

# Social Studies Curriculum Background and Evidence Paper

March 2026

# Executive Summary

## Purpose and scope

This paper provides an evidence-informed overview of the current snapshot of social studies education in Scotland across the 3-18 learner journey. It aims to highlight the contribution of social studies to learner achievement in the broad general education (BGE), and of geography, history and modern studies in the senior phase. Drawing on national data, academic research, inspection evidence, stakeholder perspectives and international reports, the paper is intended to support and inform co-design within the Curriculum Improvement Cycle (CIC), enabling stakeholder groups to reflect on current strengths, challenges and future priorities for the social studies curriculum.

## Main Considerations

- **Social studies makes a distinctive and essential contribution to Scotland's curriculum:** Across the 3-18 learner journey, social studies supports the development of political literacy, global awareness, citizenship, anti-racism education and transferable skills for life, learning and work. Geography, history and modern studies each make unique contributions, which are strongest when disciplinary integrity is maintained. The social studies curriculum plays a vital part in enabling children and young people to become successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors.
  - **Learner experiences and outcomes are uneven across Scotland:** Evidence points to variability in curriculum time, subject availability, depth of learning and progression, both between primary and secondary stages and across local authorities. The delivery of social studies can be inconsistent across primary schools due to a variety of factors including a local authority focus, lack of resources, curricular ambiguity and a lack of teacher confidence.
  - **Curriculum coherence and progression require greater clarity:** There is a lack of shared understanding of core knowledge, concepts and progression across the 3-18 social studies curriculum. Overcrowding and ambiguity of experiences and outcomes has limited depth of learning and can lead to fragmented or episodic curricular models across Scotland.
  - **Subject expertise matters:** Academic research and practitioner surveys highlight concerns about non-specialist teaching, single-teacher delivery models and multi-level classes in secondary schools. Single teacher delivery in lower secondary has the potential to detract from the attainment and enjoyment of learners, who are not taught by subject specialists. These issues can dilute subject depth, affect learner preparedness for the senior phase and create inequity in learning experiences.
  - **Professional learning, resources and collaboration are key:** There is need for clearer guidance, high-quality resources and sustained professional learning. There is a lack of subject focused career long professional learning (CLPL) for teachers. Subject associations (such as the Royal Scottish Geographical Society, the Scottish Association of Geography Teachers, the Scottish Association of Teachers of History and the Modern Studies Association) play a vital role but operate with limited capacity and funding.
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## Next steps

- Develop a clearer, flexible social studies curriculum that provides greater clarity around knowledge, skills and purposes, while retaining professional flexibility for teachers and enabling personalisation and choice for learners.
  - Establish clearer progression across 3-18, ensuring that learning in social studies builds coherently over time and supports smooth transitions from the broad general education into the senior phase.
  - Strengthen learner participation by actively involving children and young people in shaping the social studies curriculum, ensuring their voices inform priorities, content and approaches to learning.
  - Consider the role of resources in supporting high-quality social studies learning, review what types of resources are most needed and how these can be developed, curated and shared effectively with practitioners.
  - Enhance teacher confidence and expertise through stronger links with initial teacher education and increased access to subject-focused career-long professional learning, particularly in areas of non-specialist teaching.
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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Purpose

This paper offers a snapshot of the current educational landscape, drawing on a diverse range of research and evidence to illuminate prevailing trends, challenges, and successes across contexts. It serves as a foundation for ongoing curriculum development, offering insights into the policy environment, learner experience, and professional perspectives. By incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data - alongside contributions from practitioners, learners, and the wider education community - it creates space for reflection and informed discussion. While not all available studies are included, those selected reflect the breadth of work currently shaping thinking in this area. The insights outlined here are intended to support Curriculum Improvement Cycle (CIC) stakeholder groups as they consider key issues and navigate the next steps in the evolution of the curriculum.

## 1.2 Sources of Evidence

A comprehensive body of research was developed through a collaborative effort involving representatives from Education Scotland's Curriculum, Learning, Teaching and Assessment (CLTA) team, the Data, Performance and Research (DPR) team, the Scottish Government Analytical Services, and the Scottish Government Library Support Service. This collaboration brought together a wide range of expertise to support the identification, evaluation, and organisation of relevant literature. The sources drawn upon include, but are not limited to, peer-reviewed academic papers, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education publications, Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Level (ACEL) data analysis, surveys, government data sets, research produced by national agencies, Scottish Government reports, and international publications from organisations such as the OECD and the United Nations. Additionally, the perspectives of children and young people are represented through the work of bodies such as the Scottish Youth Parliament and the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland.

## 1.3 Scope of the Review

This evidence paper explores the curriculum in its entirety across the 3-18 learner journey, considering breadth and depth of provision, progression, and learner outcomes from early level through to the senior phase. This paper focuses on the social studies curricular area as outlined within Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), with the current scope concentrating around geography, history, and modern studies, however it is important to note that the social studies curriculum covers a wider context of qualifications including politics, classics, criminology, travel and tourism, people and society, and other related subjects. It considers aspects of learning and achievement in the broad general education and draws on national indicators such as senior phase attainment across geography, history and modern studies national qualifications. The paper aims to support a holistic understanding of the curricular landscape, highlighting key

themes and emerging patterns that will inform ongoing discussion and decision-making through the CIC process.

## 1.4 Related National Policies

Several key pieces of legislation and policy have significantly influenced social studies education in Scotland, shaping its development and current status. This section summarises these policies and their relevance to geography, history, modern studies, and social studies more widely.

The [Race Equality Framework for Scotland 2016–2030](#) provides a strategic approach to tackling racism and promoting race equality across Scottish society. Within education, it underpins the [Anti-Racism in Education Programme](#) (established in 2020), focusing on curriculum reform, addressing racist incidents, diversifying the teaching profession, and strengthening leadership and professional learning. The programme has produced anti-racist curriculum principles and emphasises that all schools, not only those with minority ethnic learners, must engage in this work. Social studies provides a natural context for exploring historical and contemporary issues of race, migration, empire, and diversity. Embedding anti-racist principles in social studies enables learners to critically examine the roots and impacts of racism, recognise and celebrate contributions from Black and Minority Ethnic communities, and develop the skills to respond thoughtfully to current events. In this way, social studies plays a central role in realising the framework's ambitions across education and wider society.

Political literacy is also a national priority. [CfE Briefing 14: Political Literacy](#) (2013) provides guidance for practitioners on embedding political literacy across CfE. It clarifies the role of political literacy within the four capacities and outlines approaches for developing learners' skills in critical thinking, debate, and democratic participation - all central to social studies.

Social studies also supports career education and skills development. The [Career Education Standard \(3–18\)](#) (2015) sets out expectations for learners to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attributes required for the world of work. Social studies contributes to this by fostering transferable skills, including critical enquiry, problem-solving, evaluation, and decision-making.

Social studies supports the national priority of Creativity. Since 2013, Creative Scotland and Education Scotland have partnered through [Scotland's Creative Learning Plan](#) to embed creativity across the curriculum, with social studies offering opportunities in the curriculum for innovative problem-solving.

The [Scottish Attainment Challenge \(SAC\)](#) (2016/17-2025/26) focuses on improving outcomes for children and young people affected by poverty, supported by £1bn investment over the 2021–2026 parliamentary term. Funding streams such as Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) and Strategic Equity Funding (SEF) allow schools and local authorities to implement targeted approaches to improve literacy, numeracy, and wellbeing. Literacy is central to engaging with social studies; therefore, SAC initiatives have a direct impact on attainment within the subject.

In 2023, the Scottish Government published [Target 2030: A movement for people, planet and prosperity: Scotland's Learning for Sustainability Action Plan 2023–2030](#). Building on the earlier Vision 2030+ plan, this strategy aims to ensure that every 3-18 place of education in Scotland becomes a sustainable learning setting by 2030. Informed by research from the University of Dundee and the Children’s Parliament, the plan is organised around five key themes: leadership and collaboration, curriculum and pedagogy, learning environments, learner voice, and developing meaning and understanding. Five overarching targets include entitlement for all learners to Learning for Sustainability (LfS), explicit demonstration of LfS in professional practice, and the adoption of whole-setting approaches supported by leadership at all levels. Both social studies and LfS aim to develop learners who are informed, responsible, and active citizens. LfS promotes understanding of global citizenship, sustainable development, and social justice - themes that align directly with social studies’ focus on human interactions with society, the economy, politics, culture, and the environment.

The [Climate Emergency Skills Action Plan](#) (2020) highlights that climate change is a cross-cutting issue that requires training and education in relevant skills and decision making. For social studies, this strengthens connections between environmental understanding, sustainability, and economic awareness, equipping learners with knowledge and skills for a low-carbon economy.

National consultation has also influenced policy direction. [All Learners in Scotland Matter: National Discussion on Education – Final Report](#) (2023) identified climate change, diversity, equality, and rights as central concerns for learners. Respondents emphasised the need for outdoor learning, recognition of diversity, and embedding equality and rights across the curriculum. These insights align with social studies, which engages learners in understanding contemporary social, political, and environmental issues.

The Muir Review, [Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education](#) (2022), reinforced the importance of children’s rights, climate change, diversity, and flexible pathways for learning. It recommended clearer documentation, improved assessment approaches, and centrally produced teaching materials to reduce teacher workload. These proposals have direct implications for social studies, which is often at the forefront of engaging with contemporary social and political issues in the curriculum.

Finally, the incorporation of children’s rights into Scots law through the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(Incorporation\) \(Scotland\) Act 2024](#) and its associated statutory guidance ensures that children’s rights - including Articles 12, 28, and 29 on participation, education, and aims of learning - are respected, promoted, and embedded within education. These developments create a legal obligation to involve learners in curriculum design and the CIC, reinforcing the participatory ethos which is central to social studies.

## 2 National Data Sets

### 2.1 SQA Attainment and Presentation Data

SQA attainment and presentation data provides insight into achievement in the senior phase, highlighting both strengths and areas for development.

Please note, in addition to the normal five-year reporting period, the data sets provided include an additional year, 2019, this being the most recent year prior to the pandemic where full course assessment was undertaken. It should be remembered that in 2020 and 2021 there were no external exams while in 2022 and 2023 mitigations were in place which included the withdrawal of the national 4 added value unit and national 5 and higher assignments.

## 2.1.1 Geography

### *National 4 entries and awards 2019-2024*

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Entries	3 310	3 425	3 225	3 970	4 500	4 565
Awards Count	2 945	3 175	2 735	3 460	3 985	3 995
Awards Percentage	89.1%	92.6%	84.8%	87.2%	88.6%	87.5%

### *National 5 entries, passes and pass rates 2019-2024*

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Entries	9 755	9 665	10 030	10 240	10 315	9 860
Grade A-C Passes	6 995	8 665	8 890	8 245	7 800	7 575
Grade A-C Pass Rate	71.7%	89.6%	88.6%	80.5%	75.7%	76.8%

### *Higher entries, passes and pass rates 2019-2024*

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Entries	6 865	6 435	7 130	7 175	7 425	7 570
Grade A-C Passes	5 195	5 725	6 365	5 910	5 815	5 655
Grade A-C Pass Rate	75.7%	88.9%	89.3%	82.4%	78.4%	74.7%

### *Advanced Higher entries, passes and pass rates 2019-2024*

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Entries	710	750	795	1 025	980	995
Grade A-C Passes	605	715	740	895	845	825
Grade A-C Pass Rate	85.5%	95.3%	93.5%	87.2%	86.4%	82.8%

## **Attainment**

When comparing 2024 pass rates with pre-pandemic levels in 2019, attainment patterns vary by level:

Improvements or stability at National 5 and Higher:

- The National 5 pass rate increased from 71.7% in 2019 to 76.8% in 2024, representing improved attainment.
- The Higher pass rate of 74.7% in 2024 is broadly in line with the 75.7% rate in 2019, reflecting stable performance.

Slight declines at National 4 and Advanced Higher:

- The National 4 pass rate decreased slightly from 89.1% (2019) to 87.5% (2024).
- The Advanced Higher pass rate fell from 85.5% (2019) to 82.8% (2024).

However, it is important to acknowledge that both National 4 and Advanced Higher have seen *significant growth in entries* over this period.

- National 4 entries increased by 38% between 2019 (3,310) and 2024 (4,565).
- Advanced Higher entries increased by 40% between 2019 (710) and 2024 (995).

This expansion in cohort size may reflect widening participation rather than reduced attainment. The small decreases in pass rates should therefore be interpreted in the context of a larger and potentially more diverse candidate group.

## Presentation

There have been notable shifts in presentation patterns across levels:

Increased uptake at National 4 and Higher:

- National 4 entries rose to 4,565 in 2024, the highest in recent years.
- Higher entries also reached a recent peak of 7,570 in 2024.

Declines from recent peaks at National 5 and Advanced Higher:

- National 5 entries fell to 9,860 in 2024, down from 10,315 in 2023.
- Advanced Higher entries decreased slightly to 995 in 2024, following a peak of 1,025 in 2022.

It should also be noted that candidates are presented at National 4, National 5 and Higher levels in the Gaelic medium, with most entries at National 5.

## Course reports

The following provides a summary of student performance in SQA geography qualifications in 2024 and will cover general points. Further information about performance in individual questions and in previous years can be found in the [SQA course reports for geography](#). Please note, in these reports: ‘most’ means greater than 70%; ‘many’ means 50% to 69%; ‘some’ means 25% to 49%; and ‘a few’ means less than 25%.

### *National 5 Geography Course Report (2024)*

	Areas where candidates performed well	Areas candidates found demanding
Question Paper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Candidates showed good mapping skills with most making effective use of OS maps.</li> <li>• Most candidates performed well in questions on land use conflict, farming in developed countries and effects of climate change.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many candidates did not use diagrams to help them answer questions on the formation of physical features.</li> <li>• Many candidates gave weak or insufficient responses to ‘Explain’ or ‘Give reasons for’ questions as they described but did not go on to explain.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most candidates performed well when applying specific case studies to topics such as shanty town improvements and earthquakes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most candidates showed a lack of understanding of eco-tourism.</li> </ul>
Assignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Many candidates were able to discuss how they gathered data for their assignment.</li> <li>Most candidates successfully demonstrated descriptive writing skills.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some candidates struggled to exemplify their research methods.</li> <li>Some candidates found it difficult to explain their findings.</li> </ul>

### *Higher Geography Course Report (2024)*

	Areas where candidates performed well	Areas candidates found demanding
Question Paper 1 Physical and Human Environments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most candidates performed well in questions about processes of glacial erosion, methods to collect population data, issues found in areas of informal housing, strategies to manage transport issues and strategies to manage land use conflicts.</li> <li>Candidates who scored most highly in all the case study type questions, were those referencing contemporary world issues.</li> <li>Many candidates showed accuracy in reading the flood hydrograph.</li> <li>Most candidates produced detailed annotated soil profiles.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A few candidates misread the question, e.g. writing about a U-shaped valley rather than a V shaped valley.</li> <li>A few candidates went off-topic or beyond the scope of the question.</li> <li>A few candidates struggled to accurately read and interpret the flood hydrograph.</li> </ul>
Question Paper 2 Global issues and geographical skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Candidates performed well in questions on causes of a water-related disease, strategies to manage a water-related disease, impacts of climate change and reasons for increasing energy demands in middle and lower-income countries.</li> <li>Most candidates gave detailed explanations of the suitability of the site and were able to offer a range of impacts of this development on the local area when applying their geographical skills.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some candidates gave irrelevant, incomplete or generic answers, e.g. vague responses to tackling climate change rather than focusing on strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.</li> <li>Some candidates went beyond the scope of the question, e.g. explaining strategies to manage a water related disease then going on to evaluate their success which was beyond the command in the question.</li> <li>When applying their geographical skills, a few candidates did not read the scenario question carefully and failed to discuss the main development, housing, and some candidates failed to use figures from graphs or map evidence properly.</li> </ul>
Assignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Candidates who chose countries thoughtfully, focusing on those with a common theme or geography, performed well.</li> <li>Most candidates referred to two gathering techniques, with those using primary data collection methods scoring well.</li> <li>Candidates who had clear sections referring to background reading and/or</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A few candidates submitted processed information of a poor quality, e.g. graphs, with the wrong (or no) scale.</li> <li>It was noted that literacy levels did not always reflect those that might be expected at Higher.</li> </ul>

	<p>geographical models scored well in the knowledge and understanding section.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Candidates who collected numerical data and processed their information well, scored more highly in both the processed information and analysis sections.</li> </ul>	
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*Advanced Higher Geography Course Report (2024)*

	Areas where candidates performed well	Areas candidates found demanding
Question Paper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overall performance was strong, with candidates generally well-prepared.</li> <li>• The paper was viewed as positive and fair in terms of accessibility.</li> <li>• Most candidates handled the demands of the paper effectively</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Candidates found two questions particularly demanding: Question 1(b)(iii), where many were unable to suggest appropriate and realistic strategies to minimise negative impacts, and Question 2(a)(ii), where some candidates did not adequately explain the development data and instead repeated information from the triangular graph.</li> </ul>
Project–Folio (Section A: Geographical Study & Section B: Geographical Issue)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Notable improvements were observed, especially in the geographical issue section.</li> <li>• Candidate justifications and wider reading were particularly strong.</li> <li>• Candidates researched a wide range of interesting and relevant topics.</li> <li>• Overall confidence in the folio work appears to be gradually returning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Average marks in the geographical study remain slightly lower than pre-pandemic levels.</li> <li>• Some candidates still show weaker performance in the study component compared to the issue component.</li> </ul>

## 2.1.2 History

### *National 4 entries and awards 2019-2024*

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Entries	5 810	5 795	6 175	7 815	8 825	8 980
Awards Count	5 275	5 335	5 430	6 895	8 015	7 795
Awards Percentage	90.8%	92.1%	87.9%	88.2%	90.8%	86.8%

### *National 5 entries, passes and pass rates 2019-2024*

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Entries	14 705	15 035	15 240	15 660	16 235	16 210
Grade A-C Passes	11 655	13 580	13 335	12 700	13 115	11 510
Grade A-C Pass Rate	79.3%	90.3%	87.5%	81.1%	80.8%	71.0%

### *Higher entries, passes and pass rates 2019-2024*

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Entries	9 985	9 920	10 540	9 865	10 115	10 260
Grade A-C Passes	7 265	9 000	9 370	7 705	7 965	6 740
Grade A-C Pass Rate	72.8%	90.7%	88.9%	78.1%	78.7%	65.7%

### *Advanced Higher entries, passes and pass rates 2019-2024*

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Entries	1 275	1 225	1 450	1 470	1 410	1 380
Grade A-C Passes	1 015	1 145	1 345	1 205	1 155	1 085
Grade A-C Pass Rate	79.6%	93.7%	93.0%	81.7%	82.1%	78.6%

## Attainment

When you compare pass rates in 2024 with pre-pandemic levels in 2019, it can be seen that attainment at all levels has declined, with the decline at national 5 and higher levels being more pronounced.

- The national 4 pass rate of 86.8% in 2024 is below the 2019 pass rate of 90.8%.
- The national 5 pass rate of 71% in 2024 is lower than the 2019 pass rate of 79.3%.
- The higher pass rate of 65.7% in 2024 is below the 2019 pass rate of 72.8%.
- The advanced higher pass rate of 78.6% in 2024 is slightly lower than the 2019 pass rate of 79.6%.

## Presentation

Entries at national 4 and national 5 levels in 2024 suggest growing or stable presentation respectively.

- National 4 entries increased to 8,980 in 2024, the highest level in recent years.

- National 5 entries of 16,210 in 2024 were on par with peak entries of 16,235 in 2023.

Higher level entries increased to 10,260 in 2024, recovering from a dip in 2022 (9,865) but still below their peak in 2021 (10,540).

Advanced higher level entries declined slightly to 1,380 in 2024, down from a high of 1,470 in 2022.

It should also be noted that candidates are presented at national 4, national 5 and higher levels in the Gaelic medium, with most being entered at national 5 level.

## Course reports

The following provides a summary of student performance in SQA history qualifications in 2024 and will cover general points. Further information about performance in individual questions and in previous years can be found in the [SQA course reports for history](#). Please note, in these reports: ‘most’ means greater than 70%; ‘many’ means 50% to 69%; ‘some’ means 25% to 49%; and ‘a few’ means less than 25%.

### National 5 History Course Report (2024)

	Areas where candidates performed well	Areas candidates found demanding
Question Paper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some candidates demonstrated excellent breadth and depth of knowledge and understanding.</li> <li>• Most candidates demonstrated secure understanding of skills and knowledge in the 9-mark essays, writing well-structured responses.</li> <li>• Many candidates demonstrated appropriate evaluative comments for provenance in the ‘Evaluate the usefulness’ questions.</li> <li>• Many candidates performed well in the ‘How fully does the source describe...?’ questions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A few candidates went outside the scope or time period of the question.</li> <li>• A few candidates had gaps in their knowledge, e.g. the voluntary system in the Making Modern Britain section.</li> <li>• A few candidates made statements of historical fact rather than reasons in the ‘Explain’ question and/or did not fully explain historical points in relation to the question asked.</li> <li>• A few candidates had difficulty with specific skills like structuring 9-mark essays, interpreting sources in ‘How fully’ questions, making detailed comparisons and providing evaluative comments in ‘Evaluate the usefulness’ questions.</li> </ul>
Assignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most candidates used their resource sheets effectively with many including the origin of sources and full quotes in the ‘references’ section.</li> <li>• Most candidates chose issue-based questions.</li> <li>• Most candidates gave well-structured, organised responses.</li> <li>• Many candidates included evaluation comments.</li> <li>• Most candidates were able to give a clear overall conclusion along with a supporting reason.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A few candidates chose inappropriate questions, selecting questions that were non-issue-based and/or overly broad.</li> <li>• Some candidates struggled to demonstrate evaluation effectively.</li> <li>• A few candidates failed to make a relative conclusion.</li> </ul>

## Higher History Course Report (2024)

	Areas where candidates performed well	Areas candidates found demanding
Question Paper 1 British, European and world history	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Many candidates produced well-structured responses, supported by relevant knowledge and effective analysis that directly addressed the issues.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Candidates should have a clear line of argument, factors and two points of relevant background in their introductions.</li> <li>Some candidates gave only brief or insufficient analysis.</li> <li>Some candidates failed to include evaluation.</li> <li>A few candidates gave responses using incorrect issues, e.g. using issue 5 rather than issue 4 in Britain 1851-1951.</li> </ul>
Question Paper 2 Scottish history	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Many candidates successfully demonstrated the required skills and structures.</li> <li>Candidates showed good practice by using relevant Scottish historical knowledge, including local examples, in their responses.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Many candidates lifted correct points from sources but failed to interpret them accurately in relation to the question.</li> <li>Responses included knowledge that was inaccurate, irrelevant or vague, with candidates including recall related to other areas from the description of content, knowledge from outside the time period or scope of the question, or which was generic or lacking specific Scottish examples.</li> <li>In the 'Explain' question candidates did not answer the question asked, describing rather than explaining.</li> <li>In the 'Evaluate the usefulness' question, many candidates gave generic responses to the author, type, purpose and timing of the source, rather than commenting on the usefulness of these aspects in relation to the question.</li> </ul>
Assignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most candidates selected an appropriate question, with most using assessment or evaluation type questions.</li> <li>Many candidates used the resource sheet appropriately, with the most successful using it as a planning tool that summarised key knowledge and included well-documented references.</li> <li>Most candidates incorporated references effectively, with stronger responses using them to support their analysis.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some candidates chose issues or question stems that did not allow for effective analysis or evaluation.</li> <li>Referencing continued to be a common issue, with many candidates failing to include complete reference details on the resource sheet.</li> </ul>

## Advanced Higher History Course Report (2024)

	Areas where candidates performed well	Areas candidates found demanding
Question Paper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Candidates produced a wide range of responses across the 10 sections.</li> <li>• Many candidates responded well to the essay questions offered and demonstrated understanding of the required skills.</li> <li>• Performance in the 'Evaluate the usefulness...' question improved compared to last year</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A few candidates did not complete the full paper, answering only one essay and the source questions.</li> <li>• Some candidates missed a source question entirely.</li> <li>• Candidates continued to find the 'Evaluate the usefulness...' source question the most challenging, despite some improvement.</li> </ul>
Project - Dissertation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most candidates chose suitable dissertation titles with a clear historical issue.</li> <li>• Technical expectations were generally met, including structure and engagement with sources.</li> <li>• Most candidates stayed within the 4,000-word count.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some candidates did not adhere to the criteria in the marking grid regarding footnoting and the engagement with primary evidence.</li> <li>• A few candidates exceeded the permitted word limit and received a 5-mark penalty.</li> </ul>

### 2.1.3 Modern Studies

#### *National 4 entries and awards 2019-2024*

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Entries	4 220	4 350	3 970	5 035	5 960	5 650
Awards Count	3 845	4 050	3 420	4 415	5 375	4 855
Awards Percentage	91.1%	93.1%	86.1%	87.6%	90.2%	85.9%

#### *National 5 entries, passes and pass rates 2019-2024*

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Entries	11 960	12 185	12 930	13 635	13 725	12 915
Grade A-C Passes	8 780	10 850	11 610	10 105	10 220	9 625
Grade A-C Pass Rate	73.4%	89.1%	89.8%	74.1%	74.5%	74.5%

#### *Higher entries, passes and pass rates 2019-2024*

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Entries	8 655	8 475	9 530	9 770	9 975	9 490
Grade A-C Passes	6 575	7 695	8 645	7 760	7 770	7 225
Grade A-C Pass Rate	76.0%	90.8%	90.7%	79.4%	77.9%	76.1%

#### *Advanced Higher entries, passes and pass rates 2019-2024*

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Entries	805	885	1 080	1 175	1 110	1 115
Grade A-C Passes	610	815	995	915	845	850
Grade A-C Pass Rate	76.1%	92.1%	92.1%	77.7%	76.0%	76.3%

#### **Attainment**

When you compare pass rates in 2024 with pre-pandemic levels in 2019, it can be seen that attainment at national 5, higher and advanced higher levels is stable. Higher and advanced higher pass rates closely match pre-pandemic levels while national 5 pass rates show a slight improvement.

- The national 5 pass rate is slightly higher, going up from 73.4% in 2019 to 74.5% in 2024.
- The higher pass rate in 2024 is almost identical to pre-pandemic levels – 76.1% in 2024 compared to 76.0% in 2019.
- The advanced higher pass rate is also on par – 76.3% in 2024 compared to 76.1% in 2019.

However, there is a decline at national 4 level where attainment has fallen below pre-pandemic levels. The national 4 pass rate is lower, going down from 91.1% in 2019 to 85.9% in 2024.

## Presentation

Although presentation has fallen from the pandemic-era peaks, all levels still show growth compared with 2019. In 2024, entries at every qualification level were below their most recent peak.

- National 4 entries decreased to 5,650 in 2024, down from a high of 5,960 in 2023.
- National 5 entries fell to 12,915 in 2024, from a peak of 13,725 in 2023.
- Higher entries declined to 9,490 in 2024, compared to 9,975 in 2023.
- Advanced higher entries dropped to 1,115 in 2024, down from a high of 1,175 in 2022.

It should also be noted that candidates are presented at national 4, national 5 and higher levels in the Gaelic medium, with most being entered at national 5 level.

## Course reports

The following provides a summary of student performance in SQA modern studies qualifications in 2024 and will cover general points. Further information about performance in individual questions and in previous years can be found in the [SQA course reports for modern studies](#). Please note, in these reports: 'most' means greater than 70%; 'many' means 50% to 69%; 'some' means 25% to 49%; and 'a few' means less than 25%.

### *National 5 Modern Studies Course Report (2024)*

	Areas where candidates performed well	Areas candidates found demanding
Question Paper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Candidates performed well in questions on political rights, the roles of committees or the House of Lords, the consequences of crime on communities, economic causes of crime and political causes of the international conflict or issue they had studied.</li><li>• When 'Supporting and opposing a view', many candidates were able to provide evidence that both supported and opposed a given viewpoint and structured their answer appropriately.</li><li>• Many candidates performed well in the 'Making and justifying a decision' question, justifying their decision with clear evidence from all sources and linking the evidence clearly within and between sources.</li><li>• 'Drawing and supporting conclusions' answers were well structured with candidates making clear conclusions and giving evidence to support their conclusions with evaluative terminology.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Candidates had gaps in their knowledge, e.g. the devolved and reserved matters that the Scottish and UK parliaments retain.</li><li>• In 'Explain' questions, some candidates described rather than explained.</li><li>• A few candidates did not fully address the scope or focus of the question.</li><li>• In questions that ask candidates to use source evidence, some had difficulty properly interpreting sources, e.g. missing evidence that could have been used to reject viewpoints or misinterpreting data.</li></ul>
Assignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Most candidates effectively identified their topic or issue and clearly set out their research intentions.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A few candidates chose topics or issues that did not align well with modern studies.</li><li>• A few candidates struggled with the research methods section, offering</li></ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many candidates clearly identified and discussed two relevant research methods.</li> <li>• Most candidates outlined clear findings and were able to link these findings back to their original research.</li> <li>• Many candidates used data and statistics from their findings to give clear, insightful conclusions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• generic descriptions or discussing methods different from those on their research sheet.</li> <li>• Some candidates failed to refer to their research methods when presenting their findings.</li> <li>• Many candidates failed to make specific conclusions or simply repeated information from their findings.</li> </ul>
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### Higher Modern Studies Course Report (2024)

	Areas where candidates performed well	Areas candidates found demanding
Question Paper 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most candidates performed well in questions on how the UK and Scottish Parliaments hold their respective governments to account, the causes of income and wealth inequalities, the causes of crime and government initiatives in the USA, China, and South Africa.</li> <li>• Most candidates tried to add analysis and evaluation to their pressure group responses, moving away from being descriptive, and exemplification was more relevant and up to date than previously.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some candidates provided only a simplistic description and discussion of First Past the Post.</li> <li>• Candidates misinterpreted questions on the 'effectiveness of collectivist approaches in tackling inequality', 'impact of crime on wider society' and 'effectiveness of international organisations in tackling a world issue'.</li> <li>• Many candidates did not provide any detailed analysis or evaluation of the effectiveness of citizen influence on the government of a world power they have studied.</li> </ul>
Question Paper 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In the 'Conclusions' question, many candidates gave clear and accurate conclusions, effectively linking evidence to support their conclusions, and provided comparative evidence in their overall conclusion.</li> <li>• In the 'Objectivity' question most candidates provided appropriate evidence from within and between the sources to support and oppose the view and most made it clear which way they were arguing and successfully linked evidence, displaying effective synthesis.</li> <li>• In the 'Reliability' question, many candidates accurately identified key reliability factors like sample size, date of source and expertise of authors.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In the 'Conclusions' question, some candidates confused statistics, and some misinterpreted the word 'country's' as plural, resulting in an incorrect response.</li> <li>• In the 'Objectivity' question, a few candidates did not compare statistics effectively and many either did not include a quantitative judgement or provide an overall judgment at all.</li> <li>• In the 'Reliability' question, many candidates did not provide the degree of explanation required at Higher level. Most failed to provide a valid, active comparison with the other two sources in their overall judgement.</li> </ul>
Assignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most candidates demonstrated good knowledge concerning the background to their chosen issue and effectively framed their options, with some using a clearly defined introductory section.</li> <li>• Candidates successfully used both the 'social problem with potential solutions' and essay-style approaches to the assignment.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A small number of candidates selected topics more suited to subjects other than modern studies.</li> <li>• Some candidates did not develop the information on their research sheets which limited their ability to use this information as analysis or evaluation.</li> <li>• Some candidates failed to include knowledge worthy content beyond background and framing.</li> <li>• Source evaluation was poor, with a few candidates evaluating sources not on their research sheets and some answering in very generic terms. A few missed out evaluation altogether.</li> </ul>

Advanced Higher Modern Studies Course Report (2024)

	Areas where candidates performed well	Areas candidates found demanding
Question Paper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many candidates displayed good knowledge and understanding of the political and social issues raised in the extended response questions.</li> <li>• Strong candidates produced high-quality answers containing analysis, contemporary supporting evidence, integrated evidence from an international comparator, and reference to ideas and/or theories or the academic arguments of others.</li> <li>• Most candidates correctly interpreted that the question required a comparison between the two given research methods.</li> <li>• Most candidates analysed and evaluated aspects of the source that enhanced as well as diminished its validity, reliability and trustworthiness.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some candidates did not refer to an international comparator(s) or made only cursory reference to another country.</li> <li>• In weaker responses, candidates described rather than analysed the issue, lacked supporting evidence and presented one-sided responses.</li> <li>• Some candidate responses showed appropriate detail and knowledge of the topic but did not directly engage with the question set. (Q7)</li> <li>• Some candidates provided a one-sided response that argued simplistically and provided little or no recognition of the positive, purposeful activity happening in penal settings in the UK. (Q8)</li> <li>• Some candidate responses did not relate the methods stated to the scenario in question.</li> </ul>
Project – Dissertation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most candidates selected titles from the Advanced Higher Modern Studies Approved List of Dissertations, and candidates who developed their own dissertation titles often produced insightful dissertations on contemporary issues.</li> <li>• Most candidates were familiar with the project dissertation’s assessment criteria and developed an approach and structure to fit this.</li> <li>• In high quality dissertations, candidates used a wide and varied range of both primary and secondary sources of information.</li> <li>• Quality dissertations made evaluations or conclusions consistently in and at the end of each chapter as well as in the overall conclusion.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weaker dissertations continue to be based on research gathered from a limited number of websites.</li> <li>• Some candidates adopted a weak, one-sided approach to their hypothesis, rather than objectively assessing evidence and arguments in a balanced manner.</li> <li>• A few candidates did not provide evaluative comments or conclusions at the end of each aim and/or chapter.</li> <li>• Some candidates provided very brief overall conclusions that summarised points and did not make any substantive judgements or engage with their original hypothesis.</li> <li>• A few candidates did not word aims as questions, did not make full use of the word count, or exceeded the maximum word count by more than 10% and incurred a penalty.</li> </ul>

## 2.1.4 Conclusions

**Attainment has generally stabilised at National 5 and Higher following post-pandemic adjustments, but recovery is uneven across subjects and levels.**

Geography and Modern Studies show attainment at National 5 and Higher broadly in line with, or slightly above, pre-pandemic levels, while History has experienced a more pronounced decline at these levels. Across all three subjects, National 4 and Advanced Higher attainment remains below or on par with 2019 levels.

**Presentation patterns indicate growing uptake at lower levels in some subjects, alongside declining or fluctuating entries at senior levels.**

National 4 entries have increased notably in Geography and History, suggesting wider access or uptake in the broad general to senior phase transition showing the popularity of the subjects. However, entries at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher are declining or plateauing in Modern Studies and Geography, and Advanced Higher entries remain fragile across all subjects.

**Course report evidence highlights consistent strengths in knowledge recall and structure, alongside common challenges in higher-order skills.**

Across subjects, most candidates demonstrate secure subject knowledge and can respond effectively to structured questions. However, recurring challenges include explaining rather than describing, limited evaluation, misinterpretation of command words, and inconsistent use of evidence, diagrams or sources – particularly at Higher and Advanced Higher.

**The quality of analytical, evaluative and literacy skills is a key factor differentiating higher attainment.**

Candidates who perform most strongly are those who apply contemporary examples, use evidence precisely, and demonstrate clear lines of argument. Course reports across all subjects note that weaker literacy, evaluation and analytical skills constrain performance, particularly in extended responses and assignments.

## 2.2 Labour Market Information

Skills Development Scotland (SDS) provide labour market information using a consistent evidence base to inform future investment in skills, built up from existing datasets and forecasts.

They work with key partners and stakeholders in the production of regional skills assessments (RSAs) to ensure an inclusive approach to their development, dissemination and utilisation. Regional skills assessments are published annually, covering all Regional Outcome Agreement areas, City and Growth Deal Regions and rural Scotland. The RSAs offer detailed information on regional labour markets across the country. The data included in these publications, including Oxford Economics forecast data, is the most up-to-date available at the time of writing.

The following graphs show labour market information access in November 2024 to show a 10-year forecast for Scotland as a whole. They were taken from the [SDS skills planning data matrix](#).

Employment forecast for 2034 by industry:

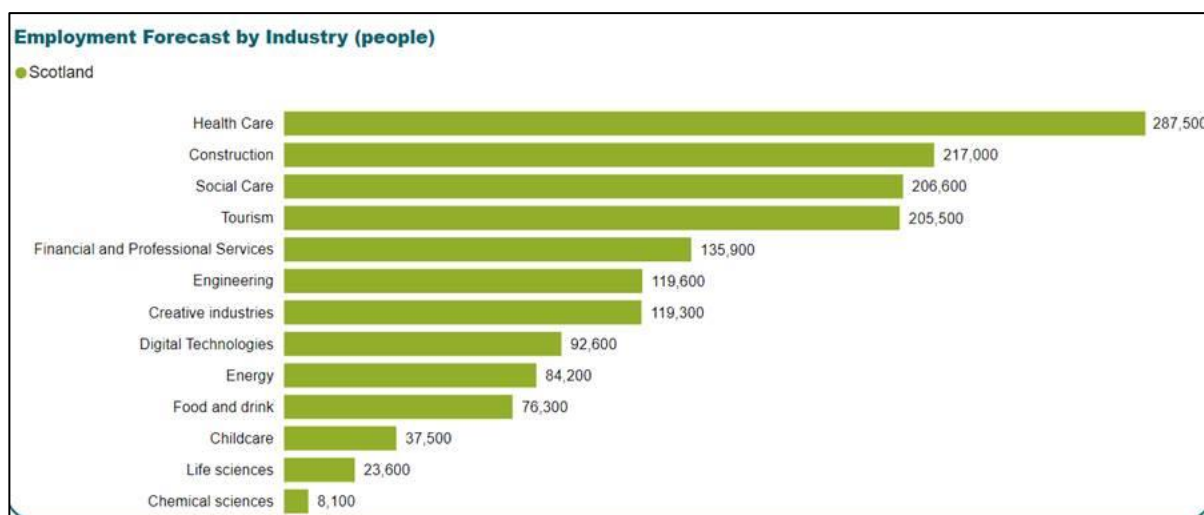


Figure 1 - Bar chart showing the future employment forecast by industry for Scotland in 2034 (SDS, 2024)

Critical thinking and literacy skills, developed across social studies, are foundational to all other skills for work. As can be seen from the graph; health care, construction and social care are predicted to be the highest employing industries. These and all the industries detailed in the graph require young people to be competent in communication, creativity and problem solving. The nature of contemporary workplaces in all the industries detailed above also requires skills such as collaboration, empathy and evaluation which are key to the social studies curriculum, learning and teaching.

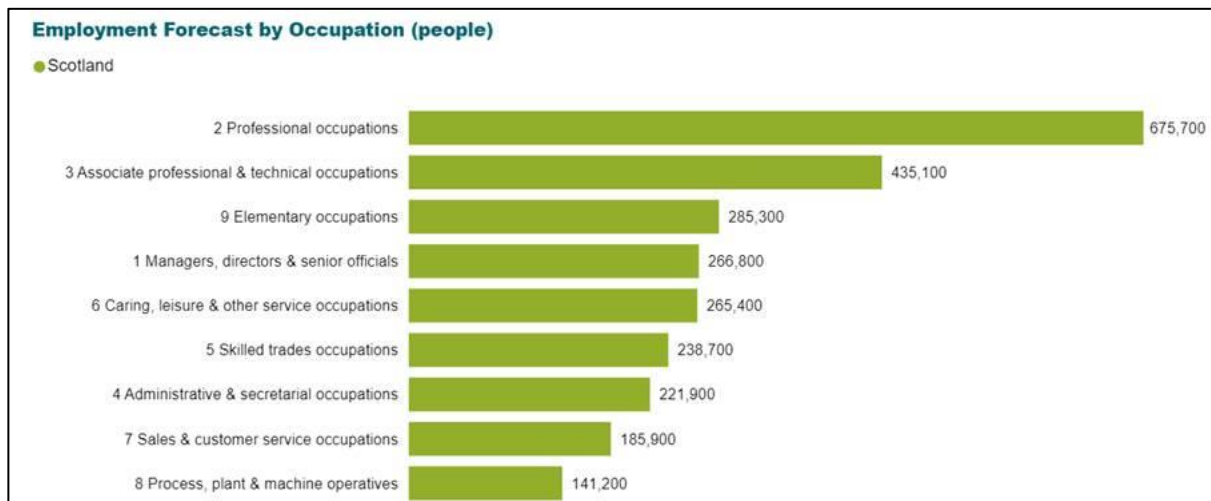


Figure 2 - Bar chart showing the future employment forecast by occupation for Scotland in 2034 (SDS, 2024)

Total requirement by industry (2027-2034):

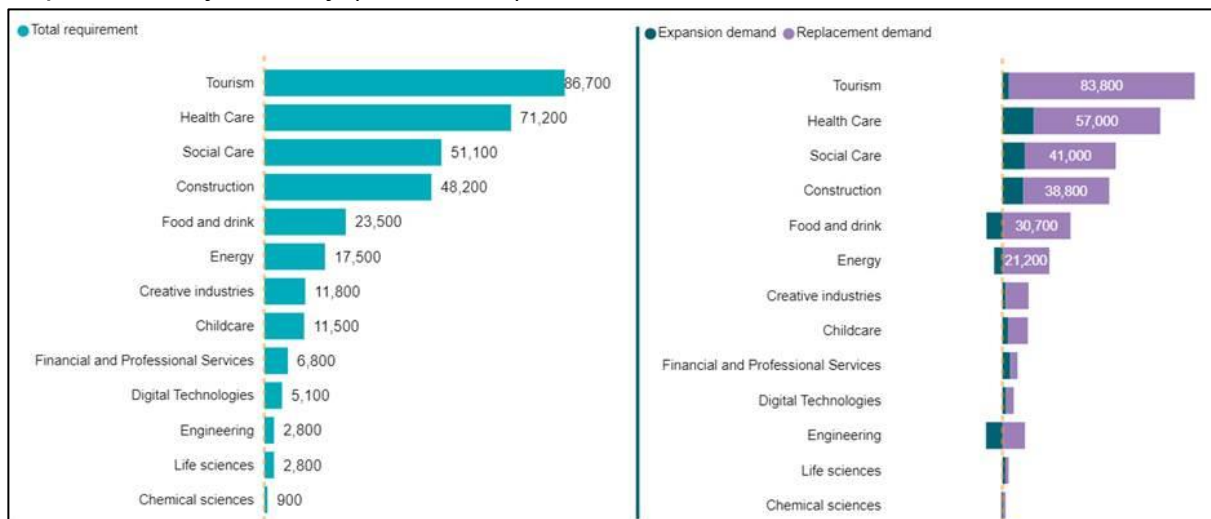


Figure 3 - Bar chart showing the total requirement by industry for Scotland in 2027-2034 (SDS, 2024) (see glossary for definition of the terms: total requirement, expansion demand, replacement demand)

The above graph on the right shows how much an industry is forecast to expand or reduce in requirement, as well as the likely replacement requirement (i.e. how many more people will be required due to people leaving the workforce). The graph on the left-hand side shows the total requirement. These numbers are different from the overall employment forecast as these graphs only show additional requirements and not those who will remain working in these industries. Health care, social care and construction show the greatest expansion demand, with food and drink, energy and engineering showing a reduction in requirements. Despite healthcare being forecast to be the largest employing industry in 2034, the actual number of jobs needed to be filled is forecast to be greatest in tourism. Social studies plays a critical role in preparing young people for this sector by developing knowledge of social, cultural, political and economic contexts, alongside transferable skills such as communication, critical thinking, ethical decision-making and understanding of global and local citizenship, all of which are essential for employment in tourism and related service industries.

The recently published [Young People’s Career Ambitions report](#) (SDS, 2025) collects views from school leavers on a range of areas - ideal job and preferred industries being just one of these. In this report over 3000 participants engaged. One of the questions asked was: “Thinking about the future, what is your ideal job/career?”. The following infographic shows a thematic analysis of their responses. The larger the circle, the more the job/career area was mentioned.

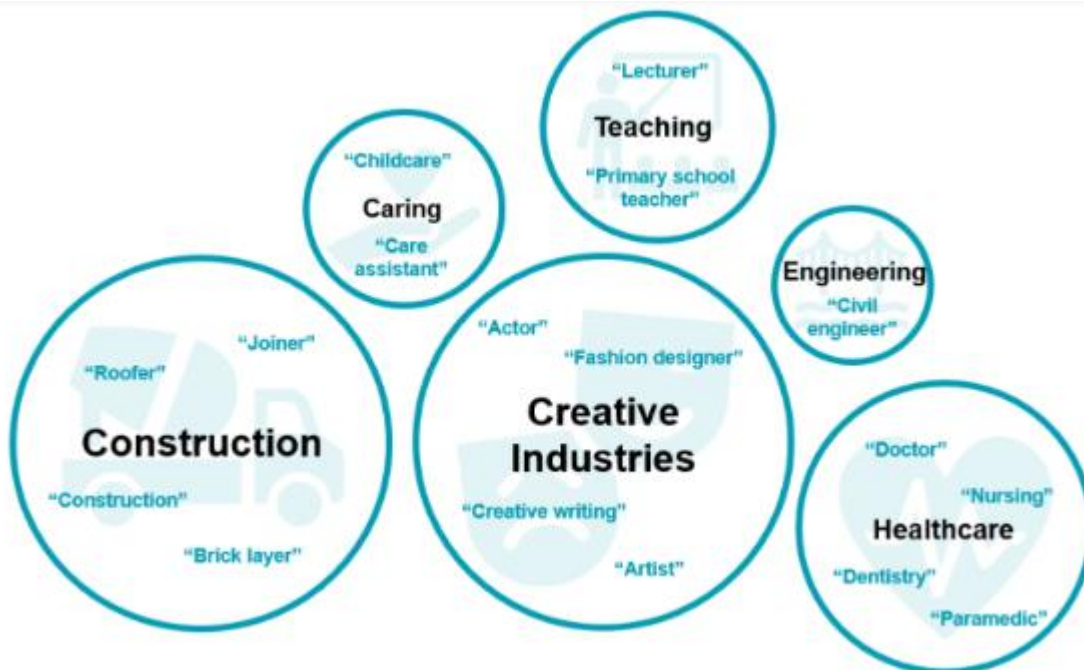


Figure 4 - Thematic analysis of young people’s responses to the question: “Thinking about the future, what is your ideal job/career?” (n=1,629) taken from [Young People’s Career Ambitions](#) (SDS 2025b)

Whilst there are some similarities to the labour market information, the largest area of interest to young people is creative industries, for which the requirement is less than half of that of healthcare (the top forecast industry in the labour market information). It can be said therefore that there is a mismatch in terms of what young people are interested in and what jobs will be available for them.

Interestingly, a [supporting infographic to the report](#) (SDS, 2025c) shows that the preferred industry depends on a range of characteristics. For example, the following infographic shows the difference between males and females:

Top Industries (Top 5, % selected)			
Female		Male	
Medicine and health	21%	Engineering	28%
Caring	17%	Construction	23%
Creative Industries	16%	Digital, computing, and IT	15%
Teaching / education	15%	Sport	12%
Media	11%	Media	10%

There are also differences in terms of ethnicity however the report has low sample numbers for this and does not disaggregate by ethnicity (only offering the categories 'white' and 'minority ethnic').

Top Industries (Top 5, % selected)			
Minority Ethnic		White	
Medicine and health	23%	Engineering	16%
Digital, computing, and IT	17%	Construction	14%
Media	16%	Creative Industries	13%
Engineering	13%	Medicine and health	12%
Creative Industries	12%	Teaching / education	12%


It also shows that there are marked differences in young people who are LGBT:

Top Industries (Top 5, % selected)			
LGBT		Non-LGBT	
Creative Industries	29%	Engineering	18%
Media	20%	Construction	15%
Digital, computing, and IT	14%	Medicine and health	13%
Caring	14%	Teaching / education	11%
Medicine and health	14%	Sport	11%


There is also a significant difference in industries selected for those from the most deprived areas (SIMD 1) compared to those from the least deprived areas (SIMD 5)

Top Industries (Top 5, % selected)			
SIMD 1		SIMD 5	
Engineering	15%	Medicine and health	18%
Construction	14%	Engineering	16%
Caring	14%	Creative Industries	14%
Medicine and health	11%	Teaching / education	12%
Creative Industries	11%	Media	11%

Care experienced children compared to non-care experienced children also show differences in their preferred industries:

 <b>Top Industries</b> (Top 5, % selected)			
CE		Not CE	
Construction	20%	Engineering	16%
Caring	12%	Creative Industries	14%
Hospitality	12%	Medicine and health	13%
Armed forces, policing or security	10%	Construction	12%
Engineering	10%	Teaching / education	11%

Lastly, learners with disabilities and those without also shows different preferences:

 <b>Top Industries</b> (Top 5, % selected)			
Disabled		Non-disabled	
Creative Industries	21%	Engineering	18%
Medicine and health	16%	Construction	15%
Caring	15%	Medicine and health	12%
Teaching / education	14%	Digital, computing, and IT	11%
Media	13%	Teaching / education	11%

The report also shows there are small differences in who each of the above groups listed as key influencers on their career with the majority listing parents and carers as their top influencers (except care experienced learners who listed careers advisors). The next most listed influencers were career advisors followed by other family members. Teachers also featured.

Finally, the factors influencing their chosen industry also vary by characteristic with most fluctuating between their ‘interests and hobbies’ and ‘the need to earn money’. ‘Qualifications achieved’ also featured highly and ‘education/training’ to a lesser extent. Interestingly, 35% of young people cited social media as an influence with Tik Tok ranking the highest followed by Instagram and YouTube. These differences highlight the importance of career education that works for and is inclusive of *all* learners, and that makes use of labour market information to help them to make informed choices. The CIC should consider this when reviewing the content and structure of each curricular area and particularly in reference to skills.

## 2.3 National Statistics

There are currently no national datasets reporting specifically on social studies. However, several national statistics - particularly in key areas like literacy, attendance, exclusions, learner destinations, and equity by deprivation - offer meaningful insights into the context in which social studies is delivered and experienced.

### 2.3.1 Literacy achievement - ACEL with deprivation breakdown

The Scottish Government's [Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence \(CfE\) Levels 2023-24](#) data shows 74% of P1, P4, and P7 pupils combined achieved expected literacy levels - the highest on record, up from 72.7% in 2022–23. Critically, data broken down by SIMD levels for combined P1, P4 & P7 pupils reveal stark inequities. In 2021-22, literacy attainment was 58% in the most deprived areas (SIMD quintile 1), compared to 79% in the least deprived areas (SIMD quintile 5) - a 21-percentage point gap ([Aberdeen City Committees](#)). Literacy skills are essential to social studies to support understanding and increase attainment. Disparities across deprivation quintiles highlight the importance of policies that support literacy development as a means of promoting equity within social studies and across the curriculum.

### 2.3.2 Attendance and persistent absence with deprivation context

Scotland's average school attendance in 2023-24 was 90.3%, down from pre-pandemic levels (around 93%). Notably, the most deprived areas (SIMD quintile 1) recorded an attendance rate of just 86.9%, compared to 93.6% in the least deprived areas ([Scottish Government](#)). Consistent attendance is vital for acquisition of knowledge and conceptual development which are at the core of the social studies curriculum. Lower attendance in areas of high deprivation likely hinders equitable access to these learning opportunities which can have a negative impact on presentation levels and attainment in social studies and across the curriculum.

### 2.3.3 School exclusions

In 2022-23, there were 11,676 school exclusions, with pupils identified as having Additional Support Needs (ASN) excluded at nearly five times the rate of their peers (rate per 1,000 pupils: 34.6 vs 7.1) ([Scottish Government](#)). Social studies often engages learners in discussions of sensitive societal issues. Exclusion disproportionately removes the voices of ASN learners, who may already be marginalised and undermines inclusive civic learning which can have a negative impact on positive outcomes and destinations for those young people who may need it the most.

## 3 International reports and comparative studies

### 3.1 International reports

In the most recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the main focuses were on mathematics, with reading and science, which limits the international comparisons which can be drawn for social studies. However, PISA 2022 also collected data on students' attitudes towards learning, including their engagement, motivation, and self-regulation. These factors are closely linked to the development of critical thinking, civic engagement, and social awareness which are all key components of social studies education. The [PISA 2022](#) findings indicate that around 60% of students feel confident in their ability to motivate themselves, approximately 50% report difficulties sustaining motivation, and over 70% admitted putting less effort into assessments than they would if grades counted, with girls generally showing higher task mastery motivation than boys. This shows the need to foster young people's intrinsic motivation and self-regulation to support critical thinking, civic engagement, and social awareness which are vital as part of a social studies education.

The [OECD's 2023 Survey on Social and Emotional Skills](#) further explored students' abilities in areas like perseverance, empathy, and emotional regulation, offering useful perspectives for understanding the development of competencies central to social studies education especially when tackling difficult and complex contexts which are covered in the curriculum. These skills are crucial for fostering active citizenship, critical thinking, and social awareness - core objectives of social studies education.

It should be noted that modern studies, a key part of the social studies curriculum, is unique to Scotland, and there is very limited international data specifically assessing this subject. As such, much of the available international evidence relates to broader social studies competencies, civic knowledge, and critical thinking skills rather than directly comparable qualifications.

### 3.2 International comparative assessments

The [OECD's Education at a Glance](#) provides some comparative data on educational outcomes across countries linking to social studies. The report highlights that civic engagement is positively related to educational attainment. Individuals with tertiary qualifications (formal qualifications after secondary school) are more likely to volunteer for not-for-profit and charitable organisations, showcasing that in OECD countries that embed civic engagement skills into their curriculum benefit from not only increased participation but also increased attainment, something which could be linked to an effective social studies curriculum.

The [OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030](#) also offers insights into the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values needed in the 21st century, highlighting competencies linked to social studies, such as critical thinking, collaboration, and responsible citizenship. The Learning Compass 2030 framework emphasises student agency, intercultural understanding, ethical values, and critical thinking - all of which align closely with the social studies curriculum. For

example, social studies supports learners to engage critically to become responsible citizens and effective contributors in society linked with the four capacities. The Learning Compass also stresses the importance of global competencies and sustainability, reinforcing the contribution of social studies to developing learners' understanding of social justice and democracy.

Comparatively, these reports highlight how Scotland's social studies curriculum (especially modern studies, with its civic and political focus) align with global priorities and are essential in future proofing young people with the skills, values and attributes needed to be successful.

## 4 Education Scotland Evidence

### 4.1 HMI evidence and reports

It is important to note that there is relatively limited HMI evidence specifically focused on social studies. Across the inspection reports analysed from 2022 to the start of 2025, references to geography, history, modern studies and social studies in general are largely descriptive rather than evaluative. Most comments document curriculum content, learning activities, or examples of practice, such as the use of digital tools or community projects, without providing detailed evaluation of the quality, impact, or outcomes of social studies learning and teaching. This suggests that while inspections capture examples of practice, there is less systematic evidence on effectiveness or impact within the curricular area, highlighting a gap in the available national inspection data for social studies.

This section summarises findings from inspection reports, summarised inspection findings (SIFs), and further inspection reports authored by His Majesty's Inspectors (HMI). The evidence focuses on social studies - geography, history, and modern studies - highlighting curriculum delivery, learning experiences, and learner engagement.

Across primary and secondary schools, inspections noted that social studies provides rich opportunities for learners to engage with their local communities, environment, and society. For example, in one school in 2023 children were observed learning about local history and traditions through partnerships with the community, including Gaelic songs, traditional stories, and musical instruments. Similarly, at another, learners developed a strong knowledge of the geography, history, and environmental significance of their island, demonstrating pride in acting as guardians of their local community.

In the BGE and senior phase, it was noted that some schools increasingly apply digital literacy, outdoor learning and sustainability practices in social studies. In 2025, children in one school used digital applications to create video presentations on discrimination, demonstrating strong digital literacy alongside social studies understanding. In another there were opportunities for learners to combine national qualifications in geography with practical experiences, such as the Duke of Edinburgh programme during residential visits, linking curriculum learning to applied skills and real-world contexts. A different school engaged learners in community initiatives, including Clean Up campaigns, connecting rural skills and path-building activities to geography and environmental studies. This demonstrates the curriculum's capacity to embed experiential learning, environmental awareness, and civic responsibility.

Across some secondary schools, inspection findings highlighted the value of social studies in supporting equalities, attainment, and progression. At a school in February 2023, staff were seen to embed aspects of equality through history, ensuring curriculum content reflected the diverse community. In another in January 2024 the report indicated that almost all learners in SIMD 1 and 2 achieved fourth level CfE in social studies, indicating the curriculum's potential to support equity in attainment.

Inspections also noted areas for improvement. In February 2023 a report noted that staffing constraints limited the school's alignment with national guidance in geography provision. While in August 2023, inspectors recommended closer collaboration between staff to ensure course availability fully reflected learners' potential in modern studies and history national qualifications.

Overall, the inspection evidence from recent years regarding social studies is so limited and largely descriptive that it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about the quality, impact, or consistency of social studies provision across Scotland. While some examples highlight strengths in connecting learning to local contexts, digital skills, equality, and sustainability, the scarcity of evaluative commentary means that the broader picture of curriculum effectiveness and learner outcomes remains unclear.

## 4.2 Education Scotland reports and evidence

### 4.2.1 Social studies 3-18 curriculum review (2013)

Education Scotland published the [social studies 3-18](#) report in September 2013. This report was the result of a series of one-day inspection and review visits across Scotland throughout 2012 to 2013, focussing on the social studies curriculum area. It identified good practice in social studies and highlighted important areas for discussion and further development.

While there have been no thematic reports on social studies in recent years, this report contains advice and guidance around what was working well in social studies at the time, as well as some areas for development which may be relevant to the CIC.

Key curricular strengths:

- Social studies is a strong and an improving area of the curriculum.
- Staff are beginning to develop approaches to ensure learners have a more coherent experience within and across the organisers. In best practice, staff develop a clear rationale for areas of study, common approaches to skills development and, where appropriate, broad themes and concepts underpinning overall social studies programmes.
- In some secondary schools, staff are planning more integrated learning experiences as they seek to provide a more coherent experience for young people.
- The use of interdisciplinary learning, drawing from experiences and outcomes across the social studies and other areas of the curriculum is increasing, particularly at primary stages. In a number of secondary stages, staff also use interdisciplinary learning approaches to provide breadth of learning before young people specialise in the senior phase.
- Staff are developing a good understanding of how the four contexts of learning contribute to children and young people's development in social studies and are beginning to plan across these four contexts.
- Schools are taking much better account of the Scottish dimension as they develop new programmes of learning.

Aspects for curricular development:

- An increasing number of teachers have translated and clustered the experiences and outcomes into a more detailed progressive programme for the development of knowledge, understanding and skills in social studies from 3 to 15.
- Transition arrangements need to be developed further in the context of social studies to support effective progression. Skills progression, in particular, needs to be more carefully planned, for example developing a better sense of chronology, good mental mapping, progression in critical thinking and analysis.
- There are issues around breadth of coverage in relation to 'people in society, business and economy' which is affecting learners' development of political literacy skills. At the early years and in primary stages, staff do not always plan for breadth well enough in this aspect of the social studies curriculum. In secondary schools' factors include the lack of clarity as

to the contribution of business education staff and, in around 20% of schools, no modern studies specialist. NB. The CIC will see 'business and economy' move to the technologies curriculum.

- Staff would benefit from more professional development focused on social studies. At the early years and primary stages staff would benefit from more opportunities to develop their knowledge across all of the subject areas within social studies. Staff at the secondary sector would benefit from widening their knowledge and understanding across each of the social subjects.
- Staff who are not specialists but who are required to teach social studies through the medium of Gaelic would benefit from career long professional learning on core aspects of social studies.

#### 4.2.2 Education Scotland surveys

In recent years, there has been limited research focused on social studies education in Scotland. To address this gap and gather up-to-date evidence, the Senior Education Officer (SEO) for social studies undertook two research exercises. These were conducted as online surveys, the first in winter 2024 and the second in spring 2025.

The first considered the issues of single teacher delivery and multilevel teaching in secondary school and had 160 respondents. Single teacher delivery is when all three social studies subjects are taught by a single teacher. This has become increasingly popular in recent years under the guise of improving the experience of S1 learners, but in fact has been about easing timetabling problems or has been a money saving exercise for many schools and local authorities.

First year of secondary school was where the most single teacher delivery took place with 46% saying this was how social studies was delivered in their schools. In S2, 34% said social studies was delivered in this way. A small minority of 3% said that single teacher delivery persisted into S3. 13% of those who responded had no single teacher delivery in their school.

The vast majority of those who responded were unhappy with the pupil experience in single teacher delivery, with 75% saying it delivered a fair or poor learning experience. This is in contrast with only 25% saying it delivered a good or very good experience. In terms of preparing learners for the senior phase an even larger majority, of 85% felt that preparation was poor or fair, with only 15% responding that preparation was good or very good for learners moving on to social studies qualifications in the senior phase. Comments about single teacher delivery included:

- Pupils perform more poorly in subject specific skills, e.g. evaluating sources in history, mapwork in geography.
- Curriculum content is watered down to allow non subject specialists to teach each other's subjects. Skills and content are not delivered in the same depth.

This research also included questions on multilevel teaching. Multilevel teaching usually takes place in the senior phase when classes have for example National 5 and Higher in the same class. Often this can be because numbers are small and a second teacher is therefore not

available, or because the timetable does not allow. Social studies teachers are used to having two levels in classes and 30% of respondents reported this. However, there are increasing incidences of more than two levels in one class, and 25% said they experienced this, with 3% saying they were expected to teach 4 levels together. 13% did not experience multilevel teaching.

The second survey was conducted with primary teachers in spring 2025 and had 66 respondents.

All of the 66 respondents considered social studies to be important in the curriculum. However, when asked about how much time they had to teach social studies, 80% said that it had gone down over the past 5 years, with 15% saying it had stayed the same, but only 5% saying it had gone up. For those who said they had less time many cited a need to spend more time on literacy and numeracy as the main reasons for the decline. However, a shortage of resources was also highlighted as an issue.

The survey also asked about which social studies subjects were most and least taught in primary schools. History came out as by far the most popular subject, with modern studies the least taught. When asked why this was the case, respondents cited issues such as resources, confidence and concerns that learners find it difficult.

The survey went on to ask about the reporting of social studies levels to pupils and parents. Only 30% provided a social studies level to parents from P1 to P7 every year. The majority, 65% never report a social studies level, with 5% saying that it tended to change from year to year.

The survey then asked if the current experiences and outcomes are helpful and a small majority at 61% felt that they were not. In addition, the respondents were asked if they collaborated with their cluster secondary school when designing their social studies framework, they were unanimous in answering, no.

Finally, the survey asked what would help in the teaching of social studies. There was a large variety of responses, but a few key themes emerged. Resources, which are up to date and engaging was a common response, as was a simplified and clarified curriculum. Also, a better consideration of how interdisciplinary learning can be included effectively. These are areas which may be addressed in the CIC process.

### 4.3 Curriculum Improvement Cycle pilot reviews

A series of pilot curriculum reviews were held by Education Scotland between February 2023 and April 2024. Their main purpose was to trial and evaluate various methodologies and engagement approaches for a future full-scale curriculum review cycle, explore views on the position of knowledge and identify key messages to inform the further development of CfE.

The pilot curriculum review for social studies took place between February and April 2023. A series of meetings were held online, attended by up to 20 participants. The review involved an examination of the experiences and outcomes to identify knowledge as it was referred to within experiences and outcomes (implicitly or explicitly).

Exploration activities included:

- Unpacking of experiences and outcomes by the SEO social studies to identify the range of knowledge implicit within the experiences and outcomes across the core social subjects.
- Reviewing of knowledge by participants invited to attend from existing national networks and subject associations (for instance the Modern Studies Association).
- The relevance and coherence of this knowledge identified across the four CfE levels was also explored.

The evaluation of the approaches taken by the social studies pilot highlighted some significant messages about the position of knowledge within the current technical framework. It was found by participants that there was a lack of clarity around the knowledge that learners were expected to have. This accords with research undertaken by Priestley & Sinemma (2014, pg. 24) where they noted in an analysis of the experiences and outcomes, “[i]n one, knowledge is the first in a list of aspirations that are described as being summed up by the experiences and outcomes. In the other, knowledge is absent in a description of what learning experiences should develop”. It also accords with the OECD reports (2015; 2021) with regard to ambiguities and gaps in knowledge.

In addition, it was identified that the approaches taken to engagement and recruitment of participants solely through online engagement was not conducive to effective dialogue and discussions.

Overall, the social studies pilot curriculum review highlighted the need for greater clarity and coherence in the articulation of knowledge within the curriculum. It also demonstrated the importance of adopting more varied and inclusive engagement approaches to enable deeper professional dialogue and more meaningful participation. These findings could provide an important evidence base for the further development of the social studies curriculum.

# 5 Stakeholder reports and reviews

## 5.1 Key Stakeholder Reports

While there are numerous stakeholders who provide vital support for social studies in terms of resources, workshops, lessons, funding, and opportunities, there is comparatively less formal published output that directly addresses the curriculum. Organisations such as museums, archives, heritage bodies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and political and civic institutions play an important role in enriching social studies through partnerships, visits, and learning resources, but these contributions are not always captured in formal evaluations or reports. This section therefore draws on a small number of published reviews and consultations, with a particular emphasis on the views of children and young people as key stakeholders in the ongoing CIC process.

Children and young people's perspectives are vital in shaping the social studies curriculum. Their lived experiences, priorities, and ideas are essential to understanding how social studies can remain relevant and impactful. This section highlights specific reports where children and young people have been consulted on aspects most closely aligned to social studies, including their sense of identity, rights, citizenship, and engagement with local and global issues. This can be seen in the ['Breaking the Mould'](#) principles and associated [Calls to Action](#), in which children and young people, as key stakeholders, emphasise the importance of a curriculum that addresses the origins and impacts of discrimination, inequality and racism.

The [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCRC\)](#) reinforces the importance of involving children in decisions that affect them, with Article 12 making clear their right to express views freely and be heard in matters impacting their lives and education. In the context of social studies, this means ensuring that learners have genuine opportunities to shape the way the curriculum is made and to see their own identities, cultures, and communities reflected in the curriculum. [The Learner Participation in Educational Settings \(3-18\) guidance](#) (Education Scotland, 2023) highlights how effective learner participation can make education more relevant and valuable, a principle that is particularly pertinent to social studies where the curriculum is grounded in enquiry, critical thinking, and civic engagement.

The report [Consulting with Children and Young People](#) (Scottish Government, 2022) undertaken as part of the wider [Putting Learners at the Centre](#) review led by Professor Ken Muir, provides direct insight into children and young people's views on the future of Scottish education. For social studies, this evidence is particularly significant in relation to their calls for respect for cultural identity, inclusion, and the importance of diverse perspectives in the curriculum.

Similarly, the [All Learners in Scotland Matter: National Discussion on Education final report](#) (Scottish Government, 2023) reinforces the central role of learners in shaping educational reform. Respondents placed emphasis on climate change, diversity, equality, rights, and preparing for uncertain futures - all of which are at the heart of social studies. These policies highlight importance of ensuring that curriculum innovation in social studies is co-designed with learner's

views, so that it reflects their lived realities, and equips them with the knowledge and skills required for active citizenship.

In addition to learner perspectives, other stakeholders also contribute to shaping the social studies landscape. The [Museums Galleries Scotland \(MGS\) Business Plan 2023–2026](#) positions museums and galleries as active partners in education, committing to expand relationships with schools, support professional learning, and engage directly with curriculum change. The plan highlights priorities such as inclusive practice, anti-racist approaches, human rights, and place-based learning - areas which closely align with the values and aims of social studies in Scotland. This illustrates how cultural institutions can act as key collaborators in enriching social studies learning and ensuring it reflects Scotland's diverse communities and heritage.

## 5.2 Subject Associations

Subject associations are vital partners in the social studies curriculum and could play a key role in the CIC. They represent subject experts, amplify practitioner voices in national discussions, and support the profession through resources, conferences, and professional learning. Their involvement helps ensure that curriculum developments are both ambitious and grounded in classroom reality which is even more vitally important when considering these organisations are run voluntarily and are not funded by the Scottish Government.

### 5.2.1 Geography

The Scottish Association of Geography Teachers (SAGT) is a practitioner-led voluntary body representing geography teachers nationwide. It works to support teacher professional growth through conferences, resources, and collaboration with SQA, Education Scotland, and Royal Scottish Geographical Society (RSGS). Its role in shaping subject status, influencing consultations, and distributing pedagogical resources makes it a vital voice for ensuring that geography remains robust and responsive to classroom realities.

Geography education in Scotland also receives strong support from The Royal Scottish Geographical Society (RSGS) which is a charity that operates through policy engagement, resource provision, and convening professional dialogue. RSGS published the [2023 Geography in Scottish Education – Where Do We Go From Here?](#), a report offering strategic provocations on how geography can assert a more compelling presence in Scottish schools (RSGS, 2023). RSGS also operates a dedicated Schools Education programme, collaborating with SAGT, Education Scotland and other partners to deliver CPD, resources, and advocacy for geography's role within social studies.

Alongside these organisations, the [Mapping the Landscape of Scottish Geography survey](#) (2025) provided a valuable snapshot of the current state of geography education in Scotland. It collated the views of teachers on subject uptake, curriculum design, resources, and professional support. The survey highlights persistent challenges, including concerns about the long-term decline in presentation numbers at National 5 and Higher, resource pressures, and the need for stronger recognition of geography's contribution to interdisciplinary learning and skills development. These findings suggest that targeted action to strengthen geography's sustainability and ensure equity of provision within social studies would be beneficial.

Together, RSGS, SAGT, and recent survey evidence provide critical professional intelligence to the CIC. They bring forward both practitioner experience and sector-wide insight, helping to surface trends in subject uptake, curriculum relevance, and professional learning needs that are essential to curriculum review.

### 5.2.2 History

The main practitioner association supporting history education in Scotland is the Scottish Association of the Teachers of History (SATH). It plays a central role in representing history teachers, supporting professional learning, and advocating for the value of history within the social studies curriculum.

SATH's current priorities reflect wider curriculum shifts towards inclusivity and critical engagement with Scotland's past. The association has been actively involved in exploring diverse histories and the legacy of the British Empire, work which is evident through its involvement in projects such as the *Teaching Slavery in Scotland (TSS)* initiative and the *Migration & Empire: Teaching the Impact of Scots Settlers (METISS)* project. These projects provide teachers with resources and professional dialogue to better integrate global perspectives, empire, and race into classroom practice - principles that also underpin the CIC.

This is reinforced by the [Survey of Secondary History in Scotland](#) (2021), which gathered teachers' views on the subject's status, resources, and challenges. The survey found strong support among practitioners for broadening the scope of history to include underrepresented voices and diverse narratives, while also identifying concerns about subject uptake and workload pressures (Survey of Secondary History in Scotland, 2021).

Taken together, SATH's projects and survey evidence demonstrate the profession's commitment to ensuring that history education in Scotland is both academically rigorous and socially relevant. They highlight the importance of supporting teachers to navigate sensitive and contested topics while ensuring learners engage critically with Scotland's role in global history. These insights provide valuable evidence for the CIC, particularly in ensuring that history remains a vital, inclusive, and forward-looking part of social studies.

### 5.2.3 Modern Studies

The main practitioner body for Modern Studies is the Modern Studies Association (MSA), which provides subject-specific support through conferences, resources, and professional learning opportunities. It acts as a national voice for modern studies teachers, advocating for the subject's unique role in developing political literacy, citizenship, and critical engagement with current social and political issues. The MSA ensures that practitioner perspectives inform national discussions on curriculum design and assessment, helping to maintain modern studies as a distinctive and valued element of social studies.

The Modern Studies, Sociology and Politics Collaborative complements the MSA by offering a practitioner-led platform for resource sharing, professional dialogue, and collective problem-solving. The collaborative carried a survey in 2025 which gathered responses from teachers across Scotland and provided valuable insight into how modern studies is currently delivered, the issues taught, and teacher confidence in addressing complex topics.

The survey found that in most schools which deliver modern studies the core topics are democracy, political systems, human rights, and inequality. However, teachers reported more limited coverage of contemporary global issues such as migration and current conflicts, citing sensitivities, complexity, and lack of national guidance. While overall teacher confidence in teaching about prejudice, discrimination, and rights was high, concerns were raised about divisive debates, the challenge of maintaining neutrality, and the risk of causing distress for pupils with lived experience of these issues.

These findings suggest that while modern studies is strong in promoting democracy and rights, the curriculum review process could offer scope to make the subject more responsive to global issues, ensure more consistent provision across schools and stages, and align content more closely with contemporary social and political debates. This highlights that there is an opportunity to reassert the unique contribution of modern studies, ensuring it remains a distinctive, well-supported subject that prepares young people to engage critically, confidently, and inclusively with Scotland's democratic life and the wider world.

#### 5.2.4 Conclusion

Taken together, the evidence from geography, history, and modern studies associations highlights the essential role these professional, volunteer led bodies play in supporting high-quality social studies education despite a lack of funding. Their surveys and projects highlight and evidence shared challenges, including declining uptake in some subjects, the need to address sensitive or contested issues with confidence, and ensuring equity of provision across schools. For the CIC, the collective voices of these associations are important in shaping a curriculum that is ambitious, inclusive, and relevant, while also being firmly grounded in the realities of classroom delivery.

### 5.3 Professional Associations

While specific curriculum-focused evidence from professional associations and teacher unions is limited in relation to social studies, it is important to acknowledge that organisations such as the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), School Leaders Scotland (SLS), the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT), and the Scottish Secondary Teachers' Association (SSTA) regularly publish a wide range of valuable materials. These include national surveys and reports on issues such as staff workload, professional learning, equality, and learner support. While these publications contribute meaningfully to professional practice and to the wider educational landscape, they do not typically address the social studies curriculum directly in terms of structure, content, or learner experiences.

One exception is an EIS funded action research project specifically focused on geography in social studies. The report [Action Research Grant: National 5 Geography - 2017 to 2018](#) explored strategies to improve attainment and learner engagement in national 5 geography. The project trialled several approaches, including the use of active learning strategies, differentiated support, and formative assessment, and found that targeted intervention and feedback improved learners' confidence in handling command words and exam-style questions. Importantly, the report also highlighted the decline in the number of presentations in geography at national 5 level, noting this as a pressing concern for sustaining the subject's position within the curriculum. This finding suggests that as part of curriculum review it could be beneficial to examine subject uptake, learner choice, and equity of provision.

## 5.4 Other relevant reports and reviews

### 5.4.1 Rich encounters with the past: history subject report (OFSTED, 2023)

Published by OFSTED in 2023, this [thematic report](#) draws on findings from routine inspections and research visits to 50 schools in England, carried out between July 2022 and April 2023. The report summarises key findings from the primary and secondary schools visited and shares recommendations for history teaching in England. In terms of curriculum in England, it recommends that:

- Leaders and teachers understand the generative power of knowledge in history: that is, how layers of historical knowledge interact so that children and young peoples' knowledge of other past societies, of recurring terms, concepts and phenomena and of broader chronological frameworks help them to learn more easily about other topics.
- The curriculum gives children and young people broad and rich encounters with the past, through different times, places and societies, different people, groups and experiences, and through the lenses of political, social, economic and cultural history.
- The curriculum enables children and young people to develop meaningful and increasingly complex knowledge about how historians and others study the past and construct their accounts (disciplinary knowledge).
- The curriculum identifies the most important concepts and content that can support children and young people in future learning. Curriculum design in history is non-linear but at every point in the curriculum there is important knowledge that pupils need to know in order to make sense of what they are learning. Therefore, leaders and teachers must make informed choices about what core knowledge to emphasise to support future learning – immediate topic knowledge, chronological overviews and recurring concepts are all essential.
- The curriculum is supported by systems and policies. Leaders make sure there is sufficient time to teach a broad and ambitious history curriculum, they plan the development of teachers' knowledge of the content they teach and of how to teach history effectively, and they assure the quality of history education by meaningfully assessing the quality of what children and young people learn and remember over time.

In the absence of a recent thematic report on history teaching in Scotland the recommendations made by OFSTED in relation to the history curriculum in England may be of interest to the work of the CIC in terms of looking outwards.

### 5.4.2 Getting our bearings: geography subject report (OFSTED, 2023)

Published by OFSTED in 2023, this [thematic report](#) draws on findings from routine inspections and research visits to 50 schools in England, carried out between July 2022 and April 2023. The report summarises key findings from the primary and secondary schools visited and shares recommendations for geography teaching in England. In terms of curriculum in England, it recommends that:

- Pupils should build on knowledge, not only within a topic but over a series of topics, so that they can apply what they have learned in different scenarios.
  - At the secondary phase, the same level of thought should be given to the curriculum at key stages 4 and 5 as is given at other key stages. Leaders should consider how to sequence the content of exam specifications in a way that allows pupils to develop a fuller understanding of the subject over time. For example, they could consider the way that places are taught in different contexts over the curriculum or look at geographical concepts that run across topics.
  - Pupils learn about places in an appropriately nuanced and complex way. They should encounter the same places at different times and in different contexts or look at a place through a range of geographical lenses. Pupils should have some opportunities for regional as well as thematic studies.
  - Procedural knowledge should be planned into the curriculum in the same way as substantive knowledge, so that pupils make progress in their ability to use different geographical skills. In secondary schools, this should include the use of GIS.
  - Pupils should be taught about fieldwork. Pupils should know how to collect, present and analyse data, and how to reach and evaluate conclusions based on this data. Some of this should include first-hand experience of collecting data. Pupils should get better at carrying out fieldwork over time. This will make sure that pupils who continue to A level are better prepared for geographical investigation, as they will have experienced a wider range of fieldwork techniques in different settings.
  - There is a planned transition between key stages. Teachers should plan their respective curriculums to support effective transition from EYFS into key stage 1, key stage 1 into key stage 2 and key stage 2 into key stage 3, so that content is not repeated across key stages.
- In the absence of a recent thematic report on geography teaching in Scotland the recommendations made by OFSTED in relation to the geography curriculum in England may be of interest to the work of the CIC in terms of looking outwards.

While the curriculum and accountability arrangements in England differ significantly from those in Scotland, these reports are of interest in providing an external perspective on curriculum design, coherence and progression, with the understanding that not all aspects will be directly relevant or transferable to the Scottish context.

# 6 Academic Research

## 6.1 Social Studies

Academic research provides an important evidence base for understanding the strengths, challenges and future direction of the social studies curriculum. There is a substantial body of scholarship on history and geography education, including both Scottish and international studies, which offers valuable comparative insights. However, research on modern studies is far more limited, reflecting its relatively recent development and its status as a subject unique to Scotland. This uneven distribution of research evidence is further complicated by international variation in how “social studies” is defined, with different countries grouping subjects such as history, geography, civics and politics in diverse ways.

Social studies as an area of research, rather than social sciences, came to the fore following its definition as a curriculum area in CfE. The fifth edition of *Scottish Education* (2018) includes a chapter on social studies by Hancock et al within the primary education section of the publication. This chapter examines the nature of social studies in the Scottish context and considers how the curricular disciplines of geography, history and modern studies work together in an interdisciplinary manner to promote connected learning for children and young people. It emphasises the significance of social studies as a curriculum area and highlights its contribution to the development of informed, critical and engaged young people.

A further study that considers social studies as a curricular area is ‘*The influence of the current national focus on literacy and numeracy on the teaching of social studies in Scottish primary schools.*’ (Robertson, 2023). This study uses two research methods: a focus group of primary senior managers from one local authority and a national online survey. It examines the prevailing climate of performativity and highlights concerns about the time available for social studies in primary schools, arising from pressures on head teachers to improve attainment in literacy and numeracy. The majority of teachers in the study rate social studies as an important area for learners; however, they perceive that it is not prioritised at local or national level. The study provides clear evidence that head teachers play a pivotal role in enabling social studies, particularly by supporting its use as a context for literacy and numeracy learning, thereby creating work that is engaging and motivating for learners. For the CIC, the study raises questions about how national and local priorities interact to support or constrain the delivery of social studies, particularly at the primary stage.

## 6.2 Geography

Much of the recent research on geography in Scottish schools focuses on concerns about the subject's position and future, the integration of geography within the social studies curriculum and its implications for geographical content, and the decline in subject specialism of teachers for learners.

Since the inception of CfE, concerns have been raised about the extent to which geography aligns with traditional definitions of social studies, given its inclusion of both human and physical geography. There is a risk that its positioning within social studies may lead to a relative neglect of physical geography in favour of more human concepts. Catling and Willy (2018) suggest that teaching geography within an integrated social studies curriculum can limit both the amount and complexity of geography taught and may fail “to provide a clear focus on the key ideas, knowledge and skills of geography (Catling and Willy, 2018, pg.13). More recent research by Stewart (2022), drawing on the perspectives of Scottish geography teachers, raises related concerns about teacher expertise and confidence in teaching physical geography where teachers' backgrounds are in the social sciences. For the CIC, this evidence points to the importance of clarity in how geographical knowledge and skills are articulated and supported, particularly in relation to physical geography.

Clare McAlister's contribution to the fourth edition of *Scottish Education* (2013) considers the distinctive role of geography in helping young people understand the world and how it is changing. She highlights the growing number of curriculum areas making connections with geography under the new curriculum structure, particularly in relation to sustainability and global citizenship, and identifies interdisciplinary learning as a natural opportunity for the subject. However, McAlister also notes potential challenges for the future of geography arising from faculty structures and the development of integrated courses. For the CIC, this analysis reinforces the importance of balancing interdisciplinary opportunities with the need to maintain geography's distinct contribution as a subject.

In the fifth edition of *Scottish Education* (2018), Ashley Fenwick examines the place of geography within both the BGE and the senior phase. A light-touch assessment of the first years of the new curriculum suggests that natural opportunities for interdisciplinary learning have emerged. At the same time, Fenwick identifies continuing concerns relating to faculty structures, integrated courses, and the extent to which the BGE prepares learners effectively for senior phase qualifications. With regard to the senior phase, she highlights controversy surrounding the content of the new higher course, the introduction of an assignment, and increased demands on literacy. For the CIC, this raises questions about curriculum coherence and progression, particularly how experiences in the BGE support readiness for senior phase geography.

More recent work has been published in the *Scottish Geographical Journal*. Two articles by Selmes et al in 2022 and 2023 explore uptake and attainment in geography, with the latter paper suggesting some grounds for optimism in both areas at the time of publication. However, Selmes' subsequent work (2025) highlights ongoing challenges, noting that while pupil uptake is increasing, there are concerns about recruitment to initial teacher education (ITE) and high attrition rates among trainee teachers. Taken together, these issues have resulted in little overall

growth in the number of geography teachers and mean that the number of geography teachers who are not subject specialists remain a concern. For the CIC, this underscores the importance of subject expertise in sustaining high-quality geography provision.

The most recent contribution by Hammond et al (2024), *Geography in the broad general education in Scotland: tensions, opportunities and suggestions for the future*, returns to the question of geography's place within social studies. Taken together, this body of research highlights tensions in geography education between subject integrity and interdisciplinary approaches. While there are some signs of recovery in pupil uptake and attainment, concerns remain around subject expertise and teacher confidence. For the CIC, the evidence points to the importance of ensuring clarity around the distinctive knowledge and skills of geography, alongside consideration of how the subject is positioned and supported across the BGE and into the senior phase.

## 6.3 History

Academic research on history education in Scotland provides a rich evidence base for understanding the discipline's distinctive role within social studies. These papers explore how history develops young people's understanding of the world, while highlighting the importance of disciplinary rigour, curricular coherence and teacher agency.

*The Position of History Education in Scottish Schools* (2010) by Peter Hillis discusses history's place in the curriculum and the debates surrounding course content. Firstly, Hillis develops a strong rationale for history education, emphasising its distinctive role in helping learners understand the present and anticipate the future through an awareness of historical processes and change. He contends that factual knowledge alone is insufficient without an understanding of history as a discipline, where an understanding of evidence and interpretations of the past help learners understand the nature of our knowledge both of the past and the present. Secondly, Hillis argues that the current fragmented curriculum, where the 'random selection of topics' (a weakness of CfE identified by Hillis), limits learners' ability to form a coherent picture of the past and so understand the present. To resolve this, Hillis proposes a more coherent framework built around thematic narratives such as 'power' and 'democracy', combining structure with teacher flexibility. For the CIC, this underscores the need for conceptual depth and coherence in history education to strengthen young people's understanding of the world.

Peter Lee's *History Education and Historical Literacy* (2011) argues that history education should be redefined around the concept of historical literacy. Lee maintains that history must be valued as a way of seeing the world and sees the divide between 'skills' and 'knowledge' as problematic. He argues that history's purpose is to help learners say something valid about the past and understand their place in time by linking past, present and future through conceptual understanding. Lee goes on to identify three components of historical literacy: understanding the discipline of history and the key concepts that make knowledge of the past possible; developing ethical dispositions such as a concern for the truth and valid argument, and respect for people in the past; and constructing a coherent 'usable past' to orient oneself in time through access to a range of substantive concepts (what is commonly called the content of history). For the CIC, this suggests that history education should go beyond information or skills acquisition to develop young people who can make meaningful sense of the past in relation to the present.

In the fourth edition of *Scottish Education* (2013), Neil McLennan seeks to provide a recent history of the subject to date within the context of the new curriculum and changes to national qualifications. McLennan presents the aims for history education as articulated by the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) history working group, which provide the core essentials for moving forward into CfE. He argues that the positive impact of the subject is not yet fully embedded across Scotland, with learners' experiences remaining uneven and inconsistent. McLennan further notes that when history is taught by non-specialists it may lack the breadth, depth and application which would be desirable. However, he concludes on a positive note, expressing confidence that the curricular changes, alongside the professional expertise of history teachers, offer the potential to provide high-quality historical learning experiences for pupils. For the CIC, McLennan's account emphasises the need to address variability in learners' experiences and to

strengthen subject-specialist provision if the aspirations for history education within CfE are to be realised.

Joseph Smith's *What Remains of History? Historical Epistemology and Historical Understanding in Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence* (2016) critiques how historical knowledge is framed within the primary and broad general education phases of CfE. Smith argues that embedding history within the wider social studies area as 'People, Past Events and Societies' misunderstands its distinctive disciplinary identity. He calls for recognition of history's unique contribution – its power to transform understanding through evidence and encounters with the unfamiliar. Drawing on international scholarship, Smith contrasts the unhelpful 'skills versus content' divide with a disciplinary model that integrates *substantive knowledge* (knowing that) and *procedural knowledge* (knowing how). He argues that history education must prioritise procedural concepts as these provide the framework through which historical understanding can progress and deepen. For Smith, history's disciplinary uniqueness lies in its epistemology: the past has no tangible existence and can only be known through the critical interpretation of relics and records, transformed into evidence. Misframing history, he argues, risks diluting these epistemic principles, shaping learners' conceptions of the subject as generic skills training rather than disciplined inquiry. Smith concludes that a disciplinary approach to history education not only safeguards its intellectual integrity but also advances the broader aims of CfE. By helping young people orient themselves in time and imagine what other futures might be possible, history contributes to the four capacities. For the CIC, Smith's paper highlights the importance of reaffirming history's disciplinary integrity within the social studies curriculum.

In the fifth edition of *Scottish Education* (2018), Smith contributes a reflective commentary on the place of history education during the first five years of CfE. Smith highlights a number of challenges faced by history and history teachers, particularly the lack of clarity within the experiences and outcomes and the resulting concerns about how effectively learners are prepared for the senior phase. Turning specifically to the senior phase, Smith notes that, despite strong uptake of history, teachers expressed concerns about the "excessive content, low status accorded to National 4 and a prescriptive examination mark scheme at National 5" (Smith, 2018. pg.442). Smith also foregrounds the rebalancing of the curriculum towards the teaching of Scottish history, in comparison to the previous 5-14 curriculum in which Scottish history could be considered a lower priority. Finally, in terms of assessment in the BGE, Smith writes of concerns around the use of experiences and outcomes and the benchmarks in considering how children are progressing in their historical learning. For the CIC, Smith's reflections underline tensions between curricular ambition, assessment practices and coherence across stages in Scottish history education.

Another paper by Smith, *Curriculum Coherence and Teachers' Decision-Making in Scottish High School History Syllabi* (2019), examines how teachers use the autonomy afforded by CfE to design school-level history programmes. Smith finds that, without clear theoretical frameworks on the nature and purpose of historical knowledge, many schools base content choices on pragmatic factors such as the interests of learners, teacher preference, timetabling, and/or senior phase preparation. This has led to a fragmented curriculum dominated by episodic depth studies with little chronological coherence. He argues that, while teachers have autonomy, they often

lack access to the professional and theoretical debates needed to create conceptually connected programmes. For the CIC, Smith's findings highlight the importance of strengthening professional learning and research engagement, ensuring teachers are supported to act as informed curriculum-makers capable of designing purposeful and coherent history curricula.

Thorp and Persson's *On Historical Thinking and the History Educational Challenge* (2020) explores the cognitive competencies underpinning historical thinking, drawing on influential Canadian research. They discuss Seixas's six key concepts – significance, evidence, continuity and change, cause and consequence, perspective-taking and ethics. Building on this, Thorp and Persson examine Lévesque's distinction between *substantive knowledge* (factual content) and *disciplinary knowledge* (how historical understanding is constructed), noting a concern that history teaching often overemphasises the former. They argue, however, that disciplinary rigour must be balanced with compelling narrative content, since 'a truly humanising history education' requires both dimensions to coexist, equipping learners with the skills to critically assess historical accounts while also encountering narratives that provoke curiosity and ethical reflection. For the CIC, this research highlights the need for a history curriculum that develops young people's disciplinary understanding while preserving the richness of historical narrative.

Smith, Harris and Burn's *History Teachers as Curriculum-Makers in Policy and Practice: Quantitative Insights from England and Scotland* (2025) examines how teachers in both countries use their curricular autonomy, particularly amid calls for greater diversification. Their study finds that, although Scottish teachers are more explicitly framed as 'curriculum-makers' in policy, English teachers are more likely to have diversified their curricular content. The authors attribute this to contextual factors such as demographic diversity, inspection regimes and professional networks, which exert more influence than formal policy. Within the Scottish context, Smith et al note that the flexibility afforded by CfE has at times resulted in a fragmented, episodic and narrow approach to history teaching. However, they also highlight examples of teachers who deliberately prioritise substantive content and coherence, seeking to help students construct a more connected understanding of the past. For the CIC, these findings underline the need to consider how best to balance professional autonomy with curricular coherence – ensuring that history teachers have both the freedom and the support to design inclusive and conceptually connected programmes.

The body of research above demonstrates that history education occupies a distinctive and essential place within Scotland's social studies curriculum. Academics agree that the value of history lies in its disciplinary integrity and learners should develop both substantive and procedural knowledge. However, under CfE, while teachers enjoy significant autonomy, the absence of shared frameworks and theoretical grounding can lead to fragmented, episodic curricula that may limit learners' ability to develop coherent understandings of the past. The CIC could provide an opportunity to consider the importance of supporting teachers as informed curriculum-makers through access to research, professional dialogue and sustained professional learning. A coherent, conceptually rich history curriculum will strengthen both disciplinary understanding and the broader educational ambition of developing young people's understanding of the world.

## 6.4 Modern Studies

While modern studies has a comparatively limited academic research base in comparison with history and geography, a number of studies provide valuable insights into its distinctive contribution to Scottish education. Collectively, this research highlights the subject's role in developing political literacy, democratic engagement and citizenship, while also examining its conceptual foundations and effectiveness.

Henry Maitles' early work, *Political Education in Scotland: An Assessment of Effectiveness* (2000), offers one of the first systematic evaluations of the impact of modern studies. The study finds that the subject enhances young people's political knowledge and engagement when compared with peers who have not studied modern studies. Although now dated, this work provides an important baseline, demonstrating the subject's long-term impact and reinforcing the need for contemporary research that considers current political and social challenges.

Maitles also contributes to the fourth edition of *Scottish Education* (2013), where he reflects on the development of modern studies and its increasing parity with other social studies subjects. Drawing on research, he notes a marked difference in pupils studying modern studies in terms of their knowledge and political interest. He highlights opportunities created by CfE, including the introduction of modern studies at the primary stage and the requirement for secondary schools to consider delivery in contexts where no specialist teacher is in post. However, Maitles raises concerns about the implementation of a common secondary social studies course, particularly where modern studies is taught by non-specialists or where opportunities for professional dialogue and subject-specific development are limited. For the CIC, this evidence underlines the importance of subject expertise and professional support in sustaining the quality and impact of modern studies provision.

Sarah Proctor contributes to the fifth edition of *Scottish Education* (2018), where she examines the values and purposes of modern studies and explores factors contributing to its increasing popularity. In relation to the BGE, she suggests that the curriculum is becoming more Scotland-centric and argues that a stronger global focus may be beneficial. She also considers faculty structures and levels of integration across the social studies curriculum area, alongside the positioning of modern studies as a subject in its own right. For the CIC, Proctor's analysis reinforces the importance of balancing national and global perspectives, and of maintaining clarity around the status and coherence of modern studies within wider curriculum structures.

Joseph Smith's article, *Modernism, modernity and contemporality: conceptualizing the modern in Scotland's Modern Studies* (2024), explores the intellectual underpinnings of the subject and how the concept of the "modern" is framed in the curriculum. The study argues that modern studies has historically drawn on ideas of modernity to position itself as forward-looking and relevant to contemporary society. For the CIC, this perspective highlights the importance of ensuring the subject continues to adapt to changing social and political contexts, while remaining conceptually coherent and grounded in its distinct Scottish identity.

In *'They're out to line their own pockets!': can the teaching of political literacy counter the democratic deficit? The experience of Modern Studies in Scotland* (2005), Maitles examines how

modern studies addresses political disengagement and mistrust among young people. The study demonstrates that the subject supports learners in developing a more nuanced understanding of political processes and builds the skills required to challenge cynicism. For the CIC, this reinforces the case for maintaining and strengthening modern studies' focus on critical thinking and political literacy, particularly in the context of ongoing challenges relating to misinformation, low voter turnout and levels of civic trust.

Looking outward, Joshua A. Douglas's *The Loch Ness Monster, Haggis, and a Lower Voting Age: What America Can Learn from Scotland* (2021) highlights Scotland's distinctive approach to political education, particularly through modern studies, and its influence on debates such as lowering the voting age. By positioning Scotland as a model for other nations, the article reinforces the subject's role in fostering active citizenship. This international recognition supports the CIC's aim of ensuring modern studies remains globally relevant while rooted in the Scottish democratic context, while also raising questions about how the subject might be framed to extend its reach.

Finally, *Citizenship education in the United Kingdom: Comparing England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales* (2022) places Scotland's approach within a wider UK context. The paper highlights how Scotland's model, grounded in modern studies, differs from the statutory frameworks in England and Wales, placing greater emphasis on democratic participation rather than knowledge transmission alone. For the CIC, these findings suggest that Scotland can build on its strengths in participatory political education, while also reflecting on lessons from elsewhere in relation to coherence and consistency of provision.

Taken together, this body of research demonstrates that modern studies is both distinctive and impactful, with clear strengths in developing political literacy, citizenship and democratic participation. For the CIC, the key challenge lies in ensuring that the subject continues to evolve in response to contemporary issues while remaining consistently accessible across all ages and stages. However, there remains a significant lack of recent, comprehensive research that considers modern studies across the full 3-18 curriculum, with much of the existing evidence focused narrowly on the senior phase, examinations and democratic education. Addressing these gaps will be critical to supporting the future development of modern studies.

## 6.5 Conclusions

Taken together, the academic literature highlights the distinctive contributions of geography, history and modern studies within social studies, while also revealing common challenges relating to coherence, progression and subject expertise. Across all three disciplines, research consistently emphasises the importance of disciplinary knowledge and ways of thinking, with concerns that integrated or broad curricular approaches can dilute subject depth if not carefully designed and supported. At the same time, there is evidence that interdisciplinary learning can enhance relevance, engagement and connections in learning when disciplinary integrity is maintained.

A recurring theme across the research is the central role of teacher expertise and professional judgement. Studies in geography and history raise concerns about non-specialist teaching and uneven learner experiences, while research in modern studies highlights the impact of subject expertise on political literacy and democratic engagement. Across the literature, teachers are positioned as key curriculum-makers; however, the absence of shared frameworks, theoretical grounding or sustained professional dialogue can result in fragmented curricula and variability in learners' experiences.

In contrast, more recent research by Quirke et al. (2025) offers insight into how integrative approaches might be strengthened through professional learning. Their study of transdisciplinary "Immersion Days" in initial teacher education for geography, history and modern studies reflects the practical reality that many teachers are required to teach beyond their subject specialism, particularly in the BGE due to ongoing educational constraints. While highlighting the benefits of integrated and collaborative approaches, the study also reinforces the continued importance of depth in subject specialism, especially when addressing complex and sensitive issues such as anti-racism, decolonisation, global citizenship and climate change.

For the CIC, this body of research suggests that future consideration of the social studies curriculum must carefully balance disciplinary integrity with opportunities for integration. Ensuring clarity around subject-specific knowledge and concepts, supporting teachers through high-quality professional learning, and recognising the realities of teaching across disciplines will be central to sustaining coherence, equity and ambition across the 3-18 social studies curriculum.

## 7 Future Trends

This section aims to use evidence and predictions available to outline future global trends, relating these to the likely impact on Scotland and its education system. Given that one of the aims of the CIC is to co-create a future-oriented curriculum, the trends in this section, whilst not certain, offer some insights for consideration.

Some of the challenges facing the world, common to many future looking reports and analyses include:

- Rising global conflict (OECD, 2025a; PWC, 2024; Scottish Government, 2025)
- Climate change, biodiversity loss and reduced food security (OECD 2025a&b; Patton et al., 2016; Royal Society of Edinburgh, 2024; PWC, 2024; Scottish Government, 2025)
- Rise in mental health concerns and obesity (especially in young people) (OECD, 2025a; Patton et al., 2016; PWC, 2024; Scottish Government, 2025)
- Aging populations (PWC, 2024; Scottish Government, 2025)
- Technological disruption and polarisation via increased used of AI and emerging technologies (OECD 2025a; PWC, 2024; Royal Society of Edinburgh, 2024; Scottish Government, 2025)
- Widening inequalities (including concentration of wealth, social instability and health inequalities) (OECD, 2020; OECD 2025a; Patton et al., 2016; PWC, 2024; Scottish Government 2025)
- Rising costs of living (World Economic Foundation, 2025).

It is also important to note that trends identified are likely to affect children and young people differently, or disproportionately, compared with impacts for older generations. This is, in part, because children and young people must live with the outcomes of identified trends for longer, and the long-term future has particular importance for those who are youngest now (Scottish Government, 2025). They are increasingly exposed to conflict, displacement, environmental degradation, and unregulated commercial exploitation, especially in digital and food environments as well as being the first generation to grow up under the ‘shadow of climate change’ (Patton et al., 2016).

Young people may also experience societal transformations differently from older generations because they are often at the leading edge of change or technology adoption. The trends will also have differential impacts for different equalities groups. Intersecting inequalities and disadvantage may reduce resilience or the ability of both households and communities to adapt to future challenges, or to take advantage of future opportunities. In many cases the trends have the potential to drive and deepen inequalities still further (Scottish Government, 2025).

Despite these challenges, there are also opportunities for a future-oriented curriculum:

- Curriculum flexibility and personalisation - a modern curriculum that is fit for purpose, meets individual aspirations and delivers a just society that meets climate goals and achieves strong economic future (OECD, 2020; Royal Society of Edinburgh, 2024)
- Learner agency and co-agency – ownership of their learning and being able to navigate uncertainty (OECD, 2020; Patton et al., 2016)
- Empowerment - Education is positioned as a key driver for enabling individuals and communities to understand environmental challenges and take informed, responsible action (OECD, 2025b)
- Bodies and minds - the need for socio-emotional learning, digital wellbeing, and health literacy across all age groups (OECD 2025a; Patton et al., 2016)
- Transformative competencies - go beyond subject knowledge to include attitudes, ethics, and values allowing learners to create new value, reconcile tensions and dilemmas, and take responsibility (OECD, 2020)
- Skills such as AI and big data; analytical thinking; creative thinking; resilience, flexibility and agility; and technological literacy are not only considered critical now but are also projected to become even more important (OECD, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2025) as well as green skills (OECD, 2025b)
- Continued relevance of human-centric skills amid rapid technological advances - leadership and social influence, curiosity and lifelong learning, systems thinking, talent management, and motivation and self-awareness considered important for this (World Economic Forum, 2025)
- Equity and Inclusion - Curriculum design must address widening inequalities (for example via intercultural understanding) and ensure access to meaningful learning for all, regardless of background or circumstance (OECD, 2020; OECD, 2025a)
- Broader Educational Goals- Education should promote individual and collective wellbeing, sustainability, and social cohesion—not just academic achievement or economic productivity. Therefore, encouraging society to value all educational pathways and destinations (OECD, 2020; Royal Society of Edinburgh, 2024)

These trends reflect a global shift toward education systems that are necessarily more adaptive, inclusive, and future-oriented - principles that align closely with Scotland's CIC. They encourage co-creation and learner agency as well as reflecting learners lived realities while preparing them for emerging challenges.

## 8 Points to Consider

The evidence reviewed across this paper highlights several important issues for consideration by the CIC as it relates to social studies. Compared with other areas, there is relatively limited evaluative evidence that focuses directly on social studies as a 3-18 curriculum area.

Equity, diversity, and an anti-racist curriculum emerge as clear priorities. Social studies provides a natural context for embedding equality and diversity, as well as for exploring Scotland's role in empire, migration, and global history. There is scope to strengthen how the curriculum engages with contemporary issues of identity, social justice, and anti-racism, ensuring that learners encounter diverse perspectives throughout their educational journey. This will require confidence, support, and exemplification to help practitioners embed these perspectives consistently.

Equity of provision and uptake is another concern. Presentation numbers in geography and history have declined, and modern studies is not consistently offered across all secondary schools, or included in the primary curriculum effectively, creating inequalities in access. These disparities affect learners' entitlement to develop the knowledge, skills, and attributes linked to citizenship, political literacy, and global awareness. Ensuring consistent opportunities across schools will be a key consideration.

Curriculum design and structure also require attention. Evidence indicates that social studies can feel overcrowded, with too much content and insufficient space for depth of learning. A more streamlined approach that prioritises core concepts, key skills, and understandings could support deeper learning, improve progression, and reduce variability in learners' experiences. Decluttering the curriculum may also create greater opportunities for more effective interdisciplinary and cross-curricular learning.

Skills for life, learning, and work are central to the value of social studies education. The transferable skills developed through the area - such as research, evaluation, decision making, creativity and problem solving - are essential for learners' future pathways. However, there is a need for greater clarity on how these skills as well as the knowledge gained in these subjects, are made visible to learners, employers, and to further/higher education. This is particularly relevant for modern studies, where there is a less obvious progression route into further and higher education. Strengthening the recognition of social studies in developing employability and citizenship skills will be important in the context of a rapidly changing economy and society.

Assessment and progression remain ongoing challenges. National data show persistent equity gaps in attainment across social studies subjects, as well as variation in how progression is supported. There is a need to ensure that assessment approaches value the combination of knowledge and skills, and that they provide fairness and consistency from early level through to senior phase qualifications. This will require collaboration with Qualifications Scotland (previously SQA) moving forward as part of wider reform.

Practitioner confidence and professional learning vary across sectors. Early learning and childcare and primary settings face challenges in sustaining depth across the full breadth of social studies. Ongoing professional learning, accessible resources, and strong professional networks will be critical in supporting practitioners to teach confidently from 3-18 and to align their practice with the new technical framework.

Finally, social studies has a central role in future-proofing the curriculum. Themes such as digital citizenship, misinformation, artificial intelligence, sustainability and global instability are reshaping society. The curriculum should remain adaptive to these developments, ensuring learners are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and values required to navigate an interconnected and uncertain world. Social studies is uniquely positioned to address these challenges by helping learners to think critically, act responsibly, and engage meaningfully with their communities and the wider world.

In summary, the social studies curriculum is faced with navigating a set of complex but crucial issues: how to embed equity and anti-racism; how to ensure consistent access across Scotland; how to declutter the curriculum while protecting subject depth and specialism; how to make skills and progression clearer; how to support practitioners; and how to ensure the curriculum remains responsive to future societal change. Addressing these points will be essential in ensuring that social studies continues to make a distinctive and powerful contribution to Scotland's curriculum as a whole.

## 9 Declaration

The content of this document was written by the author, exercising full professional judgement. Education Scotland approved AI tools were used to support review, clarity, and quality assurance. Education Scotland staff retain full responsibility and have reviewed and approved all content.

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## Version History

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Version 1	6 March 2026	First published
Version 2	18 May 2026	The section on National Data Sets p4 – p23 has been updated to ensure the language used is consistent with the language used by Qualification Scotland.
		Addition of Declaration on the use of AI.

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