Response

With thanks to the following Moray House staff who provided key content for this response: Professor Rowena Arshad; Juliet Hancock; Professor Cristina Iannelli; Dr Gillean McCluskey; Rachel O’Neill.

Questions

Q1: Have we based these proposals on the right principles?

Moray House School of Education welcomes the consultation and the focus on raising the attainment and achievement for all.

The key principles might usefully be constructed in a way that more explicitly reflects their purpose, and could be expressed more clearly as a set of key principles, rather than in their current, somewhat disconnected, list format which makes it hard to determine exactly what the principles being referred to actually are.

The principles upon which proposals are based appear to be founded on the
premise that something must be done to alter the consistent and persistent attainment gap in Scotland and to improve outcomes for those most disadvantaged. The policy context in Scotland recognises this and draws upon a long history of identifying itself as a country where social justice, fairness and equality are core to that identity. The expectation for education is that it in turn should be shaped by these principles and values (McCluskey 2017: 26). However, despite traditions based upon these principles, the most recent PISA report revealed that the attainment gap persists, and that this gap is large compared with some other countries (OECD, 2013).

It is important, therefore, that discussion about raising attainment keeps a clear view of the fact that in the broader context, Scotland is a deeply unequal society, in which the wealthiest 10% of households own 900 times the wealth of the least wealthy 10% (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2011). Therefore, changing structures on its own is unlikely to be sufficient, if addressing the cultures that frame educational practice in Scotland remain unexplored (Humes, 2017 TESS) and the broader goals of education are overlooked.

Urgent action needs to be taken that wellbeing does not drop off the important list of three. Our work with the sector provides some intelligence that literacy and numeracy is being prioritised over well-being. We would suggest that future documentation should talk about wellbeing, literacy and numeracy, reversing the order of the three areas of focus.

Q2: Do you agree with having a basket of key measures to assess the progress made?

Having a ‘basket of measures’ seeks to provide a broad and relatively straightforward picture, reducing complexity of measurement and increasing transparency. However, this runs the risk of over simplification, turning a complex and diverse landscape into something measurable rather than something meaningful, capable of being used to effect change and with direct application to those gaps responsible for consistently low attainment for some.

To measure the attainment gap properly, there is a need for individual-level data on family characteristics, i.e. parental education, occupation and household
income. This information is available in large-scale surveys (such as the Growing Up in Scotland and in the past the Scottish School Leavers’ Surveys - SSLS). More work could be carried out to use these surveys and potentially to run new surveys to provide a more reliable picture of the social class gap in attainment.

Q3: Are the proposed key measures the right ones?

The eight key measures and 17 sub-measures are useful but in their determination to achieve simplicity and to keep the focus on measures of attainment, significant data may be overlooked – in particular if key data emerging from the sub-measures is not to be subject to stretch measures.

We would urge discussion about what other measures might be required or included and not to avoid complexity. Our concern would be that the measures proposed might crudely measure attainment but does not measure achievement and wellbeing. These would require other indicators to include issues of safety, esteem, recognition and so on. The equality and diversity implications of how measures impact need be cognizant of the appropriate range of protected characteristics which should be considered alongside that of postcodes.

Q4: Will this approach avoid the introduction of perverse incentives?

Attainment measures based solely on teachers’ assessment may be problematic. Teachers’ assessments can be influenced by their own attitudes and values as well as by a number of factors such as gender, race, socio-economic background, and behaviour of the children/young people they teach. Teachers’ judgements on whether a child has achieved a certain level is based on level descriptions which are subject to a degree of subjective interpretation in their application. This may lead to unwanted variation in judging standards. This is not to in anyway question the professionalism and integrity of teachers, however, there is evidence from Scotland that teachers’ assessments have tended to be more positive than assessment based on tests (Munro and Johnson, 2008). This is largely in part because teachers do know their pupils and see the bigger picture alongside the use of standardized tests. Relying solely on teachers’ judgement may lead to perverse consequences just as much as the use of standardized tests. Consciously
or unconsciously, teachers may try to fulfil the policy desire to reduce the attainment gap and raise overall attainment and assess their students more positively than they should. The tendency for school systems to encourage performativity is well-documented in the research literature (Iannelli 2017).

Equally, this may be hard to implement in schools when the pressure is on to improve results for N5 and Higher. The self-assessment data compared to the Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring (CEM) test data used in Fife, for example, shows that some teachers are more accurate at self-assessment of their pupils with course work versus the test results. It also shows up which are the successful teachers. It is easy to see who these teachers are at primary level because of the CEM data from the Durham tests. A number of Local Authorities have bought in CEM tests and have a considerable amount of data at their disposal from these. They can see who their most effective teachers are with ease. It may therefore be both interesting and informative to see if LA’s continue to spend money on CEM tests when the national tests are in operation.

Q5: Is 3rd level the right measure to use of attainment at S3?

Third level would seem to be an expected point to measure progress by in S3, if it is predicated on an expectation that ‘young people should definitely be achieving at least 3rd level by the end of S3’. However, this may be at best unambitious and at worst contradictory to the tracking systems that schools themselves use. Understanding the context of each school remains important, in order to understand which learning and teaching approaches are working well, and where further improvements need to be made. If data is to have meaning, the aim is to enable better information to be gathered which can be used directly to develop learning and teaching is a commendable one. However, in order to in turn make an impact upon pupil progression and be of benefit to learners, all data gathered would need to have meaning, relevance and be applicable and usable with schools alongside teacher professional judgement.

Q6: Does the use of SCQF levels reflect a sound approach to measuring senior phase attainment? Are there other options such as
Insight tariff points?

There is a need to have some performance indicators which go beyond achieving a level and provide information on performance within the level considered and whether that level has been exceeded. SSLN, for example, distinguished between performing well, very well and beyond the level. This kind of information is essential to establish not only the achieved competencies but also how well that level has been achieved, with the needs and best interests of the learner in mind (Iannelli 2017). Taking this into account, insight tariff points could assist in identifying where improvements might be made at senior level, as well as fulfilling their expressed intention of identifying areas of effective practice and supporting professional dialogue around attainment and aiding the analysis of attainment data as one of a range of approaches to performance evaluation and improvement (it is unclear as to whether the intended full review of the tariff scale took place in 2017 as agreed with the Project Board). Where teacher professionalism sits in relation to this requires greater thought and clarification, including questions around developing contexts where teachers can exercise professional judgments (Priestley 2017).

Q7: How best we can give more meaning/clarity to the terms “SCQF 5” and “SCQF 6” so they are accessible to all?

In part, through further consultation with those engaging with these terms (schools, parents, learners and wider education) with regard to their meaning and clarity.

The proposed senior phase performance indicators could be construed as somewhat unambitious; having achieved 1 or more SCQF5/SCQF6 sets a very low level of attainment. Having achieved 1 SCQF5/SCQF6 level is unlikely to make a difference in terms of individuals’ progression to work or to further education. Moreover, it should be clear what SCQF5/SCQF6 qualifications are included i.e. (National 5 and other equivalent qualifications, Highers and other equivalent qualification) and distinguish among them (maybe including them among the sub-measures). The grades achieved are also very important.
Q8: Are these the right sub-measures? Are there others that should be included?

The measures proposed in the consultation aim to provide a picture at national level. However, these measures may show very different pictures at Local Authority (LA) level. It is currently unclear whether the “stretch aims” will be applied to all LAs (and schools) in the same way. The context in which schools operate varies a lot within the same LA and between LA’s. Therefore, if the educational attainment measures will be broken down by LA, it is important to contextualise those measures.

The participation measure currently presents as a somewhat meaningless measure, given that it does not tell us anything about the actual destinations and the quality of these destinations of school leavers (Iannelli 2017).

Q9: Is the use of stretch aims, by SIMD quintile, the right way to set milestones?

More detailed information is needed to assess whether young people from different social backgrounds and educational attainment end up in more or less disadvantaged destinations. Overall, SIMD is not an effective measure for identifying disadvantaged children and young people. It is an area-based indicator which fails to capture socio-economically disadvantaged people or pupils who encounter multiple disadvantage/discrimination who do not live in particularly deprived areas (as defined by SIMD) and, on the other hand, people may live in deprived areas and not be disadvantaged. Professor Lindsay Paterson has provided evidence of this in his response to the consultation (Iannelli 2017).

It would be useful to use a pupil measure of socio-economic status alongside any other appropriate protected characteristics as well as postcode and SIMD, especially in rural areas where SIMD may not be so reliable. Eligibility for Free School Meals could be used as a measure with SIMD. However, given that schools now have free school meals for all from Primary 1 to Primary 3 these records may not be very accurate until Primary 4.

Q10: Are the stretch aims set at the right level?
Realistically, the “stretch aims” should be thought out in relation to the degree of difficulty attached to achieving them. However, at present all “stretch aims” end up with the same 5% gap by 2024-25. It would appear important to determine how this 5% gap been decided. Equally, the rationale for thinking that this small gap will be reached regardless of the gap starting levels requires scrutiny. This may help to avoid a situation whereby those working on reducing the attainment gap are not discouraged by overly ambitious aims.

Furthermore, in relation to entering Higher Education, young people need to achieve a certain number of Highers at A-C level. The “stretch aims” should include a reduction of the gap in relation to number and grades achieved in these qualifications. This information is essential terms of assessing whether a reduction in the social gap has occurred for widening access to HE (Iannelli 2017).

Do you have any other comments on measuring the attainment gap and milestones towards closing it?

Schools have a key role to play, yet the challenges are great and education alone cannot ameliorate the impact of poverty. Moving on from talk of raising aspirations, to thinking more deeply about cultural, historical and social barriers to achievement would appear to be key together with a recognition that there are many gaps, and not just one. Of equal importance, is finding ways of reframing the challenge of closing the gap, for example, low pupil aspirations may be more accurately understood as high aspirations eroded by negative experience, and perhaps especially so in secondary schools (McCloskey 2017: 31;33; Carter-Wall and Whitfield 2012: 4)

Equally, there is significant potential for change in three related areas, those of parental engagement, student engagement and participation, and behaviour and relationships in schools. These aspects and the evidence stemming from them do not appear to have received the policy attention they merit and their contribution to closing the gap has been under-utilised to date. (McCloskey 2017: 33)

Statistics based on free-school meals registration are also problematic because they are not based on eligibility but on claimants of free school meals. However, since the allocation of funding from the Scottish Government through the Pupil Equity Fund is based on free school meals, some measures using free school meals registration as a proxy for disadvantage should be included. Equally
significant, (Mccluskey 2017: 32), Who Cares Scotland, has renewed its call for action, following publication of statistics that indicate that if children are entitled to free schools meals, if they have additional support needs and if they are also ‘looked after’, they are 13 times more likely to be excluded from school (Scottish Government, 2014).

In relation to pre-school measures, it is encouraging to see the proposed use of pre-school data, however, Health Visitor screening is not being implemented in the same way across Scotland.


The coverage in 2015-2016 was only 88% and therefore not universal as yet. Health boards do this screen very differently in different areas - e.g. through the use of a self-assessed questionnaire for some parents. There may be bias in who gets the questionnaire and who gets a visit based on SIMD and this is worthy of attention. Equally, the assessments used vary by health board. The most difficult to reach parents (research from Glasgow university and GUS) are likely to have children with the most issues. Tayside, (p8 of the above report) achieve 98% for 15-16 in HV meaningful data on children and may represent a model worthy of replication despite cost implications. Pages 16-17 of the Tayside Plan show their proactive support for improving early intervention in Dundee in particular, which has over 40% of children in SIMD Q1.


There would also be categories of young people such as looked after young people, those from asylum seeker, refugee and migrant backgrounds, those who have found their learning interrupted as a result of illness or harassment and bullying that should be captured if we are raising attainment for all. We would urge the Government to be thinking of Closing the Gap(s) rather than Closing the Gap. The intersection of class, socio-economic status and other protected characteristics could be better articulated.
References


