

Gaelic learning drive becomes a revolution

By Katie Macleod

From Duolingo to Dìleab, and Twitter Trends to national headlines, the Gaelic world has been buzzing in recent months. More than 200,000 users joined the free language app Duolingo to learn Gaelic since the course's launch in November, while at Celtic Connections in Glasgow last month, young people from the Western Isles wowed audiences with their Dìleab performance, a cultural showcase of Gaelic music, singing, and poetry.

This buzz around Dìleab, Duolingo, and Gaelic more generally comes as moves are taking place in Gaelic learning and policy at all levels, most recently with the announcement from Comhairle nan Eilean Siar that a "Gaelic First" policy will be applied to enrolment. From June this year, pupils in the Western Isles entering Primary One will be automatically enrolled in Gaelic Medium Education, unless their parents request otherwise.

With 47 per cent of children currently enrolled in Gaelic Medium Education, parents will now "have the choice to opt out, rather than opt in," says Angus MacIennan, Head Teacher at e-Sgoil.

"It is hoped that the Comhairle will meet its target of ensuring that 70 per cent of all Western Isles children entering Primary 1 by 2023 will be in Gaelic Medium Education. As it is, in many schools, there are already significant numbers in Gaelic Medium at Primary 1. For example, in Breasclete, Sgoil and Taobh Siar, Uig, and Daliburgh, 100 per cent of children are now in Gaelic Medium Education."

An online panel, chaired by the BBC's Coinneach Mac a' Ghobhainn, took place after the announcement last month, offering parents the chance to put forward questions to a group of language experts, teachers, and Gaelic Medium pupils themselves. "This was a very informative discussion of the issues surrounding Gaelic Medium Education, offering different perspectives and experiences, but in full agreement that bilingualism and Gaelic Medium Education was hugely beneficial to children's cognitive and academic development and achievement."

In line with this new Gaelic Enrolment Strategy, Gaelic will also be the default position for all children entering nursery provision, and there will be an increased focus on the provision of Gaelic for children aged from 0-3 years. Gaelic language

ability will be emphasised in recruitment too, with a greater focus on promoting the language in the workplace. "We have to make sure Gaelic is given more prominence, and that appropriate opportunities are given to all staff to increase their Gaelic capacity and skills," says Angus.

These changes to the focus of early years and primary education are part of a larger shift, both nationally and locally, as the Comhairle, Bord na Gàidhlig, and the Scottish Government collaborate on a proposed Gaelic Charter, as well as the Gaelic: A Faster Rate of Progress project that is being spearheaded by John Swinney, the Deputy First Minister. Both initiatives focus on the growth of Gaelic, and the importance of learning, using, promoting, and valuing the Gaelic language.

"The council is very much looking at Gaelic not being confined to the classroom. It's about getting it out there into the workplace, back into communities," says Angus. It's a goal that ties in neatly with one of the aims of the Gaelic Charter: ensuring that traditional communities of Gaelic speakers are strengthened.

Another aim of the initiatives includes ensuring that Gaelic communities have Gaelic speakers from all backgrounds. Talks are already in progress

about creating a school "immersion centre" for young pupils whose families move from the mainland and want to learn Gaelic, based on the Welsh programme of language immersion, and a successful pilot programme of informal Gaelic conversation meet-ups took place at An Lanntair last month, with more to come.

Making sure Gaelic communities are able to pass on their Gaelic culture through their own language is another priority, and the recent success of Dìleab: Air a Chuan (Legacy: On the Ocean), which saw almost 70 young people from the islands perform at the Celtic Connections festival in Glasgow, is just one example of that. Taking place on stage at the New Auditorium of the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall, the event featured the Sgoil Lionacleit Pipe Band, choirs from Sir E Scott School and Castlebay Community School, as well as box players, pipers, fiddlers, and singers from the islands' four secondary schools, alongside local musicians including Willie Campbell, Padruig Morrison, and Ceitlin Lilidh.

The concert was live-streamed to more than 3000 viewers on the night, and in the weeks since has been seen by more than 5000 people

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in 22 countries across the world, from Australia to Brazil. “The whole trip was a fantastic opportunity for the pupils involved to take part in such a world class festival and they all had a great time,” says Rhona Johnstone, Project Coordinator for Dìleab. Also focusing on cultural connections is the upcoming LUACH festival, which will feature multiple community-led events, as well as a closing concert by headline act Trail West, in early April.

Gaelic education is also set to become more widely accessible thanks to the proposed curriculum redesign, which will come into effect in the Western Isles this summer, at the same time as the Gaelic-first enrolment strategy. The redesign

features a harmonized school day and common timetable between Castlebay Community School in Barra, Sgoil Lionacleit in Benbecula, and Sir E Scott School in Harris, which will operate on the same schedule, with The Nicolson Institute harmonizing its timetable where possible.

These changes are being implemented as a means of expanding the range of subjects on offer in the Senior Phase of secondary school (S4-S6), with an added benefit being that a wider variety of subjects can be taught through the medium of Gaelic, whether that’s Higher History, Apprenticeships, or Skills for Work courses.

It’s something that’s already happening: through e-Sgoil, the Comhairle’s digital learning service, a pupil in Portree High School is studying History

through the medium of Gaelic, while another pupil in Strathpeffer is working on an apprenticeship in Creative and Digital Media through the medium of Gaelic alongside pupils from Sir E Scott and The Nicolson Institute. This kind of remote teaching and e-learning will only become more widely available as the curriculum continues to change.

“When young people engage in courses through the medium of Gaelic – such as Care of the Elderly or Creative and Digital Media – there is a relevance to the language, and those people that end up living, working, and earning in the local community will have a language that they use in their daily lives,” says Angus. “It’s about making Gaelic more relevant in the workplace and getting Gaelic to align better with local labour market

information.” It’s an approach that ties into the data, both economic and educational – something Dr. Donald Weir, Gaelic Support Officer at the Comhairle, has been looking into. “Language generation has to be embedded in economic activity,” he says.

Whether it’s online or offline, in the classroom or in communities, it’s clear there are changes taking place in the world of Gaelic. “There are a number of significant changes,” says Angus of the developments. “There’s the wealth of history, the wealth of culture, the wealth of opportunity, and the wealth that can be generated through using Gaelic as an economic asset. That’s the landscape we’re working in at the moment.”