



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Education Children and Young People Committee

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AI AND EDUCATION

Dear Cabinet Secretary,

I am writing on behalf of the Education, Children, and Young People Committee regarding its evidence session on AI and education which took place on 13 December 2023. The Official Report of the meeting can be found [here](#).

The purpose of this evidence session was to understand more about the challenges and opportunities AI can provide in the education sector.

Previous consideration of AI and Education

The Committee has raised the issue of AI in education in previous evidence sessions on education reform and with Professor Hayward.

A key consideration was how generative AI would impact on modes of assessment. In September 2023, Professor Hayward on the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment, [said](#)—

“All countries are struggling to decide how to respond to artificial intelligence just now. You will know from the [Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment] report that there were two fundamental views. One view was that we should go back to tests and examinations, because at least you can control those. Another view, which came initially through the international baccalaureate, was that the learners with whom we are working will have to live with artificial intelligence and we have a responsibility to make sure that they are able to cope with that.

“AI may change the nature of tasks. For example, it becomes fundamentally important that learners are able to discern the difference between what is fake

and what is real. That is an issue for all of us. That will become not something in the margins but a fundamental skill. For example, it may change the nature of assessment tasks. There may be a task whereby you would ask young people to generate a response using artificial intelligence, but the task would be for them to critique it, to identify some element of dependable evidence within that and to ask where the false news is.”

During the Committee’s work on education reform, the Committee explored the impacts of AI with witnesses. For example, [Dr Marina Shapira said on 8 November 2023](#)—

“I can share the way that we, in the university, think about AI. It was quite an interesting process, because, approximately a year ago, there was almost a moral panic over what we were going to do—all students were going to write their essays using just AI. Gradually, that has now developed into an acknowledgement that AI can be used creatively and to enable learning in so many ways. Yes, it will not be easy, and it will demand that everyone engage with and think about what the existence of AI means. What will it mean to the way that we teach, the way that we assess and the way that we think about knowledge? We are at the beginning of an interesting process, and I am glad that we are now thinking about AI not as some bogeyman but as something that will be used to improve our lives and educational experiences.”

A headteacher, [Peter Bain, said to the Committee on 15 November 2023](#)—

“We believe that a necessary forerunner to anything that we do is for Government to establish a degree of expertise and guidance that would guide education nationally, through into local authorities and then to schools, incorporating an understanding of AI ... We need employers, universities and colleges to be involved. We need a holistic picture of society to have the discussion about and understanding of AI. Ultimately, the job of a school is to prepare our youngsters for life and work and, unless we fully understand where AI is going in life and work, we cannot prepare them. We need to be at the forefront of the development, but we also need to be at the tail end of the discussion—otherwise, how do we know what we are aiming for? That is quite a dichotomy.”

Building on from these sessions and on the themes discussed at the recent [Scotland’s Futures Forum](#) events on AI in education held in June 2023 and November 2023, the Committee explored these issues further at its meeting in December 2023 and agreed to write to you on a number of issues raised by witnesses.

AI literacy in schools

The Committee heard of the need to continue to improve AI literacy in schools. Professor Robertson from The University of Edinburgh said—

“It is possible that there will be technological advances and that AI will become more reliable, but there are also human bad actors who might be deliberately using AI to generate misinformation. I think that we all know the

dangers of misinformation and disinformation and know why our learners need to be aware of these things and have strategies against them.”

She argued for the need to develop age-appropriate levels of understanding of how AI works for the different ages and stages, the best way of communicating this and of keeping teachers’ knowledge of AI developments updated.

Ollie Bray from Education Scotland also stressed the importance of AI literacy in schools and of teachers’ professional development in this area and argued that curriculum reform is a good opportunity to do that. He said—

“When we developed curriculum for excellence a number of years ago, some things were mentioned as things that young people need to know, but those things are probably more important than ever. The use of technology is one, and AI would be in that bucket.”

Guidance

The Committee heard of the need for guidance to be issued to educators on the effective and ethical use of AI technology in schools. Professor Robertson told the Committee—

“As far as I am aware there are no guidelines for how to use AI ethically within education, so I would welcome Government guidelines on that, at the very least. The Government needs to take a position on the matter quite quickly. We, in the room, are the partners who could say something about that. The universities would be keen to offer advice, but I think that there is a vacuum at the moment, which is slightly worrying because things are moving so fast.”

Chris Ranson from Dunblane High School echoed this point saying—

“When I started thinking about this before the summer, I thought that, by the time we got to Christmas, the Government would have released clear guidance and I would be adapting everything to fit in with that. I am not trying to be flippant; it is just that it is not clear that there is anything for me, as someone who is looking for stuff to grapple with.”

Ollie Bray also reminded the Committee of the recommendation from the Hayward review to—

“Establish a cross sector commission on education on Artificial Intelligence. As a matter of urgency, Scottish Government should convene and lead a cross sector commission to develop a shared value position on the future of AI in education and a set of guiding principles for the use of AI.”

The Committee notes that the [recent report of the ICEA](#) called on the Scottish Government to “urgently explore the implications of AI for education to identify related curriculum and professional learning policy developments, and work with universities, teachers’ organisations, business, parents, students and community, to support measured implementation.”

The Committee would welcome details of how the Scottish Government is working with the education sector to improve AI literacy in schools and to ensure teachers continue to have up to date knowledge in this area.

In addition, the Committee asks the Scottish Government whether it plans to work with Education Scotland to produce guidance for educators on the effective and ethical use of AI technologies in Scotland’s schools and whether it has any plans to establish a cross sector commission to look at AI and education.

AI and equalities

The Committee is aware that UNESCO [published guidance for generative AI in education and research](#) in September 2023 which included a snapshot of the capabilities of generative AI at the time. The guidance explores a number of issues including: the effects on digital poverty; respecting intellectual property rights; and “reducing the diversity of opinions and further marginalizing already marginalized voices” as the tools will reflect the framing of data which was or is used to train the models.

On education and research policies, the UNESCO guidance suggested actions under eight themes, the first theme being—

- Promote inclusion, equity, linguistic and cultural diversity.

During evidence, the Committee heard of the risk of a digital divide emerging where certain groups have greater access and use of AI technologies while other groups do not. There was a concern that, rather than AI supporting equality and addressing inequalities, there was the potential for AI to exacerbate the situation if access to technologies was not addressed.

Ollie Bray told the Committee—

“We are seeing across Scotland big differences in the roll-out of technology in education. There is a variety of different reasons for that, some of which are complex, but I think that, if we want equity, we need to try to level the technology playing field.”

Another recommendation of the ICEA was that the Government “take account of the likelihood of an increasing digital divide associated with access to AI” in the context of the aim to close the poverty-related attainment gap.

The Committee asks the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to ensure that AI in education will be used to promote inclusion and equality within Scotland’s schools with equal access to AI technologies and tools.

Regulation

The Committee heard of the dangers associated with generative AI and associated potential child protection issues. A number of witnesses argued for the need to help guide young people on how to use generative AI and it was suggested that there was a role for regulation in this area.

The Committee would be interested to know if the Scottish Government has given any consideration to creating legal duties or restrictions on the use of generative AI in Scotland's schools.

Scotland's AI strategy

The Committee is aware that [Scotland's AI strategy](#) was published in March 2021, which seeks to realise a vision that—“Scotland will become a leader in the development and use of trustworthy, ethical and inclusive AI.”

During evidence, the Committee heard of the ongoing technological developments in AI and the Committee is conscious that this strategy, which is almost 3 years old, does not incorporate recent important technologies and tools in relation to AI and education.

The Committee also heard of the need for Government policies on AI for schools colleges and universities to collaborate with employers, Education Scotland and other Government departments in considering the futures for young people.

The Committee seeks confirmation as to whether the Scottish Government intends to update Scotland's AI strategy and, if so, when. In addition, the Committee would be grateful if you could confirm that any future strategy will address the issues raised during the Committee's evidence sessions as outlined in this letter.

Finally, for information, the Committee discussed comparative approaches to AI and education and Helena Good from Daydream Believers spoke of the work being undertaken in Finland on the ethical use of AI. The Committee intends to gather more information on this issue with the Nordic Council.

I would welcome a response to the points raised in this letter by **9 February 2024** and the Committee expects to return to this issue later in the year.

Yours sincerely,

**Sue Webber MSP
Convener**