

PE2142/B: Review the policy on school commencement and deferred school entry in Scotland

Petitioner written submission, 12 May 2025

I've read the initial assessments and think that some key points and perspectives are being missed. Specifically, there has not been an assessment of the impact on the disabled or minority or disadvantaged groups.

Another key issue is the misleading use of the term deferral. It must be reframed as advancement for most, with correct commencement for some, and those choosing later commencement tending to be the already advantaged.

Finally, defence of a system by focussing on what is in an individual child's best interest with disregard of the best interests of or impact upon others can quite reasonably be predicted to be more harmful overall and lead to an arms race to maintain hegemony/advantage.

Policy Brief on the Relative Age Effect in Scottish Schooling Cohorts

The aim of this policy brief is to describe the harms posed to health and the inequities of being relatively younger within a schooling cohort, and to then propose solutions that are specific to the Scottish educational system, to Education Scotland and the Scottish Government.

Public Health Importance: The advantages and disadvantages associated with age relative to the rest of an age-banded cohort is known as the Relative Age Effect (RAE). Extensively studied and well known in sport, the effect also correlates with:

- Learning disabilities including ADHD
- Mental health including suicide
- Physical injury rates
- Career opportunities and earnings
- Sports/physical activities participation
- Academic attainment and streaming

Being relatively younger within 12-month cohorts is detrimental. Of specific concern in Scotland is that school cohorts are routinely 19-months with no evidence of an active decision to create these. To our knowledge, no research has been conducted of the direct health effects of extended cohorts, but research of the academic and developmental impact in similar populations has shown worse outcomes for relatively younger children, girls, those from deprived communities, and ethnic minorities.

Background: The Education (Scotland) Act 1980 sets school commencement as the August after turning five but permits earlier commencement if you turned four before March. There appears to be no record of why these dates were selected nor why starting younger has become the norm. This custom sets conditions for the youngest half (Aug-Feb born) to lawfully choose to start one year later. This choice appears to have initially been taken by white, wealthy parents of boys born in January and February that cited concerns over "school readiness". Subsequent lobbying also focussed on "school readiness" but presented research related to RAE,

whilst that relating to “school readiness” was limited and included opinion pieces by journalists and others with financial interests. Despite this, automatic government funding of an additional year of childcare was secured for the youngest two months of the customary cohort from 2014 (Jan-Feb born) then the Aug-Feb born from 2023. This removed the main financial barrier and may have financially incentivised delaying but has preceded increasing rates of “deferral”, extended cohorts, and compounded RAE whilst differential demographic uptake has endured, thus continuing to widen inequities.

Research Evidence: Research evidence was synthesised from systematic review of RAE in health, academic, and sports settings for standard 12-month cohorts. Several authors were contacted and confirmed gaps in the literature relating to effects of extended cohorts, except limited studies in the USA and Australia of RAE on development and academic attainment. Stakeholders were identified and contacted. Those that engaged provided insight into historic context and barriers to implementation. A full and extensive exploration is available on request.

| Key message | | Policy Recommendation |
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| 1 | School “year groups” are planned to be 12-months; in Scotland they can extend to 19. | Consider correcting 19-month cohorts to 12. This is a Public Health, equality, and possible safeguarding issue. |
| 2 | The custom of early commencement set conditions for deferral and extended cohorts. | Default early commencement with deferral is inequitable and harmful. The legal commencement age should be designated as the default. This aligns with the law, has funding agreed, and pilots show resources are sufficient. |
| 3 | Choice that causes undue harm to others cannot be allowed. A system that permits a similar degree of choice is desirable. | Choice is provisioned for in law through advancement. It should be reframed as an “informed request” and can be supported by a structured process to assess suitability for exceptional delay beyond legal commencement. |
| 4 | Being relatively younger in a 12-month cohort results in multiple disadvantages. | Education on RAE must be developed for parents and education, PE/sport, and health providers. |
| 5 | Extended cohorts have been shown to be detrimental for academic attainment and development, but no research has been conducted on health effects. | Research into the effects in Scotland of extended cohorts must be commenced: focussing on inequities, physical injuries, mental health, and academic attainment. |
| 6 | Differential rates of deferral widen rather than correct existing inequities. | Those that have advanced commencement, especially those that did so inadvertently, must be identified and provided with proportional additional support. |
| 7 | Funding an additional year of childcare for Jan-Feb born, and pilots for Aug-Feb born, led to increased deferral but continued demographic bias. | Funding decisions have inadvertently exacerbated inequities but also created both an opportunity to formally adopt the legal starting age as default and a transition period due to high levels of deferral. |

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| 8 | Commencement in August after turning 4½ is unique, complicates international comparison, competition, and transfer, and causes concern over “school readiness”. | Adoption of the legal commencement age will align with culturally and climatically similar Scandinavian nations balancing Scottish characteristics with interoperability. |
| 9 | “School readiness” has been used to justify deferral however the concept is disputed and better addressed by correcting the setting. | “School readiness” should be considered from the perspective of the setting. The Curriculum for Excellence advises play-based learning in Early Years. Formal education is therefore from Primary 2 whilst older, tighter cohorts reduce ability spread. |

Implementation: The two most important barriers of legal and funding are both already addressed. Indeed, the most urgent recommendation is to align default starting age with the law. Fortuitously pilot schemes encouraging greater “deferral” have been successful suggesting resources can manage the adjustment to default later start. Incremental steps to this point have widened inequity but have also created a window of opportunity to complete the transition. The need to address RAE will remain and further barriers to implementing policies addressing this may include: “choice”, transition planning, stakeholder engagement, Scottish characteristics of the policy, and lack of Scottish specific research. These can be addressed by adopting the mutually supporting and reinforcing actions in the policy recommendations table.