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Convener  
Education and Skills Committee  
The Scottish Parliament  
Edinburgh  
EH99 1SP

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Dear James

Thank you for your letter of 30 November requesting a range of additional information following our appearance before Committee.

During that appearance, I undertook to provide the Committee with information about the structure of the senior phase, particularly whether pupils are now able to take three sciences in the same year at National 5, Higher or Advanced Higher levels.

It might be helpful if I firstly explain that Curriculum for Excellence allows for a broader curriculum at S3 than existed under the previous '2+2+2' approach, when young people made subject choices at the end of S2. Young people should now be able to study a greater number of subjects in S3, individually and through interdisciplinary study, and to study them to a level which allows them either to progress to National Qualifications in S4 in these subjects, or to pick them up again either in S5 or S6. Indeed, one of the main objectives of Curriculum for Excellence is to allow for personalised learning through which all learners follow a curriculum which meets their individual needs. The guiding principle is that qualifications, awards and achievements are taken at the right stage for the individual young person over the senior phase which can be up to three years in duration. This means that groups and individuals will follow a far greater variety of “learner pathways” as they progress through their learning than was the case in the past.

One key difference which has emerged nationally is that young people are taking exams in fewer subjects at the end of S4. Schools have made these changes to ensure greater depth in young people’s learning at this stage. As they move into S5 and S6, there is also the opportunity to study different or additional subjects from those studied in S4. Also, some schools have changed the timescales over which young people study for qualifications, for example, with some higher-attaining young people “by-passing” exams in S4, and instead following a two-year course to Higher in S5.
From fieldwork carried out in 2015 and 2016, we know that schools have been reviewing their curriculum structures to take account of their experience of delivering National Qualifications (NQs), and the need to create greater flexibility in the senior phase. Young people do not solely focus on SQA qualifications. They can and do follow programmes which include activities to develop them, for example, as global citizens and as leaders and which may lead to other valued awards such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award.

In addition, the Developing the Young Workforce programme, with its emphasis on the need to offer more work-based learning and access to vocational qualifications, has resulted in new approaches to the design of the senior phase. This is helping schools respond more effectively to the needs of all young people, ensuring they follow appropriate pathways, experience suitable breadth and depth in their learning and achieve a positive destination. This represents an important dimension of the increasing breadth of programmes and pathways on offer to young people in the senior phase, as was envisaged in the original Curriculum for Excellence proposals.

The senior phase should therefore be viewed as a three-year phase of learning with flexible progression routes which allow all young people to build up a portfolio of qualifications appropriate to their needs by the time they leave school.

Turning to the specific point about the possibility of studying three sciences, choosing to specialise in three sciences at the same time obviously narrows the range of subjects experienced overall. This is likely to be pointed out to young people and their parents as part of a school’s support for pupils on subject choices and curriculum pathways. However, if a young person and his/her parents, having considered the advice provided by the school, still wants to go ahead with studying three sciences, then the opportunity should be given. I can confirm that our inspectors are finding that secondary schools are generally still making arrangements for three sciences where needed. Indeed, the percentage of young people taking 3 science subjects to qualifications has remained around the same over the past few years with only slight fluctuations. It has ranged from 3.1% to 3.6% across the 2012 (3.1%) to 2016 (3.2%) period.

Increasingly, young people are also accessing new pathways involving scientific study. The STEM-relevant Foundation Apprenticeships in engineering is an example which provides a qualification at the same SCQF level as a Higher.

Members asked for our view on whether or not there are any equalities considerations in relation to the availability of courses at different schools. We are seeing limited evidence that differing socio-economic characteristics or school size impact on availability. There is, however, some evidence that teacher availability in some subject areas and in some geographic areas can constrain the options that young people can access.
Several areas are addressing the challenge of ensuring equitable access through the use of technology. For example, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (The Western Isles Council) have been developing an e-Sgoil (e-school) which will enable every secondary school learner in Eilean Siar to access an increased range of subjects in both English and Gaelic. Further, the authority is in discussions with other local authorities across the Northern Alliance and beyond around the potential of opening up the e-Sgoil to learners in other areas.

Members also asked for further information on how we plan our school inspection programmes. Planning is undertaken by a small specialist team. The team provide updated forecasts on inspection numbers quarterly. In August they forecast that we would achieve 107 school inspections by 31 March 2017. A paper containing this forecast was discussed at our internal Portfolio Board in both August and September. At that point a decision was taken to reallocate resources to inspection to increase numbers as part of our normal mid-year budget review. This additional resource will be used to employ Assistant Inspectors, temporary staff who are mainly recently retired HM Inspectors. HR processes were followed between September and November to appoint these staff and agree the commitment each could make to Education Scotland. We now anticipate that we will conduct between 115 and 120 school inspections by 31 March 2017. Our planning team will revise their formal forecast once these individuals have been planned into actual inspections with specific dates, a process that is done one quarter in advance during the year.

Since we changed our approaches to inspection in September 2016, and due to the fact that inspection evidence is gathered for the National Improvement Framework (NIF) publication in December each year, we are planning inspections on the basis of academic years from now on. For both the next financial year and academic year school inspection numbers will increase, due to the introduction of the shorter inspection model and the fact that we currently have nine new HM Inspectors undergoing their probationary period. We also have an advert for further staff going live during the first week in December. We will include information about the future frequency of school inspections in the forthcoming Standards and Evaluation Framework which the Education Delivery plan has stated will be published in June 17.

Turning next to the question about my position in relation to the CfE Management Board, I can confirm that I am a member of the Board. I also Chair the Implementation Group which reports to the CfE Management Board on its activities. We are aware that the Committee is arranging a session on CfE management in January, and a briefing paper with a full account of the governance structure for Curriculum for Excellence will be prepared for that by the Scottish Government. We will feed into the preparation of the paper so the Committee is clear about our role and how it relates to others.
You note that some members expressed surprise that Education Scotland does not have “marshalled and clear evidence, either quantitative or qualitative, in particular on the effectiveness of Curriculum for Excellence”. As indicated above, various bodies have roles in overseeing the implementation and progress of CfE with the approach to monitoring and evaluation of CfE designed to be formative and supportive in nature, helping to improve the development and implementation of this major reform.

Education Scotland, for its part, draws on a range of quantitative and qualitative evidence from a range of sources, including but not limited to:

- our inspection and review activity;
- other evaluative activity we undertake such as impact reports focusing on different elements of the curriculum, for example, the technologies 3-18 curriculum impact report in 2015;
- ongoing engagement including our engagement with local authorities and schools through our Area Lead Officers;
- professional dialogue visits in secondary schools.

In addition, we (Education Scotland and previously HMIE) have routinely published summary reports on the quality of education based on our inspection and review findings. The last such report, Quality and improvement in Scottish education, trends in inspection findings 2008-2011, was published in June 2012. The next report, covering the period 2012-2016, is currently being prepared for publication in the early part of next year.

The Committee also asked for clarification about Education Scotland’s approach to budgeting. Almost 75% of our baseline budget is made up of staff costs with the remainder being contract costs, central overheads (accommodation etc.) and grant payments to 3rd sector organisations. We do undertake a zero-based budgeting exercise each year, although this largely focuses on the staff resource that each of our programmes bid for. The clarification about funding running for more than one year recognises that our priority programmes have a life-cycle that often run for several years and so we aim to ensure a degree of continuity in the staffing allocated to each one from year to year.

The re-profiling that was undertaken in response to the Education Delivery Plan involved making adjustments to the staffing resources initially allocated to our main programmes (which already broadly covered the main elements of the Delivery Plan) to reflect where our efforts needed to be most strongly focused.

There is perhaps some confusion arising out of the language used to describe in-year funding allocations. What your letter has referred to as ‘in-year budget revisions’ are in fact additional budget allocations (i.e. in addition to baseline budget) from elsewhere. These come mainly from Scottish Government policy directorates. They are provided in order to carry out specific pieces of work for these directorates, reflecting their policy priorities. A large part of that is the targeting of grants in support of such policy initiatives. Such additional transfers do have a small impact on our core business, as we need to deploy some of our baseline staff resource to manage the delivery of this work.
Finally, the Committee asked for some additional information in relation to "the new IT systems referred to at the start of the session". Education Scotland is transforming its online estate in order to deliver commitments in the Programme for Government and in the Delivery Plan for Education. We are moving from having an overall Education Scotland website and a significant number of microsites to a much clearer structure of four main websites designed for different audiences, which will continue to be complemented by our Glow services.

The four websites are described below:

The Education Scotland Corporate website, with information about Education Scotland, policy and legislation, news and information about Scotland’s education system and our role in it. Reflecting the Delivery Plan, existing content is being reviewed and significantly streamlined and simplified;

The National Improvement Hub, the dedicated source of education improvement materials and resources for education practitioners. The 'beta' version of the National Improvement Hub is being developed in discussion with other national partners and agencies with the view to developing federated searches and encouraging collaboration through a range of channels including social media. The 'beta' version will be released in early spring 2017;

A National Qualifications site, which provides practitioners with support materials for qualifications; and

Parentzone Scotland, the dedicated information site developed for and with parents, which includes school performance data.

This work is connected to a larger suite of enacted changes to provide modern technologies and increased efficiencies. As part of the overall technical work, since 2015, on-going technical running costs will drop from £1,129,000 to £1,047,000, resulting in an £82k per annum IT efficiency cost. The programme will rationalise and replace the microsites at a cost of £750k. Capital costs will be depreciated over an expected 5 year period.

I hope that my response answers your questions and is helpful to you and the other Committee members.

Yours sincerely

Dr Bill Maxwell
Chief Executive