Large scale national curriculum reform is a prominent feature of education systems internationally. In particular, many countries are seeing a shift from national curricula framed around the prescriptive specification of content to approaches that emphasise the development of so-called 21st century skills, child centred pedagogy and the central role of teachers as active curriculum makers in their local contexts. Research in multiple contexts indicates that this process has been far from unproblematic; in particular, there is emerging evidence that many systems do not have the capacity to undertake reform of this nature, and the nature of accountability systems appears to often undermine the intentions set out in national policies.

This seminar, hosted by the Stirling Network for Curriculum Studies, the Curriculum Journal, BERA and the British Curriculum Forum, addresses these issues. The seminar first focuses on the widespread trend across education systems to afford autonomy to schools – exemplified in Scotland by the empowered schools agenda. The first session features two speakers: Mark Priestley offering a critique of the empowerment agenda that draws on theoretical and empirical work on teacher agency; and Stavroula Philippou providing a case study of a system that has focused on teacher autonomy for over 15 years. In the second session, the seminar shifts its focus to the issue of how large scale curriculum reform might be supported: Claire Sinnema will draw on her work on international curricular trends to explore worldwide trends in curriculum reform; and Tiina Soini will illustrate how Finland has addressed the need for practitioners to make sense of new policy, thus understanding the differences between the old and the new.