

Learner Pathways: A key to successful curriculum design

A collaborative project report on what schools, communities and Government can do to support a curriculum designed around each young person.

[Learner Pathways are a key element of Scotland's curriculum design](#)

[Context](#)

[COVID-19](#)

[Overview](#)

[1. OUR PERCEPTION OF SUCCESS IN SCOTTISH SCHOOLS](#)

[Potential solutions](#)

[Intentional planning](#)

[A new story of success in Scotland](#)

[A language of equity](#)

[Group Suggestions](#)

[2. INNOVATIVE CURRICULUM DESIGN](#)

[Potential Curriculum Design Solutions](#)

[Keep balanced with students' needs and interests for as long as possible](#)

[Develop skills and knowledge, together](#)

[Make the pathways and junctions between them clearer](#)

[Ultra local learner pathway design, connected nationally](#)

[Group Suggestions](#)

[3. COLLABORATION](#)

[Collaboration next steps](#)

[Transitions, not trips](#)

[Local Authorities as promoters of a new story](#)

[Deeper, broader partnerships](#)

[Group Suggestions:](#)

[References](#)

[Participants in the Co-design Team](#)

Learner Pathways are a key element of Scotland's curriculum design

Context

In January 2020 Education Scotland engaged [NoTosh](#), a design thinking agency, to collaboratively plan a series of creative curriculum co-design events.

Representatives from local authorities and national partners embarked on three days of curriculum design thinking with school leaders on two themes: Learner Pathways and Interdisciplinary Learning.

For each, a group of approximately 40 school leaders committed their time to reflect, not only on their own context and rationale for their curriculum, but also on how the system as a whole supported and celebrated the diversity of Curriculum for Excellence in action.

This think-piece, collaboratively developed by Education Scotland and NoTosh, is the culmination of the Learner Pathways work. It seeks not only to share and explore the views of the participants, but also their vision for the Scottish education system in the years ahead.

Our thoughts are focused on three key considerations:

- **Our Perception of Success in Scottish Schools**
- **Innovative Curriculum Design**
- **Collaboration**

COVID-19

Our final Learner Pathways engagement sessions took place on 12th March 2020. One week later, on 20th March, schools across Scotland were closed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The pandemic thrust the education systems of the world into a period of radical and almost immediate transformation, causing us to examine our educational structures, both physically and metaphorically. The pace of these changes, far out-with the control of any people, agency or Government, has seen resilience, ingenuity and self-directed learning increase overnight to a level we may never have reached without the impetus of a global crisis. Throughout the first weeks of the crisis, we watched how organisations and their staff have had to use their own skills and innovation to adapt to survive. This ability to cope and adapt to the fragility of 21st century life was a key concept throughout discussions with the Learner Pathways group. Now, more than ever, schools must be places where young people learn and develop a rich knowledge, yes, but also the skills to thrive in a future which is increasingly unpredictable. That learning does not and should not solely sit within the confines and limitations of a subject-based column structure.

Neither should our opportunities in life be solely determined by a couple of key decisions made over two years in a secondary school.

Through real-life experience, we have learned the value that each person contributes to our society. We now know for certain that in times of crisis, a shop assistant or care worker are as valuable to us as our law enforcers or medical professionals and this should be reflected in what we value in Scottish schools today. The learning journey of each child is important and should be valued equally within our system.

‘Skills are central to achieving sustainable, innovation-driven economic growth and social inclusion’, OECD (2020)

Overview

Subject choices and their associated individual qualifications can no longer be seen as the only way to develop a flexible, responsive and changing workforce who are as happy in life as they are in work. From early learning through to adulthood, we need to design learning differently, with an emphasis on increasing the agency of young people in decisions that affect them. We must nurture the skills and attributes they will need to respond to the opportunities and challenges presented to them in a rapidly evolving, and sometimes frightening world.

Some of this learning will be specialised, subject-specific knowledge, but other more ‘informal’ learning is of equal importance and should be valued as such. Measuring school success purely on that which can be easily measured, ‘traditional academia’, is outdated and potentially harmful to the wellbeing of our young people and to the constructs of our society as a whole.

Despite all of the innovative practice brought about through Curriculum for Excellence, the group noted that an element which remains largely unchanged is the way we award qualifications to young people and the type of learning those qualifications reflect. This is an area we have been forced to adapt at pace in our response to the 2020 Covid-19 Pandemic, relying instead on the empowerment of teachers to make professional judgements on the abilities of a young person, rather than measuring what a young person might remember or reproduce in an endpoint exam. For 2020, at least, we have a qualifications system more akin to how we measure progress within our Broad General Education. While cognisance should be given to the fact that this immediate change to qualifications has been traumatic for some young people, their families and their teachers, we might also consider that it is perhaps the nature and urgency of the change, rather than change itself, which has caused the most distress and, in some respects, grief. Perhaps there are positive elements to consider here too.

Young people must be encouraged to develop learning that interests and engages them, as well as it being purposeful for them and schools should not feel threatened to allow them to take

learning in a different direction. They tell us this. The time and opportunity to apply learning in an interdisciplinary way, for example, will enable them to develop confidence and independence and should be seen as being an expectation which is as important as their subject choices.

Partnerships are an essential component to make this degree of choice feasible, along with a shift in mindset about where young people learn, who they learn with and from, and what the output from learning 'should' be.

While many schools represented within the group have taken great strides in providing innovative and diverse pathways for young people in their schools and communities based on their local context, many feel that these are valued less than more 'traditional' pathways, due in part to the current metrics of Scottish education and on the value placed on these metrics by the media, society in general, and in political arenas, both nationally and internationally.

In order to overcome some of these challenges, the group felt that an understanding and reframing of what success looks like in Scotland's schools, clearly shared with all stakeholders and reflected in our metrics would ensure we measure what we value and help us to celebrate the individual growth of each young person.

1. OUR PERCEPTION OF SUCCESS IN SCOTTISH SCHOOLS

What do we value as a system and is that message clear to all and reflected in our metrics? Our curriculum is based around four contexts for learning. When we reflect on where within these contexts our energies lie in our schools, we may each have a different story to tell.

Within an Early Learning and Childcare or Primary setting it may be that learning is, by its very nature, evident across the four contexts. For example, learning may be more interdisciplinary and focused on personal achievement, perhaps led by the curiosity of the child or the whole class, with rich knowledge intertwined.

It is perhaps likely that within a secondary context learning is largely centred around curriculum areas and subjects, even within the Broad General Education (BGE). We reflected on why that might be.

- Is it that children at this stage prefer to learn in a more compartmentalised way and that learning is therefore more effective for the child or young person?
- Or is it that the tight focus in a secondary context has historically always been on 'subject exams', because that is how we are measured as a system?
- Why do many secondary schools reject holistic, interdisciplinary and contextually rich learning, particularly in S1-S3, in favour of learning 'enough' to pass a binary exam in an individual subject?

-
- Is the BGE still viewed as a staging post to get young people ready for the senior phase? Many schools start preparation for qualification courses long before the end of the BGE.

Which of these learning experiences does our system value, and do we measure what we value or place value on the things that are easily measurable?

Our co-design group argues that our current system is split on what it values and it might be difficult to garner the same response to this question, depending on who you speak to. For some, the pressure to achieve '5@5' may be having a direct impact on a school's ability, and occasionally its 'permission', to try a new approach. And the debate on the 'right number' of subjects for learners to take in S4 is reemerging following the Education and Skills Committee Report (Scottish Parliament, 2019). For others, an approach which is more personalised and arguably more successful in meeting the needs of the individual has a perception problem: it is perceived as being held in less esteem by the media or within political arenas than a more 'traditional' route, because it might not accrue the same amount of tariff points.

Potential solutions

Intentional planning

This creates a real dichotomy which the co-design group felt could be eased through a system-wide shared vision of what we want for children and young people for the future - perhaps a blend of contextually rich learning and specialised subject knowledge where neither is seen to usurp the other. Can we ever be truly empowered to take a different route to suit a young person if endpoint exams are our only accountable force?

A new story of success in Scotland

As a system, we focus on August 'Results Day' to show our success, but a statistic does not show the range and depth of learning a young person has engaged with over the course of a year. It does not show the personal growth of a child and how far along their own learner journey they have come. It is only one part of the story, and yet our system focuses on it as our only measure of how and what children are learning, and how effective schools are. It also empowers the media with an easy data set to rank and share both nationally and internationally, but it only tells a small part of Scotland's story. It does not celebrate the success of the system in developing young people who can rise to the challenge of 21st century unpredictability and on the focus we, as a country, have placed on inclusion and wellbeing.

A language of equity

We thought our system language was also seen to be somewhat of a barrier to our definition of success and to the case for parity of esteem. Can we ever honestly say we value a range of experiences and qualifications if we continually seek to measure them against traditional

qualifications and encourage our parents to do the same. For example, consider the language used in this often repeated phrase: “a Foundation Apprenticeship is worth x number of Highers.” Why is this comparison with Highers felt to be necessary or even correct? All experiences need to be valued in their own right based on what they can bring to the life of a young person, be that employment, further training, college or university. Schools and government have a duty to inform parents of all of the options available to a young person and to help them recognise that some of the experiences out-with traditional qualification routes are equally valuable, and at times, perhaps even more so. And we must not forget what our partners might consider to be successful outcomes from learning in Scottish schools –

- workers who show initiative;
- people who can solve problems;
- people who can think creatively;
- team players who can collaborate;
- people who are confident enough to dare to dream.

These are only some of the skills and attributes we must value within our system, alongside rich knowledge within subject areas. There must be room and celebration for both.

Group Suggestions

- Work in collaboration with partners – parents, colleges, employers, universities and others- to create a shared vision for what success looks like for a young person in Scotland.
- Unashamedly take the emphasis from the exam metrics by celebrating other achievements throughout the year, as opposed to focussing on ‘Results Day’ in August.
- Find ways to recognise and award qualifications that rely on the continuous assessment of young people’s progress and the professional judgement of teachers, rather than on what she or he can remember or reproduce at a given point in time. The innovations borne out of 2020’s events give us an opportunity to reflect and question if there are alternative approaches to assessment in the years to come.
- Review systems and system language to value and support all pathways.
- Recognise that raw statistics do not represent the holistic growth and abilities of a child.
- Develop teachers’ professional skills in planning for learning that enables young people’s skills and capacities to be developed and recognised as much as their knowledge.

-
- Work collaboratively with cross party politicians and the media to support looking beyond results data and league tables as the measure of young people's achievements and the capabilities of their teachers.
 - Test how reporting through the Four Capacities, broken down into skills, can be used to inform a learner's portfolio.

2. INNOVATIVE CURRICULUM DESIGN

Curriculum for Excellence places learners at the heart of education and gives permission for the curriculum to be designed with the learner and the local context in mind. This flexible approach is something which might be considered easier to do within an Early Learning and Childcare or Primary context due to the freedom of a less structured school day. Secondary schools are, of course, different. We recognised that subject areas vie with each other for time and for the ultimate prize of uptake within the Senior Phase. In most cases, from S1, a young person's learning is mainly seen as separated, with learning not directed from the need or the enthusiasm of the learner or the class, but by the bell. This logistical arrangement is carefully divided ahead of time and young people develop their skills in individual areas with the support of a subject specialist.

This traditional column structure allows some degree of equity to subject areas, but it is fairly inflexible, making interdisciplinary learning, for example, problematic to plan and deliver. The irregularity of interdisciplinary learning can also make project-based work seem tokenistic or contrived for all concerned. However, this opportunity for discovery, experimentation and fun is exciting and challenging to young people, helping to authentically contextualise subject knowledge, develop new knowledge and build their broader skillset. As such, we must continue to consider ways to 'carve out' possibilities, especially, though not exclusively, across the expanse of the broad general education.

Potential Curriculum Design Solutions

Keep balanced with students' needs and interests for as long as possible

Personalised learner pathways should be the norm, not the exception. A broad, general education doesn't mean one size fits all. On the contrary, the first few years of secondary school should help young people dive deep into what they know they already love and discover new learning. Schools' options for young people at this early stage have to balance what they feel young people need to know, with opportunities and the time and space for them to pursue their interests and to experience new areas of interest, too.

As a young person progresses through secondary school, the opportunities should widen, not narrow. Partnerships with a range of partners including local employers and colleges are key to the development of the skills and attributes needed for lifelong learning, but these experiences should also contribute to the portfolio of overall success for a young person.

Develop skills and knowledge, together

Effective learner pathways are about a unique learner journey which values the young person in their entirety, not just their 'academic' ability. It is about developing skills which are transferable

and that our young people can articulate. It is also about realising passion, raising individual aspiration and developing an understanding of self. Learners will be interested in what they are learning because they will have helped to shape that learning. Their appetite for personal research, project planning and problem solving will bring them to class curious and enquiring, ready to deepen their understanding. They will consider themselves as lifelong learners.

Make the pathways and junctions between them clearer

It may appear that choices are 'clear' within the Senior Phase: training, work, college or university, yet behind each of these broad titles lie a multitude of pathways. This wealth of information can appear too vast to comprehend for many young people and, at times, their schools. We felt that, as a system, we must make more visible links to help families begin to map out a clear, personalised learner journey. This should have a clear focus beyond simply a positive post-school destination, and map out potential stages and junctions on the way. This can be well supported by the SCQF Framework.

Ultra local learner pathway design, connected nationally

Learners and families play a key role in learning design and must be given the support to understand and engage. It is important that young people can understand the progression of their skills and can see the possibilities in the path ahead. Our group discussed the need for opportunities within our system to allow young people to dream of what their future could hold, before channelling them into a particular path. Whole families need to understand the options and what's possible - they may not yet know what they don't yet know.

No one approach should work for every school and the curriculum will look different in different parts of the country, but also in classrooms within a school. Empowered teachers and leaders with the professional confidence to develop pathways that will work best for their learners are intrinsic components of a progressive curriculum. We believe that Local Authorities, Regional Improvement Collaboratives and Education Scotland should work as connectors of schools who are at similar stages or taking similar approaches based on their own contexts.

For such a system to prevail, there must be ownership at all levels. The group described this as both a 'bottom-up and top-down approach'. It must begin with learners but reach policy makers, professional associations and politicians to create and drive a system which values all forms of learning and development. The systems within which schools operate and young people learn must align; at present, they do not. The lack of alignment so far has presented an inherent obstacle to innovative curriculum design and more personalised learning for young people.

Innovative curriculum design ensures that all young people have coherent educational pathways which match their aspiration. This is not always about giving young people 'what they want', rather guiding them to navigate the range of opportunities available within their lifetime.

Group Suggestions

- Promote and celebrate what is already working well in schools' pathway design.
- Realise the opportunities already being trialled by many in our co-design team, and beyond, over the past three years, and take this to the next level: be prepared to change the structure of school, traditional timetabling, curriculum and allocation of staff and resource, and expect all local authorities and school leaders to respond.
- Invest in the capability of school teams to lead curriculum innovation and curriculum making. This will require attention to the development of design skills.
- Individual teachers and separate subjects can't innovate curriculum design in isolation. A whole-school approach needs encouragement so that learning experiences in one part of the week build on the executive function skills being developed elsewhere. Schools need to create a common expectation of what skills students might have, and what needs taught, when. The education system partners in Scotland have to support and enable schools in developing this.
- Colleges, universities and employers need to be involved in co-designing the thinking curriculum, so that admissions officers and recruiters begin to understand the quality of thinker that comes from a Scottish school.
- Ensure the learner remains at the heart and involve them in their journey and provide them with more opportunities for personal reflection.
- Amplify progression and tracking in skills to show individual growth.
- Ditch the political narrative around curriculum.
- A greater connection needs to be made between generic meta skills, earlier on, with less emphasis on the question of "what do you want to do when you leave school?".
- Design and facilitate significantly more flexible programmes, which help to develop personal attributes, skills and experiences. These programmes would include a combination of school, volunteer work, college placements and/or vocational training.

3. COLLABORATION

As reflected in '[An Empowered System](#)' (2019), there are eight key partners who work together to improve outcomes for children and young people. These are:

-
- Learners
 - Parents & Carers
 - Support Staff
 - Teachers & practitioners
 - School Leaders
 - Local Authorities and Regional Improvement Collaboratives
 - Partners
 - Scottish Government and national agencies

The support and involvement of each partner is crucial to ensuring that young people can continue to build on and progress their abilities; understand the options available to them throughout and beyond schooling; and be celebrated for the growth they have made in their learning over time.

Young people must be encouraged and supported by all stakeholders. By an engaged, motivated, knowledgeable and passionate staff who know them well and know their preferred pathways. By parents who have a clear understanding of the journey their child is on. By partners who support their development with opportunities for work-based learning. And by a wider system which celebrates and promotes their learning as a young person, rather than treating them as a statistic.

When young people's learning pathways are broad, it is inevitable that parents and carers are as much an active participant in curriculum design as teachers and young people. Their support is one thing, but there may be added responsibilities to ensure that young people are able to attend learning opportunities away from the school building, or at home.

Collaboration next steps

Transitions, not trips

Transitions can be a stumbling block in pathway design which must be overcome. Opportunities for young people need to be refined regularly to ensure that skills can be progressed and that pathways do not 'peter out' or 'close down' to young people due to a lack of opportunity or a change in staffing. Additionally, transitions between sectors are crucial in developing an understanding of the needs of the child: the benefits of effective collaboration here cannot be underestimated.

Local Authorities as promoters of a new story

Local authorities and regional improvement collaboratives have a role to play here, too. Their encouragement of diverse, innovative pathways for young people, as well as supporting progression frameworks to track skill development could be hugely supportive. Valuing the story and success of a pathway, as much as examination results information, would increase empowerment for schools and help to ensure the real needs of learners are being met. This does not mean that current measures should be ignored. Rather, we are seeking recognition that they form only part of the success story.

Deeper, broader partnerships

We recognised that increasing the breadth and quality of Learner Pathways available cannot exclusively be the work of schools. External partners can help co-design quality learner experiences for weeks, months, terms, or over the course of a year. In a system that values all learning, qualifications can be designed in many forms and still be celebrated. Every school in Scotland should form even stronger links with industry and business, locally, nationally and internationally. These partners can add value in a way that a school-based curriculum cannot.

Colleges, universities and businesses have traditionally ‘received’ learners into their organisations or institutions, placing schools more as ‘feeders’, and less as partners. That is already changing, but for learner pathways to become broader, more personalised and more ambitious, the gap between school and ‘the rest’ might need to be blurred, and the connection between, say, a Foundation Apprenticeship and a route to university needs to be highlighted as just as valuable a route as a traditional ‘five Higher’ model.

Government and national agencies are integral to the success of innovative curriculum design. They need to amplify the celebration of learning that encompasses far more than National Qualifications. They also need to ensure that the links to qualifications are well made, that curriculum design stories are shared, and that the range of qualifications on offer is easier to access. For example, they might highlight where similar units of work are applied across different qualifications.

Truly transformational learning pathways in Scotland will only be consistently achieved when each ‘plays their part’ to make it so. Only then can we say with conviction that we are meeting the needs of all Scotland’s learners.

Group Suggestions:

- Work with partners to design learning around a clear problem-solving or problem-shaping challenge.

-
- Employers need to understand the learner journeys of their future employees - there's no better way than being involved in their design so that they know how to realise the ambition of young people coming to them.
 - Collaborations with local colleges will ensure that the needs of the local context are met and continually refined.
 - Schools need to find ways to turn curriculum design from something they do for students and parents, to a co-design activity with them.
 - A jointly produced, highly visual map should show the individual learner's planned pathway as far along as is decided, and this route is agreed between the learner, parents and educators. The learner is the main user but it allows everyone involved to instantly understand where a learner is going and why.

References

Caldwell, S. (2020) "Who we are". *The Mastery Transcript Consortium*. Accessed April 3, 2020: <https://mastery.org/who-we-are/our-story/>

Hughes, D. (2020) *Championing Careers Derby, Executive Summary*. Accessed April 18, 2020: http://www.d2n2lep.org/write/Championing_Careers_Derby_Executive_Summary_ONLINE.pdf

National Parent Forum of Scotland (2020) "New Learner Journey Nutshell Launched." Accessed April 12: <https://www.npfs.org.uk/2020/03/new-learner-journey-nutshell-launched/>

Parker, K. (2020) "Evening class uptake down 50% in 10 years". *Tes*. Accessed April 17, 2020: <https://www.tes.com/news/exclusive-evening-class-uptake-down-50-10-years>

Scotland Future Forum (2019) *Scotland 2030 Future Schooling*. Accessed April 12: <https://scotlandfutureforum.org/scotland2030-future-schooling>

Scottish Government (2020) *Scotland's careers strategy: moving forward*. Accessed March 12, 2020: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-careers-strategy-moving-forward/pages/6/>

Scottish Parliament (2019). *Education and Skills Committee Subject choices in schools, 6th Report, 2019 (Session 5)*: https://www.parliament.scot/S5_Education/Inquiries/Subject_choices_report_September_2019.pdf

Skills Development Scotland (2019a) *Foundation Apprenticeships: Progress Report*. Accessed April 6, 2020: <https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/media/45251/fa-progress-report.pdf>

Skills Development Scotland (2019b) *A Human Future, Strategic Plan 2019-2022*. Accessed April 8, 2020: <https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/media/45753/a-human-future-strategic-plan-2019-2022.pdf>

Skills Development Scotland (2020) *Delivering Scotland's Careers Service*. Accessed April 20, 2020 <https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/media/46449/delivering-scotlands-careers-service-2020.pdf>

Participants in the Co-design Team

Julie Anderson, Scottish Government

Pauline Anderson, Depute Head Teacher, Galashiels Academy, Borders

Gordon Barnes, Depute Head Teacher, Alloa Academy, Clackmannanshire

Alistair Campbell, Depute Head Teacher, McLaren High School, Stirling

Craig Cowie, Depute Head Teacher, Portlethen Academy, Aberdeenshire

Sean Duffy, Depute Headteacher, Buckie High School, Moray

Norman Greenshields, Education Officer, Inverclyde Education Services

Graham Hutton, Head Teacher, Grove Academy

David Kick, Depute Head Teacher, Douglas Academy, East Dunbartonshire

Abigail Kinsella, National Partnership Delivery Manager, Skills Development Scotland

Gerry Lyons, Head of Service (North East), Education Services, Glasgow City Council

Joan Mackay, Head of Curriculum Innovation, Education Scotland

Angus Maclennan, Head Teacher, Esgoil, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar

Lyndsay McRoberts, Head Teacher, Duncanrig Secondary School

Janine McCullough, Senior Education Officer, Education Scotland

Collette McElroy, Education Manager, Renfrewshire Council, Renfrewshire

Ally McGuigan, Depute Head Teacher, St Matthew's Academy, North Ayrshire

Elizabeth McGuire, Senior Education Officer, Curriculum, Education Scotland

Ewan McIntosh, CEO, NoTosh

Morag Miller, SIO/Acting Head Teacher, Orkney Islands Council/Stromness Primary School, Orkney

Pete Moir, Operations Manager, Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scotland

Mike Paul, Head Teacher, Bucksburn Academy, Aberdeen City

Caroline Phillip, Depute Head Teacher, Newbattle High School, Midlothian

Gavin Pitt, Quality Improvement Officer, South Ayrshire Council

Sue Pope, Head of Service: Qualifications Development, Scottish Qualifications Authority

Roberta Porter, Quality Improvement Officer, Edinburgh City

Mary Rooney, Depute Head Teacher, Clydebank High School, West Dunbartonshire

Susan Sey, Digital Skills Development Officer, Education Scotland

Hamish Shankland, Depute Headteacher, Whitburn Academy, West Lothian

Calum Stewart, Depute Head Teacher, Preston Lodge High School, East Lothian

Jenny Watson, Senior Education Officer, Curriculum Design, Education Scotland

Lesley Watson, Education Officer - Senior Phase Dumfries and Galloway Council

Liz White, Head Teacher, Calderglen High School, South Lanarkshire

Donnie Wood, Development Officer. Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership