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THOUGHTMEET

on Holistic Indicators



What counts as success in education — and who gets to define it?

This question guided a rich and forward-looking ARC ThoughtMeet, where education leaders, researchers and practitioners came together to explore how systems can move beyond narrow measures of achievement towards a more holistic understanding of learning. Across contexts, there is a growing recognition that academic results alone no longer capture what children and young people need to thrive — as learners, as individuals and as citizens in complex, democratic societies.

Rethinking what we measure

At the centre of the discussion was the concept of holistic indicators — a broader set of measures that include not only academic achievement, but also wellbeing, inclusion, engagement, relationships and citizenship. These indicators aim to reflect the full experience of education, and to support both accountability and meaningful improvement.

In her contribution, Professor Kim Schildkamp emphasized a simple but powerful starting point: meaningful data use begins with clear goals. Rather than asking what data are available, systems should begin by asking what they value — and what they are trying to achieve for their learners. From there, relevant and purposeful data can be identified and used.

This shift has important implications. When data is used primarily for accountability, it can risk narrowing focus, encouraging short-term thinking or placing undue pressure on schools. At the same time, accountability remains important. As highlighted in the session, improvement and accountability are not opposing forces, but must work together in ways that support learning and development.

When the purpose is improvement, data becomes a tool for reflection and dialogue. It helps schools understand where they are, where they want to go, and what steps might move them forward. This requires a broader evidence base, combining quantitative and qualitative data, and paying attention not only to cognitive outcomes, but also to social and emotional dimensions of learning.

From data about students to data with students

A particularly powerful thread in the conversation was the role of students in the use of data. Too often, students are positioned as sources of data rather than active participants in interpreting and using it.

The discussion highlighted a growing shift — from seeing students as “objects of change” to recognising them as “creators of change”. Involving students in identifying goals, interpreting data and shaping actions can strengthen both the quality of decisions and students’ own sense of ownership, motivation and belonging.

Emerging work in Norway illustrates this potential. In pilot schools, students have been actively involved in selecting focus areas and working alongside staff to address challenges. Early experiences suggest that such approaches can contribute not only to improved outcomes, but also to stronger engagement and wellbeing. At the same time, this work points to the need for building data literacy across the system — for students, teachers and leaders alike.

Different systems, shared direction

System perspectives from Scotland and Norway illustrated how different education systems are approaching the development and use of holistic indicators.

In Scotland, the National Improvement Framework reflects a deliberate move away from single measures towards a balanced set of indicators that capture learning, wellbeing, equity and inclusion. As described by Judith Tracey, the framework is grounded in a collaborative approach, with input from students, families and professionals. The aim is to provide a credible and meaningful picture of progress, while avoiding unintended consequences such as narrow performance pressures or distorted incentives.

In Norway, Yngve Lindvig shared how real-time data and learning analytics are being used to support schools in ongoing improvement processes. Here, the emphasis is not only on what is measured, but on how data is used — as a tool for professional reflection, dialogue and action. Advances in technology, including AI-supported analysis, are enabling more timely insights, allowing schools to respond more quickly and thoughtfully to emerging needs.

Across both contexts, a common direction is emerging: a move from control towards learning, and from static reporting towards more dynamic and responsive use of data.

A shared agenda for the future

As participants reflected together, several shared priorities came into focus. There is a need to continue developing indicators that genuinely reflect what matters for learners, while also building the capacity within systems to use data in meaningful and responsible ways.

Strengthening data literacy — across all levels of the system — was seen as essential. So too was the importance of keeping goals at the centre, ensuring that data serves learning rather than driving it. Participants also highlighted the value of collaboration across systems, sharing practices and learning from one another's approaches.

Looking ahead, key questions remain. How can systems demonstrate that the use of holistic indicators leads to better outcomes for learners? What kinds of support are needed to enable all schools to engage in this work? And how can student involvement be strengthened in ways that support both learning and democratic participation?



While the answers will continue to evolve, the conversation reflected a strong and shared commitment: to developing education systems that see the whole child — and use data not simply to measure, but to understand, support and improve learning for all.