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Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 8 November 2023

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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE
28th Meeting 2023, Session 6

CONVENER

*Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
*Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab)
*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)
*Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con)
*Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
*Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
*Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)
*Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Dr Janet Brown (Royal Society of Edinburgh)
Professor Walter Humes (University of Stirling)
Dr Marina Shapira (University of Stirling)
Professor Gordon Stobart (University College London)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Pauline McIntyre

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 8 November 2023

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:32]

Education Reform

The Convener (Sue Webber): Good morning, and welcome to the 28th meeting in 2023 of the Education, Children and Young People Committee.

Agenda item 1 is an evidence-taking session with a panel of academics and experts in education policy to enable us to appreciate the progress that has been made to date on education reform, including the impact of recent reports and reviews on the ground. We are particularly interested in any progress that has been made with the implementation of the 2021 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report on Scotland's curriculum for excellence.

I welcome Dr Janet Brown, convener of the education committee of the Royal Society of Edinburgh; Professor Gordon Stobart, emeritus professor of education at the Institute of Education, University College London; Professor Walter Humes, honorary professor in the faculty of social sciences at the University of Stirling; and, finally, Dr Marina Shapira, associate professor in sociology at the University of Stirling.

I will move straight to questions from members. First, I will bring in the deputy convener, Ruth Maguire.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Good morning, panel. Thanks for being with us.

I want to start off with your reflections on curriculum for excellence. Which parts of it have been a success? Would you have changed anything about it?

The Convener: Who would like to come in first on that one?

Dr Janet Brown (Royal Society of Edinburgh): First and foremost, I would like to say that the philosophy of curriculum for excellence was absolutely bang on. It was about trying to think about what should be taught in schools and the way in which it was taught; tailoring education to make it interesting; ensuring different contexts in which children can learn; and, at that point, giving people flexibility and different pathways through the system.

All of that was to be done with a view to ensuring that individuals in the system not only enjoyed but benefited from their education, were allowed to do what they wanted to do and came out at the end with something valuable. We were supposed to be moving away from the three or two-term dash scenario, and there was a plan in a place for that. There was also a plan for a three-to-18 curriculum that enabled people to have a good pathway through the system.

As with any type of change, though, implementation was always the biggest challenge. Unfortunately for CFE, the implementation of significant amounts of that change happened at a time of severe public pressure on funding, et cetera. As a result, the whole issue of implementation became quite a big challenge.

That said, a lot of benefits have come out of it. You can see examples in some schools of really good progression paths and the different ways in which people go through the system. There was a refreshment of the types of learning that were undertaken, and that gave teachers some freedom. Some of the challenges were associated with the preparation that was undertaken prior to CFE's introduction, probably at all stages.

I will pass on to someone else to continue.

Ruth Maguire: Before you do, I would just like to come back in. You have mentioned implementation, which can be something of a theme with new work. Was implementation a challenge? Was it understood how much classroom resource and capacity would be required at the time of implementing curriculum for excellence but the resources were simply not there or too tight? Was that not understood?

Dr Brown: I do not think that it was scoped well enough. If we were to make changes now, we would really have to scope what would need to be put in place to make it successful.

Professor Walter Humes (University of Stirling): I think that curriculum for excellence was well intentioned, but, as I have written elsewhere, it was underconceptualised. It was not thought through sufficiently, and that led to a number of problems.

For a start, I did not particularly like the word "capacity", which my associates tell me was coined not by an educationist but by a civil servant at a very late stage in the deliberations. From my conversations with people involved in the original plan, I would suggest that many would have preferred the word "purposes" to cover the four purposes of education. That said, the plan also failed to take sufficient account of what we have learned from the past about curriculum development.

A very well-known educationist called Lawrence Stenhouse, who worked in Scotland for a good many years, wrote a book in the 1970s that would have given lots of useful ideas about how to develop a curriculum and, in particular, the role of teachers. Part of the problem with curriculum for excellence was that the messages to teachers were not sufficiently clear and not as well articulated as they might have been. As a result, teachers kept getting mixed messages. They were told, at one level, that the programme was going to be transformational and that it was going to make Scottish education world class. However, at another level, they were told, "Well, you are already doing lots of this stuff. Just continue doing the good stuff that you are doing." That kind of mixed message is not helpful. As the programme developed, all sorts of operational issues arose, particularly the excessive bureaucracy, which the Government attempted to address—not wholly successfully—from 2014 to 2016.

There are lots of good intentions in the programme. Some of the ideas are certainly worth retaining, but, as an example of how to move forward with curriculum development, it could have been improved.

The Convener: Dr Shapira, would you like to come in?

Dr Marina Shapira (University of Stirling): Like the other witnesses, we found that, although curriculum for excellence had the excellent purpose of improving the depth and breadth of the education that we offer to children and young people, there were lots of issues with the implementation of its aims. Of course, there were also capacity issues and financial constraints, including a lack of specialist teachers, limited contact time and so on.

Those were not the only problems, however. Our recently completed study shows that one of the main problems has been the demand for accountability. Because of the culture of performativity in schools, they focus on attainment statistics. Such a focus often comes at the expense of more pedagogical considerations, and the declared values of curriculum for excellence are often forgone in order to provide that better attainment at school level.

In our pretty comprehensive study, we not only analysed existing data and information from school leaders about the provision offered in secondary schools but carried out a number of case studies with teachers, parents and young people to understand how curriculum decisions and choices were being made by school teachers and young people. We found some absolutely appalling practices such as channelling young people into higher-performing subjects, discouraging them from taking up subjects in which they were not predicted to perform well and abandoning whole subjects that were deemed to be low performing but that might have been very important for providing a holistic, well-rounded education. For us, the culture of performativity was one of the main issues standing in the way of the successful implementation of curriculum for excellence.

The Convener: Finally, I call Professor Stobart.

Professor Gordon Stobart (University College London): As you are probably aware, I am an outsider to the Scottish system, so there are some things that I will get wrong.

I came in on the back of the OECD report in 2021, because it was concerned that, at senior secondary level, curriculum for excellence had—in its words—just lost power, because the school exam curriculum took over. At that point, CFE fades away and we go back to some fairly traditional teaching and learning styles. The concern is how to get better alignment between curriculum for excellence and assessment at senior secondary level. I think that we have to say that that area is fairly weak at the moment, because the curriculum is the exam syllabus.

Ruth Maguire: Thank you. That was helpful.

The Convener: We have already heard a little about this issue. Does the panel agree that curriculum for excellence is underpinned by active learning and by how learners construct their knowledge? If so, what practical implications does that have for teachers and other education professionals in developing what they teach locally?

Does anyone want to come in on that? Professor Humes?

Professor Humes: If you insist.

The Convener: You are all sitting back and not catching my eye. It is like when heads go down in class. [*Laughter*.]

Professor Stobart: Yes, it is like we are all pointing at somebody else.

Professor Humes: We are too polite. We have not been introduced fully into the political world yet.

You used the phrase "active learning". One of the problems with curriculum for excellence at the beginning was that the phrase was used without much general appreciation of what was meant by that. Some people interpreted it as getting children to get up and move around the classroom, for example, rather than having deeper intellectual engagement with the material that they are being presented with, finding it challenging, having to work through problems with it, and having to seek advice and consult sources in order to find

answers to those problems. That is a more meaningful sense of active learning.

09:45

One of the other terms that has caused problems and that, interestingly, continues to reverberate is “interdisciplinary learning”. That phrase caused a frisson of discontent and alarm in the breasts of many teachers, because they saw it as a kind of assault on their subject specialism, which, properly understood, it is not. Properly done, interdisciplinary learning has much to commend it, but a case needed to be made to teachers for the value of interdisciplinary learning. For a long time, that case was not adequately made. We are now in a better position thanks, to some considerable extent, to the work of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, particularly that of Professor Colin Graham. We have made progress on that, but getting a clear idea of what key concepts mean and communicating them effectively to the whole teaching force is part of the strategy that is needed.

The Convener: Dr Brown, as your organisation was name checked, would you like to follow that up?

Dr Brown: I, too, thank Professor Colin Graham for his work on IDL. There is now an IDL network across Scotland where teachers can get together to actively engage with the true meaning of IDL. It is not just project based; it is about using two or three disciplines to solve a problem that cannot be solved on its own through one individual discipline. That is really important.

The other aspects of why active learning is challenging in schools are the timetable, which is still very rigid in most schools, and the disciplinary requirement that goes all the way through the school sector and, if we are being honest, into universities. IDL in universities is getting better, but it is not happening across the board. We are not taking sufficient advantage of it.

If a teacher of a particular subject has to start understanding and learning how they can engage with another subject, they need time to do that, and that is not readily available in the current system. Therefore, it becomes very challenging for a teacher to do an interdisciplinary learning activity with another teacher in that school. It tends to go down to the lowest common denominator: you will do something useful such as a project on ecology, which will bring in biology, physics and chemistry, but you will not explore the different connections between the subjects.

It goes back to the issues of time and experience. Why did it not happen? We did not encourage or enable the teachers to develop that skill set. We need to think about the skill set that teachers need, over and above their individual subject and pedagogy. Working with others, collaborating and understanding different disciplines are things that we need to think through.

The Convener: Dr Shapira, do you want to come in on that? You do not need to; I am just going along the row. I am trying to figure out where your interests and expertise lie in these early questions so that, as the session progresses, the questions might be directed at individuals.

Dr Shapira: I would prefer to share some thoughts on what we found in relation to broad general education stage provision, which is also key to understanding how curriculum for excellence is being implemented. We found that the BGE stage shows lots of variability. The provision is different between schools and local authorities. The timing of when schools introduce subject selection for the first time differs, as does how schools navigate the transition from the BGE stage to the senior phase. However, the overwhelming impression is that the BGE stage is very fragmented. Sometimes, children are being taught by 15 teachers in a week.

One of the main problems is that the BGE stage is trying to mimic the senior phase by introducing all the subjects that children might later select for national qualifications. That often comes at the expense of being able to provide any in-depth learning. When so many subjects are provided to young children, it comes at the expense of very limited subject content, and sometimes the children are being forced to make early selections and choices. Again, it goes back to the culture of performativity, whereby, instead of offering young people a broad, holistic education, the BGE just coaches them and prepares them for the senior phase. That is probably as much as I would say.

The Convener: I suppose that that goes back to your first point about how it is almost selecting them for the courses that they will perform best in.

Professor Stobart, you were nodding. Do you want to come in on this?

Professor Stobart: I want simply to remind you that curriculum for excellence has been widely respected internationally—I come at this from a comparative angle—and was looked on as being ahead of the game. However, that was 20 years ago, and nothing stands still.

Furthermore, I do not think that there is a country that is not modernising its curriculum to keep up with the changes in society and the like. Over the past couple of years, the appearance of artificial intelligence has galvanised some of that thinking. How do we proceed when all this is available for students, teachers and the like?

Scotland was ahead of the game in its curriculum thinking, but how do you stay with the changes and make the adjustments that are needed? In a sense, to back up what has been said, CFE was admired from a distance at a general level, but nobody asked too many questions about implementation and what the teachers did or how they felt. It was a noble ambition without going into the details of it in the classroom.

The Convener: We will have some questions on implementation later.

Pam Duncan-Glancy, do you have a supplementary on this theme before I come to my last question?

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I do, convener, if that is okay. Good morning. Thank you for the answers that you have given so far and for the information that you submitted in advance, which has been helpful.

Dr Shapira, I want to pick up your point about whole subjects being abandoned and, particularly, on the point that, contrary to the aspiration of curriculum for excellence, fewer subjects are now being studied. As you have said in your report, there has been a decline in social subjects like arts and modern languages. Why do you think that is the case? What do we need to do about it?

Dr Shapira: There are several issues. The trend for studying fewer modern languages or abandoning modern languages has been long term. It started before the implementation of curriculum for excellence, and, under curriculum for excellence, the uptake of modern languages is declining further. We have also found that the uptake of social subjects, as you said, and, to an extent, sciences—technological sciences—is going down.

All of you have probably heard that it is difficult to make a comparison between qualification entries before the introduction of curriculum for excellence and after it, because the qualifications have changed and the way in which they are recorded for official statistics has changed. However, for us, looking at the trends under curriculum for excellence and seeing the trend of reduction in the uptake of those subjects tells us that the curriculum is narrowing.

What are the reasons for that? The schools are focusing on a smaller number of subjects. The idea is that young people, if they are offered fewer subjects, have a chance to develop better learning and produce better outcomes in a limited number of subjects, but that is not the case, as our study shows. From analysis that was carried out at school level, we found that, in schools where young people enter for more qualifications in secondary 4, more of them pass national 5 qualifications in S4. There is also a relationship between entry for qualifications in S4 and transitions to higher-level qualifications and qualifications passed in subsequent years. This has not happened, but it was often the line of thinking in the attempt to balance systemic demands, attainment improvement requirements and limited resources.

Why have young people been offered fewer social sciences subjects? Previously, it was the norm to take seven or eight subjects. Young people could take more than one social science subject, and taking at least one social subject was a requirement. Now, they do not have to do that: if they take one social subject, that is fine. It is the same with sciences. We have been told, for example, that children are discouraged from taking more than one science subject. The concern is that they will not be able to achieve good results if, for example, they study both physics and chemistry instead of focusing on one subject.

It is a mixed bag. I have mentioned some of the influences, but school resources are also limited and there are timetabling issues. Once the idea of flexibility had been introduced, it was far easier to channel development in that direction and offer fewer subjects, channelling young people into taking fewer subjects, than it was to tackle all the surrounding issues that would allow them to take the whole range of subjects.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you.

The Convener: Do any of the other panel members what to contribute to that? You are okay—fine. I was just checking.

I am interested in finding out what the panel think of, and whether they agree with, the OECD's comment that the "role of knowledge" in CFE requires a bit more clarification. If so, in what way? How could the understanding of the role of knowledge be consistently understood when developing a curriculum at the local level?

Dr Brown: We need to understand what knowledge should be in our curriculum as well, because the world has changed in the 20 years since curriculum for excellence was created. It is about asking what knowledge we need. Do we need to collate facts for children, or do we give them the knowledge of how to access and use facts and how to identify what facts are real and what facts are not? Knowledge is a critical part of the curriculum, and it is a critical part of what you need to develop in a school, college, university or training provider environment.

Knowledge is critical. We need to clarify what we need to be encouraging children to learn, instead of providing them with facts, and that is a very different perspective. Teachers take great care in making sure that the children who are

under their care get the sort of education that they think they need, but, as has been said by Maria Shapira on several occasions today, that is often driven by the measurement system that we have. Is the knowledge that we provide—the knowledge that gets the merit that society currently places on national 5s and highers—the knowledge that children and young people need to be successful in the 21st century?

The Convener: Professor Stobart, do you want to speak?

10:00

Professor Stobart: We do not learn in a vacuum; we need to learn about things. There was a move in learning whereby it was as though you could learn without any content. In my book, that is just not how it works. We need to have mastery of information, facts and basics in order to be able to think about them and use them. We need that kind of deeper learning. It is a combination of asking the question, "What do we need to learn now?" and the fact that we need to learn something. It should not be a case of, "We know how to do things, but we do not know anything."

Dr Brown: I was a scientist originally. In some subjects, you absolutely need to learn in a sequential way, because you need to build that knowledge in order to progress. Different subjects have different approaches and different needs. We need to understand that knowledge is not across the board; there is a different way of doing it. I totally agree with the contextualisation of knowledge.

Dr Shapira: I totally agree with the previous speakers. I just want to add that it is important for us to look also at different areas. Factual knowledge is important, but schools are preparing young people for life in the 21st century. If that is one of the aims of the curriculum, we also need to develop measures that go beyond traditional assessment of subjects that young people learn to an assessment of how well young people are prepared and equipped for citizenship and working life in the 21st century—in particular, by curriculum for excellence, which explicitly sets those goals. At the moment, we do not have that assessment in our schools.

Professor Humes: I agree very much with the comment in the OECD report that we need to be clear about how we position knowledge in our curriculum and as part of our educational aims. There was a time when we began to be less confident about knowledge because we realised that we had undervalued skills. In the attempt to adjust knowledge and skills more effectively, we perhaps became a little fuzzy about what exactly we meant by knowledge. From my perspective, propositional knowledge—formal knowledge—and procedural knowledge are important, and both should be strongly represented in the school curriculum.

I also think—this should be a source of concern for all of us—that knowledge and truth in our society are under serious assault from a variety of sources, not least the technology companies. We need to be clear about what we mean by knowledge, and we need to be ready to defend it, because there are deep democratic and ethical issues involved in this debate. Nobody has a set of easy answers, but it is an issue that we should engage with very strongly.

The Convener: Thank you, Professor Humes. I am reminded of some of the meetings that I have had recently regarding that very subject.

I will bring in Ben Macpherson, who has a supplementary question.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): Building on the points that have been made in recent answers, my understanding is that, historically and currently, the subject of English has significant prominence in the Scottish curriculum. That is for good reason: it is an important aspect of learning. However, given that it has such prominence as a requirement for entry, in many cases, to further and higher education and in a situation where, in other subjects, individuals can learn to write in the way that will suit them best for their careers—for example, in history and other social sciences, young people can learn to assess truth and validity—do we need to reconsider the prominence of English, without downgrading its importance in the Scottish curriculum?

The Convener: I will bring in Professor Humes on that question, because he is sitting straight ahead of me.

Professor Humes: I should offer a confession at this point, now that I have your attention. I started my career as a teacher of English and I value the possibilities of the English language in all its forms. I agree that the world outside schools has changed and that different forms of communication are appropriate in different contexts and particularly in employment contexts.

I would argue for the retention of a version of English as it has been taught in the past but, perhaps, looking for different indicators of a capacity to manipulate language, so that the old formal essays, compositions and interpretation may be judged no longer as essential as they were in the past. However, I would want to have a more extended conversation about how the reconfigured subject of English might look and what it can perhaps contribute that no other subject can, because conceptual clarity in

whatever field you operate in is important. You have to be able to define your terms. You have to be able to say precisely what you hope to achieve. You have to be able to communicate. We have undervalued oral communication in schools for too long.

I am interested in your question. I would not want to state a final position until we had had further dialogue about it, but it is a good question to ask.

The Convener: Does Janet Brown or Gordon Stobart want to come in on that? Willie Rennie wants to come in on this theme as well.

Professor Stobart: I also speak as an ex-English teacher. There is a whole discussion around what English is and what counts as the subject and the domain of English. Are we talking about literacy and the ability to communicate? If so, there should be much more emphasis on oral work and the like. Are we including literature, where there is always a tendency to fall back on dead white poets and that kind of stuff? We need a good discussion about what English is and how we see it. The idea of being able to communicate effectively is probably at the heart of it—knowing how to put forward an argument and to use writing and speech in that way.

Dr Brown: I started off as a scientist, and, as you can hear from the way that I speak, I have not always been a Scot. My experience was that I did English language and English literature, which was the system in England, and I stopped doing those at O level stage at 15 or 16, but then I was put on a course of English for scientists, because it was considered that we needed to continue to be able to explain things to people.

The RSE's learned societies' group recently held an ethics session, and we talked about the ability for rhetoric and how we have lost the ability to argue our points. One of the challenges in modern society is the fact that we do not have good conversations or good arguments, and we are not able to change people's minds. We sit in one space and talk to people who have views in common with ours. We have lost the ability to have positive engagement and a positive discussion with people of different views and to change people's minds. That is not just in Scotland; it is everywhere in the world. The challenge for me on English is whether we should add that to the English curriculum and get rid of the dead white poets.

The Convener: Willie Rennie and Ross Greer want in on this topic. It has obviously piqued our attention.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): As someone who seems incapable of persuading other people to my point of view, I have an interest in this area.

I return to the issue of knowledge. Some are very vocal and strident about the role of knowledge. I really want to understand where we are with that in practice. What is the scale of the problem? I understand the future threat, but where are we now? Is deviation from knowledge a real problem, and what do we need to do to fix it?

Dr Brown: The first thing is that we need to stop teaching to the test. We need to start allowing people to develop a broader knowledge than what is defined in any assessment, no matter what that assessment is.

Dr Shapira: I agree. There has to be a lot more creativity in the teaching of maths and science, in particular. It is about finding more creative measures of outcomes. It is not a secret that our young people at 15 years old are underperforming in international tests, which do not test knowledge of unconnected facts. The Programme for International Student Assessment, for example, tests how well young people can use their knowledge, understand what they are learning about and implement it in problem solving. Scottish students are not doing well in those tests. That is one of the ways in which we can start thinking about what we teach, why we teach it and what we want students to achieve.

The Convener: Walter Humes and Gordon Stobart want to come in on this.

Professor Humes: On Willie Rennie's question, I do not think that we have an immediate problem, in the sense that most teachers are still committed to teaching formal knowledge in the areas in which they have expertise. My concern is to do with the extent to which traditional forms of grappling and engaging with knowledge might be being undermined by technology. Instead of a youngster having to spend time reading things, discussing and debating them with colleagues and answering questions from teachers, there is a tendency for some youngsters—certainly not all—to say, "Oh, I don't need to know that; I can look it up on Wikipedia." Technology is seen as a sort of crutch, which means that youngsters do not have to engage with the material as strongly and in as persistent a way as perhaps was the case in the past.

Acquiring a body of knowledge is not easy. It takes time. You encounter problems and take wrong directions. However, in the process, your cognitive structure strengthens by having to encounter those uncertainties. Retaining the engagement with knowledge is an essential part of any healthy educational system.

Professor Stobart: I will chip in with one point that your question raises: in a cohesive society,

what knowledge do we need in common? If we are doing it in English, what proverbs do we need? We use expressions. Should we be looking for a common pool so that we can assume that everybody can come along with that? Is that part of our duty, or do we all go our different ways?

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I strongly agree with Janet Brown's point about the importance of rhetoric and Gordon Stobart's point about wider communication skills. However, I would be interested in your thoughts on whether those are the kind of skills that need to sit inside a subject silo such as English.

A lot of employers tell us that they do not need to know that somebody was able to get a B grade in higher English; they need to know that that person can communicate with their team, work colleagues and customers. Are those not exactly the kind of skills that Professor Hayward's recommendations around the diploma could recognise? You can be recognised for your communication skills and your ability to persuade without having done three 50-minute periods of English a week leading up to that exam. Actually, we need to recognise those kinds of skills in a more holistic sense rather than get trapped in the subject silos that lead us to all the issues that were talked about, such as BGE just becoming a diluted version of senior phase.

10:15

Dr Brown: I totally and utterly agree, but we need to make sure that it is somewhere in the curriculum, because, otherwise, it gets lost. That is where we are right now: we are losing things because they are not in any one place. The question is this: does everything have to be subject-based, or is there something broader? That is the debate that we should have. That is a much longer-term reform, but, if we do not discuss longer-term reform, we will never get there.

I completely agree with you: it should be across everything, because, arguably, one of the places where rhetoric needs to be most important is in politics with a big "P" and a little "p", the green agenda and what we should be as a society. For me, it is not just English, but English is the place where it has always been.

Professor Humes: This is slightly provocative, but you have to live on the edge sometimes. I understand where Ross Greer is coming from, but, as he was speaking, I thought of an area where I want to defend more traditional approaches to English.

Public discourse is in decline. That is evident not just in the racier end of journalism but in public documents. I lead a sad life. I spend a lot of my time reading minutes, reports and committee documents, and I am often pretty shocked at the poor standard of English. For certain purposes, particularly in a legislative chamber, absolute precision and clarity of language is essential; in fact, not to have it would be to undermine the democratic process. I am not saying that everybody has to have that level of linguistic skill, but we need to have it somewhere in the education system.

Professor Stobart: Following up on that, what role does oral communication play in the examination system? If you look at the baccalaureate and other systems, you find that students are expected to make oral contributions and to defend themselves orally. If you get down to a pencil-and-paper exam system, you find that there is no demand on that, so that becomes a curriculum issue as well. Where do we weight oral contributions, and how can we encourage them? That applies across subjects. As a historian, you can defend a piece, but we do not have room for that in the British system.

Dr Shapira: I will just put on my university lecturer hat. For years, I have observed the very poor English-language writing skills among our Scottish students. Students from England write much better. Our Scottish students are being admitted to our programme with the requirement of an A or at least a B in higher English. However, unless they come with an advanced higher, they cannot write logically and coherently. They cannot construct an argument, and they cannot critically engage with writing. However, they learn, and, by year four, almost everyone can do it.

In a way, that supports the point about whether we should introduce writing and communication skills in every subject, because every subject requires better communication. I am just not sure that it is possible to do that in schools. In schools, we need to have the dedicated subject of English, which improves students' ability to express themselves coherently in writing. My understanding is that that is not being done and that young people are being encouraged to write almost in bullet points in many subjects. We then face the problem in the universities.

The Convener: Thank you very much. As convener, I always have to keep my eye on the clock, so I apologise to my fellow committee members for the length of time that it has taken the deputy convener and me to get through our questions. However, we have taken really important evidence.

We will now move on to questions from Stephanie Callaghan. Thank you for your patience.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Thank you, convener.

We could talk about this all day, to be honest, but I will move on and talk about implementation, which I know is not always a popular word. There has, I suppose, been more of a focus on applying and carrying through changes in education systems, and different models of change have been suggested, too. What are the panel's views on how we best turn policy into practice?

I ask Janet Brown to start.

Dr Brown: First, we need to think about these things really carefully. We need to think about unintended consequences and about an overarching policy that encompasses all education skills. We started off with education for three to 18-year-olds and ended up with primary phase, BGE, senior phase, colleges and universities. When it comes to implementation, we need to think about how we do something as much as about what we will do, and we need to address as many of the identified unintended consequences as we can.

We also need to learn from the past. We have a brilliant learning scenario in how we implemented CFE; we just need to be honest and willing to say what really has worked and what has not, and not just focus on one area. After all, if you look at the OECD reports, you will see that they highlighted several areas that needed change. However, we tend to focus on only one or two such areas; they can drive the system, but they will not be a solution to the whole thing. This is about learning from the past, as Walter Humes has said; it is about thinking about how we do this and engaging across the piece.

For me, the other big thing that we need to do with regard to implementation is take Scotland with us—not just schools, pupils, learners and parents, but Scotland itself. One of the big issues with curriculum for excellence was that Scotland did not really buy into the change in the senior phase. If we decide to change things through, say, implementing Professor Louise Hayward's recommendations—which are excellent—we need to ensure that Scotland buys into that change and that we do not just slip back into doing what is comfortable and into what we did and learned before. What we learned—and definitely what I learned—when we were growing up would not serve me well if I were to live to 2050. We should not do the same to our young people.

Stephanie Callaghan: Picking up on that, I would say that, culturally, we, in Scotland, certainly take pride in teaching our children to read and write. However, has the cultural shift been a bit of a barrier for the wider public in that respect? If so, how do we address that?

Dr Brown: As Marina Shapira has highlighted, the measurement system drives what happens. Historically, the only qualifications that were discussed were the ones that came out in the summer, but that is not what the vast majority of people in Scotland would like to do, and doing that would not benefit Scotland either. We need to look at our measurement system and what we value as a society.

Perhaps I can give the example of my children, who did really well at school. My friends could not understand why they were not becoming lawyers; the answer is that they did not want to do that. We have an aspiration level in Scotland, and that aspiration is to get as many children and young people as possible into university. Is that what Scotland needs? Is it what our young people need? We need to ask those questions and be honest in answering them.

Stephanie Callaghan: I suppose that it is about what we value.

Dr Brown: It is about what we value, yes.

Stephanie Callaghan: I am interested in what the other panel members have to say about turning policy into practice.

Professor Humes: Central to successful implementation is winning the hearts and minds of teachers, because, at the end of the day, it is the teachers who will deliver the new policy—although I would be slapped over the wrist for using the word "deliver".

One problem that we face—and we have faced it for a long time; it is not a recent development—is the loss of trust and confidence among teachers in the policies that they are being asked to promote and, in particular, in the leadership of many of those who promote them. We have a culture in which teachers are too often expected to ask only "how" and "when" questions, never "why" ones. To implement a policy successfully, you have to persuade people; you have to make the case. If it is a good case, teachers—who are reasonable people—will listen to it and either agree or say, "Okay, but I am not too happy with this bit of it." You can then have a constructive dialogue.

Another requirement is for the policy to be communicated more widely, not just to classroom teachers but to all stakeholders, especially parents, and to society at large. Public education is a civic good. It is an important bulwark of democracy, so you need as many citizens as possible to buy in to the vision of where we are going in the education system.

We need to be honest: teachers have not always been presented with the intellectual case. One thing that I say that is never terribly popular is that we have had a lack of intellectual leadership in Scottish education to make the case. There has been too much cosy conformity in rehashing the same concepts and ideas, with everybody saying,

"We are doing a fine job." That will not produce the world-class education system that we all want. Uncomfortable discussion will have to take place, involving not just teachers' leaders but politicians, leading figures in the big educational bureaucracies, inspectors and civil servants. The role of civil servants in policy development and implementation requires much greater scrutiny than it has received hitherto, and there will be a period of disruption in order to engage in that kind of intellectual argument.

There—I said that I was going to be mildly controversial.

The Convener: We will have questions on that specific theme from Mr Kidd.

Stephanie Callaghan: Does anybody else want to contribute?

Dr Shapira: I support Professor Humes's point. The question that we need to answer is: what is secondary education for? What do we want to produce? It is not a bad thing to prepare young people well for the transition into higher education, but that should definitely not be the only aim. How do we measure that preparedness? We need to reconsider not just how we deliver knowledge but how we assess that and what we assess. Is that assessment fit for purpose? It definitely needs to be changed.

When you ask school leaders and teachers about the most influential factors affecting their curriculum-making processes and decisions, they always talk about systemic issues and demands to increase attainment. Once you have those demands, you focus the school's limited resources on a higher level of subject delivery. The young people who take subjects at lower levels of national qualification do not get adequate provision, and they suffer. There is a clear equity issue in how external demands affect the school's resources and the delivery of the curriculum. It really needs to stop, because we have young people who are not taking up these subjects at national 5 or higher levels, and they are suffering due to inadequate provision.

10:30

Professor Stobart: This might be uncomfortable to hear, but, coming from the outside, I am amazed at how many committees, discussions and consultations there are. Scotland keeps spinning the plates all the time, and I have to wonder how you make a decision in such a structure where you have all these different groups contributing. It just leads to inaction.

I come at this as a pragmatist who would want to say, "Actually, something needs to be done." I am aware that structural changes are being made, but I am not sure that I see a great deal else. We talk a lot about the higher-order stuff, the need for a vision and everything else. As a pragmatist, though, I just want to say, "What is the first step? Where do we go to start making changes? How do we eat an elephant one bite at a time? What is the first bite here?" As for my particular brief, I would want to look at the assessment and exam systems.

I would say, too, that you cannot add stuff without taking stuff away. You cannot say to teachers, "Here is another good idea that we would like you to do." In order to do that, you have to clear some space. You will have seen my view that Scotland has a really cluttered examinations system and that that is probably counterproductive. Scottish students are more heavily examined than, I think, anybody else in the world. I do not dare say that too strongly, but it is the case—probably, as they say about Carlsberg. Nowhere else has three sets of examinations in three years. Most places have now moved to just one set of qualifications at 18, with most students staying on until 17 or 18.

For me, there is a point there—with a bit of an edge—about something being done to change the system, but that is just me speaking from a very personal, comparative point of view.

Stephanie Callaghan: My colleagues will ask some questions about this later, but I am really interested in what you said about the fact that more and more information is coming and what we actually need are decisions to be made and steps forward to be taken. Do you think that having too large a group taking those decisions keeps the status quo in place, because you cannot all agree? Do you perhaps need a small group to take the lead and move things forward instead?

Professor Stobart: I think that there needs to be some policy leadership, yes. There might well be a tendency to say, "These two groups are not agreeing. Let's set up another group to get consensus"—and so it goes on, instead of saying, "We really have to get down to some practical steps here." There will always be objections—you cannot have reform without some vested interest being upset by it.

The Convener: Of course, two more groups were announced yesterday.

Professor Stobart: [*Inaudible.*]

The Convener: Exactly. Stephanie Callaghan, do you have any more questions?

Stephanie Callaghan: I have just a small question for Walter Humes. Professor Humes, you have talked about teachers and winning hearts and minds—indeed, you took the words out of my mouth. Teachers have such a wide range of

views, too, so how do we bring together all of their views and get them to move forward together?

Professor Humes: The aim in Scottish education for a very long time—indeed, it predates devolution—has always been to reach consensus. You can get a measure of consensus on education policy, but to expect complete consensus is not just overoptimistic; it is, in fact, not entirely desirable, because there should always be questions that are left open for revisiting at a later date. On some education issues, there might be a case for running two policies and seeing which of them produces better outcomes.

Yes, it will be difficult, and teachers are often temperamentally inclined to be conservative. They prefer the familiar—that is true of all of us in most spheres of life—but they are open minded, if a good case is put to them. That is where we have not done as much as we need to. When curriculum for excellence was introduced, there was a tendency to say that it would liberate teachers and that they would have the autonomy to make decisions. However, because they had previously lived under a regime where they were told exactly what to do, such a transition was never going to be easy, and some of them did not believe it. They kept their heads down and perhaps paid lip service to the new policy, but they continued to do what they had always done. It is always possible to find subversive ways of responding to policies that you do not like.

We need to be open to more vigorous debate and not go for the easy consensus too quickly. I sometimes say in my more critical moods—which I am not in this morning, by the way—that Scottish teachers are ambivalent. On the one hand, they will say, "We are professionals—we should be making these judgments ourselves", while on the other hand, they will often say, in a jaded voice, "Just tell me what to do and I will do it." That is not the kind of professional response that I want to see. I want to see a profession that is vigorously engaged with ideas, that engages in collaborative projects, that works through pedagogic problems in teams and in which individuals learn from each other.

There is some evidence that that is going on. I know that from work with Mark Priestley and Marina Shapira at Stirling—and from another colleague, whose name I am trying to remember; it will come to me. They have done excellent work with schools and local authorities that are engaging in precisely the sort of professional and collaborative project that I referred to. You have to have a measure of consensus, but to aim for complete consensus is probably mistaken.

Stephanie Callaghan: So, it is all about having a measure of consensus and flexibility in how you reach this.

Professor Humes: Dr Valerie Drew is the name of the other colleague.

The Convener: Well done on getting that on the record. Before we move on, I see that Marina Shapira wants to come in.

Dr Shapira: I just want to offer some empirical evidence that backs up everything that Professor Humes has said. Our studies show—as do our conversations and focus group discussions with teachers—that, very often, teachers do not really understand what they are supposed to do. They do not fully understand curriculum for excellence. There is also a lack of capacity, for example, to give teachers non-contact time so that they can actively engage in the curriculum-making processes. Providing teachers with more non-contact time for collaboration not just within but across schools, with subject teachers in different schools creating networks and taking leadership on curriculum development, can really help with implementation.

Stephanie Callaghan: So, time for collaboration and debate is vital. Thank you.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): When I attended school, I learned one thing, which was to listen to what people are saying. I have heard a great deal of what you are saying, but I am still going to ask my questions, because we are in the Scottish Parliament and we need to have a bit of talk about politics and how it is handled. We know about the roles of national Government and local government in supporting policy change in education and even driving it. How would the panel suggest balancing those traditional, top-down implementation processes with more bottom-up approaches? I know that a bit of that has been covered already, but how do you think that the two might be mixed together?

Professor Humes: That is a good question. It is highly political and the territory is contested, shall we say? One of the reasons that we are looking at proposed structural reforms is the perception that Education Scotland, in particular, was too directive from the centre, that it was also seen to be too close to the Scottish Government, and that insufficient scope was given to local authorities, headteachers and schools. Of course, the empowerment agenda that John Swinney introduced a few years ago was a kind of compromise, because he wanted to limit the powers of local authorities more than they were content with. A deal was struck, and we have the empowerment agenda, which gives more scope to local authorities. It has reduced the centralist role of Education Scotland to some extent, although that kind of trench warfare is still going on, I think.

The major thing that happened was the introduction of the six regional improvement

collaboratives, where groups of local authorities pool their expertise and resources. They share ideas and they have more scope than they used to have to try things out in their particular localities. It is slightly complicated in that the heads of those regional improvement collaboratives are employees of one of the local authorities that is involved. They must have a bit of a conflict of loyalty, because the local authority pays their salary but they are expected to do something that deviates from the traditional pattern.

There have been two reviews of the activities of the regional improvement collaboratives, and they are variable. Some seem to function better than others, but it is clear that quite a lot of good work has been done at a local level. The difficulty with the more recent evaluation is that it is quite hard to demonstrate that any impact derives from the regional improvement collaboratives and not from other things that were going on anyway. Proving an impact is very tricky. There are attempts to express the principle of subsidiarity, which allows some decision making to be done at the lowest possible level where it will have a direct effect rather than having something like the French system, whereby missives are sent out from Paris that all schools throughout the country are expected to follow. We are still grappling with that, but, as your preamble suggested, it is a thorny political issue.

Bill Kidd: What are the panel's views on how structural reform of the Scottish Qualifications Authority and Education Scotland will support better outcomes for children and young people? I do not mean this in the wrong way, but it is really supposed to be about children and young people rather than the process itself. How will that deliver?

The Convener: Gordon, do you want to come in on that one first?

Professor Stobart: I do not feel that I am in a position to say that from—

The Convener: Okay, that is fine. You gesticulated with your hand, so I am just trying to gauge your signals.

Bill Kidd: He was just agreeing with what I said; that was all.

The Convener: Janet Brown?

Dr Brown: We need to understand what structural reform will do. I know that there have been questions about whether we are just changing the nameplate. What will the difference be, and what are we trying to achieve with structural reform? Those are really critical questions. I am not trying to defend anything here; I am trying to ask the question of what exactly we are trying to do. What is the exact problem, and how will the reform fix it? We need to sit down and work that out before we go about doing it, irrespective of what structural reform we are talking about.

10:45

Obviously, there is the Withers review, and there is the purpose and principles review. We have a whole series of reviews that, as Gordon Stobart has pointed out, make recommendations, and the Royal Society of Edinburgh's education committee is looking at them all together. We do not particularly want to respond to each one individually, because that is not very satisfying. We are looking at them all together to understand where they overlap, where they conflict, potentially, and where they reinforce one another. There is one educational system here, and the opportunity cost of any sort of structural reform needs to be thought through, as do the unintended consequences for other aspects of the system.

The cabinet secretary commented yesterday that, from the SQA's perspective, it will continue its international agenda. The branding of that has an implication for its ability to operate internationally, for instance. When the colleges were reformed, unintended consequences were associated with the change in the structure and governance mechanism for the colleges. We need to think carefully about the unintended consequences, the costs of that level of radical change, the expertise that is available, what could be done in that time and the time that would be lost through institutional reform.

Bill Kidd: Is there a danger of throwing the baby out with the bath water if we change it too radically, too quickly?

Dr Brown: I do not know, but I would like to know somebody else's thoughts about it.

Professor Humes: I have written quite a lot about that area, so please stop me if I show signs of wittering on for too long. In Scotland, when there has been a recognition of the need to make change, the automatic response has always been to make structural change or to play around with the agencies. Of course, we are where we are because a political decision was taken, two cabinet secretaries ago, to replace the SQA and reform Education Scotland. That was a political decision. Two years further on, there seems to have been a bit of a loss of nerve and the process has slowed down a bit. I suspect that that is partly because of the legislative programme and partly because of cost concerns.

In what I have written, I have often said that structural issues are not the principal problem that we face. We have plenty of structures. In fact, in some ways, Scottish education is trapped in its

bureaucracy. There are just so many agencies with so many people meeting again and again in different arenas, revisiting the same issues and coming to no firm conclusions. The real problems of Scottish education are cultural rather than structural. They are to do with power and the capacity of key players to defend their interests and territories and to stop things happening.

In one of the papers that I submitted, I looked at the need to bring about cultural change. Cultural change was highlighted in the OECD report and the report of the International Council of Education Advisers, both of which said that cultural change is essential. Structural change without cultural change will not achieve what we want it to achieve. The point that I make is that, for cultural change to happen, it has to start at the top. It has to start in the way that politicians—national and local—operate. It must involve the chief executives of national agencies, inspectors, directors of education and senior civil servants. That is the challenge that faces your committee and, indeed, Scottish education generally.

The Convener: Professor, I know that we have a member who is about to pick up on that very theme, so you will be able to go into a bit more detail. Mr Kidd, do you have any more questions?

Bill Kidd: No. That is fine. Thank you very much for that.

The Convener: That is a wonderful segue to the line of questioning that Michelle Thomson will pursue.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I will pick up that thread. Let us carry on with the same theme for a minute, and then I will bring in some other areas.

I must admit that I read your submission and have listened to your comments with great interest, Professor Humes. On the basis of what you have said, I think that we have a good sense of the role that culture plays in delivery by national Government and the agencies; you have already put that on the record. How would you go about changing that? I ask that because changing culture is extraordinarily difficult to do and very time consuming, and for that very reason, agencies—at whatever level—often get rather tired of it and move on to something else. How would you go about changing the scenario that you have depicted in your comments?

Professor Humes: There is no quick fix; it takes time. One of the reasons why politicians get impatient with it is that their timescale is usually quite short term. They want to be able to demonstrate that they have achieved something before the next election. If you are trying to change a culture, you have to take a long-term view, and it requires a number of things, not a single thing. It requires the people at the top, whom I mentioned, to start looking carefully at themselves and asking themselves, "Are we exercising power in the best interests of children in schools, their parents and the community at large?" It needs to involve teacher education. You need to start at the early stages of a teacher's career by encouraging them to ask the kind of questions that, at the moment, they tend not to be encouraged to ask—the why questions, such as "Why are we doing this?" They should also be encouraged to be creative, experimental and innovative.

I was interested in one of the things that the cabinet secretary said recently about wanting to reset the Government's relationship with the teaching profession. I thought that that was an admirable thing to want to do, because there has been an issue with trust and confidence. The fact that the cabinet secretary sees that and wants to do something about it is to be welcomed. She linked that to her proposal to set up a centre for teaching excellence. She did not give much detail and was criticised for not consulting anybody about it beforehand. My thought was, "I'm not sure you want to retain the term 'excellence' in the title." I would prefer a centre for teaching innovation. We have lots of challenges in education. We have mentioned AI, which is a big one, but very few people in Scotland seem to be addressing it. Some interesting work is going on in England, which I can say a bit more about later, if you want me to.

If we changed the way in which teachers are initiated into the profession and encouraged them to ask the why questions and to put forward their own ideas and try things out, that would begin to change the culture, albeit in small, modest ways to begin with. It would create a less formal and hierarchal situation, and it would involve distributing power more evenly. It is important that the people on the front line feel that they have agency to do things. We are talking about a 10-year programme, but most politicians do not want to know about that. However, if we want to change the culture, we have to start looking at that kind of issue.

Michelle Thomson: Would anyone else on the panel like to come in, specifically on the question about how we should go about changing that? Janet, you are looking at me.

Dr Brown: I should have looked somewhere else. [*Laughter*.]

Culture is at the heart of all of this. Walter Humes touched on the culture in the education system, but the culture outside the education system has a huge impact on what we do in education. That is even harder to change, because we have no control of that at all. If you

look at the areas of the world where things have been done well and the populace has been persuaded that something is better, you will see that they have had really good advertising campaigns. If you look at southern Ireland in 2020, which was the first year of Covid, you will see that they engaged with the population by going to the level of drawing cartoons to explain what was happening with the examination and qualification system and why they were doing what they were doing. The nature of the engagement with society was taken very seriously. That engagement was not academic; it was about explaining why the change was going to be beneficial.

When it comes to how people think about career pathways in school, I get very frustrated about the fact that, after multiple years of talking about it, we still do not have parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications. If we take that as an example, how do we change people's cultural view of that? We can change that cultural view by explaining to people that someone who is a welder today will earn far more than an academic in a university, and they might have a great career and enjoy themselves. They will have a happy life doing something that they want to do and they will enable us to regenerate the industry in Scotland.

Similarly, we have a huge challenge with getting the existing building stock in Scotland ready to enable us to get anywhere near our net zero goals. How do we change the culture so that people aspire for their kids to become heating engineers? How do we show the value of that to society and to them as human beings? All too often, we think about the issue as being in two different sections. We do it at the Royal Society of Edinburgh, where there is an economy and enterprise committee that has one level of language—we talked about language earlier—whereby it talks about the need for those skills and people, and we have an education committee that talks about how we can help people to develop. We need to have one language that says, "There is a mutually beneficial relationship between what the country needs, what the industry needs and what people need."

It is a complex issue. I totally agree with Walter Humes that we are not talking about a quick fix; it is by engaging in a meaningful conversation not just with politicians, academics and educationalists, but with real people in the general population that we will be able to see a different future.

Professor Stobart: It strikes me that the acid test for any reform or structural change that we talk about is what difference it will make. That is the fundamental question. What difference will it make to the classroom? What difference will it make to teaching, to how teachers teach and to how learners learn? If we cannot answer those questions in relation to any higher-level structural or training reform, why are we doing it? That should be the focus of any moves that we make, and we should be able to answer those questions to some extent.

Michelle Thomson: Following on from that, the view of the international council of education advisers is that Scotland should aim for an "egalitarian culture" in education. What does an "egalitarian culture" mean to you? Do you agree?

Perhaps Marina Shapira might like to answer that.

The Convener: I can see the fear in people's eyes. [*Laughter.*]

11:00

Professor Stobart: I think that Scotland can be proud of its approach to this and its emphasis on equality and the like, although that does not mean that we get it, whether socially or otherwise.

One issue that has been debated, including in Scotland—to go into my narrow little world—is the idea that examinations are fairer than other ways of assessment. I am not sure about that at all. There is equality in the sense that pupils all sit down and do the same thing for the same time, but that is not the same as equality of preparation. Some have an advantaged teaching and learning situation, and that extends to the subjects that they can take. Marina Shapira's research on that is really powerful. That undercuts the rhetoric about how we all have the same opportunities. When we are more forensic, we find out that, no, we do not. Some schools really narrow down pupils' opportunities, while others broaden them out. The fact that Scotland has a largely comprehensive system and that that system has been maintained is a great strength. I come from England, obviously, and I would not say that of our system, where the privileged just keep on being privileged.

Michelle Thomson: Marina, I will bring you in.

Dr Shapira: In principle, our secondary education is egalitarian, but we have an issue with equity, because there is quite wide variation in provision by the characteristics of learners, the characteristics of the schools that they attend and the characteristics of the neighbourhoods in which they live. Our study found, for example, that curriculum narrowing is a socially stratified process. Students who attend schools in areas of social and economic deprivation experience curriculum narrowing to a much greater extent than those who attend schools in more advantaged areas. Similarly, lots of unintended

consequences from curriculum narrowing and the introduction of a new curriculum have been experienced to a greater extent by those who attend schools in disadvantaged areas.

For example, the idea of introducing flexibility into the curriculum was laudable, as it allowed young people not to take all their national 5-level qualifications in one year and, instead, to spread them over the years and allow them time to catch up. In fact, the data shows that that is happening in schools in disadvantaged areas. Those who attend schools in better areas are following the old pattern of qualification. They take all their national 5 qualifications in S4 and all their higher qualifications in S5. Those young people who attend disadvantaged schools take fewer qualifications at national 5 level in S4 and then try to take more qualifications in S5. As a result, they take fewer higher qualifications, and so on and so forth. The interesting thing is that, overall, there has been a decline in the uptake of national 5 qualifications in S5, which means that the promised flexibility has not happened. The problem has just been shifted towards disadvantaged schools, with that option being given as the second-best option to young people to catch up with qualifications.

That is just one example. It is the same when we look at the way in which the curriculum provision works. Huge variabilities start from the BGE stage. Schools have so many different models of provision. The initial idea was to have three plus three years of high school, but many schools in advantaged areas usually follow a two plus two plus two model: two years for the BGE, two years for national 5-level qualifications and two years for highers and advanced highers. Schools in disadvantaged areas sometimes follow a two plus one plus one plus one model, which results in very fragmented learning. Those are exactly the issues that need to be looked at if we want to have equitable education and equitable educational experiences.

Michelle Thomson: That leads us neatly on to the next set of questions.

The Convener: It does, but, before we go to Liam Kerr, we will have a wee supplementary question from Ben Macpherson. I hope that you will keep it concise.

Ben Macpherson: Professor Humes, can you elaborate further on what you said about political discourse and political decision making? Does a shift in political consciousness need to happen around how we discuss education reform to make sure that there is a sense of at least medium-term but, hopefully, long-term consideration happening at parliamentary level? I am thinking of some of the challenges with, for example, the implementation of curriculum for excellence.

The Convener: Can we have a question, please?

Ben Macpherson: I just asked it.

The Convener: Sorry—I asked for something a bit more succinct.

Professor Humes: Again, that is quite a challenging question. I often refer to an American political theorist called Murray Edelman, who talks about the shift to what he sees as policy as spectacle. He has detected a trend in the United States and in other countries of policy making being seen as a social spectacle. Politicians come up with a fresh new idea, or an apparently fresh new idea—it may be a recycled idea, which I suppose is environmentally friendly—and it is launched with all sorts of razzmatazz, photo opportunities and smiling children, particularly if there is a new minister involved, and the language is bigged up.

We live in a boastful age in which everything is exaggerated. Nothing is “promising” or “quite good”; everything is “awesome” or “spectacular”. That is a general trend that is fuelled by social media, advertising and television. We even see it on the BBC all the time, with all its hyped-up trailers for programmes that you do not want to see at all, especially if they include the word “celebrity”. If that is a general trend of political language, it is not healthy.

That is not the only trend. We also see a cosy, feel-good kind of discourse. I want a much more hard-headed kind of political discourse in which things are described as they are and ideas are engaged with at a proper intellectual level. It is not all about promotion, advertising and getting the headline in tomorrow’s press. Education is important; it should be about real issues, real aspirations and realistic aspirations that are not overhyped or boasted about. In that sense, the question of discourse that you raised is an on-going issue, and I would like more people to comment on it and say, “Hold on a minute—that kind of discourse is not helpful.”

The Convener: Thank you very much for that. The committee still has a lot of questions to present to the panel, so perhaps we can make our questions and answers as succinct as possible. If you do not mind, I will limit all supplementary questions until the end to see if we have time for them.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Good morning, panel. Professor Humes, picking up on comments that you made earlier, the OECD has suggested that the Scottish system might be too heavily governed. Do you recognise that as an issue? If so, how does it square, if at all, with the principle of subsidiarity, which you described earlier as decisions being made at the lowest

suitable level and which is core to curriculum for excellence?

Professor Humes: I think that the OECD is right in the sense that it suggests that the system is overgoverned. One of the questions that concerned me with the SQA and Education Scotland was how close they were to Government. National agencies are accountable, in a sense, to Government, but they need a degree of distance. One of the things that we discussed in Ken Muir's committee—I was a member of the expert panel—was what happens to the inspectorate. We recommended that the inspectorate should report to the Scottish Parliament, not to the Scottish Government. That was quite deliberate. The Scottish Government, of course, is not keen on that, because that means that it has less control.

The principle of subsidiarity has appeared on the agenda only quite recently. Local authorities are quite keen on it, but we are quite a long way from embodying a principle of subsidiarity. It is seen as an aspiration. We need to do more work on it. The desire for central control is very persistent. The desire for the traditional policy community to exercise control is very persistent, and it was there well before devolution. A wonderful book by Andrew McPherson and Charles Raab called "Governing Education: A Sociology of Policy Since 1945" sets out how the policy community in Scottish education operated. A 2015 study of comprehensive education by Danny Murphy and colleagues at the University of Edinburgh stated that McPherson and Raab's policy community was alive and well.

Liam Kerr: Dr Brown, you talked earlier about what we value and what our aspirations might be in and for the education system in Scotland. Do you take a view on how the performance of the education system should be measured at both a local and national level? Should we move from individual accountability to a more collective responsibility, as Professor Chapman has argued?

Dr Brown: It is important that we assess what is happening in the education system. That assessment should be useful; it should not just be a tool with which to beat people if they have not achieved something. We should assess the education system as a whole, because we need to know whether it is being successful. We should assess individual institutions, because we should make sure that they are performing to the level at which we expect them to. However, we also should look at whether one approach works better than another, recognising that different scenarios and environments will mean that that could have an impact.

Walter Humes suggested that we should try two different things. There has always been the view in Scotland that, when we roll something out, we roll it all out together and that everything goes at one pace. Should we be piloting things and then assessing whether something works better than something else that we are trying, so that, ultimately, we get to a point at which we start to improve the system because we understand what is going on?

That is the perspective of a collective assessment; it is not an individual child perspective. However, if there is not an assessment—I am careful to use the word "assessment" rather than "qualifications" or anything else—of how an individual learner is doing, there is no mechanism to identify what additional work needs to be done to ensure that that individual learner is successful. That can be done by the teacher—it can be done in completely different environments—but you need to be able to identify what is and is not going well, at a system level and at an individual level.

If you do that, you have to be really careful, because society—this goes back to a change in culture—takes any measure that anybody takes in education and uses it to address the agenda that they want to achieve. We have to be careful about how we use the measurement system that we put in place. Politicians need to be vocal about when it is being misused and misrepresented.

11:15

Liam Kerr: Dr Shapira, you talked earlier about teacher capacity. There has been a lot of talk about that down the years. We have in our papers a reference to a 2013 study about improving the capacity of teachers and the necessity for it, at an individual level and at a structural and cultural level. Looking backwards, can you describe how effective efforts have been to improve the capacity of teachers? Looking forwards, where should the focus be to improve capacity in the system, particularly if, as Professor Stobart said, what must not happen is adding without taking away?

Dr Shapira: From what we learned from the findings from our study, it does not seem that teachers' capacity has increased or been improved. Teachers are overworked and are complaining about lack of non-contact hours to do anything other than go into the classrooms and teach. To us, that is one of the keys—increasing resources and then allowing the teacher to have more non-contact time—if we want teachers to be able to use their agency and actively participate in curriculum-making and improving learning for students. We did not find visible improvements compared with what it was.

Liam Kerr: Unless any of the other panellists want to respond on any of those questions, I will hand back to the convener.

The Convener: Thank you. We will move to questions from Willie Rennie.

Willie Rennie: I am interested in the panel members' views on yesterday's statement, particularly on the qualifications decision. I think there was a frustration among us because we thought that we were going to get some kind of move forward, but we are getting a new debate in the new year. Perhaps Professor Humes could go first.

Professor Humes: That reinforces the impression, which I had before yesterday's announcement, that there is an inclination to delay big decisions. That will be seen with a degree of disappointment by many in the system, because they feel that the process has been going on long enough and that it is time to take decisions. Big decisions are not easy but, in the world of politics, there comes a point when you have to reach policy closure, take the decisions and live with the consequences.

This whole process was set in motion by one of the cabinet secretary's predecessors. Delay will be welcomed by the old guard, as I call them, in the Scottish education system. They are those who do not want to have their territorial reach disturbed in any way. However, I think that it will disappoint a lot of teachers, because they get to the point at which they simply want a decision to be taken so that they can see what it means for them in their subject, their school and their community. It is disappointing.

Having said that, there are some things in Professor Hayward's report that need further interrogation—in particular, the practical implications of project learning on staffing and timetabling. I was at a presentation by Professor Hayward recently where she was very well received, but there was a headteacher from Ayrshire who said that the project learning proposal, which is one of the areas that is strongly recommended in the report, would be virtually impossible to implement in his school because of the staffing level that he has. I do not have the information at hand to confirm that, but I do not think that he was making it up. He said that there were considerable variations in staffing levels in schools across different authorities. Some of them might be well placed to take up the challenge of project learning; others might struggle just to provide traditional learning. There are issues that need to be fleshed out, but that is not in itself a reason to say, "Stop the buses."

Professor Stobart: I was sitting on a train all day yesterday, so I missed the announcement. I was brought up to speed this morning. The idea that, once again, we are halting to do more consultation is just a reminder that this is Scotland and, while you are either stalling or moving very slowly, the rest of the world is getting on with this kind of thing. There are reforms going on everywhere. Even the French baccalaureate is being reformed, and that takes some doing. New Zealand and other countries are all looking at ways of bringing their assessment systems and curriculums up to date. If there is on-going internal debate in Scotland but no movement—dare I say it?—do not be surprised if you find that others have gone past you.

Willie Rennie: I encourage the others to comment on what the cabinet secretary said about the reasons for the move. She talked about issues around behaviour post-Covid and the challenge of the poverty-related attainment gap. Basically, she said, "We have enough on our plate just now and we need to consider whether we should move forward when all those other things are going on." Is there any merit in that argument, Dr Brown?

Dr Brown: Membership of the committee that is involved includes several people who work in schools and directors of education offices. From what we hear, there is a significant issue associated with the change in the nature of the children who are coming through schools after Covid. There is a big issue there.

However, I am disappointed that we are not moving ahead in general. The reasons are valid, but there will always be another reason coming around the corner. We did not do something because of the financial crisis. We are not doing something because of Covid. I agree with Professor Stobart that, if we do not do something, we will fall behind. We must think it through, but Scotland will never reach consensus on its qualification structure; we just need to accept that. It is critical that somebody takes a decision, takes leadership and does something.

Dr Shapira: I agree with that view. There are always lots of complicated issues, and there will always be another issue. There is a clear need to look at qualifications and think about whether we want to stick to the existing structure, making some changes and shifts, or perhaps move back towards Scottish credit and qualifications framework levels rather than national qualifications. That would allow us to do what we have already mentioned: bring in vocational qualifications rather than just focus on performance.

The same is true of assessment. There is a huge need to look at traditional assessment methods. That manifested itself during Covid. We all remember what happened in 2020. There is a real need to reconsider what we assess, how we assess and, perhaps, questions of equity in existing forms of assessment—again, we saw that those are not working—and think about that creatively. We are living in the 21st century. Why

do we still stick to those traditional methods of assessment and think about national qualifications when we have an alternative by which to approach it more creatively and change something? Our findings show that there is the evidence and desire to make those changes, so something needs to be done.

Professor Stobart: If we are finding a level of disengagement post-Covid, as everybody else in the world is, should that not be more of an incentive to make school more interesting and rewarding for students and to get these kids in, instead of saying, "Let's get back to the old stuff"? They have changed, and that may be an incentive to change the system rather than a discouragement.

Willie Rennie: Thank you for your excellent answers.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you for your candour, particularly in your recent answers. There is no greater need than the need to do something about the inequality that Dr Shapira and others made points on. I will move on to that now. As I said to the cabinet secretary yesterday, one reason why I think that reform is so important is that the attainment gap so stubbornly remains.

I have another question before I go into detail on that, although this is related. Is there a risk that, without examination at SCQF level 5, there is more pressure on pupils at highers? Given what you said, Dr Shapira, how will that affect our poorest students?

Dr Shapira: Can you repeat the last part of the question? There is a bit of an echo, and I am not sure that I captured it.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: No problem. I probably waffled a little bit as well. The specific question is this: is there a risk that, without examination at SCQF level 5, there is more pressure on pupils at highers? What would the impact of that be on poorer students?

Dr Shapira: The question is about whether having examinations at national 5 level puts extra pressure on students and affects their performance at highers—

Pam Duncan-Glancy: —without having examinations at that point, so exams only at highers.

Dr Shapira: I do not think that we have solid evidence on that, but we tried to understand how the existing system works, including the requirement to take qualifications at national 5 level. We could certainly see a direct link between the number of subjects and passes at national 5 level and the way in which students make the transition to take up and subsequently pass higher qualifications.

That brings us back to the question of what type of assessments we use and what we assess. There are two separate issues. More subjects need to be taken up and learned at lower levels of qualification overall, including national 5 level. Do we need to assess them using examinations? That is another question. Are there other ways of assessment, such as using continuous or formative assessment? There must be other ways of ensuring that young people have mastered the knowledge offered at that level and that they are able to make a transition to higher-level qualifications and then sit the examinations. There is definitely a need for learning on that level. Whether they need to do exams at national 5 level is the issue that we need to consider. We need to decide whether to change the way in which we assess learning outcomes at national 5 level, how to use assessment and which alternative forms of assessment to use that could be beneficial to the transition to higher-level qualifications and final exams.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you. Professor Stobart, do you want to come in?

11:30

Professor Stobart: I make the point again that Scottish students are under far more pressure than other senior secondary students around the world because many of them take three sets of exams. Around the world, most systems end for students at the age of 18 with a diploma that they have built up to over two or three years. We do not have the famous two-term dash anywhere else. Outside the British system, hardly anybody examines nationally at 16. I made the point in the paper that, in England, education is compulsory until the age of 18 but we take what is a leaving exam at 16. The same is true in Ireland and here. Formerly, that was a leaving certificate, if you like, for students at 16, many of whom left school, but 88 per cent of Scottish students now carry on in the system. How much is that kind of exam needed? There should be opportunities to do other things at that point.

Again, in the British system, you leave school without any recognition other than a few certificates or no certificates if you have not done well in the exams. Other schools have diplomas, graduations and the like, and that was the push that we made. Why not celebrate the end of compulsory education with a broad description of what students will do? That is the idea of the project. Under other systems, such as the international baccalaureate and the like, you do projects, defend yourself orally and do other things. There is the broader curriculum there. I had better stop; I am getting excited.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you, Professor Stobart.

Professor Stobart: I have taken my medication. [*Laughter.*]

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Dr Brown wants to come in, and then I have one further question.

Dr Brown: I have a very quick answer. You are talking about bypass, which is a very big issue for students who come from disadvantaged schools. In my view, this goes back to the disjointed nature of the curriculum. If we really had a 3-18 curriculum, you would be building up your knowledge, and then, when you decided you were not taking a subject any further, you would do some sort of qualification through an assessment that could be anything. If you were taking it on, you would do that assessment at that point. Effectively, instead of trying to do assessments in everything, you do not do that. It goes back to the fact that we need that assessment all the way through that allows somebody to say, "I have had enough. I do not want to take this subject any further." You have all the evidence already; you do not have to go through anything else. That is what is valued by society.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Dr Shapira, do you want to come back in?

Dr Shapira: It is just a quick comment. I do not think that we can discuss changing the way we assess knowledge and whether we change or remove some national examinations without seeing education as a part of the broader system. We can change whatever we like, but unless universities change their entry requirements, for example, those changes would not work.

It is not just about universities. In modern society, we all use qualifications as proof of having some level of skills and knowledge. If we do not have official qualifications, what else will be used? It could be a national diploma, a certificate or other ways of acknowledging learning, but that needs to be developed with interconnectivity. We cannot just change one element of the entire system that is linked to so many other things, such as employers, the labour market, higher education and further education. Again, it is a systemic issue. If we want to change, we need to think about all the consequences.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you. The interconnectedness of each part of the system and that lifelong linear learning that you described is crucial. Thank you for those answers.

I go back to the point about socioeconomic disadvantage. Dr Shapira, in your paper you note that the curriculum is narrowing and that that is socially stratified and has disproportionately affected students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Why is that? What would you change? How might that be affecting the attainment gap?

Dr Shapira: Asking how that can be changed is a good question. It needs to be changed, because we can see a clear link and connection between social disadvantage and the type of curriculum that young people are being exposed to, and that connection needs to be eliminated.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: When you say the "type of curriculum" that they are being exposed to, do you mean the subjects that they are being presented with and their assessment as opposed to looking at who is attaining what at the other side of it?

Dr Shapira: First, in schools in areas of social and economic disadvantage, students are being presented with a smaller number of subjects. Yes, definitely, and, relatedly, they also pass fewer subjects on different levels. There are lots of reasons for that. Some of those are about school resources or the availability of subject teachers, but, again, I am going back to accountability and the culture of performativity.

In schools that are in socially and economically disadvantaged areas, school resources are often focused on students who perform better, who can be successfully put through higher level qualifications and achieve better outcomes. More students are left behind to do fewer, lower-level qualifications, and they are not really provided with a valuable education experience. Again, that is linked to the way in which schools are being made accountable. That also needs to change.

Accountability is very important, but we also need to think about the kind of data that is being used for accountability. What is being used as a measure is just the number of passes at national 5 and higher-level qualifications and positive destinations. Those are not enough, because they are not what secondary education is about. They are not what curriculum for excellence is about. The creativity and ability to think about how to use the data for accountability and the kind of data that are needed for accountability are really important. They would allow the link between deprivation and local educational experiences to be cut.

The Convener: Thank you very much for that. We are going to extend the questioning for a little longer, because I know that AI is quite a hot topic.

Ben Macpherson: As the convener said, a number of you have mentioned AI. To start, I want to give you an opportunity to talk about your view of the risks of and opportunities in AI. For example, should we be taking proactive steps now to make sure that our young people know how to use AI effectively? How should certification practices work in the future? How do we confront

the reality that AI is going to affect not just our education system but society more widely?

The Convener: We know that whatever you say today might not be valid tomorrow, given the very fast pace of change, but, Dr Shapira, can you come in first, please?

Dr Shapira: I can share the way that we, in the university, think about AI. It was quite an interesting process, because, approximately a year ago, there was almost a moral panic over what we were going to do—all students were going to write their essays using just AI. Gradually, that has now developed into an acknowledgement that AI can be used creatively and to enable learning in so many ways. Yes, it will not be easy, and it will demand that everyone engage with and think about what the existence of AI means. What will it mean to the way that we teach, the way that we assess and the way that we think about knowledge? We are at the beginning of an interesting process, and I am glad that we are now thinking about AI not as some bogeyman but as something that will be used to improve our lives and educational experiences. Hopefully, that kind of thinking will also be adopted in schools. I understand that mine is a very general sort of comment, but that is as far as we have got at the moment.

The Convener: Gordon Stobart has indicated that he wants to come in on that, as has Janet Brown.

Professor Stobart: My guess is that students have been using AI on their phones for ages to distort images and the like. AI has therefore not come as a surprise to them, but it probably has come as more of a surprise to us. It presents a kind of instant threat to things such as course work at university. If I set an essay, will it be written by AI?

For me, one of the ways of dealing with it is to shift to asking why we should not let teachers continuously assess their students in the classroom through what they see, what they hear and everything else. That gives teachers a feel for what the students actually know. The idea of increasing the oral component, whereby people defend themselves, which is what happens at higher education level with vivas and the like, is really so that the students can demonstrate that they have understood the work that has come from their thesis and that they can answer questions about it. Again, it could help to broaden teaching and learning in that way. I do not have any clever answers about how we handle AI. If I can download an essay, do I have to defend it or correct it, or whatever?

Dr Brown: I agree with Marina Shapira. It is important to think about the two sides. There is the negative side that says that we just have to learn how to deal with it. That is just a blunt statement. For years, students have been cutting and pasting and learning essays verbatim that they have then regenerated in exams. Software has been generated to deal with that, whether it is for project work or for something else. It is possible to do such stuff. The bottom line is that we just have to work out how to do it, because it will be used.

This is the interesting thing. I said a little bit earlier that the committee looked at all the reports that are out there, and I tried to explain. We all pored over and read through every single report. One individual is an expert but is also very familiar with AI. He used AI to analyse all the reports, and it made his life so much easier. He came out with as good an answer as we did. For me, that is the positive. AI saves time, and it allows you to analyse things and to see the content of something. You can ask a question. You can go back, read it yourself and do something else, but it does give you a different perspective on something.

We have to stop being scared of AI, because being scared of it means that we just try to stop it happening, and we cannot stop it happening. Similarly, we need to find ways in which to assess things that are done in teams, out of school or online. We have to work out how to deal with the new reality, because that is where we are at. If we listen to Elon Musk and Rishi Sunak and think about the fact that we are all going to be dead in 100 years, we will just be really upset. If we sit and think, however, about what we can use AI for from a positive perspective and not just be frightened—

Ben Macpherson: I am sorry to interrupt you, but, in that spirit, do we need to be proactive in helping our young people to be able to use AI and have those skills? For example, we did not take the opportunity to teach every young person how to touch type, and we are behind on that. Should we get ahead on AI?

Dr Brown: We should definitely get ahead on AI, but we should also get ahead on teaching our kids how to learn from and deal with social media and how to get the right knowledge from Wikipedia, which they look at every day. There is a whole dimension of additional learning that we need to put in place, but that means that we have to take something out. We have to decide what we are not going to teach on the curriculum. Arguably, learning how to deal with AI and the new world is more important to this generation and the next generation than some of the stuff that we currently teach in schools. We need to be open, honest and willing to talk about that. We no longer teach ancient Greek or Latin. What else do we need to think about?

11:45

The Convener: Professor Humes is keen to come in on that.

Professor Humes: Yes. It is not an area in which I have expertise, but it is an area about which we should all be concerned. There are big integrity issues associated with AI, which relate to what I said earlier about the assault on knowledge and truth. Having said that, I am sure that there are advantages to what AI can offer.

If I could make one recommendation it would be that you all have a look at the website www.ai-in-education.co.uk, which was recently launched by the historian Sir Anthony Seldon. For that, he brought in a lot of people with technical expertise, but his position is that educationists need to be at the forefront of how we respond to AI. Anthony Seldon has, of course, worked in the private sector of education, but I was pleased to see that a lot of state schools in England and one independent school in Scotland have signed up for the initiative. I am sure that there is work going on in Scotland. Staff in Education Scotland are looking into the issue, but Anthony Seldon is a big player and anything that he puts his name to is certainly worth looking at. He has indicated what work the initiative is doing and the networks that he has set up. That will be a useful resource.

The Convener: Thank you, professor. Marina, you indicated earlier that you wanted to come back in on this. Do you want to make a final comment?

Dr Shapira: It relates to your comments about our being more proactive. I want to offer one good example of how AI can be used proactively in the teaching and assessment of students and maybe those in the final stage of secondary education. Students are asked to use AI to write an essay on a particular topic. They are then told to critically assess the essay using the knowledge that they have gained from literature, lectures, and this and that, and to use that critical assessment to write a proper essay. To me, that is an excellent example of how it can be used creatively and proactively and contribute to better outcomes.

Ben Macpherson: That is a good example of why we need to keep in mind, if and when it is working perfectly, that AI is not perfect, because it is reliant on the data that it can access. Our ability to create data and critically analyse what AI generates will also be an important skill.

The Convener: Thank you very much. That is a great place to finish the morning—it is still the morning. I thank the witnesses for their time and contributions and for accepting our request for a little bit of an extension to their time here. That concludes the public part of our proceedings today.

11:48

Meeting continued in private until 12:23.

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