. Is that the best way of engaging directly with front-line staff who have misconceptions?

Alastair Delaney: It is only one aspect of our approach. We are not trying to say that the media campaign has answered all the misconceptions that people might have had about inspection, but it was a good start. It has been very well received,

and the amount of activity around that social media campaign has been very strong.

We also engaged with the professional associations and others so that they could build on the media campaign and push the information out through their own channels and mechanisms, but that is not the end of the picture. We will continually look to do things such as attending local authority teachers' meetings to help them understand the new processes of inspection. We do that as a matter of course, but we are doing it more now because of the inspection review and the changes that have been taking place.

Ross Greer: You also mentioned in your response that you were using glow to allow teachers to engage directly with the director, but glow is not used consistently by teachers across the board. How are you addressing that to make sure that you are not getting a skewed sample of engagement?

Alastair Delaney: Again, it is only one mechanism. I was on a glow TV—as they call it—episode quite recently, and there is another one coming up, but I acknowledge that that will cover only those who can access it. However, we have done other things, too. For example, I have given presentations at professional association conferences and we have run workshops—our staff get out and about. The key people—our key lead officer and lead inspectors—get out into local authorities and run sessions on those things, so that we can get direct feedback from across the country. Glow is only one of the approaches that we take.

Ross Greer: Finally, what engagement have you had with learners on the inspection programme?

Alastair Delaney: With the help of Young Scot, we ran a range of activities to try to get direct feedback from learners during the inspection review process. That was really important to us, because young people are obviously the end users of education and we wanted to try to get their views. During inspections, we also engage with young people as a matter of course and talk to them in focus groups about a whole range of things: how they feel about their own education, their own school and education more broadly. We continue to do that, but it is a challenge. There is no easy way to access all young people, but we are trying hard to get young people more directly involved in giving feedback to us about how they feel about inspection and its role in improvement.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Mr Delaney, you are the chief operating officer of Education Scotland. That must give you a broad role over all aspects of the day-to-day running of Education Scotland, and you must work very

closely with Bill Maxwell. Is that correct? How would you describe your role?

Alastair Delaney: You are correct. I oversee the running of the internals of the organisation, including its operation, its planning, its finances, its human resources and its future direction.

Daniel Johnson: You are also the director of inspections. Education Scotland's response to the committee describes the director of inspection as being distinct and separate from the chief executive, and says that, through your governance mechanisms, inspection activity is independent. How on earth can that role be distinct and separate if you are also the chief operating officer?

Alastair Delaney: The inspection programmes operate through an assistant director, who is answerable to me, and the complaints process feeds through me, too. I have a clearly defined responsibility to ensure the independence of inspection and to ensure that that is not in any way impacted on by any external influence. We have a governance set-up that allows inspection to be separately considered.

Daniel Johnson: But you report directly to Bill Maxwell as chief executive.

Alastair Delaney: That is correct.

Daniel Johnson: How on earth, then, can inspection be distinct and separate if you have that direct reporting relationship? I am completely confused by what you are saying.

Dr Maxwell: Our framework document makes it quite clear how that operates, but the director of inspection part of Alastair Delaney's job can, if you like, be seen as inspection strategy and compliance. That is a clearly ring-fenced area of his role, and I do not interfere in it. If there are complaints about the inspection process or about some alleged interference in an inspection, Alastair deals with that. I do not get involved.

Daniel Johnson: But if Alastair Delaney is the chief operating officer—which is a very senior position with scope over everything that Education Scotland does—and in the vast bulk of the role answers directly to Bill Maxwell, surely there are significant consequences if Alastair says no to Bill. How on earth does he decide what hat he is wearing? How does he split his head in two? I have never come across an organisation that could manage such a management structure.

Dr Maxwell: It is perfectly feasible to have a regulatory role embedded within an organisation. To be honest, it has never emerged as an issue.

Daniel Johnson: I totally accept that, but you are saying that Alastair Delaney's role as director of inspections is distinct and separate. It strikes

me that his having such a comprehensive role as chief operating officer is just a fiction.

Dr Maxwell: No, indeed. It has very clearly worked in practice. Any complaints about the inspection process in an individual case would be handled directly through our own—quite clear—processes and through Alastair as deciding—

The Convener: So in answer to Mr Johnson's question, you do not think that there has been an issue.

Dr Maxwell: No.

10:45

Daniel Johnson: Education Scotland's inspection regime has an important role in assessing the implementation of curriculum for excellence. Thinking of your responses to our report, is the inspection regime the sole source of data on that implementation? If not, what other sources are there?

Dr Maxwell: No. There are statistics. The Scottish Government's analytical services team pulls together stats from the SQA and other sources about attainment, health and wellbeing and other aspects of curriculum for excellence, all of which are equally important. There might be research undertaken independently of Government, such as that by Mark Priestley from the University of Stirling whom you have probably come across, and by others. There are a number of sources.

Daniel Johnson: That is the Scottish Government's feed, but what are Education Scotland's information and data points? Your information might not come exclusively from the inspection regime, but is that where the bulk of it comes from?

Dr Maxwell: Yes. We do not commission any large research programmes; the research programme for the Scottish Government is run by the Scottish Government, not by us. We might occasionally commission a small piece of research about a project, but we are not a major research commissioner. The evidence that we gather at our own hand is our primary source of first-hand evidence, but of course we also look at the stats and form a view about trends that appear in SQA data and other data in the system.

Daniel Johnson: On the basis of your response to us, it seems that you adapted your approach to assessing curriculum for excellence through its implementation period. Is that correct?

Dr Maxwell: Can you elaborate a bit on what you mean by "adapted"?

Daniel Johnson: I am just using your words.

Dr Maxwell: In terms of what our inspectors were looking for, we certainly adapted.

Alan Armstrong (Education Scotland): Each year, the evidence from inspections and stakeholders about where the strengths and areas for attention lie is discussed at the CFE implementation group with the main stakeholders who are responsible for delivery. Through that, there is a chance to see exactly what is going on and to set out activities that lead directly from what is happening each year into the following session.

Daniel Johnson: This is an important point. You have stated that the inspection regime is independent, but you have also stated unequivocally that the inspection regime was changed and adapted in light of your role in implementing curriculum for excellence. I do not understand how those two thoughts are compatible with each other.

Alan Armstrong: Not the inspection regime—

Daniel Johnson: I would like Bill Maxwell to address that point.

Dr Maxwell: Let me be clear: we agreed collectively across the management board what was in effect a six-year roll-out programme for CFE through the secondary stages, which I think began in 2010 as the first cohort picked up new curriculum guidance. It clearly made sense for inspectors to respect the expectations that went with the roll-out; we expected to see CFE in secondary 1 initially and then in S1 to S3 as the changes rolled out. That is what we meant by adapting.

Daniel Johnson: So your role with regard to CFE altered the approach to inspection. I think that you just said so.

Dr Maxwell: That is the reality. There is no sense in judging by 10-year-old standards what we expect in the curriculum now. We clearly have to adapt what we expect—that is only right and proper. In many respects, we are raising the bar as we do so.

The Convener: That is completely understandable.

Tavish Scott: Do inspectors assess the effectiveness of Education Scotland guidance in schools?

Dr Maxwell: Yes, we do.

Tavish Scott: Which bit of you is “we” in this case?

Dr Maxwell: Our inspectors, as they are out in schools evaluating what they see, will get feedback on whether that guidance is having the desired impact and whether it is being effective in intention.

Tavish Scott: But in the report that you mentioned in your opening remarks—“Quality and improvement in Scottish education 2012-2016”—there is no mention of that whatsoever. They might have assessed it but they never produced a recommendation.

Dr Maxwell: The feedback that we gain from inspections is regularly fed back both to ourselves and to the broader curriculum for excellence implementation group.

Tavish Scott: So why does it not appear in the report?

Dr Maxwell: As a result, we have at times taken additional steps to emphasise the effectiveness of guidance. A classic example of that is the statement that I gave last May, which re-emphasised and clarified guidance that did not appear to be understood.

Tavish Scott: That is not what I asked. I asked why there is nothing in this however-many-pages-long report that mentions inspectors’ findings about the effectiveness of Education Scotland’s guidance and its impact on schools. There is no recommendation relating to that subject whatsoever.

Dr Maxwell: That report is written for a practitioner audience and provides recommendations for practitioners.

Tavish Scott: Do you not think that practitioners would care about that?

Dr Maxwell: Absolutely.

Tavish Scott: So why is it not in the report?

Dr Maxwell: There are mechanisms for discussing where there is a need for additional guidance—or indeed for reducing and streamlining guidance, as we have done—and we have discussed that in the appropriate forum.

Tavish Scott: So Daniel Johnson is quite correct. There is a clear conflict of interests, and the fact that you cannot even make a recommendation about that guidance based on the inspectors’ own findings illustrates that, does it not?

Dr Maxwell: No, I do not accept that at all.

Tavish Scott: All right. Thank you.

The Convener: Education Scotland is not the only organisation where people wear two hats, so we should not pretend that its situation is unique.

Tavish Scott: That does not make it right.

The Convener: That is why we are here, but we should not pretend that Education Scotland is the only place in the world where that sort of thing happens.

Johann Lamont: The notion of collective responsibility can often mean that nobody is responsible or accountable, and that is one of the frustrations here. I understand that you have to make the organisation work, because it is Government policy that Education Scotland should have both responsibilities, but that does not mean that you have to say that it is the optimal model for dealing with our education system. Just for clarification, have you not accepted that there have been fewer inspections and fewer inspectors since 2012?

Dr Maxwell: There has been a dip.

Johann Lamont: I was astonished to hear you say that inspectors have been redeployed, but that it is okay because they are doing evaluation work, given that it transpires that what that work is evaluating is the mess that has been made in the bureaucracy around curriculum for excellence. The inspectorate bit of Education Scotland is assessing how poorly the guidance on curriculum for excellence has been delivered. Surely that would not be seen as a normal job for inspectors, would it? I understand your redefining it as evaluation, but would you accept that it is not what you would see as a normal role for an inspector?

Dr Maxwell: I would not accept that, because it is absolutely normal to use inspectors to assess the extent to which consistent good practice is being applied at local level across all local authorities and schools in the country. That is part of the benefit of having a national inspectorate that looks across those boundaries.

Johann Lamont: With respect, that is not what was described; it was described as people being redeployed to evaluate and write a report on tackling bureaucracy, which staff could probably have told you from day 10 there was an issue with. Perhaps Alastair Delaney can tell us whether that redeployment would have happened had there been a separate body. Given the fact that curriculum for excellence was happening, would a separate body that was responsible for inspections have redeployed people out of its organisation to assess the scale of a problem?

Alastair Delaney: You use the word “redeployed”, but we would say “deployed”. Nobody came out of the organisation—it was just a task that we were asked to do.

Johann Lamont: If the inspectorate was a separate body, would one of its tasks be to write a report on the accumulation of bureaucratic guidance to staff on implementing a new curriculum?

Alastair Delaney: I see it as no different from asking in years to come about, for example, the impact of the PEF money or of any other initiative in the system that could be a barrier to effective

learning and teaching and to good outcomes for learners. We would be interested in anything like that.

Johann Lamont: But inspections had not really thrown up the issue before staff flagged it up.

From the convener’s point of view, I appreciate that there are a lot of areas to get through, but going back to my first point, I acknowledge that you have no choice but to make the system work. Can you cite any evidence of any external organisation other than the Scottish Government that has advocated that it makes sense to bring together an organisation that develops policy and the organisation that inspects the impact of that policy? Academics have expressed concerns about that in evidence to the committee. Can you cite any evidence from people who advocated that course of action before the Government decided to do it?

Dr Maxwell: I should start by clarifying that we do not set policy. We support the implementation of agreed policy, and we inspect and evaluate around that.

I should also clarify that the set-up is not particularly new. As some of us will remember, HM inspectorate of schools, as it was known at the time, directly led the process of reform for the five-to-14 curriculum. It undertook to look at examples of activity, very much as we have done recently, and at how well the curriculum was being implemented—

Johann Lamont: The tackling bureaucracy agenda was a firefighting process. It did not involve developing policy.

Dr Maxwell: No, it was about looking at the effectiveness of steps that local authorities had taken—and some had taken very good steps—to reduce the required workload of planning, reporting to parents and so on, and about circulating good practice from that, as we have done since then. We will follow up on that again. I am convinced that, as has been the case in the past, a separate inspectorate would also have been doing this activity, as required by the development of our current initiative.

Johann Lamont: Ahead of the system being reformed in the way that it has been, has any organisation or any individual academic argued that it would be beneficial to have the education agency in the same body as the inspection function? Do you know of anybody, apart from the Scottish Government, who has argued for that model?

Dr Maxwell: I cannot name anyone. I am not suggesting that there is a name that I could give of someone who has suggested that specific model.

The Convener: Thank you—that is fine. You have answered the question, and we will leave it there.

Ross Thomson (North East Scotland) (Con): Dr Maxwell, I understand that you have been the chief executive of the CFE implementation group since it was created in 2011. Is that correct?

Dr Maxwell: Yes.

Ross Thomson: The “Quality and improvement in Scottish education 2012-2016” report, which was quoted earlier, says:

“Scottish education does not yet provide all children and young people with consistently high-quality learning experiences. Unless this variability is addressed we will not achieve the national ambition of excellence and equity for all learners.”

Can you explain to the committee why, during that inspection period, which was under your stewardship, we still did not see consistency across the board?

Dr Maxwell: That is a big question. We will continue to promote consistency. We have a devolved system for the management of education in which local authorities run schools, and schools have a degree of autonomy themselves. The answer lies in consistently identifying, flagging up and disseminating the most effective practice, and in encouraging others to adopt it and removing any obstacles that get in the way of their doing so.

Education systems—I am sure that you will accept that this is a fair point—undergo constant improvement. None can stand still or ever reach a state of perfection; we are not suggesting that we are about to reach such a state. Greater consistency and the spread of best practice are key to achieving the world-class status that we seek.

Ross Thomson: The same report highlighted that 42 per cent of early learning and childcare settings, 40 per cent of primary schools and 43 per cent of special schools that were inspected had not implemented CFE beyond a satisfactory level. Moreover, it noted that

“colleges have made some progress with implementation of Curriculum for Excellence”

but that

“there is more to be done”.

We are now five years on from the inception of the implementation group, and CFE is far from being implemented properly. Why is that?

11:00

Dr Maxwell: These are big structural changes. To pick up on the college aspect, one of the themes that we highlight in the QISE report is the

need for greater networking between schools and local colleges, and other training providers, to deliver a full and effective range of senior phase provision. That has been helped to some degree by college regionalisation reforms and changes to the senior phase. There is good practice out there in some areas, but it needs to spread much more widely so that young people can access an integrated offer of training provision from across schools and local colleges in their area. I do not know whether Alan Armstrong wants to say any more about that.

Alan Armstrong: Change in education takes a significant time. We are seeing a lot of change happening—the QISE report points to those changes—in the ways in which schools organise their curriculum and improve learning and teaching, but it takes time for that practice to filter across every single school, become deeply embedded and fulfil the big aspirations of curriculum for excellence.

The QISE report steps back and looks at where the system is in comparison with where we think that it should be. As Dr Maxwell pointed out, there are a lot of strengths, but we need to home in on the next areas on which we must focus to turn the tide, tip the balance and bring the benefits that we seek from CFE.

The Convener: Can I come in on that point?

Ross Thomson: Yes, of course.

The Convener: Of course I can—I am the convener. *[Laughter.]*

Given where we started and where we are now, would you say that you are behind, on or ahead of schedule? You are right that it takes a long time to change education, but where are we in the process? I accept that it is a long process.

Dr Maxwell: You are reducing a very large evaluation to a fairly simple conclusion, but I would agree—

The Convener: There must have been some idea of what the journey was going to be like. I know that you could not do it smoothly.

Dr Maxwell: I almost agree with the OECD’s evaluation: we have been through a period that has been characterised by a lot of structural change that everyone in the system has had to get used to, and progress has been made and has changed things. We are now entering—rather, we are already in—a new phase in which we are really driving forward the benefits of those changes.

We are ensuring that the schools and colleges—this applies to some of them—that have adapted only half-heartedly to the new curriculum for excellence grasp the opportunities going

forward. The issue for the whole system, and for us as part of it, is undoubtedly how to promote best practice and ensure that it becomes embedded in and spread across the system. The job is certainly not done yet.

The Convener: So you would be confident that, if representatives of Education Scotland were to appear before the committee next year or in two years' time—I know that it will not be you, Dr Maxwell, because of your impending retirement—the corner would noticeably have been turned.

Dr Maxwell: Yes, I think so.

Ross Thomson: I have another two questions, convener.

The Convener: I will let Liz Smith in first, and then I will come back to you.

Liz Smith: I have a very simple question. In December, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills said in the chamber that he was considering the reform of agencies including Education Scotland as part of the governance review. Do you think that that is a good thing? What would your reformed structure look like?

Dr Maxwell: It is not for me to comment on what the outcome of that review should be. Nonetheless, a governance review such as the one that the Government is undertaking ought to look at all parts of the system and how they interact, so it makes perfect sense that Education Scotland should be part of that, as the other national bodies and local authorities are.

If I can be a little more helpful, a key issue for the governance review with regard to the role of the agency is how it interacts with regional working, which we are keen to promote across local authority boundaries.

At the moment, for example, we are working with the Tayside group, which covers Angus, Perth and Kinross, Dundee and the northern alliance, which you have probably heard of. We are looking at how we adjust what we do—if Education Scotland is to continue in its existing form—to best lever our national role with regional capacity, which needs to be improved. The role that local authorities play in supporting improvement and challenging progress in their own areas could probably be better done through regional arrangements, rather than individual local authorities all trying to do that separately.

Ross Thomson: In advance of an evidence session on 30 November 2016, at which guidance from Education Scotland was to be looked at, the committee asked teachers whether they agreed that the guidance and support associated with CFE built a world-class curriculum for all learners in Scotland. A huge two thirds of respondents disagreed with that statement.

If that finding is combined with the findings in the QISE report, is it fair to suggest that the implementation of CFE through the current structure of the implementation group has not been effective?

Dr Maxwell: The structure has got us to the point where we now need to move forward. Different activities will be required to fully embed the structural changes that have been made.

The implementation group had a particular role—it was created to co-ordinate our work with that of the SQA, the Colleges Development Network and the other bodies that were providing key aspects of the national support for the transition, particularly as the new qualifications worked through the broad general education and senior phase years. That is moving forward.

In many respects, the structural changes have been made, although, clearly, refinements are being made. That was mentioned in connection with national qualifications, on which the SQA leads.

The implementation group was created to ensure that we are joined up on the support and guidance for the delivery of the changes to the system. In addition, senior accountable officers in each of the organisations meet monthly.

We are moving beyond the structural change phase of CFE. It is now down to practice and provision at front-line level, which needs to be continually enhanced, and best practice needs to be spread across the system.

The Convener: This is Ross Thomson's last question.

Ross Thomson: Yes, convener.

I looked back to the implementation group's inception in 2011. In September that year, Dr Maxwell told our predecessor committee:

"my vision is of an education system that is based on a strong national consensus about the purposes of education and the commitment to ambitious levels of achievement for all, and which is world class in its ability to improve continuously and almost virally spread ideas about the most effective professional practice in ways that ensure that every learner gets the best-quality experience suited to their individual needs."—[*Official Report, Education and Culture Committee*, 20 September 2011; c 121.]

Has your vision been achieved? If not, why not?

Dr Maxwell: There is still broad buy-in to the overall purposes of our education system and the vision of what we want from it. That is partly because such a thorough process took place early on in the Parliament's life, from 1999 through to 2004, and then through the national debate on the purposes of education and so on. The Parliament has played a strong role.

Although there are differences over aspects of implementation—and no doubt not everything has been got perfectly right at every step in the process—nonetheless the vision remains constant and the general buy-in across stakeholders in the system is strong. Therefore, we are well placed to continue to progress and to achieve the ambition, albeit that we all need to be constantly alert to ensuring that the real intentions of the changes are realised in practice. That is for us and for all partners in the process to do.

The collective consensus behind the development of curriculum for excellence has been a powerful feature of how the system has developed. That is widely recognised beyond Scotland.

The Convener: Daniel Johnson has a small question.

Daniel Johnson: I will try to make it small.

Dr Maxwell, in answer to Ross Thomson, you talked about the world-class status of the system. You have also talked about constant improvement; indeed, you describe Education Scotland as

“the national improvement agency for Scottish education”.

Would you describe the programme for international student assessment results, which showed that we have gone from 10th, 11th and 11th for science, maths and reading in 2006 to 19th, 24th and 23rd, as improvement or as something else?

Dr Maxwell: The PISA results are disappointing. Statistically, we have moved from being above the OECD average in two areas out of three to being average in those three areas. That is not acceptable. Those results are partly the reason why we are putting a great deal of effort into supporting the system to understand standards in literacy and numeracy, which are the areas on which PISA tends to major. Those are important skills across the curriculum, and we need to see improvements.

Of course, there are many statistics in the world, and we have stats that show that more young people than ever are achieving higher—there are rising trends in that regard—and positive destinations post school are at a record high. There is a range of stats to take into account but, as I say, the PISA results are disappointing.

Daniel Johnson: On international stats, we do not see improvement—it is only on our internal ones that we see improvement.

Dr Maxwell: Our internal stats are important. The international ones are only a snapshot of certain aspects of skills at a certain age. That is not to undermine the fact that they are the only

benchmark against which we can compare ourselves with countries across the world.

Daniel Johnson: It is an interesting contrast with your own data.

Johann Lamont: I hear what you say about statistics, Dr Maxwell, but, frankly, that sounded rather defensive. At our previous meeting, we heard from the Institute for Public Policy Research Scotland about positive destinations being seen as a good statistic. However, we also heard that there are no definitions of good positive destinations, good-quality training or good education opportunities. Are you planning to do any work on that area? We have said before that a job with a zero-hours contract, no guarantees, no training and no progression can hardly be seen as a positive destination. Have you reflected on the IPPR report and the question of positive destinations?

Dr Maxwell: It is for other agencies to dig more deeply into the definition of positive destinations. I am aware that they can be broken down into higher education, further education, employment, training and so on. There are trends on the ones that I think that we would all accept are clearly positive destinations, such as higher education. There is also some evidence that the equity gap has been shifting in a positive direction, although we have a good way to go to—

Johann Lamont: You cited statistics on positive destinations as a rebuttal of the argument that, internationally, we appear to be doing poorly.

Dr Maxwell: Yes, that is one indicator.

Johann Lamont: You are now saying that some positive destinations are positive and some are not—

Dr Maxwell: No, I would not comment on—

Johann Lamont: I do not know whether that is something that you would want to reflect on further. Perhaps you could then give the committee more information on the work that you are doing in that area.

The fact that people are going into jobs should not be a defence against suggestions that standards are slipping. If you are saying that some positive destinations are more positive than others, it would be good to see your workings in that regard.

The Convener: I have a question for Dr Maxwell. Is it Education Scotland's responsibility to decide what a positive destination is?

Dr Maxwell: No. I imagine that that would be for Government statisticians working with Skills Development Scotland.

Johann Lamont: With respect, you ought not to be using that as a defence against an argument that we have a problem when our standards are compared internationally.

Dr Maxwell: We do not run that area any more than we run PISA or many of the other sources of data, but certainly—

Johann Lamont: You have been asked to reflect on data, which you used another set of data to argue against. You cannot say that it is not your job to define what a positive destination is, if that is presented as a positive argument against what has been presented internationally—

Dr Maxwell: I am sorry to step in, but if I were to flip that statistic, the opposite of a positive destination in current terms is that someone is out of a job, or is not in training or education. In the old days, the term used to be not in education, employment or training. Those numbers have reduced. That must be a good thing.

The Convener: As there any no other questions, I thank Dr Maxwell, Mr Armstrong and Mr Delaney for their attendance today.

Dr Maxwell, in case we do not see you before you retire, I wish you well for the future in whatever you decide to do. However, I think there might be a possibility that you will be back some time before you leave.

Dr Maxwell: Thank you very much. I look forward to that.

The Convener: You lucky, lucky man.

11:15

Meeting continued in private until 11:42.

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