

SQA Fact Check of draft OECD Report ‘The Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland: an implementation assessment’ dated 31 January 2021

Overview and general comments

In many respects the report is a thorough and comprehensive analysis of the implementation of CfE and all stakeholders will recognise many of the issues. We welcome the acknowledgement of the importance of qualifications in the senior phase as outlined in Building the Curriculum 5.

The report recognises the need to ensure learners have credible and recognised qualifications that provide suitable progression pathways into Further and Higher education and into employment. It also helpfully highlights the increasingly diverse range of pathways and qualifications available to learners in Scotland.

However, we have significant concerns about some key elements of the report and the evidence and analysis that underpins it. These are noted below.

At this stage we would also observe that, as a key stakeholder in the review, SQA was afforded only a very limited opportunity for engagement with the review team, a total of 70 minutes for a very general discussion. We were not offered the opportunity for an in-depth discussion of the issues relating to qualifications and assessments that are such a prominent part of the report’s findings.

Also, at a procedural level, we are unclear about this review and the further review of assessment and qualifications that is in its early stages. It is our understanding that this new review will allow the OECD, with some further specialist assessment input, to consider the issues relating specifically to qualifications and assessments, and with a stronger evidence base. The commentary within the current draft report is used as the basis for wide-ranging recommendations which provide a very unhelpful and pre-emptive context for this further work. Given the further review of assessment and qualifications, recommendations on assessment and qualifications are premature. That is the time to consider these issues, including the need for any changes.

Our more detailed comments are set out below. Specific points of factual accuracy are noted using tracked changes in the version of the draft report that is also attached.

Design, development and history of qualifications and their assessments and consequences for their alignment with the CfE Vision

The report focusses heavily on the current design of the National Courses and does not adequately evidence the design journey these qualifications have taken or offer any understanding of the reasons why they are the way they are today. This is a critical point in view of the report’s adoption as one of its key themes the view that: *‘...there does not appear to be yet a successful alignment of qualifications and exams in Senior Phase with the CfE vision’ (p.40)*. This assertion is repeated in slightly different forms a number of times across the report. It is also used as the basis for a number of recommendations including organisational reform.

For example, (p.45) there is an assertion that practice in the Senior Phase seems to be different than from the original aims. *‘This gap between the intended curriculum (in formal policy) and the implemented curriculum in (school and classroom) practices seems already to have its roots at the stage of initial curriculum design, where efforts to translate the visionary ideals into qualifications (and related course*

documents and assessment tools) have not been fully successful, watering down and compromising many initial ideals’.

As context for its commentary on qualifications and their assessments and given the central place of this theme across the report, the report could helpfully include a summary of the key design features of the new National Qualifications. It should also trace some of the key changes that have been made to the qualifications since their introduction together with the reasons for and consequences of these changes. This history is critical to an understanding of the reasons why the qualifications are as the OECD found them but it is not covered in the report. The development of the new qualifications was closely aligned with the development of CfE and SQA can evidence this. Subsequent decisions have served to weaken that alignment.

National Courses were, for example, originally designed as internally assessed unit-based courses with an external course assessment at National 5 to Advanced Higher. National 4 was broadly aligned to curriculum level 4 to allow smooth transition from the BGE to the senior phase qualifications. Each National Course clearly linked to the values, principles and purpose of CfE. This alignment was present in every course specification to support teachers to understand how learners could progress through levels. Courses were designed in hierarchies to support multi-level teaching and allow learners to progress at their own pace. In 2017, as a result of a policy decision, units were removed from National Courses from National 5 to Advanced Higher essentially making these linear qualifications with a combination of examinations and coursework. Internal unit assessment was removed at this time. This policy decision to remove units undoubtedly weakened the alignment between the qualifications and CfE.

Further to this, a rationalisation of course material (to streamline and make them easier for schools and colleges to use) also saw explicit links to the CfE values, principles and purposes removed from course specifications. This was a response to feedback indicated that statements around CfE were unnecessary duplication within course materials. Although the explicit statements were removed, the CfE values, principles and purposes remain implicit in all courses. It would appear that the report reflects only on the current design and content of the National Courses and does not adequately reflect on the original design, whilst asserting (based on the current position) that National Courses were never fully aligned, which is not the case.

Simplified presentation of approaches to assessment

The report refers throughout to Senior Phase course assessments as ‘examinations’ and/or ‘tests’, which simplifies the assessment approaches used within them. For example (p.45), *‘The Senior Phase, and especially the higher courses do not appear to be in line with CfE intentions in aims, contents, pedagogy and assessment. Its value needs to be assessed and choices made in relation to what is best for students to be prepared for their future rather than existing inertias. At present, as the current tests in Senior Phase are the only way to externally assess what students are learning, these are the incentives that lead the focus of Senior Phase.’*

For all except Mathematics and Latin, assessments for Graded National Courses are a combination of examinations and coursework components, not simply ‘examinations’ or ‘tests’. The course assessments have been designed specifically to encourage a combination of breadth, challenge and application, whilst offering some degree of personalisation and choice. The report could helpfully illustrate the range of assessment approaches adopted across Graded National Courses and the wider range of qualifications developed to support the principles of CfE.

SQA's role

The report refers to SQA increasing its number of qualifications and implies that this is directly in conflict with tension between curriculum freedom in schools which is resulting in increasing curriculum variety. *'However, we notice also reports about the tension between curricular freedom of schools (resulting in increasing variety), whilst qualifications remain to be determined by a national agency that is also increasing its own number of qualifications (SQA)' (p.45).*

This requires to be clarified – as Scotland's National Awarding body it is SQA's role to provide qualifications that fit the needs of Scotland and support the Scottish Government's policy aim of increasing the choices available to young people. Many of the new qualifications developed by SQA have been created explicitly to increase the choices available to young people, including and in particular in their approaches to assessment. In view of its emphasis on 'examinations' and 'tests' elsewhere, the report could usefully recognise this point. Elsewhere the report makes a positive reference to the range of qualifications available increasing and this risks sending a mixed message.

Schools and colleges are also free to – and increasingly do – use qualifications from other awarding bodies other than SQA. SQA has no role in the decisions centres make in this respect. The SCQF, of which SQA was a founding partner, is an increasingly effective enabler in supporting centres in their choice of qualifications.

Also in relation to SQA's role, reference is made to the production of guidance as *'expanding SQA's role'* (p.65). SQA has always provided guidance on the delivery and assessment of its courses. Assessment guidance is a core aspect of its provision to support teachers to understand the mandatory aspects that will be assessed in the course. Guidance on learning and teaching has always been provided as an optional resource to support a greater understanding of the National Standard. This provision did not expand SQA's role, it is an integral part of SQA's product surround.

Impact on qualifications and assessments on teaching and learning practice

There is an assertion in a number of statements relating to qualifications and their assessments that the intended purpose and design of the senior phase qualifications has directly affected the way the senior phase has been implemented within schools – that the design was unsuccessful and that the design has directly affected practice, but there is little evidence to support this. There is also a suggestion on p.79 that those involved in development of the new qualifications and assessments deliberately set out to undermine the principles of CfE. This, even as a suggestion, is unhelpful without evidence to support it.

Further, the report includes an assertion (p.96) that points to a link between the design of the senior phase curriculum and assessments driving teacher practice, ultimately indicating that it is the qualifications that need to be redesigned to improve practice. *'CfE has worthwhile ideals and its implementation is still progressing, but the coherence of CfE enactment is less consistent in the Senior Phase (for learners aged 15-18), where fundamental challenges exist for curriculum and subsequent assessment redesign. Without taking up this task, the practices in senior secondary will keep lagging behind in essential curriculum components (aims, pedagogy and assessment), and will also exercise a counterproductive influence on Broad General Education.'*

This message is repeated again (p.99) *'The approach to student assessment in the classroom will not change in the Senior Phase unless the approach to qualifications is fully aligned to match CfE ambitions'*. This indicates that redesign of assessments will bring about changed practice in delivery – these two areas are not inextricably linked as can be evidenced from the removal of unit assessment. In addition, one of the core principles of CfE was that assessment in the senior phase qualifications should not drive

learning and teaching. On this basis, it seems optimistic to expect that a redesign of assessments will in itself result directly in a positive impact on learning and teaching. It is also unclear what is meant by 'student assessment in the classroom' given that National 5 to Advanced Higher Courses are linear in nature with no internal assessment, other than formative.

Limited evidence and analysis

As the report stands, it often reads as a commentary of views, without sufficient consideration of the evidence or discussion with this commentary. This is particularly true of references to the limited alignment between qualifications and assessments and the principles of CfE. For example p.40 includes the assertion that: *'...there does not appear to be yet a successful alignment of qualifications and exams in Senior Phase with the CfE vision. This is not only challenging for the Senior Phase itself, but also causing a backwash into the later stages of BGE and even the primary sector.'* There is no evidence to support this statement, particularly the reference to the primary sector, and others of a similar nature made in the report. If, in this statement and elsewhere in the report, it is reporting the views of stakeholders without necessarily having supporting evidence, this should be made clear.

SQA

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