

Leavers and levers: Curriculum for Excellence and the transition from school to higher education in Scotland

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Abstract

Curriculum for Excellence is a major development in Scottish secondary education, and there are clear parallels between its focus on learner capacities and that of graduate attributes. This paper critically examines current attempts to address the transition between secondary school and higher education in light of the new curriculum.

Extended Abstract

Introduction

Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) is considered as ‘one of the most ambitious programmes of educational change ever undertaken in Scotland’ (Scottish Government, 2008:8). Overall, CfE represents a major attempt to provide a ‘whole child’ coordinated approach to curriculum reform for the full age range from three to eighteen years of age. It builds on earlier reforms in Scottish education that were aimed at specific educational stages (e.g., *Standard Grade, 5-14, Higher Still*). However, it is also explicitly driven by what are perceived to be anticipated future needs based upon economic, technological and social changes within Scotland and the wider global economy.

CfE explicitly moves away from a centrally prescribed curriculum, towards a model that relies upon adapting curriculum guidance to meet the needs of local school communities. This is allied to a modified process curricular model based upon a flexible and open-ended engagement with learning rather than a pre-determined content driven model (Stenhouse, 1975). Process curricula are based upon the development of the learner in terms of intrinsic principles rather than being driven by extrinsic objectives. They are often associated with a view of the learner as an autonomous agent and this in turn is seen as being developed through dialogical, inquiry-based and experiential modes of learning, rather than traditional didactic pedagogies.

A process curriculum is therefore founded upon Deweyan democratic values (Dewey, 1916) and often involves a set of structured learning activities that enable students to develop a reflexive stance on learning, and to routinely question matters so that critical thinking becomes internalised. This focus on the development of the individual and the explicit social benefit of exposure to a process curriculum is enshrined in CfE in terms of the “Four Capacities” that are said to develop: successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. Alongside these capacities is a more amorphous, but nonetheless desirable set of outcomes which can be aligned to the sociology of a changing society; namely individual enhancement, inclusion and participation.

CfE, as with almost any other secondary school curriculum, must also function as a means of producing qualifications. The former Standard Grade and Intermediate examination system has been replaced by National Grade 4 and 5 examinations, whilst the Higher Grades and Advanced Higher Grades have been revised in accordance with the new philosophy that underpins the curricular reform. The Four Capacities are developed throughout the Senior Phase and the curricula associated with these examinations although as Priestley and Sinnema (2014) point out there is ambiguity in the curricular documentation concerning the foregrounding of skills and capacities versus that of subject knowledge.

Curriculum for Excellence and Scottish Higher Education

This move away from the almost exclusive focus on secondary education as involving the transmission of knowledge to a growing focus of the learner and the transformational nature of the experience is also paralleled in the Scottish higher system. This reform began in 2003 as the 'Enhancement Themes' approach and has led to a range of policy and institutional initiatives that have attempted to modernise the higher education system in light of the increased participation and widening of access. As the name of this approach suggests, the focus is on enhancement as a means of changing and improving the higher education experience. This is based on the view that the student is at the centre of the process and that the focus needs to be on learning experience rather than a focus on pedagogy *per se*. The two most recent themes – *Graduates for the 21st Century* (2008-2011) and *Developing and Supporting the Curriculum* (2011-2014) – have taken this approach forward in a more integrated manner. This has involved policy initiatives that have seen the development of graduate attributes (see Barrie, 2004, 2006, 2007) become a key feature of the teaching and learning discourse in Scottish higher education. Overall these developments have opened up the learning process in such a way as to lead to a greater personalisation of learning.

These reforms dovetail with CfE in terms of the focus on the development of students' capacities or attributes. CfE has four capacities and similarly higher education institutions are increasingly marketing their courses in terms of the attributes that student will develop as the result of their studies. Indeed as school pupils move from the Senior Phase of the new CfE secondary education there is an expectation that higher education in Scotland will have to meet the needs of these new learners through adapting or altering their curricula and course provision. This process is already taking place through a number of school-college-university linkage programmes that enable school pupils to undertake part of their studies in a further or higher education institution, either through general or specific course provision, with the aim of easing the transition into tertiary education. It is clear from this work that participation and engagement are considered as being crucial to this transition process and this has been made manifest through forms active learning and personal development planning in line with a process curriculum model.

Agents of Change and Change of Agency

In developing a view of teachers and lecturers as agents of change, and in laying less emphasis on curricular content, the focus on capacities and attributes can be considered as a process of downgrading knowledge (Priestley and Sinnema, 2014) and of foregrounding the agency of the learner and the ways in which they can cooperate with others, engage in constructivist activities and, in general, be able to be flexible and adaptable. The focus on the identity of the learner and the process of transformative learning (Illeris, 2014) places much more of an emphasis on personal traits and the acquisition of social capital as an aspect of the educational process. This is linked to the drive towards widening participation in higher

education, and in the way that CfE has become a means of leverage through which Scottish higher education institutions are being prompted to consider linkages between schools, colleges and universities.

The ambiguity over foregrounding skills and capacities versus that of subject or disciplinary knowledge has also been carried over into the ways in which higher education institutions in Scotland have attempted to engage with the reform. For most of the post-1992 'new' universities CfE has become a vehicle through which cross-sectoral projects linking schools with tertiary education have been set up, or existing ones repurposed, as ways of demonstrating their mission and commitment to widening participation. On the other hand some of the 'ancient' universities have chosen to foreground knowledge and have engaged with schools in projects that enable able pupils to study at first year university level for part of their studies. This in effect, in some measure exemplifies their more selective status. However, in either case what seems to be lacking is an explicit connection made between the 'Four Capacities' of CfE and graduate attributes in any meaningful and developmental fashion. The process of transition between school, college or university although possessing definition in a technical qualification sense, is still somewhat ambiguous when it comes to specifying the linkage between capacities and attributes. This may be due the fact that the Senior Phase of CfE has yet to be fully operationalised but in any event the desired more seamless and yet at the same time flexible path into higher education is something of a work-in-progress.

Personalisation and flexibility are now watchwords within the education system. This is not unique to Scotland, but the strong focus on capacities in schools and attributes in higher education institutions arguably throws these into greater relief. It is therefore the case that the purpose and meaning of higher education now extends to that of individual behaviour. An individual's personal and social patterns of behaviour have become normalised as part of his or her portfolio of graduate attributes. This new rhetoric represents fundamental change in how higher education is legitimated; one that is less in terms of subject or discipline-specific qualifications and more towards the possession of attributes that equip graduates to respond to the changing nature of the labour market. This, in effect, codifies desired individual behaviour resulting from the educational process and encourages a process of self-realisation in relation to changing circumstances, particularly in light of transformations brought about through information and communication technologies. However, as noted above the status of knowledge content within curricula is still a source of demarcation within and across higher education institutions and the way that CfE is taken up by them in their admissions policies and teaching and learning strategies.

Conclusion

To date there has arguably been something of a piecemeal approach to considering the linkages between CfE and higher education. Some universities have taken to it as part of their mission to widen participation and have engaged in projects with this aim in mind. There has been little if any attempt as yet to consider CfE, its focus on capacities, and their relationship with graduate attributes. The role of knowledge and how students engage with it in a critical and scholarly manner, has given way to skills and the need for 'capacity building'. This is something of a missed opportunity in the way that the transition to the kinds of ways that knowledge is addressed in higher education has not been given prominence within the various CfE/HE linkage projects. However, this begs the question as to what is the 'higher' nature of higher education? In what way does its focus on attributes differ, if at all, from that of

capacities within CfE? It is only through the discussion and clarification of these questions that a structured and meaningful transitional educational experience can be brought about rather than simply the idea that one sector simply takes off from where the other leaves off in some ill-defined way.

Practical implications

This paper throws into relief the ways in which curricular reform in the school sector impacts upon the higher education sector. The higher education sector in Scotland is having to adapt and change its admissions criteria and, in some cases, its first year curricula and teaching and learning strategies as CfE is rolled out. However, although there is some coordinated activity across the sector that attempts to engage with the process of transition between school and higher education, this has yet to consider the ways in which school-based capacities development links up with the focus on graduate attributes.

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