



Fine-tuning schools' work to improve chances for pupils to find work

By Katie Macleod

Last month saw a series of events held in secondary schools throughout the Western Isles to introduce the options available to pupils in 4th-6th year.

The Parental Engagement Sessions took place between 22nd-25th January, and provided parents with details on what will be on offer for young people in the 2018 school year and beyond.

Topics covered included a general introduction to the Senior Phase, the different qualifications available, and the use of e-Sgoil to make class sizes viable across The Nicolson Institute, Sir E Scott School, Sgoil Lionacleit, and Castlebay Community School.

The goal set out by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar's Department of Education and Children's Services is for sustained positive post-school destinations for all pupils, which they aim to achieve in part through enhanced opportunities and equity of provision throughout the islands.

"We're linking the Senior Phase in with the economic needs of businesses in the islands," says Head Teacher of e-Sgoil, Angus MacIannan, who spoke at the events. "There's a lot of effort going into personalisation and choice, and linking it all into local labour market intelligence."

"We're looking at where the jobs are in the Western Isles, and what areas of the economy they are going to be in," adds Allan Smithyman, e-Sgoil's Senior Education Officer, who was also at the engagement sessions. "That's where we can try and develop new courses, so young people can access qualifications in those areas, and have a better chance of employment locally."

As a result, a new option being introduced for pupils is the Foundation Apprenticeship, which Skills Development Scotland describes as "a work-based learning opportunity for secondary school pupils." Starting in the 2018 academic session, seven Foundation Apprenticeships – at SCQF Level 6, which is equivalent to Higher – will be available to all 5th and 6th year pupils throughout the Western Isles.

The Foundation Apprenticeships were chosen with the interests of pupils and the local economy

in mind, and include Creative and Digital Media; Engineering; Social Services: Healthcare; Food and Drink Operations; Social Service: Children and Young People; Business Skills; and IT Hardware or Software.

"It's a two-year course, which gives young people industry-standard qualifications and a work placement," explains Allan. "They're an option for young people who perhaps might not have wanted to leave the islands, but had to. We're trying to give these young people the opportunity to stay and live and work in the communities where they've been brought up, rather than being forced to go away."

The Foundation Apprenticeships will be offered by the University of the Highlands and Islands, initially through Lews Castle College and West Scotland College. Thanks to the online learning technology available through e-Sgoil, exactly the same Foundation Apprenticeships will be available at exactly the same time to pupils in all senior secondary schools in the Western Isles.

"If you're in a school and you're the only person who's picked a subject, it's unlikely it will run; but if you combine four schools, with small numbers in each of the schools, you've suddenly got six pupils across four schools, where otherwise the class wouldn't be viable," explains Allan.

This practice of harmonizing and expanding provision has already been "tried and tested," Angus notes, having been used to teach Advanced Higher Maths and Higher Psychology across multiple schools in previous years. It increases choice for all pupils, whether they're interested in a Foundation Apprenticeship that will lay the groundwork for future employment, or an Advanced Higher that will give them a head start at university.

When looked at holistically, Angus notes that the new flexibility of the Senior Phase now take account of the important and interlinking roles of the islands' economy, community, language, and culture – with the curriculum in a supporting role.

"Without having the economic underpinning – jobs available in the Western Isles – none of the rest of these things will survive. You're not going to have a community, a language, and a culture that's distinctive, if the people aren't there in the first place."