reform scotland

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About Reform Scotland

Reform Scotland, a charity registered in Scotland, is a public policy institute which works to promote increased economic prosperity, opportunity for all, and more effective public services. Reform Scotland is independent of political parties and any other organisations. It is funded by donations from private individuals, charitable trusts and corporate organisations. Its Director is Chris Deerin and Alison Payne is the Research Director. Both work closely with the Trustee Board, chaired by Jack McConnell, which meets regularly to review the research and policy programme.

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Foreword

On behalf of the team at Reform Scotland, I'd like to thank you for your on-going support in all its forms throughout 2023. We hope you value the relationship as much as we do.

It's been quite the year in the world of politics. The departure of a long-serving first minister, the arrival of a new one, a police investigation into the governing party, policy chaos, the revival of Scottish Labour… and that's not to mention Westminster.

The past few months especially have been busy and productive ones for Reform Scotland. We've launched two discussion forums which have gained widespread interest and continue to receive a range of fascinating contributions.

Devolving Scotland considers how we can re-generate local government, with an opening piece from our chair, former first minister Lord Jack McConnell.

Our NHS 2048 project began with the publication of NHS 2048: Future-proofing Scotland's health and social care, which uncovered worrying data in relation to waiting times and waiting lists for orthopaedic procedures, and highlighted the growing stresses facing the NHS. Published in partnership with the BMA, the paper led to an urgent topical question at Holyrood. The discussion forum opened with an article from Paul Gray, former chief executive of NHS Scotland.

Linked to this, we are developing our website to create a new function which will allow reader comments to be added below our articles and blogs and stimulate ongoing conversation and debate.

As always, our guest blogs, brought together in this annual compendium, have highlighted problems, suggested solutions and encouraged some much-needed fresh and expert thinking.

From Stuart Paton addressing the nuclear question, to Roy Leckie on attracting immigrants to Scotland, to Dunc Chisholm highlighting the potential of football clubs to meet a number of community challenges, the blog offers inspiration and ideas. Thank you to all our contributors.

As we move into 2024, I view these coming 12 months and beyond as the most important period for Reform Scotland since I took over as Director. We are heading not just for a change of government at Westminster after 13 years, but a major shift in the dynamics of Scottish politics. The polls show not just that Labour will win back Number 10, but that the party is likely to take as many as half of the SNP's Westminster seats. After such a long period of seemingly effortless Nationalist dominance, Scottish politics is becoming highly competitive again.

Best,

Chris Deerin
Director

House prices & the cost of living – Duncan Pickard

Originally posted 11 January 2023

The cost of living features in nearly every news bulletin at present. However, while the inflation increases in the prices of energy and food are always highlighted, increases in the price of housing are seldom mentioned.

Forty years ago the share of household incomes spent on food was about 30% and the share spent on housing was 10%. Now these numbers are reversed because of inflation of house prices. Many are unable to afford food or heat because so much of their income is spent on paying rent or mortgages.

People would be able to afford to eat and keep warm enough if housing costs were lower, but politicians too often ignore this fact because they falsely believe that high and rising house prices are beneficial to the national economy. House prices are included in the calculation of GDP so rising prices can enable politicians to claim the economy is doing better than it actually is.

Schemes like "Help to Buy", which enable more people to obtain mortgages, only make houses dearer. House prices have risen enormously over the last 35 years following the boost given to house ownership by allowing council houses to be bought by their tenants at greatly reduced prices. But at the same time, houses have become a favoured form of investment because our perverse tax system taxes landed property very lightly compared with the taxation of earned incomes.

The diversion of investment into landed property and away from manufacturing industry has diminished the ability to produce essential goods, which have to be imported, and encouraged the provision of financial services which produce very little of relevance to the real economy as experienced by the majority of people.

Taxation has dominated discussions of the cost of living but has focused on the *amount of tax levied* with no comment on what is being taxed. Most government revenue is from Income Taxes and Value Added Tax which have large inhibitory effects on employment and trade.

The amount of revenue collected is far less important than where it is collected from. People currently on strike in protest about wages and cost of living could end up seeing most of the extra pay they hope to get overtaken by continuing inflation in the cost of living. They should be asking for reductions in the cost of housing , *which is not included in the consumer price index of inflation*, instead of demanding more pay.

Without radical tax reform to remove taxes on earned incomes and increase the charges on the incomes received by those of us who own landed property, *unearned*, from the increases in its price, the cost of living will not be reduced. The pursuit of more pay without tax reform is like treating the symptoms of a disease without seeking its cause. Millions have boosted their riches more from the unearned

increases in the price of their houses than from the wages they have earned from working.

The government could make a start on tax reform to rebalance the national economy by abolishing Council Tax and Business Rates and replace them with Land Value Tax (LVT) otherwise known as Annual Ground Rent (AGR).

Council Tax is based on house valuations in 1991 and has become absurdly regressive. The highest priced house owners pay a much smaller percentage of their market price than those with the lowest priced houses. The longer revaluations are delayed, they will become more costly, but if LVT/AGR replaces the present whole-property valuations, the cost will be much lower and the job done more quickly.

The variation in land values in any given area is much smaller than that of whole properties. LVT/AGR should also be charged on eligible land which is derelict and disused and currently contributes nothing to local revenue allowing its owners to afford to leave their land unused. This would provide an opportunity to increase the revenue for local government to pay for the much needed improvements in education, healthcare and welfare.

The aims of government economic policy should be to maximise the standard of living of the people; minimise their cost of living; and minimise the cost of doing business. These aims will never be achieved with the present perverse tax system which inhibits the production of wealth with high taxes on employment and trade, and taxes those who own landed property very lightly.

Politicians of all parties are content to blame the current high cost of living on mistakes made by their opponents in recent years but none of them will admit that radical tax reform has been avoided by politicians for more than a hundred years! After 1660, parliament took control of government from the monarch and all its members were landowners. Landowners had been responsible for supplying the vast majority of public revenue for government and they soon began to shift their tax burden onto working people by imposing excise taxes, which the landowners could avoid! The present tax system, after all these years, still maintains the privileges of relief from taxation of the unearned income of those of us who own landed property and most government revenue is taken from the earned incomes of working people.

All the funds for the necessary functions of government can be met by the annual collection of the economic rental value of land and other natural resources and would allow taxes on employment and trade to be abolished.

Council Tax is based on the market price of houses but most of the price of houses consists of the price of the land on which they are built, not the costs of building. The land component of the price of a house used to be about 10% of the total price. This has risen to more than 50% during the last forty years, so imposing a charge on the rental value of the land is much more effective in reducing the cost of living than a charge on the price of the whole property as it does not inhibit development.

Radical tax reform will not solve all the nation's economic problems but without it most of them will only get worse and the gap of inequality in health and wealth will get wider.

Duncan Pickard is member of the Scottish Land Revenue Group

A Present Dilemma: Why Children Stop Going to School – Anne Morrison

Originally posted 12 January 2023

My daughter was in her last year of primary school when COVID-19 pressed the pause button on all of our lives and she stopped attending school.

Five months earlier and recently separated, I'd moved with my children into a rental property in the heart of a small Scottish town best known for world-class golf, rosy sandstone buildings and miles of perfect sandy beach.

Then lockdown arrived, and with it, a surreal lucidity.

For weeks, the sun shone. The empty greens surrounding the historic town were perfect. The air was exceptionally clear and still. In the streets around the cathedral, cats strolled past silent cafes and took dust baths in the middle of the road.

Meanwhile, in our rental flat, behind a casement window and under the eaves of an attic bedroom, my eleven year old daughter slept. She slept for twenty or more hours at a stretch, barely moving position. She slept like a stone, a fairytale princess I was unable to wake with a kiss, a blast of music or a mug of hot chocolate.

Emerging from duvet-land, she wandered zombie-like through the rooms of the flat during her brief waking hours, devouring leftovers or a bowl of cereal at odd hours before retreating to the attic. She was lethargic and grumpy, avoiding all exercise. She had zero interest in school work. There were difficulties with concentration. Her mood and her self-esteem were low.

At first, I interpreted the changes as a reaction to lockdown. A hiatus brought on by an absence of routine and a lack of social contact. We were temporarily bunkered but life would soon catch up with us and we would swing into action on a positive forward momentum.

I was wrong. Lockdown ended and I went back to work. My sons went back to school and university.

But Jenny continued to sleep.

In November 2022 the independent Commission on School Reform (CSR) published a briefing paper on absence and attendance in Scottish schools. Using data gathered from local authorities, the CSR found that more than 100,000 pupils are missing a day of school every fortnight and the number of pupils with less than 50% attendance is increasing.

The impact of COVID on school attendance is undeniable, but according to the CSR, attendance rates were already slipping in the years before the pandemic. It's a similar picture across England and Wales, with children from poorer families more likely to

struggle. Some reports suggest that school appears 'optional' to large numbers of children and their parents.

So what was it that derailed my daughter's schooling? Why did her peers return to the classroom when she did not? Is she typical of the thousands of children who can't or won't go to school?

Almost three years down the line, I've learned a lot about my daughter, myself and the purpose of education. Some of these lessons have been extremely tough and when I look back on some of our darkest days, I wish I'd behaved differently. Better.

What happens if a child does not attend school? For most, regular attendance makes a marked difference to final grades. It supports the development of social skills and fosters a sense of belonging and identity. It works to move the young person along a path towards a positive destination of further training, education or work.

I should know. I'm a teacher.

But for some, a perfect storm of challenging personal circumstances, rapid physical change, illness, bereavement, deprivation, a crisis of identity or a significant loss requires a different approach.

As a family, we have been fortunate. I do not underestimate the advantages and strengths we have as a family that have allowed us to manage Jenny's absences in ways that some families cannot.

Here, then, is our story.

Grief is a powerful force that can tear at the very seams of a person. Jenny's attendance at school plummeted then flatlined during the pandemic, but her difficulties started long before COVID-19 and the school environment wasn't necessarily the problem.

Half-way through primary school, the sudden death of a cherished pet triggered a range of anxious behaviours in Jenny. She began to experience a choking sensation in her throat when she ate. There were night terrors. Hyperventilation. She became easily overwhelmed in class and had to sit in the Head Teacher's office, writing down her fears on little scraps of paper and placing them in a sealed jar so that she could continue with her day. She was no longer able to take part in school concerts and plays, finding the pressure of public performance all too much.

It would pass, I thought. It was a blip, a phase. She would get over it, children do.

Next came early onset menstruation. Jenny was ten and had just finished Primary 6 when she got her first period. The monthly cycle of cramps, nausea, heavy bleeding and exhaustion was soon followed by a diagnosis of anaemia and a borderline thyroid condition. Jenny didn't want to go to school when she had a period. She was afraid her classmates wouldn't understand what was happening to her. We wondered whether there were sanitary bins in the primary school toilets. Her teachers said it wasn't

unusual for girls to begin menstruating at the age of nine or ten. I felt intense pity for my child. I wondered how I would have coped at her age.

Towards the end of Primary 7, Jenny asked for a mobile phone. Most of her friends had one. Within months, I had confiscated it, worried that she was too young to cope with the avalanche of TikTok comments and bitchy group dynamics on WhatsApp and other platforms. I was convinced social media was having a negative impact on her mental health and I wanted to protect her.

In the years since, I've had days when I've bundled the router and all devices other than the landline into a suitcase and taken them to work with me, fearful that Jenny could be slipping down a rabbit-hole of online gaming and hidden chat rooms while I was at work.

In a joint counselling session, Jenny has said that the removal of her phone and parental snooping on her online activity was particularly difficult for her, making her feel even more isolated from her peers. Every counsellor we have seen on this journey with Jenny has either chosen not to comment on phone and internet use or has expressed a view that the removal of devices could be detrimental to her.

But there are days, still, when I want to sling the router into the sea. When I wonder about the long-term impact of daily internet use on my children's developing minds and bodies.

Jenny's health continued to deteriorate. She rarely left her room other than to go to the bathroom, eat with us at the dinner table or climb into the car and go to her dad's where she would follow pretty much the same sleeping and eating pattern, albeit under a different roof. During one memorable summer, she voluntarily left the house with me only twice in six weeks, by which time I was in despair.

Jenny's GP arranged a variety of physical tests over many months, but other than low iron, there seemed to be no obvious root cause for her tiredness. We kept an eye on her sleeping habits, which were erratic. Serotonin was prescribed to help regulate her sleep cycle. Her paediatrician made a diagnosis of chronic fatigue, informing us that it could take weeks, months, even years, for her to improve. My despair deepened.

Jenny was missing enormous amounts of schoolwork. She had next to no contact with her peers. She had disappeared from view, refusing to appear on Zoom calls with her grandparents and staying in her room if anyone visited us at home. Her friends asked me what had happened to her. They missed her. Some sent cards and gifts.

I longed for a more tangible cause to explain her lethargy so that together with her father and the school, a solution could be found for Jenny, a roadmap back to 'normality'. Sometimes I was convinced the cause of her non-attendance was physical. At other times, I believed it was down to anxiety. There were days I felt totally stumped by it all.

Jenny was referred to CAMHS and online sessions with a counsellor were scheduled. But there was a problem. The sessions were timetabled during working hours and Jenny was still sleeping excessive amounts. Unless she woke naturally, she was extremely difficult to rouse. Before each appointment was due to start, I would call her now reinstated mobile and the home landline repeatedly from my work, both of which had been placed next to her bed.

But Jenny was often unawakenable, sunk in a deep sleep coma. If she wasn't at her dad's, I would leave work and drive home to wake her up, or he would. Dopey and confused, she didn't want to switch her camera on and struggled to engage with the sessions. She began skipping appointments, logging out as soon as I got in my car to return to work. I was embarrassed and angry, knowing how long some children had to wait to get a CAMHS appointment. Jenny felt like a failure and her anxiety levels went through the roof. Together with the counsellor, it was agreed that we should stop the sessions until she felt ready to engage.

Jenny slept through Christmas two years in a row. She slept through most of her 12th and 13th birthdays. She wept out of sheer exhaustion on shopping trips and family holidays, unable to leave the car, the hotel room.

Our relationship suffered. On a few occasions, I tried to lift her out of bed. I made hollow ultimatums. I was afraid for her and for myself. I became frustrated and shouted at her, asking if she understood the implications of not attending school. She said that I didn't understand and she just wanted to be left alone, to sleep. Relatives suggested I should simply love her.

But what did that mean? Was it loving to leave my child lying in her bed every day when I went to work? Several times, worried that she might self-harm after her counsellor had emailed saying I should lock away all sharp objects and medicines, I stayed home with her, or her father did, but this was unsustainable, we both had jobs to go to and our youngest son needed us too.

It was agreed that Jenny should spend some time with her aunt in a different part of Scotland rather than being alone and unsupervised during the day. Arranging this meant deviating from the local authority Child Plan which was focused on getting Jenny back into school, even if only one hour a week. We had to explain why we weren't following the plan.

It was hard to know what was best. It was hard to know how to love.

And of course, as her parents we regularly questioned ourselves and picked over our own failings. A divorce is shattering for a young person. Seams are undone and remade differently. Our child was sad, we could see that. The family home had been rented out. Jenny was frightened when I put the cat out at night in case she never came back.
At one point, a change of school seemed like a good idea. A radical change, a set of new challenges, a fresh start and a different educational focus might shake Jenny out of her torpor. A trial week in a fee paying school was arranged. Jenny lasted until lunchtime before calling her dad from the toilets and asking him to take her home.

Throughout it all, Jenny's brothers and her wider extended family buoyed her up with positive comments about her digital artwork, her gaming skills, her love of animals and nature and her sense of humour. We all did our best. Biology lessons at the kitchen table. Pond studies and painting with her aunt. Dog walking. Game design with her older brother and her uncle. Halloween costumes. Catching COVID, twice.

Life went on. It had to.

Jenny's school has been consistently supportive and understanding. She came out of mainstream classes and joined the ASN base. On the days she makes it into school, she can attend scheduled lessons, or not. The base has a range of social and educational activities on offer which Jenny can dip into, or not. Sessions with the local authority educational psychologist have been particularly helpful during these tentative early days of re-engagement.

As Jenny's attendance has picked up, we continue to build in rest days to help her cope. A full day in school or attendance at an after-school event often means a day or more of recovery. I have learned that my daughter wants to go to school, but on many days, she simply cannot. Understanding this has been a game-changer. We celebrate the little wins. Success has been redefined for us.

Awake for longer and longer periods of time, Jenny is warm and communicative, affectionate towards her family where once she was distant. She takes real joy in her pets and is increasingly comfortable in her own skin. She bakes and decorates delicious cakes for us and this week, she completed a three-day hike with her dad, involving two nights sleeping in a bothy and miles of walking in sleet showers and headwinds. A couple of years ago, she barely had enough energy to walk from her bedroom to the car.

It doesn't feel like an exaggeration to describe her progress as miraculous.

Jenny is currently being assessed through the Neurodevelopmental Assessment Service (NDAS) as suggested to us by her educational psychologist. We recently received a letter from NDAS explaining that the assessment process may take up to three years or more, such is the current pressure on the service. By the time we receive a diagnosis, Jenny may already have left school.

On some levels, a diagnosis matters. I certainly wished for one many times over the last three years. But in other ways, it matters less than the approach taken, both at home and in school. There is, I believe, no single defining cause for Jenny's absence from school and there will be no single, straightforward solution to her reengagement. With this, she agrees.

Is Jenny a typical non-attender? It's difficult to know. How do we help children experiencing regular or prolonged periods of absence? To answer this question, more data is needed on why children missing from Scottish schools are unable or unwilling to attend, but poor mental health is a defining factor in many studied cases.

My daughter's paediatrician is a wise and caring man. During one consultation with her, he prescribed growing vegetables. At her next consultation, Jenny presented the doctor with a tub of homegrown tomatoes, whole and perfect. The doctor was delighted. Over the moon, in fact.

It was a significant moment. We had become used to measuring Jenny's progress in terms of figures, timetables and percentages. Ferritin levels, days of absence, sleep cycles, test results. But this doctor had spent enough time getting to know my daughter that he understood her interest in plants.

Tending, attending.

Tomatoes, that on some days Jenny had forgotten to water, or that her dad had watered for her. Tomatoes she'd tended to herself. A most unexpected and welcome sign of growth, and of recovery.

Anne Morrison is a Scottish secondary school teacher.

Can Scotland deliver NHS reform in 2023? – Dr Alastair Noble

Originally posted 16 January 2023

When I spoke to the Chief Executives of the NHS Boards back in 2014, I challenged them to stop commissioning 600,000 occupied bed days of Delayed Discharges. Nothing significant changed, in fact it is still increasing. I was told I had been too gentle! This is the equivalent of 2 District General Hospitals and approaching the 800,000 occupied bed days for all elective care

This time I will be very blunt. The Status Quo is not available.

Good Consultants and good General Practitioners want to deliver the highest quality of clinical care to meet the needs of our current population.

To achieve this now we must change our commissioning decisions. We must accept that there is no such thing as separate health and social care. We must now have integrated health and social care and we need to adopt, and implement, the following basic principles:

- Treat Consultants and General Practitioners as equals.
- Prioritise localities and their Integrated Care Teams.
- Each Patient must have access to good home care, good nursing home care, good community hospital care including hospice/terminal care and good consultant hospital care
- Allocate Fair Share Budget for health and social care to each locality.
- Better use of the excellent DATA sets we have, especially around the over sixty-five population alongside Community Empowerment to enable localities to accept and deliver the accountability and responsibility for their own outcomes.

Every time I have had the public discussion about the clinical variations in activity and the increasing clinical activity in the least deprived quintiles, I hear the same clinical sign up to change. So where is the resistance to improving the quality of clinical care coming from?

There is a danger that some within the sector pander to disease/age/drug company specific groups/influencers all with their own agenda. Opposition politicians can also be guilty of arguing for the status quo and we allow poor management to delay complex decisions.

The outlook is not all bad. We have the fittest, healthiest elderly population we have ever had. We should be proud of our achievements. But we must get on the front foot and make the necessary clinical changes otherwise could lead to the end of the NHS. We also have the clinical and financial DATA to show it is affordable within existing Fair Share Integrated Health and Social Care budgets.

We must prioritise the individual patient and their own locality team. This will inevitably mean a changing pattern of care in poorly performing areas. It clearly means the downsizing of Specialist Consultant care in those localities which do not have General Practitioner beds. The alternative is to continue to provide poor and unacceptable institutional care as clearly seen for example in the Mid -Staffordshire Model.

The following data highlights the scale of the challenge we face through delayed discharge:

There are 6.4 m Occupied Bed Days (OBD) in NHS Scotland. Of these:

- *0.8 m are scheduled/planned procedures-still (with big variations in day care and outpatient investigation rates)*
- *5.6 m are unscheduled/unplanned*
- *600,000 are delayed discharge. The equivalent of 50-55 wards or 2 district general hospitals.*
- *4m OBD are by patients aged over sixty-five*
- *Two percent of all patients occupy 79% of OBD. Roughly 2.5 % of total population takes up 50% of spend on hospitals and prescribing.*

Therefore, it is imperative that we concentrate on this small group and see what the alternatives can be.

I would suggest that we should be looking at about 2.5 million less occupied bed days in Specialist Consultant Hospitals and replacing them with about 1.5 million occupied bed days in Generalist Community Hospital beds/nursing homes and fully staffed home care. This is the right model for Scotland with our current and projected population changes. It is the existing pattern in the best performing parts of Scotland -so we know it is clinically and financially achievable.

In Aberdeenshire more than 60% of the OBD for the over 65 population are in GP led Community Hospitals Glasgow has none. This just illustrates the massive variations from locality to locality. We need to be looking and learning from what is happening in different areas of Scotland. Being close to a big hospital doesn't always equate to the right care options.

I have written before about the good practice that has been developed in Nairn. Reform can be incorporated into our NHS and we need a health system that can work for all areas of Scotland. A system which can deliver the best current clinical care for each individual with an integrated health and social care team in each locality and have clinical agreement between the Specialist Consultants and the General Practitioners in all Professions about what is best for the individual patient at that particular point in their journey from birth to death. This means an honest clinical discussion with the patient and their relatives, friends, and communities. The alternative is in the news every day. We can do so much better if we change to current best practice.

Dr Alastair Noble worked as a GP in Nairn

PPPs – a Perpetual Public Problem – Katelynne Kirk

Originally posted 20 February 2023

Public infrastructure spending is a complicated issue, there is no doubt about that. There will always be competing priorities – should more funds go towards the NHS or education, care or energy – let alone which communities are most in need?

But before getting into the details of which projects to fund, there is the question of how we fund our infrastructure. Since the 1990s Public Private Partnerships have been used in Scotland but you would be forgiven for thinking that PPPs were a thing of the past since the SNP government proposed to stop using the expensive and wasteful PFI model after coming into power. However, while alternatives with variations were implemented – NPDs and Hubs – they are all PPPs.

The confusing acronyms are irrelevant, each of these initiatives are Public Private Partnerships and each perpetuate serious issues for our public sector. Through PPPs we invite private companies to build and manage our infrastructure projects, like schools and hospitals. Initially this sounds great – because of the perceived short-term gain – but so does a payday loan. We may gain the new school we need with less of the upfront costs but this comes at an exorbitant cost resulting in taxpayers contributing to huge private profits and diverting public money away from vital infrastructure and services.

In all their forms, PPPs saddle the Scottish public sector with high levels of debt, poor service provision, lack of accountability, and unsafe buildings.

Jubilee Scotland is calling on the Scottish Government to abolish the use of PPPs and commit to a model which has safety, quality, value for money, wellbeing and accountability to the taxpayer at its heart.

With the introduction of private finance in a public project there is the inevitable introduction of a new priority – ensuring private profits. This means, what should be our real priorities – quality, safety, wellbeing, sustainability, value for money and accountability to the taxpayer – become squeezed, along with our limited public purse. Unfortunately PPPs are an exercise in short-term thinking asking the taxpayer to foot an enormous bill down the line.

When we see the strikes by public sector workers being opposed by a narrative *that there just isn't the money to pay higher wages*, we must reconcile ourselves to the fact that they, along with those struggling with poor service provision, are paying the price for a lack of foresight, due diligence and joined-up thinking about public spending.

This was recognised by Allyson Pollock years ago as she suggested that the cost of PFI schemes had created an affordability gap in the NHS which among other things has resulted in "30% cuts in bed capacity and 20% reductions in staff in hospitals financed through PFI."

As well as being poor value for money, PPP contracts do not reflect the realities of fluctuating economic conditions and, as shown in the hospital parking scandal during the covid crisis in Scotland, they do not allow the flexibility to adapt to other unforeseen social crises. When many in the Scottish parliament and civil society are seeking to place wellbeing and sustainability at the heart of policy, it is clear to Jubilee Scotland that the use of PPPs must be abolished in order to achieve these aims.

As we watch our Net Zero targets come and go we also have to face the fact that supposed short term solutions like PPPs are hindering our ambitions to face our environmental responsibilities. By designing and constructing buildings with an expected life span of around thirty years we are neglecting our duty to reduce our carbon emissions. We are accepting that we may need to rebuild in around thirty years, meaning we will create yet more carbon emissions with every unnecessary construction project.

"*.. we have been demolishing and landfilling, or selling-on, old, well-located schools and other public buildings, with big windows and hundreds of years left in their sturdy structures, because "it will take thousands to repair the roof", then spending tens of millions on shoddy, short-term replacements. We need to pivot towards practices that prioritise repair and renewal before demolition and replacement.*"
Malcolm Fraser (Fraser/Livingstone Architects)

So, what is the alternative to PPPs? The alternative to Public *Private* Partnerships are Public *Public* Partnerships. The Scottish Government is already using such a model for the new Learning Estate Investment Programme (LEIP), which brings together the Scottish Government and Local Authorities in a partnership. Local authorities will be fully responsible for the costs of constructing new schools, which they can pay for through capital budgets, or by borrowing the money through the Public Works Loan Board. The Scottish Government will cover the 'lifecycle and maintenance' costs of these new schools, including day-to-day running costs of the buildings and the ongoing maintenance costs. The LEIP model attempts to move away from the use of private finance, and is also an example of the progress we can see when the Government collaborates closely with Councils to find new solutions. LEIP is a step in the right direction. It would therefore be relevant that the Scottish Government explored options to expand the best parts of LEIP beyond the education sector. It is also important to explore how the planned National Infrastructure Company could support such Public Public Partnerships and what role the Scottish National Investment Bank could play if given the correct dispensations.

PPPs are not simply a domestic issue for Scotland, Jubilee Scotland is part of a global network of organisations (Our Future Is Public) working to end the use of PPPs across the world. While we have been aware of the issues with PPPs for decades, we continue to use them in Scotland, setting a damaging example for global south countries.

"*In the seven case studies in this report, we find that PPPs have failed on many different levels, with serious negative impacts on the citizens of countries from Spain to Nepal. These*

impacts have risked compromising the fulfilment of fundamental rights, and undermining the fight against inequalities and climate change."[1]

It is imperative that we find an alternative that protects public finances, not just in Scotland but in countries that cannot afford to become trapped in greater debt and potential human rights crises at the expense of private profits.

Katelynne Kirk is the Campaign, Communications & Administrative Assistant at Jubilee Scotland

[1] History RePPPeated II: Why Public Private Partnerships are not the Solution.

Comments on the interim report of the Review of Qualifications and Assessment in Scotland – Lindsay Paterson

Originally posted 08 March 2023

Scottish school assessment is about to go through a revolution. Yet the document that announced this at the beginning of March is bereft of systematic evidence, offers no analysis of the current circumstances, and contains no reasoned argument in support of its provisional proposals. The inquiry which has yielded this guide to the future – the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment in Scotland – has given us no insights into the internal deliberations of its numerous advisory groups. It has not yet published any thorough analysis of the public consultation which it launched last autumn. It platitudinously asserts that educational assessment is important for Scottish society, and yet offers no analysis that would explain how or why. It claims that its proposals are necessary to prevent Scotland's "being left behind as other countries adopt new and creative approaches", without any account of what these are. Scottish education is thus presented with a fundamental change on the basis of a manifesto of little more than ideological assertion.

There are three main aspects of the Review's interim report. The one that caught the news media headlines when it was published was the proposal that there should be a "significant reduction in external assessment" and also its deep scepticism of what it calls closed-book examinations. The only explicit rationale which is offered is that "high-stakes examinations" are stressful. Doubtless they are, but the key question that the report doesn't mention is whether the stress is or is not educationally worthwhile. Some kinds of stress are so bad that they do destroy learning. Some are a goad to revision for exams, which can be useful if a pass in an undesired subject is needed to move to a desired goal: probably the most familiar example is having to pass Higher mathematics to get into university courses that are not mainly about that subject. And some stress is creative and inspiring: the achievements of, say, Nicola Benedetti or Andy Murray or Nicola Sturgeon could hardly have been realised without stress. Yet the interim report presumes stress to be simply bad.

The role of external assessment is even more fundamental than stress. It is the main source of objectivity, the main way in which bias in the design and marking of assessment may be avoided. It is also how society holds its educational institutions to account, and the way in which teachers in one establishment recurrently adjust their professional understanding to the norms which govern their expertise. Yet the interim report presents external assessment as simply an intrusion.

The report damns exams as if they and external assessment were the same thing. They obviously aren't, but the report does not discuss the difference. It doesn't even attempt to ask where exams are valid and where they aren't, and thus also doesn't ask where essays or projects or collaborative investigations are better or worse than exams. It strongly advocates digital assessment online, while being apparently oblivious to the threat which artificial intelligence (such as ChatGPT) poses to its validity. As the Review's lead members know better than I, there is a vast research literature –

stretching back for a century – on the validity of different forms of assessment. Yet the interim report simply ignores that body of evidence.

The second aspect of the Review's proposals is on the place of distinct subjects in the school curriculum. The attitude here is resolutely sceptical. Rhetorical obeisance is paid to their place, in the clumsy formulation that they are "perceived to be the current focus of the current qualification system" (a non-committal phrasing that offers no assurance that subjects ought even to continue to exist). But there is no discussion of what a subject is, nor why they have been the basis of the curriculum for a long time. There is no recognition that subjects are not arbitrarily plucked out of some policy maker's or academic's imagination, but might, rather, be viewed as the constantly evolving sedimentation of about two and a half millennia of human learning. There is always a debate to be had about the boundaries of subjects and the creation of new groupings out of old. That's how genetics came out of biology, biology came from zoology and botany, zoology and botany emerged from the Darwinian revolution. It's how history and geography parted company with English, and how, in Scotland, parts of each were detached to contribute to modern studies. Yet for the interim report, subjects, being old, are deeply suspect.

The third feature is then what would be put in subjects' place, a mixture of what the interim report calls interdisciplinarity and something which it calls "personal pathways". There is no acknowledgement that interdisciplinarity makes no sense without disciplines, in other words subjects, nor that to get to the point at which truly interdisciplinary work might be feasible a student has first to have a solid grounding in these disciplines. The report's examples of "climate change, migration or social justice" are indeed prime instances of difficult issues that can only be addressed by the coming together of disciplinary experts who bring, precisely, their expertise. Expertise is not something that a student aged typically 16-18 is educationally mature enough to possess. But for the interim report, acknowledging that students are not always the best judges of their own interests seems to be beyond its moral bounds.

If the creative necessity of disciplines is thus absent, the idea of personal pathways is inscrutable. On the one hand, the report does not even attempt to investigate whether, in fact, students' pathways might already be described as quite personal. That's what is offered currently by Scotland's wide range of subjects, of levels of assessment, and of length of course, supported by the kinds of pastoral advice that teachers have become much better at providing than they were able to do half a century ago. On the other hand, a radically personal trajectory would require so much detailed guidance as to swamp teachers in perpetual negotiations. Add to that the interim report's suggestion that students might even be able to choose a mode of assessment, and the scope for weary disillusionment among teachers is inescapable. So also does the threat of that choice to any kind of validity of assessment or comparability of standards between subjects. Again, there is a good body of research evidence on this, some of it showing that student choice of assessment can be reconciled with validity and with manageable teacher workloads. Yet for the interim report, in this area too, offering us evidence would appear to be otiose.

What happens next? The Review invites more comments, which will be discussed by its mostly anonymous advisory groups. In due course, it says, it will publish an analysis of the opinions which it has canvassed, and which in this interim report are summarised only in forms that are presented as supporting the interim proposals. But let's be rather frank: this is a scandalously inadequate way of airing in public a question of such enormous importance. If this is a Review for which stress is bad, external assessment an intrusion, systematic evidence not even mentioned, subjects are decrepit, and expertise in policy making and professionalism weighs not at all, then there is no prospect that any kind of lastingly worthwhile system of assessment might emerge from its deliberations.

Lindsay Paterson is emeritus professor of education policy, Edinburgh University

Creative Industries: Scotland's hidden superpower – Rachael Brown

Originally posted 16 March 2023

During the pandemic we all consumed creative products, services, and experiences like never before. We devoured tv shows, ordered and consumed books, made music, generated ideas, bought fashion, created art, played games, recorded podcasts and took part in online classes in everything you could think off. Despite this, somehow the creative sector is still not valued as being an important industry. It's something over there, not as serious as manufacturing or hospitality. They're lifestyle businesses, additional business fuelled by happy individuals working hard to be creative.

In the UK alone creative industries generate more than the life sciences, aerospace and automotive sectors combined, and yet it is under-valued and under invested in. For example, in the north-east of Scotland, an area known for its dominant energy sector, the creative industries are worth more than tourism, fishing and agriculture combined but don't feature in any focused way. Why is that?

I'd suggest it's all about perception and the impacts we value relating to the economy, business & entrepreneurship. We know that the creative industries are dominated by SMEs and freelancers, disproportionately so in comparison to other sectors, therefore we perceive the creative industries as small lifestyle choices – if you can't get a real job you freelance.

We value secure jobs in and jobs out in big businesses with big investments. We don't really see the small micro entrepreneur as having value, creating value, or indeed, making value. Our lens on creative entrepreneurship is far too narrow.

At Creative Entrepreneurs' Club we have gone from 300 members to just under 4000 members in 3 years, launching the UK's first response during pandemic for creative freelancers to fine tune and develop skills, to flourish. We are a data driven social enterprise bootstrapping our way forward, for creatives by creatives.
What lens do we see this hidden superpower through:

- Micro-enterprises and creative businesses grow and shrink with equal finesse – this is not market failure, but by design, therefore are poised to be adaptable to the current opportunities, as well as weather challenges, clearly demonstrated during pandemic.
- Investment returns are not fast, but they are deep.
- Freelancers and Micro-enterprises can and do work globally from day one.
- Pre-pandemic we 'lost' talent physically to London and other places, but now we are losing talent digitally, and do we even know where and to do what?
- Flexible working, lone working and new business models coupled with digital freedom have and will create new working patterns and portfolio careers.

- The future isn't all about scale, micro businesses & freelancers are demonstrating maxi impact, no longer are people trapped in 'big' business, a new wave of creative entrepreneur is emerging ahead of the curve, we don't resource our understanding of that enough.

Scotland is known for innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurship. We talk about it all the time but how do we live it as creative entrepreneurs. Defaulting to traditional structures and institutions can only take us so far, why? Because creative entrepreneurs give us something new, pioneering if you like – the canary in the coal mine.

The patterns and behaviours around work that were adopted during pandemic, were commonplace in the creative industries. The trend of purpose driven business in Scotland and beyond are thriving in creative industries, and that adds another level of challenge – not only are they creative, but now socially motivated and purpose driven, as well as global and small, and connected and profitable, and, and, and. No one box fits.

So, what can we do to support such an important sector?

How about the first Festival of Creative Entrepreneurs. What an international calling card that would be – Scotland leading the way in being the best place to be creative and entrepreneurial. A festival celebrating our people, celebrating their creativity, and showcasing what a diverse mix of businesses and entrepreneurs we have. Highlighting what is possible when we invest in people. Creative people, creating solutions for a new world.

What a superpower.

Rachael Brown is CEO of Creative Entrepreneurs' Club

Making effective collaboration in Scotland a reality – Gillian Hunt

Originally posted 23 March 2023

The Scottish Government seeks to ensure that every child and young person succeeds, regardless of their background. They aim to raise attainment, promote the highest standards of literacy and numeracy and close the gap between disadvantaged and more affluent learners. This cannot be achieved using the resources available within the education system. We need to listen to, learn from, and collaborate with the third sector. But first, we must overcome a reluctance to do so.

I challenge the new First Minister and their Education Secretary to refocus attention on education, and to ensuring that all of our children and young people succeed. I urge them to recognise the need to create a new system, an ecosystem and to actively promote and support the contribution of third sector organisations to this ecosystem. To explore the issues above I had conversations with more than 30 individuals, from public, third and private sectors, to produce a paper entitled, 'An Ecosystem: what we need for effective collaboration in Scotland'. This was published by Reform Scotland in December 2022, with follow up articles, 'Charities should have a bigger role in Scottish schools' in the Times Education Supplement Scotland and 'We must have more charity involvement in schooling' in The Herald.

The purpose was to explore the barriers to collaboration, examine examples of co-operation between the third sector and government (national and local) and suggest lessons learned from these experiences. I concluded the paper with four recommendations to make collaboration more effective: set up an organisation to map third sector collaboration; require schools to nominate a staff member to be responsible for third sector relationships; simplify funding and allow it to follow the individual; and sectors to learn with and from each other.

I received a significant response to the paper: from around 100 individuals resulting in a further 32 conversations. Respondents were from public sector and government organisations, Scottish Parliament, third sector organisations, the private sector and parents. I believe the response illustrates a desire for discussion and debate in this area, that people want something different to happen: reform is clearly sought. There was consensus that there is too much talk and analysis of problems in Scotland, and little action.

In consideration of the responses which supported them overwhelmingly, I propose that the four recommendations remain. Where my thinking has changed around the recommendations, is noted below:

- A small national organisation to map collaboration is set up, commissioned by Scottish Government. This work may be done by an existing third sector organisation. A national co-ordinator should be appointed to lead and manage this team. The first task would be to seek out information that already exists, holding a meeting with organisations, such as SCVO, who hold that information. The team would act as the

point of contact for organisations seeking collaboration and partnership. Information on good practice would be gathered and inter-sector professional development offered. Local authorities would map their own collaborations and partnerships and share with this team. In practice, coordinating nationally, acting locally.

- Responsibility for managing collaboration cannot be an additional task but must be an organisation's way of operating. Scottish Government must recognise and facilitate the autonomy of head teachers and their staffs. Developing this way of working should begin in initial teacher education.
- Almost all respondents pointed to the fact that, money talks, that it levers behaviour. Where an organisation spends its money shows where its commitment lies. There was overwhelming support for longer-term funding and simpler procurement processes. Where we can affect change is by following the principles in Pupils Equity Fund (PEF) National Guidelines with regard to the involvement of stakeholders and collaboration with, and use of, third sector partnerships. Though working within agreed national and local guidelines, the decision on PEF spend must rest with head teachers. All political parties should engage in discussion on use of PEF and make education a cross party issue.

Additionally we should:

- Consider national and international examples. Learning from these would be published by the new organisation.
- Set up consortiums of voluntary organisations to provide more consolidated approaches, thus reducing duplication of provision, competition for funding and provide more opportunity for impact.

It is clear that the public and third sector often speak different languages and use different measures. For example schools measure in attainment, attendance and positive destinations, while a third sector organisation supporting young people in school may be growing confidence and self-esteem. This in turn impacts on attainment, attendance and positive destinations, hence the two sectors need to know and understand how one facilitates the other.

There have been numerous stories which exemplify effective collaboration. However, success stories alone do not change practice, these must be balanced with statistics. It is crucial that we evaluate and share information from pilots with politicians and other decision-makers to enable them to make reform happen.

In conclusion we require a three-stage process to affect change:

1. **Raise awareness** – Start conversations, be clear about what the problem is, explore barriers, highlight current examples of effective collaborative working and make recommendations. This was achieved with the initial paper '<u>An Ecosystem: what we need for effective collaboration in Scotland</u>', subsequent articles and follow up conversations.

2. **Pilot and evaluate** – It is helpful to show how an ecosystem approach works, to demonstrate effective collaboration in practice. Two further reports are planned: a school operating as an ecosystem in its own community and a local authority mapping out partnerships and collaborations with a view to working as an ecosystem. The story of Dunoon Grammar School, winner of T4 Education's World's Best School for Community Collaboration will be published in May 2023, following interviews with pupils, staff, parents and partners. An initial report on the local authority project is planned for the end of Ju
3. **Propose, then take action** – The final stage is to effect change: to move from talk to action. This will begin with a presentation on findings from the two pilots above. Evaluations will be shared and proposals made to decision-makers at a roundtable event and a members debate at the Scottish Parliament.

I now call upon the new leadership and cabinet of the Scottish Government to listen and take appropriate action, as noted above, to make collaboration between the public, third, and private sector more effective, in order to ensure that all young people in Scotland succeed.

Gillian Hunt is an education consultant.

Change is needed if we are to better support bereaved children
– Christine Jardine MP

Originally posted 18 April 2023

It was a conversation with my sister about our dad's death which sparked the initial thought that maybe I could draw attention to an issue that seems to have gone almost unnoticed.

She had been just 8 and my other sister 13 when Dad died suddenly one Saturday morning of a massive heart attack.

Our world was turned upside down.

Until that point we were a pretty ordinary family. Professional father, mother who was main home maker with two girls doing well at school and one at university.

We had never had, nor needed, any contact or support from social services. And so it remained.

We were not on their radar.

The girls' schools were great and I suppose the university would have been too if I had asked.

But there was no way of social services knowing who we were, where we were or whether we needed any emotional support.

Forty years on I assumed things had changed.

I was wrong.

Every year an estimated 27 thousand parents die in the UK.

And we know that by the age of 16 around 5 per cent of young people have lost one or both of their parents.

But we still do not know who they are or where they are.

Yes, fantastic work is being done by our schools and voluntary sector organisations in supporting children who have lost a parent, sibling, grandparent or other loved one.

But they can only help those children that they know about. They have no way of reaching out and offering support to those who may not be aware of the services available.

They don't know where they are and there is no data or registry to help to put them in touch.

We can't leave all the onus on the families or young people themselves. When you are grieving you do not know what support you or your children need.

And as a child you cannot possibly be expected to understand or communicate the enormity of the pain you are suffering.

I remember thinking my sisters were doing fine, that they had a loving family and the school was aware of what they were going through.

But it was only when my own daughter was eight and I watched her reading with her dad and wondered how she would cope that I realised the extent of the trauma my own sister, and mother faced.

Then when she was 13 I realised again that my other sister, facing all the normal angst of early teenage years, had been given an enormous extra challenge to overcome.

Perhaps the biggest irony of all was when my own husband died when my daughter was exactly the age I had been when I lost my own father. I realised then that I had not been as much of an adult as I thought.

And for the first time I recognised that I had carried that trauma with me for decades and never really dealt with its impact. Neither had I ever been fully aware of what my sisters needed.

In the weeks since that conversation with my sister I have raised the issue in parliament, met a UK Government minister, led a debate on the issue and contacted both the UK and Scottish Governments.

Everyone is sympathetic but seem stumped as to how to resolve the issue.

Both the UK and Scottish Governments recognise the need for action but highlight the support available through schools and other organisations.

But that is to completely miss the point.

Both because it leaves responsibility again with the families to figure out for themselves what they need.

And because it doesn't take into account that children, on the loss of one or both parents, may move to a school where they are not known and not want to have attention drawn to their situation.

Surely it would not be that difficult to find a way of recording with every death whether there is a child whose life has been turned upside down.

Then they could be notified of support that is available and the charities and organisations who so desperately want to help them would have a way of reaching out.

Looking back I am inordinately proud of how my sisters, my mother and then my daughter coped with the grief that no-one had anticipated or prepared them for.

We have all done pretty well for ourselves but I know that somewhere out there is a child who will go to bed tonight and cry for the parent who used to read them to sleep. I just wish we knew how to reach them.

Christine Jardine is the MP for Edinburgh West and Liberal Democrat spokesperson for Cabinet Office, Women & Equalities and Scotland

Ten tasks for the new education secretary – Lindsay Paterson

Originally posted 19 April 2023

No-one could envy the multiple challenges faced by the new education secretary in the Scottish government, Jenny Gilruth. Apart from the lingering effects of Covid – when schools were closed, online lessons were intermittent, and social inequalities were magnified – there is also the legacy of years of pent-up policy failures despite the rhetoric of good intentions.

So here are ten tasks that Ms Gilruth might like to consider. These are not an exhaustive list of the challenges, and they are unlikely to be solved before the next Scottish parliamentary elections in 2026. But making a significant start on them would signal an administration that was serious about effective policy.

1. Attainment

Scottish school attainment has been declining for a decade and a half. Government ministers have been reluctant to admit this. But if we use the most reliable measures available – from the regular Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), as analysed by researchers at the Education Policy Institute – the dismaying trends are inescapable. In 2006, the year before the SNP came to power, the average attainment of 15-year-olds in Scotland was well-above the international average in numeracy and science, and was the best in the UK in these and in reading. By 2018 (the most recent PISA survey), Scotland was at best average internationally, and was probably behind England in all three domains. Thus we get the starkest task to start with:

Task 1: find ways of reintroducing intellectual rigour into the school curriculum.

2. Standards in national assessments

The trends of attainment shown by Scotland's own national assessment – run by the Scottish Qualifications Authority – mostly reflect the same decline. The interruption to normal exams caused by Covid has confused the picture since 2020. But in the last pre-Covid year, the disappointing outcomes prompted Ms Gilruth's predecessor-but-one, John Swinney, to order a special inquiry. For example, of 46 subjects at Higher Grade, the pass rate declined between 2018 and 2019 in 32. For only seven out of the 46 was the pass rate in 2019 higher than in the best year since 2016. These seven made up just 4% of all entries to Higher. 2016 is a relevant baseline because the Highers syllabuses and assessments were revised after 2015. Random fluctuation should lead to about half of the pass rates going up each year, and half going down. That was what normally used to be the case. So something was going wrong.

The conclusions of Mr Swinney's review suggested what the problems might be. Syllabuses were inadequately stimulating, and learning was insufficiently rigorous. In English, for example, the review concluded that 'candidates tended to assert rather than analyse'. In Mathematics, performance was undermined by weak algebraic skills and weak numeracy. In French, there were problems with candidates' grasp of 'spelling, genders, plurals, accents, adjectival agreement [and] tenses'. In Biology, Chemistry and

Physics, 'many candidates were unable to demonstrate accurate knowledge and understanding of definitions and terminology'.

Ms Gilruth's advisers will nevertheless tell her that the proportion of all students passing Highers (and the other SQA assessments) is rising, even though the pass rates for individual subjects are stagnating or falling. When set alongside the declining PISA scores, the only reasonable inference is that the assessments are generally becoming easier, encouraging more students to be presented for them. Despite the decline in pass rates, enough of these new students do pass to enable the overall proportions who gain a pass to rise. Hence the second task:

Task 2: place the standards of the national assessments on a more consistently rigorous basis. This will require a thorough revision of syllabuses and of modes of assessment.

3. Assessment

That brings us to what will presumably be the first item in Ms Gilruth's in-tray, the current review of assessment that was commissioned by her predecessor. Much is wrong with the current modes of assessment. The practice has grown, for example, of candidates' learning mini-essays by heart, to regurgitate them in the exam room with minimal change. Tests in mathematics and science have become formulaic and predictable. Thus current exams urgently need reform.

At the same time, the assessed course-work – usually done by candidates at home – is open to too many extraneous influences to be valid. Even when parents do not intend to give unfair help to their children, they cannot avoid doing so simply by having family conversations. Out of that comes social inequality. Invigilated exams in school do not suffer from that problem.

Yet the review's interim report seems to be interested only in reducing the role of exams and reducing the extent to which assessment is externally set by the SQA rather than internally decided by the school. These are important debates, but they miss the main point, which is that assessment ought to be an assessment of knowledge.

In debates about these matters, knowledge is often caricatured as a list of facts. It is not: more important than the facts is the framework of understanding in which they can be embedded. Assessments ought to test that kind of understanding. Some knowledge can only be elicited by lengthy essays or projects or collaborative work. But these forms of assessment have to be made impervious to parental influence. Their validity also now faces a new threat: artificial intelligence (such as ChatGPT), which can instantly produce essays of what appear to be high quality, without any actual contribution from the student. Other kinds of knowledge can be best tested only by an invigilated exam. Unless the review accepts the importance of knowledge as a form of understanding, and investigates the strengths as well as the weaknesses of all forms of assessment, then it will fail.

Task 3: ensure that the review of assessment recommends the best kinds of exams as well as the most valid kinds of assessed course work. From the interim report, this at present seems unlikely.

4. Inequality of attainment
Closing what is usually called the poverty-related attainment gap was described by Nicola Sturgeon as her defining mission. Again, the PISA studies provide the only valid yardstick, and the conclusions are not encouraging. Where inequality has declined since 2006, the main reason has been a fall in the attainment of students from affluent families, not any improvement among those who are socially disadvantaged. Where the affluent have not declined, inequality has risen.

Again, the minister's advisers will obfuscate. Citing not PISA but the results of school assessment, they will claim that, on some measures, inequality is falling. But that depends on measuring inequality by the spurious Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. This is a measure of whole neighbourhoods, and is far too crude to capture the actual circumstances of individual children. Two thirds of deprived households with children are not in the most deprived areas. One quarter of households with children in deprived areas are not deprived. PISA does not suffer from this confusion, because it measures actual family circumstances, not neighbourhoods.
To reduce inequality, the Scottish government can build on policies that are already in place. The Scottish child payments have a real chance of reducing poverty. The same is true of free school meals. But some of the approach to poverty has to be more specifically about education. The SNP promised in its 2021 manifesto to provide laptops to every school pupil. The digital inequalities revealed by the Covid disruption shows that fulfilling that promise ought to be a central feature of education policy.

Task 4: keep the promise on laptops, despite budget cuts.

5. Narrowing of curriculum
Pupils have an increasingly restricted choice of subjects available in the middle years of secondary school. With the old Standard Grade (which came to an end in 2013), it was normal for schools to require most pupils to take eight subjects in the fourth year of secondary school: for example, in 2002, 70% sat eight or more in fourth year, and 88% sat seven or more. That is still normal in the independent schools. But more than half of local-authority schools now restrict the choice to five or six subjects, and only 11% allow eight subjects: in contrast, 93% of schools allowed eight subjects two decades ago. Not since the 1970s has such a low proportion of pupils had access to a broad curriculum in fourth year. Research by Dr Marina Shapira, Professor Mark Priestley and colleagues at Stirling University shows that in schools where the choice is most restricted, the decline in PISA scores has been greatest.

The reason why this narrowing has happened is the extension of what is called 'broad general education' into the third year of secondary school, thus reducing the time available to study subjects that lead to assessment at the end of fourth year. No coherent rationale has ever been offered for this new structure. Ironically, therefore, an apparent extension of breadth has actually led to its contraction at the level that keep students' choices open for more advanced courses. This is an example of a more general absence of thought-through planning in policy-making: the problem is an unintended consequence rather than a deliberate decision.

The new curriculum – which has been in place for over a decade now – is in general fragmented and insufficiently stimulating. It was introduced to make learning more enjoyable, to focus on skills, and to encourage pupils to make links between subjects. These are admirable aims, but not if they neglect rigour and knowledge (in the sense of understanding) as this curriculum does.

Another revolution would leave teachers demoralised if it was imposed from above. So what should happen now is imaginative experiment. Schools that want to explore better ways forward should be encouraged to do so. There are already many schools that are trying to keep hold of a knowledge-based curriculum, despite the official push in the other direction. These experiments should be strongly supported. For example, networks should be encouraged across the country where innovative schools can share experiences independently of the government, of local authorities and of inspectors. These experiments must then be properly evaluated so that the whole system can learn from them.

Task 5: reinstate the requirement for a broad curriculum up to age 16, and encourage and evaluate experiments in reinstating the place of knowledge at the heart of the curriculum.

6. Foundation apprenticeships

Then there is what happens beyond school. For pupils who are not likely to go onto higher education, one of the better policies of the present Scottish government has been the Foundation Apprenticeships. These offer an opportunity for students to combine core school courses with vocational study at a local college. They also have a placement at a local business. From a small start in 2016 with only a few hundred pupils, the take-up grew ten-fold to 3,500 in 2019, falling back to 3,000 in the Covid-struck 2020.

The most glaring problem is that this initiative is tiny. 3,500 apprentices may seem a lot. But, with two thirds of them taking the course over two years, they amount to a mere 5% of all school leavers. What's more, half of them don't fully complete the course.

Task 6: expand the Foundation Apprenticeships, and bring far more employers on board as partners in their provision.

7. College funding

If these Apprenticeships are among the more commendable policies of this government, the funding of local colleges has been among their more deplorable. Funding has tried to push students into full-time courses of higher education in the colleges, and away from part-time courses of the kind that can only be run in conjunction with local employers. The upshot is stark. In 2009, there were 340k student enrolments in courses of part-time further education. By 2015, this had fallen to 185k, and the recovery since then has only been to 211k. This is a massive loss of opportunity that has a particular impact on students in the most socially disadvantaged families.

Task 7: reverse the cuts to part-time further education, again working closely with local employers.

8. Access to university

The whole Scottish political class, and almost every journalist from outside Scotland, thinks that the jewel in the crown of Scottish educational policy is nominally 'free' university undergraduate education for Scottish students. When pushed to defend this, they will claim that it reduces inequality of access. In her resignation speech, Nicola Sturgeon cited as one of her successes the rise in university entrance by people from the most deprived neighbourhoods.

This again suffers from the problem of measuring deprivation by neighbourhood (see Task 4). There is evidence that universities have become adept at cherry-picking the non-disadvantaged minority in disadvantaged areas. But even using this kind of measure, the conclusion is not great: Scottish students from deprived neighbourhoods are still notably less likely to get to university than similar students in England (in 2020, 16% of such 18-year-olds against 25%). Most of the deficit is made up by higher-education courses at local colleges, but these are nearly all at diploma or certificate level – valuable in themselves, but not of the same status as degrees, and not having the same prospects of professional employment.

One way of resolving this is to strengthen the paths from colleges to universities, so-called 'articulation'. Good work is already being done in this respect, but much more is needed. If widening access is truly to be taken seriously, then articulation ought to be at the centre of higher-education policy, and ought to include all the universities, not only the newer universities that have always been better at doing this than the older ones.

Task 8: significantly expand the routes by which graduates from college diplomas can transfer to universities in order to complete a degree.

9. Cap on places at university

A baleful consequence of the no-fees policy is a cap on the number of university places for Scottish students (in order to ensure that demand does not overwhelm the government budget for this). The perverse consequence is that, as the number of Scottish school leavers who pass enough Highers to enter university has expanded, their opportunity to do so has been restricted by this deliberate government policy. An investigation by Reform Scotland has shown that, in the past 15 years, 'there has been a 56% increase in applicants, but an 84% increase in the number refused entry'.

Task 9: remove the cap. If that can't be done within budget, then the politically challenging task will have to be faced of reintroducing fees to be paid (as in the rest of the UK) in retrospect when a graduate is earning above the threshold for repaying the student loan.

10. Data

The final task is to gather better evidence. The statistical evidence about students' experience of Scottish school education is poorer now that at any time in the past three quarters of a century. In particular, decisions by the SNP government and its

predecessor before 2007 have lost four important sources. One was the Scottish Survey of Achievement, which was a survey of attainment in literacy, numeracy and science at various stages in primary school and early secondary. The second was the internationally famous series of surveys of school leavers that stretched back to the 1950s. The third and fourth were Scottish participation in international surveys of literacy and of numeracy and science, which provided evidence on a wider range of ages than PISA (which is a survey only of 15-year-olds). It has been reported that Scotland would be re-joining these international surveys, a belated decision that is very much to be welcomed. But the decade and a half of their absence can never be recovered. All of these surveys used to provide invaluable evidence on rates of progress through the school years, on social inequalities of progress and attainment, and on students' attitudes to school and aspirations for their future lives. Only large surveys – of several thousand pupils at several school stages – can give evidence about small social groups, such as minority ethnic groups.

Task 10: reinstate surveys of progress through the education system, and confirm the decision to re-join the main international surveys.

Lindsay Paterson is emeritus professor of education policy, Edinburgh University

Beyond the international education surveys – Lindsay Paterson

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The Scottish government has announced that Scotland will re-join the main international surveys which investigate pupils' understanding of mathematics, science and reading. This is good news. The data from the surveys will cast light on the effectiveness of Scottish policy and professional practice in ways that have been missing since Scotland withdrew a decade and a half ago. But there is a problem: data from the surveys will not start to become available until 2027 at the earliest, after the next Scottish parliament election. The purpose of this blog is to suggest a pragmatic way in which the Scottish government could fill the gap.

The full titles of the surveys are the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). They have been run by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) since 1995 (TIMSS) and 2001 (PIRLS). They measure pupils' attainment at ages 8-9 (Primary 5) for all three domains, and 12-13 (Secondary 2) for mathematics and science. As well as this information, they also gather data on pupils' attitudes to their studies, on their home circumstances, and on their teachers' methods (for example. whether homework is given, and whether teaching is in large or small groups). It is likely that, when Scotland re-joins, each survey will sample around 3-4,000 pupils from around 130 schools at each of the specified stages. Since Scottish withdrawal, the only international survey in which Scotland participates has been the study of 15-year-olds (Secondary 3) by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

The decision to re-join has been widely welcomed, and indeed came after much pressure from researchers and opposition political parties. Reform Scotland's Commission on School Reform has been to the fore in that campaigning, arguing that these surveys provide a reliable means by which Scotland could learn from good educational practice in the more than 70 countries that now take part in them. The Commission has also recommended that Scotland resumes its previously annual surveys of attainment, which were abolished by the Scottish government after 2017. That was the final year of the annual Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy, which itself had replaced the annual Scottish Survey of Achievement in 2011. Understanding current policies requires annual frequency. It also requires questionnaires and attainment tests that are tailored to the Scottish curriculum and pedagogy.

The delay in getting data from the international surveys is because they run on quite lengthy cycles. TIMSS has a four-year cycle, and there is currently a wave of it in the field. So the next one will not be till 2027, reporting probably in 2028. PIRLS is five-yearly, and the next scheduled wave is 2026 with reports in 2027. The problem is even worse than this. These first new waves will be able to measure changes since Scotland last took part (2007 for mathematics and science, 2006 for reading). But if an aspect of the purpose is to measure trends in attainment that might reflect on policies that are currently being implemented, the earliest date by which current change could be

detected would be the wave after next – 2031 for each series, which is two Scottish parliamentary elections away, and a quarter of a century since Scotland last took part. Here is a pragmatic proposal for what to do in the meantime, achieving two aims in one move – resurrecting an annual survey, and filling the gap until Scotland gets the first results of the international surveys. Scotland should operate what might be thought of as a shadow version of the international surveys, starting next spring and running annually. The TIMSS and PIRLS questionnaires for pupils' attitudes and circumstances and for teachers' practices are fully in the public domain, and so could be readily applied here. Access to the testing materials is more complex, because the IEA keeps confidential a portion of the test questions for repeating in each survey so as to measure trends over time. Nevertheless, there is a mechanism by which researchers can apply to the IEA for permission to use the questions that are not reserved in this way. It seems likely that researchers in the Scottish government would readily be given that permission as part of a process of applying to re-join. Because the test items and questionnaires are already used in England and Northern Ireland, there would be no need for special piloting in Scotland, because conditions throughout the UK are similar enough to ensure that questions which work in one part will work in another.

If these shadow surveys could be started in 2024, then trends would already have started to be available by the time of the next Scottish parliament elections. More to the point in a practical sense, the annual data could be used to evaluate the developing impact of the Scottish curriculum. The Scottish government could choose to extend the investigation beyond the IEA's target ages to, for example, Primary 7 for all three domains, and Secondary 2 for reading. It could add questionnaire items to measure aspects of current policies, such as universal free meals, free laptops, and policies for pupils with additional support needs.

It would also be possible to use these annual surveys to calibrate the results of the National Standardised Assessments, which were introduced by the present government from 2017. These assessments are potentially valuable as aids to teachers, and have been designed to a high standard. It would be interesting to know how the standards which they represent compare with the international criteria of the surveys. It would also be informative to set the national assessments in the same kind of contexts of pupils' homes and teachers' practices as are recorded in the international surveys. This could all be done by electronically linking the survey results for each pupil in the sample to the results of the most recent national assessments. There are reliable mechanisms by which such linkage can be done in a way that protects the anonymity of pupils, teachers and schools.

Beyond 2026-27, if this scheme seems to be working well, the proposed annual surveys could continue to run in parallel to the periodic international surveys, thus giving a better-grounded explanation of Scotland's development in a global context.
This proposal needs to be tested in debate, and I'm sure that I've failed to notice some complications that would need to be ironed out. But if something like the structure proposed here could be implemented, it would re-establish what used to be Scotland's rich environment of educational statistics. It could be a welcome long-term consequence of the government's forward-looking decision to re-join the international surveys.

Lindsay Paterson is emeritus professor of education policy at Edinburgh University.

Citizen-empowering reform of personal data must be a priority – Alan Mitchell

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Scotland's First Minister and Priorities – a request

How many priorities can the new First Minister cope with? In plain English a 'priority' is something you attend to first because of its importance or urgency. Which means that once you have more than a few, they aren't 'priorities' any more – just another item in a long list, competing for attention and resources.

Many birds, one stone

The problem with a list of priorities that grows too long is that nothing on the list retains real priority status. The risk: frantic activity but dissipated effort. In such a situation, one way forward is to identify an intervention that can help address many, or all, of the 'priorities' at the same time.

One such intervention is citizen-empowering reform of personal data.

"That's odd!", you might say. "It's got nothing to do with anything we've just been talking about!". Except that it has, because every service that deals directly with identified individuals, in the public, third and private sectors, collects and uses personal data in order to function. And every one of these services is hamstrung by outdated data architectures and infrastructure that were designed 50 or more years ago. They pile up layer upon layer of unnecessary effort and cost while acting as a straightjacket on what services can do. A productivity, innovation and growth roadblock in other words.

If this roadblock could be lifted, immense and rapid progress could be made across the board – in health, care and education, in public and third sector services, in productivity, in private sector innovation and growth, in tackling poverty and inequalities, in human rights, the wellbeing economy and even in tackling net zero.

Here's the thing: the First Minister has a real, immediate opportunity to lift the roadblock.

To see this opportunity we need to step back a bit. Every service today is organised around the organisation-centric database. That is, it works on the assumption that each and every organisation individually and separately collects, generates, holds and uses the data it needs for its own activities, even if a half or more of the data points it uses are exactly the same as the organisation operating next to it.

Result? Across the economy as a whole, we suffer bloated costs at a gargantuan scale (routine, multiplied duplication of effort and cost at every step of every process) plus endemic failures to integrate and join dots resulting in poor citizen experiences and outcomes at unnecessarily high costs.

These flaws are designed into how our economy currently works. The organisation-centric database is designed to be proprietary: to hold the organisation's data close to its chest, safe and sound, away from prying eyes. Which blocks the data sharing that's needed for efficient, integrated, inclusive, citizen-centred, joined-up services and a wellbeing economy.

A tangible example of organisation centred data sharing impacting services negatively is when the public sector and other service providers e.g. GPs ; social workers ; Occupational Therapists ; third sector service providers each maintain a database. The citizen finds themselves excluded from this process, and so do their carers and family. Each of the standalone databases is expensive and always out of date.

If the citizen is the point of integration, if trust and relationships and human rights are to be designed from the start in Scotland, we can all have collaborative services that are designed truly with the citizen at the centre. The outcome then is the citizen is empowered and data can flow to each of the organisations via the citizen's personal data store.

Multiple opportunities

There is, however, a safe, simple, practically ready-to-implement way of tackling this design flaw: the reform of personal data infrastructure and processes so that citizens are able to obtain copies of the data that organisations hold about them, to hold this data safely and securely under their own control (thereby making each citizen the point at which data about them is safely integrated), and to easily and safely share this data with other service providers as and when they need to.

By enabling citizens to bring their own pre-verified and checked data with them to the services they deal with, and by empowering them to act as hubs for the sharing of this data, these personal data stores help eliminate the huge amounts of friction, effort, delay, error and risk that currently characterises services' operations. It also enables efficient, citizen centred, joined up services in arenas such as health and social care, poverty initiatives and service innovation.

By enabling citizens to choose who they share their data with, including the creation of closed circles, it also underpins community engagement. And, by digitising previously paper-based processes and reducing unnecessary duplicated effort, it supports the move to net zero.

It can be done. Now.

This isn't just a pipe dream. All the structural reform work and preparation needed to implement such an approach to enable the reform of personal data has already been done … by the Scottish Government! For example, Digital Identity Scotland's current work on a Scottish Attribute Provider Service already embraces these principles and has already tested their practical operation. The Digital Health and Care Innovation Centre is leading the way across multiple projects in Scotland. Macmillan Cancer support are already piloting such an approach.

It's an area where Scotland is leading the world.

The opportunities of citizen-centred and citizen-empowering data sharing can therefore be opened up immediately and at very low cost. What's more, it does not involve the Government in some grand new multi-billion pound, greenfield, IT project that will inevitably overrun in terms of both time and cost while failing to deliver its promises. It is ideally suited for roll-out in an incremental test-and-learn manner, use-case by use-case, service by service, with momentum (and impacts) multiplying over time.

If implemented first in the public sector, the costs involved in the initial pump-priming investment will be quickly outstripped by the productivity improvements and cost savings unleashed. These cost reduction and insight benefits, while starting in the public sector, can spread quickly to the private sector helping firms to reduce their cost base while driving innovation and growth, thereby growing the tax base.

Conclusion

The First Minister has an awful lot on his plate, as does Scotland itself. Data is a pivotal asset in the modern economy, and the new First Minister has the opportunity to unleash the power of data in a way that helps address most, if not all of the Scottish Government's current priorities. Given the intense pressure on budgets and resources, the First Minister needs to find interventions that help tackle many different priorities all at the same time.

Citizen-empowering reform of personal data is one such intervention.

Alan Mitchell is Chairman of Mydex CIC, which advised the Scottish Government on the vision and operation of the Scottish Attribute Provider strategy.

Humza Yousaf takes a massive policy gamble – Gordon Hector

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Humza Yousaf's first few weeks have hardly been quiet. Last week he added to the cacophony, by teeing up a big change in SNP social policy.

The SNP has long trumpeted its universal benefits: free tuition, childcare, prescriptions, baby boxes, plus laptops, school meals, bicycles and bus transport for young people. The First Minister signalled a new direction. He gave a statement saying "We need to consider whether targeting help is the way forward when money is so tight… the debate must now be about tax, targeting and tough choices."

This is a fascinating intervention – and it's worth unpicking just how significant it could be.

In policy terms, there's really no need to make everything universal, or everything targeted. You can have a mix of systems sitting quite happily alongside each other, with the technical and ethical justification for targeting or universalism being pretty bespoke to each policy. Government always has spending limits, and various blends of tax and spending policy can be rational.

So on the face of it – this is just a mature statement of reality.

The problem for the SNP is that mature statements of reality are often terrible politics. This is a lesson that opposition parties learnt and re-learnt under the SNP: universal benefits have huge symbolic power. You can make all the arguments you like about the best use of resources. Taking a policy in isolation, voters quite like the idea of targeting. Yet it doesn't land because people don't see policy detail. They see values. If they don't trust your leader, your motives, or your overall credibility, your attack only ends up confirming their worst fears.

This dynamic has played out time and time again since 2007 – whether it's tuition fees, or prescriptions, or baby boxes. It's frustrating for policy purists, but you have to meet voters where they are. You have to respect their right to judge you harshly and instantly.

So while it often makes for bad policy, there's no denying it makes for good elections. The SNP's basic pitch has been a core constitutional identity, buttressed by a projection of competent, feel-good policy. Primary colours, big brushstrokes of patriotism, niceness, being *one of us*. Universalism is the clearest distillation of that brand.

So it matters – a lot – if the SNP are now proposing something of a vibe shift.

It's odd, too. It makes sense for the SNP to try and look like the grown-ups in politics, and focus a bit on delivery. It also makes sense to try and talk about something – anything! – that isn't arrests or motorhomes or missing funds.

But Yousaf's statement was strangely lacking in a sense of narrative. It felt tactical. One-off. Random.

These things have to have some sort of overarching story to make sense. It's the same lesson as the one opposition parties have learnt: you cannot see policy decisions in isolation, but only in terms of the wider offer and reputation you are projecting. That feels lacking from the Scottish Government.

It's hard to avoid thinking, for example, that if Kate Forbes had won the SNP leadership, the exact same words would feel much less casual. You *can* switch hard to targeting and you *can* raise taxes, if it's coherent with a wider gospel of fiscal savvy and operational grip.

But without that frame, the message lacks purpose. It's tough choices, but without the toughness.

That just leaves – well, choices. And that means a very juicy opening-up of the policy debate.

For every campaigning organisation looking to win funding for their pet cause, it's open season. If everything is a choice, anything is a choice.

For the right, there's a sliver of a chance to detoxify. The language of touch choices is just quite *Tory* in feel. Appeals to target services are now just the same common sense that the First Minister offers. And there might even be a bit more bite to the tax rises Yousaf is clearly trailing – compared to almost zero political impact of tax rises in 2016-21.

And for Labour, there is now much more rhetorical space to outflank the SNP with a bit of vision and moral purpose. As important, the ground has shifted a notch away from the constitution, and towards domestic policy. That's helpful for a Labour party that should want to win votes from either side of the Yes/No divide.

Maybe this is all a deliberate ploy by the SNP, and it's setting a trap for the opposition to start making undeliverable demands.

But in doing so, the SNP has conceded one of its greatest powers: to set the agenda, and use the heft of government to define the limits of acceptable policy discourse. Universalism, tax, the whole question of who gets what – the FM himself now says it's all up for debate. That just creates so much more space for others to define what comes next.

For the SNP, it's a risk. For the opposition, it's an opportunity. For observers, it's a fine opportunity to see who's really capable of seizing the moment.

Scotland's policy debate is more open than ever: may the best politician win.
Gordon Hector is a policy consultant and former Director of Policy and Strategy for the Scottish Conservatives

The Nuclear Option – Stuart Paton

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The well attended All Energy Conference took place in Glasgow a couple of weeks ago- a wide range of keynote addresses, presentations and lots of big pieces of kit covering wind, solar, hydrogen, marine renewables, storage. But not ALL energy – where was the discussion on nuclear? There seems to be a complete lack of discussion on nuclear energy in Scotland which is reflected in the Scottish Government Energy Strategy. For a low carbon energy which generated 30% of Scotland's electricity in 2021 this seems surprising.

The Scottish and UK government have very significantly reduced the CO2 emissions from the generation of electricity over the last 20 years. Indeed, Scotland has almost entirely decarbonised electricity with 57% of the electricity generated in 2021 being from renewables- wind, hydro, solar, waste and renewables – and 87% from low carbon generation- renewables plus nuclear.

However, two key issues remain. What happens when the wind, which represented 41% of total generation in 2021, is not blowing? At present, although Scotland generates significantly more electricity than it uses (about 40% more in 2021), the country only generates what it needs 75% of the time and only 50% of the time if nuclear is excluded. The balance has to be made up by importing electricity, currently from England which has a much lower proportion of electricity produced from low carbon sources (49% versus 87% in Scotland) with the balance largely gas generation end hence not low carbon. Even as Scotland increases significantly its own generation capacity in offshore wind, there will still be periods when it is not self-sufficient and hence requires base load capacity – essentially hydro once Torness closes in 2028.

Secondly, as we move to electrify other components of our economy- electric vehicles for transport, heat pumps for homes, production of green hydrogen for various industrial uses- we will need to massively increase the amount of electricity required. Using some big assumptions, I have estimated that Scotland will require 100GW of installed capacity to deal with the additional requirements for home heating and transportation. This compares against 14GW of current capacity and recent ScotWind awards of 25GW of capacity. [So, the aspiration is in the correct direction but potentially only meets 50% of the required capacity to achieve net zero for current electricity uses, home heating and EVs.] Further, the reliance on wind generation requires huge investment in the grid, to cope with the new sources of more remote onshore and offshore locations, frequency regulation and grid balancing due to the reliance on wind turbines rather than traditional turbines and storage, to balance supply and demand. The move to electrification of transport and heating requires investment in car charging points and heat pump installers plus the softer issues of public education – how does a heat pump work compared to my existing gas boiler (not an easy question to answer), how do I find out this information etc.

So, how are we going to achieve this massive increase in capacity? On the basis of the Scottish Government's strategy, we requires a huge increase in onshore windfarms of a much larger scale than currently installed – with likely local hostility and a negative impact on the environment both in terms of habitat loss and visually particularly in wild spaces – and a huge increase in offshore windfarms – at greater distance from the coast in deeper water and hence more expensive – and importing more electricity from neighbouring countries – England and Norway – which will presumably have the same demands for increased supply. Or we consider an alternative source of energy, which has safely been providing Scotland with electricity for more than 60 years and which still provides 30% of our generation.

So, what does nuclear energy provide?

Firstly, a large base load capacity of zero carbon generation for a long period of time (50-60 years). This is clearly demonstrated by the scale of the remaining operational nuclear power station at Torness which on its own generates 30% of Scotland's electricity day-in-day out, almost every day of the year (allowing for maintenance). Further, this base load capacity has been provided safely for decades relatively close to Scotland's population centres- Torness in East Lothian and Hunterston on the Ayrshire Coast- without extensive, long distance transmission as required for windfarms.

Secondly, the area required. Torness power station, with a capacity of 1.3GW covers less than one square kilometre. In contrast, the largest onshore windfarm in Scotland, Whitelees covers 55 square kilometres for a capacity of 500MW and Seagreen, offshore the Fife coast, covers 3000 square kilometres (at very low density it has to be said) for a capacity of 1GW. Without a significant change in public perception, it is hard to see the necessary huge windfarms being built onshore in more wild, remote parts of Scotland. Large offshore windfarms require significant subsea cabling which can be unreliable and costly to repair or replace and will impinge on other sea bed resources, such as Carbon Capture and Storage.

Thirdly, and unusually for many key resources which are vital for the energy transition, much of the necessary uranium is found in friendly countries particularly Australia and Canada reducing the overreliance on Chinese and Russian products. Compare this with the location of critical minerals and gas where we are increasingly reliant on the Middle East and unstable countries in Africa with scant regard for the welfare of local communities or environment.

Finally, there are a range of technical options being pursued for advancing nuclear generation. Large sums of research money, including from Bill Gates, are being invested in a variety of alternatives in particular Small Modular Reactors (SMR). These have capacity of up to 300MW per unit and can be factory assembled and transported to a location for installation. They can, therefore, be installed in sites not suitable for larger power plants, are relatively low cost and simpler design and can be installed where there are existing grid connections. The most advanced project in the UK is a Rolls-Royce led consortium designing a 470MW Small Modular Reactor. The UK government has committed £385 million to an Advanced Nuclear Fund and in March announced a

competition for small nuclear reactors. Very small scale Advanced Nuclear Reactors which could be used for back-up generation, desalination plants and in remote locations are also being advanced. And of course, the great hope of fusion technology is being progressed including in the UK.

The downsides to nuclear energy are well rehearsed.

Cost is presented as the biggest barrier. The estimated cost of Hinkley-C has yet again increased to £33 billion for a 3.2GW capacity. In comparison, Seagreen is costing approximately £3-4 billion for 1GW. However, a number of other factors need to be considered. Firstly, the costs of future nuclear stations, assuming they can be repeats of Hinkley-C are likely to come down as they have done for wind turbines and solar panels over the last ten years and there is recent upward pressure on wind turbine costs. Secondly, the electricity price of £92.5/MWhr for Hinkley-C cannot be compared against the £37/MWhr Contract for Difference prices for offshore wind as the latter does not include the costs of ensuring base load capacity- either through paying for storage or import of electricity from England at prevailing gas prices- which significantly close the gap.

Secondly, the risk of catastrophic incidents. The three highest profile nuclear accidents- Three-Mile Island, Chernobyl and Fukoshima- were fundamentally the result of poor regulation and operations. There have been no such failings in relation to UK nuclear energy in the almost 70 years since the first UK civil nuclear reactor opened. According to Our World in Data, the death rates from accidents and air pollution from nuclear energy (0.03 deaths per terrawat-hour of electricity generation) including Chernobyl and Fukoshima, are comparable to those from wind and solar and hundreds of times lower than from gas, oil and (in particular) coal.

Thirdly, the disposal of highly radioactive waste. The volumes of high level waste, essentially spent nuclear fuel, accounts for 95% of the radioactivity but less than 1% of waste by volume. All the high level waste produced to date in the UK would cover a quarter of a football pitch to 1m depth. Improving efficiency of future reactors means that the volume of waste is only likely to increase by 10% in the next 60 years. Currently most high level waste is stored at Sellafield in Cumbria where it is vitrified to make it impermeable to water and chemically stable. A permanent geological solution is being considered by the UK government with a similar scheme already under construction in Finland.

Despite the range of evidence for and against, the Scottish Government's Energy Strategy is clear and unambiguous– no nuclear including not even considering alternative technologies such as SMR. The Scottish Government's position on traditional nuclear energy has not changed: '*We do not support the building of new nuclear power plants under current technologies*'- with the stated reason being due to the cost. In relation to SMR technology, a bland statement that '*these use the same nuclear fission technology as the power generating process found in larger traditional nuclear power plants and carry the same environmental concerns*.' As stated above, the cost argument is more nuanced when taking into account the need for reliability of supply, grid and frequency balancing and possible much cheaper generation from SMRs. To

emphatically rule out SMRs on environmental grounds when the biggest environmental challenge is climate change also seems derisory.

In relation to fusion the Scottish Government strategy states: '*We are also aware of increasing interest in the development of fusion energy – which is different from traditional nuclear fission energy. However, we are clear that there is a long way to go in terms of fully understanding both the risks and opportunities that fusion energy technology presents*.'

This strikes me as a deeply disappointing view from the current leaders of a country that has been at the leading edge of a range of technological innovations. We have a thriving University sector, with deep expertise in engineering and nuclear technology- what a waste to not even get involved in the race.

In this discussion, Scotland is increasingly an outlier in its complete refusal to consider nuclear energy. In England, Hinkley-C in Somerset is already well advanced and Sizewell-C in Suffolk is approved, groundworks have started and construction is planned to start in 2024. In March, the UK government classified nuclear power as 'environmentally sustainable' which removes a level of uncertainty regarding future investment. Japan is restarting reactors shut down following the 2011 earthquake and meltdown at the Fukushima plant and is extending the lifespan of some reactors from 40 to 60 years and considering building new ones. Despite doubling renewable electricity generation since 2010, Japan has significantly increased its use of gas and coal to make up for the shortfall in nuclear. The Netherlands recently announced plans to build two new nuclear power plants by 2035 which together would provide 13% of the country's generation. In 2022, France announced plans to build six new reactors and to consider building a further eight. Worldwide there are 59 reactors under construction and 103 planned largely in China, Egypt and India. A range of national and international bodies, including the International Panel on Climate Change, the International Energy Agency, the OECD and the UK Climate Change Committee all view nuclear energy as critical to achieving net zero.

I have always struggled to understand the anti-nuclear power approach taken by the SNP supported by the other main parties in Scotland, except for the Conservatives. Although limited data exists, opinion polls generally show the public broadly in favour nuclear power particularly when considered as part of the energy mix to reach net zero. The Labour party in Scotland is also out of step with the engineering unions and the party in England. I think part of this is a hangover from the 1950s anti-nuclear movement when the development of civil nuclear generation, at sites like Chapelcross, was closely linked to the weapons development.

However, given the huge challenge we face in achieving net zero, the reliance on wind and the complete repudiation of nuclear, including research on nuclear power, seems misplaced. This is not about being pro-nuclear for its own sake but facing the reality of the situation. At a minimum, we need an informed open debate about the merits and risks of nuclear power- what are the true comparable costs to onshore and offshore wind, what are the volumes of radioactive waste, where will the waste be sorted long term. And, most importantly, if we do not have nuclear power where will we generate

sufficient, reliable, low carbon electricity for electrification of our heating, transport and industry?

Stuart Paton is an energy industry advisor and former Chief Executive of Dana Petroleum. He is also an associate of Reform Scotland

How can Scotland attract more migrants – Heather Rolfe

Originally posted 14 June 2023

Migrants' own decisions are the missing piece in Scotland's migration puzzle

Last Wednesday the Welcoming Committee for Hong Kongers, which is housed within British Future, held an event in Edinburgh jointly with Reform Scotland on the country's immigration challenges. Emma Roddick MSP, Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees gave a thought-provoking keynote speech explaining that Scotland is the only UK nation where population numbers are projected to fall, with serious consequences for the economy and services. While the UK government is pledging to reduce net migration from current record levels, the Scottish government would like to attract more migrants, rather than fewer. The event's focus was on how Scotland can achieve this aim.

What's on the table?

In her keynote speech, the Minister emphasised the present, as well as future challenges: t**he** impacts of demographic decline are already evident, with depopulation of areas of the Highlands and West of Scotland and skills shortages throughout. The Scottish Government's policy is that responsibility for migration should be devolved to Scotland, so that new routes can be created. One current proposal, yet to be agreed by the UK government, is **a** rural visa pilot where migrants would be allowed to live and work in defined areas for 4 years, after which they could move elsewhere in the UK should they wish to. The Scottish Government is working closely with employers to provide advice and support on meeting skills needs. This includes working with charities including Talent Beyond Boundaries assisting refugees into skilled employment.

Why aren't Hong Kongers coming to Scotland?

The focus of the event was on migration of people from Hong Kong, coming on the British National (Overseas) (BNO) visa route, introduced by the UK Government following the political crackdown in Hong Kong in 2020. Relatively few of the 150,000 who have come to the UK have chosen Scotland as their new home. Other speakers at the event, from the Strategic Migration Partnership, UKHK and the Welcoming Committee/British Future shed some light on some of the reasons why. They include lack of awareness of Scotland as a distinct and modern nation, rather than an extension of England or the setting for Braveheart. Harder to address issues are the weather and Scottish accents. Yet England and Wales can't be complacent since many regional and even RP accents can also be difficult for Hong Kongers who are often taught American-accented English.

A distinct feature of Hong Kongers' decisions about where to live in the UK is the influence of YouTubers who understand their audience's needs very well. Education is a strong priority for Hong Kongers, keen for their children to have successful and happy lives. Towns in Surrey, the West Midlands and North West of England with high performing schools have attracted significant numbers for this reason. Low crime, good housing and employment opportunities are other key

priorities. These are all things that Scotland can offer in abundance, along with unrivalled scenery, cultural and leisure opportunities – all of which are highly valued by Hong Kongers.

Hong Kongers are coming to start a new life

Scotland didn't have difficulty attracting EU migrants under free movement. Since 2010 EU nationals have been the majority of people who are not British living in Scotland, compared to a third in the UK as whole. EU migrants, largely from new Eastern and Central European member states, were enticed to Scotland by employment agencies and direct employer recruitment, and later by word of mouth. They were largely young and single, sometimes coming to learn English or as a rite of passage and in other cases because of lack of opportunities in Poland. Long term settlement, while it has happened to a greater extent than elsewhere in the UK, was not part of EU migrants' initial plans. This made it easier for Scotland to meet their needs since, initially at least, they were about jobs and accommodation.

In contrast, most Hong Kongers are coming as families. They plan to stay and to make a new life for themselves and their children. This makes choosing where to live a major life decision involving schools, housing, jobs, local amenities and more. Once they've decided to make the move, the UK is their oyster. And, though different from EU migrants in many respects, they are also are not attracted to areas with an existing community from their home land.

Move on from free movement

While free movement has ended, the belief that if the offer is good migrants will come, remains both in Scotland and across the UK. Record levels of UK net migration reinforce this misconception. In Scotland, lower levels are seen as proof that post-Brexit policies aren't working. Yet many of the hard to fill vacancies reported by employers are in professional, vocational and specialist occupations, many of which are eligible for skilled visas. There's a case for Scotland to have control over its own immigration. However, it seems that, for now at least, a visa and job offer might not be enough to attract the numbers that the country needs. A more proactive approach is needed.

The puzzle of why migrants aren't coming is missing a piece

After hearing from Hong Kongers on the panel and audience, the Minister agreed that the motivations and priorities of prospective migrants to Scotland – and not just Hong Kongers – need to be better understood and form part of the government's strategy to attract more migrants. Adopting this approach will help the government to fill the missing piece in the puzzle of why Scotland has not been able to attract the migrants it wants and needs. Stakeholder organisations working to support Hong Kongers in Scotland, and elsewhere in the UK, will be ready to advise the Scottish Government to help attract, settle and integrate new Scots.

Heather Rolfe is Director of Research & Relationships at British Future

Domestic policies deter people from moving to Scotland – Roy Leckie

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It is hopefully understood by all politicians in Scotland, if not yet by most of the wider public, that Scotland faces a serious demographic challenge. Our population is rapidly ageing, and our rates of fertility and immigration are currently too low to prevent an impending decline in our numbers. There will soon not be enough working taxpayers to support the promises we've made to our elderly. It's a hugely serious problem, albeit one of the many that extends beyond the five-year electoral cycle, and so is imperceptible relative to the concerns of the here and now.

Immigration is not a responsibility devolved to Holyrood. It is extremely disappointing therefore, that the Scottish government has fumbled a golden opportunity to encourage thousands of British National (Overseas) passport holders from Hong Kong to settle here. The BN(O) visa program, which opened in January 2021, is a welcome route to British citizenship for many thousands of Hongkongers who no longer fancy residing in authoritarian China. It is the first big migration policy post-Brexit Britain. Of the 166,000 Hongkongers who have so far applied for visas to come to the UK, it seems that substantially fewer than 5% have chosen to settle in Scotland. Some useful platforms and networks have been established to welcome settlers once in situ, but very little imagination or energy has been extended to encourage them to come in the first place.

I discussed some of the many potential benefits to Scotland of an influx of well-educated, law abiding, enterprising and industrious Hongkongers in a November 2020 article. It will enrich the UK, culturally and economically. I had hoped that the strong diasporatic connections, specifically between Scotland and Hong Kong, would stand us in good stead, even without any encouragement from Holyrood. I've wished the aphorism 'if you put 20,000 Hongkongers in an empty field, before long there'll be a thriving metropolis' to be prescient.

But it has not come to pass. Sadly, few Hongkongers have chosen Scotland, and the more I've thought about it, the less surprised I am. It is unlikely to have much to do with, as some have suggested, our accents being hard to decipher, or our weather being less clement, or that we have fewer YouTube influencers enticing people here. It's a good deal more fundamental than that.

There are few folk more obsessed with their future than the people of Hong Kong. What is the key ingredient for underwriting a prosperous future? A sound education. Unfortunately, Scotland no longer registers as a leading light in that regard, at least in the primary and secondary sectors. Standards have fallen across our state education system, which has failed to keep pace with best practice. There is no obvious long term strategy or vision for revitalisation. Our independent schools, which should be celebrated as global flagbearers for Scotland, are being increasingly bedevilled by the politics of envy.

Additionally, Hongkongers are hardworking, resourceful, and self-reliant. They cherish an economy that is unrestricted and growing, over and above an economy that is 'well-being'. The Scottish government's mantra of 'vote for me, and I will give you free stuff' is not a political economy that sits at all naturally with Hongkongers. When it comes to a 'fair tax system', the basic sentiment of Hongkongers is that they get to keep the significant majority of what they earn, rather than it being taken by big government to (mis)allocate. The top rate of salary tax in Hong Kong is 17%. The higher rates of income tax levied in Scotland vis-à-vis the rest of the UK, a position that may get worse still, is a deterrent. Indeed, it is not just a deterrent to would-be immigrants, it is a position that is driving aspirational Scots southwards.

There is a range of other conditions and circumstances that have provided a headwind to Scotland becoming the destination of choice. The rule of law has been an important and reliable underpinning to Hong Kong's success. Scotland's ruling party is under investigation for criminality. Our police force is institutionally racist, apparently. Our main cities increasingly appear down-at-heel and poorly administered. Our basic road, rail, airport and ferry infrastructure is deteriorating. Our politics is consumed with niche issues like gender ideology and recycling schemes. Wealth creation is deemed to be an unsavoury subject matter. And of course the primary reason Hongkongers are leaving the former British colony in the first place is because of the constitutional upheaval they've experienced. If half of Scotland gets its way, our own constitution will soon be re-written. This creates unappealing uncertainty for would-be immigrants.

So sadly Scotland is not, in totality, an attractive proposition for Hongkongers looking for a new home and a bright future at this juncture.

A few years ago passengers arriving at Edinburgh airport were greeted with a series of beautifully scenic but ultra-hubristic posters, that proclaimed Scotland to be the 'best small country in the world'. If only.

Roy Leckie

All Learners in Scotland Matter", No They Don't – Dr Gillian Evans

Originally posted 22 June 2023

I eagerly awaited the publication of the National Discussion on Education final report and 'All Learners in Scotland Matter' was published on 31 May 2023.

The report, typical of other Scottish Government commissioned reports into education, was disappointing. It had vague calls for action but no concrete detail on how the system should change.

As one of the 38,000 who took part, I was keen to read it. During an online session, I had spoken directly to Professor Carol Campbell, one of the independent authors of the National Discussion, and provided her with an example of the '*right actions*' to take to improve Scotland's education system, specifically for increasing literacy rates.

I explained to Professor Campbell that, in 2018, I had to remove my 10-year-old son from a South Ayrshire Council (SAC) accredited Dyslexia Friendly School to teach him how to read, and to protect his mental health.

I had taken SAC to the Educational and Health Tribunal, claiming that the Council discriminated against children born with dyslexia by failing to teach them how to read – a serious equity issue. A key argument was that my son needed instruction in a systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) programme to ensure he could learn how to decode words, and in turn, could then read sentences.

SSP was actually developed in Scotland by Professor Rhona Johnston and Dr Joyce Watson and made available to all Scottish Councils in 2000. In 2005, when England conducted a review of reading led by Sir Jim Rose, he witnessed SSP being used in Clackmannanshire, and he recommended this method of teaching reading be mandated for every child in England. No such mandate was given by the Scottish Government; the First Minister at the time, Jack McConnell, announced that a development officer would be appointed to 'share good practice on synthetic phonics with the rest of the country'.

The Active Literacy programme (produced by North Lanarkshire Council and promoted by the Scottish Government in 2011) used by my son's school was a balanced literacy programme which meant it used whole language with minimal phonics instruction. The design of the Active Literacy programme is detrimental to children with dyslexia because it does not teach decoding effectively. Children are also taught to memorise words as visual wholes (sight words) and to guess words by looking at the picture clues, the first letter, or the shape of the word (multi-cueing). These programme elements have since been essentially banned in schools in England.

I was convinced I was going to win my claim because I had expert witnesses: for dyslexia, Professor Linda Siegel (Ontario, Canada) and Dr Tim Conway (USA), and for systematic synthetic phonics, Debbie Hepplewhite (recommended to me by Sir Jim

Rose). This was supported by a wealth of evidence that the schools my son attended never taught him how to decode, a basic requirement for learning how to read.

South Ayrshire Council paid for an Advocate, and they instructed Dr Tommy MacKay as their expert. Dr MacKay is an educational psychologist and has never published any work in the field of dyslexia (unlike Professor Siegel) or taught hundreds of children with dyslexia how to read (unlike Dr Conway).

If I had won the Tribunal claim, I would have confirmed that failing to teach a child with dyslexia how to read was breaking the UK Equality Act, 2010. However, I lost my claim.

The Tribunal rejected all the evidence from internationally recognised experts and agreed with Dr MacKay's opinions that my expectations of my son being able read to his chronological age were too high and that my son had received the best 'support' that was available in Scotland.

The school staff knew from standardised assessments that my son's decoding age was 3.5 years behind his chronological age, but the fact that no-one provided him with a SSP programme or decodable reading books to practise decoding, was irrelevant.

The Scottish system believed that the reason my son couldn't read was because he has dyslexia, essentially it abandoned him.

Happily, I can confirm that my son – who has the severest form of dyslexia – is now reading *above* his chronological age. I taught him to read myself using an SSP programme.

Taking a council to a tribunal is a long and stressful process and I was grateful to have found Anne Glennie – a passionate advocate for SSP instruction in schools in Scotland. Anne was my supporter throughout the Tribunal hearings. Starting in 2017, Anne petitioned the Scottish Government (PE1668) to improve literacy standards in schools through research-informed reading instruction, specifically having teachers trained in SSP literacy programmes. The petition's journey came to an end in May 2022 when the Education, Children and Young People Committee decided it was not the Government's job to tell teachers how to teach.

This contrasts with England. Their introduction of mandated SSP programmes, and a Phonics Check in 2012, have led to England rising to 4th out of 43 countries in the Progress International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). It is anyone's guess as to where Scotland would rank today as we were removed from PIRLS in 2010.

I was anxious to give an account of my son's experiences to Professor Campbell in particular as she been a member of the International Council of Education Advisers (ICEA) since 2016. The ICEA was established to advise ministers on how best to achieve excellence and equity in our Scottish education system.

The suggestion I gave on how to improve the Scottish education system was that Scotland should follow the recommendations given in the 2022 Ontario Human Rights Commission's Right To Read Inquiry report.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission were concerned with the possible violation of human rights of students within their education system. The inquiry found that Ontario's public education system was failing students with reading disabilities (such as dyslexia) and many others as it was not using evidence-based approaches to teach them to read.

The lead dyslexia consultant for the inquiry was Professor Siegel, the same expert whose evidence was rejected by my Scottish Tribunal. Professor Siegel was appalled by what happened to my son in a Scottish school and described the system as 'woefully inadequate'. The Ontario inquiry findings do not just impact Canada but every country that says they comply with the United Nations Conventions for the Rights of the Child. Learning to read is a human right.

It is worth nothing that the 'All Learners in Scotland Matter' report notes that Scotland should have a *'rights-based education… that upholds the United Nations Conventions for the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)*'.

I'm now campaigning for the UK Equality and Human Right's Commission to conduct a Scotland Right To Read Inquiry. The previous Education Secretary, Shirley-Anne Somerville confirmed that the Scottish Government does 'not prescribe specific approaches or pedagogies for any aspect of learning to read'. That means that it is a complete lottery as to whether a child in need receives the SSP programme that ensures that they can learn to read.

A new, external approach needs to be taken to protect our children's right to an effective education and to ensure their right to be taught to read.

All Learners in Scotland Matter — unless you are born with the neurodevelopmental condition, dyslexia or struggle with learning to read… then, you are on your own.

Dr Gillian Evans is a home educator and Science of Reading advocate. Previously she worked as a Clinical Research Scientist and Quality Management Lead

The Inadequacies of the Independent Review of Qualifications & Assessment – Lindsay Paterson

Originally posted 23 June 2023

The Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment will shape Scottish secondary schooling for decades to come. The Review was Commissioned by the Scottish government last summer, and reported last week. The Review's chair, Professor Louise Hayward, has ensured its durability by embedding its conclusions in a complex network of consultations with all the influential interest groups in Scottish education. Few politicians would dare to challenge the might of this Scottish educational establishment.

Yet the Review ought to be challenged, rigorously and radically, because it is deeply disappointing. Its methods were flawed, and its recommendations vapid. It has a few good ideas, but they are not worked out in any detail and their practicability is doubtful. Implementing what it proposes would perpetuate the harm already inflicted by the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence, that two-decade-old reform which the present Review extols as admirable.

First, the methods. Previous formal reviews of assessment have started with systematic evidence of how the current system was working. In the past, that has required voluminous statistical investigation of attainment and progression. It has included specially commissioned research on social inequalities in these measures. Sometimes, as in the 1990s, it has also included statistical evaluation of the educational standards that are embodied in the current system, and whether these have declined since the previous reform. All of these rigorous methods were adopted by the reforms which led to the current Highers in 2000, to Standard Grade in the 1980s, to new vocational qualifications at that same time, and to Ordinary Grade in 1962.

Yet here we have nothing of the kind. Behind this review, there seems to have been no actual research into the status quo. The report's account of what it calls the 'current context' is brief and superficial, one page out of 93 pages of main text. The research that is cited mostly relates to various mission statements and similar exhortatory exercises by campaigning groups and international organisations. The research cited specifically on Scottish education comes from members of the Review's advisory group (which is fair enough), but with very little beyond that. Its two main research sources on Scotland are the deeply flawed OECD review of 2021, and a dismayingly ill-informed report on the history of Scottish assessment which the OECD also commissioned in that year.

The present review did, however, stimulate lots of consultation, the results of which it presents in support of almost all its recommendations. Consultation ought indeed to be part of the evidence-gathering that might inform recommendations. Embedding recommendations in what the system would be willing to endorse is a wise way of ensuring that a Review's conclusions will lead to action. But the opinions expressed in a consultation are not themselves evidence of a need for change. Nor are they a reliable

map for reform. These opinions are valuable as guides to policy only if they, in turn, are based on systematic analysis of what is wrong and of what other options might work. Undoubtedly some of the consulted views will indeed have been informed in these necessary ways. But the present Review does not report on that rational basis, quoting only the summary conclusions of the people and organisations consulted. In effect, then, the main body of evidence cited by this Review is a series of large focus groups. It is as if a review of diagnostic procedures in the NHS were to be based primarily on the opinions of clinicians and patients. Important though these are, they are not the same – or as important – as properly scientific evaluation of what works.

It is then not very surprising to find that, on its main topics, the Review is not convincing, retreating too often into vague aspiration. For example, it notes that not all subjects in the curriculum are amenable to the same kinds of assessment. That is true, though trite. What is needed is some detailed analysis of this point. Before getting to that, there would have to be an honest appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of all kinds of assessment – essays, projects, investigations, invigilated examinations. Yet there is no such discussion here. Everything except exams is presented as unproblematically desirable. Exams are damned with very faint praise, as being sometimes appropriate, but are mostly condemned because existing exams in Scotland encourage rote learning. They certainly do, which is why they badly need to be reformed, but there is no advice in this Review on what exams might be good at, nor, therefore, on how they might be designed to be more educationally effective.

One technical way of putting this point is to say that the Review pays no more than cursory attention to the two ideas which have been central – in all countries – to the development of assessment for a century: validity and reliability. On the latter, there is nothing at all. So there is no consideration in the Review of whether its preferred modes of assessment might give only transient results which would be different if they were given at a different time, or on a different topic. Validity is at least mentioned, though there is no explanation of why, for example, an essay might give a more valid indication of a student's understanding of a complex subject than a short exam. The Review thus comes across as hectoring – asserting that essays and so on are effective, not arguing the case in the careful detail that is required.

Perhaps most surprising of all, in connection with validity, is the almost complete absence from the Review of any analysis of social inequalities of opportunity, progression and attainment. This is really rather shocking. There is a large body of evidence on this, some of the most impressive indeed produced by the few among the Review's consultees who do this kind of thing. Yet none of it is cited, not even the impact on inequality which was caused by the Covid disruption (which the Review mentions briefly). The sections on artificial intelligence tell us nothing new, and barely even acknowledge that it is likely to become a new dimension of inequality because access to the best equipment will be rationed by affordability. On the inequality of home circumstances more generally, the Review rests entirely on faith in teachers' being able to spot when a pupil's work is not their own. In the face of the research evidence that such inequalities abound, this is rather naïve.

All these weaknesses of the Review's methods then vitiate most of its proposals. The headline-grabbing proposal to end invigilated exams in school fourth year, and to reduce their role in later years, suffers from the absence of prior attention to the role of exams in maintaining standards. It also suffers from the Review's neglect of the biases that inevitably arise when any of us marks our own students' work.

The flagship of the Review's proposals is a Scottish Diploma of Achievement, which would be based on assessed coursework, on an assessed project, and on 'personal pathways'. The last of these would include a wide range of extra-curricular activities that, while commendable, do not lend themselves to assessment or even to anything other than bland summary, like the mostly uninformative headteachers' reports that form part of students' application to university.

The need for reform to the assessment of individual courses is where this Review had its origins, but it provides nothing other than a reiteration of that starting point. Its gives no guidance on how the balance of exams and non-exam assessment might be specified in different subjects. That vagueness is an inevitable consequence of the Review's methods, because of the absence of any systematic analysis of what is wrong with present assessment, nor of the strengths and weaknesses of all feasible forms of assessment. To be told 'where appropriate, retain external examination' is to be told nothing at all in the absence of guidance on how to judge appropriateness. (This slogan also illustrates a recurrent problem in this badly written Review – the conflation of external assessment with exams, and school-based assessment with other kinds of assessment.) So the work of revising the assessment of individual subjects is no further forward.

The Review's idea that each student would work on an individually chosen project, which might span several years, is the most interesting suggestion in the whole report. Bringing together disparate bodies of learning could be very effective. But, to work, far more attention than is given here would have to be devoted to how the different levels of the various contributing subjects might be made to work harmoniously. This requires a sequencing of subjects that might be unique to each student – in principle desirable, but in practice a nightmare for a school to manage. Moreover, the Review does not even contemplate the possibility that some students might thrive better doing a specialised project in a particular subject than combining their learning from several. That possibility of specialising is, after all, one of the reasons why students choose particular Advanced Highers.

This Review thus raises far more questions than it answers. Perhaps that's good, and it certainly offers plenty of opportunities for policy-makers to cherry-pick the bits of the report that they find most congenial. But what can certainly be said is that the Review takes us no closer to a system of assessment that is educationally sound.

Lindsay Paterson is emeritus professor of education policy at Edinburgh University.

Procurement : a provocation The wrong tool for the wrong job?
– Helen Chambers

Originally posted 26 June 2023

We are currently in the eye of a perfect storm in providing services for our communities, be that within public, private or voluntary sector spheres. Services are cracking, many with insufficient funding. Processes are not fit for purposes in many instances – especially around commissioning and procuring services. We are seeing vast cost increases at a time when the public purse is contracting. Staff at all levels are toiling.

At times of such pressure it is hard to take step back and see how we can turn this situation round before it gathers its own negative momentum as staff burn out, or leave critical services.

Perhaps there is a way create a glimmer of hope.

Procurement was introduced to commission public services from the voluntary and private sector with a number of underpinning principles; transparency, and the theory that efficiency created by competition would drive up quality and drive (or hold) prices down. I would argue that amidst much rhetoric over the last few decades of evidenced based policy, we have in fact have very little evidence that using this tool to create social impact passes these tests and is in fact better than other models.

To my knowledge, whether procurement is actually the best way to select services that are focused around people and communities, and the needs that they have, has not been tested empirically at all. And it perhaps is debatable whether it is effective in the environments for which it was initially designed – the purchase of consumables or assets. Ferries or PPE anyone?

Let's explore the potential to release funding for services in communities provided by the voluntary sector in Scotland – which are considerable and often a keystone for the delivery of many other services in the public sector, especially in health and social care. There are over 40,000 voluntary sector organisations in Scotland with a combined annual turnover of >£6 billion. Collectively, the sector employs over 100,000 paid staff. Social care and health organisations employ over half of all the paid staff in the sector. Data from SCVO shows that c. £1.4bn comes from public sector contracts – of which pretty much all will have gone through a procurement process. How much of that is actually consumed by participating in procurement processes?

So let's take a medium sized voluntary organisation bidding for a contact for a £100k per annum service. That will probably take 100 hours of work across the organisation. Averaging staff costs and time spent from CEO to admin that probably a comes in at £30 ph with all on-costs. So for one organisation to bid costs £3k. But not just one organisation will bid – that's the whole point of this, so it's likely that between 5 and 10 organisations bid. That's a participation cost of £15-30K. For a £100k contract. That

is a fundamental *inefficiency* rate of 15-30%. Unless you think that the process drives 15-30 % of the cost out. Which in services is mainly either staffing levels or salaries. And where does this money come from? Well it has to be costed into bids, grant proposals and philanthropic income generation, so basically it's the funding cycle just eating itself.

And this does not include the cost of running procurement process and doing the diligence on submissions. So the act of choosing services to supporting our communities is running *above 15-30%.*

If we scale this up across the £1.4bn spent in this way we are heading for over £0.21-0.42bn spent each year in process rather than results. This is heading toward 1% of the Scottish budget – and this in only in services from the voluntary sector. We could probably easily double this if we were to add in privately supplied health and social care services.

These costings also ignore the 'in kind' cost of seen in smaller organisations where they need to rely heavily on trustee input and professional skill (law, accountancy, senior voluntary sector experience) to shepherd staff through unwieldy, complex and legalistically dominated processes.

Another dimension of the failure of procurement is the lack of finesse, skill and proportionality in how it is operated. Time and time again processes and contracts are offered for small to medium sized pieces of work with off-the-shelf 'one-size-fits-nobody' standard processes designed for larger, higher risk contracts. This takes disproportionate time to crowbar the actual project into a framework that is utterly inappropriate.

Outwith the sheer inefficiency in allocating public funding, procurement fails in many other ways. A siloed competitive process is hopeless in providing joined up whole system approaches to respond to complex individual and community needs. It drives down quality and costs – where much of that cost is the wages of health and social care staff. Who beside providing care to some of the most vulnerable individuals in our communities tend to have some of the lowest wages (which drives further poverty mainly amongst women, many of whom are likely to have children). Another consequence of driving down cost is that we are facing a gaping hole in recruitment in critical services. You can now earn more as a shelf-stacker or dog walker than in providing care. And the short term procurement cycles that we have seen for the last decade hollows out the ability of organisations to build resilient, strong, innovative organisations.

Bluntly, procurement is not fit for purpose in these settings and it's time to call that out.

It is a market based approach design for the cost effective purchase of goods, commodities and physical assets, not social impact.

A happy health thriving child is not a commodity

An bonded functioning community is not physical asset.

Supporting a frail, isolated older person is not a the same of getting the best price for 10,000 screws.

In my view it is an inefficient, un-evidenced, ineffective process that has never been evaluated in Scotland against other models. We seem to consider that the need to use current procurement systems as either carved into laws of stone, or one of the universal laws of physics. They are not. We designed them and chose to implement them. We can have a better system. It is not beyond the wit of humans.

Let's see if we can't release a significant sum back into service provision by acting in a much smarter manner. An extra £0.4bn each year could go a long way in supporting our most vulnerable people and communities.

Helen Chambers is an independent consultant focusing on strategy and turning ambitions and plans into real results. She has over 30 years of experience in voluntary and public sectors creating significant social impact. She is also a Non-Executive Director for Scottish and UK wide organisations.

The Hayward Report – A Maths Teacher's Reaction – Bryn Jones

Originally posted 30 June 2023

The Hayward report has now been published, and it makes some striking recommendations:

- Scrap all exams before S5. This would mean there would be no exam at the end of studying National 5.
- Have students work towards a Scottish Diploma of Achievement (SPA), made up of "programmes of learning" (normal classes like French, Maths, Art etc.), "A personal pathway" which considers extracurricular activities, and an ungraded project where students look into a topic in depth.

Assessment in Scotland is in need of radical reform. The Hayward report gets it spectacularly wrong.

The Current Context

We need to be honest about what assessment in mathematics looks like today. I'll begin by talking about National 4. Students do not value it. Parents do not value it. It is the butt of jokes in staff rooms. Why?

To be awarded a National 4 in maths students need to pass "unit assessments". But teachers are told exactly which questions will be asked in these assessments, and we have booklets of questions that are nearly identical the assessments for students to practice. Teachers have a massive incentive to teach to the test. What's worse is that students don't have to complete the tests in one go, they can complete them question by question, being spoon-fed information they don't understand.

This way of teaching fails to help students understand the material and sets them up to fail when they progress to National 5. Ask any teacher "does National 4 prepare your students for National 5?" and just drink in their facial expression.

What strikes me most about National 4 though is its corrosive effect on the Broad General Education (BGE), which covers classes from S1-S3. There is a widespread problem in Scotland of "Assessment Banking." This is a practice whereby BGE students are made to sit National assessments, so that evidence can be banked. Schools do this so that if a student stops attending school when they get into S4, the school will still have assessment evidence they can use to get them their National 4 qualification. This is a problem because instead of focusing on conceptual understanding we are just teaching students to pass specific questions. Some schools are losing a significant portion of BGE time, where deep understanding of the subject is meant to be developed, to pursue a qualification that actively undermines their chances of achieving at a higher level.

Teachers also don't know how to assess students as being at Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) levels. There is a lack of understanding and guidance about what the CfE levels mean, which has resulted in many schools using National 3/4 assessments as their way

of assigning levels. Because CfE levels are so wholly and meaningless, National levels are effectively all we have.

One of the motivating factors behind the Hayward Report is this idea that there is a disconnect between the Curriculum for Excellence and the senior phase. Hayward is suggesting that we make the senior phase more like CfE- are the writers of the review really not aware that CfE has failed? Are they not aware that National levels have usurped CfE ones?

Another aim of the proposals is to avoid "the two-term dash." The suggestion is that there is so much material to cover for National 5 and Higher that teachers must rush through the course in the first two terms. In my subject, Maths, our curriculum is not full. We have a fraction of the material to cover for National 5 than English students have for their GCSEs. This two-term dash is caused by time lost during the precious BGE phase – there is no need to dash.

When you put pressure on teachers to have all students pass an assessment, you give teachers poor quality worksheets designed to aid spoon-feeding of students, and tell the teachers exactly what questions will be asked in the assessment – you kill all chances of learning, along with the motivation and dignity of students for whom these assessments were created.

Assessment in Scotland is in a terrible place, and the Hayward report calls for more of the same.

Bad Statistics

Education is Scotland is driven by bad statistics. Take the headline statistics for Numeracy and Literacy:

	Percentage							
	Literacy				Numeracy			
SCQF Level	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
3 or better	96.1	96.2	96.5	96.3	95.8	96.1	96.1	95.9
4 or better	93.9	93.9	94.6	94.4	91.4	91.6	91.6	91.3
5 or better	81.7	81.7	83.4	82.0	68.7	71.0	72.4	70.7

You could be forgiven for thinking that over 70% of school leavers achieved a National 5 in maths in recent years. But "SCQF Level 5" includes not only National 5 Maths and

Apps, but also the “National 5 Numeracy unit.” The numeracy unit is similar to National 4- an assessment that teachers can see before students sit it. These statistics are largely meaningless- are students achieving a valued qualification or aren’t they? Is 70% good? There has been a race to the bottom in Scotland, and schools have gone to extreme lengths to boost the numbers of students achieving National 4 and National 5 Numeracy. Cheating is part of the fabric of Scottish education. Students who have missed swaths of time at school come back, are spirited away to a quiet room, and miraculously have passed their unit assessments.

It’s time that we start calling things out for what they are. Giving students multiple practice questions, nearly identical to the real test questions, is cheating. Assessing students question by question, so no thought from the student is needed, is cheating. Councils and schools are addicted to boosting statistics that are largely irrelevant. A school’s core purpose should be serving its students and working in their interests. When we devalue a qualification by cheating, or pull a student out of lessons to pass a random unit with no understanding, just to give them a piece of paper valued by nobody… who exactly are we helping?

Listen to Teachers

Jenny Gilruth, the Education Secretary, announced that any reform will be paused until teachers have been consulted. That fact that Gilruth has called for more consultation with teachers is a clear sign the government are well aware there will be implementation issues. It’s also a tacit acceptance that teachers have not been properly consulted with up to this point. The issues are plain to see to those actually teaching on a day-to-day basis.

For me, the Hayward report comes across to me as naïve. In schools of 1500 students, with the behaviour issues, apathy and the relentless pressure for students to pass, the proposals aren’t workable. What is going to happen when some students refuse to engage in a project, but the council makes it clear everybody is meant to achieve a Scottish Diploma of Achievement?

I see a future where students have “project” on their timetables, and they turn up to be cajoled through a “project booklet” that’s impossible to fail at. The vicious cycle starts and projects become the new National 4- any meaning they aspired to have will be stripped out of them, a hoop to jump through.

External assessments are the fairest way of awarding qualifications. Properly set, they can encourage high quality teaching, rather than teaching to the test.

In my view we need more assessments not fewer. We need to return dignity to National 4 students by having external assessments brought back. I sympathise with the desire to take pressure off exams, and I would propose a modular assessment scheme- exams in December and May in S4, S5 and S6. The exams would be large enough to be meaningful assessments, but by having more of them pressure is taken of any particular exam.

Wouldn’t that be a better move than the Hayward recommendations?

It's Time For Us to Say No

Scotland is sleepwalking into a disaster. If National 5 Maths is no longer externally assessed, it will become worthless. Worse still, students sitting Higher Maths and Higher Apps will be less prepared too.

What worries me as a teacher is I don't get the sense that people understand the crisis we're in now. Allow me to summarise:

- Teachers have no understanding about CfE levels, and so these are essentially meaningless.
- Cheating is a routine in Scottish schools, and so National 4 qualifications have become worthless.

We must repudiate the Hayward recommendations. A lot of teachers have expressed anger and fear upon seeing the report. I hope that one good thing can come from its publication: perhaps it will be the straw that breaks the camel's back.

Bryn Jones is a Teacher of Mathematics in Fife

AI in UK education can be transformative – Jonathan Rees

Originally posted 14 August 2023

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has been around for a while, but one thing is for sure, it is here to stay. Advancements in awareness and uptake of AI has grown significantly, especially since November last year when the generative AI tool ChatGPT came into the mainstream. Naturally, something of this scale and potential gave rise to legitimate concerns in the education sector in relation to the perceived negative ways in which students could use AI.

Almost a year after initial headlines, it is clear that we must embrace AI much as we do with any other tool that falls into the hands of educators – think of iPads in the early 2010s.

When we lift the lid, we see that students and educators have actually been using AI in one way or another for several years now. It has been common-place in our daily lives, influencing what we see, saving us time when sending messages and many more ways.

To better understand AI and more specifically ChatGPT, let's peel back the layers. At the heart of ChatGPT is a set of rules that include 'if' and 'then' statements that have been around for decades. Humans ask questions to which we get answers based on keywords placed within the algorithm.

In recent times, ChatGPT and other advanced technologies have made their way into the education sector as advancements in generative AI, which means there are countless new applications for the service as part of daily practice.

In writing this, I asked chatGPT how AI could support college lecturers in their work, and it wasn't short on feedback.

'I' can help with personalised learning, intelligent tutoring, lesson planning, automated grading and administrative tasks such as assisting with enrolment, it told me. Essentially, 'I' can be a very effective teaching assistant, it said.

The lecturer's role has evolved dramatically in recent times and that is without even considering the impact of Covid. With the varied roles and duties required of a lecturer, coupled with the demands and challenges of planning, delivering and assessing learning daily, if AI can support us, make us more efficient in our work, why would we not embrace that? From giving us ideas to bring learning activities up-to-date, providing inspiration for multiple choice quizzes, populating lesson plan templates, and even helping generate learning materials (e.g. PowerPoint presentations), there are significant opportunities to use the technology to boost efficiency and wide appeal. As always though, it is imperative that this is owned by a human lecturer, to shape AI's output to meet the needs of our students.

The college experience should be, and very often is, a transformative one for students. The Covid pandemic certainly transformed the college experience and, whilst few would argue it was good for students, there's no doubt we have learned much from it. Whenever I get asked why I work in the college sector, my answer is quite simple. I want to help prepare the workforce of the future. As my role has evolved from a lecturer in sport to Head of Professional Development across a whole sector, my answer remains. When looking at this in the context of AI, our industries are embracing AI, either through necessity or innovation. It is critical that we, as the college workforce, prepare employees of the future with the necessary digital knowledge, skills and capabilities in relation to AI to thrive.

The impact of the lockdowns accelerated the development of digital tools to support learning, particularly platforms which facilitated remote teaching. However, one respondent to our research measuring the digital capabilities of the college workforce, published by College Development Network (CDN) in August 2021, said: "It was like building a plane after it had already taken off." Lecturers had to try to get up-to-speed quickly with their digital skills and it was a challenging time.

Following on from that research, we have since created a Digital Capability Hub to support the entire workforce to develop the digital skills required to navigate the changing landscape of our work, including working positively with AI. CDN is perfectly positioned as the practice improvement agency for the college sector, to work with and lead colleges to improve practice in this ever-evolving space.

Technology has been and continues to be an essential tool that helps to deliver the curriculum in Scotland's colleges, particularly in the Highlands and Islands and more recently in Dumfries and Galloway. Technology allows more learners from rural locations to engage in learning experiences, minimising barriers including location, transport, and work commitments.

Dumfries and Galloway College is making use of AI to support student recruitment. It is harnessing Purlos and Jenni AI bot to help improve student experience and optimise recruitment, enrolment, and onboarding. They have done this by using AI to generate personalised messages tailored to the experience of individual students. This has increased efficiencies in the Admissions Team, allowing them to focus their attention on more complex cases and onboarding activities.

Meanwhile, lecturers at Ayrshire College have been using ChatGPT to develop high quality SQA units that meet the requirements of pre-existing SQA descriptors. And North East Scotland College (NESCol) has shown how ChatGPT and other AI tools can be used as 'study buddies' to assist students in improving their writing, helping them research, and keeping them motivated. By using ChatGPT as a study buddy, students can ask questions related to their subject and create custom-made quizzes or flashcards based on their learning goals. The College has found that this offers a smart and fun way to enhance the learning experience and, to further support students, it has developed an online toolkit to guide students on how they can turn ChatGPT into their 24/7 study buddy.

I want to stress, though, that AI will complement, rather than replace, the wider college workforce. The key is to understand and embrace AI as part of our daily practice, exploring how we can use the latest technology to free lecturers up for more meaningful interactions with our student population. Interestingly in my earlier conversation with ChatGPT, it spat out the paragraph below when we asked how AI could support college lecturers.

“It’s important to note that while AI can enhance teaching practices, it should not replace human teachers. The role of teachers remains crucial in providing guidance, support and fostering meaningful connections with students. AI should be seen as a tool to augment and support their work.”

A vast majority of lecturers and teaching staff don’t actively use AI tools and we are currently exploring how to ease the way onto the tech path for everyone.

What is clear is that, whatever we think of it, AI is the future, and it is essential that we have a skilled workforce capable of moulding AI’s development in the education sector while simultaneously preparing our students with the skills they need to excel as part of the workforce of the future.

Jonathan Rees is Head of Professional Development at the College Development Network

Education & the Programme for Government – Keir Bloomer

Originally posted 6 September 2023

In 2015, shortly after becoming First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon described education as her 'defining mission' and shortly afterwards launched the Scottish Attainment Challenge, designed to eliminate the gap in attainment between disadvantaged and other pupils. Although progress has been slow and very limited, the aim was a worthy one and there is no reason to doubt her commitment to education.

Eight years on, in introducing his first programme for government, her successor found space for a passing reference to education beyond half way through his speech. No policy or action was mentioned at this point. It is clear that education no longer ranks as a major priority.

Towards the end of the speech a little more detail was provided. Reform of Education Scotland and the Scottish Qualifications Authority is to proceed. This is to be done in a manner 'informed by independent and expert reviews'; a phrase which stops short of a commitment to implement the recommendations of the Hayward Review. This caution is to be welcomed.

The government is also to carry out a promise made earlier to rejoin two international surveys of educational achievement. This is a good decision. These surveys are a vital source of evidence about how our system is functioning.

It is perhaps unkind to mention that reform of Education Scotland and rejoining the surveys have something in common. They are both intended to reverse mistakes made by this government in the past. A willingness to admit error – even if only by implication – is surely a welcome sign of maturity.

Although he had little to say about schools, Mr. Yousaf spoke more extensively about early learning and childcare. This is an area in which the government already has a good record. There is to be an improved service for two year old children and their families with priority being given to those in poverty. This will help in the early discovery of children with developmental problems and allow for early intervention. At the same time efforts are to be made to make services more flexible and family-friendly. All this is to be applauded.

There was a strong focus in the speech on business and economic growth. It is for others who are better informed to judge how far the government's proposals will contribute effectively to wealth creation. From an educational perspective, much more could have been said to demonstrate an understanding of the connection between educational and economic success. Perhaps next year?

Keir Bloomer chairs our Commission on School Reform. He is an education consultant and a former Director of Education

Where is energy in the Programme for Government? – Stuart Paton

Originally posted 7 September 2023

On the same day that the First Minister announced his Programme for Government, the British Prime Minister announced an end to the de facto ban on onshore windfarms in England. That the announcement from Rishi Sunak was more material than anything Humza Yousaf had to say about energy shows how low the bar has been set. We at Reform Scotland have previously pointed out the lack of clarity on the Scottish government's net zero targets- at least 18 visions and strategies creating a messy policy landscape. We have stated that the Scottish government will need to bring the Scottish people with them on the cost of these targets. There was nothing in the First Minister's statement which addressed any of these issues.

The First Minister does seem to understand the need for a thriving economy to fund the promised additional state provision and the statement was broadly supported by the Federation of Small Businesses. An understanding of economic reality, and particularly the importance of small businesses, would be a strong basis for supporting initiatives required to deliver on Net Zero such as retraining the work force for heat pump installation or expansion of vehicle charging points. The Scottish Energy Minister, Gillian Martin, spoke at the large Offshore Europe conference in Aberdeen on Wednesday. However, her speech seemed to consist largely of platitudes about 'listening to the industry' and the 'opportunities of the energy transition' rather than any statements on policy. Presumably reiterating the First Minister's comment that he is 'not convinced' the Rosebank field development should go ahead would not have gone down well with this audience.

The Scottish government has set out a clear commitment to Net Zero and the technology to deliver the goal is largely well understood. However, the strategic choices required to deliver on this commitment need to be urgently and clearly set. The government has so far failed to do this with a muddled strategy and the recent consultation process. The landscape is also changing as offshore wind becomes more expensive, due to increased commodity prices and other countries rapidly growing their capacity.

As we have previously stated, there is a mammoth job in convincing individuals of the importance of the Net Zero commitment and the changes in lifestyle required by all of us. Without this work, including public awareness campaigns and regulation, the democratic legitimacy of the commitment is completely undermined. The First Minister's statement would have been an ideal opportunity to set out the Government's priorities on energy. Failing to do so says a lot about the Government's ambition to actually deliver on Net Zero.

Stuart Paton is an energy industry advisor and former Chief Executive of Dana Petroleum. He is also an associate of Reform Scotland

License to drill – Stuart Paton

Originally posted 2 October 2023

Last week, the UK government sanctioned one of the largest undeveloped oil fields in the UK- the Rosebank field with an estimated 300 million barrels of recoverable oil. A few weeks ago the government made the most significant changes in policy from a UK party with respect to climate change and energy changing commitments on the phase out of petrol and diesel cars and regarding home heating. Depending on your point of view these decisions are either cataclysmic- as we are on the edge of climate catastrophe- or sensible and pragmatic- given our reliance on oil and gas, energy security and the economy The new position does however align with the Conservative's position on oil and gas licensing. This subject has had a lot press coverage in the last few months , with contrasting statements from each of the main parties. Key claims made by proponents of continued oil and gas field developments are that new licensing ensures the UK's energy supply and that UK-sourced gas has a lower carbon footprint than imported gas. Both these claims are questionable, to say the least.

Of the major parties, the Labour Party has the clearest position: there will be no new oil and gas licences awarded, but the existing licenses (exploration and development) will be honoured. This message becomes slightly more nuanced to a Scottish audience, stressing the need for a 'just transition' and the number of jobs in the renewable sector. Labour has not made categoric statement on any specific projects and has not said they would revoke the Rosebank licence which will not be onstream by the next general election.

The Conservative Party seems to be in a position of maximising economic recovery, using the cover of the Climate Change Committee saying we can develop some oil and gas fields and that hydrocarbons will be an important energy source even by 2050. Despite the recent tactical change on onshore windfarms, the current UK government, despite their claims last week, seems less committed to Net Zero than the previous administrations led by Boris Johnston and Theresa May (who passed the bill committing the UK to Net Zero by 2050). The Rosebank development decision fits the increasing climate scepticism.

The SNP seems to be somewhat muddled, sort-of opposing some of the near-term developments, notably Rosebank and Cambo, but even then hedging its position. The party does not seem to have said anything definitive about future exploration licences apart from condemning Labour for planning a cliff edge for the industry. Of course, their coalition partners are vehemently opposed to any further oil and gas development.

But what does this all actually mean? And will ending or continuing licensing make much difference in reality?

The UK Government owns all oil and gas mineral rights in the UK, onshore and offshore. A company (or generally a group of companies) wanting to exploit oil or gas requires a licence from the UK government's regulator, the North Sea Transition Authority, as this is not a devolved matter. In the case of offshore oil and gas the government has regularly held exploration licensing rounds since the early 1960s, with the 33rd round, which awarded 110 licences, announced recently. The initial licence is focused on exploration for a relatively short period (3-5 years). At the end of this initial period the operator can retain part of the area with further commitments. If exploration has been successful, then the next step is to develop the oil or gas field. The development requires the approval of the regulator (generally for a long period of 20 years plus) as do further stages of development and the final decommissioning of the field.

The early licensing rounds generally covered large areas of entirely unexplored sea-floor. As the decades progressed, much of the North Sea (and Irish Sea) has been very actively explored, with most areas which are geologically interesting previously licensed. The West of Shetland Area has been relatively less explored due to a more challenging environment. Most of the large, multi-billion-barrel fields (household names like Forties and Brent) were discovered in the early days. The North Sea is now considered very mature, with fields generally being small and often technically complex. However, as an area matures, smaller fields can be economic as the infrastructure of existing platforms and pipelines means that development costs are less. New large fields can also discovered if there are new technical or geological concepts.

Given this context, it is not surprising that UK oil and gas production has been declining for much of the last 20 years, with a reduction from 4.5 million barrels of oil equivalent (MMboe) to about 1.3MMboe in 2022, although the last few years have not seen a decline. The key reason that companies are not increasing production from the North Sea is that this is a very mature basin with very few large discoveries, rather than due to a lack of exploration activity. Even the high-profile discoveries such as Rosebank (300 million barrels), Jackdaw (75 Million barrels, peak production 40,000 barrels of oil per day) and Cambo (170 Million barrels) are tiny on a global scale. In comparison, ExxonMobil has discovered 11 billion barrels – 11 thousand million barrels – in Guyana since 2015 and will imminently be producing 1.2 million barrels per day.

Another aspect of a mature area is that discoveries are often complex due to the geology or geographical location, often leading to significant downgrading in reserves when further work is carried out. For example, Glengorm, which was discovered in 2019, was originally thought to contain approximately 250 million barrels but following further drilling the current estimate is 60 million. And each of the discoveries is challenging – Jackdaw is very high pressure and high temperature, Rosebank and Cambo are in the relatively remote West of Shetland at approximately 1,100m water depth. Fields also take a long time to get to production – the Seagull Field, which came onstream this year, was discovered in 1990 and is a paltry 19MMmboe; the Tolmount field came on stream last year, a mere 11 years after discovery. The two most high-profile potential developments, Cambo and Rosebank, were discovered in 2002 and 2004 respectively. And for clarity the timescale is not due to regulatory delays or

approvals (as can be the case with large windfarm developments)- making the commercial decision to spend billions of pounds on a new oil or gas field takes many years of technical work.

There are two conclusions from the current state of the North Sea. The first is that while new fields could be part of the UK's energy mix, it is hugely optimistic to think they will have a major impact on the amount of gas or oil we need to import. The second is that exploration licences granted this year are unlikely to be on stream and make a material impact in the next 20 years – very close to the 2050 Net Zero commitment of the UK government (and even more so the 2045 Scottish Government commitment). So, one could take a view that the Conservatives are correct: support exploration but actually this won't in reality make much difference to our energy needs and Net Zero commitments. Or that Labour can easily make the commitment to stop exploration as it won't actually matter all that much.

Another point made by the Conservatives and much of the industry is that UK fields have lower carbon emissions than overseas fields. This argument was queried in a recent More Or Less episode on Radio 4 which referred to a statement made by then Energy Secretary, Grant Shapps, on the Today programme. Mr Shapps claimed that 'imported gas has four times the carbon than UK gas'. The North Sea Transition Authority makes a similar but subtly different claim on its website: 'domestically produced gas is on average more than 4 times cleaner than imported LNG'. Setting aside the question of what 'four times the carbon' actually means, these statements are incorrect and misleading.

First, they only refer to the CO2 equivalent emissions from the production, transportation and processing of gas, and not the burning of the gas. Burning gas produces about 310kg of CO2 per barrel of oil equivalent of gas, irrespective of where the gas comes from. The production, transportation and processing adds about 25kg of CO2 from average UK gas, 79kg from Liquified Natural Gas but only 8kg from average Norwegian gas piped to the UK. In each case, as most people would assume, the burning of the gas is much more significant than the production, transportation and processing. Neither Mr Shapps nor the North Sea Transition Authority makes this point clear. Even when pressed by the interviewer, the Energy Minister did not clarify it.

Second, what both the Energy Minister and the NSTA fail to point out is that Liquified Natural Gas, from Qatar, the USA and elsewhere, is a small proportion of the UK's gas supply. Last year, 50% of UK gas consumption was from UK gas, about 40% from Norway and other pipelines and only 10% from LNG. So, taking into account the weighting of gas imports, the lower CO2 impact of Norwegian gas and the small proportion of CO2 emissions related to production, transportation and processing, the minister and NSTA should be saying that 'imported gas has the same carbon as domestic gas'. Now, I realise that UK gas production will decline and we are likely to increase LNG imports, although hopefully also decrease domestic consumption. However, making inaccurate statements like this does not help the case for domestic producers.

So, security of supply is essentially a red herring. The development of UK oil and gas fields will have at most a marginal impact on our supply, and the CO2 argument is questionable to say the least. This is not to say we can or should shut down the UK oil and gas industry overnight – far from it. However, we need to be realistic about the impact North Sea production will have on our energy supplies and also have a debate on the impact on our progress to net zero if we keep bringing new fields on stream. In the short term, and irrespective of the next election, a much bigger impact on oil and gas developments is the government's tax policy.

Stuart Paton is an energy industry advisor and former Chief Executive of Dana Petroleum. He is also an associate of Reform Scotland

Turning Mirrors into Windows – Lorraine Davidson

Originally posted 24 November 2023

Education has once again moved high up the political agenda, the air thick with policy pledges – to deliver increased per pupil funding, recruit more teachers and break down barriers.

As politicians look to the general election and beyond, this has also placed independent schools in the spotlight as never before. And that is to be welcomed. Because it presents the sector with an excellent opportunity to share stories of success that perhaps we don't always speak of enough – so often forged in partnership with local authority schools, for the benefit of all.

One thing most politicians can agree on is that we owe it to our children to invest properly in their potential, to empower them to be all they can be.

And in Scotland, ideas have also been coming in at the pace of candidates completing an exam multiple choice paper after the Scottish government embarked on the largest listening exercise in the history of Scottish education – canvassing the views of more than 38,000 people.

Meanwhile, Professor Louise Hayward's review of qualifications and assessment has, of course, suggested much, from replacing exams at S4 and creating a new Scottish Diploma of Achievement, to a cross-sector commission on artificial intelligence.

Another of the professor's recommendations that stood out was to work in partnership with countries with similar aspirations to Scotland in order to develop qualifications and assessment. To "learn from experience within Scotland but also to be outward looking".

It echoes something the American journalist Sydney J. Harris once said: that the whole purpose of education is to turn mirrors into windows. This is an observation that holds true, whether in the context of expanding young minds during a lesson on the sun and the stars or the occasionally heated political debate over the role of independent schools in Scotland's education system. It is a debate that can sometimes unhelpfully dwell more on our points of difference than our common commitments and passion to equip young people with the skills, knowledge and positive attitudes to be good citizens, to work, and to improve life chances.

Critics sometimes argue that some in education look a little too much at themselves, focusing inwards instead of outwards, having conversations in silos.

But what I can certainly say with conviction is that, less than six months into my role as chief executive of the Scottish Council of Independent Schools, it is abundantly clear to me that communities across Scotland's independent and state sectors can take immense pride from what we are accomplishing together for the good of all through

partnership working. We are talking to each other and learning from one another more than ever – throwing those windows wide open to broaden our view.

We have a system that, in common with countries around the world, combines state-run schools with independent specialist schools for those with complex needs and independent fee-paying schools. All woven together in what a former Scottish education minister once called a "rich tapestry". Each sector has its own challenges and, despite those, each sector is delivering excellent teaching and pastoral care for our children and young people. We can achieve much more by working together.

So, what does this coming together of Scotland's state schools and independent schools (most of which are charities) look like and what is the effect?

Even the most straightforward and low-key educational partnerships can bring huge benefits to many. For example, the pupils of a small state primary school who gain the opportunity to learn to swim because they access a swimming pool at a local independent school. Many schools have demonstrated larger ambitions for their partnership working, with a determination to contribute to society and the educational outcomes of as many children and young people in Scotland as possible.

These life-changing partnerships range from George Watson's College in Edinburgh and The High School of Glasgow helping deliver the teaching of Mandarin across Scotland's largest cities, to Robert Gordon's College in Aberdeen supporting the future growth of the Scottish tech ecosystem by offering SQA-accredited Higher Computing Science and Higher Applications of Mathematics – including for students who cannot access the subjects at their local school. Dollar Academy offers free SQA courses online as well as opportunities to collaborate on global challenges with industry and university experts, and has already partnered with 50 state schools and engaged with more than 65,000 people.

Tens of thousands of secondary pupils, meanwhile, have benefited from an initiative launched by The Glasgow Academy during the Covid pandemic to enhance online provision across secondary education, helping address serious inequities in access to online learning during a national crisis. Essentially, bringing Scotland's best teachers from lots of schools to the phones and tablets of every young person in the country.

This is not to suggest that Scotland's independent sector has all the answers. Far from it. And indeed, through partnerships, massive personal gains can accrue not just to thousands of state school pupils each year but also to pupils in the independent sector and staff in both sectors. Building bridges and mutual respect between the sectors – enabling school communities to engage in new discussions and gain new perspectives as they share resources and knowledge – can lead to exciting classroom and extracurricular provision.

It can bring pupils together in a positive and often innovative learning context that breeds greater confidence and understanding, and enable teachers and support staff to benefit from high-quality continuing professional development and the sharing of expertise, with good practice disseminated widely to help everyone.

However, we are all of us held back by the absence of a formal mechanism in Scotland for discussing partnership initiatives to help our children and young people reach their potential. Instead, our schools tend to speak to their neighbouring state schools, third sector organisations and community groups as they try their best to make a valuable contribution.

If the value – and full potential – of partnership working among our sectors could be more widely recognised by more politicians, we could make an even more impactful contribution, aligned with the needs of learners.

If independent schools could be more widely seen as an untapped resource to be developed in the interests of all our young people, then together we could create innovative solutions to the challenges all parts of the education community are facing.

Lorraine Davidson is CEO of Scottish Council of Independent Schools.

PISA 2022 in Scotland: declining attainment and growing social inequality – Lindsay Paterson

Originally posted 5 December 2023

The headlines for Scottish education from the latest round of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) are dismaying. In all three subject areas covered by PISA, the scores of Scottish 15-year-olds declined between 2018 and 2022. The drop was 18 points in mathematics, 11 points in reading, and 7 points in science. A change of 20 points is approximately equivalent to one year of mid-secondary schooling. So these falls correspond to nearly a year in mathematics, over six months in reading, and a term in science.

The explanation might seem to be the disruption caused by Covid. Attainment fell in most countries, and so Scotland's problems are certainly not unique. But that is nowhere near to being the whole reason for decline. Doubts are raised about the Covid explanation by Andreas Schleicher, director of the PISA studies, in a detailed analysis of the global data (available on the PISA web pages). Not all countries did show a fall. For example, attainment rose in Japan and Korea in all three domains, and rose in two of the three in several others, for example Singapore, Italy and Israel. In fact, there was only a weak overall relationship between countries' change in score and the extent of their school closures during the Covid period.

Of most relevance to the Scottish explanation, however, is Schleicher's further point – that attainment was declining long before Covid, and that Covid merely gave it an extra downward push. That is certainly true of Scotland, as is well known. Scottish attainment fell from early in the century to the middle of the first decade, stabilised for a few years, and then, from 2012, started a steady decline which was unmitigated except for a brief rise in reading in 2018 (which was wiped out by the 2022 fall).

As a result, over the whole decade from 2012 to 2022, the Scottish decline was equivalent to about 16 months of schooling in mathematics, 8 months in reading, and 18 months in science. The baseline of 2012 is significant because it is the first PISA group to have any experience of the Curriculum for Excellence after it was officially inaugurated in 2010. Thus the decline started to become noticeable at the moment when the new curriculum started to impinge systematically on children's learning. The 2022 group was the first to have all 10 years of their schooling with the new curriculum, and attainment has never been so low as it is now.

That the loss over the decade was greatest for science, next for mathematics, and least for reading is consistent with one of the main criticisms of the new curriculum, that it neglects knowledge of the kind that students can obtain only from expert teachers. To some extent reading can be taught by parents, but fewer parents are likely to remember enough mathematics to teach their children beyond the end-of-primary stage. Science knowledge is even rarer, and in any case learning science needs access to specialist equipment.

This interpretation of the impact of the curriculum on students' knowledge is reinforced by two further aspects of the 2022 data, both relating to inequality of attainment. The first is the difference between students at the 10th and 90th percentiles of attainment in each domain. Table 1 shows the score at each of these points between 2012 and 2022. In reading there was barely any fall at the 90th percentile between 2018 and 2022, and in fact a rise of 9 points from 2012. At the 10th percentile, by contrast, there was a fall of 22 points from 2018 and 33 from 2012.

A similar contrast is evident for mathematics and science. In mathematics, the fall from 2012 to 2022 was 16 at the 90th percentile but 36 at the 10th. In science, the corresponding falls were 13 and 47. The contrast between the two percentiles is thus, again, greatest for science, next for mathematics, and lowest for reading. For all three domains, an analogous but weaker form of this contrast was found in the middle of the distribution of attainment (not shown in the table), the decline being greater at the 25th percentile than at the 75th.

Table 1: Scottish results in the PISA studies, at 10th and 90th percentiles in each domain, 2012-2022

Table 1
Scottish results in the PISA studies, at 10th and 90th percentiles in each domain, 2012-2022

	2012	2015	2018	2022
Reading				
10th percentile	394	373	383	361
90th percentile	614	608	627	623
Mathematics				
10th percentile	388	382	367	352
90th percentile	611	601	610	595
Science				
10th percentile	400	372	366	353
90th percentile	627	619	617	614

Sources: PISA data bases (2012-2018), and pp. 358, 360 and 362 of Vol 1 of OECD report on PISA 2022.

It may be inferred from this that the decline most affected students who are weakest academically, and thus are most dependent on the formal teaching of schools. Weaker learners depend more on formal, structured teaching than do stronger learners. That has been one of the critiques of skills-based curricula since the 1970s, and would certainly appear to be applicable to the Curriculum for Excellence.

A further contrast along similar lines is in the changing social inequality of attainment, shown in Table 2. Social inequality is measured in the PISA studies by an index of 'economic, social, and cultural capital'. The PISA reports compare mean attainment in each of the four quarters of this index. The table shows the trajectory in this from 2012 to 2022.

Table 2: Scottish results in the PISA studies, in lowest and highest quarters of the index of economic, social, and cultural capital, 2012-2022

Table 2
Scottish results in the PISA studies, in lowest and highest quarters of the index of economic, social, and cultural capital, 2012-2022

	2012	2015	2018	2022
Reading				
Lowest status	477	462	471	457
Highest status	555	533	545	545
Mathematics				
Lowest status	466	456	456	428
Highest status	551	531	528	526
Science				
Lowest status	483	460	451	444
Highest status	565	543	535	536

Sources: PISA data bases (2012-2018), and online supplementary data for 2022 at https://stat.link/ax46rt.

In reading, inequality rose between 2012 and 2022 because the score in the lowest-status group fell twice as fast (a drop of 20 points) as in the highest-status group (a drop of 10). The change of inequality for the other two domains is somewhat stronger. In mathematics, the contrast is between a fall of 38 points in the lowest-status students and 25 for the highest-status. In science, it is 39 and 29. Again, the contrast between the middle two quarters of social status (not shown in the table) is a weaker version of these comparisons of the lowest and highest.

The speculative explanation is then that students with the least economic, cultural and social capital from home are most dependent on gaining access to these through the school curriculum. These are less available from a curriculum that places less emphasis on knowledge than on skills and on well-being – such as Curriculum for Excellence.

So a plausible explanation of the widening inequality is the curriculum. This widening is not merely between 2018 and 2022, but stretches right back to 2012. Curricula that do not concentrate on formal knowledge are particularly unhelpful to academically weak students and to students who come from homes where that knowledge is not readily available. The school curriculum is not so indispensable for able students, and for students from affluent homes where the parents themselves have abundant formal education.

Many writers have suggested this egalitarian potential of a curriculum based on knowledge. It can narrow social and academic inequalities in student understanding. Well-known examples in England are Daisy Christodoulou and David Didau. In Scotland, Bruce Robertson – rector of Berwickshire High School – has argued in his *Teaching Delusion* series of books that knowledge is empowering.

When the distinguished American sociologist E. D. Hirsch noted the widening educational inequalities in France after its move away from a knowledge-based

curriculum in the three decades from the mid-1980s, he concluded this in his *Why Knowledge Matters*:

"*If students gain the knowledge and vocabulary of the public sphere, they will score well. … If accidents of birth have excluded that knowledge from the home environment, and if the school does not supply it, then they will score badly*."

After the shock of these new PISA results, Scottish policy makers ought to take note.

Lindsay Paterson is emeritus professor of education policy at Edinburgh University.

School Anxiety: Is it all down to Mental Health? – Gillian Mathewson

Originally posted 8 December 2023

The release of Reform Scotland's paper 'Absent Minds: Attendance and Absence in Scotland's Schools' in October 2023 brought with it some difficult to hear views around the prospects for young people who are struggling with school, as well as opinions on the competency of parents. It is a situation I understand all too well, as both a teacher and a parent of a child who is unable to attend school.

PANS (Paediatric Acute-onset Neuropsychiatric Syndrome) and PANDAS (Paediatric Autoimmune Neuropsychiatric Disorders Associated with Streptococcal Infections) are both post-infectious disorders whose symptoms have many crossovers with anxiety, mental health disorders, as well as neurodivergent conditions. In PANS and PANDAS however, the underlying cause is thought to be an abnormal immune and/or inflammatory response to common infections such as strep (in the case of PANDAS), Chickenpox, flu, Covid-19, or indeed any trigger that provokes an immune response.

The symptoms of PANS and PANDAS include OCD, tics, eating restrictions, anxiety, behavioural regression, sleep issues, emotional lability and depression, changes in behaviour (irritability/aggression/oppositional behaviours), sensory issues and urinary problems. These symptoms often come on suddenly following an infection, however depending on the severity of the symptoms they may not always be noticed at first or linked as being related to each other.

PANS and PANDAS are relatively newly identified conditions, with PANDAS being identified in 1998, and PANS in 2012. PANDAS is recognised by the World Health Organisation, having been given an ICD-11 diagnostic code, however in the UK there are no NICE guidelines for diagnosis and treatment.

Unfortunately, many medical practitioners are unaware of, or poorly informed about, the conditions. This leads to a situation where many children with acute-onset neuropsychiatric symptoms do not have access to any medical testing or treatment and, instead are referred by their GP to CAMHS, where there is a long waiting list.

Once they are eventually seen, depending upon the severity of their symptoms there can then be a long wait for treatment, which can often involve powerful psychiatric medications. For many children these medications are ineffective, as they do not address the root cause of the symptoms. In addition, children can receive multiple diagnoses for conditions such as ADHD, Tourette's, ASD, ARFID, or OCD, but again these are not addressing the cause of the symptoms, with conventional treatments for these conditions often proving less effective than expected.

The good news is that, once diagnosed, the conditions are treatable using simple, inexpensive and widely available antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory medications, in conjunction with supportive psychological therapies. While research is still developing in this area, there is emerging evidence to suggest that some children return to their

baseline following initial treatment, for others it is a longer process-there is no 'one size fits all' solution. Sadly, in the UK it is currently extremely difficult to get a diagnosis on the NHS, with many families finding themselves with no option but to seek private medical care.

So how does this link to education? Whilst some children with PANS or PANDAS are able to attend school, others find it more of a challenge. In a survey carried out by PANS PANDAS UK, 14% of parents and caregivers reported that their child had attendance issues prior to the onset of symptoms. Following the onset of symptoms this increased to 77%, increasing further to 86% when children relapsed.

This is why I felt the need to raise the question of PANS and PANDAS in response to the Absent Minds report. If we know that this is an under-recognised condition, and we know that children with the condition experience significant attendance challenges, then it seems likely that some of the absences across Scotland's schools could have a post-infectious immune response as their root cause, especially given that we have just been through a global pandemic and it has been recognised that Covid-19 has had neurological impacts. This is an area that urgently needs more research and awareness, which starts with an understanding of the incidence of the conditions. Early discussions are underway around the gathering of this data.

So, what can the education sector do? Schools have a crucial role in raising awareness and signposting. As this is a medical condition, it is not something that can be diagnosed within a school, however schools have a role to play in terms of spotting early signs and signposting the condition to parents and carers. In addition, they can help by providing evidence of changes in a child's presentation. There is also a significant role for schools in terms of understanding the condition, and supporting affected children, helping them to stay in education.

As mentioned before, awareness is currently low, but it is growing. PANS PANDAS UK, with support from NHSE, has developed a working group with numerous Royal Colleges, with the aim of developing diagnosis and treatment guidelines. There is support for this at Westminster, with an active All-Party Parliamentary Group, and a recent back-bench debate where health minister, Maria Caulfield, acknowledged the conditions and pledged her support to raise awareness and prioritise research.

In contrast, despite repeated attempts, families in Scotland are struggling to engage Holyrood on the issue. Whilst NHS Scotland will need to follow once treatment guidelines are developed for the UK, with the current level of engagement, we will be several years behind. Scotland needs to take its place at the table, to understand the scale of the problem, and to grasp the potential benefits of taking action.

The focus here should be on improving the life chances for these children and relieving the trauma and suffering that they and their families are going through. So far trying to raise the issue from that angle has had little success – I have been repeatedly reminded that it is a rare disease, and that there are many rare diseases. Imagine that if through offering appropriate diagnosis and medical care to these children (which is one of their rights under the UNCRC) you could simultaneously significantly reduce attendance

issues across the country, as well as reducing the CAMHS waiting list, allowing other children to be seen sooner. In addition, you would reduce financial costs being paid out in Child Disability Payment, Carers Allowance and other benefits, free up spaces in specialist schools, and psychiatric units, reduce some of the challenging behaviour in schools… The list goes on.

My purpose in writing this blog is to raise awareness and to call for action. There are too many children suffering with this condition. It is debilitating and traumatic for the children and their families. The health of these children should be the priority and, as educators, we have a responsibility to support that, through educating ourselves and others about the conditions, raising awareness and assisting in evidence-gathering and research.

For more information on PANS and PANDAS please visit the PANS PANDAS UK website www.panspandasuk.org

PANS PANDAS UK offers regular training for education professionals which gives an overview of the conditions, the impact that they have on children in schools, and how schools can help.

Gillian Mathewson is a Principal Teacher of Mathematics (currently on a career break to support her child). She is the Scottish Education Representative for the PANS PANDAS UK charity.

More than just a Football Club – Dunc Chisholm

Originally posted 13 December 2023

Can you remember the time when we used to position ourselves at the front door of our homes and applaud the good work being done to support the public. Buildings being illuminated in blue to celebrate our NHS and checking in on neighbours was becoming a daily ritual.

Has it all disappeared and are we all just looking at self and how we just get through it ourselves? Are we back to expecting lack of service, higher costs and lower engagement at every turn?

I think we have all accepted that money, budgets and services are restricted and with this restriction, hardship is here and there is a lot more to come over the coming days, weeks and months.

Or are we forgetting (ignoring) the amazing opportunities and work that is being delivered in our communities by organisations who simply go over and above to deliver them?

In the world of professional football, clubs often serve as more than just sports teams; they can be crucial community anchors, supporting public sector services and facilities. Ross County FC, a relatively small football club located in Dingwall, Scotland, is a prime example of how a football club can make a significant impact on its community. This blog highlights how Ross County FC supports its community and how this support can be leveraged to bolster public sector services and facilities.

Youth Development and Education

Ross County FC boasts a robust youth academy that provides local children with opportunities to pursue their dreams of becoming professional footballers. By nurturing young talent from the region, the club not only promotes physical activity but also instils important values, such as discipline, teamwork and group mentoring.
Moreover, the club has recognised the importance of education for its young players. To balance football and academics, Ross County FC offers educational programs, helping students excel in their studies. This approach aligns with public sector efforts to improve educational outcomes and decrease dropout rates.

Community Engagement

The football club actively engages with the local community through various initiatives, including school visits, football clinics, and community outreach programs. By connecting with people of all ages, Ross County FC serves as a bridge between the community and public sector services.

This engagement is particularly beneficial in tackling social issues like obesity and isolation, as it encourages residents to embrace an active lifestyle and fosters a sense

of belonging. It also opens avenues for collaboration with local health services and social support programs.

Economic Impact
As a community-based club, Ross County FC contributes significantly to the local economy. Home games attract thousands of fans, generating revenue for local businesses. The club also employs local staff and contributes to job creation. This economic stability can indirectly benefit public sector services through increased tax revenue and reduced dependence on welfare programs.

Health and Well-being
Football is a powerful tool for promoting health and well-being. By supporting Ross County FC, the local community gains access to a range of physical and mental health benefits. Whether through active participation or as spectators, residents can engage in a healthier lifestyle.

Public sector services such as the NHS could partner with the club to encourage physical activity, organize health awareness campaigns, and provide health check-ups to fans. Such collaborations can help in the prevention and early detection of health issues. While promoting good health within specific demographics.

Community Infrastructure
Ross County FC's presence also influences the development of community infrastructure. The stadium serves as a focal point for local events, not just football matches. By supporting the upkeep and expansion of the stadium, the club indirectly supports the improvement of public facilities, making the community more attractive for residents and visitors alike. From charity to events to the running of health promotions.

Social Inclusion
Football has a unique ability to bring people together, transcending social, cultural, and economic barriers. Ross County FC's activities provide a platform for social inclusion, enabling individuals from all walks of life to come together and celebrate a shared passion.

Public sector services can leverage this inclusive environment to address issues related to social cohesion and discrimination. Collaboration with the club can help create awareness and build stronger, more inclusive communities.

Volunteering and Skills Development
Ross County FC also promotes volunteering within the community. By offering opportunities for individuals to contribute to the club, it helps them develop new skills and experiences. This can be a valuable resource for public sector services, which often rely on volunteers to support various programs and initiatives.

The skills acquired through volunteering at the club can be transferred to roles within public sector services, enhancing the quality-of-service delivery.

Youth Crime Prevention Personal Dev Programme
Ross County Foundations Personal Development programme is a prime example of working smarter. Coaches/Mentors working directly with youngsters who are on the edge of disengagement from education while being with crime.

Involving young people in positive activities, such as playing football or attending matches, can be a powerful tool in preventing youth involvement in crime. Ross County FC's youth programs and community outreach efforts can play a crucial role in steering youngsters away from criminal activities, supporting law enforcement and social services in crime prevention efforts. The measure of success is in the retention figures which currently sit at 91%.

Environmental Responsibility
Ross County FC has been proactive in adopting environmentally sustainable practices. The club's commitment to reducing its carbon footprint aligns with public sector efforts to combat climate change. By setting an example, the club encourages the community to embrace eco-friendly practices, which can ultimately support public sector environmental initiatives.

Conclusion
Ross County FC's involvement in the community goes far beyond the football pitch 'More than just a football club'. The club is a vital component of the Highlands are and particularly the Dingwall and surrounding area community. The club offers support that extends into various other areas, including education, health, and social well-being. These efforts can significantly benefit public sector services and facilities, creating a more robust and cohesive community. As a model of community engagement, Ross County FC serves as a shining example of how a local football club can become a pillar of support for the broader public good.

Where else can clubs like RCFC with its stadium and facilities be supported by business and government in the pursuit of supporting the community? With public buildings crumbling, surely the option is to utilise club's facilities that lie in darkness 13 out of 14 days. How and where can the public sector engage with clubs for the greater good? Can hospital clinics be run within the stadium suites? Can health promotion be run on match day? Warm and safe environments for Community Cafes be created within stadiums that already cater for 1000's of people, utilising the positives of sport along with its health benefits to enthuse communities.

Surely, there is a huge opportunity for thinking outside the box, just a little. Who is going to step above the parapet and think like this? Who is willing to speak, support and work together?

Dunc Chisholm is Head of Commercial and Foundation at Ross County Football Club

Closing the digital skills gap: time for action – Simon Holden

Originally posted 20 December 2023

Those of us of a certain age will remember that moment when we first saw a computer in our classroom. Chances are, it was a BBC Micro or an Acorn Electron, perhaps wheeled in on a trolley so that it could be shared with other classes.

Technology has moved on apace. Digital whiteboards have replaced overhead acetate projectors and chalkboards, while pupils are now adept at using iPads and other tablets. Yet being familiar with the technology and competent in its use is only part of the story.

If we want the pupils leaving Scotland's schools to help grow our economy then they need wider digital skills that extend beyond simple coding and computations.

That's why AND Digital has launched our Digital Skills Forum (DSF) to bring together the public, private, and third sectors from throughout the UK to tackle the digital skills gap. It's time to turn words into actions and to turn ambition into impact.

The quarterly forum met for the first time at the end of last month [November] in Birmingham, where more than 100 people gathered to begin driving change. This is not simply a working group but instead it's a larger group of leaders, who have a genuine interest in this topic.

The opportunities lying in front of us are immense. The Logan Report, published in 2020, made recommendations about how Scotland can become a global frontrunner in technology, yet the report also shone a light on the urgent need to digitise our economy.

A year later, [2021] a CBI Scotland study found that the adoption of new technologies – together with the skills to use them – could add £25 billion to the Scottish economy over ten years.

AND Digital's nation-wide report in 2022 showed that the UK will need eight million people over the next three years to close the digital skills gap. Additionally, the report found that nearly a quarter (22%) of workers do not receive digital upskilling from their employer. Although the equivalent figure for Scotland is lower at 18%, there remains a need to increase understanding of why businesses should focus on upskilling and how to access such training.

I believe the DSF will be transformational in harnessing these opportunities to grow our economy through digitisation. The time for talking about the challenges is over – the time to start addressing them has arrived.

Part of the challenge is defining what we mean by "digital skills". The forum's key goals in the year ahead [2024] will be to reach an agreement on how we define digital skills,

on what is required to rapidly expand widespread digital talent, and on a realistic timescale for achieving results.

The forum's discussions are still at an early stage, but already there are some exciting ideas that are beginning to emerge. We're exploring the possibility of launching an industry-led clinic covering the digital skills challenges facing businesses, which would offer a safe and supportive environment run along "Chatham House" rules, giving companies the chance to ask questions and explore opportunities for collaboration while maintaining confidentiality.

Collaboration with educators will also be key. That's why the DSF will be inviting a broad range of representatives from further and higher education to join the forum, allowing business leaders to form connections with the vocational and theoretical training providers that will help to shape the digital skills we need to fill the gap.

Inclusion goes hand-in-hand with collaboration. Closing the skills gap will involve bringing people into our industry from diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, and then retaining them by giving them the support and training that they need to thrive.

The forum will also be a useful channel through which to disseminate information to businesses about government initiatives from the Digital Skills Council, which was launched last year [2022] by the UK Government and which is chaired jointly by digital economy minister Saqib Bhatti and Phil Smith, chairman of semiconductor firm IQE, with secretariat support provided by the Royal Academy of Engineering.

That flow of information will go both ways. Not only will businesses be able to find out about government initiatives and take advantage of the best ones, they'll also be able to provide feedback on what works and what doesn't work.

Just as importantly, companies can use the forum to feed information and ideas to the government too. The DSF will give policymakers access to white papers and other pieces of thought leadership from the players that are dealing with digital skills day-in, day-out.

Looking further ahead, I believe the forum will have a key role to play in setting ambitious targets for workforce digital literacy. International research shows current digital literacy in the UK lagging behind virtually all European countries: the UK ranks 28th in Europe when it comes to the "front-end economy", such as adopting enterprise risk management systems.

The UK lies 17% behind other G7 countries in terms of productivity; most of these rivals have adopted digital technologies to advance their production processes. Targets to get on a level playing field would be a first step in the right direction, acknowledging the significant gap that currently exists – closing this gap over the course of a decade could be a reasonable aim.

We also need to encourage more partnerships between companies in our tech sector and education providers, such as schools and colleges. AND Digital and many of our peers are already firm believers in the value of both work experience and more formal apprenticeships.

However, over the past two decades, politicians have promoted a career path that leads from school to university as the most desirable option for our young people. We believe this needs to change so that apprenticeships and work experience opportunities are valued as an equally attractive route, and not as some form of lesser option.

As the DSF gears up for its next meeting in the new year, [2024] it's time to start putting words into action. Bringing together the public, private, and third sectors will help to close the digital skills gap and ignite Scotland's economic growth.

Simon Holden is AND Digital's Hub Executive for Scotland and Yorkshire.