

An exploration of the school level curriculum making practices of secondary schools in the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence.

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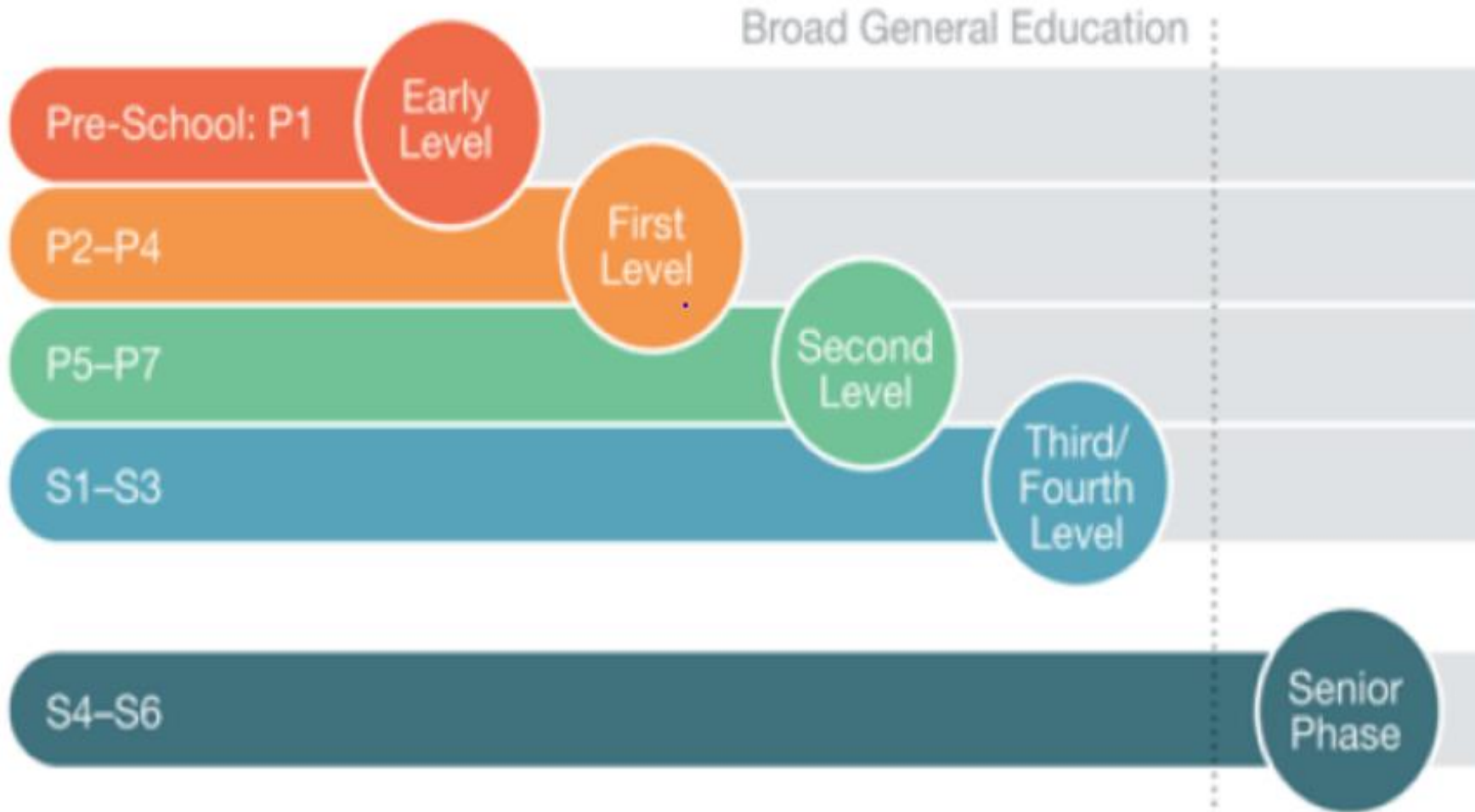
UNIVERSITY *of*  
STIRLING 

The logo for the University of Stirling, consisting of the text "UNIVERSITY of STIRLING" in a black serif font, with the word "of" in italics, followed by the university's crest which is a shield with a crown on top and a wavy base.

# Aims of the qualitative strand:

- To generate a robust evidence-base about the role of key stakeholders in the curriculum making process.
- To develop an enhanced understanding of the factors that shape curriculum making at school level.

# Context: BGE and Senior Phase



# Methodology

## **Qualitative data collection**

Iterative design informed by the survey findings.

### ➤ **Focus Groups**

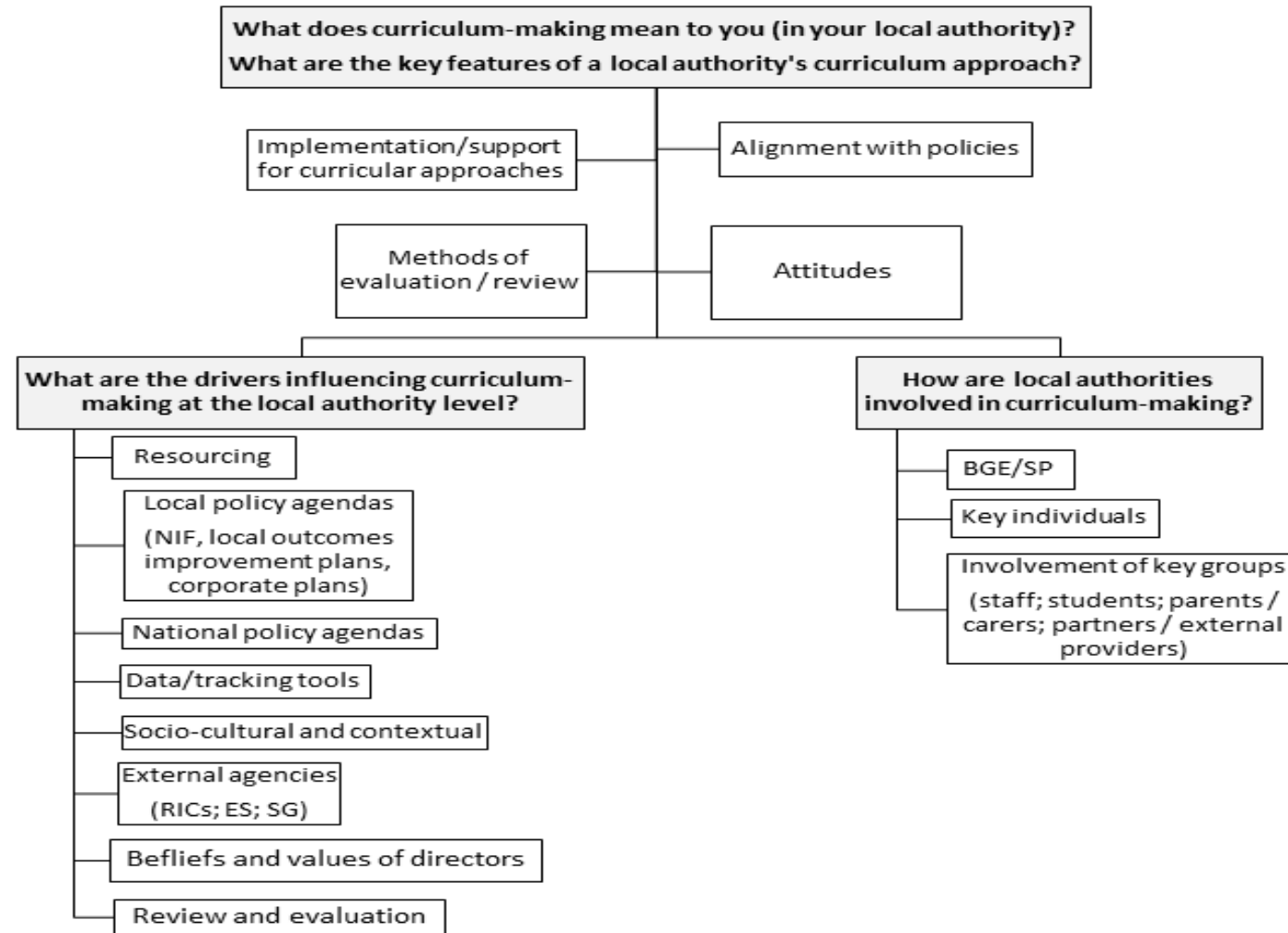
21 national level focus groups with key stakeholders.

### ➤ **Case Studies**

- Case study selection: diverse characteristics e.g. geography, SES and curricular approach.
- 6 schools were selected from the survey data. All schools are willing to participate in the research, but case studies have been postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic and will commence October 2021.
- In-depth interviews with Headteachers, curriculum leaders and pupil support staff. Focus groups with subject teachers, parents and young people.

# Hierarchical Focusing

[Hierarchical focusing – focus group map](#)



# Data Analysis



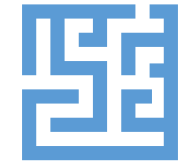
## **Focus groups**

MS Teams video recordings and interview notes are manually coded to identify key themes. Comparisons are made within and across focus groups to identify recurring themes.



## **Case studies**

All data will be analysed using a constructivist grounded theory approach consisting of:-1] open coding of data to generate themes and rich descriptive accounts of each context; and 2] the application of heuristics to develop an understanding of the range of cultural, structural, material and individual factors, which shape curriculum making.



# Emerging themes at school level

Flexibility

Equity

Attainment

Curriculum narrowing

Conceptualisation

Teacher agency

Trust

# Flexibility

- Flexibility in the curriculum is welcomed by teachers. Teachers value the fact that schools can adapt their curriculum to fit local contexts e.g. urban/rural economies and to meet the needs of their learners. However, Directors of Education, Teachers and students have expressed concern that regional variation in provision will impact on student equity at national level.
- Young people stated that they would welcome greater flexibility in the senior phase in terms of course content and wider attainment .



# Equity

- Concern was expressed across all groups that variation in the implementation of CfE will impact student equity, for example, access to courses.
- Variations in courses could impact on young people moving school and on educational outcomes due to the types of knowledge they have access to.
- Some young people reported that the number of the National Qualifications they could study was limited compared to their peers in other schools.

# Attainment

- Attainment is the main factor driving curriculum making in the senior phase. Many staff view the attainment agenda as a barrier to curriculum innovation because of the culture of accountability, in which they reported to operate.
- Attainment is the primary measure used to judge a school during inspection and in virtual comparator school data.
- Young people also report that exams dominate the senior phase and that they feel under pressure to attain.

# Attainment

- Teachers reported that fear of 'non-compliance' is limiting curriculum innovation. Teachers are reluctant to take risks because of the potential impact on attainment and inspection outcomes. This manifests in 'teaching to the test' in the senior phase.
- Learners reported that they did not enjoy the senior phase as much as the BGE because their learning was focused on the exam syllabus/technique and memorisation.

# Curriculum narrowing

- Young people stated that subject choice is more limited as they enter the senior phase and that they can't study the breadth of subjects they would like e.g. subjects for experience/enjoyment.
- There is a 'backwash' to the BGE whereby learners must select the subjects they will study at Higher level early in their school career. This was particularly pronounced in young people who need specific subjects for university entry.

# Conceptualisation

- There is consensus amongst teaching staff that CfE guidance is vague and full of ambiguous jargon. Teachers cited the need for greater conceptualisation and clarity re. terminology such as 'teacher agency' and 'autonomy' to ensure shared meaning amongst the teaching community.
- A lack of shared conceptualisation was also reported in terms of assessing CfE levels and learner progression. Teachers highlighted that this was particularly problematic in terms of transition from primary to secondary school and when making decisions about which level of National Qualifications to enter young people into as judgement varied between staff/departments.

# Teacher Agency

- Staff welcome the 'agency' afforded to them by CfE but identified the need for greater ITE/professional learning to empower teachers in their role as 'curriculum makers'.
- Teachers also report that greater non-contact time is required to spend time developing the curriculum.

# Trust

- Teaching staff and young people reported a lack of trust for educational bodies such as the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). They reported mixed messaging, poor communication and a disconnect between bureaucracy and the realities of the classroom.



## Concluding Remarks/Questions:

Further analysis is required across all strands of the project.

Many of our findings align with those of the recent OECD review of Scottish education and the OECD review of qualifications by Professor Gordon Stobart.

What are the implications of our research for curriculum-making?  
How is the qualifications system in Scotland likely to be reformed?