24 October 2018

Dear Clare

2018 exam diet: curriculum and attainment

Thank you for your letter of 24 September, and for the opportunity to comment on your evidence session on 19 September.

Firstly, I would reflect that across the education system we have a shared ambition, namely that all our young people experience the best possible education and training opportunities. That is a driving force behind the range of policies that are in place and which command broad support, such as Getting it Right for Every Child, Curriculum for Excellence, Developing the Young Workforce, and the recent 15-24 Learner Journey Review.

In addressing the issues raised as part of the evidence session I would wish to be very clear that any comparisons of the Senior Phase must take into account the fundamental differences between curriculum design before and after the introduction of Curriculum for Excellence. There are fundamental differences between the Senior Phase curriculum now and under the previous system which would suggest that direct comparison is problematic.

One of the key observations at the evidence session was that there has been a narrowing of the S4 curriculum.

It is correct to argue that there is variation between schools and local authorities in the number of subjects taken in S4 (e.g. 6, 7 or 8). This represents a fundamental shift from the approach before Curriculum for Excellence was introduced. Prior to CfE, young people studied for usually around eight Standard Grades over S3 and S4, following which some would leave school, with those remaining going on to study for Highers in S5 followed by further qualifications in S6. This was a pattern that was followed fairly uniformly, involving ‘traditional subjects’ and with little scope for schools to tailor the curriculum to the specific needs of all their young people.

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Under the current arrangements, schools now have the freedom and flexibility to design a bespoke three year senior phase of a range of courses and qualifications tailored to meet the needs of the young people at the school. This is a key difference between the new CfE curriculum and the previous system. As part of this, the precise number and range of qualifications on offer, as well as when they are taken, will be a decision for schools to take in consultation with learners and parents. It may well mean that young people take fewer qualifications – particularly at the levels of Nationals 3, 4 and 5 - than they did under the previous model. The data shows us that this is in fact the case. Studying for fewer qualifications means more time for learning and teaching in the subjects that are being studied. This now allows schools to better prepare young people for life beyond school.

It also means more time for studying for awards other than ‘traditional’ national qualifications and we have seen an increase in the numbers of these being taken. And it means that the design of the senior phase may look different from school to school, reflecting the range of young people in each school at any given time.

The Committee will recall the evidence it took from Terry Lanagan, former Director of Education at West Dunbartonshire (18 January 2017):

“We cannot look at S4 in isolation—we have to consider the whole senior phase. Schools can continue to have the breadth of choice and the specialism of three sciences even if they opt to have six subjects at S4.”

He also said:

In addition, the schools that chose the six-six-six model [with six subjects taken in every year of the Senior Phase] had the advantage that they could timetable S4 to S6 together, which meant that there was a wider choice of subjects—more subjects were viable, because larger numbers of youngsters could contribute. The schools that chose that model reported that there was a significant positive impact on the S4 cohort, because many of them were in classes with S5 and S6 pupils, whose additional maturity had a positive impact on attitude and behaviour.”

The freedom and flexibility that schools have in the design of their Senior Phase is the embodiment of the empowering schools agenda, with decisions about curriculum design, learner pathways and presentation for qualifications taken by those who best know the young people in the school.

Whether young people are taking 5, 6, 7 or 8 qualifications, they are entitled to be able to choose from as wide a range of courses as possible. Schools are able to call on increasingly creative and innovative approaches to ensuring this choice is available, through partnership arrangements with local schools and colleges, or through the use of technology, such as the range of courses offered by the e-Sgoil and Scholar.
I would also like to offer my thoughts on the point that overall attainment has declined from 2013 to 2018. The analysis is based on all candidates sitting qualifications at Levels 3-5 regardless of where and at what stage, rather than just S4 at school as presented. The analysis shows that there were fewer passes at Level 3-5 in 2018 compared to 2013. As previously stated, the principle of CfE which allows schools to decide the number of qualifications to offer may well mean that young people take fewer qualifications and these numbers evidence that.

The current approach to the Senior Phase also requires a different approach to how we evaluate how the education system is delivering for young people. Given the explicit focus on the totality of what a young person achieves over the entirety of the three year period, it does not make any sense to look at attainment at the end of S4. Whilst S4 used to be the end of a phase of learning, with the aim of accumulating as many Standard Grades as possible, now S4 is the start of a new phase of learning, with the aim of allowing learners to achieve the highest possible level of attainment.

For the same reason, nor should we be overly-focused on the number of entries for specific qualifications in any given year. That is because, whilst qualifications are undoubtedly important in allowing young people to pursue their aspirations, there is little value in accumulating qualifications at lower levels simply for their own sake.

Instead, the focus should be on the totality of a young person’s experience including the range of qualifications and awards that they leave school with. When we look at the results when pupils leave school we find that the picture is steadily improving.

Whilst we may see fewer entries for qualifications at lower levels, the proportion of young people leaving school with qualifications at these levels has increased in recent years. For example, the proportion of leavers with at least one qualification at SCQF level 5 or better has increased from 77.1% in 2009/10 to 86.1% in 2016/17.

More recently, the number of entries for Highers has remained consistently high, with fluctuations in the number of Higher entries explained by reductions in the size of the S5-6 cohort; in 2018, there was just a 1.5% reduction in the number of entries despite a 2.4% reduction in the size of the S5-6 cohort.

And whilst we would expect to see annual fluctuations in the pass rate for qualifications, as evidence of a robust qualifications and awarding system that maintains the highest standards, overall leaver attainment continues to improve. For example, the proportion of leavers with at least one qualification at SCQF level 6 or better has increased from 50.4% in 2009/10 to 61.2% in 2016/17.

The evidence session also heard about analysis that suggested that choice is reduced in S4 and that the impact appears greater in areas of higher deprivation. I would again emphasise the importance of overall attainment. The proportion of young people in the most deprived areas getting one or more qualifications at SCQF levels 4, 5 and 6 (National 4, National 5 and Highers) is increasing faster than those in the least deprived areas. And in 2017, there was a 13% increase in the number of Scots from the most deprived communities getting places to study at a Scottish university.
There was also an indication that the increase in the proportion of entries in vocational subjects was largest for schools in areas with high level of deprivation. Of course, promoting vocational education is a key plank of the Developing the Young Workforce agenda. I would wish the vocational offer to be widely available in all schools, regardless of the level of deprivation. This emphasises the need for all young people to be provided with a broad range of choices and the relevant support and guidance to help them make the best choice for them. The findings of the 15-24 Learner Journey review recognises that more work needs to be done here to ensure parity of esteem for all qualification types. Several recommendations from the review are intended to directly address this; for example a national communication strategy to explain and promote the breadth of choices in the 15-24 learner journey and the development of a regional prospectus to set out the learning choices available to learners, parents and teachers in their area.

Alongside general improvements in attainment, latest data shows record positive school-leaver destinations; 93.7% of 2016/17 senior phase school leavers were in a positive initial destination (compared to 93.3% in 2015/16). And the numbers going to university - the latest UCAS statistics show the total number of Scottish students securing a place at a Scottish university in 2018 - has hit a new record high of 28,970, up 4% from this stage last year.

These improvements in leaver outcomes are being delivered in the context of increasing numbers of young people staying on at school until S6. In 2017, the S6 cohort was 62% of the size it had been in S3. In 2007 this was only 44%, meaning that there has been an 18 percentage point increase in the rate of those staying on to S6.

However, whilst the proportion of young people leaving school at S4 is continuing to reduce, we must also ensure that the school system is delivering for those who do leave at the end of S4. However, the data here is again encouraging:

- Percentage of S4 school leavers attaining 5 or more awards at SCQF level 4 has increased by 7.2 percentage points, from 38.5% in 2009/10 to 45.7 % in 2016/17
- Percentage of S4 school leavers attaining 5 or more awards at SCQF level 5 has more than doubled, from 2.5% in 2009/10 to 5.1% in 2016/17

Finally, you asked if we were undertaking or planning any relevant work in this area. The Committee will be aware that we are commissioning some research to establish the views of head teachers on designing the Senior Phase. This study aims to provide learning to key stakeholders in Education Scotland, local authorities and schools, as well as Scottish Government that will help them to understand how Senior Phase is being implemented in secondary schools across Scotland. The headteacher survey will support this overall research aim by:

- Providing an insight into the views and experiences of headteachers of implementing Senior Phase curriculum in their school
- Providing evidence of the factors operating at individual, school and local authority level that influence how headteachers implement Senior Phase
- Providing information on the ways in which Senior Phase is being implemented within secondary schools
- Identifying differences in the perspectives of headteachers and the implementation of Senior Phase between schools across Scotland

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This work is scheduled to conclude in May 2019.

The national Curriculum and Assessment Board, which includes partners from across the education system, also continues to take a keen interest in the Senior Phase, both in terms of how the Senior Phase is constructed in the best interests of all learners, and how the vision and purpose is communicated effectively. Aligned with this, the 15-25 Learner Journey Review published in May this year, contains several recommendations aimed at supporting the Senior Phase. The report can be found here:


I will continue to consider the issues raised and look forward to working with the Committee in its forthcoming work on the Senior Phase curriculum.

Yours Sincerely

JOHN SWINNEY