



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 7 October 2014

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EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
23rd Meeting 2014, Session 4

CONVENER

*Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)

*Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*Jayne Baxter (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

*Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)

*Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD)

*Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Bill Maxwell (Education Scotland)

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)

Michael Russell (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Terry Shevlin

LOCATION

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Culture Committee

Tuesday 7 October 2014

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:05]

Curriculum for Excellence (National Qualifications)

The Convener (Stewart Maxwell): Good morning. I welcome everyone to the 23rd meeting in 2014 of the Education and Culture Committee. We have received apologies from Liam McArthur and George Adam. I welcome Joan McAlpine, who is attending in George Adam's place.

I remind all present to ensure that all electronic devices, particularly mobile phones, are switched off, because they interfere with the broadcasting system.

We will continue our discussion on the implementation of the new national qualifications and the progress that is being made with curriculum for excellence more generally. I welcome to the committee Michael Russell, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning; Fiona Robertson, director of learning at the Scottish Government; and Bill Maxwell, chief executive of Education Scotland.

Last week, we heard evidence from a range of organisations in the education sector. I am sure that members will agree that their comments and our discussions were very interesting. That evidence will be the main focus of our discussion. The cabinet secretary will be aware that we also asked members of the public to send in questions. I am sure that members will want to cover some of those. We have received a lot of questions and comments—we will not get through them all, but we will, I hope, get through some of them.

I invite the cabinet secretary to get us under way by making some opening remarks.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): Thank you very much, convener. I am delighted to be able to provide the committee with an update on curriculum for excellence and the new national qualifications on what has been for many of those in Scottish education their hardest working year.

I will start with a few reflections on the curriculum for excellence journey that we have undertaken. First, I remind members of the fact that curriculum for excellence would not have been devised in the first place without the work of

this committee's predecessor. In 2003, the then Education, Culture and Sport Committee took a long, hard look at Scotland's supposed educational primacy. It accepted, difficult as that was, that our so-called gold-standard system was somewhat tarnished. I pay tribute to that committee, particularly its convener, Karen Gillon, who was the driving force behind that inquiry.

I had the great privilege of serving on that committee. Its report was among the most ambitious that the Parliament has ever produced, and it was the foundation stone for curriculum for excellence. The report set out 10 objectives for Scottish education for the next two decades. It is instructive to look back at those objectives and to see all the work that has gone on to address them. I have asked my officials to submit a copy of the committee's report as part of my evidence. I have also brought along with me as part of the evidence a short film made for the Scottish learning festival, and I have copies for each member. That makes the point about the progress that Scottish education has made and the work that is being undertaken.

We are in a much stronger position today than we were in 2003. We have record exam results, record high number of school leavers in positive destinations, more new or refurbished schools and the lowest teacher unemployment in the United Kingdom. I pay tribute to my fellow committee members from that time, as well as to our four expert advisers—Sally Brown, the late Malcolm MacKenzie, Lindsay Paterson and Keir Bloomer—on whose evidence we drew.

From the outset, curriculum for excellence was that rare thing—a groundbreaking policy that had the support of all political parties. I recognise the role of the party spokespersons who have contributed to the success of the policy in my time as education secretary: Murdo Fraser, Liz Smith, Des McNulty, Hugh Henry, Ken Macintosh, Margaret Smith and, now, Mary Scanlon, Liam McArthur, Patrick Harvie and Kezia Dugdale. The approach has been constructive and collegiate. Although we have differed on many issues, it is really important that we continue together to support curriculum for excellence and Scottish education.

When I became education secretary in December 2009, I had my own questions about whether we were going to succeed with such a hugely ambitious programme. Yet, I have seen—at all times and in every school that I have visited throughout Scotland—a tremendous enthusiasm for the new curriculum and the work that has gone into making the policy happen, including the work of Fiona Hyslop, my predecessor.

The curriculum for excellence has provided us with the best possible long-term plan for how we

do education in Scotland. Indeed, that was the whole point of CFE, and it was what the committee's predecessor envisaged. It is a process, not an event. It has been going on for a considerable period of time; it will continue to go on; and we will learn as we move forward.

This year's exam diet was a major milestone for CFE and was, by any measure, a success. There is a general feeling that teachers who had worked exceptionally hard had come through it and learned from it, difficult as it was for some. As the committee knows, I invited the curriculum for excellence management board to reflect on the implementation of the new qualifications, and I welcomed the publication of its report in August.

We will continue to support teachers in delivering the new qualifications. However, as Ken Muir told the committee last week, it is the responsibility of everyone in the system to reduce overassessment. For example, far more pupils were assessed for the national 4 added value unit than was necessary, and a practical lesson that we have learned is that, with the introduction of these qualifications, there was a degree of overassessment. We can begin to withdraw from that and continue to develop the system.

We will make further refinements based on what the data tells us. As you will know, I have asked the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development to report in 2015 on curriculum for excellence's impact; that work is going to be supported by the Royal Society of Edinburgh's education committee, and we will look closely at what it tells us.

We are also supporting teachers in their professional development. The new Scottish College for Educational Leadership is now up and running with a new chief executive, a new website and a new fellowship programme. That will be crucial to all teachers.

Some years ago, I had the pleasure of meeting the German federal secretary for education. Over lunch, he joked that, when he met other education ministers, he was always able to spot those who were involved in introducing new curriculums, as they were the most worried-looking of all. There have been moments of worry over the past five years, but worry is—like effort, hard work and collaboration—a normal part of human life. All of those things have paid off, and they will go on paying dividends for our young people.

There is an unstoppable momentum in our schools and a huge enthusiasm among teachers and pupils to keep on learning and improving. With every milestone that we reach—and we have just reached one—we are changing the culture of Scottish education and are getting closer to realising that gold-standard curriculum that we

had, that we wanted to get back, that we envisaged getting back 11 years ago in the predecessor committee's report and which we are now getting back.

Of course, I welcome questions from the committee on these and no doubt many other points.

The Convener: Thank you very much for that opening statement, cabinet secretary.

I want to begin this morning's questioning with the issue of communication. The Scottish Qualifications Authority's submission to the committee refers to its providing comprehensive communication of

"existing key documents and resources".

However, the Educational Institute of Scotland has told us that the CFE management board and the SQA failed to communicate key messages; indeed, the EIS and others have referred to "poor communication". Can you expand on these different organisations' comments about or differing views on communication? If you accept that there has been a failure in communication, particularly with teachers, how can we improve the situation?

Michael Russell: The EIS was part of the management board, and all organisations had collective responsibility for communication. However, it can always be improved.

I was struck by Terry Lanagan's comment in last week's evidence to the committee:

"I am quite clear, having worked in education for 37 years, that there has been no initiative in Scottish education during that time about which there has been more communication or more support."—[*Official Report, Education and Culture Committee*, 30 September 2014; c 13-14.]

I think that that is a fair reflection but, if there are communication failures at crucial pressure points, we need to make improvements. As you will be aware from your evidence and your reading, the EIS has drawn attention to communication between the SQA and some of the teaching professions and schools. We want to continue to improve that.

There is, of course, external and internal communication. I insisted on having a single external communication plan for CFE; I think that that has worked and we have been able to communicate information about CFE successfully from all the organisations. We are continuing to refine the internal communications between the parts of the whole, and I think that the SQA is now fully embedded in that process in a way that it might not have been a year ago. That will continue through the roll-out of the highs.

As I stressed in my opening remarks, this has been a learning experience. Communication is improving and has improved, and I am glad that people such as Terry Lanagan see that, by and large, it has been successful.

The Convener: Thank you very much for that.

Jayne Baxter (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): One thing that witnesses reflected to us last week was that being provided with information is not the same thing as becoming knowledgeable. Some comments were made about knowing what to look for on websites and getting the information that is needed.

I would like to extend that to what parents are saying. I did a bit of my own Facebook research—I put the *Official Report* of last week's meeting on my Facebook page, and a number of parents contacted me. One of them said that she had engaged with the school, gone to all the meetings and received a lot of documentation and reports, but she was not convinced that parents who had had a poor educational experience themselves, or who face other barriers to engaging with schools, would gain much from that process. Can you comment on how that process might be improved, and on what other things that schools and educationists in general could do to make information translate into knowledge?

10:15

Michael Russell: That is a good point. We recognise that the involvement of parents in their children's learning is absolutely crucial to success. We have followed a number of routes in CFE.

One route is the collaborative partnership that we have had with the national parent forum of Scotland, which has been very strong. I pay tribute to Iain Ellis and his colleagues, who have worked with us every step of the way and who are represented on the CFE management board. They have taken a keen interest in making sure that information gets to parents. I have been to a number of parent forum events, as has Alasdair Allan, at which we have discussed with parents how to improve communication with parents, and we will go on doing that. The parent forum has been crucial to ensuring that the right type of information gets out.

Last year we published a leaflet on CFE jointly with the parent forum, which I think the committee has seen—I am happy to distribute copies of it again. It had case studies, and it was very helpful to a lot of parents because it explained exactly what people could expect of CFE. That is the collaborative element of what we have done.

Of course, individual schools also have a responsibility for communication. The focus on

parental involvement is crucial in the wider improvement work that we are doing and the improvement partnerships that we are engaged in. Indeed, I can think of a school that I visited recently—Wester Hailes—that is very focused on making sure that no parent escapes the opportunity to be involved with the school.

As you say, sometimes parents have less than happy memories of being at school and find school a difficult place to relate to. That fact needs to be understood within the practice of the school as they communicate with parents. By definition, that job will never be completed, but we are continuing to improve how we do it, through both collaboration with parent organisations and a strong focus in the improvement partnership work.

Jayne Baxter: I will briefly add that there is scope to use social media as much as possible. I am finding through my experience that it is a method that works.

Moving on, employers also need to get the knowledge that they need. There is some confusion and lack of understanding of the new qualifications among employers. My question is the same regarding them: what do you envisage needing to be improved to make their levels of satisfaction greater?

Michael Russell: We have had very strong work with employers, both on a national basis and on a school or local basis—and we can give you examples, if you wish. I have been pleased with the level of employer engagement. It has been more comprehensive than we had expected even a couple of years ago.

The actual changes in what the qualifications mean are not that hard to understand. The higher qualification remains in place; the advanced higher qualification remains in place. The national 4 and 5 qualifications are harder to get across, but we seem to have succeeded through a variety of stakeholder events and means of communication. The job is not done, but we will continue to do it. We have seen positive interaction.

We have also had that interaction with colleges and universities, which is another key group. We have worked closely with colleges and universities, which receive young people from school, so that they understand what the qualifications are and they can fit them into their own expectations. Universities Scotland issued a strong and helpful statement last year that codified the approach of universities. The colleges have been positive, and indeed they see curriculum for excellence as reflecting the way in which they work.

I also met the Russell group of universities, south of the border, earlier this year. They did not know much about curriculum for excellence but

have taken a very positive and strong stance towards it, in part due to the helpful work of the two Scottish members of the Russell group, Anton Muscatelli and Tim O'Shea.

Jayne Baxter: Do you see all of that work contributing to the implementation of the Wood report and the achievement of its objectives?

Michael Russell: Absolutely. A lot of the Wood recommendations are dependent upon the continuing implementation of CFE and the development of CFE across the board. The Wood commission grows out of the deeper, broader learning that is curriculum for excellence, and Angela Constance and I are working closely on implementing its recommendations, with great enthusiasm. It is another big step forward for Scottish education.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): I want to ask about the culture change required in the teaching profession in order to ensure that curriculum for excellence is a success. There are three quotations that I want to read to you, all from last week's evidence session.

Dr Janet Brown of the Scottish Qualifications Authority said:

"One of the fundamental principles of curriculum for excellence was that it should allow teachers to take back ownership and to use their professional judgment in creating a culture and a curriculum that is interesting and tailored to individuals."

However, Richard Goring of the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association said:

"The majority of secondary teachers have had the content, the syllabus and all that stuff there for them over the years, but suddenly they have to reinvent a lot of it themselves. That is not the experience that they had in the past and it will take time to change that."

Finally, Ken Muir of the General Teaching Council for Scotland said:

"We still have some way to go with teachers' understanding—and headteachers' understanding, in some cases—of the basic philosophy of what curriculum for excellence is trying to achieve."—[*Official Report, Education and Culture Committee*, 30 September 2014; c 6, 15, 23.]

How will the Scottish Government ensure that the cultural change required to meet the aspirations of curriculum for excellence is fully embedded in Scottish education?

Michael Russell: That is a good question, and it goes to the heart of what curriculum for excellence seeks to achieve in terms of broader and deeper learning.

One of the key lessons coming out of both Finland and Ontario—two of the big, long-term examples of positive educational change—is that there is a remarkably consistent message, and

that message is in two parts. The first part is that we need a long-term approach to educational policy. If we have constant chopping and changing and if education ministers have five good ideas before breakfast and do not stick with a long-term change, we do not succeed as well. The second part is that we have to trust teachers to teach. It is investing in the teaching profession in the long term and trusting teachers to teach that makes the difference.

I am absolutely fixated upon making sure that we do those things. Our long-term approach is curriculum for excellence. We have taken it on and are carrying on with it. It will never be finished, but it is our process and our long-term approach. Our investment in teachers also continues to grow, and it is both implicit and explicit in curriculum for excellence that teachers taking responsibility is key.

The union point of view is correct. It takes time for that change to happen. I do not want to make absolute generalisations, because I know many older teachers who have adapted to CFE quickly and well, but younger teachers coming out of college find it easier to do so because they are inspired by it and see the opportunities that it presents. That is why we have such a growth in well-qualified young people who want to be teachers, and we should note the impressive qualifications of our young teachers. They get involved in CFE, they deliver it and they take responsibility for it, but it takes a bit of time, and that is why we try to support them.

I give an example of one of the refinements that we made during the programme to help teachers. Larry Flanagan, who was not then the general secretary of the EIS but was on the management board and was leading the process, told me that he believed that we needed to ensure that teachers had more materials available to them that had been developed by other teachers. When Ken Muir was working for Education Scotland, he became key to the process as the exchange librarian of all those schemes and materials that were building up across Scotland, and he ensured that they were provided from one local authority to another and from one school to another. We were able to provide an awful lot of things that we had not done before.

We are in a process of culture change that is and has been difficult for some teachers, but the whole programme is designed to support that change and to make it happen. It is interesting to note some statistics on the implementation plan, for which Bill Maxwell is responsible. It includes the professional associations and there is absolute agreement that changing the culture of the curriculum and achieving the principles and aspirations are at the heart of what we need to do.

Statistically, we know from Bill Maxwell's organisation that 90 per cent of schools that were inspected in the past year had a key strength around young people's learning, motivation, positive attitudes and engagement. That shows the power of the good teaching that is taking place, so I think that the culture change is taking place.

There is one other culture change that is important. We are moving from a curriculum model of two-plus-two-plus-two, which is essentially the model that we saw in most schools, to a model of three-plus-three. However, culture change does not take place overnight. One of the mistakes, perhaps, in starting off on this programme was the assumption that we could change from two-plus-two-plus-two to three-plus-three just like that in every school in Scotland. We have seen that that was not possible, but the process of change is taking place, and it is now moving forward radically to ensure that we have that three-plus-three model.

There is an organic nature in culture change as well as directional and implementational culture change.

Gordon MacDonald: You said that culture change does not take place overnight. I am keen that we understand the position in the short term. The SQA, prior to the introduction of the set of qualifications, had 390 events across Scotland supporting thousands of teachers. Do you see that being replicated over—

Michael Russell: Absolutely. Education Scotland drew together every secondary headteacher in Scotland. Am I right in saying that?

Bill Maxwell (Education Scotland): Yes.

Michael Russell: Do you want to say something about how that worked? I can then talk about the SQA.

Bill Maxwell: Yes. Alongside curriculum for excellence sits the "Teaching Scotland's Future" agenda, which is absolutely about building teacher professionalism but also about strengthening leadership. As the cabinet secretary said, we ran conferences to which every secondary school in Scotland was invited. There were four conferences around the country before the summer. We are now repeating that in primary, because we see leadership as being crucial to taking forward the innovative ideas that are emerging increasingly strongly in the system, which we can then spread and cross-fertilise across the system. I say that because I like the metaphor.

Michael Russell: The SQA has done something very similar, and it has broken things down to subject level. I hope that most teachers in Scotland, over a period of time, get the chance to

interact with their peers in these gatherings, but tremendous local interaction is also taking place in local authorities and school clusters. All of that is contributing to that profound culture change, which is creating great enthusiasm.

I do not know whether any members of the committee got to the learning festival, but it seems to me that, year on year, there is growing enthusiasm and commitment from teachers who are energised by the process. It is not without difficulty, but people are seeing how important it is.

Gordon MacDonald: Thank you.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): I raised with last week's panel the question of workload in relation to CFE, and there seemed to be general agreement that it did indeed generate a certain amount of additional workload for teachers. A couple of questions arise from that. One major reason that was identified for that was overassessment. In retrospect, was there a way to avoid or reduce that aspect of the workload or was it inevitable, given the process?

Secondly, there seemed to be general agreement last week that workload in relation to CFE would reduce, but there was uncertainty as to whether there might be some residual additional workload. Is there extra workload that is integral to CFE or is that not the case?

Michael Russell: We have to understand, in so far as we can, why there was overassessment, and there is no doubt that there was. I think that the newness of the system had something to do with it. Teachers are naturally ambitious for their pupils and they did not want them to suffer or, potentially, to fail, so they went several extra miles in terms of assessment. I think that they will step back from that slightly on the next occasion, and that over a period of years we will see more confidence there.

There was also some concern about the nature of the national 4 qualification, which is not externally assessed. That was criticised, and I think that teachers wanted to ensure that they did it as well as they possibly could.

I think that the changes to assessment that the SQA undertook during the session, listening to representations from the EIS and others, will make a difference, but we want to ensure that they do. I indicated in my remarks this morning that I will want to be assured that the assessment pressures do not increase—indeed, that they will decrease over the next 12 months and in each examination diet thereafter.

10:30

We have taken very seriously the wider issue of workload. At the EIS annual general meeting in

2013, I announced the formation of the group on workload that has been meeting over the past year. The group has produced a report that is effective and needs to get into everybody's hands—Jayne Baxter's point about communication is undoubtedly true. We need to ensure that every teacher and every school knows about that report. Every local authority needs to collaborate on that, and we must sometimes hold our own hands in seeking statistics and information so that we are not contributing to the workload unnecessarily. As the convener said at an earlier meeting, there was a tendency in some local authorities to require all or nearly all N5 candidates to complete the added value unit. We all realise that that is not necessary and we will step back from that, too.

We are making progress. I have a regular meeting with each of the trade unions and I met some of them last week, including the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers. The issue of workload always comes up in those meetings, and in my discussions with the NASUWT I pointed to the responsibility on the unions to ensure that the commitments that have been entered into in the workload group are honoured by local authorities and school management. The unions have a key role in the dissemination of information on workload, too.

We are making progress and the assessment burden will reduce over the next 12 months, as we want it to.

Colin Beattie: Would it be correct to say that additional workload is not integral to CFE?

Michael Russell: Yes. I have said that publicly and I said that at the EIS AGM in 2013. I have said that additional workload is absolutely not integral to CFE. Indeed, if we trust teachers to teach, there should be a reduction in workload, particularly regarding the unnecessary bureaucracy in the system.

In any bureaucratic system, there are more belts and braces than are needed and it is important to get those out of the system. In my speech to the EIS, I used the example of the work plans that teachers are required to submit but which are never looked at by heads of departments or headteachers. We need to take that nonsense out of the system completely.

Everybody—local authorities, the teaching unions, the Government, individual teachers, the SQA and Education Scotland—is working together to reduce workload and ensure that there is no overassessment. That is positive.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Cabinet secretary, you mentioned that worries have been expressed by teachers. Earlier this year, the teaching unions said that they had never

experienced so much anger, frustration and disappointment with the exams authority as they were currently witnessing. We asked teachers, parents and pupils some questions ahead of this morning's meeting, and I will ask you some questions on their behalf.

The first question comes from a principal physics teacher:

"Why not postpone the cessation of the 'old' Advanced Higher for a year so that pupils who are following the 'old' Higher will have a continuous experience? The new CfE Advanced Higher is significantly different—pupils who followed the 'old' Higher will be disadvantaged."

What is your response to that teacher?

Michael Russell: I have been open to discussion on flexibility in such circumstances regarding both the higher and the advanced higher. We offered flexibility in the higher as required by schools in circumstances that they could define, and that was very positive indeed. It is less likely that that will be a major pressure in the process for the advanced higher. However, if any school found itself in an impossible situation, we would listen—as we always listen in such circumstances.

We do not think that there is any need for dual running of the advanced higher. We have taken quite a lot of pressure out of the system with our much more flexible view on the higher. The advanced higher is pretty intense no matter which curriculum is being followed, and in those circumstances it is unlikely that there would be the need for a final change in that regard. Nevertheless, I am always willing to have conversations. I have spent much time talking to teachers about these issues and will continue to do so.

Neil Bibby: Thank you for your commitment to that, cabinet secretary.

Teachers are raising concerns about the possible disadvantage that the new advanced higher could create for pupils. Another physics teacher said:

"I greatly appreciate the extra INSET days allocated to prepare resources for implementation of the new curriculum. However, too many of the resources that I produced on these days are now redundant as the SQA has continuously changed the guidelines. I attended a meeting in February where the SQA assured the community of physics teachers that there would be no changes to the guidelines after April 2014. They stated that changes may be made after the 2015 exam diet. This has not been the case across the range of levels. Changes have been made across the whole of the secondary curriculum over the recent months, with the most recent being published at the end of September 2014."

That physics teacher asked:

"Can the government intervene to prevent the SQA making further changes to the curriculum or that when

changes are made they are not for the current teaching session but for future sessions?"

Michael Russell: No. If you think about it for a moment, there is a good reason for that—well, there are two good reasons, one of which is that we do not set curricula. I do not think that you would want me to start interfering in what is taught in the physics classroom. The reality of the situation is that the SQA has made changes where those changes have been requested or have been seen to be essential because of the views of the classroom teachers. The SQA is not spending time dreaming up ways in which it can change things, but it is trying—indeed, this is a request of teachers and of the EIS—to be as responsive as it can be.

To some extent, the problems that some teachers experienced in the early part of this year arose because the SQA was being too responsive from time to time. It was trying to listen to every point that was put. I agree that there is a point at which we say, "That's it. It's done, it's set and that's what we're going to go ahead with."

I know the SQA well. I know that it is trying to be responsive and I think that it is much better to allow it to be responsive. However, when teachers think that there is too much change, they need to say so directly to the SQA. One of the purposes of all the meetings that have been held is to provide the opportunity for teachers to say directly to the SQA, "Hang on a minute. We think this or that." Teachers should take those opportunities.

Neil Bibby: Another question that was asked by a science teacher was:

"Why do people who have not been in a classroom for years think that subjects such as Biology and Physics can be taught at N4 and N5 in the same classroom? They are totally different courses."

What would you say to that teacher?

Michael Russell: I think that a teacher who finds it difficult to teach in those circumstances should first of all talk to their head of department and then to their headteacher. There may be reasons why that is necessary in that school for a period of time, but I am not likely to know the reasons for every single classroom. There may be opportunities for mixing those classes at certain times. That is what the teacher needs to discuss with the head of department, the headteacher, the parents of the pupils involved and the pupils themselves, because the participation of pupils in decisions on their learning is extremely important. That is how decisions can be reached.

There is a sort of parallel in something that may come up later, which is the number of subjects that are taken in a school. One of the most interesting discussions that I have had on that was with a group of pupils at Rothesay academy,

which is in my constituency. They felt that taking eight subjects was taking too many; they wanted a change to take place and they explained why it should take place. Young people who are taking N4 and N5 and highers should be influencing their own learning. That is a collaborative and collective decision to be taken within a school.

Neil Bibby: I thank you for that answer, but I think that those incidents are not isolated. We are hearing more and more concerns along those lines.

In March 2012, you said:

"I do not believe that any teacher in Scotland who has the right support, the right help and the right leadership—which will come from the Government, from Education Scotland, from their local authority and from within their school—cannot rise to the challenge and deliver the conclusion of a programme that has been eight years in the making."—[*Official Report*, 8 March 2012; c 7003.]

Why then did we hear last week that at least a third of courses will be delivered for the existing higher this year? Is it because, as the EIS survey said, the new higher was ranked as excellent by 1 per cent of teachers and as poor by 65 per cent of teachers?

Michael Russell: I think that it is a little strange to criticise now the flexibility that exists on the higher as being inconsistent with my confidence in the programme. Throughout this process, I believed that the support that we should give to teachers and schools was paramount. That is why in my time as cabinet secretary I have repeatedly brought forward additional support, why I have always offered support to the unions and why I have had discussions with Education Scotland, my colleagues in the civil service and others to ensure that the maximum support is provided.

My view last year on the higher was that, once we had got through the first diet, the pressure did not need to be so great and that there was an argument for those who had genuine difficulties or concerns to have dual running of the higher, given that dual running would exist for the higher anyway because of the system that existed. In those circumstances, I gave that flexibility. That is not a lack of confidence in the programme; that is part of the support for teachers, and I am glad that that has been taken up constructively in a variety of places.

Let us reflect where we are. I am glad that Neil Bibby quoted what I said in 2012, because, frankly, I was right; the quotes that I have in front of me from people who have commented on the diet indicate that I was right and that the introduction has been successful. We have a lot more work to do, but we have had that successful introduction. If we keep our head and ensure that we continue to support teachers, we will get through the introduction of the highers and then

the new advanced highers, and we will continue with CFE.

To be honest, the prediction turned out to be correct, but that was because we all worked together. We should work together.

Neil Bibby: How can you assert that teachers have had the right support, help and leadership when at least a third—we do not know the exact figures—of courses will be provided for the existing higher? How can you say that you have provided the right help?

Michael Russell: Because the flexibility exists to have either the existing higher or the new higher. That is a necessary flexibility and the right flexibility within the system, and it was welcomed by the teaching trade unions as well as by a wide range of others. I do not know anybody who believes that that is not the right thing to happen.

Richard Goring of the SSTA said:

"We were absolutely delighted that the national 4 and national 5 results were as positive as they were."

Jane Peckham of the NASUWT said:

"In terms of getting the voices of the profession heard"—

on this matter, for example—

"being part of the management board has certainly allowed us to take forward the profession's views."—[*Official Report, Education and Culture Committee*, 30 September 2014; c 7, 33.]

Again and again, people are being positive about the experience. They are not saying that it is perfect or that it is not without stress and difficulty, because it has not been, but we are ensuring that we are delivering something that is highly significant for Scotland's young people and the future of Scotland.

Neil Bibby: You said that the right support, help and leadership would come, but teachers are saying that they did not come. The Royal Society of Edinburgh has said that there has been

"the lack of a *systematic strategy*"

for the implementation of curriculum for excellence. I see that you are smiling at that. That is not a laughing matter.

Michael Russell: I do not agree with that, and I am quite happy to debate it with Sally Brown, who was one of the expert advisers to the committee 10 years ago. I have told her to her face that I do not agree with that. I think that there was and there remains a systematic strategy.

The interesting thing is that I have invited the Royal Society of Edinburgh education committee to be part of the OECD process to look at curriculum for excellence implementation. I have invited it in to be part of the process to ensure that

we understand what has taken place. I welcome its input, and we will have a useful debate.

Let us consider Education Scotland's teacher and secondary pupil pre-inspection questionnaires, for example. Some 8,470 questionnaires were issued between April 2012 and March 2014, and there was a 73 per cent response rate. Some 87 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that they have regular opportunities to help to shape the curriculum and 89 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that they have good opportunities for continuing professional development. I could go on. There is a range of positive views on the work that has been done.

I am with Mr Bibby on the fact that the process can be and has been difficult. It has not been perfect—no work of human hand is perfect—but genuine, good work has been undertaken across the board by the Education and Culture Committee right through to schools and individuals, and that has produced results. We intend to go on doing that.

Neil Bibby: The Royal Society of Edinburgh also talked about

"a lack of pilot trials and independent evaluation"

and stated that the curriculum for excellence

"is not being managed holistically."

What do you have to say about that?

Michael Russell: That is a point of view that the RSE can bring into the OECD assessment. I am not entirely sure what it means by saying that the curriculum for excellence

"is not being managed holistically."

On pilot trials, I am happy to vigorously defend the process that we undertook for the reason that I do not think that a new curriculum of that nature can be piloted. There was cross-party agreement in 2003, to which I have drawn attention, that Scottish education needed to change, and there was agreement that it needed to do so over a school generation. That is what all the parties agreed would happen and it is what happened. It started in 2004, has continued and has a couple of years to go until the full roll-out has taken place. If we had piloted it in one place, we would have created inconsistencies of qualification and expectation. It was right to do it in the way that it was done.

10:45

On evaluation, I have always and repeatedly said—you quote my words often, so you will no doubt find the quotation—that the right time to evaluate curriculum for excellence was after we had had the first major diet, when the curriculum

was essentially established, and that it was not a good idea to indulge in piecemeal evaluation before that time.

Last year, I said in my speech at the Scottish learning festival that we would bring in the most significant outside body with a global reputation that I could find, which was the OECD, to evaluate the implementation but would also root it within educational experience in Scotland. That is why I invited the Royal Society of Edinburgh education committee to support that process. I am very happy that that is taking place. They will reach an interesting set of conclusions and will report in December 2015. No doubt this committee will want to be part of that evaluation and of deciding what is next.

Neil Bibby: Teachers have never been so angry and frustrated and are feeling unsupported. Parents and pupils are anxious and worried. The Royal Society of Edinburgh complains of a

“lack of a **systematic strategy** for its implementation”

and says that it

“is not being managed holistically.”

You have accepted that mistakes have been made in the process—you said that there has been overassessment. As the man who is ultimately responsible, will you apologise to the teachers, parents and pupils for what is going on?

Michael Russell: No. I will pay tribute to everybody who has worked hard. Everybody has worked hard on the implementation and it has been tough for many different people. However, in those circumstances, we have done something that is worth while and is producing results for Scotland's young people.

I have maintained a positive attitude throughout and have tried to ensure that whatever we did was helpful to teachers and schools. I reluctantly contrast that attitude with the words of Kezia Dugdale in the Parliament:

“I blame the cabinet secretary. It will be his responsibility when this goes wrong.”—[*Official Report*, 18 March 2014; c 28994.]

That is probably the most unhelpful thing that I have heard in the whole period in which I have been involved in CFE because, despite disputes about methodologies and individual issues, what has determined CFE's success is a willingness to ensure that it goes right and to work hard together to ensure that it does.

I hope that Kezia Dugdale's statement was a single example and that we will be able to return to positive approaches. You and I can debate and discuss till the cows come home the individual issues, but CFE is a good thing that many people have worked together to make a success and I am

grateful to every one of them, including—as I said earlier—the Opposition spokespeople, with whom I have disagreed.

Neil Bibby: Things have gone wrong, cabinet secretary. I do not think that anyone would dispute that. You mentioned that you have been the cabinet secretary since 2009. You are the man who is ultimately responsible for Scottish education. There has been a great deal of mismanagement of the implementation of curriculum for excellence over the past couple of years. That is your responsibility. Do you accept that you have made mistakes and do you have regrets or is it other people's fault?

Michael Russell: Everybody who has been involved in the process has made mistakes. Everybody can think of things that they would want to do differently. I suspect that that is true of you and Kezia Dugdale. For example, Kezia Dugdale should not have said “when this goes wrong.”

Every day, everybody in Scottish education gets up in the morning and says, “Let's make the best we can of Scottish education,” and that attitude creates the circumstances in which curriculum for excellence is succeeding and will succeed. To be honest, Mr Bibby, you should try to be part of that success, not will its failure.

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Good morning, cabinet secretary. You have already touched on a couple of issues that are to do with embedding the general principles of CFE in future, particularly the three-plus-three model of teaching.

There is also concern around the principle of the number of subjects that are chosen. You have mentioned the fact that pupils have contributed to that debate. Is there more work to be done to explain that a reduction in the number of subjects does not necessarily mean a reduction in the curriculum and learning experience of young people? How will that be communicated to parents, carers and the wider community, including employers?

I was particularly concerned to note that the evidence that the Royal Society of Edinburgh gave last week suggested that the reduction in the number of subjects is seen as an issue with curriculum for excellence. To my mind, the general principle is the important thing—the breadth and experience of young people, and the outcomes. I invite you to touch on those general principles in a bit more detail.

Michael Russell: The individual who is involved with the Royal Society and who says that repeatedly is Keir Bloomer. Of course, he was the father of curriculum for excellence. I know that it has been a concern of his and I would advise him to talk to pupils about the matter. The most

interesting experience comes from talking to young people about their expectations.

I return to the example of the conversation with pupils in Rothesay, to which I referred earlier. Interesting experiences such as that stick particularly strongly in the mind. This has been a question over a long period of time—all the time that I have been cabinet secretary: is there, in any sense, a reduction when five or six subjects are pursued in a single year? We talk about the stress and pressure on pupils, but they are absolutely clear that they want to be able to work intensively on a smaller number of subjects, rather than more thinly on a wider range of subjects. That applies not just in relation to the pressure of examination or assessment; it applies to all the coursework that takes place and to the regular issues that arise with coursework. I think that there is no diminution, as there is no reduction over a period of time. As a result, the right number of subjects is around five, six or seven. I think that eight is very high, and is exceptional.

One of the pressures has been parental expectation. It is important that parents understand why the change is not a diminution. To some extent, we are all prisoners of the educational experience that we had. Curriculum for excellence is a different type of education. Given those circumstances, I think that the situation will resolve itself over a period of time. I would be surprised—although I am often prepared to be surprised—if the trend over the next year to two years is not towards a reduction from eight subjects, in those places where there are eight, down to six or seven. Bill Maxwell might confirm that.

Bill Maxwell: Indeed: there is a strong trend towards that, as schools are beginning to rethink their whole curriculum model. The isolated focus on what happens in secondary 4 can be a bit misleading. We need to bear in mind the fact that young people in S3 are now studying a broader curriculum than ever before to a higher standard, across a whole range of subjects. We then consider how they follow through into the three years of the senior phase. What really matters is what their cumulative achievement in study is by the end of that six-year journey—which, indeed, builds on primary.

There is a lot of very interesting thinking going on, and schools are beginning to really exploit the potential of the senior phase. There will be different pathways for different young people. We are moving away from a one-size-fits-all notion that all pupils must do the same number of subjects in the same year, towards something that is much more customised to the individual's needs.

Michael Russell: We should not forget the trajectory that runs directly into higher and does not necessarily run through national 5. We need to have that discussion. It is not yet common, but many headteachers are discussing the matter in a constructive way. As I have said, curriculum for excellence is a process. Things will continue to change, and ideas will change. I had a very interesting discussion with about a dozen headteachers in late May and early June about how that model would develop—they thought—for many pupils. That changes things, too.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I hear what you are saying, cabinet secretary, and I appreciate your points about the depth of learning and so on but is the issue not, as many of the submissions have suggested, the breadth of career opportunities and options that are available? Might the move from eight to five or six subjects not limit careers?

Neil Bibby has mentioned physics quite a lot. I have to say that physics teachers have had quite a lot to say in their Facebook and Twitter comments, but one point that they made was that the sciences, particularly physics, seem to have been made more difficult. Will the reduction in the number of subjects limit options? Given that those teaching physics and other science subjects seem to have been particularly critical of CFE this year, is the number of pupils taking those subjects at school and then going on to university likely to fall at a time when we are committed to ensuring the participation of more women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics?

Michael Russell: It is a good question, but I cannot give an answer for one cohort alone. There will be many different opportunities. Generally, I do not think that the approach reduces opportunity or choice; a school will encourage the widest possible choice and will keep those choices open for a long time. That is probably what the system does.

It might be important if we set out for you in more depth, perhaps, some of the examples that we used in last year's leaflet with the national parent forum of Scotland, which highlighted a variety of different career pathways that were chosen differently in different circumstances. For example, there are a number of learning pathways for someone studying a number of N4s and N5s: they could leave school for work; do a modern apprenticeship; complete a higher national certificate at college as part of that modern apprenticeship; and then, perhaps, matriculate into university.

There is also the opportunity to bypass N5s, in which case the issue does not arise. There is earlier selection of highers, and that particular trajectory is taken. There is also the N4 and N5

route for young people, who will, as a result, decide whether they want to do more subjects at a lower level or take a certain number of subjects at the higher—or even advanced higher—level. I therefore do not think that there is any reduction in opportunities. Indeed, we would keep ourselves alive to that, because pathways should be kept wide open as long as possible.

On your question about science, and physics in particular, I think that, of all subjects, most concern has been expressed about physics over the past two years. I and Alasdair Allan have met a number of physics teachers, and I can understand the situation. The nature of the subject perhaps lends itself to that, but we are alive to the fact that we need to continue to offer the sciences as broadly as possible and we will continue to do so.

We should always be aware that we need young people to be scientists, engineers and physicists. On Friday, I opened the new Mearns academy, and I met two inspirational young people in their sixth year who were going to study physics at university. When I talked to them about that, they told me that what created those circumstances almost more than anything else was the influence of their physics teacher. Whoever the physics teacher or teachers are at Mearns academy, they should take a bow. We need to encourage that sort of thing in a broad way.

As you will know, we also need to encourage the languages options, and I think that curriculum for excellence has been helpful in giving a broader choice, including the one-plus-two approach. I am mindful of the importance of your question, but we should also remain mindful of not limiting opportunities. If we can share with the committee some of the information about pathways, members will see that those options remain open.

Mary Scanlon: That was very helpful. I am pleased to hear that you are mindful of the issue and that you are keeping an eye on the sciences. The people concerned seem to have been very vocal over the past year.

You said to Gordon MacDonald that we have to trust teachers to teach, but someone on Facebook or Twitter has asked:

“When will government stop meddling and allow teachers to teach?”

Have we struck the right balance here?

11:00

Michael Russell: I do not think that we have ever had a system that encourages teachers to take greater responsibility for their own teaching than the system we now have. We have a very clear system in Scotland. CFE essentially encourages teachers to teach in their own way, to

their full professionalism. We have an absolutely clear registration system—the standards are clear and transparent. That frees teachers absolutely; so we are freeing teachers in that way. However, you have also heard parallel complaints about teachers not being supported enough. There is always a balance to be struck. As you know, I am a strong advocate of freeing up teachers to teach and of not interfering in that role. We have the balance about right.

Mary Scanlon: I have some further short questions. On interdisciplinary learning, when you were—as I am now—a mere Opposition spokesman—

Michael Russell: There was nothing “mere” about it.

Mary Scanlon: —you were sitting up the road, listening to Peter Peacock talking about curriculum for excellence. Although I was not involved, I was impressed by the idea that what was learned and the skills that were picked up in one subject could be applied to others. That idea was innovative and exciting. However, the evidence that we have had, including in last week’s discussions and from the RSE, is that there has been such a focus on exams—it has almost been an obsession—that we have lost interdisciplinary learning. This year, now that you are looking at tackling and reducing the bureaucracy, can we get back to curriculum for excellence’s basic principles: the confident individual, the responsible citizen and the effective contributor? I think that we would all want to see that; none of us wants to see that basic ethos lost.

Michael Russell: That ethos has not been lost. Keir Bloomer has been a strong voice in RSE’s evidence. Perhaps his strong affection for CFE blinds him a little to what is going on in classrooms. There is no loss of interdisciplinary learning; indeed, it is at the heart of CFE. If you go to any school at any time you will see how interdisciplinary learning works.

I am absolutely supportive of a reduction in exam pressure. However, the desire to see exam results does not come solely from me—it comes from a range of parents and perhaps even from people round this table, who want to ensure that exam results are solid, respectable and used to mark progress and to allow people to get into jobs and to do other things. There is a balance to be struck. If the committee wants to recommend and support a continuing reduction in exam and inspection pressures—two big issues at the start of this process—you will not find me an enemy of that in the slightest.

Mary Scanlon: The issue came up in last week’s evidence; I did not make it up.

Michael Russell: Absolutely not.

Mary Scanlon: The issue has come up, so my point is reasonable.

Michael Russell: I agree with you; we should do something about it.

Mary Scanlon: Thank you. I am pleased that we are on the same page.

Michael Russell: We are, but you will have to support it when the pressure comes from the people who say that there should be more exams.

Mary Scanlon: I “will have to support that”—I have always supported curriculum for excellence. I do not have to do anything because I am already there.

Michael Russell: The point is a serious one. You and I go back a long way, so you will understand what I am about to say. There is often pressure from people who say, “We want more exams. We have to have this exam and that exam.” Anyone in politics who says that they want to reduce the pressure of exams or inspections immediately finds themselves up against a lobby that says, “Oh no, no—we have got to have more inspections, we have got to have more exams.” The point is simply that if people believe that there should be fewer exams and less exam pressure, it is necessary for them to stand up for that when the equal and opposite pressure arises.

Mary Scanlon: I would like to think that we do not need to reduce things in order to help young people to be confident in their aspirations. I think that we all share that view.

My final point is on an issue that Jayne Baxter raised. We seem to talk about exams all the time. I am sure that you have read last week’s evidence. Given the commitment around this table to the Wood commission—we all want that to work well—and although you responded to Jayne Baxter’s question, I am not finding a dovetail between CFE and the Wood commission.

Secondly, how are you working with further education colleges to ensure that colleges, as well as schools, can offer pupils opportunities such as taster modern apprenticeships, and that pupils at school are given the opportunity to pick up modern apprenticeships and experience at further education colleges? How do they fit in?

Michael Russell: They are integral to what we are trying to do. Wood could not really succeed without the flexibility of CFE or the opportunity for divergent paths to be taken and a range of opportunities to be added on to the offer and to be there as alternatives. The really significant thing about the Wood commission is not that it says that there should be parity of esteem between vocational and academic qualifications—I do not particularly like that phrase, because that is not the right way of putting it—but that it says that the

range of opportunities should be wide and should always include the opportunity to pursue vocational as well as academic qualifications.

The system that we have developed with CFE is one that allows that to happen, so that is the first thing. The second thing is that there is an issue about ensuring that a broad general education is not narrowed unduly, and that is what we are trying to do with the three-plus-three model. When we talk about young people at school entering into modern apprenticeships, we have to ensure that that model works in terms of their broad general education. The Wood recommendations are clear on that and we can see how they are going to work.

The third issue is that the partner in delivering those opportunities has to be the FE system. It is quite obvious. Clearly the FE system has a major role to play in delivering those vocational qualifications, because it does it already. Mary Scanlon knows the FE system well, and it is a system that is keen to do that.

We got into a bit of confusion six or seven years ago with what was happening. Local authorities were trying to do things with young people in colleges and colleges were trying to do things with schools and it got confused. We are much clearer now about what the relationship should be, and we can lay that out even more clearly to ensure that colleges have a role to play in supporting young people in vocational qualifications without interfering with the broad general education that is taking place.

I was pleased that Terry Lanagan, in his evidence to the committee last week, drew attention to the fact that things are moving fast to get pilot projects in place across the country, and I think that we will see rapid change as that work develops.

Mary Scanlon: Thank you. I will leave it there.

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): I was going to ask about opportunities for sharing best practice, but you have already answered Gordon MacDonald’s questions on that subject quite extensively, so I will ask something completely different.

One of the Government initiatives that was introduced at the same time as curriculum for excellence was rolling out, and which has been affected by curriculum for excellence, was the commitment to Scottish studies in schools. That is obviously a popular initiative; I think that about 80 per cent of people in Scotland believe that their children should learn more about their own culture, and there was a big debate about whether it should be taught as a separate stream, as I believe is the case in Norway. However, it was decided that, because of curriculum for

excellence, it should be interdisciplinary and that Scottish studies should run throughout all subjects. How is that going and what is happening to monitor the effectiveness of introducing Scottish studies across the curriculum?

Michael Russell: Bill Maxwell will be able to tell us how inspections go. I am sure that Joan McAlpine has some general information, but I am also happy to ensure that she receives detailed written information on numbers and presentations.

Bill Maxwell: We can certainly get you some more specific information and feedback from our inspections, but I am convinced that embedding Scottish studies across the curriculum is the right way to go. Traditionally, primary schools and secondary schools would embed many elements of Scottish studies across different subjects in the curriculum, where that fitted. It also makes a good context for interdisciplinary learning, as was mentioned earlier. We see it happening in schools and we are active—in reference to the question that you were going to ask—in sharing best practice across the country from the best that we see in inspections, so we will continue to do that.

Joan McAlpine: How much priority is Scottish studies given? The complexion of today's discussion, quite understandably, has focused on subjects such as physics, languages and preparation for apprenticeships. Is there a danger that Scottish studies does not get included because of that? I certainly have not been aware of it as part of the general discussion around curriculum for excellence recently.

Michael Russell: I do not think that it is up to us to have a hierarchy of subjects in schools. It is up to us to ensure that the offer is wide and appropriate and that people have as many options as they need to have, but it is up to schools, young people and parents to show an interest and to take up those options.

I would want to ensure that the subject is widely available. That is our job, and I think that the evidence shows that it is becoming more widely available. I also want to ensure that people know that it exists, and people will then have to draw their own conclusions about how they take it up. I would like to have done the subject myself, but that does not necessarily mean that everyone will want to do it.

Joan McAlpine: I am quite surprised by what you have said. Basically you are saying that it is optional, but I thought that Government policy was—

Michael Russell: Everything is optional in Scottish education, with the exception of religious observance in secondary schools. I do not want to diminish the subject's importance—I am an enthusiast for it—but, equally, I do not want to say

that we are promoting it over and above other subjects. I want a very wide range of subjects to be available. I think that Scottish studies is a great thing; I would like pupils to take it; and we should continue to offer it at a growing level so that pupils can take a higher, an advanced higher or a range of other things in it. However, it is one of the options.

Joan McAlpine: Do you not think that it goes further than being just another subject? It is core to people's self-esteem, particularly the self-esteem of working-class young people. For example, working-class young people speak in Scots; legitimising their language through the academic curriculum will improve their self-esteem, and that will then go right through the whole curriculum.

Michael Russell: I hope that that is the case and that all schools ensure that they legitimise all use of Scots, whether or not those pupils are taking Scottish studies. Scots is a language and should be recognised as such, and I hope that we have gone well past the days when pupils get punished for speaking the language of their community, whether that be Scots or Gaelic.

Joan McAlpine: Does that mean that Scots will get parity with Gaelic?

Michael Russell: Scots remains an important part of study. Of course it has parity; it is, after all, a language. In terms of expenditure and the public policy that has been put in place, Gaelic is presently getting more attention, but there are good historical reasons for that.

Jayne Baxter: I want to ask about resources but, first, I want to acknowledge the achievement of teachers, pupils and everyone else involved in curriculum for excellence and this year's results. Last week, however, Larry Flanagan told us that the situation was not sustainable; Jane Peckham said that

"Teachers still feel extremely anxious about the next phase"

and Richard Goring said:

"There is a lot of apprehension and anxiety about that".—[*Official Report, Education and Culture Committee*, 30 September 2014; c 5, 7.]

Would resources play a part in reducing those fears and anxieties and building teachers' confidence? Is there any issue with resourcing teachers in different education authorities or with teacher numbers? Given what you said about colleges a couple of minutes ago, I have to wonder whether there is also an issue with the resourcing of colleges, and I come back to your comments about the Wood commission and the way forward that it has set out. Are we looking at additional resources here?

Michael Russell: I would not want to anticipate the budget and clearly I am not able to do so. However, the Government gave a commitment to resource the Wood commission, and that commitment will be honoured. Despite the strong financial pressures on the system, when I have been able to add additional resources both to colleges and to curriculum for excellence I have done so on every occasion.

As for teacher numbers, I am very keen to maintain and, if possible, expand them. We have an agreement with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on teacher numbers that requires to be honoured, and I do not think that there is a case to be made for reducing such numbers in Scotland. I occasionally hear that case being made by local authorities, but I do not think that it is valid. In those circumstances, I would like to invest more, where possible, but I am operating under the constraints of the present constitutional and financial settlements, which is always difficult.

Jayne Baxter: We will cover the subject as we scrutinise the budget, so we will return to it. Thank you.

11:15

Neil Bibby: On the resources issue, one of the teachers who contacted us through Facebook and Twitter wrote:

"The implementation of the new curriculum has been done at a time when local authority budgets have been cut. The knock on effect is reduced staff, training and resources in the classroom for the people that are delivering the curriculum. I along with many of my colleagues spend much of our own money funding some of the gaps. There are also cases of tri level teaching as the staff are not available to run National 3, 4, 5 or National 5 & Higher courses separately. Is the government planning on making available extra resources to allow teachers to deliver the described curriculum?"

Michael Russell: The reduction in local authority education budgets between 2011-12 and 2012-13 was 0.8 per cent. I fight very hard to maintain local authority education budgets, but it is within the context of enormous financial pressure on the Scottish budget settlement, and that remains the case.

I have said repeatedly that there is always bound to be difficulty in introducing major reform at a time of falling resources, but we have done remarkably well with the resource, and that means that every teacher has done remarkably well with the resource. Of course I would welcome an opportunity to increase that resource. Unfortunately, it is now not an opportunity that will be available through full control of the Scottish financial resources, as would have happened with independence, but we need to ensure that we have stronger financial control in Scotland so that

we can make these decisions. Of course, we would not be assisted if local authorities reduced education expenditure.

The Convener: I have a final question, cabinet secretary. What does this year's experience of the curriculum for excellence and the new national qualifications suggest about the degree to which the original aspirations for CFE have been realised in practice?

Michael Russell: I think that we have done very well. If we go back to the 10 points that I mentioned at the beginning, which arose from the inquiry into the principles of Scottish education—I commend that sheet of paper to you; it is quite fascinating—it is astonishing to note how many of them have been achieved or are in the process of being achieved. They are the underlying purposes of CFE, which was built on them as foundations.

I think that we have been honest. Mary Scanlon has correctly raised issues such as examination pressure and other members have mentioned assessment. Those are things that accrue in any process of change. They are a bit like barnacles, as they begin to grow on the system. We have to be pretty ruthless about saying that we do not want those things to grow on it and we want to remain true to the principles.

However, all of us have to remain true to those principles. It is not enough just to ask whether the minister is remaining true to the principles or whether Education Scotland is doing that. We have to remain true to them as politicians, because we decided on them at the beginning. We have to remain true to them as political parties, Opposition and Government, so that we are collaborating on them. We have to remain true to them across the education system. Local authorities have to remain true to them, as do schools and individual teachers.

I think that we have done pretty well in that regard, but we could always do better. Perhaps we should renew our vow—if I may use a much-used word—to ensure that we are committed to them and that we believe that this is the right direction for Scottish education. We should not be looking for failure. We should be working for success.

The Convener: Thank you, cabinet secretary. I certainly hope that it will be stronger than a vow, but we shall see.

Michael Russell: Vows are strong if they are kept.

The Convener: Thank you for your attendance today. I also thank your supporting officials, Fiona Robertson and Bill Maxwell, for coming along. There may well be issues that we wish to write to you about, but we will have a look at that after we have reviewed the evidence.

Michael Russell: I would be surprised if there were not. Thank you.

The Convener: That concludes our business for today.

Meeting closed at 11:18.

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