

Improving Practice: Developing a Gaelic Medium curriculum

The Nicolson Institute, Stornoway,
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar



The Nicolson Institute
Sgoil MhicNeacail



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1. Context and Background

1.1 This document is designed to support senior leaders in secondary schools, local authorities and regional improvement collaboratives (RICs) to improve the curriculum for Gaelic Medium and Learner Education. It is based on a case study of the curriculum at The Nicolson Institute. In preparing this case study, we used a range of sources, including our inspection findings and various presentations delivered by senior leaders at the Nicolson Institute.

1.2 The Nicolson Institute has both Gaelic Medium Education (GME) and English medium education (EME). It serves the town of Stornoway, as well as outlying areas across the island of Lewis. There are approximately 1000 pupils on the school's roll.

1.3 Before moving into S1, the young people in GME have learned through immersion at their primary schools. From P5, they learn French as a second additional language. The design of the curriculum at The Nicolson Institute enables young people in GME to learn through Gaelic for some of the time. The term **curriculum** is understood to mean everything that is planned for young people throughout their education. This is not just what happens in the classroom. This includes opportunities to learn and use Gaelic in all four contexts of the curriculum, with some pathways to National Qualifications in the senior phase. The four contexts for learning are:

- Curriculum areas and subjects
- Interdisciplinary learning
- Ethos and life of the school
- Opportunities for personal achievement.

1.4 All of the young people in EME study Gaelic (Learners) as their first additional language in primary school. As young people move into S1, they continue to learn Gaelic (Learners) from S1 to S3. There are pathways to National Qualifications in the senior phase. Young people benefit from learning German and Latin as second additional languages (L3).

1.5 Following an inspection, the school was asked to strengthen GME provision, as well as the Gaelic ethos and culture across the school. Gaelic was to be more visible and audible, both within and beyond the classrooms. A further inspection found that the school had taken extensive action to improve key aspects of its work. As a result, there was positive impact on young people's learning experiences and achievements. This included young people now benefitting from improved opportunities to learn through the medium of Gaelic. This was both in subjects and through a wide range of out-of-class activities across the school. The partnership work with BBC Alba was considered particularly effective in developing young people's skills for using Gaelic for employment in the local community. Young people in Gaelic Learner Education (GLE) were also noted as benefitting from enhanced opportunities to use the Gaelic language in

out-of-class activities. HM Inspectors asked the school to retain a strong focus on extending further young people's entitlement to GME at all stages.

1.6 The Nicolson Institute's planning for Gaelic Education is part of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar's [Gaelic Language Plan](#) as required by the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act, 2005.

2. Strategic planning for continuous improvement

2.1 The following is a summary of how improvements have been achieved in GME and GLE at The Nicolson Institute. It describes improving and effective practice, with a recognition that more can be done. There are some suggestions as to the school's next steps for improvement which are linked to [How good is our school? \(fourth edition\)](#). The case study should be used along with the [Advice on Gaelic Education](#) and the statutory [Guidance on Gaelic Education](#) to inform self-evaluation for improvement.

2.2 Senior leaders recognise the impact that their strong commitment to Gaelic has for its development within the curriculum. GME has now been integrated into the vision, values and aims of the school, and the school's strategic planning for improvement. This acknowledges that The Nicolson Institute is a school providing progression through two mediums of learning. Their next step is to develop a policy for Gaelic which would serve as a rationale for the curriculum. This will be used in the promotion of GME and GLE, including on the website and for transition.

2.3 Central to the school's strategic planning will be that self-evaluation is contextualised to Gaelic. This may be achieved with the use of Education Scotland's [Advice on Gaelic Education](#) and the statutory [Guidance on Gaelic Education](#).

2.4 Senior leaders conducted an audit of teachers' skills to ascertain who was able to contribute to learning and teaching through the medium of Gaelic. This also included teachers who may not yet be sufficiently fluent to teach in Gaelic, but who could hold discussions with young people in Gaelic as part of classroom learning. Teachers are offered professional learning bespoke to GME. This includes that for developing their language skills to enable them to teach through the medium of Gaelic.

2.5 Staff who deliver GME meet regularly with a Depute Headteacher (DHT) to ensure that professional engagement and collegiate working is focused on Gaelic. Staff are building strong links with partners who are charged with producing teaching and learning resources for GME. This helps generate resources in Gaelic as they are required for the curriculum. Young people in GME have been provided with electronic tablets on which they access their learning resources. The school will continue to develop its strategy for digital technology.

2.6 Staff drew up an improvement plan for GME and GLE with achievable and manageable priorities over a three-year period. The plan is flexible to enable staff to maximise opportunities for GME, both nationally and locally, as they arise.

2.7 Senior leaders recognise the importance of all young people, staff and parents/carers being aware of the school's vision for GME and GLE. To promote this, senior leaders set a strategic direction which highlights the importance of Gaelic language and culture to the school's local context, education and employment. To convey this, meetings are held with staff, parents, young people and curriculum partners to deepen their understanding of the opportunities available from being fluent in Gaelic. Special events are organised where employers and organisations raise young people's awareness of the range of career-related opportunities available in culture, leisure, education and business when one is fluent in the language. The school works well with local media to raise awareness amongst the public of what the school is trying to achieve. They also use social media to promote Gaelic. All of these engagements include young people in EME as a means of securing all stakeholders' engagement with Gaelic.

2.8 The school engages annually with the parents of those in P7 GME. This aims to promote continuity in learning from primary to secondary; help maintain commitment for GME; address concerns and increase the number of learners in GME.

2.9 Arrangements for assigning young people to classes were reviewed to assist with timetabling. All young people in GME are grouped together for timetabling subjects delivered through the medium of Gaelic. The school operates a house system. A house was created for those in GME. This enables house events to be made available through the medium of Gaelic. Across stages, young people in GME have house assemblies, personal and social education (PSE), and religious moral education (RME) delivered in Gaelic. Tutor time is available through Gaelic from S1 to S4. There is progression and continuity in these aspects of the curriculum across stages. In addition, the GME subject offer from S1 to S3 includes Gàidhlig, geography, history, home economics, modern studies and science. In some of these subjects, teacher fluency may result in only part of the learning being through Gaelic. As young people experience some specialisation in S3, the proportion of learning through Gaelic lessens in S3.

2.10 In S2, electives form part of the curriculum design. Young people choose electives based on their interests. Some of these electives are available through Gaelic. For example, an elective results in accreditation through a John Muir award some of which is through the medium of Gaelic. The elective, Gaelic song writing with technology, is also available through Gaelic. This may lead to a National Progression Award in Contemporary Gaelic Songwriting and Production in the senior phase. The school intends to consult Community Learning and Development (CLD) to plan further use of accreditation awards.

2.11 In S4, pathways to National Qualifications are available for Gàidhlig, history and modern studies. In S5 and S6, as yet, only Gàidhlig is available as a National Qualification. There has been a very healthy interest in the availability of history and/or modern studies through Gaelic in S3 and S4. Senior leaders recognise that interest is such that they will have to consider how to provide progression.

2.12 The curriculum offer includes opportunities for the young people to be hearing, using and learning Gaelic in contexts other than curriculum areas and subjects. Senior leaders have significantly increased the role of partners in planning and delivering the GME

curriculum. Across stages, partners such as Comunn na Gàidhlig, Feisean na Gàidheal, Radio nan Gàidheal, MG Alba, MacTV, community trusts and Acair deliver inputs in Gaelic. These inputs from partners add depth, specialism, application and challenge to young people's learning. In addition, young people are making connections to speakers of Gaelic in their community. The links with MG Alba have resulted in a few young people progressing to a Foundation Apprenticeship in media.

2.13 From working with partners, young people are interacting with fluent speakers of Gaelic who have a career in which they use Gaelic language skills. This augments and authenticates young people's learning about Gaelic-related careers as part of the PSE programme. Additionally, young people in GME do a work experience in a setting in which Gaelic is used.

2.14 A development officer from Comunn na Gàidhlig supports the curriculum by planning excursions. This enables young people to apply their Gaelic in a context outwith school, while affording them an opportunity to deepen their learning of the culture associated with Gaelic. Excursions have been organised to Glasgow, Ireland, Canada, as well as some local sites and events.

2.15 Young people also engage very successfully with national competitions such as An Deasbad Nàiseanta (Debating), Film G and the national Mòd. Senior leaders are yet to plan these events as progressive experiences, including by making links to the primary stages.

2.16 The school is yet to track, as young people move through the school, the proportion of each individual's learning that is available through Gaelic. It would be useful to use this data to raise young people's awareness of how they maintain their fluency both through in- and beyond-school opportunities. Tracking should include young people who may not be in Gàidhlig language courses but are specialising in other areas of the curriculum. All efforts should be made to keep young people engaging with Gaelic so that they retain their fluency and interest in the language.

2.17 Staff are creating a positive ethos for Gaelic within the school by raising the language's profile in the everyday life of the school. Gaelic is included in the school's oral and written communication. Announcements made through the tannoy system and plasma screens include some Gaelic.

2.18 Senior leaders attach a high level of importance to the young people who are studying Gaelic (Learners) as an additional language. They are clear that this is an entitlement for young people until the end of S3. Young people in the Gaelic (Learners) courses and programmes are encouraged to take part in the events that are organised for those in GME. However, staff ask that young people speak Gaelic at these events so as not to dilute the Gaelic experience for others. More young people are continuing with Gaelic (Learners) in the senior phase as a result of Gaelic having a higher profile within the school.

2.19 Comhairle nan Eilean Siar is working with the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) in developing locally a post-graduate diploma in primary and secondary

education. The Nicolson Institute is providing student teachers with teaching practice as well as sharing their expertise. This aims to generate future teachers for the school.

3. Challenge Questions

Having read the case study in section 2, senior leaders and teachers in secondary schools, local authorities and RICs are encouraged to use the questions below to help them reflect on their own curriculum for Gaelic and plan for improvements where required.

3.1 In reviewing how well your school is delivering a curriculum through the medium of Gaelic, and within your existing resources, to what extent are you:

- checking to ascertain that staff who are fluent in Gaelic are delivering GME?
- checking to see if there may be more sharing of teacher expertise between both primary and other secondary schools?
- reviewing how well colleges, community learning and development and Gaelic groups contribute to GME, including with the use of blended learning approaches?
- checking to see if approaches to career-long professional learning are encouraging staff to learn and improve their fluency in Gaelic?
- checking to see if universal support and registration can be provided through Gaelic, including by having the young people learning in GME in multi-stage groupings?
- working with primary schools to ensure that progression is not being hampered by switching medium of delivery?
- reviewing how well curriculum design such as specialisation, enrichment courses, electives and masterclasses are being used to increase the proportion of learning through Gaelic?
- reviewing how well interdisciplinary learning is used for GME and to promote learning about Gaelic for those in English medium education?
- encouraging partners to deliver aspects of the curriculum in Gaelic?
- reviewing how opportunities for personal achievements and accreditation can provide learning through Gaelic?
- reviewing if PSE and RME can be delivered through Gaelic across the broad general education and the senior phase?
- using lunchtime and after-school clubs as an opportunity for young people to use Gaelic?
- checking to see if progression from the broad general education to National 4, National 5 and Higher in any subject is feasible? and
- checking to see if progression from Higher to Advanced Higher is feasible?

3.2 As part of your regular review of the GME curriculum, how often do you monitor the proportion of learning that young people experience through Gaelic?

3.3 Do your observations of young people's learning include GME? How do you evidence success and next steps?

3.4 How often do you sample individual young people's GME pathways within your school?

3.5 How have you explored the use of digital technologies, including [e-Sgoil](#) as a way of increasing the learning through Gaelic in the curriculum?

3.6 How have you developed your curriculum to

- reflect the "big picture" for GME
- promote an understanding of those in EME of the rationale for GME and bilingualism
- promote equity, excellence and high-quality attainment
- enable application of knowledge, understanding and skills through Gaelic
- enable breadth, challenge and application across the four contexts of learning
- embed Gaelic language, culture, heritage and career pathways
- be based on self-evaluation and continuous improvement?

3.7 What impact can you show from using the [Statutory Guidance on Gaelic Education](#) and [Advice on Gaelic Education](#) for self-evaluation?

4 Additional resources which may be useful:

[Conference on Gaelic Education - Transitions to Secondary GME Case Study Sir E Scott School Comhairle nan Eilean Siar](#)

[HMI Advice on Gaelic Medium Education at the Secondary Stages](#)
[Statutory Guidance on Gaelic Education, 2017](#)

[A Summary of Developing Young Workforce \(DYW\) Resources](#)

[HMI Advice on Gaelic Education A 1+2 Approach to Languages](#)

[HMI Advice on Gaelic Education \(entire document\)](#)

[Advice on the Broad General Education](#)

[Advice on the Senior Phase and Beyond the Senior Phase](#)

[e-Sgoil: A GME Curriculum Through Digital Technology](#)

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