

EDUCATION IN THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT PARLIAMENTARY REPORT 6

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There has been considerable activity in the Scottish Parliament in the field of both school-based education and lifelong learning during the period November 2001 to April 2002. Not only have the two relevant Committees discussed Reports and Inquiries concerning education but there has also been an announcement of a national debate on Education in the Parliament itself. In addition, there appears to be the beginning of a system of Parliamentary Questions (PQs) which provoke some interesting Parliamentary Answers (PAs). In Scotland, as in many of the world's democracies, the way in which information is discovered, delineated and delivered may be through the determination of MSPs to ask, and to continue to ask, 'appropriate questions'. It can be a sign of maturity that after almost three years, all these procedures are beginning to be utilised. The importance of the work of the Scottish Parliament will be seen to be confirmed by open communication and widespread discussion of information: indeed, education—with so many articulate experts and interested parties in the general population—will benefit if this trend towards open access to information continues and is enhanced.

Such must be the aim of the Minister for Education and Young People, Cathy Jamieson, when she opened the Education Debate (20.3.2002). She announced the intention to hold a national debate on the future of school education and to launch a 'unique partnership' (Jamieson: 20.3.2002 col 10365) between the Scottish Executive and the Education, Culture and Sport Committee: these bodies will work together to consider the future of school education. That work had been flagged by the Committee in January when Irene McGuigan drew attention to the announcement (19 December 2001) by the Executive that there would be a 'national debate on education' which would run from March-July 2002 and that it should not be confused with the 'exercise being undertaken by the Committee'. (McGuigan EC&SC 15.1.2002: col 2976) Indeed not, urged Karen Gillon (Convenor) who suggested that there be meetings between the minister and convenor 'to ensure confusion and duplication are avoided'. (Convenor EC&SC 15.1.2002: col 2976) During the period between the announcement in December and the formal announcement in Parliament in March, the remit and organisation of the 'national debate' seems to have been clarified.

The Minister began by praising the work of Scottish teachers: she drew attention to the PISA (programme for international student assessment) which, as a major international study of pupils' achievement in more than 30 countries, ranked Scotland's pupils fifth in mathematics, sixth in reading and ninth in science. She noted, 'Our challenge is how to work in partnership with the whole education community to continue that improvement. We must remember that Scottish school surveys show that differences in family circumstances are one main source of inequality in attainment.' (Jamieson: 20.3.2002 col 10365)

Notwithstanding the problems of unequal life chances through home and social background, the Minister drew attention to the Standards in Schools etc Act 2000 which established a focus on education that 'encourages, supports and inspires every child to reach his or her full potential.' She went on to state: 'That pace of change in the world, the growth of the knowledge economy and the demands that this will place on us create an urgent need to consider what it means to deliver education for the individual in that changing society.' (Jamieson: 20.3.2002 col 10365) 'It is important that we challenge ourselves every so often by asking some fundamental

questions about education and our schools. We need to ask what school education is for, what we want it to cover, how we want to deliver it, who should be involved and what skills they will need. We need to ask when we want to deliver it - when in young people's lives, when in the year and when in the day. We need to ask what sort of places our schools should be in the 21st century and we need to hear the views of young people and the views of parents, teachers and educationalists.' (Jamieson: 20.3.2002 col 10367) To give the debate a framework, the Minister delineated three strategic points: first, any future system of school education must be grounded on the principles of inclusion and equality; second, school education must remain a public service that is available to all; third, vital links between school and community must be recognised and developed. The clear and continuing role of Local Authorities in the provision of education for children will remain central.

In discussion following the announcement, issues concerning macro institutional educational concerns were raised as well as those to do with the content and shape of the curriculum, assessment and structure of the school year. In terms of the former, Brian Monteith (Cons) noting the widespread debate now opened - and welcomed - suggested that a more appropriate system might be to fund schools directly rather than through Local Authorities. Schools would then buy in services from Local Authorities. (Monteith: 20.3.2002 col 10372)

Robin Harper (Green) focused upon curriculum concerns when he asked if the debate would question the philosophy and purpose of education and examine the place of drama, music, outdoor and environment education. 'Has the Executive identified anybody to lead on the development of environment and outdoor education?' (Harper: 20.3.2002 col 10374) Robin Harper was not alone in having a specific curriculum issue that he wished to be addressed: throughout the debate, the members' own particular interests were evident. Margaret Jamieson (Lab) asked questions on early years' education; Dennis Canavan (Indp) raised concerns about the possible re-introduction of streaming, 'a system that was discredited more than a generation ago because it contravenes the principles of inclusion and quality of educational opportunity for which the minister has expressed support'. (Canavan: 20.3.2002 col 10376); Margaret Macmillan (Lab) drew attention to the marginalised groups - children of Travellers, school-phobics and those with poor health; Alex Neil (SNP) was concerned with the transition from school to FE/HE and the quality of school leaver. The link between school leavers and employment was raised, also, by Susan Deacon (Lab) who wanted assurances that the debate would fully air the varying relationships between school and FE and HE as well as those with employment. (Deacon: 20.3.2002 col 10373)

The minister assured members that all these areas will be addressed and that next year, and following consultation, the Executive will publish their strategy for the future of school education for the 10 years ahead. This will be based upon what people want from schools so that the policy will be 'robust and grounded in reality'. (Jamieson: 20.3.2002 col 10366) Although Irene McGuigan (SNP) questioned whether the debate really was 'open'—given that the Executive appears to have made up its mind on private finance initiative building programmes, streaming, home education and mature students to name but a few' (McGuigan: 20.3.2002 col 10374)—the Minister assured members that all contributions would be considered. No doubt she was referring, in part, to the discussions that the Committee would oversee.

By March, the Committee had become fully involved: Paper 553 stated that the Committee, recognising that the world of work and of education are changing rapidly, would like to 'provoke debate in more depth [than the Parliament] on key issues about the future of education, develop its practical vision for Scottish education, inform its scrutiny of all education issues in future and to bring into the public domain the

wide range of positive thinking about education that exists in Scotland'. (EC&SC Paper 553 March 2002)

In proposing this parallel support, the Committee noted that Scottish education has made progress in the last few decades, has become more flexible and inclusive whilst remaining true to its 'strongest traditions'. 'But it needs to change: globalisation of the economy and culture may make old ways of looking at the curriculum out of date. New understandings of how people learn, raise questions about how teaching is organised... There has been a new concern with quality measurement which has made education more transparent, but also has led to a growth in bureaucracy which surrounds schools and narrows the focus of the curriculum towards those achievements that are most easily measured. (EC&SC Paper 553 March 2002) The paper concluded with the view that a practical vision for Scottish education is required.

To that end, the Committee has requested comments from the public on what it considers the main question – 'In there a need in a rapidly changing world for radical change in the education system?' and the six main themes: Coping with Change and Uncertainty; Engaging with Ideas; Keeping Everyone Involved with Learning; Promoting a Sense of Identity; Developing Necessary Skills and Fitting Structure to Purpose.

However, whilst the proposals and the background discussion about joint and parallel work between the Executive and Committee were being discussed, the Committee itself continued with its more pressing mission and conducted debates on the Education (Disability Strategies and Pupils' Records) (Scotland) Bill and the Scottish Qualification Authority Bill. The first piece of legislation comprised two unconnected elements, the first – Disability Strategies – being the most important for the Committee. But that too was not without its complications, as the Deputy Minister, Nicol Stephen, noted: One complication is that disabilities tend to relate to reserved matters (recent legislation being the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001) but special educational needs are the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament (recent legislation being the Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000). Some aspects of disability legislation relate to the responsibilities of the Scottish Parliament as well, hence the need to consider the Education (Disability Strategies and Pupils' Records)(Scotland) Bill. (Stephen EC&SC 22.1.2002:col 2990)

The Deputy Minister told members that there are around 800,000 adults in Scotland with a disability. The Standards in Schools etc Act 2000 requires education authorities 'to secure that the education is directed to the development of the personality, talents and mental and physical abilities of the child.. to their fullest potential,' (Stephen EC&SC 22.1.2002:col 2982); however, this new Bill is required to help education providers to deliver that requirement—for physical as well as curriculum access—for children with disabilities. In particular, Stephen noted, there will need to be plans to remove barriers to participation [in mainstream schools and nursery schools] and, through positive action, an end to discrimination on the grounds of a disability. (Stephen EC&SC 22.1.2002:col 2983) He urged members to recognise that 'disability' covers dyslexia, autism as well as various physical concerns. To that end, resources (£9m) are being made available in 2003-2004 to help local authorities to implement their accessibility strategies. (Stephen EC&SC 22.1.2002:col 2988) These may be to incorporate physical adaptations and also loop systems.

Discussion focused on possible problems and non-achievement of these facilities: perhaps in terms of extracurricular activities, outside school trips and even such things as access to the dining hall, the playground and the playing fields. Members voiced concerns about the need for resources for the development of lifts, ramps etc. Maggi Allan (South Lanarkshire Council) had worked out that of the Council's 124 primary schools, 40 would require lifts at a cost of £3.2m; ramps and toilets in schools would add another £5m; induction loop systems or individual mircolink

systems would cost between £500,000-£1m. The £9 resource allocation noted by the minister would be needed, in fact, by just one council. (Allan, South Lanarkshire Council EC&SC 22.1.02: col 3009) Kay Tisdall (Children in Scotland) drew attention to the stronger requirements for dissemination (especially through the ‘dovetailing’ of educational priorities and inclusion) in the Scotland’s Schools etc Act 2000 than in the current legislation under discussion. (Tisdall, Children in Scotland EC&SC 22.1.2002: col 3003) Members were advised that remedial action would be through appeal committees and eventually, a sheriff court. Kate Higgins (from Capability Scotland) urged, instead, the development of a mediation or conciliation service (Higgins EC&SC 22.1.2002:col 2996) a service which, it was later discovered, does exist in pilot form in a number of Local Authorities (Townsend, West Dumbartonshire Council, EC&SC 22.1.02: col 3015). Adam Gaines (Disability Rights Commission) suggested a review process through a system of tribunals. Generally, by Gaines and others, the Bill was seen as a huge step in the development of strategies throughout Scotland to increase access to education for disabled pupils and to play an important part in ensuring that those students have an education that is equal to that of their non-disabled peers. (Gaines, Disability Rights Commission EC&SC 22.1.2002 col 3000)

Access to education, therefore, has become an important issue within the Committee. And as part of the wider debate on social justice through education, access, along with equity in provision and equality of opportunity are seen as fundamental concerns of the Scottish Parliament. It is in this philosophical and sociological context that the Committee has been examining the second of its main legislative concerns, the Scottish Qualifications Authority Bill. Following initial discussion (29.1.02: Col 3051-3060) as to who should be asked to attend the meetings of the Committee, the eventual discussion of amendments in Stage 2 of the Bill, began in April. (EC&SC 29.1.02: Col 3186–3203)

Of primary concern was the need to ensure ready avenues of communication from and to the SQA. These may be through memorandum of understanding between the Board and the Advisory Council, as suggested by the deputy minister, or through more formalised bureaucratic procedures, as supported by Mike Russell (SNP) and other members of the Committee. Russell noted:

‘The SQA’s work was only saved from total meltdown by direct intervention from the Scottish Executive in a way that is not normal when operating a non-departmental public body... However, we also need some sort of safeguard. It is possible for the minister to have an observer at the SQA board and, under the regulations, I presume that there could be an observer at the advisory council. Amendments 4 and 6 make it a right and a duty that the minister will be represented at the board and advisory council by somebody who can see what is taking place... These small amendments would allow the Scottish Executive to continue to know at first hand what is happening within the SQA.’ (Russell EC&SC 16.4.02 col 3194) The deputy minister, Nicol Stephen, argued against Executive representation on the Advisory Council as this may be seen to conflict with the Executive’s decision-making functions. With some reservations, his view was upheld in Committee.

However, the issue of widespread communication surrounding SQA was continued when Jackie Baillie (Lab) noted, ‘Members consistently raised the matter in committee and in the parliamentary debate at stage 1. We felt that communication—or lack of communication—in the SQA has been an issue. Having an employee representative on the SQA board would help matters and would be recognised as good practice.’ (Baillie EC&SC 16.4.02: Col 3187) This proposal was supported by almost all members. Cathy Peattie (Lab) urged support for a staff member and recalled the

SQA inquiry where there was evidence presented of ‘a real communication problem in that organisation, which might have been alleviated had there been better staff representation’. (Peattie EC&SC 16.4.02: col 3187) She added: ‘I am at a loss to know why the minister is not happy with amendment 9. The staff need to be involved and we want the organisation to be accountable and open. Therefore, I believe that staff involvement is vital.’ (Peattie EC&SC 16.4.02: col 3187)

In response, the deputy minister, noted that whilst the ‘Executive supports the proper involvement of staff at all levels in the organisation and will continue to emphasise the importance of that in all its discussions with the SQA, the Executive believes that the proper involvement of staff should be achieved through a range of consultative mechanisms, good management and good communication.’ (Stephen EC&SC 16.4.02: col 3188) He urged members to recall the Executive’s policy on public appointments which offers wide opportunities for members of the community to play a role on the boards of public bodies and which ensures that the best people for those roles are appointed on the basis of merit alone. ‘The amendment (9: for a staff representative on the Board) would run contrary to that policy, which has developed over the years through rigorous examination and consideration. In recent times, the Nolan procedures have significantly strengthened the approach that ministers take to those appointments.’ (Stephen EC&SC 16.4.02: col 3189) He was joined in opposition to a staff member on the Board by Brian Monteith (Cons) who said that the staff are catered for. ‘The importance of the bill lies in having a tight working board. That does not require a member of staff to be on the board to represent staff. If we go down that road, we should go down it completely and have representatives from other groups and organisations. That was what happened previously and it failed. Staff can be represented on the council. Other organisations have staff representatives on their boards - that does mean that that is right or wrong. Each organisation must be judged individually on how it is set up, managed and represented.’ (Monteith EC&SC 16.4.02: Col 3187)

The fact that the amendment was passed may say something about the future direction of the Committee, the Parliament and the Executive. It may signal a move in the direction of access to information and transparency not only in terms of information but also in decision making, openness in communication and accountability through the organs of government. However, the worrying sign is that the Executive appear not to agree with the Committee on this. Although Labour members decline confrontation with the deputy minister, it cannot have escaped his attention that his views are only sometimes accepted and then only with extreme reluctance on the part of the Labour members on the Education, Culture and Sport Committee.

Members of the other education committee, Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee, have spent some time, also, in discussions about qualifications, especially as they relate to the interface between school and work. David Mundell (Con) drew attention to views expressed in a paper by Professor David Raffe, a witness on the Inquiry into Lifelong Learning: ‘Higher participation *per se* is not necessarily desirable’. (Mundell E&LLC 30.1.02: col 2360) Professor Raffe suggested that higher participation in education may involve students in expense, and these costs may not necessarily reap immediate or envisaged benefits; further, performance across the board may be a cause for worry. To aid performance, articulation of qualifications becomes important.

In response to the concern that adults, returning to study, ought to have portability in qualifications and credits, another witness, Dr Wray Bodys (HMIE) noted that portability of credits within the Scottish qualifications framework will require convergence in programme design, and availability and strategic coverage of subjects and levels by colleges, universities and other providers. ‘There is no theoretical

reason why processes could not converge...HMIE and QAA procedures have many common features.’ (Bodys E&LLLC 30.1.02: col 2366) From the QAA for HE, Mr Normal Sharp urged the committee to be imaginative in their thinking: ‘We are in the early days...the credibility of the framework rests, on the quality of the qualifications and awards that are placed in it...We are currently carrying out pilot projects with the Army and Community Learning Scotland to consider how work-based experience and qualifications can be placed reliably in the framework.’ (Sharp E&LLLC 30.1.02: col 2369) Mr Sharp drew on his experiences in working with South African colleagues by noting that the South African Qualification Framework had a remit of ‘no dead ends’. In Scotland’s developing Credit and Qualification Framework, ‘no dead ends’ is also the goal. This is particularly important for those from the least advantaged sections of the population. As Alex Easton (Headteachers Association of Scotland) said, ‘(w)e are pretty good in Scotland at educating the able...the Programme for International Student Assessment put Scotland fourth in the world... the vocational and the academic have still not achieved equal status... The interface between education and work and enterprise is an area to consider.’ (Easton E&LLLC 30.1.02: col 2372)

A number of expert witnesses spoke to the need to support pilot projects for inclusion of the widest range of people in lifelong learning. ‘Around 15,600 employers participate in skillseekers modern apprenticeships’, noted Paul McGuinness (Opportunities and Choices Working Group) ‘We wanted to examine the employers’ claim that the qualifications do not meet their business needs and that there is a high drop-out rate of young people from the skillseekers programme... (we will) work on a sectoral basis with groups of employers to develop training programmes that are fit for purpose.’ (McGuinness E&LLLC 30.1.02: col 2382) However, Marilyn Livingstone (Lab) was concerned with the number of pilot schemes: ‘We do not need pilots to tell us that we need choice. When we undertook the case study in Fife and Dundee, we met 24 employers and 24 students, who told us that they want choice. many of them would stick to the SQV route, ...however they want choice.’ ((Livingstone E&LLLC 30.1.02: col 2382) There was general agreement that the ‘employer is crucial to the process... to decide what skills are required to do the job and what is the best way of getting those skills delivered.’ (McGuinness E&LLLC 30.1.02: col 2384) These were issues addressed also by Dr Andrew Cubie (Joint Advisory Committee on the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework). However he widened the need for the ‘ladder’ approach of a qualifications framework from employer-led skill requirements to include, in climbing frame form, ‘personal development, economic advantage and creating the culture of a learning Scotland’. (Cubie E&LLLC 30.1.02: col 2390) ‘The framework will allow employers, learners and the general public to understand the full range of Scottish qualifications, how they relate to one another and how each of them can contribute to the improvement of skills.’ (Cubie E&LLLC 30.1.02: col 2390) He noted that Level 1 begins with learners who have severe and profound learning difficulties..on Level 12, are those taking taught doctorates. (Cubie E&LLLC 30.1.02: col 2393) ‘Parity of esteem comes from robustness that is brought about at each level, which is essential to the framework..appropriate credit is given for learning, (perhaps) away from the rigid structure.’. (Cubie E&LLLC 30.1.02: col 2396).

It may well be that the successful development of a qualifications framework will be seen, not only in a rise in domestic up-take of the courses and credits, but also in the numbers of overseas students who come to study in Scotland. As all higher education institutions in Scotland are looking vigorously overseas for students (Cubie E&LLLC 30.1.02: col 2398) the *raison d’être* of a qualifications framework may struggle to continue to be educational. Not only are employers a determining voice in its creation and course generation, but also will become important the overseas

and international market of students who will formalise the long-term financial attractiveness offered through the climbing frame itself.

By May 2002, it is apparent that education is going through times of change: in one committee open access to information, accountability and transparency in decision-making are central concerns: in the other committee, the development of qualifications and their markets are apparent. These, one can see, are the realities of 'social justice' in Scotland's educational arena in the early years of the 21st century.