

Curriculum for Excellence and its Impact on Higher Education in Scotland

A toolkit for institutions

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May 2014



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1 Introduction

1.1 This toolkit has resulted from work undertaken as part of the 'Curriculum for Excellence and its Impact on Higher Education' project, part of the 'Developing and Supporting the Curriculum' Enhancement Theme. The project involved two regional workshops and a national conference that considered the current and potential impacts of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). What became increasingly evident over the course of the project was the extent to which institutions are already engaged with CfE through a range of different kinds of initiatives that bring together secondary schools and institutions that offer higher education. The purpose of this toolkit is to provide institutions with a means of considering CfE in a wider context so that they engage in discussions at varying levels about how to make the most of the opportunities that this curricular reform has to offer.

1.2 In order to aid these discussions the toolkit has been designed to bring out some of the issues that arose during the course of the project. CfE is more than simply a curricular reform that has implications for higher education admissions policies. Important as this aspect is, there are many more issues that institutions will face and need to address as the Senior Phase of CfE becomes established. Many of these issues are not new, but CfE gives them a different dimension and raises the prospect of impacting on higher education in ways that could potentially improve the nature of collaborations with, and transitions between, schools, colleges and higher education institutions. Having said this, the project also raised some problematic issues, and these also have been included as part of the toolkit.

2 The toolkit

2.1 The toolkit is based on a modified *Viewpoints*¹ format that permits participants to address different facets of curricular design. It is based on a distillation of themes raised within the project workshops and conference and is divided into three substantive parts, 'The ABC of CfE', plus a resources section to be used in conjunction with the toolkit. These sections raise questions for a range of staff within institutions and, since the nature of higher education is a collegiate enterprise, all can be involved in shaping responses to 'one of the most ambitious programmes of educational change ever undertaken in Scotland'.²

Adapting to CfE

This element aids in considering issues that relate to adaptation of admissions criteria and changes to the first year (SCQF Level 7) experience.

Building for CfE

This element encourages institutions to consider how they can build curricula that both aligns with the principles of CfE as well as the enhancement process that has come to define Scottish higher education over the past decade.

Collaborating around CfE

This element encourages institutions to evaluate and develop collaborations with those who deliver the Senior Phase of CfE, both schools and colleges.

¹ Further information on *Viewpoints* is available at: <http://viewpointproject.blogspot.co.uk/2009/04/about-viewpoints.html>.

² Scottish Government (2008) *Building the Curriculum 3: a framework for learning and teaching*, available at: www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/06/06104407/0

2.2 As the arrow on the left on the previous page indicates, the ABC elements constitute a model of engagement with CfE that moves from adapting current admissions criteria for programmes of study to building in curricular change associated with it, and finally to collaborating with partner schools and colleges to create a more integrated curricular process. However, although these elements represent different modes of engagement with CfE, they are not necessarily unidirectional but rather, as the arrow on the right indicates, they are inter-twined with a bidirectional 'flow-back' through the sequence.

2.3 There are two suggested formats for using the toolkit.

Format A

2.4 One way of addressing the issues raised in the following sections is to hold a series of meetings between staff who hold the same positions in institutions; for example, separate meetings of admissions tutors, programme/course leaders, teaching staff with responsibility for the delivery of first year (SCQF Level 7) modules/courses, senior managers and so on. The advantage of this format is that staff with these functional responsibilities can explore in detail what CfE means from their perspective and what ideas they would like to take up at either a strategic or practical level. These groups can then report on views and initiatives within other meetings, for example, various committees.

Format B

2.5 Another way of addressing the issues raised is for institutional and departmental teaching and learning committees (for example, subject group committees, faculty teaching and learning committees, quality enhancement committees) to consider the questions and issues raised as part of open special meetings or as part of routine ongoing business.

The advantage of this format is that it allows for a range of views to be expressed while still addressing core teaching and learning issues.

3 Adapting to CfE

3.1 All higher education institutions in Scotland will have to adapt to CfE as the new curriculum and revised school examination system will impact upon admissions policies. This most basic level of adaptation operates at the point of transition between school (or in some cases college) and higher education and could involve 'tinkering' with existing admissions policies and procedures, or perhaps prompt a more radical overhaul of them.

Task 1

Questions for discussion

Consider from the viewpoints of admissions tutors/administrators, teaching staff and senior managers the following questions in relation to your institutional/departmental admissions policies with respect to entry from the Senior Phase of CfE.

- (i) How did you arrive at these admissions policies?
- (ii) Consider the following passage from Universities Scotland 'Scottish Higher Education Sector's Overarching Statement on Curriculum for Excellence' (November, 2013).³

Minimum requirements continue to be expressed in terms of Highers. The majority of institutions consider a diet of Highers taken over S4 and S5 as equal to a set of Highers taken only in S5. Some universities will require a minimum number of Highers/Advanced Highers to be studied in at least one year of the Senior Phase. Advanced Highers and Baccalaureates are also recognised for their potential to support progression in learning and provide a valuable grounding for study at undergraduate degree level.

Where does your institution/department stand on the issue of minimum numbers of Highers/Advanced Highers to be studied in a single year? Will possession of appropriate Advanced Highers and Baccalaureates permit advanced entry?

- (iii) Do you consider the diversity of study routes offered by CfE to be helpful or problematic for the purpose of admission to your programmes of study?
- (iv) Will you be considering the skills and capacities of applicants as well as grades? If so how will this feature in your admissions processes?
- (v) Will you be monitoring your revised admissions policies and procedures in light of CfE? Do you envisage further revisions?

3.2 Some institutions may wish to consider revising and adapting their first year (SCQF Level 7) curricula in light of CfE and the skills students present with upon entry. This may involve revisions to the content, structure and or pedagogy employed.

Task 2

Questions for discussion

Consider different viewpoints from teaching staff, support staff and senior managers with respect to the following questions.

- (i) In light of the potential differences in students' study routes through CfE, is there a need to revise the first year experience in your programmes of study? If so what will this involve in terms of course content?
- (ii) CfE is considered to be a 'process curriculum' with a focus building up the 'Four Capacities' - successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. Do you think that students coming through CfE will have different expectations of learning and teaching and different skills? Have you planned for this by, for example, introducing more enquiry-based learning?

³ Scottish Higher Education Sector's Overarching Statement on Curriculum for Excellence, available at: www.universities-scotland.ac.uk.

- (iii) Will there need to be a greater focus on collaborative learning and small group teaching in the first year?
- (iv) Do you think CfE lead to a different focus within the first year of higher education programmes; one involving a more interdisciplinary curriculum?

4 Building for CfE

4.1 While it is inevitable that institutions will need to adapt their admissions policies and perhaps the nature of the first year experience, there is also the potential to build upon CfE in relation to the development of graduate attributes.

Task 3

Questions for discussion

Consider from the different viewpoints of teaching staff, senior academics and managers the following questions and issues.

- (i) How can the development of 'Four Capacities' - successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors - be aligned with the recent focus on higher education on graduate attributes?
- (ii) The linkage of capacities and attributes may be expressed within teaching and learning strategies, but how will it also be translated into: (a) programme structures, (b) pedagogical practices, and (c) assessment practices?
- (iii) Building for CfE also raises the role of continuing professional development in higher education. Teaching staff need to be aware of the knowledge and skills that students will be entering their programmes with and perhaps how to build into their assessments 'audits' of these so that they can build upon them. How can this be achieved in relation to your institutions/programmes?
- (iv) Debating point: Address the critique that teaching time for core knowledge and academic skills in higher education is being lost to the teaching of so-called 'soft-skills' such as teamwork and communication, that are being encouraged through curricular reforms such as CfE?

5 Collaborating around CfE

5.1 Perhaps one of the most interesting and potentially productive aspects of the CfE/HE interface is the opportunity for institutions to collaborate with one another. What was striking over the course of the project was the extent of range and depth of collaborations between schools and higher education institutions. Many of these collaborative projects were not created for the purpose of CfE but rather had evolved from earlier work which had then become 'repurposed' in light of the new curriculum. This section does not try to 'reinvent the wheel' by suggesting new collaborative projects, but rather poses questions about how these might be developed as CfE becomes established.

Task 4

Questions for discussion

Consider from the different viewpoints of teaching staff in your institution and collaborating schools, as well as senior managers, the following questions.

- (i) What practical steps can be taken to ensure that school pupils are advised on admissions criteria in relation to their routes through the Senior Phase?
- (ii) How can school and higher education teachers work together in ensuring that there is a development in the capacities through CfE that leads into 'readiness for HE'? What mechanisms need to be in place?
- (iii) CfE perhaps goes against the old adage that one cannot be 'all things to all people'. Some higher education institutions are collaborating with schools to ensure that very able pupils can seek advanced entry into specific programmes; others are focusing more upon raising pupils' aspirations to enter higher education through projects that seek to build up interdisciplinary learning and study skills. In either case there is the vexed question of credit value for such programmes. How does your institution handle this issue?

6 Resources

Digital access reports and presentations

Reports and presentations associated with the CfE project can be found at:

www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/resources/presentations-papers/developing-and-supporting-the-curriculum

Education Scotland's section on CfE and HE can be found at:

www.educationscotland.gov.uk/thecurriculum/whatiscurriculumforexcellence/learningthroughoutlife/highereducation/introduction.asp

The Universities Scotland 2012 report *Beyond the Senior Phase: University Engagement with Curriculum for Excellence* can be found at:

www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/uploads/USBeyondtheseniorphaseCfEMay2012.pdf

Academic books and articles

It is surprising that there has been relatively little in the way of academic research on CfE within Scotland, and especially within Schools of Education. One notable exception is the work of Priestley and collaborators through the School of Education at the University of Stirling (see below). Much of this work raises questions about the nature of CfE as a curricular reform, as well as the mutations it has undergone since its inception. Nevertheless, despite the sometimes critical perspective taken, Priestley has acknowledged that CfE is a step in the right direction and one that can yield positive collaborations between schools and HEIs.

Priestley, M and Sinnema, C (2014) Downgraded curriculum? An analysis of knowledge in new curricula in Scotland and New Zealand *Curriculum Journal*, Special Edition: Creating Curricula: Aims, Knowledge, and Control, vol 25, no 1, pp 50-75

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Priestley, M, Miller, K, Barrett, L and Wallace, C (2011) Teacher learning communities and educational change in Scotland: the Highland experience, *British Educational Research Journal*, vol 37, no 2, pp 265-284

Priestley, M (2011) Schools, teachers and curriculum change: a balancing act? *Journal of Educational Change*, vol 12, no 1, pp 1-23

Priestley, M and Humes, W (2010) The Development of Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence: amnesia and déjà vu, *Oxford Review of Education*, vol 36, no 3, pp 345-361



QAA872 - Aug 14

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