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7.5 Secondary schools in Scotland

Reviews, reports and unprecedented reform

Anna Beck

Introduction

Since the introduction of 'A Curriculum for Excellence' (CfE), Scottish education has been in a constant state of reform. However, the intensity of change has increased significantly since the publication of an influential report by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2021. Since then, we have seen multiple reviews, endless consultations and an abundance of reports and recommendations. An ambitious programme of change has been proposed, encompassing the entire education system. This reform has the potential to fundamentally change the way that secondary schools operate and the context within which teachers carry out their professional roles. However, the sheer number and perceived direction of these changes pose the risk of creating feelings of overwhelm and uncertainty amongst the teaching profession and wider education system.

As part of this wider shift in thinking, secondary school curriculum and assessment have come under increased levels of scrutiny, and radical reform of both curriculum and assessment has begun. The infrastructure of education is also changing, with significant reform of central governing bodies, such as Education Scotland and the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) underway. Placing the voices of pupils at the heart of education has always been at the heart of Scottish education. This focus has become even more central to the aims of Scottish education following the incorporation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into Scots Law in July 2024, which is a powerful driver behind structural and curricular reform and presents schools with new opportunities and challenges. Teacher voice has also become increasingly important, with several recent reform agendas being built around opportunities for the teaching profession to share their views.

The unit begins by outlining some of the core features of the Scottish education system. It then illustrates the systems of governance by first describing the nature of policy processes and then introducing important stakeholders that play a role in the formation of policy. Key legislation is also discussed.

The unit then examines the structure and nature of the curriculum in Scotland, CfE, and describes assessment in the secondary sector. Finally, it discusses the changing nature of secondary teaching in Scotland, by signposting key policies that are driving reform in the Scottish education system and considers what Scottish education might look like in the future.

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OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit you should be able to:

- Describe the distinctive features of the structures of governance in Scottish schools and identify key legislation that drives teaching practice.
- Understand the nature of policy-making processes and identify key policies in Scottish education.
- Describe the structure and features of the Scottish secondary school curriculum.
- Have a clear understanding of the standards for Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and a basic understanding of the standards for full registration of teachers in Scotland.
- Understand the nature of education reform in Scottish education and the implications for assessment in secondary schools.

Check the requirements for your ITE programme to see which relate to this unit.

Key features of the Scottish education system

For over 300 years, since the UK was formed, Scotland has developed and governed its own education system, which is separate from and, at times quite different, to the education systems of Wales, Northern Ireland and England. The Scotland Act of 1998 provided formal distinction from the UK, removing it from the control of Westminster, situating it as a devolved matter within the Scottish Government. Although similarities can be drawn between the Scottish education system and other systems across the world, it is still promoted as one of the three key Scottish institutions that mark it as distinct from the rest of the UK, alongside the church and legal system (Scotland, 1969).

In Scotland, pupils begin primary school between the ages of four and five, where they move from Primary 1 through to Primary 7. They then transition to secondary school between the ages of 11 and 12. Secondary school is compulsory up to the age of 16, which means that some pupils will leave school at the end of fourth year or halfway through fifth year. Secondary school in Scotland is comprised of six distinct years: S1 through to S6, with S5 and S6 acting as 'optional' for those over the age of 16. S1 to S3 is known as the 'broad general education'.

Primary and secondary schools follow *A Curriculum for Excellence* (CfE), which is a 3-18 curriculum, developed at the beginning of post-devolution. It is interesting to note that CfE is not legislated, instead consisting of a set of curriculum guidelines, constructed in partnership between schools, local authorities, government and other stakeholders, thereby prescribing to the Scottish tradition of democratic policymaking. It was designed to support pupils to become: 'successful learners', 'confident individuals', 'effective contributors' and 'responsible citizens'; the 'four capacities'. CfE places the learner at the centre and promotes learner-centred pedagogy focused on pupils' interests, promoting individual choice and flexibility in what is taught. It positions teachers as 'co-creators' of the curriculum, suggesting that learners and teachers should have agency and choice in how the curriculum is taught. However, several issues and challenges in its enactment have restricted the extent to which this vision is reflected in practice, and we explore these in more depth further in this unit.

The way in which teachers are prepared and supported is often portrayed as a distinctive feature of the Scottish education system. ITE has remained the responsibility of universities. While alternative forms of teacher education have been developed to address teacher shortages and issues

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around teacher retention, fast-tracked school-based programmes such as Schools Direct and Teach First have so far been resisted. The teaching profession is regulated and supported by the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTC Scotland) using a suite of professional standards and through the promotion of professional learning. While similar teaching councils across the world have been abolished, GTC Scotland has retained a strong position, reinforcing the idea of teaching as a 'profession' within Scotland.

The 'distinctive' nature of Scottish education policy

The Scottish education system has always been developed and governed separately from the rest of the UK and, as a result, it is said to have taken an increasingly divergent path from the education systems of Wales, Northern Ireland and England. Following political devolution, the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 and the referendum on independence in 2014, a strong political identity has been created for Scotland. One of the central pillars of this identity is the Scottish education system (Paterson, 2003), which is increasingly used in political discourse to position Scotland as distinct from the rest of the UK.

Throughout history, a particular set of values has come to be associated with Scottish education. These are widely cited as: *egalitarianism, democracy* and *meritocracy*; and attached to these are a number of claims about the purpose and importance of education in Scotland:

- Education should be a public good and available to all at no personal expense.
- Education systems should be democratic and self-governing, encouraging a culture of democratic debate.
- Academic success comes to those who work hard, regardless of social class.

These values and claims are often used to describe the education system and to heighten the differences between Scotland and the rest of the UK in political discourse. Whether real or imagined, these beliefs do influence the way that those working within education perceive the system and their role within it (Humes, 2020). They also shape the content of education policies and the processes by which they are made. For example, the Scottish education policy process is often described as 'democratic' as it is common for the government to invite affected stakeholders (e.g. parents, school pupils and teachers) to participate in consultation about intended reform. Historically, these values have acted as gatekeepers, protecting Scottish education from the traction of neoliberal agendas that can be seen elsewhere in the UK, such as the emergence of academy chains and the increased accountability measures placed on schools and teachers. However, recently the landscape has started to shift.

Scotland is not immune to the traction of travelling neoliberal policy promoted by global organisations such as the OECD. The OECD has become a prominent actor in policy discourse and is often invited by the Scottish Government to conduct reviews and evaluations of their education system, directly influencing the direction of reform. The OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and Scotland's declining performance within it, are increasingly used as a political tool to justify the need for wide-scale reform. Given the homogenising effect of global forces and the rate of change within Scottish education, it is possible that the distinctive features outlined at the beginning of this section will become less visible over time.

In 2007, the OECD conducted a review on Scottish schools and found that where a pupil comes from has a greater influence on their education than the school that they attend. More recently,

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research (Sosu & Ellis, 2014) has revealed a continuing and intractable gap in attainment and achievement between pupils from low-income and high-income households. This 'attainment gap' begins before children start school and widens as they progress through the system. By the age of 5, this gap is already 10 to 13 months. Rising levels of child poverty in Scotland directly contribute to the 'attainment gap'. In 2023, Scottish Government statistics revealed that almost one quarter of children living in Scotland between 2020 and 2023 were living in poverty. In its Programme for Government 2024–2025, the Scottish Government made a public commitment to eradicating child poverty, positioning it as 'single greatest priority' for government, and set out ambitious plans to support the most vulnerable in our society.

With regard to education, there is an abundance of policies and resources that have been developed to support pupils and families living in poverty. The '2024 National Improvement Framework and Performance Framework' (NIF), sets out the government's vision and priorities for Scottish education, with its central aim to close the poverty-related attainment gap. It was first published in 2015, in response to the OECD (2015) review of school curriculum, which highlighted a lack of system-wide data as a major problem within Scottish education. Each year, an updated version is released, which sets out plans to collect data on six key drivers:

1. School leadership;
2. Teacher and practitioner professionalism;
3. Parental/carer engagement and family learning;
4. Curriculum and assessment;
5. School improvement;
6. Performance information.

At the centre of this policy is a strong drive for data on pupil learning and a suite of standardised assessments has been developed for this purpose. These assessments are carried out at the following stages of a pupil's education: Primary Year 1, Primary Year 4, Primary Year 7 and Secondary Year 3. Concerns have been raised about the impact of increased assessment on young pupils, as well as those in secondary schools where assessment is already a significant feature. However, the government continues to place emphasis and importance on collecting this type of data in order to determine and share 'what works'.

The measurement of teacher and school performance as drivers of improvement, as well as the potential increased levels of accountability and responsibility within schools, have raised concerns amongst the education profession. It is in tension with the wider vision of Scottish education, such as the school and teacher empowerment agenda and the concept of teachers as curriculum makers, change agents and co-constructors of policy that is promoted by CfE (Humes & Priestley, 2021). Teachers are therefore expected to navigate through an increasingly complex and contradictory policy landscape.

The structure and governance of education in Scotland

The distinctive nature of policy processes in Scottish education

Although the direction of policy as set at the centre by government, the education system is maintained by a small number of key institutions, three of which will be discussed in this unit in more detail. Representatives from these key organisations are invited to participate in policymaking

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through 'advisory boards', 'partnership groups' or consultation. The policymaking process is therefore strongly influenced by a distinct group of powerful institutions and individuals chosen to represent them. One of the most notable features here is the sheer number of organisations that are involved in shaping national education policy.

It is rare, if not unheard of, for policy to be made and implemented without each of the main stakeholders being involved or consulted beforehand. Although this has its advantages, some concerns have been raised about the length of time that it takes for decisions to be taken and changes to be made. Concerns have also been raised about the extent to which the 'usual suspects' are drawn on to inform policy development (Humes, 2020) and the implications that this has for the facilitation of new voices and ideas.

Because of its collaborative nature, the 'Scottish style' of policymaking is often regarded as somewhat unusual and is described as consultative, participative, inclusive and democratic (Britton, Schweisfurth & Slade, 2019). The establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 was widely regarded as an expression of the Scottish Government's commitment to open and public forms of policymaking. However, concerns have been raised about the mythical nature of this narrative and the possibility that it has become a story that is told to show Scotland as distinct from the rest of the UK, but a story that has become embellished over time.

Nevertheless, efforts have been made over the last two and a half decades to engage teachers, parents and pupils in the formation of policy, albeit inconsistently. The use of public consultation to inform education reform has become common practice in Scotland, and has featured heavily within the current programme of education reform. The 'National Discussion', launched in 2022, was billed as the most ambitious consultation ever to take place on the future of Scottish education. From the very beginning, there was a clear commitment to supporting the participation of those who are often unheard in policymaking, guided by the mantra 'every voice matters'. An unprecedented level of activity followed, with large numbers of pupils, parent/carers, teachers, early years practitioners, youth group practitioners and members of the public amongst others, giving up their time to participate through various mediums.

The final report, 'All Learners in Scotland Matter', detailing a shared vision and 'call to action', was submitted to Scottish Government in May 2023. At the time of writing, it is still unclear how this vision will be taken forward, or if it will even be taken forward at all. While the National Discussion might be the perfect example of participative policymaking in action, it serves as a reminder that participation does not necessarily lead to influence.

Local authorities

At the time of writing, there are a total of 32 local authorities in Scotland. Each local authority has a committee with responsibility for education that oversees and approves all matters relating to education policy and related budgets. The Committee is made of elected members and teacher representatives and is chaired by a Convener, who is a member of the ruling political administration. Each Scottish Council has an education authority, within which key officers have responsibility for delivering and managing an education system that meets all statutory requirements and has due regard to the implementation of any guidance issued by the Scottish Parliament. In this regard, education officers report regularly to their respective Education Committees who ultimately have full responsibility for meeting all the statutory requirements placed on local authorities in terms of the range and delivery of their education services.

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Although obliged to follow government policy, each local authority has a degree of autonomy over the implementation of policies at school level. In 2007, a Concordat Agreement was made between the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), which created further distance between centrally constructed government policies and the implementation of these policies in schools. Essentially, the Concordat Agreement guaranteed the allocation of grant-aided expenditure and allowed a degree of autonomy to prioritise budget spend.

Scottish schools have recently witnessed an unprecedented rise in distressed and violent incidents following the return to school post-pandemic. Furthermore, there has been a significant increase in the number of pupils with additional support needs (ASN), including young people with undiagnosed conditions. The most recent 'Behaviour in Scottish School Research' report (Scottish Government, 2023) highlighted a perceived increase in incidents of low-level and more serious disruptive pupil behaviour and recommended higher levels of funding and support to meet the needs of all learners in mainstream education.

However, the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent period of recovery have had an enormous impact on the operation of Scottish local authorities. More recently, a reduction in funding from Westminster following a change in UK Government has resulted in significant pressure on local authority funding. Education budgets have experienced significant reductions, most notably resulting in proposed cuts to teacher numbers, which has caused immense concern across the system. Reduced staffing poses a significant risk to the future learning of pupils in Scotland, particularly those who require additional support.

Education Scotland

Education Scotland is an agency with full responsibility for supporting quality and improvement in Scottish education and is one of the most powerful actors in Scottish education. While it is an executive agency which operates independently, it is directly accountable to Scottish Government ministers. Its function, at the time of writing, is twofold: it supports curriculum development, curriculum innovation and teacher professional learning, while also evaluating and inspecting provision at school, local and national level.

Education Scotland is currently being reformed following the publication of the influential OECD (2021) review, which highlighted the need for a reduction in the breadth of functions carried out by Education Scotland, which was felt to lead to uncertainty and contributed to a confusing policy landscape. A subsequent independent report by Professor Ken Muir, 'Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education' (Muir, 2022; also known as the 'Muir Report'), conducted in response to these concerns, echoed the OECD's findings. Muir (2022) highlighted a lack of clarity around the role of Education Scotland, and a sense of tension surrounding the dual role of development and inspection. Proposed developments include the removal of its inspection function and a renewed focus on curriculum design and delivery.

General Teaching Council for Scotland

In order to teach in a Scottish state sector school, teachers are expected to maintain a current valid registration with GTC Scotland, which was established in 1965 and was one of the first teaching

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councils to be established worldwide. It can be considered as one of the most important organisations in the Scottish education system as it is responsible for shaping and maintaining the quality of the teaching profession and has the power to declare teachers as unfit to teach. The main activities of GTC Scotland include maintaining the register of teachers in Scotland, setting the Professional Standards expected of all teachers and investigating and adjudicating on the Fitness to Teach of registrants.

In April 2012, under the Public Services Reform (General Teaching Council for Scotland) order 2011, the GTCS changed from being an advisory Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB) to an independent self-regulatory body, which made it the first independent regulatory body for teaching internationally. It is interesting to note that this legislation was passed at around the same time that the General Teaching Council for England (GTCE) was abolished, highlighting another distinction between the educational systems north and south of the border.

In January 2017, the GTCS embarked on an ambitious revision of their existing Professional Standards in order to ensure that they align more closely with changing contexts within Scottish education. Following wide-scale consultation, national events and working groups, the new Professional Standards were introduced in January 2021 and became mandatory in August 2021.

GTCS Professional Standards are promoted as a description of teacher professional in Scotland: 'our way of being'. They are not just for student teachers entering into the profession, but for teachers to work with at all stages of their career. This suite of Professional Standards provided a framework for teachers to examine, inform and develop their practice and thinking, and consisted of:

- The Standard for Provisional Registration (SPR) and the Standard for Full Registration (SFR): The SPR details what is expected of a student teacher at the end of their ITE programme; having gained this, all provisionally registered teachers move towards the attainment of SFR;
- Standard for Career-Long Professional Learning;
- Standards for Middle Leadership;
- Standard for Headship.

Professional values have always been at the core of GTCS Professional Standards but appear to have a strengthened position within the revised set. The refreshed Professional Standards begin with a section titled 'Being a teacher in Scotland', which explicitly position the values of 'Social Justice', 'Trust' and 'Respect and Integrity' at the centre of 'what it means to be a teacher in Scotland' (GTCS, 2021). To become a teacher in Scotland, candidates need to demonstrate that their practice and professionalism are underpinned by the following values (GTCS, 2021, pp. 4–5):

1. Social Justice: 'the view that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities now and in the future'.
2. Trust and Respect: '... expectations of positive actions that support authentic relationship building and show care for the needs and feelings of the people involved and respect for our natural world and its limited resources'.
3. Integrity: '... the practice of being honest and showing a consistent and uncompromising adherence to strong moral and ethical principles and values'.

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The new Professional Standards also promote a particular vision of Professional Commitment, which portrays GTC Scotland's view of what a teacher should be in Scotland. It sees lifelong learning, reflection, enquiry, leadership of learning and collaborative practice as key aspects of teacher professionalism. Professional Commitment forms three areas of action:

1. Developing deep knowledge of learning and teaching
2. Critically examining how teaching impacts on learners
3. Using evidence collaboratively to inform teacher judgement and next steps for learners.

(GTCS, 2021, p. 5)

Task 7.5.1 sets you the task of providing evidence that you are meeting the standards required of teachers in Scotland.



Task 7.5.1 Achieving the standard for registration (Scotland)

Look at the description of Professional Values and Professional Commitment above and in the full SFR document online. The full Standards for Provisional and Full Registration can be accessed here: http://www.gtcs.org.uk/

Drawing on your ITE and school experience, can you evidence development in these areas? Pick two and write a short explanation of how you meet these requirements, drawing on your experience. Discuss your findings with a colleague.

Another requirement for registration with GTC Scotland is to engage in Professional Update. The purpose of this scheme is to maintain and improve teacher quality, and to support and enhance teachers' continued professionalism. All teachers in Scotland are required to:

- Take responsibility for their own professional development needs.
- Participate in a system of supportive professional review and development (PRD).
- Be able to confirm and evidence that they are maintaining the higher standards required of a teacher in Scotland.

Essentially, this means that all teachers are required to maintain a reflective record of professional learning and provide evidence of the impact of this on their thinking and actions, by referring to the values outlined in the new Professional Standards. To maintain registration with GTC Scotland, teachers are required to update their registration details online every year and sign off with their line manager to confirm engagement in the process every five years.

More information about the suite of Professional Standards, Professional Update and Professional Standards Review can be found here: http://www.gtcs.org.uk/

Acts and legislation

The Scottish Government frames legislation for education with formal responsibility for the system as a whole residing with the Scottish Ministers, who are informed and advised by His Majesty's

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Inspectors of Education (HMIE) and a range of advisors with specialist knowledge in specific areas of education. However, formal responsibility for the *provision* of education is the responsibility of Scotland's 32 local authorities.

While policy is set at the centre and further developed through networks, responsibility for its implementation is delegated to local authorities and schools. Ultimately, Scottish Ministers have the power to pass regulations concerning education; however, where possible, the Scottish Government prefers to issue *guidance* about education instead of legislation. This provides schools and local authorities with a significant degree of freedom; however, in the main, schools and local authorities tend to follow guidance closely. In contrast to England, there is no formally prescribed national curriculum in Scotland. The majority of schools follow the recommendations of national documents closely; however, there is no legislation that requires them to follow it completely. The fact that the Scottish Curriculum is not prescribed in law is often cited as one of the Scottish education system's most distinctive features.

However, there is of course some legislation that schools are required to engage with. Five key acts, including the incorporation of the UNCRC, are discussed below.

To a large extent the provision of education in Scotland is still governed by the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, which emphasised:

- the right of pupils to be educated as far as is reasonable in accordance with the wishes of their parents;
- the duty of parents to provide efficient education by ensuring their children regularly attend school or receive efficient education by other means;
- the duty of education authorities to secure adequate and efficient provision of school education.

One of the first Acts developed by the Scottish parliament was the 'Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000'. This Act set out five national priorities for education, which local authorities and schools are required to take forward by law:

1. Achievement and Attainment: to raise standards of educational attainment for all in schools, especially in the core skills of literacy and numeracy, and to achieve better levels in national measures of achievement including examination results.
2. Framework for Learning: to support and develop the skills of teachers, the self-discipline of pupils and to enhance school environments so that they are conducive to teaching and learning.
3. Inclusion and Equality: to promote equality and help every pupil benefit from education, with particular regard paid to pupils with disabilities and special educational needs, and to Gaelic and other lesser-used languages.
4. Values and Citizenship: to work with parents to teach pupils respect for self and one another and their interdependence with other members of their neighbourhood and society and to teach them the duties and responsibilities of citizenship in a democratic society.
5. Learning for Life: to equip pupils with the foundation skills, attitudes and expectations necessary to prosper in a changing society and to encourage creativity and ambition.

Task 7.5.2 asks you to consider how to integrate the national priorities from the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000, into your professional practice.

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Task 7.5.2 Integrating the national priorities into professional practice (Scotland)

Examine the National Priorities above. Choose one to think about in more detail. How could you integrate the aims of this National Priority into your professional practice? What critical factors would need to be taken into account?

Discuss this with your peers.

The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 is another important act for Scottish secondary school teachers. It provides the legal framework for identifying and addressing the ASN of pupils who face a barrier or barriers to learning.

This act was amended in March 2016 by the Education (Scotland) Act 2016, which extended the rights of children aged 12 and over. This Act, in line with the current government agenda to close the 'attainment gap', affirmed that strategic planning in education must consider socio-economic barriers to learning. It also placed a duty on local authorities to promote and support Gaelic Medium Education within schools.

In 2024, Scotland became the first jurisdiction in the UK to incorporate the UNCRC into legislation. The UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 was enacted on 16 July 2024. The act ensures the protection of children's rights in Scotland and all public bodies and associated organisations, including schools, are required to follow the legislation. The UNCRC has been at the heart of education policy in Scotland since its creation. It has been a driving force behind policies such as 'Getting it Right for Every Child' (GIRFEC), CfE and the GTC Scotland Professional Standards for Teachers. In recent years, its presence within policy has become much more explicit, with UNCRC clearly positioned at the heart of current education reform.

School curriculum and assessment

Curriculum for Excellence

In 2002, a National Debate on Education was conducted to determine the future of Scottish education. Following this, a Curriculum Review Group was established in 2003, which identified the key principles to be applied in any curriculum re-design. A CfE was published in 2004 and was first implemented in Scottish primary and secondary schools in 2010, after a lengthy period of review and consultation with teachers, and the wider education community.

CfE claims to provide a coherent, more flexible and enriched curriculum to enable each pupil from 3 to 18 to become a 'successful learner', a 'confident individual', a 'responsible citizen' and an 'effective contributor'. These four 'capacities' are at the heart of the curriculum, and are intended to be used as tools to structure and design learning. However, they have been criticised for being overly vague, becoming vacuous slogans, used in a tokenistic manner (Humes, 2014). Research with school pupils has shown that there is confusion surrounding the four capacities, and more alarmingly, that a large majority of S1-3 and Senior Phase pupils had not heard of them (McIntosh & McLauchlan, 2022).

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CfE has been designed to help each pupil develop a host of attributes and skills essential for life as a democratic citizen in an increasingly interconnected and digital world. Emphasis is placed on inter-disciplinary learning, creativity, flexibility and adaptability, teachers as curriculum-makers, personalisation and choice and the importance of pupils being able to lead their own learning. Within the primary context, play pedagogy is particularly important, but the emphasis on this tends to reduce as pupils move towards the upper end of primary school.

Although CfE was officially introduced to schools in 2010, its enactment has not been straightforward and continues to be a source of contention for secondary schools. At the core of CfE, was the promise of increased flexibility for teachers over how and what they teach. The curriculum positioned them as 'co-creators' of the curriculum, suggesting that they should play an active role in developing the curriculum. This provided teachers with the opportunity to translate the key principles from CfE into practice, using their professional knowledge and experience. This was generally received as a positive move as it signalled a significant degree of trust between government and the teaching profession. However, as CfE began to be rolled out in schools, many teachers found themselves requesting further guidance and support as the curriculum was felt to be too vague (Priestley, 2010). Furthermore, with teachers now responsible for the development of curriculum content and assessment, concerns were raised about teacher workload.

In response to these criticisms and concerns, a set of learning experiences and outcomes were created. The Es and Os are a core feature of CfE and are used by teachers to assess progress in learning and to plan the next steps for their pupils. They are intended to provide professional space for teachers to meet the varied needs of their pupils. In secondary schools they are generally used until the end of S3. Secondary teachers use them to work out where they can make contributions to experiences and outcomes from more than one curriculum area, allowing for a more coherent curriculum before the senior phase. They are organised into eight curriculum areas:

- Expressive arts;
- Health and wellbeing;
- Languages;
- Mathematics;
- Religious and moral education;
- Sciences;
- Social studies;
- Technologies.

The Es and Os can be considered as a technical framework, which is intended to support enactment of the overarching vision of CfE. However, they have been criticised for being too 'tickboxy', encouraging an inflexible and technicist approach to teaching, learning and assessment (Humes & Priestley, 2021).

The curriculum within Scottish secondary schools has two phases: broad general education, which runs from S1 to S3 and builds on the learning from primary school, and the senior phase, which runs from S4 to S6 and is predominantly qualifications and awards-based. National qualifications in Scotland include National 1 to 5, Higher, Advanced Higher and Scottish Baccalaureate. Vocational and technical qualifications can also be achieved throughout the senior phase, and schools work with further education providers to offer access to Skills for Work, Foundation Apprenticeships, Professional Development Awards and National Progression Awards.

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CfE's vision was revisited in 2019 to ensure it remained 'fit-for-purpose' and relevant to today's context, and a 'refreshed narrative' was published (Education Scotland, 2019). Despite this, a 2021 OECD report emphasised the need for CfE's vision to be revisited again in light of changes and trends in education since its original design 20 years ago. It also highlighted a requirement for an improved balance between breadth and depth of learning and for the Senior Phase to align more closely to CfE's vision, with secondary schools tending to focus more on qualification and assessment, rather than the holistic development intended by CfE. As well as an over-emphasis on high stakes attainment data, there has been a systematic decrease in the range of qualifications available across Scottish secondary schools, a process that is often referred to as 'curriculum narrowing' (Shapira, Priestley, Peace-Hughes, Barnett & Ritchie, 2023).

In response to concerns about the misalignment between the aspirations of CfE and the existing system of qualification and assessment, an 'Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment' was carried out by Professor Louise Hayward, and the final report of recommendations, 'It's our Future', was published in June 2023 (Hayward, 2023). The review process was multi-layered and far-reaching, drawing on the expertise and experiences of a wide range of stakeholders, including teachers, school leaders, parents/carers and most importantly, young people. The report itself is extensive, but key ideas included a Scottish Diploma of Achievement, which would allow for the acquisition of both academic and professional subject knowledge, the ability to demonstrate wider achievements, a strong focus on project learning and a distinct shift away from high-stakes assessments.

Task 7.5.3 asks you to audit your knowledge of the content of the curriculum as part of your preparation to teach.



Task 7.5.3 Auditing curriculum content knowledge in preparation to teach

Are you ready to teach? Look at the information for the area you teach on the following website: http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/45625.3728.html

Identify your subject and examine the course assessment specifications and unit specifications at Higher level. Do you have the subject knowledge necessary to teach all the subject matter? Conduct a brief audit and identify any areas that are a development need for you.

Make a note of this in your professional portfolio.

In Scotland, there is currently only one national examination body, the SQA (soon to be renamed as Qualifications Scotland), which offers broad range of national qualifications for entry into higher education or the workplace. Nationals 1 to 5 were introduced in August 2013, the new Higher was introduced in August 2014 and the new Advanced Higher was introduced in August 2015. Currently, Highers are ordinarily required to allow entry to a university or college course that leads to a degree or Higher National Certificate or Diploma. Advanced Highers are generally for those pupils who have passed Highers, and wish to continue studying a particular subject at school level in sixth year.

Task 7.5.4 asks you to review the requirements for national assessments and consider how you could prepare pupils for these.

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Task 7.5.4 Preparing pupils for national assessments (Scotland)

Visit the same website from Task 7.5.2 (http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/45625.3728.html), select the subject that you teach and look for a specimen or exemplar question paper. Look at the nature and structure of the examination papers. How could you ensure pupils are prepared for undertaking examinations of this nature?

Compare this to your own current experience and qualifications and make note of the similarities and differences. Discuss this with a colleague.

The teaching profession in Scotland

Another distinctive feature of Scottish education is that ITE is still provided solely by universities. Although the nature of school experience has changed slightly, with new partnership approaches developed and trialled between university staff and teachers to support student teacher learning (see Conroy, Hulme & Menter, 2013), the provision of ITE has remained firmly within higher education and involves an equal blend of academic and practical learning, shared between university and schools.

In 2010, Professor Graham Donaldson was invited by the Scottish Government to conduct a large-scale review of teacher education in Scotland. The review looked at teacher education provision in its entirety, with key areas including: selection for entry to ITE; content and structure of ITE; career-long professional learning (CLPL) and leadership. The report of the review, 'Teaching Scotland's Future' (Donaldson, 2011), contained 50 recommendations to improve and modernise the Scottish teacher education system. These recommendations were underpinned by the importance of re-shaping teacher professionalism in line with the changing nature of society and the need to develop partnerships between local authorities and universities. Related to this was the promotion of teaching as an 'intellectual profession' as opposed to a technical 'craft' (as has been adopted elsewhere in the UK) and a call for teachers to take responsibility for their own professional learning.

Donaldson painted a particular vision of the teacher within his report, and this can be taken as a statement of the kind of teaching qualities required by the introduction of CfE. He highlighted the need for teachers to be 'reflective' and 'enquiring', engaged in and with educational research; to have the capacity to shape and lead educational change; and to be 'agents of change', not 'receivers of top-down prescription'.

The Scottish Government accepted each of Donaldson's 50 recommendations, 'in full, in part or in principle' and established two partnership groups to further develop and implement the core ideas of the report. Over 15 years on from the initial review, a number of changes can be seen within Scottish education, including:

- Restructuring of traditional undergraduate B.Ed. ITE degrees to incorporate a broader spectrum of academic subjects in the development of BA degrees.
- Increase in level of qualifications required for entry to ITE.
- Development of partnership agreements between local authorities and universities.
- Drive towards Master's level learning and the creation of Master's credits for ITE students.
- New models of school experience involving joint assessment of student teachers between classroom teachers and university tutors.

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A review of its implementation was conducted in 2015 by a market research company, Ipsos Mori, and their report 'Evaluation of the Impact of the Implementation of Teaching Scotland's Future', was published in 2016 (Black, Bowen, Murray and Zubairi, 2016). The evaluation suggested that there had been a 'cultural shift' within schools, with greater engagement in professional learning and a rise in the numbers of teachers willing to try new approaches. In line with this cultural shift, informal teacher-led learning and practitioner enquiry became increasingly popular forms of professional learning across Scotland (Kennedy & Beck, 2018).

Following this review, there have been a number of changes to the landscape of ITE with the emergence of new routes into teaching in response to teacher shortages within both primary and secondary sectors. At the time of writing, there are 11 universities that offer various programmes of ITE in both primary and secondary education. While problems around teacher shortages and teacher retention have persisted over time, particularly within rural and remote-rural areas, workforce problems have been further compounded by a significant reduction in the number of permanent teaching positions available across Scotland due to local authority budget restraints.

Concerns have also been raised about the quality of ITE in Scotland, most notably by the Scottish Parliament (2017) and the extent to which current ITE provision suitably prepares student teachers to enter the profession. In response, a government-funded longitudinal research project; 'Measuring Quality in Initial Teacher Education' brought together key stakeholders to develop a 'contextually appropriate means of measuring quality' in ITE (Kennedy, Beck & Shanks, 2021). This involved gathering annual data from student and early career teachers and those who support them in school and university, to understand more about perceived levels of preparation and what 'quality' might look like in different contexts. Findings from the project (Kennedy, Carver & Adams, 2023) revealed that Scottish ITE is not 'in crisis', early career teachers are not ill-prepared, and when compared with other ITE systems from around the world, Scotland is doing well. However, areas for improvement were identified, such as early career mentoring, the need for greater personalisation and choice in early phase professional learning and a lack of shared understanding around the purpose of ITE.

March 2023 witnessed a significant change within the Scottish Government and the arrival of a new Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills. This change in personnel was accompanied by a renewed emphasis on teacher quality, and the announcement of a new Centre for Teaching Excellence, to 'ensure excellence in teaching' by supporting teachers to develop evidence-informed practice, highlighting this as central to the wider reform agenda.

The future of Scottish education

The education system in Scotland faces several challenges, the most significant being the impact of child poverty and reducing the poverty-related attainment gap. It is likely that the national push for a more equitable school system, and the increasing reliance on performance data, will continue to shape the direction of education in Scotland for many years to come.

While Scotland awaits a clear response from government about the intended enactment of the changes to senior-level qualifications and assessment as detailed in 'It's our Future', an ambitious programme of curricular review has started: the Curriculum Improvement Cycle (CIC). The CIC, beginning officially in March 2024, brings together a range of stakeholders, including teachers, to work together to review and enhance CfE. While it appears that the main vision within CfE will remain, it is likely that much of its supporting infrastructure will be renewed in some capacity. It is important to remember that curricular changes are taking place within the context of broader educational reform, and the establishment of new governing bodies, which will have implications for the way that teachers and schools are supported and governed in the future.

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The increasing focus on teacher quality, and the establishment of a Centre for Teaching Excellence to 'ensure excellence' in the teaching profession, hints at the possibility of a new reform to teacher education provision being on the horizon. Perhaps it is time for an updated Donaldson report. What will it mean to be a teacher in Scotland in the future? If there is one characteristic that describes the current context of secondary schooling in Scotland, it is change. Teachers at all stages of their careers will need to be ready to embrace new opportunities, while negotiating longstanding challenges and unpredictability in the wider system. There is no doubt that Scottish education is teetering at the edge of what could be an extraordinary turning point, or to use the language of the OECD, a 'watershed moment'.

SUMMARY AND KEY POINTS

This unit has sought to identify key features that make the Scottish education system distinctive from that in the rest of the UK. It has also tried to raise awareness of the structure and balance of the curriculum in Scotland and highlight the preparation that may be required to teach within the secondary sector. Linked to this was a discussion of the teaching profession and the nature of professional learning. An additional aim of this unit was to show the distinctive model that is used to govern the education system, and the apparent 'consultative' nature of policy-making processes. The intention has been to stimulate thinking about some of the issues that are likely to impact upon the professional practice of secondary teachers in Scotland.

- The Scottish education system is currently going through a period of **significant transformation** in a number of areas.
- The Scottish education system is often regarded as more **'democratic'** and **'meritocratic'** than the English education system.
- The Scottish Government frames legislation for education, however, often only issues guidance to local authorities and schools. Scottish schools are therefore not legally required to follow policies set by government, although tend to follow guidance closely.
- There is no formally prescribed national curriculum in Scotland.
- The development of education policy involves a range of **stakeholders** and attempts are often made to engage teachers at early stages of policy development (e.g. in the development of CfE they were invited to be 'co-developers of the curriculum'). The policy process in Scottish education is therefore regarded as '**consultative**'.
- At the time of writing, the biggest educational priority for the Scottish Government is to reduce inequity in the education system and close the attainment gap between pupils from low-income and high-income households.
- The National Improvement Framework details the Scottish Government's overarching strategy for achieving excellence and equity in education, which aims to collect a significant amount of data on various elements of the school system.
- The curriculum, qualifications and assessment are undergoing a period of extensive reform through the CIC.

Check which requirements for your programme have been addressed through this unit.

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Further resources

Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)

Information about Curriculum for Excellence and the Curriculum Improvement Cycle can be found here: https://scotlandscurriculum.scot (Viewed 31 July 2025).

Essential for understanding Scotland's curriculum framework, the four capacities, and how to plan learning experiences that align with CfE principles.

General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS)

Information about the GTCS Professional Update can be accessed here: https://www.gtcs.org.uk/knowledge-base/categories/professional-update (Viewed 31 July 2025).

Critical for maintaining your teaching registration and understanding ongoing professional development requirements throughout your career in Scotland.

Curriculum for Excellence Assessment Information (CfE)

Assessments Information about the Scottish curriculum and related assessments and awards can be found here: http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/58062.html (Viewed 31 July 2025).

Practical guidance on qualifications, assessment methods and examination requirements for secondary teachers preparing pupils for national qualifications.

National Improvement Framework (2024)

Scottish Government. (2023). *2024 National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government. More information and a PDF version of this report can be accessed here: https://www.gov.scot/publications/education-national-improvement-framework-improvement-plan-2024/ (Viewed 31 July 2025).

Key policy document outlining Scotland's strategy for achieving excellence and equity in education, including the focus on closing the attainment gap – essential for understanding current Scottish education priorities and data collection requirements.

UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024

This Act can be accessed here: https://www.gov.scot/publications/statutory-guidance-part-2-uncrc-incorporation-scotland-act-2024/pages/3/ (Viewed 31 July 2025).

Recent legislation making children's rights central to education practice – understanding this helps you create pupil-centred, rights-respecting learning environments.

The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004

This Act can be accessed here: http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2004/4/pdfs/asp_20040004_en.pdf (Viewed 31 July 2025).

Essential legal framework for supporting pupils with additional support needs – crucial for inclusive teaching practice and understanding your responsibilities.

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