

Scottish Education – 3rd edition

The Independent Sector

The independent sector of education is somewhat of an enigma in Scotland. It does not fit into the pattern of state education, currently divided amongst 32 education authorities, nor does it fit into one geographical area, in addition to which it crosses school sector boundaries. In other words it provides pre-school, primary, secondary and special education for young people aged 3-18 across Scotland. It is also, as its name suggests, independent in every sense – it is difficult to categorise, both as a sector and as a type of education, as its schools are so different and diverse. The fact that most of the independent schools in Scotland belong to the Scottish Council of Independent Schools (SCIS) has helped them to develop a corporate sense of identity and has strengthened their position in Scotland.

The definition of an independent school was amended by the School Education (Ministerial Powers and Independent Schools) (Scotland) Act 2004 to be ‘a school at which full-time education is provided for pupils of school age (whether or not such education is also provided for pupils under or over that age), not being a public school or a grant-aided school’.

Despite the above statutory definition, describing an independent school is like teaching a modern language – for every general comment, there are exceptions to the rule. There are 31,500 pupils in independent schools in Scotland. SCIS represents around 97% of those pupils in 80 or so schools which are located in 20 of the 32 education authorities in Scotland. Scattered and diverse though the sector may be, its 31,500 pupils place the sector numerically between the 7th and 8th largest education authorities in Scotland. They therefore represent a significant proportion of young people in school education in Scotland. Independent schools are particularly prevalent in the City of Edinburgh, (where they represent 25% of the total pupil population at secondary level) in the cities of Glasgow, Aberdeen and Dundee, and in Perth and Kinross with the remainder mostly in other areas in the central belt¹.

The geographical diversity of the sector is matched by the diversity of types of schools. The independent sector offers parents not only an alternative to education authority schools but also a range of choice within the sector. A large majority of the schools are co-educational, reflecting the long-standing tradition of co-education in Scotland; there are several girls-only schools and a small number of boys-only schools. Most of the schools are all-through schools, offering education from age 3-18, whilst some are senior only and others junior only. Despite the fact that 10% of the pupils in independent schools are boarders, over 30 of the schools offer boarding provision, ranging from the mainstream traditional boarding schools to those specialist schools which cater for pupils with educational, social and emotional difficulties or other specific support needs.

Tradition and Continuity

Scottish independent schools have many ideals in common. The sector has a strong tradition of academic attainment, good examination results, sound discipline and a commitment to a wide range of sporting, cultural and extra-curricular activities. Many of the schools combine long-established traditions with modern, exciting and innovative approaches, in an effort to prepare young people to become active and useful members of society, or ‘responsible citizens’ and ‘effective contributors’ to use the language of ‘*A Curriculum for Excellence*’. The blend of the traditional and modern approaches is often reflected in the physical environment of the schools, many of which are located in magnificent historic buildings,

which house ultra-modern high-tech facilities. Pupils in independent schools are encouraged to develop their talents and to pursue new interests through clubs and societies, sport, music, drama, outdoor pursuits, community and voluntary activities. They are encouraged to undertake community and voluntary work to support those who are less fortunate and to play an active part in their local community. They are also encouraged to become 'global citizens' through international education programmes, supported by exchange opportunities, visits abroad and making connections electronically through the internet.

It is interesting to speculate why these schools, many of which have been providing education for hundreds of years, have managed to thrive and are still so popular in the 21st century. One theory is that they are masters of their own resources and are therefore able to plan strategically for the future, to raise the resources needed and to implement those plans with a minimum of bureaucracy. Being independent of local and central government gives the schools the freedom to innovate, the flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances, the ability to respond to new initiatives, to develop specialist expertise and to use their resources to meet the needs of current and future generations. Standing still is not an option for independent schools.

Whilst generalising about the independent sector, it is important to recognise that each school has its own character and ethos. In choosing an independent school for their child, parents are strongly advised to visit at least two or three schools, to meet pupils in the school, to talk to staff and to find out as much as they can about the school. Parents often seek advice from SCIS and from the London-based parent body, the Independent Schools Council (ISC), about choosing a school and about questions to ask when they visit for the first time². Websites have become the most popular source of information and parents visiting the SCIS website can be directed to the websites of individual schools, where they can find out more about the school and make direct contact.

With average fees at £5,200 per annum (primary) and £8,200 per annum (secondary) how can so many families afford the cost? For those who choose boarding, the cost is over £20,000 per annum³. Undoubtedly parents do much soul searching before they make the commitment to paying fees, possibly for as long as thirteen years or for the six years of secondary education or sometimes for the initial seven years of primary education after which they will review and assess the position. Most parents are keen not to break the commitment once their child has settled happily into the school. At one end of the spectrum, there will be parents who can afford the fees due to their high earning capacity; at the other end of the spectrum significant numbers of children are on free places or bursary awards. Although awards are made to pupils in junior or primary schools, most awards tend to be offered at the stage of entry to the senior school and in many schools a significant percentage of secondary pupils will be in receipt of a means-tested bursary award. At almost every school there will be large numbers of parents who do not ask for help but who make personal sacrifices themselves, use their savings, take advantage of fee planning services and make hard choices in order to afford an independent school for their child.

The fees clearly represent value for money in the eyes of the families who have chosen this route. The costs are broadly comparable to the cost of educating a child in an education authority school⁴ and are therefore not regarded as unreasonable. Although the argument is put forward that parents are paying twice for their child's education, through the taxation system and through paying school fees, most parents accept this when they make the choice. They can be reassured that they are not being overcharged for their child's education, seen as possibly the most important investment that they can make for their family. Unlike most other factors in life, education is permanent, a life-long asset that cannot be taken away.

Most independent schools are charities and many have long histories, with some foundations stretching back several hundred years. The oldest schools, still thriving today and bearing the names of their founders, were set up to help those for whom education was not accessible before a national education

system was established in the late nineteenth century. Even when there was an entitlement to a state education for every child, the independent foundations continued, dependent on endowments, raising fee income or government grant. Other publications trace the history of independent education, the interesting factor being their ability to survive change and to adapt to new situations. In the latter part of the twentieth century independent schools again found themselves in the position of having their government grant stopped, when the Labour government decided to phase out the assisted places scheme. Once again the schools proved resourceful, reassessed their position and almost immediately embarked on fund-raising initiatives to support children of parents who would not otherwise be able to pay the fees. These efforts have enabled the schools to maintain their communities of pupils from diverse social backgrounds, with a wide cultural, social and ethnic mix.

Independent schools are not restricted to taking pupils from a pre-defined catchment area and they use their endowment and other funds to award bursaries to those for whom the fees would be out of reach. During the debate on the Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Bill on the reform of charity law in Scotland, it became clear that independent schools wished to retain their charitable ethos in tune with the purposes for which they were originally founded. The debate in Parliament produced some sharply divided views about the nature of independent schools. A minority took the view that independent schools were a 'disbenefit' to society because they perpetuated inequalities. Supporters of independent education take the opposite view, namely that the schools enrich society and that in a democratic country parents have the right to choose the school that is best for their child. The debate reflected the fact that objections to independent education tend to be on political or social grounds rather than on educational grounds. The Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Act, passed in 2005, confirmed that the advancement of education was a charitable activity, the new factor being that charities will in future have to demonstrate that they provide public benefit. Under the legislation all charities, including independent schools, will be required to meet a charity test in order to remain on the charity register. In 2005 the funds distributed in scholarships and bursaries by independent schools were worth an estimated £12.5 million a year and, taking into account the savings to the public purse of educating 31,500 children, the independent sector in Scotland estimate that they save the country over 35 times as much as they receive in financial benefits (estimated at £4.5 million a year in 2005).

The analysis of comparable costs with education authorities reflects similarities in the way that schools are structured, whether fee-paying or otherwise. School costs are labour dominated and salaries and wages form over 70% of the overheads. Teachers in the independent sector are paid either according to national salary scales or a modest percentage above the national scales, a key difference being the pupil-teacher ratios which are more favourable in the independent sector. Figures published by the Scottish Executive for 2006 show that that the average pupil teacher ratio was 8.5:1 in independent secondary schools in Scotland, compared with 12.7:1 in local authority secondary schools. In the independent sector, salaries, wages and all other costs have to be met from the fees, whereas the published education authority costs exclude a number of factors, including costs met centrally by the authorities such as support for learning and transport, and the very significant cost of capital building programmes.

Curriculum and Examinations

Although distinctive, many independent schools in Scotland reflect the structure of education authority schools, offering seven years of primary and six years of secondary education. As indicated earlier, many also have an integrated pre-school department, thereby offering education to pupils from age 3 to age 18. The educational agenda in independent schools is not likely to differ significantly from the agenda in other schools, as the majority of pupils will be sitting the same examinations as other pupils in Scotland. The *Curriculum for Excellence*, national qualifications, assessment, literacy and numeracy, interpersonal skills, citizenship, enterprise, child protection, ecology and information technology will feature in all schools. For the most part, independent schools in Scotland present pupils for the Scottish system, which offers a wide range of qualifications, including Access, Standard Grade, Intermediate, Highers and

Advanced Highers. The Advanced Higher qualification has proved popular in Scotland and its increasing credibility both north and south of the border has helped to strengthen the rigour of the Scottish sixth year, when pupils can develop independent learning skills and prepare for further and higher education. In independent schools over 80% of pupils stay on for a sixth year, which means that a disproportionate number of presentations for Highers and Advanced Highers comes from the independent sector.

Statistics produced by the Scottish Executive Education Department and by the Scottish Qualifications Authority indicate consistently good results from independent schools at the key stages of S5 and S6, with 44% of pupils attaining over 5 Highers in S5, compared to a national average of 9% in Scotland (SQA Statistics, 2006). Nearly 60% of pupils in the independent sector left school with 5 or more qualifications at Higher or Advanced Higher level in 2006 compared with 20% from local authority schools and over 11% achieved 3 or more Advanced Highers compared with just over 1% in the local authority sector (SEED statistics for 2005/06). It could be argued that the figures are not comparing like with like, given that independent schools can select their pupils and are not restricted to a specific catchment area. Whilst comparisons between local authority and independent schools in the same area also favour independent schools, the value added factor is more important to parents than the raw results.

Some of the most well-known schools in Scotland are boarding schools, which enjoy a world-wide international reputation. Whilst the popularity and demand for boarding education has declined in recent years, there will always be a need for boarding schools by parents who frequently move location and who are seeking security and stability for their child in a family atmosphere. More recently, boarding has become popular with families where both parents have significant work and other commitments. Scottish boarding schools also attract international boarding pupils from around the world seeking a British education. The structure in mainstream boarding schools in Scotland tends to reflect the independent school system in England and many of the Scottish boarding schools offer the English system of examinations, at GCSE, AS and A level; some also offer the International Baccalaureate.

Independent schools regularly review their curriculum, with a view to offering an intellectual challenge that is appropriate to pupils' abilities, alongside an education that can teach social, moral and emotional values. Independent schools are not swayed by current trends in education and will, for example, choose to retain subjects such as Latin and Greek, if they can justify the value of learning and teaching such disciplines. In the current climate, the indications are that independent schools are strongly resisting the national decline in subjects such as physics, chemistry, biology, modern foreign languages, and economics, which they recognise are crucial to a vibrant, dynamic economy. Independent schools will, wherever possible, offer subjects that are considered to be important to society and relevant to current needs.

Contrary perhaps to public perceptions, independent schools do not just cater for the most academic children. When selecting their pupils, the schools are looking not only for ability but also for potential, academically and in areas such as sport, art, music and debating, so that talents can be encouraged and developed. Many of the mainstream schools offer specialist support for children with learning difficulties or other needs and many have their own style of curriculum, for example, schools modelled on the Kurt Hahn philosophy, or the Steiner schools, or specialist schools for music. There are significant numbers of independent special schools in Scotland, mainly residential over 52 weeks of the year, that cater for young people with specific disabilities (such as autism, visual or hearing impairment) and for young people with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties. In most cases these pupils are referred to the school by the local education authority or by social services and are funded by their local authority. The special independent schools' community provides a valuable service for families of young people who are not suited to mainstream schooling.

Parental Choice

A MORI poll for Scotland in 1996 indicated that 32% of parents would send their child to an independent school if they could afford the fees, 51% said they would not and 17% said they did not know. This has probably not changed significantly and compares with figures for England and Wales where 48% said they would send their child to an independent school if they could afford the fees, 40% said they would not and 12% did not know. There has always been a smaller proportion of independent schools in Scotland than in England and the absence of independent schools in many areas of Scotland eliminates the choice for families in those areas. There are undoubtedly parents in Scotland who can afford to pay school fees and who choose not to, either because they are against fee-paying education in principle, perhaps because they have no experience of independent education or because they choose to spend their money differently. There are also parents who may choose an independent school reluctantly, as it goes 'against the grain', but because they consider it to be in the best interest of their child.

It is important for independent schools, individually and for the sector as a whole, to be responsive to the complex reasons why parents choose an independent school, as shown in SCIS research⁵. Perhaps surprisingly, examination results, facilities and social links come low on the list; top of the list are the individual attention given to a child, small classes, good discipline, clearly defined values and realisation of the child's potential. With around 50% of parents being 'first time buyers' of independent education, not having attended an independent school themselves, it seems that they are seeking the kind of education that they may have had in their local academy or high school some thirty or so years before. Parents clearly value a close partnership with their child's school and are seeking a core set of values that will reflect and support the family environment. Parents are looking for an ethos that will encourage their children academically and in a way that promotes individual achievements in a caring environment. Reports on independent schools by HM Inspectorate of Education, available through their website at www.hmie.gov.uk, comment not only on academic standards but also on climate and relationships, on expectations, on promoting achievement and equality, and on the quality of the school's partnership with parents and with the local community. The 'can do' approach that is currently being promoted for lower achieving young people in Scotland is familiar in the independent sector for pupils with a broad range of learning outcomes. A caring pastoral environment is particularly important for schools with residential provision where children are away from home either because of family circumstances or because they have been referred to the school by their local authority as children with particular additional support needs.

Teaching Staff

The ethos of achievement that is prevalent in independent schools extends beyond the pupils and their families to the teaching and support staff. Teachers in independent schools are required to have a university degree and a recognised teaching qualification. Schools attract well qualified, highly skilled and talented teachers who are subject to the necessary safe recruitment checks prior to appointment and thereafter. Most teachers in the independent sector are registered with the General Teaching Council for Scotland and are strongly supported by the Scottish Council of Independent Schools. Teachers are recruited from the teacher education institutions as newly qualified graduates, or as mature students if they choose to move into teaching at a later stage in their career, and are expected to have a relevant teacher training qualification. Although the independent sector is not part of the national induction scheme for probationers in Scotland, many newly qualified teachers welcome the opportunity to undertake their probationary year in an independent school on the same basis as teachers in the induction scheme. The salary structure for teachers in most independent schools is based on the national pay scales, plus an allowance in some cases of up to 6% over the basic scales, reflecting the additional commitment to extra-curricular activities that is a characteristic of the sector.

Teachers in the independent sector in Scotland are supported through their probationary year and throughout their professional career by the extensive SCIS programme of continuing professional development, details of which can be found on the SCIS website, www.scis.org.uk. The SCIS CPD programme encourages teachers to keep their skills up-to-date, to work closely with teachers from other schools and to share good practice across the sector. The independent sector is an attractive option for teachers and other professional staff where they are welcomed as members of the school community, encouraged to promote a love of learning and are able to see the value of their teaching recognised. One of the greatest strengths of independent schools is the quality and commitment of the staff, who readily contribute to the wide programmes of extra-curricular activities offered during the school day, after school, in the evenings, at weekends and sometimes during the holidays. Teachers are supported by highly skilled and committed administrative and care staff for whom a similar extensive CPD programme is offered.

Teachers from the independent sector make a significant contribution to the work of national educational bodies in Scotland such as the Scottish Qualifications Authority and other organisations. Teachers move between the independent and education authority sectors continuously and maintain contact with colleagues through subject associations, national working parties and other professional groupings; in this way and through the strong links that have been created by SCIS, good practice in learning and teaching skills can be shared across Scotland. The teaching and support staff in schools also establish close inter-agency links with health professionals, social workers, the police and other community bodies.

Independent Schools within the Scottish Educational System

Supported by SCIS, independent schools are keen to be part of the Scottish education system and of the education community in Scotland. Independent schools have to be registered with the Scottish Executive Education Department and are subject to the same style of inspections by HM Inspectorate of Education as local authority schools. The Scottish Care Commission inspects the care provision for pre-school and after-school activities and for pupils in schools with residential accommodation. HMIE and Care Commission reports are public documents and reflect the ethos and high standards generally found across the sector. The schools have their own quality assurance systems and receive advice from SCIS and from the professional associations to which their heads, bursars and governors belong. As most of the schools are charities, they are required to prepare and submit accounts according to the recommended practice laid down for charities and the requirements of the Office of the Scottish Charities Regulator established in 2006. The schools are primarily accountable to the pupils and their parents with whom they develop close relationships through the head, the teachers, the guidance system, the school council and parental liaison groups.

It is interesting to reflect on the position of the independent sector in Scotland since devolution and on whether the perspective towards the independent sector has changed. Numerically the sector is remarkably stable having had 31,500 pupils or so for well over a decade. This stability could be seen as growth, given the declining pupil population across Scotland (SEED Independent School Census 2005/06). Within the sector there have been significant changes, mainly in the form of closures and mergers. Small schools, particularly in more rural areas, have found it difficult to meet the challenge of providing an increasingly diverse curriculum across a broad spectrum of academic ability, together with rising costs and the increasing burden of regulation. Many of those schools have merged with larger neighbouring schools, thereby strengthening the provision in that area. Large schools strive to maintain the personal element that was offered in the smaller school, by having well organised and sensitive guidance systems to support the individual child and encourage close parental links.

Qualitatively, the independent sector is highly regarded by educationalists in school, further and higher education, employers and other professionals. Despite varying views on fee-paying education, the sector appears to be widely respected and accepted across the political spectrum as part of the Scottish education system. This has given the sector a quiet confidence, reflected in a more outward-looking approach. Independent schools are now represented on the Scottish Qualifications Authority, Learning Teaching Scotland, the General Teaching Council for Scotland; they are invited to contribute to national developments through working groups and conferences. The independent sector is called upon to give evidence to the Scottish Parliament and has a voice on key educational issues. It is happy to learn from others and to share its good practice. Exhortations from the Scottish Executive, HMIE and the Care Commission are taken seriously and all schools are striving for improvement. The priorities for the sector as a whole, as well as working on educational issues, include engaging in meetings with MSPs across the political spectrum, offering independent special schools support in coping with new legislation and regulation, reaching out to support vulnerable and disadvantaged children, considering how independent schools can share good practice more widely, promoting, continuing and encouraging CPD and promoting professionalism, good leadership, governance and management.

The SCIS Review of 2006 states that the independent sector is holding its own in Scotland and that schools can be proud of their achievements but not complacent. Independent schools are aware of their far-reaching responsibilities and are keen to strengthen their contribution to education in Scotland.

Judith Sischy
Director, SCIS
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¹ SCIS Factcard 2006/07 (http://www.scis.org.uk/genInfo/genInfo_intro_stats.html)

² 'Questions to Ask When Visiting a School', Independent Schools Council (www.isc.co.uk)

³ SCIS analysis of fees 2006-07 (http://www.scis.org.uk/genInfo/genInfo_intro_basicFacts.html)

⁴ Scottish Executive publication: Expenditure on School Education in Scotland, 2005-06 (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/165163/0044999.pdf>)

⁵ SCIS research: 'Why parents choose independent schools in Scotland 2005-06'