



# the National Parent Forum of Scotland

*Evidence to the Education and Culture Committee  
Curriculum for Excellence: New Highers  
January 2015*

## **Introduction**

1.1 The National Parent Forum of Scotland (NPFS) welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence for the Committee's inquiry into the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence and the new Highers.

1.2 NPFS has been working closely with parents and other partners to help support the introduction of the new qualifications, and has been listening to and representing the views of parents on the progress that has been made. We have contributed to a range of national working groups including the Tackling Bureaucracy group and the Curriculum for Excellence Management Board, and held our own working group on assessment and reporting. We are also participating in leadership events for both primary and secondary head-teachers to help agencies, schools and local authorities understand the needs of parents.

1.3 We engage with parents through focus groups held throughout the year, and also gather parents' views through local events, quarterly forum meetings, and at our annual conference. This evidence is based on the views of NPFS representatives who responded to our request for information.

## **New Highers and implementation of Curriculum for Excellence**

2.1 Our view is that some of the issues around the implementation of the Nationals and the new Highers are underpinned by a more fundamental issue about Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). NPFS supports the principles of CfE, but believe that there is a risk that CfE's aim of delivering personalisation and cross-curricular learning is not being fulfilled. This is a concern that we raised in our evidence to the Committee on the Draft Budget 2015-16, and is also reflected in the report of the CfE working group on Tackling Bureaucracy which stated that: "The overwhelming perception from those interviewed is that CfE has not turned out the way it was intended. Many [teachers] spoke of still liking the principles and theory behind CfE but that the process of implementation has lost sight of some of these principles. In particular the levels of assessment and the new exams in S4 [were problematic]."

Personalisation was intended to improve young people's learning experience by spreading out learning over three years in the Senior Phase, rather than the previous situation where Highers were crammed into one year (S5 for the majority). Senior Phase was also intended to provide scope for wider learning opportunities beyond the attainment of qualifications, but there is little evidence that this is happening. Parents and learners have said that they are uncertain whether college and universities are adapting their entrance requirements to reflect the principles of the Senior Phase.

2.2 Parents have reported that teachers seem to be under pressure due to delivering the new Higher courses while at the same time there are still issues to be resolved around the Nationals. NPFS representatives have told us over-assessment is still appears to be a problem. If teachers are overworked and uncertain, this could have a negative impact on pupils' learning experiences, and if pupils and teachers are unclear about what they are doing then this lack of clarity will be reflected in their communications with parents.

There seems to be a particular issue with Highers for completely new subjects. One of NPFS' local representatives told us that "there is even more uncertainty and negativity coming from teachers [in relation to] these totally new subjects".

These concerns are reflected in evidence from the EIS and other teaching unions. In a letter to the previous Cabinet Secretary for Education, the EIS wrote that "teachers are increasingly concerned regarding the lack of clear information regarding the new Higher courses, the content of the new Higher exams (in some subjects), the lack of resource material to support the learning and teaching process in the classroom, and the demanding workload implications of attempting to prepare for new Higher exams whilst implementing new National 1-5 qualifications."<sup>1</sup>

2.3 Parents want to help support their child's learning, particularly at exam time. Although parental involvement is valued by schools and is recognised as having a major impact on children's learning<sup>2</sup>, many parents feel that they have not been sufficiently involved in the decisions about which Highers are being offered, and they do not have enough information about what is happening.

A local NPFS representative told us that "few parents have had any information about the new Higher... [at] schools which are doing both old and new Highers this year the parents have had no information (other than from their child) as to which Highers their child is being presented for. There is a high number of parents who are unaware there actually is a change to Highers."

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.eis.org.uk/public.asp?id=2430>

<sup>2</sup> For a summary of recent research on the impact of parental involvement, see <http://engagingwithfamilies.co.uk/strategy/positive-outcomes/>

Further confusion has been caused by the fact that it is down to individual schools to decide whether they are delivering old or new Highers this year. Parents and learners are unclear as to why, for instance, one school is still offering old Highers, whereas another one in the same town has decided to offer all new Highers. Better communication between schools, parents and pupils is required so that all parties are involved in the decision-making process and are clear about what is happening and why.

2.4 In particular, there is a lack of clear, easily accessible information for parents on the new Highers. NPFS supports the comment in the Tackling Bureaucracy working group's report that the SQA website needs to be easier to navigate. Information should be presented in a way that makes sense to learners and parents. For example, it is currently quite difficult to locate information on the new Highers, as this appears under 'New National Qualification Subjects', which parents may find confusing as they will see National qualifications as only relating to Nationals 1-5, not Highers. Moreover, once you access the parents' information pages there is very little currently available information on the new Highers. It may well be that there are plans to update the information but it is unfortunate that there is nothing currently available as many parents will be looking for this now as prelims are underway in many schools and parents will be looking for this information now to support their children to revise, as exams start in April.

2.5 Parents have told us that they are worried about the lack of resources and study material. One local representative told us:

"We are struggling to get any practice papers for subjects, or marking schemes. You can get plenty of old Higher resources, but the gradings are different. Teachers are rehashing old material, trying to make it work. The new Higher has potential but not enough time or money has been put in place to make it work."

Another local representative reported the following:

"Trying to order resources for new Higher Graphic Communications on Amazon, received the following:

'Linton, Peter "Course Notes - CfE Higher Graphic Communication Course Notes" Estimated arrival date: November 04 2015 - November 06 2015.'

2.6 Specimen papers and marking instructions are available for each new Higher, but some parents are concerned that this is insufficient. The creation of a bank of questions, from which the exam questions could be randomly selected, might be more helpful, as that way pupils could see the full range of potential questions.

2.7 Arguably, the lack of study materials could create an unfair advantage for pupils sitting old Highers, as they will have access to a range of past papers and other resources. Some schools have been advising that the questions in

the new Higher exams may be similar to those for the old Highers, but again, this is causing confusion and uncertainty.

2.8 The continuous assessment requirements in new Higher subjects is something that many learners welcome. However, one local representative told us that they are concerned about the impact that continuous assessment is having on some learners. The representative told us that:

“In practice, [continuous assessment] seems to be putting students under way too much pressure to perform... This will of course vary from student to student depending upon the individual subjects they have chosen, resulting in some learners being under more stress than others, but typically, unless schools co-ordinate the timing of the individual subject demands and to an extent "control" choices to ensure that not too many of the more demanding subjects are taken (I mean "demanding" in terms of the amount of material which has to be submitted throughout the year), we could be putting our students under intolerable stress.”

## **Conclusion**

3.1 NPFS supports the introduction of the new Highers, but we have concerns about the way in which they are being implemented. In particular, the lack of available study materials, and the postcode lottery in terms of whether old or new Highers are being offered in schools, is creating confusion and worry for parents and learners. Teachers' lack of certainty about the new courses, on top of on-going issues around the implementation of Nationals 1-5, could have an adverse impact on young people's learning. Parents are uncertain about what is happening and there are concerns about the impact on learners, both in terms of this lack of clarity and in relation to practical issues such as the availability of study materials and the amount of continuous assessment involved. More fundamentally, there is a risk that that the aims of Curriculum for Excellence - personalised, cross-curricular learning which places the child's interests and needs at the centre – are being lost sight of, as some of the problems that parents have raised with us about the new Highers suggests.

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