HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: Education

Date: **17 November 2021**

Report Title: **Consultation on the review of SQA and Education Scotland**

Report By: **Executive Chief Officer – Education**

1.   Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1   This report and appendix updates Members on the Education Reform consultation launched by the Scottish Government on 30 September 2021, which is seeking views on plans to replace the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and reform Education Scotland (ES).

1.2   The draft response will be brought to Council in December and will reflect engagement with elected Members, staff, parent groups and Trade Unions.

1.3   It is expected that the draft Council consultation response will be in two parts. Firstly, there will be an assessment of the broad themes arising from the proposals, which will be representative of the views of Members as expressed through two all-Member workshops and feedback from a number of focus group sessions with staff, parent groups and Trades Unions representatives. Secondly, there will be responses to the specific questions put in the consultation document itself. Many of these are specific educationalist/specialist questions and will reflect the professional views of managers and professionals from across the Education and Learning Service as well as the views expressed in the Members' seminars and other stakeholders.

2.   Recommendations

Members are asked to consider the terms of the consultation and:

    i.   Note the main themes and conclusions reached in the OECD reports that are being consulted on as part of the review of SQA and Education Scotland;
    ii.   Note the proposed engagement with internal and external stakeholders to help inform the response to this consultation;
    iii.   Note that the draft response will be brought to full Council in December.

3.   Implications

3.1   Resource – an assessment will be made of the resource implications arising from the proposed changes and will be brought back to Members at the same time that the draft response is submitted for approval.

3.2   Legal – The OECD proposes significant revisions and changes to existing arrangements some of which are likely to need to be introduced through legislative process.

3.3   Risk/Impact – The consultation seeks respondent's views on the potential risks and mitigations associated with the OECD's recommendations. These will be brought back to Council for consideration as part of the consultation response.

3.4   Gaelic – there is no distinction made in the consultation between English and Gaelic Medium education.

3.5   Community (Equality, Poverty & Rural); and Climate Change – It is not considered that there are any direct implications at this time.

4.   Background

4.1   In June 2021 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published the report "Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future" which, whilst backing the Curriculum for Excellence as the right approach for Scotland, also recommended changes to the national education agencies. In August 2021 the OECD published their report on student assessment "Upper-Secondary Education Student Assessment in Scotland: A Comparative Perspective" suggesting ways in which improvements could be made to align Curriculum for Excellence and assessment in the Senior Phase. The recommendations of both reports have been accepted by the Scottish Government and, following on from this, the Scottish Government has agreed that the SQA will be replaced and the functions of Education Scotland will be reviewed with the removal of the Inspectorate from its remit.

4.2   Professor Ken Muir has been appointed as an independent advisor to the Scottish Government on the SQA and ES plans. He has established an expert panel to support his remit and a Practitioner and Stakeholder Advisory Group comprising over 50 agencies and organisations likely to be impacted by the reforms. It is expected that Professor Muir will make recommendations to Ministers in January 2022.

4.3   Given the potential significant impact of the Government's plans, the need to engage with a range of internal and external stakeholders and the tight timescales for responding to the consultation, it is proposed that the response to the consultation be remitted to full Council for consideration in December.

4.4   The original deadline date for consultation responses was 26 November 2021. This was subsequently changed to 3 December following a direct request from Highland Council for an extension through the SOLACE Education representative at the meetings attended by CEOs.   This means that the draft response will need to be submitted in advance of Council on 9 December, with any changes agreed at the Council meeting conveyed to the consultation team thereafter.

5.   About the consultation

5.1   The current consultation does not seek to survey views on all aspects of the two OECD reports. Instead, its primary focus is on the ownership of the Curriculum for Excellence, issues around roles and responsibilities for curriculum and assessment and what OECD identified as a 'misalignment' between Broad General Education (BGE) and the senior phase and proposals to establish a new Curriculum and Assessment Agency. The consultation also invites views on the potential risks arising from any change and implications for the changes on the wider education system.

5.2   The consultation is divided into four sections: Vision; Curriculum and Assessment; Roles and Responsibilities; and replacing the SQA and reforming ES. Broad statements are made about each theme followed by a series of questions some of which are very specific and use a Likert rating scale for capturing nuance, whilst others are broad open text questions, inviting fuller, more detailed responses.   Some of the questions appear to be seeking validation for the OECD's conclusions, but others are seeking input on their recommendations. Given the Scottish Government has already accepted the OECD's assessment, it is arguably the latter group of questions that will be the most important to consider as part of the Council's response.

5.3   In some cases, the questions are clearly aimed at educationalists and teachers and these will be considered as part of the internal stakeholder engagement with Education and Learning staff. However, there are also a number of questions more focused on founding principles and strategic approach and these will be explored in the member seminars and with parent representatives.

6.   Next Steps

6.1   Appendix 1 contains the specific questions posed in the consultation. These form the basis of the engagement opportunities with elected members, staff and parent representatives that are currently underway and proposed responses will be brought back to Council in December.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer – Education and Learning

Date: 9 November 2021

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Background Papers:

- [Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future](#)

- [Upper-Secondary Education Student Assessment in Scotland: A Comparative Perspective](#)

- [Education-scotland/scottish-education-system/broad-general-education/](#)

- [About Education Scotland](#)

- [About SQA](#)

Education Scotland and the Scottish Qualifications Authority: consultation

Section 1 - Vision

Two decades have passed since the original vision for Curriculum for Excellence was set out. In 2019, a revised narrative on Curriculum for Excellence was published which aimed to update the original vision[12]. Since the introduction of Curriculum for Excellence, there have been marked changes in educational research giving rise to new insights into children and young people's learning, pedagogy, and the kind of knowledge, skills and attitudes students need to progress as learners.
"Scotland's curriculum – Curriculum for Excellence – helps our children and young people gain the knowledge, skills and attributes needed for life in the 21st century."

[Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence (scotlandscurriculum.scot)](scotlandscurriculum.scot)

As an introduction to the questions which follow in this consultation, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

1.1 The vision for Curriculum for Excellence reflects what matters for the education of children and young people in Scotland.
- *Strongly Agree*
- *Agree*
- *Neither Agree/Disagree*
- *Disagree*
- *Strongly Disagree*

1.2 What do you think should be retained and/or changed?

Section 2 - Curriculum and Assessment

The OECD reports *Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future*[13] and *Upper-Secondary Education Student Assessment in Scotland: A Comparative Perspective*[14] make it clear that aligning curriculum, qualifications and system evaluation is essential to delivering on the commitments made in Curriculum for Excellence relating to assessment.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

2.1 Curriculum for Excellence provides a coherent progression in the journey of learners (3-18 and beyond) that gives them the best possible educational experience and enables them to realise their ambitions.

- *Strongly Agree*
- *Agree*
- *Neither Agree/Disagree*
- *Disagree*
- *Strongly Disagree*

2.2 Please share what you believe currently contributes to a coherent progression.

2.3 Please share ideas you may have to improve learner progression across stages and sectors.

3.1 In practice, learning communities are empowered and use the autonomy provided by Curriculum for Excellence to design a curriculum that meets the needs of their learners.

- *Strongly Agree*
- *Agree*
- *Neither Agree/Disagree*
- *Disagree*
- *Strongly Disagree*

3.2 Please share ideas you may have on what is needed to enhance this in future.

4.1 The creation of a Curriculum and Assessment Agency will help to address the misalignment of curriculum and assessment as outlined in the OECD report[15].

- *Strongly Agree*
- *Agree*
- *Neither Agree/Disagree*
- *Disagree*
- *Strongly Disagree*

4.2 Please share your views of the potential advantages of establishing such an Agency.

4.3 Please share your views of the potential disadvantages of establishing such an Agency.

5.1 The full breadth of existing SQA qualifications[16] play an important part of the curriculum offered by secondary schools.

- *Strongly Agree*
- *Agree*
- *Neither Agree/Disagree*
- *Disagree*
- *Strongly Disagree*

5.2 Please identify the main factors, if any, that support a broader range of SQA qualifications being included in the curriculum in secondary schools.

5.3 Please share any ideas you may have on what is needed to enhance the role of a broader variety of qualifications in the curriculum in secondary schools.

6.1 Technologies are fully and appropriately utilised as a support for curriculum and assessments.

- *Strongly Agree*
- *Agree*
- *Neither Agree/Disagree*
- *Disagree*
- *Strongly Disagree*

6.2 Please share any comments you may have on the use of technologies to support curriculum and assessments, and what could be done to deliver improvements.

7. Please share any additional comments you have on curriculum and assessment.

Section 3 - Roles And Responsibilities

The rationale for reform of Scottish education is to ensure that learning communities get the best possible support to provide the highest quality of learning and teaching for our children and young people. The aim is to continue to reduce the attainment gap and reduce variability in outcomes achieved by young people in different parts of the country.

Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future[17] recognises the complexity in Scottish education and highlights duplication of functions between different groups. It is claimed that this reduces clarity and consistency for practitioners and points to the need for Scotland's system leaders and stakeholders to revise the current allocation of responsibility for Curriculum for Excellence, including responsibilities for its strategic direction, its reviews and updates, and the response to needs and/or requests for support with curriculum issues.

A key challenge in improving the transparency of responsibilities and accountability mechanisms surrounding Curriculum for Excellence is in ensuring that the functions of agencies are designed in a way that maximises support for achieving excellence and equity for all children and young people from the early level upwards.

Building on a commitment to shared ownership of Curriculum for Excellence, the report therefore points to the need for improved clarity on functions and simplification of guidance for all stakeholders in order that the system is more coherent and more easily understood by all, allowing a greater focus on learning and teaching.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
8.1 There is clarity on where the responsibilities for the strategic direction, review and updates for Curriculum for Excellence lie.

- *Strongly Agree*
- *Agree*
- *Neither Agree/Disagree*
- *Disagree*
- *Strongly Disagree*

8.2 Please indicate where you think the responsibilities for the strategic direction, review and updates for Curriculum for Excellence should lie.

9.1 There is clarity on the roles played by national agencies and other providers for responding to needs for support with curriculum and assessment issues.

- *Strongly Agree*
- *Agree*
- *Neither Agree/Disagree*
- *Disagree*
- *Strongly Disagree*

9.2 Please share which aspects of the support currently provided by national agencies and other providers is working well.

9.3 Please indicate where you think greater clarity is needed in relation to the roles played by national agencies and other providers for responding to needs / requests for support with curriculum and assessment issues.

10.1 There is clarity on where high quality support for leadership and professional learning can be accessed to support practitioners.

- *Strongly Agree*
- *Agree*
- *Neither Agree/Disagree*
- *Disagree*
- *Strongly Disagree*

10.2 Please share any comments you may have on support for leadership and professional learning.

11.1 There is sufficient trust with all stakeholders, including children, young people, parents & carers, so they are genuinely involved in decision making.

- *Strongly Agree*
- *Agree*
- *Neither Agree/Disagree*
- *Disagree*
- *Strongly Disagree*

11.2 Please share any ideas you may have on how trust and decision making can be further improved.

12.1 Independent inspection has an important role to play in scrutiny and evaluation, enhancing improvement and building capacity.

- *Strongly Agree*
- *Agree*
- *Neither Agree/Disagree*
- *Disagree*
- *Strongly Disagree*

12.2 Please give examples of how you would like to see scrutiny and evaluation being carried out in future.

13. Please share any additional comments on roles and responsibilities in Scotland's education system.

Section 4 - Replacing The Scottish Qualifications Authority and Reforming Education Scotland

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills announced in June 2021 the intention to replace the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and consider a new specialist agency for both curriculum and assessment while also taking forward reform of Education Scotland, including removing the function of inspection or scrutiny from the agency. This section seeks views on how best to take forward key aspects of the Cabinet Secretary's decision including:

- **Removing Scrutiny (Inspection and review) from Education Scotland**
- **Further reform of Education Scotland**
- **Replacing SQA**
- **Considering the establishment of a new Curriculum and Assessment Agency**

While it is expected to take some time to establish new or revised national agencies, it is anticipated that they will have a key role in taking forward delivery of wider OECD recommendations. This would include embedding a refreshed vision for Curriculum for Excellence, defining indicators to understand progress across the four capacities, building curricular capacity, implementing new pedagogical and assessment practices, implementing approaches for internal assessment in determining qualifications, ensuring appropriate breadth and depth of learning through the Broad General Education[18] and in respect of the Senior Phase[19], embedding a structured and long-term approach to implementation, effective stakeholder engagement and coherent communications.
To assist you in answering these questions, information on the current roles and functions carried out by SQA and Education Scotland are provided within the [supporting documents section](#).

Removing Scrutiny (Inspection and review) from Education Scotland

External scrutiny (inspection and review) plays a fundamental role in the overall drive to continue to improve education in Scotland for all of our children, young people and adult learners. HM Inspectors carry out

independent, external evaluation of standards, quality and improvement with a clear focus on impact and outcomes for learners. The scrutiny programme covers all sectors from early learning and childcare to adult learning, The evidence gathered through observing practice at first hand identifies what is working well in our education system, including examples of highly effective practice, areas which are showing improvement and areas where further development is needed.

14. Please share any comments or suggestions you have on this proposed reform below.
We are particularly interested in hearing your views on:

a) the approach this reform should take (for example what form should this agency take)

b) the opportunities these reforms could present (for example the development of a new national approach to inspection including alignment with other scrutiny functions)

c) the risks associated with any reform (for example whether the independence of the inspectorate could be jeopardised by change)

d) how any risks might be mitigated

e) the timescales over which these reforms should take place.

Further Reform of Education Scotland

Beyond inspection Education Scotland is a broad organisation responsible for a range of important functions designed to support a number of parts of the Scottish Education system. These functions include directly supporting learning communities at local and regional levels, offering a wide range of professional learning and leadership development programmes and opportunities, Community Learning and Development (including the CLD Standards Council), supporting digital pedagogies and as the function of Registrar of Independent Schools.

15. Please share any comments or suggestions you have on how the functions currently housed in Education Scotland could be reformed.
We are particularly interested in hearing your views on:

a) the approach this reform should take (for example which functions should continue to sit within a reformed Education Scotland, and are there any functions which could be carried out elsewhere)

b) the opportunities reform could present (for example should more prominence be given to aspects of Education Scotland's role)

c) the risks associated with any reform (for example disruption of service to education establishments and settings)

d) how any risks might be mitigated

e) the timescales over which these reforms should take place.

Replacing SQA

SQA has two main roles: accreditation and awarding qualifications.

- **SQA Accreditation** accredits qualifications other than degrees and approves and quality assures awarding bodies that plan to enter people for these qualifications.
- **SQA Awarding Body** devises and develops national and vocational qualifications across schools, colleges, training providers and employers; sets standards and maintains such qualifications; validates qualifications (makes sure they are well written and meet the needs of learners and practitioners); reviews qualifications to ensure they are up to date; arranges for, assists in, and carries out, the assessment of people taking SQA qualifications; quality-assures education and training establishments which offer SQA qualifications; and issues certificates to candidates.

Within both of these roles, SQA offers a range of services for businesses and training providers, ranging from course and centre approval through customised awards, to endorsement, credit rating and licensing services.

16. Please share any comments or suggestions you have on this proposed reform below.
We are particularly interested in hearing your views on:

a) the approach this reform should take (for example could a function be carried out elsewhere)

b) the opportunities these reforms could present (for example should more prominence be given to an aspect of SQA's role)

c) the risks associated with any reform (for example loss of income, confusion as to system of awards in Scotland)

d) how any risks might be mitigated

e) the timescales over which these reforms should take place.

Considering the Establishment of a new Curriculum and Assessment Agency

The establishment of new Agency has the potential to enhance the quality of teaching and learning across the education sector. It will be important that the remit, purpose, governance and culture of the new agency match the aspirations of the system it will be designed to serve. We are therefore interested in the role of the new agency, its relationship with other parts of the system including the Scottish Ministers and how we will know it has been successful.

17. Please share any comments or suggestions you have on this proposed reform below.
We are particularly interested in hearing your views on:

a) the approach this reform should take (for example are there alternative models for this reform?)

b) the opportunities these reforms could present (for example what should the role of the new agency be?)

c) the risks associated with any reform

d) how any risks might be mitigated

e) the timescales over which these reforms should take place.