

THE SCOTTISH EDUCATION SYSTEM: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Current status

- Scotland's population is 5.373 million, and its school population is 688, 959
- Pupils have some limited, part-time, state-funded access to nursery education. They start primary school age 4 or 5 as they enter Primary 1 (P1), and stay in Primary School until the age of 11 or 12 in Primary 7 (P7). Pupils will begin their process through the "Broad General Education" of the Curriculum for Excellence.
- Thereafter, pupils enter Secondary School, typically referred to in Scotland as "high school", age 11 or 12 in Secondary 1 (S1). Attendance is compulsory until age 16 (either June of S4 or December of S5). Thereafter, S5 and S6 are optional years. Most pupils now remain until the end of S6 and leave age 17 or 18.
- When pupils enter S4, they enter the "Senior Phase" of the Curriculum for Excellence. This involves the gaining of formal qualifications run by the national Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA).
- Schools have a significant responsibility to manage not only destinations from school but to ensure they are sustained positive destinations for some years thereafter. A range of options are available: Modern Apprenticeships, college and university.
- University courses in Scotland last for 4 years. Students already resident in Scotland have their tuition fees paid for by the Scottish Awards Agency for Scotland, and EU students are entitled to the same arrangement. Awards Agencies for other parts of the UK have opted not to pay these fees as tuition fees exist elsewhere in the UK, so non-Scottish UK students must pay for university tuition, as must non-EU students.
- Unless they are independent (private) schools, all schools in Scotland are **comprehensive** schools. This means that all schools are entirely mixed ability – no state schools in Scotland are selective. Schools must offer entirely vocational courses plus academic courses such as Advanced Highers, which are generally equivalent to the first year of university. Some Scottish schools may be called "Grammar" or "College" or "Academy", but these are simply older names for these schools dating from before 1965 when selection of pupils still occurred.
- Unlike other parts of the UK, there is no "national curriculum" in Scotland. However, schools do follow the Curriculum for Excellence, which bases learning around experiences and focuses on 4 capacities: confident individuals, responsible citizens, effective contributors and confident individuals.
- Of the 2500 state schools in Scotland, 366 are Roman Catholic schools. This means that there is a different focus to formal school ethos plus religious education in these schools and certain rules apply to the appointment of senior manager posts.
- 4.1% of school pupils in Scotland attend independent schools, lower than the UK average of 7%. Around 50% of the Scottish independent school population attend school in Edinburgh.

Background

- Scotland's "distinctive" approach to education in these islands is long established. The 1707 Treaty of Union founded the United Kingdom, and with the abolition of the Scottish and English Parliaments to create a British Parliament, the Treaty established the permanent existence of the independent Scottish legal system, Presbyterian national Church and the education system.
- Lindsay Paterson of the University of Edinburgh has noted that education is "one of the main sources of Scottish national identity" and thus has long been a source of national pride, but there are serious questions to consider as the country's education system now falls far below its long-ago status as an educational world leader.
- Paterson identifies 4 main themes characterising the aims (if not always realities) of Scottish education through the centuries: open to a wide range of social classes allowing for greater social mobility; a public system provided by public means, developing over the years since 1494 and in particular since the assumption of state control of education in 1872; offering a

broad curriculum; prominence given to “ideas” based around philosophy, history and psychology.

- Between 1707 and 1999 there was no Scottish Parliament, all decisions were taken by the UK Government in London. However, throughout this time education (as with many other areas) remained very different in Scotland. In 1944, education in the rest of the UK was transformed by new laws, while Scotland was unaffected and continued with the reforms it had already implemented in 1872, 1918 and 1929. In 1965, all forms of selection to Scottish schools was stopped. In the 1980s, forms of privatisation took hold in many school systems in England, while in Scotland all state schools remained entirely under state control with no private involvement.
- The creation of a Scottish Parliament in 1999 saw national policy on education come entirely under the control of the Scottish Government in Edinburgh. Government Ministers cannot dictate what is and is not taught – key responsibilities are instead held by executive agencies Education Scotland, the Scottish Qualifications Authority and the General Teaching Council for Scotland.
- Day-to-day administration and running of schools is carried out by Scottish local authorities, of which there are 32. Although they employ teachers, terms and conditions remain the same across all of Scotland.

Challenges

- In common with many other countries, the Scottish education system faces challenges in adapting to the modern world. The introduction of the Curriculum for Excellence (for ages 3-18) in the mid-2000s was described as the biggest reform of an education system in a developed democracy in peacetime, ever. To this day, it has its fierce defenders and critics both domestically and internationally.
- In 2015 the OECD concluded that the Curriculum for Excellence could be a world-class system, but also concluded that standards in Scotland – although above international averages – had fallen from high to average in some key areas over the last 10 years.
- In common with much of western Europe, Scotland faces a demographic timebomb: there are now more over-60s than there are school pupils in Scotland, and Scotland faces among the worst demographic challenges within the UK. All 5 parties in the Scottish Parliament – from the more radical Greens to the centre-right Scottish Conservatives – are in favour of greater immigration to Scotland. However, immigration is not a power of the Scottish Parliament and the issues can be obscured by constitutional arguments over Scottish independence and/or Brexit. The problems of an ageing population pose further problems for the Scottish education system.
- Scotland suffers from key social problems to a greater extent than any other part of the UK. For example, average life expectancy in parts of Glasgow is only 54 years. For every social class and socio-economic, key health indicators limp behind the rest of the UK. The impact of this upon youth is clear, and associated challenges for education have been made explicit by the 2008 World Health Organisation report on Scotland, as acknowledged by then-Chief Medical Officer, Harry Burns. A 2005 WHO report found that Scotland had the second-highest murder rate in western Europe and labelled Glasgow “the murder capital of Europe” – with knife killings of youth gang members the largest part of this statistic. An approach which put education – through teachers and social workers working together with police in a proactive campaign – at the heart of this and has led to a 69% reduction in weapons offences and a near-total eradication of youth knife deaths in Scotland. Assaults, alcoholism and other issues remain disproportionately high and schools are increasingly at the heart of national and local policies to tackle this.
- The Scottish Government’s key agenda is to “close the gap” and reduce inequality and all schools have this as a core aim.