



REPORT TO EDUCATION & CHILDREN'S SERVICES COMMITTEE – 7 OCTOBER 2021

OECD: “SCOTLAND’S CURRICULUM FOR EXCELLENCE: INTO THE FUTURE” AND UPPER-SECONDARY EDUCATION STUDENT ASSESSMENT IN SCOTLAND: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE”

1 Reason for Report / Summary

- 1.1 In 2021 two significant reports were published in relation to Scottish education, both by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development). The first was a critique of Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence, providing some key recommendations for the future and the second was in relation to upper-secondary education student assessment and was written in response to the difficulties which arose from the cancellation of the SQA examination diets in 2020 and 2021. Both reports are likely to have significant implications for the future direction of Scottish education.

2 Recommendations

The Committee is recommended to:

- 2.1 Consider and comment on both reports and consider the potential implications for the education system in Aberdeenshire which may arise from recommendations within the reports.**

3 Purpose and Decision Making Route

- 3.1 This report is being presented to Education and Children’s Services Committee as both recent reports from the OECD are likely to have long term implications for the future direction of education in Scotland and as such it is essential that Members of the Committee have the opportunity to consider these reports.
- 3.2 This report has not been considered by any other Committee.

4 Discussion

OECD: Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future

- 4.1 Curriculum for Excellence (CFE) was published in 2004 further to a significant national debate on the future of the curriculum and education in Scotland. There remains widespread support for Curriculum for Excellence and its aspirations and it has been held up internationally as a powerful model for other jurisdictions considering how best to structure a 21st century curriculum. CFE aims to ensure that all young people develop and grow into successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors, with the knowledge, skills and capacities to thrive in the 21st century. Nevertheless, in spite of the general widespread support for CFE, education debate in Scotland has become increasingly intense in recent years and concerns have been raised about various aspects of educational performance and the variability of

performance between schools and indeed between local authority areas. In light of this, the OECD was invited to assess the implementation of CFE in primary and secondary schools. This report was published in June 2021 and the full report can be accessed [here](#).

OECD Recommendations

4.2 In short, the report makes twelve key recommendations which the Scottish Government has indicated it will accept and progress. These are outlined below;

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

- 1. Re-assess CFE's aspirational vision against emerging trends in education** to take account of evolutions in education and society: Scotland should consider updates to some of its vision's core elements and their implications for practice, in particular, the role of knowledge in CFE; and define indicators aligned to the vision to help understand students' progress across all four capacities set out in CFE.
- 2. 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 the Broad General Education (BGE), and nurture and hone this base for them to progress seamlessly through the Senior Phase and the choices it offers.
- 3. 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.
- 4. Continue building curricular capacity at various levels of the system using research** by developing the environment of curriculum design support around schools, including in supporting exchange and collaboration between practitioners for curriculum design and experimentation within and across schools; and collaboration between schools and universities.

Combine effective collaboration with clear roles and responsibilities

- 5. Ensure stable, purposeful and impactful stakeholder involvement with CFE:** System leaders at national and local levels could continue encouraging the involvement of stakeholders (and in particular, students) with CFE by better structuring each engagement initiative they offer, clarifying its purpose, designing it accordingly, and letting stakeholder input inform decision making.

6. **Revise the division of responsibilities for CFE:** System leaders and stakeholders could revise the current allocation of responsibility for CFE, including responsibilities for its strategic direction, its reviews and updates, and the response to schools' needs of support with curriculum issues. The revised allocation should be stable over time to fulfil Scotland's commitment to shared ownership of CFE.
7. **Structure a coherent communication strategy to support developments of CFE:** System leaders, with the Learning Directorate and Education Scotland at the forefront, could develop a communication strategy in support of CFE's next developments and collaborate with practitioners, scholars and other CFE stakeholders as they do so.

Consolidate institutional policy processes for effective change

8. **Provide dedicated time to lead, plan and support CFE at the school level:** In support of the next phase of development of CFE, Scotland could consider the provision of additional dedicated and ring-fenced time for all teachers, for curriculum planning, for monitoring of student achievement and in support of moderation of assessment outcomes.
9. **Simplify policies and institutions for clarity and coherence:** To align the institutional structures with clear ownership of CFE, Scotland could explore assigning leadership and development responsibilities for curriculum (and perhaps assessment) to a specialist stand-alone agency; and consider refreshing the remit of an inspectorate of education regarding CFE.
10. **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.
11. **Develop a systematic approach to curriculum review:** Scotland could consider establishing a systematic curriculum review cycle with a planned timeframe and specific review agenda, led by the specialist stand-alone agency.

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

12. **Adopt a structured and long-term approach to implementation:** Building on the system's existing strengths, Scotland should consider how to take on board the recommendations in this report as a coherent package rather than individual policy actions for the next steps

- 4.3 The OECD report will have significant implications for Scottish education, for schools and local authorities and will likely guide and inform much of our work and strategic direction in Aberdeenshire over the forthcoming five to ten year period. Many of the recommendations will require significant change and some of the recommendations may well also be significant in terms of the financial implications involved.
- 4.4 The OECD report highlights the inconsistencies and variability in supports provided to teachers locally and nationally and as such there is a perception that a “postcode lottery” exists when it comes to support for teachers’ roles as curriculum makers and designers. The report also highlights that teachers in Scotland have some of the highest class contact time in the developed world and that this prevents teachers from having sufficient time for curriculum design, innovation and assessment and moderation activities. Any changes to class contact time will have an impact on budgets and also on the learning estate.
- 4.5 In the context of developing an empowered system, local leadership capacity should be freed up to support curriculum development and whilst the OECD found that some Head Teachers welcomed local authority priorities for curriculum development, others found these constraining in a system where local school-level autonomy and flexibility were to be key drivers. To that end, there is a balance to be reached between central prescription and local empowerment.
- 4.6 OECD also concludes that the support landscape is quite cluttered and a greater delineation of roles and responsibilities at all levels of the system would provide greater clarity to teachers and would also provide greater system wide coherence. Since the publication of the OECD report, the Scottish Government has announced that Education Scotland is to be restructured and the SQA is to be replaced. Discussions are also currently underway around the role of Regional Improvement Collaboratives (RICs) in providing system support for teachers and other practitioners and how these add value to locality working

The Senior Phase and Qualifications

- 4.7 The report highlights that there has been some real success in implementing CFE within the primary school sector, but work is required in secondary education, particularly at the important transition phase between the Broad General Education (BGE) which ends at the end of S3 and the Senior Phase (S4-6)
- 4.8 The report indicated that the current two stage secondary model, S1-3 and then S4-6 is the most significant barrier to implementing CFE in the secondary sector as the disconnect between the qualifications in the Senior Phase and CFE’s philosophy hinder the relevance of the first and the power of the second. Furthermore, the report suggests that the pivotal four Capacities of CFE are

displaced by the 5 Highers as the purpose of the curriculum at the Senior Phase level.

- 4.9 In the BGE level of secondary, the curriculum is described as being “mile wide, inch deep” and the over-emphasis on preparing young people for National Qualifications in the Senior Phase begins to play out in the first three years of secondary education where there remains confusion over the curriculum principles of breadth and depth. This confusion remains in the Senior Phase where opinion remains polarised on the issue of the number of subjects taken by learners.
- 4.10 What is clear from the review is that there is clear misalignment between the learning approaches designed for CFE and the reality of what is happening in the Senior Phase (and S1-3 to an extent).
- 4.11 Secondary education has been one of the most fiercely debated elements of CFE implementation over the past decade. True to the spirit of CFE, the vast majority of Scottish schools (89%) have adopted a 3+3 approach to curriculum design (S1-3 and then S4-6) whereas 11% of schools (and all independent schools in Scotland) have retained the more traditional 2+2+2 approach (S1-2, S3-4 and S5-6) and across the country there is great variation as to when subject choices are made, leading to parental disquiet, media interest and increased politicisation of the curriculum reform agenda. This is unsurprising given the impact this variation may potentially have on entry to Higher Education and this is very much one of the risks of having a system which allows greater school-level freedom and autonomy.
- 4.12 CFE gave a commitment to align the qualifications framework in the Senior Phase with the aspirations of CFE, but this has yet to be realised in practice with the “two term dash” to Higher still being recognised as the main driver in the Senior Phase despite a much wider range of qualifications and pathways, including Foundation Apprenticeships and National Progression Awards now being in place for young people.
- 4.13 The Covid-19 pandemic has further exposed the risks of over-reliance on a largely high-stakes assessment regime and the future of qualifications and assessment in the Senior Phase will be a key priority during Covid-19 recovery. It is argued that we have a 21st century curriculum operating with a 19th century assessment model and this needs to be challenged to ensure a Senior Phase, including qualifications, which leads young people effectively to the world beyond school, and one which parents, employers and society at large understand.
- 4.14 In response to the cancellation of SQA exams in 2020 and 2021 and the controversy which surrounded this decision and the processes put in place to allocate awards, the Scottish Government further commissioned the OECD to provide a comparative analysis of the upper-secondary school assessment

system in Scotland to allow further reflection on how the Scottish system could adapt in future. This report was published in August 2021 and can be accessed via this [link](#). There are three main themes which emerge from this report;

1. How external assessment could be more innovative in order to capture a wider range of student capabilities.
2. The role of teacher assessment and the emphasis placed on continuous school-based assessment
3. Improved integration of academic and vocational strands within the assessment system

4.15 The Covid pandemic undoubtedly highlighted that countries with a heavy reliance on external examinations faced a greater crisis in determining student awards and grades than those countries which drew on multiple sources of assessment evidence and thus were able to adapt to the unprecedented circumstances more swiftly and easily.

4.16 The OECD comparative study provides a range of options for moving beyond the legacy system currently used to assess students in Scotland and these are;

1. Exploring the replacement of examinations at age 16 by a school graduation certificate
2. Developing a more resilient upper-secondary assessment system
3. Seeking better alignment of assessment with curriculum and pedagogy through broadening the forms of assessment
4. Reconfiguring and increasing the role of school-based assessment and adapting the central moderation system
5. Systematically investigating students' perceptions and views of assessment arrangements
6. Further developing the role of vocational qualifications in broadening the curriculum

4.17 The comparative study acknowledges that assessment systems take time to evolve and any change, particularly more radical change, is often inhibited as a result of social reluctance to change a system which everyone understands and many generations may have gone through and experienced themselves. Whilst in Scotland we shifted from Standard Grades to new National Qualifications after 25 years in 2014, there was little real system change with examinations remaining dominant features in the system at the ages of 16, 17 and then 18 at the end of S6. As such, there is a recognised system and approach to an examination structure in place which generations will have been familiar with and many will continue to value, despite the fact that it may not be the best model of assessment for modern times or indeed fit for the future.

4.18 The OECD comparative study will likely generate significant debate about the future direction of upper secondary assessment in Scotland and this is a debate which is to be welcomed and which is much needed. The Scottish Government

announcement that it plans to replace the SQA, along with the many other recommendations arising from OECD in both reports published in 2021 provide unique opportunities to make significant changes to how we approach senior phase assessment in Scotland.

5 Council Priorities, Implications and Risk

5.1

Pillar	Priority
Our People	Education Health & Wellbeing
Our Environment	Infrastructure Resilient Communities
Our Economy	Economy & Enterprise Estate Modernisation

Underpinning the Priorities are a number of key principles. They are: right people, right places, right time; responsible finances; climate and sustainability; Community Planning Partnership Local Outcome Improvement Plans; human rights and public protection; tackling poverty and inequalities; digital infrastructure and economy.

5.2 The table below shows whether risks and implications apply if the recommendation is agreed.

Subject	Yes	No	N/A
Financial		X	
Staffing		X	
Equalities and Fairer Duty Scotland		X	
Children and Young People's Rights and Wellbeing		X	
Climate Change and Sustainability		X	
Health and Wellbeing		X	
Town Centre First		X	

5.4 There are no financial or staffing implications arising directly from this report.

5.5 An integrated impact assessment is not required because this report is providing a commentary on two recently published national reports on Scottish education which is for discussion and debate only. Any policy changes which were to arise from these reports in future would be subject to an IIA

5.7 The following Risks have been identified as relevant to this matter on a Corporate Level:

ACORP002 Changes in government policy, legislation and regulation

The following Risks have been identified as relevant to this matter on a Strategic Level:

ECSSR002 To secure continuous improvement for children and young people

6 Scheme of Governance

- 6.1 The Head of Finance and Monitoring Officer within Business Services have been consulted in the preparation of this report and had no comments to make and are satisfied that the report complies with the Scheme of Governance and relevant legislation.
- 6.2 The Committee is able to consider this item in terms of Section E.3.4 of the List of Committee Powers in Part 2A of the Scheme of Governance as it relates to the functions of the Council under the Education (Scotland) Acts, the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004, and all other relevant legislation and regulations.

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