



PE1530/V

**Response to petition PE01530: Guidance on how creationism is presented in schools**

**1. About the Society**

- a. The Humanist Society Scotland (HSS) is a national Scottish organisation which seeks to represent the views of Scots who wish to lead an ethical and fulfilling life without reference to religion. HSS is also a member of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) which is an international association of 97 local and national humanist organisations.
- b. HSS has a longstanding policy of opposing the teaching of creationism/Intelligent Design as scientific fact or an alternative to evolution.
- c. Throughout history Scotland has led the world as a beacon of progressive enlightenment values, based on science and empiricism. HSS think that a high quality science education is of vital importance to young learners, equipping them not only with valuable tools they will need for later life, but as a fundamentally important aspect of understanding the world around us.

**2. Issues raised by the petition.**

- a. Situation in England and Wales
  - i. The scientific consensus on the importance of understanding evolution are overwhelming. In 2011, our colleagues in the British Humanist Association launched a campaign – supported by Association for Science Education, British Science Association, Campaign for Science & Engineering, and leading theological think tank Ekklesia – for firmer statutory guidance against the promotion of creationism in England and Wales<sup>1</sup>.
  - ii. As part of this campaign the following statement was produced:

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*“Creationism and ‘intelligent design’ are not scientific theories, but they are portrayed as scientific theories by some religious fundamentalists who attempt to have their views promoted in publicly-funded schools. There should be enforceable statutory guidance that they may not be presented as scientific theories in any publicly-funded school of whatever type. Organisations like ‘Truth in Science’ are encouraging teachers to incorporate ‘intelligent design’ into their science teaching. ‘Truth in Science’*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://humanism.org.uk/2011/09/19/news-327-3/>



*has sent free resources to all Secondary Heads of Science and to school librarians around the country that seek to undermine the theory of evolution and have 'intelligent design' ideas portrayed as credible scientific viewpoints. Speakers from Creation Ministries International are touring the UK, presenting themselves as scientists and their creationist views as science at a number of schools. The current government guidance that creationism and 'intelligent design' should not be taught in school science should be made statutory and enforceable. It also needs to be made comprehensive so that it is clear that any portrayal of creationism and 'intelligent design' as science (whether it takes place in science lessons or not) is unacceptable."*

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- iii. This statement was signed by (among many others); Professor Jim Al-Khalili; Sir David Attenborough; Professor Richard Dawkins; Sir David Smith and Dr Helena Cronin<sup>2</sup>. Members of the Public Petitions Committee and interested parties may find this website useful for background to the situation in England and Wales <http://evolutionnotcreationism.org.uk/progress/>.
- iv. In June 2014, the Government updated its Free Schools and Academies funding agreements to require all such schools to teach evolution, and to preclude the teaching of creationism as science. It also clarified that the same requirements were implicit for all English state schools through the requirement that they teach a 'broad and balanced' curriculum. In August 2014, the Government announced it would close the loophole which allowed creationist private schools to receive state funds through a nurseries scheme. And finally in September 2014, a module on evolution was added to the national curriculum in primary schools, meaning that all English state-funded schools from primary level onwards must teach evolution, and not creationism.
  - b. Situation in Northern Ireland
    - i. Creationism has become an increasingly politicised issue in Northern Ireland<sup>3</sup>, combined with rather unique religious demographics Northern Ireland is atypical in the UK, having a high support for belief in creationism<sup>4</sup>.
    - ii. In 2009, Queen's University in Belfast published a study into the attitudes of science teachers regarding the teaching of 'alternatives to evolution'. This study shows alarming levels of

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<sup>2</sup> <http://evolutionnotcreationism.org.uk/signatories/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bcseweb.org.uk/index.php/Main/CreationismInNorthernIreland>

<sup>4</sup> <http://campaigndirector.moodia.com/Client/Theos/Files/RescuingDarwin.pdf>



support for non-scientific theories. The report mentioned said, *“Concern is raised over the ability of these new teachers to distinguish between scientific and non-scientific theories.”*<sup>5</sup>

- iii. The current state of creationism/Intelligent Design in Northern Ireland is unclear, in 2008 the then Minister of Education - Caitriona Ruane MLA – said in an answer to a question on the subject, *“...alternatives to evolution and distinguishing between evidence-based scientific theories and alternatives that would be more suited to religious education.”*<sup>6</sup>
  - c. Situation in Scotland
    - i. The teaching of evolution in Scotland is introduced around P5, as highlighted in your SPICe briefing<sup>7</sup>. Creationism/Intelligent Design are not included in any science materials for the Curriculum for Excellence.
    - ii. In 2008, in response to a question by Patrick Harvie MSP, the then Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, Fiona Hyslop, said: *“Scottish schools and the Scottish Government would challenge creationism if it were taught in our schools. However, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education reports that no schools in Scotland currently conduct education on creationism.”*<sup>8</sup>
    - iii. On 4<sup>th</sup> March 2011, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning Michael Russell MSP answered a written question from John Farquhar Munro MSP, saying: *“The curriculum in Scotland is not based on statutory prescription. It is for schools, in light of the curriculum framework within which they operate, to determine how best to organise the syllabus. However, there are no plans to include intelligent design within Curriculum for Excellence guidance and there is no evidence to suggest that intelligent design is being taught in science classes.”*<sup>9</sup>
    - iv. In September 2011, the Centre for Intelligent Design was opened in Glasgow<sup>10</sup>. This organisation drew the attention of Patrick Harvie MSP, who raised the issue in a Parliamentary debate, he noted specifically that *“...neither the Government nor Learning and Teaching Scotland give any indication that*

<sup>5</sup> [http://pure.qub.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/the-growing-visibility-of-creationism-in-northern-ireland-are-new-science-teachers-equipped-to-deal-with-the-issues\(b7d1c93c-fbb2-4e8f-9011-79418e07e063\).html](http://pure.qub.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/the-growing-visibility-of-creationism-in-northern-ireland-are-new-science-teachers-equipped-to-deal-with-the-issues(b7d1c93c-fbb2-4e8f-9011-79418e07e063).html)

<sup>6</sup> <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s1205200901414>

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/BeliefandSciencev3\\_tcm4-303173.doc](http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/BeliefandSciencev3_tcm4-303173.doc)

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/sp/?id=2008-11-27.12875.5>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/spwrans/?id=2011-03-04.S3W-39797.h>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.c4id.org.uk/press/PUB110926.doc>



*they have in place measures to prevent that material from entering schools.”<sup>11</sup>*

- v. As recently as 2013, the issue of creationism was raised in the Scottish Parliament with a question from Patrick Harvie MSP to The Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages Dr Alasdair Allan. In his response to the question Dr Allan said that throughout religious and moral education (RME) *“...creation will be explored, examined and critically reflected upon...”*, but reassured Mr Harvie that he has *“...complete confidence in our teachers to deal objectively with contentious issues as they arise.”<sup>12</sup>*
- vi. The petitioners raise the issue of local authority religious representatives, many of whom have publicly declared creationist views. Whilst this does not directly affect the appropriate teaching of science, it is alarming that individuals with such views are granted unelected status on such committees. HSS policy is to end the automatic appointment of such unelected representatives<sup>13</sup> by the repeal of Section 124 of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, and Section 31 of the Local Government etc. (Scotland) Act 1994.

### 3. Response to proposed policy

- a. The Humanist Society Scotland is opposed to the teaching of creationism as a viable alternative to evidence-based scientific theories.
- b. The Humanist Society Scotland is reassured that it has not found any evidence of creationism/Intelligent Design being taught in Scottish schools. However, there have been several cases recently which raise significant concerns. The case of volunteer classroom assistants distributing creationist literature at a South Lanarkshire school has been highlighted in your SPICe briefing<sup>14</sup>, there is also the case of Midlothian physics teacher who was accused of telling his class that evolution was ‘not proven’<sup>15</sup>.
- c. We agree with the petitioners, that the only place in which non-scientific creation-myths should be explored is ‘within a discussion context in religious and moral education classes’<sup>16</sup>. Education Scotland (formerly Learning and Teaching Scotland has produced some useful materials for this complex area for the Int 2/Higher Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/sp/?id=2010-11-10.30278.0>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/sp/?id=2013-11-21.23.0#g23.1>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.humanism-scotland.org.uk/files/HSS-petition-PE1498-response.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefingsAndFactsheets/Petitions%20briefings%20S4/PB14-1530.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/home-news/calls-for-probe-into-creationist-physics-teacher.22287215>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-24371575>



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[http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/BeliefandSciencev3\\_tcm4-303173.doc](http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/BeliefandSciencev3_tcm4-303173.doc)).

- d. We believe that further research into this area is needed to understand the nature and extent of the problem which the petitioners allude to. The claims made by the petitioners are serious ones, and should not be dismissed without more thorough investigation.
- e. Some of the examples highlighted by the petitioner are cases where external visitors to schools, such as the 'People With a Mission Ministries Challenger Bus'<sup>17</sup> which the petitioners also highlight sells creationist literature. We believe that this is part of a larger problem about who has access to schools in Scotland. Earlier this year HSS issued a joint statement with the Church of Scotland in which we said that all visitors to schools should be required to adhere to the policies of the local authority and/or the educational establishment. We think that guidance from Government in this matter would help clarify expectations from Headteachers.
- f. We suggest that the Committee undertake to write to the Association for Science Education (Scotland) (<http://www.asescotland.org.uk/>) to seek their views on the petition and professional opinion on the need for statutory guidance. Education unions should also be consulted over the need for further guidance in supporting teachers to ensure that any action taken has the best possible outcome for learners. The Committee may also find it helpful to write to Education Scotland and ask them for a report into the concerns raised by this petition – the last indication from HMIE came in 2008 and the situation may have changed since then.
- g. It is important to note that although the petition by the Centre for Intelligent Design seeks to debate the principles of the scientific theory of evolution, it is not the purpose of the petition, nor the job of the Committee to consider its authenticity. The scientific consensus for evolution is overwhelming, as Professor Richard Dawkins says, "We need to stop calling evolution a theory. In the ordinary language sense of the word it is a fact. It is as solidly demonstrated as any fact in science."<sup>18</sup>

Gary McLelland, Education Policy Officer

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.pwamm.com/challenger-bus-in-caithness/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://humanism.org.uk/2011/09/19/news-327-3/>