

# Executive summary

## Curriculum for Excellence in context

Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) offers an inspiring and widely supported philosophy of education. Its framework allows for effective curricular practices and for the possibility of a truly fulfilling education for learners. Building upon its commitment to education quality, Scotland can make adjustments within CfE's flexible framework to achieve its potential for learners present and future.

Students in Scotland engage in learning through CfE, which aims to provide a holistic, coherent, and future-oriented approach to learning between 3 and 18 years and lets schools design their curriculum based on a common framework. CfE's approach was designed in 2004 and started rolling out in schools in 2010.

The Scottish Government invited the OECD to assess the implementation of CfE, to understand how curricula are designed and implemented in schools, and to identify what can be improved for CfE to continue delivering quality learning for all students.

The OECD assessment looks at the Broad General Education (BGE) and the Senior Phase from an implementation perspective. The analysis was undertaken following standard OECD methodology, including desk-based policy analysis, interviews with stakeholders, school visits, exchanges with a practitioner's forum, and comparative analysis based on research and international practices. All visits and meetings occurred online due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) travel restrictions.

## Key findings

### ***Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence continues to be a bold and widely supported initiative, and its design offers the flexibility needed to improve student learning further***

CfE's vision to achieve excellence for all students is widely shared by stakeholders and continues to be an inspiring example equated with good curriculum practice internationally. The two decades since the formulation of CfE's vision have been marked by accelerated changes, including in educational research, giving rise to new insights into student learning, pedagogy, and the kind of knowledge, skills and attitudes students need to progress as learners. CfE has stood the test of time, but it will only remain relevant if Scotland uses these insights to continue its development.

CfE's complex framework works well in BGE and for learners taking Advanced Highers, where the concepts, pedagogical and learning approaches are coherent, and the implemented school curricula seem consistent with policy intentions. However, there is some ambiguity about the role of knowledge and ways of knowing in a 21st century curriculum framework. Adjustments might therefore be needed in the concepts of CfE and the tools to put them in practice in both BGE and the Senior Phase. The structure, learning practices and assessment approaches in the Senior Phase also need adapting to be consistent with CfE's vision, and to allow for the smooth curriculum experience promised from 3 to 18.

Teachers are well-trained and respected professionals in Scotland, and school leaders have developed strong pedagogical leadership capacities. Both are committed to varied teaching approaches for student learning and have proven their ability to develop schools' own curricula. Curriculum design and continuous improvement require time and professional investment, which schools can only achieve with ongoing support from the system.

***Stakeholder engagement is at the heart of Curriculum for Excellence and offers the possibility, with better structure, for shared ownership and effective leadership of CfE***

Significant efforts were made to engage stakeholders throughout CfE's lifecycle, which contributed to wide support for CfE as a direction of travel for Scottish education. However, there is a gap between stakeholders' involvement and their impact on effective enhancements to CfE implementation.

Stakeholders agree that schools and the profession should hold responsibility for the conception, implementation and outcomes of their own curricula, provided the rest of the system fulfil their own responsibilities to support schools and the profession within a clear policy framework. At the same time, CfE ownership was most often described as fragmented, with many lacking clarity on their responsibilities.

Scotland successfully developed an education language to support the philosophy of CfE that made its way into daily discussions of education policy makers, teachers and learners alike, thanks to communication efforts by system leaders. But the constant production and recycling of documentation was often described as "overwhelming", and the terminology used too technical and open to interpretation.

***Continued efforts are needed to enhance the coherence of the policy environment with Curriculum for Excellence***

CfE's originality continues to influence international curriculum policy. Scotland made great progress in developing and supporting teachers' capacity to be curriculum makers, and the capacity of school leaders to lead the curriculum process in their schools. This work has become challenging for schools considering the multiple new policy initiatives; and Scotland's comparatively high rate of teachers' class contact time and its expectations for teachers to lead and plan curriculum locally.

Other education policies were developed to build a coherent system around CfE's innovative philosophy. However, work remains on striking a balance between autonomy with CfE and equity for students and aligning and simplifying the many initiatives. Early policy developments showed promise to align student assessment, qualification practices and system evaluation to CfE's philosophy. The 2010 Framework for Assessment was hailed internationally as an exemplar. Despite attempts to reform qualifications, misalignment between CfE's aspirations and the qualification system became a barrier to CfE's implementation in secondary education. Additionally, the data generated by current system monitoring seem limited to fully support CfE's ambitions.

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

***The approach to the ongoing implementation of Curriculum for Excellence has lacked structure and long-term perspective***

The Curriculum and Assessment Board and predecessors provided the opportunity to engage stakeholders, get feedback and develop agreements on CfE's developments. Schools and local authorities

were afforded significant autonomy to shape CfE, possibly building capacity on the ground. Yet, CfE has lacked a structured approach to plan its developments with a longer-term perspective.

## Recommendations for next steps: Focus on student learning progress

### ***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 it 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.

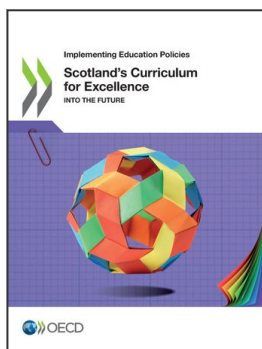
### ***Consolidate institutional policy processes for effective change***

- **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.



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