**TENSIONS: Tensions around Curriculum for Excellence that impact student learning**

This OECD assessment aims primarily to understand how CfE is implemented in BGE and the Senior Phase and to what extent it contributes to an education of quality for all young people in Scotland. As the scope of the assessment was agreed upon, a number of issues cutting across the Scottish education system were raised by the Scottish Parliament and Government, as well as by the OECD team. These issues arise from the need to find a balance between many parameters in Scotland’s complex education system and have implications for how CfE is implemented in the current policy context. The issues are reviewed below as part of the broader context and provide a useful backdrop for the analysis presented in the following chapters:

**Tensions found between local curriculum flexibility and the need for coherence to achieve system-wide objectives:** By design, CfE enshrines the principle of local curriculum flexibility since it gives schools the autonomy to design their own curriculum to best respond to students’ needs. CfE committed to school empowerment in a system already characterised by strong policy leadership from the centre and assertive local governments. At the same time, concerns arise in the public debate about whether the variability that inevitably characterises schools’ curricula effectively provides an excellent education for all learners or if it might increase educational inequalities. This also touches upon the issue of what level and kind of support schools might need to design curricula of high quality while respecting teachers’ and school leaders’ working time.

**Tensions in the understandings of breadth and depth of learning:** Opposed in the public debate, breadth and depth of learning seem not to have the same definition for the various stakeholders. Stakeholders interviewed by the OECD team tended to reflect this tension in the opposition between Broad General Education and Senior Phase, but the lack of clarity around the concepts poses many questions. For instance: does breadth refer to the number of subjects taken by students, and depth to the time allocated to each; or do they both refer to specific pedagogical approaches; are they exclusive or can they be complementary, and many more.

**Tensions in the conceptualisation of knowledge, skills and competencies:** Although CfE was developed to promote the acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes, the public debate as observed by the OECD team in Scotland throughout discussions tends to oppose knowledge and skills. Some also observed that while BGE was focused on the combination, the Senior Phase may still be focused on disciplinary knowledge (defined as subject-specific concepts and detailed content (OECD, 2019[29])). The OECD’s Future of Education and Skills 2030 project describes the integration of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values (integrations referred to as “competencies”) that enables students to perform in ill-defined environments, thus allowing them to navigate a fast-paced and uncertain world. The definition of competencies as integrative and with a broad performance orientation allows the debate to shift away from the traditional “knowledge versus skills” focus by acknowledging the importance of both in learning.

**Tensions between curriculum, student assessment and evaluation:** There is an apparent (mis)alignment between curriculum, assessment and evaluation policies, especially at the Senior Phase. This tension was raised throughout the meetings of the OECD team in Scotland as one of the key issues that needs to be reviewed for CfE to perform at its best. These policies have complex relationships across numerous education systems, requiring alignment in their design as well as their implementation (OECD, 2013[30]; Gouëdard et al., 2020[2]; OECD, 2020[31]).

Some of these tensions likely arose throughout the development and the ten years of implementing CfE due to a combination of the ambition of the policy and the principle of flexibility embedded in CfE. Yet, some of these are inherent in the design of CfE itself, as it allows for flexibility in the interpretation of the principles and actions to make CfE happen on the ground across Scotland.

These tensions may affect the learning experiences of students across the country. They may vary in terms of the curriculum, as teachers have great freedom and may be overloaded in terms of course choices in some places with much less offer in other regions. When learners move up to Senior Phase, they have different types of assessments in relation to the type of learning they are experiencing in Broad General Education. Finally, students may have challenges finding the right balance in developing their knowledge and broader competencies. To resolve these tensions, it is necessary for Scotland to pinpoint where it wants to be on each of these, for CfE to reach its full potential and allow Scottish education to offer an education of excellence to all its learners.

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1. **Curriculum for Excellence (CfE): The Complexity of Managing Change**

For two decades prior to the introduction of CfE, curriculum reform in Scotland had become increasingly centralist, with one commentator referring to the “new authoritarianism” of the 1980s (Gatherer, 1988) and others detecting an intensification of this trend when the National Guidelines for the 5-14 programme were introduced in 1993 (Roger and Hartley, 1990). Although these “guidelines” did not have the statutory force of the National Curriculum in England, introduced in 1988, they were treated as mandatory and teachers were encouraged to follow them without question. Objections that this would lead to a diminished teaching force, with staff becoming compliant technicians rather than thinking professionals, were disregarded. Against this background, the expectation that teachers could adopt a different mindset under CfE, contributing to the development of the programme and being given more scope for professional judgement, was decidedly optimistic. What was being asked was a complete change of culture, a transition that could not simply be willed. It would take time and would depend on the emergence of a climate of trust between policy makers and practitioners. It would also involve a challenge to traditional hierarchies and to previously uncontested notions of what “professionalism” entails.

The influence of supra-level discourses (national government, international organisations OECD, World Bank, EU) can be seen in the language of education policy, often exhibiting tensions between different discourses. On the one hand, policy emphasizes the necessity of ensuring a more skilled, flexible and competitive workforce, and the importance of leadership, targets, audits and accountability in driving improvements (Scottish Government, 2016). Running alongside this hard-edged managerial language is a softer form of discourse promoting professional autonomy, ownership and empowerment, designed to appeal to the teachers charged with the task of responding to the proposed reforms. Some of the tensions that can arise from the attempt to reconcile a neo-liberal culture of performativity with claims that new approaches open up the possibility of greater professional freedom.

1. **Policy Transmission: (Re-)interpretation and Resistance**

Critique of the proliferation of documentation (OECD 2015) prompted Education Scotland to remove many items from its website and issue a simplified Statement for Practitioners, highlighting the key messages and decrying unnecessary bureaucracy (Education Scotland, 2016). At this stage the government also published assessment benchmarks for each curriculum area, apparently in response to teacher demands for clearer guidance, but in effect introducing additional layers of complexity – a spiral of specification (Wolf, 1995) that has added thousands of new statements to the 1850 Experiences and Outcomes and done little to reduce the bureaucracy (see Priestley 2016). Moreover, interpretation of what is recommended is, to a significant extent, context dependent and subject to the personal philosophies of the recipients (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015). Thus, education officials in local authorities, for example, are likely to focus on the managerial requirements necessary to promote, disseminate and embed the reform programme, while classroom teachers may be more inclined to consider how compatible the new ideas are with their own professional philosophy. Messages are also subject to mutation as they move from one context to other. This helps to explain what is often referred to as the “implementation gap” between policy intention and classroom practice.

1. **The ICEA Report (2018)**

The ICEA produced an interim report in 2017 and a formal report in 2018. The 2017 report recommended improving pedagogy for specific subjects, unleashing untapped potential within the system and ensuring a culture of collaboration. The 2018 report reinforced the centrality of Curriculum for Excellence, describing it as “the cornerstone of educational transformation in Scotland” (ICEA, 2018, para. 6) and emphasising the need to retain its “vision and holistic approach” (ibid, para. 13). The report endorsed the shift from “coverage of defined subjects or areas” (ibid, para. 21) to a pedagogical approach which “sought to describe what young people should become as a result of their learning” (ibid, para. 21). This was a direct reference to the four capacities of CfE and perhaps implied that an over-emphasis on “successful learners” had led to insufficient attention being given to “confident individuals”, “effective contributors” and “responsible citizens”. Comparisons were drawn with similar reform programmes in other parts of the world and with the OECD’s 2030 project (ibid, para. 22). The ICEA report did not offer a detailed review of the extent to which CFE could be judged successful, but drew attention to the need to view curriculum change in relation to other policy initiatives, such as the National Improvement Framework (NIF) and Pupil Equity Funding (PEF), which sought to promote the twin aims of “excellence” and “equity”. The NIF is designed to bring about improvements in attainment, particularly in literacy and numeracy, while PEF provides additional resources to support disadvantaged children, as part of a strategy to reduce the poverty-related “attainment gap”. These initiatives have sometimes been described in terms of “delivering” improvements. The ICEA report cautions against the language of delivery and states that a “clear and consistent narrative of change” (ibid, para. 79) is needed: that narrative “should be founded on professional agency, empowerment, improvement, and change, and not premised on the technical terminology of delivery, reform and implementation” (ibid, para. 80). An analysis of the language of the report is interesting, not only for what it contains but also for what is largely absent. The economic drivers of educational reform hardly feature at all: the word “skills” appears four times, “market” three, “employability” two and “employment” one. Even “knowledge” (8) and “subjects” (4) are not strongly represented. These low figures can be contrasted with a group of terms that constitute the dominant narrative thread: “culture” (40), “capacity-building)” (31), “collaboration” (28), “empowerment” (22), “partnership” (10), “trust” (10) and “ownership” (10). This collection of terms suggests that there is a significant challenge for Scottish education to create the right professional climate for teachers to feel confident that they can function effectively as curriculum developers and change agents.

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