

## **EIS response to the Education and Skills Committee Inquiry into Subject Choices**

The EIS, Scotland's largest teacher trade union, representing more than 80% of Scotland's teachers at all levels of their careers, is pleased to provide evidence to the Committee's inquiry into Secondary school subject choice.

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

The EIS is of the view that the structure of the Senior Phase is mostly unchanged from its pre-CfE design. While the qualifications themselves have changed, the ways in which young people undertake them much too closely resemble the experiences of senior students a decade and a half ago when the new ambitions of CfE, including those for the Senior Phase, were being articulated out of the desire to transform the curriculum for the better.

Indeed, it could be argued that the current arrangement is poorer as the compression of qualifications at SCQF levels 4 and 5 into one year (S4) rather than the two years of Standard Grade (S3 and S4), has required a reduction in the number of subjects chosen and also a significant time pressure in delivering said courses in a single year.

The inertia in terms of progress towards achieving the ambition for the Senior Phase is for three main reasons. One- an unstinting and misplaced focus on qualifications by government and Education Scotland as CfE was being implemented, rather than on support to schools in re-designing coherent new curricula reflecting the design intentions of the CfE Senior Phase: breadth and depth of learning, and parity of esteem for 'vocational' and more traditional learner pathways, courses and qualifications. Two- the rush to implement the new qualifications in 2014 before schools had been afforded the time to consider how to transform their Senior Phase curriculum offer. Three- the profile given to school attainment data from within the system itself and by external observers and commentators, particularly politicians and the media.

Schools, under pressure to deliver the new qualifications in such a context, achieved this without detriment to young people's qualifications but only through a significant explosion in excessive workload for teachers. Having battled consistently since the introduction of the new qualifications with short-notice changes to courses and assessment, only now are schools, to some extent, beginning to make adjustments to the Senior Phase curriculum to bring it in line with what was originally intended.

Education Scotland and the SQA have both identified that there are modest signs of greater curriculum diversification. In the view of the EIS, this is not enough to account for the positive picture painted in the recently published School and

Leaver Attainment and Destinations data. There is evidence within the data that Scottish Education is performing well by the measures set:

- 94.4% of school leavers were identified as being in work, training or further study within three months of leaving school last year, this the highest rate of such success since 2009
- a halving of the gap in the achievement of positive destinations by the most and least deprived young people, in addition to the eighth successive reduction in the gap between the most and least deprived young people in terms of attainment of Higher passes
- overall attainment at Higher is also an improved picture with more than 30% of young people leaving school with five Higher passes or better; the 2009 figure was 22.9%
- a strong level of engagement by young people in their school experience with further increase in the numbers staying on at school into S6- almost two thirds in total.

The EIS would argue, however, that this is more a sign that the qualifications are being well delivered rather than that the overall structure of the curriculum has been transformed according to CfE principles to deliver these outcomes. Much more needs to be done to meet the ambitions of CfE and this should not be piecemeal.

The majority of schools, for the reasons outlined above, continue to structure their senior curricula as per pre-CfE- i.e. around annual acquisition of qualifications. There has been no significant change to presentation patterns as a result of CfE. Even the welcome increase in students being presented for and achieving qualifications from the extended SQA qualifications menu, largely reflects the continuation of work already established pre-CfE through such means as school college partnerships. A combination of annual patterns of presentation across S4, S5 and S6, and insufficient curriculum diversification, therefore, conspire to inhibit progress in learning and achievement of the kind envisaged.

To realise the vision, the EIS believes, learner pathways designed for two years of study from S4 towards an exit qualification, based on students' prior learning, achievement and attainment during the three years of Secondary BGE, are the way forward. Such pathways should be creatively constructed to engage students in academic, 'vocational', and personal and social skills-based learning in a balance that suits their prior learning, achievement and attainment, and which is appropriate for the next stages of their learner journey. S6 should enable students to deepen their learning in some areas, diversify in others, and in so doing, acquire additional qualifications as necessary and appropriate to their chosen post-school destinations.

Within such a model, National Qualifications would be undertaken for the vast majority of students, for the first time, in S5; only the 10-11% of students who leave school at the end of S4 should sit National Qualifications after one year – or more realistically 9 months -of study within the Senior Phase.

Where schools (only a small minority currently) have moved to curriculum models that closely reflect the original design intentions of CfE Senior Phase – which

maximise opportunities for depth and richness in learning, and consequently minimise the amount of unnecessary formal assessment which detracts from the core purpose of learning and teaching- our members report positive impact on learning and overall achievement.

They cite the shift to a three-year Senior Phase as being beneficial to student outcomes because it enables much greater flexibility within the timetable for young people to take courses at a level and at a point within the three years of the Senior Phase as most appropriate for them. For example, students sitting National 5 and SCQF Level 6 Units during S4 and S5, then sitting Higher in S6, or students studying Higher during S4 and S5, and having the option of more 'vocational' learning in the remaining available time. There are different models in operation across different schools.

Where increased flexibility within the timetable has been matched by a widening of achievement opportunities such as 'vocational' qualifications, leadership and employability awards, our members indicate that this reflects fairer, more inclusive prioritising within the curriculum offer than perhaps was the case previously when timetabling decisions rested often on ensuring that Higher and Advanced Higher classes would run.

In scenarios in which the curriculum architecture has changed its overall shape but where the ethos continues to be rooted in the pursuit of maximising the number of Higher passes attained, the benefits to students' learning and achievement are questioned by our members, particularly where it is felt that the individual needs and interests of students are not the key determinants of subject choice.

Our members in schools which have maintained pre-CfE curriculum shape, report either no significant change or deterioration to learning, achievement and attainment.

In these contexts in particular, difficulties remain in relation to National 4 courses. The EIS has been of the view for some time that National 4 courses require to be re-structured to include an assignment, perhaps in replacement of the Added Value Unit, which is externally marked and graded by the SQA. Scottish Government has procrastinated on this issue for over two years.

Over-assessment persists, also. While EIS members welcomed the removal of mandatory units from National Qualifications, the EIS is aware that too many schools continue to present students for National 4 or SCQF Units in addition to presenting them for qualifications which include a final exam. Such practice strangles progress towards realising the ambition of the Senior Phase, and fails to address the problem of SQA-related teacher workload. We welcome the albeit late-in-the-day announcement from the Deputy First Minister that such presentation patterns will not be permissible next session.

Also of concern in relation to presentation patterns, is the tendency in the majority of schools for the curriculum to resemble a 'ladder' of qualifications, with students required to sit N4 before progressing to N5 before progressing to Higher. The intention to enable students to 'by-pass' unnecessary qualifications in S4 and to

deepen learning within a course of two-year study at an appropriately challenging level is being realised still only in a minority of schools. This needs to change.

**b) Education Scotland says the Senior Phase has the “flexibility to offer a range of pathways that meet the needs and raise the attainment levels of all learners”. How does your school offer flexibility to its learners through the Senior Phase and how does this impact on the range of subjects available and the depth of pupils’ learning?**

The EIS has previously argued that the curriculum in S4-S5 should be structured as per the Standard Grade S3-S4, with eight available options and two school sessions within which the associated learning is undertaken. Not all of the eight options would be National Qualifications, therefore time and space would be created for students to engage in a broader range of learning experiences- community-based learning, Modern Apprenticeships, Duke of Edinburgh Awards, etc. – and in greater depth in some, depending on course and level.

Schools which have continued to structure their Senior Phase curricula as per the Standard Grade model- S1&S2, S3&S4, and S5&S6- offer the least flexibility in terms of the range of pathways, with students still undertaking eight National Qualifications in S4. In such schools, breadth of learning, or at least a perception of it, is treated more as a priority than depth.

As referenced above, this raises significant questions about the amount of teaching time that S4 candidates studying eight National Qualifications in one year are receiving. In many/most cases, teaching time falls far short of the 160 hours allocated notionally per course, with learning for what were originally designed to be two-year courses being crammed into a timescale that stops significantly short of one school session. This strongly mitigates against the principle of depth in learning.

Where schools have sought to embrace the design intentions of the Senior Phase, members report greater diversification of learner pathways- subjects being delivered on a school cluster basis, and a larger number of ‘vocational’ courses, some of which are delivered through partnership with colleges. In these cases, timetables are being built around learner pathways rather than timetables dictating the pathways. Flexibility is further enhanced through the offer of lateral as well as linear progression within a curricular area, and accreditation of wider achievement.

**c) Do you think there has been a narrowing of the range of subjects and subject choices in:**

**I. broad general education (BGE)**

In some schools, the BGE offer is reduced. This is particularly the case where there are staffing shortages which result either in BGE courses not running at all or being allocated less time within the timetable. Where staffing within a particular subject area is limited, our members report that priority is given to staffing Senior Phases classes.

Aside from this, difficulties arise, again, where schools treat the third year of the BGE as preparation for undertaking National Qualifications in S4 (as per the Standard Grade model), and not as intended, the final year of the BGE experience. Subject choice is unsatisfactorily narrowed for young people at the end of S2 as a result of this approach, for example, from 13 to 6, 7 or 8 subjects, depending on how many qualifications students undertake in S4. Worse still is that many S3 pupils for whom National 4 study is not planned, are needlessly sitting N4 units which are 'banked' before progression to N5 in S4. This is far from what was intended for the BGE.

Other schools have sought to address issues around the transition from BGE and the Senior Phase by providing 'masterclasses' and other enriched learning experiences that are intended to support more seamless movement from S3 and the end of the BGE into S4 and beyond. This is not universal, however. The EIS is of the view that progression from the BGE to the Senior Phase is an area that requires time and space for system-wide thinking and subsequent action in order to improve it for all young people regardless of the school that they are in.

## **II. S4?**

As previously mentioned, where schools have sought to deliver the aspirations of the Senior Phase of CfE, students often study 6 subjects in S4, whilst other schools remain fixed to the previous curriculum model with students studying eight subjects – National Qualifications in the main- and the vast majority of pupils sitting qualifications including exams at the end of S4.

The latter is effectively the Standard Grade model, largely unaltered from the previous O Level model, which was structured to enable the completion of seven or eight (sometimes nine) qualifications before the majority of students left school at the end of S4. S4 no longer serves that primary purpose.

It is for this reason that the EIS advocates re-purposing of that year as the first of a two-year learner pathway that incorporates both depth and breadth of learning, and greater diversity of experience, with stronger emphasis on the development of creativity skills, as outlined previously in this paper.

## **III. S5**

As outlined above, the EIS believes that S5 should be the second year of a two-year learner pathway for the vast majority of students, and the first in which they sit exit qualifications. Within most current models, the range of subject choice for S5 remains at is was in the past but is too narrow to realise the full ambition of Senior Phase CfE.

## **S6?**

This varies from context to context - some members report that the range of subject choice in their schools has remained the same, others that it has increased, others that the range of subjects on offer has reduced somewhat.

The EIS believes that the fullest range of subjects should be available to young people in S6 to maximise opportunities for their progression, and to enable them

to undertake learning at the appropriate level, and as far as possible at the appropriate stage, in their individual learner journey.

**d) What are the factors that influence the range of subject choices? Possible factors include: curriculum timetabling; local decision making; school size; area and school demography.**

As articulated in the early sections of this paper, the key driver in influencing the range of subject choices is strong adherence to an atomised qualifications-gathering approach rather than universal commitment to the creation of coherent learner pathways that offer more holistic learning experiences.

Also featuring heavily in the influencing factors as cited by our members are the availability of staffing and school size. Staffing levels in Secondary schools influence to a large extent, what can and cannot be offered. What has until recently been a challenge relatively exclusive to particular geographical areas and affecting a minority of subjects, is now being more universally experienced across the country and in a large number of subject areas. The challenge is compounded in small schools where the size of the school roll, in limiting the overall size of the staffing complement, restricts also the range of subject specialism within the teaching staff profile. Larger schools can benefit to some extent from economies of scale.

Increasingly, schools facing shortage in certain specialisms are reliant on cluster arrangements and college provision to maximise the options choice. Commonly, in single-teacher subject areas, teachers are under increasing pressure to teach multi-level classes, this effectively amounting to multi-course teaching in subject areas where there is little commonality of course content across levels. The EIS has consistently argued that this is neither educationally sound nor conducive to teacher wellbeing.

EIS members also report moves towards the delivery of learning and teaching for some subjects, in order to keep them as live options, within 'digital campuses'- a development which raises many questions about the quality of teacher-student interactions and the ability to learn co-operatively with fellow students in the context of learning being a fundamentally social experience. The EIS is keeping a watching brief on such developments.

In some schools, parental demand for the priority provision of particular subjects, a broader range of subject choices and students undertaking more qualifications in one year- S4 in particular- has also been identified as an influencing factor. Schools perceive the need to maintain such curriculum architecture in response to parental demand and the continuing misunderstanding of employers, also, about the purpose of the Senior Phase and the value of some of the new qualifications, National 4 being one of them.

Parental preference for their children to study STEM, and arguably the drive from government, in addition to more 'academic' subjects, has reportedly led to some marginalisation of Creative and Aesthetic subjects, Social Sciences, Home Economics, etc. in some schools.

The EIS is of the view that system-wide efforts are needed to enhance parents' and employers' understanding in this regard. Again, we see it that the rush to implement the new qualifications in 2014 missed the crucially important step of educating and gaining 'buy-in' from stakeholders who are highly influential in the decisions that young people make about their Senior Phase options, and thereby in the decision-making that occurs at school level around curriculum architecture.

**e) Have you experienced any changes in the level of uptake in particular subjects in the past 5 years? If so, what subjects in particular and what do you think has caused this change?**

This appears to be a mixed picture across schools.

Teacher availability, of course, is critical to subject options being available. For example, the EIS is aware of the critical shortage in Home Economic teachers which has resulted in this subject being removed from the curriculum in many schools.

The proliferation of faculties and subsequent diminution in the number of subject specialist Principal Teachers is having an impact on the uptake of some subjects. In the past, each subject in a Secondary School was led by a PT who had a role in promoting awareness of their subjects and of the benefits of studying them to young people. Increasingly, collections of subjects are grouped together within Faculties led by Principal Teachers who are specialist in only one of the disciplines, leading to less even promotion of individual subjects across the range.

In instances where Maths is no longer mandatory at S5, members report some modest decrease in uptake. Maths qualifications have not been without their difficulties in recent years. This may be influencing decision-making.

Other schools report increased uptake in more 'vocational' or practical subjects such as Accounting, Practical Cookery, Cake Craft, Music Technology and Practical Metalwork and Woodwork at N5. At Higher, Administration and IT, Computing Science, Engineering Science and Photography have increased uptake; whilst at Advanced Higher the demand for Art and Design, Business Management and Computing Science has increased significantly. This may be accounted for by these schools' sharpened focus on creating learner pathways, or at least providing subjects, that more accurately capture the interests and talents of the majority, if not all, of the learner population.

In schools where there is a strong focus on STEM, and particularly where this is supported by parents, EIS members report decreased uptake in creative, social and languages subjects.

**f) What is the impact, positive or negative, of any limitations on subject choices?**

Limiting subject choice without ensuring sufficient richness and diversity of the learning experience within the Senior Phase, and just as importantly within the BGE from S1 to S3, is likely to impact negatively on young people's motivation, and the quality of their learning, achievement and attainment.

Of primary importance is that each school has a sufficiently diverse choice of coherent learner pathways which are flexible enough to prevent young people being locked into narrow routes; to enable the possibility of them changing their minds about the direction they would like their learning to take without valuable learning being lost; and to enable them to undertake learning at the appropriate level at the appropriate time in their development.

We stress that young people should not as a rule sit qualifications in the same subject at a different level, year upon year. While qualifications and/ or exams in S4 may be necessary for those leaving school at the end of the year, this is not needed and indeed is an unhelpful barrier to depth and richness, and arguably greater enjoyment, of Senior Phase study, for the vast majority of young people -almost 90%- who remain at school until the end of S5, two thirds till the end of S6.

A two-year S4-S5 approach to presentations would enable a greater breadth of experience and greater creativity within individual subject areas. More time and space would be freed up for projects and visiting specialists; interdisciplinary learning and collaboration with other learners; sound formative assessment practice that encourages young people's ownership of their learning; extension to learning contexts beyond the classroom and school, strengthening relevance, deepening understanding and enhancing creativity; and building engagement with Modern Apprenticeship and other work-based programmes of learning.

The relative freedom that such approaches would offer from the constraints of the traditional examination regime and the gift of time that it would give to spend on activities which are nurturing and beneficial to personal, social and emotional development, would be hugely beneficial to young people's mental health and overall wellbeing, to their enjoyment of their Senior Phase experience, and thereby to their learning and overall achievement.

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