

**Education, Children and Young People Committee**  
**Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development Report**  
**Wednesday 9 September 2021**

## INTRODUCTION

The Committee is taking evidence from the team that produced the OECD's review of the Curriculum for Excellence, entitled '[Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future](#)', which was published in June 2021.

This paper sets out the background to the commissioning of the OECD review. It then briefly sets out the structure of the OECD's report, its recommendations and the Scottish Government Response.

The OECD was also asked to produce a comparative paper on assessment in upper secondary (normally understood as 15/16-18). This was [published on 31 August 2021](#) and was produced by Professor Gordon Stobart. This report is separate but linked to the June report. A brief summary of the Stobart report is included in this paper.

## THE OECD

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is an international organisation that seeks to support development through evidence-based policy making. The OECD works to "encourage countries to compare their experiences and learn from each other, and we accompany them in the difficult process of policy implementation."<sup>1</sup>

The triennial Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) studies 15-year-old students' key knowledge and skills. PISA assessments cover reading, science and mathematics, and focuses on different themes in each cycle. Additional themes could be financial literacy, global competence, digital literacy and student well-being.

## 2015 REVIEW

The 2021 review was the third OECD review of the Curriculum for Excellence. A report on the performance of the school education system was published in 2007 and a review of Broad General Education (BGE) in 2015.

The 2015 review, [Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective](#), said that CfE, then, was at "watershed" moment and a needed "a bold approach that moves beyond system management in a new dynamic nearer to teaching and learning." Its recommendations informed much of the reform activity in the previous session.

Some of these reforms were highly contested. For example, the OECD recommended strengthening the 'middle', i.e. the structures and support between the learning and teaching in schools and national policy. The Scottish Government set out to legislate to change (among other things) the statutory position of headteachers and create duties on

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/education/OECD-Education-Brochure.pdf>

local authorities to collaborate with one another, but due to political opposition took these goals forward administratively.

This experience points to a process of interpretation of OECD recommendations and how (and whether) to practically apply those recommendations in policy, following the publication of the report.

## **LEAD-UP TO THE 2021 REVIEW**

The Scottish Government initially commissioned the OECD in 2019 to undertake a review of the Senior Phase of education – the fourth to sixth years of secondary education. This was in response to criticisms of how changes to the structure of secondary education had worked in practice, particularly the number of qualifications being taken by pupils in S4.

The remit was expanded to include all of the Curriculum for Excellence after [a motion was agreed in Parliament](#) which, among other things, called for “a full review of broad general education and how it articulates with the Senior Phase”.

The remit of the review included examining:

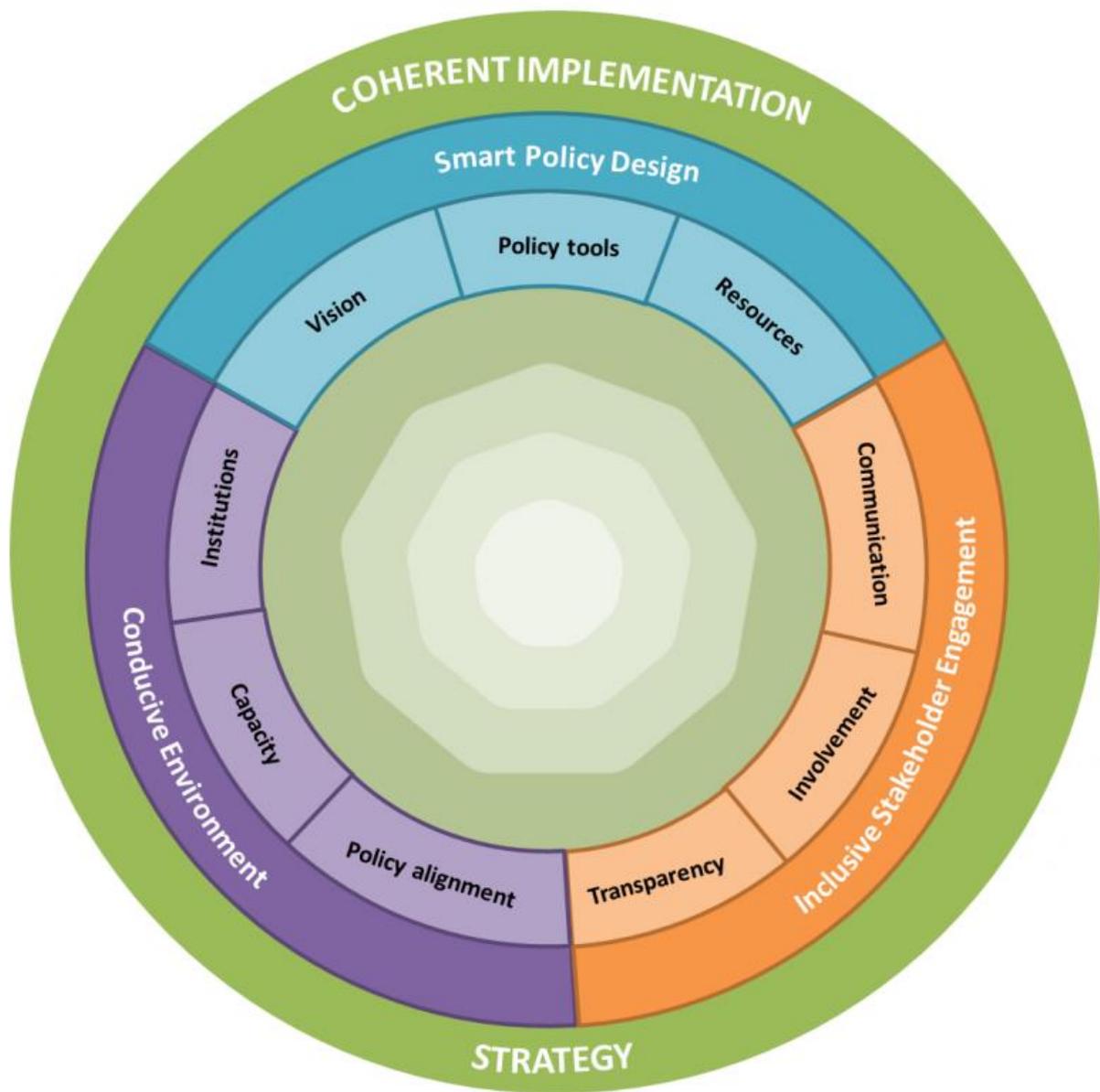
- curriculum design
- depth and breadth of learning in the Senior Phase (S4-S6)
- local flexibility versus increased prescription
- the transition from S1-S3 to S4-S6
- vocational and academic learning and awards, and
- roles and responsibilities in relation to the curriculum.

## **OECD REVIEW**

The [OECD review of CfE was published on 21 June 2021](#). Its review was underpinned by the [OECD's implementation framework for effective change in schools](#). This framework sees effective policy implementation through:

- Smart policy design
- Inclusive stakeholder engagement
- Conducive environment (i.e. effective institutions, capacity and policy alignment)

This approach is set out in the following diagram:



The OECD report was positive about the aims of CfE, suggesting that “Scotland should consider renewing its commitment to CfE’s bold and relevant vision” (p65). It also stated that CfE had been consolidated in the BGE phase of education (ELC to S3) and that it “allows for reasonable coherence” over these phases of education. However, the linkage to Senior Phase (S4-S6) and the period where pupils learning is certificated is problematic. The report stated—

“The coherence of CfE enactment is less consistent, however, in the Senior Phase (for learners aged 15 to 18 years), where fundamental challenges exist for curriculum and subsequent assessment re-design. Without taking up the task of a re-visioning of CfE in the Senior Phase, the practices in upper-secondary education will keep lagging in its curriculum components (aims, pedagogy and assessment) and will exercise a counterproductive influence on Broad General Education and the transition for students.”

The OECD highlighted a number of tensions around Curriculum for Excellence that impact student learning. These were—

- local curriculum flexibility and the need for coherence to achieve system-wide objectives
- understandings of breadth and depth of learning in the policy discourse
- conceptualisation of knowledge, skills and competencies, and
- curriculum, student assessment and evaluation. (p34-35)

The OECD noted that stakeholder engagement is at the heart of CfE and that considerable efforts have been made in this regard. The OECD said that this has led to the “communication and development of a shared language created the conditions for shared ownership and wide support of CfE’s vision”. The OECD team identified three challenges “inherent to stakeholder engagement around CfE”. These are—

- “A gap between the seemingly intense involvement of stakeholders at all levels of the system and the confidence they have in their effective influence on decision making.” Two particular issues were identified in this regard, “the clarity of purpose of engagement initiatives and consistency in terms of using stakeholders’ input.”
- “CfE ownership was most often described as fragmented, with too many stakeholders claiming ownership of CfE while not necessarily fulfilling the responsibilities that come with such ownership. Transparency in the division of responsibilities among stakeholders is a necessary condition for policy success in a system that promotes shared responsibility of its curriculum.”
- “Communication around CfE remains confused, which can hinder implementation by leaving CfE open to wide interpretations and overwhelm schools, learners and parents.” (p90)

School leaders and teachers are key to the design of CfE. with teaching and learning and curriculum design largely a matter for schools and teachers. The OECD noted that work has been progressed in supporting teachers and school leaders’ capacity in this regard. However, the “review found that the capacity of teachers and school leaders and elements of system leadership were being constrained by multiple initiatives in a busy local and national policy environment.”. In terms of policy alignment, the review stated—

“While the policy environment is crowded with multiple initiatives, gaps and misalignments remain – such as that in assessment, for example – and where new policies are introduced (or old ones revisited), alignment and coherence is an issue. Another gap in the policy environment is an established systematic review cycle for CfE supported by robust data and evidence.” (p107)

The review also noted that while there was a broad sense of ownership of CfE, the responsibilities were “often described as fragmented”. Responsibilities were described as somewhat blurred. The review said—

“Transparency in the division of responsibilities among stakeholders is a necessary condition for policy success in a system that promotes shared responsibility of its curriculum. Along with trust, transparency is essential to inspiring ownership and supporting sustained implementation.” (p84)

The review identified three reasons for the lack of clarity of responsibilities in CfE. these were—

- Bodies, committees etc unclear of their role;
- Organisations taking on responsibilities “de facto because they had resources to respond to stakeholders’ demands”; and
- “Top administrative and executive positions in Scotland’s education system tend to be held successively by a small number of agents” risking conformity of thought and discourse. (p87)

Overall, the review said—

“Scotland’s system is heavily governed relative to its scale and numbers of schools. The multiple layers of governance and additional responsibilities created around CfE can complicate implementation processes by generating additional policy priorities and supplementary materials with little co-ordination.” (p87)

Chapter 4 of the review further examined the coherence in the system. The OECD outlined that a system which places a high level of responsibility on teachers, “relies heavily on the capacity, culture and status of the teaching profession and the quality of school leadership”. The review continued—

“Systems that promote such local innovation and strive for the empowerment of system actors – including learners – require strong system leaders to drive a culture that is empowered and accountable, and who can present a compelling case for the education system to the media, politicians and the general public.” (p96)

The OECD found evidence that there are strengths in the professional support for teachers and school leaders. It also found that school leaders have strong networks. However, it reported that “school leaders see their role as interpreting the policy context for their school to ensure that the school and the teachers are protected from policy incoherence and overload”. (p98)

In terms of assessment within CfE and particularly BGE, the review said it was “struck” by a lack of longitudinal and authoritative data. It suggested better data, a “single source of truth” would support public debate and political decision making in the future. Currently however—

“There is general confusion, confirmed by the stakeholders interviewed by the OECD team, as to what data counts when it comes to student learning. Given CfE’s focus on the four capacities, the absence of data on how well students are achieving in three of these – the capacities beyond ‘successful learner’, which are harder to assess – is also noteworthy. The OECD team received much anecdotal evidence about how CfE appears to support and develop the four capacities during interviews with learners, their parents, teachers and system leaders. Beyond its own observations and examples in validated school self-evaluation reports, the OECD team observed no systematic evaluation data to support a judgement as to whether

the aspirations articulated in the four capacities 20 years ago are being realised.”  
(p100)<sup>2</sup>

In terms of the Senior Phase, the OECD said that there is a disconnect between it and CfE. This disconnect hinders both the relevance of Senior Phase and the power of CfE. (p101)

The review noted that Education is a high-profile and political policy area. However, this can lead to a reactive and therefore busy system. And while it identified the coherence between Senior Phase and BGE as the main point of misalignment, “alignment challenge extends beyond assessment”. (p107)

## **Recommendations**

Chapter 5 of the review’s report outlined the recommendations. The chapter is summarised in its abstract—

“[This chapter] suggests that the next steps for CfE need to focus on students and their learning progress. This implies reviewing how CfE is consistently providing learning opportunities through the Senior Phase; clarifying ownership of CfE and regularity in responsibilities and communication; defining a stable institutionalised curriculum review process and an aligned assessment system; and gathering consistent data to monitor progress.” (p111)

The structure of the report’s recommendations is complex. There are four overarching headings, and several subheading recommendations. Each of those sub-headed recommendations has a fairly lengthy explanation which include details on options that should be considered – these explanations are condensed in the Executive Summary. It is therefore a little unclear the degree to which the Review team consider the text underneath the sub-headings to be part of the recommendations themselves. An example of how this might lead to debate over how to take forward the recommendations of the review is shown below. The recommendations listed in the Executive Summary, along with the short explanatory text, are reproduced in Annexe A to this paper. Members should note that Chapter 5 details a more fulsome rationale for those conclusions.

The review recommended a re-assessment of the vision of CfE in light of emerging trends in education. The review picked out the role of knowledge in the curriculum and how this is reflected in the Experiences and Outcomes. It said, “clarifying the role of knowledge in the vision of CfE is the first step to strengthen the coherence of CfE.”(p118) The review also suggested that a “better balance between breadth and depth of learning throughout CfE” should be found and “Scotland might consider creating guidance about the elements of knowledge to prioritise, and how to select and update and integrate them more clearly in curriculum areas”. (pp119-120).

In terms of addressing the problem of coherence between Senior Phase and BGE, the review is clear that the more traditional Senior Phase should change to match BGE, rather than the other way around. It suggests considering “reviewing the coherence of CfE enactment for learners aged 15 to 18 years, as the qualifications focus the attention on

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<sup>2</sup> The four capacities within Curriculum for Excellence. These are: 1) Successful learners; 2) Confident individuals; 3) Responsible citizens; 4) Effective contributors.

‘traditional’ exam- and memory-based assessment, and limit the wider purpose and scope of CfE.” The review noted that Senior Phase provides for a range of options for learners, but the review suggested that there should be a clearer articulation for the diversity of pathways. It said that the “possibility to clarify the structure of the Senior Phase, without restricting its diversity, could be to define a number of typical pathways or profiles for upper-secondary education with a limited number of compulsory courses, specialisation courses, and room for additional or optional units.” (p121) In August, the OECD published a paper setting out some of the approaches in other countries to certification to support the Scottish Government in any policy choices relating to Senior Phase. This is summarised below.

As well as suggestions to consider changing the model of certification assessment, the OECD also commented on the national reporting of CfE levels (known as ACEL). It said, “small changes in data of this kind cannot give the system the intelligence it needs to monitor the achievement of particular groups of students within the cohort.”. The OECD report stated—

“The OECD team believes that there is now an urgent need for robust, reliable data to support these priorities and support wider policy and decision making, as well as the curriculum review cycle ... Previous attempts at this kind of sample monitoring were not successful for a range of reasons ... The experiences of other systems in recent years in building these sample-based systems that make very little demands on teachers and schools but provide extremely useful information can inform the deliberations in Scotland. These long-term monitoring arrangements allow for particular focus on under-achieving groups within the population and give rise to a dataset that can be made available to independent researchers for additional data mining and research.” (p128)

The review suggested that Scotland “could revise the current allocation of responsibility for CfE, including responsibilities for its strategic direction, its reviews and updates, and the response to schools’ needs for support with curriculum issues.” The review also suggested that a redistribution of responsibilities may be required and that duplication of responsibilities should be avoided. It noted that those organisations that have responsibilities should be resourced sufficiently to carry out their responsibilities. (p124)

The review suggested better, more coherent stakeholder engagement and communications are required. The review recommended a reduction in teacher contact time (the time in front of a class) to support curriculum planning, monitoring student achievement and moderation.

The OECD recommended that policies and institutions be simplified for greater clarity and coherence. The review stated, “consideration should be given to a specialist stand-alone agency responsible for curriculum (and perhaps assessment) in the future.” The review was equivocal whether the agency should contribute to or lead “the next stage of the development of national assessment in Scotland, aligned with CfE.” It was clear, however, that the OECD’s view was that HMIE should become a stand-alone body.

The new body is envisaged to lead on planned systematic reviews within a regular cycle. The rationale for having a regular review included:

- reduce reliance on external independent reviews when controversies arise
- build internal capacity for curriculum monitoring

- reduce the need for ongoing guidance and clarifications and give the system greater stability overall
- the energy of leaders could be redirected to focus on the implementation of CfE in their schools rather than responding to the most recent update or clarification
- support coherence of CfE

The OECD envisaged some flexibility for urgent issues to be addressed outwith the cycle. It concluded—

“Such a systematic, more apolitical approach is well suited to a system such as Scotland’s, where there is a high level of interest in education.”

The OECD recommended that there be a long-term view on implementing change. Scotland was advised to “consider how to take on board the recommendations in this report as a coherent package rather than individual policy actions”. It said—

“Leading the change process itself will require reinforcing the stability, trustworthiness and effectiveness of the decision-making processes, especially to define the next steps of CfE: what needs to be done, by whom, when and how it will be measured. On this last point, Scotland should consider setting up the metrics needed to understand progress with implementing CfE actions over the long run.”

The OECD recommended an action plan on how to take forward its suggestions. This is—

1. Start by re-assessing the vision of CfE to take on board social and economic developments, emerging trends in education and up-to-date research
2. Define the indicators that can support progress with the implementation and impact of CfE and establish a communication strategy that can be updated to support CfE’s developments.
3. Revise the roles and responsibilities of those stakeholders involved in CfE. This will include defining the concrete role of the institution that should take the main responsibility for CfE. This institution can then establish a systematic approach to curriculum review and set up consultations to explore a range of issues raised in this assessment: the balance of knowledge across the different stages of CfE, between breadth and depth of learning.
4. Work on developing the approach to stakeholder engagement with CfE ensuring stability, purpose and impact.
5. Work with SQA and other related institutions, including consultations, to consolidate an assessment system that aligns with the CfE vision and student learning needs.
6. In parallel, discussions on teacher and school leadership time and professional development needs may be organised by the Scottish Government and Education Scotland.

## **Scottish Government response**

Before the publication of the review, the SNP manifesto committed the SNP administration to “take forward the recommendations of the OECD review of the curriculum.” [The Scottish Government’s response](#) accepted all of the headline recommendations.

Much of the work in taking forward the recommendations will involve the Scottish Government working collaboratively with stakeholders, e.g. through the Scottish Education Council. There is no mention of open consultations being planned.

As noted, the Government has accepted all of the headline recommendations. This is an important distinction as the Scottish Government has not, it appears, accepted all of the commentary under each headline recommendation. For example, during the statement to Parliament on the review and the Scottish Government’s response, Ross Greer MSP highlighted the criticism of ACEL as a national monitoring tool within BGE. [The Cabinet Secretary responded](#)—

“What Ross Greer said in his question about Scottish national standardised assessments was not a specific recommendation in the OECD’s report. Assessment was mentioned and I am aware that the issue was mentioned in the webinar yesterday, but national standardised assessments are a key element of our improvement agenda as part of the national improvement framework. They allow us to have consistent, objective and comparable information. Ross Greer will be well aware of the independent review that took place in 2019, which concluded that assessments have a valuable potential and should be continued, albeit with some important changes that we will take forward.”

The Scottish Government’s written response also noted that it is undertaking work to consider whether or how the Scottish Government can change the data collected to better reflect the 4 capacities. This work is in response to Audit Scotland’s report on [Improving outcomes for young people through school education](#).

The Scottish Government announced that it would remove HMIE from Education Scotland and establish a new specialist agency that will be responsible for curriculum and assessment. This would replace the SQA. The Scottish Government has appointed Professor Ken Muir to lead the work on how these new structures can be taken forward.

More broadly, the Scottish Government’s response indicated that it would publish an implementation plan on taking forward the recommendations in September. This will “set out the roles and responsibilities of all involved in delivering improvements, and the indicators to be used to measure progress and undertake systematic reviews of implementation.”

### **Wider response to the review**

Responses from across Scotland were broadly welcoming and supportive of the conclusions of the review.

[COSLA](#) welcomed the report. Councillor Stephen McCabe, Children and Young People spokesperson for COSLA, described the recommendations as thoughtful and wide-ranging. He said that COSLA would look to “input and inform the national reform process to ensure the whole system works together to achieve the best outcomes possible”.

The [NASUWT](#) said that the review reaffirmed teachers’ concerns about both the curriculum and assessment. It said “the founding principles of Curriculum for Excellence have been

lost amid an over-emphasis on assessment and bureaucracy, which is driving up teacher workloads and diverting teachers from focusing on teaching and learning.” It called on the Scottish Government to “develop a genuinely collegiate approach going forward, ensuring that the perspective of classroom teachers is integral to future curriculum development and design.”

[Connect](#) also welcomed the report and suggested that everyone involved in education will recognise much of what the report says. It particularly highlighted the issues with genuine stakeholder engagement, saying that the view that opinions are “sought and encouraged by the key players in Scottish education, but this does not appear to translate into improvement and change ... will ring true for many”.

[Youthlink Scotland](#) welcomed the report. In the context of balancing the curriculum, Youthlink highlighted its view that the education system “must fully embrace the range of practitioners (including youth workers) who are involved in its delivery and truly value the totality of a young person’s learning across both formal and non-formal settings”.

[Scottish Youth Parliament](#) suggested that the report provides an opportunity to take a more children and young people centred approach.

[EIS](#)’ response highlighted a “massive assessment overload in the senior phase, which squeezes out the time needed for both depth and breadth of learning”. The EIS welcomed the intention to abolish the SQA, saying that any new body should be “accountable to the profession through a model of governance based on educational, rather than political, considerations and with a teacher voice at its heart”.

A blog by [a number of academics](#) from Stirling University linked the review to research they were undertaking. The blog identified widespread disconnect between key aspects of CfE and curriculum making in schools, it said “decisions are being informed and led by narrow definitions of success and focusing narrowly on only one of the Four Capacities, the ‘successful learner’; this in turn may undermine the remaining three capacities and the underlying principles of the Four Capacities in creating well-rounded individuals.”

The [Commission on School Reform](#) published reflections on the review, highlighting particularly the role of knowledge in the curriculum and calling for a roll-back in guidance and greater local autonomy.

Professor Lindsay Paterson’s response in his paper, [Partial, Sycophantic, and Superficial: The OECD Review Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence, 2021](#), stands out in its criticism of the review. Professor Paterson was concerned primarily about three aspects of the review, “the unconvincing process by which the review reached its conclusions, its misleading presentation of the limited evidence that it collected, and, above all, its no more than rhetorical treatment of the importance of knowledge in any curriculum worthy of the name.”

## **OECD REPORT ON SCOTLAND’S OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF ASSESSMENT**

A [report on Scotland’s options for the future of assessment](#) was published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) on 31 August 2021. This work, by Professor Gordon Stobart, was commissioned as part of the OECD’s work on the Scottish education system and follows the June 2021 CfE report. Professor Stobart

is an Honorary Research Fellow at Oxford University and was appointed by the OECD to carry out the work. **Members will note that the witnesses did not author this report.**

The report compares Scotland's approach to assessment in the senior phase of secondary school with systems used in nine other countries. Arrangements being implemented in these countries are explored in the report. For example, in Norway some exams are now computer-based and pupils have access to online resources. Pilot studies in New Zealand, Israel, Norway and Finland also found online and on-screen assessments could be implemented, though there were logistical challenges of doing this. The report also looks at how other countries adapted assessment and examination arrangements as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Report conclusions**

The report recognises the challenges of aligning broad visions for education such as CfE with examination policies in the senior phase of school, stating:

“At present there are few examples of how national examinations can assess broader global skills such as creativity, collaboration, and communication.” – p14

The report explains that many other countries use alternative forms of assessment such as school-based exams, teacher assessment, presentations and practical assessments as part of their qualifications systems.

The OECD sets out options for the future of assessment for Scotland to explore, including:

### ***Removal of National 5 examinations in S4 and move toward a school graduation certificate or diploma.***

The OECD highlights the high number of exams from S4 – S6, stating:

“In comparative terms, Scottish upper-secondary school students are more frequently examined than those in other jurisdictions.” (p.42)

The report also states that there are few countries with exams at the end of compulsory schooling (up to 16 in Scotland), suggesting a “school graduation certificate may be more appropriate” (p42). This could be organised around the four capacities of CfE and might include school based assessment as well as external components such as vocational, music, or Duke of Edinburgh awards. The report cites current National 4 examination statistics from 2019 as part of the case for introducing a certificate at age 16. Using SQA data, it finds:

- Of the 46,544 learners entered for National 4 in 2019, 43.2% (20,107) registered only one pass while 4.9% (2,278) had no passes.
- Of the 80,046 learners entered for National 5 in 2019, 30% (23,994) achieved one A-C pass, while 15% (12,052) had no passes.

The OECD concludes that “these results provide minimal information about the students, a substantial proportion of whom will leave school... A fuller profile of achievement might provide richer information for users and serve leavers better at this stage.” (p42)

The report suggests “simplifying” the current system by removing National 5 exams and moving to a school graduation certificate or diploma.

***Developing a more resilient upper-secondary assessment system.***

The OECD states the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the “fragility” of the current assessment system. The reliance on final examinations has meant major disruption to the system following lockdown and the OECD observes that countries with qualifications systems based on a combination of teachers’ continuous assessment, school-based exams and external exams tended to experience less disruption in issuing final awards. The report suggests the development of “more localised and resilient models of assessment” (p44).

***Better alignment of assessment with CfE and pedagogy through broadening forms of assessment.***

This recommendation recognises that while the National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher were intended to align exams with the CfE, this has not been realised and the exam system remains “relatively traditional and cautious” in contrast to the pedagogy of CfE.

The report states interactive approaches such as the introduction of computer-based exams, e-Portfolios, oral presentations and practical assessments could help bring about a move away from the dominance of academic exams. Norway, New Zealand, Finland and Israel are cited as countries using computer-based exams and online resources as part of their assessment system.

***Increasing and adapting the role of continuous, school-based assessment carried out by teachers throughout the year, moving away from centralised moderation.***

This seeks to move away from “rote learning and memorisation” (p45) and the “two term dash” (p42) identified as a current feature of exam preparation. The report noted that while previous attempts to do this – most recently with National 5 qualifications - had not been successful: “The wide recognition of the lack of alignment of National 5 with Curriculum for Excellence and the system failures during the COVID-19 pandemic, could provide a new impetus for change.” (p43)

Examples of school-based assessment that could be more frequently used alongside exams include: course-based classwork, school tests, teacher set and marked work and oral and practical presentations. The report states that while teacher assessment is used in Scotland’s current exam system, “it is generally narrowly conceived as specific pieces of coursework that are submitted and moderated by SQA” and the system is “highly centralised and controlled” (p45).

In order to facilitate the introduction of more school-based assessment, the report suggests decentralising some assessment procedures and developing teachers' assessment literacy and the professional capacity of schools to carry out assessment.

### ***Ensuring student views are considered and used to shape assessment arrangements.***

The OECD sees a key role for students as stakeholders who need to be consulted. In addition, as last year's [Rapid Review of National Qualifications Experience 2020](#), carried out by Professor Mark Priestly, highlighted, young people need to be involved fully in decisions affecting them in line with United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) obligations.

The OECD report concludes that more systematic study of student perceptions needs to be supported, stating the limited evidence available finds student support for continuous assessment and a reduced emphasis on external exams.

### ***Further developing the role of vocational qualifications.***

Under the current system, SQA is responsible for general and vocational qualifications<sup>3</sup>. The OECD concludes this represents an opportunity to raise their profile, building on recent work to integrate qualifications such as Foundation Apprenticeships into the mainstream offer. It could also serve as a means of delivering assessment that is more closely in line with CfE. However, the OECD does acknowledge that work will be needed to change the "traditional British mindset" (p48) that gives preference to written exams. The report states that countries that have had some success in giving vocational education parity with academic appear to have "integrated both in their qualifications", however even within these "society may still value the academic strand over the vocational" (p47).

## **Scottish Government response**

The Scottish Government sees the report as an endorsement of CfE and recognises that the cancellation of exams is an opportunity to look at the exam system and how to recognise pupil achievements. The [Scottish Government press release](#) announcing the publication of the review states that the recommendations:

“...will be considered as part of a wider conversation with learners, teachers, parents and others on how Scotland's qualifications and assessment system can best evolve in line with the curriculum and society of today.”

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills Shirley-Anne Somerville MSP will update Parliament on how the Scottish Government intends to take the OECD's recommendations forward as part of wider work to implement the OECD recommendations following their review of CfE.

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<sup>3</sup> Currently foundation apprenticeships are delivered in partnership by Skills Development Scotland (linking with employers) and SQA (overseeing the certification process).

## **Wider response to the review**

The [EIS](#) response welcomed the report's suggestions for "de-cluttering" the S4-S6 examination "ladder", stating this could help ease assessment overload. Suggestions on the enhanced role of teacher assessment were also welcomed for consideration, however EIS also stated the use of more digital based assessment would need "careful consideration".

[Connect's](#) response outlined the challenges of the current system and said the OECD's findings "chime with what many educators, parents and young people have been saying for many years", adding: "We look forward to a radical overhaul and a move to a system which meets the needs of all our young people and reflects their skills, knowledge and achievements."

The [Scottish Youth Parliament](#) welcomed the report's call for continued engagement with young people on the issue of exams and assessments.

**Ned Sharratt & Lynne Currie**

**SPICe Research**

**3 September 2021**

Note: Committee briefing papers are provided by SPICe for the use of Scottish Parliament committees and clerking staff. They provide focused information or respond to specific questions or areas of interest to committees and are not intended to offer comprehensive coverage of a subject area.

The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP [www.parliament.scot](http://www.parliament.scot)

## Recommendation of the Review

### ***Balance Curriculum for Excellence so students can fully benefit from a coherent learning experience from 3 to 18 years***

**Re-assess CfE's aspirational vision against emerging trends in education** to take account of evolutions in education and society: Scotland should consider updates to some of its vision's core elements and their implications for practice, in particular, the role of knowledge in CfE; and define indicators aligned to the vision to help understand students' progress across all four capacities set out in CfE.

**Find a better balance between breadth and depth of learning throughout CfE** to deliver Scotland's commitment to providing all learners with a rich learning experience throughout school education: Scotland could consider how the design of CfE can better help learners consolidate a common base of knowledge, skills and attitudes by the end of BGE, and nurture and hone this base for them to progress seamlessly through Senior Phase and the choices its offers.

**Adapt the Senior Phase to match the vision of CfE:** Scotland could consider adapting the pedagogical and assessment practices and the structure of learning pathways in the Senior Phase to enhance learners' experience of upper-secondary education and help them develop CfE's four capacities continuously.

**Continue building curricular capacity at various levels of the system using research** by developing the environment of curriculum design support around schools, including in supporting exchange and collaboration between practitioners for curriculum design and experimentation within and across schools; and collaboration between schools and universities.

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

**Ensure stable, purposeful and impactful stakeholder involvement with CfE:** System leaders at national and local levels could continue encouraging the involvement of stakeholders (and in particular, students) with CfE by better structuring each engagement initiative they offer, clarifying its purpose, designing it accordingly, and letting stakeholder input inform decision making.

**Revise the division of responsibilities for CfE:** System leaders and stakeholders could revise the current allocation of responsibility for CfE, including responsibilities for its strategic direction, its reviews and updates, and the response to schools' needs of support with curriculum issues. The revised allocation should be stable over time to fulfil Scotland's commitment to shared ownership of CfE.

**Structure a coherent communication strategy to support developments of CfE:** System leaders, with the Learning Directorate and Education Scotland at the forefront, could develop a communication strategy in support of CfE's next developments and collaborate with practitioners, scholars and other CfE stakeholders as they do so.

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

**Provide dedicated time to lead, plan and support CfE at the school level:** In support of the next phase of development of CfE, Scotland could consider the provision of additional dedicated and ring-fenced time for all teachers, for curriculum planning, for monitoring of student achievement and in support of moderation of assessment outcomes.

**Simplify policies and institutions for clarity and coherence:** To align the institutional structures with clear ownership of CfE, Scotland could explore assigning leadership and development responsibilities for curriculum (and perhaps assessment) to a specialist stand-alone agency; and consider refreshing the remit of an inspectorate of education regarding CfE.

**Align curriculum, qualifications and system evaluation to deliver on the commitment of *Building the Curriculum 5*:** Scotland could first identify modes of student assessment that could be used in school and external settings at Senior Phase levels, in alignment with the four capacities and CfE philosophy; and second, re-develop a sample-based evaluation system to collect robust and reliable data necessary to support curriculum reviews and decision making.

**Develop a systematic approach to curriculum review:** Scotland could consider establishing a systematic curriculum review cycle with a planned timeframe and specific review agenda, led by the specialist stand-alone agency.

### ***Lead the next steps for Curriculum for Excellence with a long-term view***

**Adopt a structured and long-term approach to implementation:** Building on the system's existing strengths, Scotland should consider how to take on board the recommendations in this report as a coherent package rather than individual policy actions for the next steps.