Generic skills in the 14-19 curriculum: an international review

Scotland

International case study

Generic skills description	Skills for learning, skills for life, skills for work.
Generic skills in the academic and vocational curriculum	Integrated into the common Curriculum for Excellence.
Skills teaching and learning approaches	Taught through academic and vocational subjects using approaches used in those subjects.
Generic skills assessment	Through learning portfolios.
Teacher autonomy	Professional body with independence but teachers report limited experience of agency.

This is a case study of generic skills in 14-19 education in **Scotland,** developed through a desk review of selected, mostly official documents. It is intended to be read alongside another 9 international case studies and an overarching summary report of the research *Sheffield Institute of Education* undertook in collaboration with *Centre for Education Systems* with funding from *The Charitable Foundation for Educational Development*. The project investigated how 'generic skills' are characterised, understood, and implemented across 10 jurisdictions, with particular reference to the relevance for England.

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Summary

Generic skills, in the form of skills for learning, skills for life, and skills for work, are a key part of the Curriculum for Excellence, introduced in Scotland in 2004. The core aims for the curriculum are to develop students in four capacities, as:

- Successful learners
- Confident individuals
- Responsible citizens
- Effective contributors [1]

These capacities are currently incorporated into existing subjects and vocational areas and are assessed by teachers as part of learning portfolios.

Within the Curriculum for Excellence there is specific entitlement for "*opportunities for developing skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work*" [2], also known as Curriculum 4. The specific skills include literacy, numeracy and associated thinking skills; skills for health and wellbeing, including personal learning planning, career management skills, working with others, leadership and physical co-ordination and movement skills; and skills for enterprise and employability.[3]

The Scottish Government commissioned an Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment. The report of the review group, published in June 2023, proposes a greater emphasis on generic skills in the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence, by creating personal pathways and compulsory projects within the learning programme.[4] It also proposes a single Scottish Certificate of Achievement to be awarded to young people when they finish the senior secondary phase, with the varied individual qualifications sitting within the Certificate. Scottish education policy is relatively centralised. A professional body sets the professional standards for all teachers and lecturers but does not appear to be influential in relationship to skills, and there is evidence that teachers experience limitations to the extent of their influence on the programmes they deliver.[5]

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[1] Education Scotland, 2023 https://education.gov.scot/curriculum-for-excellence/about-curriculum-for-excellence/what-is-curriculum-for-excellence/

[2] Ibid

[3] Education Scotland, 2009 https://education.gov.scot/media/tcnk33qn/btc4.pdf

[4] Scottish Government, 2023a https://www.gov.scot/publications/independent-review-qualifications-assessment-review-key-recommendations/

[5] Ibid

1.   Contextual Factors

This section provides an overview of the country of Scotland, beginning with its social and economic context and its educational context in section 1.1. Section 1.2 explores the key systems and structures of the education system. Section 1.3 covers the education workforce and professional status. Finally, section 1.4 describes how policy relating to skills is formed and enacted in Scotland. These are all discussed particularly in relation to generic skills.

1.1   Economic, social and economic context

Scotland is a nation within the United Kingdom with a devolved government that has responsibility for education. Its population is around 5.46 million people, of whom nearly 20% are aged under 18.[6] Scotland has become increasingly diverse, as a result of net inward migration, particularly over the past 10-15 years.[7] Before the pandemic, Scottish productivity was seen as around 20% below top-performing OECD countries.[8] Wealth inequality has been growing in Scotland.[9] In 2016-17, nearly a quarter of children lived in households below the UK relative poverty line, with this figure projected to increase to 29% in 2023-24.[10]

Educational overview

Education has been formally devolved to the Scottish Parliament since 1999.[11] However, Scotland's education system was already different from education in other parts of the UK due to different traditions and policies including in school organisation and importantly assessment. The UK 1988 Education Reform Act that established the National Curriculum in England did not apply to Scotland. Although there is a longstanding tradition of a distinct Scottish education system, even with devolution the UK government still has considerable indirect influence. For example, most taxes are still levied and decided by the UK government including those that affect education, such as the apprenticeship levy.

Scotland made a series of key decisions on education since devolution including the announcement of the Curriculum for Excellence in 2004 and maintaining largely free higher education for students rather than introducing fees. As a result, there is a cap on student

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[6] OECD, 2021 https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/bf624417-en/1/3/1/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/bf624417-en&_csp_=51c450f180c5a8837f5b133c929c2dfe

[7] Ibid

[8] Skills Development Scotland, 2023 https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/skills-for-a-changing-world/a-changing-world

[9] Resolution Foundation, 2018 https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/the-1-trillion-pie-how-wealth-is-shared-across-scotland

[10] Resolution Foundation, 2019 https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/wrong-direction-can-scotland-hit-its-child-poverty-targets/

[11] UK Government, n.d. https://www.deliveringforscotland.gov.uk/scotland-in-the-uk/devolution/

numbers, as used to be the case in England. A joint funding council across Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FE) meant that colleges saw cuts in funding, and a major reorganisation in 2012/13 (Scottish Parliament, 2022). Now with only 26 Colleges across Scotland, there is a more coherent tertiary education system, with HE and FE as part of local and regional economic development plans.

1.2   Key systems and structures

Curricula, assessment and qualifications

As noted, Scotland has long had a different education system from the rest of the UK, including different exams. In 2000, Advanced Highers, to be taken at age 18, replaced the Certificate of Sixth Year Studies, and in 2014, National 1-5 exams replaced Standard Grades.[12] Scotland has a Credit and Qualifications Framework (see **Figure 1**, over) which allocates different levels to qualifications to enable progression and an understanding of equivalence across academic and vocational qualifications.

The senior phase in Scottish education runs from S4 to S6, which covers ages 16 to 18. According to the Curriculum for Excellence framework[13], all young people in Scotland have an entitlement to a senior phase which:

- provides specialisation, depth and rigour
- prepares them well for achieving qualifications to the highest level of which they are capable
- continues to develop skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work
- continues to provide a range of activities which develop the four capacities
- supports them to achieve a positive and sustained destination.

The senior phase can be delivered by schools in partnership with colleges, universities, employers, and community learning partners. Although the specific qualifications that young people take will be based on a subject or vocational area, the programme for the senior phase should include other aspects including physical activity and personal development, as set out in the entitlement described above.

The Curriculum for Excellence forms the foundation of the Scottish national curriculum from nursery to age 18.[14] It was originally devised in 2004 and then implemented in 2010 following a series of consultations. The curriculum implementation is overseen by Education Scotland, the Scottish Government executive agency responsible for supporting quality and improvement in Scottish education. The Curriculum for Excellence aims to foster four key capacities in young people so that they become successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. **Figure 2** (over) lists specific skills and attitudes pertaining to these four capacities.

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[12] Education Policy Institute, 2021 https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/EPI-UK-Institutions-Comparisons-2021.pdf
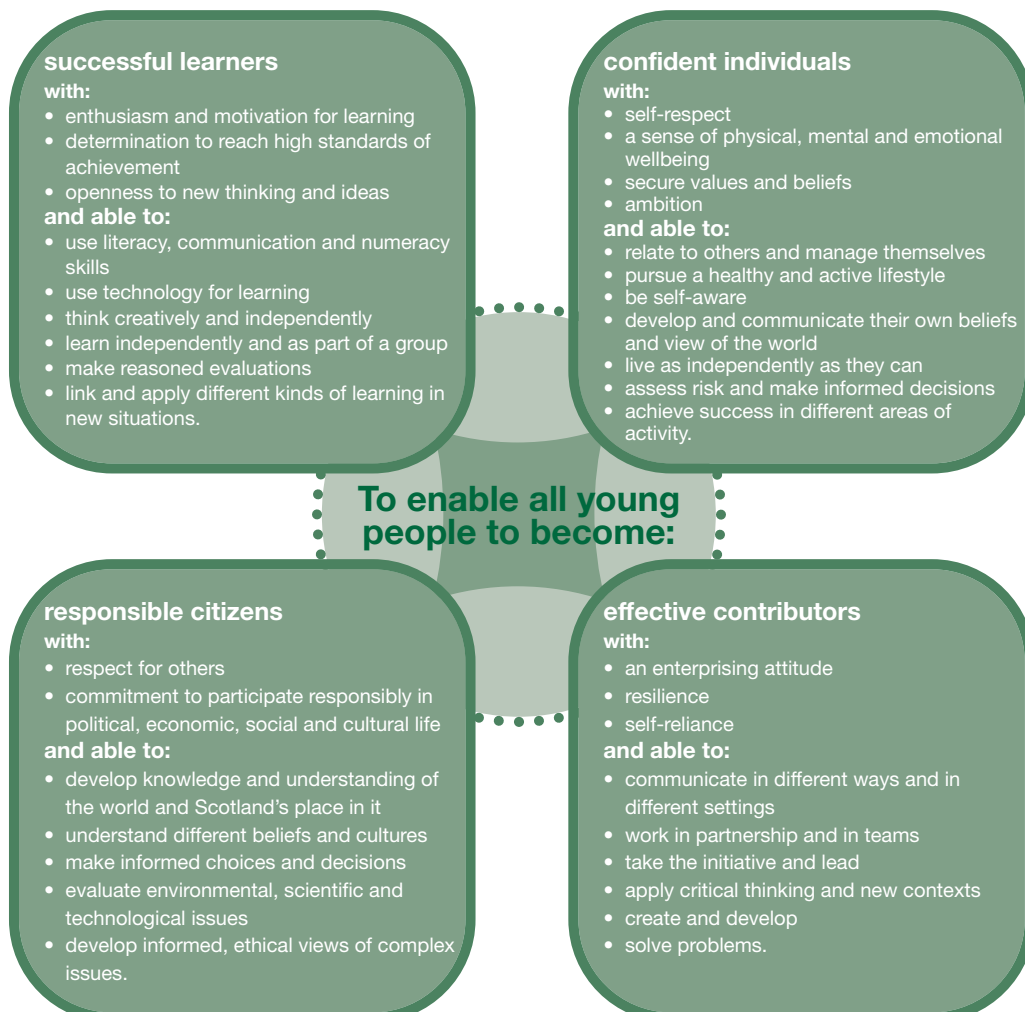
[13] Education Scotland, 2022 https://education.gov.scot/curriculum-for-excellence/about-curriculum-for-excellence/curriculum-stages/senior-phase-and-beyond/senior-phase/

[14] Education Scotland, 2023

Figure 1: Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework[14a]

SCQF Levels	SQA Qualifications				Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions	Apprenticeships & SVQs
12					Doctoral Degree	Professional Apprenticeship
11			Professional Development Award		Masters Degree, Integrated Masters Degree, Post Graduate Diploma, Post Graduate Certificate	Graduate Apprenticeship Professional Apprenticeship SVQ
10					Honours Degree, Graduate Diploma, Graduate Certificate	Graduate Apprenticeship Professional Apprenticeship
9					Bachelors / Ordinary Degree, Graduate Diploma, Graduate Certificate	Graduate Apprenticeship Technical Apprenticeship SVQ
8		Higher National Diploma			Diploma Of Higher Education	Higher Apprenticeship Technical Apprenticeship SVQ
7	Advanced Higher, Awards, Scottish Baccalaureate	Higher National Certificate			Certificate Of Higher Education	Modern Apprenticeship SVQ
6	Higher, Awards, Skills for Work Higher			National Progression Award		Modern Apprenticeship Foundation Apprenticeship SVQ
5	National 5, Awards, Skills for Work National 5	National Certificate				Modern Apprenticeship SVQ
4	National 4, Awards, Skills for Work National 4					SVQ
3	National 3, Awards, Skills for Work National 3					
2	National 2, Awards					
1	National 1, Awards					

Figure 2: Curriculum for Excellence - Four Key Capacities[14b]

successful learners

with:
- enthusiasm and motivation for learning
- determination to reach high standards of achievement
- openness to new thinking and ideas

and able to:
- use literacy, communication and numeracy skills
- use technology for learning
- think creatively and independently
- learn independently and as part of a group
- make reasoned evaluations
- link and apply different kinds of learning in new situations.

confident individuals

with:
- self-respect
- a sense of physical, mental and emotional wellbeing
- secure values and beliefs
- ambition

and able to:
- relate to others and manage themselves
- pursue a healthy and active lifestyle
- be self-aware
- develop and communicate their own beliefs and view of the world
- live as independently as they can
- assess risk and make informed decisions
- achieve success in different areas of activity.

To enable all young people to become:

responsible citizens

with:
- respect for others
- commitment to participate responsibly in political, economic, social and cultural life

and able to:
- develop knowledge and understanding of the world and Scotland's place in it
- understand different beliefs and cultures
- make informed choices and decisions
- evaluate environmental, scientific and technological issues
- develop informed, ethical views of complex issues.

effective contributors

with:
- an enterprising attitude
- resilience
- self-reliance

and able to:
- communicate in different ways and in different settings
- work in partnership and in teams
- take the initiative and lead
- apply critical thinking and new contexts
- create and develop
- solve problems.

The Curriculum for Excellence sets out a specific entitlement for **"*opportunities for developing skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work*"**, also known as Curriculum 4.[15] The specific skills include literacy, numeracy and associated thinking skills; skills for health and wellbeing, including personal learning planning, career management skills, working with others, leadership and physical co-ordination and movement skills; and skills for enterprise and employability.[16]

There is a large body of guidance available for teachers and education managers setting out the expectations, outcomes, and delivery of these skills. The clear thread throughout is that these skills should be taught to all pupils and young people at every level and type of qualification.

The report of the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment, published in June 2023, made recommendations for the senior phase that update the Curriculum for Excellence but in keeping with its foundations and philosophy.[17] The report recommended the introduction of a Scottish Diploma of Achievement with three elements – a personal pathway, programmes of learning, and project learning.

- Programmes of learning describe existing programmes and qualifications including Highers and Advanced Highers. However, the report recommends a modular structure for these programmes and qualifications, to allow learners to build up credit, with a wider range of assessment methods and fewer exams.

- The personal pathway is intended to reflect learning that would be authenticated but not graded. As the report states, **"*the purpose of the Personal Pathway is to give learners the opportunity to personalise their qualification profile by selecting aspects of their experiences that reflect their interests, the contributions they make to society and their career aspirations in employment and to discuss these in a reflective way.*"**

- The project learning aspect of the recommendations involves a project undertaken by a learner on a topic relevant to their programme of learning. It could be an individual or group project but would be assessed individually. The projects would not be graded, but should be set at the appropriate level of the Scottish Curriculum and Qualifications Framework and with appropriate credit.

The intention is to create parity of esteem across different types of qualification. All learners who complete their programmes, and have their personal pathway and project learning authenticated, will be awarded a qualification at the applicable level of the Scottish Curriculum and Qualifications Framework. However, it is not clear whether the reports recommendations will be acted on and if so which will be accepted. [18]

[14a] Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, 2023 https://scqf.org.uk/media/bdlei545/framework-diagram-a3-web-mar-2024.pdf

[14b] Education Scotland, 2009

[15] Education Scotland, 2023

[16] Education Scotland, 2009

[17] Scottish Government, 2023a

[18] Hepburn, 2024 https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/secondary/qualifications-assessment-education-reform-hayward-review-will-begin-2024-promises-jenny-gilruth

School/college organisation

Secondary school in Scotland runs from ages 12 to 18, with the possibility of studying at an FE College from 16.[19] At age 15/16, the main qualifications taken are National 5s in a variety of subjects. At the end of the senior phase, around age 17/18, individuals take either Highers or SVQs at Levels 5 or 6. These are shown in **Figure 1** (page 6).

Schools are under relatively high levels of control by local and regional governments in Scotland, compared to the rest of the UK. For example, governing bodies have been replaced by parental consultative committees while local government has greater involvement in staff recruitment and retention.[20]

Partnership working is a key part of the Curriculum for Excellence. Schools and colleges are encouraged to work together to support improvement and provide a high-quality learning experience for young people.[21]

1.3   Education workforce and professional status

Teaching workforce numbers in Scotland are tightly controlled by the national government which sets annual workforce replacement targets via initial teacher education (ITE).[22] These targets are sent to the Scottish Funding Council and the appropriate number of places are made available in Scottish universities. This approach aligns with the policy of free tuition in Scottish universities and the related policy of student number controls for courses and universities, to ensure the cost can be borne by the government. However, recruitment for training courses for secondary teachers in recent years is approximately half the number required.[23] Conversely, there are indications of an oversupply of primary teachers with a minority having permanent posts at the end of probationary periods.[24]

Policy changes relating to Scottish teachers have seen higher workloads, in particular for administrative and non-teaching duties, and an increase in contact time from 22.5 to 25 hours per week since 2014.[25] Although funding for schools in Scotland has increased over the past decade in real terms,[26] this appears not to be the experience of schoolteachers themselves, particularly with respect to support for pupils with additional needs.[27] The NASUWT reports teacher morale as low[28] but teachers have received a slightly higher pay offer than teachers in England[29] without having to take strike action.

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[19] Brand Scotland, n.d. https://www.scotland.org/live-in-scotland/school-systems 3

[20] Education Policy Institute, 2021

[21] Education Scotland, 2009

[22] Scottish Government, 2023b https://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications/sfcan052023/

[23] Scottish Government 2023 https://www.gov.scot/publications/teacher-workforce-planning-advisory-group-initial-teacher-education-intake-figures-2023

[24] Seith, E. 2024. https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/general/teacher-recruitment-targets-not-changed-scotland

[25] NASUWT, 2017 https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/static/uploaded/68518b39-cfa4-4cf4-bcd812fb75998dc4.pdf

[26] Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2023 https://ifs.org.uk/news/growing-gap-school-spending-pupil-between-scotland-and-rest-uk

[27] NASUWT, 2017

[28] Ibid

[29] Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2023

Professional status and autonomy

Teachers and lecturers who work in Scottish schools and colleges must register with the General Teaching Council for Scotland. This body was established in 1965 and has been independent of government since 2012.[30] It accredits initial teacher education qualifications, keeps a register of individuals who are qualified to teach in Scotland, and requires those registered to maintain and update their knowledge through regular continuing professional development. All teachers or lecturers working in schools or colleges in Scotland must maintain membership. College lecturers can join without a teaching qualification but must obtain one within five years of registration, mirroring a requirement made in 2008 in England but abolished in 2011.

This outline might suggest that teachers have a significant sense of professional status, given the licence-to-practice requirement, and the autonomy implied by the focus on meeting the needs of all young people within a broad curriculum. However, research by EPI found that "*the perceived role of teachers in shaping course offerings and content is lower in Scotland than in the rest of the UK, with a large perceived role for national and local government.*"[31]

1.4   Policy formation and implementation

Policy-setting in the Scottish education system is relatively top-down, with a national curriculum having been in place for some time, an education department which sets targets for teacher training, and a professional body which sets the professional standards for all teachers and lecturers. There is a funding council that distributes funding for schools and colleges to local authorities, and these institutions are under local authority control. As above, there are no independent governing bodies for schools in Scotland, only parental consultative committees. There are benefits to having a centralised approach and maintaining a curriculum over many years. Theoretically this could give school leaders and teachers the confidence to experiment and enact curriculum policy flexibly, but evidence cited above suggests this is not the case, and government's role is dominant (see previous section).[32]

Policy implementation

The recent review of assessment and curriculum may serve to shift perceptions that education policy is somewhat top-down. It aims to shape the evolution of the Curriculum for Excellence to have increased input by schools and teachers, and identifies the need for culture change, investment in professional learning, and time for school to school and teacher collaboration and moderation.[33]

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[30] GTC Scotland, n.d https://www.gtcs.org.uk/about-us/

[31] Education Policy Institute, 2021

[32] Ibid and NASUWT 2017

[33] Scottish Government, 2023a

An earlier review, the Review of the 15-24 Learner Journey in 2018[34] focused particularly on information, advice and guidance for learners, as well as funding challenges for the sector. It used extensive learner data and involved several project review groups made up of individuals working for a range of educational organisations and trade unions. Consultation with stakeholders was a key stage of both reviews, as it is for most Scottish Government reviews. Most of the bodies implementing the changes are part of the Government, for example Skills Development Scotland and the Scottish Funding Council. It remains to be seen whether recommendations of the more recent review for greater focus on professional development and teacher autonomy will be implemented.

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[34] Scottish Government, 2018 https://www.gov.scot/publications/15-24-learner-journey-review-9781788518741/pages/2/

2. Generic skills

Generic skills, in the form of skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work, are a key part of the Curriculum for Excellence and are compulsory for all students at all levels. The skills are assessed by teachers and as a part of more traditional subjects, but not in terms of a formal exam. Learning portfolios, a place to record progress, are reviewed annually and should set out the teacher assessment of these generic skills. From S3, distinct literacy and numeracy qualifications are available for young people and adults.[35]

[35] Education Scotland, 2009

[30] GTC Scotland, n.d https://www.gtcs.org.uk/about-us/

[31] Education Policy Institute, 2021

[32] Ibid and NASUWT 2017

[33] Scottish Government, 2023a

3. Subject and vocational skills

Subject and vocational skills are developed through clear qualifications in Scotland as set out in Figure 1 above. These are governed by the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework and, in the main, young people achieve Nationals, Highers, and/or Scottish Vocational Qualifications.

The broad curriculum areas within the Curriculum for Excellence[36] are:

- Expressive arts
- Health and wellbeing
- Languages (including English, Gàidhlig (Gaelic), Scots, modern languages and classical languages)
- Mathematics
- Religious and moral education
- Sciences
- Social studies
- Technologies

Core generic skills such as literacy and numeracy have their own qualifications, although whether individuals take them will depend on their mix of qualifications, particularly at 18. The three aspects of generic skills framed in the Curriculum for Excellence – skills for learning, skills for life, and skills for work – are all incorporated within the mix of qualifications that young people will take at school or at college. In general, all young people will specialise in a smaller mix of subjects or a vocational area at ages 17 and 18.

[36] Education Scotland, 2023

4. Teaching and learning approaches

Teaching and learning approaches for the Curriculum for Excellence are set by the Scottish Government, with a variety of resources and guidance available including a specific framework for teaching and learning.[37] Although much of the emphasis is on schools working in partnership and teachers developing the best approaches for their learners, the Hayward Report has highlighted the need for greater focus on professional development and autonomy for teachers. As noted, teacher morale is low[38] and Scottish teachers feel they have less autonomy than in other areas of the UK.[39]

Nonetheless, across the UK there is a general perception that amid the plethora of guidance and support, teachers are able to tailor lessons and the curriculum to the groups of learners they teach, provided that they meet the expectations for quality and appropriateness set by inspectors, government, or even the school. The extent to which teachers feel able to do this does seem to be lower in Scotland than the rest of the UK, possibly due to tighter guidance from schools and government.

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[37] Education Scotland, 2008 https://education.gov.scot/media/ocvddrgh/btc3.pdf

[38] NASUWT, 2017

[39] Education Policy Institute, 2021

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