



# Career Review Whitepaper

# **OECD Report On Curriculum for Excellence: Implications for Career Services**

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October 2021



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# Introduction

In 2020, the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament jointly commissioned the OECD to assess the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) in primary and secondary schools to understand how school curricula have been designed and implemented in recent years.

The OECD published their report, Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future, in June 2021. A subsequent report Upper-secondary education student assessment in Scotland was published in August 2021, offering further insight into how alignment between CfE and upper-secondary assessments could be improved.

Scottish Government has accepted all of the OECD's recommendations and has committed to working with stakeholders across the education system to implement them. It is therefore critical that the Career Review responds to both the specific recommendations and broader OECD analysis around CfE.

This paper summarises the OECD's findings relevant to career choices.



# Focus of the Report

The Report confirms the standing of CfE as “...an inspiring example equated with good curriculum practice internationally” and that it has stood the test of time against a background of accelerating change and a range of new insights from educational research.

However, while CfE is seen as working well in the Broad General Education years and for learners taking Advanced Highers, the OECD highlight a need to change the structure, learning practices and assessment approaches in the Senior Phase to be consistent with the CfE vision and to allow for the smooth curriculum experience promised from 3 to 18.

Overall, the focus of the Report is on curriculum development and realising the empowering nature of CfE to help schools develop their curriculum in ways that meet the specific needs of their pupils and their local context.

There are three main points that emerge from the Report:

- The current assessment process needs to be revised to encourage approaches and behaviours that are consistent with the vision of CfE. In other words, the success of CfE is being compromised by a long-standing assessment process that is not consistent with the CfE approach.
- Specifically, there is a need to assess the progress of pupils against the 4 CfE Capacities of:
  - Successful learners
  - Confident individuals
  - Responsible citizens
  - Effective contributors

‘The OECD view is that the focus of assessment has been on ‘Successful learners’ and there is a need to balance these by a greater understanding of progress against the other three capacities.

- There is a need to take a more coherent, long term approach to relevant policy to reduce policy and practice tensions and ensure a clear direction of travel.



# Relevance of the Report to the Career Review

## The changing context

There is recognition in the Report of the implications of rapid contextual change for education:

“Education systems may suffer from “initiative overload” as rapid social, technological and economic changes place increasing pressures on schooling. In countries like Scotland, where there is strong public confidence and interest in education, these pressures can be particularly acute.” [OECD Report, page 104]

The issue of ‘initiative overload’ is also implicit when the Report discusses the lack of coherence between different policies affecting schools, and the scope for tension between different policy thrusts.

The Report mentions the value of the 3 pillars supporting the education system – including the DYW focus on meaningful work – set out as a way in which coherence has been enhanced:

“Among the most notable efforts towards coherence was the positioning of CfE as one of the three supporting pillars of the education system alongside Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC, 2006) and Developing the Young Workforce: Scotland’s Youth Employment Strategy (2014). The three pillars of support present as a significant and coherent structure – a pillar for what and how children learn (CfE), a pillar to support children’s well-being (GIRFEC) and a pillar to support children and young people into meaningful work (DYW)” [OECD Report, page 103]

The Report has a strong focus on ensuring that CfE can realise its potential as an empowering framework that helps individual schools develop locally appropriate curricula.

However, relevant to career choices, there is limited reference to labour market demand and employer demand for knowledge and skills.



## References to careers

There is a single mention of 'careers advice' in the OECD Report, under a contextual paragraph about Developing the Young Workforce (page 32). There are 12 references to career or careers (though half of these refer to teacher careers), with the main reference being in the context of DYW:

### Developing the Young Workforce: Scotland's Youth Employment Strategy

In 2014, Developing the Young Workforce: Scotland's Youth Employment Strategy set out to reduce youth unemployment levels by 40% by 2021. The strategy aims to create a work-relevant, school-based curriculum offer for young people in Scotland, informed by the needs of current and anticipated job markets. This includes embedding career education for children aged 3 to 18 years, offering formal careers advice at an earlier point in school, embedding employer engagement in education, creating new work-based learning offers and widening learner pathway options for young people in their Senior Phase. New learner pathway options include a wider apprenticeship offer for young people with Foundation Apprenticeships (SCQF Level 6) and Graduate Level Apprenticeships in place and Levels 4 and 5 in development. Implementation of DYW required schools to include the strategy as part of their curriculum development, thus creating direct links with CfE (Scottish Government, 2021[5]). [OECD Report page 32]

Given the importance of subject choice and the link to subsequent career choices, it is worth noting that the OECD raise a number of important issues in terms of the choices that students actually have and the equity issues that this raises:

The OECD team noted schools' commitment to conceive curriculum models that offer a wide variety of learning experiences, subjects and qualifications...The issue of subject choice was initially considered as an example of local curriculum flexibility. Different pathways have developed, especially with a wide array of vocational choices also delivered by colleges. The variation of subject choice between schools may have unforeseen consequences for learner progression, however, given the historical importance of subject choice in Scotland. There seems to be an issue about the real choice options students have, given the variation between schools, depending on the context, capacity and resources (Shapira and Priestley, 2018[29]), which touches on equity concerns. Of note in discussions between the OECD team and stakeholders were some observations about the constraints placed on schools by some local authorities in curriculum organisation. [OECD Report, page 53]



Later in the Report, the OECD return to this issue:

“The same study [a Nuffield project] found considerable differences in the year of schooling when students make their first subject choice. In the sample of headteachers, 14% reported that this happened in S1, 51% in S2 and 34% in S3. Clearly, the implementation of CfE in the secondary phase remains a work in progress, with schools moving at different rates away from what was. However, given the well-documented relationship between subject choice and educational outcomes in secondary schools, variation of this scale would be a cause for concern in any system. For Scotland, it is particularly worrying given the importance of subject choice in determining entry to higher education (HE). A study comparing differences in entry to HE in Ireland and Scotland showed that inequalities in entry to HE were explained by subject choice in Scotland, whereas in Ireland (where students take fewer subjects), they are more closely associated with academic performance (Iannelli, Smyth and Klein, 2015[5]). These particular variations are associated with some of the assessment and qualifications issues identified in the review. However, they are also a reminder that when schools exercise their much-valued “flexibility to meet the needs of students”, it may not always work in the interests of their students in the longer term, nor may it serve system goals towards equity.” [OECD Report, page 97]

Whilst career choices are not referenced widely throughout the report, the OECD’s recommendation that the Senior Phase and associated assessment process needs to be reviewed is clearly linked to the career aspirations of students and to the needs of employers:

“As a source of inspiration for this process [to redesign Senior Phase], the conclusions from a recent comparative study on upper-secondary education across nine jurisdictions (O’Donnell, 2018[7]) provides some food for thought for Scotland to enhance the Senior Phase experience. The study supports Scotland’s ambitions for its Senior Phase, as it highlights that upper-secondary education systems do not aim for a one-size-fits-all offer but rather to provide students with a range of options with a view to suiting their future destination and specific demands for upper-secondary alternatives to traditional academic pathways. Other conclusions should further inspire Scotland to enhance the Senior Phase. First, it appears that upper-secondary education systems usually work with defined pathways broadly split between academic, vocational, and in-between tracks to provide some structure to student choice. Although the curriculum is determined by students’ choice of pathway, the study of some compulsory subjects is usually a requirement for completion of upper-secondary courses. Bridging programmes to allow more permeability between tracks are developing, which lessen the weight of choice for students. Upper-secondary curricula and assessment systems are closely interwoven and interdependent, and official records of achievement, in addition to certificates, are a feature of this phase, serving the needs of students first, but also of future employers and educational institutions. Finally, the comparison points out that links between upper-secondary education and the previous and next phases of a student’s career and education are crucial. Consequently, reforms introduced in this phase can have wide-ranging implications at individual and system levels.” [OECD Report pages 121/122]



## Assessment

The OECD make consistent reference to issues created by the current assessment processes, concluding that the evolution of CfE is being hindered by an inappropriate and unbalanced assessment regime. In particular, the OECD felt that there was a lack of data to assess progress on all 4 capacities:

“There is general confusion, confirmed by the stakeholders interviewed by the OECD team, as to what data counts when it comes to student learning. Given CfE’s focus on the four capacities, the absence of data on how well students are achieving in three of these – the capacities beyond “successful learner”, which are harder to assess – is also noteworthy. The OECD team received much anecdotal evidence about how CfE appears to support and develop the four capacities during interviews with learners, their parents, teachers and system leaders (OECD, 2020[2]). Beyond its own observations and examples in validated school self-evaluation reports, the OECD team observed no systematic evaluation data to support a judgement as to whether the aspirations articulated in the four capacities 20 years ago are being realised. [OECD Report, page 100]

In their follow-up report Upper-secondary education student assessment in Scotland – A comparative perspective (August 2021) the OECD compare Scotland’s approach to assessment in the senior phase of secondary school with systems used in nine other countries.

The report highlights a range of options for the future of assessment in Scotland. These include:

- Exploring the replacement of exams at age 16 by a school graduation certificate: noting the high number of exams in Scotland and the fact that few countries have exams at the end of compulsory schooling, the report suggests a “school graduation certificate may be more appropriate” (p.42). This might be organised around the four capacities of CfE and could include some external components such as vocational, music, or Duke of Edinburgh awards combined with school-based assessments.
- Developing a more resilient upper-secondary assessment system: the OECD observes that countries with ‘mixed economy’ systems such as Canada and Norway proved more resilient to lockdowns. In these systems awards are based on a combination of continuous assessment, school-based examinations, and external examinations.
- Seeking better alignment of assessment with curriculum and pedagogy through broadening the forms of assessment: including a recommendation that SQA further develop a range of options including computer-based examinations, incorporation of e-Portfolio and personal projects for external marking, and more use of oral presentations and practical assessment.



- Reconfiguring and increasing the role of school-based assessment and adapting the central moderation system: to incorporate more school-based assessment, Scotland should decentralise some of its assessment procedures, while further developing teachers' assessment literacy and the professional capacity of schools in assessment.
- Systematically investigating students' perceptions and views of assessment arrangements: concluding more systematic study of student perceptions needs to be supported, stating the limited evidence available finds student support for continuous assessment and a reduced emphasis on external exams.
- Further developing the role of vocational qualifications in broadening the curriculum: the report highlights transfer within Higher Education e.g., through Foundation Apprenticeships and National Progress Awards and raises an option to further integrate them into the mainstream qualification offer. The report states that countries that have had some success in giving vocational education parity with academic appear to have "integrated both in their qualifications", however even within these "society may still value the academic strand over the vocational" (p.47).

The relevance to the Career Review here is important. If a new assessment process is to have a more balanced approach to measuring progress across the 4 capacities, then it will be important to reflect on the contribution that careers education and the roles within the education system provide to support students in developing their 4 capacities as:

- Successful learners
- Confident individuals
- Responsible citizens
- Effective contributors.

### **Knowledge gaps**

The Report identifies a number of gaps in current knowledge, specifically in terms of insights from student journeys:

"In commissioning a programme of independent research on the impact of CfE, Scotland should consider a longitudinal cohort study, of one or both phases of the system, with a focus on the student experience of curriculum and assessment, student achievement, student engagement with learning, subject choice and equality of outcomes for a representative sample of students across different kinds of schools. Tracking the impact of curriculum review and proposed assessment changes through such a study would provide rich data to inform ongoing review and evaluation and important information on the differential impact of changes on particular groups of learners." [OECD Report, page 129]

It may therefore be valuable for the Career Review to consider those aspects of such a longitudinal study to explore the experience of engagement with career support and the influence of this on choices and futures.



## Curriculum Assessment Body

The Report proposes the creation of a new organisation responsible for the curriculum and potentially assessment:

“Given the high international profile of Scotland in curriculum innovation policy and research, and the need to establish clear ownership for CfE, consideration should be given to a specialist stand-alone agency responsible for curriculum (and perhaps assessment) in the future. Aware that this was a situation that existed historically in Scotland, the OECD team believes that the complexities of contemporary and future curriculum, especially as envisaged in CfE, need dedicated support and ownership. The remit for an agency of this kind could include in the short term:

- Updating the skills, knowledge and attitudes in the CfE framework to take account of recent and future developments, such as the OECD’s Learning Compass, for example
- Identifying and articulating the balance of 21st century knowledge, skills and attitudes associated with each level that gives those moving to the next level the opportunity for successful progression and subsequent success in learning.
- Communicating the future direction of CfE to all stakeholders, as suggested in Recommendation 2.3.
- Contributing to (or leading, depending on the outcome of the assessment review) the next stage of the development of national assessment in Scotland, aligned with CfE.

In the medium to longer term, this agency would be responsible for the ongoing monitoring of the most effective balance between flexibility and prescription and between personalisation and equity. Engaging with international networks to ensure that Scotland’s curriculum is benchmarked against international development on an ongoing basis and commissioning research in support of both of these goals would also be part of the remit of this agency. A key task for this agency would need to be to periodically review CfE and its different areas of learning to ensure they are up to date to prepare students for the future.” [OECD Report pages 125/6]

It will be important for this new organisation to be able to draw clear connections between curriculum development and the needs of the economy, and therefore to be able to connect to the significance of career support and information/insight as a vital way of connecting students to labour market opportunities.



# Summary:

## The implications of the OECD Report for the Career Review

The OECD Report focuses on curriculum development, and the extent to which CfE has realised its potential as an empowering framework that provides schools with the ability to develop a curriculum that meets the needs of their pupils and their local economy.

It concludes that the way that the Senior Phase is designed, and the way that students are assessed, is currently a hindrance to achieving the full potential of CfE, and that there are risks of inequity in the way that curricula are currently developed and implemented.

There is limited reference to careers or careers advice in the Report and nor its role in helping students make choices and in strengthening their 4 capacities. Similarly, there is limited reference to the current dynamism of the labour market and the implications of this for curriculum development, subject choices and pathways. In this sense the Report has an inward focus on the process of curriculum development rather than an outward focus on the rapidly changing labour market and its implications for schools and their curricula.

The Career Review is in part about how to create a strong link between the opportunities afforded by the economy (in terms of private, public and third sector roles) and students, and how to support them in developing skills that enable them to make confident choices (subject, pathways) and develop and pursue

fulfilling careers on the basis of support, information and insight.

So, it will be important for the Career Review to:

- Position itself in the context of the OECD Review in terms of its relevance to its findings – in other words, articulating the integral nature of careers education, information and insight by developing innovative learning experiences that are part of the curriculum, helping students make subject and career choices and make sense of the increasing range of pathway options.
- Articulate clearly how the proposed new curriculum development organisation should relate to the careers agenda.
- Describe how a longitudinal cohort study could incorporate questions around students' use of career support, information and guidance and its role in helping them make choices around subjects, pathways and careers
- Stress the significance of the growing partnership around individual schools – specialist providers, employers/employees, DYW, SDS staff – and how this partnership is part of the wider ecosystem of support available for young people in terms of helping them make well informed decisions about their next steps.



## About the author



Richard Scothorne is a Founding Director of Rocket Science, an organisation working across a range of consultancy, research and grant management projects focusing on improving people's lives.

He is one of the most experienced employability and skills consultants in Scotland, working for a range of clients including Scottish Government, government agencies, local authorities and community projects.

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Before becoming a consultant Richard worked for Local Authorities in England and Scotland as a planner, policy officer and Head of Economic Development, and he was Scottish Director of British Shipbuilders Enterprise Ltd.

