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Curriculum for Excellence



## Plans afoot for a hard look at CfE evidence

News | Published in TESS on 6 September, 2013 | By: **Henry Hepburn**

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News

Government pledges independent scrutiny after criticism of reform

The Scottish government is to commission an independent evaluation of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), amid concerns that it will be impossible to judge whether the landmark reform is improving standards, TESS can reveal.

The news comes after fears were expressed about scrutiny of the policy during a University of Edinburgh event on educational attainment and inequality in Scotland.

“Why is Curriculum for Excellence not being subject to independent evaluation?” asked David Raffé, professor of sociology of education and director of the university’s Centre for Educational Sociology. “What is it about the Scottish government that it lacks the confidence for an independent evaluation?”

In response, a government spokeswoman said that the government and Education Scotland will “closely monitor the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence through a range of means, including school inspections”.

“We are currently considering the most appropriate options for longer-term independent evaluation,” she added.

According to the government, the CfE management board, which has members from all corners of Scottish education, is considering the issue. Further details will be made available in the next few weeks.

The decision to put the reforms to the test comes after sustained criticism from parts of the teaching profession that CfE will fail to deliver on key aims of making education more flexible and better tailored to the needs of individual students.

Walter Humes, emeritus professor of education at the University of Stirling, told TESS that if the government is serious about independent evaluation of CfE it must not give the job to Education Scotland. It should even consider commissioning researchers from outside the country, he added.

Professor Humes, who has previously questioned the Scottish government's commitment to educational research, argued that the small size of Scotland's "policy community" is a compelling reason to look elsewhere. "The main concern is that it's to be properly independent rather than the usual inside job," he said.

Sally Brown, convener of the Royal Society of Edinburgh's education committee, spoke of her concern about the lack of research into CfE during last week's event. "The question is how does somebody who is not part of Education Scotland know what's going well and what's not going well?" Professor Brown said. "Where's the evidence going to come from? Where are we going to find it?"

Education Scotland chief executive Bill Maxwell, one of the event's main speakers, conceded that CfE could seem "amorphous and hard to communicate".

He explained that relevant research already exists, such as Scotland's annual survey of literacy and numeracy. Further research may be commissioned on specific areas within CfE, he added, while stressing that it may be some time before the benefits of the programme are felt in a measurable way.

"Not all the elements of Curriculum for Excellence will be working as we would want them to be, and therefore we need a feed of evidence to target effort and learn from what experience we have," Mr Maxwell said.

Professor Raffè added that Scottish devolution has not proved a boon for educational research: "In many ways we are worse off," he said. Two or three decades ago, English researchers would look enviously north of the border; now, the reverse is more likely to be true, he argued, adding that Wales has "much better data" than Scotland.

According to Professor Raffè, too much emphasis has been placed on flying American educational gurus into Scotland, rather than on close internal scrutiny of Scottish approaches.

He is sceptical about the "flexibility" often billed as a key advantage of CfE, which is intended to allow young people to follow educational paths best suited to their own needs. He believes that it may instead exacerbate problems for children from poorer areas.

Meanwhile, research suggesting that Scottish educational attainment has stood still proved another source of controversy at the event. The study from the London School of Economics under discussion, on which TESS reported previously ("CfE has an edge on independence, academic claims", 9 August), found that the exam and test performance of students in compulsory education in Scotland has shown little improvement, while attainment in England has improved markedly.

But Danny Murphy, a former headteacher who works at the University of Edinburgh, said these are narrow measures of success that do not take into account, for example, the increasing number of Green Flag Awards and John Muir Awards granted for environmental projects in schools over the past decade.



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- This article demonstrates that the fight over the cadaver of Scottish education is not yet over and no one has managed to land a knockout blow! From the start CfE has been fought over by all sorts of groups struggling for control and a role in the proceedings. No need to spell out the names of the usual suspects.

There is basically no consensus about CfE apart from the generalisation it is a good thing! Exactly what it is, is another question.

Anyone who has an interest in Scottish education must despair at this lack of agreement or consensus on some basic issues and at the struggle for power and influence which is going on.

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