

A guide for practitioners

CfE Briefing ¹

Broad general education in the secondary school

Scottish education has long been based on a strong commitment to maintaining breadth in the range of areas covered in the school curriculum, whilst also building solid foundations for later specialisation. The entitlement to a 'broad general education', which is a central design feature of Curriculum for Excellence, represents a redefinition of this central tradition of Scottish education, adapted to the needs of learners in the 21st century.

In Curriculum for Excellence, the broad general education phase is the first of two closely connected phases of education. It stretches from age three to the end of S3, after which learners move on into the senior phase from S4 to S6. It is designed to provide the breadth and the depth of education which all young people will need in order to thrive now and into the future. Its purposes span all the key aspects of a young person's learning and development, as expressed in the attributes and capabilities of the four capacities of Curriculum for Excellence.

This Briefing raises some key issues which secondary schools should be considering as they plan to develop their provision for the broad general education at the S1 to S3 stages.

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BGE is designed to provide the breadth and the depth of education which all young people will need.

1. What are the national expectations for the broad general education phase?

The flexible nature of the broad general education phase gives teachers tremendous scope to apply their professional skills, knowledge and creativity to deliver varied, rich and rewarding educational experiences for their children.

The core national expectations for broad general education are described through the experiences and outcomes (the Es and Os). Experiences are described as well as outcomes, to emphasise the point that well-planned experiences are important and valuable in their own right, as well as more easily measurable learning outcomes. Schools are expected to ensure that all children have opportunities to experience all the Es and Os¹, across all curriculum areas, up to and including the third curriculum level. These should be experienced by all pupils, as far as this is consistent with their learning needs and prior achievements. Most learners will also progress into the fourth curriculum level in many aspects of their learning before the end of S3.

In many areas, expectations are higher than before, reflecting new challenges which our young people will face, and national ambitions to raise attainment and achievement.

2. How does personalisation and choice feature in the broad general education at S1 to S3?

The common national expectations defined by the Es and Os do not mean that all young people in S1, S2 or S3 will follow common programmes of learning throughout this phase. On the contrary, effective learning depends upon personalisation and on enhancing learners' motivation by giving them opportunities to influence what they learn.

Learners can have opportunities for personalisation and choice across many aspects of their learning throughout S1 to S3. These can include choices through learning, teaching and assessment approaches; topics or contexts; themes for interdisciplinary learning; the opportunities learners have to contribute to the life of the school as a community; and the activities they undertake for personal achievement. The activities which a young person chooses should build on their prior learning and provide progression through breadth, challenge and application.

A key principle for curriculum design at the S1 to S3 stages is to ensure that all pupils do receive their national entitlement to experience the full range of Es and Os at third level by the end of S3, and that as many as possible go beyond to achieve success in relation to the fourth level Es and Os.

Individuals will progress towards the fourth curriculum level Es and Os at different rates. S1 to S3 curriculum frameworks need to be designed to enable them to make this transition at the appropriate time. Many schools are planning their curricula so that young people will work across the third and fourth levels within curriculum areas throughout S2 and S3, and progress to the fourth level as and when they are ready, with a degree of choice and specialisation in S3. Greater scope for choice will naturally emerge as pupils progress successfully through the full range of the third level Es and Os, in the latter stages of the broad general education phase. It would be unlikely, on the other hand, that young people will have gained sufficient depth of learning and ability to apply this learning confidently in different contexts at the third level across the entire curriculum at earlier stages, for example at the end of S1.

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¹The exceptions to this statement are where specific sets of experiences and outcomes are specialised: Gàidhlig, Gaelic (learners) and classical languages and religious education in Roman Catholic schools

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3. How might specialisation appear at the fourth curriculum level?

Once young people have achieved the outcomes of the third curriculum level in a curriculum area they may then be given options to extend their learning and specialise through, for example:

- focusing in on specific subjects within the curriculum area, while still retaining breadth of learning; this can take place through programmes which run for all or part of the school year;
- ‘majoring’ in one subject for some parts of the curriculum (for example history within social studies) - while continuing with some more limited studies in the other subjects in the same curriculum area, so keeping options open for the choice of qualifications at the senior phase;
- selection of particular aspects of subjects to enable study in greater depth;
- well-planned interdisciplinary learning which combines Es and Os from different subjects and curriculum areas and applies them in motivating and relevant contexts;
- electives or ‘master classes’.

Young people who have experienced learning at the third curriculum level but have achieved only some of the outcomes should also be given sufficient opportunities for personalisation and choice. These need to be planned to enable them to pursue particular interests further whilst still continuing to ensure that further progress is made in the areas

where third level Es and Os have still to be achieved, thereby ensuring that the full broad general education entitlement is experienced.

Choices and personalisation are an important part of maintaining young people’s motivation, providing challenge and preparing them for progression into the senior phase and qualifications. Care needs to be taken, however, in the design of the S1-S3 curriculum to avoid closing off options for the choice of qualifications and subsequent pathways available to young people as they enter the senior phase in S4. This includes curriculum models which require all young people in a cohort to narrow down to a set of specific subject choices at the end of S2 (or even earlier). It also includes models which lack strong design features to maintain continuing breadth and to ensure that options are kept open for a variety of national qualification pathways as pupils enter S4. Models such as these would deny young people the important benefits of a broad general education up to the end of S3, a key feature of Curriculum for Excellence.

4. What is the outcome of assessment and profiling through the broad general education?

The cumulative outcomes of all the learning pupils have undertaken throughout the broad general education phase will be recognised in the S3 profile. The process for developing this key document will include reflection, by young people jointly with their teachers, on what they have learned, experienced and achieved.

The attributes and capabilities of the four capacities provide a useful focus for this dialogue and for ensuring recognition of all relevant achievements up to this point. This reflection and dialogue will also support learners in making their transition to the senior phase, including making choices about the qualification pathways that will best match their needs, aspirations and prior achievement.

5. How is progression from broad general education into the senior phase supported?

The new National Qualifications have been designed to build directly from the Es and Os in the broad general education phase. Because that is the case, the notional 160 hours of learning for National Qualifications spans the broad general education and the senior phase, potentially incorporating time spent on programmes delivering relevant Es and Os in S3 as well as time spent on NQ courses in S4. There should be a continuum of learning that will be validated and certificated at the right point in time. For some this may include specific preparation for Skills for Work qualifications. For some it will mean taking a National 4 or National 5 at the end of S4; in other cases, learners might choose to ‘bypass’ and take a higher qualification at a later point in time. These are decisions for schools and learners to take, depending on how well a learner is achieving in a subject.

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The continuum of learning within CfE, in which the Es and Os and National Qualifications link seamlessly with each other, allows a more flexible approach in which programmes of learning can be tailored to the needs of the individual learner in terms of appropriate breadth, depth and pace of learning. This allows young people to aim for the most appropriate levels of qualifications. For some learners in S4, this may include learning towards National 1, 2 and 3 qualifications; for others National 4 or 5, or National 5 and Higher. This more flexible approach allows the curriculum to be designed to provide a range of flexible progression routes through the senior phase.

Whilst there will always still be scope to arrange early presentation (i.e. in S3 or earlier) for particular individuals in exceptional circumstances, the planned early presentation of whole cohorts or class groups of young people for qualifications in S3 would constrain and undermine the flexibility and benefits which the broad general education is intended to provide and is not therefore compatible with the principles of the broad general education.

6. How can the quality of broad general education be evaluated?

At a time of major curriculum change it is especially important to monitor closely every young person's progress and the quality of their curricular experience. Important questions to ask when planning or reviewing the broad general education phase in your school include:

- Does the curriculum reflect high aspirations, confidence and ambition for its young people?
- Are learning experiences in S1 to S3 motivating and challenging and do they ensure that each young person experiences success?
- Are young people well supported by teachers and parents to make choices and decisions about their learning, informed by evidence of their prior learning, progress, and aspirations?
- Is the curriculum designed to take account of each young person's needs, stage of development, interests and prior attainment?
- Is there smooth progression at points of transition with no loss of momentum?
- Can learners progress in different ways and at different rates?
- Do teachers plan for learning across

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the four contexts of the curriculum, not only through subjects and curriculum areas?

- Do learners experience coherence and progression across all aspects of their learning, irrespective of where it takes place?
- Is there a clear rationale for the pattern and timing of subject choice with a particular emphasis on enabling every young person to experience their full entitlement to the broad general education by the end of S3?
- Are choices made during the broad general education phase planned in a way that avoids 'locking in' young people to very specific pathways too early, but rather seeks to preserve options and opportunities for progression into qualification routes in the senior phase.

Further reading on Building the Curriculum can be viewed at:

www.educationscotland.gov.uk/BtC3
www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Developingyoursecondarycurriculum
www.educationscotland.gov.uk/curriculumplanning

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

T +44 (0)141 282 5000 E enquiries@educationscotland.gov.uk W www.educationscotland.gov.uk
The Optima, 58 Robertson Street, Glasgow G2 8DU

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