



**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Education and Skills Committee

**Wednesday 19 September 2018**

**Session 5**



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**EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE**

**22<sup>nd</sup> Meeting 2018, Session 5**

**CONVENER**

\*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

**DEPUTY CONVENER**

\*Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab)

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

\*Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)  
\*Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab)  
\*Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)  
\*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)  
\*Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)  
\*Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)  
\*Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con)  
\*Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD)  
\*Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

\*attended

**THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:**

Dr Alan Britton (University of Glasgow)  
Dr Janet Brown (Scottish Qualifications Authority)  
Professor Jim Scott (University of Dundee)  
Dr Marina Shapira (University of Stirling)  
Alistair Wylie (Scottish Qualifications Authority)

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Roz Thomson

**LOCATION**

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)



# Scottish Parliament

## Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 19 September 2018

[The Deputy Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

### Interests

**The Deputy Convener (Johann Lamont):** I welcome everyone to the 22nd meeting in 2018 of the Education and Skills Committee and remind all present to turn mobile phones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting. I also note for the record that Alasdair Allan has given his apologies; he will have to leave the meeting at some point to move some amendments at the Local Government and Communities Committee.

The committee has had a change of membership since its last meeting. Agenda item 1, therefore, is an opportunity for new committee members to declare whether they have interests relevant to the committee's remit. I warmly welcome Clare Adamson, Alasdair Allan, Jenny Gilruth and Rona Mackay to the committee, and I invite Ms Adamson, first of all, to declare any interests.

**Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP):** I declare that I am a board member of the Scottish Schools Education Research Centre.

**Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP):** I draw people's attention to my declaration in the register of members' interests, but I do not think that there is anything in it that is relevant or from which I derive any remuneration.

**Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP):** I draw people's attention to my declaration in the register of members' interests as a member of the General Teaching Council for Scotland.

**Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):** I have no relevant interests to declare.

**The Deputy Convener:** Thank you and welcome to the committee.

I record my thanks to all the members who have left—James Dornan, George Adam, Richard Lochhead and Gillian Martin—for their contributions to the work of this parliamentary committee. In particular, I thank James Dornan, who as convener managed to pull and hold the committee together as we dealt with very substantial and challenging issues. That was very important. He also showed a real willingness to take the committee out of the committee rooms and to engage actively with people across

Scotland with an interest in education. I wish him well in convening the Local Government and Communities Committee.

### Convener

10:02

**The Deputy Convener:** Agenda item 2 is choice of convener. On 1 June 2016, the Parliament agreed to motion S5M-00278, which resolved that members of the Scottish National Party were eligible to be chosen as convener of the committee. I ask for a nomination for the post.

**Jenny Gilruth:** I nominate Clare Adamson.

**Dr Allan:** I second the nomination.

*Clare Adamson was chosen as convener.*

**Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab):** I congratulate Clare Adamson on her appointment and look forward to working with her. I will now hand over to her so that she can do the hard part of the job.

**The Convener (Clare Adamson):** Thank you. I am very pleased to be a member of the Education and Skills Committee, having served on the Education and Culture Committee in the previous session of Parliament. I echo the Deputy Convener's comments about the members who have gone on to new roles in the Parliament, and I wish them well.

## Decision on Taking Business in Private

10:03

**The Convener:** Agenda item 3 is a decision on whether to take in private agenda item 5 at this meeting and consideration of our work programme at our next meeting. Do we agree to take those items in private?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

## 2018 Exam Diet (Curriculum and Attainment Trends)

10:03

**The Convener:** Agenda item 4 is an evidence-taking session on the curriculum and attainment trends in the 2018 exam diet. I am very pleased to welcome to the meeting Dr Alan Britton, senior lecturer in education, University of Glasgow; Professor Jim Scott, school of education and social work, University of Dundee; Dr Marina Shapira, lecturer in quantitative methods, University of Stirling; and Dr Janet Brown, chief executive, and Alistair Wylie, head of technology, engineering and construction qualifications, Scottish Qualifications Authority. We have received apologies from Professor Louise Hayward, who is unable to be with us this morning.

Our papers contain some themes that we are to cover, but I think that I will just let members ask their questions once the witnesses have made some opening remarks. I invite Professor Scott to lead off.

**Professor Jim Scott (University of Dundee):** Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. It is something of a challenge to condense all that has happened in curriculum for excellence into about three minutes, but I will do my best.

I will not read out my evidence on attainment or the curriculum, because the committee has seen that. What I will say is that I have drawn evidence by sieving the documentary pile of every school and local authority: the websites, the papers—the lot. I have examined agency papers and Government papers, and I have interviewed 100 of the governance actors, to the level of headteacher and depute headteacher. It is by triangulation of a great deal of evidence that the conclusions in my paper arise.

Curriculum for excellence is a very difficult, but highly commendable, thing for Scotland to achieve, and I spent many years of my professional life trying to help it do just that. It is worth noting that major initiatives tend to take 10 to 15 years to work through, and in the past they tend to have covered two years of the secondary curriculum or aspects of the primary curriculum. We are attempting to improve the entire curriculum. One would have expected, therefore, that there would be issues and that the process would take a significant period. My evidence suggests that there are issues and that we are by no means at the end of the process.

I have looked at two parts of the curriculum: the broad general education in secondary 1 to

secondary 3 and the senior phase in S4 to S6. Members have in their possession a cut-up version of a map of the entire Scottish S1 to S3 curriculum. It demonstrates beyond any doubt that the things that Douglas Osler, when he was the senior chief inspector of schools back in the late 90s, told us not to do have been implemented in the flesh in Scottish schools. There is significant fragmentation of the curriculum; taster courses have reappeared in many schools, despite the fact that Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education always warned us not to do that; and languages appear or do not appear. I was hoping that I could smile at Dr Allan, because he and I have had many conversations about the one-plus-two model. The reality of the situation is that that model is by no means implemented in the broad general education, although it should be. Approximately two thirds of Scottish schools more or less implement the one-plus-two process.

In the S4, S5 and S6 curriculum, the real problem lies in S4. However, there is a subterranean problem there, because much of the problem lies in the articulation of S3 and S4. If you have tried to work your way through the curriculum map that I supplied you with, you will see that articulation—the idea that courses are coherent and progressive, which are things that the CFE would wish them to be—does not seem to take place. If we look only at the schools that are progressing towards six courses in S4, we see that that happens with anything from eight courses to 24 courses in S1. I suspect that none of us would take the view that eight courses or 24 courses is an appropriate way to educate Scottish children.

That happens in S2 as well, but in S3 there appears to be significant confusion in the profession. That is backed up by interviews that I have carried out recently and not so recently. S1 and S2 are often quite consistent, but the progression route through S3 to any one of those six-course, seven-course or eight-course models in S4 can appear to be almost random. In one block of schools that do, say, 16 courses in S1 and S2, you can have 12 to 15 different processes through to the next set of courses in S4. That is not something that we should support.

We did away with the curriculum guidelines at the end of the 1990s and replaced them with circular 3/2001 and then curriculum for excellence. All of that allowed headteachers, in communication with their school bodies, to choose the curriculum. It appears that either headteachers or school communities have made some very random choices.

There is another layer there, because some Scottish local authorities have chosen to mandate their schools to carry out a certain core structure.

That is evident in the map that I supplied to the committee to show what happens in the S4 curriculum. Many of the local authorities in the north have opted for six courses; most of the rest have opted for something else. The Scottish Parliament information centre and I have produced numbers that demonstrate what is happening in S4 in Scotland. I have just finished another survey of all 359 Scottish secondary schools, so I can tell you that the latest position is that 54 per cent of Scottish secondary schools are offering their children—I say this carefully—only six courses. Slightly less than one third are offering seven courses and 11 are offering eight courses. There are still three or four hardy souls who are offering five courses.

The problem is in the detail for the child, because in the end it does not matter tuppence what the curriculum structure is unless it meets the needs of the child. The evidence demonstrates that the problem for many middle and upper-ability children is that their choice is being squeezed, particularly in the five and six-course schools. What happens in a six-course S4 school is that most children choose maths and English—understandably—and then choose two sciences and a social subject or two social subjects and a science, depending on their aspirations. That leaves the entire remainder of the Scottish curriculum fighting for one column in those schools.

Needless to say, much of what would have been a beneficial experience for those children in times past has gone. That obviously has an impact on attainment. Some of my critics have chosen to point out that I have focused on S4. The only reason why I have focused on S4 is that there was data for S4 sooner than there was for S5 and S6; it takes time for these things to work through. However, we will leave that to one side. If things had continued in S4 as they were in 2013—and 2013 was not the strongest of the pre-CFE years; 2011 and 2010 were stronger and 2013 was only a middling year—we would have had an extra 622,000 qualifications in Scotland over the five years since. I struggle to say that in a public forum—it is almost unbelievable.

We have chosen to do something different, but that curriculum narrowing has impacted significantly on both the quantity of attainment—I will come back to quality in a minute—and the progression pathways available to children. Most of you are probably aware that I am an ex-headteacher of several schools, which had quite different catchments. In all of them, children who were aiming for a particular thing frequently did not end up doing that because things went wrong in exams, so they had to use other subjects as back-ups in order to move forward.

We were able to assure children that those progression pathways were there, but is harder now and almost impossible in a five-course school. Anecdotally, one school in Scotland that chose to do five courses opted to do English, Gaelic native speakers and mathematics as mandatory subjects for two years at the beginning of CFE, which left them with two other subjects for everything else. That is a refined form of madness, I have to say.

If one moves on into S5 and S6, one sees that the current mantra is that we should look at leavers' attainment. I have no problem with that. Those of us who worked in schools and local authorities always looked at leavers' attainment—there is nothing new there at all. The evidence suggests that things have continued to improve in terms of leavers' attainment, and that is true.

However, if we look at the profile of what has happened with leavers' attainment, we see that it grew quite strongly from the beginning of recording the data in 2009-10 up to the point when we hit curriculum for excellence. Since then, leavers' attainment has either grown much more slowly or plateaued, or, in one case, it looks as though it might be beginning to go down. If it is going down, that would be in line with what seems to be happening in the senior school.

Level 7—advanced higher—progresses more or less smoothly. There have been a couple of little ripples, but they could be experimental error—there is no suggestion that there is anything wrong there. That is probably not surprising, because the most able children tend to survive changes of system most effectively. They have all the additional benefits. The thing that concerns me most about my curriculum and attainment findings is that it seems that those who are worst affected by curriculum for excellence are at the lower end of the average group of children and in the lower group of children.

I do not know a headteacher or educational researcher in Scotland who would not subscribe to the concept of equity. It is something that education professionals spend their lives attempting to achieve. The evidence suggests that equity is not being achieved and that, in fact, things appear to be getting somewhat worse. That is not a happy thing to say to a group of politicians, because that is not what you want either.

I was aware that there was a limit, so among the many pieces of school-based evidence that I did not give you is a profile of schools that still declare their attainment. We all understand that, since 2001, parents and children should be consulted about the nature of the curriculum that children experience, but the problem is that the pattern from schools that declare their attainment—too many of them do—demonstrates that, generally,

the schools in which attainment has gone down are in less affluent areas.

10:15

There are quite marked profiles on what has happened among schools across Scotland. Some schools have allowed their level 3, level 4 and level 5 attainment to rise and supported that in effective ways. In other schools, there has been no change in attainment. There are other schools in which attainment has gone down a bit or, in a small number of cases, gone down quite significantly. One of my colleagues will talk about our findings in that context later.

We have the problem that we do not seem to be achieving excellence. If attainment in S4 has dropped by 33.8 per cent since 2013—again, I find that statistic difficult to say in public—and if equity appears to be diminishing rather than increasing, we have a problem.

There are three layers of problems. One lies with the national process. I will just have a drink of water—I do not know why I have a dry mouth while sitting in a political meeting. We might describe curriculum for excellence as a process of four committees and two administrations, and the trouble is that the process has not been smooth.

I am a mathematician, so I might be tempted to describe the process as orthogonal, but it might be worse than right angled. We had a national debate, a ministerial response to that national debate, a curriculum review group, a ministerial response to that curriculum review group, then we went to a curriculum board and then another curriculum board. The process of going from one group or board to another is not smooth. I have been involved at the front edge of all the national developments since higher still—and possibly the one before it, to some extent. In all the developments that have gone through, this is the one that has had the most random national governance pathway.

The bodies that are responsible for implementing the process are Scottish local authorities. As an ex-headteacher and an ex-local authority officer—on and off—I can say with some feeling that it has become harder and harder for Scottish local authorities to carry out those actions, because their residual level of highly experienced educationalists has diminished over the past 10 to 15 years.

Then there is the school situation. I do not know whether the committee speaks to headteachers a great deal, but we would all commonly accept that not all headteachers are curricular experts. All headteachers have quite different skill sets, so if there is no curricular guidance to guide headteachers, we must assume that they will do



the best that they can in the circumstances. They will meet the needs of their constituency as best they understand it.

I used to be chairman of the building our curriculum self-help group, which is the only body in Scotland that has produced consistent exemplification of how curriculum for excellence can be implemented in secondary schools. My successor was a guy from Glasgow called Gerry Lyons, whom I suspect the committee might have heard of. The two of us have spent considerable time trying to support schools. One thing that we learned from holding national conferences year after year through the curriculum for excellence development process was that headteachers claimed that they were uncertain, that they were not as well informed as they should be and that their colleagues were confused by going to different national meetings with different national agencies, because some said one thing and some said another. Before I came to the meeting, I did a small resurvey with some of my key witnesses to check whether they were still saying those sorts of things. The response was that the situation is better, but that some recent changes have resown some confusion.

There are three fronts. On the curriculum, there is fragmentation, narrowing and—in one or two cases—excess broadening. On attainment, there has been a significant drop in fourth year and the beginning of a drop, by the looks of it, in fifth year. There is also the point about the ability of the various bodies in a school community to come together and improve things. There are challenges in all those areas. Those challenges are not insurmountable, but my bottom line to you would be in line with that of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2015 report, which suggested that there should be a reconceptualisation of CFE and, to underpin that reconceptualisation—I remember my evidence to the committee that wrote that report—the CFE process, documentation and support materials should be worked through more effectively.

**The Convener:** Thank you very much, Professor Scott. I invite Dr Britton to make a contribution.

**Dr Alan Britton (University of Glasgow):** I thank the committee for inviting me. I will try to offer my insights into the issues that are under consideration.

My analysis mainly stems from a long-standing research project; I have been tracking the origins and evolution of CFE more or less from the outset and, indeed, looking back to its precursor in the national debate that Jim Scott mentioned. Your predecessor committee—the Education, Culture and Sport Committee—carried out an inquiry into the purposes of Scottish education in 2002, which

is in many ways at least as interesting as the national debate when we look back at it, because it explored the purposes of education. I think that we have reached that point again in the process. The issues that Jim Scott has articulated take us back to that starting point that we have perhaps lost sight of, which is about what it is that we are trying to do through this process.

The analysis that I can present to you is based on interviews with senior policy actors who were involved in CFE from the outset and a lot of document analysis. I was asking what the underlying drivers of that process are. What are the power dynamics between the different stakeholders in the process? What is the balance of power between the different organisations? Also, crucially in today's context, I have kept an eye on both the governance and the sequencing of the implementation process. What follows on from which thing in that sequence? That has turned out to be critical in reaching the point that we are now at.

I have continued to monitor the evolution of CFE and I still engage regularly with practitioners and new teachers on how the system is adapting to CFE—the policy translation from the original vision in 2004 to what we have today.

Drawing from that research, I have set out a number of short bullet points in my submission, which is in annex A of committee paper 2. I will not repeat all the points just now, but I hope that some of the following observations will help to frame the discussion this morning.

First, the issues under consideration emerge as unintended but inevitable consequences of the way in which curriculum for excellence was conceived and implemented. I do not think that anyone has consciously set out to create the rather chaotic pattern of provision that Jim Scott has outlined across all the different schools and local authorities. It is accidental in nature but still inevitable.

For example, in relation to assessment and qualifications, a conscious policy decision was made in 2004 that sought to delay the thorny issues around certification. The vision of education that was presented in the review group report was not a good fit for the assessment and qualifications regime that existed at the time. That conscious delay meant that the problems were simply delayed and there was no opportunity to do pilots to work through some of the inevitable problems that would emerge. We are left with the legacy of that today.

What we tend to find now—the picture that Jim Scott describes is important here—is that schools and school leaders are having to retrofit solutions to the nature of the policy and the architecture that

we are left with, and the decisions that they are making are not necessarily educational decisions. That is a critical point to consider. It is not through any fault of the individual schools, but they have to make pragmatic decisions on timetabling and the resources that are available to them, and those are not educational decisions.

The variation in practice across the country that Jim Scott has described is indicative of underlying and unresolved tensions in governance. We are still caught in the tension between having very centralised forms of accountability and a presumption of, and rhetoric about, devolved responsibility and subsidiarity in other elements of education. There is no coherent rationale for identifying which elements of governance sit centrally and which are devolved either to local authorities or to individual schools.

Finally, as Jim Scott has hinted, the operational version of curriculum for excellence that we have ended up with is not the one that was originally intended. I think that it is time to revisit some of the key principles and objectives that were set out at the outset and which are, if you like, part of the genealogy from the national debate and the ESC report—explicitly stated aims and high-level objectives such as curriculum coherence from three to 18; more choice to meet individual pupils' needs; and ensuring that assessment and certification support learning—and to work collectively and without blame to identify ways of moving forward on the matter.

**Dr Marina Shapira (University of Stirling):** I want to talk about findings from our recently finished paper on the decline in the number of subject choices in S4. We have done other research on the narrowing of the curriculum, but I thought that that paper would be the most relevant to this morning's discussion.

We used the data provided by Scottish Government from the Scottish Qualifications Agency on subject entries in schools from 2011 to 2017. We had data for every secondary school in Scotland and, when we analysed the variation in the number of subjects offered to children in S4 and the number of subject choices made by children across different local authorities and levels of deprivation, our findings were quite striking and very worrying. For example, we found a clear relationship between the rate of reduction in the number of subject choices made by S4 pupils and the level of school area deprivation. In general, the trend is towards a narrowing of the curriculum and, on average, there has been a reduction in the number of subject choices across the entire secondary sector in Scotland. However, the reduction is larger in schools in higher areas of deprivation; in schools where there are more children getting free school meals, which means

that there are more children from a deprived socioeconomic background; in schools where fewer subjects overall are offered for national 4 and 5 qualifications; and in schools with fewer qualified subject teachers. The findings show that these developments in curriculum for excellence are putting a particular group of young people at a disadvantage. It is most worrying, because that is the group for whom the opportunities for social mobility provided through the education system are very important.

To find out why this has happened, we need to look at previous research on links between the curriculum, subject choice, attainment and progressions from school into work and higher education.

10:30

The literature often says that the curriculum for excellence has had a number of unexpected consequences, and the reduction of the curriculum is considered as one of those unexpected consequences because, at the beginning, the stated aim of the curriculum was to broaden the educational opportunities of young people. However, looking at the existing literature, we find that the reduction was not an unexpected consequence, because there is a clearly established link not just between student aptitude, their family background and characteristics and the subject choice that they made at school, but between school characteristics and the opportunities that schools offered children in terms of subject choices.

When the curriculum for excellence delegated more autonomy to local authorities and schools to shape the curriculum provision and decide how many, and what configuration of, subjects they could offer young people, the links became stronger between the characteristics of students in a school and overall composition of the school intake in terms of socioeconomic background and ability, and the opportunities that are offered to children through the curriculum and the curriculum choices that they make. That is why, today, there is an increased relationship between social deprivation on one hand and curriculum choices on the other. If we look at the trends in our findings, we can see that curriculum choices were far less differentiated in 2011 by school characteristics and by the local area's level of deprivation than they were in 2017.

For that reason, it is very important that curriculum policy should be brought back to a more general understanding of curriculum development, and to the link between curriculum type and opportunities for the reduction of social inequality and for social mobility.

It is also important to carry out more research at the level of schools, and to understand exactly the process of curriculum making in schools at different levels, starting with the headteacher and moving on to curriculum leaders and teachers. All participate in some way in making decisions and we need to understand to what extent they are prepared to participate in the process and feel themselves to be part of the process. We need to know whether they realise that, through the process, they shape the opportunities of young people as they transition from, for example, S4 to the upper stage of secondary education and, more importantly, in their transition from secondary education into the labour market or higher education. That is very important, and it can be done only if we carry out more research at the level of schools.

It is important to look at the changing levels of attainment in conjunction with changing enrolment in different subjects, because subject enrolment is a selective process. If we look at the attainment of those who were enrolled in a subject, we can see a rise in attainment. However, if we do not account for selection bias and come to a conclusion that attainment is rising by just looking at those who attain as a proportion of those who were enrolled in a particular qualification, we might again miss the important point that enrolment is going down and, for some young people, that is a missed opportunity.

That is not a random selection. The young people who are missing the opportunity of being enrolled in particular subjects are likely to be from more disadvantaged backgrounds, which is where the attention should be.

**The Convener:** Thank you very much, Dr Shapira.

Dr Brown, would you like to make an opening statement?

**Dr Janet Brown (Scottish Qualifications Authority):** I have some very brief comments to explain the role of the Scottish Qualifications Authority. As the committee will know, we are required to develop, validate, quality assure and award all the qualifications that we are talking about today, and we certificate those every August. As we have heard, what subjects are taken is very much a decision for schools, but it is our responsibility to ensure that qualifications are available for people to enter for.

On the point that Dr Shapira has just made, it is important to say that we have data on the number of people who have attained our qualifications only based on the entries; it is not based on the school roll.

This year, we saw a change in the volume of entries, with small reductions continuing at

Scottish credit and qualifications framework levels 5 and 6 and a very slight increase at levels 2, 3, 4 and 7. We saw a small increase in attainment in the wider area of qualifications that we make available, both in wider achievement awards and in vocational qualifications at SCQF levels 2 to 6. Attainment across national courses and awards this year was broadly in line with what we have seen in previous years, as we saw a slight increase in attainment at advanced higher and a decrease at national 5.

In August, we also published high-level data for a longer period of time, from 2011 to 2018. As we have heard from other panel members, the new qualifications were introduced in 2014, so the data prior to that year also included standard grade qualifications. I would like to place some caveats on which comparisons are possible between pre-2014 and post-2014 figures; some of those figures can be used.

Before the introduction of the new national qualifications, candidates were generally entered for two levels of standard grade, which would be either credit and general or foundation and general. However, the grades that they were awarded would have depended on how they had done on those qualifications, so it is very difficult to look at entries at SCQF levels in the standard grade era. However, we can compare attainment in SCQF levels for the prior period, when standard grades existed, with the qualifications that are currently in place. For instance, a learner who performed poorly in both general and credit assessments could have been awarded a foundation qualification, which makes the entries a little bit of a mess. However, we can definitely compare on attainment. We can also compare entries if we add the figures for levels 3, 4 and 5 together in both systems. I am sorry that that sounds a little complicated, but the point is important.

It is also important to say that we can look at attainment volumes, which is the number of learners who are gaining qualifications at SCQF levels across the piece, and which is a very meaningful measure. We have seen a decline in that over the years all the way back to before the introduction of the curriculum for excellence. As other panel members have pointed out, it varies by subject, so we have undertaken work to look at attainment levels in, for example, English, maths, sciences and languages. That is included in our submission, but I will be very happy to take any questions on the data that we have provided.

**The Convener:** Thank you very much, Dr Brown.

I invite our deputy convener to open the questioning. Committee members should indicate to me whether they would like to come in.

**Johann Lamont:** I thank all our witnesses for their remarks, which have been an important first step in our trying to understand what is happening. I do not think that, in this session, we will get to the heart of what needs to be done. The issue has been very challenging. I find it deeply troubling that a decision has the unintended consequence that young people in poor areas have fewer chances than they had five years ago.

I want to focus on the issue of S4. I hear what Janet Brown says about standard grade but that seems to me to be an argument to have retained it, rather than seeing it as something that confuses the statistics. Do folk have a clear understanding of why and by whom it was decided that we should not have certification at fourth year, when it allowed young people from poorer backgrounds a better opportunity? Do you have specific suggestions for what we should be doing about that? Nobody has ever explained to this committee why that decision was taken, so presumably it could be unpicked.

Dr Shapira seemed to be suggesting that it is not just that less able youngsters are having less opportunity but that bright children in poorer communities are now more disadvantaged than they were before. It would be worth while to expand on that point. What can we do about S4? What should we be looking at? That may be an unintended consequence but it is a very severe one. I ask Jim Scott and then Dr Shapira to comment.

**Professor Scott:** Your perception of what is happening and what we have all tried to say is largely correct. There is a problem for the most able children. Neither Janet Brown nor I touched on the conversion rate from enrolment to success. Something has clearly happened at level 5, because that conversion rate has gone down sharply. That is partly because parental and school aspirations have got a bit ahead of children's inherent level of ability. We saw a significant spike in level 5 presentations in 2014—the first year—and that may have been based on optimism rather than realism. It has settled down since then, but Janet Brown and I have both found that able children in schools in less able catchments do not appear to do as well. Both our sets of data support that, to some extent.

The decision to move away from standard grade and finally settle on new national qualifications was made by the first education minister of the current Administration. My understanding is that she did that on professional advice.

**Johann Lamont:** This is a personal obsession, because standard grade was introduced when I was teaching and the joy of having a certificated rather than non-certificated class was that it brought respect and resource to the course.

People may aspire to national 5, but if they do national 4, it is not externally assessed and it is a simple pass or fail. Has that had and will it continue to have an impact?

Whatever we thought about standard grade, there was a great sense of achievement for a lot of kids. We could get them to general level, out of foundation, or we could get them to stay at school long enough to get a qualification. That sense of achievement is disappearing. It means that there is a whole group of children who will not even be encouraged to achieve their potential.

**Professor Scott:** One wants to encourage achievement. If we look at the leaver data from 2009-10, the number of children leaving school with no qualification is slowly creeping up; that is in my set of stats and in Janet Brown's set of stats. It is still a small number, but the fact that it is creeping up in 21st century Scotland is not something that any of us should accept.

Part of that is because some schools have been boldly experimental. There is always a danger for headteachers around that; they should be able to experiment with their school communities and they should try to offer a different range of experiences for the children, but my acid test as a headteacher was always to ask: what will happen to that young man or woman 10 years down the line when they are applying for their third job? Have we equipped them not just to go out of the door into a positive destination but to stay in one? Have we given them the appropriate broad and deep set of experiences to support them?

There has been some experimentation both before and since CFE with things such as the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network and bringing the Duke of Edinburgh's award into the curriculum. In Perth high school, we did all that pre-CFE and I know that my successor still does all that post-CFE. There does not seem to be any difference in the alternative experiences in many places.

I have not carefully added up the numbers for level 3, so I will let the SQA contradict me if I am in any way wrong, but since we moved away from standard grade, it appears that children on the narrower curriculum, at a lower level, are more prone to failure and thus some of them are dropping right through the system and gaining nothing. I need to do some research—or someone else needs to do some research—to track the children at the bottom end who are gaining five, four, three, or two qualifications or just one qualification at that level.

10:45

That information is in the leaver data, but it would have to be differentiated for the least able.

That would allow us to see whether there is a significant change at the bottom. Obviously, the global measures, such as the number of children enrolling at level 3 compared with the number of children attaining a level 3 qualification, indicate that there has been a drop-off. I looked very carefully to see whether there was clear evidence that all the children who disappeared from the level 3 stats had moved into level 4, which would indicate that there was a significant gain due to CFE. Sadly, the stats show that although there may be some upward movement from level 3 to level 4 and from level 4 to level 5, a significant number of other children have just disappeared from attainment measures, and that is not necessarily because of the curricular narrowing.

The 33.8 per cent drop in overall attainment is 17 per cent structural; it is due to curricular narrowing. The rest of it is partially due to a drop in the roll, and it is partially due to how a school has structured its curriculum and the aspirations of headteachers, teachers and parents in that school. There are several questions to be investigated about exactly what is happening in certain schools in Scotland. However, there is no doubt that the removal of the safety net has added to the problem for those children.

**Dr Shapira:** Our study is on the level of schools and not on the level of pupils. What we see at the moment is a link between the level of school area deprivation, the number of children in school on free meals and the average number of subject choices at a school. We have not carried out a study on that, so we can only speculate about it. However, literature exists that can probably offer insights into the relationship and explain why school characteristics are important for subject choice.

What I gathered from the literature is that the mechanism of that relationship is not entirely clear. Again, more research is needed. One way in which the mechanism might work is that schools in more deprived areas might have more difficulties in attracting subject teachers, especially in subjects such as sciences. Our study shows a clear relationship between the number of qualified full-time teachers at a school and the average number of subject choices.

Another possible explanation of how the mechanism might work is that a large number of children from more disadvantaged backgrounds may lead to behaviour or create an atmosphere at a school that affects the attainment of other students and, as a result, the way in which they make subject choices.

We suspect that if a school has more children from disadvantaged family backgrounds, the school's role of providing career and subject choice guidance is more important. We know how

important family networks are, and family advice on subject choice. Families can help youngsters to make informed choices, because they can advise them about the consequences of their choices. Schools with children from more disadvantaged backgrounds have more responsibility for that guidance. If schools uniformly offer fewer subjects, that reduces opportunities for children from disadvantaged backgrounds to select more subjects, or subjects that would help those children to make successful progression after school.

That is why I think that more research is needed on curriculum decisions by not just teachers but pupils and their families, so that we can understand the interaction between those and how that is changing with the new curriculum for excellence.

**Johann Lamont:** Is it true that, in a more deprived area, a child who is very well supported by their family and is very able will not be able to compete to get into university because they will already have been denied the opportunity to do the number of subjects that they wanted to?

**Dr Shapira:** If their school uniformly offers five or six subjects, there is no way that the child would be—

**Johann Lamont:** Is there any research that looks at the cohort of young people who are able to compete to get to university or college? With a cap, it follows logically that people are competing on the grounds of qualification. That is how the rationing is happening.

**Dr Shapira:** In our study, we are looking at the impact of the curriculum for excellence on subject choices, attainment and the transition into higher education. Research has been done in Scotland on the impact of subject choices on the transition into higher education under the old curriculum. We are now trying to look at the impact of the new curriculum and the reduced number of subject choices on the transition into higher education.

**The Convener:** I want to move on. Members have been asked to address their questions to specific panel members. If other members of the panel would like to pick up any points later on, they will have an opportunity to do so.

Many members have questions to ask and we are tight for time, so we will move on to Mary Fee.

**Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab):** I will roll my questions into one to get through them as quickly as possible. I come at the issue from the simplistic point of view that our schools should meet the needs of our children. Professor Scott talked about the significant fragmentation of the curriculum and the almost chaotic explosion that has taken place.

My questions cover three areas, which are all to do with the needs of our young people and the flexibility that they have in schools. Not all children stay in the same school from when they enter S1 until they leave to go to college or university. I would be interested to find out about the impact that the number of curriculum areas has on a young person's ability to move school and follow a particular path. I am also keen to hear your views on the impact that the number of curriculum areas has on our teaching staff. Are the subjects that are available in certain schools available because that is what they can offer or because those subjects are what the school thinks that its young people need?

My final question is on the skills gap. What impact does the availability of curriculum choices have on the skills gap? We have heard about areas in which there are shortages of young people to go into a particular type of employment. Does the fragmentation of the curriculum impact on that?

**Professor Scott:** The obvious answer to your last question is that it must.

I am not sure that I would describe what is happening in S1 to S3 as chaos. I think that it is a more measured attempt by individual schools to meet the needs of their constituencies. The question is whether they have got it right. The schools at the extreme ends of the spectrum have probably not got it right. What worries me a little is that my current trawl around them all again, a year after the one that is reported in my written evidence, suggests that some of them are going further towards the ends of the spectrum. That is an issue.

You asked about staffing. Although it was not the subject of a major question in my recent mini survey, I have some empirical evidence, because I asked my witnesses about it. I run another research team at the University of Dundee, which is looking into the Scottish attainment challenge and pupil equity funding, and we have asked a set of headteachers specifically about staffing. There is no doubt that some schools are experiencing difficulties in recruiting teachers in some areas and some of those areas are quite key to the curricular experiences of a number of young people.

It is not simply science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects; we are all making a great fuss about STEM at the moment but the curriculum is much more than STEM. There are significant deficits in a number of subjects; there are shortages of home economists and computing teachers, for example. However, uptake of computing has developed by the best part of 50 per cent in S4, so the question is whether it is a chicken-or-egg situation. It is difficult to say; my suspicion is that in the case of computing, the

shortages are caused more by the curriculum demands than by the lack of teachers.

Does fragmentation affect the life chances and future pathways of young people? Yes, it does. Life chances are more affected by the narrowing of subject choice in S4. If you are brought down to six subjects—or, God help us, five; let us assume there are no fives, for the future wellbeing of Scottish children—you inevitably have to have a bet with yourself about column six and what will be beneficial to you.

The real problem is not for able kids who pass all their subjects and move on, because they have made the right choices and they can progress. Able children almost always survive in a system, although I completely agree with Marina Shapira's point that it is harder for children who live in a deprived area. The able children who succeed go through. Average and able children, and particularly less able children, who pick up a clutch of six subjects and fail several of them, are then playing catch-up in a way that they were probably not in the situation before CFE. That bears on the original question as well.

Those children have had to narrow their curriculum choices anyway—some of the key parts of their curriculum have not worked out, so they are into repeats and catch-up. If you go down from eight subjects to six, you should have 25 per cent more time available to you, which can be redeployed in pursuit of the six subjects that you are still studying.

That should mean that the pass rate is higher—the conversion rate from enrolment to pass is higher—but it is not. It should mean that the passes in these subjects should be of a higher quality. There is some evidence that the passes are of a higher quality. That varies from subject to subject, but there is some clear evidence that the quality is improving and there is some clear evidence that the number of children getting at least one pass at that level is going up a bit, albeit more slowly, as I said earlier, so there are slightly contradictory flows there.

The bottom line is what happens if you do not get it right at the first hurdle. I remember the national debate on education. It was a highly commendable process in which one of the things that people said was, "Get rid of the two-term dashes." At that point, we had two two-term dashes. Well, folks—we now have three two-term dashes and children are indeed dashing.

There is a big question about the worth of level 3 and level 4 qualifications—the worth to schools, to individual children, to families, and to employers. I suspect that those qualifications would be seen a little more positively by all those

constituencies if they did not simply rely on teacher judgment.

I remember the Deputy First Minister's recent comments on teachers' judgment and CFE levels and I entirely agree with him that there are issues about the quality of teacher judgment across the piece. I do not think that it is any different at level 3 and level 4. Teachers do the very best they can and they try very hard but they are not perfect people. Having an external agency that applies a rigid standard to qualifications assists things significantly.

**The Convener:** We move on to a question from Liz Smith.

**Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** Thank you, convener, and congratulations on your new role.

I have a question for Dr Brown. In the submissions from Professor Scott and Dr Britton, they both made the comment that in the developmental period of CFE, the three to 15 period was pretty good; there was a lot of organisation that was quite effective. However, beyond that, it was largely left to you to lead the senior phase and, as you rightly pointed out in your opening remarks, that is not technically your job—your job is to make sure that the qualifications suit whatever the educational strategy is.

Do you think that that problem for the senior phase—the problem of not thinking about the strategy in a coherent manner—is part of the problem that we are discussing?

11:00

**Dr Brown:** Part of the problem, as Jim Scott highlighted, is that the curriculum was for three to 18, and we need to think about that. The extension of broad general education by one year had an implication on what the senior phase was intended to be. The qualifications need to involve the amount of learning that is necessary. Therefore, there is a required assumption that candidates are at a particular level at the end of broad general education. Clarity is needed on the whole three to 18 pathway, so that people can be successful when they get to the courses that are co-designed by the SQA, teachers and universities. We need to think about what needs to be in the curriculum for those courses in the senior phase to allow candidates to go to the right destinations and to be successful. We need to think about the pathway, because the way in which we think about broad general education and what is required at the end of that education to be successful in the senior phase might have been a little disjointed.

**Liz Smith:** Is that lack of connection more to do with what non-traditional, extra-vocational courses—which have been pretty successful, in many cases—are on offer? Is the problem related to what is on offer, or are there qualitative issues about school standards and what is being delivered in order to allow pupils to have that additional choice?

**Dr Brown:** That is a very complicated question. Jim Scott pointed out that, if candidates go from taking eight subjects to six subjects, they should have more time. However, eight subjects were taken over two years, and now we are trying to have them take six subjects over one year. That complexity has an implication on lots of different issues in the school sector. What is on offer has an implication on how many candidates are being asked whether they want to take a higher over two years or the two-term dashes. One of the original implications was that that would free up curriculum time in S4.

**Liz Smith:** Previously, the committee has discussed national 4. I think that you are in the middle of a review of national 4. When will that review be finished?

**Dr Brown:** The review is being done by the curriculum and assessment board, which is due to meet in a couple of weeks. We have a Scottish education council meeting tomorrow, and part of that group's responsibility is to decide the nature of national 4 in the future.

**Liz Smith:** That recommendation will be made to the Scottish Government.

**Dr Brown:** Yes.

**Professor Scott:** I have a few associated points, if I can remember them all.

I was part of the process with the 16 to 18 curriculum that the SQA carried through. As Janet Brown knows, I was part of the curriculum review group on language, which went through a thorough process that tried to involve all agencies and parties. Although I am the author of the comments that Liz Smith talked about, there is no doubt that, to some extent, the issue was left to the SQA, and it should not have been. The key question is: where was Learning and Teaching Scotland and what did it do? Nevertheless, the process was carried through by an attempt to bring together all the relevant constituencies, so the issue does not lie with the SQA.

There is a problem in schools that is associated with that issue. If you read school handbooks—if you have no life and nothing else to do; although it is edifying to read the handbooks of 359 secondary schools, where they exist, I say carefully—you will find that a significant minority of schools appear to have confused the curricular

levels with the assessment levels. In print, one or two schools have drawn the conclusion that, because their children have reached a given curriculum level, they do not need to be presented for attainment at level 3. That bears upon a couple of the earlier comments.

Some schools say quite clearly in the presentation policy in their handbooks that they will not present to level 3. One finds excellent practice, in that some schools consider everything from SCQF level 1 to SCQF level 6—which is entirely appropriate for fourth-year children, because some are at the end of that spectrum—and other schools tend to look at levels 4 and 5 only. It would be accurate to say that the majority of the schools in the latter pattern come from what might best be described as leafy suburb areas, but those schools still have groups of children who are operating at level 3 or below, and simply to say, “We don’t do that,” does not appear to serve the needs of all children.

There are things running at several levels. The third thing that I was going to add is that local authorities have a key role here. There have been some interesting practices by local authorities—no names, no pack drill; this is not the occasion for that—and some local authorities have given clear guidance to schools about what they should do to deal with the S4 problem.

I will quote one positive example from Glasgow City Council. Maureen McKenna’s handbook for headteachers on curriculum for excellence is exemplary. It makes very clear that they should countenance what happens in S3 and that the experiences and the work that is done in S3 can count towards the 160 hours, and that takes away some of the sting of doing it in one year instead of two. I note with interest, however, that that local authority then allows its headteachers to choose, so some of them have gone for six subjects and some have gone for seven and to some extent we are all over the place again. Nevertheless, that is a local authority fulfilling its duty and giving a clear lead in saying that S3 should count. If all local authorities did that—trust me, they do not—we might find ourselves in a stronger position.

**Jenny Gilruth:** I would like to follow up on Liz Smith’s line of questioning. Dr Shapira, I note that you state in your evidence:

“Fewer subjects are being taken in school year S4 for level 5 National Qualifications”,

and that 2011 choices were far less differentiated than in 2017. Mine is a practical question. As a former teacher, I am interested in timetabling and in how that works in practice, and we have not spoken about that elephant in the room today. Professor Scott alluded to the 160 hours for each NQ course, and I would be interested in finding out

more about how you think that would work in practice. From my perspective as a former teacher, one of the issues with fewer courses being taken is that there is less time in which to teach. How does that work in practice?

**Dr Shapira:** I do not think that I can answer on how it works in practice. Professor Scott would know better than I do.

**Professor Scott:** Schools adopt various practices. Some of them change their timetable not in June or August but at Easter, which buys them an extra eight or 10 weeks. In some schools, those are not necessarily the most productive eight or 10 weeks, it has to be said, because other curricular experiences are carried out at that point. However, my experience of children is that, if you start them early, they will turn up and they will engage in the process of learning, because they perceive it as beneficial for the next stage of their education, so that certainly works to some extent.

The other thing is to deal sensibly with how you phase from S1 through S3 to S4. When Eddie Broadley and I ran round Scotland on behalf of LTS for a couple of years, what we tried to sell schools was that they would operate a wedge system in S1 to S3, so that they would start with Douglas Osler’s 13 or 14 qualifications and head towards what would be implemented in S4, which would be six, seven or eight. That went down well at national meetings, but if you look at my evidence on what schools are actually doing you will see that only a tiny minority of schools have taken that on. They have gone in various directions. There is no obvious pattern to what is happening in Scottish education at S3. It is not random but it almost appears random when you first look at it, and that is a significant concern.

How do you do that in a wider sense? My question would be, why do you not do seven courses? Apart from reading council websites and school handbooks, I also read inspection reports on schools, and I cannot see evidence in HMI’s findings over the past five years that schools doing seven courses are failing their children in a way that schools doing six courses are not.

If you are familiar with “Building the Curriculum 3: A framework for learning and teaching”—sadly, it is engraved on my heart, just above Calais—you will know that nothing that is in it, particularly on pages 20 to 25, which refer to the curriculum, in any way suggests that schools should offer six courses. The document says that schools should do what is appropriate for their children’s needs, which is right. I therefore ask why any school that has children with aspirations would not offer them seven courses, and why any school that has children who have profound needs would not look at a different curricular system.



If we go back to the Perth high school curriculum that I left behind me—Liz Smith might know better than me whether it is still there—we had a three-phase curriculum with an integrated S4 to S6, which allowed children to work in layers of ability and to pursue pathways that took six, seven or eight courses. That allowed them all the options that their ability permitted them to take.

It is absolutely true that that is easier to achieve in a school of the size of Perth high school, but it is by no means the largest school in Scotland. I have seen differentiated curricula—they are the answer to the question—done well in a pile of medium-sized schools by headteachers and their colleagues who have worked out that they can do that. However, the only sensible way to do that is to use third year.

**Jenny Gilruth:** My experience when CFE was introduced was of reluctance in the profession. At the time, a lot of headteachers understood the advice on the broad general education to mean that it lasted until the end of S3. I was teaching then, so I know that the fear in the profession was that assessment could not be undertaken before the end of S3. The advice from Learning and Teaching Scotland, which is now Education Scotland, was that teachers could gather evidence for the outcome and assessment standards at the end of S3, but could not formally assess students. There has perhaps been some confusion.

Did Perth high school advocate course choice earlier in the year—perhaps in February in S3? Did you follow that model?

**Professor Scott:** I followed the model of fourth year having as early a start as possible. I was never an Easter starter; I had pragmatic reasons for allowing children to get through the exam process before changing, so I lost two weeks before the exams that some schools picked up. My colleague at the time in Balfron high school, who had a strong school in terms of ability, was keen to get in as much time as possible, so she started at Easter. Some colleagues started two weeks after me, and some started in August. There are differences in practice.

I wrote down a quotation in case someone asked me about the issue, which I am grateful to you for raising. It is clear from guidance that

“Learning in S3 can and should contribute to the ‘160 hours of directed study’ associated with a national qualification”

and that children should have, at that stage, experiences that contribute to qualifications in S4. That is written into the book.

**Jenny Gilruth:** The disconnect when CFE was introduced was about whether people could assess before S4. The profession was reluctant to assess, and the advice from Learning and

Teaching Scotland was that no assessment was allowed to happen in S3—teachers were allowed to gather evidence, but they had to carry out the assessment in S4. Perhaps that evidences some of the reluctance to move to different models.

**Professor Scott:** I had a personal pathway through LTS that resulted in my decision that I would, in the end, sever my connection with it. That is not germane to the meeting, so I will not comment on that personal position.

I accept that contradictory advice was given—perhaps not by the agency but by individual officers who went out to service meetings. For two and a half years, I was an inspector for local authorities, and I inspected 45 schools. At that time, the senior inspector in HMI and I were reasonably close, and we cross-referenced the grades that we gave in order to ensure that I was not making a fool of myself, so I am fairly confident that the inspectorate would support what I am saying.

It seemed that schools did not understand what they were being asked to do and that some of the confusion came from national meetings that they had attended. Neither I nor anyone else can ever dig inside the mind of an individual headteacher or teacher to find out what they take from a meeting—that would be a difficult process—but there is evidence that different people offered different advice at different meetings. I cannot speculate on the extent to which that caused the problems.

11:15

**Dr Britton:** What we are hearing is illustrative of the very confused policy landscape. We hear changeable advice, guidance and direction in policy making, and it is very hard for schools to react and understand what is statutory, what is required of them, and what remains advisory. That landscape has existed for a long time. The situation has never been resolved, and that seems to have fed the initial confusion and uncertainty in schools about what they have been asked or told to do. That remains a tension in governance that has not been resolved.

**Jenny Gilruth:** On changing enrolment levels, how many people should select a course in order for it to run? Dr Shapira hit on that issue. In my previous life, I had three girls who wanted to take advanced higher modern studies, but I was not able to run that course because there was not a big enough footfall for it. The girls were then sent to a hub school that provided advanced higher modern studies; other pupils from other schools were likewise able to go there. How many pupils should there be to enable a course to run? Surely

some courses cannot be run because there is no uptake.

**Dr Shapira:** As far as I know, some schools that do not have enough students who are signed up to studying for a particular qualification at a particular level offer them the chance to take the same course in another school or at, for example, Edinburgh College. There are ways of solving the problem if it is just a question of whether the number of students who have signed up to do a course is enough to run the course at the school. I know that a number of good schools with more advantages in their intakes do that in Edinburgh: they either send their students to other schools that have those models or send them to colleges.

**Dr Britton:** That is another example of the ad hoc nature of the landscape. There are pockets of excellent practice and really good models for those scenarios—for example, the advanced higher hub at Glasgow Caledonian University started with modern studies and expanded to cover other subjects—but there is no consistency or national approach that would resolve some of the issues.

**Professor Scott:** Obviously, there are choices to be made by any school. I agree with my two colleagues that there is good practice, but the good practice is often in urban areas, because it is very easy to move people around in urban areas. There was an exemplary scheme in West Lothian—it might still be running, and I have simply lost touch with it—that moved children throughout the area and had an entire transport infrastructure built under it to facilitate that. Obviously, that is very easy to achieve in Perth, for example, where the high schools sit in a pair looking at each other across the street.

In the 14 years or whatever for which I was headteacher at Perth high school, I do not think that we ever failed to deliver a senior school subject for children because of the lack of a teacher or inability to timetable it. It might have been necessary to work with Perth academy, or even with Perth grammar school on the other side of the town, but delivering subjects was achievable.

A wider issue is the extent to which there is demand for certain subjects. Before that demand can be serviced, a teacher needs to have been employed. Headteachers make historical analyses of what is likely to be wanted in their school, and they employ staff accordingly. Of course, a pattern is built up from which it is quite difficult to change. What does one do with a surplus modern languages teacher? Many schools now have surplus modern languages teachers. It is very difficult to persuade a local authority to take them out of one's complement and park them somewhere else. That is a disgusting way to

describe a teacher's professional life, but that is what happens. It is hard.

**Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD):** I think that that will get worse because, if the range of subjects is narrowing and French, German, Gaelic, computing and geography are declining, as your figures show, local authorities will have fewer teachers of those subjects. Therefore, the prophecy becomes self-fulfilling, does it not?

**Professor Scott:** I am afraid that that seems largely to be correct. That is particularly evident in modern languages, as Tavish Scott said, and in the creative and aesthetic subjects, the numbers in some of which are falling very steeply. It is also evident in some aspects of technology, although other aspects are growing, so there is some counterbalancing. Given that we live in the 21st century and we have invested tens of millions of pounds in information and communications technology, it is at best surprising that interest in the subject seems to be falling away.

**Tavish Scott:** The issue of overall attainment falling over the five-year period by 33.8 per cent must be deeply disturbing to all of us. The comments that you helpfully provided to the committee say that 16 per cent to 17 per cent of that might be attributed to narrowing of the curriculum. What do we do about that? Logic suggests that we should change that.

**Professor Scott:** There is no obvious reason for the narrowed curriculum.

**Tavish Scott:** So, we have got it wrong then.

**Professor Scott:** With all due respect, I say that Tavish Scott might know better than I do why the S1 to S3 level was introduced in the first ministerial response to the curriculum review group's paper, because his party was part of the Administration at that point. I cannot find out through research why S1 to S3 appeared. I have asked some of the key players—a civil servant who chaired the committee, several members of the committee—why S1 to S3 suddenly came up, even though it was not mentioned in the report. The answer appears to be that someone somewhere decided that that approach was to be taken, but nobody can tell me who. Either the person is not prepared to admit to their guilt—that idea of guilt might be a particularly Scottish thing—or does not remember, which I think is unlikely.

There is an issue about how we found ourselves suddenly bumped into S1 to S3, bearing in mind that only five years before the report was published, Douglas Osler had warned the whole of Scotland carefully that S1 to S2 was being wasted and that secondary schools did not use that time wisely. He said that schools needed to focus and condense much more and have a clear pathway forward. However, an extra year was added to that

period, which caused a major problem of linkage with the S4, S5, S6 process, and no one seems to be accountable for that. Peter Peacock signed the piece of paper, so maybe he knows something about it. However, I sent an intermediary to try to find out from him what the story was, and the answer that came back—I better say the alleged answer, because I cannot quote it—did not in any way illuminate my darkness. I am a bit stuck with regard to how we got into this mess. We should not be in this mess.

**Tavish Scott:** We are 14 years on, so what are we going to do now?

**Professor Scott:** My evidence to the OECD suggested that it was time for a mid-life upgrade. The OECD echoed that almost to the word. There has not been a mid-life upgrade since 2015, and I think that it is past time for there to be one, to be honest.

**Tavish Scott:** Who should lead that “mid-life upgrade”?

**Professor Scott:** I must say that Scottish education has not been well served in terms of using the benefits of research. Only the Munn report accessed research to any significant extent. The rest of Scottish educational strategic initiatives are a bit research-light, to be honest—I think that Alan Britton would probably agree with that.

The problem is that the mid-life upgrade has to be based on something that holds water. Who would be involved in it? My suggestion is that it should be a broad-based process. I have sat in rooms where national policy is decided—I have served on several national committees. People in those rooms do the very best they can. I am 33 and a third per cent responsible for circular 3/2001. Ken Muir, Gordon Mackenzie and I meant well, but we did not get it right. The process whereby you stick three or four experts in a room is not necessarily the best idea.

I thought that the national debate on education was a step in the right direction, because we went to the general public—we were able to involve quite a lot of the wider public—and asked them what they valued in Scottish education. We got back the findings from that debate but, before two reports had gone by, the situation had completely changed. The appendix to my paper to the OECD in 2015 charts that process. It is quite amazing how we got to where we got to.

There has to be a political input, obviously—you are the people who make decisions on behalf of the people of Scotland. There is no choice there. There have to be civil servants in the room, and there have to be national agency people in the room, and there should be teachers, headteachers, parents and children in the room, too. The trouble is, some such bodies are severely

challenged by being involved in making such significant decisions. Therefore, what tends to happen is that you build a hierarchical structure, with a national steering committee of the great and very good, but responsibility for implementation falls to other people. It is the process of going up and down through the structures that results in the golden thread being lost. We need to find a better way of doing things.

I can give you a good example of that. Higher still is regarded by pretty much any academic or professional source who has commented on it as a successful initiative. The approach to that initiative was completely different in that it was trusted to two well-thought-of professionals, Mary Pirie and Tony Keeley, with the chief inspector sitting alongside them to ensure that they did not do anything that was not acceptable to that constituency or to politicians. The three of them ran it. There was an interesting degree of friction around that, because vested interests tried to operate within it, but they delivered something that was well resourced with extremely good training, that was delivered on time and that functioned quite effectively.

Of the 51 strategic initiatives in Scottish education since 1947, only one third have been significantly successful, and—I hate to say this, because I have not been paid to say it—most of those have been qualifications initiatives, whereas the curricular initiatives have generally had significant or partial trouble. We have not got the mix right for curricular initiatives.

**Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con):** I want to return to a couple of comments that were made earlier. Given my constituency, I have a particular interest in the situation in smaller rural secondary schools, where the number of subjects on offer has dropped, as has the number of teachers offering those subjects, even before qualification level. We get mixed messages from the schools in my region. For example, there is quite a big variation between what is on offer in Dumfries town and what is offered in smaller schools around it. Some teachers say that it is better to focus on a smaller group of subjects and to teach those better, but parents are obviously alarmed, particularly in relation to specialisms such as medicine or veterinary studies, because pupils cannot take the full complement of courses.

Dr Scott mentioned capacity. I am worried that, in smaller rural local authorities, there is not the same back-up or support from the centre. Dr Shapira mentioned school characteristics. Does any of your evidence highlight issues in smaller rural schools?

**Dr Shapira:** Overall, the multilayered analysis did not really find that rurality and the size of localities in a region have a significant impact on

the number of subjects, although of course we were looking at general trends. However, we found that, although on average there are almost no changes in the number of subjects that schools offer in S4, there are variations between local authorities and between areas with different levels of deprivation. Probably, what you are seeing is a result of the variation between local authorities in the supply side—the number of subjects that schools can offer, given the number of subject teachers that they can recruit in those schools.

**Professor Scott:** I agree with all of that.

There are two forms of poverty that we attack and try to resolve in Scotland. The one that gets by far the larger extent of publicity is urban poverty, because of the way in which things work in Scotland. Unfortunately, rural poverty and the other issues that attach to rural schools, such as the difficulties in finding staff, which lie at the bottom of the narrowed curriculum particularly in rural schools, do not get the same publicity. The staffing model of a local authority may or may not work well for small rural secondary schools.

I have just finished reading about most of the rural local authorities in Scotland for my latest trawl. I do them separately from the urban ones because the issues are different. Oliver Mundell is absolutely right that the curriculum in many rural authorities, particularly in rural schools, can be quite narrowed. In the plethora of secondary schools in the Highland Council area, there is obviously an issue in maintaining the breadth of curriculum that we find in Inverness in smaller schools that serve quite small communities, albeit that they have a bigger hinterland.

It is very difficult to find a solution to that. Once upon a time, Scottish local authorities offered teachers inducements such as houses, extra money and golden handshakes for going to more remote places. We live in the 21st century, so I do not think that many houses or golden handshakes will be offered. That means that a teacher will face a choice between getting a job at a school that is 5 miles down the road, to which they will be able to commute easily, and making a wholesale move. The result tends to be that teachers choose convenience. One can understand why that is, particularly for women—many teachers are women with young families and all the issues that go with that.

11:30

I must agree that the curriculum appears to be narrower in rural schools. I would like to say that that is not true, but it appears that to be the case. Some of the subjects that we, on a hill top in Perth, prided ourselves on offering are not evident in many rural schools. The core is clearly evident

in them, and the evidence on attainment suggests that it is often very well taught by the teachers in those schools. There is not an issue with the teachers—it is just that, alas, the breadth of subjects cannot be supplied.

**Oliver Mundell:** My second question is about the unresolved tensions that you mentioned. There is mixed opinion in the academic community and in the teaching community about whether the core principles of the curriculum have been the correct ones to follow. Has that contributed to some of the issues that we are talking about?

**Professor Scott:** There is nothing wrong with the core principles of the curriculum. To a large extent, they are devolved from prior principles that were in evidence and in action in the curriculum before we got to where we are now. I have found no evidence that any headteacher or teacher I have spoken to disagrees with the core principles. The issue is in how those principles have been enacted. A number of things were suggested in the national documentation. BTC 3 is a very good document; it is very thin, but it is very effective. It does not exemplify what it preaches, but what it preaches is absolutely correct. It suggests how a set of principles should be unpacked into a working curriculum, and it covers not just subjects but the skills issue and the wider set of experiences that young people should pursue.

From speaking to people in schools and local authorities, I think that part of the problem is that some of them have quite different understandings of the balance between the set of experiences that young people should have and the set of subjects that will embody the curricular part of that process. That takes us back to the idea that there is no common consensus in Scotland on what CFE actually consists of. That is writ large in the relationship that I have with my successor as the chairman of the building our curriculum self-help group, Gerry Lyons. If you put us in a room, we will shake hands warmly and talk about our families and all the rest of it but, 30 seconds later, we will disagree profoundly about the curriculum, and we will continue to do that for the entire morning. That is an issue. We disagree not on the principles—both of us subscribe completely to the four capacities and the curriculum principles—but on the mechanisms. That is because the documentation that was developed through the process of implementation does not deal with that issue.

I will use the building our curriculum self-help group as a metaphor for the whole issue. The group was set up at the behest of Learning and Teaching Scotland, and our first report was produced as a Learning and Teaching Scotland report. We were then sent into the outer darkness because we said something that someone in LTS

disagreed with. We became a multi-authority agency because we managed to persuade a majority of Scotland's directors of education to support us and to fund us. We staggered on as a quasi-independent body because of the good auspices of that set of local authorities, which says a great deal for them. We then became quasi-official again, briefly, and our fourth report had a rubber stamp from the national agency that said it was a good idea for people to read it. Our subsequent report and activities have been informal, multi-authority processes. As far as I am aware, the building our curriculum self-help group has given the most exemplification. Why has there been no national exemplification? There should have been.

In the context of higher still, I mentioned Mary Pirie and Tony Keeley, who were criticised for providing shed loads of material. They provided too much material, but I know why they did that—they wanted to make sure that the sort of issues that we are talking about would never be discussed. There is a happy balance to be struck, but we have not struck it.

**Dr Britton:** On the unresolved tension, one of the more profound things to have been going on in Scottish education is that two distinct messages are being sent out to the profession, parents and young people about the nature of education. Up until the end of what is now S3, the emphasis is on forms of knowledge that are interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary, yet, at the end of S3, young people still come back to study the discrete subject and the single discipline.

If, as an extreme thought experiment, we were to remove certification and qualifications from the landscape, what would the curriculum look like if the same principles were applied? With the idea of a focus on experiences and outcomes, you could conceivably create a vision for Scottish education for 3-18 year olds that was developmental and progressive, and in which there were elements of personalisation and choice. The challenge would always be that you could not go through with that thought experiment in reality; you would have to have certification and qualifications. There is a rather abrupt shift in the fundamental philosophy that underpins Scottish education, and that is the nature of the unresolved tension.

**Oliver Mundell:** I have one further, unrelated, question. Professor Scott, I want to return to your point about the number of pupils who disappear. I know that you are still working through that, but do you have a rough estimate of how many young people drop out of the system?

**Professor Scott:** I had help from the SQA in pursuing that research, for which I am grateful. However, more work needs to be done on the issue, because we need to get to a level at which

we can interrogate the pupil data. The University of Stirling has done some excellent work in starting to interrogate the pupil data, and more of us need to do that.

I have deliberately chosen to come at the issue from the school side, because I am working towards a process in which I can show the extent to which schools and local authorities engage with their communities. The answer to that question, which you will have seen in that little bit of work, is that they do not do as much as they should.

I think that we will find that the percentage of children at level 3 has dropped from about 12 per cent to about 3 per cent of the original total. Some of them have gone upstairs to level 4, so the probable drop is one half to two thirds of them disappearing to other places where they are not easily tracked. The question is, what are they doing?

I have deliberately, and very carefully, tracked the schools whose headteachers have stood on platforms saying that they have produced a more effective curriculum that better meets the needs of their children, and in no case so far have I found any significant differences in their curriculum before and after. I remain to be pleasantly surprised that something new and exciting is coming.

I also tracked some things that the committee knows something about, such as the number of schools that do six, six and six. My understanding is that, at a previous meeting, the committee was told by a representative of the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland that there is no problem with qualifications because schools are increasingly providing six courses in S4, six in S5 and six in S6. However, the number of schools that I found that do that—the number is easily given—is only nine. A number of other schools hint that they might do it, as some children do five, some do four and others do six courses. The implication but not the statement is that the least able will do six because the others are doing five highers, or three or four advanced highers. It is possible to track some of that, but the ones who are hardest to track are those who are least able to survive in the environment that they find themselves in.

It is a matter of urgency. I have done my best to pull a lot of things together, but I am a little bit ashamed that I have turned up here without an answer to that question, because equity is the most important thing that we provide. We have to pursue excellence, but equity is what makes the difference.

**Rona Mackay:** Professor Scott, in your opening statement you said that it will take 10 to 15 years for a new initiative such as curriculum for

excellence to bed in. Is there too much comparison with the old system in your research? To what extent are your results based on the fragmentation of the implementation of the system in schools and local authorities?

**Professor Scott:** A system that did not learn from the past would be very unwise.

**Rona Mackay:** I am not suggesting that there should not be a learning process. However, is there a danger of comparing the new system to the old system too much?

**Professor Scott:** You are asking whether I am some sort of prophet of the previous system. I am not. As I said, I spent three years running around Scotland, trying to sell CFE to people, and I spent four years as the chairman of the building our curriculum self-help group, which has produced the only exemplification of CFE. My entire professional focus has been on trying to make things better and move them on.

I am, however, a historian, so I draw on the fact that a great deal has happened before and that we should have learned some lessons. The biggest problem that we have with strategic initiatives in Scottish education is that we do not get everybody lined up behind them and, to some extent, we are not clear about what we are trying to do.

If I were to add a codicil to that, it would be that, when things go wrong, we usually have no exit plan. People who aspire to leadership are taught that they need to plan for failure as well as for success. I teach a lot of aspiring headteachers, and some of them are outstanding and will greatly improve the profession. However, most of them do not believe that, of the 51 initiatives, 17 went well, 17 went badly and 17 stuttered along, so we need to unpack that for them for about two lectures. After that, they say, "Aye, right."

Headteachers tend to work in the now and, to some extent—I say this with due respect—politicians tend to work in the now. The reality of that is that people look to see what is needed to move things forward right now, whereas it takes a more reflective process to stand back and ask, "Where are we? What do we actually know? What are we trying to achieve? What do we know about how that might be affected?"

Historical evidence and research evidence are key parts of the process. Apart from the Munn report, we have not used research to any great extent. The OECD—which I would consider to be not necessarily a research body but a transnational body with a neoliberal stamp—is reasonably well respected and, bizarrely, has given us a clear view of what we need to do next with CFE. The Scottish Government invited the OECD to give us that clear view, but we have not done much about it. Things that we could do quite

easily are sitting on the shelf. Tavish Scott talked about being a bit more inventive about how we build the group and the consensus that will take things forward, and he is absolutely right.

Some historical lessons have worked. The clear and obvious thing to say is that the SQA and its predecessor have made most of their initiatives work quite well. The committee will note the caveats—no doubt, Janet Brown will, too. We could learn from their preparation, organisation and focus on the initiatives going forward. We tend to set up a national committee on top of the previous national committee.

Back in 2002, I was a member of the curriculum flexibility national steering group. I made the keynote presentation at Hampden Park, and I was taken into a side room at that meeting and told by an SQA colleague—whom I shall not name—that something called curriculum for excellence was about to overtake everything that we were doing and that everything that we were doing was a complete waste of time. That was a heart-warming moment for me. *[Laughter.]* Realistically speaking, one has to say that we have not always done the right thing. We can do better.

**Rona Mackay:** On headteacher guidance, you quoted the Glasgow model as being successful. Should it be mandatory for headteachers to have curricular guidance?

**Professor Scott:** It should be mandatory for headteachers to tell parents what the curriculum is and to have asked them what the curriculum might be in the first place. My figures are clear that that is not the case at the moment. I would have stuck with a national curriculum framework. The intention of the group that produced circular 3/2001 was not to do away with the national curriculum framework—someone else did that for us. We ended up as the responsible officers, having not recommended what happened. That is another example of things not always quite working out.

In the secondary sector, it would certainly be immensely helpful to headteachers and their colleagues to have some indication of what should be done. We are coming to a situation in which the five-course people will disappear and the eight-course people, who are fading fast, will probably disappear. Other than in the leafy suburbs, eight courses is a fair stretch in the new system, so we will end up with people taking six or seven courses. The split will be 55 to 45 per cent, 60 to 40 per cent or something like that. Why do we have two systems? What possible benefit is there in someone taking six courses instead of seven if the seven are implemented as BTC 3 says?

I once suggested to Dr Allan, in his previous incarnation, that he bring back curricular

guidelines. Given that he is not in the room to defend himself, I will not quote him. Obviously, that did not happen—perhaps one passing headteacher was never going to make it happen—but, realistically speaking, I think that we can make an immense difference.

Not all headteachers are curricular experts: some are, some are not. We should consider the case of one very unfortunate secondary school that ended up four feet high in the national press coverage because of its unusual curricular structure. People were pilloried, parents and children were alarmed and none of that would have happened had we had some guidelines.

11:45

**Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green):** I have a specific follow-up question on the issue of guidance for headteachers. Professor Scott, you mentioned that, at the start of the transition to curriculum for excellence, headteachers received confused or conflicting guidance depending on which national officials they spoke to. You also said that, although there has been a bit of an improvement in recent years, much more recent events have again sowed confusion. Can you expand on what those events have been?

**Professor Scott:** I must be careful not to tell tales out of court—I was giving you a very broad summary of the feelings of the headteachers whom I am interviewing at the moment. The problem is the removal of unit assessments. A significant number of headteachers—roughly 65 per cent of my sample of about 30—are saying that their colleagues are coming back from meetings somewhat uncertain about what they should be doing and about how the changes will affect them and their students. I am not in a school any more, so this is dangerous ground for me to stand on—and I am not going to stand on it for any length of time—but apparently there is an issue in respect of the latest change.

Let me make a wider point that will allow me to escape from under your question with—I hope—some skin left: there is a problem with the extent to which we are piling initiatives on initiatives. This is the second period since the war in which Scottish education has experienced a tremendous pressure of initiatives. It happened back in the 1980s, when there was a great surge. Things went quiet for a little while, but, in the build-up to 2000 and onwards, the number of initiatives has gone up.

It is entirely understandable—perhaps more so in the context of a Scottish Parliament rather than a United Kingdom Parliament—that people who are in a position to pull levers of power want to do so. All of you want to make things better. We

understand that, but the problem is that, unless you get it right, you can actually make things worse. I am not suggesting for a moment that any of you would wish to make things worse, but sometimes what gets done does not work.

I have evidence with me of failed, abandoned and truncated initiatives—initiatives that did not work out as they were supposed to—and their impact on the lives of children, primarily, and the lives of teachers and parents. We just need to do these things a bit better.

**Ross Greer:** I will not continue to press you on that question, because I appreciate how open you have been with your information.

**Professor Scott:** I might accidentally reveal a source, and I cannot do that.

**Ross Greer:** On the transition from S1 to S3 into S4, we have touched on what some might describe as a misalignment or, perhaps, approaches that have slightly different philosophical bases, given who was responsible for developing the various phases. Interestingly, the SQA published a report at this time last year, I think, on the experience of learners, and their feedback was that they felt that the shift was quite significant and unsettling. We have discussed the tangible impacts of subject choice and achievement, but I am interested in less tangible impacts on the learners' expectation of their own education journey and aspirations. I do not know whether the SQA has gone into any detail on that or whether any evidence is available from elsewhere, but does anyone have evidence of the impact on the learners' expectations and their experience of education?

**Dr Brown:** We have surveyed not only schools, headteachers, senior management teams and teachers themselves but, just as important, pupils on their experiences of the transition and the new qualifications, and we have published two such reports over the past couple of years.

The young people told us that the pace of learning that they experienced during broad general education was quite slow—not across the board, because there is variety across the system—and that, as soon as they hit the qualifications, the pace of learning increased dramatically and they found that challenging. There are multiple reasons why that happens, and we have touched on some of them, such as the amount of time that is available for particular subjects. We felt that we needed to go back and ask them how they had experienced it the year after—the first year involved talking to S4 pupils, so we talked again to S4 and S5 pupils. Again, the feedback from the kids was that the pace of learning in BGE was getting a bit better. We introduced it very quickly and that has been a

challenge, because there has not been a lot of piloting, as has been mentioned, although I think that teachers were getting their heads around it. The pupils reported that there was a bit of improvement in the second stage. The kids definitely said that the pace of learning went up dramatically when they hit S4.

**Ross Greer:** Is anyone else aware of any academic work that is being done on the impact on pupils' self-expectations and on their aspirations arising from the shift in that transition?

**Professor Scott:** Marina Shapira will know about that. Mark Priestley was working with Highland Council at one point, doing a linear study of children there, but I do not know whether that is still being done. That study had great promise, watching what happened to children going through the process. I will drop him an email and see whether there is anything still going on there. I am not aware of anything else.

**Ross Greer:** That would be useful. I believe that the committee has already been in touch with Mark Priestley.

**Dr Britton:** Some of the best data about the impact on young people may be held by the Scottish Youth Parliament or by the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland or Young Scot. There are other people who are trying to keep up with the possible impact of examination pressure on young people's health and wellbeing.

The broader point that occurs to me is that there is limited research on the topic. For such a major initiative, it is massively underresearched.

**Dr Brown:** We have been using Young Scot to talk to young people about how they feel about assessment and what the future of assessment should look like. That is an interesting approach, and Young Scot will publish a report on young people's views on assessment. Young people want the qualifications because they are seen as a passport to the next stage, but they want the assessment to be much more fluid and continuous as opposed to examinations. It is really important to keep talking to young people, because, although there is a real challenge for schools and for teachers in how to approach qualifications, young people are the ones we are doing it for.

**Ross Greer:** Do you have an indicative publication deadline for the report?

**Dr Brown:** It will be published in October.

**Ross Greer:** That is fantastic.

**Jenny Gilruth:** I have a brief supplementary to Ross Greer's question, which I thought was really interesting, because we have not really spoken about young people until this point in today's meeting. I note from your research, Professor

Scott, that you talk about column choice. I know that in some high schools the pupils design the curriculum because they opt for choices and then the timetable is arranged around their needs, which seems to be much more responsive.

However, I was interested in what Janet Brown said about the SQA's findings on the mental health of pupils in the system, particularly with regard to assignments and gathering of data at the pressure point at the end of term. Approaching the exam diet, around March and April assignments might be due for every subject at higher and national 5 levels, which can have an impact on children's mental health. Has the SQA considered staggering deadlines in order not to put pressure on pupils just before they sit final examinations? I know that that is a huge pressure point for teachers, but it also puts pressure on pupils who are sitting examinations in a range of subject areas.

**Dr Brown:** That is when we pick up assignments, but they can be done at any point in the year. Part of the flexibility of an assignment is that it can be done at the appropriate point for the particular learner. We recognise that a lot of people tend to do assignments towards the end because they have gathered all the knowledge by that point, but it is a flexible environment. We need to pick assignments up at a certain point in order to be able to mark them. We are engaging with Young Scot partly to start looking at how we might assess skills and abilities in different ways. It will not happen next year, but we need to think about how to do it slightly differently.

**Jenny Gilruth:** With due respect, I point out that teachers usually work to a deadline, so if the SQA gives them a deadline for something, they will complete it for then. Could the SQA consider an earlier date so that there is not the same crush at the end before the final examination?

**Alistair Wylie (Scottish Qualifications Authority):** Obviously, we have challenges every year, depending on where the Easter holidays fall. For the 2019 examination diet, the deadline date is towards the end of March. A lot of subjects fall into that category, but for practical subjects or subjects in which the course work is a high proportion of the final overall grade, the dates are pushed back. For example, we have other collection dates that go quite far into April. Therefore, not everyone has to work to a single date.

**Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP):** Before I go on to my questions on narrowing of choice, I have a couple of technical questions about the data, just in order to try to understand it. My understanding is that school rolls have been dropping in S4, although they will pick up eventually, because we can see the pressure in primary schools—



**Professor Scott:** Rolls are starting to pick up.

**Gordon MacDonald:** There were 55,000 S4 pupils in 2011, which fell to 49,000 in the most recent figures—a 10 per cent reduction. Have you reflected that in your year-on-year comparison of exam results?

We have talked about the fact that some pupils are attending colleges for courses. Are the number of passes at colleges reflected in the data?

**Professor Scott:** To save a lot of time, I will just say that the answer to both your questions is yes. However, I will amplify that a little. The drop in the S4 roll is probably one of the second-tier effects. The change in curricular structure has caused a 17 per cent drop in attainment—there is no doubt about that, as it is evident from the structure. After that, we are left with the remaining 16.8 per cent, and there is no doubt that roughly half of that comes from the declining roll. That was not quite as evident in the earlier years of curriculum for excellence, but it has become a greater factor. We saw that in 2018, when the figure dropped quite sharply. That is partly due to the declining roll and partly, I suspect, to unit assessments and the changes that the SQA has made.

However, there are a number of factors that have caused the problem. There is clear evidence, which may not be spotted quite as easily, of overaspiration in the early years of CFE to have children in level 5. Particularly in 2013-14, a huge lump of children ended up in level 5 and simply did not pass. That has tapered off a bit as we have gone on and, to an extent, it has balanced the decline in population. I tend to factor those two against each other, and I have a number of about 8 per cent against the two of them together.

After the 17 per cent for curricular decline—it was 12 per cent initially and went up to 17 per cent—we have a remaining 9 or 10 per cent that is due to other factors. I think that I have evinced most of those factors this morning—aspiration is one. Another is particular twists to the curriculum structure: as well as the shrinking number, there are some strange little twists. A few schools present pupils for certificate-course subjects such as religious and moral education or physical education in addition to their six, seven or eight subjects, which means that there is a slight boost to the numbers.

Unfortunately, it is not a simple process, although I wish that I could say that it was. If you are asking whether I take account of all those factors, thank God I can say yes.

**Gordon MacDonald:** I have a question on narrowing of choice. Back in November 2016, Dr Bill Maxwell, the previous chief executive of Education Scotland, said:

“One key difference which has emerged nationally is that young people are taking exams in fewer subjects at the end of S4.”

He went on to say that

“As they move into S5 and S6, there is also the opportunity to study different or additional subjects from those studied in S4”,

and he referred to

“some higher-attaining young people ‘by-passing’ exams in S4, and instead following a two-year course to Higher in S5.”

The example that is given of young people taking courses in S5 and S6 that they would formerly have taken in S4 is that, in 2017, there were 62,000 entries at national 5 in S5 and S6, which was 21 per cent of the national 5 total. I know that you said at the beginning that you were comparing S4 results because the data was easily available and comparable, but will the picture change as we move on to S4 and S5 and then S4, S5 and S6 as the data becomes available?

12:00

**Professor Scott:** That is absolutely correct. I have no problems with that at all. It is not often that I get a chance to offer a trailer for a forthcoming academic paper but here we go. If you wait, in a few weeks I will demonstrate what the curriculum of every Scottish secondary school is and how that is concatenated through S4, S5 and S6. I have done that.

The overwhelming situation is that most Scottish secondary schools still offer either 6, 5 and 4 subjects, although some of them have been liberal enough to offer 6, 5 and 5. You have heard me say that 6, 6 and 6 almost does not exist apart from for the least-able children.

Much of the uptake that you are talking about comes from that least-able or lower-middle group, who are picking up an extra subject in S5 or S6, which allows them to pick up one or two extra qualifications. That is the driver for the continuing growth in people getting one qualification at that level. I say again that that growth has slowed since CFE, so contrary tides are working.

However, what Gordon MacDonald said is absolutely correct: more people in S5 and S6 are turning to lower-level qualifications. SQA data and my data show that. That will be a beneficial factor. The problem is that that tends to disguise the issues that are happening within each stage because they are all lumped together in one set of results. It would be useful for us to disaggregate those.

I have been trying hard to pick out the traditional five at 3, five at 4 and five at 5 figures, to which, interestingly, more schools are returning in their

presentation of attainment. In the years ending 2014 and 2015, it was almost impossible to see a school's progress at five at 3, five at 4 and five at 5. They gave up. However, we are increasingly returning to that.

If the committee wants to see them, I am carrying with me the results of 50 secondary schools out of 359. They show the extent to which they are improving in fourth year, because we can pick that out as fourth year figures, but we need to be able to do that to see the effect of fourth year and the subsequent years. Gordon MacDonald is absolutely correct.

**Gordon MacDonald:** Thank you.

**The Convener:** I will take a quick supplementary and then move to final questions.

**Johann Lamont:** One of the things in your evidence that struck me and that we will want to look at further is that there are quite strong lessons about how new initiatives are developed, the importance of getting evidence when you are developing a plan and when it is being implemented, and the importance of monitoring how it has been implemented. We also hope to go back to the issue of unintended consequences.

I am sure that you are all aware of the controversy around standardised assessments. Do you have a view on that initiative? How well do you think the initiative has been evidenced? How does it sit with the philosophy of curriculum for excellence?

**The Convener:** Can we have very brief answers on that, because it is pushing the boundaries of the work?

**Johann Lamont:** I understand that Dr Shapira has said something in public about it, and I am quite interested in that. The matter has to be seen in the context of the broader initiative in education.

**Dr Shapira:** At the moment, we are just starting to collect the data and look at the emerging trends. It is important to develop more informed understanding of what is going on at all levels, and of the connections between the impact of curriculum development at school level and the consequences for enrolment at different levels and for progressions from one level to another.

It is important to think about the impact on attainment and progression. We must also understand the consequences for pupils' various outcomes, including the outcomes for their wellbeing, for the broader competences that they develop and for their skills. That can be understood in part by looking at the data on school leavers' early destinations, for example.

We can also benefit from analysing existing longitudinal data, which can show us the pass

rates not only of young people who are going through the secondary education system now—during the period of implementing curriculum for excellence—but of those who went through the system before them. In the data for the past 10 years, we can compare the broad outcomes for attainment, transitions and destinations of pupils who went through the system before 2013 with those of pupils who went through it after 2013, and we can combine that data with the understanding of what was going on in policies, schools and local authorities. Doing that would help us to develop recommendations, fulfil the mid-life policy changes—to use that expression—and introduce much-needed changes in how curriculum for excellence is implemented at different stages in secondary schools.

On who should be on the committee that reviews the mid-life policy changes, certainly education researchers, curriculum specialists and people who see the relationship between the type of curriculum and the consequences for social inequality should be involved.

**Dr Britton:** The issue has become highly politicised, so I will separate my take on it from any of that.

I apply the same forms of analysis as I applied to the origins of curriculum for excellence, so I consider whether the policy initiative passes certain criteria on the extent of consultation, the extent of reference to existing research at home or abroad and the extent of consensus building. I do not necessarily see those characteristics in relation to the policy.

**Professor Scott:** I entirely support what Alan Britton said. We are not political—we are researchers—but we know what Parliament will debate this afternoon. We can judge an initiative only by the evidence that demonstrates that it will be beneficial. I have not to date seen sufficient evidence that the measure will be beneficial, although I do not claim that my reading is exhaustive.

If I were chairing a committee, I would bring an initiative to it only if I felt that I could demonstrate that it was well thought out, that it would generate clear benefits and that there was a mechanism for carrying it out effectively. I am not sure that we are there at present, which is typical of Scottish education.

**The Convener:** Mr Mundell must be very quick with his supplementary, which must be on today's issue of exam results and attainment.

**Oliver Mundell:** My question relates to piloting, which has come up elsewhere. Does Professor Scott agree that some of the issues have arisen because initiatives have not had enough road testing before being rolled out across the country?

**Professor Scott:** There is a terribly awkward balance in developing an initiative. Philip Banks, who is a former Her Majesty's chief inspector, used to rant—I use the word advisedly—that it takes 15 to 20 years to fully bed in any major Scottish initiative. He was right.

There is a terrible tension between starting something that you want to apply to young people in order to improve their situation, and making sure that you have got it right. With all the things that I have talked about that did not quite work or which did not work at all, what happened was that things were rushed, and insufficient work was done to ensure that they could go forward. It is unfortunate that we keep doing that.

I cannot possibly talk about the current situation, and I am not going to, but as far as the piloting of CFE was concerned, it would have been very helpful if we had tried to work through some of the issues. Eddie Broadley and I produced curricular model after curricular model to try to help schools, and we brought dozens of headteachers, deputies and principal teachers together to try to get them to work through what the models would mean for their schools. We did what we could as a totally independent agency, but it would have been better had that sort of thing been organised on a central basis.

People were brought together in a number of gatherings, but they did not look at the evidence from that kind of piloting. You cannot launch the curriculum in one school three years ahead of the others if that also involves a major change to the qualifications system—you have to work with what you have. There were, for a while, two groups trying to do that work, but one of them, sadly, lasted only about six months and then decided that it could not do it. We carried it through as best we could, but all of us who were involved in the process are aware that more could have been done and that we could have done a better job. Piloting is important.

**The Convener:** I have some questions of my own, the first of which brings us back almost to where we started with Dr Britton's comments about what the principles of curriculum for excellence were at the very start of the process. When the Education and Culture Committee took evidence on the curriculum in 2012, Terry Lanagan, who was the director of education at West Dunbartonshire Council but was representing the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, said:

"The new system is not about going for eight or nine qualifications in one year—it is a continuum of learning."

He mentioned pupil-specific needs with regard to an individual's journey through the process and the

"two-term dash to highers",

which was considered a problem at the time. He also said:

"The other myth that has grown up is the idea that those schools that choose to present some or all pupils for eight qualifications in S4 are somehow doing better than those that adopt another model."—[*Official Report, Education and Culture Committee*, 28 February 2012; c 795-796.]

The crux of the issue is the models that have been adopted.

I notice that, according to figures from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, Scottish enrolments have shot up by 4 per cent this year. Of course, that does not include some articulated routes to degree-level qualifications that might people be taking through the colleges. Moreover, the Office for National Statistics figures for attainment and leaver destinations for young people, which were published in June, show that 92.9 per cent of the 2016 school leavers had reached a positive destination. I absolutely accept the correlation that has been made between subject choices and certain areas and that the curriculum has narrowed at S4, but I am still struggling to see the evidence that that is affecting outcomes for young people leaving school.

It has also been suggested that universities might be somehow disadvantaged if pupils do not take their subjects in one year, but universities have said that they are looking at the whole final stage of the curriculum in order to decide which students to accept for degrees. What is the evidence that there is a significant impact on youngsters?

**Professor Scott:** I gave some evidence in my presentation and my papers, but I will set it out again.

There is clear evidence that the problems in S4 have transferred to S5, in that the profile of higher attainment has changed. SQA can tell you this better than I can, but there was steady growth in higher attainment from 2006 or 2007 up to the present. That growth was predicated on two things: a brief period of growth in the pupil body and the fact that the profession was bedding in higher still. There was no major initiative during that period—thank goodness. The profession was coming to terms with what higher still meant, implementing that effectively in schools and allowing teachers to become experts in it and its effects on the children's learning.

However, with the first year of the new higher in the CFE system, the growth profile changed completely—and from the latest figures it clearly looks as though there might have been a downward turn at higher level, never mind a slowdown in progress. Obviously, advanced highers are not affected because the most able

children in any system tend to reach the top anyway, but it is clear that there are issues with highers and the fourth year qualifications.

We have seen that, with the figures on leavers with one pass or more at level 5 and one pass or more at level 6, the profile of growth, which was significant up to 2013, has suddenly changed and is at a much lower level of climb, or has perhaps even levelled off in one of the indicators. We also see evidence that things appear to be changing at the top end.

12:15

We do not get a sudden and irrevocable change when we change qualification systems. What tends to happen is that a pattern establishes. I have deliberately delayed a whole lot of data because HMIE would say that anything less than three years does not constitute a trend and that it would prefer five years to be used. Therefore, we wait until we can demonstrate that something is happening with our data. There are now signs that something is happening. It sure as heck is happening in fourth year, and it is happening to a lesser extent in fifth year and in leavers data, but there are signs that changes are occurring.

The best time to do something about an unwelcome change is early on in the process. Generally, one does not wait 10 years to see whether a change is as bad as one thinks it is. The time to see whether we can ascertain what is going on and do something is now.

**Dr Britton:** I agree with Jim Scott about the timescale for those things, but if we wait for the longitudinal effects to really bed in, it will be too late.

**Dr Shapira:** I agree with my colleagues, but I want to add something.

The question is, why do we have evidence that the narrowed choice has a negative effect? Overall, we will have to wait and see, and we will probably have to look at the trends in a couple more years' time. More generally, children as early as 14 already have to make choices that will affect their future, because S4 subject choices affect S5 and S6 subject choices, which consequently affect opportunities to transition to university. Therefore, less S4 subject choice means that, if children are not successful in five or six subjects, instead of doing highers, they will have to take other subjects at a lower level and will then have less opportunity to take higher-level qualifications.

We should not narrow young people's opportunities, and we should not simply pragmatically restrict them to the subjects that they need to study in order to progress to university, for example. Why should young people

not be allowed to select history, geography or a third science subject, for example? Why is it expected that, at age 14 or 15, children will know what they will want to do when they are 17 or 18? Why are we not giving them opportunities to remain open about that until they are 18? In order to do that, we need to keep their choices quite broad and allow them to choose more—not fewer—subjects and to try different things. In that sense, I am sure that narrowing the curriculum has a negative effect on everyone.

**Dr Brown:** The whole conversation exemplifies the fact that it is really important to look not just at the SQA qualifications, because they are year-on-year qualifications. It is about the senior phase and understanding what students achieve at the end of that phase, whether there are five or eight subjects, and the impact of that on their success in the future. We do not have data on that at this point in time. That set of data is critical.

It is also critical to look at three different groups of students—students who find learning challenging, average students and high achievers—because there will be a different impact on each group, and it is really important that we understand what that impact is.

**Professor Scott:** Some of our problem is caused by the management information system that is now used in schools, which is called insight. It was bold to try to incorporate equity into the reporting processes of insight. I was the first principal teacher of computing in Scotland and I have worked with management information systems for a long time, and I have to say that, whereas the previous system was quite effective, efficient and relatively easily used, insight—according to almost every headteacher, depute head or directorate official whom I have interviewed—has been something of a trial. It now incorporates level 3, which is progress, at least. Insight will easily spit out key data but—with regard to Mr MacDonald's earlier question about the proportions of fourth year, fifth year and sixth year pupils reaching certain levels, which is key—if we had the five at 3, five at 4 and five at 5 data for fourth year, as well as the fifth year data and the sixth year data, we would instantly have a better picture of what is going on. It would also be helpful in that regard if we had a local authority-level breakdown and/or a school-level breakdown of what is happening, because schools are generally not publishing their results. It is not difficult for a Government to cause that to happen—that is what happened before.

I understand that, in the process of transition, because things were different, there was a period in which things had to be brought up to speed. We all understand that. However, we are all in a situation in which that information could be

generated quite easily. Last Saturday, I asked a room full of headteachers from across the nation how many of them knew their five at 3, five at 4 and five at 5 data, and every hand went up. However, when I asked how many published that data, only two hands went up. I asked the others why they did not do that, and the standard answer was just to mumble. There really was no clear answer given at all. The Administration has the power to change that, although not at a stroke, because some work would have to be done with people to get that sorted. Actually, those headteachers are in breach of the school handbook regulations of 2013 and the enabling regulations of 2012 that set out how that parental information should be made available. Nothing is required to be done other than reminding schools and authorities that that requirement exists. It is not a big job.

**The Convener:** I thank everyone for their contributions this morning. This is a huge area and we have received a lot of food for thought. I am sure that the committee will return to the issue in the future.

12:22

*Meeting continued in private until 12:32.*



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