

## EDUCATION IN THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT NO 4

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The winter months of 2001 have seen an eclectic range of issues discussed by both the Education, Culture and Sport Committee (ECSC) and by the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee (ELLLC). From the Education (Graduate Endowment and Student Support) Bill and debates on the New Economy and Knowledge Economy, the SEN Inquiry, the Schools Infrastructure Inquiry and the Regulation of Care (Scotland) Bill to debates on Gaelic Broadcasting, this period has seen a diffusion in the issues addressed by Committees. Given the intensity of debate around the Scottish Qualifications Authority 'debacle' which meant that the work of both Committees between June-November 2000, was almost totally focused on responsibilities and recriminations, such eclecticism may well be a form of political therapy.

However, the SQA issue has not departed the Scottish political and educational arena and may well re-emerge again this summer of 2001. Such a possibility is almost inevitable given response of the Executive to the recommendations of the consultants' (Deloitte Touche) Report into the governance of the SQA. This Report, discussed by the ELLLC, recommended that the SQA Board should be reviewed and notes that changes to legislation may be necessary to permit some changes to the Board. However the Executive, whilst agreeing that changes may be needed, argues against making substantial changes until the Diet 2001 has been delivered.

This does not bode well for 2001, especially in light of the evidence taken by the ELLLC concerning the training of Board members. The ELLLC concluded that there was some confusion about the position of stakeholders on the Board. 'There was no confusion when the appointments were made,' the ELLLC noted, as all appointments had quite clearly been on an individual basis. (14.3.2001 ELLLC Reports and Inquiries 2001)

In addition, the extra liaison between the Executive and the Board - in the form of monthly meetings, internal and external communication procedures and the establishment of a Ministerial Review Group - may enable greater monitoring of the Diet 2001 by the Executive but also draws attention to the diverse political, financial and bureaucratic structures within which the SQA, a non-departmental public body, operates. This range of agendas was made more complex when responsibility for SQA was moved (on 3 November 2000) to the portfolio of the Minister for Education, Europe and External Affairs, although the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning and ELLD officials will continue to have an interest in SQA given the policy responsibility for the further education and higher education sectors and for vocational qualifications and training policy.

Towards the end of 2000, the ECSC also published a Report on the Examinations and Scottish Qualifications Authority and debated the Exams Results Inquiry and, in March 2001, the SQA (20.3.2001). In its Report, with 56 Recommendations, it stated that measures must be taken to ensure that SQA puts in place a greatly improved internal and external communications system and to ensure that pupils should never have to face such an experience again. In this way, the credibility of the SQA is restored. In part, this could be achieved by developing a more transparent, open and co-operative system and by honouring its commitment to undertake sending results to candidates, centres and local authorities by the due dates. (ECSC 11th Report 2000 SP Paper 234) These key targets and due dates would become the measure of success of the SQA. It was worrying that the SQA had failed to provide these targets

for inclusion in the Report. The gamut of problems — outlined in the previous Parliamentary Report in Scottish Educational Review (Donn, 2000) — were addressed in the Recommendations, which encompassed IT issues, complexity of the Higher Still assessment and certification procedures, SQA personnel and the fees paid to markers, assessors and part-time professional staff appointed for the examination(s).

At the debate on the SQA in March, Bill Morton, chief executive of the SQA, noted that there had been progress to introduce and implement the required changes. In particular there was improved management of information systems so that the SQA could track the progress of key stages in preparation for the summer. He noted that their immediate task had been to improve the process that supports certification and that through the establishment of four new dedicated teams, many of the problems of last year had been dealt with. A system of strict validation of data is now in place to ensure that the originating centres can verify the information that is held by the SQA and that any errors can be identified and rectified quickly. (ECSC 20.3.2001 col 2131) In addition, 6,052 markers had been appointed, another 1,307 responses were awaited and 500 were in reserve. He said he felt 'confident that the progress is satisfactory' (col 2132) and with agreement of the Board, further improvements could be made regarding the fees for examining and length of contracts. But as a number of members noted, in light of the McCrone proposals on teachers' pay and conditions of service, it may become important to offer examiners and markers contracts which are not renewed annually. (Monteith (Con) ECSC 20.3.2001 col 2136)

However, not everything at SQA was in place and ready for Diet 2001. As Don Giles (SQA) noted, 75% of required examiners had been appointed (25% vacancies) 88% of moderators appointed (12% vacancies) although 'early indications from the entry data suggest that we may not require the full complement of moderators.' (ECSC 20.3.2001 col 2134) One just hopes that this is the case. It would appear premature to be optimistic (and certainly not complacent (Morton (ECSC 20.3.2001 col 2156)) about the progress, Mike Russell (SNP) noted, when he drew attention to the press releases and press coverage of the March period. He said that headlines such as 'Ominous signs of exams fiasco' and 'Taxpayers face huge bill to meet the cost of SQA exams fiasco' do little to restore confidence. (ECSC 20.3.2001 col 2138) He added, '99% success is not enough: can you state that if problems arise this year they will be far smaller than the problems that arose last year?' (ECSC 20.3.2001 col 2140) Again, worryingly, Bill Morton declined to give an affirmative answer. 'I think it would be disingenuous of me to do so.' (col 2140) He added that 'Morale inside the organisation is not good; it is low and .. staff are not comfortable with all the changes either that are taking place or that are yet to be refined.' (col 2141)

Moving on from the SQA and examinations (for the moment), the other major issue of concern for the ELLLC has been the Education (Graduate Endowment and Student Support) (Scotland) (No 2) Bill. This Bill was the replacement on 8 December 2000, for the one introduced in the Parliament by the Minister for ELLL on 5 October 2000. It emerged from the Cubie Committee, the Independent Committee of Inquiry to investigate student finance, which had the task of completing a comprehensive review of student fees and financial support for students and of reporting on the desirability of promoting access to further and higher education, particularly for those groups under-represented. (ELLLC Session 1 (2000) SP Paper 252:9-10) The Cubie Report recommended the abolition of tuition fees for all students; the continuation of non-repayable bursaries for FE students; the re-introduction of an endowment scheme for post-graduation contributions of £3,075 towards tuition costs, payable (once annual salary is above £25,000) at a rate of 2% of income pa; the abolition of the student loan entitlement for students with parents earning more than £47,000pa;

the introduction of Wider Access Bursaries and Mature Student Bursaries and the introduction of additional support for lone parents, mature students with children and students with disabilities. (ELLLC Session 1 (2000) SP Paper 252:14) Following the Cubie Report and widespread consultation, the Bill was seen as an attempt to widen access to further and higher education and to offer support for students.

In considering the Bill, the ELLLC acknowledged that it forms part of a wider programme of reform of student support arrangements in Scotland. This includes the abolition of tuition fees for all eligible students studying in Scotland; a new scheme which assists part-time students on low incomes; a young student's bursary; a mature student's bursary and modernisation of the way in which families are assessed for contributions towards student maintenance. The Committee agreed with the Deputy Minister that widening access would not be tackled through the package of measures in the Bill alone (col 1390). He noted, 'we are talking about a cultural change, but one that is vital for the whole of Scotland and particularly for Scotland's economy. We need more highly skilled individuals, which means that we must encourage more people from a variety of backgrounds to enter higher education.' (col 1391)

The Committee considered that one way of encouraging people from disadvantaged backgrounds into higher education is for the institutions to be more flexible in accepting non-traditional qualifications for entry, such as modern apprenticeships and vocational qualifications. It noted that 40% of higher education students currently enter from further education and argued that the development of the new Scottish Qualifications Framework would simplify the system to achieve greater comparability between qualifications and the break down of barriers. (col 1390)

The payment of debt brought about through the acquisition of loans for education was an issue which the ELLLC felt strongly about. Under the proposals in the Bill, students would be liable to pay an endowment of £2,000 on graduation; any loan, taken out to pay off the endowment, would be repayable when earnings reach £10,000pa, rather than the £25,000 recommended by the Cubie Report and supported by the SNP (MacAskill ELLLC 7.3.2001 col 1640). Following consideration of the ramifications of financing arrangements, some in the ELLLC welcomed the endowment as a method of financing higher education. (ELLLC Session 1 (2000) SP Paper 252:94) Others disagreed. (MacAskill ELLLC 27.2.2001 col1617) Further, in a later Committee, Annabel Goldie (Con) said that she was appalled that there was no provision within the Bill for repayment by lump sum. 'Not to offer some form discount for repayment by lump sum, which would greatly facilitate the collection, is incomprehensible, sterile political ideology. I just do not understand it. One would not find such an approach in business.' (ELLLC 7.3.2001 col 1631) Indeed, the whole idea of a collection system raised some criticism as it was seen as another layer of expensive bureaucracy and took funds away from students. (Thomson (Lab) ELLLC 27.2.2001 col 1621)

A number of Committee members expressed surprise that only the Student Loans Company and the Student Awards Agency for Scotland were involved in the discussions about costing of and collection of student loans. Mr Kenny MacAskill (SNP) asked, 'are there not organisations and companies that deal with such matters? Would it not have been possible to do to them, in addition to going to an organisation that, to be frank, has a vested interest?' (ELLLC 7.3.2001 col 1634)

The debates on student loans and their collection became fraught and drew attention to the complex relationship between the UK Government and the Scottish Executive and their separate, sometimes overlapping and sometimes conflicting realms of responsibility. This was apparent when the official of the Scottish Executive ELLD, when pressed as to why the ELLD report for the Committee had not provided data about a variable system of collection through the Inland Revenue (rather than the Student Loans Company) said that 'in conjunction with other UK departments

we have a relationship with the Inland Revenue under the auspices of the income-contingent loan scheme. The Inland Revenue does certain things on our behalf, but that is all dealt with under the UK scheme. The Scottish Executive does not have the competence to form a relationship with the Inland Revenue outwith that UK scheme. Therefore, as things stand, we are not in a position to strike a separate arrangement with the Inland Revenue.’ (ELLLC 7.3.2001 col 1638) The Minister confirmed that this was, indeed, the case: ‘The reality is that collection through the Inland Revenue is a reserved area.’ (ELLLC 7.3.2001 col 1639)

Whilst the Bill and the previous debate on the Cubie Committee Report drew attention to the relationship between the UK Government and the Scottish Executive, subsequent debates in the ELLLC focused upon education and employment skills in The New Economy (24.1.2001) and the Knowledge Economy (9.2.2001). Both debates indicated how important new technology, vision and leadership are for the Scottish economy. As Nick Johnston (Cons) noted, ‘When we hear about the examples of Sweden, Virginia and Washington, it is clear that someone has taken the bull by the horns to stimulate those communities to act so beneficially. Where, if any, is the vision and leadership in Scotland?’ (ELLLC 24.1.2001 col 1488)

Perhaps that question was, in part, answered during the Committee’s debate on Public Appointments (9.2.2001) when the minister for Education, Mr Jack McConnell, announced the launch of ‘Partnership for Scotland’, the consultation on modernising the public appointments system in Scotland. He noted that, ‘as an executive, we want to create a modern and dynamic society, in which people from all walks of life can play their part. Partnership in Scotland commits ministers to innovative government that is open, welcomes good ideas from whatever their source and encourages participation ... it sets out the Executive’s commitment to diversity in public appointments and to making the boards of public bodies more representative of, and accountable to, Scotland as a whole.’ (ELLLC 9.2.2001 col 845)

Visions of Scotland were considered during the debate on the Knowledge Economy when the Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning, Nicol Stephen, noted that ‘Scotland’s economic future depends on the knowledge of its people ... Scotland’s success depends on the knowledge of each and every one of us, and especially on the knowledge of young people - each and every student and each and every child.’ (ELLLC 9.2.2001 col 859) He added, ‘there have been major changes in Scotland over the past 50 years, from a reliance on heavy manufacturing, with industries such as shipbuilding, to the new industries such as electronics and biotechnology ... in 1997, electronics accounted for more than half of Scottish manufacturing exports ... These are the new global realities we have to contend with. In that environment, Scotland’s economic future depends on our ability to change - to change enough, and to change fast enough.’ (ELLLC 9.2.2001 col 859)

Mr Stephen urged members to see that for Scotland to be competitive there needs to be real developments such as Lord Macdonald’s Task Force, established in 2000, on the interface between academic institutions and commercialisation of research. Scotland needs to make the most of its science and research base, recognising that hundreds of thousands of graduates produced each year in emerging economies such as Russia, India, China and Brazil provide massive and increasing global competition. So that in the future, Scotland will not be able to compete if it has an economy based upon ‘low-skill, low-margin, high-volume production’. Rather, Scotland must produce people of talent, creativity, innovation and passion, focusing upon skills, learning and knowledge of every person in Scotland. In suggesting this way forward, Mr Stephen was underlining the importance of the knowledge economy task force established by Henry McLeish in January 2001. ‘ (ELLLC 9.2.2001 col 860) All these developments depend on the energy and enthusiasm of students, teachers and those in lifelong learning. That is, all of Scotland.

As Mr Stephen said later in the debate, 'the knowledge economy is not only about electronics, e-commerce and the internet. The 21<sup>st</sup> century may be dominated by other industries, such as biotechnology, in the same way as the latter half of the 20th century was dominated by the IBMs, the Apples and the Microsofts.' (ELLLC 9.2.2001 col 863) However, Mr Swinney (SNP) was less optimistic about the growth in and support for the knowledge economy - unless and until the Government actually provides the coherence in policy and resources to translate the definitions of a knowledge economy into reality. This, he suggested, is 'at the heart of all of Scotland's business and commercial activity as well as at the heart of the personal and learning environment in which individuals participate'. (ELLLC 9.2.2001 col 866) The reality involves, he argued, more than the remit of the task force - encouraging commercialisation, academic incentives, clusters and the science enterprise challenge. It is much broader than that: it has to touch on the small business community, the sector making up the majority of Scotland's internet-using business. In his submission, Mr Swinney noted that there also needs to be clarity in the responsibilities of the UK Government and those of the Scottish Executive, otherwise any competitive advantages of the commercialisation of the Scottish economy might be lost.

Relationships between all players in the new knowledge economy were seen as especially important by David Mundell (Con) who thought that there was no evidence of radicalism or even a willingness to be radical. (ELLLC 9.2.2001 col 869) 'Times change!' he noted, 'Is it not time to commit to going beyond conventional thinking, institutions and structures? If the knowledge economy task force produces conclusions that challenge the status quo in Scotland, will the Executive give a commitment to follow them through?' Restructuring the economy needs a revolution and a commitment to deliver it against vested interests. (ELLLC 9.2.2001 col 870) Rather worryingly, given the recent establishment of the Scottish Executive, he added that modernisation of the Scottish Executive is long overdue. It is 'failing to deliver or galvanise or co-ordinate action. There is a fundamental lack of clarity about the responsibilities of the UK Government and the Scottish Executive; those must be resolved immediately.' (ELLLC 9.2.2001 col 871)

Indeed, given the diffuse nature of debates during this period of early 2001, one might argue that there is a general lack of clarity in the direction of Scottish education, both in terms of its policies (following on from the Cubie and McCrone Committee Reports) and in their implementation. Such opacity is not unique to Scotland. Many countries have similar problems in the transformation of policy into practice. What gives Scottish education a slightly different feel, is the apparent difficulty in delineating the separation of powers and responsibilities between the UK Government and the Scottish Executive, and the underlying angst felt about a repetition of the exams fiasco 2000 in the year 2001. In light of this edge, this Parliamentary Report might be sub-headed, the political lull before the storm.

#### REFERENCE

Donn, G. (2000), Parliamentary Report, No.3. *Scottish Educational Review* Vol 33, pp.180-91.