



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 24 April 2019

Session 5



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EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

13th Meeting 2019, Session 5

CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)

*Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)

*Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab)

*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

*Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)

*Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con)

*Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD)

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

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Dr Alan Britton (University of Glasgow)

William Hardie (Royal Society of Edinburgh)

Alison Harris (Central Scotland) (Con) (Committee Substitute)

Professor Jim Scott (University of Dundee)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Roz Thomson

LOCATION

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 24 April 2019

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Subject Choices Inquiry

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the Education and Skills Committee's 13th meeting in 2019. Apologies have been received from Oliver Mundell, although we are delighted to have Alison Harris with us as his substitute. Tavish Scott will join us a little later.

Agenda item 1 is the second evidence session in the committee's subject choices inquiry. I welcome Dr Alan Britton, who is a senior lecturer in education at the University of Glasgow; William Hardie, who is the policy advice manager at the Royal Society of Edinburgh; and Professor Jim Scott, who is from the school of education and social work at the University of Dundee. When witnesses would like to respond to a question, please indicate that to me or the clerks, so that we can get you in as often as possible. We will move straight to questions.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Before Easter, we had our first evidence session for the inquiry, which involved Education Scotland. In response to my colleague Iain Gray, that organisation implied that the reduction in subject choices is intentional, because the traditional curriculum was no longer working for too many youngsters and because we wanted to move away from breadth in learning to greater depth in learning, and to increase the number of courses that teach other skills. From the research that you have all done, is your interpretation the same—that the reduction is intentional?

William Hardie (Royal Society of Edinburgh): Not at all. It is clear from the research and other work that has been carried out that the reduction in course choices in secondary 4 is an unintended consequence of fitting in the 160 hours of learning for national qualifications in a single year. A key issue is the point at which students can begin to prepare for qualifications—that is about the extent to which the broad general education phase can be used to prepare for qualifications. No policy intention to reduce subject choice is stated anywhere: it is an unintended consequence.

Liz Smith: For clarification, are you disputing Education Scotland's implication? The reduction has definitely taken place; we have a lot of evidence on its extent in different parts of

Scotland. Has it happened as an unintended consequence, and with no direction? Why have we ended up in the situation?

William Hardie: The reduction is an unintended consequence of how schools have had to interpret national guidance. Because course choices were reducing, Education Scotland had to issue new guidance in 2016 on how the broad general education and senior phases knit together. However, even the new guidance is unclear about the extent to which learning in the broad general education phase can prepare young learners for progression to national qualifications.

Liz Smith: If that is correct, is the structure of the system wrong?

William Hardie: The lack of guidance on that key issue certainly means that schools and local authorities have been somewhat left to their own devices. Education Scotland tried to rein that in with its guidance in 2016, which said that schools should offer between six and eight subjects, but, having looked at the guidance, schools and local authorities could still be unclear about what that means for preparing pupils in the broad general education phase for senior phase qualifications.

Liz Smith: Professor Scott, from the extensive research that you have done—school by school and local authority by local authority—why do you think there has been that considerable reduction in subject choice? In particular, why has it affected some local authorities more than others?

Professor Jim Scott (University of Dundee): It is quite difficult to answer that question, as I suspect Liz Smith knows. I completely agree with what William Hardie said about there being no intention to reduce choice.

Several factors affect the situation. One factor is that some local authorities have mandated their schools, almost without exception, to offer six courses in S4. That is the only mandating that has gone on. That virus has spread from Angus right round the north of Scotland in a fan shape, and there have also been outbreaks in the south and south-west of Scotland. If members care to follow my analogy, there has also been a ripple of infection through the central belt, but the central belt still largely has schools that produce a curriculum that meets the needs of their learners, which is what I thought we were all about, and is certainly what the Deputy First Minister says on a regular basis. That is a major factor in the number of schools offering six courses. Roughly half of Scotland's secondary schools offer six courses in S4.

Generally, the schools that offer seven have chosen to do so, as a more sensible position in which to stand in a tighter curricular space, because schools have only S4 to play with for the

first course. It would be a challenge for them to offer eight courses. When I was the headteacher of Perth high school, I chose to move to seven courses, because that was a sensible compromise between the danger in offering six choices, which I will spell out in a second, and the danger in offering eight—which is that there would be pressure on children from squeezing eight subjects into the available time, which would be difficult.

I understand that the six-course choice—if “choice” is the right word—came from interviews with the great and the good of Scottish education, and that a group of members of the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland decided that that was the best approach to take. I have no way of substantiating that, but it is what I was told. It would be interesting to ask ADES the question, but I have not tried to do so.

It is perfectly possible for schools to offer seven courses in the available time. If one reads Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education reports on Scottish secondary schools that offer six course and schools that offer seven courses, no difference is evident in the pattern from inspections across the two models. Therefore, the question that I always ask myself is this: “If you can do seven in the time, why don’t you just do seven?” If schools are offering six courses because they want to do something else, there needs to be evidence of that something else.

Liz Smith alluded to my map of the Scottish curriculum. There is little evidence that there has been infill by new vocational or other courses, so one has to ask why schools are offering six courses—or, worse, five—if they are not being mandated to do so by the local authority. If they are being mandated, we must ask what the local authority’s rationale is for doing that.

As some people in the room know, I spent a great deal of time trying to find out exactly what each of the 32 local authorities was up to, and their rationale for doing what they were doing. I researched every single document—I mean every document, right down to every committee paper from every committee since 2008—and managed to find only three curricular policies from the 32 authorities. I am sure that there are more, but they are not in a public place. Of the three policies, one predated curriculum for excellence. I did the same research with schools to look for curricular rationales that would explain why the reduction was happening, and only 15 to 20 per cent of Scotland’s secondary schools could produce a rationale.

Liz Smith: You have said that councils mandate schools to take a particular line. Is that in the spirit of curriculum for excellence, which is supposed to be designed to suit individual needs so that the

educational journey is in the best interests of the child and the school? Is it appropriate for councils to take a one-size-fits-all approach to the structure of the curriculum?

Professor Scott: The short answer has to be no, because using one model necessarily means that a council is lumping all children together in one direction, which might or might not meet their needs.

Worryingly, that model has significant flaws. I have recently done some research on a number of authorities. I point out that the research is not yet published. As some members will know, I have several papers coming out. I do not have a wide enough sample yet to prove that this is true, but the research is tending to suggest that, in authorities where the offer is six columns and six subjects, the child actually sits five, or sometimes fewer than five, qualifications. One begins to wonder whether there is a correlation between that and the absence of figures on attainment of five Scottish credit and qualifications framework qualifications at level 3, five at level 4 and five at level 5—although one can get the five at level 5 figures if one digs around in council papers.

With regard to the spirit of your question, I think that it would be helpful to all of us—certainly, to the committee—to have broad information. We are being driven into corners. We tend to talk about pupils leaving school with one plus qualifications at level 5. I have no problem with talking about leavers, because I think that the purpose of education has always been to allow children to leave it with a broad set of experiences and qualifications that meet their needs. I do not think that that has changed with CFE—indeed, it certainly should not have changed.

We tend to talk about leaving with one-plus at level 5 or level 6 does a number of things. I have been tracking schools that demonstrate the five at level 3, level 4 and level 5 figures; one can still find quite a lot of them if one digs. In them, one can find some surprising things. By and large, the more able pupils are doing better in respect of five at 5—but you know what I am going to say next, don’t you? That is not the case for the least able pupils. The final purpose—although not the original purpose—of CFE was to improve equity.

The following example relates to a school the name of which I cannot give because I have not yet published the research. In several schools in my collection, in 2012-13—just before the introduction of CFE—the five at 3 percentage was in the 90s. That was the case for many schools. However, I can show you examples of schools in which the figure has dropped to 60-odd per cent, 50-odd per cent or even, in a few cases, 40-odd per cent. That is beyond being acceptable. Serious issues have to be addressed—although I

should say that there are schools in which the percentages have been maintained or, in some cases, are even better. The situation is not homogeneous, and that is the problem.

The question was about whether we were getting a certain level of quality with the approach, and the answer, sadly and in all honesty, appears to be no.

The Convener: Just before I bring in Dr Britton, I want clarification of whether your analysis looks only at SQA levels. Is there, as Education Scotland has told us, a possibility that some pupils who are not performing so well are doing other curricular activity or even modern apprenticeship college courses?

Professor Scott: I hate to do this—Keir Bloomer has described what I am doing as the “Blue Peter” approach to curriculum planning. I am unfolding a map of all the 357 secondary schools in Scotland. There is no way you will be able to reproduce the map for your notes—and you are not getting it, either. *[Interruption.]* I apologise to the microphone. The map clearly demonstrates that there is considerable variation. I find it difficult to tell you that anything in this is improving. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry. I lost the thread of the question in the midst of unfolding the map. Can you repeat it?

The Convener: The figures that you have just given were for the performance of less-able students. Have you any way of tracking what non-SQA qualifications they might be doing?

Professor Scott: I beg your pardon. I lost that when I got caught up with the microphone.

Yes, I can track that because I can quite see clearly all the lesser SQA qualifications. Not many schools publish their attainment information—when you get right down to it, it is a very small minority—but of them some publish information on other qualifications.

One can see that better when one examines schools’ curricular structure. It is often possible to see quite clearly from the option choice form the qualifications that are being offered. It does not say how well a pupil did, but from it you can see the extent to which a school has offered alternative provision. So, yes—I can track school by school whether schools are offering other courses.

There was quite a bit of alternative provision before CFE came in, and many schools have carried that forward into CFE: some have enhanced provision and some have not. I appear to be finding that the enhancements are fewer than the non-enhancements, which is a little bit of a worry.

One of the problems, of course, is that many options get stacked up against each other when there are six columns, whereas if there are seven or eight columns, the options can be spread out a bit more. However, I can track that.

10:15

Dr Alan Britton (University of Glasgow): Some of what has been said and Liz Smith’s questions reinforce a point that I tried to convey in my submission and responses last year. We still have not resolved who owns the curriculum in Scottish education. We have a system of distributed responsibilities and, therefore, quite opaque accountabilities.

It is in the spirit of curriculum for excellence for schools’ headteachers to be empowered and autonomous to make decisions relating to the curriculum. Moreover, that is part of the general ethos of Scottish education.

However, there has always been a tension between autonomy and central control. The quite profound backdrop to everything that has been happening is that we are still unclear about who owns the curriculum and, therefore, about who owns responsibility for the outcomes. We talk about distributed leadership and autonomy at local level. That was part of the thrust of CFE and it is the context in which I have previously characterised the unintended consequences. The consequences have emerged from deep-rooted structures of governance in Scottish education, which we have never resolved.

Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP): Good morning to the panel. I would like to go back to the map of the 357 secondary schools in Scotland that Professor Scott showed us. Was evidence gathered in the past on standard grades and the various offers that were made in secondary 4? For example, when I was studying for my standard grades, 20 years ago—I know that you cannot believe that—I was offered seven subjects. That was the base-level offer from Madras college, which is a Fife Council state school in St Andrews. A couple of years later, my middle sister was offered eight subjects, and a couple of years after that, my baby sister went to Bell Baxter high school in Cupar, just down the road—also a Fife Council school—and was offered nine subjects. Variation is surely not new. Was it ever mapped in the past?

Professor Scott: That was done to an extent; relatively few people are insane enough to try to read the writings of 357 secondary schools. It is not a quick process. However, it would have been much easier to map that in the past because, until 2000, when the “yellow peril” and the successor “white peril” curriculum guidelines for Scottish

secondary headteachers were revoked, schools should have been offering eight qualifications. That was the basic offer—"offer" seems to be the word for describing a curriculum these days. Every school had a set of Munn report modes of activity in its curriculum—literacy and numeracy, social subjects and so on. We worked across seven of those, and there was an eighth column. A few inventive schools—I worked in a couple of them—also certificated other aspects of their work through SQA qualifications or alternative qualifications.

Without being cheeky, I say that I do not think that there has been an actual map of Scottish education until now, so that mapping was probably not done. However, there would not have been such a degree of variation at that time.

Jenny Gilruth: My point is that there was variation under the previous system, and it is important that we acknowledge that from the outset.

What is your view on the subjects that are currently on offer potentially limiting subject options later—after S4, for example? My sisters and I studied different numbers of subjects because different numbers of subjects were available. However, all three of us were able to sit five highers; we were not disadvantaged. Are you suggesting that the current system disadvantages pupils at the end of S4, for example, because they are offered fewer subjects?

Professor Scott: That depends on how pupils do. I think that the most able pupils will survive in any system. In fact, I think that the most able are prospering. Earlier on, I suggested that there is a danger that inequity is growing. That is because, to be honest, the most able pupils will cope in any system: if they are given only six or seven qualifications to work for, they will use the time well and will probably prosper in that system.

The trouble comes for the pupils at the bottom end of a group—below the most able, the average or whatever—for whom it is much tougher in pretty much any school in Scotland.

I have reservations about schools that offer only five qualifications in S4. There are still about four, I think, and that is a problem, because they were always very tight. One had a curriculum for a while that included English, mathematics, native speaker Gaelic and any two other courses that the pupil fancied. I would not call that a Scottish curriculum. However, on schools offering six, seven or eight qualifications, assuming that the child manages to carry forward five subjects, they will be able to get five highers. If they do not manage to do so, that is a different matter.

Jenny Gilruth: I was quite taken with your point that the most able will survive. My concern is

about yesterday's Reform Scotland report, which focused overtly on the number of subjects. As a former teacher, I am concerned that we are still obsessed with getting children to study more subjects at a younger age, at S4, and we are not considering how that impacts on their mental health, particularly given the course requirements of national 4 and national 5. N4 requires an added value unit and N5 requires an assignment, with all the extra burden that that places on our pupils, never mind the mental health of our teaching profession. Has there been any analysis of that?

Last night, I sponsored a parliamentary reception for the Mental Health Foundation, and I know that pupils are really struggling with some of the requirements of those courses at the moment. Are we really saying that they should be studying more subjects, which will potentially add to their mental health issues?

Professor Scott: There are so many factors. One could equally ask whether the addition of a third two-term dash to the other two significantly increased the pressure on young people. My suspicion, having talked to quite a lot of young people, is that the answer would be yes.

In 1998, when I arrived at Perth high school—an upper middle-class secondary school, which was very comfortable—the five-higher figure was 6 per cent. When I left, the figure was about 24 per cent, and nobody had been killed in the process or had had any serious damage caused to them. We did that for the most able; I could talk to you equally well about how we introduced college courses for the middling group of children, which were vocationally based courses. It depends on how one focuses the learning of young people and what the headteacher, colleagues and the community choose to take forward.

Jenny Gilruth: It does. I am sorry, convener, but I have a final, practical question for the whole panel about how we solve this issue. The committee is here to try to help the system.

I will go back to William Hardie's point about hours allocation. I raised that point with the previous panel before the recess. I was quite taken aback by what Professor Scott said about the six-course choice coming from ADES—that is not my understanding of the situation. As a former teacher, I understand that the six-course choice option was driven by hours allocation from the SQA. If we look at the 160-hours allocation, we see that in one year it is possible to timetable only 5.3 subjects, given that there are 855 teaching hours.

We would have to start a bit earlier if we wanted to give a bigger offer of subjects. We have heard that the Scottish Association of Geography Teachers wants to go back to the two, two, two

model, and Jim Scott suggested that his previous school had seven subjects as the offer in S4. I am interested in the panel's answer to this.

Professor Scott: I will deal with the ADES point first. It would be wrong for me to name the director of education concerned—although I could—but I understand that one director of education carried out some of what I would call timetabling 101 work, with simple calculations along the lines that you have spoken about, and decided that that was all that could be carried out in the time.

I prefer to look at someone whom I am happy to name: Maureen McKenna in Glasgow, who is exemplary and whose work is excellent; HMIE recently agreed with me on that. Her documentation on CFE clearly says to her headteachers and colleagues that they need to consider third year carefully and use it wisely. There are experiences and outcomes in third year will set pupils up well for progress in fourth year.

You mentioned Kier Bloomer's document that was published yesterday. Glasgow's response to that was, "We do not impose a system on our schools; we allow them to consider their opportunities and needs and build a curriculum that meets those needs".

My old friend, Gerry Lyons, in two of Glasgow's secondary schools, has chosen to go for six courses. His curriculum is almost exactly the same as mine at Perth high school because we did them together, but he has managed to squeeze it into six columns. It is really a matter of how you think you should best meet the needs of your children.

It is not a matter of the number of minutes. If one uses third year wisely, there are more than sufficient minutes.

Dr Britton: I am going to cop out of providing an answer on the technical dimensions to this. There are lots of different possible models but, from my perspective, I can offer how you go about arriving at the solution. That is critical. The committee's report on national tests that came out yesterday identified some of the issues around policy implementation, and that is where we are now. How do you implement policy more effectively? That would also be the question for this scenario.

What do you do to solve the problem? You talk to headteachers who feel free to talk to you without any restriction on what they have to say.

Alongside that, as Jim Scott suggests, there is expertise out there on resolving timetabling. It would be difficult to propose a one-size-fits-all solution, and it would not be appropriate in the spirit of Scottish education governance to legislate for something like that. That is one of the tensions in the Scottish system. Sometimes, we legislate in education; at other times we try to enact change

purely through policy. It is quite a grey area. When does something become legislation and when is it policy? I do not think that you can necessarily legislate to solve problems, but you can work with the profession in different ways and look at the impact it can have in a more systematic way.

I have made the point previously that, other than Jim Scott's work and that of a few other people, we have very little research evidence about the impact of the different models. Schools have been left to try things out, almost certainly based on sound local judgment, but there is very little evidence. We need to have all those things in place to arrive at a solution.

William Hardie: I agree with my colleagues. We do not want to mandate particular models at this stage, because we could start getting into other unintended consequences. I very much support what Alan Britton said about the need for more research into what different structures and pathways mean for attainment.

What happens in third year is key to providing preparation for qualifications and the potential for doing them. We have spoken a lot about doing the qualifications in one year and Jenny Gilruth mentioned the stresses that that could put on pupils. To what extent are two-year courses being run? My impression is that the one-year course is the dominant approach but—this goes back to the need for research—perhaps we should look at what two-year pathways look like and what that means for the number of qualifications that can be taken, for attainment and for the wellbeing of learners.

Alison Harris (Central Scotland) (Con): I would like to ask about the issues surrounding multilevel teaching. Are courses designed to support that method?

William Hardie: As well as supporting the Royal Society of Edinburgh's education committee, I support the learned societies group, which brings together learned scientific societies such as the Institute of Physics, the Royal Society of Chemistry and the Royal Society of Biology. We also have computing science and maths, as well as one or two others.

Multicourse teaching seems to be a particular issue in the sciences. Although courses might have similar titles, the national 4 course in physics, for example, will be very different from the national 5 course, but they will often be taught together. It can affect the quality of the teaching if a teacher has to teach quite different classes together, and that can be exacerbated by having national 4, national 5 and higher pupils in the same classes.

10:30

Of course, the issue is related to the difficulty in recruiting subject specialist teachers, particularly in the sciences—notably computing science—which means that in some schools multicourse teaching might well be the only way in which schools can timetable courses to allow them to be run.

The learned societies group raised the issue, back in 2016, I think, with SQA, Education Scotland and the Government, so those bodies are aware of it. At the time, there was, if not a commitment—I do not think that I can go as far as to say that—certainly a dialogue between Education Scotland and local authorities, to highlight that multicourse teaching is undesirable in the sciences.

I am not aware of action having been undertaken since then and, as far as I can tell, multicourse teaching is as prevalent now as it was when the learned societies group raised the issue.

Dr Britton: The simplest response to the question is this: would any teacher actively choose to construct their teaching and learning in such a way? Although there are some—relatively weak—pedagogical arguments for multilevel teaching, which are to do with the notion of peer support in the classroom and so on, the reality for most teachers is that if they were given a choice, they would not choose multilevel teaching.

This is a matter on which it is important to speak to headteachers and identify the resource allocations that are driving the inevitability of multilevel teaching.

Professor Scott: We are making three different points, which is helpful.

One of the things that concerns me, based on what I have done over the past couple of years, is the extent to which tri-level teaching is still prevalent in places. It tends to be prevalent in minority subjects and smaller schools—or both—but it is a genuine issue.

I get a lot of mail from teachers who write in to tell me about the situation in their schools. That is a bit unexpected and it is very good, not just for statistics but for other things. It is interesting that geography teachers, who have featured this morning, seem to be particularly exercised about tri-level teaching—other teachers are, too. As William Hardie said, in the sciences it should be a no-no.

Tri-level teaching seems to be prevalent in quite a lot of the smaller subjects. Given the pressure on the last couple of columns in six-course schools, there is a tendency to jam a lot of things in there, which seems to have led to more tri-level teaching.

Alison Harris: I asked the question because many parents have written to me and are very concerned about the issue. I wanted to hear the panel's opinions, because I cannot see how it can work. How can someone teach a child in S4 and a child in S6? That is stretching the teacher very far.

Professor Scott: Sorry, I did not realise that you meant teaching across different year groups. That is even more difficult—

Alison Harris: Sorry. Maybe I should have been more specific.

Professor Scott: I think that that is much less common, and it is very difficult to do. I am a computing and mathematics teacher, and if I were to attempt to teach advanced higher computing, higher computing and national 5 computing in one room, there would be a significant challenge, even for the most able kids.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): We have been talking a lot about the quality of education for all our young people, and I wonder whether multilevel teaching is a particular issue for the most disadvantaged young people—albeit that that might be an unintended consequence of the system—which is making them even more disadvantaged.

William Hardie said that multilevel classes will obviously have an impact on the quality of teaching. Education Scotland told us that that is not the case and that it is all about the quality of the teaching. Dr Britton, you deal with initial teacher education. To what extent do you factor into initial teacher education that a teacher might be asked to teach across different levels?

Is any work being done on how prevalent the issue is? Given my family background, I understand that in small schools in remote areas—where having a secondary school makes a huge difference—compromises have to be made. However, I have been told that, in my city, Glasgow, multilevel teaching happens routinely, across subjects. It did not happen back in the day when I was a teacher, 20-odd years ago.

Those are my questions. How are we supporting teachers to address the issue, and how prevalent is it?

Dr Britton: I do not have data on prevalence, although colleagues might have.

Initial teacher education will do what it can to prepare teachers who are beginning for the various scenarios that they will encounter. Of course, our students will go out to 32 local authorities with different approaches, and there are also different approaches in individual schools. There is a wide variety of approaches, so we cannot necessarily prepare people for every eventuality. However, we try to introduce the

notion that, for example, if they are teaching in a small rural primary school, they might well teach a composite primary 1 to primary 4 class or a primary 5 to primary 7 class, and that, in such a situation, they should introduce peer-to-peer learning. I have to say that I have seen superb examples of that peer-to-peer learning in small primary schools.

In secondary schools, the preparation is about giving people the policy context. They have to know what they are going to face when they go out there. That is particularly difficult for secondary teachers who are recruited through the one-year postgraduate diploma in education programme, which the University of Glasgow offers. Half of that year is spent out in schools, so that does not leave a lot of time to prepare them in that regard, although we do so as best we can. If they are subject specialists, each part of the specialist input will try to prepare them for the reality of multilevel teaching, which means that they will learn about the different levels and different qualifications and what is involved in those. They are given ideas about how to teach across different levels. That is nothing new in the secondary sector. In the 1990s, I taught O grades and then standard grades, and I would often have a foundation-general or a general-credit class.

That goes back to the point that I made earlier. Most teachers would say that, optimally, you would teach a foundation class, a general class and a credit class, with the understanding that there could be transitions between those levels.

Johann Lamont: However, you would rarely have taught a higher class and a standard grade class at general, credit and foundation levels. That is the sort of thing that I am being told is now happening, and it is happening more routinely than it did in the past.

Dr Britton: Yes, but the higher and the intermediate classes often came together.

Johann Lamont: Do you think that there is an equity issue in this? Way back in the day, a tiny proportion of the kids whom I taught stayed on until fifth year. In the school that I taught in, you could cobble together a higher class, but there was a wide range of ability. However, in the secondary school up the road, they would have five classes doing higher English, with 25 or so pupils predicted to get an A.

Is there an issue that people in more disadvantaged communities are more likely to be taught in multilevel classes, because there are fewer of them at that level, which means that they have a more limited chance of achieving their potential than do their peers who are in a school in which 25 kids are predicted to get an A in higher English?

Dr Britton: I do not have that data. I do not know whether anyone else has it.

William Hardie: I do not have specific data on how prevalent that issue is in disadvantaged schools. However, it comes back to the issue of the difficulty of recruiting teachers, particularly in subjects in which there is a shortage of teachers. As I mentioned before, the sciences are an area in which multicourse teaching is employed. It may well be that schools in disadvantaged areas find it more difficult to recruit teachers to teach some of those subjects than schools in less disadvantaged areas do.

On the availability of data on prevalence, the last piece of work that I am aware of in that regard was done by the Royal Society of Chemistry in 2016. Information about that was included in the submission to the committee by the learned societies group—paragraph 20 provides a short summary of it. That research revealed that multicourse classes were prevalent in 73 per cent of national 5 classes, and that the most common pattern involved national 5 being combined with national 4. That information came from a survey of 259 chemistry teachers. It is clear from that survey that teachers feel that it is difficult to support the needs of the students across those different levels in the same class.

As I said earlier, we know that the Scottish Government, Education Scotland and the SQA are aware of the issue, but I do not know what action has been taken to address it since we raised it with those bodies in 2016.

Johann Lamont: Do you share my concern that Education Scotland did not think that the issue was a problem and has not done any analysis or equality impact assessment, which I believe would show that more disadvantaged young people are likely to be in multilevel classes and are therefore likely to get less support than their peers in more advantaged schools? That was the case back in the day, and it is more of an issue now.

William Hardie: I certainly share your concern if we are talking about Education Scotland turning its ear away from the issue, given that the issue has been flagged up. It is certainly aware of the issues that the learned societies group has raised with it.

Johann Lamont: Is it your view that the driver in this regard is the shortage of teachers, but that people have started to say that they can continue to go on in the way that things are going? Has a vicious circle developed, with people saying that we can simply put all the levels together in one class so that we do not have to find an adequate number of teachers?

William Hardie: There might be issues with the school management, with people not necessarily knowing the differentiation between courses. To

people at that level, the content might appear to be superficially similar, which might lead them to think that the classes could be put together, even though, quite clearly, that is difficult to do.

Professor Scott: I am normally quite cautious about answering questions when I do not have the entire set of data sitting in front of me, and, as you know, you are asking a particularly difficult question.

Most interviews with teachers indicate that the issue that you highlight seems to be a growing problem and that there seem to be several sources of the problem. Some teachers suggest that the problem arises from local authority staffing levels, and some suggest that they are put in a particularly difficult position because of the view of the curriculum that is taken by the head teacher or the senior management team—they may be qualified to say that, but I do not know that; I can only hear what they have to say. Some teachers, probably with more accuracy, say that the issue arises with their principal teacher, who wants to take the approach that we are talking about in order to make more time for their other duties, although that should be moderated by the senior management team.

The question that you ask about Education Scotland is hard to answer. If I understood what the chief executive was saying when she gave evidence to you, she said that Education Scotland was only just restarting aspect inspections. One of the things that one would normally expect in any major educational initiative—I have lived through a few of them—is a rolling inspection process. HMIE was the pride of the world in terms of the way in which it rigorously carried out such inspections—Scotland had a right to be proud of that. Some of us who were inspected by HMIE did not always feel that that was the case, but it carried out those inspections extremely thoroughly.

I was aspect inspected in Perth high school in December 2011—that was almost the last thing that I did in that school. I assumed that that approach would roll on, but, obviously, it has not. Normally, what happens is that aspect inspections and school inspections build up, and one gathers a necessary parcel of inspection evidence. HMIE inspects around a dozen secondary schools a year. If you give it 10 years, it will manage about 100 secondary schools, and the first half of the evidence will be obsolete by that point. Unless you create aspect inspections, it is quite difficult to get a feel for what is going on and to really drill down into aspects of the major initiative that is being carried through. Normally, what comes from that is a portmanteau report that says where we stand with regard to curriculum for excellence. However, unless I have missed something completely, there is currently no such report. I think that we face a

problem in terms of how we are assessing ourselves in that regard.

The geography teachers, science teachers and other teachers who write in all feel that they are the losers in the process. That is one of the reasons why they are raising the issue. If they are all losers, perhaps there is a problem.

10:45

Johann Lamont: I have a question about Professor Scott's report. It contains a lot of interesting stuff and it clearly merits a great deal of attention. At one point, it says that the statistics appear to

"substantiate the suggestion ... that equity may have been adversely affected by CfE."

I am in danger of looking back to a golden age of standard grade, because the transition from non-certificate courses to standard grade courses was extremely significant for our lot of young people who were completely written off and had been put on to a non-certificate course. The fear is that, now, there is a possibility that, although some young people will be doing courses, those courses will be non-certificated, which will mean that we go back to the days in which such pupils got less attention. That seems to me to be a huge challenge. I do not think that that is the intended consequence of the change, but I think that it is possible that those who were supposed to be supported most through certification for all are now losing out in a curriculum for excellence that is supposed to be designed around equity. What can we do to address that?

Professor Scott: I wish that I had an easy answer to that. A glib answer would be that you should do what the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development said to do in 2015 and go back and carry out a thorough mid-session review of curriculum for excellence, consider what it is trying to do and think about how it should move forward. I heard the chief executive of Education Scotland saying that Education Scotland is getting around to that. I understand that it has other priorities but, to be only getting around to that four years after the publication of a major international report seems to be quite a serious issue.

My personal view is that it will be difficult to resolve the problem in those areas where six courses are mandated. That is because people's options have become so narrowed, and the six courses become five or four, and they are really in trouble right away. Those children are not being given a chance. I understand that some basic timetabling led some people, whether they were directors of education, headteachers or whoever, to make those choices, but they should have been

more informed. I used the phrase “unintended consequences” in the title of a thesis about this issue way back in 2014. It has been obvious from that point that these problems were building up. I remember Dr Allan and I talking about the modern languages problem in a previous committee in this Parliament, because it was evident quite early on that some things were going off the rails.

How we put things back together is not simple. It is a bit like turning around a supertanker or the Titanic. It takes 15 to 20 years to launch and steer a major educational initiative; you cannot just change things with a click of your fingers. Whatever we do now will involve a process of planning and organisation, and it will take time.

I share your concern, because this is a process that is designed to help children from deprived backgrounds, children who are in difficulties, young carers and learners from all the other contexts that we have talked about to be able to come up alongside all the young people who have all the advantages in the universe. If we allow this to drift for another five years while we sort out something that we can go forward with, we are in serious trouble and we will be in danger of creating a generation of people who have not had a good experience in education. The only thing that we can do is honestly debate what the findings are. Personally, I would release the five subjects at SCQF level 3, five at 4 and five at 5 figures for every school in Scotland, and I would release information about the extent of planning, organisation and leadership by each of the 32 local authorities, because that is a mixed picture, as I suspect that you all understand. That would give us some basis, alongside the leaver statistics, which are very helpful, and the other statistics that we have. I would also try to ensure that information about all the qualifications that children get, whether through the SQA or not, is publicly available, so that we can see how schools are doing.

Further, you are responsible for legislation that was enacted in 2012 and 2013 that required every secondary school and every local authority to produce information on attainment and the curriculum. However, if you have read any of my research, you know that, on a massive scale, that is not happening. Not all authorities are doing it, and many individual schools are not doing it. They are better at publishing the curriculum but, as you can see from the pretty little map that I have here, there is a problem. Look at the big stripe down at the end of the map. The green box shows the schools that publish the curriculum, but the white box—look at the size of it—shows the schools that do not publish the curriculum at all.

I did exactly the same thing with attainment. Only a small percentage of Scottish secondary

schools publish their attainment levels for parents to see, so that they can understand how well the school is doing. Many schools do not even bother to suggest to parents that they can see some information if they go to the parent zone or whatever—that information is just not there.

There are things that we can do now to allow the public debate to happen much more effectively. We could do some this week, but I do not think that we will. However, there is a harder job of trying to plan something quickly over the next year or two to pick up the pieces of what should be an excellent initiative and turn it into something that does the job that it was supposed to do.

Jenny Gilruth: I want to pick up briefly on Johann Lamont’s point with regard to equity, which I think is really important. Professor Scott spoke about children not being given a chance. We need to reflect on what came before curriculum for excellence and what happened before the present day. In a school in Edinburgh that I taught in until 2014, the policy until about 2012 was that in the preliminary examinations, which would happen before the final exams, unless a pupil obtained 33 per cent, they could not go forward and sit for a higher qualification, for example. We therefore used to discount a huge number of pupils, who were just moved to the side, which was not fair as they did not have a chance to succeed. However, the school and the City of Edinburgh Council changed the policy in order to focus on poverty and give those kids a chance.

Do you recognise that, Professor Scott? Do you think that we have moved away from that? Do you think that the system enshrines inequality? I do not recognise some of what has been discussed this morning. I think that, in fact, our schools are working really hard to give all pupils an opportunity to succeed in a way that they just did not do 10 or 20 years ago.

Professor Scott: Bizarrely, I think that you and I are saying the same thing but in different ways. I do not think that anyone disputes that all schools are working their socks off and trying very hard to do the job. However, we need to look at the advice that they have been given, the supportive framework that they have or have not been provided with and the ways in which headteachers are taking that forward, either individually or as a group within the local authority, with their colleagues in the school and with their community. If you read the parent council minutes of every parent council in Scotland, you will see how many of them have been involved in consultations about the curriculum. I will not state that information here, because I am still adding it up and have not published it yet, but it is not a high number.

I recognise what Jenny Gilruth says about schools discounting children, but I have already said this morning that the process is still happening. Children with six columns for subject choice end up doing five subjects, or four or fewer. If the average is 4.7 and we start with six, obviously some are doing only two or three subjects. The process of discounting children from what they set out to do is therefore still happening.

I should not ask this of a teacher, but I will anyway. Where is the skill of the teacher and the people who support the teacher in the upper echelons of the school? Where is the skill of ensuring that the child who starts on the journey ends the journey successfully? That is the learning and teaching part of the process. Whatever the structure in which that operates, there has to be good learning and teaching. Part of what we all seem to be getting from people is that they are not certain and are unsure.

I deliberately quoted the Glasgow City Council handbook to support CFE that Maureen McKenna produced, because it is one of the highest-quality ones in Scotland. In many authorities, there is no such handbook at all and no advice from the authority for the schools. I cannot find that in most of Scotland's authorities. Schools are operating in a complex environment in which the natural supports that one would turn to—for example, HMIE for long-term advice on how things are going—are not there. One would turn to the local authority for policy, training and support, which might or might not be there. One would turn to a consortium arrangement of schools to work together and sometimes that works and sometimes it does not. Jenny Gilruth would recognise all those things from her previous experience.

We have a situation in which CFE should be a world-class initiative, and it has the potential to be so. I have debated with a few people in this room what the first committee started with in terms of the four capacities and a view of education, and I do not think that any of us disagreed that CFE is other than a good idea. However, the implementation process has gone in various directions and somewhere along the line a lot of the teachers, headteachers and local authorities have been left behind.

I very carefully evaluate a couple of Scottish local authorities professionally in my role as their chief external evaluator. I cannot talk about those authorities, because that is commissioned work. However, I can tell you that, when I speak to headteachers, deputy headteachers or teachers in the local authorities, there will not be a homogeneous understanding of CFE in any of the authorities that I deal with or a homogeneous view of how certain groups of young people can be

supported effectively. That should not be happening. To look back to the higher school training process, Mrs Pirie may have shipped out furniture van loads of CDs to everyone and we may all have complained, but at least we had supportive materials to work with. This time, we are working with, at best, a partial vacuum.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Where should the guidance and support come from? Is there a bigger role for Education Scotland, the SQA or the Scottish Government? I heard what you said about not mandating, but should there be a mandate to schools to say that five subjects is too few? That might raise the number. Coming from a non-education background, I cannot understand why, if some schools can do seven and eight subjects, the rest of the schools cannot do that. Where does that come from?

Dr Britton: An interesting illustration of the mandating issue comes from the document that William Hardie referred to earlier: Education Scotland's guidance on "Progression from the Broad General Education to the Senior Phase". The document's language is guidance, and throughout is the word "should"—

Rona Mackay: I am sorry to stop you—what is the document?

Dr Britton: I can make it available to the official reporters afterwards.

Rona Mackay: Whose report is it?

Dr Britton: It is from Education Scotland, and is guidance for schools, local authorities and their partners. My point is that the language throughout is "should" and cannot be "must", because of the nature of Scottish education and how governance is distributed.

What can be provided is a more coherent approach to informing the profession. Jim Scott is absolutely right that there was a failure to communicate clearly from the outset about the review group report in 2004, which we have spoken about before. There has been a perfect storm, because the report coincided with the loss of local authority capacity to provide policy translation, which was provided previously for things like higher still, standard grades and the 5 to 14 curriculum. There was a middle cadre of people in the system who were able to interpret high-level guidance and provide ways to implement it consistently in schools. It was a cascade model, to some extent, but it operated in both directions. A policy could be cascaded from above, but information from the ground up was fed into the system.

That middle layer has largely gone, as the OECD highlighted in its report. A possible way

forward is through the regional improvement collaboratives, which are at least an attempt to re-establish a layer that is sustainable in the current climate to provide regionalised support for policy implementation and to help headteachers to find their way around this.

Professor Scott: It is easy to kick Education Scotland, as it provides several opportunities—I hate to say that. However, it does have the key and important role, which is to be a focus. It ought to be the marketplace of Scottish education, and training and development work should all come together there, to some extent, although I am not suggesting that it should run it all. However, it does not seem to have fulfilled that function for the past several years.

Like Johann Lamont, I have to be careful of golden eras in the past—there was not one for Learning and Teaching Scotland, so ES is not necessarily a worse product than the one before. Realistically speaking, Learning and Teaching Scotland was useful in a number of ways. It had Eddie Broadley, a curriculum expert by anybody's standard, who could stand on a platform and convey it. He and I ran around Scotland for a couple of years, trying to help people to understand what CFE was about. LTS also had high-quality information and communication technology people and others who, if supported appropriately and brought to the fore, were capable of doing the job that we require to be done right now. In Ken Muir, it had a chief inspector of curriculum who understood Scottish education root and branch and was able to work with people and facilitate things.

11:00

All those people have moved on. I am not defaming in any way their successors, but the inspectorate used to have a conveyor belt of people who rose through the system. The lesser ones fled to the sides, like the chaff, and strong people came to the top. In recent years, there has been discontinuity in the inspectorate, and we have not necessarily seen continuity of expertise and ability. I hesitate to say that of an agency that has done immensely good things for Scottish education, but we seem to have blurred the edges a bit.

The short answer to your question is that the curricular side of Education Scotland, which is belatedly being restrengthened and which went through a difficult period, needs to come together with the inspectorate side and local authorities, which need to start to put together the expertise that my colleagues said has disappeared in recent years. If we can build that, we should be in a position to take this forward. However, that cannot be done by three civil servants in an office down

the road at Victoria Quay; it must be done much more systematically.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): What is the panel's understanding of the link between an area's Scottish index of multiple deprivation status and the average number of highers that secondary schools offer?

William Hardie: I do not really know about the higher offering, but research clearly shows that schools that offer fewer courses in S4 tend to be in more deprived areas. That leads me to believe that that position would roll on to higher provision, but I do not have data on that.

Dr Britton: I refer again to the Reform Scotland report that came out yesterday, from which we could extrapolate. In East Dunbartonshire, all schools appear to offer eight subjects, so we might be able to extrapolate the higher context from that, but I do not have the data. That is another example of information that we need for the system—everyone needs it.

Professor Scott: I could probably give a school-by-school answer, but I cannot add up the figures in an instant. If Ross Greer wants to ask me at the end of the meeting for the figures, I will be happy to give him them.

Schools that offer seven or eight subjects are often in areas that have slightly more advantaged pupils. That leads schools to keep higher numbers of courses, because they think that pupils can get through, which tends to mean that more pupils do five highers. However, that relates to demography and not the curriculum structure.

Ross Greer: I will move from the number of highers that a pupil can take at one time to the number that they are offered. About 18 months ago, *The Times* did a bit of work on that, and its understanding was that schools in the most deprived communities offer a choice from 17 higher subjects on average, whereas schools in the least deprived communities offer a choice from 23 higher subjects on average. Does that correspond with your understanding of differences between deprived and less deprived communities in what is offered?

Professor Scott: I wrote a chunk in my overly long report to demonstrate that. If you are asking whether schools in more upmarket communities offer a wider choice of highers, the answer is almost certainly yes.

Ross Greer: It is reassuring to hear you say that because, when Education Scotland gave evidence three weeks ago, I posed exactly the same question. I said:

“Does Education Scotland accept that, if I were a pupil ... in one of the most deprived communities”,

I would be offered a choice from roughly 17 highers whereas, if I were in one of the least deprived communities, I would be offered a choice from roughly 23 highers? The response was:

“No, we do not accept that.”—[*Official Report, Education and Skills Committee*, 3 April 2019; c 25.]

The longer exchange can be read in the *Official Report*. What is your reaction to the fact that Education Scotland does not accept a link between deprivation and the breadth of subjects that are offered to pupils in our schools?

Professor Scott: In all honesty, it is not my role as an academic to comment on the leadership of Education Scotland.

I have to say that I was surprised—I listened with great interest to a number of things that the Education Scotland witnesses said and, in all honesty, I found myself wondering whether I lived in the same educational world. Beyond that, I really should not comment. It is the job of Education Scotland witnesses to answer for what they have said and whether it was accurate. All I can say is that I did not recognise that answer as the situation pertaining.

William Hardie: My point is similar to Professor Scott’s. Clearly, the data that Ross Greer refers to is based on research and work that has been undertaken by *Times Higher Education*. Education Scotland says that there is no link between deprivation and subject choice, but it has not substantiated that statement. This committee might want to follow up with Education Scotland to see whether it has data that shows a different answer. I am not in possession of data on this issue.

Ross Greer: I have a final, brief question. You might not have this information immediately to hand. Education Scotland referenced its belief that there was no link on the basis of the attainment challenge reports. However, my understanding is that the attainment challenge reports do not back up Education Scotland’s conclusion. If you take a broad overview of the attainment challenge reports that we have so far, you are not led to the conclusion that schools in the most deprived communities have just as much on offer as those in the least deprived communities. Is that correct?

Professor Scott: Having just carried out comparative analysis of the nine Scottish attainment challenge authorities, I suppose that that question is for me.

Obviously, the different authorities have carried out the work to different standards. Two of them have been declared to be excellent, two have been declared to be whatever the current word for mediocre is and the remainder have been somewhere in between. Those that have done the

job particularly well appear to have genuinely affected equity positively and appear to offer coherent sets of choices. However, I could take you to schools at the bottom end of the middling set that offer a significant choice, as well as to schools with exactly the same demography that are struggling to offer the same breadth of choice.

The trouble is that, when one sits in a committee such as this, one can make grand statements about how things are; however, when a headteacher in a relatively run-down school at the back end of a city somewhere—not that those exist in Scotland any more—may be facing a significant budget cut by a local authority. The headteacher might have had their entire SAC budget taken away by the local authority—that is not unknown—and they may be struggling to find teachers of certain subjects, even in a city. The picture can be very complex.

The trouble is that there is not one thing that causes this; it is often due to an accumulation of factors, and the unlucky school that happens to be sitting at the epicentre of everything that is going wrong is the one that gets into a bad situation. The answer to your question is that the picture is very complex.

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): Are regional improvement collaboratives making any difference to the discussion on subject choices across Scotland, given that they are a relatively new part of the landscape in education?

Dr Britton: One view is that it is very early days. I think that they are still being established. Again, this may be an opportunity to set the agenda, to some extent, for the regional improvement collaboratives as part of the wider ecosystem of governance. It is important to be clear about what the collaboratives can and cannot do and the level of support that they provide.

I mentioned that the collaboratives can potentially help to fill the gap that has been left by the evisceration of support at the local authority level, but they cannot do that on their own—there must be a whole-system approach. There is a danger that that situation could lead to a further spiral, with local authorities further relinquishing the support function, which is still a really important part of the system because that is where the local democratic structures and oversight of education reside in the system as it is constructed.

I think that the collaboratives will be part of the response, and the work of this committee can perhaps feed into that response as well, because you are raising some really important issues. I think that that is the way to move forward, collectively.

In my previous evidence to the committee, I made the point that, for me, none of this is about

politicising; it is about making the system work so that there is coherence across the board.

Professor Scott: That is a very interesting question. I have, stupidly, read the plans for almost all the RICs—which is an edifying experience in itself—and it is clear that they are not homogeneous. In a small country, we are bedevilled by a lack of homogeneity.

As Dr Allan knows, I have been to China quite a few times. I do not particularly like the idea that everybody should be doing the same on Thursday afternoons—that is not what Scotland is about—but it is helpful if a parent can have confidence that the experience that their child will have will be pretty much like the experience that another child will have, in terms of quality at least.

The RICs plans are interestingly different in their intents, and I will be interested to see how that works out. I have some knowledge of the inner workings of some of them, but I am not at the stage at which I am going to publish anything on that subject, because I am currently just learning. It looks as though some of them are off to a good start and some of them have made a much slower start. That may be because of local factors and the personnel who are available to them.

Alan Britton has nailed the issue down several times. Local authorities have not necessarily ended up with strong sets of people to do the developmental and training jobs that we want them to do, and that is a serious problem. That is an issue in the context of councils slowly being ground down. I was fortunate to work in a local authority in which my director held his budget particularly well. That meant that we had development opportunities. However, I left that job seven years ago, and who knows how things are there now?

It is early days to see fruit coming from the RICs, and there is the whole issue of why we stuffed an extra layer of bureaucracy into the education system. I was a co-author of a report of a headteachers professional association—which shall not be named—the last time the issue came up. We recommended going for a regional-type system or keeping with the councils and strengthening them—we did not come down on one side or the other. We did not imagine that someone would stuff something in the middle.

It will take RICs quite a bit of time to maximise the resources that they have, and some will be more fortunate in doing that than others. However, we will have to wait two or three years to see what they produce.

Tavish Scott: My other question relates to the point that Professor Scott made about the 2015 OECD report and its suggestion—actually, it was more than a suggestion—that there should be a

fundamental review of CFE so that we know where we are. Forgive my lack of knowledge about this, but do other nations provide a state-of-the-nation report, in effect, on how their education system is doing? That is probably not done on an annual basis—I was struck by your point about long-term assessments—but do they do that on a three-year or five-year cycle? Is there something that we should learn from that practice?

Dr Britton: I cannot say whether they produce state-of-the-nation reports, but we see systems that implement fundamental change. It is quite interesting to look at the example of Wales. To some extent, Wales has followed in Scotland's footsteps in respect of the nature of the educational reforms that it has undertaken, but with some of the lessons that were learned from the early implementation phase of curriculum for excellence and its roll-out. It will be interesting to see how it does things. It was able to learn from some of the mistakes and start with a much stronger baseline and a much stronger sense of what success would look like. That was pretty much absent in the early phase of CFE. It was very aspirational, but very little was said at the time about what success would look like. It will be interesting to see what happens in Wales, because it has a stronger starting point, and I think that it will have a strong point for review further down the line.

That has been a recurring theme in Scottish education for quite a long time. The Audit Scotland report on the implementation of the McCrone recommendations pointed out that it was almost impossible to evaluate any aspects of effectiveness or value for money because that was never made clear at the outset. There is nothing new in this, but we do not appear to be learning that we need to have a far stronger sense of where we are in order to revisit that issue further down the line.

11:15

Professor Scott: If you have nothing else to do, read chapter 4 of my thesis from 2014, which deals with exactly that point.

Tavish Scott: I will read it this afternoon.

Professor Scott: I will try not to waste your time by going on about it.

We, in Scotland, do not have a good record. We have probably carried out 22 major educational initiatives since the war, and roughly one third of them worked, one third did not work and a little bit of the rest sort of worked. We tend to abandon things that do not work. That is true of all parties. I can smile at all of you because all of you, at various points in time, have just given up on things. We have not really learned the lesson

about going back to the initiative that we are dealing with and saying, "Sugar! This isn't working. What can we do about this? How do we make this better?" We tend to say, "Let's have a new initiative. That'll sort the problem." Modern languages is a classic example of that.

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): It is a modern one rather than a classic one.

Professor Scott: Indeed. Some countries have been reasonably systematic in doing this. New Zealand, which appears to have a major curricular initiative every 13 or 14 months—which is not a good idea—is quite good at publishing stuff. In recent years, we have been pointed at Finland because it is quite reflective. I am not sure that the Finnish system is remotely transferable to Scotland, but it is interesting to look at.

There are quite different systems in much of western Europe that do not really coincide with ours particularly well. The Germans, Swiss and Austrians have a much stronger vocational side, which tends not to make them good comparators for us. It is, however, interesting to read about how they planned that, so there is some meat there that might be useful.

I have given up trying to read about American curricular developments, and I should probably say no more about that in a parliamentary committee.

It is not easy to find a simple parallel that we can use for Scotland. I quite like the Welsh system, but I note with interest that the Welsh took a whole lot of our people, including Professor Donaldson, down there to set it up. Maybe the lesson for us is to use our own people more wisely.

William Hardie: The OECD's report focused on the broad general education phase because, back in 2014-15, the senior phase was still in its infancy. We have now had a number of years of running the senior phase, and quite a lot of the comments that have been made in discussion have been about how the broad general education knits with the senior phase. Given the fact that that was not covered by the OECD review in 2015, there could be a case for undertaking a review to look systematically at how the broad general education phase now fits with the senior phase. Curriculum for excellence is meant to be a 3-to-18 integrated curriculum but, if we have reviewed how it does only for those up to the age of 15, it might make sense to look at the system in total.

Jim Scott made the point that there is a need for evaluation and for building it in from the start of initiatives. The OECD has clearly said that, when it reviewed curriculum for excellence, the lack of baseline data meant that it was not possible to

undertake a full and proper evaluation. The Royal Society of Edinburgh often makes that point. Again, it comes back to learning from mistakes and ensuring that data collection, working with independent education researchers and evaluation are built into all educational reforms, so that we can fully evaluate their impact and where improvements can be made.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): The committee has heard previously from Education Scotland that there is not really a problem here and that, although there appears to be a narrowing of choice, that hides a wider choice and more access to alternative pathways. We have heard from the panel today that, in their view, that is not the case and that the narrowing of traditional subject choice has not been offset by vocational courses, non-SQA courses and so on.

We have also heard from the panel about a potential reduction in equity, which runs completely contrary to the key objective in education policy at the moment. We have not heard a lot about an issue that I think Mr Allan will ask about, but Professor Scott talked about the future of some subjects in schools being in jeopardy because of the current trends. Although he does not believe that to be the case for STEM subjects, there is potential jeopardy for the economic prospects of the country, and the RSE has expressed concerns about a fall in the number of young people choosing STEM subjects not just at national 4 and national 5 but at higher.

This morning, Professor Scott, you said something like, "There is a danger of a generation losing out." How big a problem have we got? How serious are the issues that we are discussing around what is happening in the curriculum in the senior phase in our schools and the trends that there are? Education Scotland told us, in its evidence, that there is not really a problem. How serious a problem does the panel think we have?

The Convener: Professor Scott?

Professor Scott: Do you want me to go first? I would like to hide behind my colleagues. Iain Gray's is the \$64,000 question, is it not? It is very difficult to ask a national agency that has a Parliament and a Government sitting over it whether it is not doing a very good job. I have already declined—and will continue to decline—to comment on its leadership, because people have to be given a chance to do the job.

The committee knows that I had something to do with Education Scotland at one time—I worked with it rather than for it. Has it done the job that one would have hoped it would in supporting the development of CFE? I do not think so, and certainly not to the extent that one would have wished. Is it currently telling us the truth about

what is going on? One assumes that it believes that it is, because surely no professional person would turn up at the committee and say other than what they believed to be the truth. Therefore, we are dealing with elements of perception.

Sometimes, when someone is in a pressured situation, leading an initiative with things falling at them from all places, it is difficult to see the wood for the trees. It may be that Education Scotland believes that there is not a problem, but we, on this panel, are not the only three people in Scotland who are saying that there is. One hears that from parents. If I walk out of my front door and along the road in Dunblane, I bump into ex-colleagues of mine and other people whom I know, and, because I am an educationalist and occasionally in the papers these days, there is often a conversation in which they raise issues. Colleagues whom I work with in universities and schools—where I still often go—raise those issues as well, and I have just finished interviewing an entire set of headteachers, depute headteachers and teachers in one Scottish local authority who made it significantly clear that the situation is not moving forward in a shiny, polished manner. Therefore, I am forced to say that I do not agree with Education Scotland's analysis.

I believe that I have clear evidence—not just the spreadsheet that I have here, but lots of spreadsheets—that demonstrates that there is a problem. I also believe that some of the things that the committee has been told, such as by an Association of Directors of Education in Scotland rep—was it Terry Lanagan?—who said that lots of schools in Scotland are running a six-six-six pattern of courses when only about 31 out of 358 schools are, are things that people may believe to be true because someone has told them they are but that are demonstrably not true when one examines the situation. Is that a major problem? Yes, it is. It means that we have to do what we have all been talking about, which is to open the issue up for sensible debate, gather the evidence that is needed to see what the state of the problem is and, from that, build a platform on which to move forward. That is the only thing that we can do.

Dr Britton: I can only speak about the situation more broadly. The danger is that testimony like that can be translated into headlines about a crisis in Scottish education, and we need to be careful of that. For example, I do not think that there is a crisis in learning and teaching in Scotland's classrooms. The quality of the teaching profession has never been higher, and incredible work is going on in schools at all levels. I would not say that there is a crisis in the system.

However, there are problems with the system, to which I have alluded. The narrowing of curriculum

choice, albeit that it is an issue in itself, is a manifestation of wider issues that are not yet resolved. I keep coming back to that point. There was a review of governance, but it was pretty inconclusive. We need to have an open conversation about ownership, responsibility, accountability and autonomy in the system. Competing models of how we deliver education in Scotland have been floating around for quite a while and no one has yet resolved the issue.

The Convener: Do you want to comment, Mr Hardie?

William Hardie: I do not have much to add, other than to say that there is a need for a common set of data, so that we can all work from the same page. It would be helpful if the data were produced independently, where possible.

Rona Mackay: I want to ask about outcomes. Notwithstanding everything that we have discussed and the clear issues to do with equity, last year a record number of pupils went on to university and other positive destinations, including apprenticeships. How does that square with what we have been discussing and all the work that is being done to resolve matters? Should the outcomes outweigh all that?

Professor Scott: You are absolutely right to point out the outcomes. In the end, education is about what benefits a child in the future. I always tried to advise young people to build themselves a range of qualifications, experiences and attributes that would serve them well not only in the job that they go into straight after school, college or university, but in the next one and the next one—because that is the sort of society that we live in, these days.

That requires a balance; it requires more than just a lot of vocational experience. Employers are employers, sadly, and they still want to see a set of qualifications on a piece of paper. We need to build both sides. That is why, in response to Tavish Scott's question, I brought up the German, Swiss and Austrian system, in which there are far more effective ways of balancing the academic and the vocational. I am not saying that I like all parts of the system, but it works.

The increase in university admissions is a good thing: there is no doubt about that. That is related to the fact that there is no doubt that, in many cases, level 5 children are doing better than CFE, which is one half of the equity issue. I have given several reasons for why that might be the case, as have my colleagues.

However, it is not like that for the pupils at the bottom end. I take the point about apprenticeships and college entrants. *The Times* did a piece on my evidence on Saturday, and the Government response was about outcomes, but the

Government response has shifted. The response to the first year of performance data that I put out was about the overall set of qualifications, and it was that it was a blip that would sort itself out. Then the response was that we need to look at the totality of the child's education and at leaver attainment. Sadly, I recently cut the feet out from under the leaver attainment stats quite effectively. Now, we are talking about something else.

My problem with what is going on is that the ground shifts all the time. There is mission creep that operates in a number of contexts in CFE: the goals of CFE have changed, the ways in which we measure CFE have changed and the structures that we put in place to support and evaluate CFE have changed. There is therefore no yardstick that we can apply across the system so that we can say whether things are getting better. That is really quite difficult.

That is why I keep coming back to the need to put all the evidence on the table. From my big map of data, I could pull out 100 schools for which I have the figures on five qualifications at level 3, five at level 4 and five at level 5. They make fascinatingly stark reading. I cannot do that now, because the information has not been published and I have to be careful about how I handle it. Some schools have pretty much just gone along as they were before. A few schools—not only the best ones, but others—are significantly better in more than one respect. Some have gone downhill in respect of the pupils at the bottom end, or the ones at the top end or both.

11:30

There is no standard school response to the curriculum for excellence, which is to some extent the problem with which we are all grappling. There are a great many variables in relation to how the system was designed. If you read the curriculum for excellence documentation—from “A Curriculum for Excellence”, through “A Curriculum for Excellence: Progress and Proposals” to “Building the curriculum 3” and so on—you will see that none of them deals with the issues that we have been grappling with today. They do not deal with time allocations, numbers of columns in different year groups, other arrangements or other vocational qualifications. We never set out what we wanted curriculum for excellence to do. We had some cosy and fuzzy ideas about wanting to make better people who were more successful in four contexts. That is brilliant, but we did not support it with the necessary stuff.

We need to highlight the positive statistics that have been mentioned, which show that some things are working. I am amazed that no one has raised the issue of tariff points—I was going to do so but decided that I would not bother.

Rona Mackay: I do not know what that means.

Professor Scott: Nor does any parent know, which is why I decided not to raise the issue. One of the things that quite a lot of Scottish local authorities do to prove that they are doing better is quote the tariff points from the Insight tool. Every course that a child passes gets a number of points from Insight, depending on the SCQF level, and there are various ways of homologating tariff points that allow a local authority to see how well it is doing. You really did not want me to start on this, did you?

The explanation flows out of my head just now because I have just analysed the nine SAC authorities, and I know that some of them will claim that they are doing quite well in relation to tariff points. However, I would then set their tariff points against their five at 3, five at 4 and five at 5 figures, their leaver statistics and demonstrations of other educational experiences that children have had. That would take us nearer to the sort of things that Jenny Gilruth was trying to get me to talk about in the first place in relation to the breadth of Scottish education. If we could get all that data together, we could see how well we are doing.

I will go back to the comment about how we might see how we are doing. The fourth edition of “How good is our school?” is relevant in that regard. The data is there. Any local authority that says that it cannot tell you its five at 3, five at 4 and five at 5 figures is not telling the truth, because they are in Insight. A headteacher should be able to snap their fingers and send the information straight to headquarters, which should have its own version, anyway. We should be able to get the data that allows us to see what the balance is between the good points and bad points across Scottish schools.

William Hardie: I return to the point that I made earlier, which was that research shows that schools in the most disadvantaged areas tend to offer fewer subjects. However, the research also shows that the choices that are made in S4 have major implications for what people do in S5, S6 and beyond school. There is a major equity issue there. If pupils are somewhat constrained earlier in the school system and cannot get back to doing a broad range of subjects, that has quite major implications for what they do in the senior years and their destinations beyond the school system. My main point would be about equity.

Rona Mackay: That goes back to my earlier point. Should a minimum number of subjects be mandated? Should we say that five is not acceptable? That might help in relation to the equity problem.

William Hardie: Obviously, the issue is complex. As has been mentioned, we have to meet the needs of learners, so we do not want to mandate something that might be unattainable. We have to get the balance right.

However, pupils being constrained by a narrow range of subjects is obviously an issue—especially when other schools are offering more subjects. I am keen to see what the research says about what different curriculum structures and pathways can tell us about the attainment of learners. The question of two-year, as opposed to one-year, courses for qualifications is relevant and might help to open up the pathways a bit more.

Dr Britton: Mandating the number of subjects would require legislation, if I understand the system correctly. A similar situation exists in relation to the minimum class size, which could not have been implemented as a matter of policy in Scottish education without legislation being passed. It is conceivable that Parliament could legislate for a minimum number, and you could roll a number of other elements into that. The question is whether that is how you wish Scottish education to be governed.

The Convener: Finally, we will hear from the very patient Dr Allan.

Dr Allan: Thank you. Jenny Gilruth and others have referred to the fact that we have been concentrating a lot on what happens in fourth year. The national debate has been concentrating on that, when in fact what is important overall is the qualifications that people leave with at the end of their time in school.

However, there is no getting away from the fact that, in some subjects, the number of people studying them in fourth year them has gone down a lot. I will concentrate on languages, for which the number of people studying them in fourth year has gone down by 18 per cent in four years. I could equally have picked technology subjects, in which the number of students has also gone down by 18 per cent. I suppose that the system is premised on the idea that people will in their fifth year take the subjects that they are not taking in fourth year. What many of us on the committee are looking for is a clear picture of whether that is happening.

Professor Scott: I am tempted to quote Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. I am sorry; Dr Allan's Gaelic is much better than mine. If I read the evidence correctly, staff were very concerned that there would be some sort of gap in the learning process, because we know that if there is not a continuous flow of study in a language that greatly impedes the learner's ability to build up expertise. The idea that people will leave it alone for fourth year and then come back to it is death to learning most languages. It is a disgrace even to propose it.

French and German are the greatest losers, although Gaelic is, worryingly, pretty much in the same ball park. The number of people studying those languages has dropped by between 50 per cent and 60 per cent since 2013. That is unbelievable, and it is a serious issue.

Given that we may all be hurled, volens nolens, into the maw of Brexit, we need people who can go into the world and speak for us. That is not just a nice idea; it is an essential. Perish the very idea that, as another unintended consequence of CFE, we allow modern languages, apart from Spanish, to just fizzle away. Those of you who have a long history in education will know that the 1947 report from the Advisory Council on Education in Scotland recommended that “children of lesser ability”—the council's words, not mine—should be made to learn Spanish because it was easy. Those were its words. I have to say that there is some truth in that, because Spanish learning is holding up, but against that I place the hideously difficult Chinese, which is, despite the tones and all the rest, also holding up. Ease is not the only factor.

However, the truth is that if someone does six qualifications, necessarily doing English and maths and doing either two social subjects and a science, two sciences and a social subject or—God help us—three sciences, that leaves only one column. I am sorry, but that is not a curriculum. It might be a manifestation of an English curriculum at the upper stages, but it is not even remotely a Scottish curriculum. We have a real problem in that we have lost the mechanism for breadth in the middle of the secondary schooling process. The Scottish Association of Geography Teachers is a bit revisionist in suggesting that we should go back to two, two, two, but it is an interesting thought, because it would cure a lot of the problems—although not at a stroke, because we would have to do a lot of work to sort out the mess that has been made. I do not know how we will revive the subjects that are dying.

One of my two subjects—computing—is in pretty much the same ball park. I listened with—I choose my words carefully—abject horror to a representative of Education Scotland in early April, who suggested that, if a school could not get a computing teacher, it should take pupils to a local company that drives drones around the place, where they could have a really meaningful experience. Well, hell yeah—it would be a meaningful experience, but it would not be education. I will be worried if we start to lose that. I was a teacher of the information superhighway—in the white heat of technology, computing was going to solve all the problems. I work in a university in which several of us did that and we are all looking at the situation and thinking, “You've got to be joking!” We have spent tens of millions of pounds

and we are allowing our international lead in gaming technology and all sorts of things just to dwindle away.

We probably have five problems. We have a modern languages problem, an ICT problem and a STEM problem because of a drop that was caused by structural changes in Scottish education. Despite Keir Bloomer's not having got a lot of answers, I know how many schools are doing six columns: roughly half of Scotland's schools are. We have a problem with STEM subjects because, whether we like it or not, they suffer in a six-column environment. Instead of the 16 to 17 per cent drop in those taking STEM subjects that we should have had, there was a drop of 25 to 27 per cent.

There are also problems in the arts and the technologies, as several of us have said, because they are competing with one another for part of the last space: it is extremely difficult to give them all curricular bandwidth unless the columns are ramped up to seven or eight.

I am not proposing that we go back to eight columns—I am not sure how many children have used their eighth qualification—but we need to do something to stop the narrowing.

William Hardie: I am not sure whether I can add much to that. Professor Scott stole my thunder on the reduction in the sciences.

The learned societies group has highlighted one point. We have focused on 2013 to 2018 because the committee's call for views focused on the data over that five-year period. Although the number of higher entries across all subjects increased between 2013 and 2018, the number of STEM entries declined relative to other subjects. Entries to some other subjects might have increased but, given the framework that Professor Scott set out in respect of the narrowing down to six columns, the sciences are probably competing with one another, as well. They have certainly suffered at national qualification and higher levels.

Dr Britton: The discussion has become very technical. The technical dimensions are very important, but if we are at the point at which there is an appetite to review where we have got to, it is important to revisit what constitutes a curriculum and what the purposes of education are. If we conclude that education ought to be broad and should encompass space for people to have artistic and expressive arts experiences alongside science, English and maths, the system has to invest in that.

The evidence in the committee's review has shown that the message from teachers is that there are all kinds of barriers, but the availability of teachers and resources at the most local level is the bottom line. That has come across from them.

I previously made the point that the national debate in 2002 was, in many respects, less interesting than the report by this committee's predecessor committee on the purposes of the curriculum. We might choose to hook a review on consideration of the purpose of the curriculum. To some extent, we started with that, but that has been diluted and the response has become very technical, school by school and local authority by local authority. It might be time to look back, ask why we are educating, ask why we value certain subjects more than others and follow the conclusions that might arise from that.

Professor Scott: I am sorry, but I would like to sneak in another tiny point that I should have made. Who said that a three-year BGE is a good idea? Where did that come from? I think that I know the answer, but I cannot say it in a public forum. In the documentation that quite a few people in this room had something to do with or signed, I say realistically that a three-year BGE is not justified anywhere. I am sure that it was somebody's good idea, but it was never carried through in a process of consultation or analysis in any way. The unwise timetabling decisions that followed the three-year BGE led to the six-course and—God help us—five-course difficulties. Everything goes back to that.

Before we launched CFE, HMIE told us that we wasted the first two years anyway. It said that we did not do them well, that we were not focused, and that we were not organised, so we blew it up by 50 per cent and made it a three-year period. That caused compression at the back end, which caused the subject difficulties that we are talking about. If we are going to review, should not that be the starting point?

The Convener: I thank the witnesses very much for their attendance and their submissions to the committee, which have been very helpful.

I suspend the meeting and remind members that we will come back into public session.

11:45

Meeting suspended.

11:49

*On resuming—***Music Tuition in Schools Inquiry**

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is consideration of responses to “A note of concern: The future of instrumental music tuition in schools”. Responses have been received from the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities; they are contained in paper 4.

Members will be aware that the committee is holding a debate on the report in the chamber next Tuesday afternoon. That will be a further opportunity to discuss the responses.

There are no comments on the responses from the Scottish Government and COSLA, so are members content to consider the report in the debate next week?

Members indicated agreement.

Subordinate Legislation**Teachers’ Superannuation and Pension Scheme (Scotland) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Amendment Regulations 2019 (SSI 2019/95)**

11:49

The Convener: Agenda item 3 is subordinate legislation. The committee will consider the Teachers’ Superannuation and Pension Scheme (Scotland) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Amendment Regulations 2019, which is an instrument that is subject to negative procedure and that will amend another negative instrument that the committee considered before the Easter recess.

As members have no comments to make on the regulations, that concludes the public session of the meeting. The next session in our inquiry will be on 1 May.

11:50

Meeting continued in private until 12:11.

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