



National Discussion on Education

#LetsTalkEducation

Awards Network Response

Introduction

The Awards Network is pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the National Discussion on Education. Our origins lie in that part of the educational landscape known as the youth work sector, that over the years has pioneered innovative approaches to engaging young people in learning and has developed youth awards as a means to recognising, accrediting and celebrating achievement. In recent years youth awards have increasingly been utilised to engage and support learners in a multiplicity of settings and contexts, including family learning and growing examples of youth work and school collaboration.

We have been encouraged by recent Reports from the OECD and Prof. Stobart that recognise and embrace the value of non-academic personal learning and achievement within and outside school through youth work, volunteering, social action and supported by youth awards. The subsequent Report and Recommendations from Prof. Ken Muir reinforce the need, in the context of a broader curriculum that values all four CfE Capacities, to *'enhance parity of esteem across academic and non-academic qualifications and awards.'*

We believe that youth awards can make a significant contribution to development of an inclusive education system that values all success in learning and skills development and does not seek to define young people by exam results alone.

Background

The [Awards Network](#) was established in Scotland in 2008 as a forum of providers of non-formal learning opportunities for young people, recognised by youth work awards. Our (currently) 37 member organisations and Strategic Partners work together to raise awareness of the range and impact of youth awards and to grow access to the opportunities they provide for recognition and accreditation of young people's personal learning, skills development and achievement.

Our Vision is that *Young people's non-formal learning youth awards are nationally recognised and equitably valued with formal learning qualifications as evidence of attainment and achievement.*

[A HMI Review of Youth Awards in Scotland](#) concluded that: *'youth awards can play a key role in helping young people to be successful, confident, effective and responsible citizens with a greater focus on non-formal, experiential learning and the development of personal and interpersonal skills and competencies'.*

It is particularly in the area of 'wider achievement', increasingly referred to as 'Personal learning and Achievement', that youth awards are making a significant contribution. [Professionally Learning Resource 8: Personal Learning and Achievement](#) states that *'Engaging in personal learning and achievement, alongside formal... qualifications, allows all learners to have a greater understanding of themselves, their learning and their potential. It enables them to better recognise and articulate their*

strengths and skills in different areas of their lives. ...broadens learning and helps to raise self-esteem and confidence in their own abilities. It is relevant for ALL young people...'

It notes that youth awards 'help young people develop knowledge, competences, and skills for life, and for work. They are also recognised and accepted as evidence of achievement and attainment through non-formal learning. They can complement formal learning and for some young people provide invaluable alternative learning pathways.'

Our flagship publication, *Amazing Things*, now in its 5th edition, links through our website to [78 award programmes](#), with progression levels offering more than 170 award achievement opportunities. Almost half of the award programmes are credit-rated on the SCQF, offering formal accreditation from SCQF Level 1 to Level 7 (equivalent to learning at Advanced Higher). Other awards not on the SCQF, such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, Saltire Awards and Queen's Scout Award, have wide societal recognition and are highly valued by employers.

Awards Network members reported achievement of a record 116,383 youth awards during the pre-Pandemic year 2019/20. Lockdown and related restrictions significantly curtailed award achievement opportunities in community and school settings over the past two years, but signs of recovery are encouraging. We have recorded annual growth of 45% in awards achieved during 2021/22, with pre-pandemic achievement levels expected to be met or surpassed during 2023/24.

Informing our Response

Our response to the National Discussion is informed by Awards Network discussions involving partner organisations and members operating in either or both of community youth work and school settings. It also draws on views from young people gathered through discussions led by some of our members and other interviews on education reform-related issues.

In addition to the responses below, we commend two video recently produced by the Awards Network:

- ['Youth Voices'](#), a short video capturing views of young people recorded for an SLF22 session entitled: *Why youth work is the key to recognising achievement in a reformed education system*.
- A [video case study of KYTHE, Kinross](#), illustrating the value of using youth awards in community-based youth work, including views of young people on the benefits of awards in accommodating different learning styles.

Response to the Survey

1. What kind of education will be needed by children and young people in Scotland in the future and how do we make that a reality?

- The purpose must be to prepare young people for life and work, recognising that life skills are more than just about employability. Young people need to be equipped with the skills to navigate their way through life. A predominantly subject-based curriculum is unlikely to achieve this.

- There is a need for education that offers a better balance between knowledge and skills, and recognises that young people exhibit, and respond differently to, a range of learning styles. It must value all types of learning and enable young people to be assessed in the learning that is most relevant to them.
- Educational achievement should not be 'judged' in hierarchical terms. Rather it must be more person-centred, placing formal and non-formal learning, academic and vocational pathways as equally valid and valued – as indeed was the expectation behind the design of CfE.
- We need to recognise key changes that have a profound impact on education and learning, not least being the rapid advances in digital technology and the critical importance of learning for sustainability. The ability to amass and recall facts is diminishing in importance against equipping young people with the skills to find out where to go for information and the ability to critically assess its origin, purpose and validity.
- Other key skills that young people recognise as being important to acquire, are identified in [Exploring the Four Capacities](#), and include critical thinking, curiosity, creativity, teamwork, communication and leadership. We might expand this to include the ability to influence change.
- Members identified concerns about a continuing obsession with a subject based curriculum and call for an approach that recognises and values all types of learning. This includes recognising that learning and education are not solely the preserve of schools. Rather this should also embrace opportunities provided in other settings such as through youth work, workplace, volunteering and social action. There should be greater opportunities for experiential learning, making better use of IDL and harnessing broader partnership and collaborative working.

2. How do we ensure that children and young people in Scotland feel supported in their learning in the future? / How can every child and young person's individual needs be supported and addressed in the future?

- Recognise that young people learn in different ways and seek to accommodate the learning style of each learner. This is not just down to teachers but will require a more collegiate partnership between schools, youth work and others to meet the educational and health and well-being needs of each young person.
- Young people – particularly those deemed more vulnerable - need to be supported by ensuring availability of **safe spaces for learning**. Individual and small group working will be part of this, as should smaller class-sizes overall. However, it's not just a physical space but also a space populated by a relevant health and well-being focused curriculum that respects diversity and is supported by appropriate adults, including youth workers, health professionals and other non-teachers.
- There has been an exponential growth in the past few years in the number of young people undertaking Well-being and **Health and Wellbeing** awards. Some youth award providers have also noticed an increased focus on HWB issues in projects and actions pursued by young people as part of their awards. In part, this is a response to a need given further prominence as an impact of COVID disruption. Over the school curriculum offer as a whole,

however, it is felt by many young people that HWB issues are not addressed in a consistent and coherent manner.

- In contrast, the preponderance of youth work and youth award programmes that incorporate outdoor learning is a reflection of how the youth work sector has long recognised the importance of health and well-being as part of a young person's learner journey. The input of young people themselves, alongside youth workers, to the design of youth work programmes they choose to participate in invariably provides a higher visibility for HWB issues.
- Many recent examples of effective collaboration between youth work and schools have emerged in response to the Pandemic, learning loss and the poverty-related attainment gap. There is a need to build on such work, valuing the skills and expertise that youth work can bring to bear in a school setting. Equally, there is a need to recognise and value that participation in youth work, and similar extra-curricular activity within and beyond school, offers by way of support to young people's learning and development.
- The Scottish Government Report [Closing the poverty related attainment gap: A report of progress 2016-21](#), states that '*recognition of wider achievement alongside attainment is a strength to take forward in supporting children and young people to achieve their full potential.*' It further notes the positive impact of '*effective collaborations between education staff and others, including CLD staff.*'
- A Report for the UK Social Mobility Commission - [An Unequal Playing Field: Extra-Curricular Activities, Soft Skills and Social Mobility](#), concludes that access to extra-curricular activities through school, youth work or otherwise, can deliver important benefits to participating young people '*not only positive educational outcomes but also offering the possibility of developing a wider set of skills beyond the qualifications from school.*'
- To ensure young people's individual needs are addressed and supported requires recognition and resourcing of real rather than abstract learning communities. That requires fostering awareness, mutual respect, collaboration and **sustainable partnerships** that harness and build on strengths of all education providers operating within and outside schools.

3. What is one thing that needs to stay and why?

No single constant emerged from our discussions, other than a recognition that the CfE four Capacities in their totality were uniformly supported as offering a sound basis for the curriculum.

Other common issues that emerged include:

- **Professionalism:** Recognising and valuing the professionalism of the youth work and school sectors and investing in workforce development to ensure that educators remain fit for purpose, continually reflect and move on in their development.
- **Assessment and Certification:** Retaining some form of assessment and certification, which does not equate necessarily to exams. Indeed, many question whether exams should be retained for all as the most appropriate and effective measure of progression and achievement.

- SCQF should be the principal language of qualifications and awards. A form of equivalence should be pursued for non-levelled programmes.
- What young people have to offer is derived from the totality of experiences they have gathered. It is more important that young people are able to recognise and communicate their skills and abilities to others as appropriate to their preferred destination. This necessitates valuing equally a variety of learning types and experiences. **Young people should not be defined by exam results.**
- On a cautionary note, however, it is stressed that at all costs there is a need to **avoid trying to assess and accredit everything** that a young person does.
- **The need to change:** What is required is an education system that is not cast in stone but is constantly moving forward, reflecting on, and learning from, the past and keeping a-pace with developments in technology and the needs and expectations society as a whole. Embracing change requires a system that is designed not to last unchanged for 20 years but is able to demonstrate the flexibility and agility required to constantly evolve, remaining relevant and responsive to the changing needs of learners, employers and wider society.
- **Choice:** there is a need to retain (or perhaps in many cases deliver) choice for young people with respect to their education, whether that be about place of learning or curriculum, subject led, experiential or academic.

4. What are the most important priorities for a future Scottish education system?

The priority is the learner. Meeting the needs of all learners requires acceptance of the fact that young people engage in learning in many settings and contexts. It's not all about school!

We note also the following expectations for the future:

- A **rights-based education** system that enables young people to exercise **choice** over their learning, including place, content and style.
- **Parity of esteem**, valuing all qualifications, awards and achievements, differing learning styles, assessment, approaches to teaching and educating, and embracing learning and skills developed from a wide variety of experiences. The lack of parity of esteem is reinforced by a points system (Insight) designed to measure school performance, which can result in limiting choice to what will deliver best for the school rather than the learner.
- It's essential that **Insight is replaced or modified** in such a manner that it captures the breadth of every young person's personal learning achievements
- Valuing and promoting **alternatives to exams** to recognise learning achievements. Exams have their place, but are not the appropriate 'gold standard' in all cases. In [Exploring the Four Capacities](#), No Tosh tabulate a wide range of ways advanced by young people in which *to recognise achievement in far more sophisticated ways than exams*. These include youth awards and other non-formal learning opportunities.
- Bringing together the different elements of the educational landscape that young people experience to **work in partnership** to deliver effective learning, choice, and support. This

recognises education as a shared responsibility. Harness the skills and expertise of youth work, and indeed of employers, alongside that of schools in supporting young people's learning, ensuring that the outcomes and achievements that young people gain through their totality of learning experiences are captured and celebrated.

- Deliver CfE as intended, with due attention to **all four Capacities**
- Develop a system that works for everyone, that ensures that nobody falls through the net and prepares young people to contribute purposely and gainfully to society. This means a system that is not solely focused on personal advancement or individual achievement but also considers the wider benefits to society of educating our young people.
- Embed **Learning for sustainability**, ensuring that young people have a sense of place in the world and in their local community, this to be supported through a cross curricular approach

5. Overall, what is your vision for the future of education in Scotland?

It was noted with some disappointment that the discussion prompts related to this question seemed very much school oriented - questions about the school day, classrooms, school timetable, teachers, etc. Perhaps we might consider the learner day, not constrained by place or educator.

- Our vision is of an education system that equips all young people with core skills for learning, life and work and does so by valuing and embracing the full range of learning that young people undergo, within and outside of school, supported by teachers, youth workers and other educators.
- What is needed is a refreshed and agreed understanding of what we mean by a learning community. This requires the development of a common language for all involved in education whether they be principally school-based or operating outside of a school setting.
- There was a consensus that the vision should **focus on skills** as the basis of such a common language, supported by profiling and tracking achievement.
- We believe that **partnership between youth work and school** is an essential element of the Vision for the future. We see youth awards being valid options within the school curriculum, and otherwise being accepted as valued evidence of personal learning achievement in whatever setting a young person chooses to learn.
- A view emerged of a system that includes a common core base of skills (not subjects), which a young person can choose to top-up with other skills, knowledge and experiences that are appropriate to their individual needs. Once again, the Vision is of personal choice.
- Overall we need an education system that all young people feel they have a place in, that engages all young people in meaningful learning and equips them with skills, knowledge and the ability to 'tell their story', helping them to advance to the next stage of their learner journey.

6. How can we make that future vision for education a reality in Scotland?

- The collective focus must be on how best to support learners to progress and achieve. Formal accreditation may be a part of this but should not be the driver of change.
- We have already remarked on the need for parity of esteem between different types of learning and different forms of qualification and accreditation. However, to be of value, not all learning requires accreditation as an end result. Our principal focus is on learning and recognition of achievement through youth awards, and whilst a significant proportion of these awards lead to formal accreditation, many more do not. That should not negate their value.
- Indeed feedback from schools and others using awards that do not lead to accreditation suggest that they can be valued precisely because of that. The absence of formal accreditation has been demonstrated in some circumstances to remove barriers to participation and enable young people to enjoy new learning opportunities. For some it is the route to re-engaging with more formal learning.
- On the other hand, we also heard from an award organisation that offers both accredited and non-accredited programmes, but has found it difficult to engage some schools with the non-accredited offer. Asked if accreditation would change how they viewed the programme, most responded that they would look on it more favourably and would see it as an opportunity for a more narrowly defined cohort of pupils to participate and gain a qualification. From the provider's perspective one of the consequences of this would be that the value of the programme as designed would be diminished significantly, since one of the key objectives is to challenge young people to build effective working relationships across abilities and outside of individual comfort zones.
- Achieving our vision therefor requires a commitment to **recognise and value all learner achievements for the learning involved and the impact on the learner rather than just valuing a qualification gained.**
- To that end, our members are supportive of the introduction of a **continuous record of achievement** for every young person that would follow them through their learner journey. This would include academic and non-academic achievement, formally accredited by reference to the SCQF or otherwise articulated.

7. What are the most important steps we need to take to achieve the future vision for education in Scotland?

- Achieving our vision requires all key **education actors working together**, respected equally for their skills, expertise and all they bring to the table. That includes those focused on formal learning sitting alongside those with interests predominantly in non-formal learning approaches; representation from school and youth work sectors, higher education and from employers.
- The **youth work sector, including awards providers, need to be 'in the tent'**, valued as partners rather than just suppliers of services. This should be reflected in the make-up and governance of new structures created to support and oversee the education system, including the new National Agency for Education and the Qualifications and Inspection bodies that are to emerge.
- **Youth work and school partnership** should be the norm rather than the exception, offering greater learner choice and responding to ancillary support needs of learners.

- Closed doors of today are perhaps a reflection of a lack of understanding of what each partner can bring rather than a desire to exclude. These need to be opened. This will require new professional respect and understanding; development of a **common professional language**; and introducing core elements of **joint teacher and youth work / CLD professional training**.
- There is also a need to better inform parents, employers and indeed young people themselves of the vast array of progression pathways available to support learners achieve their personal goals.
- **The unhelpful obsession with formal qualifications needs to be tackled.** Work needs to be done to raise awareness of the range of programmes and awards using alternatives to exams to assess and accredit achievement, supported by consistent value messaging.
- Work and related investment is required to develop a **robust system for capturing personal learning achievement** that enables young people themselves to engage with it to ensure that achievements from within and beyond school are recorded.
- **New certification** should follow, that accords parity of esteem to all formal and non-formal qualifications, awards and learning achievements.

8. How can we ensure that everyone involved in education in Scotland has a say in future decisions and actions?

- The National Discussion seems to have generated much interest and engagement. There is perhaps much to reflect upon from this public exercise that might inform further related consultation and engagement.
- From an Awards Network perspective, our members have been pleased to have availed of numerous opportunities to engage with various related strands of work supporting innovation and change. We sincerely hope that this may continue.
- The 'ask' is about the future of education. It should not be just about schools. It must also embrace youth work, awards providers, higher education, DYW, careers and employer interests too. The make-up of bodies responsible for implementation, delivery, and oversight of reform must reflect this. So too must investment to ensure equal capacity to engage.

Submitted on behalf of the Awards Network, 5 December 2022

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