



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 28 September 2016

Session 5



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Wednesday 28 September 2016

CONTENTS

	Col.
DECISION ON TAKING BUSINESS IN PRIVATE	1
CURRICULUM FOR EXCELLENCE	2

EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

6th Meeting 2016, Session 5

CONVENER

*James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)

*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

*Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)

*Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP)

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)

*Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)

*Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD)

*Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*Ross Thomson (North East Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Keir Bloomer (Royal Society of Edinburgh)

Dr Janet Brown (Scottish Qualifications Authority)

Ann Grant (Shawlands Academy)

Susan Quinn (Educational Institute of Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Roz Thomson

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 28 September 2016

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:46]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (James Dornan): Good morning and welcome to the sixth meeting of the Education and Skills Committee in this session of Parliament. I remind everyone present to turn mobile phones and other devices to silent mode for the duration of the meeting. Apologies have been received from Johann Lamont, who is unwell, and Fulton MacGregor, who is unable to attend.

Agenda item 1 is consideration of whether to take in private item 4, under which the committee will discuss its approach to scrutiny of a legislative consent memorandum. Does the committee agree to take item 4 in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Curriculum for Excellence

09:46

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is a panel on curriculum for excellence. This is the fifth of six panels providing an overview of key areas of the committee's remit, and these evidence sessions will inform consideration of our priorities for the parliamentary session.

I welcome Keir Bloomer, convener of the education committee of the Royal Society of Edinburgh; Dr Janet Brown, chief executive of the Scottish Qualifications Authority; Ann Grant, headteacher at Shawlands academy; and Susan Quinn, education committee convener at the Educational Institute of Scotland. I understand that Mr Bloomer may at times comment in a personal capacity or as a member of the Reform Scotland advisory board. Whenever you feel it necessary, Mr Bloomer, please clarify what capacity you are speaking in. That will make things simpler for the committee.

We will go straight to questions, and I will begin with a question for the whole panel. To what degree have the original intentions of the reforms been met?

Susan Quinn (Educational Institute of Scotland): The evidence shows that, to some extent, the original intentions of curriculum for excellence have been taken forward. Considerations around changes to pedagogical approaches within the broad general education, particularly in the early years and the primary sector, have been clearly developed over the years. Aspects with regard to the four capacities form a great focus for the work of schools and establishments and how they assess and report on young people in those areas.

However, reports from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and others suggest that areas of evaluation, through Education Scotland and even within our own membership, and aspects of the original principles have not been met. The move to less formal assessment for young people has not, in our opinion, been realised across all the sectors, and there are still assessment burdens within the BGE and in the qualification stages. We also still see some issues with the overcrowding of the curriculum, although one of the original intentions was to consider how the curriculum could be decluttered in terms of what was there from five to 14. There are merits to what of the original intentions has been taken forward, but specifics still need to be worked on in order to realise the full original aims.

The Convener: Can you give any reasons for any move away from the original objectives?

Susan Quinn: I do not think that there has been a move away from the original objectives; it is just that what was intended was not realised. Overassessment came about because the Es and Os were being assessed on an individual basis in some establishments in the primary sector or were becoming a tick-box exercise in relation to assessment for the national qualifications. Challenges with regard to the unit assessments have been aired in the committee's papers and were considered by the national review group.

The approach to assessment has not been rounded off. The aim was that teachers would use their professional judgment, but we have not seen that backed up by other aspects of the approach. People said, "This is about teachers' professional judgment, but we want that backed up by standardised tests and more paperwork, to ensure that we have the evidence that those judgments are being made."

In the primary sector, guidance on curriculum architecture has not been strong enough to enable curricular areas to be developed in a way that makes the curriculum less crowded. In the primary sector, for example, a range of worthwhile approaches to the curriculum has been developed in schools, such as focus weeks on green issues, literacy, numeracy, financial education and so on, but there has been no joining of the dots about how that looks over a 25-pupil-hours week and a 39-pupil-weeks year.

On the BGE, the issue is whether there is an understanding of a curriculum architecture that enables the worthwhile approaches to education that have been developed to sit in a structure that does not mean that people just jump from one thing to the next and do not get the depth and balance that we want.

The Convener: Thank you.

Ann Grant (Shawlands Academy): Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak to the committee. I can speak only on behalf of my school; I cannot speak for secondary education in general.

I am an optimist, and I am positive about what is happening in curriculum for excellence, which has given the profession the opportunity to look carefully at the curriculum. The idea of progression from three to 18 is positive, and the setting out of the four capacities has provided a strong and clear statement for the profession. The emphasis on pedagogy has also been important. The OECD has said:

"CfE is at a 'watershed' moment",

and I think that people in Scottish education have a chance to take education forward, building on what has happened so far.

I agree that there are issues that needed to be looked at, such as assessment. In Shawlands, we tried to ensure that we looked at the Es and Os when we were planning, but I do not think that we did that as a way of assessing pupils; perhaps the approach has been different in the secondary sector. However, the assessment burden was an issue, and I am delighted that that has been looked at. I think that the new approach will make a significant difference.

As I have said, I am an optimist, and I think that this is a good time in Scottish education.

Dr Janet Brown (Scottish Qualifications Authority): One of the challenges of curriculum for excellence is that change takes a long time to bed in. Teachers have done a really good job in understanding the nature of what CFE is trying to achieve, part of which is the depth and breadth of learning that has already been mentioned.

The challenge is to consider what we are trying to achieve in education. There are milestones that individuals hit, such as the qualifications in the senior phase, but what is critical is the individual's learning and growth as they approach a qualification. Depth of learning is very important. It is not just about jumping through the hoop of getting a qualification, but about the ability to apply knowledge in different contexts, and that has started to really come through in some of the last diet.

Contextualisation of learning is another issue for CFE. The teachers in the room are probably better able to talk about this than I am, but learners learn better if they are interested and excited by the context in which they are learning. Curriculum for excellence really gives us that. One of the things that we continue to develop across the system is the ability to put learning into a context that excites the individual. If kids learn about angular momentum with a pendulum, they get bored, but if they learn about it in a racing car or some different context, they get interested. Such an approach is possible and is being done across CFE. That is very positive.

Associated with that is the idea of personalisation and choice not just in how a pupil learns something, but in what they learn. In the set of qualification structures that we have run over the last three years, we have seen an increase in personalisation and choice. When we first began, we provided some examples of how people could teach particular things in the national courses, and a lot of teachers used them. For instance, in general, everyone used the wind farm to teach environmental science. As teachers become more

confident and comfortable, they are starting to use different contexts, which will lead to personalisation and generate excitement for the students.

CFE has also been about broadening the curriculum, which means focusing not just on the national qualifications—national 4, national 5, highers and advanced highers. That is a cultural shift that the country needs to go through; it is not just about what happens in schools but about what parents expect their children to be doing. The fact that we are starting to see a bit more take-up of the other aspects of learning within the school is positive.

There are many different goals associated with CFE. We are well on the way to achieving some of them; with some, we know what we need to do to get there, and we are reassessing others. Assessing is an appropriate term to use. As the committee is aware, we did some work at the end of last year and the beginning of this year on how the qualifications had worked and the role of assessment, and we identified that the unit assessments were causing issues in schools and took action to address that. As has been said, the Deputy First Minister has decided to remove unit assessments, which should free up some time for additional teaching and learning in the courses. However, it is really important that the courses are given the appropriate amount of time to allow students to learn. Time is a real issue with regard to depth and breadth of learning.

We are on a good journey. We have made a lot of progress and continue to do so.

Keir Bloomer (Royal Society of Edinburgh): Strictly speaking, none of us can answer your question, convener.

The Convener: Thank you for that.

Keir Bloomer: We do not know what progress has been made because no serious attempt has been made to evaluate it. We are talking about the most significant development in Scottish education since the war, but no system for evaluation was set up at the outset; we do not even have a baseline upon which to make comparisons. That is a serious shortcoming. One of the things that the RSE has consistently argued for is proper independent research and evaluation of what is going on.

Successive Governments have claimed success in relation to curriculum for excellence, but those claims are based on no evidence whatever. We all have impressions, and indeed, the OECD report backs up those impressions by saying a lot of positive things about curriculum for excellence and putting it—quite rightly—in the main stream of global educational developments. The report points to things that have taken place in the

context of curriculum for excellence that are very positive. That said—and I do not disagree with my colleagues on any of the positives that they have mentioned—it is important to stress that the supporting evidence is simply not there.

10:00

What we can say with some degree of confidence is that there has been significant change in pedagogy and a greater emphasis on depth of learning. Although that is extremely important, as Susan Quinn pointed out, the flipside of that has not taken place. It is not really possible to get depth of learning unless the time and space are made available for it, and that is dependent on curriculum for excellence's original intention to declutter.

We have not been successful in decluttering—and if members would like some evidence of that, I refer them to page 44 of the OECD report. The OECD examined all the guidance that has been issued in relation to curriculum for excellence and found that it contained four capacities, 12 attributes, 24 capabilities, five levels, seven principles, six entitlements, 10 aims, eight curriculum areas, four contexts for learning and 1,820 experiences and outcomes. That is self-evident lunacy. Over the years, we have allowed mountains of guidance to accumulate, much of which is very badly written and nearly incomprehensible, and that now stands in the way of decluttering the curriculum. I am pleased that the cabinet secretary is determined to do something about that. It is slightly unfortunate that the most recent attempt to do something about it has resulted in the issuing of a further 99 pages of guidance, but it would be nice to think that the next attempt will be more successful than that one.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I would like to pick up on that point. How did we end up in a scenario in which so many different pieces of jargon have to be used in trying to assess curriculum for excellence? How did that happen?

Keir Bloomer: That is a very good and important question. In reviewing what has happened in the 12 years since the original curriculum for excellence document was produced, I think that some political mistakes have been made, but most of the mistakes have been made by the leadership of the profession. The quality of advice that Governments have received has not been strong, and there has been a lack of strategic overview of the process as a whole, with the result that guidance has multiplied. The overall consequence of that has been to obscure rather than to illuminate.

Liz Smith: You mention in your submission that you feel that there are issues with the delivery plan

for Education Scotland in relation to staffing, capacity, capability and resources. You go on to say:

“It will need to demonstrate an increased willingness to consult widely within the profession and to take proper account of comment received.”

I should have said that the submission is from the Royal Society of Edinburgh rather than from you personally, but can you comment on that?

Keir Bloomer: Certainly. In general, the RSE welcomes the delivery plan; there are only one or two things in it with which we disagree. However, we are concerned about its manageability. I tried to count up the actions in it, and I came to 117. I think that a delivery plan with 117 separate actions in it is in danger of becoming unmanageable. If that is combined with the plan’s very demanding timescales, I think that it will be extremely difficult to take the profession along with all aspects of it. Therefore, there are some difficulties with the plan.

A large proportion of the actions fall to be carried out by Education Scotland. One thing that has concerned me in the past few weeks has been the choice of Education Scotland—or rather, the inspectorate part of it—to look at bureaucracy and unnecessary workload. To be fair, it was asked to do that by the cabinet secretary; it did not take on the role itself. Had it done so, that would have been a grotesque impertinence, given its responsibility for much of the unnecessary workload and the unnecessary documentation that are involved in curriculum for excellence. If it is to be involved in slimming things down and taking forward the many actions in the delivery plan, serious capacity issues must be addressed. In addition, something of a reprogramming exercise will have to be undertaken.

Liz Smith: I will finish my initial questions with a question for Ann Grant. Do you as a headteacher feel that your staff have been compromised in trying to deliver the curriculum for excellence because of the number of things that they are asked to do, the jargon that goes with it and the difficulty of interpreting outcomes and experiences?

Ann Grant: There is jargon in any profession, and my staff are used to the jargon of curriculum of excellence. I certainly hope that they are, because it is my job to make sure that they are. However, there is a recognition nationally that a lot of information has been given out. A lot of that has been well meant and helpful in its intention, but I am, I have to admit, pleased to note that the new Education Scotland website will have four pathways, which should make the accessing of resources and information much more manageable. Within that, there will be a specific pathway for staff, which will contain slimmed-down information. One issue has been that information

has been added to without other information being taken away, and the new process will make things much more meaningful.

Every day, the teachers in my school are delivering education and delivering for young people. Our focus has been very much on making sure that what happens in the classroom in terms of learning and teaching is of the best quality. I have seen it as my job as headteacher to filter the information to staff. As an employee of Glasgow City Council, I listen to what Glasgow says; as a teacher in Scottish education, I listen to what is happening nationally. It is also my job to ensure that in my school we agree and focus on our priorities.

As I have said, it has been my job to filter the information and ensure that people are aware of things. My staff are not here to say so, but I hope that they feel comfortable with the tasks that they have been asked to do. As I have said, the fact that the website will be slimmed down can be only a good thing.

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): Has the information on curriculum for excellence that has come from the centre come from Education Scotland or from your local education authority?

Ann Grant: Again, I say that I am very comfortable with the information that we get from both Education Scotland and Glasgow City Council.

Glasgow City Council obviously works within its parameters. When we do an improvement plan, we follow Glasgow City Council policies, which it sets within the national context. We respond to Glasgow City Council and we respond nationally. Glasgow City Council filters information in the same way that I do.

Tavish Scott: You made a very clear point about having to do all the filtering, but curriculum for excellence information has to come from somewhere. Does it come from Education Scotland, as Keir Bloomer suggested?

Ann Grant: I think that it does; that is a fair statement. However, the profession has been engaged in a dialogue. I genuinely believe that teachers have been empowered to discuss learning and teaching issues. They have that capability, and in the council in which I work I have a certain degree of autonomy and am able to organise what we need to do to ensure that we deliver the best for young people.

Tavish Scott: I want to ask Keir Bloomer—

The Convener: Susan Quinn wants to come in.

Susan Quinn: It is important to reflect on where we were before CFE. Before CFE, teachers were told what to do and, in the national debate, they

reported that what they were instructed to deliver on was almost robotic. We tried to reprofessionalise teachers and bring them into the conversation, so that they could make professional judgments in the context in which their young people were learning. Over time, advice notes and documents have come to Education Scotland and the CFE management board, in which all the stakeholders are engaged, and those have added to the advice for teachers and the responses to questions that have been asked by the profession and others. Ann Grant is right—sometimes information has not been removed to avoid duplication in the conversation.

It is then about how that information is delivered locally by a local authority—that is the challenge around the advice that is given. We know that some local authorities took a very firm approach and said, “We’re all going to do the same tracking system and the same reporting system,” which meant that we were back where we started, with schools being told what things should look like for their young people, regardless of context. In other local authorities, the local authority input has not been helpful because the attitude has been, “It’s there—design your own things”.

We suggest that there is probably a happy medium somewhere in the middle where supportive advice is given locally to ensure that curriculum design, assessment, moderation, tracking and reporting are done in a way that meets the needs of the establishments, the parents and the young people. The challenge is how to do that.

If I take, for instance, the Es and Os and where we are now—

Tavish Scott: For the record, you should maybe say what the Es and Os are, because it is all jargon.

Susan Quinn: Sorry. They are experiences and outcomes—the building blocks of each curricular area.

Tavish Scott: We are all meant to know this, but—

Susan Quinn: I appreciate that each time we give evidence, we come before different committees.

When the experiences and outcomes were introduced, they needed to be the way that they were for people who took the five-to-14 book and just went through it. We needed that shift and then we needed to develop things and get more structure around them.

Part of the problem is that when CFE started out, we were in a different climate in education in terms of finances and so on, so a bit more time and space could be created. For example, I was

able to create professional learning opportunities for teachers because there were enough staff and I could free up time. That time and space is not as readily available now, which makes CFE more challenging to take forward.

Education Scotland has responded by looking at how the Es and Os have been interpreted. It has looked at the significant aspects of learning, which has taken things a wee bit further forward and maybe given more clarity around assessment and the work that is done in schools.

I think that the answer to your question is probably that there is a bit too much information from everybody. There are lots of different things in lots of different places, and consistency is an issue. Some of our members report that they are being instructed too much locally, whereas other members report that they are not getting enough support. It is a balancing act.

In relation to where we are now, the key issue is how we create the time and space to review what is happening, whether locally in an establishment, in a local authority, or nationally. We need to work out where we are in terms of CFE and how to make sure that the BGE—sorry; that stands for broad general education—is delivered in line with the initial intentions. That relates to where people are from the ages of three to 15, before we get into the qualification stages. We have major concerns about the extent to which that has been delivered, how far it has gone and its disappearance as people get to the secondary stages and become more focused on qualifications.

Tavish Scott: That sounds fair to me.

I have a supplementary for Mr Bloomer in the context of Liz Smith’s questions. In its submission the Royal Society of Edinburgh suggests that it is incompatible for Education Scotland to have the inspection function alongside all the responsibility for guidance that the witnesses have described. The logic is that that should change in the future—as the OECD, in my view, hints at.

Keir Bloomer: Yes. That is a fundamental and irreconcilable conflict of interest that is built into the organisation. That is not the organisation’s fault, of course, but it is there and it has to be resolved. We cannot have an agency that is responsible for development inspecting its own work.

Tavish Scott: Absolutely. Thank you.

10:15

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I want to follow up the points that Susan Quinn made in her introductory remarks. What stand out are the additions to the guidance and the issues

around joining things up. When I go to schools, especially primary schools, I ask what curriculum for excellence means. I have been shown big binders that the schools use to map out how the outcomes will work and how the schools will deliver the curriculum without gaps. My question is for Ann Grant. What, in a practical sense, is required for you to implement curriculum for excellence?

Ann Grant: We were issued with big green binders, but that was meant to be helpful and supportive. The staff were given materials that they could use as professionals. The notion in the McCrone report is that teachers are professionals who have autonomy in their own classrooms for the work that takes place. However, we do not really use the binders.

As my colleague Janet Brown said, change takes place over time and the way that people have worked with the information has altered. A lot of the information is online and there is a lot of discussion in secondary school departments and faculties as well as across departments in different schools. People in the same curricular area get together, discuss issues and support one another. That collegiate approach is very much a strength of what is happening in the teaching profession.

It is not really a case of a teacher sitting with a green binder and ticking things off or reading through the contents in isolation. Those days have gone—if they ever really existed. It really is now a case of people working together collegiately, looking at information online, sharing good practice and learning from one another, in order to meet needs.

Teachers are always concerned to do the best for young people so we need to ensure that nothing has been missed and that people are doing their jobs well. Individual teachers want to make sure that they are meeting young people's entitlements, which are built into curriculum for excellence. If we want to make sure that that is happening, that is when we look back at lists and check that we are doing things.

The experiences and outcomes for each curricular area are to do with planning. The new statement indicates that short-term planning should be done in a certain way, but the longer-term planning should look at Es and Os across the year or session. Teachers get together to discuss what they are going to do in terms of the curricular aims in their own curricular area.

Susan Quinn: I do not disagree with Ann Grant. However, it is often reported to us that although things go along very smoothly when collegiate working takes place, there can be a difficulty in a secondary school where the departments all do their own thing, because a bureaucracy has built

up around how to track, monitor and record some of what is being done. The issue is not what is being delivered; it how that is evidenced.

One of the biggest issues in the primary sector has been that primary schools have planned around the Es and Os, although they are now moving towards planning around the significant aspects of learning. On top of that are the special interests that are added to the curriculum. For example, we have the one-plus-two approach to languages; the science lobby is telling us that we need to do more science, technology, engineering and mathematics work; and there is a desire for schools to respect rights, get a green flag, become a fair trade school and so on. All those events are, in and of themselves, worth while in terms of the learner's experience. However, often schools do not determine that, because a particular thing covers all or the vast majority of what they need to do, they will do that one thing but not another—they want to do everything, which has become a problem.

That is exactly what happened in the five-to-14 curriculum. It was overcrowded because we tried to do too many things. Those things are genuinely worth while to young people, but not if we try to do them all. We need to decide which are the key priorities for a session, whether we can use a particular thing and whether it covers all the significant aspects of learning that we need to cover.

Daniel Johnson: I have been struck by the volume of work that primary schools in particular are undertaking to make the curriculum usable. Is that an accurate reflection of widespread practice? We talk a lot about streamlining, and instinctively we think that that means less guidance. However, I wonder whether we need better, rather than less, guidance.

Susan Quinn: Keir Bloomer said that we need a system shift. To an extent, we have taken new jargon and tried to make it fit with what we have always done on the curriculum. We have changed some pedagogy—some approaches to learning—within schools, and in many ways, that has taken off. However, we are still trying to fit things around a model that is similar to what we did previously.

When I started teaching 25 years ago, we had an hour and a half of language and an hour and a half of maths in the morning, which left two hours in the afternoon for everything else. With CFE, we have not decided to look at those five hours a day, or 25 hours a week, differently; in too many establishments, we are still trying to teach to the exact same curriculum design but with more stuff. We are squeezing in two hours of physical education a week, and then we have languages and so on. The curriculum design from three

through to the end of the learner's education has not shifted enough.

Daniel Johnson: Are you saying that we have not quite added up the time that is required to do all the things that we are asking to happen?

Susan Quinn: There is a bit of that. However, if we have to have two hours of PE a week and one-plus-two languages and so on because it has been agreed that those things will be worth while for our young people's life skills, we need to think about how those things are delivered across a young person's educational experience.

Some of the reporting has indicated that we do not need to cover every curricular area every week. In the primary sector, we are still probably trying to do a bit of art, a bit of music and a bit of drama every week. We need better examples of curriculum architecture in the primary sector to allow us to ensure that the young people get the best experience. Teachers are only doing what they know and do not have the necessary structure, so we need better guidance on the primary curriculum architecture.

We also need better guidance on the BGE in secondary 1 to 3. There is a real miss there and a real problem with the fact that we do not have consistency throughout the country on young people's experience of broad general education to the end of S3. That is partly to do with the fact that we have not gone wholesale for the original principles behind the qualifications—in general, national 5s and highers were originally two-year qualifications—and the architecture around that approach. At secondary level, we are in many cases simply modelling what we used to have. Instead of standard grades and highers, we have national 4s and 5s and highers, but we are doing things in exactly the same way. We have not moved enough on that.

Daniel Johnson: Your point about the educational architecture reflects absolutely what I have been hearing over the summer, so I thank you for that.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): Almost inevitably, the conversation has drifted slightly towards bureaucracy and streamlining guidance.

There has been a great deal of concern from teachers regarding the volume and quality of the guidance that has been issued. Over a period, there have been quite a few initiatives in connection with reducing the bureaucracy. From what Susan Quinn says, however, it seems that that has not been as successful as it might have been. Indeed, only in August Education Scotland said:

"There is currently too much support material and guidance for practitioners."

However, I seem to remember that, a few months ago, there was concern that not enough guidance was being issued in certain respects. How do we get a balance?

Dr Brown: I agree with everything that everyone has said about that. We have provided more and more support, and we have added to that, but we have not necessarily gone back and looked at modifying rather than adding. That is one of the challenges.

How do we ensure that we improve the amount and nature of the support that is given? It is about understanding from the teachers what they need. We need a lot more conversation about the support that a particular teacher in a certain context requires and how easy it is for them to get that.

Right now, the system produces documents that cover multiple aspects. One of the challenges is how we give support and guidance in a way that is timely and appropriate, and that is delivered just in time for when teachers need it. Arguably, that involves giving smaller pieces of advice and support that teachers can use on a daily basis. It is challenging to do that, and to tailor the support to the requirements in a variety of different contexts.

For me, the whole issue of support is being talked about with regard to teachers getting together. One of the philosophies of CFE was about the profession meeting together and sharing experiences and support at a school, local authority and national level. We can see really good examples of that across the country, but there are areas in which that has not happened. Some schools are left with not as much peer support as they could get.

In the SQA's experience of the senior phase, the most positive feedback that we get is when we run events and bring teachers together. Teachers getting together is a key element, and one of the challenges is allowing teachers the time that enables them to do that.

Keir Bloomer: Part of the problem lies in the word "guidance". In a sense, it is a weasel word. Sometimes it means instruction, and sometimes it means suggestion, and it is really important to distinguish between the two.

The essential role of Government and its agencies is to provide clear strategic advice that is limited, manageable and memorable. There is scope for any amount of suggestion, and there is no reason that the Education Scotland website or any other information source cannot contain a limitless amount of suggestion for teachers, which they can look at or not, and adopt or not, as they

see fit. However, that is very different from the strategic role of guidance—the bit that is essentially instruction, which must be very limited in its nature.

As far as the suggestion side is concerned, what Janet Brown has just said is perfectly correct. What do teachers need? The suggestion element needs to be teacher led, and it needs to respond to difficulties, problems and issues that teachers are genuinely experiencing, rather than consisting of gratuitous advice that is thrown out from the centre regardless of whether it is answering any need in the classroom.

10:30

Underpinning all that is the problem of how to bring about change in a complex system, and it seems that we still have a considerable way to go in understanding that process. The first step in understanding it is the separation of the genuinely strategic from the operational and the permissive, as it were. A further stage is understanding the nature of iterative change—change that takes place not all at once but gradually over time, with successive changes building on the experience of previous changes, eliminating weaknesses and emphasising strengths. We have really not succeeded in doing that.

I will give two examples of that. The first is the experiences and outcomes that have been referred to. The experiences and outcomes are a serious attempt to build a curriculum on the basis of the skills and knowledge that young people are actually acquiring. The notion behind the experiences and outcomes is that they will define, in each case, what the learner should be able to do at the end of the experience that they were not able to do at the beginning. That is a perfectly sensible and highly innovative way of building a curriculum, and I think the Scottish attempt has probably been the most thoroughgoing of any in the world so far.

That is not to say that the experiences and outcomes are without their failings; they have lots of failings. There are far too many of them. Many—probably most—of them are obscurely worded and require a textual exegesis on the part of teachers that they should not be asked to undertake on a daily basis. They also differ in kind. In many instances, they break down learning into comparatively small steps, which is what they are supposed to do. In other cases—for example, the health and wellbeing ones, which are regarded by the Government as being crucially significant—no progression whatsoever is built into them and they cover every level from early to fourth in the form of aspirational statements. That is completely useless.

The experiences and outcomes have been around for something like eight years, and we should have been going through a process of iterative change whereby we refine our approach to the experiences and outcomes and they become steadily more useful. However, we have not done that; we have duplicated them, first in the significant aspects of learning, which were really a recognition that the experiences and outcomes were too many and too complex, and which provided a simpler system. Susan Quinn referred to those. However, my impression is that even they are no longer current but have been replaced by the newly issued benchmarks. If that is not the case, we now have three systems of the same thing, which is a strange approach to simplification. There is a need to look seriously at how change can be brought about and to dramatically simplify what is on offer.

The other area, which nobody has mentioned yet, is the “Building the Curriculum” series of documents, which is supposed to be high-level, genuinely strategic guidance on curriculum for excellence. Although it is very repetitive and badly written, it contains much that is useful—particularly in the third document of the series, which is about curriculum structure—but there is no sense of the planning of the series overall. For example, interdisciplinary learning, which has been mentioned, is a key part of curriculum for excellence with which teachers were not familiar, but there is no “Building the Curriculum” document that deals with it, whereas the subject of curriculum areas receives attention in “Building the Curriculum 1” although it is an area with which teachers were totally familiar—most of them could have written “Building the Curriculum 1” in their sleep. In the overall architecture of the guidance that is on offer, there is no coherence and no overall strategic plan.

To my mind, these are the crucial things: we need to be genuinely strategic, we need to demote much of what has been published to the level of suggestion and we need to empower teachers to operate within limited strategic guidelines, showing initiative of their own.

Colin Beattie: But if we do what you suggest and simplify the guidance and make it more limited in nature, are we not in danger of oversimplifying and ending up with a tick-box approach?

Keir Bloomer: I think not; I think the opposite. Either we trust the teaching profession or we do not. The whole philosophy of curriculum for excellence is that we trust the profession and set a sense of direction. Curriculum for excellence set a sense of direction that was widely welcomed and agreed; I think that nobody at all queried the principles of curriculum for excellence at the outset. We supplement that with a limited amount

of strategic advice and trust the profession to implement it. To my mind, that is the way in which we achieve genuine change, but we have done too little of it.

Colin Beattie: Perhaps I can turn to the bureaucracy side, which has been well publicised. There seems to be a bit of debate about where that bureaucracy is coming from. Is it predominantly from national Government? Is it predominantly from local government? The RSE referred in its paper to

“the implication in this action that local authorities have been more responsible than government and national agencies in generating unnecessary workload.”

Where is the bureaucracy really coming from?

Susan Quinn: It depends where teachers work—that is the genuine answer.

Colin Beattie: Do you mean different education authorities?

Susan Quinn: I mean different education authorities and establishments. Keir Bloomer is right to say that if we trust teachers and the headteacher is working with them, they should not require teachers to fill in lots of bits of paper; they should be able to have conversations with teachers around how young people are progressing. The quality of conversation in the timescale in which curriculum for excellence has been implemented is significantly better in lots of establishments because people spend time talking to each other. Where headteachers are less confident in the conversations, they tend to have boxes of ringbinders of tick-box things that prove nothing other than that a teacher can tick boxes.

Similarly, if someone has beautiful forward plans, all that that proves is that they are good at writing a beautiful forward plan; it does not prove that they are delivering quality learning and teaching to young people. We have been asked what teachers want—they want the time and space to deliver quality learning and teaching, and to have the kind of conversations that Janet Brown talked about with peers in their own establishments and with people in the wider communities. However, there is not time to do that because in many cases teachers are replicating the old system of a term plan that is handed in and maybe discussed or marked and then handed back; then there are daily plans and, in some cases, weekly plans, assessment folders with tick boxes and all sorts of stuff. All of that will depend on where a teacher works, because it will be dictated or prescribed by their local authority or because it is what happens in their establishment.

Colin Beattie: That is alarming in its own way. If there is such diversity of bureaucracy deriving from local authorities and the local schools, how

can any national initiative be made effective to reduce that bureaucracy?

Susan Quinn: We now have the opportunity to look at what is happening in different areas. Keir Bloomer made the point about having more concise advice. What we should have now, as a result of the inspection process, visits to establishments from all sorts of people and local knowledge, is examples of good practice, which will then be fitted to a more concise group of contexts, with people looking at a particular situation for their own establishments.

I do not think that the local situation that I am describing is terribly different from what we had before. A lot of it is about how confident the leadership in an establishment is in their ability to articulate their school. Our members often tell us, “We have to keep a daily diary in a particular way, we have to keep our forward plans in a particular way and we have to keep our assessment folders in a particular way, in case the inspector calls.” Education Scotland’s inspection team’s guidance and advice have long since been very different, but it does not matter how many times I say that, as education convener in the EIS: teachers still have it in their heads that if the inspector comes they will have to produce lots of evidence. The evidence should exist within a confident leader, who can say, “This is where my school’s at. How do I know that? Because I talk to my teachers, I talk to my young people and I talk to my parents. Do I keep lots of books about that? No, I don’t, but I speak to people and I know.”

However, a lot of people do not have that confidence, because we have not made the culture shift. We hear in the press that employers do not understand the new structures, and so on. We need to look at how we communicate what education is doing in Scotland in the wider context, so that everybody understands it. I have teacher pals who do not understand the new qualification processes, because they are early years teachers. They have young people going through secondary school and they are saying to me, “What’s it about?” There is a problem in how we have communicated.

It is not that we have not tried to communicate. There have been loads of communication documents about lots of different things, but for some reason we have not sold the approach, partly because we have not had the time or space to make the culture shift.

The Convener: I welcome Gillian Martin, who has just arrived. Gillian has been at another committee meeting this morning—I should have said that at the start of the meeting.

I remind members to direct questions to individuals if they can do, and I ask members and

witnesses to keep their questions and answers as short as possible, because we have a lot to get through.

Tavish Scott: In response to Colin Beattie's questions, Keir Bloomer said that there was no strategic plan and no coherence. Who is responsible for that? Who should take that on?

Keir Bloomer: That is a Government responsibility.

Tavish Scott: You think that the responsibility sits with the minister's office.

Keir Bloomer: Yes. Many of the things that the cabinet secretary has said recently indicate a desire to put in place a much stronger strategic framework and to tackle some of the problems that have been identified, such as the bureaucracy that Susan Quinn talked about. There is an understanding of that, and in essence it is a Government task.

Tavish Scott: Thank you.

Daniel Johnson: Keir Bloomer talked about whether the Es and Os are compatible and coherent and suggested that the benchmarks are an additional set of assessments. Do Ann Grant and Susan Quinn share that opinion? It is quite an important point.

Ann Grant: My understanding is that the recently published benchmarks—which are for certain aspects of the curriculum; benchmarks for the rest of the curriculum will be published by the end of the calendar year—have subsumed the Es and Os and the significant aspects of learning. In other words, the benchmarks document is now the working document that I expect to look at with my staff. I do not expect to look at Es and Os and the significant aspects of learning in the same detail.

The benchmarks for literacy and numeracy have an interesting feature, which is that there are bits that are in bold or italics that are for all teachers, and there are other bits in plain font, which are specifically for English teachers, in the case of literacy, and maths teachers, in the case of numeracy. That has all been conflated in one document. I may be wrong, but that is the way that I approach it.

10:45

Daniel Johnson: Thank you for that clarification.

Susan Quinn: I agree. Those documents will now be the key planning documents for schools. However, they arrived only in August and only for certain subjects—the others are not there yet—so we will still be talking about Es and Os and the significant aspects of learning until the establishments can get to grips with the new

documents. Again, people should have the time and space to look at them and consider what it means for their establishment and the work that they are doing.

There is a challenge around development. Schools and local authorities will have produced their improvement plans prior to the summer holidays, in order to plan what they will do with their development time over the year, but now we have something new. That something new should be helpful, but it also means that establishments will need to revisit their priorities and find the time and space to discuss them.

Ross Thomson (North East Scotland) (Con):

I will follow up on the theme of how we go about reducing bureaucracy. The cabinet secretary was before the committee not all that long ago and he emphasised that he wants to look at how to reduce bureaucracy, duplication and teacher workload, and in his statement to Parliament he announced the creation of regional clusters. I have a question for Ann Grant, as a headteacher and someone who is at the front of delivery. What is your understanding of how the regional clusters will work, what will the relationship between the region and the schools be like and has there been any engagement between your school, your education authority and Education Scotland to create a blueprint for how this might actually operate?

Ann Grant: I have not been engaged in any discussions about that with my education authority or Education Scotland. I am pretty sure that it will happen. My understanding is that regional clusters will be supportive bodies to ensure collegiality across councils. My reading is that the aim is that where one council is doing well in a particular area and another council close by is doing less well, then those councils can get together and share information. I hope that the regional boards will not have any governance role. I understand that it is about sharing information across councils, rather than governance.

How the structure develops in terms of governance and the role of the local authority will be interesting. I can comment on that if you want me to, although perhaps I should not.

The regional clusters are a response to the OECD report, which suggested that councils can learn from each other. I think that that already happens: Glasgow is linked with Fife and we share ideas about the way in which we approach things.

Ross Thomson: Absolutely. For example, I represent North East Scotland and we have the northern alliance, through which councils work together to address issues, particularly in relation to teacher shortages. Speaking to educationists in Aberdeen city and shire, it seems that they do not

have a clear understanding of what the regional clusters mean but think that they could operate as boards, perhaps with a joint quality improvement organisation, which would go in and present challenge to the schools. How do we ensure that we have greater collaboration without adding an additional layer of bureaucracy or management between the local education authority and the Scottish Government? Is that achievable?

Susan Quinn: It is achievable if you accept that you can use the same activity for multiple purposes. One example of the work of a regional board is around the moderation of standards. That work will go on within an establishment and across establishments in the local authority, but it will now also need to go on outwith the authority.

There is the potential to say, “Actually, we’re going to do a moderation exercise three times because you’ll do it with your own school, with your neighbouring schools and, now, with people in other authorities,” but you can use one activity to meet the three needs and avoid duplicating and overworking something. You mentioned the idea of joint QIOs—that needs to be considered. The support systems within local authorities vary across the country depending on their ability to provide the staff in those areas. That has been hit by local authority budget cuts and the resulting decisions. Rather than having a part-time QIO in a smaller authority, it would make more sense to the system to have one full-time QIO across a number of authorities because good practice would be shared and understanding would be developed.

As Janet Brown said, we see developments when teachers talk to each other. Whether it is classroom-based, in middle and senior management or in strategic offices, when people talk to each other and do not just stay in their own wee bubble, good practice is shared and developed.

Keir Bloomer: Can I comment on that?

The Convener: Yes, of course.

Keir Bloomer: Ross Thomson referred to regional clusters. In fact, the governance review paper refers to schools clusters and to educational regions. Those are two separate things in the review document. The first is obviously a group of schools in a neighbourhood—generally the secondary school, associated primaries and probably pre-five establishments in the same area. The educational regions appear to be the aggregate of a number of local authorities.

The paper is very fair. It gives a concise outline of governance in Scottish education as it currently stands, and asks a number of quite open questions. It does not tell us all that much about clusters and it tells us even less about educational regions. In responding to the document, we are

free to make our own interpretations and suggestions as to what those regions might be and what they might do. That seems to be a perfectly fair approach to consultation.

It is difficult to answer your question at present. We do not really know what the regions will turn out to be. At the outset of a consultation, I have no complaint about that. I do, however, remain to be persuaded that there is any purpose to them whatever. The RSE will respond to the consultation in due course. At present, I cannot anticipate precisely what we will say, but we are likely to be sceptical about what they will contribute that is additional and helpful.

Liz Smith: I wonder, Dr Brown, whether we can pursue some SQA issues. The cabinet secretary was very clear in Parliament that you and he had had discussions about what was possible so as not to compromise the integrity of the exam system and pupils’ progress. Yet, not long after that, we find that unit assessments are completely disappearing. Why has that major U-turn taken place?

Dr Brown: My conversation with the cabinet secretary was about removing units and not doing anything to the further assessments that were in place. The feedback from our research and fieldwork showed that over-assessment was associated with the units.

Some of that was associated with the nature of the units themselves, some with other issues that have been discussed in the committee such as the preparation candidates were getting from their broad general education, the amount of time being given to the teaching and learning of the courses and the nature of the cohort being presented for the qualifications.

We have looked at whether it is possible to reduce workload by removing units. In looking at how to address course assessment in general—the assignments that are undertaken and the final examination at the end of the year—it has been possible to decide that what we have been assessing through the units we will now assess through the course assignment and the final examination. The SQA is scoping ways to have full course coverage associated with the qualifications to maintain the credibility and standard of those qualifications. That means taking the things that had been assessed in units and looking at what would have to be added to the course assessment, whether that be an additional assignment, a strengthening of an assignment or a strengthening of the examination.

I want to emphasise that both the examination and the course assignment are absolutely compliant with the curriculum for excellence philosophy. We have talked about the flexibility

that is necessary so that kids can learn appropriately and demonstrate their knowledge and skills in different contexts. The course assignment is something like a project or work in science that allows them to demonstrate knowledge and skills in different contexts. The work is done in the school environment but is sent to the SQA to be externally marked and that is where the quality assurance comes from. That allows flexibility within the curriculum for excellence.

Liz Smith: Notwithstanding that flexibility, would you have some sympathy for the parents of those pupils who have already gone through those unit assessments who have suddenly found out that they are not particularly rigorous or academically sound and are to be dropped? Are you sending a message to them that there might be some other reforms coming down the line that they might have to adopt as well?

Dr Brown: The unit assessments are absolutely rigorous and absolutely academically sound.

Liz Smith: So why have they gone?

Dr Brown: Part of this is cultural shift and part is the way that the unit assessments are being used. We had already planned to make some changes to the unit assessments that are in place for the current session that we believed would reduce workload.

The decision has been made that the approach to assessment should not be both units and course assessments, but only course assessments. The units themselves historically are absolutely rigorous and appropriate. We are changing the way in which we assess candidates' knowledge and skills by moving that to the course assignments—such as projects—and making sure that the examination has greater course coverage than it currently has.

Liz Smith: I will press you on that, Dr Brown. If you are a parent who is being told that the units are rigorous and very much worth academic pursuit, you might wonder why they are disappearing, given what you said about flexibility in the curriculum. Also, are other changes coming down the line?

Dr Brown: There are no more changes coming down the line. We have committed to the cabinet secretary that we will work on national 5 for introduction in the next academic year, highers the year after that and advanced highers the year after that.

The course itself is not changing. The nature and content of the course, the type of learning, the knowledge that the kids will be getting, the way in which they will be asked to demonstrate that knowledge in different contexts, and the way in

which they will be asked to apply that knowledge to problem solving are all part of the philosophy of curriculum for excellence and are all still there. How the SQA captures that experience and knowledge is being changed from having three aspects—units, the assignment and the final examination—to two.

Liz Smith: Did the units go because the impression from schools was that they were an assessment burden?

Dr Brown: Yes. That was a very strong piece of feedback that we got from our research, which I think that the committee has a copy of or a link to.

Other aspects around why overassessment was undertaken in schools have been discussed at the working group on assessment and national qualifications that the Deputy First Minister chairs.

11:00

Liz Smith: At your appearance before the committee on 22 September last year, we discussed the integrity of the exam system in light of the problems that were experienced with the new higher. There had been some issues with human biology and classics. At that time, you acknowledged that there had been some concerns, but you were utterly sure that the integrity of the exam system was 100 per cent and you said that changes had been made to ensure that grade-related boundaries and so on had been very carefully put in place.

I want to ask you again about the exam system. What process is undertaken to ensure that papers are properly produced in the first place and properly moderated? Can you give a cast-iron guarantee that the work is always done by people who are experienced in that particular subject?

Dr Brown: Yes—the people who are involved in the development and verification of the question papers are absolutely qualified; that is one of the criteria that we have.

The advantage of the Scottish education system is the full participation of teachers. Every year, we hire 15,000 appointees not only to develop the question papers and assessments but to mark them. That is absolutely essential—the teachers are part of the system.

We put in place quality assurance processes. As you say, there have in the past been occasions on which there have been issues with question papers. There was an issue with higher maths a couple of years ago. As a result of that experience, and the experiences this year, we have doubled our efforts to ensure that the quality assurance processes catch everything.

Liz Smith: Why did we have some problems with national 5 computing this year?

Dr Brown: There were several issues associated with national 5 computing, and I have apologised for that question paper because it was a real challenge. We all need to recognise that, although the SQA is developing qualifications, we are also delivering the live certification every year. Putting the appropriate focus on that remains a challenge for us.

As a result of the experiences last year and this year, we have added additional steps. There is a completely separate—again, fully qualified—group that looks at the exam paper after the exam has been completed. Fresh sets of eyes look at the paper so that we can catch those issues when people who have been embedded in the process for a long time have not been able to do so.

Liz Smith: When you advertise for people to set and mark papers, are you confident that you get absolutely the right people all the time?

Dr Brown: Yes—there is very strong support from the Scottish teaching profession for the SQA and we look forward to that continuing.

Liz Smith: Convener, would it be helpful if Dr Brown was able to tell us whether we, as a committee, could access the quality guarantee for the setting and marking of exams? Would it be possible to put that in the public domain?

Dr Brown: Do you mean how we do the quality assurance?

Liz Smith: Yes.

Dr Brown: Yes—I am perfectly willing to provide that.

Liz Smith: That would be very helpful.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): The other side of the coin is the issue around national 4s. There has been some discussion of the fact that parents see less value in national 4 because there is not an exam at the end. I am interested to hear the witnesses' views on that, although I have my own views. How student-centred an approach would it be if we were able to make national 4 an exam-based qualification?

Susan Quinn: When the qualifications stage of CFE was being developed, the EIS and others in the system adopted the position that national 4, as the exit qualification for a group of young people, was not best placed to include an external exam. We stand by that position.

It is not the lack of an exam in and of itself that has brought about questions around national 4. There are a range of reasons that it has not been seen as a qualification in its own right. To simply

add an exam back into the qualification would not remedy the issues.

Our reason for moving away from the exam was to do with equity, opportunities and the life skills and approaches that that group of young people would have, so having an exam would not, in and of itself, reverse whatever is there. It goes back to the cultural shift and the understanding of employers, parents and other groups about the purpose of national 4.

We have had reports from our teacher colleagues that those young people for whom national 4 was going to be their exit felt demoralised because they did not have an exam. When you drill down, you discover that they felt demoralised not because they did not have an exam but because so much focus at school assemblies was being put on those groups of pupils who were having exams—there was too much of a focus on the young people who were going to have study leave before their exams, so those who were not doing exams felt different as a result. It was not the case that they were asking for an exam. I am fairly confident that if you asked most fourth-year pupils, “Do you want us to give you an exam on each of these subject areas?” they would probably say, “No, you're okay, thanks very much.”

It is a question of how we present national 4 and how we take it forward. The other issues around it can be considered as the assessment review group moves forward into the next stages. In looking at that, they can consider whether it is viable to have the value-added units externally assessed and that might give some credibility to those who feel that it needs an external assessment component. You could do that by looking at whether to extend the idea of having a simple pass or fail result, so that it is graded or there is a pass plus, but those considerations are for the assessment review group to take to the next stage of discussion.

In and of itself, national 4 as an end qualification for those young people who will leave school at fourth year is not a bad approach. The principles behind it and the reasons why we moved away from the end exam remain sound, in my opinion. It is now a question of how we promote that qualification as part of the bigger pathway package, and we need to look at the wider qualification options for young people, rather than having national 5 and higher as the be-all and end-all.

Janet Brown and I have had this conversation many times. We have too big a focus on qualifications in lots of ways, because we have not had the culture shift and because it is really easy for the press to judge a school purely on the number of highers and the number of young

people going to university, and that is to the detriment of those for whom that is not the appropriate educational pathway. We need a system where we value every learning opportunity that a young person can have, recognising that we are not all the same and cannot all be the same. It would be a shocking world if we were all the same, because we would be struggling if we did not have people to do the wide range of jobs that we need in our society.

I would not go for an exam for national 4. I would look at how you could promote that as an end qualification and as part of a pathway. Schools need to reflect on how they promote and encourage pupils. At their assemblies, they would have been trying to encourage those students who were going for their exams. They would have been trying to gee them up, but they might not have thought that there was also a group of young people who felt different because they were not getting exam leave. If we move to a two-year qualification system, there would not be any exams in fourth year. Everybody would be doing them in fifth year or sixth year, so there would not be study leave and no one would be worried about it.

Gillian Martin: I suppose that it comes back to the issue of wider achievement. We need a cultural shift among parents and in Scottish society more generally to recognise wider achievement as attainment.

Dr Brown: It is really important that we think through what the country wants from national 4. That should be done in a well-studied way. In fact, part of the next phase of research that we are doing is to examine national 4 and solicit feedback on its nature from teachers, parents, industry and, importantly, pupils.

I will comment on internally assessed qualifications and touch on the point about broadening the curriculum. Employers are very familiar and happy with internally assessed qualifications. That is what the whole vocational space is made up of. The challenge is communication with parents and, to be blunt, teachers. Many teachers say that internally assessed qualifications have no credibility because a school down the road is not doing the assessment properly. They say that their school is all fine but the other school is not. There are many credibility issues on internally assessed qualifications within the profession.

We also need to ensure that we continue developing Scotland's young workforce, because the qualifications and awards in that approach are really valuable. It includes awards about personal development and personal finance, as well as entry-level national certificates for the vocational professions. That is part of what we should be

doing and the school and parents should celebrate all that.

Over the past couple of years, when we have put out our statistics, we have put out everything that the schools undertake. We do not put out what is done throughout the year in colleges because not all the kids get their qualifications in August. They do qualifications throughout the year, through the college engagement. As a nation, we have to start to recognise that we need to celebrate all of that. It does not help when we continually focus on the higher pass rate. A higher is brilliant—unless the young person wants to do something else.

Many committee members may have been at the Colleges Scotland event yesterday. If they talked to some of the young people at that event about the work that they are doing on their apprenticeships and the things that they are studying, members would have found that those young people are able to start on that route through SQA qualifications through the school and the college. We need to celebrate that as much as highers, and it is really important that we think through what the qualifications are for, what skills and knowledge they give the kids and how best to assess them so that we understand their abilities.

Tavish Scott: I agree with your last point strongly, not least because I was at Moray College in Richard Lochhead's constituency last night because my son was graduating—if that is the right term—from there. However, I am now totally confused, because you made a good argument about wider achievement but we are being pushed down a route of focusing on attainment and assessment. How are those approaches compatible and consistent?

Dr Brown: Scotland needs to understand where people are. Assessment seems to be a dirty word in some scenarios. We are talking about ensuring that we can assess the learner's abilities, knowledge and skills to standard. That standard can be assessed in multiple ways. As we just discussed, in the new approach to national 5s and highers it will be done through an assignment and an examination, but it is equally possible to do it through internal assessment. Scotland needs to decide how it wants to assess its candidates and learners, whether in primary, secondary or the senior phase.

Tavish Scott: Is the logic of that that we end up being able to compare school against school on the basis of data?

Dr Brown: That is not helpful. Personally, I think that we need to understand where a learner is whether they are eight or 62, because we are trying to develop that individual in a way that helps them in the next phase of their life.

Tavish Scott: Thank you. That is helpful.

Daniel Johnson: I will follow up on your comments on Liz Smith's line of questioning about the change to unit assessments, Dr Brown. Previously, you as the chief examiner said to us that we could not go any further on unit assessments without compromising standards. What has changed or what is being done to compensate for that? Will you expand a bit more on how we are maintaining standards with the change that is coming through?

11:15

Dr Brown: When I said that I was unable to move any further, that was because there was no focus on modifying the other assessments—the focus was just on removing units and certificating. It is not possible to do that and to maintain credibility and standards.

The change cannot be implemented immediately because we need to look at what we are assessing in the units and put that in the assignment that is undertaken in the school. We must consider whether a new assignment needs to be put in place and whether we need to strengthen and increase the coverage of the examination.

Daniel Johnson: When we talk to schools, we get an appreciation of the volume of assessment that goes on with unit assessments. I had a school class in yesterday and it gave me the number, which was a bit mind-boggling. I understand the driver for the change, but are we shifting the workload elsewhere? Will there be an increase in teachers' workload regarding assignments, or will there be an increase in the SQA's resource requirement for external assessment of the pieces of work in question? Are you confident that you have the resource on hand to enable you to deliver the increased requirement for assessment?

Dr Brown: There are two aspects. The assignments are done in the classroom. That process should be part of teaching and learning; it relates to the change in pedagogy, which is to do with the nature of how a kid demonstrates their knowledge and skills and applies them.

If we increase the number of assignments or we add assignments to those qualifications of which they do not currently form a part, the SQA will require additional external markers. We engage with the profession on that every year and we appoint appointees. Similarly, if we have to add additional aspects to the examination question papers, we might need more markers. It is true that we need to be able to look at that.

We are continuing our discussions with the teaching professional bodies to make sure that

everybody participates in the system. I am sure that other members of the panel will agree that teachers' participation in SQA activities has a strong value. One of the challenges is ensuring that every teacher in Scotland understands the standards—that is key. A teacher who becomes a marker for the SQA definitely gains an understanding of the standards. There is a great deal of professional development associated with that, and we are working with the General Teaching Council for Scotland to make sure that that is recognised.

There is likely to be an increased requirement, but we are looking at freeing up teachers' time in the classroom as a result of not doing the unit assessments.

Daniel Johnson: I have two further questions to ask. We need additional markers to compensate for that change. How many are we talking about, roughly speaking? Is it a big jump? How confident are you that you will be able to find the markers that you need? How big a change will it be?

Dr Brown: We do not yet know how big a change it will be, because it is quite a complex process to look at what is being assessed subject by subject and level by level within national 5 and higher, and to consider what needs to be moved from units into an assignment or the course assessment, so I cannot give you that information at the moment. We are currently in the planning phase.

Over the past few years, we have been strongly encouraging teachers to participate. We had a full complement of teachers participating last year. I know that the unions have expressed concern about workload issues but we believe that, as that goes away, the unions and the teaching profession will again fully participate in the SQA's activities. That is beneficial for everyone. The system is run by all of us.

Daniel Johnson: Given that you need qualified teachers to be markers, that this is a workload issue and that teachers are finite to the extent that we cannot instantly bring in new teachers, as there is a time lag involved in that process, is there a danger that we are just pushing the workload problem round to another part of the system? Is it the case that we will still be asking teachers to do more work, but as appointees rather than in their role as teachers?

Dr Brown: The appointee role is undertaken outside of school hours and is fully compensated by the SQA.

Daniel Johnson: But it might well be the same people doing the same work under a different mode of employment.

Dr Brown: That is the way in which the system works today—teachers volunteer on a regular basis.

Daniel Johnson: I do not dispute that.

Susan Quinn: On the dangers around workload, teachers have said to us that they were frustrated by the duplication of assessment within unit assessments, coursework and exams. As an organisation, we have provided a significant document that covers our members' views on that. What will now migrate from unit assessments to coursework or otherwise will vary in quantity depending on the subject.

On your question about the workload just moving around, if an individual teacher wants to continue to volunteer to do paid overtime with the SQA, that is their choice and their decision. However, with the potential changes to the system, their workload within their contracted job will be more manageable. Importantly, the workload will also be more manageable for young people. At the EIS annual general meetings in the past two years, the most moving speeches that were made were not related to teacher workload. Clearly, that has been our predominant issue, but teachers also mentioned young people struggling with their workload.

We are comfortable that the unit assessments, in and of themselves, may well still help to structure courses and play a part, but if they are not a mandatory part of the qualification, people will not keep redoing them. That will help. If that means that people feel more comfortable about going back to work with the SQA outside their contracted hours, that will be their choice. At the moment, that is what has been the key issue for us.

Dr Brown: I do not disagree that the unit assessments were too demanding in certain aspects. That is one of the things that we found when we did our research. However, the amount of assessment and the workload for pupils also need to be looked at, given the time that is available for them to do courses. For example, there is an assumption that a candidate for a national 5 will have been secure at curriculum level 4 before entering that course, which requires 160 hours of learning and teaching. If that is not available for the candidate, we will not improve the experience for them regardless of whether we take out the units.

Susan Quinn: That brings us back to the point about curriculum architecture, the original principles around what was intended and the design brief for CFE.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I have a question for Ann Grant and perhaps Susan Quinn about personal, social and health education in

curriculum for excellence. The curriculum is about creating confident, well-rounded individuals, but that core area does not seem to have caught up.

The time for inclusive education campaign found that about half of teachers were not aware of Government-funded resources on dealing with homophobia or lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues, and that 80 per cent of teachers did not feel confident in those areas. The Scottish Youth Parliament has found similar concerns among young people about mental health—both about educating young people about it and about supporting them through mental health difficulties.

Do we need a significant refresh in personal and social education? It has not caught up with the rest of society or the aims of curriculum for excellence.

Ann Grant: As teachers in early years, primary and, in my case, secondary, we believe that the importance of looking after young people should not be underestimated. I genuinely believe deeply that the job of a teacher is to be someone who looks after other people's children, and the trust that parents have in us as we do that is something that we hold dear. We need to consider the whole notion of how young people develop and grow. It is fine to talk about attainment, examinations and offering young people opportunities for wider achievement, but everyone in my school and, I think, everyone in society wants to ensure that young people feel safe, cared for and happy. That is how we operate at Shawlands academy. We have worked hard on it, and it is very much to do with our values—we consider ourselves a values-based school.

What Ross Greer says about personal education is important, and mental health issues are a significant concern for young people today. We have the resources to support young people, to some extent, although we could look at having more—that is just how the resources are just now. The support that a young person can get from their pastoral care teacher—a teacher who just listens and cares—can be significant in their life, and it should never be forgotten or undervalued.

As a secondary school, we are also looking after young people at a stage in their lives when they are recognising their sexuality, and that is likewise significant. On one of the in-service days at the beginning of August, we had three hours of LGBT training. We recognise that Shawlands academy is an incredibly diverse community and that we have to respond to different needs in many different ways, but we questioned whether we were responding to the needs of LGBT young people. We addressed that in looking at how we approach young people in our school. It has been a significant aspect of how we work in the school

and I am sure that it is going to happen in all schools in Scotland.

Susan Quinn: You are probably correct in saying that we should look at the wider need to refresh. Often, a key initiative gets a lot of publicity—whether in the press, in establishments, in local authorities or otherwise—and there is a push in that area, but only until the next big thing comes along. We have not found ways of keeping the momentum in all these areas, and we can forget that schools need to refresh their training. I am thinking back to the clear and sound training in anti-racism education that I received 20 years ago. Lots of teachers will not have received that training again because, once done, it will not have been revisited, as we do not necessarily have the time for that.

That takes us back to the need to create the time and space to fit such things in. We need to look at the absolutes that still need to be addressed. Do we still need to spend an hour a week on handwriting in the primary sector when most of our young people will use technology? How can we create time and space to allow such education to be more integrated within the system, so that it is not an add-on? That is where things fall off—if it is just added on and does not become an integral part of the system, it can fall off when things start to spin a wee bit faster. That is a key area to look at.

On some of the wider health issues, it is about the whole getting it right for every child approach and how we can engage much more with wider partners. The challenge comes when everybody is stretched, because partnership work takes time and requires individuals to talk to each other, plan and see who is going to be involved in things. If a headteacher, a deputy headteacher or a principal teacher is struggling, or if a social work department or third sector organisation is struggling, it becomes more difficult to organise that work. However, where there are examples of good practice in engaging with third sector partners, in particular, in relation to young people's mental health issues, that in itself can make it not an add-on but an integral part of the whole establishment and system.

11:30

Ross Greer: Ann Grant, you mentioned the training that you have facilitated at Shawlands. Is there inconsistency across local authority areas because the issue comes down to individual leadership in schools? In your case, presumably, you decided to allocate part of your budget to facilitating that kind of training.

Ann Grant: We have talked about collegiality a lot today. With regard to the identification of

issues, we have to respond to the needs in our schools. Susan Quinn spoke about anti-racism education, which is embedded in our values and in everything that we do at Shawlands academy. LGBT training is something that we had evaluated and decided that we needed to do. It is important that schools are given that opportunity to be able to respond to need within their communities. As I said previously, it is also something that is responded to nationally, and there have been national initiatives. As society changes, schools need to be able to respond to that.

There is an element of balance between responding to the needs that you recognise within your own school and community and responding to national initiatives and the way in which society changes. Schools have to reflect and respond to the changes in society. We are, after all, engaged in looking after the young people who will make up society in the future.

Ross Greer: I take that point. My concern is that the schools that do not feel that they have the need to do what you are talking about are the ones with the greatest need to do so, particularly with regard to LGBT issues, for example.

Ann Grant: Again, I would imagine that responsibility for that would involve the local authority monitoring the situation, discussing what is happening and seeing which schools are responding and which schools are not. That comes back to the issue of there being a regional board where people can look across the way. I imagine that that is the way in which things will happen. I certainly hope that it is.

Susan Quinn: There are ways and means by which a local authority can direct schools, such as by using school improvement planning processes. Most school improvement plans are not wholly school improvement plans, if you see what I mean. The vast majority of a school improvement plan will involve national and local priorities. Local authorities will often say, in their advice each year, that a school will have no more than three priorities, one of which needs to be the national priority on raising attainment and so on. They could say that another priority needs to be a review of the PSHE programmes to take account of the issues that we are talking about, and they could leave the third one up to the schools.

Local authorities often give directions about national or local priorities; schools' priorities are not necessarily up to the schools to identify through their self-evaluation processes. Often, establishments cry out that their school improvement plan is not really their school improvement plan but is about the ways in which they will respond to national and local issues, although I would question what issues there might be locally that would not be assignable to either

local or national priorities. However, the point is that there are ways of ensuring that key issues are in the improvement plans and are addressed.

Ann Grant: One of the key aspects of the Shawlands improvement plan is inclusion, and our response to that has come under that heading. Inclusion is part of Glasgow City Council's agenda, so it has come through that way.

Ross Thomson: I know that local authorities work with schools to put in place the school improvement plans and that they are often set for a year but that they can look further ahead. In my area, when we considered making changes to ensure that there was some teacher training about the dangers of legal highs, we found that getting that into the plan was quite difficult, so the school took another approach. That touches on Ross Greer's point about there being an inconsistency across local authorities about what they determine their priorities to be. How might we be able to get greater consistency across local authorities on fundamental issues, so that we can ensure that issues to do with inclusivity and so on are included in our plans?

Keir Bloomer: I hope that organisations will respond to the current governance reviews in ways that will address that question.

One of the questions that the governance review raises implicitly—although it is not one of the questions that have been posed by the Government—is how desirable local variation is. One of the principles that have underpinned governance in Scottish education up to now—certainly, as is set out in the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, which is still the base legislation for education—is that the principal agent of governance is the local authority, and that that is an expression of local democracy. Obviously, local democracy entails that priorities can differ from one council area to another. However, it is increasingly evident that, in relation to education, the public do not believe that. That is something that might well come out in the governance review. However, as long as that is the legal position, we have to accept that there will be significant variation from one local authority area to another.

Ross Thomson: I appreciate that you do not want to dictate to schools what they should include in their local improvement plans. However, there is a need to ensure that there is equality on issues that are as fundamental as the ones that Ross Greer raised.

Keir Bloomer: My view would be that a school improvement plan should be the school's improvement plan. That is a pretty straightforward concept.

Incidentally, just to give a more general answer to Mr Greer's question, I would say that the

orthodoxy in Scotland is that the most powerful way of improving the education system is by improving the quality of teaching. Globally, that is the view that is expressed by the OECD. However, that is very much open to question. It seems to me that, important though the quality of teaching is, there is something that is even more important in a school, which is the nature of its culture and the quality of the relations among the people who are attending the school—learners, teachers and so forth.

The Convener: Thank you very much for opening that can of worms just as we are about to end the discussion.

I thank the panel members for their contributions today. The discussion has been excellent and I am sure that we have all taken a lot from it.

I welcome all the students who came into the public gallery about five minutes ago and who we are just about to ask to leave as the public session is now coming to an end.

11:37

Meeting continued in private until 11:49.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* of this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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