



University
of Glasgow

Where next for Scottish Education:

Creating tomorrow's education for today

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**WORLD
CHANGING
GLASGOW**

Understanding the challenge

This is our third paper on the future of Scottish education.

Our first two contributions, *Learning is Scotland's Future* and *Leading from the Classroom* focussed on the here and now of the immediate challenges facing the system. In this paper we direct our gaze more firmly into the future. Previously, we have argued that Scottish education is at a crossroads, but we increasingly believe that the very nature of education in Scotland and more widely is about to take a radical departure from the current position. Put simply, we are experiencing a version of what the late Sir Ken Robinson called a paradigm shift.



It is our contention that we are entering a new phase of global history. The recent pandemic combined with existential opportunities and challenges, all conspire to make the planet a very different place to a world of relative stability where incremental change and improvement tended to be the order of the day. Climate change, geopolitical uncertainties, an enhanced threat of nuclear conflict, global financial crises, mass population displacement and the emergence of artificial intelligence have huge implications for our future lives and therefore for how we educate our young people.

Teaching has always been a challenging and rewarding profession, but recent times have taken the challenges to an unprecedented level. Unfortunately, there is no crystal ball with the ability to second guess the future, but it is very likely that schools and education systems will look radically different sooner rather than later. We don't know how they will look different, but it is our view that change will be driven by technology and changes in global circumstances at an unprecedented pace.

And these changes are already with us. For example, there are signs that the social contract between families and schools is at breaking point. For some families, attendance at schools has become optional. In January 2025 STV reported statistics stating that 180,000 pupils missed a day of schooling every two weeks and a further 71,852 pupils missed a day of school every week. For others, part-time schooling is on the agenda with some local authorities considering the feasibility of four-day weeks. Furthermore, technology is proving itself to be an alluring and plausible alternative for the many rather than the few. As connectivity becomes more ubiquitous, virtual provision may become a more equitable alternative. This is compounded by, and accelerated through, the emergence of new possibilities afforded by generative artificial intelligence. Young people increasingly have myriad new opportunities to construct learning experiences in any place at any time. Not only is change happening now, it is gathering momentum and will only accelerate.

The technological nature and pace of change has significant implications for addressing issues of inequity. For example, if some sectors (e.g. private sector), or some contexts (e.g. those serving more advantaged communities) embrace technology while others resist it is likely that educational inequities will increase at a faster pace than we are currently experiencing. Put simply, we need ubiquitous engagement if there is to be any chance of tackling growing inequities.

In 2001, the OECD set out four scenarios for the future of schooling, arguing that there are many paths to the future. These scenarios were revisited during the initial year of school lockdown (OECD¹) with greater emphasis on technology and flexibility. In the five years since lockdowns, we have seen some of the additional harms of pandemic play out across the population. The global challenges have intensified further, once again shifting the goalposts and raising the level of challenge.

The OECD's first scenario presents its most conservative and perhaps reassuring picture of the future: schooling is extended with the support of technology, but schools and their supporting systems remain as we know them today. The second equates to the further neo-liberalisation of education where markets drive the digitalisation of education while choice and diversity of educational providers all prevail. The third sees the rise of place-based approaches as the norm where initiatives such as Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland move from interesting, outlier initiatives into the mainstream; schools are the key anchor organisations pulling services and communities together. The final scenario is the most radical departure from the current situation. This scenario envisages an educational revolution where digitalisation redefines education into a set of activities where learning can take place in any situation without the need for schools or school systems.

These scenarios are not intended to be predictive or mutually exclusive; any elements or number of them may coexist at any one time. Alternatively, the scenarios could be seen as a continuum whereby the first, the closest to the current set of arrangements evolves into the second and third and so on. Despite this uncertainty, it seems that the scenarios are a helpful starting point to think about what the future may (or may not) hold. They challenge us to consider what might be done to shape the future rather than being shaped by constantly responding to events.

In this paper we draw on evidence and insights from our experience to reflect on what the Scottish education system could put in place to navigate these uncharted waters. Encouragingly, aspects of such steps already exist, providing a platform for more radical reform.

In the next section we move on to consider what needs to be done to take a proactive stance in an unpredictable world. The third section concludes by considering the culture and mindset required to make this a reality.

¹OECD (2020), Back to the Future of Education: Four OECD Scenarios for Schooling, Educational Research and Innovation, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/178ef527-en>.

Navigating the future: Getting the right pieces in the right place



We believe that the essential starting point for educational success lies in **having a clear, common purpose that is founded on shared values and is rooted in the reality of schools and classrooms.**

A strong case can be made for the extent to which the early years of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) stood up well to these tests. It represented a radical change in thinking about the purpose of schools. It reflected a new approach to designing a curriculum for all young people at all ages. It commanded both professional and political support. It gave much greater agency to schools to translate purpose into classroom reality and, it excited international interest as seen, for example, in how successive OECD reviews of Scottish education affirmed broad support for CfE as a significant reform. However, while there appears to remain broad support for the principles of CfE, it remains very much as unfinished business in terms of its sustained impact on schools and their pupils. As a reform CfE, suffers from what Michael Barber² termed “*controversy without impact*”, when a bold reform lacks high quality execution.

The hardest parts of any reform lie in **remaining true to original purposes and sustaining momentum** in the face of inevitable issues of implementation and of fresh political challenges. If the purposes underpinning reforms are not sufficiently embedded in professional and political cultures then, little by little, they can mutate into forms that fail to reflect original intention. We believe that the evolution of CfE reflects such a process and that the starting point for any future progress should lie in a reaffirmation/reappraisal of purpose.

The context for such a reappraisal is very different from that of twenty years ago when CfE was being conceived and developed: globalisation is in retreat; the very existence of liberal democracy is being questioned; and sustainability in the face of a climate crisis has become paramount. Beliefs that can be traced back to the Scottish Enlightenment are being challenged. At the same time, the digital revolution is affecting how we live, work and relate and its implications for teaching and learning and for the wellbeing of our young people are becoming ever clearer. CfE's approach to developing capacities in young people may sit well with this uncertainty, but their form and elaboration in curriculum design demands fresh thinking.

If purpose is to become reality, we also need to ensure that **what we assess, and certificate reflects our original intentions.** Arguably, the limited impact of CfE in secondary schools can be significantly attributed to a failure to see its principles embedded in national assessment and examination systems. In following through the philosophy of the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment (Hayward Report)³, it will be important to preserve its emphases on broadening the scope of assessment and certification to reflect the realities of the emerging educational context. The uncertainties outlined in the first section of this paper may well lead some to caution against adopting the broad philosophy of the review. It is our view, however, that significant changes to the Scottish qualification system are needed and that the Hayward proposals are a good starting point. Indeed there are signs that interesting developments are already occurring from the ground up.

²Barber, M. (2007) *An Instruction to Deliver*. London: Politico.

³Scottish Government (2023) *It's our future: Report of the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government

Making it happen

all create a complex mix within which schools and teachers work. We envisage seven steps that could create a more dynamic approach to policymaking that can bridge the gap with the classroom and thus the learning and wellbeing of young people.

First - If we are to translate exciting possibilities into school reality, we need a **collaborative approach to determining purpose and direction**.

This approach can build from the curriculum review currently in train but needs to go further and faster. A reimagined Education Scotland should continue to be in the lead in providing the forum within which all the key stakeholders can engage with the very complex issues that surround curriculum purposes. The engagement strategy employed in the Hayward review of assessment and qualifications, enhanced through citizen assembly approaches, could provide useful means of securing broad involvement and ownership of purpose. Digital communication opens up possibilities for participation in ways that transcend traditional or superficial forms of 'consultation'.

We have argued in the previous section that the key to future success lies in determining and sustaining purpose based on strong values and a willingness to think creatively. In this section, we consider more directly what may be needed to translate intention into reality.

Education policy has become an increasingly politicised and contested area. Ideology, vested interests, societal changes and economic constraints

Of course, ultimate responsibility for setting the direction and ensuring delivery must rest with the elected government of the day. However, good government can only benefit from a deliberative process that engages the hopes and the capacities of everyone with the interests of Scottish young people at heart. Enhanced participation in determining and pursuing purpose can provide Ministers with the advice and evidence they need to set expectations, secure resources, establish support and oversee progress.

Second - The principle of **subsidiarity** that we explored in *Leading from the Classroom* should be more entrenched in our educational culture. The closer decision-making is to the realities of the classroom, the more the focus will be on the needs of young people and the specifics of learning and teaching. The challenge for policy is to secure ownership of and commitment to overall, national purposes and to create the conditions that will facilitate, animate and inform their realisation in practice. Mechanisms that create easy access to

innovative thinking in ways that can translate into classroom reality lie at the heart of embedding impactful reform. Not outside in but through collaboration and interaction. Reform becomes authoritative and persuasive when it is purpose-driven, co-owned and relates directly to the specifics of the daily lives of teachers and pupils.

Third - Meeting the challenges facing our schools today and going forward will require sure-footed leadership at all levels. That means **getting the right leadership in the right places**. Change does not happen solely through policy mandates or robust accountability. We need to invest in building leadership capacity that is rooted in shared values and knows how to build support for agreed purposes across different types of boundaries, contexts and professions to create a Networked Learning System⁴. We also need to apply the subsidiarity principle in ways that respect differing levels of decision making, placing trust in the professionalism and capability of those in key leadership positions at all levels of the system.

⁴Madrid Miranda, R. and Chapman, C. (2024) Towards a network learning system: reflections on a university initial teacher education and school-based collaborative initiative in Chile, *Professional Development in Education*, 50:4, 760-774, DOI: 10.1080/19415257.2021.1902840



Fourth - There needs to be an **unrelenting focus on supporting the professional learning of teachers and other players who guide and support the learning and wellbeing of our young people**. There can be no real change without the wholehearted support of the teaching profession and the wider educational community. Educators have a professional responsibility to act in the best interests of all children and young people. A teacher's job has always been challenging but the extent and nature of fresh demands require fresh thinking. Put simply, the quality of education reflects the quality of the workforce.

A curriculum that gives scope for local interpretation and elaboration together with greater devolution of responsibility and decision-making place different demands on professional knowledge and expertise. The 2010 report, *Teaching Scotland's Future*⁵, envisaged just such an investment in building the confidence and capacity of the teaching profession. While some progress has been made since then, there remains a need to revisit its recommendations and implications in the new emerging context. Fifteen years on *Teaching Scotland's Future* remains unfinished business.

Fifth - We need rigorous and imaginative thinking about how **generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) can enhance learning and teaching while being realistic about its limitations and dangers**. The world round our schools is being transformed by the digital revolution. Young people engage directly with this technology in most aspects of their lives. While caution is of course needed, we should not seek to insulate schools from its potential benefits. GenAI's role in easing aspects of teacher workload is clear but it also presents broader possibilities for enhancing learning and teaching. Its implications for young people to practise and reinforce their learning at a time and place of their own choosing look promising. Furthermore, GenAI also has the potential to provide more detailed diagnostic feedback to teachers and pupils about aspects of learning requiring further support. At its best, the judicious use of artificial intelligence can create the space for more face-to-face contact between teachers and pupils. At its worst, it could lead to a depersonalised and isolated learning environment.

Sixth - We need to **harness the potential of the university sector**. That means reimagining how the university sector intersects with policy and practice. We need to be much more effective at generating new ideas that match the opportunities and challenges in our schools and the changing needs of all our young people. To date, the contribution of Scottish universities to informing and supporting education policy and practice has been marginal. This untapped resource working together with the wider system could reshape how fresh thinking is generated, tested and implemented throughout the system. For example, if the newly established Centre for Teaching Excellence (CfTE) is to be sustainable it must generate the ideas and mobilise the expertise and energy to motivate the profession. The success of the CfTE should be judged on its ability to support the profession to find solutions to emerging challenges faced by schools, society and the economy. Working directly with universities and research organisations in Scotland and beyond, with teachers and with the wider system, the CfTE should generate, harvest and encapsulate fresh and creative thinking about the future of education in an age of turbulence and uncertainty.

And seventh - We need an approach to **accountability that is authoritative and constructive and promotes improvement** in ways that recognise the complexity of the challenges facing our schools. This will require structures and processes that provide ongoing, formative evidence about the reality of our young people's school experience. A reformed and independent Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) is well placed to fulfil such a role. Its inspection programme should be designed to enhance understanding of emerging trends in performance and issues requiring attention in real time. But HMIE should also generate and deploy other forms of evidence to provide a more complete picture and broader commentary than can be gained from inspections alone. There is a case for the various research, evaluation and testing functions to be grouped under an inspectorate that is charged with providing a holistic picture of how far purpose is becoming reality. In that way, the extent to which original purposes are continuing to drive decisions about practice can be monitored and adjustments made timeously.



⁵Donaldson, G (2010) *Teaching Scotland's Future: Report of a review of teacher education in Scotland*, Edinburgh: Scottish Government

The challenge ahead

The impact of all the suggestions we make about the way ahead for Scottish education will depend on fundamental changes in cultures and behaviours. If innate conservatism fuelled by vested interests prevail then nothing will really change.

We have argued that we are on the brink of dramatic developments and that these developments will inevitably require an imaginative and purposeful response from the entire education system. Those in leadership positions with the influence and power to reimagine tomorrow's education system for today have a huge responsibility to be brave, creative and collaborative in setting a compelling agenda. Our young people cannot afford their school experience to be increasingly divorced from the realities of their lives now and in the future.

Our previous papers on where next for Scottish Education are:

Where Next for Scottish Education: Leading from the classroom (March 2024)

Where Next for Scottish Education: Learning is Scotland's future (March 2023)

They can be found at:

Leading from the classroom: glasgow.ac.uk/media/Media_1055704_smxx.pdf

Learning is Scotland's future: glasgow.ac.uk/media/Media_930286_smxx.pdf

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