INTRODUCTION

On 19 September 2018, the Committee took evidence on the 2018 exam diet and curriculum and attainment trends. The Committee heard from—

- Dr Alan Britton, Senior Lecturer in Education, University of Glasgow;
- Professor Jim Scott, School of Education and Social Work, University of Dundee;
- Dr Marina Shapira, Lecturer in Quantitative Methods, University of Stirling;
- Dr Janet Brown, Chief Executive, and
- Alistair Wylie, Head of Technology, Engineering and Construction Qualifications, Scottish Qualifications Authority.


The Committee asked that SPICe produce a summary of the themes and issues raised during the discussion.

THEMES

Results from 2018 diet

Dr Brown reported that the results from the 2018 exam diet—

“This year, we saw a change in the volume of entries, with small reductions continuing at Scottish credit and qualifications framework levels 5 and 6 and a very slight increase at levels 2, 3, 4 and 7. We saw a small increase in attainment in the wider area of qualifications that we make available, both in wider achievement awards and in vocational qualifications at SCQF levels 2 to 6. Attainment across national courses and awards this year was broadly in line with what we have seen in previous years, as we saw a slight increase in attainment at advanced higher and a decrease at national 5.”

S1-3 curricula

Professor Scott told the Committee that his research had identified a wide diversity in secondary schools’ S1-S3 curricula; he stated that there is evidence of “significant fragmentation”. (Col 5)

Articulation from Broad General Education to the Senior Phase;
The Committee heard that the development of CfE was conducted in two parts: Broad General Education (c3-15) and the Senior Phase (c16-18). Professor Scott stated that the development of the Senior Phase was “left to the SQA” which is not a curricular body; Professor Scott questioned Education Scotland’s (or LTS’) involvement in this process. (Col 22).

The Committee was told that there had been concerns that BGE hadn’t dovetailed with the senior phase. Dr Brown called said “clarity is needed on the whole three to 18 pathway, so that people can be successful when they get to the [Senior Phase] courses”. (Col 21) Dr Brown indicated that the SQA’s research had shown that the pace of work in S3 had increased recently and the jump in pace in S4 had reduced. (Col 38)

**Narrowing of the number of choices at S4**

**Extent**

Professor Scott stated that his research has found that 54% of Scottish schools offer 6 courses at S4, around 30% 7, and a small number offering 8 or 5. (Col 5)

Professor Scott indicated that he is currently undertaking research into the curricula structures and choices across the three years of Senior Phase. He indicated that his initial findings show that very few schools are offering six choices in each year of Senior Phase. (Col 34)

**Impact on attainment**

Professor Scott stated that attainment in S4 had dropped by 34% since 2013. (Col 8) He qualified this later saying that 17%pts of this fall is due to the change in the structure of the curriculum (number of subjects) and that the declining roll would account for roughly 8-9%pts. (Col 41)

Professor Scott also reported that the improvement in school leavers’ attainment has slowed. (Col 7)

Dr Shapira noted that attainment of those enrolled in subjects has increased; however looking at this in conjunction with changing enrolment patterns is important as there will be a selection bias and it is important to recognise that for some, there will be a missed opportunity to take the subject. (Col 13)

**Impact on schools in areas of higher deprivation and rural areas**

Dr Shapira noted that her research suggested that there is “a link between the level of school area deprivation, the number of children in school on free meals and the average number of subject choices at a school.” and that this may be explained, in part, by there being fewer teachers at such schools. (Col 17)

Professor Scott argued that reducing the numbers of subject choices at S4 has a disproportionate impact on less able pupils. He said more able pupils “pass all their subjects and move on” whereas less able pupils may fail several of the six subjects and “then are playing catch-up in a way that they were probably not [before CfE]”. (Col 20)

Dr Shapira also suggested that the supply of teachers may impact on choice in rural schools. (Col 31) Professor Scott agreed that rural schools may not be able to support a
breadth of subjects and that, as well as teacher shortages, the size of the school may be a factor. (Col 31)

Capacity of headteachers to design curricula

Dr Shapira noted that local authorities and schools had been given greater autonomy to shape curriculum models. (Col 12) Professor Scott stated that headteachers are not all curricula experts and will have quite different skill sets, so if there is no curricular guidance to guide headteachers, we must assume that they will do the best that they can in the circumstances “ (Cols 8&9)

Certification at appropriate levels 3 and 4

Professor Scott noted that there has been a reduction in the numbers of pupils being presented and attaining at SCQF levels 3 and 4. He said, “the stats show that although there may be some upward movement from level 3 to level 4 and from level 4 to level 5, a significant number of other children have just disappeared from attainment measures, and that is not necessarily because of the curricular narrowing”. (Col 17) He also stated that some schools do not offer certification at level 3. (Col 23)

The Committee explored the merits of external certification at levels 3 and 4. Dr Brown confirmed that the review of National 4 is continuing. (Col 22)

Review of CfE

A number of the witnesses called for a review of Curriculum for Excellence in the context of the discussions during the evidence session.

It was suggested that part of this should be more research into the impact of changes, particularly in Senior Phase and curriculum structures. Dr Shapira called for research to “compare the broad outcomes for attainment, transitions and destinations of pupils who went through the system before 2013 with those of pupils who went through it after 2013, and we can combine that data with the understanding of what was going on in policies, schools and local authorities.” (Col 44)

Professor Scott said that to understand how the Senior Phase as a whole is affecting attainment it is important to identify the number of students achieving five or more passes at levels 3, 4 or 5. (Col 42)

Dr Brown agreed that it is important to look at the outcomes of pupils across the Senior Phase, she said, “it is also critical to look at three different groups of students—students who find learning challenging, average students and high achievers—because there will be a different impact on each group, and it is really important that we understand what that impact is.” (Col 48)

Dr Britton identified a tension “between having very centralised forms of accountability and a presumption of, and rhetoric about, devolved responsibility and subsidiarity in other elements of education.” He suggested that the version of CfE that has been deployed in Scottish education is not as was originally intended and that “it is time to revisit some of the key principles and objectives”. (Col 11) Professor Scott called for a broad-based “mid-life upgrade”. (Cols 29&30)

Flexibility in teaching and assessing national qualifications
Dr Brown noted that the effect of extending Broad General Education by a year is that Scottish education has moved from a situation where “eight subjects were taken over two years, and now we are trying to have them take six subjects over one year”. (Col 22) In this context, the Committee explored the extent to which time could be used in S3 to teach national qualifications’ course content. (Col 24)

**Experience of young people**

Professor Scott said that the intentions at the beginning of the process leading to CfE was to remove the need for two two-term dashes and that now pupils experience three two-term dashes. (Col 20)

Professor Scott noted that Stirling University had been involved in a longitudinal study with pupils in Highland Council’s schools progressing through school. Dr Brown told the Committee that the SQA has been working with Young Scot on their views of assessments and the future of assessments and that this work will be published in October. (Col 39)

**Information for parents**

Professor Scott stated that there is inconsistent reporting of attainment and reporting and consultation with parents on the curriculum. (Cols 7&8)

**Standardised Assessments**

The Committee sought the views of the panel on Standardised Assessments. (Col 43)

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