

Education, Children, and Young People Committee

28th Meeting, 2023 (Session 6), Wednesday 8
November 2023

Education Reform

Introduction

1. This session, the Education, Children, and Young People Committee has agreed to scrutinise the continuing reforms to education in Scotland on an ongoing basis.
2. The Committee is scrutinising in particular the steps that the Scottish Government has taken in implementing the recommendations of the [OECD's report on Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence](#) and where this fits in the wider education reform context in light of more recent developments and reports. These include the publication of James Withers' report [Fit for the Future: developing a post-school learning system to fuel economic transformation](#) and Professor Louise Hayward's report on [Qualifications and Assessment](#).

Committee meeting

3. At its meeting today, the Committee will take evidence from academics and experts in education policy. The panel consists of–
 - Dr Janet Brown, Convenor, Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) Education Committee.
 - Professor Gordon Stobart, Emeritus Professor of Education, Institute of Education, University College London.
 - Professor Walter Humes, Honorary Professor in the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Stirling.
 - Dr Marina Shapira, Associate Professor in Sociology, University of Stirling.

Supporting information

4. A SPICe briefing paper is appended in **Annexe A**.
5. The Committee has received written submissions from Professor Gordon Stobart, Professor Walter Humes, and the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) which are appended in **Annexe B**.
6. Dr Marina Shapira has provided a copy of a report she co-authored, [Choice, Attainment and Positive Destinations: Exploring the impact of curriculum policy](#)

[change on young people](#). Dr Shapira has also provided a short summary of her report. This is also included in **Annexe B**.

7. Ahead of its meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Association of Directors of Education Scotland (ADES), COSLA and the National Parents Forum of Scotland to seek their views. At this time, the Committee has received responses from ADES and COSLA. These can be found in **Annexe C**.
8. Finally, the Committee has received a letter from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills providing an update on the implementation of the recommendations of the [OECD's report on Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence](#). It is included in **Annexe D**.

**Education, Children, and Young People Committee Clerks
8 November 2023**

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Education Reform

Introduction

Education Reform has been a constant within the school education system for many years. Reform in the current session of parliament has been framed around the conclusions of the OECD's 2021 report, Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence Into The Future. The purpose of the OECD's work was to explore "how the curriculum is being designed and implemented in schools and to identify areas for improvement across the country."

The Scottish Government commissioned the OECD review in response to debates in Parliament where concerns around previous reforms had been implemented, particularly the introduction of National qualifications.

The 2021 OECD review could be seen as part of an ongoing reform process. At the time the Scottish Government commissioned the OECD, there were other aspects of school education where reform was taking place. Particularly in relation to the aim of [creating an "empowered system"](#), but also in other areas such as Additional Support for Learning and parental engagement and involvement.

The processes of reform have a number of areas of focus. Central to most of this work is the process of ensuring that schools and teachers have the support, the structures, the capacity and the agency to enact the Curriculum for Excellence. Alongside this is a focus to reduce the poverty-related attainment gap and to support pupils with additional support needs. One of the issues that the OECD identified was a disconnect between Broad General Education ("BGE") and the Senior Phase. This observation led to the review of qualifications led by Professor Louise Hayward.

The Committee has taken evidence on education reform on several occasions this session.

- [OECD team on 8 September 2021](#).
- Professor Gordon Stobart attended [Committee on 10 November 2021](#) on his paper for the OECD, [Upper-secondary education student assessment in Scotland – A comparative perspective](#).
- [Professor Ken Muir, 23 March 2022](#)

- [Professor Louise Hayward and colleagues on the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment, 20 September 2023](#)

This session, the Committee will hear from a panel of academics. This paper will set out some key areas of recent and current reform across a range of areas. Given the centrality of the curriculum, the first section looks at the curriculum.

Submissions have been received from Professor Gordon Stobart, Professor Walter Humes, the Royal Society of Edinburgh, Dr Maria Shapira, COSLA, and the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland.

Curriculum for Excellence

Curriculum for Excellence is intended to support young people to gain the knowledge, skills and attributes needed for life in the 21st century. It seeks to support learners to achieve four capacities. The Four Capacities aim to enable all children to become:

- Successful learners;
- Confident individuals;
- Responsible citizens; and
- Effective contributors.

The curriculum is defined very broadly as “the totality of all that is planned for children and young people from early learning and childcare, through school and beyond.” CfE seeks to place a significant amount of responsibility and agency on teachers and practitioners for developing curricula. At least in Broad General Education, this is to be undertaken within a relatively loose framework of the Experiences & Outcomes and Benchmarks under each curriculum area. Learners should also engage in/experience interdisciplinary learning, engage with the ethos and life of the school, and have opportunities for personal achievements

CfE was formally implemented in 2010-2011. There was a great deal of material produced nationally and locally; indeed, this was described by [Education Scotland in 2016](#) as “too much support material and guidance for practitioners” which had led to the “growth of over-bureaucratic approaches to planning and assessment in many schools and classrooms across the country”.

The 2021 OECD report observed—

“translating curriculum policy documents into classroom realities is a complex and demanding task; it needs space, time and support for teacher professional development”

And—

“Compared to many other countries, Scottish teachers seem to rely much less on textbooks produced by educational publishers. This may be seen as a sign of strong professional capacity among teachers. However, it also raises some questions about efficiency, as developing high-quality instructional materials requires a lot of expertise, time and energy, while teachers often lack time for this type of work.”

Shortly after the formal implementation of CfE, the McCormack Review¹ made recommendations on the terms and conditions of teachers, and the Donaldson Review² looked at the education and professional development of teachers and school leaders.

Early in the implementation of CfE, there were concerns about buy-in and understanding of the constructivist philosophy³ which (according to Professor Mark Priestly and Sarah Minty⁴, and [Professor Lindsay Paterson](#)) implicitly underpins CfE and whether the structures had been put in place to enable teachers to take on the role that CfE envisages.

The 2021 OECD report noted that it had seen a variety of approaches in different schools, it said—

“When one compares the intended, implemented and attained curriculum, many good practices emerge. The original policy intention of CfE was to provide a future-oriented curriculum with a clear vision that gives more autonomy, space and flexibility for schools to adapt and enact it. The OECD team has heard testimony of this approach, building on a high-quality teaching workforce, pedagogical leadership and availability of support approaches and materials for schools and their professionals. Although the actual task of curriculum design still appears to be challenging for all schools across Scotland, a variable but gradually growing capacity is observed. It is important to realise that it takes long-term investments and time for such processes to become successful and institutionalised. That lesson can be learnt from, for example, the four decades that it took education in Finland to build up such bottom-up curricular capacity in communities and schools, with lots of patience, stamina and ongoing support.”

The 2021 review was positive about the aims of CfE. It also stated that CfE had been consolidated in the Broad General Education phase of education (ELC to S3) and that it “allows for reasonable coherence” over these phases of education. However, the linkage to Senior Phase (S4-S6) and the period where pupils learning is certificated was identified as problematic. This is explored in a later section of this paper.

The OECD 2021 review also suggested that the policy landscape is reactive and fragmented with areas of responsibilities across different agencies being unclear.

The recommendations were wide-ranging and have been fully accepted by the Scottish Government. They include reassessing “CfE’s aspirational vision against emerging trends in education”, considering “how the design of CfE can better help learners consolidate a common base of knowledge, skills and attitudes”, rethinking the Senior Phase, improving stakeholder engagement and communication, revising the division of responsibilities for the curriculum, simplifying policies and institutional structures, aligning school qualifications to the aims of the curriculum and planning cyclical reviews of the curriculum (e.g., every 10 years).

As noted above, commentators have argued that CfE has an implicitly constructivist approach. The 2021 OECD report suggested that there are tensions in the conceptualisation of knowledge, skills and competencies within CfE and argued that “clarifying the role of knowledge in the vision of CfE is the first step to strengthen the coherence of CfE.” (p118) The OECD referenced its Future of Education and Skills 2030

¹ [Advancing Professionalism In Teaching \(2011\)](#)

² [Teaching Scotland’s Future \(2010\)](#)

³ Constructivism can mean somewhat different things in different contexts, broadly it is the theory that knowledge is constructed by the individual rather than being discovered by or imparted to the learner.

⁴ Priestley, Mark and Minty, Sarah (2013) Curriculum for Excellence: ‘A brilliant idea, but...’ Scottish Educational Review 45 (1), 39-52

project which describes the integration of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values as competencies. [This said](#)—

“The concept of competency implies more than just the acquisition of knowledge and skills; it involves the mobilisation of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to meet complex demands. Future-ready students will need both broad and specialised knowledge. Disciplinary knowledge will continue to be important, as the raw material from which new knowledge is developed, together with the capacity to think across the boundaries of disciplines and “connect the dots”. Epistemic knowledge, or knowledge about the disciplines, such as knowing how to think like a mathematician, historian or scientist, will also be significant, enabling students to extend their disciplinary knowledge. Procedural knowledge is acquired by understanding how something is done or made – the series of steps or actions taken to accomplish a goal. Some procedural knowledge is domain-specific, some transferable across domains. It typically develops through practical problem-solving, such as through design thinking and systems thinking.”

It is not clear whether there has been a reassessment of knowledge in CfE or indeed how this would be operationalised.

The Cabinet Secretary recently wrote to the Committee with an update on the progress in taking forward the recommendations of the 2021 OECD report. She said that Education Scotland are leading on how to better align the curriculum across BGE and Senior Phase. She noted that there had been a number of “pilot curriculum review groups involving a total of more than 500 teachers and educators, local authority representatives and senior leaders are involved in the work”. She also told the Committee that—

“I am currently considering proposals for a potential systematic review process aiming to ensure that the curriculum remains relevant, forward looking, reflects the contemporary needs of our children and young people and ultimately supports high quality teaching and learning.”

The RSE’s submission to this Committee stated—

“The system must be prepared to be self-critical and challenge long-standing assumptions in the name of continuous improvement. This process could lead to some uncomfortable truths about the very foundations of Scottish education, such as Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). The Education Committee has previously commented that CfE – though noble in its intentions – did not live up to its full potential due to significant issues with its implementation. Although the system as a whole requires change, the Committee would like to acknowledge the many examples of excellent practice that exist across the sector that are delivered by passionate and tenacious professionals and centres.”

Implementation or enactment

The 2021 OECD review addressed the implementation of its recommendations. It said—

“Each recommendation points to a number of actions that should be taken to strengthen CfE and tackle its ongoing implementation challenges. However, they need to be considered as a coherent package rather than as individual policy actions. A structured approach to CfE implementation, building on the system’s existing strengths and this report’s recommendations, can help Scotland not only tackle ongoing or future challenges for CfE but also provide a platform for effective and sustained review of the change process and how it is reaching its objectives to help all learners achieve excellence.”

The [Scottish Government published an Implementation Framework](#) of the recommendations of the OECD's 2021 report in October of that year. This indicated that work on all of the recommendations would have begun by the end of 2022. The framework said that the Government would adopt the OECD's [implementation framework for effective change in schools](#). In this, the OECD noted that “policy reforms do not always translate into concrete actions and visible results in schools, however well designed they may be ... effective education change requires recognising that implementation is as important as the policy design itself, and is in fact a key aspect of the policy success in reaching schools and classrooms”. The OECD suggested implementation should balance “traditional top-down implementation processes with more bottom-up approaches”. It suggests that an effective implementation strategy needs to:

“align and communicate three key dimensions and make them actionable in a coherent way:

- Smart policy design.
- Inclusive stakeholder engagement.
- Conducive environment”.

The report of the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment also suggested a model of change. This was the Integrity Model of Change which “pays attention to three overlapping and interacting areas:

Educational Integrity - the need to ensure that what is done will lead to better educational opportunities and better life chances for every learner, for example, is informed by policy, practice and research.

Personal and Professional Integrity - the importance of ensuring that everyone who has a role to play in making the innovation successful is involved in its design and development, recognising and valuing the crucial role that each will play.

Systemic Integrity - the need to ensure that the various parts of the system are aligned to support the reform. Learners, parents and carers, The Government, the national agencies, professional associations, local communities, teachers, education providers, colleges, employers and universities, all have to actively support the change process if the reform is to be successful.”

Professor Humes' submission suggested that change “win the hearts and minds of teachers” who have “received mixed messages in recent years, on the one hand being encouraged to exercise ‘agency’ while still being subject authoritarian pressures from above.” During the Committee's work on the Scottish Attainment Challenge, the Committee heard evidence from Professor Mel Ainscow. He explained that in his view teachers are policy makers, rather than simply the implementors of policy decided from above. [He said—](#)

“Educational change is about implementation; you can have the best policies in the world, with the sort of wonderful brochures and documents that Scotland is very good at—you have some fabulous documents; indeed, they are so beautiful that I have shared them in other countries—but the real challenge is implementation down the levels. As I keep reiterating, teachers are policy makers, and we have not only to engage and support them but to give them freedom.” (OR 9 Feb 2022, Col 5)

A paper by Professors Chris Chapman and Graeme Donaldson published in March 2023, [Where Next for Scottish Education, Learning is Scotland's Future?](#), said—

“Education systems are complex, messy, and often inflexible. They are composed of a diverse range of stakeholders including learners, parents, the profession, business, and local and national government. Of all public services, it has been claimed that education systems are the toughest to reform.”

This paper highlighted several issues “that should guide thinking about where next for Scottish education”. These were—

- Change is a constant.
- The rationale for reform need not only be sound but it needs to be understood and embraced by those who will make it a reality.
- Less central prescription of the curriculum has significant implications for the work of schools and teachers and of local authorities.
- The best leadership creates a culture of aspiration and creativity.
- Scotland’s commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child reasserts the need to place the interests of young people at the heart of decision-making.
- If we are to embrace change rather than react to events, we need to establish mechanisms that can anticipate and harness such developments.

ADES provided the Committee with its response to the Muir review, written in 2022. This noted that the reform landscape had become “overly complex” and suggested a holistic approach to taking forward is required. It said “addressing the recommendations on a report-by-report basis undermines the OECD call for a systematic approach to curriculum review and a structured long-term approach to implementation to reflect the existing strengths within the system.”

The context and culture within which CfE was a theme of the OECD’s 2015 review, [Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective](#). This said that after “a decade of patient work to put in place the full curriculum programme” CfE was at a “watershed moment” and that bold measures were required to ensure that the curriculum is “to be built by teachers, schools and communities”. This report argued for a strengthened “middle”; this broadly was referring to the structures that sit between the classroom and national policy, and the OECD called for “networks and collaboratives among schools, and in and across local authorities.” It also stated—

“There needs to be clarity about the kinds of collaboration that work best to bring about the innovations and improvements to enhance student learning, and to create coherent and cohesive cultures of system-wide collaboration. This is not an argument for mandated collaboration or contrived collegiality to implement centrally-defined strategies. But it is to argue for greater consistency in collaborative professionalism and of moving towards the higher quality collaborative practices that have the most positive effects on student learning.”

The 2015 OECD report was influential in the policy work of the Government in the previous parliamentary session. In the last session, the government had a significant focus on professionalism, ‘empowering’ different levels of the system (particularly headteachers), leadership, and collaboration. Developing cultures, capacities and professional collaboration is not the type of reform or policy work that is going to be immediately visible

at a national level. One of the more concrete examples of action was the establishment of Regional Improvement Collaboratives across the Scotland.

The Cabinet Secretary recently wrote to the Committee with an update on the progress in taking forward the recommendations of the 2021 OECD report. She said—

“The government’s implementation of this recommendation acknowledges that we are building on our education system’s existing strengths. Fully implementing the recommendations of the OECD report will take time and while I remain committed to delivering these, things have moved on since the report’s publication. The OECD stated that the recommendations should be delivered as a coherent package, not as individual policy actions, and in the context now of a number of reports which could lead to significant change, it is important that there is a holistic and co-ordinated response to all potential Education and Skills reform. I see the implementation of the OECD recommendations as part of this wider education reform landscape and as such the Action Plan will be updated following the Government response to the recent Reviews.”

The 2022 Muir review looked specifically at the national agencies. The 2023 National Discussion examined the wider vision for school education in Scotland. These are examined below. The Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment looked at the future of certification in senior phase – this is examined later in the paper. Lastly the [Independent Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape](#) report (“the Withers’ Review”) was published this year as well – the committee will hear from James Withers in the coming weeks and a precis of that review is included as an appendix to this paper.

Current Government position

The Scottish Government is considering its response to the National Discussion, the Hayward Review, the Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape, alongside the Purpose and Principles for Post-School Education, Research and Skills, and its work to establish the new national education bodies.

In [her statement to Parliament on 22 June](#), the Cabinet Secretary said that she would, in respect of the Hayward Review, seek further views from teachers. She said that “with four substantive reports being published within four weeks, the Government now requires to provide an overarching narrative that ties those outputs together to set a clear trajectory and not miss the inherent opportunities that exist.” Ms Gilruth also announced that the Government would delay introducing a reform Bill. She said—

“We must take the opportunity to design our entire national education and skills landscape to better support children, young people and adult learners. Pre-empting what is possible in the context of the new national bodies by taking a narrow legislative focus at this stage would, I believe, miss that opportunity. If we are to deliver parity of esteem across the education system, we will require a holistic approach to legislation.”

The paper ADES provided to the Committee argued that structural reform does not need necessarily to have to wait for legislation, particularly in relation to the functions of Education Scotland. It said—

“Legislative changes appear to be a barrier to progress taking place at pace. It should be recognised that there are equally dangers in delaying any change. The danger is that the system becomes cynical about a genuine desire for change. Given the drivers for change any delay in progressing change at pace appears like complacency and an acceptance that the current arrangements are adequate for our

learners. Interim arrangements could be progressed which show the direction of travel, but which are not fixed. The inspectorate function beginning to operate independently of current Education Scotland functions would be a clear sign that the proposed changes set out in the Muir report do not need to wait until the Autumn of 2024.”

Muir Review

In June 2021, Professor Ken Muir was appointed an Independent Advisor to Scottish Government to take forward actions in response to the OECD review. [The news release suggested](#) that Professor Muir would “lead work to replace the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) with a new specialist agency for both curriculum and assessment.” Professor Muir was supported in his work by an [Expert Panel](#) and a Practitioner and much larger [Stakeholder Advisory Group](#). Professor Muir [undertook a consultation on](#) “the replacement of the Scottish Qualifications Authority and the reform of Education Scotland” which was launched on 30 September 2021 and closed on 26 November 2021.

On 9 March, the Scottish Government published [Professor Muir’s report](#) along with analyses of the consultations Professor Muir undertook. The then Cabinet Secretary delivered a [statement to Parliament on 9 March 2022](#). The Scottish Government also [published its response](#) to the report that day. The recommendation around a renewed vision led to the National Discussion, which is explored below. In terms of the national agencies, Professor Muir’s recommendations included:

- A new body, Qualifications Scotland, should be established. This new body should be an executive Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB). It should take on board SQA’s current awarding functions, chiefly the responsibility for the design and delivery of qualifications, the operation and certification of examinations, and the awarding of certificates.
- There should be a national agency for Scottish education. This should be an executive agency of the Scottish Government comprising the current support and improvement functions of Education Scotland, SQA’s Accreditation/ Regulation Directorate, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) Partnership and elements of Scottish Government’s Curriculum, Qualifications and Gaelic Division.
- A new Inspectorate body should be established with its independence enshrined in legislation. Its governance should reflect this independence, with the body funded by the Scottish Parliament, staffed by civil servants and inspectors, the latter of which are appointed with the approval of the monarch via the Privy Council.

The Government accepted all of the recommendations; some were “fully” accepted, some “broadly” accepted, and some accepted “in principle”. There were a number of points where the Government did not indicate that it was fully supportive. For example, one such was the suggestion that HMIE be directly accountable to the Parliament. The Government’s response did, however, indicate that it was minded to underpin the independence of HMIE with legislation.

The Government [announced in November 2022](#) that its preferred model is that the prospective new qualifications agency would include both the Awarding and Accreditation functions currently performed by the SQA.

National Discussion

Following the Muir Review, the Scottish Government and COSLA established a “National Discussion” to establish “a compelling and consensual vision for the future of Scottish education”. This work was independently facilitated by Professor Carol Campbell and Professor Alma Harris who are members of the Independent Council of Education Advisors.

The National Discussion was a wide-ranging [consultation exercise undertaken in Autumn 2022](#). [All Learners in Scotland Matter: Our National Discussion on Education](#) was published on 31 May 2023.

The National Discussion proposed a Vision Statement for Scottish Education. This was:

Vision Statement for the Future of Scottish Education: All Learners in Scotland Matter

Children and young people are at the heart of education in Scotland. The Scottish education system values collaborative partnerships that engage all learners, the people who work within and with the education system, parents, and carers to ensure that all learners in Scotland matter.

All learners are supported in inclusive learning environments which are safe, welcoming, caring, and proactively address any barriers to learning and inequities that exist or arise. Education in Scotland nurtures the unique talents of all learners ensuring their achievement, progress, and well-being.

Each child and young person in Scotland have high-quality learning experiences which respect their rights and represents the diversity of who they are and the communities they live in.

Each child and young person experiences great teaching, resources, and support for joyful learning that builds their confidence and equips them to be successful and to contribute to their life, work, and world, so they know how much they matter.

The report of the national discussion identified themes that had arisen from the consultation in a wide range of areas, broadly under the themes of:

- learners and learning;
- a learning system, which included professionals, the curriculum and assessments and qualifications;
- digital futures; and
- Human Centred Educational Improvement.

The last chapter of the report was titled Coda and it drew together the authors’ impressions from the consultation and how they envisaged the report to be acted upon. This found both a desire for change and a level of cynicism around whether genuine change could occur. The report said—

“The people of Scotland have spoken, and we have listened. So now it is time for action, most critically is time for the right action. We are not proposing that an avalanche of changes is imposed on the education system but rather that the National Discussion is viewed as a mandate for desired change that informs short-term, medium-term, and long-term actions. Change for change's sake serves no-one and inevitably generates instability and confusion within the system. We are very aware that the education system and the professionals working in it are stretched

with current demands and resource constraints and we understand concerns about exhaustion, burnout, workload, work intensification, and working conditions. Hence, we are proposing that the pace of change needs to be realistic for quality implementation and sustainable improvement. This means changes cannot be frenetic but change also cannot be invisible or non-existent over the coming months and years. We heard about overdue and urgent changes needed. It is important to put in place carefully sequenced and adequately resourced improvements with time for consolidation over the short, medium, and long-term.”

Culture and capacity

A recurring theme in discussion around reforming school education in recent years has been on culture change and ensuring that there is capacity (both in terms of resources and competencies). The [International Council of Education Advisers’ 2018-2020 report](#) stated—

“The ICEA has consistently underlined how a focus on cultural change, capacity building, and structural change were key elements in securing sustained improvements in Scotland’s education system. Developing effective leadership and a robust culture of collaborative professionalism are critical components of such an approach. The previous report noted that capacity building measures were clearly moving in the right direction.”

The ICEA’s first report argued that Scotland should aim for an “egalitarian culture” within its education system. This, it explained, is where—

“... mutualistic or ‘self-improving’ organisations work laterally across the system, providing mutual support for each other’s development in a networked system where those in the front line take responsibility and ownership for improvement, while others act as brokers and facilitators to connect schools and others, and create the conditions for improvement. ... [In an egalitarian culture] it is anticipated that high levels of social cohesion would be manifested through partnership, collaboration, and co-production between service providers (and the communities they serve), and low levels of social regulation would promote high levels of flexibility, agility and innovation.”

A paper by Professor Mark Priestly and Sarah Minty published in 2013 said that building the capacity of teachers and supporting their agency was key, their paper continued—

“Agency is ecological; agents act by means of their environment, so that the achievement of agency strongly depends on cultural (meaning, interpretation and understanding), structural (relationships, power) and material resources. The promotion of teacher agency is therefore not solely a matter of enhancing individual capacity, but also requires change to the cultural and structural conditions within which teachers work.”⁵

The 2021 OECD Report outlined that a system which places a high level of responsibility on teachers, “relies heavily on the capacity, culture and status of the teaching profession and the quality of school leadership”. The review continued—

“Systems that promote such local innovation and strive for the empowerment of system actors – including learners – require strong system leaders to drive a culture that is empowered and accountable, and who can present a compelling case for the education system to the media, politicians and the general public.” (p96)

⁵ Priestley, Mark and Minty, Sarah (2013) Curriculum for Excellence: ‘A brilliant idea, but...’ Scottish Educational Review 45 (1), 39-52

The OECD found evidence that there are strengths in the professional support for teachers and school leaders. It also found that school leaders have strong networks. It also reported that “school leaders see their role as interpreting the policy context for their school to ensure that the school and the teachers are protected from policy incoherence and overload”. (p98)

The Government intends to reduce teachers' class contact time by 90 minutes per week, to 21 hours. Any changes to teachers' terms and conditions will need to be agreed by the [Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers](#) and there have been reports that there has been [little progress on this commitment](#).

There are a range of programmes to support school leaders in Scotland, for example through Education Scotland and [Columba 1400](#). The Government also recently announced that it was to establish a centre of excellence for teaching.

Subsidiarity is the idea that decisions should be devolved down to the lowest suitable level. This is key to the approach of CfE. Professor Humes' submission to the committee suggested that a “desire to achieve ‘one right answer’ can sometimes be unhelpful” and there could be greater diversity. [Professor Chapman and Professor Donaldson's 2023 paper](#) said—

“New arrangements must create a context and mechanisms for cultural change that promote subsidiarity and place decision-making and support for improvement closer to the ‘classroom’.”

There has also been criticism of national policy-making approaches. A 2020 critiqued the functioning of national policy forums (e.g., the [Scottish Education Council](#) and groups that sit below that body). He notes that there are a number of forums that purportedly support a diversity of voices to influence policy such as the Teacher Panel and the Learner Panel. However, he argued that senior officials from the Government and national agencies exerted significant influence over the discourse in these groups. He said—

“The use of government patronage ensures that dissident perspectives rarely disturb the process. Constructive ‘collaboration’ is the preferred way of reaching agreement. There is no awareness of the dangers of ‘groupthink’, whereby powerful players set and control the agenda, promoting forms of discourse that effectively close off alternative policy options. This can create an unhealthy anti-intellectual climate in which bureaucratic values stifle creative thinking.”

In his submission to the Committee, Professor Humes said that culture change “must start at the top”. He continued—

“Politicians (national and local), Chief Executives of national agencies, Directors of Education and senior civil servants need to ask themselves how they will change. This will raise challenging issues about authority, power and responsibility.”

One of the key tensions is how to support a system where there is a great deal of freedom while at the same time having a system of accountability. One approach at the local-to-national level has been the development of the Core-Plus targets agreed by local government to support closing the attainment gap, where local authorities are involved in setting their own improvement targets. There has also been criticism that too much focus is placed on attainment results to measure the success of schools (e.g., see the Morgan Review). [A “think piece” that Professor Chris Chapman drafted for ADES in 2019](#) argued that there should be move away from individual accountability and towards “collective responsibility”. The paper continued—

“If we can foreground collective responsibility as the key check and balance within our collaborative, networked endeavour then individuals will be less likely to revert to

past behaviours when they meet challenges that require risk taking and innovative practice. Collective responsibility has the potential to be the glue that holds people together when the going gets tough. Conversely, if individual accountability has primacy it is likely to be the knife that breaks the links between people.”

The OECD noted that stakeholder engagement is at the heart of CfE and that considerable efforts have been made in this regard. The OECD said that this has led to the “communication and development of a shared language creat[ing] the conditions for shared ownership and wide support of CfE’s vision”.

The OECD team identified three challenges “inherent to stakeholder engagement around CfE”. These are—

- “A gap between the seemingly intense involvement of stakeholders at all levels of the system and the confidence they have in their effective influence on decision making.” Two particular issues were identified in this regard, “the clarity of purpose of engagement initiatives and consistency in terms of using stakeholders’ input.”
- “CfE ownership was most often described as fragmented, with too many stakeholders claiming ownership of CfE while not necessarily fulfilling the responsibilities that come with such ownership. Transparency in the division of responsibilities among stakeholders is a necessary condition for policy success in a system that promotes shared responsibility of its curriculum.”
- “Communication around CfE remains confused, which can hinder implementation by leaving CfE open to wide interpretations and overwhelm schools, learners and parents.” (p90)

Overall, the 2021 OECD review said—

“Scotland’s system is heavily governed relative to its scale and numbers of schools. The multiple layers of governance and additional responsibilities created around CfE can complicate implementation processes by generating additional policy priorities and supplementary materials with little co-ordination.” (p87)

Senior Phase

One of the key observations of the 2021 OECD review was that the linkage to Senior Phase (S4-S6) and the period where pupils’ learning is certificated is problematic. The report stated—

“The coherence of CfE enactment is less consistent, however, in the Senior Phase (for learners aged 15 to 18 years), where fundamental challenges exist for curriculum and subsequent assessment re-design. Without taking up the task of a re-visioning of CfE in the Senior Phase, the practices in upper-secondary education will keep lagging in its curriculum components (aims, pedagogy and assessment) and will exercise a counterproductive influence on Broad General Education and the transition for students.”

A number of the recommendations in the 2021 OECD review are relevant to assessment and qualifications. These are summarised below:

- **Find a better balance between breadth and depth of learning throughout CfE** to deliver Scotland’s commitment to providing all learners with a rich learning experience throughout school education: Scotland could consider how the design of CfE can better help learners consolidate a common base of knowledge, skills and

attitudes by the end of BGE, and nurture and hone this base for them to progress seamlessly through Senior Phase and the choices its offers.

- **Adapt the Senior Phase to match the vision of CfE:** Scotland could consider adapting the pedagogical and assessment practices and the structure of learning pathways in the Senior Phase to enhance learners' experience of upper-secondary education and help them develop CfE's four capacities continuously.
- **Align curriculum, qualifications and system evaluation to deliver on the commitment of *Building the Curriculum 5*:** Scotland could first identify modes of student assessment that could be used in school and external settings at Senior Phase levels, in alignment with the four capacities and CfE philosophy; and second, re-develop a sample-based evaluation system to collect robust and reliable data necessary to support curriculum reviews and decision making.

The OECD report authors [gave evidence to the Committee on 8 September 2021](#). Beatriz Pont from the OECD said:

“There are all the student assessments, and the structures are set for students to pass the exams but not to have a broad experience, as CfE considers it. We think that that is hindering the curriculum experience of many young people. Actually, the students whom we met told us that. They said that, when they arrive in the senior phase, having learned in a new way and having had a much broader experience, they then have to go back to learning for the test, which changes the way that they perceive education. We think that the senior phase has an issue between breadth and depth that is still unsolved and needs attention.” – [Official Report, 8 September 2012](#)

Ms Pont stated the OECD saw better definition of pathways in the Senior Phase as a potential solution to this. The OECD suggests a balance of assessments, ensuring that students have support mechanisms and provisions to give a good understanding of student performance.

In 2021, Professor Gordon Stobart authored a working paper '[Upper-secondary education student assessment in Scotland](#)', published in August 2021. Professor Stobart was an Honorary Research Fellow at Oxford University and was commissioned by OECD to produce the report, which followed the OECD's June 2021 report.

The working paper was commissioned by the OECD to complement work on the 2021 review. Rather than providing recommendations, the paper lists assessment options for consideration. In his paper, Professor Stobart describes Scotland as an:

“...international leader in adopting broader '21st century' capacities for education and life outside schooling.” – p9

However, the challenges of assessing the capacities of curricula such as CfE are also highlighted:

“At present there are few examples of how national examinations can assess broader global skills such as creativity, collaboration, and communication.” – p14

The paper compared Scotland's system of certification in upper secondary to a variety of other countries' systems. He also noted that Scotland's students are more frequently examined than in other jurisdictions. During evidence to the Committee, he was surprised at the number of examinations in Scotland and the complexity of the system. Professor Stobart's recent submission to this Committee said—

“In comparative terms, Scottish upper-secondary school students are more frequently examined than those in other jurisdictions, where typically certification is at 18. This results from offering three suites of national examinations (National 5; Highers; Advanced Highers) during S4-6. A consequence of this is the ‘two term dash’ in which students move rapidly from one set of exams to the next.”

[Professor Hayward told the Committee in September](#)—

“There has been consistent evidence across a range of reports that there are real challenges with the idea of having three consecutive years of examinations. We heard consistently from young people and teachers deep frustration about the balance of time spent in assessment and examination processes as opposed to focusing and deepening learning and teaching.”

[Professor Stobart’s paper](#) set out options for the future of assessment for Scotland to explore, including:

- Removal of National 5 examinations in S4 and move toward a school graduation certificate or diploma.
- Developing a more resilient upper-secondary assessment system in light of the disruption through the pandemic
- Better alignment of assessment with CfE and pedagogy through broadening forms of assessment.
- Increasing and adapting the role of continuous, school-based assessment carried out by teachers throughout the year, and moving away from centralised moderation.
- Ensuring student views are considered and used to shape assessment arrangements.
- Further developing the role of vocational qualifications.

The genesis of the 2021 OECD reviews and much of the subsequent work can be traced to concerns raised in Parliament last session around the impact the new qualifications was having on the breadth of learning in schools, using the number of subjects as a metric. The OECD noted these debates and suggested that there was a lack of clarity around what ought to be offered. The 2021 Report said—

“As CfE aims to provide both breadth and depth of learning, without agreement on what constitutes an education that is both broad and deep, schools lack clarity on the number of subjects their students should study and the appropriate structure to support their progression. The high number of classes taken in BGE – up to 15 and 17 according to school testimonies – might result in fragmentation and superficiality (with few hours available for each subject per week). ... The number of subjects in the Senior Phase is seen by some as too low, as they are narrowing a broad education, limiting choice to students and offering insufficient preparation and depth into disciplinary knowledge due to the focus on qualification preparation. Others believe that the importance of broad choice is perhaps over-emphasised, as it may create tensions with the desired deeper understanding of knowledge”. (p53)

Dr Marina Shapira along with Professor Mark [Priestley published research in February this year on the impact of curriculum policy on choice, attainment and destinations](#). This found, among other things—

- Overall, under CfE, a reduction in the number of National Qualifications entries in S4 compared to the period prior to the introduction of the new curriculum.
- A steeper decline in enrolments in subjects such as Social Subjects, Expressive Arts and Modern Languages, compared to subjects seen as core curriculum (e.g., Maths and English).
- Evidence of social stratification in overall and subject entry patterns in S4, with a steeper decline (e.g., fewer entries, a narrower range of subjects) affecting students from comparatively disadvantaged areas.
- Significant variation in the number of subjects studied in the BGE in secondary, both between schools and across different year groups.
- Evidence of the significant curricular fragmentation in many schools, with a large proportion of students being taught by over 15 teachers each week.

The paper explored some of the reasons for these patterns of provision. These included—

- Significant evidence of the existence of a culture of performativity in many schools, encouraging the instrumental selection of content and/or organisation of curriculum provision to maximise attainment in the Senior Phase.
 - BGE provision mirroring the senior phase choices, with the potential for fragmentation, incoherent provision and premature subject choices.
 - The existence of practices which are counter-educational, including abolishing low-performing subjects in the Senior Phase, teaching-to-the-test and channelling students into courses to benefit school attainment statistics.
- Shortages of teachers (especially in STEM subjects) and a lack of teacher non-contact time, which limit subjects offered and teachers' capacity for curriculum making.
- Evidence that many key actors in the system (including Local Authority Directors of Education) dislike current practices associated with the attainment agenda, which they see as acting counter to the philosophy of CfE.

The paper noted that while there have been fewer entries at level 5 of the SCQF, a higher proportion of those who took up these qualifications have passed and the pass rate of Higher qualifications in S5 has increased since 2014. However, the research also found that “curriculum narrowing is associated with negative consequences for young people in relation to attainment, transitions to subsequent study in school, and destinations beyond school”. It also noted that the intention was that Senior Phase would be seen as a three-year stage where qualifications could be taken through that period at the appropriate time. However, the research found that “while the entries to Intermediate 2/Standard grade qualifications in S5 rose between 2011-2014 (i.e., before CfE), entries to National 5 level qualifications in S5 under CfE have decreased”.

Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment (the Hayward Review)

Following the two OECD publications on Scottish Education in 2021, the Government commissioned Professor Louise Hayward to lead an Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment. The [review began its work in early 2022 and through 2022 and 2023 undertook a number of phases of consultation](#). Its final report was published shortly prior to the summer recess.

Some of the key recommendations in the report are:

- Adopting an SDA (Scottish Diploma of Achievement) as a graduation certificate for all senior phase educational settings.
- Removing exams in all subjects up to SCQF level 5 (e.g. National 5s), examinations may be retained in levels 6 and 7 (e.g., Highers and Advanced Highers).
- a digital profile for all learners which allows them to record personal achievements, identify and plan future learning.

When [giving evidence to the Committee in September, Professor Hayward](#) said that the vision for the future of qualifications and assessment in Scotland is a crucial part of this work. The proposed vision is for—

“an inclusive and highly regarded Qualifications and Assessment system that inspires learning, values the diverse achievements of every learner in Scotland and supports all learners into the next phase of their lives, socially, culturally and economically.”

Professor Hayward also stated that the report provides a “longer-term direction of travel for qualifications and assessment in Scotland”. She also touched on implementation – as previously mentioned her report suggests an “Integrity Model of Change” – and at committee she said—

“What we have learned from the curriculum in Scotland, but also internationally, is that it is not enough to plan for the educational aspect of innovation; there has to be a plan for change. The process of change has to be carefully planned, and, to be effective, it has to be co-constructed. So, everyone who is involved in making it work has to be involved in the process. The pace of putting ideas into practice should depend on the level of resourcing that is available. It is about working through the ideas and being realistic about the investment that can be made as they develop.”

Scottish Diploma of Achievement

The Review recommended that the SDA be made up of three, equally weighted parts. These are:

“Programmes of Learning

“In-depth study of individual areas of the curriculum, subjects and vocational, technical and professional qualifications, will remain a fundamental part of qualifications. However, the new approach to qualifications should go further to improve alignment with CfE.”

“Project Learning

“Learners should have opportunities to demonstrate how they can use knowledge from across subjects/technical and professional areas to tackle challenges. These kinds of experience are closer to those learners will have beyond school or college, for example being able to work as part of a team, to investigate, to solve problems and to look for creative solutions.”

“Personal Pathway

“Learners are individuals and should have opportunities to demonstrate their individuality- the courses they choose, the projects they undertake, their interests, their contributions and aptitudes. Together, these combine to help learners make good decisions about what they might do next. This wider, more personalised information will provide colleges, employers and universities with a better evidence base to inform their decisions about which students or employees are likely to be best suited to which course or job.”

The intention is that the programmes of learning will be graded and assessed as they are currently, project learning will be assessed at an SCQF level but not graded, and the personal pathway element will be neither graded nor assessed.

Under Programmes of Learning, the review envisages a broader range of assessments to be used. The review was critical of too much reliance on external examinations, but that these should be retained (at levels 6 and 7) “where they are an important part of the assessment methodology”.

Under Personal Pathway, the review lists a number of possible activities that this element could include:

- Contributions to the community.
- Cultural or sporting activities.
- Supporting wellbeing of themselves and others.
- Work, enterprise or entrepreneurial activities.

The review says that the focus in this aspect should not be about collecting experiences, rather it should be on what has been learned through those experiences.

Ned Sharratt, Senior Researcher (School Education, ELC, and Culture), SPICe Research

1 November 2023

Note: Committee briefing papers are provided by SPICe for the use of Scottish Parliament committees and clerking staff. They provide focused information or respond to specific questions or areas of interest to committees and are not intended to offer comprehensive coverage of a subject area.

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Appendix

The Withers Review

In August 2022, Scottish Ministers announced an independent review of Scotland's skills system, and in June this year the [Independent Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape](#) report was published. This review was carried out by James Withers, former Chief Executive of Scotland Food and Drink and NFU Scotland.

The Economy and Fair Work Committee held an [evidence session with James Withers on 27 September to discuss the independent review of the skills landscape](#).

The report sets out 15 recommendations. Five of these are structural, setting out reforms for the agencies involved in skills delivery. James Withers states in his report that the structural recommendations “form a package of public service reform, which, in my view, would need to be implemented in full” to be a success. Structural recommendations are:

1. Giving the Scottish Government responsibility for skills planning at national level.
2. Establishing a single funding body, bringing together many of the functions of SFC, SDS and SAAS.
3. Giving the new qualifications body a remit for development and accreditation of all publicly funded post-school qualifications, the underpinning skills frameworks and occupational standards.
4. Reform Skills Development Scotland (SDS) to focus on development of a national careers service and embed careers advice within educational settings, workplaces and communities.
5. Giving the enterprise agencies a clear remit for supporting businesses with workforce planning.

The remaining recommendations are operational. These include:

1. New culture of leadership from the Scottish Government.
2. The need for success in skills to be defined.
3. Establish areas of strategic workforce opportunity and need.
4. Empower regional partners to develop their own solutions.
5. Develop a new model of funding for post-school learning provision, taking in all learning pathways and flexible and part-time modes of study.
6. Reviewing post-school qualifications using SCQF as a foundation to create a universal skills framework with consistent language around qualifications at the same SCQF attainment levels.
7. Developing a clear map of the post-school system to help aid understanding around qualifications and learning pathways.
8. Developing a new digital training record for learners to track their skills development throughout their lives.

9. Expanding the remit of Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) to establish a national employer board and wind up the Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board (SAAB).
10. Exploring greater private sector investment in the post-school learning system, for example through in-work learning opportunities.

The Review does not set out any timescales for implementing the recommendations but it does draw attention to five recommendations which should be a priority for Scottish Ministers. These five are:

1. Developing the purpose and principles to guide the new system.
2. Establishing new skills planning processes.
3. Setting out a new model for funding.
4. Carrying out an audit of post-school qualifications.
5. Establishing a network of employer boards.

Annexe B

Submissions from Professor Walter Humes

Abstract

This article explains how education in Scotland is different from that in other parts of the United Kingdom, noting the importance of both traditional values and the current political context. Concerns about standards are discussed in relation to three main issues: the Scottish curriculum; the comprehensive principle; and attempts at structural reform. It is argued that, while the need for cultural change is acknowledged, it has not yet been adequately addressed. Restoring confidence and trust among teachers will require stronger intellectual leadership, a redistribution of power and an invigorated policy community.

Keywords: Curriculum for Excellence; comprehensive education; attainment gap; structure and culture; discourse; intellectual leadership.

Introduction

Scotland has a proud educational history, often said to embody the principles of democracy and equality, but in recent years its reputation has been subject to critical scrutiny by both internal and external observers. In 2016, Sir Michael Wilshaw, then Head of Ofsted in England, said that 'Scotland used to be a beacon of excellence - it's not any more'. More recently, the author of *Class Rules: The Truth About Scottish Schools*, himself a Scot, said that 'we have a school system that is both in need of and ripe for radical – even revolutionary – reform'. (McEnaney, 2021). Comparative surveys, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), have suggested that standards in key areas (language, maths and science) show evidence of decline. Scotland has withdrawn from other international studies, which means there is a lack of reliable longitudinal data on which to assess progress.

Arguments about the quality of Scottish education have taken place against an unresolved political debate about the constitutional position of Scotland. Nationalists want Scotland to become an independent country, while unionists favour remaining part of the United Kingdom. A Scottish Parliament was established in 1999, with a number of responsibilities, including education, devolved from the UK Parliament in London, though the system's distinctive character long pre-dated devolution. Since 2007, the Scottish National Party (SNP) has been in power, with the main aim of achieving independence. A referendum in 2014 failed to produce a majority in support of this aspiration, but the subject continues to be a source of tension between nationalists and unionists within Scotland, and between the Holyrood and Westminster Parliaments. Education has featured prominently in the exchanges between the two camps, with nationalists saying Scottish education remains fundamentally healthy, despite some areas of concern, and unionists saying that successive SNP administrations have been responsible for a series of failed policies.

This article will first comment on the distinctiveness of Scottish education within the United Kingdom. Scots are sensitive about careless references to 'the British educational system' and are quick to point out that their country's schools have developed in different ways from those in other parts of the UK. One important area of difference can be seen in the Scottish curriculum: the second part of the article will look at Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) which has served as the framework for all 3-18 provision since 2004. The third part will examine the extent to which the comprehensive principle is still embodied in secondary schools, noting particularly attempts to address the 'attainment gap' between socially advantaged and disadvantaged communities. The final section will discuss the need for cultural, not

just structural, reform in Scottish education and argue that stronger intellectual leadership is required if public confidence and trust is to be restored.

Distinctiveness

One account of the distinctiveness of Scottish education links its underlying values to a sense of national identity and commitment to social equality:

This takes the form of a story or 'myth', shaped by history but not always supported by historical evidence, to the effect that Scotland is less class-conscious than England, that ability and achievement, not rank, should determine success in the world, that public (rather than private) institutions should be the means of trying to bring about the good society and that, even where merit does justify differential rewards, there are certain basic respects - arising from the common humanity of all men and women [*sic*] - in which human beings deserve equal consideration and treatment. (Humes and Bryce, 2018, p. 110)

Viewed from this perspective, Scottish state schools are often perceived as presenting a very uniform picture. The independent sector is small compared with England and the vast majority of children attend primary and secondary schools run by local authorities. All state secondary schools are comprehensive. Unlike in England, there are no academy trusts, selective grammar schools, church-run schools or boards of governors (though the words 'academy' and 'grammar' still appear in the names of some schools which existed before 1965). Statutory responsibility for the provision of educational services and the employment of teachers resides with 32 local authorities, to whom headteachers are directly accountable. Local authorities, in turn, are subject to National Priorities set out by the Scottish Government, reviewed each year, which may be reinforced by funding incentives for particular projects. To outsiders, the system can seem centralised and directive, with little scope for variation.

This impression of uniformity, however, needs to be qualified. Roman Catholic schools exist within the state system, their position permitted under the provisions of the 1918 Education (Scotland) Act. But they too are run by local authorities, though the church retains some powers over the appointment of teachers, particularly to senior positions. Moreover, the argument that denominational schools have a distinctive ethos appeals not only to adherents of the Catholic faith but to a significant number of Muslim parents, who choose to send their children to Catholic rather than non-denominational schools.

Geographical variation also serves to qualify the overall impression of uniformity. This extends beyond the simple contrast between small rural schools in the highlands and islands and large establishments in the heavily populated central belt. Although the independent sector is small, it is heavily concentrated in the capital, Edinburgh. There, some 25 per cent of pupils receive their schooling outside the state system, within a well-established group of private institutions, some originally modelled on English public schools. Although these schools attract limited attention, their existence can be seen as a further qualification on the extent of commitment to equality. Edinburgh is the most Anglicised part of Scotland and the centre of political and economic decision-making. The legal, medical and academic establishments are prominent in the city and provide plenty of scope for advantageous networking. Although not as marked as in England, inter-generational privilege can certainly be detected in Scotland (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2015).

But even within the state system, it would be misleading to conclude that all Scottish schools are much the same. Unsurprisingly, there are large variations in educational attainment, as measured by public examinations, between schools in socially advantaged and disadvantaged areas. For example, the prosperous area of East Renfrewshire, south of Glasgow, has nearly all of its secondary schools appearing high in unofficial exam 'league tables', while most schools in a city like Dundee struggle to achieve average

results. It is estimated that more than 25% of Scottish children live in poverty (McGarvey, 2018). Schools and teachers can still make a difference to the ambitions and achievements of individual pupils, but they alone cannot remedy the deep social inequalities that persist. The findings of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) highlight the endemic problems associated with poverty, unemployment, poor health, inadequate housing, family dysfunction and community despair, which continue to adversely affect the life chances of many youngsters.

Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)

Since 2004, the flagship policy of Scottish education has been Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Executive, 2004). Unlike the National Curriculum in England, it is not prescribed by statute but a long-standing habit of 'looking to the centre' for direction has meant that almost all headteachers are content to follow its guidelines. CfE is an ambitious programme of curricular and assessment reform, covering the age range 3-18 (Priestley & Biesta, 2013). Its key features include: a desire to promote four generic 'capacities' (successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors, responsible citizens); a description of the learning process in terms of 'experiences' and 'outcomes', set out in a framework of linear levels; 'progressive' and 'active' pedagogy, placing the learner centre-stage; an aspiration that teachers should become curriculum developers and change-agents (Priestley & Humes, 2010; Humes & Priestley, 2021). The initial proposals were generally well received by teachers and other stakeholders, and a substantial amount of development work was undertaken before new courses were introduced in 2010. However, a number of concerns about aspects of the innovation arose. There were mixed messages from government about the nature of the reforms, sometimes described as 'transformational', at other times as merely requiring teachers to adopt existing 'best practice'. Certain key concepts, such as 'active learning' and 'interdisciplinary learning', were not clearly defined at first. New national examinations were slow to emerge (on the understandable grounds that decisions about curriculum should come before decisions about assessment): this created uncertainty among teachers and a later perception that there was a mismatch between the broad general education offered in primary and early secondary schooling and the examination-driven nature of teaching and learning in the upper secondary stages. A national review of qualifications and assessment is currently underway, with a report expected early in 2023. There were also complaints about the management of the CfE programme, the quality of in-service training, and excessive bureaucracy (teachers lacked time to read the avalanche of documentation descending on schools). The Scottish Government and national agencies (such as Education Scotland and the Scottish Qualifications Authority) sought to respond to these concerns, while maintaining that the fundamental principles of CfE were sound. Critics suggested that too many political and professional reputations were at stake to admit that the programme might be ill-conceived. Persistent critics were marginalised.

The official line gained a measure of support from external reviews of the reform. Two reports from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2015, 2021) concluded that, while improvements were certainly needed, Scotland deserved credit for its efforts to re-define the priorities of schooling in the 21st century. The 2021 report described CfE as 'an inspiring and widely supported philosophy of education', at the same time stressing the need 'to enhance the coherence of the policy environment'. The Scottish Government also received reassurance from its International Council of Education Advisers (ICEA), which described CfE as 'the cornerstone of educational transformation in Scotland' (ICEA, 2018). The ICEA report did, however, have some cautionary observations to make about the need to make cultural, not just structural, changes if the intended benefits of CfE were to be fully realised. This point will be discussed further below.

The Scottish experience has attracted interest from other jurisdictions. Within the United Kingdom, the clearest example is in Wales, where an independent review led to a report

which echoes many of the issues raised in Scotland (Donaldson, 2015). This is not surprising since the reviewer, Professor Graham Donaldson, was formerly the Senior Chief Inspector of Education in Scotland, and was closely involved in the early stages of CfE. The engagement of Professor Donaldson as a consultant by the Welsh Government has an interesting political dimension, setting two of the smaller UK countries on a different educational trajectory from that being pursued in England.

CfE has now been centre-stage in Scottish education for nearly twenty years. Some countries (e.g., Finland and Japan) automatically review their curricula every ten years and, given the pace of change in the wider world, there is a danger that Scottish schools could fall behind in making the necessary responses to technological advances, geopolitical pressures and economic challenges. One observer (educated in Scotland but now working in England) has described Scottish education as 'cautious, conformist, risk-averse and stuck in its ways' (Battacharya, 2021).

The Comprehensive Principle in Scotland

The most detailed study of the impact of comprehensive education in Scotland was published in 2015 with the sub-title 'Lessons from fifty years of comprehensive schooling' (Murphy et al., 2015). This drew on a range of evidence relating to inequality, staying-on rates beyond the age of 16, pupils' views of their experience in comprehensive schools, gender differences in attainment, and the governance of the system. It also contained perspectives from England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The final chapter sought to sum up what can be learned from the Scottish experience, expressed in seven propositions:

- A comprehensive system needs a clear vision
- A comprehensive system should achieve a fair balance between uniformity and diversity
- A comprehensive system needs to recognize the wider determinants of inequality
- A comprehensive system should be clear about the knowledge, skills and understanding it expects all of its learners to develop
- A comprehensive system should empower its learners and teachers
- Improvement needs to be defined in terms of all of the aims of a comprehensive system
- A sound knowledge base and capacity for independent scrutiny are essential to a successful comprehensive system (Murphy et al, 2015, chapter 11)

While acknowledging that many pupils have had opportunities that were denied to them under the old selective system, the book is careful to avoid a self-congratulatory interpretation of what has been achieved. Official accounts tend to emphasise the importance of partnership and collaboration among the Scottish policy community. Murphy et al., however, caution that 'this may make it prone to complacency and a pragmatic desire to seek consensus – especially among the most powerful stakeholders – rather than pursue policies informed by more systematic evidence' (p.204). Thus, they stress the importance of independent data collection and analysis, transparency and peer review, not the 'positional authority' of powerful players, such as the inspectorate. They also draw attention to 'the complexity and dynamic tensions in competing valuations of liberty, equality and fraternity' (ibid: 204), which are often cited as underpinning principles of comprehensive education.

In 2016, Scotland's First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, declared that closing the attainment gap between pupils from 'advantaged' and 'disadvantaged' backgrounds would be 'the defining mission' of her government. A Scottish Attainment Challenge was set for schools, with substantial additional resources for those serving deprived communities. This was undoubtedly well-intentioned and headteachers welcomed the extra funding. It was hoped

that substantial progress would be seen by 2026, but the coronavirus pandemic and the abandonment of the normal examination diets in 2020 and 2021 (replaced by teacher assessments) meant that measuring improvement was highly problematic. Insofar as conclusions can be drawn, it seems that some modest progress has been made but there is still a long way to go. The government has now retreated from the 2026 target.

This episode illustrates a recurring feature of recent Scottish policy making. The initial launch of the Attainment Challenge was over-ambitious and failed to take account of the decades of evidence that schools alone cannot compensate for the big structural inequalities in wider society. It created a level of expectation that was likely to be disappointed and could be regarded as an instance of what the American political theorist Murray Edelman (1988) has called 'policy as spectacle'. Thanks to the pervasive influence of PR 'experts', boasting has become the default position of many public and private organisations (just look at their websites). Appearance is seen as more important than substance and anything that might detract from the headline message is simply disregarded. The language in which many Scottish educational policies have been framed is often emotionally appealing – who wouldn't be in favour of reducing the poverty-related attainment gap? – but that can conceal the substantial barriers that exist between intention and achievement.

Structure and Culture

Since the 1960s, the institutional structure of Scottish education has increased in size and complexity. There are now many arenas in which policy can be discussed, frequent opportunities for consultation, and a steady stream of reports. One consequence is that decision making is often slow. Bureaucratic organisations seek to defend, and sometimes extend, their territory and are adept at using their narrative privilege to give positive accounts of their achievements and resist calls for major change. A further complication is that, in the relatively small Scottish system, senior members of the policy community tend to know each other, often attending the same meetings and revisiting the same issues. It might be thought that this could promote vigorous debate. But one of the striking features of the leadership class in Scottish education is the high level of conformity within it. Its members have learned to 'go with the grain' of current orthodoxies and avoid controversy. The aim is often to reach a comfortable consensus which does not encourage critical interrogation of official policies. A form of 'groupthink' is evident in the recycling of approved forms of discourse.

Where the need for educational reform has been recognised, Scotland's response has usually been to introduce structural changes, reshaping existing institutions and establishing new ones, but often involving the same people in leadership roles (Humes, 2020). The period 2016-20 was marked by a reconfiguring of the educational landscape, including the creation of six Regional Improvement Collaboratives, designed to encourage better coordination between national and local bodies through more effective sharing of expertise. However, this initiative has already been overtaken by the Scottish Government's decision, influenced by the 2021 report of the OECD, to replace the Scottish Qualifications Authority and Education Scotland, both of which had been subject to criticism by teachers. The Inspectorate, currently part of Education Scotland, will be given independent status and its role subject to redefinition. A subsequent review of what form these changes might take has been broadly accepted by the Scottish Government (Muir, 2022), but legislative changes will be required and the new agencies will not be in place until 2024. Concern has been expressed that the reforms will be managed by the same people who have been perceived as part of the problem: the traditional policy community in Scottish education has been skilful at defending its own interests over a long period (Humes, 1986; McPherson & Raab, 1988).

Cultural reform is arguably more important than simply changing structures, but it is not

easy to achieve and takes time. Many observers, inside and outside the world of education, perceive the system as authoritarian (despite the use of a soothing rhetoric of 'empowerment'). Teachers have reported a loss of trust and confidence in both Education Scotland and the Scottish Qualifications Authority, a feeling intensified by problems encountered during the pandemic. This has caused a degree of scepticism about the language promoting the CfE programme, which emphasises the opportunities for teacher 'autonomy' and the exercise of professional 'agency'. Some have started to suggest that politicians, civil servants and senior officials in national agencies themselves need to show a willingness to change how they operate in framing and promoting policies. In other words, there needs to be a shift in the balance of power so that more weight is given to the experience of those at the front line of educational provision. The traditional deference given to senior civil servants, who move from one government department to another without having to live with the consequences of some of their advice, can no longer be guaranteed. While this is understandable, it carries the risk of strengthening the traditional conservatism of the teaching profession. Teachers' organisations, such as the Educational Institute of Scotland (formed in 1847), like to position themselves as politically radical, but in professional matters they are often deeply conservative. Effective cultural change will require all stakeholders to question their assumptions and procedures.

Future

All governments like to hear good news about their achievements and seek to play down or dismiss unfavourable reports. The political context in Scotland has encouraged an unhelpful degree of polarisation in accounts of what has been happening in education. Unionists, who oppose independence from the rest of the UK, highlight evidence that suggests that standards are falling and argue that traditional claims that the Scottish system is superior to the English are no longer valid. Nationalists assert that apparent weaknesses have been exaggerated, that strenuous efforts have been made to address problems, and that in a fully independent Scotland the education system would be 'world class'.

It is important to note, however, that although Scottish education has been going through a period of uncertainty, there have been some encouraging developments: e.g., improved provision for early years; greater recognition of children's rights, including the establishment of a children's parliament; better use of the potential of outdoor learning; efforts to address mental health issues; and strategies to promote global understanding among the young. With regard to the last of these, Scotland showed up well in a 2018 PISA study comparing the Global Competence of young people in 15 countries.

These developments deserve credit but, in relation to broader questions about aims and values, Scottish education needs stronger intellectual leadership. The policy community has become too inward-looking and insufficiently open to thinking from outside its own ranks. Similarly, the academic community, which should have been a major source of ideas, has too often been complicit in its own containment: the drive to secure research funding and the kudos attached to serving on government committees have served to encourage caution. Too few academics have been willing to speak truth to power.

We need to escape from the 'parochialism of the present' and learn from our past. In the last 70 years, there has been no policy document to match the quality of the 1947 Advisory Council report on secondary education. Its principal author was Sir James Robertson, Rector of Aberdeen Grammar School (SED, 1947). The report was visionary, written in a style that puts the corporate 'officialese' of most current documents to shame, and should have paved the way for an earlier introduction of comprehensive education. The Scottish Education Department, known at that time as 'sleepy hollow' within the Scottish Office, missed the opportunity, first delaying a decision and then shelving the report.

Citing the 1947 report should not be seen as an attempt to recapture some imagined 'golden age' of Scottish education. Rather it is an attempt to assert the importance of deep intellectual engagement with the purposes of education, viewed in relation to current social circumstances. In the case of the 1947 report, the context was post-war reconstruction. Educational thinking now needs to engage with a series of daunting challenges: the assault on knowledge and truth by populist politicians; the potential of the internet both to improve access to information but also to serve as a vehicle for dangerous misinformation; the threat to the environment; the longer-term effects of the pandemic; the capacity of multi-national companies to exercise power over democratically-elected governments. The last of these includes the steady expansion of involvement by global corporations in the marketing of educational 'packages', some embodying particular ideologies (Ball, 2012). Scotland has so far shown greater resistance to educational entrepreneurs than England, but economic pressures could force it to compromise the extent of its commitment to public sector provision.

Finally, one of the outcomes of the Muir Report was that the Scottish Government agreed to promote a National Conversation about the direction of Scottish education (similar to the National Debate which took place 20 years earlier). This was launched in September 2022, with the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Shirley-Anne Somerville, stating that 'Our reform programme will build on all that is good in Scottish education and deliver real change and improvement'. It will be interesting to see what emerges when the results are reported in the spring of 2023. The exercise is being co-convened by the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), both of which might be regarded as having a vested interest in defending their stewardship of the system hitherto. Two academics from outside Scotland will help to 'facilitate' the process, both of whom were members of the International Council of Education Advisers appointed by the Scottish Government in 2016. One of the means of encouraging responses is an online survey. It consists of ten questions, most of which focus on children's learning and their needs in the future. This is an appropriate priority, but there are no questions about governance, leadership or culture. Already some of the responses are expressing scepticism about whether the exercise will address the deep issues of confidence and trust which have been a feature of recent years. For Scottish education to flourish, policy makers need to reflect critically on their own role, listen to dissident voices and be receptive to fresh, creative ideas.

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Meeting of the Education, Children and Young People Committee of the Scottish Parliament: November 8, 2023

Starter paper submitted by Walter Humes, Honorary Professor in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Stirling

This short paper is intended to suggest some possible areas which the members of the committee may wish to discuss. For a fuller account of my position on key issues in Scottish education, see my article 'Scottish Education: A Crisis of Confidence and Trust', published in *FORUM* in March 2023 (also submitted).

Education Reform Programme Board

- Shaky start with criticisms of membership (dominated by civil servants and senior SQA and Education Scotland staff).
- Recent minutes suggest some improvement but progress slow, perhaps because of cost implications and the need for legislative change.
- Need for an effective engagement and communications strategy with stakeholders when final decisions have been reached.
- A comment in the Withers Report may also apply to school reform: 'change will not be easy. It may be uncomfortable for many people. My strong advice to Ministers is not to shape change based on the views of those with current delivery responsibilities'.
- New agencies must have credible chief executives and chairs of boards.

Proposals for Reform of Qualifications and Assessment

- Scottish Diploma of Achievement: programmes of learning; project learning; personal pathway.
- Implications of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on the integrity of assessment.
- Likely effect of the proposals on the attainment gap.
- Staffing levels required for the successful introduction of project learning (variations across local authorities).

Consensus

- Desire to achieve consensus seen in many reports – e.g., the report of the National Discussion, despite acknowledgement that responses included views that were 'conflicting, controversial, and perhaps uncomfortable for some to hear'.
- Risk of 'groupthink' – the uncritical recycling of approved forms of discourse.
- Scottish education seen as 'cautious, conformist, risk averse and stuck in its ways' (Social Market Foundation Report, 2021)
- Desire to achieve 'one right answer' can sometimes be unhelpful. There is a case for allowing greater diversity.

Changing Culture

- Repeated calls for a change of culture in Scottish education (e.g., from the OECD, ICEA, Muir Report)
- Not easy and will take time (no quick fix)
- Must start at the top. Politicians (national and local), Chief Executives of national agencies, Directors of Education and senior civil servants need to ask themselves how they will change. This will raise challenging issues about authority, power and responsibility.

Teaching Profession

- The case for reform must win the hearts and minds of teachers. They have received mixed messages in recent years, on the one hand being encouraged to exercise 'agency' while still being subject authoritarian pressures from above.
- Class contact time in Scotland compares unfavourably with many other countries.
- Financial pressures on local authorities have meant that cuts have had to be made to support staff.
- Teacher education programmes provide limited opportunities for the kind of innovative and creative thinking that is needed.
- Recruitment and retention issues.

Local Government

- Statutory role in providing schools and employing teachers.
- COSLA Education Committee and the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland.
- Financial constraints following the announcement that Council Tax will not be increased.
- Perception by teachers that independent thinking is not encouraged.
- Regional Improvement Collaboratives (RICs): two reviews, evidence of some good work, but hard to assess wider impact.

Research

- Relations between researchers and politicians have sometimes been strained, partly because of different expectations.
- National Advisory Group: Academic Reference Group.
- Increasing use of commercial social research companies to analyse data.
- Reliable longitudinal data essential to inform policy.
- More research required on the economics of education.

Proposed Centre for Teaching Excellence (announced in October)

- How will it relate to existing agencies concerned with teacher education (e.g., GTCS and TEIs in universities)?
- Will it be part of the organisation that replaces Education Scotland?

Effective Education Policy

- Requires a good intellectual foundation, professional expertise and supportive administrative structures.
- The current institutional landscape is perceived by many as over-crowded – too many agencies revisiting the same issues.
- The 'iron cage' of educational bureaucracy is a major impediment to innovation.
- While there has been a welcome attempt to involve a wider range of voices in policy formulation, dissident voices are still marginalised and the traditional policy community has resisted attempts to reduce its power.
- Language is important. Aspirational language has its place, but boastful discourse about intentions which are not subsequently translated into successes leads to disappointment and sometimes cynicism. Policy documents need to be written in a more measured style, free of adjectival overload and well-informed by relevant research and independent analysis.

Submission from the Royal Society of Edinburgh

1. The Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) Education Committee⁶ brings together representatives across a range of sectors including early years, schools (including Initial Teacher Education), local government, college, university, and industry. The Committee's remit is to consider and analyse educational and skills issues, to stimulate public debate and, when appropriate, produce policy advice for decision-makers. Its membership is predominantly comprised of RSE Fellows and members of the Young Academy of Scotland, supplemented by external expertise. Like the RSE at large, the Committee's strength lies in its convening power as well as its ability to synthesise evidence-based, politically neutral policy reflections that draw upon the expertise of our multidisciplinary Fellowship and Young Academy.
2. The Committee takes an interest in the education and skills system in its broadest sense, from early years through to school, across different pathways through post-secondary education and training, adult learning, and the transition from education into employment destinations. Given the breadth of its membership, the Committee is well placed to provide holistic reflections on the education and skills system as a whole. The Committee has followed and has commented on the education reform agenda since the OECD review of Curriculum for Excellence in 2021.
3. Over the course of the past months with the publication of several reviews commissioned by Scottish Government, several key themes have emerged from the deliberations of the RSE Education Committee:
 - a. **Engagement** with - and subsequent 'buy-in' to - any reform by **wider society** in Scotland will be essential to achieving successful change.
 - b. Any reform should be anchored in an **overarching education and skills policy** that considers implications and provides coherency across the system.
 - c. The '**curriculum**' (the content in terms of skills development and acquired knowledge) must enable both the individual and Scotland to be successful in a rapidly changing environment.
 - d. The education and skills system must enable Scotland to address the key **societal challenges** being faced, not least the climate emergency.
 - e. Recognising and addressing the challenges of **technological change**, whilst maximising the benefits that it can bring to learning, teaching, and assessment, will be critical.
 - f. The current way in which the **success** of both individuals, institutions, and the system as a whole **is measured** continues to have negative consequences, both in terms of achieving equal value for different pathways but also on the nature of learning and teaching.
4. Based on its analysis of the reform agenda to date, the RSE Education Committee would highlight the following areas as **key determinants of successful implementation**. These points are accompanied by excerpts from relevant advice

⁶ <https://rse.org.uk/about-us/governance/standing-committees/education-committee/>

papers and briefings that have been prepared by the Committee in response to previous consultations.

- **There is concern that the approach to reform has so far been disjointed and could give rise to unforeseen and unintended consequences.** Several institutional reforms are proceeding prior to engaging in a more detailed discussion and approach to what learning and skills are required to equip our young people for a very different future from that experienced to date. Should we not at least consider whether a more radical change in content is needed and then identify how best to deliver and support it? There must also be clarity on how such ambitious change will be appropriately resourced at a time when public funding is particularly scarce.
- **Establishing the purpose of education.** Children who have entered early years settings in September 2023 will be entering the workforce in 2040. We must ask ourselves what skills and knowledge will benefit them in their future lives and careers. Education is intended to achieve multiple ends: the individual and the societal, the personalised and the universal, the prescriptive and the creative, the practical and the theoretical. We must decide how these various forces should be balanced and prioritised to derive the best outcomes. **Select quote:** *'It is essential that the present reform agenda include a consideration of what assessment is for, how it is undertaken, and how it can be used to inform qualifications. Similarly, Scotland must consider the purpose of a qualification, who uses it, and what knowledge and skills it says the recipient possesses.'* (RSE response to the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment)
- **Promoting parity of esteem.** This will necessarily involve sparking a profound culture change in which society is prompted to reflect on what it truly values in its education system. Parity of esteem is not just about ensuring that different learning pathways and career destinations are afforded equal respect. It is also about delivering on individual autonomy and dignity. Education fulfils multiple objectives, from driving the economy to empowering individuals to become informed, engaged members of society. The system must honour and support the different ways in which learners choose to interact with it. **Select quote:** *'The future system must be founded on a more expansive definition of academic and personal success. Education should encourage and balance the dual aims of self-development and wellbeing, in whatever form they take. All aspirations should be respected as equally valid, rather than forcing learners down certain pathways to suit a particular narrative about what constitutes "success."'* (RSE response to the national discussion on education)
- **Achieving policy coherence,** not only between different strands of education policy but also between education and other areas of Scottish Government policy including economic prosperity and climate change. At present, there is no unifying vision for Scottish education, with different elements of the sector often working to different objectives and expectations. Greater coherence would allow different policy areas to better articulate what they need from the education system, helping to ensure it is operating efficiently to meet national

priorities and address pressing societal challenges. For example, in the context of the growing climate-biodiversity crisis, the true scale of the skills gap in critical sectors such as construction is nothing short of alarming.

- **Deep and meaningful engagement** with learners, the teaching profession, parents, and wider society. Many of the recommendations arising from the reform agenda – such as the proposed changes to the assessment and qualification system – will require a significant reconsideration of how success is measured. We cannot expect the system to produce new outcomes when we as a society are still relying on outdated (but deeply entrenched) performance metrics that perpetuate perceived hierarchies between different learning pathways. As one obvious example, while Scotland professes to value technical and vocational learning, secondary school league tables are still driven by the percentage of pupils who achieve at least five Highers. The outcomes of these tables are then given significant media attention while other equally important forms of attainment are noticeably excluded.

Select quote: *‘All too often, the SQA qualifications (National 5, Higher, and Advanced Higher) results that are published every summer form the mainstay of the way in which the education system in Scotland is judged. If we truly aspire to value wider achievement and encourage different pathways, a broader and more holistic measure must be developed and recognised by all.’* (RSE response to the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment)
- **A dynamic curriculum that reflects contemporary needs and challenges.** As one key example, the RSE has done considerable work in championing interdisciplinary learning (IDL), including running a large-scale conference in 2019 which led to the development of the IDL Network (idlnetwork.substack.com) to share best practice and learnings with teachers and educators, as well as publishing an advice paper and numerous briefings on this topic.

Select quote: *‘[IDL] is becoming increasingly important as the most significant challenges, advances, innovations and discoveries in the world today and envisaged in the future are at the interface of disciplines, including climate change, globalisation, sustainability, demographic change and digitalisation. Scottish education at all levels needs to reflect these interlinked realities. IDL must be grounded in disciplinary knowledge and understanding, since it is the disciplines that give structure and rigour to the development and understanding of knowledge. Without the disciplinary “pillars”, the interdisciplinary “lintels” will fall.’* (RSE advice paper on interdisciplinary learning)
- **Acknowledging and learning from past failures.** The system must be prepared to be self-critical and challenge long-standing assumptions in the name of continuous improvement. This process could lead to some uncomfortable truths about the very foundations of Scottish education, such as Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). The Education Committee has previously commented that CfE – though noble in its intentions – did not live up to its full potential due to significant issues with its implementation. Although the system as a whole requires change, the Committee would like to acknowledge the

many examples of excellent practice that exist across the sector that are delivered by passionate and tenacious professionals and centres.

Select quote: *'It is important to note that Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) as envisioned in 2004 was met in general with acceptance across professional and political spheres. The crux of CfE's problems is rooted in its implementation – beginning in 2010 – and how this has diverged from what was originally conceived.'* (RSE response to the Muir review)

- **A reasoned but open-minded perspective on the role of technology in education.** Technology is becoming increasingly mainstreamed across our daily lives and education is no exception. The education system should be willing to embrace new technologies that could enhance the teaching and learning experience. In doing so, it must ensure that digital poverty and student safety are appropriately addressed. In this respect, we would also like to signpost to the work of the Learned Societies' Group on Scottish STEM Education (LSG) (for whom RSE provides secretariat support and policy input) who are currently investigating how the curriculum can be used to support ethical literacy to help learners become more critical consumers of knowledge. The LSG would be pleased to share its findings with the ECYP.

Select quote: *'Whilst there are some challenges in terms of accessibility, equity and efficacy, these [digital advances] bring opportunities for a wider range of assessment techniques, as well as raise fundamental questions about approaches to assessment itself.'* (RSE response to the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment)
- **A commitment to data-gathering.** The RSE Education Committee has regularly remarked on the poor availability of educational data. In the absence of a comprehensive evidence base, the system cannot accurately identify issues nor optimise performance. It is critical that Scotland develops the necessary infrastructure to support effective but proportionate data-gathering to inform subsequent policy responses.

Select quote: *'There is a clear need for an agreed and authoritative set of performance indicators which are regularly compiled and span key skills and markers of knowledge.'* (RSE response to the OECD review of Curriculum for Excellence)

Select quote: *'The RSE supports the need for more systematic, integrated, and robust data gathering which adequately captures the full breadth of learning and attainment, from formal qualifications to more qualitative markers of personal development.'* (RSE response to Scottish Government consultation on enhanced data gathering for improvement)

Select quote: *'We must also be clear on the power of data. As a society, we must ensure that data is being communicated and used responsibly and for its intended purpose rather than to uphold popular narratives. We must also discourage gathering data solely as a tool for delivering accountability, recognising the perverse incentives this can introduce.'* (RSE response to Scottish Government consultation on enhanced data gathering for improvement)

5. The RSE Education Committee would be pleased to offer its services and expertise to the ECYP throughout its ongoing scrutiny of the reform agenda.

'Education is not the learning of facts but the training of the mind to think.'
Albert Einstein

Submission from Professor Gordon Stobart, author: [2021 OECD Research Review Upper-secondary education student assessment in Scotland: A comparative perspective](#)

Scotland's *Curriculum for Excellence* is a pioneering example of 21st century curriculum reform which seeks to equip young people with the knowledge and skills they need for the modern world. Similar aspirations are found internationally in ongoing curricular reforms. However, the assessment of senior secondary school students has seen far less change. The 2021 OECD evaluation of the Curriculum for Excellence concluded that it 'lost power' in the Senior Secondary phase which was dominated by the preparation for national examinations. This poses the question of how senior secondary assessments, particularly those based on centralised examinations, might better align with curriculum expectations and more creative approaches to learning and teaching. The challenge for Scotland's senior school assessment is how to adapt to broader curriculum goals and to be fit-for-purpose for an increasingly diverse student body.

The review took a comparative approach to Scotland's senior secondary assessment which considered nine jurisdictions, four within the historic British system and five from systems that represented other assessment approaches.⁷ The review raised policy issues for Scotland's assessment of senior secondary students:

1. Why is the British legacy system now one of the very few systems with national examinations taken at 16 years of age (eg National 5; GCSE)? These were formerly leaving examinations for most students, but no longer serve this purpose. Some 88% of Scottish students now stay on in education or training.⁸ Those who leave at 16 have often little to show, in terms of examination success.⁹ *Would some form of school graduation certificate, based on a broader range of performance, be more appropriate at the end of compulsory education?*
2. In comparative terms, Scottish upper-secondary school students are more frequently examined than those in other jurisdictions, where typically certification is at 18. This results from offering three suites of national examinations (National 5; Highers; Advanced Highers) during S4-6. A consequence of this is the 'two term dash' in which students move rapidly from one set of exams to the next. *Would the removal of National 5 examinations de-clutter the system and promote a more in-depth teaching and learning in senior secondary education?* Higher and Advanced Highers could continue to serve their selection function for training and higher education.

⁷ The review's assumption is that assessment systems are rooted in the culture and history of their societies. Scotland is positioned within the British tradition, along with England, Wales, Ireland and Hong Kong. Other traditions are represented to show other approaches to senior secondary assessment. The American system is represented by the Canadian province of Ontario, while Norway is used as an example of the Nordic system. The French *Baccalauréat* system represents a historical system which has been the model for other Baccalauréates, including the International (IB) and Scottish and Welsh. New Zealand is included as a representative of modular systems, while Queensland, Australia, is used as a distinctive example of teacher assessed qualifications.

⁸ In England, education is now compulsory to age 18.

⁹ In 2019, 15% of N5 entrants gained no passes and 30% only one pass.

3. In place of National 5, a more decentralised approach would give schools and teachers more say in the assessment of their students. This would allow a more varied range of activities and skills to be assessed. While this is routinely done in Nordic and American systems, as well as in Queensland and New Zealand, it has proved more difficult within the British tradition. Here the central regulation and moderation of assessments, and concerns about comparability and accountability, have led to reductions in coursework contributions.¹⁰
4. Scotland has a highly centralised and regulated senior secondary assessment regime. Given the role of Highers and Advanced Highers in the selection for university and occupational selection, this process ensures the comparable standards in assessment for this. The format of these relies largely on traditional pen-and-paper timed examinations under standardised conditions. To better meet CfE aspirations, *one option is to broaden the range of assessment instruments in the external assessments*. Other jurisdictions, and some SQA qualifications, demonstrate that the format of external assessments can be broader and more creative. For example, more use could be made of Information Technology to provide online examination resources and more interactive approaches (as in Norway and New Zealand). There might also be further incorporation of ePortfolio and personal projects for external marking (as in, for example, the IB Diploma) and use made of oral presentations and dialogue (as in the French Baccalauréat).
5. The COVID pandemic exposed the vulnerability of exam-based assessment systems to disruption. Other systems which use a 'mixed economy' of examinations and school-based assessment showed more resilience. Jurisdictions such as Norway, Ontario, and Queensland, as well as the IB, had far fewer problems with cancelled examinations because of the ongoing assessments by teachers.
6. While teacher assessment plays a part in the Scottish examination system, it is generally narrowly conceived as specific pieces of coursework that are submitted and moderated by SQA. Teacher assessment can take other forms, particularly *the continuous assessment of regular classroom work*, which may include oral and practical work. These are central to upper-secondary student assessment in jurisdictions such as Norway, Ontario, New Zealand, and Queensland. Tests developed by teachers, possibly drawing on a central questions bank as in the reformed Baccalauréat in France, may also be part of this wider range of assessments.
7. Teachers in Scotland are trusted to make ongoing assessments of their pupils throughout primary and lower-secondary schooling, as are lecturers in Further and Higher Education. While upper-secondary teachers provide coursework marks, which contribute to examination grades, the weighting of these is relatively low, and moderation requirements are administratively demanding. This system is highly centralised and controlled in comparison to systems such as Ontario, Queensland, and Norway. Even the highly centralised *Baccalauréat* is regionally assessed. Teachers in Scotland are well-trained

¹⁰ Policy makers in England, driven by the high-stakes accountability system, have removed coursework from most subjects. In Ireland, it was the teacher unions that opposed the introduction of teacher assessment into the Junior Certificate for 16 year-olds. The 2017 revisions of the Scottish Nationals saw an overall reduction in coursework to reduce the assessment workload on both teachers and students.

professionals and, with suitable ongoing professional development, can be trusted to provide dependable assessments of their pupils.

8. With SQA responsible for both general and vocational qualifications, Scotland is well placed to raise the profile of vocational qualifications as a way of broadening its curriculum offer and developing student capacities. At present vocational qualifications are often treated as outside the mainstream qualification system. An option is to further integrate vocational qualifications into the mainstream qualification offer. In countries such as Australia and New Zealand, vocational and academic subjects can be combined in a single mainstream qualification offer. In Ireland the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) is integrated with the national Leaving Certificate and involves joint modules.
9. There appears to be limited systematic research evidence on how Scottish students themselves would prefer to be assessed. As a signatory to the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) fuller attention to the preferences of students would be anticipated. The anecdotal evidence from consultation panels, for example SQA's *Young Scot Vision Panel* (2018), and from interviews (OECD, 2021) suggest they would prefer a greater emphasis on continuous assessments by their teachers. While these play a central role in other jurisdictions, many teachers, employers, and parents in Scotland appear to be wedded to examinations and would even wish to see them at National 4.

Submission from Dr Marina Shapira

Choices, Attainment and Positive destinations: Exploring the impact of curriculum policy change on young people

Findings and recommendations from the project funded by the Nuffield Foundation
Project Principal Investigator: Marina Shapira, Professor (Associate) in Sociology, University of Stirling.

Co-investigator: Mark Priestly, Professor of Education, University of Stirling

Introduction

The evidence presented to this committee emerges from the research project funded by the Nuffield Foundation. The project explored the curriculum making processes in secondary schools in Scotland and examined the degree to which curriculum narrowing in secondary schools under CfE is tied to socio-economic factors and is linked to various outcomes of young people.

Findings from this mixed-methods study resulted from analysing secondary data, which included administrative, longitudinal, and international survey data. Additionally, primary data was collected and analysed, including a national survey of Scottish secondary school leaders, along with targeted case studies of schools, and interviews with teachers, students, and their parents.

The evidence presented here can inform debates about curriculum policy and practice, and deepen understanding of how curriculum policies and decision-making processes impact educational attainment, early life transitions and other outcomes that indicate young people's preparedness for life beyond school in the 21st century.

The project methodology

Our methodology incorporated a mixed-methods research design. This included:

1. an analysis of pre-existing secondary databases. We analysed the Scottish Longitudinal Study (SLS), administrative education data provided by the Scottish Government, and Scotland's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) dataset. This allowed us to examine the patterns of subject enrolment and their relationships with pupil/family and school characteristics, attainment in National Qualifications, and OECD Global Competency measures.
2. We also generated new data through:

- Surveys: Conducted a survey of Secondary School Senior Leaders regarding curriculum provision in both the BGE and Senior stages of secondary education.
- Qualitative research: We interviewed key stakeholders in Scottish education, including Local Authority Directors of Education and Quality Improvement Officers, school headteachers, and school staff. Focus groups were conducted with young people, and parents/carers to provide an in-depth understanding of the factors influencing curriculum choices and decisions.

This research design gave us a comprehensive and representative view of school curriculum provision in Scotland. It highlighted the patterns of offered subjects, their organization, student choices, the influences shaping curricular decision-making in schools, and the effects that curriculum provision has on the outcomes of young people.

Main Findings

The study findings can be presented under three broad themes:

Patterns of provision: Senior Phase:

The provision of the Senior Phase under CfE has been a topic of considerable debate in recent years. Controversy hinges on whether a focused and narrower curriculum permits better learning and results, or if it counters Scottish tradition of a broad, balanced curriculum.

Our research sheds fresh light on this issue by investigating the patterns of provision. We found that under CfE, fewer students are entering National Qualifications in S4 and fewer subjects are being studied. This decline is most noticeable in non-compulsory subjects such as Social Subjects, Expressive Arts, and especially in Modern Languages and Technological Subjects.

Interestingly, while the number of entries declined, the percentage of passes for National 5 qualifications increased from 60% to 80% from 2014 onwards. This suggests that selective entry under CfE could potentially influence the enhanced pass rate for SCQF level 5 qualifications.

We discovered socially stratified patterns that indicate the students in socio-economically disadvantaged areas are adversely affected by the changes under CfE, experiencing a steeper decline in entries to qualifications in S4.

An interesting trend shows that the negative impact of a student's residential area's level of deprivation on the number of passes on SCQF level 3, 4 and 5 qualifications has increased under CfE. While students residing in more advantaged areas see a bigger increase in SCFQ level 5 qualifications with a corresponding drop in lower-level qualifications, this isn't the case for those in disadvantaged local areas. The decrease in the number of lower-level qualification passes in the areas of higher disadvantage did not lead to an increase in the number of higher-level qualifications passes. As a result, under CfE, curriculum narrowing has been socially stratified and has disproportionately affected students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

In schools where fewer National 5 qualifications were entered in S4, fewer Higher qualifications were also entered in S5. Furthermore, both the uptake and pass rate of National 5 qualifications in S5 have decreased. These trends oppose the expectations of CfE architects, who anticipated that the new National 5 qualifications would provide students with greater flexibility and that spreading these qualifications over a longer period would allow students to "catch up". The uptake of National 5 qualifications in S5 rather than in S4, and Higher qualifications in S6 rather than in S5, has become a feature of schools located in disadvantaged areas.

Patterns of provision: BGE phase

Secondary school curriculum management during the Broad General Education (BGE) phase shows significant variability, particularly in relation to the range of subjects offered, the timing of initial subject selection, and in how schools navigate the transition from the BGE to the Senior Phase. Many schools provide a large array of subjects during the early years, often leading to a highly fragmented, traditional learning structure. This is typically characterised by students being taught by 15 or more teachers per week.

This structure has been reported to essentially mimic the Senior Phase, preparing students for qualification requirements rather than focusing on the broader educational aims of the BGE phase. This often leads to a narrow selection of subject content, primarily geared towards exam preparation and performance, which limits both the depth of study and interdisciplinary connections.

Some schools apply innovative strategies such as subject rotations and hybrid subjects to mitigate these issues. A significant portion of schools practice early subject filtering, sometimes as early as the end of the first year, which can skew towards subjects likely to be chosen in the senior phase.

This premature specialisation can inadvertently undermine the philosophy of the BGE, which promotes a broad foundational program. Instead of adhering to the intended 3+3 model (3-year BGE and a 3-year Senior Phase), most schools adopt a model that mirrors the Senior Phase much earlier, effectively leading to a 2+2+1+1 or 3+1+1+1 structure.

The overall picture here is one of considerable variation in provision in the BGE, raising equity issues (e.g., variable curricular experiences and outcomes differentiated by school and/or local authority) and questioning whether provision is fit-for-purpose in the context of current curricular policy.

Explanations

The study indicates multiple influential factors, such as data related to attainment, and positive destination positive destinations, and national policies, affecting curriculum design and provision in Scottish secondary schools.

It seems that schools often prioritise meeting performance indicators and other externally specified measures of 'success', rather than emphasising the core objectives of the

curriculum set out in national policies such as the Four Capacities of CfE (with the latter being only moderately influential in informing curriculum design in many schools). .

The study also exposes some significant areas of conflict in the realm of curriculum making which sometimes offer tensions between governmental pressures to raise achievement versus teachers' professional values and the core values of CfE. This tension often leads to a culture of performativity,

emphasising 'teaching-to-the-test' over more holistic and active teaching methods. Moreover, the allocation of limited resources to the higher level and more traditional subjects can lead to the neglect of developing areas of knowledge not well-covered in traditional subjects.

The data further details a **trend of 'performativity'** whereby schools may focus more on maximising attainment in the Senior Phase, sometimes to the detriment of broader learning objectives. Pressure to raise attainment in the senior phase can lead to practices which are counter-educational including abolishing low-performing subjects in the Senior Phase, teaching-to-the-test and channelling students into courses with higher pass rates and pulling them from subjects they may not excel in, to benefit school attainment statistics.

Decisions about curriculum design in the BGE phase are also influenced by a desire to produce better performance data. BGE provision often mirrors that of Senior Phase subjects, focusing more on early selection of subjects that will be assessed in the Senior Phase, rather than developing educational rationales suitable for this foundational phase. The data describe BGE provision as comparatively under-resourced and subject to relatively little innovation, despite its importance in the development of the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE).

The study points to the impact of the **hierarchical structure of Scottish education** on curriculum making, with schools often opting for traditional, tried-and-tested approaches due to the perceived risks associated with innovation. Resources for levels below the SCQF level 5 are noted as lacking, with schools being judged primarily on high-level '5 at' attainment statistics. Consequently, students at lower levels may be left disadvantaged, particularly in multi-course classroom settings.

Evidence suggests that **financial constraints and capacity issues** - such as a lack of specialist teachers in some subjects and limited non-contact time - are affecting curriculum design. Though policies like 'Getting It Right for Every Child' (GIRFEC) aim to cater to all learners, they are sometimes neglected due to the conflicting demands of efficiency savings.

Concerns are also raised about how these dynamics potentially limit much-needed teacher professional agency and inhibit meaningful enactment of initiatives like CfE. This tension between policy intentions and practical implementation primarily revolves around the pressures from higher authorities to maintain performance standards and improve **attainment statistics**. This emphasis on performance and attainment can curtail creative and innovative approaches in teaching and course design, discouraging adherence to the educational goals of CfE.

Notably, schools' focus on data and performance hinders innovation and falls far from the intended balance sought by the CfE. Teachers and headteachers express dissatisfaction with these pressures that conflict with their professional values and the spirit of CfE. Other

challenges include dealing with capacity issues, such as shortages of specialist teachers, issues related to teacher's professional education and registration, and the use of limited non-contact time to cover absences.

Evidence from the research underscores the need for an empowered and supportive system where schools and teachers can prioritise educational rationales and fulfil the foundational experiences promised in the Broad General Education phase, despite pressures to perform and maintain the school's attainment statistics. The hierarchical nature and the centre-periphery model of the Scottish education system impose asymmetric power relations and contribute to the consolidating culture of performativity. It seems crucial to reconcile this tension between policy rhetoric and practical implementation to actualise the principles laid out in initiatives like CfE.

Effects:

The study uncovers that curriculum narrowing, while often justified by aiming to improve students' attainment, actually tends to have a negative impact on students' academic performance and life chances. In contradiction to the widely-held belief that doing fewer subjects improves students' results, the research found that a narrower curriculum in S4 associated with lower attainment. In fact, schools where students opted for more subjects at the National 5 and Higher levels yielded more passes at these levels.

Moreover, incongruently with the flexibility introduced under CfE to spread National 5 qualifications across S4, S5, and S6, schools were entering fewer National 5 level qualifications than before in S5. There were also marked social inequalities in the extent of curriculum narrowing and the timing of qualification uptake, disadvantaging students in less affluent areas.

The study also explored the links between curriculum provision and wider competencies measured by PISA and found positive correlations between studying a broad range of subjects in S4 and PISA test scores, as well as measures of global competencies. In other words, students who followed a broader curriculum appeared more prepared for life in the complex, interconnected modern world.

In terms of transitions to further study or work, the study found that schools focused heavily on entering students for few subjects to increase attainment outcomes, often lost the opportunity to prepare students adequately for further study or entrance into the workforce. School leavers who entered for more subjects in S4 were more likely than those who did fewer subjects to proceed directly to Higher Education after leaving school.

Moreover, the findings show a significant social stratification in terms of the curriculum. Students attending schools in disadvantaged areas are more likely to undertake National 5 qualifications in S5 and Higher qualifications in S6 - a trend that can delay their transition to the next stage of education or to the workplace.

Additionally, the research raises concerns about equity: there is a significant correlation between the average number of subjects taken in S4 and the eventual post-schooling destinations, suggesting that the narrowing of the curriculum disproportionately affects students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

The research confirms that many Higher Education institutions prioritise students who have completed a wider range of qualifications in a single year, and spreading out qualifications

over multiple years may disadvantage students applying to universities. Some caregivers indicated a lack of comprehension about these university requirements - an issue, they argued, that needs to be transparently communicated early enough in a student's school career to allow for informed decision-making about qualifications.

Conclusions

The Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) in Scotland aimed to improve the depth, breadth of student learning, and prepare young people for the workplace. Despite these intentions, evidence suggested curriculum narrowing and reduced choice in senior secondary education, with students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds being disproportionately affected.

Therefore, the aim of this research was to critically explore curriculum provision in Scottish secondary schools, examining patterns of provision and the reasons behind these patterns and examine the relationship between the patterns of provision and the outcomes of young people in terms of attainment at different levels of SCQF qualifications and transition into positive destinations. Given the close alignment between the OECD's global competencies framework (OECD 2021) and the 'four capacities' of CfE, we also explored the relationship between the breadth of the S4 curriculum and the OECD measures of Global competences available in the 2018 PISA study.

A mixed-methods research design was used, combining the analysis of existing data with the collection and analysis of new quantitative and qualitative data.

The study found that curriculum narrowing occurred in the fourth year of secondary education (S4) under the CfE. This was observed among students across from all socio-economic backgrounds, but was especially pronounced among students from underprivileged backgrounds. The study suggested that the decrease in qualifications passed in S4 was mainly due to a drop in SCQF level 3 and 4 qualifications. Despite the decrease, students from more privileged socio-economic backgrounds experienced an increase in passes in SCQF level 5 qualifications while students from disadvantaged backgrounds did not see a corresponding increase in National 5 qualification passes. Additionally, under the CfE, the reduction in subject uptake at SCQF level 4 qualifications continued.

In addition, despite CfE's goal for flexible qualification uptake spread over a long period, we did not find found no increase in S5 uptake of National 5 qualifications. The data suggests the policy changes have not resulted in a larger uptake of these qualifications in S5, despite S4's reduced uptake. In fact, entries to National 5 level qualifications in S5 under CfE have decreased.

The study also found a decline in the number of entries for non-compulsory subjects at National 5 level, contradicting CfE's goal of encouraging students to take part in a broader range of qualifications. Despite compulsory subjects and General Vocational subjects seeing steady enrolment figures, other subjects such as Sciences, Technological Subjects, Social Subjects, Expressive Arts, and Modern Languages saw a decline in student enrolment over the years 2013 to 2019.

Qualitative feedback from teachers, parents, and students indicated multiple factors contributing to the observed trends under the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). Schools operated within a culture primarily driven by attainment, creating pressure on staff to meet system requirements rather than make decisions based on an educational rational.

The decline in student uptake of non-compulsory subjects at National 5 level was largely attributed to a reduction in the variety of subjects offered and inflexible scheduling structures.

Further, the demand for achieving pass results for National 5 qualifications (often viewed as a prerequisite for higher-level study in the same subject) and stringent timetabling constraints significantly influenced the shaping of secondary school curriculum practices.

These factors collectively created a constrained educational environment and limited opportunities for young people.

The study also highlighted a tension inherent in the design and implementation of CfE - while its objectives were aimed at comprehensive student development, the operational environment created systemic pressures oriented towards external accountability and performance metrics. This led to decision-making processes that prioritised output over holistic educational values, resulting in a system where schools were investing significant effort in aligning educational practices to meet external data demands.

This research concludes that the grounding principles of the CfE - developing students' knowledge, skills and abilities for life beyond school - have unfortunately been overshadowed by the need to generate favourable performance data. This tension between the educational objectives of the CfE and how it is enacted in practice has created a framework that, in many ways, inhibits rather than facilitates inclusive, flexible, and well-rounded learning experiences.

A concerning implication of the research is the manner in which the observed performance-driven culture in the education system not only impacts subject choice and attainment, and post-school transitions but ultimately constraining their ability to fully engage with and contribute to the 21st century society and workplace.

In light of these findings, it is critical that future discussion surrounding curriculum development in Scotland prioritises the fostering of an environment that supports and encourages more meaningful and educationally driven practices, as originally envisioned in the CfE. Moreover, an examination of systemic structures that may contradict or constrain the aspirations of a curriculum aimed at creating holistic, well-rounded, and adaptable citizens is extremely necessary.

Recommendations

Based on these conclusions, the following policy and practice recommendations have been made:

1. Accountability and Performativity

- Conduct an independent review of data usage for accountability purposes.
- Reform National Qualifications assessment methodology to include more continuous coursework assessment.
- Incorporate broader measures of student outcomes that reflect the holistic development of students.

2. Curriculum Provision

- Develop new national guidance to define the structures and transitions between the BGE and Senior Phase.

- Reconsider the structure of the Senior Phase and shift discourse away from NQs to SCQF levels.

3. Building Capacity

- Increase teacher non-contact time for collaborative curriculum making.
- Promote the formation of teacher collaborative networks with expert leadership at a regional level.
- Implement a national program for professional learning focused on curriculum-making.

4. Policy Development

- Commit to reviewing the technical structure of the curriculum.
- Develop systems for shared interpretation of policies at national/regional levels.
- Allocate further investment in policies that disrupt the link between socio-economic disadvantage and qualifications' uptake.

5. Enhancing Data Access for Research

- Enhance data collection of administrative education datasets for guiding educational policies.
- Improve researchers' access to existing administrative education and including international datasets;
- Facilitate data linkage and data analysis for researchers.

Annexe C



20th October 2023

Sue Webber MSP
Convenor – Education, Children and Young People Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

Via Email - ecyp.committee@parliament.scot

Dear Sue,

Thank you for your letter of 29th September 2023 on the Education Children and Young People Committee's work on education reform, inviting the views of COSLA on the issue.

Local Government is committed to providing the best possible outcomes for children and young people. As set out in the COSLA Plan 2022-27, we are prioritising work to develop and secure the best education for all our children and young people, providing wider learning and support while tackling poverty and social inequality.

Due to the timescales of this request, we have been unable to consult our Children and Young People Board on the range of issues mentioned within your letter, as such the following draws on existing COSLA's positions which may be evolved as work progresses.

'Scotland's Curriculum: Into the Future'

COSLA have noted the wide-ranging recommendations made by the OECD's 2021 report, Scotland's Curriculum: Into the Future.

Whilst COSLA has engaged in strands of work which has followed this report, most obviously Professor Muir's work on the national bodies, we have not had a great deal of direct involvement in the response to these recommendations in the round.

'Putting learners at the centre'

COSLA's response to Professor Muir's consultation in 2021 focused on the following key messages:

- Over the past decade we have seen a consistent and/or increased level of resource provided to national education bodies, whilst at the same time Local Government have faced serious financial constraints requiring councils to make difficult decisions in how they support improvement within education. This review is an opportunity to review the balance of resources to support education, and which functions can be delivered nationally or better supported locally. We believe that the presumption should be resources should be channelled as locally as possible, with clear justification for those functions which remain national.
- Roles and responsibilities across Scottish Education can be blurred. There is also an opportunity to ensure greater shared vision across the system, we believe that there are lessons to be learned from the experience in public health reform of creating a shared vision. Specifically, the co-sponsorship model between COSLA and the Scottish Government for Public Health Scotland should be considered in the reform of national bodies.
- We would welcome establishment of an independent inspectorate. We recognise that inspection can play an important role in providing public confidence and determining and sharing best practice.

Following the publication of the 'Putting Learning at the Centre' report, COSLA agreed the following position:

- COSLA supported a national discussion to create 'a compelling and consensual vision' for the future of Scottish education.
- COSLA welcomes the establishment of a new qualifications body, and the recommendations that the governance of this body is more accountable to its stakeholders, including Local Government, noting the importance of building a new body in line with the work on the redesign of qualifications being led by Professor Hayward.
- The theme running through the report that national education bodies should be more responsive to local needs was an overdue recognition of the importance of taking a child-centred and bottom-up approach to supporting children and young people.
- The focus on subsidiarity was seen as particularly important for the new national education agency. COSLA therefore welcomed the recognition of the benefits of a cosponsorship model, between COSLA and the Scottish Government, for the new national education agency to drive that more responsive body.
- COSLA welcomed the development of an independent inspectorate and an opportunity to take a broader look at inspection activity to have greater focus on empowerment, collaboration and self-improvement.

All Learners in Scotland Matter - national discussion on education

As set out above, COSLA's welcomed Professor Muir's recommendation to hold a national discussion on the future of Scottish Education.

COSLA and the Scottish Government agreed to co-convene the national discussion, which reported both to Scottish Ministers and COSLA. COSLA officers, alongside Scottish Government officials, worked to support the independent facilitators – Professor Carol Campbell and Professor Alma Harris – through their extensive engagement programme.

COSLA have welcomed the work by Professor Campbell and Professor Harris. This included the publication of 'All Learners in Scotland Matter' which included a vision for the future of Scottish education, guiding values and the suggested priorities within the call to action, published in May 2023.

We continue to consider their findings, COSLA have recognised the importance of creating a coordinated response to the wide range of reports which have been published in recent months. We are engaging with the Scottish Government to discuss the merits of a joint response to the findings of the National Discussion across Local and national Government.

Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment (the “Hayward Review”)

COSLA responded to Professor Hayward's public consultation in 2023. The following key messages were set out as being core to the considerations of a review of qualifications and reform:

- Ensuring qualifications enable greater continuity between the delivery of the curriculum during the Broad General Education stage and in the Senior Phase.
- Ensuring qualifications capture the breadth of knowledge, skills and capacities that young people develop throughout their education.
- Learning from the alternative delivery of qualifications during the pandemic and consider what lessons can be learned from assessment and qualifications in further and higher education.
- The importance of understanding the capacity of the education system to meet changes to qualifications and what further support may be required.

Further to the publication of the 'It's Our Future' report, COSLA was invited to provide an initial response by the Scottish Government over the summer. The following were the key points agreed by the COSLA Children and Young People Board in August 2023:

- COSLA is broadly supportive of the direction of travel of the new approach to qualifications and the shape of the reform programme set out by Professor Hayward's report, as it is in line with the key points set out in COSLA's response to the public consultation.
- However, we believe that this report is a first step and there are areas that will need to be worked through in more detail with schools, local authorities, and our partners across the education system.
- A key area will be ensuring a continued focus on equity as a new framework for qualifications and assessment is created. Scotland's communities, and therefore schools, are diverse in terms of geography, demographics, and levels of deprivation. It's important to consider what support will be required to ensure all children and young people are able to demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and abilities that they have gained from their experiences.
- Equally important will be the work that will need to take place across Scotland to understand the capacity that will be required in schools across Scotland to deliver a new approach to qualifications.

Independent review of the Skills Delivery Landscape (the "Withers Report").

The Withers Review made a number of recommendations across the whole of the skills delivery landscape. Education services have a key role to play in building skills, as do a range of other services delivered by local authorities, including economic development and employability.

As such, COSLA continues to engage with colleagues across the Local Government family to consider the recommendations of the Withers review.

Connections with wider reforms across Children's Services

COSLA has set out positions on the recent report on education reform above, however we would also be clear that connections must be made and maintained with the reform programme across Children's Services. This includes - but is not limited to – the implementation of the Promise, proposed children's services structural reform, further expansion of early learning and childcare, continued efforts to tackle child poverty and the work of the Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing Programme Board.

Achieving the best possible outcomes for children and young people in terms of their health, wellbeing and achievement requires the input from a wide range of services across the public and third sector. Education of course plays a vital role but must not be seen in isolation amidst a complex policy landscape.

Verity House Agreement

As the Committee will be aware, the Scottish Government and COSLA signed the Verity House Agreement earlier this year. The agreement sets out new and improved ways of working between Local and national Government in terms of three shared priorities – poverty, transforming our economy through a just transition to deliver net zero and delivering sustainable person-centred public services.

Education reform clearly has a role to play across all three of these priorities. The Scottish Government and COSLA have been undertaking initial discussions on the implications of Verity House Agreement on education and children's services.

Recognising the comprehensive and wide-ranging recommendations from the recent reports on Scottish Education (and the interactions with wider reforms across Children's Services set out above), it is important we work collectively as an education system to create a considered, sequenced and deliverable programme of reform.

Vitally, this response must be focused on improving outcomes for children and young people.

We look forward to continuing constructive discussions with the Scottish Government across the education reform agenda in line with the priorities and approach agreed in the Verity House Agreement.

I hope the content of this letter is helpful to the committee in their consideration of the education reform agenda.

Yours Sincerely,

Response from ADES

Introduction

ADES is committed to working with government officials, partner agencies, council departments and the third sector organisations who support children young people and their families. The expectation that a period of formal education will be sufficient to improve life chances does not reflect the adverse circumstances and poverty levels experienced by children and young people or recognise the gaps in literacy and numeracy skills that may already exist well before they start school.

ADES took time to consult with its members following the publication of Ken Muir's Report, 'Putting Learner's at The Centre' which resulted in the paper submitted along with this overview paper.

Insufficient time was given to provide an extensive or detailed response for the November Education, Children and Young People's Committee that could be agreed with the ADES membership on all of the current reviews and subsequent recommendations. However, an attempt has been made to make a response that reflect the views of ADES members, ADES Networks and the ADES Executive over the last few months.

International Council of Education Advisers Report 2018-2020

The ICEA recommends:

- an education system that is universally designed and pandemic-proof;
- a commitment to system change that is driven by collaborative professional relationships and underpinned by peer challenge rather than external demands;
- superior digital pedagogies and universally accessible, high quality, and interactive national learning platforms;
- cyclical reviews of Curriculum for Excellence and the realisation of its core capacities;
- deliberate development of increased student capacity for self-directed learning;
- a shift towards continuous professional assessment supported by investment in appropriate professional learning;
- an asset-based view of students, families and communities that avoids stereotypes like Generation C, and refrains from scapegoating marginalized youth;
- a theory of change and leadership approaches that emphasise distributed responsibility and engagement, professional judgment and agency, robust collaborative professionalism, and local energy and ownership;
- integrated learning, health and wellbeing within a place-based holistic educational approach;
- a Networked Learning System to enhance connections among schools and professionals, designed-based research and practice-based professional learning;
- support for leaders in their work and wellbeing through mentoring as a professional entitlement;

- a teaching profession with certification, terms, conditions, support, and professional learning that enhance digital competence, capabilities concerning teaching outside, and strengthened collaborative professionalism.

OECD – ‘Into the Future’, 2021

Over two years ago The OECD 2021 report outlined the need for change in the senior phase. This is a well accepted theme that has regularly been debated for a number of years and ADES agrees that in order to improve outcomes for our children and young people and move towards the vision of Equity and Excellence a change in the senior phase is required.

The OECD 2021 report was commissioned by the Scottish Government to inform the ongoing development of education policy, practice and leadership in Scotland as well as an independent review of the direction of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)

Again this OECD report stressed the importance of streamlining our systems and processes to reduce bureaucracy. It is clear that the existing reform landscape is already overly complex with the potential for layers of bureaucracy. The OECD provided examples including OECD reports, ICEA reports, the NIF Review, Putting Learners at the Centre and the review of qualifications.

Addressing the recommendations on a report-by-report basis undermines the OECD call for a systematic approach to curriculum review and a structured long-term approach to implementation to reflect the existing strengths within the system.

ADES Comment

ADES agrees with the OECD that by addressing recommendations on a report by report basis undermines the approach required in Scottish Education at the current time. We require a coherent and well-structured long-term approach that builds on existing strengths in Scottish Education and looks to see where a focus is required for improvement in outcomes for our children and young people.

Stobbart 2021

Stobbart sought to explore the following points in light of the COVUD Pandemic:

- the development of a Senior Phase qualification system based on a combination of teacher assessment and exams
- the simplification of S4-5 assessment by “de-cluttering” the historical diet of exams
- the increased use of online exam resources and oral presentations as an assessment format
- the inclusion of pupils views in decisions around assessment
- enhancing the role of vocational qualifications

‘Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) is a pioneering example of 21st century curriculum reform. With Scotland positioned within the historic British examination tradition, qualifications for upper-secondary school students have seen far less reform. The cancellations of examinations in 2020-21, and the crises these generated, have provided an opportunity to reconsider the upper-secondary assessment system..... Three major themes

emerge from this comparative review. One focuses on how the external assessments could be more innovative in order to capture a wider range of student capabilities. The second is to rethink the role of teacher assessment, with more emphasis placed on continuous school-based assessment. The third is to better integrate the academic and vocational strands with the assessment system which, given SQA's responsibilities for both, would offer a broader range of curriculum options.'

Extract from Stobbart 2021

ADES Comment

ADES agree that CfE is pioneering and is often the envy of other countries and that we should use CfE as a basis for further developing our curriculum. We also agree that little has changed in the senior phase assessment system and to explore a move to a more continuous assessment system would be welcomed.

Education Reform - 'Putting Learners at The Centre', March 2022

In summary, the Putting Learners at the Centre report proposed the following:

- There should be a new agency for qualifications, a new education agency and an independent inspectorate.
- The new education agency should include SQA's Accreditation/Regulation Directorate and the Community Learning and Development Standards Council.
- The Registrar for Independent Schools should return to the Learning Directorate and link directly with GTCS.
- The staff in Education Scotland who are HM Inspectors or support the inspection functions of Education Scotland should move to an independent inspectorate.
- The new education agency should create and sustain a forum for ongoing and proactive discussion about curriculum, learning and teaching

ADES Comment

ADES agrees with the above proposals in general terms. The detail can be seen in the accompanying paper.

"Change in the education system is a challenge because we need to balance the needs of those in the current system with the pressing need for change. The report (Putting Learner's at The Centre) strikes the right balance between much needed reform now while pointing over the horizon to the ongoing and more radical change we need. It is now up to all of us in the system to deliver a more inclusive way of accrediting young people's learning with the right qualifications."

Douglas Hutchison, ADES President

Hayward– 'Its Our Future', June 2023

It's Our Future report was based on the following assumptions -

- Society is changing very quickly, and Scotland should look to the future and consider whether our current qualifications and assessment system is fit for a potentially very different future.
- The international COVID-19 pandemic which highlighted dissatisfaction with Scotland's qualifications. Following the cancellation of examinations in 2020 and 2021, and the alternative approaches taken to National 5, Higher and Advanced

Higher qualifications, there was public concern about fairness and widespread dissatisfaction with results and perceptions of inequity.

- The evidence emerging from two OECD reports (OECD, 2021, Stobart, 2021) indicated a need for change in the Senior Phase.
- A longer-term dissatisfaction within Scotland about differences between the original intentions for Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) qualifications and learners' experiences of them.

The findings from the Its Our Future Report suggested a number of recommendations including –

- Continuing the process of culture change within the Scottish Education system
- Work to learn from other countries and assessment models
- Use a Scottish Graduation Certificate approach for all young people
- Ensure the offer of a broad curriculum
- Enhance parity of esteem between all types of qualifications
- Time given to professional learning for all staff
- Embed qualifications/assessment within a wider reform agenda

ADES Comment

ADES endorses the Its our Future report and its recommendations and sees this report as the most positive approach to changing the Scottish Education system as outlined in Putting Learner's at the Centre.

Withers Independent Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape, June 2023

Key recommendations made by Withers include:

- the creation of a new single funding and delivery body, bringing together functions from Skills Development Scotland (SDS), the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and, possibly, the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS)
- giving the enterprise agencies a clear remit for supporting businesses, with workforce planning as an embedded and integrated part of business development and planning
- ensuring there is a clear remit for the new qualifications body – the successor to the SQA - in overseeing development and accreditation of all publicly funded post-school qualifications
- moving responsibility for national skills planning to the Scottish Government
- reform of SDS to create a new body with a singular focus on careers advice and education

ADES Comment

ADES agrees that more coherence and stronger links between SDS and education at a strategic and operational level would enhance outcomes and life chances for our young people.

Specific Questions requested by committee:**1. Progress made to date and the opportunities for and risks of reform**

The brief summaries in this document outlines the number of different external reviews and their associated recommendations that cover many similar areas of Reform in the Scottish Education system. These summarised reports are not the only relevant report when exploring reform of the Scottish Education system, the other documents listed below and some not featured here should also be considered in debating the requirements for reform.

The pandemic and the changes in political leadership have slowed progress in reform. The number of external reports has made it difficult to provide coherence and focus to what needs to be retained and what needs to change.

There are many opportunities outlined in the many external reports on the direction of reform but the number of reports and recommendations has paralysed the system. Now is the time for some brave decisions based on all of the advice already provided over the last 3-4 years.

The risk is to ignore the advice and not progress with a review of the senior phase in particular.

2. The impact of all the recent reports and reviews on education reform on the ground

There is no doubt that confusion and frustration exist in the system due to the large number of external reports followed by the number of recommendations making progress unmanageable, swiftly followed by inactivity.

Currently the impact is expectation of change.

3. Progress made on addressing the recommendations of the OECD report of 21 June 2021

There has been little progress other than further external reports

Associated Reports

- [Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence.](#)
- [Upper-secondary education student assessment in Scotland: A comparative perspective.](#)
- [Curriculum for Excellence review: implementation framework.](#)
- [Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education.](#)
- [Education Reform - Consultation Analysis.](#)
- [Putting learners at the centre: response to the independent advisor on education reform's report.](#)
- [All Learners in Scotland Matter - national discussion on education: final report.](#)
- [Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment](#) (the "Withers Report").
- [Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment](#) (the "Hayward Review").

- [Scottish technology ecosystem: review.](#)
- [Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability.](#)
- [Purpose and Principles for Post-School Education, Research and Skills.](#)



Education Reform Introduction

Scottish education will achieve better outcomes for our children and young people, especially those who rely most heavily on public services, when all parts of the system work together effectively. This paper sets out the ADES position on *Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Vision for Scottish Education*¹¹ and the Scottish Government response.¹² The intention of the paper is to assist the government in taking forward the ambitious plans for education reform. ADES members across Scotland were actively involved in the compilation of this paper and shared their views through the Directors' Forum, ADES networks and online seminars. ADES welcomes the recommendations for change and the opportunity to engage in the development of a refreshed vision for Scottish education.

In summary, the *Putting Learners at the Centre* report proposed the following:

- There should be a new agency for qualifications, a new education agency and an independent inspectorate.
- The new education agency should include SQA's Accreditation/Regulation Directorate and the Community Learning and Development Standards Council.
- The Registrar for Independent Schools should return to the Learning Directorate and link directly with GTCS.
- The staff in Education Scotland who are HM Inspectors or support the inspection functions of Education Scotland should move to an independent inspectorate.
- The new education agency should create and sustain a forum for ongoing and proactive discussion about curriculum, learning and teaching

For ease of reference this paper sets out the ADES view on the recommendations from Professor Muir's Report and provides additional commentary on the Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) and National Improvement Framework (NIF). The key sections are:

- Wider Implications
- Renewed Vision
- New National Agency

¹¹ Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Vision for Scottish Education (9 March 2022)

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/putting-learners-centre-towards-future-vision-scottish/>
<https://www.gov.scot/publications/putting-learners-centre-towards-future-vision-scottish-education/documents/education/documents/>

¹² Putting learners at the centre: response to the independent advisor on education reform's report (9 March 2022) <https://www.gov.scot/publications/putting-learners-at-the-centre-response-to-the-independent-advisor-on-education-reforms-report/independent-advisor-on-education-reforms-report/>

- Inspection
- Qualifications and Assessment

Section 1 Wider implications

Beyond schools

Although the emphasis in *Putting Learners at the Centre* was on school education, in particular mainstream schools, it is vital that we do not lose sight of the fact that the work of local authorities extends well beyond the delivery of statutory education. Local authorities hold the legislative responsibility for continuous improvement, raising standards and reducing the impact of poverty on children's education through the Standards in Scotland's Schools Act (2000) and the Education (Scotland) Act 2016 but learning begins well before the start of formal schooling. The vital role of families and communities in supporting children and young people must be placed firmly at the centre of government policy. All parents and carers have a fundamental role to play in ensuring that children and young people are in a place of 'readiness to learn' if we are to achieve the ambition of closing the gaps in outcomes arising from relative poverty. Addressing socio-economic disadvantage must be viewed as a priority across all government departments and council services. ADES is committed to working with government officials, partner agencies, council departments and the third sector organisations who support families. The expectation that a period of formal education will be sufficient to improve life chances does not reflect the adverse circumstances and poverty levels experienced by children and young people or recognise the gaps in literacy and numeracy skills that may already exist well before they start school.

Agency roles and clarity of purpose

The ADES view is that we should all be mindful of the statement that:

'The challenge of central government is to balance necessary consistency of purpose with local energy, innovation and ownership. The roles of national and local government and of intermediate agencies need to be clearly understood with an emphasis on inclusiveness, responsiveness, agility, and collaboration within a framework of common purpose. The principle of subsidiarity whereby local agency is valued and protected should be part of such a longer-term approach to governance.' ICEA report December 2020

ADES believes that the principle of subsidiarity when applied in the correct context can be a powerful agent of change. However, there is a need to ensure clarity of meaning and purpose to achieve success. Recent OECD reports have stressed the importance of streamlining to reduce bureaucracy. It is clear that the existing reform landscape is already overly complex with the potential for layers of bureaucracy. Examples include OECD reports, ICEA reports, the NIF Review, *Putting Learners at the Centre* and the review of qualifications. Addressing the recommendations on a report-by-report basis undermines the OECD call for a systematic approach to curriculum review and a structured long-term approach to implementation to reflect the existing strengths within the system. The national discussion will offer additional insights into the views of parents, carers, pupils and wider

stakeholders. This will provide an opportunity to revisit, prioritise and streamline the existing raft of recommendations.

Section 2 Renewed Vision

The ADES view is that the time is right to refresh the vision for education. The current vision was established as part of the development of a Curriculum for Excellence and there is an opportunity to revisit it to reflect today's society. To be effective, it must look to the future and beyond the here and now. It must promote lifelong learning and a recognition that the future for our children and young people is unknown and uncertain. A vision must be more than a strapline or mission statement – it has to be a live vision which sets out the purpose of education and drives change. To be meaningful, a refreshed vision must be inclusive and reflect the holistic role played by education in meeting the needs of all children and young people. The vision needs to be crisp, clear and linked to the moral purpose of education. It also needs to be compelling, memorable and accessible to those not immersed in education.

The key points arising from the ADES discussions on a refreshed vision are:

- In the existing political landscape, the reference to 'excellence and equity' describes a problem rather than a purpose. Reference to 'Excellence and equity' does not explicitly include children and young people with additional support needs. Equity is interpreted as the 'poverty-related attainment gap'. Children with additional support needs deserve better.
- A number of different 'visions' currently exist which adds complexity to the debate and leads to visions becoming just words rather than being purposeful. We need something different and better.
- The rationale for current initiatives must be embedded within the vision. This should include The Promise; Article 29 from the UNCRC; Sustainable Development Goals; the Logan review on a digital eco-system in Scotland; and our Carbon Neutral aspiration.

Section 3 New National Agency

ADES agrees that a new agency should be established and that it should deliver more consistently at local and regional level. To be effective the new agency structure and remit should be simplified; the links with individual local authorities should be redesigned and strengthened; and partnership with Regional Improvement Collaboratives (RICS) should build on existing strengths. More proportionate links to RICs have to be considered to take greater account of scale and need.

Although the legislative responsibility for improvement lies with local authorities, ADES agrees that 'external' influence enables early learning and childcare settings, schools and educational establishments to improve. External influence can take different forms, but "external" support and challenge is essential along with purposeful and targeted support.

The new agency should be well placed to perform such a role. The fostering of purposeful connections across local authorities and schools by the new agency would have the potential to create a strong climate of mutual trust and confidence to bring about improvement. Local authorities are well placed to provide continuity of contact with the agency and close partnership working would reduce duplication and maximise intelligence-led approaches to inspection. The role of inspection in providing assurance to parents, carers and learners on the quality of education being delivered should continue, however the new agency will need to work closely with the inspectorate to reduce duplication and maximise intelligence-led and evidence-based approaches.

The new agency could be re-structured in a number of ways which will be the subject of considerable analysis and debate. Some specific comments are contained in Appendix A. Consultation within the current agency and with key partners and stakeholders should be at the heart of all discussions. In the immediate term, key interim positions could be established to steer the transition process. This would be on a short-term basis under the management of the Director General of Education and Justice. From an ADES perspective, we would make the following points:

- A more intelligence-led, proportionate approach to the use of staff should be developed. The deployment and use of the regional team (if that continues) should be negotiated at local authority level and reflect the authority's needs. This approach would reduce bureaucracy. It will be essential that each local authority receives a consistent quality of delivery which is in line with their needs as well as scale.
- The function of NIF Advisors is not required and there is scope for redeployment. Including the Scottish Attainment Challenge within the NIF would strengthen the rationale to revisit the current structure. This would include a review of roles, remits and responsibilities.
- The input from subject specialists is valued and could be provided using fixed term secondments linked to specific activities.
- The current governance of Education Scotland has good representation from its non-executive Board members and there are regular meetings with key stakeholders. However, these need to be more open and transparent with published minutes and action points. Board membership should include representation from across educational establishments and the country.

Section 4 Inspection

The new independent inspectorate should inspect early learning and childcare settings, primary, secondary, ASL/special, services, colleges and CLD. Inspection of early learning and childcare, child protection and services for children needs to be considered in partnership with the Care Inspectorate and other scrutiny bodies. In the last few years, the emphasis for early learning and childcare has been the expansion of the number of hours from 600 to 1140. The expansion has been complex and continues to present challenges, particularly in terms of the skills of a rapidly expanded workforce. The burden from regulation from the Care Inspectorate must be considered and an attempt made to reduce in line with the principles of Crerar while ensuring that children's rights are protected. A clear understanding of the difference between regulation and inspection is required. In the run up to the establishment of the new agency, inspections should continue but with no

formal evaluations. A report should be published with evaluative comments. This approach would maintain the emphasis on professional dialogue as schools and nurseries continue to recover from the Covid experience. (ADES members expressed strong disappointment at the recent announcement of a return to 'business as usual' inspections from August 2022.) ADES would offer the following points for consideration:

- Associate Assessors should continue to be involved as members of inspection teams.
- Each local authority and college should have a link HMI. A similar link should be developed for CLD. Link inspectors should provide support and challenge to local authorities and be responsive to emerging needs.
- The choice of schools to be inspected would be agreed with the local authority. In order to provide assurance to parents, carers and learners it is essential that schools which have not been inspected for a number of years are visited at the earliest opportunity.
- HGIOS4 has served schools well and will continue to be used as part of schools' self- evaluation. However, some of the quality indicators have not worked as well as originally intended. Therefore, over the next two years, there should be a revision of HGIOS4.
- A framework for the evaluation of local authorities should be considered in partnership with ADES to reflect the current activity involving Collaborative Improvement.

Section5 Qualifications

ADES does not have strong views on the separation of Accreditation and Regulation and the qualifications agency. Members recognised that the Covid 19 period had been very challenging for all involved in education. There was recognition that some changes to qualifications made prior to the pandemic had not impacted positively on young people. For example, the blanket removal of unit assessments from national qualifications had resulted in changes to external examinations and in some cases, the introduction of an external examination.

ADES members highlighted the consequences of not having an agreed qualification model as noted in the Stobart review. This could give rise to the potential for a new qualifications process being introduced and then ignored by higher education institutions. This could lead to universities setting their own entrance exams, as happens in places like Finland where they sit the Matriculation Exam - minimum five subjects and six hours of exams per subject.

There is a need for a balanced discussion about how we assess, not just for national qualifications, and for what purpose. It must be recognised that the role of the new agency will be to deliver qualifications and that the role of the system will be to determine assessment methodologies. In the same way it will be very important that teachers, pupils and parents understand the role of the qualifications agency. The one-handed clock

reference in Stobart report¹³ that describes the trade-offs around validity, reliability and manageability in terms of the senior phase is helpful. In the same way, there is a need for a greater understanding of the role of the new agency in light of the assessment review being led by Professor Hayward. It is essential that partners, particularly those who work most closely with young people, are fully engaged in future developments of assessments and qualifications.

The ADES position can be summarised as follows:

- The breadth of qualifications should continue to be offered.
- The active involvement of serving teachers/lecturers should continue (verifiers, markers, moderators of assessments, etc.) with SQA staff being the experts on the logistics of the examination process.
- Links with local authorities have been positive and should continue.
- The composition of the Board of Management and the Advisory Council should be revisited to make it more representative.
- Consideration should be given to the creation of a young person's panel which would ensure that the voices of senior phase pupils and college students were heard.
- There should be a comprehensive and open communications plan to enable the new agency to gain lost ground.
- The new qualifications body should be more responsive to the needs of young people and to the system: it must listen more and be more agile and flexible. In terms of issues such as the role of digital learning, it should be proactive rather than reactive.
- Given that the OECD were supportive of the curriculum but noted the disjoint between BGE and the senior phase it was felt that, moving forwards, qualifications and the associated assessment methods should reflect the curriculum rather than the curriculum being driven by qualifications.

Section 6 Scottish Attainment Challenge / National Improvement Framework

The Scottish Attainment Challenge needs to be considered as part of the education reform. The same principles of openness, transparency and collaboration need to be applied to the governance of SAC. The following comment is instructive:

'.... the approach we are recommending in Scotland is not about the introduction of particular techniques. Rather it is an overall way of thinking that involves processes of contextual analysis used to develop strategies that fit with particular circumstances. In so doing, the aim must be to make better use of the expertise within those situations and to build capacity to manage change through processes of collaboration and networks. To do this, local barriers need to be identified and addressed.'

'As we move into the next phase of the Challenge, there is an opportunity to shift the original focus of the initiative from developing specific interventions to close the poverty-

¹³ National Qualifications and Assessments (Professor G Stobart, 31 August 2021)

related attainment gap to exploring the relationship between poverty and the variations in outcomes in more creative ways.'

(Changing Education Systems A research-based Approach, Mel Ainscow, Christopher Chapman and Mark Hadfield, 2020)

Points for consideration:

- The proposed link HMI for each authority should be actively engaged in supporting the local authority's planned approach to improving outcomes for those experiencing disadvantage.
- Local authorities should be represented in the governance arrangements for SAC with regular sharing of practice and plans. This could build on the success of 'Collaborative Improvement' which has been led by ADES with active involvement from Education Scotland.

ADES members also noted the importance of linking the overall vision to the NIF, including the agreed NIF measures. The National Improvement Framework was reviewed in 2021. It will be important that the National Improvement Framework is central to discussions during the National Debate on education. It is the view of ADES that consideration should be given to a review of the existing drivers and the measures. Given that the revised Scottish Attainment Challenge provides funding to all 32 authorities, there is scope to include the Scottish Attainment Challenge within the National Improvement Framework. This would streamline and reduce the existing layers of complexity in the system. It would also challenge the system to consider the improvement of outcomes for all young people experiencing disadvantage in all its forms, not just poverty.

28th July 2022

Appendix A

Specific practical suggestion on the new national agency and independent inspectorate

A new agency could be re-structured in various ways. For example - Learning & teaching, Curriculum & Assessment, Families, Leadership while HR and finance would be the backbone of a Corporate division/directorate. Glow support could be included in Corporate as part of the IT functions. The Accreditation and Regulation function of SQA could be included within Curriculum & Assessment.

Another approach could be to have learning, teaching, curriculum & assessment as one division – called Learning.

- Learning – includes learning, teaching, curriculum and assessment
- Families – includes family learning, CLD, early learning & childcare
- Leadership – leadership for learning, range of leadership pathways, including qualification(s) to demonstrate Standard for Headship, research and data, including the Insight team

Attainment Advisors could be part of the Learning Division or equivalent. A more intelligenceled, proportionate approach to attainment advisors should be developed in partnership with the proposed link inspectors and local authorities. Some attainment advisers would work across more than one local authority. Their deployment and those of the regional team (if that continues) would be negotiated with the local authority and be targeted to align with the authority's plans for Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) using their allocated central resource as well as their core funding. The streamlining which has been proposed would reduce the current level of bureaucracy that has appeared in some areas. It is also worth noting that the stretch aims being proposed by the government for SAC were raised as a growing concern for local authorities.

There was a clear view from ADES members that the function of NIF advisors was not required. Therefore, they would be redeployed. In the section on National Improvement Framework, the proposal to reduce bureaucracy by including SAC within the NIF would strengthen the rationale to reduce the staffing across attainment advisors and NIF advisors.

Subject specialists have been highlighted by some stakeholders as being valued, particularly for secondary schools. This needs some further thought in partnership with the inspectorate, the new agency and local authorities.

Independent Inspectorate

The new inspectorate could be established quickly. While legislation would be required for the new independent inspectorate, an interim position could be developed with the lead or interim lead for the inspectorate being line managed by the Director General of Education and Justice until the legislation is confirmed.

Legislative changes appear to be a barrier to progress taking place at pace. It should be recognised that there are equally dangers in delaying any change. The danger is that the system becomes cynical about a genuine desire for change. Given the drivers for change any delay in progressing change at pace appears like complacency and an acceptance that the current arrangements are adequate for our learners. Interim arrangements could be progressed which show the direction of travel, but which are not fixed. The inspectorate function beginning to operate independently of current Education Scotland functions would be a clear sign that the proposed changes set out in the Muir report do not need to wait until the Autumn of 2024.

Annexe D

31 October 2023

Dear Convener,

I am responding to the Committee's request on the 6th October 2023 to receive an update on the implementation of the recommendations from the OECD report *Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future* (published June 2021).

As you indeed acknowledge in your letter, the implementation of the OECD recommendations will necessarily have to be considered in light of the subsequent reports commissioned to look at key OECD recommendations in more depth, and the wider education and skills reform landscape. Decisions on reform including the future of qualifications and assessment, which is of course inextricably linked to curriculum and pedagogy, will not be taken lightly. It is right that we are taking the time necessary to properly consider it and understand the potential impact on schools, teachers and pupils.

I intend to update Parliament, providing more detail on next steps in education and skills reform. Those next steps will be set in the context of Programme for Government commitments to tackle poverty and improve educational equity, and ensure sustainable public services.

Turning to progress we are making on taking forward the OECD recommendations while acknowledging the above context, the following provides an update against the four key areas identified in the OECD report.

Balance Curriculum for Excellence so students can fully benefit from a coherent learning experience from 3 to 18 years:

Education Scotland are leading a partnership approach to taking forward work on related recommendations focussing on better alignment between the broad general education and senior phase in particular, through piloting curriculum review approaches. Work is being taken forward alongside teachers, practitioners and key stakeholders such as the Association of Directors of Education (ADES), in particular the ADES Curriculum, Assessment and Qualifications Network¹⁴. Other examples of work include the establishment of a National Timetable Group focused on sharing innovative approaches; development of a professional learning offer on curriculum design; a thought paper *Exploring the Four Capacities* and exploratory work on a Scottish Learner Profile.

Co-design and pilot curriculum review groups involving a total of more than 500 teachers and educators, local authority representatives and senior leaders are involved in the work. Initial pilot curriculum reviews were held in three curriculum areas (Maths, Health and Wellbeing and Social Subjects) in session 22/23 with follow up sessions planned in these areas for 23/24. An additional three curriculum area reviews in Modern Languages, Expressive Arts and English are planned for session 23/24. Members of the groups come from across all local authorities and national partner groups with representation from early years through to post school.

¹⁴ The Curriculum and Qualifications Network is a network of curriculum leads within each local education authority, which meets approximately every quarter.

This approach reflects wider OECD advice and research on successful implementation of education reform and the significance of developing capacity, focusing on implementation processes and inclusive stakeholder engagement. Responses from the sessions has highlighted the enthusiasm from teachers to be involved in education reform work which supports professional development, improved classroom practice and ultimately better outcomes for pupils. Education Scotland provides regular updates to the Curriculum and Assessment Board (CAB) on progress towards the implementation of these recommendations.

Combining effective collaboration with clear roles and responsibilities:

In June, I updated Parliament on how I planned to take forward Education and Skills Reform. This included the Scottish's Government's commitment to the reform of our national education bodies.

Work continues to develop plans for a new public body responsible for qualifications, a national education agency and an independent inspectorate, ensuring that we establish clearer accountability and well understood roles and responsibilities. This will help strengthen the support, experience, and outcomes for all those who use and rely on our education and skills infrastructure.

As part of this, work is now at an advanced stage in the recruitment for a new Chair of SQA and for an interim HM Inspector of Education. These roles will provide enhanced leadership to support the development of the new bodies. The new Chair of SQA will, subject to Parliament, transfer to the new qualifications body.

Delivering new bodies will not in itself deliver all the change we require. I have therefore announced plans for a new national Centre of Teaching Excellence, recognising that excellent learning and teaching must be the foundation of all that we do in Scottish education. The Centre will be set up as part of the education reform programme, co-designed with teachers and professional associations and will put Scotland at the forefront of innovative research in teaching practice.

As I outlined in my June update to Parliament and as confirmed in the Programme for Government, legislation in respect of new national education bodies will be introduced in this parliamentary year allowing the government to draw on the independent reviews and reports that have been published. As part of my update on education and skills reform later this year, I will outline next steps with regards the national bodies.

Consolidating institutional policy processes for effective change:

Initial work on this recommendation, in particular the call to develop a systematic approach to curriculum review in Scotland, has been undertaken by Scottish Government supported by Education Scotland. Officials have engaged with stakeholders and drawn on a rapid evidence review supported by the OECD, which looks at international best practice. I am currently considering proposals for a potential systematic review process aiming to ensure that the curriculum remains relevant, forward looking, reflects the contemporary needs of our children and young people and ultimately supports high quality teaching and learning.

Leading the next steps for Curriculum for Excellence with a long-term view:

The government's implementation of this recommendation acknowledges that we are building on our education system's existing strengths. Fully implementing the

recommendations of the OECD report will take time and while I remain committed to delivering these, things have moved on since the report's publication. The OECD stated that the recommendations should be delivered as a coherent package, not as individual policy actions, and in the context now of a number of reports which could lead to significant change, it is important that there is a holistic and co-ordinated response to all potential Education and Skills reform. I see the implementation of the OECD recommendations as part of this wider education reform landscape and as such the Action Plan will be updated following the Government response to the recent Reviews.

I look forward to engaging and working with the committee to ensure education and skills reform delivers tangible benefits for those teaching, learning, and working throughout Scottish education and the skills sector.

Yours sincerely