

THE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTE OF SCOTLAND

EIS Evidence to the Scottish Parliament Education and Skills Committee on CfE Priorities and Challenges

28 September 2016

- 1 The Educational Institute of Scotland, Scotland's largest teacher trade union, welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence on Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) to the Education and Skills Committee of the Scottish Parliament.
- 2 It is the view of the EIS that the education system in Scotland has reached a stage in the development of CfE at which reflection on progress to date and on future direction, measured against the original aims and philosophy, is required.
- 3 A key principle of CfE is the promotion of deeper learning. The EIS believes that significant further work is needed to create the requisite time and space for this to be realised more effectively, both within the Broad General Education (BGE) and the Senior Phase.
- 4 In Primary in particular, the curriculum remains heavily cluttered with teachers and pupils being placed in the position of having to respond within their learning and teaching to too many national, local authority and school priorities and initiatives. This has resulted in wide coverage of multiple priorities within the pupil week at the expense of depth of learning.
- 5 Efforts are being made to address the cluttered curriculum with the recently published advice to schools from Education Scotland, endorsed by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills. While this is welcomed by the EIS, there is a need to ensure that the advice on paper is translated into decisive action at authority and school level. Previous initiatives such as the "Tackling Bureaucracy Report" have failed to achieve the necessary purchase within the system.
- 6 Similarly, the section of the same advice document that focusses on assessment must be followed up to ensure that assessment practice in schools is firmly rooted in the interests of learning and on the principle of the primacy of teacher professional judgment.
- 7 Two further key aims of CfE were to reduce the burden of formal assessment to maximise time for high quality learning and teaching, and to ensure that teacher judgement is at the heart of decision-making around teaching, learning and assessment.
- 8 Until now, as a consequence of an auditing approach to coverage and assessment of Experiences and Outcomes, pupils have been over-assessed and at the same time, the accompanying recording and reporting frameworks have become unwieldy. This consumes time that could be better spent by

teachers engaging in professional dialogue around understanding of standards and the growing of confidence around assessment judgements.

- 9 The EIS welcomed statements issued pre-Summer by Education Scotland on the importance of teacher professional judgement but has concerns that the aspiration around teacher confidence and reliability relative to this will not be realised without significant additional investment of time for professional dialogue and collaboration within and across schools and local authorities.
- 10 Also regarding assessment approaches, the EIS has ongoing concerns about the Scottish Government's intentions to reintroduce national standardised assessment for pupils within the BGE as an element of the National Improvement Framework (NIF). The EIS believes that the primary function of assessment is to support the learning of pupils as individuals; it should not be used as an accountability mechanism with which to measure the performance of the system or of individual schools. It is the view of the EIS that the suitability and timing of assessment for individual pupils should be left to the professional judgement of teachers. The EIS, therefore, would not support the testing or assessment of whole cohorts of pupils at once, using the same assessment tool. Such an approach is based on "benchmarking" the system rather than supporting pupil learning. The EIS has reiterated this view repeatedly within a variety of NIF fora and awaits the final design detail of the standardised assessments at which point members will be keen to evaluate the extent to which this is consistent with EIS policy.
- 11 Within the Senior Phase, while significant progress towards reducing the burden of formal assessment has been made with the decision to eliminate mandatory unit assessment from National 5 and Higher qualifications, this change being precipitated by the recent EIS industrial action, more work is required to realign the Senior Phase, in practice, with the original design intentions.
- 12 For example, for the most part, schools not having had the time to consider alternative curriculum architecture for the Senior Phase, continue adherence to a legacy model within which all students begin qualifications in S3 for completion by the end of S4. While future cohorts within this model will now be spared the burden of unit assessment, they will continue to sit formal qualifications in S4 which will quickly be superseded by higher level qualifications in S5. In effect, without the requisite time and space for schools to consider alternatives, the vast majority of students will continue to sit exams in S4 in addition to all of the accompanying preparatory assessment for no sound educational purpose. The argument that students need practice in sitting exams, while legitimate, does not demand the current approach—there are other means by which schools can create such opportunities. Such emphasis on formal exams within the period of the Senior Phase mitigates against depth, personalisation, and, arguably for many students, enjoyment of learning.
- 13 Related to this, and also of crucial importance to the future of the Senior Phase, is resolution of tensions around the place and value of National 4 qualifications as perceived by students, teachers, parents and employers. A

combination of adherence to past curricular models and difference in qualification design across N4 and N5, has had the unintended consequence of fostering belief that the N4 qualification is of lesser value than higher level qualifications.

- 14 There is an opportunity to redress this imbalance of esteem in the context of the Developing the Young Workforce agenda and the aspiration to create parity of esteem between 'vocational' and 'academic' pathways (though this is, of course, linked to the rewards in terms of remuneration and status that society attributes to each and so the issue cannot be addressed by schools alone). The NQ Review group also needs to consider the interface between the S3 BGE experience and the move into the S4-6 Senior Phase.
- 15 Finally, the EIS is of the view that in order to secure the healthy future progress of CfE at school level and for schools to 'lead from the middle', as recommended by the OECD, significant efforts to develop and enhance collegiality (this being of crucial importance); to fulfil properly the professional learning entitlements of teachers; and to ensure effective and responsive support to schools in terms of pedagogical leadership and professional networking, are required.