

**Liberal education in a neo-liberal world: re-culturing and recalibrating**

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**1: Neo-liberalism and education**

The ideas of neo-liberalism, as developed by the free-market philosophers and economists, in particular Friedrich von Hayek (1944) and Milton Friedman (1962), were described by left economist David Harvey (2007) as ‘the doctrine that market exchange is an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide for all human action’. George Monbiot (2021) argued that ‘the central premise of neoliberalism is that the locus of decision-making can be shifted from democratic government to the individual, working through ‘the market’. Rather than using politics to change the world for the better, we can do it through our purchases’. This has become dominant in both thought and practice throughout much of the world since 1970 or so. Its spread has depended upon a reconstitution of state powers such that privatization, finance, and market processes are emphasized. State interventions in the economy are minimized, while the obligations of the state to provide for the welfare of its citizens are diminished.

Whilst the ideas of neo-liberalism have been questioned over the last 12 years or so due to the financial crisis and the Covid pandemic, the impact on education is still strongly embedded. It is over 20 years since Tony Blair declared that his 3 main priorities were ‘education, education, education’. In this he was reflecting a worldwide belief that the knowledge economy, whether graduates or skilled workers, was paramount to the competitiveness of a national economy.

The chosen method across the world for improving education was the neo-liberal model which saw the market as the key focus to ensure change in a comprehensive system that seemed resistant to any major shift away from a collectivist perspective. This mantra was outlined by Allyson Pollock (2004) recounting her meeting with Gordon Brown (Chancellor of the Exchequer) that *‘*his response was simply to declare repeatedly that the public sector is bad at management and that only the private sector is efficient and can manage services well’. Alistair Campbell, Tony Blair’s official spokesperson, in 2001 summed this up in the media by describing some British schools as ‘bog standard’ comprehensives, which needed an injection of private sector type dynamism. And, indeed, a major point to be made is that this process was started by Conservative governments across the world but has been sometimes enthusiastically, sometimes grudgingly taken up by social democratic governments, including the SNP. In England, we have the bizarre spectacle of Cabinets full of rich former students who never paid fees and many who got grants ensuring that this generation does not benefit from those things.

The impact of this was to introduce the market into education – marketization, rote learning, testing, league tables (of schools, universities, colleges), privatisations, attainment gap, universities in competition, managerialism, school effectiveness, commercialization, lack of accountability of unelected interests, ‘choice’, critiques of professionalism and deskilling, work intensification and so on. Other aspects, such as humanity, citizenship, diversity, creativity, cultural issues and fun are put to one side as schools, FE and universities are gauged on exam results and other ‘measurables’. Linked in with this is the commercialisation of nurseries, schools and higher education, which, as Stephen Ball (2007) has shown has reached a peak in the USA where, for example, the private University of Phoenix has 500,000 students and all teaching staff on precarious contracts. The CEO boasts about how easy it is to just not re-engage staff if circumstances require. Taylor (1993) summarised the thinking behind the reforms of the various Conservative governments: ‘The thrust of educational reform has been towards making schooling more relevant to the needs of a market economy, controlling the demands of education on the public purse, improving the efficiency and effectiveness of teaching, and satisfying public and political demand for tangible educational outcomes’. Commenting on this, Nisbet and Watt (1995) claimed that ‘Among all these changes, the interests of the educationally disadvantaged seem to have been overlooked, or have had to take second place’.

# As we have suggested above, there are growing inequalities throughout the world and particularly within countries. Although often the poorer the society the greater the gap between rich and poor, inequalities are major issues in the developed world too. Its impact on education is far reaching. There is a mass of research evidence to show that those in deprivation do far worse in terms of educational attainment and, thus, in terms of opportunity than those in better off areas. Whilst there can be the odd ‘blip’, a survey of those schools with lowest attainment generally correlates to those schools with the highest negative social factors. Indeed, Prime Minister Gordon Brown’s own Treasury reported as far back as 1999 that the key predictor of educational attainment was parental income; that’s why the education gap grows as the wealth gap grows. It is far harder for these kids to move out of poverty and the areas of deprivation than we had perhaps previously assumed. This is not to say that schools can do nothing in this but the challenge facing governments is that it needs macro planning not tinkering at the edges.

A further point to note is that the impact of these neo-liberal policies across the world has tended to be through a process of piecemeal change, in which many of us have opposed the threat but have found ourselves unwilling agents in a process that we have engaged in to mitigate the most harmful effects. One often hears ‘I didn’t move into education for this’ but nonetheless the constant repetition of ‘There is no alternative’ from the Conservatives, repackaged as ‘The only show in town’ by social democrats, has demoralised activists and incorporated a section of us in managing these changes. Often it is to mitigate the worst excesses, but nonetheless individual and union incorporation into the process, linked in with policies on unions making the taking of action more problematic, has made the marketization of education deeply embedded. But nevertheless, as in most contested areas, there is constant conflict, debate, discourse and opposition. Not least, the Black Lives Matter movement has raised issues about institutional or structural racism in the education sector as a key factor, pointing out the experiences of black students and teachers at all levels and the eurocentrism of the curriculum, which it is argued needs decolonising.

Whilst we can acknowledge that formal education should be a 3-18+ relatively seamless process and that the impact of neo-liberal policies impacts on all education, for the purpose of this paper we have arranged our review into manageable and recognisable sections. Section 2 examines issues within early years and the primary school (often called elementary school in other systems and countries). We have put them together as play centred learning is a key component of our understanding of the development of the child. The next section looks at issues within the secondary, in Scotland predominantly comprehensive, schools, examining the effects of high stakes testing on the development of curricular reform. Sections 4 and 5 have FE and HE as their focus, particularly the effects of neo-liberal education on these areas. After each section we have some recommendations.

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**2: Early Years and Primary schooling; the place of play, outdoor learningand creativity.**

**Introduction**

When *A Curriculum for Excellence* was published in 2004, it sought to look at schooling from 3 to 18. This holistic view had not been taken since the Advisory Council’s reports after the Second World War. We have taken the view that early years and primary overlap substantially in philosophy, ethos and pedagogy and can be explored together.

Early years education in Scotland has grown both in terms of its availability (to all 3 and 4 year olds and some 2 year olds) and its contribution to the closing of the attainment gap. The most recent publication (2020) from Education Scotland, *Realising the Ambition; Being Me*, is in many ways ground-breaking, as we discuss further below. It draws on international research evidence and puts play at the forefront child development. However, it is unclear as to whether this heralds a radical reform. The Conservative Government’s introduction of the 5-14 curriculum in the 1990s (having dismissed the 10-14 Report as being too radical) heralded a neo-liberal approach which saw early years education as being principally a preparation for primary school. The introduction of national testing was widely contested but was a central plank of Conservative policy. Not until the publication of *Curriculum for Excellence* in 2004 was early years seen as being important in its own right. We will consider the new approach to early years and primary education and child care but will suggest that the system may find it difficult to embrace the international move towards play-based learning unless testing and the use of external inspection (both care and education) is re-examined. Trust in teachers and intelligent accountability must accompany pedagogical change.

**Early Years: a starting point**

In the 1980s, Strathclyde Regional Council (SRC) pioneered the integration of education and social care for pre-school children. Up until that point, early years provision was in the main provided by private enterprise. It was out of reach of poor families whose only access was to informal playgroups. SRC’s approach was not universally popular, however, as it sought to alter terms and conditions for those who worked in the field. Its aim was to make provision 52 weeks of the year, with a service that some say saw as being dominated by a social work rather than school ethos.

Nevertheless, by the 1990s, a curriculum for early years was being developed, followed by ‘performance indicators’ of the type being applied to primary and secondary schools. This was presented as a plus to the early years sector, but, in reality, it was simply a means of centralised control. The national framework for children 3 to 5 appeared in 1995. Thus, what began as a positive development, was absorbed into the same neo-liberal framework as the rest of the education system.

The 2000s saw the publication of *A Curriculum for Excellence* (2004) and a review of international literature in 2006. In 2007, the SNP Government made early years a priority. Among the justifications for this, were promoting ‘nurture groups that have proved successful in improving the attainment and behaviour in early primary school’. This focus on attainment, i.e., test scores and behaviour as opposed to fulfilment of potential sat uncomfortably with ‘seeing early childhood as a good to which children are entitled’. This juxtaposition of neo-liberal and radical thinking is confusing, especially since the SNP Government has seen early years as both a starting point for closing the gap and reducing the impacts of poverty.

**Care and education: an unnecessary differentiation?**

In the book, *Scottish Education,* first published in 1999 and updated in 2003 and 2008, it is interesting to note that there are two chapters, by different authors, on early years, one on childcare (W. Dunlop) and the other on education (A. Hughes). The former looks at the coming together of agencies, the raising of the profile of care and on the formalisation of provision. This included ‘a new focus on monitoring quality’ (Dunlop, p299) in the form of standards, benchmarks and outcomes. This for many would seem to be incompatible with the early years philosophy. There are many questions posed in Dunlop’s chapter, not least ‘Care and education; unequal’ and ‘the over-formalisation of learning?’

The chapter on education looks at the notion of early years as a ‘preparation for Primary schooling’ and comes to the conclusion that it must be more than that. The 5-14 Programme introduced in the 1990s by the Conservative UK Government, was highly prescriptive. Teachers were told what to teach, when and what order to teach it, for how many minutes it should be taught and which subject areas were more important than the others. Piaget’s ‘age and stage’ philosophy was adopted uncritically, and the work of Vygotsy, Bruner and others, were underplayed. The latter two educationalists saw social interaction and cognitive development going hand in hand; but 5-14 did not see it that way. Indeed, by proposing National Testing it lost the support of teachers, parents and local authorities.

**2.4 *Realising the Ambition: Being me***

From 2000 until 2020, there have been a number of significant publications on the issues surrounding Early Years education. For the purposes of this paper, the most recent will suffice. *Realising the Ambition: Being me* is a substantial and, in many ways, impressive document. It is well produced with copious photographs, mainly of young children learning and playing. It also has references to books, academic papers and other articles to substantiate its arguments. (This in itself it unusual; pre-2000 publications emanating from HMIE rarely had references except to their own publications. Research was conspicuous by its absence.) The document begins with the number of hours of early years learning children are now entitled to in Scotland; 1140 for 3 and 4 year olds and a quarter of 2 year olds.

The first section has a disclaimer; ‘This guidance does not support any particular theory of child development.’ This seems a little negative. Presumably, the report is built on theory as well as research and practice. It would have been useful if there had been a critique of some of the most important theories. It also says that it has ‘No rigid ideas of ‘school readiness’ but, again, some exploration of what has been a contentious issue would have been useful. Section 2 of the report lays out 5 dimensions of early years learning: self-regulation; communication and language; confidence, creativity and community; movement and coordination; and self-and social development. However, these are followed by some 8 pages of ‘indicators’ expressed in the voice of the child. These are immediately reminiscent of the Es and Os (​​​​​​​​​​​​​experiences and outcomes) which were superimposed on *Curriculum for Excellence* and are still seen as bureaucratic and cumbersome by teachers.

Section 4 is a welcome guide to the ‘importance of play’. It references Froebel in this context; a proponent of play in the early 19th century and highly influential in Scotland in the later part of the 20th century. There is a discussion about ‘schematic play’ and references the national strategy for play in Scotland published in 2012. This is a very positive section of the report, covering the ‘pedagogy of play, child-centeredness and play, the role of the adult and guided pedagogy’. It also proposes outdoor play and makes reference to the 4 capacities of Curriculum for Excellence. However, it suggests that ‘playfulness does not happen by chance’ (p66) and makes reference to ‘literacy, numeracy and mathematics but in a playful context’ (p70).

Play Scotland has produced a manifesto, *A Playful Pedagogy*, supported by a number of organisations including Early Years Scotland, based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and offers in in the light of the harms done to young children by Covid-19 and the closure of schools. There are five key issues, each with 2 recommendations. The first is that ‘Every child has a right to play’ and suggests that this be incorporated in law. Second, ‘Play is vital for children’s wellbeing’ and argues that funding is required if Early Years is to contribute to reducing inequalities. Third, children have a ‘right to experience inclusive play opportunities as equal and active participants’ and that children’s voices should not be ignored in the design of learning environments. Fourth, *A Playful Pedagogy*, is central to learning, as advocated by *Realising the Ambition: Being Me*. Fifth, ‘Playing outdoors is an intrinsic part of a child’s right to play’ and it is suggested that there is a national commitment to Outdoor Learning

*Realising the Ambition: Being Me* has been widely welcomed by early years practitioners and parents. The straitjacket of central imposition is disappearing; there is less pressure on having learning rigidly timetabled; and ‘creative learning’ is now to the fore. Outdoor learning is widely welcomed and many pre-schools and primary schools have already embraced it. Internationally, outdoor play-based learning is being championed by Pasi Sahlberg (2014), highly regarded for his book, *Finnish Lessons,* and for the part he played in structuring education in Finland. He would go further than the Scottish report. He argues that play should be a core part of learning throughout primary – and secondary – schooling. Time should be built into the school day for play. The irony of this will not be lost on secondary schools in Scotland where the school day has systematically been re-structured as to inhibit play. The afternoon interval has gone; the lunch hour is often less than an hour; and the school estate is not always conducive to play. Sahlberg cites three core elements of Finish education: addressing inequalities early; trusting teachers and other professionals; and building ‘self-directedness’ in learners. But the fundamental argument he makes is that educational excellence will be achieved through greater social equality. There are signs that some schools in Scotland are taking on these ideas and extending them into primary education. However, there is also a case to be made that early years should not be a mixed private/public affair but, like almost all other compulsory education should be free and state run, paid for out of general taxation.

**2.5 The dark side of policy-making in the sector**

Policy-making in Scottish education has long had a neo-liberal side. On the one hand, there has been a number of radical and progressive reports; on the other, few have been implemented and some unceremoniously dumped. The heavy hand of politics channeled through Her Majesty’s Inspectorate, fueled by neo-liberal ideology and the desire for centralised control, have put paid to a number of promising initiatives. We need to break out of this pattern of education policy-making since the Second World War:

* A document is published as a result of the deliberations of a working group which is then published and released to schools;
* The report itself is generally of a radical and progressive nature (the one exception being the neo-liberal 5-14 programme)
* Little if any consultation with the teaching profession takes place before, during or after the publication;
* Post publication, central bodies take control of the ‘fleshing out’ of the report and elements such as new subject areas, new examinations, ‘Levels’ of pupil achievements – often linked to assessment;
* Little, if any, attempt is made to link the proposed changes to any other part of the system, notably Early Years or Secondary – even where this, in the case of the 10-14 Report, is the raison d’etre;
* Little, if any, concerted Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is provided for teachers;
* Bureaucracy and teacher workload increase;
* Inspection becomes focused on lists of goals which were produced, apparently, to aid teachers in the classroom;
* No concerted research or evaluation takes place on the efficacy of the curricular change.

However, fortunately there are some signs that this model may be changing. Teaching unions, local councils (though COSLA) and pressure groups are now much more likely to be part of the process of policy-making. Covid-19 has initiated a process of change which we all hope is continued when the pandemic is under control. We need an early years and primary education which is inclusive, democratic, collegiate and child-centred. The signs are that early years and primary education will be at the forefront of the movement towards child-centeredness. The role of play within this structure needs a stronger representation of early years teachers.

Primary education and, indeed, education into the early secondary years has borne the brunt of a number of negative interventions but, as we suggest, it has, more often than not, managed to hold on to its fundamental principles and ensure that pupils continue to receive a broad and balanced education. The biggest challenge it faces is to be recognised as an equal stage of education in its own right rather than simply a preparation for secondary. There is some evidence that the Broad General Education phase, introduced by Curriculum for Excellence into secondary schools, is capable of brining more continuity into primary-secondary transition.

Scottish primary education remains highly regarded across the world and yet within Scotland itself it struggles to be taken seriously and is often the poor relation of secondary schooling. This has not been helped by the political emphasis on early years education and the growing evidence of its importance in helping to close the gap in educational achievement caused by poverty and disadvantage.

Yet, primary education is, from a parental point of view, a key element in their children’s growth and development. Parents often become very supportive and possessive of their primary school. Any attempt by a local authority to close a primary school inevitably meets with a fierce reaction. The fact that children have one teacher for all subjects, the emphasis placed on ethos and nurture and the openness of schools to parents, add up to a strong bond.

It is also highly regarded by other countries and the primary teachers who work there. Even countries which are among the most successful in terms of international league tables rate Scottish primary education highly. There are many reasons for this including the professionalism of Scottish teachers, the quality of initial teacher education (at its best provided by highly experienced teachers and head teachers), the generalist nature of the teachers allowing inter-disciplinary learning to take place, the effort and creativity which goes into the planning of lessons, and so on. Above all else is the awe, often articulated by visitors from countries where the gap between rich and poor is lower than in Scotland, of the teaching approaches and the pedagogy employed to help the poorest pupils to learn with their peers.

**2.6 The Advanced Division: A Blot on the System**

It is useful to take a broad historical sweep in order to look at the ways in which primary schools have been treated by successive government interventions, often channeled through official bodies such as the Scottish Education Department (SED), in its various iterations, and national bodies such as Her Majesty’s Inspectorate and successive curriculum and assessment organisations. Our starting point is the early 1950s, when primary education performed a function which illustrated the contempt with which the urban poor were treated. In 1932, the mother of one of the authors of this paper, left school from the Advanced Division of a primary school. Her final report card, or Day School Certificate (Lower), sets out the scope of a curriculum offered to children deemed unable to benefit from a secondary education. Time does not allow an in-depth critique of this document. Suffice it to say that the curriculum was narrow, sexist and uninspiring. The grades offered for achievement were mere abbreviations – FG, G and Ex – with no explanatory comments. There was a grade, too, for ‘Character and Conduct’ (for which the recipient received her only Ex). The Advanced Division was, by this time, on the way out and it was not until the end of World War Two that a secondary education became the right of all children.

There is evidence from around the world that the primary-secondary transition is less than satisfactory in many countries. In Scotland, there have been many attempts to tackle the apparent discontinuities, not least the current *Curriculum for Excellence*, which had as one of its list of changes to be made was ‘to better connect the various stages of the curriculum 3-18’. Pupils moving from a school in which they have one teacher at each stage to one in which they will meet upwards of 12 teachers in a week; pupils, who have been given responsibilities both in their learning and their interactions with others (e.g. wet interval monitors) finding out that they are being treated as if their 7 years (or more) of learning may not be of interest to secondary teachers; and pupils finding themselves organized in ways that are alien to them (e.g. sitting in rows and in sets according to ability. These are all of this points to discontinuity.

In Scotland, there have been several attempts to address the concerns around primary-secondary transition. In the 1980s there was the ill-fated 10-14 Report (1986), undermined by the neoliberal policies of the Michael Forsyth, rejected, in the main, because it was too ‘teacher centered’. Its promotion of ‘autonomy within guidelines’ did not find favour. Its replacement, the 5-14 Programme had the weight of the Government and the Inspectorate, but it has to be acknowledged that it did little to improve transition. Local authorities, notably Strathclyde, had already attempted to create its own solution (1981) in its *Report on the first Two Years of Secondary School* but its impact was somewhat diminished by the Note of Dissent from six members of the committee who objected to the idea that S1 and S2 classes should be mixed-ability.

Research carried out by Simpson and Boyd (2000) in a local authority in Scotland involved spending the final term of P7 pupils and following them up in the first term of S1. The report concluded that while there were good intentions, the pressure on secondary teachers of exam-related demands produced what McPherson and Raab (1998) called ‘downward incrementalism’. One particular example summed up the problem. During the first in-service day in one of the secondary schools, the staff were addressed by the Assistant Head Teacher (Lower School) and were informed that the ‘Best Work Folders’ which had been compiled by all of the P7 pupils across the Authority (while the researchers were there) were in her office and had been collated into classroom sets. She asked that Heads of Department contact her in advance when they planned to examine the folders at an early Departmental Meeting. Some weeks later, as the research was coming to an end, the Assistant Head Teacher was asked if all of the Departments had taken up her offer. The answer was ‘no’; fewer than a quarter of the Departments had looked at the folders. Her view was that while teachers might have found them interesting, in the main, Departments ‘didn't’ see the point’. They just wanted to get started to teach their syllabus, and they would soon find out the strengths and weaknesses of the pupils.

More recently, a review of research was published by the Scottish Government in 2019, looking at evidence from around the world. Its conclusions indicated that there had been little improvement. Decline in educational outcomes after pupils moved from primary to secondary were found in 14 studies. However, in the main, pupils responded positively to the move to the secondary school. While concluding that more research is required, the single most significant issue was that transition was a challenge which no country appears to have handled satisfactorily.

Primary and secondary teachers have struggled to address the issue of transition. To say this is not to blame teachers. There needs to be a radical review of the current structures in P6 to S2 in order to make the move more coherent and connected. From the perspective of the secondary school – often seen as the villain of the piece – the current Broad General Education phase must be sheltered from the downward pressure of exams. Teachers, in primary and secondary, must be enabled to collaborate across the sectors. This will involve additional staffing and creative time-tabling. And, above all, the pupil voice should be listened too; primary 7 pupils have been in the system for nine years by the time they reach secondary. Their views are worth listening to. The transition from primary to secondary schools is neither coherent or progressive, and pupils are let down by the lack of continuity and lack of responsibilities (Maitles and Deuchar 2006).

**2.7 Assaults on primary education**

Prior to the *Curriculum for Excellence*, there had been four major policy initiatives in Scottish primary education, some of which did not make it to the classroom, some which were imposed without consultation and others which were welcomed initially only for them to be smothered by bureaucracy

Firstly, The Advisory Council Report on Primary Education, published in 1946 was radical, rejecting what it saw as an over-emphasis on the ‘3Rs’: ‘We discard with little regret the narrow and obsolete view that reading, writing and arithmetic are the three fundamentals of education’ Hunter, (1974), described the 1946 report as a ‘radical pronouncement’. The view of primary schooling in the 1946 report had suggested that the child should be treated as an individual by the teacher, ‘manifesting towards him [sic] a consistent and active goodwill.’ The language may seem archaic, but the sentiments were 20 years in advance of the Primary Memorandum, often regarded as the initiator of ‘child-centeredness’. However, this enlightened view was so negatively received by the educational establishment that the SED Memorandum of 1950 felt able to promote ‘moral training’ and circumscribed its view of happiness by suggesting that the pupil ‘must learn that he can be happy and enjoy a large measure of freedom within the law’.

The next major policy initiative was the 1965 Primary Memorandum. It is regarded by many as something of a watershed moment in Scottish primary education. It is widely attributed with the move to child-centeredness, activity methods and the application of the work of Jean Piaget. Osborne argued that the Scottish Education Department appeared to subscribe to the work of Piaget ‘with all the appearance of having undergone a sudden conversion’ (Osborne, 1968). However, there was an inherent contradiction. The Memorandum seemed to have decided on an approach which was conditioned by a particular – and contested – theory and there was no real effort to take teachers with them in this bold venture The Memorandum seemed to be telling primary teachers what to do when at that time teachers were used to a high degree of autonomy. Now they were presented with what was a paradigm shift, and more control from the centre. There was a disconnect; primary teachers, policy-makers and policy-implementers were not on the same page. When HMI carried out a survey in 1981 of Scottish primary schools – some sixteen years after the publication of the Memorandum – many teachers were found to be using the same teaching methods that they had been using prior to the publication.

Once again, the upper echelons of the Education Department in the early 1980s decided, without consultation, that there needed to be something done about primary-secondary transition. There was no groundswell from the teaching profession for another national policy change. In the secondary sector, the Munn, Dunning and Pack reports of 1977 had introduced major change in the curriculum and in exams, a strike had delayed implementation, and the challenge ahead was still formidable. But the national policy-makers – the Consultative Council on the Curriculum, the Inspectorate and the Scottish Education Department – felt that the 10-14 year olds represented the last great discontinuity in the system and the final barrier to an educational experience that was progressive and developmental. Meanwhile, the rise of the New Right in the United Kingdom, with a focus on standards, on the creation of a National Curriculum and on promoting an anti-comprehensive school ideology, meant that central government was unlikely to support what it saw as unnecessary change, as they saw it. Contested issues such as partnership and control, fiat and autonomy, ownership and delivery were always going to prove difficult to reconcile. The educational world was changing and not in a way which would support liberal and radical curriculum change; certainly not when the Conservative Government of Margaret Thatcher was creating structures which would give the centre control of what was to be taught and how it was to be taught. The 10-14 Report, published in 1986, was seen by many as radical, progressive and teacher-centred. But, even before it saw the light of day, Michael Forsyth had made it clear that the Government would not implement it. He set up a Costing Review, undertaken by HMIE, which, predictably, concluded that it was too expensive. In the meantime, education officials were preparing to unleash the 5-14 programme, which had all the hallmarks of a National Curriculum.

Before the ink was dry on the 10-14 report, the paper proposing a new curriculum was published. It was to all intents and purposes, a national curriculum, notwithstanding the historical Scottish reluctance for such a model. Legislation was not seen as the Scottish way but given Westminster’s lack of knowledge of the Scottish education (for example, Thatcher’s assumption that Scottish schools had Boards of Governors, which would facilitate her proposals for schools opting out of local authority control) there seemed to be no reason why 5-14 should not be a national curriculum. Neo-liberalism was at the heart of the new curriculum. A plethora of papers outlining in detail the syllabuses for every subject was distributed to every school in the country; national testing was to be rolled out for primary school pupils; and a move away from collaborative, small-group teaching towards whole-class teaching was to be overseen by HMIE. However, the neo-liberalism was contested by those unwilling to see Scottish education becoming an appendage of the English system. While 5-14 was not statutory, it was centrally driven and controlled and the emphasis on national testing provoked a revolt. Local authorities (notably Strathclyde Regional Council), parent groups and teaching unions (in particular, the Educational Institute of Scotland, EIS) opposed testing and after an acrimonious battle, won their case. However, it was a pyrrhic victory; the approach to testing was changed but its scope was widened.

5-14 did not go down well with primary schools, which bore the brunt of the change. Teachers were now being taught what to teach, when to teach it, in what order to teach it and for how many minutes a week to teach each element. Levels were introduced (A to F) and goals were set for pupils at each stage from 5-14. It took no account of the individuality of pupils or of the differences in attainment caused by social and educational disadvantage. It opened up the probability that these levels would result in more internal selection (setting) particularly as pupils moved from P7 to S1. But, although most secondary teachers felt straight jacketed by 5-14 and its consequent testing, there was no effort made to ensure Secondary schools followed the guidance in terms of carefully analyzing the work undertaken in the primaries. Further, secondaries were not impressed by the inter-disciplinary approach to subjects such as Environmental Studies*. De facto*, it became the 5-12 Programme. Once again, primary schools bore the brunt. Secondary schools, after all, were about ‘serious’ learning (i.e. subject-based learning) and preparation for exams. Primary schools were, more than ever, seen as preparation for secondary. Parity of esteem was not enhanced by this policy.

**2.8 *A Curriculum for Excellence*: origin and remit**

In 2002, Professor Pamela Munn, of the University of Edinburgh, was commissioned by the Scottish Government to undertake a piece of research to find out what the population in general thought of the current state of Scottish education. It was heralded as a national debate on education and she carried out a survey of parents and others which indicated that in general they had confidence in the system of schooling. It was not broken, as some had suggested, and so did not need to be fixed. However, there were concerns. Parents worried about the curriculum being overloaded; too many subjects and too much content. They were worried, too, about the transition points in education, not least primary-secondary and secondary-HE/FE/work. There was a feeling too that pupils’ views were rarely taken into account and that creativity was stifled. As a consequence, the Government, instead, set up a working group to look at how the findings of Professor Munn’s survey could be taken into account in order to improve the school system.

The Working Group was established in 2003 under the chairmanship of a senior civil servant, Philip Ryecroft. Historically, civil servants stayed in the background, and the chair of such working groups would be a senior figure from the world of education, perhaps a director of education, head teacher, college principal or leading academic. The make-up of the group was more traditional. There was the usual attempt to have representatives from all of the stakeholders in Scottish education, including parents, business, professional associations, primary and secondary schools, academics and local authorities

The Group was given a very short timescale; the report was expected to be ready by late 2004. The Group was to meet on a regular basis and would be supported by a civil service researcher so that it could draw on similar curricular reforms undertaken by other countries. It may have been the Millennium Effect, but a significant amount of curriculum reform was taking place across the world and we were able to draw on their experiences. The remit was a narrow one. It was to look at how the curriculum could become more sensitive to the concerns raised in the survey. The remit did not include assessment or examinations. The Chair made it clear that he wanted this report to be uplifting and aspirational and to be informed by what other countries were doing. The single most important aspect of the remit was to examine the curriculum 3-18. This had never been done before. Even the Advisory Councils immediately after the war looked separately at primary and secondary schooling, albeit trying to recommend progression and continuity. The Group was not looking at content. This was to be a ‘big picture’ review, looking at what schooling should be trying to achieve through the curriculum – principles, values, aims and pedagogy. There was also an attempt to signal that teachers could, and should, be trusted. Intelligent accountability was to be the order of the day.

The principles of the new curriculum were to be built on the 5-14 programme. This was no zero-sum game or, indeed, an attempt to wipe the slate clean. To the five principles of breadth, balance, coherence, progression and continuity were to be added depth, relevance, challenge and enjoyment and personalisation and choice. The debate in the Working Group over these new principles was intense. Most contentious of all was enjoyment. Depth, on the other hand, was unanimously accepted. The feeling was that a curriculum, too full of content, often resulted in surface, rather than deep, learning. Finally, personalisation and choice as a principle was included to give pupils more agency in what they were learning and how they learned it. However, the Group felt that it was a key principle if learners were to have a voice.

Four capacities, successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens, underpinned the Report. The aim was to have young people emerging from their schooling with more than exam scores to show for it. Pupils were to be rounded individuals who would use the skills, knowledge and experiences to contribute to the society in which they lived. These capacities were contested. There was controversy around the term, ‘confident’, and some were worried that the word ‘responsible’ might be taken to mean supine or passive rather than bold and critical and that the capacities were neo-liberal. Importantly, the report argued that it was impossible to separate what was to be taught from how it should be taught. Pedagogy was thus at the heart of the report. This reflected the impact of a number of pedagogical influences already making an impact in Scottish schools. The most influential of these was assessment is for learning*,* which had emerged froma literature review to ascertain what, according to international research, it was that good teachers did to improve pupils learning. The publication of *Inside the Black Box* (1996) was having significant impact on pedagogy in Scottish schools at this time.

The reception of the report, entitled *A Curriculum for Excellence* (CfE), was mixed. However, it was now in the hands of the Education Department and a bureaucratic juggernaut emerged. Groups were set up within Education Scotland to provide lists of Experiences and Outcomes (Es and Os) for every subject from 3 to 18. The first of a series of documents was published in 2006. *Progress and Proposals* laid out a set of levels A-F.They were presented as ‘staging posts’ in the learning journey, not levels which were fixed to age and stage. *Framework for Assessment* emerged with emphasis on ‘Quality Assurance’, ‘Moderation’ and ‘Verification’. The Scottish Qualifications Agency (SQA) was now involved. Soon, new exams appeared, replacing the Standard Grades. National 4 and National 5 appeared from nowhere without serious consultation.

The CfE, for primary teachers, opened up possibilities of active, cross-curricular learning which alongside every school adopting policies for citizenship, has led to much positive learning. Indeed, the report and its suggestions were welcomed by many, indeed perhaps most, primary teachers. A comment made by Jerome Bruner who addressed an audience of educationists in Glasgow in 2008 gives an inkling of how CfE is regarded. A renowned educational theorist and writer, he was regarded by many as one of the greatest educational and learning process thinkers of the 20th Century. His opening remark was ‘I have just received and read A Curriculum for Excellence of the Scottish Curriculum Review Group. All I can say is that Scotland can thank its lucky stars … a brilliant and ambitious document, and a bold and creative one’ (Bruner, 2008).

**Recommendations for early years**

1 We must continue to invest heavily in early years and to see it as a sector in its own right and of equal importance to primary, secondary and post-school education. There is a strong case for it being provided as a statutory state provision.

2 We need to learn the lessons of the past. Heavy-handed accountability by the Inspectorate, often using ‘indicators’ as a basis for judging provision needs to be avoided. Intelligent accountability, based on trust is more likely to succeed.

3 Play is a crucial aspect of learning. It is not frivolous; it is essential and should be a part of learning in early years and beyond.

4. The more that poverty in society is challenged, the greater the impact Early Years will have on the life chances of our children in Scotland.

**Recommendations for primary**

1. A stronger emphasis on outdoor learning, examining the positive aspects of this from, in particular, the Scandinavian countries. When visiting elementary schools in Norway, for example, even in the winter lessons are often outside. One of the authors of this paper observed English, maths and science lessons mid-winter. The enthusiasm and glow of the pupils was memorable – they were learning and physically active. The keys were organisation by the school and teachers and buy in from the parents. As we outlined in the early years section above, there is much evidence coming from Scandinavia about the value of play-centred curriculums.

2. Even more initiative and choice given to teachers to discuss with students aspects of the curriculum. Finland sets an example here, through its minimalist curriculum, emphasis on citizenship and, again, buy in from parents.

3. An understanding that primary schools should incorporate ‘fun’ into their remit. An understanding that play, fun, outdoor activities and active learning lead to better, deeper learning. As Dewey put it in 1915: ‘’Give the pupils something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking; learning naturally occurs’**.**

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**3: Comprehensive secondary education: following the neo-liberal model**

**3.1 Introduction**

It is generally assumed that Scotland embraced the comprehensive school revolution more easily than the rest of the UK because of the prior existence of omnibus schools. This myth will be challenged on the basis that while all pupils in a given area (normally rural) attended the same school, the internal organisation simply mirrored the national senior and junior secondary divide. The elitism underpinning secondary education continues to distort the comprehensive ideal today in the form of internal selection through setting, a practice with no basis in research. This practice continues to disadvantage working-class children and is reinforced by the current examination system. The algorithm used by the SQA was exposed during the pandemic as being unfair to schools and pupils in areas of disadvantage and yet no one was held to account. Indeed, the report by Mark Priestly (2020) on the whole sorry affair seems to have been buried and has never properly been considered. In addition, the current examination system distorts the learning and teaching which takes place in secondary schools, with its overemphasis on rote learning and the creation of hierarchies among subjects.

**3.2 The comprehensive ideal**

The comprehensive school was introduced by the Harold Wilson Labour Government of 1965. Its goal was ‘to end selection and to eliminate separatism in Education’. While it applied to the whole of the UK, not all of the countries within the UK were equally ready for it. In Scotland, there was a general acceptance of the changes introduced by Circular 600 (10/65 in the rest of the UK) and an Act of Parliament was not required. However, in England, the initial unanimity did not last long and comprehensivisation became a highly contentious policy for several decades to come.

It has to be acknowledged that the system of schooling in Scotland prior to 1965 was only slightly less selective and elitist than the rest of the United Kingdom. While the proportion of pupils attending senior secondary (grammar) schools was higher in Scotland (some 35%) than elsewhere in the UK, nonetheless, practices such as internal selection and pupils only being allowed to sit Higher exams if deemed by the school to be certain to pass, ensured that only a minority of pupils left school with any formal recognition of their potential. As for the 65% who attended junior secondary schools (secondary moderns), no national examinations were available.

In Scotland, the ideals on which comprehensive education was based had been debated some 18 years earlier. In 1947, the Ministry of Education, in a report entitled *The New Secondary Education*, defined a new approach to schooling as one ‘intended to cater for all the children in a given area’. In the same year, in Scotland, an Advisory Council report argued that the comprehensive school was ‘the natural way for a democracy to order the post-primary schooling of a given area’. However, the report was never implemented and the heavy hand of centralised policy-making ensured that the status quo ante prevailed.

**3.3 Selection and the concept of intelligence**

*Reconstructions of Scottish Secondary Education* (Gray *et al.* 1983:67) examined the impact of selection on secondary schooling, observing that: ‘selection limited the areas of human experience, and the proportion of pupils, to which terms such as ‘broad’ and ‘common’ were in practice applied; and by influencing what was taught, and to which pupils, selection thereby entailed explicit judgements of who and what were valued’. Selection was not just a process of organising or managing schooling; it was an ideology and one which limited the potential of working-class pupils. The mechanisms by which selection was undertaken was the 11+ in England and Wales, and the Qualifying Examination in Scotland. Both were crude instruments of selection. They were based on age-old, but nonetheless, misleading theories. The assumption was that there was a single entity called ‘intelligence’ which could be measured by a test and which could predict how successful people would be in their education (and, indeed, their lives). It was also assumed that intelligence was fixed and unalterable to the extent that pupils of different levels of intelligence could not be educated in either the same schools or in the same classrooms. The vast majority of pupils selected for grammar/senior secondary schools came from middle-class households. The process was elitist and discriminatory mainly because the tests had an in-built bias in favour of middle-class pupils. Paterson (2003:137) pointed out that research showed that ‘allocation to senior-secondary courses was often unfair in meritocratic terms. As a result, the pressure for the introduction of comprehensive schools became irresistible’. Pedley (1979), writing about the English system, argued that the comprehensive school implied ‘richer and broader provision for all pupils than was previously available.’

**3.4 Scotland’s omnibus schools**

In Scotland, there already were ‘omnibus’ or ‘multilateral’ schools, mostly in the smaller towns and villages. The Scottish myth suggests that these schools were already *de facto* comprehensive; in reality, these schools contained two organisations under one roof – a senior and a junior secondary. As Gray *et al.* (1983) observe, the myth was not false; it was, rather, incomplete. The fact they were under one roof made the move to comprehensives easier and less costly. Opponents argued that the move away from selection would lead to dumbing down rather than enabling education to tap ‘the vast reservoir of ability’ in all of our schools.

While the national debate around comprehensive schools was becoming more polarised, there were some voices which were more nuanced than the simple elitist/ egalitarian divide. Halsey (1972), fearful of the emergence of different kinds of comprehensive schools leading to a watering down of the fundamental principles, warned, ‘your comprehensive is not necessarily my comprehensive’. An article in the then *Glasgow Herald* (1982) was more hard hitting, arguing that *‘*educational ghettos are the results of social ghettos’ and suggested that the examination league tables showed that a genuine mix of pupils had not yet been achieved by comprehensivisation.

**3.5 The Thatcher era heralds a neo-liberal offensive**

By the time Thatcher became Minister for Education, the move towards comprehensivisation was well underway. Rhodes Boyson had argued that a true comprehensive would need to have a balanced intake. Thatcher had known that this was the Achilles heel of the comprehensive movement and she set out to make it more difficult for schools to achieve a balanced intake when she introduced the Parents’ Charter, effectively abolishing catchment areas in England, thus enabling largely middle-class parents to move their children from schools in disadvantaged areas to school in leafier suburbs. Schools in the leafy suburbs simply creamed of the children of aspiring parents, and the damage persists to the present day.

While selection had effectively been abolished in Scotland as far as secondary school intake was concerned, internal selection – both setting (by ability in individual subjects) and streaming (by aggregated scores of all subjects) – continued in secondary schools. In 1981, Strathclyde Regional Council published a report into the first 2 years of secondary school. It came down strongly in favour of mixed ability teaching in S1 and S2 but included an equally strong note of dissent from a group of head teachers and elected members on the committee. The dissenters argued that ‘there is no mass of incontestable evidence to the purely educational advantage of mixed ability organization …’. What they omitted to include in their note was that there was no research evidence whatsoever from around the world that setting or streaming improved the learning of all pupils, not even the most able.

Linked to this was an over-concentration on exam targets as the central (sometimes it seems to be sole) measure of school. Of all the market reforms enthusiastically introduced by the Conservative governments and taken on board by ‘new’ Labour, testing and league tables were to be the most divisive. Although teachers and many parents opposed this kind of testing both in Scotland and England and Wales, piecemeal introduction was achieved. The testing led to league tables, introduced in 1993 as an ‘aid’ to parental choice. For most families, of course, it is no such thing; the higher ranked schools are usually private, specialist, grammar, academy in England or comprehensives in Scotland (usually oversubscribed) in middle-class areas. Some commentators go as far as to maintain that this is a new form of segregation, as race, ethnicity and class become ever more the factors in determining the school one attends (Gale and Densmore, 2003; Gewirtz *et al.* 1995; Whitty *et al.* 1998). Besides, the league tables are themselves so flawed that even governments wedded to neo-liberalism effectively discontinued them, although the data is still published in the media. The nature of raw data tables can hide much more than they show, particularly if the evidence of the links between social inequality and educational attainment is valid. Quite simply, the effort by government to measure a person’s ability by exam performance is quite meaningless; getting good ‘A’, GCSEs or ‘Highers’ is generally less a sign of school outstanding excellence and achievement and more the good luck of being born to parents who are relatively well off. Yet, the unfortunate consequence is that money follows the ‘successful’ schools in the league tables as parents are keen to get their kids, where feasible, into these schools. This leads to the development of over-subscribed schools close to ‘sink’ schools.

There can be moderate differences between schools in similar areas. However, these small differences are pondered over and the eye is taken off the real differences in a city; the real difference is not between schools in similar areas but between schools in affluent areas and those in areas of poverty. Research (Mortimore *et al.* 1988) outlined a number of reasons why some schools did better than others in similar areas. Mortimer assumed that social class accounted for more than 90% of achievement and outlined a number of factors that explained the other 10%: firstly, a collaborative way of working between staff (including senior staff) and pupils; secondly, a commitment to equality of opportunity; and thirdly, first class teachers who turned down the chance of an ‘easier’ life in an ‘easier’ school because they were politically committed to improving the chances of working-class children. Most of this research was deliberately ignored and ‘effective’ schools were said to be those that had a strong line management hierarchy amongst staff, greater discipline, uniforms, streaming and selection. Indeed, as Gale and Densmore (2003) pointed out, the hierarchical and market-orientated approach leads to disaffection, deskilling and alienation of staff leading to attitudes which amount to ‘I don’t want to know about the politics, just tell me what to do’. In a damning critique of the school effectiveness research and school improvement industries’, Slee *et al.* (1998) maintain that:

*…while purporting to be inclusive and comprehensive, school effectiveness research is riddled with errors: it is excluding (of children with special needs, black boys, so called clever girls), it is normative and regulatory … it is bureaucratic and disempowering. It focuses exclusively on the processes and internal constraints of schooling, apparently disconnected from education’s social end - adulthood.*

Unfortunately, it is on this school effectiveness anvil that our educational policy is being forged. And, there are further unfortunate effects of this culture of league tables, target setting and school effectiveness. Research from Davies (2000) and Gillborn and Youdell (2001) suggest that, although unconsciously in many cases, educational rationing is in use in schools. The agenda set out by the league tables leads to Gillborn and Youdell describing a ‘triage’ system operating in schools. Triage is a system used in hospital casualty departments to prioritise those patients who need urgent or immediate attention, as opposed to those whose case is not urgent or, indeed, those who are beyond meaningful help. In schools, it can lead to a situation of concentrating on those underachievers at the margin of the ‘good’ grades, with whom some effort can lead to improved grades. The other groups, the ‘safe’ and those ‘without hope’, can be left with little attention - effectively their education is being rationed as schools become desperate to get pupils into the ‘good’ grades. Gillborn and Youdell (2001:198-199) conclude that throughout the study of their schools:

*the importance of grades A-C has continually surfaced. They are the key performance indicators for schools, subject departments, individual teachers and pupils…the proportion of final year pupils attaining five or more higher grade passes remains largely unchallenged as the central criterion of success or failure…an A-C economy has developed, such that higher grade passes have become the supreme driving force for policy and practice at the school level…secondary schools are increasingly geared to maximising their performance in relation to the ‘bottom line’, whatever the cost elsewhere. In the A-C economy, the needs of the school, so far as the league tables are concerned, have come to define the needs of the pupils.*

The concentration on exam targets also affects virtually any attempt to develop better rounded people. Thus, initiatives, however supported, such as Education for Citizenship or the *Curriculum for Excellence* are always couched in terms of their impact on school targets and, indeed, often arguments are heard that these initiatives are a waste of time as they do not help the school, or the teachers, make their targets. Gillborn and Youdell (2001:199) commented that *‘…* our case study schools have responded by interrogating virtually every aspect of school life for the possible contribution to the all consuming need to improve the proportion of pupils reaching the benchmark level of five or more higher grade passes.’ MacBeath (2004) argued that this kind of school evaluation and approach can lead to a culture where profoundly undemocratic, rote learning schools with ‘good’ exam passes can be gauged as effective, as the measure of success is usually passes in maths, language and science. In this atmosphere, ideas of creativity and citizenship are only gauged as useful if they aid the exam results. Indeed, teachers who complain that active learning does not develop students for the rote learning Highers are correct – and if they are gauged on the latter, why use the former? So, the narrative of good learning is subsumed by the needs of the exams. The tail wags the dog.

**3.6 The aims of schooling**

The aims of schooling are part of this argument. Are schools about identifying and separating out pupils by means of (highly dubious) tests of prior ability? Some would say that schooling should be about ‘training for a participatory democracy’ (Chomsky, 2000) while others contend that Eliot (1948) is correct in his notion that education should play a part in preserving the status quo.

When society is in turmoil, it would seem, the curriculum begins to be in the eye of the storm. In the 1980s, unemployment became the driver of curriculum reform. The neo-liberal view was that the curriculum should be directed towards new technologies and preparing young people for the world of work. Others suggested that a broad, general curriculum, with an emphasis on life skills, would be more useful. Scotland has always portrayed its schooling – primary and secondary- as broadly based but it has failed to acknowledge that not all pupils have equal access to the so-called academic curriculum. Indeed, the very terminology around curriculum, academic and non-academic needs to be challenged. Historically, universities have had a role in this, demanding 5 Highers in academic subjects for law, medicine, dentistry and accountancy. The question to be asked is why these subjects are more important than the arts – music, art, drama and dance – or more important than history, geography and modern languages (formally a requirement for entry into arts courses). As for the so-called ‘practical’ subjects, are they really worth less?

The content of the curriculum, the range of pedagogies used and the creativity which should underpin the learning process are in need of review. The emphasis on exam success, a belief that the ‘more able’ should be fast tracked through the school system into the professions via university degrees, undermined the comprehensive ideal. Pupils destined to go into further rather than higher education could not expect parity of esteem. The notion, espoused by Hargreaves (1982) that the curriculum should seek ‘to endow a general sense of dignity on all of its pupils’ was not applied to all.

In 1982, a survey by the Centre for Educational Sociology in Edinburgh, found that ‘Scottish Education since the War has been neither meritocratic nor equal.’ In slightly more robust language, the *Glasgow Evening Times* (16 December 1984) suggested, ‘My advice to any child who wants a good education is: get yourself a rich Daddy.’ Indeed, this has been further highlighted in the school field by the March 2021 Auditor General’s Report (*Herald*, 2021), which suggested both that the attainment gap has not shrunk but is likely to have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

It is difficult to blame schools for not being comprehensive enough. The fact is that politicians and policy-makers have not had the will to see the comprehensive ideal through. The specter of the selective senior secondary school lingers on, as demonstrated by the examination system, the hierarchical miasma which surrounds the governance of schools and even the trappings of selective/private schools – the persistence of formal school uniforms (blazers, ties - even for girls – prefects (with braided blazers) etc. Internal selection in the form of setting or streaming suggests that the old IQ myth lingers on.

**3.7 Closing the education gap: impact of the global pandemic**

The move towards comprehensive schooling in the 1960 and 1970s was educational and highly political. In the 2000s, the politicisation has continued but the focus has shifted. There is a sense in which the fact that our secondary schools in Scotland are non-selective at the point of entry, the egalitarian emphasis of the original Circular has been achieved. However, the fact that the current Scottish Government made closing the gap its main priority in 2017, clearly demonstrates that there is more to be done. While the term ‘comprehensive’ is no longer part of the discourse, the impact of the 2020 pandemic on the secondary school system and the national examination process clearly shows that we need to re-visit the comprehensive ideal. The architects of the comprehensive school were aware that ‘education cannot compensate for society (Bernstein, 1970) but saw the abolition of selection as one stepping stone to equality.

The pandemic has highlighted the inequalities which exist in society. While living in poverty was known to be bad for your health long before Covid-19 appeared, it has become all too clear that those in the lower economic strata are likelier to catch the disease and indeed die from it. This in turn leads to the worsening of educational outcomes; poorer children are more likely to have to self-isolate and to miss in-school learning. Their ability to take advantage of ‘blended learning’ is less than middle-class children and their support structures at home are not as robust.

The examination system has shown that it is inherently biased in favour of more advantaged schools and more advantaged pupils. The use of algorithms which take account of the previous performance of schools simply make it less likely that pupils in schools in disadvantaged areas will achieve grades which seem out of keeping with previous years’ achievement.

What we need to focus on now is poverty; its causes, its impacts and its eradication. The pandemic has brought some uncomfortable truths to the fore, in society and in schooling. It is often said that we will not be able to return to the old normal, and education is one of the arenas in which radical change will be needed. If, indeed, we wish to become more equal (or, at least, less unequal) then schooling needs to be at the forefront of this change.

**3.8 The future of secondary education; some lessons from Finland**

The comprehensive school in Scotland is alive and well but needs updating. The most recent publication on comprehensive education in Scotland was published in 2015: *Everyone’s Future: Lessons from fifty years of Scottish comprehensive schooling.* It suggested a success but that there is still more to be done, not least the creation of a school system (and, indeed, an education system) which is true to the ideals of the founders of 1965. Others, notably the Nordic countries, have embraced forms of comprehensivisation which go far beyond our system. Sahlberg (2014) records that when Finland suffered a severe recession in the 1970s, it took the view that schooling should be at the heart of its recovery. It was determined to ensure that education would be equally available to all and that it would be seen as a common good. There was no role for private schooling and the state system should be based on the concept of trust. While accountability was necessary, it would be intelligent accountability, and teachers and schools would have a level of autonomy within guidelines which would not require an external inspectorate.

An important element of the Finish system is governance. There are 310 councils which have responsibility for schooling. In a country with roughly the same population as Scotland, this level of local governance is remarkable and indicates a level of involvement which underpins the importance of education to the country’s wellbeing. We would argue that a system of governance based on clusters of schools would be possible in Scotland. The structure already exists; every secondary school with its associated primary schools, nurseries and additional support needs (ASN), already form clusters. The problems, however, are that the structure is loose and does not involve parents or other stakeholders except at the level of the individual school. In addition, the existing local authorities control not just the budgets and staffing, but the policy-making too.

Even more importantly, in Finland, a decision was made to put creativity and problem-solving at the heart of the curriculum and to ensure that all pupils had equal access to it. In Scotland, we need to break free from the hegemony of testing and examinations. Testing from the age of 5 to 17 or 18, dominates and distorts the curriculum, creates hierarchy among subjects and stifles creativity and child-centred learning.

**Recommendations**

1. A starting point would be to revisit the principles of our current curriculum and to ask whether or not all of the so-called four capacities of *A Curriculum for Excellence* (2004) - successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens - are equally valued. These were drawn from the 1996 UNESCO aims for education worldwide; learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be. We would argue that the UNESCO principles be in reverse order, putting the individual student first and foremost.

2. We must recalibrate the curriculum and remove the hierarchy of subjects. Inter-disciplinary approaches are needed if the curriculum is to enable learners to address issues such as climate change, mass crimes and the eradication of poverty. There needs to be a larger emphasis on active learning – not just at younger levels but at all levels throughout the secondary curriculum.

3. We must review the current content to take account of Scotland’s history and of Black Lives Matter.

4. Accountability must be based on trust, and the role of testing and exams needs to be examined. The exams at the end of secondary education need to be completely rethought. External inspection needs to demonstrate how it can contribute to intelligent accountability. Governance of schools should be at the most local level which is feasible.

5. All education should be free. There is no place for private schools in a country which sees education as a public good.

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**4: Further Education: public good or corporate competition**

**4.1 Introduction**

Further education (FE) over the past 30 years provides a clear insight into the impact of neo-liberalism on education. In this section, we provide illustrative examples of experiences from Scottish FE which stem directly from the imposition of neo-liberal ideas upon the FE sector. In particular we consider how this political agenda has impacted upon individuals in the workplace, but also on certain sections of the student body. The ramping up of the neo-liberal agenda led to what became known as ‘incorporation’ in 1993. In that year FE colleges in Scotland became independent corporate bodies, although still funded directly by the Scottish Government. Prior to this, FE colleges were governed by local authorities, but retained individual college councils, which included some semblance of local accountability through the inclusion of local councillors as members. However, in the midst of the Thatcher/Major public sector reforms, colleges had found their public service role being questioned, and along with most other parts of the public sector at that time, faced pressure to respond to ‘customers’ needs. In the case of FE colleges, government saw these customers not as the student body but instead employers. The Further and Higher Education Act 1992 replaced College Councils with Boards of Management, which had to have a majority of members from business and commerce. In line with neo-liberal thinking, a key thrust of the Act was to introduce a more entrepreneurial and managerialist culture into the operations and governance of colleges, including all resources and staff.

**4.2 FE: Public or Private**

Prior to 1993, colleges had been firmly situated within local government, and as such were part of the broader state education service. Post-1993, college boards quickly moved to adopt a clear firm neo-liberal agenda and impose alternative cultures which were often anti-union, employing an extensive managerialist leadership, and quickly dismantling national pay and conditions. The dismantling of national bargaining and the move to local bargaining on a college-by-college basis was seen as a key element in the creation of a more compliant workforce. The role of Principal swiftly transitioned from that of an academic leadership role to one of a CEO role and the college management senior leaderships quickly began to ensure salaries became comparable to private sector pay levels despite the fact that these institutions were still state funded. Buoyed by their removal from democratic accountability and newly discovered freedom, many of these leaders set about establishing what they saw as their own personal fiefdoms. A drive to distinguish between commercial work and core activity led to a number of unintended consequences. While the aim of imposing competition and marketisation was supposedly to nurture greater efficiency and reduce dependence on public funding, in fact in the absence of any form of democratic oversight, Principals’ pay increased dramatically (Denholm, The Herald, 2016). While salary increases seemed bad enough, severance payments for senior managers and Principals often led to public consternation over the amount of public funds directed towards private individuals (Denholm, The Herald, 2015). In particular, one former Principal claimed that an enormous severance paid to him (over £300,000) came not from the public purse, but instead from ‘private funds’ generated within the college. (The Herald, 2015). This was, of course, rejected by the Holyrood Public Audit Committee (Public Audit Committee, 2016), yet this did not stop that former Principal from keeping his pay off. The sense of entitlement displayed by a number of Principals highlighted the general perception within college management that colleges were no longer part of the public sector. Despite reclassification of FE colleges as public sector organisations by the ONS in 2016 (SPICe, 2016), many Principals continue to view colleges as their own personal domains.

The shift in roles led to a clear demarcation between teaching staff in colleges and management teams, with differing values becoming clear. Key elements of neo-liberalism began to appear quickly across the sector as marketisation embedded in the form of competition developed between what were once seen as community-based institutions. Colleges sought to market their provision in areas outwith their communities and began to develop marketing functions within their structures. The rapid move to reduce public accountability was inbuilt to the structures of colleges, and they were encouraged to seek alternative income streams in attempts to reduce reliance on funding from the state. The shift away from community colleges embedded within their local communities took a step further with the introduction of a merger process which saw 43 colleges merge down to 26 over a period of four years starting in 2011. To this day, no educational rationale has been provided for any of these mergers in Scotland’s FE colleges. While many of the mergers were welcomed by senior managers, most were opposed by staff within the colleges merged (EIS/FELA, 2015). The merger process created larger institutions which are far more remote from their local communities. The move from a large number of local colleges, many community based, to a smaller number of larger colleges illustrates the natural process of market competition, where markets eventually lead to greater concentration and, in fact, a reduction in competition as large players seek to gain the so-called benefits of monopoly control. Tied to this concentration, there was a further move away from local responsiveness and failures to listen to the voices of local communities.

A consequence of lack of local accountability combined with the creation of larger more remote institutions has meant that some colleges have chosen not to seek to meet the needs of local communities. And, as is often the case in a world dominated by neo-liberalism, it is the least able who often bear the brunt of attacks on services. The experience of students with ASN provides a case in point - during a time when the government has, as a priority, been seeking to close the gap in educational attainment, FE students with additional support needs have often found it difficult to find places on courses. FOI requests from EIS/FELA in 2014 found wide disparities in levels of ASN provision offered by colleges across Scotland (EIS/FELA, 2014). The disturbing findings were that provision of FE services to the most vulnerable in society were being dramatically reduced had been identified earlier by the Scottish Consortium for Learning Disabilities (Miller, 2011). Key findings recorded in the SCLD Briefing Paper included:

* Part-time courses for people with learning disabilities being cut by more than a third and most students had very little notice that their college places were being cut.
* Little evidence of alternative provision being made for students in this situation.
* Colleges reconfiguring ASN provision from lifelong learning to employability skills. However, while the drive towards accredited courses focusing on employability had benefit for some the disproportionate impact upon students with complex needs was considerable.

Cuts in provision of courses along with little consultation with communities were a feature of the times due to the then ‘age of austerity’. However, the reconfiguring of provision has continued. National cuts were bad enough but more worrying was the finding in the EIS FOI that some regions of the country were provided with very low levels of provision while others were much higher. This was particularly problematic as many FE colleges in Scotland had prided themselves on delivering tailored course provision for students with ASN, ranging from part-time course for students with profound learning needs through to those with mild learning disabilities. For many of these students, ‘Lifelong Learning’ has not simply meant a Blairite political catchphrase, but instead a manifest opportunity to develop life skills and move toward independent living.

In a forerunner to the isolation which many of us now experience under COVID protection measures, students who were once able to participate in courses which developed skills in independent travel, independent living and developing citizenship skills found themselves isolated and cut off from society as a result of the closure of support centres and the cutting of course provision. The age of austerity heralded a reduction in social services at the same time as some colleges questioned their role in providing courses which did not directly lead to employment. Prospective students with a need for part-time courses in independent living have not gone away or disappeared, however the provision of courses offering them routes to independence have disappeared across the country.

The postcode lottery of ASN provision and the general cuts in provision identified by the EIS FOIs above have come about through the drive for efficiency and removal of accountability. A lack of accountability would appear to be a factor in allowing some colleges to assign limited resources to ASN provision while others have managed to maintain some level of provision. The impact upon students with ASN is immeasurable, many of whom have limited opportunities to travel to colleges outwith their local regions. Management by spreadsheet has meant that many resource intensive areas of provision such as ASN provision are discarded as too costly, and the needs of local communities are replaced by the needs of the organisation to satisfy budgetary control. Thus, colleges operate as independent financial entities with advice issued centrally but without specific duties imposed upon them. this has meant that the needs of the college have replaced the needs of the most vulnerable, and key courses such as citizenship, independent travel and life skills for students with ASN have been decimated across the country. The dramatic reduction in provision identified by the EIS/FELA FOI displayed itself in a number of ways including reduction in the number of students enrolled, the number of course offered, the number of classes run, the reduction in numbers of qualified staff employed and the number of rooms allocated towards ASN provision in colleges. The clear picture of a systematic reduction in ASN activity and capacity to deliver provision across Scotland was clear. (EIS/FELA, 2014)

**4.3 A sector riven by conflict**

The removal of individual colleges from what had been seen as a national FE service, along with the development of managerialism within colleges led as we have seen to a number of Principals viewing the seeking of extra funding as the key object and in many cases led to conflict between lecturing staff who saw their role as defending pedagogic cultures against attacks from management by spreadsheet. The drive for efficiency and quantification of all activities across colleges has led to an unsettled sector, with the general view from above being that staff are not an asset but a cost. This culture has led to drives to employ staff on more insecure contracts and a generally negative attitude to staff from college managers (Scottish Law Reporter, 2011).

Conflict between managerialism and academic staff has seen frequent attacks on the representatives of teaching staff with many instances of union representatives being targeted for redundancy. A number of such cases have found their way to Employment Tribunals but only one has been able to gain reinstatement. Jim O’Donovan the National President of the college lecturers’ section of the EIS trade union was dismissed by Central College of Commerce, on charges relating to his activities on union matters. O’Donovan successfully won his case and was reinstated after almost two years without a job. (TES, 2004) The clash of cultures between the managerialism of many colleges and academic staff continues with a clear difference in values between many academic staff and senior management teams.

Numerous disputes across the sector illustrate the differences in values between staff and senior management, but none more so than the current dispute which the sector finds itself embroiled in as we go to print. (EIS/FELA, 2020) The neo-liberal agenda has led to a dispute over lecturing posts being replaced with lower paid instructor grades. Many of the factors mentioned earlier have contributed towards this dispute. A number of Principals who feel that they have complete control over their domain have led the drive to reduce costs, engaging in a deliberate choice not to consult with affected communities and stakeholders, and showing an unwillingness on the part of management to accept that staff in colleges have a voice which is worth listening to. Staff in colleges through their union EIS/FELA have taken a stand against the replacement of qualified professionally registered lecturing posts with different roles which would see the nature of delivery of FE change if allowed to progress. Contracts for the instructor grades take no account of the need for preparation for classes, or the need for time to mark and assess work from students. This dispute exposes the rift between teaching staff who value quality of education in FE and some managers who see these staff as a cost on a spreadsheet instead of a valuable asset in the delivery of high-quality education. If EIS/FELA members do not win this dispute, many of them feel that the face of FE in Scotland will change immeasurably in a negative way. The quality of education on offer will be far poorer, colleges will fail to attract suitably qualified staff and Scottish society will be all the poorer for that. In a few words, neo-liberalism will have wrecked havoc across the country yet again.

**4.4 Useful work**

In *Bullshit Jobs,* Graeber (2018) dedicated his work ‘to anyone who would rather be doing something useful with themselves’. The fact is that for many in FE, Graeber’s words have struck a chord. Most in the FE sector do wish to be doing something useful with themselves including staff who, due to the agenda forced upon them by senior managers, begin to question who and what the system is for; and students, who see their learning time reduced and the quality of education on offer under attack, in the face of management by spreadsheet. For students, who do wish to be doing something useful with themselves, colleges have to listen and be more accountable.

To return to the example of ASN provision, if local communities were given a voice in the resources assigned to such provision, we would see a more responsive model in operation: one which recognises the need for lifelong learning in the truest of senses, and one which recognises the need for life skills, and colleges which would see themselves embedded in communities. If colleges were embedded in local communities, the need for such provision would be difficult to ignore. For staff within the sector, the dispute over changing the nature of FE through the replacement of lecturers with instructors does bring into focus the value of useful work. EIS/FELA members in colleges are certain that colleges should be organised around a more collegiate model and that they should have a voice; in a progressive country they are entitled for that voice to be heard as set out in the Fair Work Framework (Fair Work Convention, 2016). Other members of local communities are entitled to feel that their local college meets the needs of local communities. Over the past few decades, the neo-liberal agenda driven by successive governments and implemented by teams of managerialists has sought to remove the public service ethos from colleges and replace it with a competitive market-based culture, staff in the sector have fought this for many years and will continue to do so if the current dispute is any measure of that.

**Recommendations**

1. Reintroduction of greater accountability on college boards.

2. Development of collegiate culture as opposed to top-down hierarchical structures.

3. Recognition of the employee voice as per the Fair Work Framework.

4. Recognition of rights of students with additional support needs as a requirement across Scotland and not based upon a post code lottery.

5. Recognition of further education as a public good, the operative word being education, and while employer engagement is vital, recognition of the rights of students to learn.

6. Removal of competition between colleges and a return to community-based institutions rather than large centralised monoliths.

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**5: Neo-liberalism and universities**

**5.1 Introduction[[1]](#footnote-1)**

It might be worth asking the question: what are universities for? Obviously, they sustain a workforce and student population which, it might be argued, is good for the local economy. But there is a process much more fundamental than a Keynesian response to local communities. Collini (2009) asks this very question in his critique of the development of neo-liberalism in universities. He argues that universities ‘are not chiefly, and certainly not exclusively, economic. They are intellectual, educational, scientific, and cultural’. As Wolf (2016) put it a university should be ‘a special institution: a community of teachers and scholars. Its purpose is to generate and impart understanding, from generation to generation’. Whilst this may seem self-evident, it is by no means accepted by governments, who see most universities as employment factories for a technology driven society. The policy driver is described by Maisuria and Cole (2017) as ‘openly and explicitly demanding that universities develop specific capacities in the next generation of workers, such as entrepreneurialism and a competitive spirit, to reproduce neo-liberal capitalist relations of production and an ideological agenda.’

**5.2 The Market**

The university sector in Scotland is now locked into a philosophy and practice of the market – external and internal. Performativity, casualization, competition and league tables are now widespread and have channeled learning and academic research into crude algorithms. It has been ubiquitous and all pervasive, meaning that the crude competition is now embedded in every senior leadership team’s way of thinking. As Maisuria and Cole (2017) put it ‘individual providers of HE are pitted more directly in competition in a dog-eat-dog environment where, in the conditions of reduced government funding, the losers that fail to attract ever increasing numbers of students will be susceptible to closure’. Every aspect is spun to make ‘our’ university look as though it has a lead on its ‘rivals’. Large amounts are spent to try to get the university a few places up the *THES, Guardian* or *Times Good University Guide* league tables and/or highlighting the one area that was very good and ignoring the rest. This permeates down into faculties, schools, departments and sections. As Brown and Carasso (2014) pointed out, in the 1990s ‘officially sanctioned consumer market mechanisms – league tables, performance indicators, student satisfaction surveys, published quality information etc began to supplement academic judgements’. Harvey (2007) argued that this has been so deep, intensive and all-encompassing it has become almost natural in that the neo-liberal agenda has normalised the narrative that defines HE. What this means is that if you try and question this ‘normal narrative’ you are met at best with a sympathetic shrug and at worst with being ignored as a hopeless dinosaur – a flat earther or someone who believes the sun moves around the earth! In the movie *The Usual Suspects*, the lead character comments that ‘The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist.’ In universities, Blacker (2013:6) argues that neo-liberalism ‘runs smoothest when it’s not noticed as such; this state of being taken for granted, being ‘‘assumed’’, is where ideology exists at its purest’.

Ironically, until this millennium, universities were structured in a manner which was, at least in part, democratic. Checks and balances comprised the model. To give an example of one university, which was quite typical: the Principal was appointed, the Depute was elected, the Vice-Principals were appointed and Deans and Heads of Department were elected. The elected posts involved manifestos, hustings, and discussions as to the meaning of education. Posts were usually held for three years and then another election. This model was completely destroyed to give way to a position where all these leading posts were appointed by the Principal – introducing a corporate management team, strong potential for patronage and a divorce between the senior management and the staff, reflected in large increases in salary for this elite. Although recently, following significant pressure from the unions there has been change to governance, with the introduction of *The Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Act 2016*. For the first time, trade unions have nominees on higher education institution (HEI) governing bodies, there is now an election amongst staff and students for the university senior governor (chair of governing body), and there is renewed scrutiny on how things are run. We are only just starting to see how these new requirements can make a meaningful difference in how universities operate, with decisions, including remuneration committee proceedings, more open today than in the past. Nevertheless, there is still a long way to go to temper the runaway salaries of university (and college) principals. It is worth noting that one of those outstanding recommendations from the 2012 von Prondzynski review of higher education governance was the placing of all senior staff, including Principals on pay scales relative to the rest of university employees.

The greatest impetus in the UK outside Scotland was student fees, introduced by the Blair government and consolidated by 2006 with the introduction of variable fees of £3,000. This, some 14 years later, now stands at a virtually universal £9,250. Its philosophy has the student as consumer, with choice and satisfaction ratings, and recourse to litigation if not satisfied. However, it would be incorrect to suggest that Scottish universities were impervious to it all. Firstly, there are still some voices who argue that Scottish universities cannot compete as in England the £9,250 fee exceeds the £6,500 Scottish government income per student. As the government won’t increase this, ‘the only show in town’ of fee supplements is gaining currency. Secondly, although there are no fees, every other aspect of marketization applies to Scottish universities. Thirdly, the fee model has been rigorously applied to international students, such that universities claimed as the pandemic developed in 2020 that without this income, some universities would fail and most others would need to retrench and make cuts.

This has changed the relationship from academic-student to teacher-consumer. As such, the consumer has the right to expect a first or a 2.1 degree. And indeed, recent figures show that some 75% of student/consumers achieve that across the UK. And, it is not uncommon for programme leaders to be questioned if they fall below this ‘target’ as it makes the programme/university look less efficient than others, both within and outside the university. It reduces the relationship to one of individual material gain rather than a collective pursuit of knowledge. We need to restate, as Collini (2009) puts it ‘higher education is a public good, not simply a set of private benefits for those who happen to participate in it’.

Added to it is the Research Exercise Framework (previously the Research Assessment Exercise), which has its own league table structure and dominates research thinking. It can be argued that this directs research into certain areas and also has a hierarchy of research journals, which can stipulate a way of working which, it has been claimed, stifles creativity. The Impact Case Studies are often tweaked to suggest far more impact than is really there – again it is to be used creatively to push one’s department or institution up the league table. Further, it divides the academic workforce into 2 categories -- university teachers (little or much less research time) with less status and the higher status university academics (more research time). In some institutions, these are formal contractual division, meaning that the university can then ‘show’ that 100% of their academics are research active and, thus, boost their research standing. It is of course playing fast and loose with the truth. But it does have a demoralizing impact on hard-pressed staff. Of course, the vast bulk of the REF funding goes to the ‘golden triangle’ of Oxford, Cambridge and London with the rest getting the crumbs – sometimes large, as in the case of the Russell Group of elite universities, or minute, as is the case of the rest. But huge amounts of time and effort are put into playing the game.

The result of the marketization and REF has been teams of ‘effectiveness’ organisers, often highly paid, examining the strive for ‘excellence’; indeed, there is such a stress on the desire for excellence that it is often wondered if you can be excellent or super excellent. Or indeed, is it time to invent a word that means better than excellent – perhaps, ‘post-excellent’? Graeber (2018) argues that neo-liberalism has invented ‘bullshit jobs’– professional managerial positions that assume ambiguous titles, such as quality assurance officer or student experience manager or excellence in learning manager. They have a quasi-moral virtue – it’s for the good of the students -- making virtually pointless quality assurance (QA) tasks almost unquestionable. These practices involve creating data to produce numerical metrics that are used as a proxy for quality and high standards. As he argues, these blunt quantitative measures take precedence over any qualitative experiences, feelings and interactions, where personalized, meaningful, rich and transformational journeys cannot be easily captured. Statistics are important as ‘proof’ of the fact that something is worthwhile. To give one example, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) requires 3 metrics – the first is the National Student Survey (NSS), but as pointed out above students now expect a 2.1 and academics realize that if students get a 2.1, they are more likely to be positive in the NSS; the second metric is retention and continuation scores, which consistently work against universities who take students from more precarious backgrounds or non-traditional routes, i.e., the newer universities; and thirdly graduate destinations, something that universities have no say in; if there are more and better jobs in London than Glasgow, does that make the quality of learning in UCL better than Glasgow University? To ask the question is to get the answer.

**5.3 Casualisation**

Until recently, the casualisation of staffing was something creeping. The pandemic has thrown it into sharp relief. HESA (2019), analyzing the official returns from UK universities, showed that in 2017/18 among academic staff, 70,945, or 33% were employed on fixed-term contracts in. Of these, where full-time academic staff, 25% were employed on fixed-term contracts and 50% of part-time academic staff were employed on fixed-term contracts. Apart from the obvious impacts this will have on a section of the workforce in terms of precariousness, there are worrying impacts on students and on the ability of unions to defend a workforce in circumstances where there is such a substantial minority of staff in that casualised category.

**5.4 Continuing Inequalities**

Although some 50% of Scotland’s school leavers are in HE, there are still glaring inequalities. It was in the first term of the ‘new’ Labour government, in 2000, that the first major education debate of the millennium took place. Laura Spence, the Tyneside comprehensive school student denied a place at Oxford University, highlighted aspects of the effect of both elitism in general and socio-economic deprivation in particular.[[2]](#footnote-2) As usual with ‘new’ Labour, it hid more than it revealed, as the former was flagged up and the latter hidden. For ‘new’ Labour, it was to be seen as a popular crusade on behalf of those middle-class parents of bright children educated in the state sector; the very ones who had switched to ‘new’ Labour in 1997.

It is clearly true that our universities are populated by the children of the better off. In the early part of twentyfirst century, the figures suggest that 13% of the lowest socio-economic group go on to university, while 72% of the highest socio-economic group do so; for the second lowest and highest, it is 45% and 17% respectively (Social Trends, 2003). Since then, the measurement has changed to be based on free school meals. And, the gap has hardly changed. The recent figures for 2019 compared the gap between students on free school meals and those not from 2005/6 to 2018/19. In the earlier date it was 19.2%, in the most recent, 18.6%. It has hardly moved, despite government protestations that it was a priority. Indeed, at the ‘top’ universities (designated by high tariff entry), nearly 40% of students come from independent schools – and this has hardly shifted in the last decade - where spending per student and consequent class size ensure that there is no level playing field. The most recent figures suggest that the average pupil/teacher ratio is 7.7:1 in independent schools and in state schools is 17.8:1. The independent sector in England and Wales educates 7% of pupils, but employs 14% of teachers. In Scotland, a different measure has been used – the percentage coming from SIMD20, the lowest 20% - using a menu of social deprivation measures. Currently, it stands at some 15.9% of students are from SIMD20 (Scottish Government, 2020). However, this is overwhelmingly in the newer universities; in Russell Group Scottish universities it is at 10.8% at St Andrews, 10.6% Edinburgh, and 4.4% Aberdeen. Retention rates for in 2018-19 for SIMD20 fell by 3% to 86.8%. The HESA figures for 2020-21, published in February 2021 (*Herald*, 2021) show that, if anything the figures across the UK expose greater inequalities, with 40% of the ‘top’ universities seeing a fall in numbers of entrants from state schools. And, indeed, it could be argued that what we have when they do take working-class students is the ‘top’ universities creaming off the most able of the pupils from areas of deprivation – something they have always done – rather than a real attempt to rebalance inequalities.

**5.5 Covid**

The impact of Covid exposed this neo-liberal model like little else has been able to. The university managements clearly put revenue before health and encouraged students to return to halls of residences which we now know acted as super-spreaders. The exact numbers are unknown, although it may be as high as 40,000 students in the UK have contracted Covid, in a situation where we have not yet fully understood what has been termed ‘Long Covid’. Universities owning their own accommodation or contracting with private providers faced financial losses if students stayed away and studied online. Many universities insisted that students had to attend the campuses, or at least the halls, and benefit from ‘student experience’. In many cases, they found themselves virtually imprisoned in the halls. In one well reported incident, students at Manchester Met symbolized their feelings with the sign MMU HMP. In Scotland, the initial advice that ’work that can be done remotely must be done so’ was dropped and students told to attend. And, as a final irony, students themselves were then blamed for spreading the virus by acting irresponsibly and meeting other people, as if that was not a major reason that students are at university. Students were then told that almost all work would be distance learning and campuses effectively closed. Students in Glasgow, Sussex, Manchester, Brighton, Cambridge and other universities have demanded rent reductions and, in some cases, won these.

Further, there is developing evidence that university managements are using the Covid crisis to develop newer agendas, which have involved non-reemployment of casualised staff and redundancies at some universities. At Heriot Watt, Brighton, SOAS and University of Central Lancashire, successful strike ballots and/or action caused managements to back off from redundancy threats or compulsory redundancies and as we write UEL are striking against redundancies, which have included union committee members. Other universities are balloting.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**5.6 Challenging the student as consumer model**

There are models of university learning which can challenge at some levels the dominant neo-liberalism narrative. One of the most interesting has been the student as producer. As opposition to the ‘student as customer/consumer’ model, thinking has developed around learning which can be called ‘student as producer’. Built on Marxist and critical pedagogy models, the thinking is that within the neo-liberal university, there is still space to develop left-wing models of learning which challenge aspects of the neo-liberal – indeed, entire capitalist -- system. As McLaren (2015) put it, the university academics can develop a curriculum which can be ‘anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, anti-racist, anti-sexist and pro-democratic and emancipatory’. Maisuria and Cole add anti-discriminatory to the list. The project was attempted in some departments and University of Lincoln management encouraged or at least tolerated it over the last decade. Clearly, we would not be opposed to it in principle but whether a proper anti-capitalist curriculum can be developed in a neo-liberal university may be problematic. Even at Lincoln, the academics involved found that they had to continue the model outwith some university strictures. What has tended to happen in most universities is that critical pedagogy perspectives tend to be developed as ways of doing things better – something to dip into – rather than a curriculum that challenges the whole idea of a neo-liberal university. Indeed, a review of it by Neary and Saunders (2016:14) felt that the processes put in place to maintain the dissensual incorporation of student as producer ‘appeared to have turned into just another bureaucratic management procedure’. One can almost see Graeber (quoted above) discussing the new Director of Excellence in Overthrowing the Neo-liberal University!

**5.7 Race**

A major challenge to both the theory and practice of the neo-liberal university has been Black Lives Matter. It has highlighted two main issues around race in our universities – firstly, the institutional racism towards BAME staff and students; secondly, the racism inherent in the curriculum. Equally importantly, the challenge has been at the level of doing something about it, not just highlighting it. The UK Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) report (2019) *Tackling racial harassment: universities challenged* suggested that it was not only name calling, but that universities routinely did nothing about it and that racial harassment had led to as many as 5% of students dropping out; further two-thirds of students and half of staff did not even report it as they were so lacking in confidence of it being tackled. It was not just name calling, it was institutional and systemic. Indeed, the EHRC argued that the evidence points to the culture of universities being to blame. In 2020, BLM has argued strongly and forcefully that this institutional racism must go and a resurgent student movement will perhaps ensure that. For example, pressure has led to the renaming of The David Hume Tower in Edinburgh after racist comments attributed to Hume came to prominence. This is not the place to discuss whether a plaque or renaming is ‘better’; rather to note that it is now on the agenda. Glasgow University has acknowledged the rewards and patronage it gained from slavery and slaveowners and has pledged to recompense somewhat through scholarships.

# The curriculum in Scotland also needs a root and branch examination. Where is the citizenship learning that will encourage debate about the legacy of slavery in Scotland? Where in our universities are students urged to consider the impact of colonialism and empire? Possibly in some history modules – indeed following BLM, probably a lot more. Indeed, UAL (2019) brought out an interesting study on *Decolonising the Arts Curriculum*. But what about other students – medicine, nursing, teaching, science, business, engineering? They too should leave university with an understanding of our heritage – positive and negative. If this were to be a legacy of BLM, then it should be welcomed.

**Recommendations**

1. The neo-liberal model should be effectively eliminated. Universities should be paid for out of general taxation and seen as public and societal goods. Co-operation between universities should be encouraged and league tables and destructive competition should be discouraged.

2. The relationship between academic and student should be as co-producers of knowledge, rather than customer-provider. Teaching staff should not in general be on precarious contracts

3. We would argue for a review of administration with a view to reintroducing democratic procedures into the running of universities, effectively ending patronage.

4. Whilst overseas students should be welcomed with open arms, the financial model, which relies on heavily overpriced fees, should be stopped.

5. A further concentration on encouraging students from areas of deprivation into HE – all institutions to be involved in how this can be done.

6. The curriculum needs a thorough review for decolonization and for strengthening of human rights/citizenship underpinnings.

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**6: Conclusion**

Our conclusion takes us back to the beginning. There has tended to be a belief that Scottish education used to be the best in the world and now it is only mediocre. Neither of these claims has any basis in fact. Pre-pandemic, most parents were happy with the education and learning in early years and primary although less so in secondary. And there is also general support for no fees in HE and a belief that our FE and university sectors have manifest strengths. There is a strong, well-educated and committed workforce. Further, the central idea of neo-liberalism – a belief that the market is the best way of structuring all aspects of society (Friedman, 1962; Hayek, 1944) -- has taken a knock over the last 12 years or so due to the financial crisis and the Covid pandemic, which saw on occasions governments abandoning any pretence of the market and spending massively to protect the system. Nonetheless, there are still some powerful weaknesses, as we have highlighted. If we were redesigning an education system from scratch, there are aspects we have highlighted that we would keep. However, there are still some glaring weaknesses, both in terms of structure, governance and emphasis that we would suggest need attention. These are highlighted in our recommendations after each section. Sometimes, the changes could be implemented fairly easily, such as a greater emphasis on outdoor learning. Others, for example, ending market domination in FE/HE or devising a replacement for the ‘Highers’ or dealing with poverty will be more contentious and problematic. It is our belief that whether they want to or not, events in the outside world – such as BLM and the pandemic – will ensure that changes take place. Our task is to ensure that the disadvantaged do not lose out. Indeed, The Welsh Government has intimated in March 2021 that in the Welsh curriculum the teaching of BAME histories will be mandatory. This has the likelihood of being a welcome priority across all the nations of UK and sectors of education.

1. In May 2019, the Jimmy Reid Foundation launched a paper by Jeremy Valentine (2019) on the impact of neo-liberalism on university sector. This section will not repeat that but build on it. See <https://reidfoundation.scot/2019/05/neo-liberalism-and-the-new-institutional-politics-of-universities-paper-now-available/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Laura Spence was a Tyneside comprehensive student whose rejection in 2000 by Magdalen College, Oxford University became a national cause célèbre. Mr. Kelley (head at the school) and Gordon Brown (chancellor of the exchequer) lambasted the Oxford admissions procedure as elitist when she was rejected before she got her A-level results, which turned out to be five As. John Prescott (deputy prime minister) denounced Oxford (and later included Cambridge in his attacks) as 'elitist' and talked about 'a class war'. Laura eventually studied at Harvard University in Massachusetts reading biochemistry. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See https://www.ucu.org.uk/your-support-is-needed [↑](#footnote-ref-3)