

Priorities for our exam system - Contradictions in Scotland's Ten Letters

Barry Black, Scotland Policy Conferences Seminar on the Review of the Curriculum for Excellence, 6/10/20

It was said to me not too long ago that the priority for Scotland's exam system should be for it to have some priorities.

Within that tongue-in-cheek sentiment lies great elements of truth. All too often it seems that different elements of Scotland's education system, however well intentioned, designed or operated, appear to pull in different directions from each other. That they operate often within their own silos, according to their own priorities, with different sections of young people as their audience.

I want to talk to you today about ten letters. Ten letters which now define the education of every young person in Scotland and how the alignment of these ten letters should be the priority for our qualification system, and indeed the senior phase curriculum.

CFE SCQF DYW.

Three acronyms we will all be familiar with, but which represent policy strands that frustratingly remain at odds with each other.

Take a young person obstructed from pursuing three sciences qualifications in one sitting because of the sharp narrowing of subjects the curriculum increasingly prescribes when entering the senior phase.

Or a young person presently taking two subjects in S5 that they would rather have sat at a later stage due to a need - both practical and cultural - to take five Highers in one go.

Or a young person who ends up caught in the middle of a dispute between their school and potential university due to the university not recognising a foundation apprenticeship as a Higher, despite other areas of the education system assuring that learner it would.

These are not hypothetical scenarios, but real stories young people told me during my PhD fieldwork this year.

Stories of young people attempting to take up some of the excellent opportunities which now exist in our schools, only to encounter a disjointed system which prevents them from taking full advantage of the curriculum.

The focus of my Doctoral research is to understand more about how young people in Scotland negotiate the influences upon them when making their subject choices, central to this is the exploration of the Curriculum for Excellence and whether it has delivered on the changes it promised.

Prior to lockdown, I spoke to around one-hundred pupils, in a range of school across the West of Scotland, about their choices, aspirations and pathways.

The impression I had formed in my desk-based work previous to this however, and indeed the general discourse surrounding education, was that the overall standard of education in Scotland's schools - through no real fault of their own - was declining and that they were being let down by an education system failing to implement the structural changes designed years ago.

Whilst not downplaying the very real issues within our schools, my experience of being at the 'coalface' has challenged these preconceptions. The discourse of 'failing' Scottish schools was far away from the reality of what I experienced. Over those months, I witnessed a dynamic, vibrant, innovative and exciting system, packed full of dedicated professionals striving to do their very best by every young person.

And yet structural issues - the failings of the wider system - were however evident.

CfE

Parliament of course voted in January for a review of the senior curriculum, a vote that has led to us all looking at our screens right now! But some core issues - which arose largely from the work of researchers such as Professor Priestley, Dr Shapira and Professor Scott - became evident during the course of the inquiry into subject choices.

Rather than these concerns just existing solely at this 'national level', they were a key issue for individual pupils within much of my research too.

Rather than a broad general education that prepared young people for the senior phase, it was evident amongst pupils I spoke with that third year was often an empty year that seemed more an extension of the previous two than a clear point of transition. In response, some schools even begin formal Nationals at this point - still reflecting more the structure of Standard Grades - evidence of a system that has nearly as many curricular structures as it has schools.

CfE envisaged a cohesive and flexible three-year senior phase - focused on achievements at the point of leaving school, as opposed to within individual years. But I observed schools and pupils still using it as a three-year progression - which is in fairness in line with the expectations of employers, colleges and universities.

And rather than an integration of short courses, extra experiences and wider achievement awards right across the senior phase, these opportunities often exist solely for 6th years, who have previously '*got their grades*' needed for their post-school aspirations.

SCQF

Now while it is hoped and assumed that the review will address many of these issues, it is increasingly evident to me a key factor is the imbalance between the holistic intentions of the curriculum and the ridged criteria of our qualifications system.

I have little interest today in rehashing the saga that has just past in terms of exam results, but one of the most interesting issues it raised was that the system - and those who govern it - prioritised the exam diet above all else. Maintaining 'all conquering' exam grades as absolute priority, and in doing so governing destinations and life chances.

Further, the seeming lack of regard for how the structure of new qualifications would impact on senior phase timetabling is clearly one of the key reasons for strain on the senior phase curriculum.

DYW

Perhaps where I saw the greatest curriculum innovations was in Developing the Young Workforce programmes. How progress has been measured against the overall aims of DYW - not least in destinations and youth unemployment - tell a story of emerging success and the great enthusiasm surrounding it is testament to this.

One school I was in, with a cohort including some of our most deprived areas, had a vibrant DYW programme running, with post-school destinations improving year-on-year and a real awareness from pupils of the link between their subjects and their aspirations.

Much of this work however was driven forward by a few individual teachers, rather than being structurally engrained.

But in schools in more affluent areas, DYW was sometimes non-existent. This aligns with the findings of the reviews carried out into the programme, which evidence that implementation depends heavily on a range of factors, including socio-economics and geography.

There are cultural issues too with how new pathways are viewed in education and industry. Sometimes too the young people I spoke to believed there was a cultural NIMBYISM from parents and schools regarding these pathways - that apprenticeships are great, but for other kids.

Until a straight A student veiw's foundation, and then ultimately modern apprenticeships are a viable alternative to university, DYW will not have been fully integrated and its true potential will not be realised.

CfE is of course a curriculum based on building four broad capacities, using eight curriculum areas, across five levels. The refreshed narrative rightly discusses *knowing the big ideas, using meaningful learning networks and embedding creativity*.

Its structure equates to a curricular model Kelly would explain as *curriculum as process and education as development*.

Such models plan learning to be flexible and open ended, not pre-determined and rigid, and allow development to take place at looser stages than the other models. Many of the starting points for such curricular structures are based around ambitions and principals, rather than outcomes and procedures.

Whereas, Developing the Young Workforce is a program focused very much on specific skill enhancement and destinations as the key outcomes.

Overall, our exam system disregards and overrides the holistic intentions of our curriculum.

Indeed, connecting these two different approaches to curriculum, as well as how assessment interacts with them both, is a question that seems as yet unanswered in Scottish education. Perhaps a question that may be answered by the current review.

There are three suggestions which I believe could make a difference.

Structural reform of Nationals - to reduce their stranglehold on the senior phase timetable - would allow greater flexibility for the senior phase to achieve the change it sought. It may also address some of the issues concerning the vast differences in curriculum structures - and numbers of subject choices available - that we see across Scotland.

Integrating fully the range of options DYW has created and firmly recognising skills for work qualifications as equivalents to Nationals and Highers would make these options more attractive and accessible for young people.

And a more holistic assessment system, in line with our curriculum intentions, would better reflect learner journeys and appreciate the broader range of achievements available in the senior phase.

Big changes yes, but then, we *should* have big ambitions.

In conclusion, aligning the CFE, the SCQF and the DYW - our ten letters - needs to be our system's priority.
