Dear Mr Dornan

This statement is provided in response to your recent request for written feedback to the Education and Skills Committee on the performance of Education Scotland (ES) and SQA in relation to outcomes expected by the Scottish Government. As explained to Ned Sharratt, in my email dated 27/09/2016, I am confining my response to commentary on issues relating to the development of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). The first of Education Scotland’s strategic goals states that it will ‘Build a world-class curriculum for all learners in Scotland’, and my focus will remain primarily on this issue. In my view, CfE has not been developed to its full potential. The reasons for this are complex, and involve the performance of key bodies such as Education Scotland and SQA, as well as less tangible issues such as the culture of Scottish schools and adherence to prevailing practices of schooling. I wish to frame my response around three key problematics identified by the OECD in their recent review of CfE:

- **The narrative of the curriculum** (i.e. the associated documentation, and general vision and directions set for curriculum reform). This has become over-complex, leading to confusion about the goals of the curriculum in many schools.
- **The role of the ‘middle’** (i.e. the nature and extent of support provided by meso-level organisations, bodies which operate at an intermediate level between government and schools). Organisations such as Education Scotland and local authorities have tended to fulfil two roles: 1] the production of guidance (arguably, in many cases, a reinterpretation of policy that is not required); and 2] a quality assurance or inspection role, to ensure that standards are being met. Absent from the middle has been a support role, comprising hands-on leadership for curriculum development and specialist advice. This used to be provided by Advisers within local authorities but these posts have been largely replaced by Quality Improvement Officers, who essentially fulfil an inspection/quality assurance role.
- **The enactment of the curriculum in schools**. Research suggests that CfE is at best only partially implemented in terms of the vision set out in 2004, a view supported in the OECD analysis, which states that ‘implementation is proceeding at varying speeds’ (p.10).

In discussing these issues, I shall make reference to both Education Scotland and SQA.

**Background**

I would argue CfE initially comprised some well-articulated narratives for developing the curriculum, including clear purposes (the Four Capacities) and principles, set out in the 2004 Review Document. The future direction of the narrative was shaped by an earlier decision (outlined in the 2004 Ministerial Response) to continue with the previous 5-14 curriculum’s approach of setting out content as layers of hierarchically stated outcomes (now called the Experiences and Outcomes). Thus, the early decision determined that CfE would be complex and highly
specification. Subsequent documentation produced by Learning and Teaching Scotland (LTS), the body which preceded the setting up of Education Scotland (e.g. the Building the Curriculum [BTC] series) continued to build this complexity, and laid the foundations for the current situation, where CfE has become associated with over-assessment and excessive bureaucracy. Particular issues that can be attributed to the performance of LTS in this early stage include:

- There has been a lack of a clearly articulated process for curriculum development. The prevailing orthodoxy in many education systems is to steer practice through outcomes or performance indicators. This tends to ignore specification of processes, and encourages the development of performative cultures in schools, often characterised by strategic compliance with policy and game-playing. Advice emerging from around 2008 onwards was for schools to audit current provision against the new Experiences and Outcomes (Es & Os), and this has led to often superficial, tick box approaches to curriculum development. Such approaches undermine professional judgement, and have often intensified workload, as well as leading to provision that is incoherent and fragmented in many schools. They also run counter to the claim at the start of CfE that the reform would enhance the autonomy and agency of teachers.

- This lack of clarity was exacerbated in many ways by the recourse to a self-congratulatory rhetoric in many of the early CPD sessions, including the oft-repeated message that CfE is ‘just good practice’ that schools are doing already. A more constructive message would have been that CfE is different, radical and new and needed new forms of engagement by schools.

- Further to this has been an emphasis on a narrow ‘best practice’ variant of so-called evidence-based practice, which neglects consideration of contextual differences between schools, encouraging the implementation of one-size-fits-all techniques.

- There has been a lack of a systematic strategy for engaging with research in the area of curriculum. This includes a failure to take account of the previous, successful Assessment is for Learning programme, which did engage with researchers, and which had a clear methodology for developing the curriculum. While LTS did second a senior researcher for a period of time (from Glasgow University), the organisation did not systematically develop links with the research community in Scotland; nor did it develop its research capacity, along the lines of, for example, the Dutch SLO (Netherlands Institute for Curriculum Development), which employs professional curriculum developers and researchers.

- There has been a tendency for the organisation to produce guidance, rather than act as a leader or facilitator of curriculum development. It would have been good, for instance, to have seen the establishment of working groups, along the lines of the Schools Council Projects in the 1970s, to develop programmes for schools. Missing from the early process in schools was a systematic sense-making phase, which could have been led by LTS – along the lines of the first phase of the current Welsh curriculum (Embedding the Four Purposes), where groups of schools are engaging with one another to develop understanding of the key tenets of what is a new approach to education for them, before actively implementing the curriculum.

- There was a lack of dialogue about what is to be learned in schools, and why. Official documents have tended to focus on skills rather than knowledge. Our research suggests an absence of this sort of dialogue in schools, and LTS could have made these issues more explicit in early documentation. To be fair, this is a worldwide trend in curriculum policy development; but it is one that could have been avoided had there been greater dialogue with curriculum specialists and professional curriculum researchers from the outset.

Subsequent developments
The situation described above set the conditions for the uneven evolution of CfE. Since the formation of Education Scotland, subsequent developments have further shaped the curriculum in practice, leading to the current state of play. I list some of these here, as they relate to the capacity of Education Scotland (and to a lesser extent SQA) to develop a national curriculum.

- The decision by SQA to stick with 160 hour courses for National 4 and National 5 qualifications, which I believe to be influenced by European frameworks, has been significant in shaping schools’ development of senior phase provision. This course specification has meant that, while eight exam courses were typically run over two years in previous provision, it is now common to see five or six courses run over one year. The consequence of this has been a narrowing of the curriculum in many schools in S4, at a stage when students are being asked to make significant choices that will impact upon their life chances. Emerging evidence suggests that this narrowing is adversely impacting on non-core subjects such as foreign languages. It runs counter to the well-established reputation of Scottish education for breadth.

- SQA has stuck with a competency-based model for senior qualifications. This model was designed for vocational qualifications, and includes the concept of mastery, assessed through unit tests. Mastery is applicable in vocational areas (for example, if one is learning to wire a plug, it is good to know that all steps are understood). It is less applicable for academic subjects. A serious consequence of this model has been the over-assessment of young people in the senior phase (anecdotal evidence suggests four or more unit tests per week across the range of subjects in some cases) and concomitant workload pressures for teachers. It also reinforces well established tendencies for teachers to teach to the test narrowly (exam techniques etc.) rather than teaching to educate young people.

- Linked to the above, there have been complaints that moderation processes for internally assessed coursework (to ensure consistency in assessment judgments) have become over-complex and bureaucratic. It is unclear whether these issues are due to SQA’s procedures, or schools over-interpreting these, or a combination of the two. Moderation is necessary, particularly in a system where assessments are high-stakes for teachers, and where low attainment is a reputational issue for the school. That this is an issue was starkly illustrated recently by an email to centres from SQA, warning them of the dangers of inflating internally assessed grades.

- Curriculum guidance by Education Scotland has continued to reiterate (often with subtle changes) rather than replace previous guidance. This has led to a proliferation of guidance and clarification, most recently during the summer of 2016. There are several clear tendencies emerging, all of which militate against clarity in curriculum development: 1] a tendency for meanings to change (for example the Experiences and Outcomes were not originally intended to be assessment standards, but subsequently came to be called this); 2] a tendency for certain terminology to become fashionable for a while, then to be replaced by other terms; and 3] a tendency for documentation to become more highly specified over time – a ‘spiral of specification’ (Wolf, 1995). The net result of these trends has been confusion for many practitioners and an increased need for bureaucratic box-ticking approaches, which in turn increase workload.

- While the rhetoric of CfE continues to emphasise teacher autonomy, the system within which teachers work effectively disables them from exercising that autonomy. There is a need for a better understanding of how system dynamics enable and constrain teachers’ agency in curriculum development. Currently, innovation is seen as being risky by many teachers. High-stakes assessment (evaluation of schools using attainment data) and inspections are part of this ecology of risk. Decisions are often thus made to protect the school’s reputation, rather than for educational reasons. High workload associated with accountability (collection of evidence, etc.) continues to stifle innovation by squeezing out the spaces where it might otherwise thrive. Moreover, the demands of national qualifications continue to exert an undue influence on decisions made about the broad general education phase in secondary schools. In primary schools, our research suggests that
curriculum development is often shaped by the need to gather evidence of attainment (as measured against the Es and Os). Performativity is a phenomenon that is well documented in research in education\(^i\). At its worst it can consist of cheating and fabrication of attainment. This may be uncommon; nevertheless, less malign variants commonly exist, including the massaging of image, the steering of pupil subject choices, and teaching to the text.

In summary, Education Scotland and SQA are part of an ecology of schooling that can militate against the sort of curriculum development envisaged in the early CfE documentation. Practices around curriculum development, assessment and accountability are shaped by this ecological infrastructure, including the cultural expectations that surround schooling in Scotland. CfE aspired to transformational change, but what is evident from 12 years of development falls well short of these aspirations; instead, CfE has been largely assimilated by the system, and the result is a curriculum that is, at best, only partially implemented. Worse, its mode of implementation has served to alienate many of the teachers who enthusiastically embraced it at the outset, squandering goodwill, and arguably undermining the future realisation of the aspirational aims of the curriculum for years to come. This record also raises uncomfortable questions about the quality of leadership and direction at various levels of the Scottish educational system: existing institutions need to become more open to good ideas from outside their own ranks and less preoccupied with bureaucratic systems and managerial control.

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\(^i\) An illustrative anecdote here concerns a recent staff development session (September 2016) at a high school (one that has very high attainment). On arriving at the schools, I was assured by the Headteacher that the school in question was cutting edge in its approach to CfE. Conversely, discussions with groups of teachers during the session elicited comments from many that they do not understand CfE. This experience is concordant with our most recent empirical research, which suggests that many teachers continue to lack a developed understanding of the principles and goals of CfE (e.g. Drew, V., Priestley, M. & Michael, M. (2016). Curriculum Development through Critical Collaborative Professional Enquiry. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, 1, 1-16.).


\(^v\) The recent announcement that these are to be abolished is to be greatly welcomed.

\(^vi\) The email suggested that some centres show a wider discrepancy than others between externally and internally assessed components. While this has been disputed by teacher unions, the statistics show a clear picture. Interestingly, this is something that we warned SQA about in an unpublished report commissioned by them in 2010; Priestley, M. & Adey, C. (2010). *Supporting teacher assessment in National 4/5 Qualifications: a report for the Scottish Qualifications Authority*. Glasgow: SQA.

\(^vii\) Originally, they were framed as expressly not for assessment – they ‘are not designed as assessment criteria in their own right’ (CfE overarching cover paper, 2007). BTC5 changed this: "In Curriculum for Excellence, the standards expected for progression are indicated within the experiences and outcomes at each level" (p13) and “…assessment tasks and activities provide learners with fair and valid opportunities to meet the standards.” (p36). The same document described a standard - “something against which we measure performance” (p11).

\(^viii\) The term ‘achievement pathways’ appeared prominently in the 2013 CfE Briefing Part 3. *Curriculum Planning at the Senior Phase*, and subsequently in a range of vignettes (2013/14) on the Education Scotland website. A search of the website identified no recent usage, although *How good is our school?* (2014, 4\(^{th}\) edition) frequently makes reference to ‘learning pathways’, and on one occasion to ‘progression pathways’. Earlier key documentation (e.g. BTC5; Briefing 3, Curriculum for Excellence: Profiling and the S3 profile; Briefing 6, A guide for practitioners: Progression from the Broad General Education to the Senior Phase) utilise the term ‘pathways’ from time to time, but not the explicit term ‘achievement pathways’.

\(^ix\) Intriguingly, the latest example of this – the specification of extremely detailed benchmarks for assessment – appears to have emerged as a response to calls by the OECD to provide a new simplified narrative. While these benchmarks have been accompanied by an apparent simplification of the Es & Os, they add a new layer of complexity. The literacy and numeracy drafts each contain around 350 assessment benchmarks – if duplicated across all subjects, this will provide practitioners with around 4000 criteria for assessment.