The Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Education and Skills Committee’s consideration of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). Since its establishment in 2009, the RSE Education Committee has actively engaged on CfE-related developments. We welcomed the Scottish Government’s decision to commission the OECD to review the implementation of CfE. The RSE engaged with the OECD during the evidence gathering phase of the review and we will continue to contribute to the plans for taking forward the OECD recommendations.

The OECD report reinforces established RSE positions on the importance of independent evaluation, systematic research evidence and the collection of baseline data to inform CfE developments. It is notable that the OECD recommends the need to evaluate how CfE is actually being implemented in schools throughout Scotland, especially in relation to learning outcomes and pupils’ progress. Without high quality evaluation, not only do we not know what is going well and what is not, but we have no way of developing a proper understanding or an ability to plan so that improvements can be made. With the delivery of CfE varying by school, it is important that the character of the variation inherent in schools’ approaches to CfE is understood well. An important principle in innovative developments such as CfE is that independent research plays a central role in promoting excellence. The OECD highlighted the need to draw upon the professional input of independent researchers and increase the value assigned to data and research evidence in informing education policy and practice.

The Delivery Plan for Education is evidence of the Government’s determination to take forward the OECD’s recommendations for CfE, as well as progressing the priorities of the National Improvement Framework. We welcome the commitments in the Delivery Plan to simplify and clarify CfE, to tackle teacher workload, to empower schools, to review governance and to place a greater emphasis on research and evidence.

In taking forward these commitments it will be important to ensure that there is a coherent framework which clearly articulates the purpose and vision of CfE. This will require consideration to be given to the original aims and intentions of CfE and whether the intended outcomes are being achieved. It will be particularly important to look closely at the features of the reforms that are distinctive and innovative.

- The purpose of the curriculum is encapsulated in the four capacities. While they are a feature, it is notable that they are not directly assessed. There is a need to consider the extent to which the aims of CfE as set out in the four capacities are being realised.

- CfE has attempted to define the curriculum in terms of learning experiences and expected outcomes for pupils (the Es and Os). In response to concerns about fragmentation of learning approaches under the Es and Os, Education Scotland subsequently developed the concept of ‘Significant Aspects of Learning’, which has sought to bring together the core knowledge, skills and attributes for each curriculum area. More recently, new curriculum level benchmarks have been devised, initially for literacy and numeracy, but eventually

---

1 The RSE Education Committee’s remit spans all sectors of education in Scotland. More information about the Committee is available at: https://www.royalsoced.org.uk/551_EducationPolicy.html

2 RSE education-related advice papers are available from: https://www.royalsoced.org.uk/695_Education.html

The Royal Society of Edinburgh, Scotland's National Academy, is Scottish Charity No. SC000470
The Royal Society of Edinburgh, Scotland’s National Academy, is Scottish Charity No. SC000470

covering all curriculum areas. It will be important to consider whether schools and teachers are clear on the relationship among the Es and Os, the significant aspects of learning and the benchmarks, and the extent to which these components are addressing teacher workload. It will of course be important to guard against a simplification process that results in more rather than less complexity and documentation.

➢ A central and distinctive context for learning in CfE is interdisciplinary learning (IDL). While IDL has been recognised as an important aspect of the curriculum for many years, it requires better understanding, articulation and exemplification if it is to be embedded in schools.

➢ Other key elements of CfE which would benefit from further consideration, include: active learning, which is said to be central to all stages of CfE; the use of curriculum principles, especially, personalization and choice, depth, challenge and enjoyment; the provision of ‘Entitlements’ for all young people up to the age of 18; and improved continuity across learner transitions with consequent requirements for improved partnership working.

The ambitious programme of change set out by the Delivery Plan has to take account of the capacity of the system to respond. Given that the Plan covers a large number of disparate actions, it will be important to avoid an approach where actions are taken forward in isolation with little appreciation of their contribution to the core aims of the reforms. This highlights the need to develop a strategic approach. In so doing, consideration will need to be given to how transformative change can be made within complex systems. This calls for careful attention to be paid to using appropriate processes for bringing about change. It will be important to ensure that realistic timescales are set that enable organisations and individuals to contribute to the Delivery Plan actions. Expertise, views, experiences and critiques that extend beyond the national agencies and the CfE Management Board need to be taken account of. In particular, there needs to be widespread engagement of teachers in the process.

We are strongly of the view that the essence of future success will lie in the capacity of the teaching profession to rise to the opportunities associated with greater freedom under CfE. We welcome the intention to give schools greater autonomy. Continuing effort is needed to build the capacity of the teaching profession and to develop a powerful and inclusive leadership culture. These are the fundamental building blocks of high quality education. It is crucially important that these aspects are not allowed to become submerged in an undifferentiated work programme.

Education Scotland is the national agency for quality improvement in education. If it is to be effective in taking forward the many significant aspects of the Delivery Plan that lie within its remit, consideration needs to be given to its staffing, capacity, capability and resources. It will need to demonstrate an increased willingness to consult widely within the profession and to take proper account of comment received.

The RSE expressed concern about the creation of Education Scotland in 2011 as a single agency with responsibility for both policy development and quality assurance. This is the case where Education Scotland carries out the development work and has responsibility for evaluating those developments. As an action arising from the Delivery Plan, we note that Education Scotland has recently reviewed the CfE-related demands placed on schools by each local authority. We reject the implication in this action that local authorities have been more responsible than government and national agencies in generating unnecessary workload.