



SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

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Qualifications, Assessment and Curriculum Division

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GUIDANCE ON FLEXIBILITY IN THE CURRICULUM

Dear Colleague

Introduction

1. Flexibility in the delivery of the curriculum is essential if teachers, schools and education authorities are to meet the needs and wishes of all pupils. While the 5-14 curriculum guidelines have previously allowed for some flexibility, the focus of this guidance is to clarify and strengthen these arrangements. Ministers are keen to encourage education authorities to review their current approaches to flexibility and innovation in the curriculum. The intention is to ensure that schools and teachers are in a position to take advantage of the full range of existing flexibility in order that all young people have the opportunity to achieve their full potential.

2. This circular:

- sets out the flexibility available around and within current curriculum guidelines and arrangements for national qualifications; and
- explains new procedures which HM Inspectorate of Education will use when inspecting schools which have taken advantage of this flexibility.

3. While this circular concentrates on the 5-14 curriculum, the general principles in terms of flexibility and a focus on outcomes apply equally to the curriculum for pre-school education and for those in post-14 education.

4. The distribution of the circular meets a recommendation made by the Discipline Task Force regarding the provision of guidance to all schools on the degree of curricular flexibility available within current guidelines to enable them to take account of local circumstances and meet individual pupil needs.

Flexibility within Guidelines

5. The *5-14 Curriculum Guidelines* along with *Curriculum Design for the Secondary Stages: Guidelines for Schools* give advice on an appropriate curriculum framework for primary and secondary schools. They draw on existing effective practice in schools and have been developed through a process of considerable consultation with Education Authorities, interested individuals and organisations. They contain guidance on the structure and balance of the curriculum with indications of suggested time allocations for the different areas of the curriculum.

6. Within both sets of guidelines there is provision for flexibility with 20% of time in primary school and the first 2 years of secondary school unallocated. In S3 and S4 the flexibility factor is 30%. In addition, the 5-14 guidelines recognise that at different stages and for different purposes different allocations of time will be appropriate. There is no single curriculum structure that covers the wide variety of school contexts. For example in the early stages of primary school significantly more time than the suggested 35% may be spent on language and mathematics while in P6 and P7 aspects of Environmental Studies may require an increased time allocation.

7. Similarly, Circular 6/99 previously emphasised the importance of flexibility within the curriculum. Up to now, teachers may not have taken full advantage of such flexibility. This circular builds on previous guidance by reinforcing the flexibility available to teachers and encouraging full implementation of these arrangements.

Flexibility around Guidelines

8. Guidelines on curriculum content and delivery are an attempt, through a degree of standardisation of inputs to education, to ensure the provision of a high standard of education for all pupils. The Executive believes that the principles underpinning the 5-14 guidelines of Breadth, Balance, Coherence, Continuity and Progression will remain appropriate for the delivery of high quality education provision.

9. However, recent attention from many people in the education system has focussed on an outcome-based model for education. The National Priorities for education, shown in Annex A, were set by order of the Scottish Parliament in December 2000. These are the priority outcomes which will be the focus of attention in schools over the next three years. They will underpin the Improvement Plans which local authorities will publish by December 2001, which will in turn form the basis for each school's development plan, due to be published by 2002. Performance measures and indicators related to these priorities will be published in the autumn.

10. The advantage of a focus on outcomes rather than inputs is that it removes the bureaucratic burden of attempts to raise standards through detailed control of the inputs to school education. While a high-quality, broad and balanced education will result if the *5-14 Curriculum Guidelines* and *Curriculum Design for the Secondary Stages: Guidelines for Schools* are implemented well, it is unreasonable to suggest that they are the *only* model capable of delivering that end result.

11. Local authorities in their improvement plans and schools in their development plans will have to address how they will achieve the highest possible standards against all of the national priority areas. For their particular local circumstances, they may have an approach to offer which does not follow the detail of curriculum guidelines.

Criteria for innovation around guidelines and school inspection

12. HM Inspectors of Education use the 5-14 guidelines as a basis for their inspections of schools. As a further encouragement to flexibility, HMIE have now agreed the new criteria which will be applied to instances of curricular innovation. These are that:

- there should be clearly identified educational gain for pupils based on a clear rationale and objectives and consistent with the National Priorities;
- there should be full consultation with stakeholders (including parents, teachers and pupils) and consensus before proposals are introduced; and
- rigorous quality assurance arrangements should be in place to monitor and evaluate the proposals and their implementation against the objectives and the results of these evaluations should be made available to the key stakeholders; and,
- there should be well planned implementation using development plans and action plans.

13. These criteria will come into operation with immediate effect. Innovative approaches to the content and delivery of the curriculum which fulfil the above criteria will be welcomed, and judged on their merits in terms of the outcomes achieved.

Particular Effects of Curriculum Flexibility

14. The encouragement of flexibility in the delivery of the curriculum has important implications for all teachers and all pupils. However, there are some areas of school education curriculum where flexibility will have particular effects. These are set out below.

Discipline and Behaviour

15. The report of the Discipline Task Group published in June of this year identified an inappropriate curriculum as one of a number of barriers to learning experienced by disaffected young people. It endorsed the use of more appropriate curriculum management to support not only some of the specific needs of pupils with social, emotional and behavioural problems, but also a much broader range of pupils who experienced boredom and lack of inspiration in school.

Guidance to New Community Schools

16. The New Community Schools Prospectus issued in 1998 offered support to approaches which were radical and designed to secure a step change in the attainment of children. It encouraged adjustment to the curriculum when it could be demonstrated that a better education and experience would be offered for those pupils concerned and student potential maximised. It also suggested the adoption of styles of learning and teaching (possibly including active learning and informal education techniques) to ensure that an appropriate and stimulating curriculum is accessible to all students.

Standard Grade and New National Qualifications

17. The Scottish Qualifications Authority sets down detailed conditions in respect of the presentation of candidates for examinations including 'Age and Stage' restrictions which until April 1999 required students to be at stage S4 at least, or reach 16 in that calendar year, before presentation for Standard Grade; and S5 or 17 for Highers. Following a wide ranging consultation exercise arrangements were revised to enable pupils from the 1999-00 session to take external assessments for Standard Grade in S3 and new National Qualifications in S4. This flexibility enables the most able pupils to make more rapid progress while making it easier for less able pupils to gain qualifications before leaving school.

18. The new National Qualifications offer coherent progression routes between qualifications and some schools may decide to replace some or all Standard Grade provision with these courses where appropriate. For example, some schools have already after consultation with stakeholders, decided that it would best meet the needs of its pupils to offer the range of new National Qualifications in place of some or all Standard Grade courses with Intermediate 1 or 2 being offered in S3 and Higher in S4. Access courses may be of use in meeting the needs of the pupils for whom a wide range of Standard Grade courses would be too demanding.

Modern Languages

19. SED Circular 1178/89 as amended by Circular 2/90 provides guidance on the provision of modern languages in Scottish schools and states that the study of at least one language other than English, and preferably of a modern European foreign language, should normally be pursued by all pupils throughout the third and fourth years of compulsory secondary school. The Report of the Action Group on Languages have recommended an entitlement for all within education 5-16 with a suggested example for how that entitlement can be achieved. Using this entitlement package for language education strengthens current provision by offering a flexible approach to language learning which can be adapted to suit local circumstances and individual needs. It puts pupils needs at the centre of languages policy by outlining clearly what they can expect to see made available in their school. By giving pupils an entitlement to education in a modern language but not compelling such study schools, pupils and parents should be in the best possible position to ensure that the needs of each pupil are met appropriately.

20. Please send a copy of this circular to the Headteacher of each school in your area.



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National Priorities

- (1) To raise standards of educational attainment for all in schools, especially in the core skills of literacy and numeracy, and to achieve better levels in national measures of achievement including examination results;
- (2) to support and develop the skills of teachers, the self-discipline of pupils and to enhance school environments so that they are conducive to teaching and learning;
- (3) to promote equality and help every pupil benefit from education, with particular regard paid to pupils with disabilities and special educational needs, and to Gaelic and other lesser used languages;
- (4) to work with parents to teach pupils respect for self and one another and their interdependence with other members of their neighbourhood and society and to teach them the duties and responsibilities of citizenship in a democratic society; and
- (5) to equip pupils with the foundation skills, attitudes and expectations necessary to prosper in a changing society and to encourage creativity and ambition.