Notes for Education and Skills Committee 19/9/18

Dr Alan Britton (writing in a personal capacity)
Senior Lecturer in Education, University of Glasgow

a) Relevant areas of specialism:
   - Education policymaking and governance;
   - The origins and evolution of A Curriculum for Excellence from National Debate through to implementation;
   - The distribution of roles among key stakeholder organisations in Scottish education

b) Key themes/observations

The knowledge and expertise that I understand might be most relevant and useful to this sitting of the Committee is mainly derived from empirical work I undertook a number of years ago, into the origins and the development of A Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). Having been a secondary school teacher, a civil servant, a Parliamentary official and an education academic I came at this theme from a number of different analytical perspectives. First and foremost, however, I sought to penetrate the often opaque forms (at least as viewed by those on the ‘outside’) of policymaking and governance undertaken in Scotland. This kind of disaggregated policymaking and governance is often characterised by “pluralism, incoherence, [and] complexity” Cairney and McGarvey¹, 2013: p142

My research questions related to whether new forms of policymaking - consultative, transparent, and participative – had emerged in the post-devolution era, drawing on models such as the CSG Report (Scottish Office, 1998)²:

I undertook documentary analysis, and interviewed senior officials from across a range of relevant stakeholder organisations (civil service, SQA, HMIE, Learning and Teaching Scotland, as well as members of the original CfE Review Group) to evaluate the extent to which the claims around new policymaking had translated into particular policymaking practices, with specific reference to CfE. One key theme that emerged in my research was the complex policy architecture in Scottish education, and the tendency of this architecture to affect and sometimes distort, education policy development.

Looking back on this research, the issues that are now emerging in relation to curriculum narrowing and changing patterns of presentation at SQA Examinations can be attributed at least in part to decisions taken some time ago. The current issues of concern to the Committee might best be characterised as unintended but inevitable consequences of the courses of action decided in the implementation of CfE, notably in the period around 2004-2008.

In Figure 1 below I set out the key stages in the implementation of CfE for ease of reference.

**Figure 1: The Genealogy of A Curriculum for Excellence (Britton, 2013)**

The CfE Review Group was convened as a direct response to the National Debate in 2002. According to the subsequent Review Group Report, “People argued for changes which would:

- reduce an overcrowded curriculum
- better connect the different stages of the 3-18 curriculum
- achieve a better balance between ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ subjects
- equip young people with new skills for tomorrow’s workforce
- make sure that assessment and certification support learning
- allow more choice to meet the needs of individual young people”

(Adapted from SEED, 2004: p7, emphasis added)

---

I have highlighted some of the bullet points above as they seem pertinent to the current concerns around the narrowing of curriculum choice in many schools and local authorities, and the negative impact on particular areas of the curriculum, including modern languages. How, despite these clear policy intentions stated above, did we arrive at this situation?

**Key points on the current situation and how we got here:**

1. The implications of the underlying educational philosophy of CfE for the qualifications and examinations regime in Scotland were seen as too sensitive and challenging in 2004, and were consciously delayed, 'kicked into the long grass'.

2. Despite the emphasis in CfE on a coherent curriculum from 3-18, the reality was that the curriculum retained the traditional split in middle secondary, only this was shifted from a transition at S2-S3 to one in S3-S4.

3. In the context of CfE, the developments after 2004 focused on the creation of a *curriculum* from early years to the end of the Broad General Education (BGE), but with a *syllabus* thereafter.

4. The post BGE phase did not receive the same pedagogical consideration as the earlier levels, and the strong messages about the need to revisit aspects of teaching and learning from the CfE review were not addressed to the same extent.

5. While Learning and Teaching Scotland, with the support of HMIE and the subject groups (which included large numbers of experienced practitioners) developed the Es and Os, preparation of the revised Senior phase was to some extent outsourced, and only belatedly in the process, to SQA.

6. The 3rd year was essentially removed from the middle/senior phase, leaving only one year to cover the Nationals. In the past, S3 was a year in which schools could prepare pupils for the certification phase, and you could prepare larger numbers of pupils for presentation at the end of S4. This also limits the scope for extension, e.g. Credit at start of 3rd year in the old arrangements.

7. Now, schools tend to ‘run out of road’ at the end of level 4 in CfE. The underpinning philosophy of CfE comes up against logistical and practical challenges in S4. For example, if a pupil is working at a level above level 4 in S3, where do they go? And in S4, there are simply not enough actual or notional learning hours to offer more than 6 qualifications, and sometimes as few as 5.

8. Curriculum narrowing, while not being actively pursued, seems to be inevitable in this context. Under the old system 8 Standard Grades was the norm (in perhaps 90% of schools). The process of narrowing was conscious and phased in the old system (5-14 breadth– 8 Standard Grades-4/5 Highers). Now pupils have to make choices at the end of S3 [and sometimes earlier] from a narrower field. From 6 subjects in S4 to 5 in S5 seems to represent a very limited degree of choice.
9. There are challenging implications for the current approach – in relation to limited choice in STEM subjects, for example, and the gradual marginalisation of other subject areas. Schools can’t always provide the choices the pupils make. This directly contradicts the principles of curriculum design – including breadth, depth, personalisation and choice. There was previously room in 4th year for arts, music, ‘minority’ subjects, and more than one language. A 1+2 approach to languages earlier in the system fails to be matched by the landscape of choice available to pupils subsequently.

10. A crucial technical point relates to timetabling and organisation – schools often try to create an integrated senior phase timetable from S4-S6. This approach brings lots of benefits, including economies of scale, and being able to include S4-S6 pupils in one class where necessary. S5 pupils have enough time under this model, but S4s less time to undertake broader course choices. There are also technical challenges around cross-matching column choices.

11. The fundamental architecture was not entirely thought through from the outset, and now schools are having to retro-fit solutions due to organisational pressures in light of the qualifications framework – elements of the pedagogy and original purposes of CfE have been diminished, while there has also been a challenge to the integrity of subject specialism.

12. The hugely varied practices across the country in relation to curriculum choice demonstrate problems of governance. There is a need to address the tensions between centralised oversight on the one hand; and assumptions of devolved responsibility and subsidiarity.

13. From a wider systems perspective, we have reached a point where a number of unintended consequences have taken root.