**CONTEXT The Scottish education system in context**

**Education policies**

Curriculum for Excellence

Curriculum for Excellence, introduced for its first phase of implementation in schools in 2010, caters for children aged 3 to 18 years, with what is commonly known in Scotland as Broad General Education (early learning, primary and lower-secondary levels) followed by the Senior Phase (three years of upper-secondary education). The philosophy of CfE is that of a future-oriented education, aiming to help students develop into successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors (referred to as the “four capacities”).

CfE defines curriculum as all the learning planned for children and young people from early learning and childcare, through school and beyond. Learning aims to be holistic and centred on the learner, and students are expected to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes inherent to the four capacities. The CfE framework encompasses four contexts for learning: eight curriculum areas, interdisciplinary learning, ethos and life of the school, and opportunities for personal achievements. CfE enables school communities to design their curriculum, and teachers are encouraged to teach in the way they esteem best suited to their students’ needs. The conception of teacher as curriculum developer was relatively new when first implemented in Scottish schools. Schools and local authorities were encouraged from the beginning to innovate and find local approaches to planning and delivering the curriculum within the framework provided centrally.

In 2015, an OECD review of Scotland’s Broad General Education concluded that CfE was a “watershed” moment for education in Scotland, widely supported and exemplified in some schools’ inspiring curriculum experience, but that it required ongoing efforts to turn it into a reality for all students in the system. At the time, the OECD review acknowledged that the foundations of CfE had been set, including curriculum building blocks, assessments and qualifications, and adjustments to teacher education, leadership and the support structure. The consensus around CfE was deeply rooted, and the teaching profession was progressively taking ownership. Challenges remained, however, including a lack of clarity in the nature of CfE (was it a curriculum or a reform package?) and a risk of adopting a “wait and see” approach that would hinder CfE and its development in schools. The review proposed a number of detailed recommendations. Those directly linked to CfE are summarised here (the detail can be found in the full report) (OECD, 2015[4]):

* To ensure equity and quality, develop metrics that do justice to the full range of CfE capacities informing a bold understanding of quality and equity.
* To strengthen decision making and governance, 1) create a new narrative for Curriculum for Excellence; 2) strengthen the professional leadership of CfE and the “middle”; and 3) simplify and clarify core guidance, including in the definitions of what constitutes Curriculum for Excellence.
* To enhance schooling, teaching and leadership, focus on the quality of implementation of CfE in schools and communities and make this an evaluation priority.
* To improve assessment and evaluation, strike a more even balance between the formative focus of assessment and developing a robust evidence base on learning outcomes and progression.

The Scottish Government received these recommendations and used them as input into further policy development of CfE. The main actions taken as a result are summarised below and are analysed to a larger extent in Chapters 2-5 of this report:

* The guidance framework for the BGE curriculum was updated (including the development of CfE Benchmarks and publication of a Statement for Practitioners in 2016), and a “refreshed curriculum narrative” was published in 2019 as a response to the call for a new CfE narrative and simplified guidance.
* National oversight and management arrangements for the curriculum framework were adjusted in 2018/19 in an attempt for more collaborative and systemic implementation.
* The quality and equity of CfE implementation in schools were made the focus of sampled inspection, and a number of tools, action plans and strategies were developed to enhance CfE implementation and to increase engagement in secondary schools.
* The Scottish Attainment Challenge was developed in 2015, and the National Improvement Framework in 2016 to promote and monitor equity and quality across the education system.

**Main education policies and priorities around Curriculum for Excellence**

**Getting it right for every child**

Getting it right for every child was introduced in 2006. It provides a framework for all professionals working with children and youth to enforce children’s rights and guarantee children’s well-being holistically and across services. The Scottish Government decided in 2019 that the best way to promote and embed GIRFEC further was in partnership with local delivery partners, through practical help, guidance and support, and not on a statutory basis. The Scottish Government is therefore refreshing GIRFEC policy with those partners and developing new practice guidance on the key components of GIRFEC. Along with CfE and Developing the Young Workforce: Scotland’s Youth Employment Strategy (DYW), GIRFEC is a pillar of Scotland’s commitment to inclusive education. GIRFEC policy has been undergoing revisions since 2019 (new guidance) to allow for more partnership work between local delivery partners and the Scottish Government.

**Early childhood care and education**

Realising the Ambition: Being Me was published in February 2020 as an update to national practice guidance for the ECEC sector (Building the Ambition, 2014 and Pre-birth to Three, 2010). The policy reflects CfE curriculum guidance for ECEC based on national and international research in early childhood. It provides pedagogy and practice guidance for practitioners working with young children, also in alignment with other policies (e.g. GIRFEC) (Scottish Government, 2021[5]).

**Scottish Attainment Challenge**

As part of the SNP’s programme for government in 2016, the First Minister set her government the mission “to close the poverty-related attainment gap between children and young people from the least and most disadvantaged communities.” The Scottish Attainment Challenge was developed to this end in 2015, with GBP 750 million over five years to support schools and local authorities in improving literacy, numeracy and health and well-being in a way that would “close the gap”. Following implementation of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, the Scottish Government provided some evidence of impact from several performance and evaluation reports published in 2019 (Scottish Government, 2021[5]):

**Developing the Young Workforce: Scotland’s Youth Employment Strategy**

In 2014, Developing the Young Workforce: Scotland’s Youth Employment Strategy set out to reduce youth unemployment levels by 40% by 2021. The strategy aims to create a work-relevant, school-based curriculum offer for young people in Scotland, informed by the needs of current and anticipated job markets. This includes embedding career education for children aged 3 to 18 years, offering formal careers advice at an earlier point in school, embedding employer engagement in education, creating new work-based learning offers and widening learner pathway options for young people in their Senior Phase. New learner pathway options include a wider apprenticeship offer for young people with Foundation Apprenticeships (SCQF Level 6) and Graduate Level Apprenticeships in place and Levels 4 and 5 in development. Implementation of DYW required schools to include the strategy as part of their curriculum development, thus creating direct links with CfE (Scottish Government, 2021[5]).

**Teacher policies**

A review of teacher education published in 2010 (Donaldson, 2010[25]) concluded that the two most important and achievable ways in which school education can realise the high aspirations Scotland has for its young people are supporting and strengthening the quality of teaching and leadership. The publication, Teaching Scotland's Future, highlighted the importance of sustained teacher professional learning and development in improving outcomes for young people. It also emphasised the importance of career pathways in supporting teacher recruitment and retention. The review led to wider recognition of the importance of quality professional learning and good educational leadership while providing a basis for professional update. It also reinforced the place of masters studies for teachers, increasingly common at all levels of the profession. A wide range of new forms of initial teacher education programmes also appeared in Scotland towards the end of the decade, aimed at helping to address recruitment challenges for teachers in priority subjects and the remote and rural areas of Scotland. Work to develop teacher career pathway models was conducted from 2017 to 2020. It was delayed by the COVID-19 crisis and implementation originally scheduled for August 2021 might also be delayed (Scottish Government, 2021[5]).

**Leadership**

The Scottish Government has prioritised developing teacher and school leadership in recent years, including developing a broader offer of professional learning and the new requirement for school leaders to hold the Standard for Headship, a new qualification. The mission to clarify and bring coherence to educational leadership in Scotland, previously held by the Scottish College for Education Leadership, was transferred to Education Scotland and its Professional Learning and Leadership Directorate in 2018. Education Scotland started an evaluation process to inform developments of the professional learning offer and committed to collaborating with Regional Improvement Collaboratives, local authorities and the Learning Directorate in this endeavour (Scottish Government, 2021[5]).

**New national courses and revised national qualifications**

The Scottish Qualifications Authority, in collaboration with stakeholders, designed new national qualifications in the attempt to align them with CfE and to support learners’ achievement in developing the four capacities and the skills for learning, life and work that underpin them. The new national courses and qualifications aim to provide high standards and a formal acknowledgement of learners’ achievements while ensuring at the same time continuity with the breadth and depth of learning sought at earlier levels of CfE. The new national courses were first introduced in 2013/14, then revised and implemented as the revised national qualifications between 2016 and 2019, following concerns that the new structure and practice of national courses resulted in an overload of assessment (Scottish Qualifications Authority, 2021[26]; Scottish Government, 2021[5]). The number of qualifications registered in the SCQF beyond those awarded by the SQA also grew due to the Scottish Government’s promotion of the diversification of possible pathways and qualifications for learners.

**The National Improvement Framework**

The National Improvement Framework was developed in 2016 with the ambition to “make Scotland ‘the best place to grow up and learn’” and to complement the existing pillars of the Scottish education system: CfE, GIRFEC and DYW. The NIF aims to structure a system and collaborative approach to educational improvement to pursue two key targets: achieving excellence through raising attainment and achieving equity by ensuring that all children have the same opportunity to succeed. The NIF sets out a holistic view of the education system, bringing together evidence and information from all levels and on all aspects that impact performance.

A new national data collection system provides additional information at the school, local and national level about children’s progress in literacy and numeracy, based on teachers’ assessment of progress. To support teachers in making judgements, the Scottish Government has introduced benchmarks for greater clarity on national standards as well as expanding opportunities for professional dialogue around standards through the Regional Improvement Collaboratives.

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