

A guide for practitioners

CfE Briefing ²

Curriculum for Excellence: Assessing progress and achievement in the 3-15 broad general education

Scottish education is going through a period of significant and important change to its curriculum, learning and teaching, and the processes that underpin them. Education Scotland is supporting this change by evaluating and sharing evolving practice as part of a national professional learning community. This paper is one of a series of briefings which provide succinct advice on the progress being made in key areas of change, to help inform discussion and promote further innovative development. This latest addition to the series explores how teachers are developing suitable, joined-up ways of assessing progress and achievement which underpin high-quality learning in the broad general education.

"Staff have a clear assessment strategy to deliver a joined-up approach to planning learning, teaching and assessment. They ensure an appropriate balance between the ongoing assessment that supports learning

and the periodic assessment that takes a closer look at an individual learner's progress and the assessment of key milestones in learning."

The Journey to Excellence

Curriculum for Excellence¹ needs a joined-up approach to planning for learning and teaching which is underpinned by effective assessment. In developing assessment, staff are finding that self-evaluation is vital because it helps them to build on effective practice and identify priorities for improvement. They are finding that learners need to be fully involved in all aspects of planning assessment so that they take ownership of their own learning and gain a deep understanding about what is being learned. These **fair** and **inclusive** approaches also help to give each learner the best possible chance of success by being better placed to show how well she/he is progressing and what has been achieved.

¹ Refer to www.educationscotland.gov.uk for full guidelines on Curriculum for Excellence, including details of the four capacities, attributes and capabilities, experiences and outcomes, skills and higher-order skills/Bloom's revised taxonomy, Principles and Practice papers, referred to throughout this briefing.

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A joined up approach to planning for learning and teaching is underpinned by valid, reliable and proportionate assessment.

1. What is progress and achievement in learning?

In the 3-15 broad general education, progress and achievement in learning is the substance of what learners gain in knowledge and understanding, skills (including higher-order thinking skills), attributes and capabilities. But for learning to meet the long-term needs of learners, it needs to have suitable **breadth** and **challenge** and be capable of wide **application**.

What is breadth?

Breadth refers to the **number and range of experiences and outcomes** encountered by learners. Learners need to be fully involved in planning how breadth, suitable to their needs, will be increased, and how they will show what they have learned. Examples of where an increase in breadth can show that a learner is progressing include:

- a growing confidence and competence in skills for learning, life and work in familiar and routine contexts;
- a broadening range of texts, performances or presentations;
- an improving range and competence in skills and concepts;
- a broadening use of more advanced language, formulae and equations; and
- a broadening amount of detail in the descriptions and explanations they give.

What is challenge?

Challenge refers to the **attributes, capabilities** and **skills** (including higher-order thinking skills) which are embedded in learning and may be planned through **personalisation** and **choice**.

For example, many of the experiences and outcomes include skills such as analysing, evaluating and creating. Examples of where an increase in challenge can show that a learner is progressing include:

- learning in more complex contexts;
- using and/or presenting increasingly complex texts in terms of length, structure, vocabulary, ideas, and/or concepts;
- responding to and producing increasingly complex pieces of work, information and concepts;
- responding accurately and confidently to more complex contexts;
- individuals becoming more adept at evaluating their own and other's learning; and
- demonstrating increasing responsibility and independence in learning.

What is application?

Overlapping with both breadth and challenge, **application** refers to how knowledge and understanding, attributes, capabilities and skills (including higher-order thinking skills) are used in new and unfamiliar contexts so that they become transferable and secure. This is about learners becoming flexible and adaptable in the way they apply their learning. Examples of progress in application of learning include:

- using skills and knowledge in different situations;
- using skills and knowledge in creative and innovative ways;
- finding, selecting, sorting and linking information from a variety of sources;
- using information for different purposes;
- creating texts to persuade, argue and explore ideas;

- recording and presenting thinking in different ways; and
- presenting, analysing and interpreting evidence to draw conclusions.

2. Why do we need a wider range of evidence of learning?

Curriculum for Excellence has the potential to enable learners to be better equipped for the changing world through gaining a wide, up-to-date and relevant body of **knowledge and understanding, skills, attributes and capabilities**. This means that assessment needs to make use of a **broader range** of approaches which **match** the nature of that learning and the way it was encountered. This will ensure that learners **can show** more accurately what they know, understand and can do. Assessment should **not constrain** learning but reflect and **be driven by it**, thereby giving responsibility and considerable scope for learners and those that guide them to design together how best to do it. A **carefully planned blend** of approaches to the kinds of evidence used, and the ways in which it is gathered, can give **validity** and show an accurate picture of progress in learning over time. Most of all, it removes the limitations to the breadth, challenge and application of learning sometimes caused in the past when learning may have been geared solely towards, for example, the narrow requirements of a pre-defined check up or written test.

When do we assess?

Assessment is **ongoing, periodic, and transitional**. A blended, proportional approach makes this feasible. It relates to the kinds of evidence used, and the ways in which it is gathered. It is best

Staff use a range of evidence based on the breadth, challenge and application of learning to determine if a learner has achieved a level.

when it ensures a balance between ongoing assessment that underpins learning and periodic assessment of key aspects at key points, such as transitions or when achievement of a level is to be confirmed. Examples of where the evidence may come from include:

- ongoing day-to-day, routine, and familiar contexts; and
- periodic focus on specific assessment tasks (relevant check ups, assignments, projects, performances, reports) on key aspects of learning.

There are many examples of practice which fit one or more of the above and offer straightforward and sustainable approaches to assessment, including:

- a sampling approach which assesses learning in the context in which it takes place;
- scope to assess learning in challenging and unfamiliar situations, including requiring learners to draw together their learning and transfer skills from one context to another;
- rich and challenging tasks which require learners to demonstrate their resilience and the ability to stick to a task until it is complete;
- valid, well-understood and recognised judgements by all involved, including at transitions; and
- rounded, holistic judgements across a range of evidence to determine achievement of a level.

3. How do we know when a level has been achieved?

Derived from progress in knowledge and understanding and skills, attributes and capabilities, staff use a **range of**

evidence based on breadth, challenge and application of learning to determine if a learner has achieved a level, either in part of or a whole curriculum area. Some use the term **secure** to describe when a level has been achieved. Evidence comes from day-to-day learning as well as from specific assessment tasks, activities, tests and examinations. Staff use their professional judgement to evaluate a range of evidence when they believe that a learner has a firm grasp of a significant body of learning; they do not base their judgement solely on a one-off test or piece of work. They are taking an increasingly holistic approach so that they reach a well-founded judgement overall about achievement of a level. This includes gauging the sufficiency and quality of evidence about 'how much' and 'how well' each individual has learned.

The **Principles and Practice**¹ papers, together with the experiences and outcomes, provide the **framework** for an appropriate focus on the range of knowledge and understanding, skills, attributes and capabilities. Teachers are using this information to underpin their professional judgement. Also, they are building on existing standards, using and contributing to the National Assessment Resource, and participating in local and national quality assurance and moderation activities. As these new approaches evolve, the present need felt in some schools to use assessment tools which do not relate to planned outcomes will be reduced.

Quality assurance and **moderation** are presently building on existing effective practice. They are vital for understanding, applying and sharing

standards. When planning learning, teaching and assessment, including at key points of transition, professional dialogue is essential. It enables agreement on valid and reliable assessment approaches which can be built into the learning process without distorting it. It also helps to build reliability, trust and confidence in professional judgements within teams across stages and at key points of transition.

4. How are we improving the way we track progress and achievement?

Effective tracking of progress and achievement is essential if assessment is to underpin learning and teaching. It is important that learners are meaningfully involved, through discussion, in tracking progress using the profiling and reporting processes. Different systems are now being used to help staff track progress, including a number of helpful ICT-based systems. To ensure that such systems underpin learning, it is important that they focus on information related to the key aspects of learning, and that they use the **language which is used by learners themselves**. Teachers are finding it helpful when their tracking systems can be applied at each stage from planning through to gauging achievement of a level. Careful analysis of tracking data and subsequent actions and interventions can help to raise attainment by helping staff to improve the progress of groups and individuals. Discussions about tracking data will help staff and learners make changes to planning, learning and teaching to improve progress and ensure that tasks, activities and resources are well

Learners need to be involved in planning assessment, discussing progress and planning next steps in learning.

matched to learners' needs. Learners also need to be meaningfully involved in tracking, profiling and reporting to parents and carers, as well as planning their own next steps in learning.

Many teachers are using a range of terms to describe progress in learning, including terms such as **developing**, **consolidating** and **secure**. Some are finding these terms to be helpful as they come to terms with the new content of experiences and outcomes, whilst others are using them to sum up and report on progress in learning at a later stage. Whilst all of these approaches may be useful at this stage of the development in assessment, a keen eye should be kept on how, over time, staff can reduce the complexity of assessment language and reduce the amount of recording which is currently taking place.

5. How can we take forward our assessment approaches?

Assessing progress and achievement in the 3-15 broad general education is fundamental to taking forward high-quality learning for all. Consideration of this paper and the following

questions will help us all to develop our approaches further.

- How confident are we that assessment approaches underpin and enrich learning and teaching and do not in any way constrain or distort it? Do we always plan the learning first and design the assessment to match?
- Does the evidence of learning we use, and the way in which we gather it, draw directly from the way learning was planned and the contexts in which it took place?
- What are the key features of a blended, proportional approach to assessment in our context? To what extent have all stakeholders gained confidence in the range of approaches used and the nature of the evidence gathered?
- How effectively are we working together to develop a shared understanding of the standards and expectations at each level?
- How effectively is this shared understanding being used to reach reliable judgements in which everyone is confident?
- How well do approaches to assessment focus on what really

matters in learning, for example by drawing on principles and practice advice in each curriculum area?

- How effectively is tracking information used to improve the progress of individuals and groups of learners?
- How well do we use assessment information to take action to improve learning and teaching and to raise attainment for all learners?
- How effective and consistent is our whole school approach to assessment with clear individual and collective responsibilities, together ensuring validity and reliability?
- How well do we involve partners?
- How well do we plan for progression in knowledge and understanding, skills, attributes and capabilities, and ensure that learners are active partners in assessment?
- How effectively do we recognise progress in learning as can be seen through breadth, challenge and application?

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The CfE Briefing is a new series designed to provide practitioners with information and advice to support their implementation of CfE.

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