

## SUBJECT CHOICES: A RESPONSE TO THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT'S EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

- There is growing concern about narrowing of curricula across the UK, particularly in the context of international comparisons and the way in which the nature of work is changing. There has undoubtedly been a narrowing of the curriculum across Scottish secondary schools with fewer subjects being taken in S4 compared to previously. Six qualification courses at S4 is the most common approach.
- The impact of reduced subject choice will be felt most keenly by those learners who leave school at S4 with fewer qualifications than previously might have been the case. This conflicts with the Scottish Government's aspiration to close the attainment gap. Recent research has, worryingly, found a clear relationship between the reduction in the number of subject choices made by S4 pupils and the level of deprivation of the school's catchment area, with the reduction in subject choice being most pronounced in schools in areas of higher deprivation.
- Reduced course choice at S4 can constrain learners' S5/6 options since it will be more difficult to progress to Higher level in S5 or S6 without the pre-requisite learning at National 5 level. Fewer course options at S4 also reduces the learner's room for manoeuvre in the event that s/he does not succeed in one or more of their chosen subjects. This is not only important for those learners who plan to leave at the end of their compulsory schooling, but also for those who intend to progress to further study in their chosen subjects at S5/6.
- Curriculum for Excellence is intended to be an integrated, 3-18 curriculum. It is important to consider the extent to which the broad general education and senior phases operate together to form a coherent curriculum. There has been no independent review of the coherence of the entire school learning journey and work undertaken to-date indicates a lack of clear curricular rationale for the different curriculum structures adopted by schools. The relationship between the broad general education and senior phases has a significant bearing on the extent to which learners are prepared for qualification courses and on schools' senior phase structures.
- The RSE is firmly of the view that independent research needs to be undertaken to assess the impact of different curriculum structures and qualification patterns on attainment. This should not only look at school-based attainment, but needs to consider the implications for post-school destinations, including further and higher education and employment.

# Summary

## Background

1 The RSE Education Committee welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Parliament Education and Skills Committee's inquiry into subject choices. This is an area of longstanding interest and importance, and one that continues to receive significant attention as more information and data become available about the curriculum structures and learner pathways that are taking hold under Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). The RSE response draws on the research work undertaken so far and we highlight areas in which further research is required. The RSE would be pleased to discuss our comments with the Committee should members consider this helpful.

### Has the structure of the Senior Phase of Curriculum for Excellence allowed for better learning and overall achievement than previously?

2 It is difficult to answer this question objectively in the absence of independent evaluation of the impact of the senior phase on learning and achievement. The OECD's review of CfE primarily covered only the Broad General Education (BGE) period to the end of S3; it did not extend to the senior phase.<sup>1</sup> There has, therefore, not been an independent review of the coherence of the entire school learner journey. There is a tendency to look at the BGE and the senior phase of school in isolation from one another. Since CfE is supposed to be an integrated, 3-18 curriculum, it is important to look at how, taken together, the BGE and senior phase operate as a coherent whole.

3 It is notable that there is a lack of accessible information on schools' curricular models, including those relating to the senior phase. Work has, however, been undertaken to try to generate a better understanding of schools' curriculum structures. The study published last year by Professor Jim Scott provides detailed insight into the multitude of ways in which schools are structuring the first four years of the secondary curriculum.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, the study highlights the high level of fragmentation in terms of many

secondary schools' approaches to the BGE and a lack of clear curricular rationale for the different structures adopted. This is due, in large part, to very little attention having been given to curriculum design during the development and implementation of CfE. This emphasises the importance of ensuring the use of appropriate curriculum theory in the design of curricula. With the delivery of CfE varying by school, it is important that the character of the variation inherent in schools' approaches to CfE is understood well. The RSE strongly believes that independent research needs to be undertaken to assess the impact of different curriculum structures and qualification patterns on attainment. This is in line with the OECD's view that there is a need to evaluate how CfE is actually being implemented in schools, especially in relation to learning outcomes and pupil progress.

4 It will not only be important to consider the impact of the senior phase structures on learners' school-based achievements; this has to be linked to post-school transitions and destinations, including the implications for entry to and achievement at further and higher education, and into employment.

### Do you think there has been a narrowing of the range of subjects and subject choices in broad general education and in the senior phase, and what is the impact of any limitations on subject choice?

#### *Narrowing of subject choice at S4*

5 There has undoubtedly been a narrowing of the curriculum across Scottish secondary schools with fewer subjects being taken in S4 compared to the breadth of choice available under the pre-CfE Standard Grades.<sup>3</sup> Recent research indicates that the majority of Scottish secondary schools now offer six qualification courses at S4.<sup>4</sup> The widespread reduction in the number of subjects studied in S4 is not the result of any conscious policy decision but is the unintended consequence of the interpretation of national guidance, with the SQA national qualification courses based on 160 hours of directed study.

1 Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective; 2015 <http://www.oecd.org/education/school/improving-schools-in-scotland.htm>

2 Scott, J.; Curriculum for Excellence and the Early/Middle Secondary Curriculum in Scotland: Lessons Learned or Forgotten?; March 2018 <https://discovery.dundee.ac.uk/en/publications/curriculum-for-excellence-and-the-earlymiddle-secondary-curriculu>

3 Priestley, M. and Shapira, M.; Narrowing the Curriculum? Contemporary trends in provision and attainment in the Scottish Curriculum; Paper presented at the European Conference for Educational Research, Copenhagen, 21-25 August 2017 <https://dspace.stir.ac.uk/handle/1893/25879#.XHQQk7jgqU1>

4 Scott, J.; Curriculum for Excellence and the Early/Middle Secondary Curriculum in Scotland: Lessons Learned or Forgotten?; March 2018

### *BGE and senior phase relationship*

- 6 The ongoing confusion in this area led to Education Scotland issuing updated guidance to schools in 2016.<sup>5</sup> This sought to clarify the relationship between the BGE and the senior phase, particularly as to how the former can be used to prepare learners for the latter. The guidance also stated that schools should offer between six and eight qualification courses from S4. This has helped to minimise the number of schools offering fewer than six courses at S4.<sup>6</sup> However, its effectiveness in enabling a broader senior phase hinges on the extent to which schools use S3 to prepare learners for qualifications but in a way that does not compromise their entitlement to a broad general education in S3. This is the nub of the issue since the synergy between the BGE and the senior phase will have a significant bearing on the extent to which learners are prepared for qualification courses and the shape of the senior phase curriculum structures.
- 7 In addition, it would be instructive to consider the extent to which the CfE Benchmarks, introduced in 2017 to help de-code the CfE Experiences and Outcomes, have improved the tracking and monitoring of learners' progress in the BGE and aided progression to the senior phase.

### *Senior phase curriculum models*

- 8 The curriculum model for many schools results in candidates being taught qualification courses within a single academic year. The number of qualification courses that can be taken in S4 will be influenced by the preparation learners have received in BGE, the SCQF level of the qualification itself and the amount of time available for teaching and learning for the qualifications within the scope of one academic session.
- 9 Other approaches to curriculum models in S4 include young people 'by-passing' National 5 and moving straight to Higher or, indeed, taking National 5 courses over two years. While these models can provide more time for learning and teaching, they too have an impact on subject choice in the senior phase. Candidates would need to choose the courses that they would be aiming to achieve in S5 by the end of S3, a full year earlier than in the previous system. In the case of those learners taking National 5 courses over two years,

while they would likely have a broader range of subjects from which to select their Highers, they would need to undertake them in S6, a year later than in the previous system.

- 10 In addition, Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) has opened up learning and career pathways in the senior phase, making it possible for more vocational courses, including modern apprenticeships, to be provided at this level and increasing connections between schools, other education partners and employers. It would be useful to consider to what extent schools are providing for these opportunities.
- 11 The above points emphasise the need to generate a better understanding of schools' senior phase curriculum structures and their impact on attainment. This closely links to the need to give much more attention to the importance of curriculum design.

### *Implications of narrowing of subject choice, including on the attainment gap and on meeting the needs of individual learners*

- 12 While we agree that it is important to look at the totality of learners' attainment at the end of the S4-S6 senior phase, the impact of reduced choice will be felt most keenly by those learners who leave school at S4 with fewer qualifications than previously might have been the case. This conflicts with the Scottish Government's aspiration to close the attainment gap. Reduced course choice at S4 can also constrain learners' S5 and S6 options since it will be more difficult for a learner to progress to Higher level in S5 or 6 if they have not had the pre-requisite learning at National 5 level. Fewer course options at S4 also reduces the learner's room for manoeuvre in the event that s/he does not succeed in one or more of their chosen subjects. This is not only important for those learners who plan to leave at the end of their compulsory schooling, but also for those who intend to progress to further study in their chosen subjects at S5/6. These points also highlight the pressure placed on learners relatively early in their school careers (i.e. by the end of S3) to make their senior phase course options, with narrowing of subjects making it more difficult for learners to deviate from their initial choices.

5 Progression from the Broad General Education (BGE) to the Senior Phase – updated guidance, Education Scotland, 2016 <https://education.gov.scot/Documents/progression-from-bge-to-the-senior-phase.pdf>

6 Professor Jim Scott's research published in March 2018 found only four schools offering five qualification courses at S4 down from an original 18 or 19 schools.

- 13** It will be very important to consider the impact of narrowing course choice at S4 on the effort to close the poverty-related attainment gap. Recent research from the University of Stirling has, worryingly, found a clear relationship between the reduction in the number of subject choices made by S4 pupils and the level of deprivation in the school's catchment area, with the reduction in subject choice being most pronounced in schools in areas of higher deprivation.<sup>7</sup> This therefore adds another dimension in terms of subject choice and its links to economic disadvantage.
- 14** The Committee could consider the extent to which local authorities have imposed on schools under their responsibility a blanket approach to senior phase curriculum structures, particularly on the number of courses that can be studied at S4. While a uniform approach may provide consistency among schools within a local authority, it may not be in the best interests or meet the needs of individual learners within secondary schools. In any event, this approach is difficult to reconcile with the joint agreement between Scottish Government and local authorities that schools should be increasingly empowered in relation to decisions about the curriculum.
- 15** There is also an important issue in relation to the extent to which schools are able to accommodate and offer a range of differentiated curriculum pathways to meet individual learners' needs as opposed to applying a 'one-size fits all' curriculum structure. Given that personalisation and choice is a key principle of CfE, it will be important to ensure the availability of differentiated curriculum pathways. Our comments on DYW opportunities are relevant here.

## What factors influence the range of subject choices?

- 16** A variety of factors can influence the range of subject choices available. This includes: learners' individual needs; the availability (or lack thereof) of subject specialist teachers; local authority and school decision making, including the level of school autonomy; timetabling; school demographics; school location and size; and school partnerships, including clusters and linkages to other education establishments.

## Connected developments

### *Interdisciplinary Learning*

- 17** While our earlier comments focus on subject choice, it is very important that learners are able to

make connections between and across different disciplines since life, especially the world of work, requires people who are able to solve problems that draw upon knowledge from more than one discipline. Having secured its place as an explicit context for learning, interdisciplinary learning (IDL) is one of the most innovative features of CfE. However, progress in implementing IDL in Scottish schools has been slow and patchy. There remains a lack of clarity and understanding among many headteachers and teachers about what constitutes IDL, how it relates to the disciplines across the curriculum, how it should be assessed and why it is important for learners. The ongoing focus on reform of the qualifications along with the practical challenges to schools of providing the collaborative conditions to support IDL remain barriers to its implementation.

- 18** Over several years the RSE has undertaken a range of work with partners to increase the awareness and understanding of IDL in Scottish education. On 30th January, we hosted a major one-day conference which considered IDL within and across the school, further and higher education sectors and employment. This brought together a wide range of perspectives from Scotland, the UK and also internationally. The RSE is undertaking further work to ensure that the conference outputs and outcomes contribute to helping to embed IDL in Scottish education. We would be pleased to keep the Committee updated on these developments.

### *Other UK developments*

- 19** There is growing concern about narrowing of curricula across the UK, particularly in the context of international comparisons and in the way in which the nature of work is changing. The Royal Society, London, has, for example, recently set out plans for a review of UK post-16 education and the RSE is considering how we can contribute to the Scottish dimension of their work.<sup>8</sup>

### *Additional Information*

This Advice Paper has been signed off by the General Secretary of the RSE.

Any enquiries about this Advice Paper should be addressed to Mr William Hardie (email: whardie@theRSE.org.uk)

All responses are published on the RSE website (www.rse.org.uk).

<sup>7</sup> Dr Marina Shapira oral evidence to the Scottish Parliament's Education and Skills Committee, 19 September 2018 <http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=11680&mode=pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <https://royalsociety.org/-/media/policy/Publications/2019/12-02-19-jobs-are-changing-so-should-education.pdf>