

Thinking Inside the Box

College Perspectives on Curriculum for Excellence

Introduction

Curriculum for Excellence has been around for some time. It precedes the current government administration. It emerged from a national debate on the education of 3-18 year olds. It might have been that colleges were not fully engaged in that process but life has moved on; colleges are now fully involved and the time for complaining has passed.

Curriculum for Excellence is a radically different type of curriculum reform to those we have experienced in the past. While previous reform programmes have focussed on specific time periods of the learner experience in schools, this reform impacts on education experiences from 3 to 18. While previous reform programmes have concentrated on attainment, either in redesign of qualifications frameworks or in establishing levels of expected performance on the 5-14 programme, this reform impacts on curriculum – the totality of experience of the learner. While previous reforms diluted the professionalism of delivery staff though provision of materials interpreted as prescriptive, this reform enhances and builds upon the professionalism of staff. While previous reform programmes have adopted a power-coercive approach to change management driven by the centre, this reform programme has a strong elements of engagement with expectations of local interpretation meeting local contexts.

As articulated in the HMIe report 'Improving Scottish Education',

Curriculum for Excellence embodies a new way of working. It recognises that sustained and meaningful improvement should, to a significant extent, be shaped and owned by those who will put it into practice.

Scotland's Colleges (SFEU) have recently completed a series of events aimed at college staff to raise awareness of the reform programme. There have been a variety of responses from the we-do-this-anyway to the show-us-how-to-do-it. It would be true to say however that college people recognise that much current practice in colleges can be reframed in Curriculum for Excellence terms. That is an encouraging sign – any successful curriculum reform, particularly on this scale, needs to be built on existing practice and notions of what represents good practice in learning and teaching. It is a 'next practice' reform.

In this sense, curriculum for excellence represents a progressive agenda for colleges, It is not driven by systemic weakness in the sector though any such weakness should be addressed in moving forward. In line with its progressive nature we need to move on to consider the opportunities being opened up.

Thinking Inside the Box

There was a time in the development of the college sector when the mantra was 'think outside the box'. Colleges became incorporated bodies and responsible for their own destiny. There was an acceptance that a successful college would be one which used this new found freedom to generate new markets and new ways of doing things. After all, in this context, no external was going to say 'don't'.

The funding methodology demanded innovation. There was a need to shake out complacency and the habits encouraged by some paternalistic local authorities. There

was a need to liberate the creativity in the sector. 'Thinking outside the box' put the sector in a good place – the 'can do' sector. The sector responded and delivered, the recent review of Scotland's colleges confirmed the progress made. Through this period, there has been an accumulation of experiences, development of new traditions, an outward facing perspective and a responsiveness now widely acknowledged as one of its key strengths. 'Thinking outside the Box' served us well.

'Thinking outside the box' was an artefact of a particular time in the maturity of the sector. This is not one of those times. There is now a mature sector in many respects. It is now a sector fully engaged with key issues of economic development and social justice. The Curriculum for Excellence reform is a time for **thinking inside the box** – of building on current practices and thinking about them differently.

Boxes of Opportunity

In our work with Curriculum for Excellence, we have become aware of two boxes of opportunity – there may be others. These relate largely to strategic and operational perspectives. The strategic perspective is one of Scotland's Learning System while the operational perspective is one of delivery.

Learning System Box

The college curriculum is not well understood. Its diversity of provision, the diversity of experiences provided to learners, the limited (and often second hand) experiences of those from the external world have led to a multitude of perspectives emerging. The Cabinet Secretary's response to the Review of Scotland's colleges, 'Promoting Excellence', articulated the role of colleges while there were specific recommendations relating to work in establishing the college role in Scotland's learning system. It is difficult for colleges to play their full part in the learning system if other elements of the system do not understand their role. Colleges need to take responsibility to establish its place in system terms and there are opportunities in Curriculum for Excellence for progress to be made.

Opportunities:

- Articulate the college curriculum

It is difficult to make judgements about implications of Curriculum for Excellence for the colleges if the college curriculum is not understood. It has been one of the fundamentals in assessing impact of 'Curriculum for Excellence. In sector terms, how do we make strategic judgements about the proposed reform? There is an opportunity to articulate the college curriculum which will have a range of uses beyond the current reform.

- Strengthen College Links with Schools

Curriculum for excellence provides a common vocabulary to facilitate work between schools and colleges. A sense of common purpose has emerged in the notion of capacity building for learners and expression of four specific capacities. There is a tendency for colleges to be seen as a supplier of vocational experiences with a status which reflected that role. A particular consequence has been an underestimation of skills in colleges in processes of curriculum design and flexible delivery. Colleges viewed as joint partners in developing capacities of young people creates a different context for discussions, enhanced recognition for college contribution to educational processes and greater utilisation of college staff skills.

- Further Challenge to the Academic/Vocational 'divide'

Higher Still developments was one of the first formal attempts to achieve 'parity of esteem' between academic and vocational provision. The poor status of vocational education in the past did a disservice to those young people whose educational experience was largely vocational; a vocational curriculum conveyed a sense of failure, of being seen as second best and as something to do because you couldn't do other things. There is now high level recognition that debate around 'academic' and 'vocational' is sterile and regressive. The term 'Skills for Life, Skills for Work, Skills for Learning' is increasingly being used. HMIE refer to the need for 'an appropriate education for all.'

- Skills Utilisation

We recognise the gap between the potential suggested by the qualifications base in Scotland and the reality of productivity levels and/or quality of service provision. While more work needs to be done in this area, there is a credible notion that the process by which qualifications are obtained might influence future behaviours and associated productivity in the workplace.

Delivery Box

The opportunity in the future is to ensure the learner experience in Scotland's colleges is a 'curriculum for excellence' experience. While the policy perspectives of the reform refer to the 3-18 age group, this cannot be sustained in the college environment. It is not a credible position, given the foundations of the reform in learning and teaching, for college leaders to deny some learners experiences common to others. The age profile of college students, their varying length of engagement with a college, the influence of externals upon the curriculum (particularly employers) amongst other factors suggests that it is through evolution of pedagogy that the influence of 'curriculum for excellence' will come to bear.

Opportunities:

- Build on 'holistic' learning processes

As indicated in the 'What's Next ... In Learning and Teaching in Scotland's colleges?', the college curriculum has evolved over the years beyond provision focused firmly on technical, job-related skills. Policy drivers and fresh insights into pedagogy have led to higher expectations of the learner experience beyond that suggested solely by employer demands. Colleges and their staff moved to develop structures around course/programme teams and management processes to ensure the learner experience reflects these complex expectations through the various elements of the programme. The initial disposition (influenced by the funding methodology) to 'add on' elements has moved to approaches which integrate these demands into programmes providing an holistic rather than an atomised experience. Very significant progress has been made with solid foundations to build upon.

- Refreshed set of qualifications

A known and managed tension in education has been whether the learner experience is driven by qualifications or broader curriculum perspectives which include the provision of qualifications. In colleges, that tension is more acute given a core purpose to provide qualifications and with perceptions which equate the two terms. In

the 'curriculum for excellence' reform the relationship has been managed with qualifications providers brought into discussions at a point when curriculum thinking had moved to an advanced stage.

Proposals for qualifications reform are currently out to consultation. There are expectations of moves towards reducing the perceived level of prescription in qualifications specification in line with the Curriculum for Excellence philosophy while addressing the demands of national standards. Whatever the final position adopted, there will be changes which colleges are influencing and to which they will adapt.

- Tackling the assessment burden

A long standing and acknowledged issue is the assessment burden on college learners. The emphasis in colleges has been on summative assessments providing evidence of achievement as demanded by the specification of qualifications. Some work has been undertaken through the HN Modernisation programme to reduce the assessment though full benefit has not been secured because of an overly rigid interpretation of requirements. There is still progress to be made.

The assessment burden is not simply the number of assessments but their nature with an over reliance on 'safe' traditional written assessments and a reluctance to explore and implement alternatives.

The sector has not yet benefitted from the kind of strategic intervention in the school ('Assessment is for Learning') and the university sector (Enhancement theme). These provide useful insights into assessment processes and have been built in to development opportunities; similar activity in colleges is overdue. Such an activity would help address the need for improvement in providing effective feedback to learners identified by HMIE.

- Progression opportunities

In any curriculum reform, but particularly one of this nature, on this scale and of this duration, there are significant risks in achieving intended outcomes. If these risks are successfully managed then we can anticipate more confident individuals, more successful learners, more effective contributors and more responsible citizens entering the college sector to continue their learning. As currently, colleges will wish to ensure the learner experience responds to and builds upon previous experience and achievement.

- Enhancing the professionalism of staff

The success of Curriculum for Excellence depends critically on the professionalism of staff. Indeed, enhanced professionalism is seen as a significant factor in addressing current and future challenges in education generally. That enhanced professionalism will be reflected in greater freedom to shape curriculum by confident practitioners inspiring learners with modern approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. The professionalism will be marked by commitment to CPD and use of professional learning opportunities to impact upon practice and system capacity for professional networking.

Conclusion

A curriculum reform on this scale will require to be underpinned with significant development activity at all levels within the system if these opportunities are to be realised. The bulk of this will be delivered locally. National development activity will have

to be sensitively designed and delivered and ensure sector reputation for coherent responses to curriculum reform is enhanced. Underpinning this work will be clarity on college curriculum, its shape, qualities and delivery.