

The Highland Council
Education, Children and Adult Services
11th November 2015

Agenda Item	9.
Report No	ECAS 97/15

Curriculum Delivery in the Senior School

Report by Director of Care and Learning

Summary

This report provides an update regarding:

- The Highland Council approach to subject choice for pupils in S4.
- The direction of travel on other structural issues, which will enhance the provision for young people in the senior school.

1. Background

- 1.1 At the request of Secondary Headteachers in Highland, a Steer for Secondary Schools was issued in 2011. Although well received, it became clear in 2012 that a tighter steer on some aspects of Curriculum for Excellence would be appreciated by schools. The second edition was produced in January 2013, and further Secondary steers have been issued on an annual basis.
- 1.2 During session 2014/15, Headteachers felt that the Steer document should be replaced by a number of policy and procedural documents, which set out the Council position. A collegiate process has been developed with Headteachers to ensure these documents are grown out of best practice across the Highland and beyond.
- 1.3 The first of these policy decisions provided clarity on the number of subjects which should be offered for students in S4. It is intended that further policy/procedural statements will be consulted on and issued over the coming months.

2. The number of subjects offered in S4

- 2.1 Schools have already engaged with key stakeholders about the last three years on the delivery of up to six subjects in S4.
- 2.2 The recent policy statement confirmed the approach, and 27 out of 29 secondary schools have already delivered on this.
- 2.3 The following 'Frequently asked Questions' address the issues that can come up in discussion about the offer of six subject choices.
- 2.3.1 *Why are students not choosing eight N4/5 subjects at the end of S2 which they could study in S3 and S4, as they did in the past?*

Curriculum for Excellence ensures that every secondary student is entitled to expect their education to provide them with:

- a broad general education, including well planned experiences and outcomes across all the curriculum areas in S1-S3

- a senior phase of education after S3 which provides opportunities to obtain qualifications.

S4 is the first time students should begin studying towards National Qualifications.

2.3.2 *Surely choosing six subjects in S4 instead of eight limits a student's future options?*

The depth and style of learning in S4, prepares students better than ever before to attain in S5, offering greater opportunities for the development of skills for work, life and learning. Improved attainment often leads to increased choice in both future choices of study and in employment. Students also have the opportunity to study courses in S5 and S6 that they have not studied in S4, thus increasing their range of qualifications should they need or wish to.

2.3.3 *How can we be sure that students are not disadvantaged at university application if they have 6 N5s compared to other students who have sat 8 N5s?*

University entrance requirements are based upon the number and grade of N6 (Higher) qualifications an applicant has. In the past, some courses demanded that these were attained in one sitting, but this is in decline as universities make adjustments to their systems in line with Curriculum for Excellence. The number of N5 qualifications or similar (Standard Grade/ GCSE) is not taken into account when offering places at University. To date, some Universities have requested that, in addition to Higher qualifications, students should have Standard Grade passes at certain levels in specific subjects - the details of which vary depending on the choice of degree course. As a result of Curriculum for Excellence, Universities are modifying their practices in recognition that across Scotland students will have fewer awards at National 5 level than they would have had in Standard Grade, and many of the additional specific requirements are disappearing as a result.

Universities have worked together to develop guidance on entry requirements in light of Curriculum for Excellence. All Scottish universities have now produced new guidelines for entry. There is no evidence at the moment to suggest that young people in Highland have been impacted on negatively with regard to entry to university.

2.3.4 *Those schools who are offering 8 are doing so by spreading the course over S3 and S4. Other schools offering more than 6 are starting courses at Easter. Is there no way that Highland schools can do this?*

The guidance given to schools on the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence states that the first three years of the secondary school is where students should experience a broad general education. Students should not begin courses of study during these three years which limit their courses of study in the senior phase. S4 – S6 is when students should first start studying and being assessed in National Qualifications.

Education Scotland's Guidance states that HMle will expect to see that at "S1-S3, arrangements for choices do not narrow options for qualifications in the senior phase. Such choices do not involve traditional subject choice at the end of S2 (or earlier) for all young people in a cohort for a two-year course leading to

qualifications in S4.”

2.3.5 *How has the system adopted prepared students to meet the challenges of the senior phase?*

Highland Schools approach to the Broad General Education phase (S1-S3) provides a very solid foundation to enable students to achieve in the senior phase. By following a core curriculum to the end of S3 all students have had the opportunity to develop the knowledge, understanding and skills that would prepare them for National 4 level or above in all curriculum areas in S4.

Furthermore, the more familiar our teachers have become with the new courses, the more convinced we are as an authority that the N5 Qualifications are significantly more demanding than Credit level Standard Grade or Intermediate 2 courses. This increased level of challenge will provide a better bridge for students between the BGE and Higher. The old system was proven not to be a good preparation for the demands of studying at Higher level.

2.3.6 *Is it still possible for a student to study towards a N4/5 in S4, if they haven't studied the subject in S3?*

Yes. Through the BGE, all students have had the opportunity to develop the knowledge, understanding and skills that would prepare them for National 4 level or above in all curriculum areas. If a student has not studied a particular subject in S3, it may mean that they will be in S6 before they will be ready to attempt the Higher as they would do N5 in S5, but it will still be possible to pick up subjects that have not been studied in S3.

2.3.7 *How will students be better prepared for Highers as result of the new system?*

Unlike previous systems, the learning experience for students sitting N5 will be very similar to their experience of sitting Highers. For a long time in Scottish Education, students were ill prepared for the pace and personal demands of the Higher system due to the different structures of the Standard Grades and Higher courses. As a result of the new system, students will be more prepared to cope with the increased pace and challenge and will respond to the greater emphasis on their own responsibility for their learning.

2.3.8 *How will the classes work if you have a student that has chosen to study a subject in S3 and a student who picks it up again in S4, having missed it out in S3?*

By ensuring that all S3 students continue to study all 8 curricular areas, the impact of this is minimised. Every class has a broad range of abilities and good teachers build differentiation into their lessons to ensure that they meet the needs of all the learners. This will continue into the senior phase. Where staffing and numbers allow, classes will be timetabled to allow for grouping by ability and prior knowledge. Some courses in the senior phase will be identified as more appropriate for those who have not studied the subject as an elective.

2.3.9 *Is it possible for a student to do a National 6 (Higher) course without having gained a National 5 pass previously?*

Most students will be required to achieve an N5 pass in a subject to be accepted

onto a N6 (Higher) course. In a small number of cases students can study a course where they can show that they have attained to the required standard in a subject with a similar skill set or at the same level.

2.3.10 *Doesn't dropping a subject in S4 render the work the pupils have achieved up till then worthless?*

No. There are many reasons for studying a subject in addition to gaining a qualification. Through studying a subject in depth students may gain knowledge which can enhance their understanding of the world and develop transferable skills which may assist the student in school and beyond. A student will also have the opportunity to re-engage with that subject in S5 and/or S6 years and study towards a National Qualification if they wish.

2.3.11 *Doesn't achieving fewer N5s narrow the choice for pupils in S5 and S6?*

For a student who wishes to achieve five Highers in their fifth year studying 6 National Qualifications in S4 as opposed to eight Standard Grades does potentially narrow their choices in S5. However, as a result of following a broad general education for three years students will be more experienced and thus more able to decide which National Qualifications they wish to take. They can also choose to pick up other subjects in S5 and S6.

2.3.12 *Why is there a variety of approaches to the senior phase across Scotland?*

The Scottish Government and Education Scotland have allowed authorities/schools to decide the most appropriate curriculum structures for themselves as long as they work within their guidelines. Highland has taken the decision in conjunction with Head Teachers has taken the decision to offer six.

2.3.13 *Why can't we compromise and offer seven choices in S4?*

Each National Course lasts for 160 hours. The school year lasts for 39 weeks. This is reduced to 34 teaching weeks when time is removed for prelim examinations and the final examinations. When the content of the new National Qualifications became clear, teaching staff at Kelso High School were agreed that students would need as close to 160 hours as possible in order to give them the best chance of being successful. Offering 6 qualifications at 5 periods per week means that students will receive 162.5 hours in each subject. In order to offer 7 qualifications, courses would have to be delivered in 130 hours. This is not enough time. It is also our belief that a common curricular structure will offer schools a better chance to work collaboratively together in the future.

3. Further structural changes to be implemented

3.1 There are a number of further structural changes that are being considered with Head Teachers:

- The harmonisation of the school day/week in areas where it would offer educational benefit.
- Implementing a common timetable structure through a 32 or 33 period week
- Delivery of the senior school provision of a single cohort across S4, S5 and S6.

3.2 Schools have already engaged with key stakeholders over the last three years on

many aspects of the CfE. Schools may require further engagement around these developments set out above.

3.3 A key factor will be that although CfE suggests strongly that schools should have local flexibility to decide their own development of the Senior school, this flexibility needs to set against the wider context of providing greater opportunities to the students across Highland.

3.4 It is proposed that these changes would be implemented for the start of session 2016/17, in areas where it is practical to do so, but certainly no later than 2017/18.

4. Implications

4.1 There are no legal, risk or climate change/carbon cleaver implications.

4.2 **Resources** – The approach set out in this paper seeks to make best use of available resources. This situation will be monitored closely over the coming months.

4.3 **Rural** – It is important to ensure the agreed policies/procedures maximise the opportunity for young people in rural locations across the Highlands.

4.4 **Gaelic** – It is important to ensure the impact of curricular decisions does not impact negatively on the development of Gaelic in schools.

4.5 **Equalities** – All policies/procedures will be required to be monitored to ensure their implementation promotes equality and equity in learning and teaching.

5. Recommendations

5.1 Committee is asked:

- to approve the strategic approach that has been taken on the development of the curriculum in the senior school, and
- to note and comment on other practical steps that will offer schools greater opportunity to provide flexibility and options in the senior school.

Designation: Director of Care and Learning

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