

# Progress with the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland

*Stakeholder seminar to discuss OECD preliminary draft  
findings*

*Confidential background document for discussion. Please do not distribute, cite  
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This document provides information on preliminary draft findings of the OECD's Assessment of the implementation of Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence for the purposes of helping inform a consultation seminar with stakeholders. The information presented relates to draft findings that are preliminary and may be adjusted prior to the publication of the final report, including as a result of the input received during the stakeholder seminar. This seminar forms part of the OECD's methodology and is intended to help inform its analysis and refine its conclusions and recommendations. The final report is expected for publication in June 2021 and will include the evidence to support its conclusions.

## Seminar agenda

**Date and time:** Tuesday 16 March 2021, 1:00 p.m. – 3:30 p.m. (GMT)

**Purpose:** The Scottish Government invited the OECD to assess the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) in order to better understand how the curriculum is being designed and implemented in schools and to identify areas for improvement across Scotland. This seminar is an opportunity to discuss the OECD's preliminary draft findings and recommendations with selected Scottish stakeholders. Seminar participants will include a wide range of CfE stakeholders, from national agencies and organisations to local authorities and school practitioners. Participants should note that the draft findings and recommendations set out in this document are preliminary and may be adjusted prior to the publication of the final report, including as a result of the input received during the stakeholder seminar.

Participants are invited to consider the preliminary draft findings and discuss how the preliminary draft recommendations might be taken forward. Participants' input will be taken into account in the preparation of the final report.

**Preparatory information:** a summary of preliminary draft findings and recommendations is provided at the end of this agenda.

### Agenda

UK time (p.m.)	Activity	
12:45-1:00	Signing up to the online event	
1:00-1:05	Welcome	Presentation of the agenda of the day by the OECD team
1:05-1:30	Preliminary draft findings and recommendations	Presentation by the OECD team
1:30-1:50	Question and Answers with the participants	
1:50-2:20	Working session #1	Group discussion about one of the preliminary draft OECD recommendations
2:30-3:00	Working session #2	Group discussion about one of the preliminary draft OECD recommendations
3:00-3:30	Plenary session and wrap-up	Groups report back to plenary OECD wrap-up

## Online seminar information

The event will be held on **16 March, from 1:00 to 3:30 p.m. (GMT)**. The online meeting room will open at 12:45 p.m. to allow participants to test equipment and connection. We kindly ask participants to join at 12:55 p.m. at the latest.

The event will be in English and take place online.

Before joining the meeting, please write your **first and last names** in the videoconference client. This is a closed meeting and no unidentified participant will be allowed to join.

Some useful information:

- A headset with microphone is recommended or an audio system with echo canceler
- A wired internet connection is recommended
- Please mute your microphone throughout the meeting, except when you wish to speak

**Personal Data protection, security and privacy:** The OECD processes personal data in accordance with its Personal Data Protection Rules: <https://www.oecd.org/general/data-protection.htm>

The OECD's configuration of the Zoom service reflects the following measures:

- Pre-registration, passwords, and the "waiting room" functions are enabled to prevent unauthorised access to the conference.
- Specific identity format for remote participants for easy control of each attendee in the Waiting Room before admitting them into the meeting.
- Only the host (OECD) or co-hosts can enable a recording on their local computers.
- No chats can be saved, and no private chats are permitted, except with the host or co-hosts.
- Participants enter the conference call muted and without video showing, unless and until they enable these features themselves.
- Avoid discussing any highly-sensitive matters. Do NOT share your personal invitation link.

## Progress with the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence: OECD preliminary draft findings and recommendations

Scope of the Curriculum for Excellence Assessment: The Scottish Government invited the OECD to assess the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) in order to understand how the curriculum is being designed and implemented in schools after ten years in practice. The OECD was also asked to identify what can be done for CfE to continue to deliver quality learning for all students across Scotland. This document includes a summary of the preliminary draft findings of the OECD's Assessment of the implementation of Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence to inform a consultation seminar with selected stakeholders.

### ***Curriculum for Excellence in context***

The progress of Scottish education, the evolution of its structure and performance, and the unexpected impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on society, the economy and education, provide a dynamic background to this OECD review. While Scotland's PISA results had been declining over the past 20 years, they remained stable between 2015 and 2018. New evidence from PISA 2018 also showed Scottish students were among the top performers in central 21<sup>st</sup>-century abilities, including their capacity to engage with people from different cultures, and to act for collective well-being and sustainable development. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds significantly improved their performance. Attainment and positive destinations of school leavers and other indicators linked to CfE also progressed in recent years.

Students are engaged in learning through Curriculum for Excellence, which started rolling out in schools in 2010. CfE aims to provide a holistic approach to learning, to develop knowledge, skills and attributes together to think critically and adapt to the future. Based on a common framework, schools and their teachers have the responsibility to design their own curriculum. The government introduced a range of policies and strategies to support schools, teachers, and the education system with CfE, and to drive system performance to higher levels. Ten years after its first implementation across schools, a range of issues have become apparent.

How do students experience CfE and their learning as they progress through the system? The analysis undertaken for this assessment reflects on how CfE has and can deliver the best possible learning experience to prepare students for their future by looking at CfE and its change approach. The OECD assessment focuses on CfE in broad general education and senior phase from an implementation perspective. The analysis was undertaken by a team of OECD analysts and external experts, following standard OECD methodology. This includes desk-based policy analysis, interviews with key stakeholders from across the Scottish education system, school visits, exchanges with a practitioner's forum, and comparative analysis based on research and relevant international practices. All visits and meetings have been occurring online due to COVID-19 related travel restrictions.

### ***A bold initiative requiring a focus on learners' journey***

CfE as a policy was a bold initiative in its inception that has progressed and reached school across Scotland. CfE's vision to achieve excellence for all students, embodied in the four capacities, is widely shared by stakeholders. Although initially developed in 2004, the vision remains relevant for its bold, future-oriented approach, and continues being an inspiring example equated with good practice internationally. Anecdotal evidence and international surveys point to some success in the impact CfE is having on learners' experiences, attitudes and results beyond literacy and numeracy, even if there is limited evaluation data at the level of Scotland's system. The success of school-based curriculum design results in a wide variety of practices between schools and classrooms, which is positive when it allows to respond to students' needs and ensure all can succeed: the attainment gap appears also to have somewhat

decreased over the last decade. Twenty years after CfE's vision was formulated, the progress made in curriculum research and further evolutions in education and societal issues offer opportunities to develop some of the vision's core elements, such as the role of knowledge in 21st century curricula.

CfE's complex framework works well in Broad General Education (for learners aged 3-15) and for learners taking advanced highers, where the concepts, pedagogical and learning approaches are coherent and the implemented school curriculum appears consistent with policy intentions. The OECD team observed that knowledge plays a key role in schools' curricula, and that adjustments are needed both in the CfE's concepts and their operationalisation to avoid ambiguity about the importance of knowledge as part of a 21st century curriculum framework. There is a need for more coherence between the structure, learning practices and assessment approaches in the Senior Phase to be consistent with CfE's vision and to allow for the smooth curriculum experience promised to learners from age 3 until the age of 18. Fundamental issues in the design of CfE for this phase need addressing around the balance between breadth and depth of learning, their link to student choice, and the alignment with student assessment for qualifications.

Teachers are well-trained and respected professionals in Scotland, and school leaders have developed strong pedagogical leadership capacities. In general, both teacher and school leaders are committed to varied teaching approaches for student learning and have proven their ability to develop schools' own curriculum with some examples of excellent practice. Curriculum design and continuous improvement in teaching and pedagogical leadership requires time and professional investment, which schools can only develop with continuous support from the system.

### ***Towards a shared ownership of CfE***

Stakeholder engagement is at the heart of Curriculum for Excellence. Significant efforts were made to engage stakeholders throughout CfE's lifecycle, which contributed to wide support for CfE as a direction of travel for Scottish education. Consultation and collaboration are at the core of CfE processes, as much in policy design as in curriculum planning, development and enactment. There seems to be a gap, however, between stakeholders' intense involvement, and the impact of these views on effective enhancements to CfE implementation. Learners' input in particular does not appear to be taken enough into account in decision-making, although Scotland is committed to consulting its youth. More generally, greater clarity is needed in the purpose of stakeholder engagement initiatives around CfE, and consistency in the use of stakeholders' input.

The great degree of stakeholder involvement around CfE created the conditions for shared ownership and wide support of CfE's vision. Stakeholders agree that schools and the profession should hold responsibility for conception, implementation and outcomes of their own curricula, provided the rest of the system fulfil their own responsibilities to support schools and the profession within a clear policy framework. At the same time, CfE ownership was most often described as fragmented, with many owners lacking clarity about their responsibilities. Transparency in the division of responsibilities among stakeholders is a necessary condition for policy success, in a system that promotes shared responsibility of its curriculum.

Scotland successfully developed an education language to support the philosophy of CfE that made its way into daily discussions of education policy makers, teachers and learners alike thanks to efforts of communication by system leaders. CfE allows for flexibility in school curricula, so it was pivotal to ensure a shared understanding of CfE's vision and policy objectives. However, the constant production and recycling of documentation was often described as "overwhelming" by practitioners, and the terminology used was deemed too technical and lending itself to too much interpretation.

### ***Continued efforts towards alignment***

The originality of CfE at the time of its development continues to influence international curriculum policy. Affording autonomy at school level within a central framework, an innovation carried by CfE at the turn of

the millennium, is now widely used as a curriculum design principle. Scotland made great progress in developing and supporting teachers' capacity to be curriculum makers, and the capacity of school leaders to lead the process of curriculum in their schools. This work has become more challenging for schools given the need to respond to multiple new initiatives at local and national level. A tension exist between Scotland's comparatively high rate of teachers' class contact time and the expectations for teachers to lead and plan curriculum locally.

Other education policies were developed to build a coherent system around the innovative philosophy brought by CfE: a pillar for what and how children learn (CfE), a pillar to support children's wellbeing (GIRFEC) and a pillar to support young people into meaningful work (Developing the Young Workforce, DYW). Additional initiatives were introduced such as the Scottish Attainment Challenge in 2015, the National Improvement Framework (NIF) in 2016, the Regional Improvement Collaboratives (RICs) in 2017, and the Joint Agreement on an Empowered System in 2019. Work remains on getting the policies in place that ensure the right balance between CfE autonomy and equity for students, and on aligning and simplifying the many frameworks and strategies for schools.

Early policy developments around CfE promised to align student assessment, qualification practices and system evaluation to the philosophy of CfE. The comprehensive framework for assessment designed in 2010 was hailed around the world as an exemplar with a clear focus on the centrality of the learner, and new tools such as the low-stakes SNSA and revised national courses for qualifications were developed. In spite of attempts to reform qualifications, misalignment between the aspirations of CfE and the system of qualifications has become a barrier to the implementation of CfE in secondary education. In addition, the data generated by current system monitoring tools seems limited to fully support CfE's ambitions.

Education is traditionally a source of pride in Scotland, which shows in the broad commitment to CfE and educational excellence for all. It has been granted great importance in the political debate to a degree that would be the envy of many a system. This importance has sometimes translated into a busy system at risk of policy and institutional overload. The centrality of education in the political debate allied with the absence of an identified cycle of policy review result in a reactive and oftentimes political approach, which is not the most efficient way to addressing issues with CfE and its implementation.

### ***An implementation approach that requires a long-term perspective***

The implementation of CfE has followed a particular path to change, without a long-term strategy. The Curriculum and Assessment Board and its predecessor provided a venue to engage many stakeholders, get input and feedback and develop shared agreements on progress and challenges. It allowed for responsiveness to the challenges raised regarding CfE implementation. A lack of a clearly structured implementation strategy gave schools and local authorities significant freedom and autonomy to design and shape CfE's developments, possibly building capacity on the ground. Efforts were made to communicate about CfE and its developments, but in an adhoc manner involving many documents, reports, supporting materials, without a clear sequence of events. There has not been a simple approach to look forward and plan CfE's developments with a longer term perspective.

### **Considerations for next steps in the implementation of CfE focused on students**

Scotland has been successful in implementing CfE across schools, especially up to BGE. CfE is well known by all those interviewed and well supported, and has been developed and improved through a co-design process. While they cannot be attributed directly to the latest reforms, results in global competences of 15-year-old students in PISA could be related to CfE and its broader concepts included in the four capacities. The NIF also shows progress in recent years in a number of indicators related to CfE. CfE reflects a strong curriculum policy, that has given education professionals agency to shape it and enact it in order to adapt to schools' and students' needs. With the first student cohorts having completed their education through

the lens of CfE, and the experience gained, it is a good opportunity to review practice. It is common across high-performing education systems to review curriculum regularly, just like Japan and Finland do every ten years. We suggest to focus on students' learning experiences and trajectories to define the next steps of CfE's implementation.

### **1. Balance CfE for students to fully benefit from a coherent learning experience from 3-18**

Ten years following the beginning of CfE's implementation, some action should be taken to rebalance CfE for students to have a consistent learning experience from 3 to 18 years old. The OECD team suggests:

- Revisiting CfE's aspirational vision in meaning and practice
- Finding a better balance between breadth and depth of learning throughout CfE
- Adapting the Senior phase to match CfE's vision
- Continuing to build curricular capacity at various levels of the system using research

### **2. Combine effective collaboration with clear roles and responsibilities**

In order to sustain CfE's commitment to stakeholder engagement and to fulfil its potential, action could be taken to combine effective collaboration around CfE with clear roles and responsibilities. The OECD team suggests:

- Ensuring stable, purposeful and impactful stakeholder involvement with CfE
- Revising the division of responsibilities for CfE
- Structuring a coherent communication strategy to support the vision of CfE

### **3. Consolidate institutional policy processes for effective change**

Action should be taken to consolidate the institutional policy processes around CfE and continue translating its philosophy throughout the education system. The OECD team suggests:

- Providing dedicated time to lead, plan and support CfE at school level
- Simplifying key policies and institutions for clarity and coherence with CfE
- Aligning qualifications, system evaluation and curriculum to deliver on the commitment of Building the Curriculum 5
- Developing a systematic approach to curriculum review

### **4. Lead the next steps of CfE with a long-term focus**

Leading the next steps of CfE implementation with a long-term focus will help reinforce the policy's internal coherence (its design) and its external coherence with other education policies. Paired with a collaborative ownership of the policy, it will support better the sustainability of Curriculum for Excellence. The OECD team suggests:

- Adopting a structured and long-term approach to implementation.