Scholar - explainer for union members

What is Scholar?

Scholar is a **not-for-profit online learning platform**, formed as a partnership between Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES) and Heriot-Watt University. A pioneer of online learning, Scholar has been an integral part of digital education in Scotland for the last 25 years, aimed to help bridge the gap between secondary and Higher Education.

Scholar currently has **42 interactive online courses**, fully aligned to SQA curriculum across **SCQF Levels 5, 6 and 7,** in Maths and Sciences, English and Languages, Humanities and Social Sciences. Scholar has also produced content for HWU (e.g. MSc / BSc IT) and alternative curricula (e.g. AS / A-Level, CCEA).

The platform provides comprehensive courses, authored by subject matter experts, with **over 9,000 rich interactions and formative assessments**. The reporting system provides learners and teachers valuable **insights into progress and assessment scores** as well as **aggregated statistics** for Local Authorities.

How is Scholar funded?

Scholar has been entirely self-funded, without financial support from Heriot-Watt University. Scholar operates on a three-year subscription model with Local Authorities and extends the same offer to SCIS independent schools and FE colleges. Occasionally, Scholar undertakes extra projects, such as with Scottish National Standardised Assessments (SNSA) which generated significant additional income, with all surplus passed to HWU (2017-2022).

Scholar has maintained sector leadership, however, education budget cuts and costs being passed to Headteachers, meant Scholar could not secure enough subscriptions to cover operating costs for 2025–28.

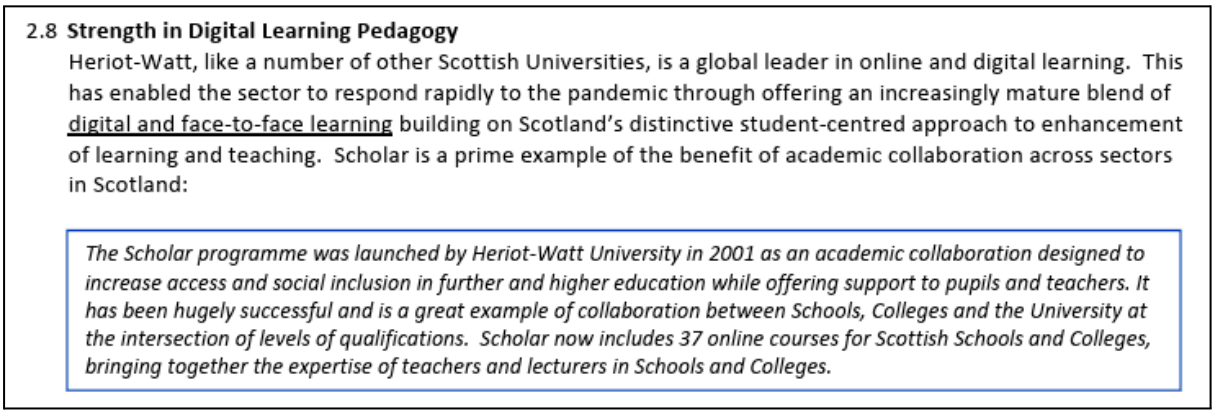
Scholar played a key role in supporting senior phase education during the pandemic, working with Education Scotland to provide most of the 'supported' National e-Learning Offer (NeLO) resources, while receiving no funding for this work. Combining Scholar with e-Sgoil's live lessons could help to realise SNP's proposed National Digital Academy, positioning Scholar well to contribute to a nationally funded programme.

Despite a relatively small shortfall in funding, HWU issued the required 12-month notice to subscribers in July 2025, noting that **if long-term funding is not secured, Scholar will cease operation from 31st July 2026**. HWU contacted the Scottish Government in June 2025, and funding discussions are ongoing.

Why does Scholar matter to Heriot-Watt University?

It is evident that **Scholar is recognised as an asset in HE sector** as illustrated by Universities Scotland referencing Scholar under their "*commitment to the common good, collaboration and reform"* through deepening their "*relationships with schools to help young people to realise their full potential and to help address the poverty-related attainment gap*".

HWU frequently references Scholar to the Scottish Funding Council - either through inclusion in Outcome Agreements (2021-22, 2022-23, 2023-24) or in responses to calls for evidence, as illustrated:



2.8 **Strength in Digital Learning Pedagogy**

Heriot-Watt, like a number of other Scottish Universities, is a global leader in online and digital learning. This has enabled the sector to respond rapidly to the pandemic through offering an increasingly mature blend of digital and face-to-face learning building on Scotland's distinctive student-centred approach to enhancement of learning and teaching. Scholar is a prime example of the benefit of academic collaboration across sectors in Scotland:

The Scholar programme was launched by Heriot-Watt University in 2001 as an academic collaboration designed to increase access and social inclusion in further and higher education while offering support to pupils and teachers. It has been hugely successful and is a great example of collaboration between Schools, Colleges and the University at the intersection of levels of qualifications. Scholar now includes 37 online courses for Scottish Schools and Colleges, bringing together the expertise of teachers and lecturers in Schools and Colleges.

All HWU staff and students have access to Scholar Maths through Heriot-Watt Maths Gym. The existing Scholar Maths content was used to curate a new course tailored to support the transition to university which is available to HWU staff and students using their HW credentials.

HWU students access Scholar resources – the Malaysia Foundation Programme, Global College and pockets of other HWU departments work with Scholar to ensure their students can access relevant Scholar course materials. Given the opportunity, Scholar could also provide additional avenues of support for HWU students during their transition into university in a similar vein to the Maths Gym resource, for example in areas such as STEM and English.

HWU's reputation has been embedded throughout Scottish schools for over a generation. With over 100,000 Scottish secondary learners (and 15,000 teachers) registered annually, it is highly likely Scottish students studying at HWU started their relationship with the university before they even matriculated.

HWU demonstrates its commitment to widening participation and inclusive education, ensuring learners with ASN, EAL or interrupted learning pathways are better prepared for HE. Scholar has supported charities with similar values and delivers professional learning to ITE institutions, introducing trainee teachers to Scholar's resources so they can effectively support all learners, regardless of their needs.

Who is behind Scholar?

There are **13 incredibly knowledgeable and values-driven staff** (equivalent to 11.3 FTE) working hard to ensure learner and teacher needs are met, alongside ever-changing educational policies and technological advancements. Scholar comprises:

- Admin and Registration team - helping users access the platform
- Educational Developer team - producing and maintaining the content
- Software Developer team - maintaining the platform and developing new features
- Engagement team - providing teacher training and liaising with educational stakeholders

Scholar has historically had a Director overseeing strategy and engagement with Heriot-Watt, Scottish Government, Local Authorities and other senior educational stakeholders. Following the departure of Scholar's Director in 2021, Heriot-Watt chose to explore international expansion of Scholar, appointing new Directors at a higher grade with little knowledge of the Scottish educational landscape. The higher staffing costs and diverted team focus contributed to the current deficit of around £300k. As of July 2025, Scholar does not have a dedicated Director and sits under the leadership of Heriot-Watt Online.

The Scholar team wants to continue to make an impact on secondary school learners and university students for generations to come, continuing Heriot-Watt's mission to *create and exchange knowledge that benefits society*.

How can you help?

Closing Scholar has a **wide impact** and denies future generations of a resource which **broadens subject choice** and **widens participation in HE**.

Please show your support by signing our form and feel free to share your thoughts on the value of Scholar.

Support for Scholar - a National Digital Learning Service for Scotland

Thank you!