



COMHAIRLE NAN EILEAN SIAR

Learning in the community

It's top marks for effort and skill as Council agencies link worlds of work and school

By Katie Macleod

School leavers in the Western Isles are among the most successful in Scotland, thanks to initiatives encouraging employability as an essential aspect of education.

Recently released figures show that 95.5 per cent of local 2011/12 school leavers went into positive destinations – such as higher education, further education, employment, training or an Activity Agreement – after finishing school. This year 29 per cent of local young people moved into employment; an increase on last year and 9.2 per cent higher than the national Scottish average.

These impressive results can be attributed in part to collaborative efforts from a number of agencies in making employability a core part of the curriculum. “We’re working across all agencies so that we are able to achieve the best we possibly can for our young people,” says Catriona Stewart, Chair of the Education and Children’s Services Committee. Partnerships have been formed between local schools and colleges, the Economic Development Department, employers, and Skills Development Scotland.

“The Outer Hebrides are quite unique in the Scottish sense, in that our economy has been on a knife-edge for longer, so we’ve been looking at education and employability for a while,” explains Skills and Enterprise Officer Iain Stewart. It was back in 2008 that the Education Department introduced their Vocational Education Strategy, and it is only now that other local authorities are following their lead. “There’s a drive to better articulate a curriculum to meet the needs not only of academics but those young people looking for training, development and employment locally.”

“We need to look at economic opportunity,” adds Iain. “We need to ask ‘Where are the jobs going to be in five years time?’ One of the core principles of the Vocational Education Strategy – and a key part of the Scottish Government’s educational aims – is that vocational education opportunities are an entitlement for all pupils. “Different young people have different barriers to learning, so we need to work to find a place for these young people, promote opportunities locally and work with employers effectively. The figures on positive destinations show that there are good opportunities

and support in place,” says Seonag Campbell of Skills Development Scotland.

The strategy states that vocational education needs to have formal accreditation on par with academic courses, while curriculum reform under the Curriculum for Excellence needs to demonstrate economic as well as educational imperatives – a move that has been underway in the Western Isles for some time.

In terms of local economic drivers, the Community Planning Partnership recently approved the new ‘Creating Communities of the Future’ Regeneration Strategy for the period to 2020. Key areas of growth include: renewable energy, tourism, food and drink and the creative industries. As Joe MacPhee, Head of Economic Development, explains, “We are now in the process of developing action plans to deliver the agreed objectives.”

In practice, education and economic opportunity come together locally in a number of ways. One of these is ‘Progression Pathways’, which incorporates Skills for Work into the curriculum as accredited qualifications. “With Progression Pathways, we can move through in a cohesive way to take advantage of these economic opportunities,” explains Iain.

A number of new SQA qualifications have been written here and introduced in recent years as a result of these local economic needs. The Skills for Work in Energy, studied in all Western Isles secondary schools, has been enhanced with an additional focus on renewable energy. With engineering a core component of the renewable energy industry, an Engineering Skills for Work qualification at Intermediate 2 is offered in Castlebay, while it is underway in the Nicolson Institute for the first time this year.

This is already creating opportunities, and North Sea employers are taking note: local groups have been invited to engage with them at an employment summit in Aberdeen this month. “In terms of recruitment they are realising they have to look beyond the North East,” says Iain; by doing this they are creating a space for students in the Hebrides to step up to the challenge.

Closer to home an SQA qualification in crofting was introduced in Sgoil Lionacleit to meet local economic demand. From this grew a Higher in Local Food Production, taught in partnership with horticulture at the Lewis Castle College. With a

focus on ‘food metres, not food miles’, the creation of the course in 2012 was almost prescient, given the present prolific headlines on supermarket food from far-flung areas.

Harris Tweed has always loomed large on the local stage, but with its recent revival a Harris Tweed Skills for Work qualification was created and launched in Sir E Scott three years ago. The course is practical, covering the design, making and selling of tweed, as well as the business aspects of the trade. “It supports people in developing skills for a growing industry here in the Hebrides,” says Seonag. “It is adding value, building up indigenous skills and opportunities.”

From Harris Tweed to Gaelic media, the creative industries in the island are continuing to grow, and the curriculum is being adapted to reflect this. Courses in creative digital media are being taught in both English and Gaelic, while a partnership with MG Alba proves that cooperation between all involved is a step to further success. “Over 300 employers help us with work experience,” notes Iain. “Without these partnerships the integration of these courses within the mainstream curriculum would not have occurred.”

This is particularly evident in Uist and Barra, where a pre-nursing scholarship has been introduced alongside the Health Skills course, with the local NHS providing a one-week residential placement in Stornoway to allow an insight into the sector.

Qualifications have also been introduced to combat concerns raised in the tourism sector over difficulties in recruiting and retaining local young people to the industry. The Skills for Work Hospitality option has proved to be a “very popular, oversubscribed course” across all secondary schools in the islands. “It’s meeting an interest that young people expressed, and also local economic demands,” says Iain, adding that “a pound earned locally circulates locally.”

But it’s not just economic necessity that is being taken into account – young people’s priorities are prized too. “Opportunities are available based on what students ask for, not what institutions want to provide,” Iain points out. A consultation with the students who recently made their Standard Grade choices on what they would have liked to see for subject selections, brought interesting ideas to light. “They readily engaged with us,” says Iain, “and two

of the most popular options were Mandarin and App Writing.” It shows intelligent insight on the part of the pupils, who are already aware of the changing world around them – globally and locally – and are eager to engage with new areas and ways of learning.

Self awareness and knowledge of where the opportunities are and how to access them is another aspect of employability that Skills Development Scotland is keen to promote. “We want to encourage young people to develop an awareness of themselves, their strengths, the networks that are there to help them, and the opportunities that are available,” says Seonag. It’s part of the approach to help people to develop career management skills for the rest of their working lives and coaching people to achieve their goal. “The time of a career for life is gone. We need to prepare young people for the world of work that is constantly evolving, so they can adapt, throughout their lifetime, to changes that the emerging workplace will demand.”

It is preparation that starts early, even in the classrooms and playgrounds of primary schools, where entrepreneurial activities like food production and school crofts start early paths to progress. Enterprise Education such as this encourages schools and young people to look for ways they can exploit the local infrastructure for employability. With transferable skills earned throughout their education, young people will be able to adapt to the challenges and opportunities of future employment.

Joe identifies one of the next steps as creating a Skills Investment Plan for the Outer Hebrides, to support the economic priorities. This must be rooted in what the business community needs and the opportunities that have been identified for growth. Working together we then need to connect people with those needs and opportunities.

The school leavers of 2020 will be the primary pupils who are today learning enterprise skills on the school croft. The positive destination figures are, as Iain says, “a validation” that the partnerships and efforts in education and employability are making a real difference to the opportunities for the young people of the Western Isles. “We need to make sure these positive destinations are sustained by working together.”

Council thanks public for its contribution to decision-making as Budget deal agreed

By Katie Macleod

During February, after a lengthy consultation process with local communities, the Comhairle finalised its financial budget for the next two years. “With the main items of concern, we looked at how to go towards them and make the process easier,” says Council Leader Angus Campbell. “The budget addresses a lot of areas that were brought to our attention.”

The Budget Seminar held on February 13th allowed council members to consider all the options available to them. “The process led councillors to make amendments and reflect on the consultations. Each version brought adjustments, issues, and concerns,” adds Angus.

As expected, concerns were raised on cuts

to education expenditure – which makes up 40 per cent of the council’s total budget – as well as changes to various aspects of the curriculum and teaching provision. Policies such as the introduction of e-learning were passed without problems, while others have been revised as a result of the consultations.

On the issue of the provision of itinerant teachers in primary schools, a compromise was reached between retaining them and removing them altogether. A total of £260,000 was kept in the education budget for specialised teaching provision from Learning Communities as and when these teachers are required.

The policy of shared headships also proved controversial during the consultation process, although it was one introduced prior to the budget decisions. In the final deliberations, it was decided

that a shared headship will be introduced this year between Tolsta and Sgoil a’ Bhac, with a revised saving of £45,000. Further shared headships have not been ruled out, however, and the policy of considering shared posts when the situation arises still stands.

Additionally, the introduction of the asymmetric week has been amended. The policy, which is already in place in authorities across Scotland, would have seen all schools in the Western Isles work to a common timetable across four and a half days. Its implementation will now be left until the 2014-2015 period, depending on savings made in the interim. As Angus points out, the council now “has two years to prove it can work.”

The consultation process involved considerable time and effort on the part of both councillors and communities – not to mention the students

themselves. “The principle of doing things by consultation can’t be overturned at the last minute. You either have that principle of consultation or you don’t. We have to acknowledge the efforts of the community, and the record number of responses we received,” says Angus, referencing the attendance at local meetings, surveys, and online submissions that numbered in their hundreds.

“We recognised that some of the issues were difficult for people to grapple with, so we came up with proposals we thought would work in the best interests of the children,” explains Catriona Stewart, Chair of the Education Committee. “It’s fair to say it’s been a very long process. We tried to get as much information into the public domain as possible, and respond to that. The officers did an enormous amount of work, beyond what would be expected, in order to bring it to a successful conclusion.”