

IMPACT REPORT

EXCELERATE»

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Acknowledgements

We are incredibly grateful to The Wood Foundation's Board of Trustees and senior leadership team for their vision, guidance, and commitment to the Excelerate investment.

We would like to extend our gratitude to Aberdeen City Council, Aberdeenshire Council, and Angus Council for their willingness to collaborate and support their colleagues within all 19 partner schools.

Excelerate was only possible because of the courage and dedication of our school leaders. We are thankful for the opportunity to work with Michael Foy and Aboyne Academy, Angela Wotherspoon and Alford Academy, Judith Mohamed and Arbroath Academy, Alan Horberry and Banff Academy, Fiona Lawrence and Brechin High School, Mike Paul and Bucksburn Academy, Susan Moffat and Carnoustie High School, Katie Arthur and Dyce Academy, Kas Mohamed and Forfar Academy, Stuart Craig and Harlaw Academy, Kyle Scott and Kemnay Academy, Louise Moir and Mackie Academy, Sharon Noble and Mintlaw Academy, Craig McDermott and Northfield Academy, Joanne Hesford and Oldmachar Academy, Gerry McCluskey and Peterhead Academy, Barry Drennan and Portlethen Academy, Iona Reid and St Machar Academy, and Emma-Jane Whitehead and Turriff Academy.

We would also like to thank the strategic leaders and former school leaders who supported, guided, and engaged with Excelerate before progressing onto new opportunities. In particular, Vincent Docherty, Linda Duthie, Ross McLaren, Joan MacKay, Lee Menzies, Moira Milne, Neil Morrison, Douglas Watt, and The Wood Foundation's Lizbeth Paul who joined the team after leading Kemnay Academy's journey between October 2019 and December 2023.

Excelerate worked with a wide range of stakeholders between December 2016 and March 2026. We benefited from the insights of the Scottish Government, Education Scotland, DYW Regional Groups, and school leaders across Scotland. Additionally, several organisations worked closely with the Excelerate team throughout design and delivery of the investment; we are particularly grateful for the support of Matthew Horne and Tom Beresford from the Innovation Unit, Nick

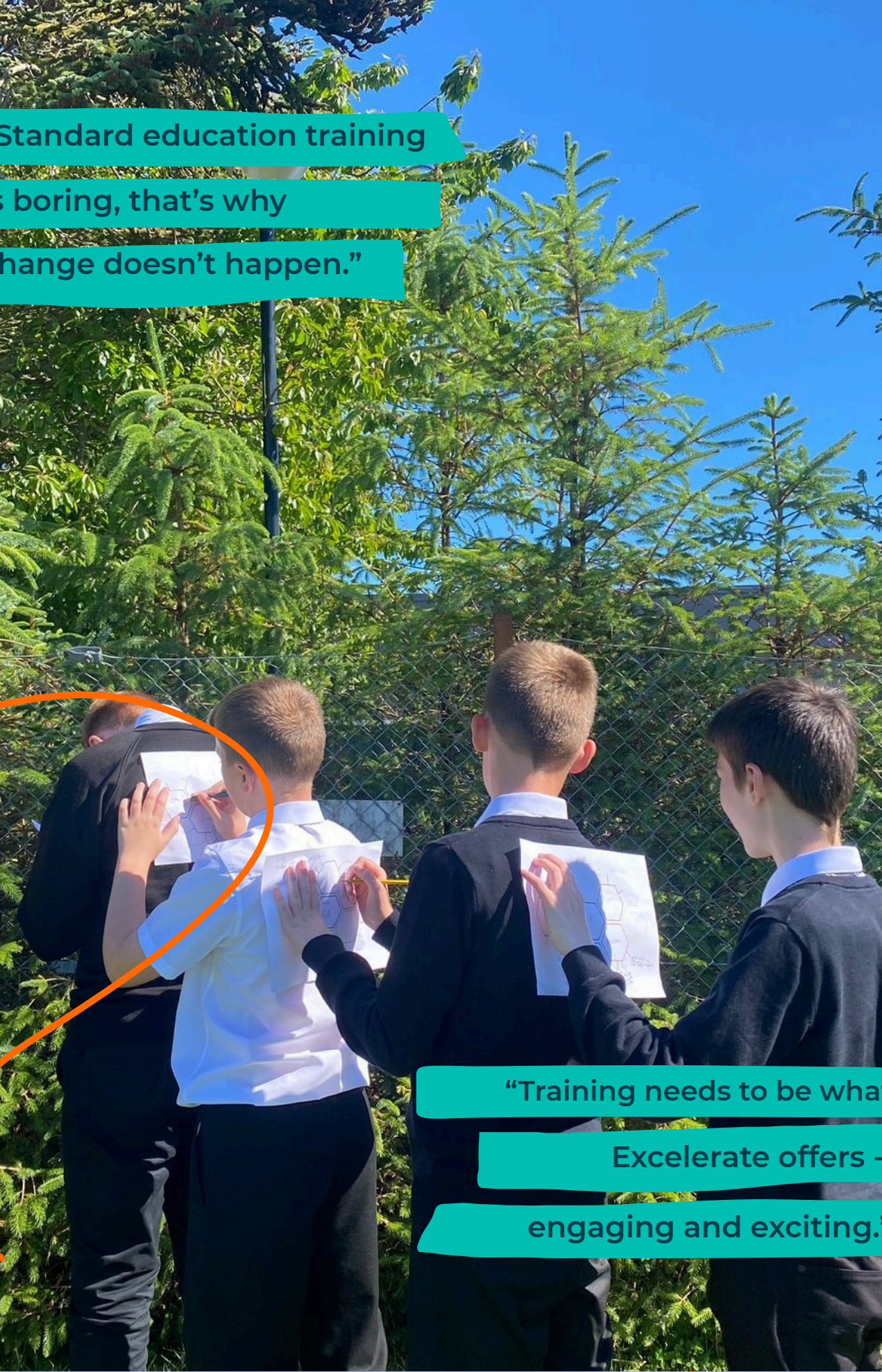
Chambers from Education and Employers, and Olly Newton and Helen Beardmore from the Edge Foundation.

The delivery of Excelerate depended on some exceptional colleagues who willingly worked alongside us to co-design and co-deliver a range of professional development inputs. We thank the teams at Alignment Nashville, Ford Next Generation Learning, Oracy Cambridge, and the XP School Trust. Our deepest gratitude goes to Cheryl Carrier, Donna Gilley, Beth Grzelak, Gwyn ap Harri, Starr Herrman, Mel Hewitt, Alan Howe, Neil Mercer, Julie Morrell, Scott Palmer, Steve Pinning and Andy Sprakes. We would also like to thank Liz Robinson and the team at Big Education, Katie Murrie at the Service Design Academy, Chris Muir, and Melvyn Tully.

Excelerate would be nothing without its core team. We give our heartfelt thanks to Alison MacLachlan, our strategic co-designer and longstanding champion and ally. Thanks also go to Gayle Duffus, our first lead for Project-based Learning and Oracy; Lizbeth Paul, our Lead Coach, Change Leadership Champion, and Project-based Learning developer; Laura Young, our Project-based Learning Trainer who re-developed and delivered the next iteration of Project-based Learning alongside Lizbeth; Maciej Alexander, for leading our evaluation and working closely with school partners to identify change; and Layla Edrich, for coordinating every professional learning offer in Scotland and overseas. Additionally, we are forever grateful to our Business and Community Support Officer team: Amy Anderson, Chloe Borwick, Ian Cooper, Catherine Cormack, Teresa Dawson, Megan Douglas, Chris Dunhill, Sam Foley, Isla Gibb, Lucy Hogan, Amy McNaughton, Scott Marshall, Karen Paterson, Katie Reekie, Jenni Reid, Mollie Ritchie, and Dave Salmond - your commitment has brought learning to life for thousands of young people - you are the backbone of this work. And last, but not least, we would like to thank Melanie Liddell, Suzanne Mackie, and Dani Ollerova for telling Excelerate's story on behalf of The Wood Foundation and our school partners.

Leading Excelerate has been an immense privilege and we are extremely proud of our community's achievements.

Georgea Hughes,
Programmes Director, Excelerate



**“Standard education training
is boring, that’s why
change doesn’t happen.”**

**“Training needs to be what
Excelerate offers -
engaging and exciting.”**

Executive Summary

Education is widely recognised as a critical driver in a country's economic success. With the education budget being the second largest area of public service expenditure in Scotland, there is cross party recognition of the vital role education plays in creating a healthy prosperous nation. Scottish government assistance extends beyond day-to-day financial resources; since the early 2000s there has been significant support for curriculum development and education policies designed to foster a skilled and entrepreneurial nation.

“Recognising the disconnect within the system, Excelerate was launched as a test of change”

Fundamental to the success of any education system, and arguably any sector, is a highly skilled and adaptive workforce. In Scotland, there is widespread agreement that professional learning is essential to equip school leaders and teachers with the vision, knowledge, and skills they need to provide learning experiences that empower students to thrive in a dynamic world. However, despite this consensus, no sustained programme of high-quality professional learning has been designed to enable school leaders and teachers to implement Scotland's skills focused education policies with confidence and fidelity.

Recognising the disconnect within the system, Excelerate launched in October 2019 as a test of change. The investment engaged a network of 19

secondary school partners from Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire and Angus to determine whether or not a versatile staffing model and a sustained programme of professional learning could help school leaders and teachers realise the ambition of Scotland's curriculum (Curriculum for Excellence - CfE) and youth employment strategy (Developing the Young Workforce - DYW).

Between October 2019 and January 2026, school partners accessed a range of professional learning and development interventions including, but not limited to:

- **480** hours of coaching support,
- **275** school leaders and teachers participated in a two-day study visit to XP Trust schools in Doncaster,
- **139** school leaders and teachers participated in a four-day study visit to the Career Academies of Nashville and Romeo (Detroit),
- **500** school leaders and teachers participated in a two-day project-based learning workshop (PBL 101), and
- **201** school leaders and teachers participated in a multi-year Oracy Lead and Oracy Practitioner programme.

Additionally, 16 school partners accessed a Business and Community Support Officer, as a dedicated school-based resource, responsible for sourcing and nurturing a wide range of industry and community partners.

Collectively, over **900** partners gave their time and talent to school partners via **2,800** unique curricular inputs.

In the years since Excelerate was launched, there has been a review of the implementation of Scotland's curriculum,^[1] qualifications and assessment structure,^[2] and the development and delivery of skills.^[3] There has been debate on the efficacy of a competency-based curriculum whilst success remains determined by examination results, the importance of knowledge over skills, and the value of project learning as a practice. Since 2021, Scotland has put education under a spotlight and the school leaders and teachers at the coalface of service delivery now wait patiently, once more, for a response and guidance on next steps.

Concurrently, the majority of school leaders and a critical mass of teachers within the Excelerate school network attended training, trialled learning and evolved structures and practices that addressed some of the concerns and recommendations discussed within the system-wide reviews. The spectrum of change across the Excelerate network is wide. It has, invariably, been dependent on the interventions accessed by school partners. In schools that accessed almost all interventions, change has been incremental but wide reaching, impacting the structure of the school day, timetabling, curriculum design, pedagogy, pupil support, and partnership engagement. In others, where one or two interventions were prioritised, there has been small scale change that is limited to a handful of teachers who have developed their learning and teaching practices as a result of their engagement in project-based learning (PBL) and oracy training.

Whilst all schools have undoubtedly benefited from the Excelerate investment, it is clear that impact, positive or otherwise, depends on leadership's capacity for change and capability to lead change. Coaching was an intervention designed to support leadership development. Across the school network, the greatest change



has occurred where headteachers and leadership teams have had protected one-to-one strategic conversations with a credible and experienced coach. Coaching has lifted leaders beyond day-to-day operational requirements into long-term strategic planning. It has provided a safe space to think big, discuss opportunity, and test theory. Across the Excelerate school network, the schools that embraced strategy and distributive leadership have ultimately achieved the greatest gains in relation to curriculum design, collaborative partnerships, and skills development.

With regards to delivering upon the ambitions of DYW, there has been a marked increase in the breadth and depth of partnership engagements schools have been able to offer with a Business and Community Support Officer in place. Introduced in January 2020, the Business and Community Support Officer is a non-teaching role that provides schools with the capacity required to carefully curate a range of partners who provide a real-world context to learning and teaching across the curriculum and beyond. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the role is most successful in schools with a high number of teachers trained in PBL.



Almost three-quarters of all school partners have incorporated a holistic pupil support model, inspired by XP Trust's Crew, into their timetable. The rationale for incorporating this model ranges from culture development, ensuring every child is seen, and centering student wellbeing as the responsibility of all. Additionally, across the majority of schools, there is a renewed focus on skills; not just talking about skills, but actively helping young people recognise, reflect, and articulate their skill development in relation to their learning inside and outside of school.

The Wood Foundation (TWF), chose to develop, deliver, and fund Excelerate through the Developing Young People in Scotland portfolio. By investing in a test of change, TWF sought to evidence that an investment in Scotland's educators is an investment in Scotland's future. Whilst there has been criticism regarding the equity of a small-scale regional pilot, TWF has built sustainable capacity within the system to allow for scale should local authority partners and national governing bodies wish to capitalise on learning from the investment. There are now eight locally based practitioners trained to deliver PBL 101 workshops.

In addition, there are six practitioners trained to deliver oracy. These trainers have each undergone a year of training to qualify as trainers and each one is an active school-based educator with demonstrable success in delivering PBL and oracy within the Scottish school context.

As an investment, Excelerate has come to an end, almost seven years after it started. However, the work will continue to evolve. TWF firmly believes in the aims of CfE and DYW; they are strong, flexible, and future-facing frameworks that can provide an education flexible enough to prepare young people for a dynamic world. Excelerate's school partners are on a transformation journey and there is much to be learned from their experiences. As a real-time test of change, within Scotland's system, there is scope for Scottish Government, education's governing bodies, local authorities, DYW, and Initial Teacher Education providers to work closely with all 19 schools to capitalise on TWF's investment.

This report tells the story of Excelerate, its aspirations, interventions, challenges and, most importantly, the impact reported by school partners. It is a snapshot of the change emerging across 19 secondary schools in the Northeast of Scotland as a result of investment and partnership. TWF recognises that all systems are a complex web of multiple actors and levers with varying influence and agenda. As such, the transformation process is embryonic yet intentional. Educator, school, and student experience of and within the investment will vary, however, there are clear thematic learnings and impacts that the report highlights.

At its heart, this report offers an optimistic insight into what is possible when teacher training is aligned to policy expectations. However, despite emerging change and some beautiful examples of student-centred education, it also highlights frustration with the numerous systemic challenges that restrict Scotland's education system from turning the rhetoric of its policies into action and better outcomes for young people.

almost two
decades of
experience



Background

In Scotland, The Wood Foundation has almost two decades of experience investing in the development of Scotland's teachers, curriculum, and young people. Through national programmes such as the **Youth and Philanthropy Initiative** (YPI - launched in 2008 and now delivered in 270 secondary schools across Scotland), **Raising Aspirations in Science Education** (RAiSE – launched in 2015 and jointly funded and managed with Education Scotland, Scottish Government and 27 local authority partners), and **Global Learning Partnerships** (GLP – launched in 2012 and accredited by the General Teaching Council Scotland in Learning for Sustainability), TWF has worked collegiately with educators and systems leaders to optimise learning experiences for young people across Scotland, in line with national priorities.

TWF operates under the values of venture philanthropy; investing time, talent, and finance to effect lasting change in social causes. Venture philanthropy prioritises medium to long term investments that are developed and delivered in partnership with the communities they seek to serve. School leaders and classroom teachers are the custodians of Scotland's education system, and they have the capacity to influence structural and practical change across their school communities and more widely. TWF understands systems can only be changed by the people who lead them.



In December 2016, TWF's Board sought to understand how Developing the Young Workforce: Scotland's Youth Employment Strategy (DYW), was being implemented within the education system; specifically secondary schools. The objective was to identify and champion the successes, explore the challenges, and consider where there may be opportunities to provide support.

In exploring the education system, the team reviewed the policies, practices, and resources helping or hindering the implementation of DYW within Scotland's secondary schools. Good practice was evident within the senior phase (S4-S6) with a range of work-ready programmes and qualifications providing students with meaningful work-related learning opportunities. DYW regional groups were increasing the number of partners working with schools; however, most of the interactions were traditional one off engagements aimed at senior students. There were some schools co-designing and co-delivering curriculum inputs with partners, but they were not coordinated or equitable, they were isolated inputs dependent upon one or two enthusiastic teachers. Overall, it was established that students in the Broad General Education (S1-S3) had few opportunities to interact with industry partners. The result was students making their subject choices, from as early as S2, without the opportunity to identify and explore the range of career pathways available to them.



Stakeholder interviews helped the team understand the disconnect between policy rhetoric and the reality in schools. Through these interviews, the most obvious frustration emerging was the challenges associated with trying to implement a 21st century curriculum within a 20th century school system governed by rigid timetables that prioritised the needs of senior students. This was exacerbated by the perceived misalignment between the ambitions of DYW and Curriculum for Excellence and the expectations of the exam system; and with the latter remaining a primary measure of success it was also a school's main priority. Time was also repeatedly cited as a limiting factor in working towards a co-designed and co-delivered curriculum; staff shortages and busy timetables meant there was little time for collaboration internally or externally. Lastly, they discussed limited access to professional learning that would help school leaders and teachers plan and deliver the curricular ambitions laid out in DYW.



System change can be described as ***“an intentional process designed to alter the status quo by shifting and realigning the form and function of a targeted system.”***^[4] For a funder, system change may feel like an appealing and appropriate endeavour. However, a simple definition does not convey the complexity of this work. To engage with system change, funders must first understand what they can support and how. In addition, funders must have comfort investing from a position of contribution rather than attribution.

By examining the implementation of DYW, TWF identified a shortage of professional learning designed to help school leaders and teachers to achieve the aims of the strategy. With experience sourcing, developing, and delivering formally recognised high quality professional learning in Scotland’s education system, a clear opportunity to add value to the education system emerged.

Launched in October 2019, with four Aberdeenshire secondary schools, Excelerate aimed to challenge the status quo through a range of strategic interventions designed to shift the mindsets, behaviours, relationships, and structures that shape educational outcomes for young people in Scotland. The investment was operationally managed and fully funded by TWF and concluded in March 2026. This report provides an overview of the investment, the emergent outcomes, and considerations for the future.

Context

Identifying the Problem

In January 2013, Sir Ian Wood^[5] was appointed Chairman of the Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce. Together, the Commission was tasked with considering:

- How a high quality intermediate vocational education and training system, which complements our (Scotland's) world-class higher education system, can be developed to enhance sustainable economic growth with a skilled workforce.
- How to achieve better connectivity and co-operation between education and the world of work to ensure young people at all levels of education understand the expectations of employers, and that employers are properly engaged.
- How to achieve a culture of real partnership between employers and education, where employers view themselves as co-investors and co-designers rather than simply customers.^[6]



Established at a time when Scotland's youth unemployment rate was at 18.8%,^[7] the Commission recognised the importance of engaging young people in an education that combines academic and vocational studies as well as skill development. They also highlighted the need for meaningful partnerships between employers and educators to provide young people with exposure to the world of work in the formative years before senior phase.

The Scottish Government responded positively to the Commission, adopting their recommendations through the publication of Developing the Young Workforce: Scotland's Youth Employment Strategy (DYW); a seven-year, multi-million-pound, commitment to Scotland's young people and the economy. Released in December 2014, six months after the Commission made their recommendations public, the Scottish Government acknowledged the need to provide all school age children with **"the opportunity to engage in purposeful and directly work-related learning while at school"**. Additionally, they noted the importance of collaboration between schools and employers in shaping **"the workforce of the future by helping to develop and deliver young people's experiences of the world of work while at school."**^[8]

The Scottish Government also recognised the flexibility of Curriculum for Excellence and the opportunity it offered to engage students, in the Broad General Education and Senior Phase, in developing the skills required for learning, life and work. In the period between 2015 and 2021, the strategy aimed to increase the range of qualifications, including vocational qualifications, young people could access in their Senior Phase, develop and deliver the curriculum with employers, provide clearer guidance on career and employment opportunities, and increase the number of young people progressing into further education, training, and employment directly from school.^[9]





innovators and disruptors within education

The Exploration Phase

Between January 2017 and December 2018, TWF sought to understand how DYW was being developed and delivered within Scotland's secondary school system. The primary focus was to gain an insight into the measures being taken to provide young people with exposures to the world of work through the curriculum. The team interviewed stakeholders from the education sector including DYW Regional Groups, government and local authority representatives, school leaders, classroom practitioners, and industry representatives. Stakeholders discussed emergent strengths, particularly Foundation Apprenticeships and Senior Phase engagements with employers. Additionally, they discussed employer engagements in the Broad General Education as limited, and aside from Foundation Apprenticeships, Senior Phase engagements were centred on traditional inputs such as mock interviews and C.V. writing skills. Conversely, these challenges were also considered opportunities for further development.

In exploring why some opportunities remained out of reach, school leaders and teachers cited timetabling restrictions, traditional and prescriptive exam requirements, lack of time, an increase in priorities outside of learning and teaching, and limited access to professional learning that would support collaboration with each other, and employers, to design and deliver meaningful curriculum inputs. Additionally, there was widespread recognition that these constraints had inhibited previous change ambitions resulting in tweaks at the margins rather than the delivery of anything more transformational.

Alongside interviews, the team undertook a literature review to provide a wider understanding of systems change in education. Initially, the team did not consider DYW to be a system-change policy. However, this view

changed after further exploring the ambitions of the strategy and the work required to embed the recommendations.

With renewed understanding of the scale of change required to implement DYW, the team focused their research and questioning on school transformation and systems reform. The greatest insights came from McKinsey & Company's 'How the world's best-performing school systems come out on top,'^[10] 'How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better,'^[11] and David Crossley's 'Sustainable School Transformation: An Inside-Out School Led Approach.'^[12] These publications each examined the complexity involved in achieving whole scale reform through one-size-fits-all solutions whilst exploring the role of professional development, leadership, collaboration, and partnership, in supporting school systems to implement change.

Recognising whole scale change as complicated and time consuming, the team sought to identify stakeholders and school leaders considered innovators and disruptors within education.^[13] The initial process involved desk-based research centred on nations with similar policies, exam patterns, and school structures to those in Scotland. The focus then narrowed on school models identified as sector leaders in curriculum design, industry partnerships, and skills development. The final distillation concentrated on interdisciplinary learning and collaborative approaches to curriculum design and delivery.

A landscape review included interviews with researchers, service designers, funders, and operational partners supporting school transformation across the United Kingdom and the United States; they included Edge Foundation, Baker Dearing Educational Trust, North East Local Enterprise Partnership, Innovation Unit, Education and Employers, Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce, Alignment Nashville, PENCIL, and Ford Next Generation Learning.

The team also met with representatives from High Tech High, Studio Schools, and EL schools. Lastly, the team participated in study visits to School 21, XP, NuVuX, UTC South Durham, and the Academies of Nashville. The feedback from each stakeholder was consistent; to achieve whole scale reform, you must have a relentless commitment to strategic review, collaboration, and professional development.

In assessing the findings, it was apparent that professional development was a key factor in supporting school systems to innovate and improve. The importance of professional development as a tool to support the adoption of new policies was recognised by Sir Ian Wood in 'Education Working for All! Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce Final Report', where he reflected ***"new teachers need to better understand employability and modern work skills, and our existing teachers' Continuous Professional Development programmes within the new Professional Update process, must focus much more on this."***^[14]



"To achieve whole scale reform, you must have a relentless commitment to strategic review, collaboration, and professional development."

The Scottish Government also acknowledged that their ambitious strategy required changes to the way educators plan and work and they made a commitment to ***"capitalise upon the opportunities provided by other key national programmes including Teaching Scotland's Future."***^{[15][16]} In 'Teaching Scotland's Future', a 2010 review also commissioned by the Scottish Government, Graham Donaldson advocates for a professional learning offer that is relevant and sustained, providing school leaders and teachers with insights into the world their students live, and ultimately will work in. Donaldson also suggests there should be greater alignment between an educator's professional development needs, and the development needs of their school.^[17]

Feedback from teachers, school leaders and the team's own research, showed there was limited opportunity to engage with interactive and collaborative professional learning that would give school leaders and teachers the knowledge, skills, experiences, and confidence they need to embrace the ambitions of DYW.

To fully embed DYW in the curriculum, changes to the way educators planned and taught the curriculum required careful scaffolding; however, the training on offer (at that time) focused on interpreting DYW and the Career Education Standard (3-18). The team could not find a training offer that would provide the knowledge, skills, and experiences school leaders needed to implement the structural and pedagogical changes required to fully achieve the changes Scottish Government hoped to see by 2021.

The Gap Identified



Acknowledging there was a lack of professional learning and training for teachers and school leaders, specific to DYW, TWF worked to identify the interventions that might facilitate the implementation, and exemplify the possibilities in practice, of DYW through the frameworks of Curriculum for Excellence in the secondary school setting.

With leadership, at all levels, frequently cited as a vital component in systems change, the team identified a credible coaching provision that would help school leaders develop long-term strategic plans. To provide the vision required to re-imagine industry engagements, study visits were viewed as an opportunity for educators to look inwards, outwards and forwards.^[18] Pedagogical development in project-based learning and oracy was also seen as fundamental in helping teachers to bring knowledge to life whilst also developing the core skills required for learning, life, and work. Finally, to bring partners into school, as **“co-investors and co-designers,”**^[19] the team determined that a non-teaching role, focused on relationship management, would allow schools to dedicate time and energy to partnership engagements across every subject specialism. These identified elements continued to evolve and became the core opportunities available through Excelerate.

Inputs identified, the team worked with the Innovation Unit to crystallise the case for investment. With a strong track record in education reform and community-led design, the Innovation Unit worked collaboratively with TWF to build a case for change, refine the interventions identified, and develop the design principles and goals for a regional test of change referred to as Excelerate (see Exhibit 1).

A test of change (see Exhibit 2) is commonly used within private and public sectors to evaluate transformation concepts on a small scale. Excelerate planned to work with a sample size of up to 25 secondary schools from local authorities located in the Northeast of Scotland with the aim of creating a learning hub, consisting of urban and rural schools. The schools, representing a variety of geographies and demographics, would allow TWF, and their partners, to examine how the same interventions were used within each school's unique setting and then identify thematic implementation trends across the network. Additionally, the learning hub would be used to promote collegiate discourse, shared learning, and collaboration.

To pressure test the interventions, a pilot phase, with four school partners, was deemed essential to receive feedback on each intervention and the range of external delivery partners providing the schools with support. Additionally, it would allow TWF's team to observe how the interventions were utilised within each pilot school before adjusting the offer for new school partners.

In August 2019, following meetings with Scottish Government, Education Scotland, and local authority representatives, the TWF Board agreed to be the sole investor in Excelerate for a period of up to 10-years. With approval from the Board, and confirmation that Aberdeenshire Council would be the first local authority partner, the Excelerate theory of change was born. In October 2019, the team were introduced to the first four secondary schools, selected by Aberdeenshire Council, ready to test the theory that high quality professional learning, together with carefully nurtured partnerships, could help schools realise the ambition of DYW.

Case for Change

Trustees

- There is a mandate to explore the opportunity for a programme of work that is systemic and realises the opportunity for change around young people's work readiness.
- There is an opportunity to build on existing strengths in the system for more equitable outcomes for young people.
- Work must be focused on raised aspirations for all young people.

School leaders

- Improving the morale and capabilities of our teachers can provide high quality pedagogy, partnerships and pathways to deliver on the promise of CfE.
- Better support to move from policy to implementation can help schools deliver on the potential of DYW and CfE.
- Schools shouldn't be expected to do this alone. Realising the potential of the Scottish education system requires multi-stakeholders working together.
- Change fatigue is real. New programmes of work must aim for impact that is long lasting and sustainable.

National policy makers

- Scotland has a globally renowned curriculum. The task is to turn policy into implementation to realise its potential
- There is an opportunity to build on existing strengths in the system for more equitable outcomes for all young people.
- There is a need to improve the morale and capabilities of teachers.

Investment outcomes

Developing all young people's readiness for work by enabling schools and partners to deliver high quality, diverse pathways that fully realise the opportunities of Curriculum for Excellence.

The target outcomes include:

- Higher quality and more diverse learning pathways (BGE).
- Stronger sense of ownership amongst schools and school leaders.
- Deeper relationships and activities between schools, employers, and the wider community across BGE.
- Upskilled, confident teachers with strengthened pedagogy.
- Engaged, informed, motivated and empowered young people.
- Increased work readiness amongst young people.

Investment Design Principles

How do we want the investment to feel to us and our partners and what cultural norms would we want to consciously set.

We agree that:

- Everything we do will be learner centred.
- Everything we do will be focused on practical, real-world learning.
- We will take a split-screen approach.
- Co-creation would sit at the heart of the work.
- Our work will be evidence informed.
- We will be risk aware, not risk averse.
- Our work will build sustainability to allow the work to scale beyond a test of change.

Investment Components

Capability building

- With an emphasis on governance, design and implementation for sustainability (with partners)

Movement building/ non-financial support

- Convening
- Influencing
- Using the power of stats and stories

Financial support

- Aligned to TWF's venture philanthropy model

Systemic innovation

- Achieve buy in that leads to policy consideration.

A Theory of Change

Exceleerate is designed to ignite system-level change by investing in the professional development of school leaders and teachers, building capability and capacity through a bespoke package of professional learning, coaching, and the employment of a team member with dedicated responsibility for liaising with industry and community partners.

Exceleerate will bring key stakeholders together to help build an eco-system that enables young people to thrive at every stage of their school journey whilst also preparing them for the world of work and life.

Inputs

Study visits offering opportunities to look outwards and explore other school models.

Coaching support for school leaders and extended leadership teams.

Professional learning (PBL and Oracy).

The recruitment and funding of Business & Community Support Officer (BCSO) for 32-months.

Outputs

- School leaders and teachers review structure, process, and practice of these schools in relation to their own contexts.
- School leaders and teachers identify the structures, processes, and practices that stretch and inform a new vision.

- School leaders develop and implement multi-year co-created improvement plans.
- School leaders, teachers, partners, parents, and students actively engage in the development and implementation of a community connected school vision.

- School leaders and teachers have the knowledge, skills and experience to develop and deliver lesson plans incorporating the principles of Oracy and project-based learning.
- Teachers are given time to try new practices in a safe, reflective and deliberately developmental environment.
- Teachers plan and implement lessons that connect learning to the real-world and develop skills for life.

- Schools are partnered with a variety of industry and community partners who actively engage in curriculum development, delivery, and school planning.
- Young people engage with industry and community partners throughout their school career, accessing equitable and diverse learning opportunities.

Vision:

To create an eco-system consisting of school leaders, educators, and partners who have the vision, skills, experience, and commitment to prepare all young people for the world of work and life.

Mission:

This will be achieved by fostering a critical mass of skilled educators and leaders who, together with community and industry partners, take informed risks to implement innovative and equitable learning opportunities that prepare students for sustainable careers and life.

Outcomes

There are more high-quality and diverse learning pathways.

There are upskilled, confident teachers with strengthened pedagogy.

There are deeper relationships and activities between schools, employers and the wider community.

There are engaged, informed, motivated and empowered young people.

Impacts

Scotland's education and economic policy makers work collaboratively with school leaders and industry experts to drive innovation, equity and excellence in education to ensure Scotland has workforce equipped with the knowledge, skills, and experiences required to fulfil its job market and compete on the global stage.

School leaders and teachers create robust learning opportunities that build both knowledge and skills through consistent pedagogy and real-world learning approaches co-designed and co-delivered with a range of partners.

Young people are actively involved in shaping school vision and curricular design; they have exposure to a diverse range of learning opportunities and they clearly understand the relevance of learning in relation to the world and careers.

School Recruitment

Academies Joined

2019/ 2020

Pioneer Schools

- Alford
- Banff
- Kemnay
- Portlethen

2021/2022

- Aboyne
- Bucksburn
- Harlaw
- Mackie
- Mintlaw
- Oldmachar
- St Machar

2022/ 2023

- Northfield
- Turriff

2023/2024

- Arbroath
- Dyce
- Forfar
- Peterhead

2024/2025

- Brechin
- Carnoustie

>>> EXHIBIT 3

The Northeast of Scotland was selected as the test of change zone due to TWF's proximity to the region and well-established partnerships with Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Councils, and local school communities. In designing the theory of change model, it was planned that no local authority partner would have more than 50% of their secondary schools participating in the test of change. It was thought that 50% would be large enough to trial interventions within school communities servicing a range of demographics, and, in theory, it would provide local authority partners with the opportunity to compare partner schools progress towards the aims of DYW against a control group of schools that were not engaged in Excelerate and, cascade learning. With the ambition of working with up to 25 secondary schools, the Northeast hub would potentially work with up to four local authority partners in and around the region.

Both Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council were supportive of the aims of Excelerate, and both shared their interest in working collaboratively with TWF on the test of change. In the summer of 2019, TWF's Chairman and UK Director met with Councillors, the Chief Executive, and Education Directors from both local authorities to agree on a phased approach to partnership working.

In September 2019, Aberdeenshire Council was confirmed as the first local authority to partner with TWF to pilot Excelerate. Aberdeenshire Council had a strong rationale for engaging in the pilot. As an authority, they had a strong internal Foundation Apprenticeship delivery model, invested in industry partnerships, and were collaborating closely with school leaders and teachers to communicate the breadth of pathways available to their students and their families. However, even with these emerging strengths, they recognised there was a predominant focus on Senior Phase students and there remained opportunities to provide students in the Broad General Education with career insights and skill development through every day curricular engagements. The desire to do more for the Broad General Education coincided with their growing concern for the increasing number of young people who appeared to be passively engaged in their journey through school.

As the pilot partner, Aberdeenshire Council was responsible for identifying the first four secondary school partners. TWF requested schools where the headteachers had courage and demonstrable success as change leaders. In October 2019, Alford, Banff, Kemnay, and Portlethen Academies joined the Excelerate network as pioneer school partners. Each headteacher had their own reasons for agreeing to become partners, however, they all cited access to professional development for their staff, and themselves, as a primary driver towards improving outcomes for their students.

The initial school recruitment strategy included a staggered plan with clusters of four to five new schools joining the learning hub each year for five consecutive years. However, Covid-19 and the impact of ongoing lockdowns, paused school recruitment in the 2020/2021 academic year. The 'gap year' provided much needed collaborative space to work with all stakeholders to refine the interventions. Additionally, the Excelerate team used the time to review the hours dedicated and the associated impact to each input and identify the interventions that require the biggest commitment. The postponement of school recruitment also allowed the team to use the learning from pilot schools to create a more intentional recruitment process for new school partners.

In April 2021, Aberdeen City Council joined as an official partner of Excelerate. Soon after, all secondary schools in Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City were invited to submit an Expression of Interest (EOI) to join the Excelerate network. 11 EOIs were received and all parties were interviewed. Of the 11 schools interviewed, seven were invited to join the network in 2021/2022, and two from the 11, were invited to join in the 2022/2023 academic year. As a result, no open application occurred for additional schools in the 2022/2023 academic year.

With the percentage of secondary schools from Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire fast approaching 50%, Angus Council was officially confirmed as a new Excelerate partner in April 2023. In May 2023, all Angus secondary schools were invited to submit an EOI for up to four places in the network. Additionally, the remainder of the Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire secondary schools, not already an Excelerate partner, were invited to submit an EOI for one final place from each authority. In the 2023/2024 academic year, Arbroath, Dyce, Forfar, and Peterhead Academies joined the Excelerate network. Interestingly, three out of the four new headteachers had already engaged with Excelerate in other schools; Arbroath Academy's headteacher had previously been headteacher in Oldmachar Academy, and Dyce and Peterhead Academies headteachers had been depute headteachers in Kemnay and Mintlaw Academies.

As the team approached the 2024/2025 academic year, questions were raised regarding the size of the test of change and the need to pursue that top level number of 25 schools. The learning hub consisted of 17 secondary schools, all at varying points in their change journey, and all representing a wide range of urban and rural communities. The team reflected on the pace of change taking place across the network and ultimately decided that seven new schools would not add significant value to the learning hub or the outcomes of the test of change. However, to ensure there remained a commitment to 50% of schools from each partner local authority, the remaining six secondary schools in Angus were invited to submit an EOI for the final two places. In 2024/2025, Brechin and Carnoustie High Schools joined the Excelerate network consisting of 19 school partners (see Exhibits 3 and 4).

1



All secondary school headteachers, from across participating local authorities, are invited to a presentation to learn about the offer.

2



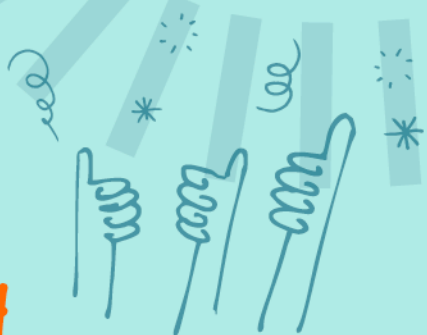
Interested parties are invited to submit an Expression of Interest (EOI) – which asks them to share information about their school community and student body; the opportunities for empowerment, distributive leadership, and opportunities for innovation across the school; partnership and opportunities for growth; and how student voice, choice and diversity of experience and ambition is recognised.

3



Interested parties are then invited to a one-to-one meeting with representatives from TWF, their local authority, and delivery partners (where appropriate). The meeting aims to understand the school and its community more deeply; success, challenges, and opportunities for development are explored openly and honestly.

4



School participation is agreed between TWF and the local authority representatives before schools receive confirmation that they have been successful in their application.

5



Local authority partners sign a Memorandum of Understanding each year to confirm the participation of their secondary schools, and their support for the interventions offered as part of the Excelerate investment.

Why Engage?



Lizbeth Paul
Pioneer HT & Lead Coach

In 2019, the Excelerate Investment onboarded its first four schools in Aberdeenshire Council. As one of the pioneer schools, Kemnay Academy was selected by the local authority based on its improvement trajectory and the strength of its existing development work. The opportunity was seen as both novel and significant, offering access to a bespoke professional learning programme unlike anything the school had experienced before. Headteacher at the time, Lizbeth Paul, described the investment as a catalyst for growth:

“It was all about opportunity. It was an opportunity to challenge myself as a school leader. It was an opportunity to help and support staff to access high-quality professional learning. But mainly, it was an opportunity for the young people; if it was going to open a door for them, I was ready to take the opportunity.”

This emphasis on opportunity provided a clear lens through which Excelerate’s impact can be understood, particularly in relation to leadership development, staff practice, and the experiences offered to young people.

For Lizbeth Paul, Headteacher of Kemnay from 2015 to 2023, the Excelerate Investment offered a rare chance to move the school beyond established routines and rethink what was possible. While the ultimate goal of the investment was to empower pupils, it also created space for professional growth across leadership. Coaching relationships, particularly the work with Ford NGL, proved pivotal, challenging assumptions and pushing leadership practice in new directions. Study visits, though initially difficult to interpret in context, later helped shift thinking from limitation to possibility, encouraging a more outward looking perspective. The school was able to broaden their understanding of partnership working, ensuring the very best experiences and outcomes for young people. For leadership in the school, the investment expanded their strategic lens and provided capacity to lead a school where innovation felt not only achievable but expected.

For staff, the programme unlocked substantial professional development opportunities that directly supported performance and energised practice.

Many interventions left a lasting imprint, with Project-based Learning (PBL) training in particular aligning closely with the school's improvement priorities and informing subsequent strategic planning. The development of the Business and Community Support Officer (BCSO) role demonstrated the transformative value of dedicated coordination, connecting teachers to local businesses and enabling new learning experiences for pupils.

"It was all about opportunity"

Over time, an increasingly confident culture emerged in which staff were trusted to exercise professional judgment, contribute through distributive leadership, experiment with new approaches, and view mistakes as valuable opportunities for learning and improvement. The cumulative effect of these opportunities contributed to a stronger school identity which in turn attracted staff who were excited to innovate and committed to bringing the curriculum to life.

For the young people, the benefits were direct, varied, and often inspiring. Excelerate opened doors to experiences they would not otherwise have had. Pupils saw their artwork projected onto Aberdeen City's Music Hall, they collaborated with comic book authors to develop their own stories, and even spoke with real-life astronauts. Some offers were targeted, such as providing Foundation Apprentices with real-world experiences through business connections established by the BCSO. Others were delivered to whole year groups, including barista training for S5 leavers or working with the Ranger Service through the John Muir Award in S2. Each experience brought learning to life in powerful and relevant ways. These activities nurtured confidence, curiosity, and a genuine sense of possibility, strengthening a culture where staff and partners held ambitious expectations for what young people could achieve.

Above all, the programme fostered a school environment where creativity, connection, and opportunity sat at the heart of the learner experience.

The way Excelerate offers were first embraced at Kemnay Academy demonstrates the value of brave leadership and looking outward. The school's journey shows that meaningful change comes from being open to advice, seeking help when needed, and embracing the professional learning opportunities available. The impact of the BCSO role highlights what can be achieved when a clear vision for community engagement is matched with strategic investment. If industry and community partnerships are nurtured, the return can be tenfold. Insights gained through coaching reinforce the importance of honest reflection, challenge, and support in shaping a more ambitious culture. Above all, the school's experience affirms that when staff and leaders are willing to ask questions, take risks, and commit fully to growth, the possibilities for young people expand immeasurably.

Rules of Engagement

Scotland's education system, like others around the world, is a complex web of legislation, policy, quality assurance, professional standards, pedagogy, curriculum design, and assessment. Its publicly funded schools serve over 53,000 teachers and almost 700,000^[20] young people in uniquely diverse communities the length and breadth of the country. The introduction of new education policies very rarely considers where a school might be in their improvement journey and the support required to implement the changes needed to achieve the Government's desired ambitions. With this awareness, there were three non-negotiables identified in the development and delivery of Excelerate:

School leaders decide what is best for their schools:

Excelerate was designed to impact education at the roots, and no one understands a school better than the school leaders and teachers who work there. Improvement priorities, internal politics, staffing constraints, parental expectations, attainment, pupil support requirements, curriculum design, and budget management, are all unique to a school. In acknowledging that a one-size-fits-all approach would not be feasible nor effective, Excelerate met schools where they were with a package of non-prescriptive interventions which schools could choose from. The only intervention deemed essential was a transformational change coach and school partners who joined the learning hub between 2019 and 2023 were aligned to a named coach. From 2023/2024 onwards, coaching became an opt in intervention.

Interventions must have the potential to provide both immediate and long-term support:

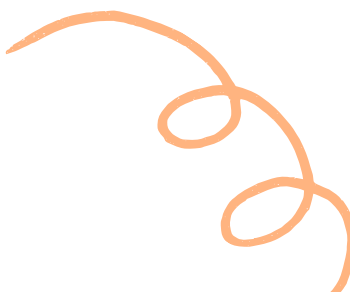
To make any impact, the interventions offered through Excelerate had to be inspiring and useful. The interventions centred on building capability and capacity within partner schools and each one was aligned to the ambitions and expectations of Curriculum for Excellence, How Good Is Our School? (Fourth Edition), Teaching Scotland's Future, and DYW. Additionally, every intervention was designed to be experiential, collaborative, delivered by credible service providers, and working towards sustainability. The aim was to provide impactful professional learning experiences that promoted a sense of agency and challenged traditional behaviours and habits.

Flexibility would be required to support, review, and evolve varying approaches to implementing change:

Excelerate is not a linear programme, nor a bespoke investment; it offers every school partner access to the same suite of interventions. However, how a school partner uses these interventions, to support their improvement journey, will be bespoke. Excelerate school partners all have different challenges and opportunities therefore it is important not to compare the progress of one school's change journey against another's. Understanding a school's unique position, and being able to provide the right support, depends on the quality of the relationship between the school and TWF. Open, honest dialogue is the bedrock of good relationships and being flexible ensured Excelerate, as a test of change, was supportive and proactive rather than directive and reactive.

For TWF as the funder, and the Excelerate team as the operational manager, there was a commitment to avoiding, as far as possible, issuing advice to school leaders and teachers. As a test of change, the priority was to observe how the interventions were implemented in each school, examine what worked well and what fell short, identify thematic trends, and tell the story, as honestly as possible, and without interference.

Interventions



Designed to provide school leaders and educators with the vision, knowledge, skills, and capacity to realise the ambition of Curriculum for Excellence and DYW. There was a core set of interventions offered to school partners including, but not limited to, a Business and Community Support Officer, coaching, study visits, project-based learning training, and oracy training. Nothing similar to anything listed was, at that time, available to Scottish educators. The rationale for each intervention is described below:

Business and Community Support Officer (BCSO):

Central to the mission of Excelerate was increasing the number, and type, of industry and community partners engaging with young people and educators, through the delivery of the curriculum. The BCSO role was created to enhance educational experiences by sourcing partners who, working in partnership with classroom teachers, could integrate real-world contexts into the curriculum supporting students to develop essential skills, an understanding of the range of pathways available to them, and a sense of civic responsibility.

The BCSO role is based on similar roles embedded within the Career Academies model in the United States, XP Trust Schools, and School 21. BCSOs were recruited by TWF on a 32-month contract with the aim of employment being transferred to the school at the end of contract. BCSOs were recruited for 16 schools between January 2020 and January 2024. At the time of this report, seven BCSOs transferred into their school on a full-time basis.

Coaching

In Scotland, TWF's initial research could not identify qualified coaches with lived experience and demonstrable success in leading transformational change in state schools. It was for this reason that Ford Next Generation Learning (FNGL), a transformative education initiative using experienced educator-coaches, were recruited to work with headteachers as they developed, implemented, and adjusted their strategic improvement plans.

FNGL used an internationally tested, phased roadmap to encourage reflective practice, challenge preconceived ideas, and shift school leadership teams towards a collaborative community driven approach to whole-school improvement. Key outcomes of this work include the creation of a school leaver/learner profile which, co-designed with parents, pupils, teachers, and partners, provides schools with a student-centred blueprint for curriculum design. Additionally, coaches supported school teams, and their stakeholders, to develop a shared vision and values statement that underpins the development of their school improvement priorities.

11 out of 19 schools accessed executive coaching sessions provided by FNGL. As FNGL is an international organisation, TWF recruited a headteacher, from one pioneer school, as a Lead Coach. With the aim of building sustainability within Scotland's system, the Lead Coach received training and mentorship from FNGL and used their own school transformation experience to provide support that was contextually specific to Scotland.

Study Vists

A crucial component of professional learning and cultural knowledge exchange, study visits provided school leaders and classroom teachers with a genuine opportunity to look outwards. Study visits are not a 'how to,' they are designed to galvanise the mandate for change,

challenge preconceptions, broaden perspectives, inspire innovation, and reimagine what is possible within Scotland's context. Study visits were carefully selected to show schools who were actively and intentionally delivering upon the aspirations of Curriculum for Excellence and DYW. Representatives from all 19 school partners participated in study visits to XP Trust Schools in Doncaster and the Career Academies of Nashville or the Career Academies at Romeo (Detroit).

XP Trust Schools provide an insight into a school that places the wellbeing of people and planet at the heart of their curriculum. Subject knowledge and skill development occurs through academically rigorous expeditions; interdisciplinary projects, mapped to academic standards, which are co-designed and co-delivered by teams of teachers and supported by external experts to provide learning that is structured, clear, and purposeful. Emphasis is placed on crafting work and students share their final product with parents, community members, and industry partners. Students at XP are published authors and artists, filmmakers, event managers, and activists all before leaving school. At XP, staff and students are Crew. Crew consists of a small group of students who spend 45 minutes together, every morning, with their Crew Leader from year seven (S1) through to year 11 (S5). Crew ensures every child is known, supported, challenged, and championed. XP delivers their approach within the constraints of a traditional education system that is still predicated upon exams being the ultimate determinant of success. However, through their student-centred practices and norms, their young people have strong relationships with teachers, very few instances of bullying, and the support required to achieve their full potential academically or otherwise.

The Career Academies of Nashville/Romeo (Detroit) is a school within a school model that works collaboratively with growth sector industry partners to design and deliver their curriculum. Guided by a community-created learner profile, the curriculum provides students with the opportunity to learn their chosen subjects through the lens of the industry sectors that appeal to them whilst developing the skills, competencies, and qualifications required for learning, life, and work. The school within a school model creates small learning communities where teams of teachers work together to provide all students with the emotional, physical, and academic support they need to thrive in and outside of school.

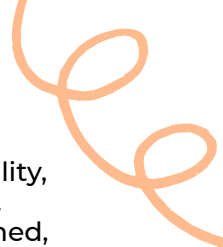
Between October 2019 and April 2025, study visits became more bespoke to meet the needs of schools redesigning their curricular offer. Alongside TWF observations of what was being taken forward in schools, feedback from partner schools was used to co-design visits that gave participants more insight into Crew and Expeditions (XP), and Freshman Seminar and Powerful Partnerships (Careers Academies).

Project-based Learning (PBL):

PBL was selected as an intervention to provide school leaders and teachers with professional learning that would help them plan and implement interdisciplinary learning (IDL). Despite being a context for learning in Scotland, there were no practical training options for teachers to access. PBL was identified as a practicable option to give teachers the tools they need to plan and implement IDL or use some of the protocols in their practice, while also meaningfully engaging partners in relevant lessons.

PBL is an approach where students gain knowledge and develop skills by investigating, analysing, and responding to complex, often local questions, problems, or challenges over an extended period. Carefully constructed PBL is a vehicle for developing and delivering an academically rigorous curriculum that connects learning standards to the real world through projects rooted in local and global contexts. PBL engages students in sustained inquiry, providing them with time to explore topics in-depth, apply critical thinking and problem-solving skills, work collaboratively, and articulate their learning through the presentation of a final product. As a pedagogy, PBL provides teachers with the opportunity to make learning interesting and relevant. Additionally, it provides industry and community partners with an authentic way to provide career insights, contextualise curriculum content, and build relationships with teachers and students.

With no PBL training provision available in the UK, training was sourced first through PBL



Works and the Edge Foundation, then through Alignment Nashville. To ensure sustainability, two members of the Excelerate team worked closely with the PBL trainer at each session. Later, eight educators from across the Excelerate school network were recruited and trained, over the course of a year, to become PBL trainers. In Scotland, there are now eight PBL trainers with credible experience developing and delivering PBL in a Scottish context.

More than **500** teachers from across 19 school partners have accessed PBL training. Additionally, the Excelerate team delivered a two-day PBL 101 workshop for over **50** educators from Education Scotland's Interdisciplinary Working Group.^[21] PBL 101 workshops have also been delivered for, and on behalf of, Inverclyde Council.

Oracy

Oracy is defined as ***“the ability to speak eloquently, to articulate ideas and thoughts, to influence through talking, to collaborate with peers and express views confidently and appropriately. Oracy refers to both the development of speaking and listening skills, and the effective use of spoken language in teaching and learning.”***^[22]

Communication continues to be one of the most important skills sought by employers and it is very rarely prioritised in secondary school classrooms. Not only is it an essential life skill required in the world of work, but the use of effective talk in classrooms can have significant effects on the academic success of young people.^[23] To provide teachers with the skills they require to develop the spoken language skills of their students, Oracy Cambridge was contracted to deliver an in-depth training programme to Oracy Leads from schools across the Excelerate learning hub.

The initial programme of training required long-term commitment from teachers and schools. As a result, there was a level of attrition beyond what we witnessed in other intervention areas. The offer was adapted to create a shorter input which provided participants with the opportunity to develop a practitioner toolkit they could dip into and was immediately practicable. To ensure sustainability within the system, five Oracy Leads were trained to become Oracy Trainers. Over the course of a year, the Oracy Trainers worked closely with Oracy Cambridge, and a member of the Excelerate team, to fine-tune and deliver the new training model.

199 teachers from across 19 school partners accessed oracy training either through the Oracy Lead programme or the Oracy Practitioner programme.

The Excelerate core offer was augmented with additional training inputs at the request of school partners. Requests for training in Crew and Crew curriculum were frequent, as were requests for Expeditionary Learning inputs. In addition, school leaders requested opportunities for their middle leaders to engage with change leadership. Exhibit 5 highlights when additional interventions were offered and where adaptations were made to support a specific need or request.

2019/2020

2020/2021

2021/2022

2022/2023

4 Schools

Launch - Oct 19

FNGL Coaching is introduced via online coaching sessions and quarterly in-person school visits scheduled.

Study Visit to Career Academies of Nashville introduced with coaching support from FNGL.

PBL 101 in Newcastle delivered by PBL Works & Edge Foundation.

Excelerate launch with FNGL, schools, industry, and community partners.

First BCSOs recruited and placed in schools January 2020.

Study Visit to XP introduced.

Lockdown

4 Schools

Lockdown

FNGL Coaching delivered weekly online.

Online School leaver/learner profile events for all schools – planned and coordinated by FNGL.

Crew Training – online in-person modules with XP.

PBL Splash – 3 hour online in-person introductory workshop for all school staff – delivered by Alignment Nashville.

Virtual Career Academies of Nashville Visit introduced.

Service Design Academy provision for Alford Academy.

11 Schools

FNGL Coaching delivered weekly online with 3 x scheduled visits annually introduced.

Career Academies of Nashville Study Visit – in-person resumes with coaching support from FNGL.

XP Study Visit re-introduced

Oracy Leads Programme introduced – delivered by Oracy Cambridge with support from TWF. 5 x workshops delivered in the year with in-school support available.

PBL Splash – 3-hour online intro sessions delivered to all new schools by Alignment Nashville.

PBL 101 2-day workshops introduced - delivered by Alignment Nashville with support from TWF. 3 x workshops delivered in the year.

Big Education's Big Team Adventure – Teaming introduced to St Machar, Harlaw, Northfield, and Turriff Academies with online and in-person coaching sessions delivered across the year.

Community Connected Learner Profile / Shared Learning Event – Delivered by TWF and FNGL.

13 Schools

FNGL Coaching delivered weekly online with 3 x scheduled visits annually.

Career Academies of Nashville Study Visit – in-person with coaching support from FNGL.

Crew focused XP Study Visit introduced.

Expedition focused XP Study Visit introduced.

Oracy Leads Programme continues – Oracy Leads from 2021/2022 entering year 2 and new Oracy Leads entering year 1 of their learning. Delivered by Oracy Cambridge with support from TWF. 5 workshops per year with in-school support available.

PBL Splash – 3-hour online intro session delivered to one new school by Alignment Nashville.

PBL 101 2-day workshops delivered by Alignment Nashville with support from TWF. 3 x workshops delivered in the year.

PBL Recall Day delivered to all trainees by Alignment Nashville and TWF.

Shared Learning Event co-designed and co-delivered by TWF, School Partners and FNGL.

>>> EXHIBIT 5



2023/2024 >

17 Schools

FNGL Coaching delivered weekly online with 3 x scheduled visits annually.

Excelerate Lead Coach recruited and undergoing FNGL training, mentoring and shadowing.

Career Academies of Nashville Study Visit – in-person with coaching support from FNGL.

Crew focused XP Study Visit.

Expedition focused XP Study Visit.

Oracy Leads Programme continues – Oracy Leads from 2021/2022 entering year 3 and new Oracy Leads entering year 2 of their learning. Delivered by Oracy Cambridge with support from TWF. 5 workshops per year with in-school support available.

School-based Oracy Trainers Trained by TWF and Oracy Cambridge.

Investigate creation of an oracy practitioner training offer with Oracy Cambridge
PBL 101 2-day workshops delivered by Alignment Nashville with support from TWF. 3 x workshops delivered in the year.

PBL Recall Day open to all trainees and delivered by Alignment Nashville and TWF.

PBL Champions network introduced for PBL practitioners nominated by their school - 3 workshops delivered across the year by TWF and Alignment Nashville.

School-based PBL Trainers Trained by TWF and Alignment Nashville.

Change Leadership Workshop delivered by Sofhi Consulting.

Shared Learning Event co-designed and co-delivered by TWF and School Partners.

2024/2025 > 2025/2026

19 Schools

FNGL Coaching delivered weekly online with 3 x scheduled visits annually. Final year of FNGL engagement.

Excelerate Lead Coach providing coaching and mentoring to new school partners.

Academies of Romeo – bespoke study visit designed by TWF and FNGL introduced – with coaching support from FNGL.

Expedition & Crew focused XP Study Visit.

Oracy Practitioners Programme Introduced with 4 workshops. Delivered by newly trained school-based Oracy Trainers with support from TWF and Oracy Cambridge.

PBL 101 2-day workshops introduced – delivered by school-based PBL Trainers with support from TWF and Alignment Nashville. 3 x workshops delivered.

Additional school-based PBL Trainers trained by TWF and Alignment Nashville.

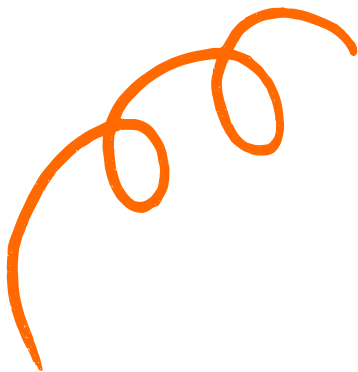
Change Leadership Coaching co-designed and co-delivered by Sofhi Consulting and Excelerate Lead Coach. 2 x workshops delivered.

19 Schools

Excelerate Lead Coach providing coaching inputs across the Excelerate school network.

PBL 101 1-day workshop introduced – co-designed and delivered by TWF. 2 x workshops delivered.

External Factors



Change is not a linear process, and it is often subject to influence from a range of multifaceted and interconnected factors. While the Excelerate team worked hard to avoid interfering in how a school utilised the interventions, there were external factors that directly impacted the delivery of Excelerate and how partner schools engaged with the investment.

COVID-19



Scotland officially entered 'lockdown' on 24th March 2020, five months into the Excelerate pilot. In the months prior to lockdown, pilot schools had been assigned two Ford Next Generation Learning Coaches and accessed two study visits to the Career Academies of Nashville, one study visit to XP Trust Schools in Doncaster, and a two-day project-based learning workshop delivered by PBL Works and the Edge Foundation. When schools closed and the work from home mandate was introduced, the Excelerate team, delivery partners, and all four partner schools had to pivot.

Through the duration of the Covid-19 restrictions, conversations were both exciting and challenging. This phase showed school leadership at its best; with some leaders using a period of enforced change to develop long-term strategies, co-design skills frameworks with partners, and ensure the wellbeing of students became a priority for all staff. Conversely, the shock of home working left some leaders unable to extend their thinking beyond day-to-day tasks. This period was a leveller, highlighting the impact of different leadership approaches to change. As the funder and operational manager of the investment, it provided TWF with the opportunity to listen to school partners and be adaptive enough to support their needs whilst not deviating too far from the original interventions.

Throughout 2020 and 2021, school leaders redesigned pupil support sessions to incorporate lessons learned from the Crew model seen across XP Trust Schools in Doncaster. The aim was to have daily wellbeing check-ins with students learning from home and then returning to school after extended periods in isolation. To support design and delivery of these sessions, school partners proactively requested online training inputs from XP Trust. To support this request, the Excelerate team commissioned XP Trust to create and deliver an online programme of training. The XP Trust modules were very well attended, and school partners expressed a desire for more online training to ensure continued momentum and boost staff morale. The Excelerate team then commissioned Alignment Nashville to deliver an online introduction to PBL which could be delivered to whole school teams.

Interestingly the work being undertaken by the pilot schools was attracting attention from schools within their local authority, in Aberdeen City, and beyond. TWF was being approached by local authority representatives and headteachers seeking opportunities to engage in the professional learning on offer through Excelerate. Equally, there were also school leaders who did not wish to engage with Excelerate citing their desire to provide a steady environment for teachers and students returning to school after a significant period of disruption.

System Review

In the six years since Excelerate was launched, there have been four reviews of Scotland's curriculum, executive agencies, qualifications and assessment structures, and skills development provision (see Exhibit 6). These reviews proved to be a beacon of hope for TWF and school partners within the Excelerate school network; each review echoed the challenges faced by school leaders in their ambition to achieve the aims of Curriculum for Excellence and DYW. The cross-cutting recommendations laid out in Muir, Hayward and Withers, in response to the OECD's findings, aligned closely to the strategic direction of school partners and their plans for real-world curriculums, school-learner profiles, career exploration in the Broad General Education, and tailored career exposures in the Senior Phase.

Whilst most school partners were already developing and delivering a curriculum that embraced the recommendations within Hayward and Withers, a few school leaders were initially hesitant to see these reviews as the 'green light' to do something different. There was a feeling amongst some that they should wait for the response from the Scottish Government before planning and implementing anything new. In exploring the reluctance to use the Excelerate interventions to prepare for the Scottish Government's response, conversations revealed a workforce experiencing change fatigue, over evaluation, and a cynicism around there being any meaningful change when the inspection and exam structures remained the same. At the time of this report, there is a Curriculum Improvement Cycle underway nationally, however, at this time, there is no clear strategy to formally address the considerations and recommendations detailed within Hayward and Withers. Without formal approvals, there are school leaders, within the Excelerate school network and nationally, who will not proactively plan for change.

Implementing Education Policies:

Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence – Into the Future²⁴ (OECD):

In 2020, Scottish Government invited the OECD to assess the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence in primary and secondary schools.

In 2021, the OECD released their report 'Implementing Education Policies: Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence – Into the Future' which recognised the ambition, potential, and wide support for Scotland's 21st century curriculum framework.

However, it also identified a disconnect between the Broad General Education and Senior Phase where the latter tended to move away from the aims of Curriculum for Excellence back towards traditional exam preparation. Additionally, the report recommended more support, time and autonomy for schools to implement a curriculum fit for purpose within their context.

Putting Learners at the Centre:

Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education²⁵(Muir):

In 2021, as a result of the OECD's report, Scottish Government commissioned Professor Ken Muir to provide independent advice on the executive agencies supporting Scotland's education system. In March 2022, 'Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education' was released.

It recommended a renewed vision for the future of Scotland's education, the creation of a new qualification and assessment body, a national agency for Scottish education providing "bespoke support and professional learning at regional and local levels"²⁶, a new independent inspectorate, and a dedicated team to support transition.

It's Our Future:

Report of the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment²⁷ (Hayward):

In 2021, Scottish Government commissioned an independent review of qualifications and assessment. In June 2023, Professor Louise Hayward and the team released 'It's Our Future: Report of the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment'.

The review explores a broad range of qualification and assessment models that allows students to demonstrate their acquisition of knowledge, skills, and experiences throughout their school journey.

The report advocates for Project Learning and recommends "national bodies for curriculum and qualifications should work together.... to develop examples of what Project Learning could look like in different contexts"²⁸, the work being done by Excelerate school partners is listed as an example. The report urges changes to ensure the system is responsive to the changing needs of young people and society.

Fit for the Future:

Developing a post-school learning system to fuel economic transformation – Skills Delivery Landscape Review – Final Report²⁹ (Withers):

In 2022, Scottish Government asked James Withers, an Independent Advisor, to conduct a Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape and recommend the future function, remit and status of Skills Development Scotland.

In May 2023 the final report was released. In 'Fit for the Future: developing a post-school learning system to fuel economic transformation – Skills Delivery Landscape Review - Final Report',

Withers recognises the role of frontline career advice and education in helping young people to make informed choices about their pathways. However, he argues it is currently elusive due to a lack of understanding within schools of the range of jobs and occupations that exist³⁰.

Leadership

The reviews of Scotland's education system, which took place between 2020 and 2022, do not reveal anything new to those working within the system. Curriculum for Excellence, DYW, and Determined to Succeed before it, all provide schools with the permission to design and deliver a curriculum that is both knowledge rich and experiential; providing opportunities for students to develop an entrepreneurial mindset, and the skills and competencies required to thrive in the pathway to the career of their choice. Scotland's curriculum and education policies are good, and recognised internationally as good, however, they have not been supported with the relentless dedication, energy and resource required to succeed in their ambitions. In part, this has been due to short-term leadership at all levels within the system.

Systems change requires strong and consistent leadership committed to achieving and maintaining the goals of reform. In 'How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better,' McKinsey and Company analysed 20 improving school systems globally to determine the elements that support successful school reform. New leadership was found to be a trigger for reform but continuous leadership, of six years plus, was seen to be a core factor in sustaining reform.^[31] Since Excelerate was launched in October 2019, Scotland has had three Cabinet Secretaries for Education and Skills: John Swinney (2016 – 2021), Shirley-Anne Sommerville (2021-2023), and Jenny Gilruth (2023 – present).

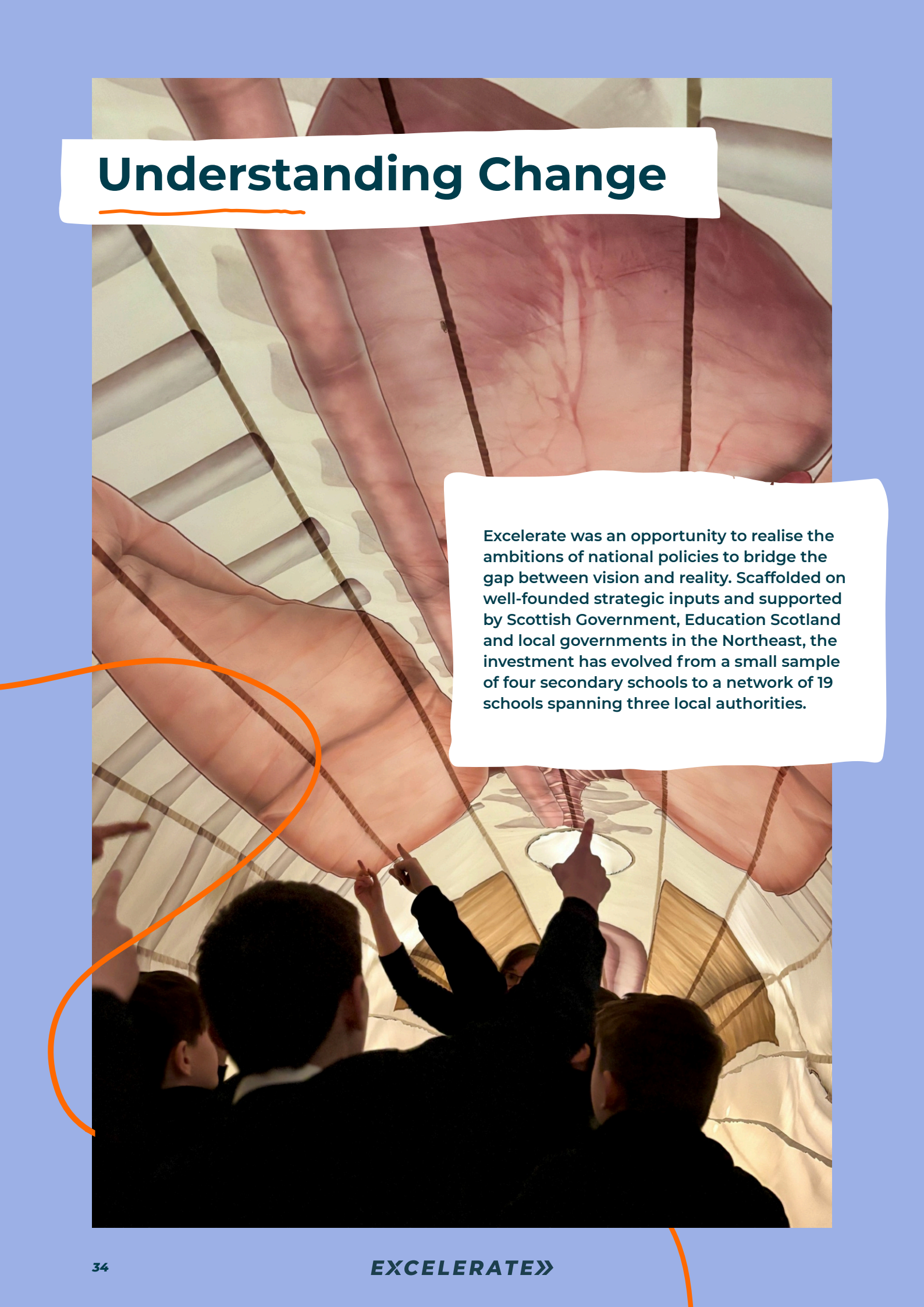
Consistency of leadership is not only a challenge in government, but also within local authorities and schools. The Excelerate school network consists of 19 secondary schools. Of those 19 schools, nine have had a new headteacher, and leadership teams, whilst being an Excelerate school partner. Whilst many of these changes injected a new sense of energy and enthusiasm into the partnership, in some instances, the decision was made to take stock and limit or pause engagement.

Inspection

The inspection process in Scotland is a vital quality assurance exercise. Of the 19 school partners within the Excelerate learning hub, three schools had been visited by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) prior to joining Excelerate and 11 were inspected whilst implementing their improvement plans. The Excelerate team observed each school plan for their first visit, or return visit, with laser focus. In most cases, school partners used the experience to show their commitment to learning and teaching through Excelerate's professional learning offer. Additionally, they introduced inspectors to their Crew models, skills frameworks, and an extensive range of partners. In three cases, they paused all engagement with their new plans and reverted to their previous improvement plans. In two cases this was the decision of the headteacher, in the other case, it was upon the recommendation of the local authority.

HMIE's response to the changes being implemented in schools has been varied. Some inspectors understood Excelerate to be a professional learning offer schools used as a positive lever for their improvement journey. Others, not fully understanding Excelerate, believed Excelerate to be a programme that is being implemented in schools, with structures such as Crew viewed as branded initiatives that cannot be discussed in final reports, despite it being mentioned as a positive structure in other school reports. As a result of the uncertainty and inconsistencies in the inspection and reporting process, schools that are yet to be inspected are unsure how to discuss Excelerate and their partnership with TWF. This contradicts the education system's desire to work collaboratively across private, public and third sector organisations and it diminishes the role of partnerships in supporting system evolution.

Understanding Change

The background of the page is a large mural. It depicts several large, pinkish-red hands reaching out from the top and sides towards a central point where a bright light emanates. The hands are rendered with visible veins and a realistic texture. Below the mural, the silhouettes of several children are visible, their arms raised and fingers pointing towards the central light of the mural. The entire scene is set against a light blue background.

Excelerate was an opportunity to realise the ambitions of national policies to bridge the gap between vision and reality. Scaffolded on well-founded strategic inputs and supported by Scottish Government, Education Scotland and local governments in the Northeast, the investment has evolved from a small sample of four secondary schools to a network of 19 schools spanning three local authorities.

The following section introduces the findings of the evaluation and provides guidance on how they should be interpreted. It is intended to help readers navigate the evidence presented and how conclusions about consequential changes have been drawn.

The findings are structured around key themes and outcome areas and reflect the investment's overarching objective of an educational eco-system of school leaders, educators, and partners who have the vision, skills, experience, and commitment to prepare all young people for the world of work and life. The themes mirror both the intended areas of impact and those where change was most prominent, however, they do not follow the structure of the theory of change.

Evidence presented in the following chapters draws on a mixed methods approach combining qualitative findings from interviews and focus groups with survey data. Quantitative data provides an indication of patterns, where available over time, across participating schools, whereas qualitative evidence provides context and depth of change, specifically how educators, leaders, young people, parents, and partners experienced the investment and its intended outcomes.

The evaluation uses a contribution-focused lens frequently used in complex systems. In education, a complex system shaped by national policy, local authority priorities and school context and challenges, attributing change to a single intervention, such as Excelerate, is neither appropriate nor feasible. Instead, the chapters that follow explore how the investment contributed to shifts in thinking, leadership, practice, relationships, and structures, particularly in regard to partnership working, professional development and learning that connects education with future work.

Themes described in these sections vary in scale and depth, but also stage of development and implementation. They also do not assess individual schools but consider Excelerate in its entirety. In some areas, evidence points to established and embedded practice. In others, it reflects early experimentation, greater risk-taking or changes in intent, rather than structural and sustainable impacts. Variation across schools, including their own context and readiness, is an important part of the analysis rather than its limitation.

Finally, these findings should be read as a snapshot in time, reflecting stakeholders' experiences and perceived change during the evaluation process. Although these provide a useful insight into how the investment has leveraged change, they do not claim long-term impact as Excelerate was not built with a randomised controlled trial approach in mind. They do, however, offer a comprehensive account of how Excelerate has contributed towards building the conditions for an educational ecosystem focused on the needs of future school leavers, while emphasising systemic and contextual challenges.

Methodology



Overview

Excelerate evaluation adopted a mixed method approach combining qualitative and quantitative data collection to establish the impact of Excelerate across multiple stakeholder groups. The use of mixed methods enabled the evaluation to capture both the breadth of experiences through surveys and the depth of reflections via interviews and focus groups. This approach allowed for triangulation across data sources and stakeholders' perspectives which ultimately strengthened the robustness of the evaluation findings.

That evaluation was designed to be reflective of the principles of good evaluation set out in the Magenta Book:

- Useful,
- Credible,
- Robust,
- And proportionate.

Data Collection

Data was collected from a range of stakeholders to ensure a comprehensive and balanced understanding of the investment's impact. The stakeholder groups included:

- Young people,
- Parents,
- Teachers,
- Headteachers,
- Members of school senior leadership teams,
- Key strategic partners including representatives from partner local and national governing bodies, and
- Business and community partners.

Surveys

Surveys were administered to:

- Teachers working within Excelerate partner schools,
- Young people within Excelerate partner schools, and
- Business and community partners collaborating with Excelerate partner schools.

Survey tools included a mix of closed and open-ended questions. Questions were designed to align with the investment's outcomes including impact on young people, pedagogical approaches, and systematic changes within the broader educational setting. Surveys were completed anonymously to encourage honest and reflective responses.



Interviews

Semi structured interviews were conducted with:

- Headteachers,
- Strategic partners,
- Business and community partners, and
- Parents.

Interviews were chosen as an appropriate evaluative method to explore strategic contextual and experiential impacts in greater depth. A structured interview guide was issued before the interview to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing for flexibility to explore issues of relevance to each stakeholder group and its own unique perspective.

Interviews were conducted in-person or online to suit participants' needs. Where appropriate, interviews were recorded and transcribed to support the analysis phase of evaluation.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted with members of senior leadership teams to explore their perspectives on strategic alignment of organisational change and school-level impacts attributed to Excelerate. Each focus group was facilitated by two evaluators. The two-person facilitation model was used to ensure both effective facilitation and consistency across workshops. One facilitator led the discussion, while the other captured accurate discussion points and supported group dynamics. A shared discussion guide was used across all focus groups to ensure consistency.

Data pilot and refinement

All data collection methods were trialled prior to full implementation. Surveys, interview guides, and focus group plans were reviewed and piloted either with a selection of relevant stakeholders or through an internal oversight group with appropriate expertise. This approach enabled the evaluation team to:

- Assess relevance, clarity, and accessibility of questions,
- Unsure alignment with the investment's objectives, and
- Identify and address any ambiguities.

Feedback from the pilot phase led to appropriate refinements of the tools and approaches.



Data Analysis

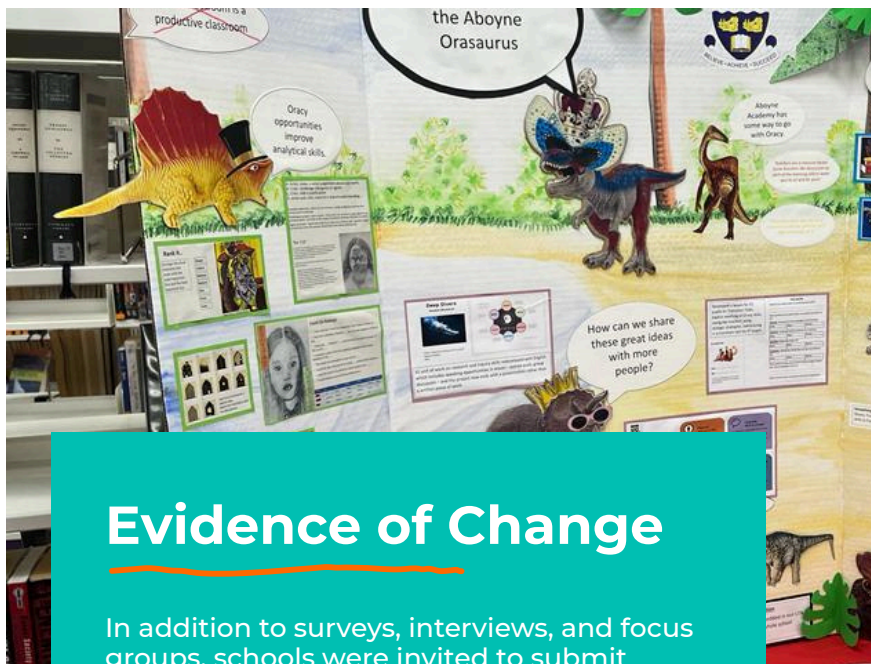
Quantitative survey data was analysed (in PowerBI) to identify patterns and trends across stakeholder groups.

Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups was analysed (in NVivo) using a thematic analysis approach.

This multi-stage approach entailed:

- Data familiarisation: which involved reading all field notes,
- Coding: applying codes to segments of text that represented key experiences,
- Thematic analysis: the coded data were grouped into overarching themes which reflected shared patterns and insights across interviews and focus groups, and
- Validation: informal peer-review of emerging codes and findings was undertaken to provide an opportunity for refinement and to ensure accuracy of findings.

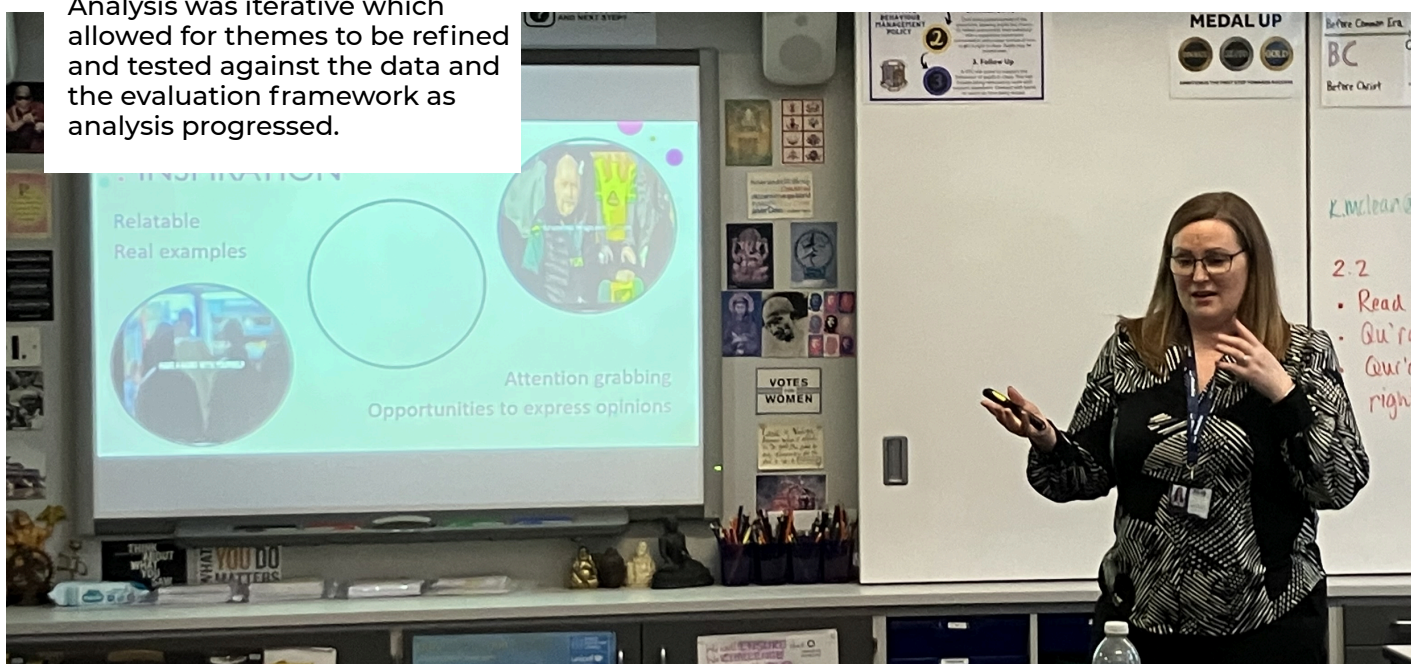
Analysis was iterative which allowed for themes to be refined and tested against the data and the evaluation framework as analysis progressed.



Evidence of Change

In addition to surveys, interviews, and focus groups, schools were invited to submit evidence of change to support the evaluation findings. This method was intended to provide concrete practice-based examples of how Excelerate led to change at a school level and to complement other data collection tools.

Schools were asked to choose and upload examples of evidence that demonstrated change aligned with the investment objectives. Evidence took the form of strategies, reflective accounts, reports, data, and other documents as deemed appropriate by schools. Findings from this data source were analysed alongside qualitative and quantitative evidence to exemplify emerging themes rather than draw direct conclusions.



Ethics

The evaluation was conducted in line with an ethical guideline framework developed specifically for this evaluation. This framework outlined principles of evaluation practise that stressed that the evaluation should be:

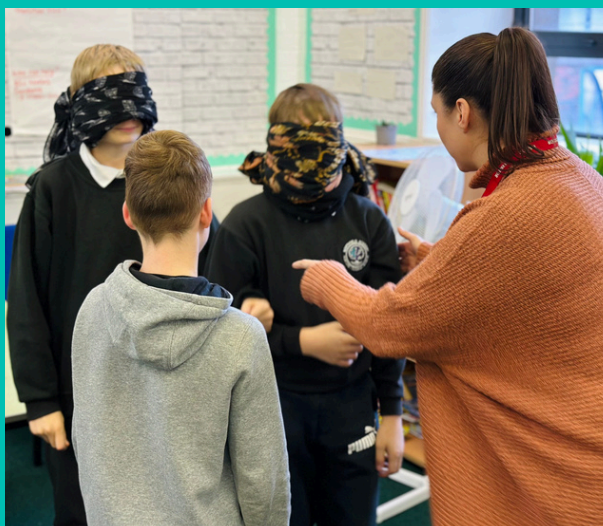
- Useful: that is producing findings that are meaningful and actionable,
- Credible: based on transparent and systematic methods,
- Robust: ensuring that any themes are supported by triangulated evidence, and
- Proportionate: that is appropriate to the scale and scope of the evaluation project.

This ethical framework also sets out expectations for:

- Respect for an inclusive engagement with key stakeholders,
- Ethical communication and conduct within the evaluation team, and
- Responsible, fair, and transparent approaches to data analysis and reporting.

Additionally, the evaluation adhered to the guidance of the UK Evaluation Society and The Ethical Statement of Practice of the British Sociological Association.

All participants involved in interviews and focus groups were provided with an informed consent prior to participation. Data was anonymised and stored securely, and findings are reported in a way that prevents disclosure of individual or institutional perspectives.



*rigorous,
proportionate, and
aligned with
recognised principles*

Limitations

The evaluation was designed to be rigorous, proportionate, and aligned with recognised principles of good evaluation practice. It draws on multiple data sources and perspectives to develop a rounded understanding of the investment's impact.

However, as with all evaluations conducted in complex educational environments, methodological limitations should be acknowledged. These do not challenge the overall findings but provide an important context for interpretation and reflection.

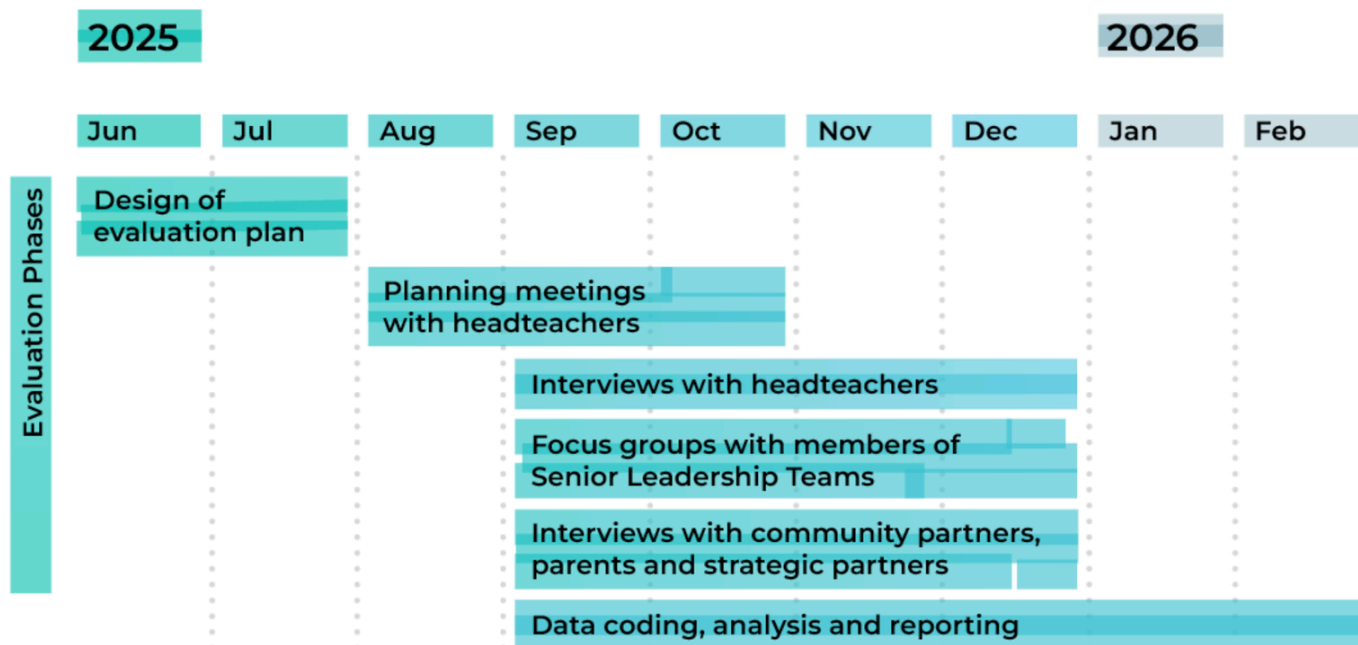
In particular, the evaluation focused on depth of insights of stakeholder perspectives and ethical and participatory engagement over longitudinal design. Consequently, the findings offer credible and robust insights into the investment's outcomes rather than causal statements about long-term impact of the investment.

Key limitations include:

- Self-reported data: evidence is based on participants' perceptions which might be influenced by recall, response bias, or researcher effect,
- Voluntary participation: engagement in surveys, interviews and focus groups was optional which may have affected the range of perspectives captured,
- Sample size and inferences: some stakeholder groups, namely teachers and young people, were represented by relatively small samples, therefore quantitative findings are not statistically generalisable, and
- Contribution not attribution: the findings reflect the investment's contribution to outcomes within a complex educational context, rather than direct causal impact.

Engagement Strategy

The evaluation framework was designed, developed and trialled over a period of two months. Its work has been informed by an internal Oversight Group comprising members of The Wood Foundation with relevant expertise. Evaluation phases took place over a period of 9 months:



Over a period of 9 months:

17 out of 19

Headteachers within Excelerate partner schools took part in semi-structured interviews.

2,349

Young people within Excelerate partner schools responded to the final survey.

60

Leaders from 16 Senior Leadership Teams within Excelerate partner schools participated in focus groups.

7

Strategic partners took part in semi-structured interviews.

17

Community and business partners, who collaborate with Excelerate partner schools, took part in structured interviews led by Business and Community Support Officers.

8

Parents, from the Excelerate partner school network, took part in semi-structured interviews.

140

Community partners, who collaborate with Excelerate partner schools, responded to the final survey.

299

Teachers, from within the Excelerate partner school network, responded to the final survey.

The Need for Excelerate

Analysis of stakeholder data highlights a clear rationale for the investment in the Northeast of Scotland. There was a strong consensus that existing structures and practices within the educational system were no longer sufficient to prepare young people for the world after school. The need for Excelerate was not seen through one single lens but as a mixture of systemic, pedagogical, strategic, and cultural factors.

Five overall themes underpinned this need: pedagogical innovation, limitations of the current system, strategy and policy gaps, ripple effect and influence, and culture, leadership, and workforce.

Pedagogical Innovation

The need for pedagogical change and innovation emerged as a strong and recurring theme across all stakeholder groups. Participants described teaching and learning, while well-intentioned in the current, often constrained, environment as outdated and out of touch with the current world of work. What's more, the impact of the global pandemic required schools, and the broader education system, to rethink not only teaching and learning, but also the place of schools in the 21st century.

"There was a strong sense that traditional approaches no longer met the needs of all learners, and a desire to accelerate innovation rather than return to normal" – Headteacher, Aberdeenshire

Even though some schools created connections with the local employers, these were constrained to national agendas and objectives; were mostly opportunistic and tokenistic and focused on senior phases. Real collaboration between employers shaping the curriculum and educators embracing opportunities to work with them was scarce and inconsistent across the three local authorities.

What is more, there was particular emphasis on the limitations of traditional subject-specialism approaches, which valued knowledge over skills, and led to silo learning experiences. Participants highlighted the desire to connect teaching and learning with the world of work, but lacked confidence, time, and even institutional and system-level support.

"Staff [are now] feeling empowered and confident to invite SLT into the classroom to see the work" – SLT member, Aberdeen City

The external focus of the Excelerate offers became an appealing opportunity to look "outside the box" for educators constrained to mostly in-school training and development opportunities.

"[Excelerate] offered a chance to look outwardly, instead of focusing on individual schools' environments" – Strategic partner

Furthermore, the provision of quality professional learning and development opportunities had been eroded, leaving the workforce with limited, predominantly online options.

"Standard education training is boring, that's why change doesn't happen. Training needs to be what Excelerate offers – engaging and exciting" – Headteacher, Aberdeenshire

Excelerate's international lens, shaped by thought leaders, system disruptors, along with well esteemed and local strategic leads, provided an opportunity to connect learning to community. Specifically, the investment allowed schools to look outward to practise, experiment and test the most suitable pedagogical approaches within their own contexts without fear of failure. As one interviewee put it: **"Excelerate gave people permission to do things differently."**

From PBL to PBLx



Peterhead Academy students engaging with real-world learning

One of the most popular offers made by Excelerate was training in Project-based Learning (PBL). Although all 19 schools were given this opportunity, uptake and implementation varied significantly from school to school. Peterhead Academy took a particularly distinctive approach, developing its own version of PBL inspired by the PBL 101 training and study visits to XP Schools and the Academies of Nashville. Peterhead Based Learning Experiences (PBLx) draws on learning from several Excelerate offers, providing teachers with a bank of nine protocols that can be woven into everyday lessons, with the use of all nine protocols across a project amounting to a full PBLx.

Peterhead Academy's development of PBLx was the product of deliberate design, informed leadership, and the full range of opportunities offered through Excelerate. Joining the investment with prior exposure to PBL through Mintlaw Academy, Headteacher, Gerry McCluskey, had the benefit of hindsight. With this, Peterhead Academy was able to prepare the groundwork for delivering PBLx, drawing on existing community connections and the expertise of their DYW coordinator, who helped establish an initial network of local partners before the school began their Excelerate journey.

Onboarding with the investment in 2023, Peterhead Academy immediately set out to make the most of Excelerate's professional learning offer. Initially, six members of staff completed the PBL 101 training alongside the Headteacher. These teachers were carefully selected as they were already demonstrating the kind of practice and curriculum thinking that aligned with PBL principles, and there was belief that they could carry forward the work in the school.

A decision was made to invite many of the same teachers to study visits to XP Schools, Nashville, and Detroit, further contextualising and building upon the learning of this core team. Study visits afforded the opportunity to gain a rich understanding of different approaches, helping to clarify what would work at Peterhead. The consensus was that rather than replicating another school's model, the team would intentionally design something bespoke.

Looking outward, Peterhead Academy could use their learnings to shape PBLx: a flexible, protocol-driven approach that fit with the school's existing structures rather than requiring a full timetable redesign. In conception and implementation, staff autonomy and buy-in was a priority.

As part of its roll-out, teachers were not given directives, but instead given readings, rationale, and professional learning to give context to the changes.

PBLx was framed as high-quality learning and teaching “packaged differently,” with the aim of enhancing the experiences of the young people. Staff who chose to adopt PBLx were provided guidance and support by the PBLx Coaches who were the six members of staff who first trained. Now, in their fourth year, around twenty staff at Peterhead Academy have completed PBL 101, which remains the core training that underpins the model.

The school now has a long-term plan, spanning ten years, to embed PBLx across all faculties in S1 and S2.

By next year [2026/2027], every BGE class will be expected to use at least one PBLx protocol, aligning with the curriculum improvement cycle and the refreshed Scottish curriculum. The focus is not on changing what is taught, but how it is delivered. PBLx supports redrafting, deeper learning, and preparation for life beyond school, countering the previous content-driven, test-heavy BGE experience.

An example of PBLx at Peterhead Academy would be the S2 Global Burger Challenge. This project saw pupils take part in a hands-on food product development project in partnership with Quality Meat Scotland and local industry professionals. Following an industry-led workshop exploring farm-to-fork processes, sustainability, and nutrition, pupils worked in teams to design, develop, and refine their own original burger recipes using locally sourced ingredients. They applied creativity, teamwork, and practical culinary skills in a real-world context, culminating in a final competition where winning burgers were professionally prepared and sold in a local butcher's shop.

This project demonstrates authentic learning through meaningful employer partnership, giving pupils direct insight into industry standards and career pathways.



Staff trained in PBL

The impact of these curricular changes is evident and reaches beyond the school. Pupil voice highlights that the majority of young people recognise and have used the protocols, and feedback from this is overwhelmingly positive. Classrooms are calmer, more engaged, and more interactive, reflected through a decrease in referrals, and an increase in merits awarded. Though curricular changes are concentrated in S1 and S2, impact can be seen in the senior phase.

Faculties that embraced PBLx early, such as Social Subjects and Creative Arts, are seeing increased uptake in senior phase courses. Staff motivation and confidence to use PBLx protocols has grown year on year. The high-quality nature of the PBL 101 training has meant that some staff who were initially sceptical have become advocates for the practice. Community partnerships have flourished. Local businesses now approach the school proactively, and the school's profile in the community has strengthened.

Ultimately, PBLx is a direct result of the full suite of Excelerate inputs. The training, visits, and professional learning shaped a complete re-imagining of Peterhead Academy's curriculum model in S1 and S2, and its identity as a school. The long-term vision is clear: a consistent, high-quality, community-connected approach to learning that prepares young people for life beyond school.

Current System

Interviews and focus groups with school leadership articulated clear frustrations with structural and systemic limitations of the current education system. These, it was felt, hampered innovation, progress, and relevance of education to the current world of work.

Many stakeholders spoke of rigid accountability structures, limited, if not archaic, curriculum and assessment frameworks, and overemphasis of grades over cultural, civic, and societal outcomes schools aspire to deliver on.

Moreover, despite numerous attempts at realising the ambitions of Curriculum for Excellence, some stakeholders felt the Scottish education system failed to present a tactical model for delivery of education that considers schools' unique contextual circumstances and helps them prepare young people for life beyond school.

"Previous experience of embedding [another educational] model within the cluster schools failed, and there was determination to find an approach that will transform the way education was delivered, which Excelerate provided." – Headteacher, Aberdeenshire

Unlike other educational approaches, Excelerate focused on educators, whose *"identity is often tied into the subjects they teach and [ultimately] gave people control over the system"* (Strategic Partner).

Strategy and Policy Gaps

There was a strong sense amongst most interviewees that the ambitious plans and strategies, national, and school-level, often remained at the visionary level rendering

the implementation phase difficult, if not impossible. Excelerate was seen as a way of connecting the national agenda with reality.

However, many school leaders felt ill-equipped and, at times, left to their own devices, when leading change in their school communities.

"While the school had a strategy, it was unclear how to move from reality to vision. Excelerate, especially PBL, offered an opportunity to bridge this gap." – Headteacher, Aberdeen City

Some also reflected on the disconnect between the nationally prescribed 'Into Headship' programmes for aspiring headteachers, and the reality of school leadership, leaving them knowledge-rich but experience-poor, arguably a parallel between the experiences of school leaders, teachers, and students.

Very quickly, many leaders recognised Excelerate as the crucial element in helping them realise their schools' aspirations. The investment, especially its experiential pedagogical approaches, provided a bridge from the current status quo to a vision aligning closely with Curriculum for Excellence and initiatives like Developing the Young Workforce.

"[Headteacher] acknowledged that realising [the vision] would require support and tools he didn't have at his disposal. Excelerate was the answer. It was the bridge between today and the vision [for tomorrow]." – Headteacher, Aberdeenshire

Nevertheless, pressures from external sources, such as inspection and shifting educational priorities, undermined undergoing improvement work, and further emphasised the need for innovative approaches like Excelerate to empower educators and enhance outcomes for young people.

Ripple Effect and Influence

While Excelerate followed three years of intense research, discussions with thought leaders and determining readiness for change in the North, including carefully tailored selection criteria, it was the early success stories from enthused teachers implementing new pedagogical approaches that created a following of subsequent and curious school leaders from other schools. Equally, promotions and transitions of staff between schools, led to a crosspollination and greater curiosity around Excelerate.

“PBL 101 [delivered at another Excelerate school] had a massive impact on the Academy joining Excelerate. Training provided at [the other Excelerate school] was refreshing, interactive and immersive, not like a couple of hours in Glasgow listening to an uninspiring guest speaker.” – Headteacher, Aberdeenshire

Ultimately, a successful implementation of Excelerate’s interventions across four pilot schools, and subsequent cohorts, created a ripple effect across secondary schools joining the network in Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire, and Angus. Over time, the investment started to symbolise a shift towards an outward-looking approach, emphasising collaboration with external agencies, immersive learning opportunities, and challenges to the status quo.



Culture, Leadership and Workforce

Participating stakeholders also emphasised cultural and workforce-related challenges that were central to their decision to participate in Excelerate. They talked about leadership being “traditional” and exercising power over people, instead of power sharing, or distributive. There was consensus that traditional approaches no longer had a place in the modern education system and needed an overhaul.

What is more, it was evident that the leadership pipeline, or succession planning, was experiencing recruitment challenges, directly impacting education and the outcomes of young people. Creating leadership opportunities and transforming school culture became priorities.

Additionally, nearly all stakeholders talked about the need to elevate the importance of relationships in the Scottish education system. The impact of the global pandemic, while it forced a different delivery of Excelerate’s interventions, proved immensely effective in empowering leaders to prioritise wellbeing, relationships, consistency, and accountability. What is more, the **“pandemic made the school shift towards rebuilding relationships which became fractured through new and uncharted ways of delivering education, which subsequently created a desire to put the school at the centre of the community.”** - Headteacher, Angus

Distributive Leadership: Building Talent from Within

Since the introduction of the Excelerate investment, the movement of teachers and leaders between schools in the network has been a powerful mechanism for improvement. This mobility enables strong practice to be shared across the 19 schools, ensuring that effective pedagogy, systems, and cultures are not isolated within individual settings. Underpinning this is a clear commitment to distributive leadership. By introducing responsibility and expertise at every level, senior and middle leaders can experience professional growth within healthy, high-performing environments.

Current headteacher of Dyce Academy, Katie Arthur, served as deputy at Kemnay Academy from 2017 to 2022 before progressing into headship. Movement between schools allows for common values, proven approaches, and a deep understanding of school improvement to be shared across the network enabling continuity and coherence across the schools. This case study examines how distributive leadership supported meaningful change across two school contexts, initially at Kemnay Academy and later at Dyce Academy, through the trust and empowerment of middle and senior leaders.

At Kemnay Academy, distributive leadership was central to redesigning the registration system with inspiration coming from study visits to XP in Doncaster. Rather than directing change from the top, the headteacher fostered a culture of trust and professional autonomy.

Senior leaders were encouraged to explore ideas, adapt structures to their own context,



Investing in leadership development

and reflect on what would genuinely strengthen relationships with young people. This approach not only empowered individuals but also ensured that improvements were grounded in school specific needs. The non-prescriptive nature of the Excelerate offers encouraged this style of distributive leadership.

Additionally, coaching played a central role in building leadership capacity. In the context of both Kemnay and Dyce, it helped emerging leaders recognise their expertise, develop strategic clarity, and gain confidence in taking on new responsibilities. By promoting collaborative problem solving and reducing reliance on top-down instruction, coaching reinforced a distributive model where leadership was shared and dynamic.

Across both Kemnay and Dyce, distributive leadership has led to a more collaborative culture, greater willingness among staff to lead, and clearer alignment between school vision and day-to-day practice. Valuable lessons can be learnt from each context: trust takes time but is essential; schools benefit from collaboratively designing solutions that fit their context; equitable inclusion of both early-adopters and sceptics strengthens outcomes; and staff commit fully when they understand the purpose behind change. Ultimately, distributive leadership enabled sustained improvement by empowering individuals and building a shared sense of purpose across the school community.

Aspirations



While the previous section outlined contextual and systemic factors that gave rise to Excelerate, a more detailed analysis of stakeholders' experiences presents a granular and, at times, pragmatic picture of the hopes behind the investment.

Those who engaged with the evaluation process often cited Excelerate as an opportunity to move beyond problems towards constructive, collaborative, and sustainable change. Their aspirations extended beyond sheer problem solving and reflected a desire to reimagine education to better prepare young people for the jobs of tomorrow: outward facing, skills-driven and community orientated.

The aspirations of the investment cuts across several intertwined domains. From strengthening connections with community and business partners, supporting development of young people, creating future-focused and real-life learning experiences, and improving educational outcomes, including, but not exclusively, attainment. Both interviewees and focus group participants talked about ambitions related to professional practice, such as quality of teaching and learning, cross-departmental collaboration, leadership, and a review of the existing curriculum.

Additionally, aspirations were seen not solely through the lens of learners, but also through the lens of culture, values, and relationships. They consistently talked about the opportunities to look outwardly: not only beyond physical school boundaries but also established norms, practices, and rules, as a way of building innovation and partnerships, but also reigniting the purpose within the educational system.



Quality of Teaching and Learning

There was an overwhelming sense that the standard of teaching and learning has been declining despite the rapidly changing world of work. Teaching and learning were often seen as teacher-led, focused on academic achievement with little consideration to alternatives of what educational success might look like. What is more, connecting classroom teaching to the local environment, community and culture through hands-on and experiential learning was also sparse.

Excelerate, with its experiential, collaborative and reflective learning outputs, provided an opportunity to place an emphasis on accountability and responsibility among staff for their own teaching practices, which were not effectively preparing young people for the needs of the modern workforce.

“It was clear that, while professional learning was available, good quality and impactful professional learning was scarce, if [not] non-existent” – Strategic partner, Aberdeenshire



Furthermore, at times of local authorities' and schools' dwindling budgets^[32] Excelerate was seen as a precious lifeline with the potential of transforming archaic teaching pedagogies. That is why Excelerate's interventions, namely PBL, oracy, coaching and study visits, provided an irresistible offer of learning through experiential, grounded and collaborative pedagogies, which aimed to connect learning with local communities and develop skills for the future.

“Everyone who comes back from Excelerate training ‘gets it’ which deepens the understanding that it is possible to teach differently, by connecting subjects with external organisations' inputs” – Headteacher, Aberdeenshire

Connect with Community and Business

A recurring aspiration expressed by many stakeholders was the desire to rebuild and strengthen school connections with the community and employer. This desire was also reciprocated by business and community partners supporting Excelerate schools. Most of them engaged with the schools to spark young people's interest in the areas of their work (85%) and to build connections between them, as employers and schools, as hubs of future workforce.

While some already worked with various partners, their relationships were, at times, tokenistic and one-sided. Their aspiration was shaped by a perception that relationships between education and community had weakened over time, with some participating schools subject to negative perceptions across their communities. Excelerate was seen as a catalyst for change, renewed, or indeed new, engagement and positioning the school in the centre of the community.

For other schools, a desire to build strong, sustainable, and mutually beneficial relationships would lead to long-term partnerships embedded in school life and curriculum to reflect the realities of the world of work.

"[This] is a place that could live on its own as it is a home to local, national, and international companies. As such, it does not need much external input, however, [we] wanted to connect the school with local community and businesses, an inspiration which was borne out of the study visit to Nashville." – Headteacher, Aberdeenshire

There was a clear belief, across most accounts, that stronger community and

business connections enhance the relevance of learning for young people. They create experiential context, which helps pupils understand the purpose and application of what they learn, but also develops a sense of belonging and responsibility. As one strategic partner put it **"[we joined Excelerate to] enhance education by providing context (reason) for learning, to [help young people] gain employment but also to engage with the community and build civic activism."**

Create Future Proof. Real-life Learning

The ambition for stronger links between schools and community partners became more future focused as school leaders and their teams started engaging with Excelerate offers.

From diversifying learning opportunities for young people who ordinarily were focused on academic achievement, to exploring pathways through community engagement, engaged businesses sparked young people's interest in future careers, and bridged school curriculums with the needs of businesses.

The connection with partner organisations became an important aspect of preparing young people for the world of work, creating a sense of ownership and mutual benefit.

"It became evident that a well-designed education system brings about financial benefits to the businesses who are involved in it" – Headteacher, Aberdeenshire

The aspirations for real-life learning highlight a clear shift from traditional, siloed, and knowledge-rich approaches towards agile, contextual, and applied learning that prepares young people for future pathways and lifelong learning.

Build Leadership at All Levels

Stakeholders consistently articulated that leadership was a central lever for true sustainable change. Aspirations extended beyond formal roles or hierarchical authority. They emphasised the need for a shared leadership culture where responsibility, innovation, and accountability are distributed and owned across the whole school and underpinned by open and consistent communication.

Participants expressed a desire to move away from leadership concentrating authority in a small number of roles towards approaches that actively and gradually empower others to take leadership opportunities. This however required conditions where staff felt trusted to make decisions, take informed risks and learn from mistakes without fear or blame.

“We need to be showing teachers they can make mistakes and take risks.” – Headteacher, Aberdeen City

Some stakeholders described leadership not as a position, but practice embedded in everyday interaction, which recognised supporting emerging leaders and those who wished to do education differently.

“[I wanted to create conditions for] empowerment of staff to make decisions and be accountable for reimagining education.” – Headteacher, Aberdeenshire

Key to this was a clear and compelling vision, values, and direction of travel (which Ford NGL coaching focused on) that school and community could subscribe to.

“[Excelerate] allowed us to demonstrate what was possible; the sought-after vision became a reality along with an understanding of the tools and approaches that help realise it” – Headteacher, Aberdeen City

Leadership was seen as critical in translating ambition into action through transparent planning, open and fair engagement, and consistent communication with visible results.

A further dimension of leadership aspiration focused on repairing and strengthening relationships. Many stakeholders acknowledged that relationships with and around the school environment have been strained, whether between leaders, teachers, young people, schools, and their communities. They expressed a desire for schools to prioritise trust and dialogue as essential in transforming education. In this context, leadership was seen as both relational and strategic.

“Excelerate felt like how things should work rather than a pioneering initiative: practical, relationship-based, and grounded.” – Strategic partner

Review Curriculum and System

By far the most common reason for joining Excelerate was the need to overhaul the education system to make it relevant and future proof.

“The local authority joined the investment with the hope of changing the curriculum by bringing it into the 21st century.” – Strategic partner

School leaders wanted to improve the curriculum as it was limited and shaped by external factors, such as exams and assessments. The perceived focus in secondary education on attainment and exams came at a cost of broader societal and civic development. That is why some school leaders focused on making changes to the senior phases, while others shifted their attention onto the Broad General Education.

“We need to be showing teachers they can make mistakes and take risks.” – Headteacher, Aberdeen City

It is worth noting that attainment improvement, while referred to and discussed throughout most interviews and focus groups, did not feature prominently as a main reason for engaging in Excelerate. In fact, at times, it was seen as a byproduct of a reimagined curriculum.

Explorers, Adventurers & Voyagers: The Journey Beyond School



*Celebrating the Street Food
Pop Up at Mackie Academy*

A key theme within Excelerate is the way the investment has given schools dedicated time and capacity to explore learner pathways more deeply. For Mackie Academy, the space created through Excelerate has enabled staff to step back, analyse their existing curriculum, and redesign key elements with a sharper focus on skills development and Project-based Learning (PBL).

The school identified that meaningful pathways begin earlier than previously considered and that skills progression needs to be consistently embedded from primary into secondary. Looking outward, drawing on both local and international inspiration, Mackie Academy has used the Excelerate offers to establish sustainable leadership structures that support innovative pedagogy and long-term curriculum development. This renewed vision aligns learning and teaching with a curriculum designed around real-world competencies, ensuring that young people develop the skills and confidence needed to navigate future pathways and lifelong learning.

The Explorers programme, designed for all S1 pupils with two weekly periods, introduces a structured skills-based curriculum across three strands: an introductory skills pedagogy term, "Down the Rabbit Hole," and "Talking Trash."

The course has evolved significantly, incorporating My World of Work (MyWOW) profiling tools and pairing these with meta-skills aligned to Skills Development Scotland. Projects explore themes such as the impact of media over time and environmental sustainability, encouraging pupils to act as researchers addressing real-world issues. Oracy strategies and shared classroom protocols are embedded throughout, alongside clear ground rules and assessment rubrics. Student reflection is captured through gallery walks and digital profiling, with ongoing feedback informing annual course refinement.

The Adventurers course, delivered to S2 pupils for one period per week, builds on the foundations of Explorers through two core projects focused on social responsibility and community engagement. A central component of the programme is participation in the Youth and Philanthropy Initiative (YPI), through which pupils investigate local social issues, research charities, and advocate for a chosen cause with the potential to secure a real financial grant for their community. This experience strengthens skills in effective contribution, teamwork, communication, and critical thinking while giving learners an authentic platform to influence positive change.

Across the course, pupils develop key competencies such as adaptability, creativity, respect, and kindness, supported by consistent Oracy practices that ensure all learners can articulate their ideas with clarity and confidence.

The young people deepen their understanding of social connections, enhance their presentation skills, and apply learning beyond the classroom. Overall, the Adventurers course fosters active citizenship while building learners' confidence, empathy, and collaborative abilities, helping them understand their role as contributors to both their school and the wider community.

The Voyagers programme for S3 pupils, delivered through a double weekly period, shifts focus toward business engagement and pathway development within the Northeast.

Pupils develop adaptability, creativity, respect and kindness

It builds on the skills framework established in S1 and S2, connecting pupils with local industries and broadening awareness of future opportunities. Emphasis moves from the skills wheel to the school leaver profile, supporting learners in understanding their strengths, aspirations, and next steps in education, training, or employment.

Much of the content delivered in Explorers, Adventurers and Voyagers is delivered through PBL, with an emphasis on oracy as a unifying thread across the projects. From S1 onwards, pupils are explicitly taught how to discuss, reason, question, and present effectively, fostering inclusivity and ensuring every learner has a voice. Mackie Academy adopted the Oracy Cambridge framework, then tailored protocols to suit their context. Extensive professional learning has ensured staff confidence and consistency, with oracy strategies embedded across subjects and visible in classroom practice.

Oracy techniques and structured questioning support resilience, adaptability, and independence, preparing learners to become articulate, confident contributors.

PBL and oracy are unifying threads across projects

Mackie Academy's model has created a coherent, skills-driven curriculum from S1 to S3 that empowers staff and pupils alike. The impact is reflected in the organic growth of oracy and PBL, both of which have developed naturally from practitioner engagement rather than top-down direction.

As these approaches have evolved, they have contributed to a structured and coherent BGE curriculum, empowering colleagues to confidently transfer effective strategies back into their own faculties. High-quality professional learning has established consistent pedagogical threads across subjects, ensuring staff feel skilled, supported, and motivated to embed these approaches into their daily practice. Crucially, the model has broadened participation in learning and teaching beyond those with formal leadership roles, reinforcing the belief that learning is everyone's responsibility.

As a result, good practice has permeated throughout the school. The continued, organic development of oracy and PBL has strengthened staff confidence, enhanced collaboration, and better prepared teachers to design meaningful learning experiences that improve outcomes for all learners.

By prioritising authentic, skills-rich experiences over isolated content delivery, the school has fostered a culture of collaboration, innovation, and shared responsibility. The approach has embedded good practice throughout the school and better prepares young people for senior phase learning, higher education, and the world of work.

Impacts and Changes

Excelerate began as a test of change investment in 2019. The initial cohort of four Aberdeenshire secondary schools grew to the Excelerate hub of 19 schools from across three local authorities by 2025.

Despite vast differences in school demographics, leadership styles, geographies, teachers, and pupil numbers, the evaluation has uncovered strong thematic links between the participating schools. The overall perception of Excelerate ranged from an emerging promise, a useful framework, to a transformational model capable, with the right support, of revolutionising education.

Stakeholders talked about greater opportunities to engage with external partners enhancing collaboration amongst staff and young people, fostering a culture of empowerment and connection to post-school life. This is demonstrated by three in every four surveyed educators (75%) describing their school's partnership approaches as meaningful and contributing to student experiences, and at times even strong and sustained; a stark contrast to the way in which they worked with partners previously.

Many spoke about stronger leadership, revamped professional learning approaches introduced as a result of study visits, quality training, and/or peer learning. They reflected on how their relationships with the community changed, highlighting pivotal moments and key obstacles, which some leaders are still grappling with. There is a notable reflection on students' skill development aligned with local business needs, emphasising collaboration and relationships across the whole school community.



“What is particularly different between Excelerate and non-Excelerate schools is the relationships, culture and atmosphere in these schools and the application of teaching and learning.” – Strategic partner, Aberdeenshire

Despite challenges with parental engagement and some leadership transitions, Excelerate is viewed as a catalyst for change in spite of the constraints of the current education system. The following section outlines the main impacts attributed to the investment by those participating in the evaluation.

Community and Business Engagement

With over **2,800** individual engagements between Excelerate schools and over **900**^[33] organisations and teams, it is not surprising that community and business engagement was the most visible change attributed to Excelerate over the last six years. In fact, three quarters of surveyed educators (75%) reported better opportunities to work with external partners enriching their teaching practice since joining Excelerate. Interestingly, while on the whole, young people did not perceive significant changes (increase or decrease) in the number of visits from external organisations over the years, those in S6 have reported a slightly or significantly greater number of external partners engaging with their schools, compared with the rest of the school (42% and 20% respectively).

While not all schools have been ready for the Business and Community Support Officer role, those who have, point to its unique character. As noted by one of the Aberdeenshire's headteachers: ***"[the] BCSO bridges the gap between the educator, who 'doesn't know how to speak to businesses' with the world of work."*** Those observations are reciprocated by organisations engaged with schools through Excelerate, with nearly all stating the investment has helped them, a little or a lot, build links with schools or give back to the community (98%). All but one also felt its principles have fostered a sense of community when engaging with the school.

The BCSO role is credited with significantly enhancing community engagement within schools; creating meaningful partnerships that improve curriculum design and promote student learning through project-based learning (PBL) or other pedagogical approaches Excelerate has introduced. Further, the educators survey suggests that three quarters of teachers (76%) have been in a better position to integrate elements of real-world learning into their classrooms, compared to 19% who have seen no improvement or even deterioration.

The power of the BCSO role has been so impactful that some Excelerate schools have absorbed its funding and operational management to ensure it was embedded as a core part of their organisational structures. This structural change, although limited to seven out of sixteen Excelerate schools eligible for a BCSO, echoes the calls by interviewed community and business partners, who consistently highlighted the value of one person brokering relationships between classroom teachers and businesses looking to give back to the community.

"Honestly, it's been one of the most rewarding things I've done in my time here. [...] But, in reality, I think it was the relationships that we've built up with students and teachers within the school [that has been the most rewarding]." – community and business partner, Aberdeen

"The Business and Community Support Officer role has become a part of the school's budget. The role cements existing relationships, which [I'm often] unaware of because there are so many of them." – Headteacher, Aberdeen City

This collaborative approach has shifted perceptions, with students increasingly prepared for life beyond school via partnerships with local businesses and organisations. Initiatives like community projects and presentations have led to greater local involvement and pride in the school.

"The relationship [between school and its community] is strong and getting stronger. Local businesses and organisations are regularly involved with the school, and pupils are often out in the community doing activities and visits." – parent, Aberdeenshire

What is more, the emphasis on career readiness, local organisations and active internal collaboration has contributed to a positive reputation for the school, enhancing its visibility and demonstrating the value of community integration in education.

“True and structurally sustainable partnerships would have never developed the way they have.” – Headteacher, Aberdeenshire

However, while some brokered partnerships have been impactful, others lacked meaningful engagement, often focusing on quantity over quality undermining a fundamental principle of Excelerate.

Powerful Partnerships

It is difficult to discuss the key goals of Excelerate without examining the development and impact of powerful partnerships, and how this concept looks in different school contexts. When referring to powerful partners, we mean partners from industry and the community who support the development and delivery of the curriculum. Powerful partnerships are intentional, collaborative, and embedded in the school with sustainability in mind. In order to succeed, these partnerships need to be nurtured; relying on time, coordination, and consistency, meaning the Business and Community Support Officer (BCSO) role is often instrumental. The experiences of St Machar Academy and Kemnay Academy demonstrate the difference this capacity makes.

St Machar Academy

With sustained, cross-sector partnerships embedded in the school, St Machar Academy showcases the heights partnerships can reach with the dedicated support of a BCSO in post. Powerful partners, such as NHS Grampian and Deloitte, play a central role in strengthening the curriculum through real-world learning. These partners are firmly part of the school community, contributing to its curriculum and culture. Both partners work with the school to ensure learning reflects current industry practice, delivering regular inputs and collaborating with staff to ensure content remains relevant and aspirational.



St Machar Academy team
externship at NHS Grampian

The involvement of Deloitte and NHS Grampian in St Machar Academy is not tokenistic. Deloitte formally endorses the Business Faculty, meeting annually with staff to refine courses and strengthen authentic business links, while NHS Grampian provides similar support across health-related areas, offering externships to teachers and enhancing their professional practice and confidence. Additionally, both organisations participate in the school's annual Community Conference, reviewing the School Improvement Plan and contributing to whole-school direction. With a dedicated investment of time and resource, a powerful partnership is one that reaps benefits on both sides.

The true impact of powerful partnership is directly realised by the young people, with pupils gaining clearer insight into diverse career pathways. In the case of St Machar Academy, several young people progress into positive destinations directly linked to these partnerships, such as one pupil entering a Deloitte apprenticeship, and pupils exploring a broad range of health-sector opportunities. The consistency and depth of these partnerships are possible because the BCSO maintains relationships, coordinates activity, and ensures partners feel valued and connected to the school.

Kemnay Academy

Conversely, changes at Kemnay Academy illustrate what happens when capacity to invest in partnership working is removed. At the beginning 2024, the school held a strong partnership portfolio, built by their BCSO who has been in post for multiple years. At this time, the BCSO coordinated weekly engagement with partners across faculties, maintained detailed records of this, and managed a structured system categorising partners by level of involvement. Due to the well-developed partnership systems put in place and managed by the BCSO, partners who work with Kemnay Academy could expect engagements to be high-quality and intentional.

However, the departure of the BCSO in August 2024 exposed fragility in Kemnay Academy's partnership model. Within months, partner engagement declined significantly, with events that previously attracted over eighty partners now drawing only a dozen contributors. Without a dedicated role to maintain and nurture relationships, partnerships shifted from being integral to becoming peripheral.

Teachers, despite their commitment, did not have the capacity or specialist networking skills required to sustain such a model. While some long-standing community links remain, the breadth, diversity, and strategic value of partnerships has diminished. Opportunities to develop new relationships are limited, and as a result learning has become less connected to real-world contexts.

Looking at the examples of St Machar Academy and Kemnay Academy, the importance of investing in partnership working is evident. Where schools invest in dedicated partnership capacity, industry engagement becomes embedded, sustainable, and transformative. Without it, even highly motivated schools face barriers that limit the relevance, reach, and impact of partnerships on young people's learning and pathways.

BCSO Partnership Engagement Day



Staff Leadership and Development

The introduction and subsequent implementation of Excelerate, especially through staff training and development, across the Northeast has enabled school leaders and teachers to move away from a risk-averse environment that inhibited creativity and innovation.

“[Excelerate] has created an atmosphere and ethos where people can lead and make mistakes. Always building capacity in staff to lead.” - SLT member, Aberdeenshire

Coaching, specifically aimed to help school leaders move beyond operational thinking into long-term strategic action. Through the provision of regular, confidential conversations with a coach experienced in systemic school change, school leaders were given the space to reflect, explore, and plan the long-term vision for their school and school community.

Consistent and sustained coaching conversations, unavailable as a long-term training intervention across Scotland's system (often 12-18 months before tangible results emerge), became spaces where school visions were conceptualised, tested and challenged using well-researched strategies and approaches.

“I wish I had known the purpose of [the coach], from the get-go.” – Headteacher, Aberdeenshire

Initially provided to headteachers only, they gradually made coaching support available to SLT members, however, not all school leaders chose to widen access of these opportunities to the rest of their teams.

Often seen as a critical friend, coaching, in time, became a gauge of progress operating as guardrails and a roadmap for change. Some school leaders, including members of SLT, saw coaching as a helpful challenge to their thinking, assumptions, but also complacency, which, while uncomfortable at the time, was seen as beneficial months later. Although coaching was part of a wider array of interventions offered by Excelerate, many school leaders reflected on its impact to them personally; helping them grow strategically, identify areas of development, explore uncomfortable topics, and reposition their understanding of leadership, all of which is fundamental to the change management process but has to be experienced, rather than taught.

“[Coaching] made me think differently and focus on sustainability, so that not one single person holds onto one thing.” – Headteacher, Aberdeenshire

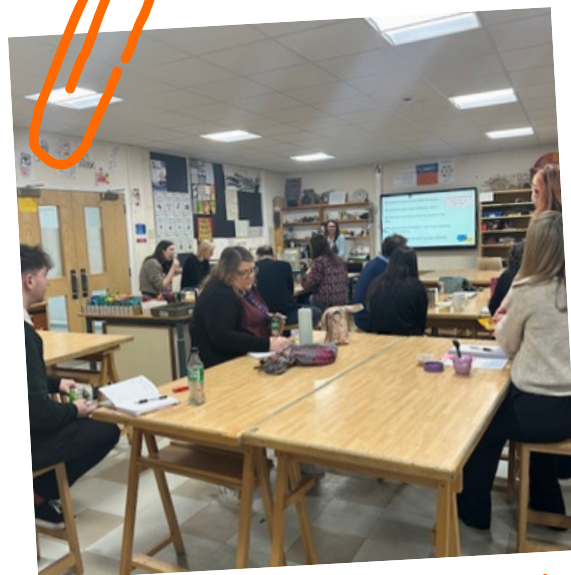
Even though at times, coaching conversations felt like they drifted into mentoring that could be seen as dictating the direction of travel, the majority of those who received coaching reflected on its instrumental role in changing their schools' cultures and practices. Interestingly, where coaching was provided by American coaches, some stakeholders felt that the limited understanding of the Scottish education system hindered its impact; others found this same aspect liberating as it allowed coaching to be free from local contextual constraints.

Gradually, although not consistently, a culture of capacity building and ownership has grown. It created conditions where staff felt empowered to lead and learn from mistakes.

“PBL training allowed teachers to shift their mindset and start considering new opportunities.” – Headteacher, Aberdeen City

Most notably, as access to professional development opportunities increased, so did teaching staff enthusiasm. Participating in professional learning opportunities has also led to greater cross-departmental collaboration, which is reflected in the educators' survey, where over half of surveyed teachers (54%) reported greater opportunities for cross-departmental working opportunities since their school became part of Excelerate, although 40% saw no difference at all.

Oracy in Action



Oracy in action at
Aboyne Academy

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, Aboyne Academy took the decision to embed oracy within their school practice after recognising the widening vocabulary and communication gaps caused by social isolation. Selected to be part of the first oracy training cohort David Woods, an art teacher, and Hayley Lockerbie, the school librarian, soon became deeply involved in developing oracy within the school. Both were able to reflect on their experiences:

David approached oracy from the perspective of a non-mainstream subject, aware that isolation had damaged students' confidence, social skills, and willingness to speak. He felt a moral responsibility to implement oracy practices in his own classroom before advocating for them more widely, especially when presenting to experienced colleagues. His work was driven by the belief that students needed structured opportunities to speak, use vocabulary, and rebuild the interpersonal skills lost during the pandemic.

Hayley's involvement began when she was selected to be part of the first oracy training cohort, a decision she recognised

as both intentional and meaningful. As a librarian, she occupies a unique position in the school as an educator but not a classroom teacher. This allows her to build different, often more informal relationships with pupils. Under her guidance, the library has become a purposeful and open talk-rich space rather than a more typical quiet area. From this vantage point, she felt a strong responsibility to help young people find their voices again after Covid-19 and believed that oracy should extend far beyond the classroom into every part of school life.

The oracy training both received was high-quality and energising, creating a sense of synergy. The knowledge felt too valuable to gatekeep, so within two weeks, the learning was shared via a whole-school CPD session in the form of a live podcast. Soon after, a programme of whole school CPD was delivered after school, during in-service days and through lunch and learn 'snackchats'. This sparked excitement across the school and helped reinvigorate staff who were still recovering from the challenges of the previous years.

Being part of a cross-authority network of oracy leads further strengthened their practice, providing access to a community of practitioners who shared the same depth of understanding, resources, and language. Although the impact was difficult to quantify, it was undeniably powerful. Collaboration continued when David and Hayley joined the Oracy Trainer Programme. David and Hayley worked closely with Oracy Cambridge to co-design a suite of professional learning inputs steeped in local context.

David and Hayley delivered the newly established Oracy Practitioner Training, on behalf of Excelerate, to educators across Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire and Angus. The training is now being offered to all staff within Aboyne Academy and its feeder primary schools.

The non-prescriptive nature of the Excelerate Investment meant schools were given autonomy in how they implemented different offers. With oracy at Aboyne, David and Hayley initially worked with teachers who approached them as well as departments who were already incorporating elements of oracy in their practice. This approach allowed for frameworks to be tested and refined before being shared more widely. This gradual roll-out meant oracy grew organically. It was a case of planting seeds and seeing where they grew, sometimes in unexpected places. For example, guidance teachers became particularly invested in oracy after developing a bespoke unit of work for pupils who struggled with presentations in S1.

The progress made at Aboyne Academy was strengthened immeasurably by the wider Excelerate network that underpinned the oracy training. Being part of a collective of schools who had received the same high-quality input created a shared language, a shared purpose, and a shared level of ambition. It meant David and Hayley were never working in isolation; they had access to experienced practitioners, a wealth of resources created by colleagues with similar challenges, and a professional community that could offer support at

different tiers, including academics at Cambridge University. This network provided both credibility and momentum, enabling Aboyne Academy to refine its oracy approach with confidence.

A Whole School Approach

Consistency sought using
Learning Teaching and
Assessment protocols
including Think, Pair, Share
& Dig Deeper

Co-creation of Talk Rules
with staff and students

Resources accessible to all
staff via the Aboyne
Academy SharePoint

Whole school Practitioner
Enquiry where oracy was the
most popular focus

Pupil Confidence and Activism

Through feedback from parents, teachers, external partners, and even young people themselves, it is evident that Excelerate has had a positive impact on their experiences at school.

Most interviewed stakeholders talked about improvements to confidence and self-esteem amongst young people whose schools have participated in Excelerate. Young people themselves reported a 25% increase in confidence at the end of Excelerate.^[34]

Parents reflected on the growth of self-awareness, communication and interpersonal skills through Excelerate-generated projects delivered by schools. This is echoed by teachers, 59% of whom believed their relationships with young people have improved since joining Excelerate (compared to 37% who did not).

“Some schools deliberately focused on developing particular skills through Excelerate provided pedagogies. [...] It’s evident that young people are much more confident and articulate” – strategic partner

Some stakeholders also reported on improved pupil safety and better behaviour accountability; however, these changes have not been consistently demonstrated across the Excelerate cohorts.

Young people have also indicated that, while certain schools’ consultative activity remained tokenistic and functional, over half of them (52%, an increase from 19% at the beginning of their Excelerate journey)^[35] felt their influence and participation was more meaningful and equal, although still with scope for further improvement. What is more, the proportion of those with no positive relationships with teachers halved from 13% at the beginning of Excelerate to 7% at the end point.

In addition, many accounts reflected on school structural changes, such as timetables, and community engagement, highlighting connections between learning and real-life applications. The pathways initiatives, influenced by study visits and supported by coaching, offers students hands-on learning experiences, practical career advice and support, and exposure to local industries that enriches their knowledge and skill development. In fact, through Excelerate, young people have been exposed to an array of work experience opportunities, such as career and skill development sessions. These two types of external partnership engagements exceeded 700 inputs since 2020.

“The ownership of learning amongst young people has improved – they are more involved in the planning of learning, they are developing their skills, they are talking for themselves – they are leading their learning.” – member the Senior Leadership Team, Angus

Many stakeholders specifically mentioned the Crew^[36] model, originated in study visits to the XP Trust schools in Doncaster, when reflecting on the development of young people. Incorporated in 15 out of 19 Excelerate schools, Crew is built on relationships, and uses standard practices, like appreciations and apologies (for and to staff, students, and partners) and stands (for values and culture), which many saw as pivotal in building positive relationships and changing school cultures.

“Young people in Crew that might not have been heard before, can be now. It gives an opportunity for all to be seen.” – Headteacher, Angus

The Crew model has been associated with positive impacts across many domains, such as influencing attendance, late arrivals, referrals for specialist support, but also behaviour. At some schools, it has become part of their staff structure and timetable, although its implementation has not been consistent across the 15 Excelerate schools. Nevertheless, it appears that “crew is the answer to relationship-poor schools,” as one strategic partner put it.

“This initiative has also led to more awareness of available pathways and opportunities for students. Attendance has risen [...], alongside behavioural improvements.” – Headteacher, Angus

Despite those positive changes, ***“Excelerate has created a generation of children who have had different experiences to others; however, it’s [still] too early to see what difference it will have on their future choices.”*** [strategic partner]. This reflection mirrors some of the survey findings, which remain insufficient to make conclusive and causal observations.

Place-Based PBL: Developing a Community- Connected Curriculum



Banff pupils fully
engaged

Many of the opportunities provided by the Excelerate Investment challenge schools to critically rethink their curriculum offer. Banff Academy's shift toward Project-Based Learning (PBL) began with a clear recognition that its traditional, exam-driven curriculum no longer met the needs of its young people or its rural community. Many pupils were leaving school without the skills, confidence or pathways required for a rapidly changing world. Excelerate created both the conditions and the momentum for Banff to explore more innovative, purpose-driven pedagogy, making PBL an attractive and necessary shift.

The origins of Banff's PBL journey can be traced back to a project with a group of fourteen disengaged S3 pupils. The pupils were taken out of their modern language periods and placed into a community-focused project class instead. The group participated in the Youth and Philanthropy Initiative (YPI), researching local social issues and charities, before advocating for their chosen cause. Their engagement and behaviour improved dramatically, signalling the potential of a project-based learning approach. The

project was so successful that it became the blueprint for how YPI was delivered in the school moving forward.

Around the same time, there was a shared sentiment in the school that the existing BGE model was no longer fit for purpose. Headteacher Alan Horberry, and his senior leadership team began exploring alternatives to the existing model. Through involvement with the Excelerate Investment, staff across the school had exposure to different methodologies and professional learning around PBL, however there was no coherent strategy or individual responsible for leading PBL. This inconsistency highlighted the need for a structured, school-wide model.

To address this, a working group was established. This group brought together staff with varied backgrounds and experiences and challenged them to design a model fit for Banff's context. They selectively drew the best practice from the methodologies they had been exposed to, combining them to create a unique approach that became known as "The Banff Way." The school subsequently established a principal

teacher of PBL, and PBL was embedded structurally through a dedicated faculty with a regular timetable provision: two days per week for S1, one day per week for S2, and 200 minutes for S3, all delivered within a system of 100-minute periods. Recruitment challenges in the rural context meant Banff could be creative, leading to the employment of primary-trained teachers to staff the PBL faculty. With a background in primary education, these teachers were interdisciplinary specialists, particularly suited to relationship-driven, cross-curricular learning.

A defining feature of Banff's PBL model is its deep commitment to place-based learning. Recognising that Banff is a rural, coastal community with rich heritage but also significant challenges, the school sought to anchor learning firmly in the local context. The PBL curriculum moves intentionally from the local to the national and then the global, helping pupils see themselves as part of a wider world while remaining grounded in their own community. Historically, the school had been perceived as disconnected from the town and from local employers. PBL changed that dynamic by building partnerships with businesses, community groups, artists, heritage organisations and tradespeople, and by giving pupils meaningful and authentic contributions to make. This model not only strengthened the relationship between the school and the community but also fostered pride in Banff among pupils, many of whom had previously expressed negative views about where they lived.

One of the flagship successes of PBL at Banff Academy is the "Doorstep Explorers" project. Before it began, many pupils had little appreciation for their local area. Through hands-on exploration, collaboration with partners and authentic creative outputs, pupils began to rediscover the value of their surroundings. This shift in mindset also influenced how community partners viewed the school. What was once a relationship characterised by distance has become one of collaboration and mutual respect, with partners commenting that the public perception of the school has been transformed.

The success of Banff's PBL approach is fundamentally rooted in its community-connected curriculum. The school actively engages partners to identify community priorities and translates these into meaningful project opportunities. This has led to pupils addressing issues such as declining footfall on the High Street, stigmatisation of the Traveller community, and coastal accessibility. A pinnacle in Banff's PBL journey has been the "Banff to Bethlehem" project, led by Principal Teacher of PBL, Stewart Clelland. The project saw Banff pupils collaborate with Palestinian street artist Taqi Spateen, and young people from Hussan School for Boys, located near Bethlehem. The project culminated in the artwork of the S2s being displayed in local art hubs in Banff, as well as on the Separation Wall in Bethlehem. This was a project that truly transcended borders. Because Banff Academy projects are authentic and community-driven, pupils quickly recognise their purpose and remain deeply engaged.

"Pupils see themselves as part of a wider world while remaining grounded in their own community"

Implementing PBL at scale has been demanding. Traditional school structures are not designed to support this approach. At Banff Academy, the need for constant innovation creates workload pressures and staffing challenges. Recruitment difficulties and fixed mindsets among staff unfamiliar with PBL create additional barriers, and new teachers often arrive at the school without training aligned to this pedagogy. Additionally, working with real-world issues brings concerns around public image and perception, meaning a comprehensive PR strategy is needed. With these challenges in mind, strong leadership is essential. Without a headteacher committed to protecting

and championing PBL and place-based learning, progress would have been much slower.

Additionally, the school's Business and Community Support Officer (BCSO) plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between the school and the wider community. The BCSO proactively builds and sustains partnerships with local businesses, community organisations, cultural groups and employers ensuring that projects are rooted in authentic local contexts and address real community priorities. This role is particularly important in a rural setting, where strong relationships and trust are essential to meaningful engagement. By coordinating partners and facilitating communication, the BCSO builds capacity for teaching staff. In doing so, the BCSO acts as an enabler, ensuring projects are not only relevant to the curriculum, but linked to their local area and future pathways.

The practice of Banff Academy provides a key lesson: authenticity is vital. Pupils disengage quickly from projects that lack real purpose. Looking to the future, Banff Academy aims to further develop PBL within the senior phase, expand partnerships, and strengthen pathways into employment, training and further education. The overarching ambition is to build a community-connected curriculum that supports both personal development and community sustainability. Banff's approach recognises that PBL not only helps create effective workers, but also ethically minded, socially aware young people equipped to make positive contributions to their community and beyond.

Pupil artwork displayed on the Bethlehem Wall



Relationships, Culture, and Vision

Although not a primary outcome, Excelerate has been instrumental in reshaping the value and understanding of a school's relationships with internal and external stakeholders.

Stronger relationships, culture, and vision kept emerging as both enablers and outcomes of successful change. Stakeholders, from headteachers to parents, consistently described how trust, communication and the development of a shared purpose created conditions for innovation and collaboration. Two thirds of surveyed educators (66%) reported a greater understanding of their school's purpose (vision) and why they do what they do (mission) as opposed to 26% who have experienced no difference. This change was also echoed by young people, half (49%) of whom felt like they belong in their school community compared to 29% at the outset of Excelerate.

However, instead of specific, measurable outputs, these relational changes were experienced as shifts, often gradual and unnoticed to begin with, in how people interacted with each other, and how the school positioned itself within the community.

“Relationships have evolved significantly over the past two to five years.” – parent, Aberdeenshire

Those changes were evident in prioritising relationship building, ensuring staff and young people feel connected and supported. Many schools used the strategic planning process, carefully supported by Ford NGL coaches, of engaging with key stakeholders as a means of resetting or deepening relationships.

“It was mostly the development of the school's vision which truly reflected the power of Excelerate and allowed the community (businesses, parents, young people, teachers) to develop their own why.” – Headteacher, Aberdeenshire

As a result, these processes, often intentionally developed through coaching, have helped to reconnect schools with their core educational values, clarify a collective vision, and set expectations and accountability.

“Culturally, there's a much stronger focus on relationships, shared values, relevance of learning” – Headteacher, Aberdeenshire

In many cases, participants emphasised that these changes, both strategic and relational, led to tangible improvements in teaching, learning and engagement. This is evident in many schools' structural changes, mainly in BGE, which promote personal development, community connection, and teamwork.

“[Excelerate] has changed people's mindsets. When planning the curriculum people think ‘how can we make this better’ and that's about engaging with partners to help bring a real-world context” – member of Senior Leadership Team, Aberdeenshire

The growth of the value of relationships has cascaded beyond the school boundaries. Successful examples of strong external relationships with local partners identified how they can, with the right resources and strategic focus, shape the curriculum, enhancing community ties and values in the learning environment.

“[without Excelerate] true and structurally sustainable partnerships would have never developed the way they have.” – Headteacher, Aberdeenshire

The Power of Crew

Across the Excelerate network, many schools have been inspired by study visits to XP Trust schools in Doncaster and seeing Crew in practice. At its heart, Crew is a model that ensures every young person feels seen and heard, and is supported by a trusted adult who stays with them throughout their journey in education. Many Excelerate schools began exploring Crew after recognising its capacity to transform school culture through deep, relationship-centred practice. In the aftermath of Covid-19, schools grappled with challenges around wellbeing, belonging, and social isolation. Viewed as a potential solution, the Crew model offered a coherent way to strengthen relationships, build character, and create purposeful, connected school communities. Both Northfield Academy and Forfar Academy saw Crew not just as a structure, but a chance to reimagine what school could feel like for young people. Their journeys highlight the power of Crew when adapted thoughtfully.

Northfield Academy

At Northfield Academy, Crew was primarily introduced to bridge the significant gap between primary and secondary education, even in a context where enhanced transition already existed. Early implementation centred on building strong relationships with a key adult, prioritising core skills, and establishing routines that supported pupils' wellbeing and readiness to learn.



S1 Crew Expedition

The journey was not linear, but the school's sustained commitment meant that Crew gradually reshaped the culture. Over time, what began as a structural change evolved into a defining element of Northfield's identity, particularly as the model moved up through the year groups.

In 2023, Northfield introduced a dedicated Crew department staffed by specialist primary-trained teachers, recruited specifically to be Crew leads. These Crew leads deliver core subjects and create consistent, safe spaces for pupils within B-Block, a distinct area of the school designed to reinforce belonging and security. Pupil voice was instrumental in shaping the model, with learners adapting ideas from Doncaster into something uniquely suited to Northfield. The school also persisted with impactful experiences such as a multi-day expedition for the whole year group on the first day of S1. Despite the financial pressures of running the trip, the school has committed to it year on year because of its clear benefits in building resilience, trust, and shared memories.

The impact of Crew quickly became visible and remains strong. Visitors consistently remark on how articulate, polite, and confident the young people are. Headteacher, Craig McDermott, attributes this to the deliberate emphasis

on oracy within Crew. Staff report having calmer classrooms, stronger engagement, and improved readiness to learn. Stability in the model was further improved when the nine, originally seconded, Crew leads were appointed as permanent staff. This was a tipping point in momentum, signalling Crew's long-term value at Northfield Academy. Looking forward, the Headteacher hopes Crew will continue to equip young people not just with qualifications, but with the character, confidence, and resilience that shape who they become beyond school.

Forfar Academy

Similarly, at Forfar Academy, the need for Crew emerged powerfully in the years following Covid-19. Staff observed significant challenges such as rising mental health concerns, increased attendance issues and school refusal, more referrals for support, and local trauma linked to suicides in the community. Although learning had been sustained well during the pandemic, the school felt a need to reconnect with its purpose. Crew offered a way to bring together relationships with nurture, accountability, and belonging into a coherent approach that supported young people as whole human beings.

Early development was shaped by visits to XP Trust schools in Doncaster, and more locally, Banff Academy, in 2023. Headteacher, Kas Mohamed, also drew upon theoretical influences such as the work of Ron Berger, which was further solidified by his visit to the Northeast in September that year. Interest in Crew grew rapidly, and when the approach was introduced to the wider staff team in November 2023, engagement exceeded expectations.

The development of the Crew model began with identifying a team of committed staff who shared the vision for meaningful change. A Crew Leader commitment was created to solidify practice, and to act as a compass to direct the team. Development work culminated in a Crew Leader Adventure where the team climbed a mountain together. It was a defining moment, strengthening identity, trust, and collective commitment. The core group of

eighteen Crew Leads and six Principal Teachers of Pupil Care and Support (PCS) emerged as a strong foundation to build the model. A dedicated in-service day focused on the “why” behind Crew proved crucial for securing genuine buy-in. Parent engagement was also prioritised through a Crew Parents’ Evening that built understanding, clarified expectations, and established early trust between families and Crew leaders.

The implementation of Crew at Forfar was intentional and structured, with clear expectations, shared resources, and protected timetabling that enabled PCS teachers to support staff during the first period each day. Weekly staff Crew meetings and termly collegiate Community Meetings ensured consistency and continued reflection. The impact quickly became visible with initiatives such as Thoughtful Thursday encouraging routine and attendance, and Community Meetings providing young people with a platform to grow in confidence through articulating their appreciations, apologies, and stands. The model champions inclusion, with some Crews adapting check-ins to include Makaton to support non-verbal pupils. Attendance for S1 and S2 consistently sits in the 90% range which is higher than both the school overall and national averages. Some staff have described Crew as the most meaningful work of their careers, with several expressing that their Crew feels like a family.

The experiences of Northfield Academy and Forfar Academy show how schools, inspired by XP Trust schools in Doncaster, have adapted Crew into models that meet their unique contexts and needs. Though different in design, scale, and starting points, both schools demonstrate the same core purpose. They both demonstrate a commitment to place relationships at the heart of education. Crew has strengthened belonging, improved confidence, raised expectations, and built communities where young people feel seen, supported, and capable. While sustaining Crew requires ongoing commitment and thoughtful leadership, its long-term value lies in shaping not only learners, but compassionate, resilient human beings who carry these foundations long after they leave school.

Collaboration

Consequently, many schools have seen significant improvements in the way they operate and work internally. Top-down decision making has shifted towards more collaborative approaches introduced and modified through Excelerate interventions.

“Baseline focus groups identified staff wanted more opportunities to collaborate, so we have made time for this-school improvement groups, peer faculties. This change happened at greater speed due to Excelerate.” – Headteacher, Angus

Some schools, more than others, have implemented approaches such as formalised collegiate groups, sector days, improvement groups, and peer faculties, designed to bring representatives from various departments together and bring classroom engagement to life.

This commitment to breaking systemic and cultural barriers has demonstrated that perseverance with the right level of support and leadership makes a difference in how schools operate.

“[There’s a] greater sense of being valued amongst teachers, who experience high quality professional development opportunities; they, in turn, collaborate more effectively, which ultimately benefits young people.” – Strategic partner

It has also been acknowledged that Excelerate interventions created conditions for local authorities to bring people together and create consistency in relationships amongst northeast educational leaders.

“[We] have used Excelerate’s principles of bringing people together and creating consistent relationships.” – Strategic partner

Beyond Qualifications: Shaping the Whole Person Through the SLP

Across the Excelerate network, many schools who chose to develop a School Leaver Profile (SLP) took early inspiration from study visits to Nashville and Detroit. These visits offered a compelling insight into how a clear, values-based vision for pupils can anchor a school's culture, shape curriculum design, and foster a strong sense of community. Perhaps the most fundamental learning from these study visits is that an SLP cannot simply be replicated from another setting. It must be rooted in the identity, aspirations, and lived-experiences of individual schools. While the principles observed in the United States provided a useful catalyst for change, the development of the SLP in Excelerate schools has been a highly contextual process.

Alford Academy and Aboyne Academy exemplify this approach. Both schools were influenced by the same international learnings, yet each created a profile that looks, feels, and functions differently because it reflects the individual culture and values of each school. Their journeys demonstrate that while the concept of an SLP may be shared, its expression must be authentically unique.

Alford Academy

At Alford Academy, the SLP emerged through a deeply collaborative process involving staff, pupils, parents and carers, employers, Skills Development Scotland (SDS), and The Wood Foundation.



Alford Academy SLP

Stakeholders explored multiple design options and co-selected the final version, ensuring that the profile reflected both the school's aspirations and the expectations of its wider community. The same co-design approach shaped the nine meta-skills that define an Alford learner, drawing on input from around sixty employers.

Progress was intentionally steady, with no imposed deadline; the priority was ensuring authenticity and staff ownership. A collegiate improvement team trialled approaches, while SDS and a pupil subgroup helped create pupil-friendly descriptors and real-world examples. Coaching from Ford NGL challenged the Senior Leadership Team to refine their vision and embed it meaningfully.

The result is an SLP now fully woven into daily practice. It is displayed in every classroom, referenced in lessons, used on praise postcards, and integrated into the merit system. Pupils are increasingly confident in articulating the skills they are developing, and this has been recognised in feedback from parents and carers, and industry partners. The SLP has become a shared language across the school and community, strengthening consistency and clarity around what it means to be a pupil at Alford Academy.

Aboyne Academy

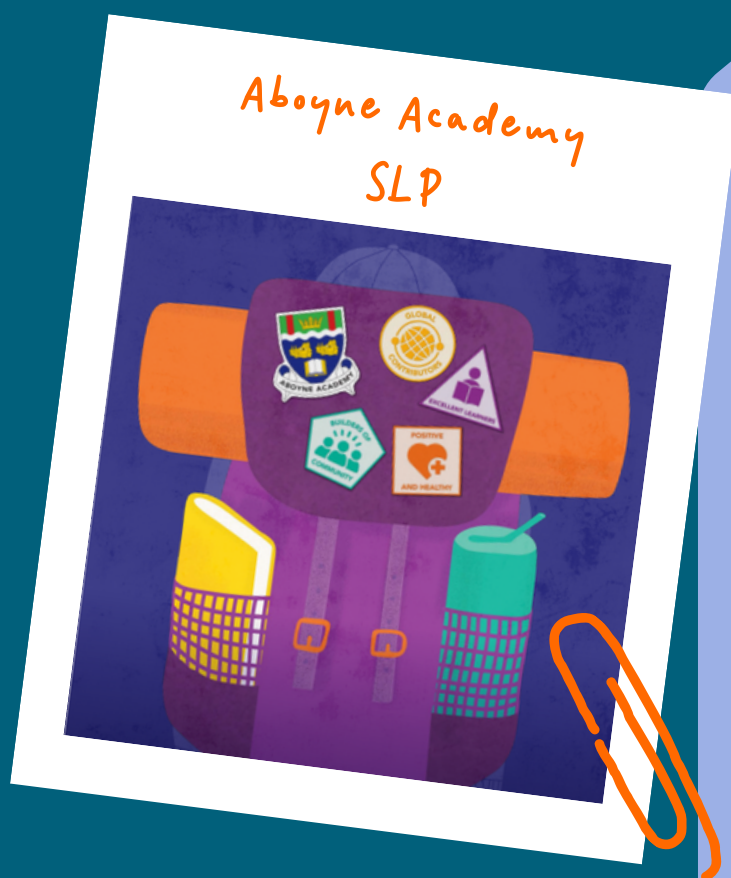
Aboyne Academy's School Learner Profile (SLP) grew from leadership reflection, professional coaching, and insights gained from study visits. It became clear that the school needed a framework that captured more than academic skills. It was created as a "north star" for pupils to strive for. The SLP was designed to reflect the school's ethos, culture, and community identity, and now serves as a guiding influence on decision-making and improvement planning.

The development process was collaborative and carefully paced. Pupils, staff, parents and carers, and community partners contributed through focus groups that helped refine language and identify the four core themes underpinning the profile. Based on pupil feedback, the school chose to use the term "learner" rather than "leaver," ensuring the profile felt relevant to all year groups.

After early design work with pupils, professional graphic designers, FortyTwo Studio were commissioned to create the final visual. Although staff were initially unsure, pupils strongly favoured the adventure-themed design, which felt true to the school's ethos and accessible to all learners. Implementation has been steady and intentional. The Senior Leadership Team now references the SLP in strategic discussions, and faculty improvement plans embed SLP skills within curriculum development. The framework has been aligned with the SDS skills framework to ensure consistency from primary to secondary education.

Early signs of impact include pupils increasingly using SLP language to articulate their strengths and ambitions, and enthusiasm for collecting badges linked to the profile. Staff have responded positively, recognising the SLP's long-term potential and the value of its collaborative development.

Taken together, the journeys of Alford Academy and Aboyne Academy show how an SLP can become a powerful anchor for culture, curriculum, and community when it is developed with authenticity and care. While both schools were inspired by international practice, their profiles were shaped by the voices and values of their own communities. Both schools have a commitment to developing young people as whole learners, equipped not only with qualifications but with the skills and qualities they need to thrive in life beyond school.



Curriculum Design



As a result of Excelerate inputs and exposure to new pedagogies and leadership styles, curriculum design in many Excelerate schools has significantly evolved through collaboration with partners. One in every five engagements (18%) with external partners focused on supporting curriculum delivery. What is more, 60% of teachers believe their schools' curricula entail at least some integration of experiential learning and partnerships.

While curriculum design and scheduling are a skill on its own, Excelerate has opened teachers' eyes to the possibilities of working with external partners to develop an education offer that becomes relevant, enticing and future-proof.

These external possibilities, in turn, led to significant changes in teaching approaches, emphasising real-world learning and enhanced pupil engagement.

“As a school, we’ve changed our view on curriculum. [It is now] more accessible to more of our pupils. How do we make it flexible? [Through] pockets where it started and it continues, things are being learned and developed” – member the Senior Leadership Team, Aberdeenshire

Many of the curriculum changes have been driven by study visits, PBL and oracy training, and resulted in schools incorporating their key elements, such as driving questions, teaching protocols, business and sector days, but also amending timetables to introduce new pedagogical approaches, such as Crew and pathway models. These, in some schools, have led to improvements in attendance and greater focus on skill development by extending teaching periods.

Interestingly, many of the school curricula incorporated diverse learning formats with a focus on future skillsets, but also provided accessibility for all students, not only those academically inclined.

From opportunities to build staff skills, curriculum confidence, external partnerships, peer learning, and real-world pupil projects, Excelerate has “created professional dialogue, validated new approaches, and directly shaped timetable and curriculum redesign.” (Headteacher, Aberdeenshire).

Professional Learning

Excelerate, as a test of change in education, always strived to invest in those leading and delivering it. As such, professional learning opportunities were offered to school leaders to strategically disseminate to a critical mass of staff in their schools. Across both interviews and focus groups, professional learning, unsurprisingly, emerged as an area of impact associated with the investment.

Participants consistently described how access to world class training delivered by thought leaders, exposure to new methods, and opportunities to engage in experiential learning helped them build confidence, shift their mindset, and develop professional agency. Many spoke of the “seeing is believing” effect, which allowed them to experience, first-hand, diverse ways of thinking about, and delivering, education. It is unsurprising that seven in every 10 surveyed teachers (70%) felt they had had more meaningful learning opportunities for professional development (compared to 24% who reported no significant differences).

“This [change] has been evidenced mostly through mindset changes amongst teachers, most of whom have been teachers all their life and haven’t experienced any other types of work in their adult lives” – Headteacher, Aberdeenshire

Professional learning, delivered out with their school environments, was experienced as an enabling factor that challenged stagnation and paved the way for experimentation, reflection, and challenging established practices.

“The high quality of the training has allowed us to improve our practice and our professional learning within the school. So many teachers are doing amazing things that when shared it’s bringing everyone else up.” – members of the Senior Leadership Team, Angus

A strong theme, although not experienced consistently, was an increased sense of value as professionals. Those who were exposed to high-standard and immersive development opportunities reflected that it signalled trust and investment, particularly in times where professional learning has been dwindling, limited, and delivered in an online or lecturer-student manner. This sense of value appeared to have a motivational effect with some participants seeking additional external learning opportunities to further develop their skills and knowledge.

Experiences of new pedagogy were often linked to changes in practice and structure. Headteacher and senior leadership teams recalled how engagement with external ideas enabled their teams to introduce or adapt approaches such as Crew, student learner profiles, and pathway models. Importantly, while some of these were a direct replication of externally experienced practices, others used them as inspiration and subsequently adapted them to meet the needs of their local contexts.

Additionally, improved confidence and professional agency featured strongly across the interviews and focus groups. This took the form of being more confident in making decisions, engaging in professional collaboration with their colleagues and senior leaders, but also owning their mistakes and learning from them.

This was often linked to a shift in mindset: from a fixed sense of “how things are done” towards a curious beginner’s mindset. Some staff also described becoming more open to the unknown and more comfortable with uncertainty. Some, but not all, view mistakes as part of the learning process rather than as risk or fault.

External stakeholders and headteachers noted a visible change in staff energy and morale, especially after external training.

“Enthusiasm for change motivated by seeing the potential of Excelerate impacted on young people, pathways, curriculum.” – members of the Senior Leadership Team, Aberdeenshire

Embedding PBL as a Driver of School Improvement



PBL is now embedded within the Broad General Education

Arbroath Academy adopted Project-based Learning (PBL) as a deliberate whole-school improvement strategy. This decision followed inspection feedback highlighting the need to strengthen learning and teaching, particularly in relation to learner engagement and ownership.

Senior leaders identified PBL as a structured approach capable of deepening learning, increasing pupil agency, and strengthening connections between curriculum and community. At the same time, the school was seeking to rebuild partnerships with local businesses and organisations following Covid-19 disruption. PBL provided a coherent framework through which these ambitions could align.

Implementation was underpinned by strong and visible leadership. Members of the senior leadership team, including the headteacher, were among the first to complete PBL 101 training, signalling its strategic importance. Across the first two cohorts, the majority of senior leaders and all principal teachers participated, ensuring representation across faculties and creating distributed expertise.

Practical barriers to professional learning were removed through provision of supply cover and logistical support. This positioned PBL not as an initiative, but as a long-term pedagogical shift.

A key strategic decision was to create dedicated curriculum time for PBL within the Broad General Education. Since 2022, all S1 and S2 pupils experience two timetabled periods of PBL per week, delivered as a double period by trained staff.

This discrete model ensures that there is a universal entitlement to high-quality PBL experiences, sufficient time for sustained inquiry and depth, and a structured environment for staff to develop confidence and consistency.

Members of the senior leadership team teach within this model, reinforcing alignment between strategic intent and classroom practice.

Alongside the protected S1/S2 model, faculties are expected to design and deliver PBL experiences within their subject areas. This ensures that PBL is embedded across the curriculum rather than confined to a standalone programme.

To maintain coherence, key staff are taken off timetable annually to collaboratively design and refine projects. Shared protocols and collective planning support quality assurance, alignment with improvement priorities and cross-faculty consistency.

The combined approach provides both depth (through dedicated curriculum time) and breadth (through subject-based delivery).

Arbroath Academy has developed a range of authentic, community-facing projects, including:

Arbroath Explorers: delivered in partnership with the Angus Tourism Cooperative and local businesses,

Marseum: developed with Daydream Believers, Angus Alive and the V&A, culminating in public exhibition,

Seastory: integrating creative design and maritime conservation.

These projects provide genuine audiences and real-world relevance, strengthening pupil engagement while reinforcing community relationships.

planning and strong community partnerships.

By aligning these elements, the school has embedded PBL as a sustainable mechanism for improving learning and teaching, strengthening learner agency and reconnecting curriculum with community.

Since 2022 all S1 and S2 pupils experience two timetabled PBL periods per week

Partners report increased clarity about how their contributions support young people's learning, and engagement is sustained through exhibitions, social media and public outcomes.

PBL is now embedded within the ethos and operational structures of the school. It features within Broad General Education timetables, faculty planning processes, professional learning pathways, and recruitment information for prospective staff.

This integration has supported a shift from isolated innovation to sustained cultural change.

Arbroath Academy's experience demonstrates that meaningful implementation of PBL requires clear strategic intent, visible leadership commitment, protected curriculum time, investment in professional learning, structured opportunities for collaborative

Partners bring PBL to life



Real-world Skills



Despite national policy aspirations, nearly all headteachers felt the focus on skills was limited in practice and insufficient to properly prepare young people for the world of work. As one headteacher put it: ***“[the] existing authority strategy, while focused on skills, talked about skills awareness rather than development, [and there] was a significant leap between one and the other.”***

When reflecting on their journey through Excelerate, members of senior leadership teams and headteachers proudly reflected that students were now engaging in real-world learning through various activities that provided them with practical experiences and pathways beyond traditional academic routes. Indeed, a comparison of baseline and final survey results^[37] indicate an overall self-reported skill improvement of around 23%. Critical thinking and resilience have seen the greatest improvements (up by 29% and 26% respectively) compared with digital skills, followed by emotional intelligence (increase of 17% and 18% respectively).

From modernised timetables, embedding of locally sought-after skills framework into classrooms, school leaver/learner profiles, to creating provisions for exposure to work environments, through Foundation and Modern Apprenticeships, many school curricula have been redeveloped to help students understand various pathways, not limited to college or university.

“Our S3’s attainment and civic skills have developed immensely.” – Headteacher, Aberdeen

However, it is the parents who seem to see the most remarkable changes in their children and their peers. They reflected that schools were preparing their children well for post-school life by exposing them to local industries and helping them make informed decisions about their future. Many emphasised a growing focus on transferable skills and a well-rounded development of each student, recognising that education success does not need to be limited to academic achievements and can take multiple forms, promoting enterprise and community engagement.

“Education delivery has become more student-centred and focused on relationships, with greater teacher–pupil engagement. [The school] recognises multiple pathways beyond exams and university” – parent, Aberdeenshire

Pathways: Explore, Experience, Evaluate

When embraced strategically, the Excelerate offer can often add momentum, and strengthen good work that is already underway. By investing directly in staff through high-quality professional learning, leadership coaching, and structured reflection time, Excelerate gives schools the capacity they can lack to move from intention to implementation. This was certainly the case at Bucksburn Academy, where Excelerate acted as a catalyst for the development of the Pathways programme. The school already had a strong culture of innovation and a desire to rethink skills education, but the opportunities provided through Excelerate allowed staff to move more quickly, work more collaboratively, and design a model far more ambitious than would have been possible within existing capacity.

The development of the Pathways programme is rooted in a clear, three-word ethos: explore, experience, evaluate. These principles capture the programme's purpose which is to support young people to explore their interests, experience authentic learning alongside partners, and evaluate their future aspirations with clarity and confidence. This approach represents a significant curricular shift at Bucksburn Academy, grounded in meaningful partnerships, strategic planning, and a commitment to placing skills development at the heart of learning



Pathways students on a site visit

The inspiration of the Pathways programme can be traced back to an initial study visit to Nashville in March 2022, where staff, including headteacher Mike Paul, witnessed firsthand what an investment in skills education could look like. The subsequent visit in March 2023, was vital in building upon the foundational knowledge established the previous year. The team observed a model in which skills were not an add-on, but were deeply embedded within the curriculum, shaped through authentic collaboration between schools, businesses, and higher education partners. What was impressive about the approach was the strong sense of shared ownership, and the clear commitment from all partners involved. While it was immediately apparent that the Nashville model could not simply be transplanted into a Scottish context, it offered powerful principles that could be adapted.

From this inspiration, the journey progressed through several key stages, each with intentionality. After the second study visit to Nashville, the team engaged in planning and brainstorming before presenting the initial concept to the senior leadership team (SLT). Once SLT approval was secured, the concept was then shared with the wider staff team, many of whom were enthusiastic about contributing. A major stakeholder

event followed, bringing together around 80 participants, including teachers, industry partners, and further and higher education institutions. The event allowed stakeholders to understand its purpose and contribute to the development of the programme. With a shared vision from the wider school community, a steering group was formally established to drive the work forward. The group consisted of school staff, and external stakeholders, who guided a full year of planning leading to launch. Throughout this process, regular coaching for school leaders proved invaluable.

97% of staff agreed Pathways was a good idea, and **67%** expressed interest in being directly involved

Staff engagement quickly became a cornerstone of the programme's development. Early consultation showed strong support for the emerging model with 97% of staff agreeing Pathways was a good idea, and 67% expressing interest in being directly involved. This enthusiastic response reflected Bucksburn Academy's culture of trust, collaboration, and innovation. Staff were confident that they would be supported throughout the process and that the programme's focus on curriculum-embedded skills, rather than isolated interventions, aligned with the school's vision for meaningful learning.

Co-design with partners quickly became a defining feature of the Pathways approach. The stakeholder event in September 2023 brought together businesses, educators, community organisations and higher-education partners, all contributing directly to the shaping of each pathway. The opportunity allowed partners to assume leadership roles in the delivery of the programme, with James Dunn Salon supporting the delivery of Hair and Beauty and TechFest supporting delivery in STEM. While some pathways required refinement, the collaborative momentum remained strong. Staff were invited to lead or co-design pathways, typically in pairs and supported by the principal teacher of Pathways, who ensured strategic oversight and consistency.

As the curriculum developed, key principles became clearer. Pathways were to be delivered through Project-based Learning (PBL) and co-designed with partners to ensure authenticity. The model drew inspiration from the school's own SCRIPT for Success framework, as well as external influences such as the Freshman Seminar in Nashville. The Pathways curriculum was launched in May 2024. To further solidify its purpose, a SCRIPT Skills Focus Afternoon afforded the young people an opportunity to understand, develop and articulate their SCRIPT Skills with industry partners, bringing learning to life. Since this launch, young people are increasingly able to speak about their skills with conviction. Additionally, there has been a reduction in referrals and improved representation; for example, the Energy pathway saw an increase from no girls in its first cohort to three in the second. Parents report on greater engagement at home, while partners note pupils' increasing confidence, articulation and employability.

Between years one and two, partner engagement shifted significantly. Initially the school had to promote the vision, but by the second year partners were approaching Bucksburn proactively, reflecting the programme's growing visibility and credibility. During this time, the school also refined its progression routes, examining "off-ramps" at different stages to ensure that each young person could access qualifications and pathways aligned with their aspirations, rather than following a single hierarchical model.

Today, Pathways stands as a central outcome of the Excelerate journey at Bucksburn Academy and sits at the heart of the school's curriculum vision. As the programme expands towards S6, the ambition is that every young person will have access to meaningful work experience, higher-education opportunities and a wide range of relevant learning experiences. Guided by its ethos of explore, experience, evaluate, the model now represents a curriculum defined by authenticity, partnership and purposeful skills development which supports young people to navigate their futures with clarity and confidence.

Transformation

Excelerate, as an investment in system-level change, in most cases, aligned closely with school's strategic goals, providing external and practical support that fostered significant changes in operations and culture.

While some schools embraced Excelerate fully, others selectively adopted its elements. The key differences between Excelerate and non-Excelerate schools, as observed by strategic partners, lie in their relationships, culture, and teaching approaches, with support mechanisms for integrating new professional development into regular practice.

“When things go wrong or the ships rocks, Excelerate centres you.” – Headteacher, Aberdeen

When reflecting on the role of Excelerate in their schools' journey towards educational change, the majority of interviewed headteachers talked about Excelerate being woven into their school's fabric making it inseparable, as was the intention, however, this also difficult to evaluate. They spoke of greater clarity of strategic direction of travel, confidence to lead change, especially in times of uncertainty, experiential opportunities to see how education can be delivered differently which, in turn, inspired their teams to drive and experiment with change. Most of them pointed to significant improvements to teaching and learning, which would not have been possible without the Excelerate investment.

“Excelerate is seen as the single biggest driver of school improvement journey [...], touching on curriculum, ethos, skills, partnerships and self-evaluation” – Headteacher, Aberdeenshire

Although most attribute system-level changes to the investment, they also recognise that Excelerate has been one of many factors, but definitely, the most important in the school's evolution.

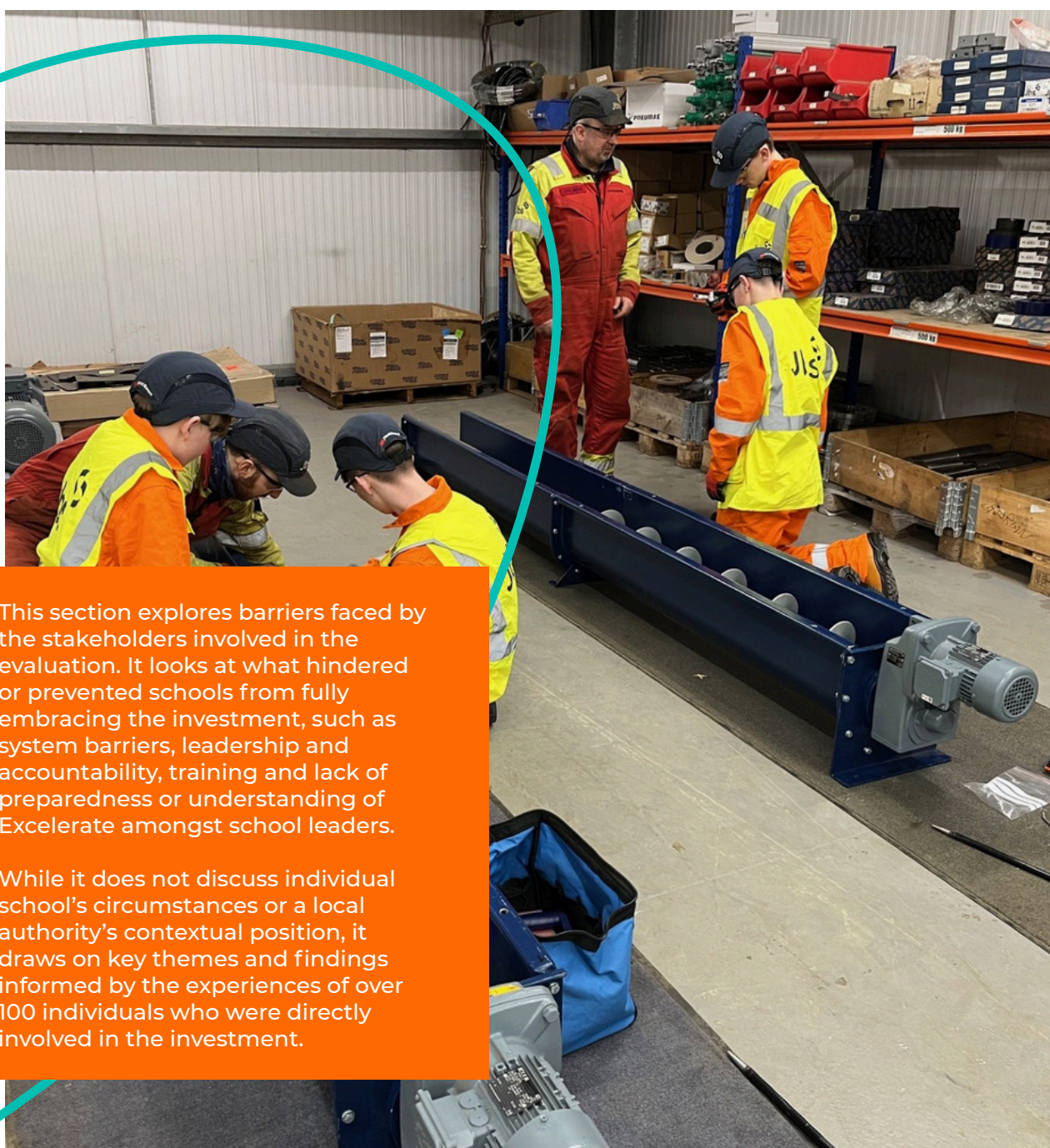
“The changes have been significant but also impacted by other factors, however, Excelerate has definitely accelerated these changes.” – Headteacher, Angus

While not without hurdles and setbacks, the investment has allowed schools to move forward and create conditions for implementing change, a selection of examples is listed below:

- Development of School Leaver/Learner Profile following comprehensive engagement processes with local businesses, communities, and coaches,
- Establishment and refocus of new or existing staff roles, incorporating various elements of Excelerate's philosophy, such as Leadership Roles focused on Teaching and Learning, Professional Learning, Crew, and Business and Community Support Officers,
- Introduction of pedagogical approaches, such as learning rubrics, student-led conferences, school charters reflecting Excelerate's principles and high-quality standards,
- Introduction of various forms of Crew, which helps build consistent relationships between young people, teachers, and community, and
- Development of community-based projects based on principles of PBL and oracy.

Challenges and Limitations

Excelerate aimed to align professional learning to the ambitions of Scotland's policy and curriculum. Through a wide range of high-quality professional learning opportunities, namely oracy and PBL training, coaching, study visits, and change leadership, peer networking and the Business and Community Support Officer role, schools hoped to ultimately develop the knowledge, skills, values, and attributes young people will need to thrive in our ever-changing society.



This section explores barriers faced by the stakeholders involved in the evaluation. It looks at what hindered or prevented schools from fully embracing the investment, such as system barriers, leadership and accountability, training and lack of preparedness or understanding of Excelerate amongst school leaders.

While it does not discuss individual school's circumstances or a local authority's contextual position, it draws on key themes and findings informed by the experiences of over 100 individuals who were directly involved in the investment.

Lack of Clarity and Understanding Against Existing Pressure

Despite the investment offering a realistic bridge between education and industry, addressing the disconnect between the two, Excelerate faced cynicism amongst some school leaders and their teams who were already suffering change fatigue. While the early conversations between TWF and local authority leads created unprecedented enthusiasm and hope for a relevant and agile education system, they did not translate into clarity of purpose at school-levels. Nevertheless, one in five educators (21%) saw Excelerate as an emerging promise that required significant work at the end of the investment.

“Initial discomfort and scepticism about Excelerate stemmed from how [it] was introduced, [...]—a forced process led by a selected few”
– Headteacher, Angus

Many felt that the ambitions of the investment, at the outset, were unclear, ambivalent, or unspecific making engagement with the opportunities it offered difficult.

There was also a sense, although not across all stakeholders, that participating schools had to engage with and use all the interventions the investment offered, which made it difficult to manage and understand amongst existing local and national priorities.

“[to begin with, there were] unspoken expectations to use all of Excelerate offers” – Headteacher, Aberdeen

There was also an observation that local authority partners had missed the opportunity for deeper engagement with Excelerate which could have created a stronger strategic focus on the opportunities for shared learning and the potential for system-level change offered through the investment.

Some school leaders expressed a desire for a more prescriptive delivery model, whilst others appreciated the autonomy and independence that Excelerate offered as a test of change.

Leadership and Accountability

The theme of leadership, control and power has featured, directly and indirectly, in most accounts reflecting on the successes and challenges faced in implementing learning from the Excelerate investment.

Many stakeholders emphasised effective and person-centred leadership as a key enabler for change, including system-level change. They talked about missed opportunities by poor and/or inexperienced leaders to direct staff energy and resources provided through the investment and direct them towards the teaching and learning improvements Excelerate offered. Ultimately, however, most believed that the success of Excelerate was tied to the quality of leadership.

“Excelerate has its place and its offers provide an answer to many of the education ails, but it's important to recognise that it will only succeed if the leadership is right, which sadly, has not been the case in all Excelerate schools.” – Strategic partner

This has cascaded to parents who, while on the whole have been very positive about the changes they have seen in Excelerate partner schools, noted that at times schools lack identity, which impacts on community cohesion and a sense of belonging. Some senior leaders reflected that the management and communication of Excelerate's offers was, at times, ineffectual, lacking a clear purpose and relevance.

Others felt that sometimes the training provided was either rushed or insufficient with many leaders being risk averse. In fact, many conversations painted a picture of leaders who, despite being driven by the possibility of system-level change, believe they are limited by the current educational requirements, and thus focus on grades over broader positive outcomes.

“Leaders across Scotland tended to be risk-averse, and some sought conformity rather than daring to change, Excelerate required a leap of faith to embrace the service design principles” – Strategic partner

Some noted that changes in leadership at local authority level stalled the progress of change initiated by Excelerate; by focusing solely on local and national KPIs the aims of Excelerate were weakened and promising outcomes diminished.

Poor leadership and a lack of ownership of the investment was also reflected in the interventions being seen as add-ons or distinctive pieces of work that already tired, and at times resentful, teachers were required to undertake and implement.

System Level Constraints

One of the key lessons from Excelerate relates to the limits of impact when system level oversight, alignment, and involvement are inconsistent. While the investment was intentionally designed to empower school leaders and practitioners to test and innovate, this approach often operated within the structural (such as inspections), contractual (such as Working Time Agreement), cultural and accountability (e.g. exam results) limitations of the current educational system.

“The limitations came from the system: a secondary curriculum and accountability dominated, [if not], threatened by national qualifications, structural inflexibility and reluctance to change” – Strategic partner

This reflection was also noted by some parents, who recognised changes in the Broader General Education, but not in the senior phase that remains traditional due to exam requirements. As one parent put it: ***“staff work extremely hard and care deeply for pupils; the limitations are structural, not attitudinal.”***

Against this backdrop, it might come as a surprise that, despite some structural changes, the key influencing factors in young people's career choices remain their parents (53%). However, the roles of other factors, namely personal research and social media, have also changed more significantly over the years (43%, up from 13%, and 37%, up from 28% respectively). Interestingly, the role of teachers in relation to future career choices has also changed (up from 9% to 15%).^[38]

A frequent challenge was the missed or limited opportunity to work more closely with local authority leaders to help them support and oversee strategic progress. Even though schools were supported, through Excelerate, to develop local strategic plans and implement pedagogical approaches, there was not always a shared understanding at an authority or system level that the schools were prioritising how they reflected wider policy or strategic goals.

“The main shortfall is system-level, not the investment itself, especially the disconnect between Excelerate's empowerment and the constraints of local authority and national systems.” – Headteacher, Aberdeenshire

Many stakeholders also highlighted the difficulty in translating empowerment and local ownership into action within a highly regulated and constrained system.

Outdated school curricula, complex timetables, and accountability pressures around national qualifications and traditional subjects, were often mentioned as limiting or constraining factors. This led to a disconnect between innovation led by schools and the system requirements woven into the discourse at more strategic levels.

Some participants also highlighted the need for stronger and clearer governance with flexibility to implement change, especially when school leaders felt less confident or more resistant to it. This level of readiness was often seen as a determining factor in optimising Excelerate and its offers.

Transparency and relationship management across the local authorities was also seen as another challenge. In some instances, schools not directly involved in the investment shared feelings of exclusion, jealousy or even inequity, which strained local relationships. Greater levels of communication on engagement could have helped local authority representatives to share learning more widely and use the investment as a collective resource, as intended, rather than a selective and exclusive opportunity.

Networking and Collaboration

One of the key offers provided as part of the Excelerate investment were regular, structured, and reflective networking opportunities aimed at brokering deeper connections, knowledge and practice exchange and amplifying system-level change amongst the participating schools.

However, it has been evident that these have been limited in scope and impact. Some of the reasons included distance between schools, prior commitments, but also, at a deeper level, competitiveness among headteachers, and an insufficient culture of openness in place to overcome this were also identified as barriers.

What is more, peer networking opportunities have been disappointing, partly due to varying readiness levels among schools, lack of opportunities to build strong and trusting relationships, which, at times, led to fear of acknowledging mistakes.

When asked about experiences of networking opportunities, one Aberdeenshire-based headteacher reflected that ***“[Excelerate fell short in] creating a safe space for learning and acknowledging mistakes through peer networking”***, a theme evident across many accounts, some of whom saw this aspect of the work as the responsibility of the funder, whereas others felt it was the collective responsibility of those involved.

For those reasons, some headteachers have been hesitant to embrace opportunities fully, even if they acknowledge that there is

a need for better knowledge exchange. They also point to the missed opportunity by the participating local authorities who, they had hoped, would facilitate engagements and pair schools with similar contexts to enhance understanding of shared barriers, alongside inspiration and opportunities.

Training

Although the provision of training opportunities was broad and extensive, with over **500** teachers trained in PBL and **190** trained in oracy over the last seven years, there have been challenges in implementing the learning but also understanding of those offers and the value they bring.

“Excelerate has been seen as a ‘sweetie shop where people could take anything from, regardless of their readiness.’ – Strategic partner

There have been substantial differences in the value Excelerate training offers have brought. While PBL was widely valued and schools with strong oracy focus have seen young people become more articulate and emotionally intelligent, others experienced the oracy training as complex, out of touch and ineffective with minimal impact in the areas it had potential to improve.

The professional learning offered by Excelerate did not reach all staff equally, leading to inconsistencies in implementation.

“[Professional learning] opportunities for staff were not equitable. The initial interaction for all staff was ‘PBL Splash’ [...] was poor and gave a negative first impression” – member of the Senior Leadership Team, Aberdeenshire

Concerns were also voiced about the quality of in-house training due to staff turnover.

There is also a worry that maintaining the positive impact of training requires a substantial number of trained educators, who move across local authorities or leave the profession altogether.

“We have questions regarding how training is being implemented in practice in classrooms.” - member of the Senior Leadership Team, Angus

A few accounts reflected on accessibility and logistical issues with training sessions held in locations proving difficult to travel to. Some felt that follow-ups on training had been lacking, thus limiting the potential outcome of the offers.

Limited Scale

While not frequent, a minority of Excelerate’s strategic partners and school leaders expressed concerns about the scale and pace of change Excelerate aimed to bring about. They pointed to the test of change being a small sample of schools, all of which operate in a context-specific environment, which renders inferences of change difficult to align solely to the investment.

Others felt that the speed and scale of the implementation of change in some schools, which requires appetite for change and readiness, was a challenge with few leaders understanding the effort it would take to transform their schools.

“Changes to the system take time, and perhaps Excelerate offered too much too soon.” – Strategic partner

Others felt that the investment would struggle to make a systemic difference because it has only had an impact on those who have first-hand experience of what Excelerate had to offer, namely professional and high-quality training. And even those who have had exceptional experiences through Excelerate are hindered by outdated resources and dwindling specialist support. Some stakeholders stated overtly that due to retention issues and limited leadership pipeline, quality education in the northeast of Scotland is under threat.



Moving Forward

When thinking about the future, school leaders emphasised their commitment to amplifying the principles of, and learning from, the Excelerate investment. They were determined to continue collaboration between Excelerate partner schools through effective peer networking and professional development. They also talked about strengthening consistency in teaching approaches, such as PBL or oracy, and learning from one another. While some worried that without TWF as a central point of contact, the legacy of the investment would be at risk, others remained positive that the momentum had been created.

“We will always be an Excelerate school, even after the investment ends.” – Headteacher, Aberdeen

However, instrumental to this success is the local authorities' engagement and support to ensure education in the Northeast of Scotland creates more relevant educational experiences. The following sections focus on schools' short and medium plans following the ending of the external investment.



Learning Communities

While the experiences of formally organised peer networking sessions were broadly seen as ineffective, there was a clear desire to sustain the momentum by purposeful, structured, and equitable collaboration between schools, through headteacher or trained teachers' forums.

There was a sense that peer networking could enhance long-term impact of the investment by creating specialised centres for excellence which could address significant educational challenges faced in Scotland.

“There remains significant value in cross-authority collaboration to sustain momentum and avoid schools innovating in isolation again.” – Headteacher, Aberdeenshire

There was a strong belief that the non-formal networking sessions delivered effectively in Detroit, Nashville, and Doncaster, could provide insights to shared practices, tools and approaches developed throughout Excelerate.

“We need to celebrate the pride in learning and not be discouraged by fear of being weak.” – Strategic partner

Overall, many stakeholders from strategic partners, senior leaders and headteachers advocated for ongoing centrally supported networking with the aim of sharing best practices and structured learning opportunities to ensure sustainable growth within the educational network in the Northeast.





Curriculum

There was an array of actions headteachers, and senior leaders plan to undertake post-investment. While most of them were stage and context specific, several common aspirations emerged, such as:

- To develop and, where appropriate, re-evaluate young people's skills profile to ensure it remains relevant and future-focused to equip young people with the skills for tomorrow,
- To introduce and incorporate skills frameworks co-designed by the wider community into classroom teaching,
- To provide in-house training sessions delivered by teachers exposed to Excelerate offers, such as PBL, oracy, and Crew,
- To introduce quality assurance processes to further embed professional learning from Excelerate,
- To develop student pathway models in the Broad General Education, based on the success of similar models within Excelerate partner schools,
- To develop teacher capability,
- To embed gold standard oracy and PBL into classrooms,
- To develop and share an evidence base of successful approaches to allow for crosspollination of learning and implementation, and
- To refine academic success beyond attainment, and include wellbeing, confidence, belonging, and destinations.

Many believed that capitalising on the investment's legacy and creating learning communities will ***“create educational currency that sets young people up for a meaningful future”***- Headteacher, Angus.

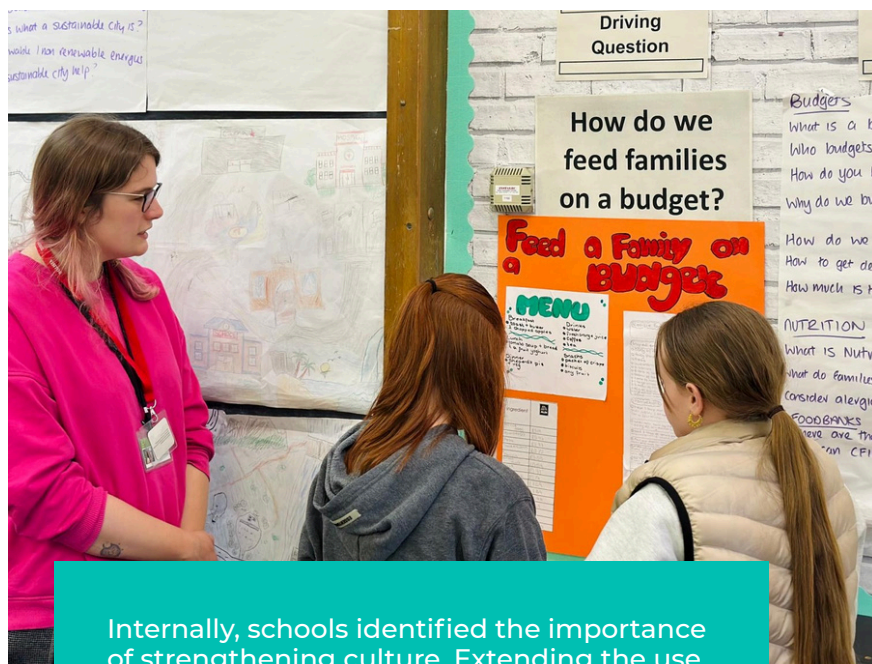
Partnership and Capacity

In addition to cultivating curricular changes, stakeholders consistently highlighted the importance of ensuring that the momentum is maintained and translates into shared ownership, sustainable structures and clear connections between education and businesses.

A key next step is the broadening of community and business engagement that positions schools as active contributors and actors in their local ecosystems. This includes strengthening partnerships with growth sector organisations, and ensuring that, on an operational level, every faculty has the opportunity to collaborate with industry and community partners.

Moving beyond reliance on individual relationships or those within a single department, partnerships should evolve into operating as a school-wide resource, supporting curriculum, staff professional learning, and future-focused, relevant learner pathways.

Linked to this is the need to frame partnership work not solely as an educational initiative or responsibility but as a part of a wider economic strategy. Developing clearer pathways, as evidenced by some of Exceleerate schools, can help schools respond to the skills of tomorrow by offering young people routes that connect learning with employment and civic opportunities.



Internally, schools identified the importance of strengthening culture. Extending the use of Crew structures, including Staff Crew and Community Crew, across all year groups was seen as a practical way of reinforcing shared values, vision, and relationships. This aligns with a broader ambition to build and sustain culture described by participants as **“brilliant schools for brilliant people,”** where trust is balanced with collective responsibility and accountability.

Finally, stakeholders noted early indications that strengthened or renewed focus on “the why,” coupled with professional development and external engagement might further contribute positively to teacher and leader recruitment and retention.



Conclusions



Excelerate emerged after three years of intense review into examining how Scotland's youth employment strategy was being implemented in secondary schools across Scotland.

As a test of change, it aimed to create an eco-system consisting of school leaders, educators, and partners who have the vision, skills, experience, and commitment to prepare all young people for the world of work and life.

Open to 5% of all Scottish secondary school teachers and young people concentrated in the Northeast of Scotland, Excelerate offered participating schools the opportunity to step out of their comfort zones and discover how world-class offers of professional development can, with the right leadership appetite, transform the education system.

This evaluation set out to explore how Excelerate has contributed to the development of an education ecosystem preparing young people for the world of work.

Using a contribution, rather than attribution lens, and engagement with nearly 3,000 stakeholders, this report focused on exploring changes across culture, leadership, professional practice, curriculum, and external engagement.

There is convincing evidence that the investment has acted as a catalyst for change. Stakeholders pointed to strengthened professional agency, greater risk-taking and improved confidence in trying new approaches. Many participating schools redeveloped their curricula, making space for new elements and structures, such as Crew, but also greater integration of business and community engagements in classrooms and the local community. Excelerate schools have also seen a shift in mindsets, from accepting status quo and existing practices to exploration and innovation, realising that Excelerate compliments Curriculum for Excellence by providing the tools to realise its ambitions.

The level of change and its sustainability vary from school to school, though. Where leadership and power are shared and

intentionally distributed, change appears more embedded and less susceptible to erosion. What is more, a clear and compelling vision developed collectively with the school and local community cements changes introduced during Excelerate lifecycle. In other school contexts, sustained developments depend on individuals or roles and, at times, become secondary to other priorities. Structural features of the current educational system, namely national qualifications, attainment, and timetabling continue to disproportionately influence the level of change that is realistically possible. While Excelerate has allowed some schools to work more creatively within these limitations, it cannot remove them altogether.

Importantly, the evaluation also suggests that Excelerate's greatest contribution is in the alignment between vision and practice, where schools and local communities enrich one another, especially when partnership work has moved beyond transactional engagement towards a more sustained collaboration. While some perceive Excelerate as a set of individual and discreet offers open to a limited few, school leaders who have been brave and shared power with their school community, have been harnessing the fruit of this investment in the form of more outward facing, relational and collaborative practice.

While the desire to build on Excelerate remains, its legacy will depend on how quickly and effectively learnings of this evaluation are acknowledged, consolidated, and implemented to support an evolved education system that aligns with the ambitions of Scotland's strong, forward-facing curriculum and education policies. Excelerate should act as a lesson in how to provide long-term support to schools at differing points in the change journey. A blanket approach towards professional learning should be avoided. Local authority leaders, Education Scotland, and the Scottish Government should commit to a long-term programme of professional learning that meets schools where they are but is also flexible enough to stretch and challenge a school community based on incremental progression.

Notes and References

Notes

[1] In 2020, Scotland invited the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to review the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). The findings were published in 2021.

[2] In 2021, in response to the OECD's findings and recommendations, the Scottish Government commissioned an independent review of Scotland's qualifications and assessments. The 'Hayward Review', led by Professor Louise Hayward, published its findings in 2023.

[3] In 2022, the Scottish Government commissioned an independent review of the skills delivery landscape in Scotland. The review was led by James Withers and the findings were published in 2023.

[5] At the time of appointment, Sir Ian Wood was also the Chairman of The Wood Foundation.

[13] Undergoing reform is in reference to the ongoing commitment required to evolve the structures, processes, and practices of system-change.

[21] TWF bid for the opportunity to develop and deliver the PBL 101 workshop for, and on behalf of, Education Scotland through Public Contracts Scotland.

[32] Interviewees provided estimates of £4,000 training budget per school, or £50 per (primary / secondary) teacher.

[33] Individual and organisation engagement numbers reflect only those directly brokered by the Business and Community Support Officers within Excelerate partner schools.

[34] Due to methodological changes, caution needs to be taken when interpreting baseline and final data survey findings.

[35] Due to methodological improvements, like-for-like comparison of survey findings is limited.

[36] Some schools have incorporated the Crew pedagogy as Clan, Squad, UPS, or form in their schools.

[37] It needs to be noted that the final young people's survey underwent methodological improvements on the original baseline survey.

[38] Analysis of young people's surveys administered at the start and end of the Excelerate investment

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IMPACT REPORT

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