

Translation of contributions from Dr Gillian Munro, Principal, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig

This is a written translation of the contributions of Dr Gillian Munro at the Education, Children and Young People Committee on 8th May 2024.

Some background information is provided to help the reader understand the context in which Dr Munro spoke. In some cases, questions have been paraphrased.

As such, this translation should be read in conjunction with the Official Report, which is the substantially verbatim record of the meeting proceedings. This is available [online](#).

Contribution 1 (10:48)

Good morning I'm Gillian Munro, principal of Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. I speak Gaelic and I also speak Scots. My first language is Doric. I am proud to be here.

Contribution 2 (10:57)

Does the current pathway involve getting a higher national diploma, or did you say that it was a higher national certificate? And is that currently available only through UHI?

It is an HNC.

I am sure it is available through the University of the Highlands and Islands network. The emphasis is on fluency skills, that the workers are fluent in the language and also that they perform at a very high curricular level.

Contribution 3 (10:58)

It is delivered remotely.

Contribution 4 (11:01)

How many are taking up the course via distance learning?

I don't have the number, but I know that someone in the public gallery has the number if you would like it.

Contribution 5 (11:02)

Would there be particular advantages to a curriculum model that originated in Gaelic? What would be the challenges in developing that?

I must say there are very good resources around us that we could use more often. We support the Tobar an Dualchais project for example. There are wonderful resources in that archive. Also, the same is true of the Scottish School of Studies, which provided some of the materials in Tobar an Dualchais. There are materials that would contribute to idiomatic richness, materials that would enrich knowledge, that would flesh out the somewhat meagre Gaelic cultural content in the Curriculum for Excellence.

I have a child myself and I see the kind of education that child is receiving. Looking, for example at reading, very often, there is no trace of the culture that surrounds them. Therefore, I think there are resources out there that could enrich, improve the Curriculum for Excellence.

Contribution 6 (11:06)

I will add a little more. I am so proud to sit in the Scottish Parliament as we recognise the languages and cultures that people speak in the communities around us. For far too long, we have been suppressing them, and it is so important that this bill goes through Parliament. It is cause for hope that all the parties are around the table today, that all the parties are on the cross-party group for Gaelic in Parliament, and that you all support the languages.

I was shocked last week to hear, in the opinion of some, that we should stop the work that is being done on the bill. It is sorely needed. It is twenty years, for example, since the Gaelic Language Act 2005 was passed, and it is time for us to do more for the people of Scotland.

The very points we raise about the Curriculum for Excellence exemplify how scant our understanding is of what we provide parents and children. It is time to adapt Curriculum for Excellence to accommodate Gaelic and Scots language culture.

Contribution 7 (11:14)

How about the number of learners who are achieving SQA qualifications? Is an overall increase in 230 SQA awards over 36 years satisfactory progress?

I agree with Inge Birnie. It is not enough, and the numbers are not high enough. A big obstacle stands in the way and, unfortunately, there is nothing in the bill at this stage that is going to help us.

Parents do not have a right to Gaelic-medium education in this bill, and that is what would open the door to solving many problems.

It is dreadful that only one percent in primary school are doing Gaelic-medium education. Without giving parents rights to Gaelic-medium education, we are not going to see growth. That's the first thing we need to do.

Contribution 8 (11:27)

Is there anything in the bill that needs to change in order for it to deliver what you think it needs to deliver for Gaelic-medium education?

I will be brief. Parents and children need a legal right to Gaelic education. Along with that, a big initiative is needed to train teachers and to do so like, for example, the Basque Country. We could look at the Basque Country and how they made such a big difference in such a short time. It meant paying teachers their full salary and allowing them enough time to become fluent in the language and to convert to teaching through the medium of Basque.

Why not do something similar? That's a question about resources, I'm sure, but the bill may not deal with that, but we could be very radical and propose a new way to recruit, train and support teachers. Teachers also need the third thing, much more support.

Mention was made earlier of how isolating it is to work in a class teaching through the medium of Gaelic - that the resources are not there and that the support is not there in general, and that you do not have the resources in particular if you have children in the class with additional needs.

Also, if you teach in Gaelic-medium education, you often teach children at different ages. My own daughter is in a class with 3 different levels. That in itself is a problem, and we need to look at how we can support teachers who are in these situations.

I am not surprised that many have lost confidence. It is easier to teach in English-medium education. If we really want Gaelic and Scots to survive, we must implement really strong measures now, and perhaps leave financial questions to other people.

Contribution 9 (11:51)

What is the scale of current Gaelic-medium further and higher education provision in Scotland? [...] What would be the benefits of delivering Gaelic-medium university provision? How successful has the Gaelic plans' approach been in supporting the language in colleges and universities? Should the bill have a greater focus on the colleges and universities sector?

I can try to give parts of the answer. Sabhal Mòr is the only provider of immersion education in a completely Gaelic environment – the only opportunity you have in Scotland, and in the world.

We also have provision in Lews Castle College, as it was called – today, UHI North, West and Hebrides. There is not the same immersion outside the classroom, but courses run there in college as well.

Also, Gaelic education is available in the major universities in Edinburgh and Glasgow, and through teacher education at Strathclyde.

Contribution 10 (11:52)

I can expand on the other points or questions if you would like, but maybe others want to answer.

Contribution 11 (11:54)

Thank you very much - excuse me, I'll continue in Gaelic!

Regarding the benefits that would come from a Gaelic-medium university, we are used to thinking of universities as very large-scale educational institutions, but the Gaelic community is so small and therefore, why use the national criteria for English-language institutions when considering a Gaelic one?

We want it to be possible for you to be able to speak Gaelic, use it in many parts of your life from youth to old age, and for you to be educated from youth to old age as well.

At the moment, Gaelic education is available in various forms – some good, some not good enough – from a level of zero up to 180 points, but the missing piece is an institution that works entirely through Gaelic, with university status. That would confer respect – and it would make us think of ourselves with respect.

When you were asking earlier whether the two languages should be in the same bill, I would say that they should. There are many opportunities to learn from each other and to strengthen each other.

Lydia Rohmer said earlier that Gaelic is probably a little more fragile than Scots. I don't know if that's true, because for both languages, lack of self-confidence is the root of all problems, and I myself suffer from that.

Scots is my first language but after 20 years working as a Gaelic activist, I found myself on a train in Aberdeen and I saw someone in a suit looking very smart. I had to speak Scots to my uncle, and I went to the corridor between the two coaches so that the man could not hear me. I hadn't realised how deep the lack of self-confidence is when you

don't encounter your own language or culture in different parts of public life, in education for example. So, there are many things we could learn from each other.

Also, I would say it's a loss that we are not considering other languages. British Sign Language was mentioned earlier, that maybe that should be included, but we could also look at the Chinese and Indian communities and languages from all the other countries that we have here.

Sorry – I'm digressing a bit from talking about a Gaelic university, but maybe that's enough about that for now.

I also wanted to make one small point. In the evidence today, we heard a lot about the importance of Scots dialects.

In the Gaelic world, we appreciate that dialects are beautiful and so interesting and so important in terms of self-esteem, but at the end of the day, time is running out on us. Time is running out and we need to look at the broad picture – Gaelic – and not worry about whether a teacher from Glasgow is teaching Gaelic in Lewis or a teacher from Lewis teaching Gaelic in Skye.

There is not enough time for that. The most important thing is that the language is taught, and that children and teachers realise the importance of understanding and respecting other dialects – but, at the end of the day, the language and culture are what matter.

Contribution 12 (12:04)

I'll try to be brief too.

At the end of the day, all parts of the education system in the Gaelic world are interconnected. It will be the same in Scots as well. Without the numbers coming through the primary schools and through the secondary schools, we will not have enough people at college or university level.

Therefore, the crux of the matter is the need for development at primary school level and for parents to have a right to Gaelic-medium education. Then, we will see growth and come back maybe in another ten years with more things we can do for FE and HE.

Contribution 13 (12:08)

If you were advising on how to get greater reach and legitimacy, and really pinnacling Scots in our society, based on what Gaelic has been through as a medium for education, would you hope for provision on Scots in higher and further education?

I would warmly welcome such a development. I don't see why there wouldn't be a Sabhal Mòr Ostaig for Scots, an immersive environment for learning about the language but also learning another subject.

At Sabhal Mòr you learn through the language but you learn other subjects. You work on all aspects so that you achieve a very high level of fluency, but you also gain knowledge that allows you to go into the media or write books or go out and teach. Why couldn't the same thing be done at tertiary level for Scots.

Also, it would be very good to see development in the teaching of Scots in universities at the moment. For example, when I started at the University of Edinburgh in the 1980s there was a part of the English language course – you could look at your own language or Scots as part of it. That gave me a lot of pride.

If there were courses like that at FE and HE level when I was 18, I might not be in the Gaelic world at all, but in Scots development. I look forward to the next generation who will develop Scots as well.

Contribution 14 (12:15)

What is the role of online and distance learning in supporting Gaelic and Scots further and higher education?

I agree that remote delivery is vital to the growth of the languages – Gaelic and Scots. At Sabhal Mòr Ostaig distance learning is in our DNA.

We have been delivering distance education for many years now – before I was at Sabhal Mòr, and I have been there for almost twenty years. We run a beginners'-level immersion course for people who are interested in the language.

I'm not sure which year, I have to admit, but previously, students have been studying from all over the world from twenty-eight different countries and across five different continents.

The numbers are not as big as we would like but these numbers can grow. With distance education, there is no limit to the number of pupils who can be educated, if you have the staff.

A lot of our staff are also remote. We have someone teaching Gaelic from South America for example. We have to operate in the modern world, to be flexible, to meet the needs of learners – if they are in different time zones, we have to think about how we can deliver classes when students are awake and so on. We understand how important this is.

Contribution 15 (12:18)

How is education linked to supporting communities to use Gaelic and Scots in everyday life? And on the evidence related to the Gaelic plan and working with creative culture and heritage and the curriculum for that area? Is it an aim for education providers? If so, how would that aim be evaluated?

That is a very good question. I am so glad to hear a question about the links between FE/HE education and community, because without community – what is there?

It is extremely important that existing courses are available in communities, with instructors from the communities who can deliver provision.

Sorry – my adrenaline is depleting and I'm getting slow now.

Sabhal Mòr, for example, thinks it very important to be involved in initiatives with other organisations. For example, we are involved with Duolingo. We have been very much at the heart of writing the Duolingo materials in Gaelic. We know that 1.8 million people have registered in different communities to use the products.

We know that about half a million are busy working from day to day or from week to week using these products. Support classes are also available in communities.

Sabhal Mòr is also involved with SpeakGaelic, a national initiative with funding support from the Government. Bòrd na Gàidhlig and MG ALBA are also involved. Programmes are broadcast but there are materials available at community level for use with adult-education classes.

It is also so important that FE/HE helps parents who have children who study Gaelic at school – especially in Gaelic-medium education – that there are classes in the communities to support them, so that they can be confident, that they can follow, for example, the homework in Gaelic-medium education.

It is also very important that we run classes in communities, for example, Skye, the Western Isles, Glasgow and Aberdeen, and that we run classes for people who understand Gaelic, perhaps, or who have a little but do not have the confidence or feel that they do not have the speaking skills. It is really important that we are very involved in that.

Also, national projects like Tobar an Dualchais –

Contribution 16 (12:21)

How are the impacts of some of those programmes [mentioned during evidence] being evaluated in those communities?

Perhaps our impact assessment could be better and more formal. Usually, people have benchmarks and they have to report on them, as to whether they are achieving them.

The main aim is to encourage and create more speakers. That's the sort of thing the criteria we should be assessing.

Contribution 17 (12:22)

Are such things [youth work and opportunities to play sport and do art, drama and singing and speak Gaelic] important for embedding language, particularly for young people, so that it is not just about school, but about life?

Indeed. Everything has to be involved in creating a community, certainly.

I work at Sabhal Mòr and I will talk a little about Sabhal Mòr. We have also been working, for example, with Comunn na Gàidhlig, looking at how their network of officers can get more support and come together.

We felt, after some research, that officers often lack confidence. Often, they are young, and it was necessary to bring people together and look at training opportunities for officers who go out into the communities and work with groups of children and teenagers.

Sabhal Mòr is one example of an educational body that works with other organisations, understanding the need for leisure activities, other events and natural opportunities, as it were, that bring people together to use the language.

I better give someone else a chance.

Ends