

Acting on **ACHIEVEMENT**



**Awards
Network**

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This report highlights evidence of the crucial role for youth awards in making learning more flexible, meaningful, experiential and relevant.

Despite the evidence, researchers have noted that education systems around the world have struggled to match the theoretical, societal, cultural and technological changes surrounding them (Iversen et al., 2015). After the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) was pioneered in Scotland, it promised a new direction to education. Challenges such as financial difficulties, changes in leadership, and the pandemic have hindered the realisation of its ambitions. Yet, the pandemic also provided an opportunity to pause and reflect, leading to a recent renewed investment in reforming education in Scotland.



Youth awards are carried out across the whole of Scotland. In youth clubs, community groups, streets, fields, parks, rivers, lochs, forests, mountains, beaches, seas and in schools.



There is growing global recognition that formal education is one of several methods of learning now available to us (UNESCO, 2015). Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective (OECD, 2015) reported that Scotland has been wedded to a high-stakes senior phase exam system which needs to change if it wants to prepare young people for an unpredictable and increasingly tech-fuelled future.

It found that Scotland's curriculum needs:

“...an ambitious theory of change and a more robust evidence base, especially about learning outcomes and progress. CfE needs to be less managed from the centre and become more a dynamic, highly equitable curriculum being built constantly in schools, networks and communities with a strengthened ‘middle’ in a vision of collective responsibility and multi-layer governance.” — (p.11)

Several documents now amplify calls for education reform, presenting youth awards providers with an important opportunity to be part of a strengthened Scottish learning network. Along with an exemplary track record in learner-led experiential approaches to learning, awards programmes bring deep-rooted connections to local young people and their communities.

The UNCRC Article 29 notes that:

“Education... goes far beyond formal schooling to embrace the broad range of life experiences and learning processes which enable children, individually and collectively, to develop their personalities, talents and abilities and to live a full and satisfying life within society.”
— (Convention on the Rights of the Child | UNICEF, n.d.)

As the UNCRC was officially incorporated into Scots Law with royal assent in January 2024, it is important to consider how Scotland now gives young people access to a wider range of experiences that fulfil UNCRC articles and break away from traditions of didactic teaching of a fixed curriculum. Doing so requires letting go of power to allow young people to become active agents of their learning instead of passive recipients.

These approaches to learning are not new. They are situated in constructivist theories formed by authors including Piaget, Vygotsky and Dewey (Brau, 2020). Rogers highlighted the need to increase learner engagement and motivation by combining the cognitive and emotional aspects of learning ('Freedom to Learn (Rogers – 1969)', 2011). Freire (1968) emphasised critical thinking, dialogue, and problem-solving, which help individuals to develop the skills they need to navigate and contribute to the world around them.



A driver for change is young people's views of school. The most recent Health and Wellbeing Census (Scottish Government, 2022) revealed that whilst the majority (80%) of young people agree or strongly agree that they enjoy learning new things and maintain positive views throughout their school years, a much smaller proportion (57%) agree/strongly agree that most of the time they are happy at school. Less than half (43%) of young people feel like they have a choice in what they are learning.

Similar findings are found in a briefing paper on 'Self-confidence and social well-being in Scottish adolescents' (Cosma et al., n.d.) where two-fifths of young people reported feeling pressure from school work. Between 2006 and 2014, the percentage of 15-year-old girls experiencing high levels of stress increased from 40% to 80%. This trend is attributed to societal and academic pressures, which negatively impact the wellbeing and learning of young people. Another study has found that low school engagement increases the likelihood of attempted suicide, suicide-risk and self-harm (Public Health Scotland, 2022).

Subsequently, feelings of agency (choice) and enjoyment (happiness) of learning and school connectedness are clear indications of a need to change existing approaches to learning.

Yet many commentators are optimistic that current pressures and attitudes can be reversed if the system and approaches to learning are transformed. Validation of such optimism is found in the findings of the 2019 National Youth Social Action Survey for the UK (Brasta & Claudia Mollidor, 2020). The UK wide report confirms

that most young people (88%) cared about making the world a better place and believed they could make a difference (74%).

There is a positive increase in the proportion of young people recognising the benefit to others (81% in 2019, compared with 75% in 2018). Although, participation in social action dropped slightly from 59% in 2015 to 53% in 2019. One possible explanation is the rise in young people believing that there are 'few/no opportunities in my area' (19% in 2019, compared with 4% in 2017).

“Almost half (48%) of all young people worry about not having the right skills and qualifications or the right experience (57%) to get a job in the future. Over a third (39%) no longer feel in control of their future, and over a quarter (26%) feel they will fail in life, rising to over a third (38%) of those who are NEET (not in education, employment or training) or from poorer backgrounds.”

— (Princes Trust, 2024)



A key message for Scotland's schools and organisations – that support young people to become effective contributors and responsible citizens – is that young people who had taken part in meaningful social action were more likely to feel a stronger sense of belonging in their communities and take a more active role in their community than those who didn't engage. Being asked by a teacher or a member of staff (52%) to get involved and being able to do it with a friend are key motivators for engagement. Nevertheless there are disparities with girls (37%) more likely than boys (34%) to be engaged in social action, those from rural areas (45%) are more engaged than those in urban areas (32%) and young people in more affluent areas are more engaged than those experience deprivation (41% of those defined as ABC1, compared with 29% of those defined as C2DE).

Engagement in youth awards can help to reconnect young people with a stronger purpose, higher levels of agency, clearer outcomes and better social connectedness.

Research findings align with the document 'Rethinking Education' where UNESCO advocates that 'education and knowledge should be considered global common goods' which is characterised as a 'collective social endeavour'. It recommends moving away from individualistic approaches so that learning occurs through working towards a common purpose.

Several reports on educational reform in Scotland have emphasised the significance of determining the knowledge and skills that young people need to acquire for the future. Skills Development Scotland refer to the gap between knowledge and performance:

“ In this emerging economy, higher expectations of “peak performance” are fast becoming the new norm for work and living... Peak performance (if not actual human survival) will depend more and more on the effective use of skills that bridge the distance between vast stores of knowledge and productive performance.” — (Skills 4.0, 2018)

The Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment (IRQA) confirmed the following:

“ Learners, schools, colleges, employers and universities told us that learners need opportunities to develop the knowledge and skills they need as they progress beyond school and college. The ability to work together, to use knowledge to tackle problems, to think creatively, to persevere are examples of the skills learners will need in life. In addition, qualifications should provide learners with opportunities to show who they are: what makes each person individual, their interests and wider achievements, the contributions they make to communities or to society more broadly; and how every learner might be supported to make good decisions about what they might do next.” — (Hayward, 2023)



'Putting Learners at the Centre' (Muir, 2022) suggests reforms that are better aligned with the rights to education described in the UNCRC:

“...if Scottish education is to become a more coherent and self-improving system that is truly successful in meeting the needs and aspirations of all its current and future lifelong learners.

- All efforts, whether concerned with educational recovery post-pandemic or in terms of the future vision for Scottish education, must be directed to the purposes described in Article 29 of the UNCRC.”
- ...A redistribution of power, influence, and resource within Scottish education to one that reflects the principles of subsidiarity, genuinely empowers teachers and practitioners and where learners' voices, experiences, perspectives and rights are central to decision making.

In addition, Muir raises the importance of ensuring individual needs are met including those with additional support needs. Similarly, he calls for recognition of our more ethnically diverse and pluralistic society, the need for greater equity and the need to close the poverty-related attainment gap.

An HMI review of youth awards in 2019 summarised the benefits to Scotland's Curriculum:

“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.”



133,000

youth awards were distributed to young people in Scotland in 2022-23.



42%

of young people in Scotland achieved a youth award in 2022-23.



Awards Network members support the desire to improve Scotland's education system. Awards providers and delivery partners bring years of experience, learning frameworks and resources that are known to equip young people with the knowledge and skills needed to thrive in the modern world, regardless of their background or socio-economic status.

An overarching desire of Awards Network members is to see youth awards gaining parity of esteem with formal curricular education. The idea has gained traction, with a growing number of references to the benefits of youth awards in public documents. The Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment (IRQA, 2023), made a recommendation to introduce a Personal Pathway as means to recognise non-curricular learning, as follows:

“Include the Personal Pathway element as a prerequisite for the award of the Diploma. It is an entitlement and must be available to all learners. This is an issue of equity. It must be flexible for all learners, recognising the importance of personal choice and should focus on what learners have learned about themselves.”

Although at the time of writing it is unknown whether this recommendation will be endorsed by the Scottish Government, perception is rising of the need to incorporate more flexible forms of non-curricular learning into mainstream education.

The report raises the need for pathways which support a positive destination, which includes youth awards. A challenge to overcome in achieving this is having a common language across sectors, as the report states:

“Ultimately, we need to consider the entire post-school landscape as a holistic, integrated learning system which recognises that learning happens in school, colleges, universities, workplaces and elsewhere in communities.”

Within 'Personal Learning and Achievement – For Scotland's learners, with Scotland's educators – a guide for practitioners who work with children and young people, in formal and non-formal learning settings; there is a section dedicated to the Awards Network and the potential role youth awards have in supporting and recognising young people's achievements.

Risks are attached to undervaluing the benefits of youth awards. Research has found that non-curricular achievements which should be celebrated are perceived as recognition of failure by young people (Hart et al., 2010; Withers, 2023).

What is the role of youth awards?

09



To reveal an insight into the current context for learning and achievement in local schools and communities, Education Scotland led a research project into learning and achievement within the Forth Valley and West Lothian Regional Improvement Collaborative. It concluded that:

“There is work to do to build a clearer shared understanding of dimensions of achievement through youth work – with young people, youth work colleagues, formal educators and parents.

Flexible connected systems that make it easier to gather, collate and aggregate rich data about young people’s achievements across a range of settings are needed.

It’s important to continue to build young people’s confidence and motivation to ‘own’ and record their own learning journey and achievements.

...Recognising and recording achievement is not just an end in itself. Doing it well will provide insights that inform young people, youth workers, formal educators and policy-makers about individual learning pathways, curriculum development and service improvement.”

The report acknowledges that around half of schools are already using a range of innovative approaches to recognise and celebrate some of young people’s achievements, which lends itself to better sharing of what works. It has 10 recommendations, which include the following:

“Schools and CLD providers should develop local collaborative partnerships to support the development of achievement opportunities and youth awards. This should involve staff upskilling, shadowing and practice sharing opportunities at a local level. Partnership agreements should be co-designed and regularly evaluated.

Schools and CLD partners, including youth work providers and youth award providers, should work together to build a common language to recognise young people’s personal achievements – in school and in their communities.

The Awards Network should provide a regional feedback opportunity... surrounding the data they gather and share. Awards Network partners should capture postcode data to ensure accuracy of specific local and regional information.”

One of the action points to emerge from the study was the need to create and co-host a webinar to share learning from the pilot. The first webinar hosted jointly by Education Scotland and the Awards Network took place in January 2024.

As many of the documents confirm, the success of Scotland's future education system lies in the partnerships that will be formed with civil society (UNESCO, 2015). Youth awards offer genuine advantages as a partner in education, for example:

Flexibility

For most young people taking part in youth awards, they will find learning frameworks that are easily accessible to them with a variety of progressive levels on offer. This means that it is possible to engage young people in the same project or activity but vary the levels of difficulty to suit each individual. It removes any exam pressures and allows young people to have choice over what they learn and the pace in which they advance.

Accreditation

Around a quarter (24%) of current youth awards are SCQF aligned, which means that young people gain accreditation at levels which are equivalent to existing exams undertaken at school. Current levels range from Level 2 to Level 7. It is anticipated that more will become aligned in future.

Why offer youth awards?

01: Experiences

Youth awards bring real experiences to young people allowing them to solve real problems in real places and find out what they can do to make a difference.



02: Skills

Youth awards are excellent for developing the 'meta skills' which employers are looking for in their ideal candidates. It's one sure way to be the best humans and a great story to tell at those all important interviews.



03: Connections

Youth awards connect young people with good adult role models. People with jobs, family and wider connections. It gives young people a wider positive network to guide them into a successful adulthood.



04: Accreditation

Whether it is a 'badged award' or SCQF level, youth awards are a passport to building up your credentials – everything you need to succeed in work, life and leisure pursuits.





Multi-recognition

Dual or multi-recognition is a popular way for people to engage in youth awards. If we consider undertaking a school garden project, youth awards can take many forms. Learning about the soil and plants would fit with one of the nature-based awards such as Wild Challenge from RSPB. The time spent volunteering can qualify for Saltire awards. Some young people might choose for it to count towards different aspects of a Duke of Edinburgh's Award, especially if they belong to a uniformed group that offers this. Furthermore, if Dynamic Youth Awards was selected as the underpinning framework for the project, participants can also be put forward for SCQF accreditation. Potentially, young people can leave the project with several forms of recognition and accreditation that they can carry with them into further education and employment.

CV Building

Building a strong CV and personal profile is another important feature of youth awards. Young people are often at a disadvantage with little or no work experience, youth awards help bridge this gap and allow young people to demonstrate their valuable transferable skills, a sense of character and indication of their values to potential employers.

The Awards Network is currently involved in the Personal e-Profile co-design project which is one of the Curriculum Innovation strands underway. The hope is that this project will produce a digital solution for storing and tracking curricular and non-curricular learning in one place.

Stories and Experiences

Awards Network members emphasise that youth awards provide the experiences, the stories and the connections that we all need to get ahead. Our hope is that young people, parents, schools, communities, further education and employers come to develop a shared confidence in the role of youth awards for building the 'meta-skills' of self-management; social intelligence and innovation which have been identified as a skills model to drive Scotland's future (Skills 4.0, 2018).

Searchable Database

The Awards Network has existed now for over 15 years. As such it has a website with a searchable database of youth awards. This is recommended as the first port of call for anyone looking to access youth awards for the first time or hoping to strengthen their offer.

<https://awardsnetwork.org/awards>





Awards Aware

One of the schemes run by the Awards Network is the opportunity to become 'Awards Aware'. This allows schools, youth and community groups and others to take part in awareness raising training that they can then share with colleagues. Anyone taking part is given an 'Awards Aware' certificate for their school or organisation. The logo can be used on headed paper, websites and social media to demonstrate that we are working together to support young people's learning. It affords privileged access to quarterly newsletters and occasional events.

National Data

The Awards Network gathers annual data on youth awards distributed throughout Scotland. We anticipate that the depth and details of data will enhance rapidly in the next few years. Therefore, it is important that we are capturing everything that we should. We believe that most youth awards providers know about the network and are already part of it. However, if you are engaged in awards that are not listed, you are welcome to get in touch and let us know.



As Scotland considers the educational landscape of its learners and how best to reform it, there is substantial evidence and expert opinion that youth awards should be afforded parity of esteem and recognition of what they can provide.

Youth awards can be an important factor in empowering young people to be active and engaged agents in their own learning. Youth awards can facilitate the recognition of young people's rights in their learning journey and provide a means with which to recognise their achievements and skills beyond the classroom. Finally, youth awards can encourage 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.”
— (HMI, 2019)

For more information on the huge range of youth awards that support and recognise Scotland's young people, visit the Awards Network at <https://awardsnetwork.org> and subscribe to our newsletter here: <http://eepurl.com/dyr4Bb>



20%+

of young people in each local authority in Scotland achieved a youth award in 2022-23.



50%+

of young people in four local authorities in Scotland achieved a youth award in 2022-23.

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The Awards Network is hosted by Youth Scotland



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A company limited by guarantee No: 125456.

Scottish Charity No: SC000501.

Registered in Scotland.

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