

Executive Summary

In 2006 the Scottish education authorities asked the OECD to examine in depth the performance of the school system within the framework of the Organisation's reviews of national policies for education. The purpose of the review was to examine the strengths of Scotland's schools and the challenges they face in securing high standards for all children. The Scottish authorities were particularly interested in receiving advice about the adequacy of recent reforms in view of the experience of several 'comparator countries' facing similar challenges. After the Scottish Government and the OECD Secretariat agreed on Terms of Reference to guide such a review, the Secretariat assembled a team of independent examiners with extensive experience in four of the comparator countries identified by the Scottish Government. The Scottish Government, in consultation with the OECD Secretariat, prepared a Background Report—*OECD Review of the Quality and Equity of Education Outcomes in Scotland: Diagnostic Report (SEED 2007)*¹—to provide the examiners with an overview of the Scottish Education system. The examiners visited Scotland early in 2007.

The report of the examiners takes an international perspective in assessing how well Scottish schools perform and examines both PISA findings and national test and examinations results in the context of educational reform, both within Scotland and without. This executive summary offers only a brief overview of strengths. These are very fully explored in Chapter 2 of the report. The challenges receive more detailed attention in this summary, as a discussion of these is essential for setting the context of the review's recommendations. Chapter 1 explains how this report is organized as well as giving more background to the OECD review. Terms of reference are reproduced in Annex 1.

¹ In September 2007 Scottish Ministers formally adopted the title Scottish Government to replace the term Scottish Executive as an expression of corporate identity. For more details, see: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2007/09/31160110>

Strengths

Scotland performs at a consistently very high standard in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Few countries can be said with confidence to outperform it in mathematics, reading and science. Scotland also has one of the most equitable school systems in the OECD. Only a very small proportion of Scottish 15 year-olds are assessed in the lowest bands of performance. Headteachers are amongst the most positive of school principals in the OECD in judging the adequacy of staffing and teaching resources, and students are generally very positive about their schools. Underpinning the impressive international performance of Scottish schools is a system of near-universal and high-quality pre-school education.

On national tests, many children are one or two years in advance of expected levels. There have been significant reductions in under-achievement. There is now greater consistency of achievement in the earlier years of primary school. Higher proportions of students in the final year of compulsory school are passing at the highest levels of the examinations. Notable progress has been made in improving the achievement of children living in poverty.

The OECD examiners were impressed by the capacity of Scottish primary schools to respond to public expectations of continuously improving standards and consistency of outcomes. This is in a context in which Scotland depends more than ever on the quality and impact of its schools. Indicators of improvement as well as high international standards also show that Scotland's confidence in its comprehensive system of secondary schools is well-placed.

Publicly-funded school education is the responsibility of Scottish local authorities. It is through them that an equitable distribution of resources across Scotland is managed, and they are also responsible for ensuring that schools are responsive to community needs, adaptive, and effective. The community assets represented by schools are in capable hands. The professionalism and commitment of the education departments of the local authorities makes wider reliance on them a good strategy.

Scotland has been a leader in testing the effectiveness of its schools and curriculum through student destinations monitoring. Continued commitment to transparency of outcomes for all of Scotland's young people, whoever they may be, matches the high level of trust placed in public schools. Coupled with this is a system of universal and individualised careers counselling.

Scotland has invested heavily in school education. The Teachers' Agreement (2001) has had a wide-ranging impact on teacher morale and on

interest in the profession through substantial salary increases, improved working conditions, and continuous professional development. Scotland's approach to teacher induction is world class, and the Scottish Qualification for Headship is an outstanding and demanding programme. Renovation of schools is occurring through a major building and refurbishment programme.

Challenges

On the measures quoted above, Scotland is building a strong platform of achievement in basic education. One major challenge facing Scottish schools is to reduce the achievement gap that opens up about Primary 5 and continues to widen throughout the junior secondary years (S1 to S4). Children from poorer communities and low socio-economic status homes are more likely than others to under-achieve, while the gap associated with poverty and deprivation in local government areas appears to be very wide.

A second challenge relates to the need to build on the strong platform of basic education through socially broader and more successful participation in upper secondary education and greater equity in Scottish higher education. Inequalities in staying-on rates, participation at different academic levels of national courses, and pass rates in these courses are a concern. So, too, are the number of young people leaving school with minimal (and in some cases no) qualifications and the comparatively high proportion in precarious transition.

Understanding the challenges

To respond well to these challenges hinges on having a good understanding of the causes of under-achievement. PISA findings provide valuable insights. Little of the variation in student achievement in Scotland is associated with the ways in which schools differ. Most of it is connected with how children differ. Who you are in Scotland is far more important than what school you attend, so far as achievement differences on international tests are concerned. Socio-economic status is the most important difference between individuals. Family cultural capital, life-style, and aspirations influence student outcomes through the nature of the cognitive and cultural demands of the curriculum, teacher values, the programme emphasis in schools, and peer effects.

That differences between schools contribute relatively little variation in student achievement highlights the importance of cultural and organisational factors which are common to Scottish schools, but which weigh unequally on individuals from different family backgrounds. National attainment data confirm the point-in-time picture from PISA that children from poorer

homes are more likely to under-achieve, disengage from schoolwork, leave school earlier than others, and—if they continue—study at lower academic levels and record lower pass rates. The geographical perspective that national data afford also show that deprivation intensifies the effects of family socio-economic status and of a predominantly academic culture in schools through the concentration of multiple disadvantages in schools serving poor communities.

While there is no formal prescription of the curriculum, innovation appears to be modest (as confirmed by the National Debate on curriculum in 2002), and schools have only limited flexibility in teaching resources. These are the two key instruments of change and adaptation in schools. So lack of more freedom in them makes achieving high standards for all groups of students more difficult.

Schools should be able to build the mix of staffing they need to tackle the particular challenges they face and to offer programmes which best address these challenges. Greater management freedom in these two areas needs to be part of a compact with local government which establishes expectations in exchange for autonomy, and encourages and protects innovation and risk-taking through an authoritative mandate.

Addressing the challenges

A new curriculum is on the way in Scotland. The OECD review was impressed by the breadth of vision and commitment to both high standards and social inclusiveness in the concept documents of a Curriculum for Excellence as well as in the wide consultation process. Earlier reforms of curriculum and examinations in Scotland succeeded in expanding social access to secondary education. But they did so by differentiating levels of cognitive demand to reduce academic barriers. With higher levels of staying-on now achieved, the national goal is to raise standards of achievement—that is, to increase demands on students. This is reflected in the defined purposes of the new 3-18 curriculum.

To meet the goal of successfully raising demands on students can only be done by building strong incentives into study programmes. Intrinsic incentives relate to quality of teaching, enjoyment of learning, robust instructional design, formative assessment, continuous feedback, individual attention, and sensitivity to student learning style. Extrinsic incentives relate to the economic benefits of school. They include skills, generic and specific competencies, practical experience, access to accredited vocational training, and good pathways to further education, training, and employment.

A Curriculum for Excellence aims to deepen and enrich the demands made on students. A learner perspective on what counts as enjoyable and

valuable learning is therefore essential. International experience suggests that Scotland would gain from a bolder, but also broader approach to vocational studies in schools than it has so far demonstrated. Vocational education and training should not be seen too narrowly in terms of employability.

In this report, we consider vocational studies to involve a mix of courses which place an emphasis on applied and collaborative learning, problem-solving, sharing of learning tasks, overt meaning and purpose, formative and competency-based assessment, and real-world orientation. Vocational studies are intended to form the whole person and to be motivational and constructive of broad capacities. However, their economic rationale is important, should be explicit, and must involve proven quality of training.

Progressing the new 3-18 curriculum presents a major challenge to Scottish authorities. Incentive-building must be a major part of addressing the challenge. But to deliver on the incentives will require much greater freedom in curriculum both for local authorities and for schools themselves. Flexibility cannot reside simply in broad study designs or approved margins of freedom to vary time devoted to particular areas of the curriculum. Local authorities are well placed to determine the balance of learning opportunities that should be available to their communities, and schools need substantial freedom of action within a framework of agreed goals and outcomes to vary the courses they offer.

In Scotland, local government is responsible for the delivery of school education. The capacity of local councils to ensure a more consistent pattern of outcomes across Scotland is limited partly by funding arrangements and partly by inflexibility in national curricula and examinations. Local councils are the main vehicle of redistributive funding to schools, but their capacity to address relative need within their boundaries is not necessarily enhanced by direct “ring-fenced” grants from government to schools, by multiple funding lines, complex accountability arrangements, and reverse “claw back” productivity transfers.

Local authorities have only limited influence over the curriculum in schools and over the full range of learning opportunities available to the communities they serve. Promotion of change in schools is hampered by the vulnerability of schools to adverse perceptions and judgements based on examination results. Although local authorities are the employers of teachers and the builders of schools, their influence is limited by wider arrangements which have a centralizing and conforming effect.

The OECD review considers that greater flexibility is needed in arrangements linking local councils to the Scottish Government, and linking schools in turn to local government. But without greater flexibility in

arrangements relating to curriculum, examinations, and qualifications, more autonomy for councils and schools will not go far.

At the same time, the OECD review is concerned that greater local council and school autonomy in matters of finance and curriculum needs to be counter-balanced by greater transparency and accountability. The Scottish Government does not have reliable information on the extent to which educational standards are being reached in each of the 32 local authorities. Information that is available points to very wide national variations in test scores and exam results. While this report notes significant improvements in student learning outcomes, there is a risk that greater autonomy could lead to greater variability.

To counter this possibility, policy instruments should be adopted which set down clear expectations about improvement in student opportunities and outcomes and are backed by a comprehensive survey and monitoring programme which furnishes reliable data to the Scottish Government, local authorities, and schools.

There is also a concern that without reliable data on student achievement and school performance throughout Scotland, the suitability and effectiveness of the current methodology for distributing grants to local authorities cannot be tested. The formula allocation of block grants—whose obscurity is not without attracting a certain pride—is weighted for deprivation, but this is an input-driven approach whose impact on differences in student achievement is unknown. As regional inequalities in Scotland appear to be both large and persistent, lack of knowledge about the effectiveness of national-to-local government financial arrangements is significant. There needs to be a more integrated approach, with the funding methodology tied to a national strategy, clear objectives, transparency, and regular assessment of impact.

Recommendations

To tackle the environment of poverty and deprivation and to renovate the way good schools routinely work, the OECD review suggests five broadly-framed strategies:

- **National priorities funding through local government compacts**
- **Greater school autonomy in a local government framework**
- **A comprehensive, structured, and accessible curriculum**
- **Continuous review of curriculum and teaching**
- **Monitoring of student destinations.**

These strategies aim at creating greater flexibility for the agencies which exercise the most direct responsibility for how well schools work. We have sought a balance between greater freedom of action, on the one hand, and greater transparency and accountability, on the other.

The first two strategies relate to the delivery system—how the national government gets money to local government (under a compact) and how local government puts resources into schools (again under a compact). The next three strategies are about defining, implementing and evaluating the programme of demands made on students (and on their teachers). These strategies concern the curriculum as a national framework, but also as it is delivered in the many varying sites across Scotland.

National priorities funding through, local government compacts

Recommendation 1. That the Scottish Government develops a national innovation plan to fund improvements in educational opportunities and outcomes through negotiated agreements with local authorities (“national innovation agreements”).

Recommendation 2. That funding for the current Schools of Ambition programme be applied in a more selective and targeted way through the national innovation plan.

Recommendation 3. That the Scottish Survey of Achievement be extended to all children throughout Scotland as a basis for negotiating resource and outcome agreements with local authorities and to enable improvements in schools to be measured at an individual and sub-group level.

Greater school autonomy in a local government framework

Recommendation 4. That each local authority develops a policy framework which defines the priority impacts it seeks to make under the national innovation plan, including targeted improvements in student opportunities and outcomes.

Recommendation 5. That where a local authority provides additional resources to schools for equity purposes, it should do so within the framework of the national innovation plan as a means of concentrating the total resources available to a school, consolidating funds to achieve more flexibility and reliability, and enhancing the ability of the authority to evaluate programme effectiveness.

Recommendation 6. That local authorities negotiate agreements with schools under which greater management autonomy in staffing and curriculum is

established in return for progress on an agreed platform of improvement in learning opportunities and outcomes.

A comprehensive, structured and accessible curriculum

Recommendation 7. That each local authority develop an explicit policy framework which contains a charter of learning opportunities—a commitment to provide a range of education and training places in a delivery configuration which best suits the circumstances and needs of its communities.

Recommendation 8. That, as a matter of national policy, vocational courses be accessible to all young people in schools from S3, and that sequences of study be developed spanning the compulsory and post-compulsory years.

Recommendation 9. That the Scottish Government support school-based provision of vocational courses where local authorities seek to implement this model within the framework of the national innovation plan.

Recommendation 10. That each local authority establish a curriculum planning and pathways network which links schools, colleges and employer groups to assist in establishing a charter of learning opportunities and defining the pathways through school to further education, training and employment.

Recommendation 11. That Standard Grades examinations be phased out as the new 3-18 curriculum is implemented and as clearer and more effective pathways are established for the whole range of young people.

Recommendation 12. That a Scottish Certificate of Education be developed to sanction completion of an approved programme of studies or training, whether in school, college or employment. This “graduation” certificate should have defined minimum requirements to reflect the purposes of the new 3-18 curriculum, but also substantial flexibility as to content, level and duration of studies to ensure accessibility.

Recommendation 13. That young people proceeding to S5 undertake a programme of studies with specified minimum standards leading to the award of a Scottish Certificate of Education at the end of that year or at the end of S6, depending on the individual study pattern.

Recommendation 14. That those young people who choose to leave at the end of compulsory school negotiate an individual plan for further education and training to be undertaken over the next two years under supervision of an appropriate authority (e.g., a college), and that, if specified minimum standards of

achievement or competency are met, they be awarded a Scottish Certificate of Education.

Continuous review of curriculum and teaching

Recommendation 15. That education authorities in Scotland examine current approaches to gathering student feedback on quality of teaching (e.g., the Student Evaluation of Learning software) and that they work with teachers to gain wider acceptance of the most promising approaches.

Recommendation 16. That rolling consultations be undertaken with teachers from a wide cross-section of schools regarding their classroom experience in delivering selected courses, the quality of course design, and learning outcomes for students.

Monitoring school leaver destinations

Recommendation 17. That consideration be given to extending the scope of the Scottish Survey of School Leavers to make contact with young people well before they leave school and to provide fuller information about school achievement and experience.

Recommendation 18. That Careers Scotland investigate approaches to providing all schools and local authorities with comprehensive point-in-time data on school destinations, including work and study status, jobs, and hours of work, and broken out by qualification level and gender (at a minimum).

References

Scottish Executive Education Department (2007), *OECD Review of the Quality and Equity of Education Outcomes in Scotland: Diagnostic Report*, available on the OECD website <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/148012367602> or www.oecd.org/edu/reviews/nationalpolicies.