

EIS Submission to the Education and Skills Committee Inquiry into SNSAs

The Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), Scotland's largest teacher trade union, representing 80% of Scotland's teachers and lecturers, welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to this inquiry by the Committee on the evidence base for the recently introduced Scottish National standardised Assessments (SNSAs).

The EIS has been involved in the debate and discussion around national standardised assessments since the First Minister in September 2015 made the announcement on their introduction.

The EIS is of the firm view that all assessment, both by its design and method of delivery, including the way in which feedback is given to children and young people, should support learning. Our union has been influential in shifting the initial thinking of the Scottish Government away from designing SNSAs as a summative assessment tool, with tests to be undertaken during what resembled an exam-type diet, and results of which would be published on a school by school basis; such a potentially damaging, high-stakes model of assessment, designed to serve an explicit accountability imperative, would have had the unintended consequence of worsening educational inequality.

In its stead, the current model is one which at least sought to be diagnostic in nature and was intended to be one small contribution to the professional judgement of teachers, predominantly based on a much wider, more sophisticated, formative assessment context.

Our initial evaluation of the extent to which this has proven to be the case in the first year of SNSA implementation, however, is negative. The use of the assessments has largely breached the guidelines established and moved them in practice towards the high stakes testing approach which had been rejected. (The EIS continues to monitor and evaluate the use and effectiveness of SNSAs.)

This response will focus on two areas of the inquiry, mainly: the evidence base for moving away from the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy; and what information the government's assessments can provide that contribute to improving the educational outcomes of children and young people.

The evidence base for moving away from the SSLN

In the view of the EIS, the evidence base for moving away from the SSLN has never been made clear by the Scottish Government; nor indeed has the evidence base for the re-introduction of national assessments in the interests of closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

The EIS considered the SSLN to be a useful sampling tool, serving to inform aspects of education policy, until it fell foul of the Scottish Government's rash reaction to the criticism of political opponents who sought to capitalise on what was a relatively modest – albeit concerning – dip in the SSLN Literacy results in 2015. These results were produced by the Survey at a point when the impact of

austerity and its resultant poverty were weighing heavily on at least 20% of the pupils who took part, yet the political focus was less on that fact than on constructing a false narrative of failure about Scottish education. The EIS view remains that educational inequality must be tackled at its root and by investing in education. Collective political commitment in these areas leads to better outcomes for children and young people; politicking and spin around the messages of attainment data, do not.

In terms of the SSLN as a sampling tool, the EIS favours the proportionate gathering of data to provide appropriate system-wide information to inform policy making, whilst protecting the crucial role of assessment in supporting learning, and avoiding the league table approach which featured within the previous regime of national testing, and which was removed for good reason with the introduction of CfE.

Finland concurs:

'At the national level sample-based student assessments ... that have no stakes for students, teachers, or schools are the main means to inform policy-makers and the public on how Finland's school system is performing. Teachers and principals in Finland have a strong sense of professional responsibility to teach their children well but also to judge how well children have learned what they are supposed to learn according to curriculum designed by teachers.' ([Washington Post](#), 25 March 2014)

Rather than the emergence of any evidence of an inherent flaw in the SSLN as a sampling tool, what was clearly visible was the instinct of some to seize upon data about children's and young people's learning, for ill-purpose, which apparently propelled the Scottish Government towards seeking a different set of measures of system progress towards closing the poverty-related attainment gap. No clear evidence base for SNSAs has ever been forthcoming.

Indeed, the EIS and others were truly baffled as to the suddenness and the intensity with which the Scottish Government appeared welded to the principle of national standardised assessment. Since 2015, no one in Scotland has come forward laden with evidence of the virtue of such a model and identifying themselves as the lead proponent; no academic journal or conclusive system research has been cited as the rationale for the development of SNSAs as a tool for realising greater educational equity.

On the contrary, there is a strong evidence base to suggest that large-scale standardised testing/assessment is an inhibitor of equity, and of student wellbeing which is inextricably linked to young people's ability to make good progress in their learning. Now much documented- Finland, an international champion of educational equity and excellence, almost entirely rejects standardised assessment. Andy Hargreaves- one of the Scottish Government's own International Council of Education Advisors - warns of the growing evidence of 'ill-being' caused by 'standardised testing and out-moded approaches to learning and teaching' (based on observation of standardised assessment practice in Ontario and South Korea, in particular). Much international evidence points to the inherent

bias within standardised assessments in favour of more affluent learners; there is the potential, then, for the (mis-)handling of results to exacerbate existing educational inequalities related to socio-economic background.

Information SNSAs can provide that contribute to improving the educational outcomes of children and young people

The EIS is of the firm view that assessment must be for the benefit of learners in the classroom. All assessment, by content and delivery style, must align fully with what is taught to ensure its validity, and should align with the values underpinning CfE, of which commitment to social justice and equity is one.

The question of assessment validity is highly pertinent to the continuing debate around P1 SNSAs. The EIS is clear that SNSAs are misaligned with and contradictory to, the play-based pedagogy and curriculum of Early Level CfE. For this reason, we have called for them to be scrapped – not to be replaced with a different brand of standardised assessment according to the particular preference of a local authority, and not as a result of political game-playing by local councillors, but to enable the consolidation of assessment practice that is appropriate for a genuinely play-based P1 curriculum.

At all ages and stages, the EIS is clear that all assessment data gathered must be of use to teachers, and, crucially, to learners themselves. They need to understand the criteria for 'success', and assessment feedback must be accessible to them if the assessment is to have any value in supporting their future progress. Any assessment which does not possess these features will not provide information that is useful to learning and teaching in the classroom; is wasteful of valuable time for good quality learning and teaching; and worse still, can actively damage children's confidence, muddle theirs and their teacher's understanding of their learning, and slow or even reverse their progress as a result.

Currently schools and teachers use a wide range of assessment methods, involving human interaction, evaluation and observation, which gather rich data on children's individual progress – their strengths, development needs and next steps. Coined 'small data' by another of the International Council of Educational Advisers, Pasi Sahlberg, this is the information that is most useful to teachers, learners and parents as they work in partnership to progress individuals' learning. Such data may not be easily understood by those driving narrow accountability agendas either at local or national level, but this is the information on which successful learning and greater equity of outcome fundamentally depends.

Questions remain for the EIS about the assessment validity of SNSAs in terms of their content, mode of delivery, including in digital format, and ability to provide feedback that is meaningful to learners; our scepticism about the national drive for 'big data' to which SNSA results can contribute, holds firm.

Prior to and coinciding with the launch of SNSAs, speaking at various conferences and meetings of stakeholders, Scottish Government officials made clear the relatively marginal importance of SNSAs as an assessment tool. The assessments were said to cover at a maximum around one tenth of the skills and knowledge

expected at each CfE level in two areas of the curriculum only-Literacy and Numeracy.

The coverage of SNSAs in terms of the knowledge and skills assessed is, by the government's own admission, quite limited, as is the assessment information elicited. In the case of the Literacy assessment pertaining to Writing, for example, it provides only minimal diagnostic or summative data (depending on how the assessments are used), on children's grasp of some technical aspects of writing – spelling, grammar and punctuation. (In this regard, the assessments do not align well with how writing is or should be taught, which calls into question the reliability and validity of the information that they provide on children's understanding of writing.) Any data produced by SNSA completion requires the much richer, broader collection of assessment evidence gathered by teachers through talking with, listening to, and observing children as they engage in learning activities; and through evaluating both the process and products of children's learning across a whole curricular area.

A further issue lies in what appears to be a lack of shared clarity around the purpose of the assessments. When first announced by the government, it was clear that the intention was that they would be a summative measure of children's attainment, applied across the country during the same window of time each year. The influence of the EIS and others persuaded the government of the value of some forms of standardised assessment for diagnostic purposes, and of the fact that if assessment is to genuinely support the learning of individual children, then whole cohorts and classes of young people should not be undertaking the assessments at the same time. SNSAs were then designed to enable their use at any point in the year, the government advising that the timing be determined by schools and teachers in consultation with the local authority.

What happened in the first year of implementation, though, was that children in 25 local authorities- the vast majority- sat the assessments at the same time, teachers having had little to no decision-making influence on the timing. The marginalisation of teacher professional judgement in determining the timing of what should be diagnostic assessments to support learning and teaching for individual and groups of children, compromises the usefulness of any information elicited.

The recent publication of teacher judgement of CfE levels obtained by pupils at P1, P4, P7 and S3 during session 2017-18 highlights an increase in the numbers of children reaching the appropriate level within the timeframe desired. Though 2017-18 was the school session in which SNSAs were introduced, the recent successes cannot be credited to national standardised assessment since most schools carried them out, as largely directed by local authorities, in the final weeks of the session, for summative purposes, when it was too late for teachers to use the information diagnostically to benefit children's learning and progress towards the appropriate CfE levels. Those successes were the result of teachers' efforts to ensure the provision of quality learning and teaching, leading to strong outcomes for our children and young people, amidst huge challenges stemming from continuing workload increase, pay erosion and teacher shortage.

A recent EIS snapshot survey of members who had been involved in Year 1 delivery of SNSAs specifically asked for comment on the extent to which data provided in SNSA learner reports had been useful in providing reliable information on children's progress, in identifying next steps in learning, and informing professional judgement on the achievement of CfE levels.

This question elicited 40 pages of comments - 33 pages contained negative comments; pages of positive or more neutral feedback totalled 7.

The majority of comments in response to the question of its utility to learning and teaching, were critical of the value of SNSA data. The reasons cited were largely the unreliability of the assessment data in the context of wider assessment - in many cases the evidence provided was not in line with the wealth of information elicited by more valid and reliable means.

Many teachers commented that the SNSAs provided little to nothing in the way of new information to inform their understanding of children's progress and next steps in learning. Some explicitly referenced them as a waste of valuable time for this reason.

Other issues experienced were in relation to the amount of information provided per pupil per assessment - far in excess of that which teachers have time to absorb in the granular detail provided. Many teachers complained that they were unable to make sense of the results, not having had access to or sight of the assessments themselves, or not having had adequate training to enable their understanding of the language within the associated 'learner report'.

Of the very few positive comments about the helpfulness of SNSA data in providing useful information about children's progress, one expressed appreciation of the ability to compare the progress of children in the school with national standards. A few respondents said that they found the data useful in identifying gaps in children's learning and determining next steps.

Some of the positive comments stated the value of the SNSAs in relation to teacher professional judgement of pupil progress. It was clear from several of such comments, though, that some teachers are viewing the SNSA results as a means of 'testing' or 'checking' their own professional judgement. Clearly there remains misunderstanding of the intention that the results of SNSAs should 'inform', not 'confirm', teacher professional judgement of children's progress. Misuse of the results in this regard will simply serve to undermine the place of teacher professional judgement - a cornerstone principle of CfE- to the detriment of teaching and learning. The EIS welcomes the recent endeavour of ADES and Scottish Government to ensure clarity in terms of the relationship of SNSAs to teacher professional judgement.

To conclude, the EIS remains clear that efforts at national and local level should be channelled more thoroughly towards enhancing the confidence of teachers in their professional judgement by freeing up time - as in many high-performing education systems internationally- for meaningful collaboration and professional dialogue among teachers, which is focused on learning, teaching and assessment. This together with increased investment in additional support for learning

provision and reductions in class sizes to allow more time for teachers to talk on an individual basis to children and young people about their learning within a formative assessment context, would go a significantly greater way towards improving educational outcomes for Scotland's children and young people than SNSAs will.