

THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT'S COMMISSIONED OECD REVIEW OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CURRICULUM FOR EXCELLENCE

- 1 The Scottish Government has commissioned the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to undertake an independent review of the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) and the quality of the associated learning and teaching being provided in Scotland's schools. The OECD review is expected to report by December 2015 and it is a key component of the Scottish Government's wider plans for developing the 3-18 education system in Scotland. The aims for that system include a requirement that it should be able to evolve over time, ensuring that the curriculum stays relevant and responsive to the changing environment it serves.
 - 2 Through its Education Committee, the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE), Scotland's National Academy, identifies and promotes priorities for education in Scotland at all levels. This has included monitoring and responding to the development and implementation of CfE. The absence of a systematic programme of independent evaluation of CfE has been a long-standing and key concern of the RSE Education Committee. Without high quality evaluation, not only do we not know what is going well and what is not, but we have no way of developing a proper understanding or an ability to plan so that improvements can be made. The RSE has therefore welcomed the Scottish Government's decision to commission the independent OECD review of CfE. However, it is our understanding that the OECD review will not undertake an in-depth evaluation of the impact of CfE. Rather, it will adopt a broader, forward-looking perspective on how the CfE reforms are being implemented, making recommendations it deems to be appropriate.
 - 3 The Scottish Government has invited the RSE to contribute to its plans for reviewing 3-18 learning in Scotland. The RSE has made and intends to continue to make an input in terms of: providing advice and comment on the purpose, remit and methods for the OECD review; commenting on the background report on the Scottish education system that will be prepared by Scottish Government and its agencies for the OECD; and meeting with the OECD reviewers during their evidence gathering visits to Scotland in 2015.
 - 4 While the RSE is supportive of contributing to the Government's plans for the OECD review, it has emphasised to Government the importance of protecting the Society's independence and authoritativeness, including maintaining the RSE's ability to publish any comments it has on the review. It is in this context that we have prepared this paper.
 - 5 The RSE is of the view that high quality evaluation of CfE must relate to the *aims* of the reforms and the *criticisms* to which the reforms have been subjected. It should seek to identify what is *different about CfE* and consider the extent to which the *distinctive* and *innovative features* of the reforms are being reflected in classroom practice. It must provide evidence on *what is* and *what is not* working and why this is so, and evidence-based proposals for *improving* matters. It must use a variety of kinds of data in order to address the variety of criteria that might be used to evaluate CfE; all such data must be *rigorously analysed*. Given that CfE represents an evolving process of educational reform, there should be a commitment to an *on-going* and sustainable programme of evaluation.
 - 6 By its very nature, CfE is intended to be decentralised, with the delivery of the reforms varying by school. It is important that the character of the variation inherent in schools' approaches to CfE is understood well. That will require much preliminary investigation as to the range of ways in which the curriculum is being interpreted.
- Data-related issues pertaining to evaluating CfE***
- 7 However, the RSE believes that it would be extremely challenging for anyone to undertake a thorough and rigorous evaluation of the CfE reforms, especially their impact on outcomes for learners. The following summarises why we believe this to be so.
 - 8 The absence of a systematic strategy has meant that independent evaluation has not been considered as a central feature of the CfE reforms from the outset. It is notable that no pilot studies were undertaken prior to the universal roll-out of CfE, and that no dedicated baseline data were collected that would enable any effect of CfE to be assessed. In order to establish an evidence base, independent monitoring and evaluation should have been explicit from the introduction of CfE. In the absence of such prior evidence, it is impossible to draw valid inferences about any effects of CfE.

- 9 More specifically, the baseline data that would be required to undertake an evaluation of CfE is not available from the surveys that are routinely conducted in Scotland. The quantitative data that are available will be of limited value to an evaluation of CfE.
- From 2011 the Scottish Survey of Achievement (SSA) was replaced by the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN). Whereas each year the SSA focussed on a different aspect of the school curriculum and, depending on the survey year in question, has involved up to 40,000 pupils, the SSLN alternates yearly between literacy and numeracy only, with approximately 11,000 pupil participants. The small number of pupils participating from each school in the SSLN means that it is not possible to study reliably variation between schools, and yet the philosophy of CfE – of devolving autonomy to schools – would require school-to-school variation to be studied in order to understand the implementation and any effects of the reforms.
 - Constraints on any evaluation have resulted from the uniformity in the timing of the implementation of CfE i.e. by-and-large schools embarked on the implementation of CfE at the same time thus precluding the opportunity to compare performance in those schools implementing CfE with those yet to introduce the reforms.
 - The Scottish School Leavers' Survey was discontinued in the early part of the past decade, and so there is no scope for understanding change in pupil outcomes according to measures that are comparable over time.
- In 2010 the Scottish Government announced that it would withdraw Scotland from participating in two of the three widely regarded international comparator studies. Scotland no longer participates in: the Trends in International Maths and Science Survey (TIMSS), an international assessment of pupil attainment in maths and science at primary and secondary level; and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which assesses the performance of P5 pupils in reading. There is therefore no scope for understanding change in pupil attainment in Scotland according to internationally comparable measures.
 - While Scotland does still participate in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), this deliberately does not examine the mastery of specific school curricula. Indeed, one of the strengths of PISA is that it enables countries to be compared independently of differences of curriculum. PISA would therefore seem to be of limited value to an evaluation of a curricular reform such as CfE. In addition, PISA is based on data samples for 15-year-olds only, whereas CfE applies to all children and young people aged 3-18. Thus PISA happens too late in a pupil's school career to allow valid assessment of the primary and early secondary school phase of CfE, but too early to provide an overall assessment of pupils' progress from 3 to 18.
- 10 As part of its review, we would expect OECD to comment on the quality and extent of the data available in Scotland. This would be an important outcome in terms of seeking to address the data-related issues to which we have referred.

Additional Information and References

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