

EDUCATION IN THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT

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One year on from the ‘debacle’ and ‘fiasco’ of the Scottish Qualifications Authority’s ‘mis-management’ of the Higher Still examination results, it is strange to have silence on the issue of examinations. They have been set, been entered, been marked and the results have been returned to candidates. A small ‘well done’ was noted for the SQA, but this hardly interrupted the main work of the Scottish Parliament’s two education Committees and their focus upon schooling and FE/HE concerns. Recently, the latter seem to have become the most controversial.

Nevertheless, the Education, Culture and Sport Committee has been busy, in this, the year of the European Year of Languages, with an inquiry into language development in Scotland, particularly the role of educational and cultural policy in supporting the developing Gaelic, Scots and minority languages. Irene McGugan (Lab.) the Committee Reporter noted, ‘With our sense of history and identity linked to the use of language, it is vital that our children’s education is supported and developed through proper access to and understanding of each of Scotland’s distinctive languages.’ The inquiry is sure to establish an interesting discourse about languages and literacies in Scotland with the Report being a contribution to that debate.

Alongside the languages inquiry, the Education, Culture and Sport Committee has started an inquiry into the impact of the current financial situation in the Scottish Borders Council’s education budget. With evidence being submitted, this Report may make fascinating reading. In addition to these inquiries, the Education, Culture and Sport Committee has responsibility for the Committee stage of the School Education (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill. This is a Bill which seeks to clarify the law about the provision of education for children under school age for whom placing requests have been made; and to make provision relating to the abolition of the post of assistant head teacher. With evidence currently being collated, this discussion, alongside the discourse on languages, may come to form part of the frequently contentious education debate. It will be interesting to see how these interwoven issues develop.

However, most current discussion has come from the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee. In responding to the commissioned study on Lifelong Learning, the Committee found that there was ‘no coherent national strategy’ behind the delivery of the £1 billion a year provision for lifelong learning. Indeed, the Committee noted a confused and overlapping array of services currently provided by public sectors agencies across Scotland. The Convenor, Alex Neil (SNP) said, ‘The main theme emerging from this mapping exercise, is the absence of a clear national strategy for lifelong learning ... different projects, courses, initiatives, and programmes - often targeting the same potential unemployed individuals and the same sort of provision - can be offered by a Social Inclusion Partnership, the Employment Service, the Local Enterprise Company, a voluntary association, an FE College and a department of the local authority.’ (Committee News Release 28.9.01) It is interesting that one of the study’s findings questioned the sustainability of Scotland’s 47 FE Colleges, especially as the competitive market place becomes more crowded with other agencies and providers. It is almost a decade since the FE College sector was given budget holding powers and allowed to enter into this competitive market place: ten

years on, it may be that there will now be an FE debate in Scotland and that it will focus also upon the future number and roles of FE Colleges.

In addition to the problems for FE brought about by over-diversification of provision as well as extreme competitiveness, perhaps most attention during the past few months has been focused upon the HE sector. The commissioned study noted that there is a concern that the older universities are less flexible in encouraging wider access by non-traditional entrants to HE. Whilst some of the concern about HE does focus upon access policies, other concerns have centred upon funding.

In March 2001, following changes in and controversy about the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) higher education teaching review, it was agreed that the E and LLL Committee would hold a series of three hearings on the subject of the funding policy. Having done so, the Committee published its 12th Report which focused upon the way the £440m grant (1999-2000) is allocated through 66% Teaching (£258) and 34% Research (£155m) Funding. (12th Report 2001 para 6) (A 5.6% increase in funding has resulted in the total budget for 2001-02 being £660m rising to £700m in 2003-04.) The most contentious issue was SHEFC's proposal to reduce the number of subject areas from 22 to 6, which SHEFC viewed as providing institutions with greater flexibility to vary numbers in courses within subject bands and to initiate new course programmes. (12th Report 2001 para 10)

However, the Report noted that the intention to reduce the number of subject areas from 22 to 6 would reduce transparency in spending within institutions and would advantage medicine over other subjects which are seen as central to the development of the Scottish economy.

What is currently proposed by the Funding Council is not a thorough pricing system. As pointed out by many witnesses, it represents a major correction for medicine plus a weighted averaging system of allocation across broad and unrelated group of subjects. In particular, the Committee was concerned about the effects on those subjects taught in small groups, many of which may be technology-based and important for economic development. Whilst the Funding Council has belatedly acknowledged the impact on small specialist colleges, it has so far failed to recognise the funding difficulties of, for example, language courses which require intensive small group teaching methods. (12th Report 2001 para 91)

Given these concerns, the Report recommended that SHEFC should return to the drawing board on the funding of teaching. (12th Report 2001 para 99) In addition, it recommended the establishment of an independent review body, separate to SHEFC with a remit to examine the costs of teaching, including the costs of teaching medicine.

In the Parliamentary debate on the SHEFC Review, Alex Neil (SNP) noted whilst the Committee had criticised aspects of SHEFC's work, particularly in relation to teaching funding, 'we recognise that it had a difficult job and that it made an effort to bring the teaching funding system up to date, even though we believe that that needs further thought.' (Neil: 1.11.01 col 3541) He was pleased that some of those who had contributed to the hearings had sent messages of support for the Report. These included Professor Bernard King, the principal of the University of Abertay, Dundee who said, 'The enterprise and lifelong learning committee's report into SHEFC's recent funding reviews is ... far-sighted view of how university teaching and research should integrate with the wider economic, cultural and social life of the nation.' (Neil: 1.11.01 col 3542)

The key concerns were whether 3-rated departments — often the most innovative in terms of subject areas — should be included in research assessment exercises; whether there was adequate reward for spin-offs and patents as there is for academic papers; whether seed corn funding is in place to fund tomorrow's research excellence. Neil stated that to cut off level 3-rated departments from this funding exercise

would have a number of detrimental effects, particularly for the new universities. Also, as level 3-rated departments (frequently with innovative research) may go on to become level 4 or level 5-rated departments, this policy would cut off seedcorn funding. 'If we cut off funding to the seedcorn research, which is often level 3-rated research, we will not be able to enhance our excellence for future years.' He added, 'Our excellence is growing at an almost exponential pace ... if we are fully to realise our potential and ensure that the nursing of research at levels 3 and above on the research assessment exercise scale is properly funded ... there will have to be substantial new funding from the private and public sectors in the years ahead.' (Neil: 1.11.01 col 3544)

In the debate on the Review, Marilyn Livingstone (Lab.) noted (Livingstone: 1.11.01 col 3547) 'it has long been recognised that Scotland's economic prosperity requires a highly skilled and motivated work force; we believe that higher education institutions, further education colleges and private sector training providers have a fundamental role' in this economic development. However, she argued, there is much still to be addressed in SHEFC's approach to teaching: 'we need a review of the medium and long-term costs of teaching ... it will provide a funding system that is fit for the 21st century. It should celebrate diversity and equality and embrace access as its driving principle.' (Livingstone: 1.11.01 col 3550)

The rhetoric of the 'world out there' just waiting to be made more economically efficient continued as speakers gave variations of that theme: Jamie Stone (LD), 'We could harness the energy from the whole heap of ability out there. Useful work has been done on renewables, agriculture, crofting. Further work could be carried out on ways to diversify and make those industries more profitable and more likely to survive'. (col 3558); Kenneth MacIntosh (Lab.), 'We are aware that Scotland's future prosperity lies in increasing our productivity and creating a knowledge-based economy ... the committee concluded that the economic impact of research spending in the higher education sector could be greater than it is.' (col 3561); Andrew Welsh (SNP), 'Long-term Scottish research capability depends absolutely on maintaining a diverse research base and responding to new opportunities whenever and where ever they arise. The removal of funding from level 3-rated departments is likely to have the opposite effect by over-concentrating core research funding in a limited number of traditional academic disciplines and in a smaller number of institutions.' (col 3568)

Indeed, the economic dimension, which generated the inquiry, has not been fully satisfied: 'It is apparent that the funding formula that is used to determine research funding requires to be refined and improved to make it more relevant to the need for the development of research into downstream economic activity. Although over the past ten year the research assessment exercise has improved markedly, it still has some way to go toward serving the nation's needs.' (Neil: 1.11.01 col 3543)

However, whilst social justice through education was seen as important, economic performance was the central and the underlying theme of the debate. Kenny MacAskill (SNP) in noting the economic success of Finland, urged the Parliament to 'create a conduit between commercialisation and the ideas that emanate out of the universities with a scientific and technical base. At the same time we have to allow our entrepreneurs and business community access to the universities. It is a two way process'. (MacAskill: 1.11.01 col 3553),

The Committee is at an interesting juncture: on the one hand it is tasked to consider, inquire into and report upon enterprise issues in Scotland. To that end, it has just reported on the Impact of the New Economy; on the other hand, it is the parliamentary guardian of all those principles underlying state-funded education - equity, equality of opportunity and social justice. Richard Lochhead (SNP) summarised these demands by saying: 'Higher education has three roles. First, it

must equip Scotland for the 21st century. Secondly, it has to maintain Scotland's reputation in those areas in which we excel. Thirdly, it has to provide all people with the opportunity for self-development.' (Lochhead: 1.11.01 col 3578) Or as another MSP stated: 'I would never suggest that higher education or lifelong learning should ever just be about addressing the needs of the marketplace or the Scottish economy. Education is an empowering force for the individual. It is the key to unlocking the door to social exclusion. It can build good citizens. It can also help our economy to prosper.' (MacIntosh: 1.11.01 col 3562)

It is becoming apparent that developments in enterprise may not necessarily be congruent with, or even support, state-funded education. This can be seen in the contrasting discourses concerning the New Economy and those involved with the SHEFC Reviews of Teaching and Research Funding.