

a summary of building the curriculum 5 a framework for assessment

curriculum for excellence

- > SUCCESSFUL LEARNERS
- > CONFIDENT INDIVIDUALS
- > RESPONSIBLE CITIZENS
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Key ideas and priorities

What is Building the Curriculum 5 about?

For many years teachers¹ have been concerned that assessment has tended to determine the curriculum and not the other way round. *Curriculum for Excellence* is about raising standards for all by actively engaging learners, improving pedagogy, promoting deep understanding and developing skills. It is vital that assessment approaches (including those relating to qualifications) should reflect these aims. This applies to schools, colleges and other educational establishments involved in *Curriculum for Excellence*.

What does it say?

The purposes of assessment include:

- supporting learning
- helping to plan next steps
- informing learners and their parents of their progress
- summarising achievements (sometimes through qualifications)
- monitoring the education system and influencing future developments.

Assessment should emphasise literacy, numeracy, health and wellbeing, ICT and higher-order skills, including creativity.

Assessment should support children and young people in developing the four capacities and the characteristics associated with them. These include a range of personal qualities and skills that in the past may not always have been formally assessed, such as thinking creatively and independently, working in partnership and in teams, making informed decisions and evaluating environmental, scientific and technological issues. These skills and attributes are embedded in the experiences and outcomes. Assessment needs to focus on these, as well as on measuring factual recall and routine procedures.

Assessment procedures in Scottish education have become steadily more sophisticated. The Assessment is for Learning programme has encouraged diagnostic and formative approaches that directly support learning. They should remain at the heart of practice.

¹ Throughout this paper, the term 'school' is taken to include pre-school centres, residential and day special schools (including secure provision) and primary and secondary schools. The term 'staff' or 'teacher' in this document is used to refer to all staff involved in assessment and includes pre-school practitioners, college lecturers, Community Learning and Development (CLD) staff and other relevant practitioners. The term 'parents' should be taken to include foster carers, residential care staff and carers who are relatives or friends.

It is important that assessments should be consistent with shared standards and expectations being applied across the country. Arrangements will be put in place for moderation and schools will be expected to assure the quality of their own assessment procedures. A National Assessment Resource is being set up to share assessment materials and to help teachers develop a shared understanding of standards.

What is new about it?

The priorities in *Building the Curriculum 5* are grouped around eight key ideas. None of these is entirely new but each is given added prominence and should be used to shape assessment processes that will meet the needs of *Curriculum for Excellence*. These ideas are:

1. Learner engagement in assessment is crucial.
2. Teachers need to use many approaches to assessment.
3. Assessment should focus on breadth, challenge and application.
4. Evidence of learners' progress can be gathered across the four contexts for learning.
5. Professional dialogue is central to agreeing standards.
6. Assessments should be reliable, valid and proportionate.
7. *Curriculum for Excellence* principles should underpin reporting.
8. Assessment needs to be quality assured.

1 Learner engagement in assessment is crucial

The active engagement of the learner is a key feature of *Curriculum for Excellence*. It is intended to increase motivation while also ensuring that the educational process benefits from the insights of the learner.

At its most basic, learner engagement requires teachers to share learning intentions and indicate what would constitute good measures of success. Learners also need to receive early and accurate feedback and should be given the opportunity to discuss the teacher's assessments and their implications for future progress.

However, learner engagement should move beyond these basic requirements. Sound approaches to assessment will help learners to demonstrate what they can do. Therefore, it is appropriate to involve them in choosing and developing assessment approaches and in selecting and summarising the evidence that emerges.

If they are to be fully engaged, learners need to understand all of the roles of assessment. They also need to develop the skills necessary to evaluate their own work effectively and to be able to participate in peer assessments. These understandings and skills should be explicitly developed by teachers from the early level onwards.

2 Teachers need to use many approaches to assessment

The idea of assessment requiring learners to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and skill implies that a range of techniques needs to be employed. Evidence can be drawn from observation, records, products and a range of other kinds of information.

It is for the teacher, in discussion with learners, to select approaches that are suited to the learners' circumstances and to the requirements of the particular assessment. Thus, for example, day-to-day evaluation may rely on less formal methods such as observation, whilst more formal assessments, say at points of transition, will tend to place greater weight on written records.

3 Assessment should focus on breadth, challenge and application

As far as possible, all assessments should evaluate success across a range of experiences and outcomes, the ability to respond to the level of challenge these involve, and the capacity to apply knowledge in circumstances different from the ones in which it was acquired.

Breadth involves learners in not only achieving mastery across many outcomes but also being able to make connections among them.

Challenge, on the other hand, is about depth. It requires learners to be able to show more than the acquisition of knowledge. Learning needs to be focused on understanding and skills and to recognise that progress is not always linear.

Challenge is thus closely linked to application and to developing higher-order skills, i.e. the ability to turn knowledge to practical effect by applying it in the real world and not merely in the particular classroom in which it was first acquired.

To ensure that learning is secure, assessment has to be concerned with evaluating learners' skills, often in new situations, not merely their capacity to retain factual information or apply routine procedures in predictable contexts.

4 Evidence of learners' progress can be gathered across the four contexts for learning

Curriculum for Excellence views education in very broad terms. It identifies four contexts in which learning occurs. Two relate to learning within curriculum areas and interdisciplinary learning. The other two – the ethos and life of the school as a community and broader opportunities for achievement in the outside world – are now seen as equally important. Irrespective of where the learning occurs, assessment will focus on the experiences and outcomes.

Therefore schools need to consider how best to evaluate children and young people's participation in and contribution to the school community. They should also consider how to improve learners' access to opportunities for gaining valuable experiences in the outside world. In some cases these experiences may support accreditation and qualifications of various kinds. In any event, schools should recognise and celebrate all aspects of achievement and help young people to present a comprehensive view of their accomplishments.

5 Professional dialogue is central to agreeing standards

Standards are embedded in the experiences and outcomes and, for the senior phase, will be set out in the requirements for the new qualifications. It is essential that a common, in-depth understanding of those standards should be shared throughout the profession and should be communicated to learners, parents, users of qualifications and other interested parties. This is particularly important in relation to literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing – the responsibility of every teacher.

Professional dialogue is central to the creation of this shared understanding. Schools need to create space for sharing ideas among staff internally and for teachers to engage in various external discussions. It is important that shared standards and expectations should apply among the primary schools in a cluster and across departments in secondaries. Transition will be greatly assisted by sharing ideas across sectors.

Teachers will be involved in moderation across the curriculum. Local authorities will develop procedures for moderation across their schools and for linking local and national arrangements.

6 Assessments should be reliable, valid and proportionate

All aspects of assessment should accord with the purposes and principles of *Curriculum for Excellence*. This implies that they should measure not only knowledge but also understandings, skills and personal qualities that *Curriculum for Excellence* deems important.

In many cases this means using innovative approaches that give greater validity while preserving the standards of reliability of more traditional forms of assessment. Engagement in professional dialogue and moderation should assist teachers to ensure that their assessments measure what they set out to measure and do not focus merely on things that are easier to assess. For example, recall of factual information cannot be taken as a proxy for deep understanding.

Assessments that have greater validity are often those that are carried out relatively informally in the course of classroom activity. The quality of classroom interaction is crucial. Professional development relating to assessment needs to take account of this factor.

Both reliability and validity in assessment depend on well-known but vital principles. Instructions to learners need to be clear. Small steps in progress need to be recognised, especially in the case of learners with additional support needs. Ongoing assessment should be used to give feedback and plan next steps. Periodic assessments at the end of a sequence of lessons and those at points of transition are also important.

Assessment activity should not dominate the learning process. Assessment must be proportionate and sustainable, and the demands it places on teachers' time should be carefully monitored.

7 Curriculum for Excellence principles should underpin reporting

Reporting should give information on:

- literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing
- progress within and between levels and in relation to qualifications
- strengths and areas for development
- application of knowledge in different situations
- the need for additional support, where relevant.

Reporting should adhere to the principles and purposes of *Curriculum for Excellence*. Comment should be made on those aspects of learning that are important, not merely on those that are easy to measure.

Reporting should be regular and is particularly important at points of transition (between classes as well as from one sector to another), and especially at the end of the phase of general education. It is also important that reporting activity should be proportionate and not unnecessarily burdensome.

8 Assessment needs to be quality assured

Educational establishments need to ensure that sound mechanisms exist internally for quality assuring assessments. Quality assurance and moderation should ensure that assessment:

- is fit for purpose
- is valid and reliable
- takes account of national standards as embedded in the experiences and outcomes and specifications for qualifications
- focuses on breadth, challenge and the application of learning
- promotes active learner engagement.

Local authorities need to have mechanisms in place for moderation and for encouraging teachers to share standards.

In conclusion

Building the Curriculum 5 and other documents contain a wealth of information on assessment and should be consulted as appropriate. However, educational establishments will wish to prioritise and the immediate focus should be on the eight key ideas in this paper. Above all, they should ensure that their assessment procedures reflect and support the principles and purposes of Curriculum for Excellence.