The OECD Review of Scottish Education: Introduction to background material from the Royal Society of Edinburgh

The Education Committee\(^1\) of the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) is well aware that in undertaking reviews of national education systems the OECD puts great emphasis on recommendations for the *future* rather than raking over the past. By sending you a set of papers that relate to some radical changes in Scottish school education that have been going on for several years, we run the risk of being accused of looking backward. We should, therefore, explain our position on this.

Currently, Scottish education from age 3 to 18 has two sets of priorities. First, there is the completion of the implementation of the:

- *Curriculum for Excellence* (CfE) and the
- *New National Qualifications* (NNQ).

Secondly, there are new government policies for renewed emphasis in the future on issues such as:

- *Disadvantage: Closing the Gap in Attainment*
- *Developing the Young Workforce; Scotland’s Youth Employment Strategy.*

In looking forward to these developments, we are concerned that we learn from the nation’s recent experience of the earlier radical reforms. We attach those papers and commentaries (see Appendix 1) that we have been aware of as focusing on the Government-led changes over the last few years. We also enclose an Appendix 2 on the distinctive features of CfE and suggest lines of enquiry which the OECD may wish to pursue in the review.

The collection of the material we are sending to OECD on CfE and NNQ is relatively modest for such a major set of reforms. However, it includes:

1. *Academic research related to the development and implementation of CfE*

2. *Various surveys and commentaries on the implementation of CfE and the NNQ*

\(^1\) [http://www.royalsoced.org.uk/551_EducationPolicy.html](http://www.royalsoced.org.uk/551_EducationPolicy.html)
3. Reports and updates from the bodies charged with leading the implementation of the reforms

In relation to the latter, the RSE would encourage the OECD to seek access to survey research into bureaucracy in Scottish schools which was undertaken by Blake Stevenson Ltd (consultants) under commission from Education Scotland. While Blake Stevenson completed its work in September 2014, the report has yet to be published.

OECD might also find it useful to consider the evidence sessions (25 February 2014, 30 September 2014, 7 October 2014 and 3 February 2015) which the Scottish Parliament’s Education and Culture Committee have held on the implementation of CfE and NNQ. Witnesses have included Scottish Government Ministers and officials, and senior representatives from Education Scotland, Scottish Qualification Authority, local authorities, General Teaching Council for Scotland, teaching unions and teachers’ associations. The transcripts from the evidence sessions are available at: http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/29802.aspx

What the collection demonstrates is the lack of any reports of independent evaluations, major research or gathering of baseline data to enable a subsequent assessment to be made of whether the reforms “have made any difference”. The RSE Education Committee has previously shared with the OECD its paper which highlights these important matters.

Much of the material in the collection comprises discursive accounts which reflect widespread general support for the ideas underpinning the innovations, but also make clear the marked dissatisfaction with the implementation and resourcing of the reforms. We would be pleased to discuss what we regard as profound weaknesses in the strategic thinking and action associated with the implementation of CfE and NNQ, but our focus here is on the need for more effective future strategies.

The RSE, together with the Learned Societies’ Group on Scottish Science Education (LSG), has had significant concerns about the implementation of the changes and are keen to avoid similar pitfalls as we move into future developments. The LSG was established in 2012 and comprises representatives from the Association for Science Education, British Computer Society, Engineering Policy Group in Scotland, Institute of Physics, Royal Society of Chemistry, Royal Society of Edinburgh and Society of Biology. The RSE’s first priority is to encourage the OECD to recommend for the future that:

**The Scottish Government should undertake and facilitate rational, coherent and progressive strategies for the implementation of educational change.**

Future strategies should consider the following well-tried innovation elements:

1. Scrutinise research on comparable innovations elsewhere to evaluate what has and has not been found effective in achieving intended goals. Use this analysis to criticise

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un-tested ideas about what developments are likely to work. Draw up an action plan for discussion and subsequent testing that has sound theoretical underpinning.

2. Undertake pilot studies with independent formative evaluation identifying aspects that are, or are not, making the differences intended. Be ready to modify the action plan as necessary, plan for and establish teachers’ continuing professional development from the start of the pilots.

3. Recognise the importance of collecting baseline data at the initial stages of the innovation to enable the impact of the reforms to be assessed.

4. At the same time, directly involve and plan the role of the teacher education institutions so their contribution to building the capacity of the teaching profession through initial teacher education and CPD is assured from the start.

5. Employ a suitably holistic approach and framework for the developments to avoid past problems of too many groups and committees with little mutual accountability.

6. Ensure that the expertise, views, experiences and critiques of, for example, classroom teachers, specialists, researchers and parents is heard and seen to be taken account of.

7. For wider national implementation, keep a balance between unreasonable delay and over-rapid introduction that is short of appropriate resources and preparation.

8. Develop a clear atmosphere of expectation of accountability among everyone taking actions or decisions in relation to the innovation.

9. Make early plans for summative evaluations to be introduced at later stages of the innovations that have been introduced. HM Inspection is not enough.

There are concerns that in recent years the former high quality of empirical research into Scottish education has not been maintained. The level of funding for such research in recent years has been substantially lower than that provided in the past by the Government in Scotland. An important principle in innovative developments recognises that independent research plays a central role in promoting excellence.

The RSE is looking forward very much to meeting again with the OECD reviewers during their visit to Scotland in early June

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Appendix 1

*Academic research related to the development and implementation of Curriculum for Excellence*

ENCLOSURES (web hyperlinks provided where available):


Surveys and Small Studies on the Implementation of Curriculum for Excellence and the New National Qualifications

ENCLOSURES (web hyperlinks provided where available):

Progress Update Reports from Organisations with Lead Responsibility for Supporting the Implementation of the Curriculum for Excellence and National Qualifications’ Reforms

ENCLOSURES (web hyperlinks provided where available):

Appendix 2

Focusing on the Essentials of Curriculum for Excellence

In reviewing Curriculum for Excellence, the OECD will require to be mindful of the original aims and intentions of the reforms. As well as considering whether standards in Scottish schools appear to be rising and whether the relative position of the disadvantaged is improving, OECD will need to form a view of the extent to which any changes can be fairly attributed to the introduction of Curriculum for Excellence. This will require OECD to look closely at the features of the reforms that are distinctive and innovative.

In the view of the RSE, the principal distinctive features are as follows:

1. Curriculum

   - Adoption of a limited number of long-term strategic objectives (the so-called four capacities)
   - The attempt to define the curriculum in terms of learning experiences and expected outcomes for the pupil (the Es and Os)
   - The use of curriculum principles, especially, personalization and choice, depth, challenge and enjoyment
   - An increased focus on the development of skills, especially advanced cognitive skills
   - A balance between subject-based and interdisciplinary activity
   - An enhanced value placed on learning outwith school (with implications for partnership working)

2. The nature of learning

   - Constructivist pedagogy or, in the terms of CfE, ‘active learning’
   - Improved continuity across transitions (pre-five to primary, primary to secondary and secondary to various positive destinations) with consequent requirements for improved partnership working
   - Learner engagement

Although significant, the following aspects are not especially distinctive or innovative. Rather, they reflect more familiar educational intentions. Given the need to keep the exercise manageable, it would seem appropriate to focus on the items under 1 and 2, above, but accepting the need to remain vigilant on the matters below.

3. Learning pathways

   - Phases of education (broad general and senior), within the context of a continuum of learning from 3-18
   - Establishment of pupil entitlements
   - The development of new national qualifications
   - Improvements in assessment approaches
Exploring these issues will require a focus on a number of key questions. These can be summarised as follows:

1. Fundamental purposes

- What do teachers, parents and employers see as being the purposes of CfE? Are these clear and expressed in terms that are readily understood?
- To what extent do these key groups see the CfE programme as it has developed fulfilling these objectives?

2. Translating policy into practice

- What do teachers see as the key pieces of guidance that have been published to support CfE? Is this guidance clear and well expressed, is it sufficiently succinct to be readily understood and adopted?
- Does the guidance cover all of the important aspects of CfE (e.g. interdisciplinary learning or active learning)?
- Has the guidance been presented in a coherent and manageable way? Have teachers found it easy to use? Has it influenced practice?
- How have the Experiences and Outcomes changed approaches to curriculum planning and classroom practice?
- Are the Experiences and Outcomes easy to use? Is it straightforward to use them to plan progression in learning?
- Do teachers see the seven curricular principles as having influenced the development of the programme and classroom practice? Have they received satisfactory advice on how they should be put into practice?

3. Pedagogy

- What is commonly understood by the term ‘active learning’? In particular, how does the guidance material from Education Scotland construe and interpret the term? What kinds of change does it imply in classroom practice? Are such changes becoming evident through inspection findings or other evidence?
- Is interdisciplinary learning an important feature of CfE implementation? What are its perceived advantages? Do teachers feel that they have received satisfactory advice on this aspect of the programme?
- What differentiates good interdisciplinary learning from ‘a bit of this and a bit of that’? Have government and its agencies taken advantage of new ideas and activities developed elsewhere in relation to interdisciplinary learning?
- In what ways do teachers, parents and employers see skills, especially advanced cognitive skills, as being built into the programme? Do teachers feel they have received satisfactory advice?
- Has the increased emphasis on skills been at the expense of promoting knowledge? Does the programme strike an appropriate balance between knowledge, understanding and skills?
- Has CfE given priority to ‘learner voice’? Is this the same as personalisation? How does CfE build on the many attempts that have been made in the past to personalise the curriculum for individuals with less than encouraging results?
4. Managing the programme

- What would be the characteristics of a well-planned and managed programme of educational change? Has the CfE programme followed a clear strategy that has exhibited these characteristics?
- Has workload been well managed in the CfE programme? What aspects of the programme, if any, have given rise to difficulties?
- What have been the effects, both positive and negative, of assigning greater autonomy in the curriculum to local authorities, schools and teachers, and so resulting in much more variation in curriculum practice and structures across schools?
- The importance of partnerships is stressed in Curriculum for Excellence. Has partnership working been a significant factor in the development of the programme?
- How have changes outwith the planned CfE innovations impacted on implementation of CfE e.g. resourcing issues and policy imperatives within local authorities and the college sector?

The RSE hopes that the OECD will take the opportunity in its programme of visits and interviews to pose questions of this type. Only by following such a strategy will it be possible to gain an understanding of the contribution that Curriculum for Excellence has made to change within Scottish education over the past decade.