Scottish Government's Plan for School Research 2023-2026

CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS

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Introduction

The Scottish Government's Plan for School Research sets out the priorities for research and research activities which will support the Scottish Government to deliver evidence informed policy making in school education. The strategy builds upon the work which took place under the [Research Strategy for Scottish Education](#) which was published in April 2017.

The Plan covers the period from summer 2023 to summer 2026, at which point the Plan will be reviewed.

What is the scope of the plan?

By school education, we mean broad general education (P1-S3, excluding pre-school) and the senior phase (S4-S6). The plan, thus, covers just one part of the wider learner journey in Scotland and does not include (though may interlace with) early years, further and higher education, and lifelong learning.

Though the research priorities set out in the plan are likely shared with the wider education research community in Scotland, the plan refers specifically to the research and research activities that will be led by the Scottish Government. Collaboration, however, is a central thread throughout the plan and we will work closely with the wider research community when planning, delivering and disseminating research.

What is the aim of the plan?

The aim of the plan is to support the Scottish Government to deliver evidence informed policy making in school education. Evidence informed policy making is an approach to policy development that aims to ensure that the decisions we make as a government are informed by the best available research evidence. It, thus, necessitates the effective, transparent and accessible communication and appraisal of evidence for policy makers and Scottish Ministers.

The plan has four objectives:

- delivering robust and timely evidence to support the policy making process
- collaboration with key partners
- supporting independent education research
- continuing to improve data access

What is the current policy landscape?

The school education landscape in Scotland has changed considerably in recent years. The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic brought about severe disruption to education and we are currently in a period of education recovery. What is more, Scottish education is now undergoing a programme of reform across the education

and skills landscape, in particular with our national bodies, along with potential changes in our approach to qualifications and assessment for Senior Phase learners.

COVID-19 pandemic

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic upon practitioner and pupil wellbeing, pupil attainment and assessment, and the role of digital learning are a few key issues that emerged during the pandemic. It is widely acknowledged that the pandemic was a particularly difficult experience for children and young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. In late 2020, we partnered with Education Scotland to undertake an Equity Audit to deepen our understanding of the impact of the pandemic on children from disadvantaged backgrounds which identified key areas of focus for accelerating recovery.

This included:

- health and wellbeing support
- digital infrastructure and connectivity
- support for parents and families
- teaching provision and the quality of learning
- support for teachers and the wider workforce

Research into these areas, as well as other longer term impacts of the pandemic upon education, is of central importance as Scotland continues to recover from the pandemic.

Education reform

In recent years there have been a number of key policy developments, with Scottish education now undergoing a programme of reform. A number of key education reports have informed this:

- Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future, 2021 (OECD)
- Upper-secondary education student assessment in Scotland (Stobart Report), 2021 (OECD)
- Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education, 2022 (Professor Muir for the Scottish Government)

Based on the recommendations of these reports, the Scottish Government committed to:

- facilitating a national discussion, alongside Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), on the vision for the future of Scottish education, and appointing an independent facilitator to deliver this work
- consulting with learners, teachers, parents and others on how Scotland's qualifications and assessment system can best evolve in line with the curriculum and society of today

- establishing a new qualifications and assessment body
- establishing a new national education body responsible for providing support and professional learning to teachers and schools, and provide advice and guidance on curriculum, assessment, learning and teaching
- establishing a new inspection body which is separate from the national education agency
- reviewing post-school education and training

The final report from the National Discussion - [All Learners in Scotland Matter - national discussion on education](#) – sets out a vision statement for the future of Scottish Education that all learners in Scotland matter. The vision statement outlines the following:

- the Scottish education system values collaborative partnerships that engage all learners, the people who work within and with the education system, and parents and carers
- all learners are supported in inclusive learning environments which are safe, welcoming, caring, and proactively address any barriers to learning and inequities that exist or arise
- each child and young person in Scotland has high-quality learning experiences which respect their rights and represents the diversity of who they are and the communities they live in
- each child and young person receives great teaching, resources, and support for joyful learning that builds their confidence and equips them to be successful and to contribute in their life, work, and world

The vision is underpinned by a call for action. The key message is "educating our future" which reinstates the need for an education system that will: support the rights of all children and young people; offer quality teaching and learning that suits the different needs of each learner; and help learners their goals and meet the needs of a changing world.

The final report of the [Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment in Scotland](#) has set out a potential new approach to qualifications and assessment via the introduction of the Scottish Diploma of Achievement (SDA). The proposed approach aims to provide better outcomes for all learners by offering a wider range of ways for learners to demonstrate achievements. It proposes to offer learners a wide and flexible range of opportunities to build knowledge and to develop skills.

In 'Programmes of Learning', the Review recommends that learners should continue to study a range of core subjects but a wider range of methods of assessment should be used and the number of examinations reduced, with removal of exams in S4. In 'Project Learning', the Review explains that it would give learners the opportunity to apply the knowledge and skills they have developed in 'real-world' situations by undertaking a project important to them. The 'Personal Pathway' is a reflection on learning, whether that be in school, college or the community. The purpose is to give the opportunity to personalise the Diploma, by

selecting experiences that reflect their interests and the contributions they make to society.

The [Report of Independent Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape](#) (led by James Withers) was published in 2023. The Review considered skills functions and remits of Scotland's national public bodies, making recommendations for future adaptations to support the National Strategy for Economic Transformation. This included:

- the creation of a new single funding and delivery body, bringing together functions from Skills Development Scotland (SDS), the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and, possibly, the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS)
- ensuring there is a clear remit for the new qualifications body – the successor to the SQA - in overseeing development and accreditation of all publicly funded post-school qualifications
- moving responsibility for national skills planning to the Scottish Government
- reform of SDS to create a new body with a singular focus on careers advice and education

The Scottish Government is currently considering these recommendations as part of its education and skills reform agenda.

The National Improvement Framework

The plan is also informed by the National Improvement Framework (NIF). The NIF sets out the vision and priorities for Scottish education that have been agreed across the system, and the national improvement activity that needs to be undertaken to help deliver those key priorities. Scottish Ministers have a statutory duty, introduced by the Education (Scotland) Act 2016, to review the NIF and publish a [National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan](#) on an annual basis.

The vision of the NIF is to develop an education system which delivers both:

- **Excellence through raising attainment and improving outcomes:** ensuring that every child and young person achieves the highest standards in literacy and numeracy, as well as the values, attitudes, knowledge and skills necessary to shape a sustainable future as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens, and effective contributors.
- **Achieving equity**: ensuring every child and young person has the same opportunity to succeed, no matter their background or shared protected characteristics, with a particular focus on closing the poverty related attainment gap.

The key priorities for the 2023 NIF are:

- placing the human rights and needs of every child and young person at the centre of education
- improvement in children and young people's health and wellbeing
- closing the attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged children and young people
- improvement in skills and sustained, positive school-leaver destinations for all young people
- improvement in attainment, particularly in literacy and numeracy

There is an ongoing need for research and data to provide a full picture of how Scottish education is performing and to identify the range of factors that contribute to a successful education system.

Objective 1: Delivering robust and timely evidence to support the policy making process

Research evidence has an important role throughout the entire policy making process. Evidence is needed to: identify new policy priorities; support the initial development of policy; monitor the implementation of policy; and evaluate the impact of and lessons learned from policy. Objective 1 is, thus, concerned with producing robust evidence that meets the needs of policymakers.

What are our evidence needs?

Below we set out areas in which evidence is needed to support policy development. We have set out the current key priorities for Scottish school education that will determine how we will prioritise our resources and where we feel the wider education research community is well positioned to add to our evidence base.

Our evidence base will be drawn from both primary qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research and secondary data analysis. Though our focus is primarily on the Scottish education context, we will also look to evidence emerging from the rest of the United Kingdom, as well as internationally. We have a particular interest in how various aspects of education are experienced by young people and educators with protected characteristics and/or who are experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. Our research will be child-centred, supporting Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which states that 'every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously'.

Our areas of research interest are:

- education reform - specifically, qualifications and assessment, curriculum, and inspection - and ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the outcomes and impact of reform

- the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on school age education in Scotland and education recovery

- the health and wellbeing of pupils and educators, including behaviour and attendance

- closing the attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged children and young people

- improving the attainment of all children and young people, particularly in literacy and numeracy

- embedding children's human rights in teaching and learning

What type of evidence will we produce?

Each year we produce a range of evidence that is used to inform decisions that are made about school age education in Scotland. This evidence includes:

- statistics on school education in Scotland, including pupil performance, attainment and qualification results, and pupil and teacher characteristics

- reports on international comparison studies of education such as Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) – we will rejoin the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) studies

- research on the beliefs, experiences and attitudes of pupils, parents and educators, providing rich detail about policy contexts, and offering nuanced insights about the processes through which programmes are implemented

- consultations on proposed areas of policy development

- evaluation of the implentation, effectiveness and/or impact of education policy interventions and delivery

- sythesis of existing evidence

Evidence is produced both in-house, by Scottish Government social researchers, statisticians and economists, and externally commissioned to independent research providers. Our approach to commissioning research is governed by the Scottish Government's procurement strategy. Contracts are awarded via fair competition on the basis of both quality and price. Projects for tender are published on 'Public Contracts Scotland' - the Scottish Government's official national portal for public sector contract opportunities.

Objective 2: Collaboration with key partners

In recent years, we have developed valuable relationships with a range of users and producers of educational research. This has largely been via our National Advisory Group and Academic Reference Group which bring together the Scottish Government with educational stakeholders representing public bodies, universities and professional networks. These groups act as effective channels through which to share evidence, ideas, and expertise.

Our networks of educational stakeholders are likely to see transformation in the coming years with the development of three new national bodies – an independent inspectorate, a qualifications body, and a national agency to replace the Scottish Qualifications Authority and Education Scotland. This presents an opportunity to establish greater collaboration between the research functions of the Scottish Government and other educational bodies, particularly in producing evidence to support the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of education reform. We are committed to working closely with these bodies to support the development of their own research functions and to ensure their inclusion in existing education research networks.

Cross-sector collaboration will, thus, remain an integral part of our work. To achieve this, we will continue to work with public bodies, universities and professional networks via our National Advisory Group and Academic Reference Group. This may include: identifying joint priorities and shared evidence needs; synergising and aligning research agendas; the co-design and co-delivery of research and evaluation; and sharing learning.

National Advisory Group

The National Advisory Group (NAG) was established in 2017 to feed into the development and evolution of the aforementioned Research Strategy for Scottish Education. The remit of the NAG is to:

- seek out opportunities for collaboration and, where appropriate, the pooling of resources – e.g. joint procurement/commissioning of research, opportunities to collaborate with regard to knowledge exchange/ dissemination of research findings
- where relevant, to lead and/or provide input into the activity of focused short-life working groups or sub-groups
- share updates regarding each organisation's/institution's ongoing, planned and future research activities

External membership of the NAG will include senior colleagues with responsibility for and/or oversight of (educational) research from the following key stakeholder organisations:

- Education Scotland
- Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)
- Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES)
- General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS)
- Scottish Council of Deans of Education (SCDE)
- Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists (ASPEP)
- Scottish Educational Research Association (SERA)
- Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)

Academic Reference Group

An Academic Reference Group (ARG) was established in 2017 to offer advice and guidance on the future direction of the Research Strategy for Scottish Education.

The purpose of the ARG is to facilitate dialogue and collaboration between Scottish Government analysts, policy makers and university researchers. The ARG will act as a vehicle for knowledge exchange between analysts and users of research across government, academia and educational practice. We will work with members to develop and/or improve opportunities and channels for knowledge exchange with the aim to translate knowledge into impact.

Membership is drawn from the Royal Society of Edinburgh's Education Committee and all eleven universities represented by the Scottish Council of Deans of Education, and will include at least one member who can represent research interests relating to Gaelic Medium Education.

In order to diversify membership of the ARG, the group will include two representatives per academic institution:

- one well-established, senior, research active colleague, preferably with a knowledge exchange role within their institution
- one early career researcher (within five years of graduation from PhD or Ed.D)

Objective 3: Supporting independent research

Scotland's universities have an international reputation for excellent research that delivers economic and social benefits for both Scotland and the wider world. The Scottish Government is the largest single source of university research funding in Scotland, with funding allocated through the Scottish Funding Council. The value of university led research for education policymaking is clear, with researchers providing robust subject and methodological expertise as well as a sound understanding of the many factors that shape the educational outcomes of Scotland's children and young people.

Knowledge exchange

The OECD's[1] 2015 report on improving schools in Scotland recommended that education research could be strengthened with greater collaboration between researchers, policy-makers and practitioners and that decision making would benefit from the input of evidence from independent researchers.

Since 2017, we have been working to identify and improve knowledge exchange opportunities between analysts and users of research across government, academia and educational practice. We define knowledge exchange as a process that brings together Scottish Government analysts and policy officials with other public bodies responsible for delivering education, university researchers, and educational practitioners to exchange evidence and share ideas and skills. It is a process through which external research, perspectives and expertise can be brought into the policy making process and government research and data can be shared, with the aim to translate knowledge into impact.

We want to ensure that decisions about education policy are informed by the best available evidence on Scottish education. This necessitates the identification, appraisal and use of a wide range of evidence sources. Our primary sources of evidence are Scottish government statistics and social research. However, we also draw on evidence produced by other public bodies, such as local authorities and executive agencies, UK and international evidence, and independent research led by universities.

We want to further embed the use of independent research in the policy making process. Effective communication between university researchers and policymakers plays an important role in the uptake of academic research evidence and widening the impact of university research. There are a number of challenges, however, in enabling policymakers to effectively engage with academic research. This includes: outputs tailored to different audiences, shortage of open access

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[1] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2015). Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective. [Online]. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/education/school/Improving-Schools-in-Scotland-An-OECD-Perspective.pdf

research, and few channels for knowledge exchange between governments and universities.

Our Academic Reference Group has gone some way to establishing improved lines of communication between education researchers and policy officials. In 2022, we launched the 'Education Research Seminar Series'- a monthly online seminar series which offers policymakers an opportunity to hear from and engage with university researchers. We will continue to develop new channels for knowledge exchange in the coming years. We will work with the Academic Reference Group to identify new and emerging education research and explore ways in which we can support policy officials to better use independent research when developing and evaluating education policy.

We will also ensure that the research published by the Scottish Government is shared, in an accessible format, with those who can use, learn from and/or implement the findings. This includes the primary users of our research – policy officials and Scottish Ministers – and other research users such as teachers and other education practitioners, public bodies, and independent researchers.

Increasing opportunities for doctoral and early career researchers

We recognise the importance of supporting doctoral and early career education researchers to engage with government. These researchers represent new talent, skills and ideas, and are often more diverse in terms of socio-economic background, gender, and ethnicity. However, our engagement with university researchers, is typically with more established or senior reearchers. This means that early career researchers, who represent the future of education research and university leadership, have few opportunities to share their research with the government.

To better support early career researchers to maximise the impact of their research, we will open up membership of the Academic Reference Group to early career researchers and continue to provide paid internships for doctoral reseachers via the Scottish Graduate School of Social Sciences (SGSSS) internship scheme.

Objective 4: Continuing to improve data access

Our statistical data on Scottish education, including pupil performance, attainment and qualification results, and pupil and teacher characteristics, can expand the Scottish evidence base for new research and policy evaluation. We have a duty to adhere to data protection legislation and we, thus, have well established data access protocols in place to ensure the lawful sharing of data. We recognise the opportunities that better access to Scottish Government data can bring to the wider education research community. Such data, made accessible for researchers in ways that upholds data protection, can provide new and innovative analysis and renewed insight into the performance of the Scottish education system, which can further guide the development, implementation and evaluation of policy interventions. This necessitates transparent processes and timescales for access and linking data, and building awareness of our datasets amongst education researchers.

In recent years there have been a number of changes to how researchers can access education data. We have made a range of education datasets available on [Administrative Data Research (ADR) Scotland](#). This includes the Pupil Census, attendance and absence, exclusions, leaver destinations and attainment, and qualifications. We publish a range of statistical datasets on our [Open Data Platform](#) and bespoke requests for data can be submitted via an application to the [Statistics Public Benefit and Privacy Panel](#), which replaced our Education Analytical Services Data Access Panel. We are also now part of the [SafePod Network](#) which provides researchers with standardised safe settings (SafePods) across the UK for data that requires secure access for research. Approved projects can access data through Safe Haven, SafePod Network or, in some circumstances, a data transfer via a secure method such as Objective Connect.

In the coming years, we will continue to support data access. We will increase the number of datasets available on ADR and on our open data platform and use channels for knowledge exchange to increase awareness of the available datasets and the process for making data access requests.