

EDUCATION IN THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT NO. 7

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It seems a long time since March when the Minister of Education, Cathy Jamieson, launched the national debate on education. Eight months later, in making a statement on the progress of this consultation, she noted that she had wanted this to be 'a once in a decade opportunity for everyone to think about what sort of education we want for young people in Scotland'. In addition, she asked people to consider how education will 'offer the right opportunities for our children and young people to meet their aspirations, achieve their potential and build the future that is right for them; to examine the place of education in building Scotland's future; and to share views with each other, the Parliament and the Executive' (Jamieson, Official Report: 9.10.02, col 14481).

She said that in response to the request for views on 'the national debate', there have been 1,500 responses, of which 400 have been from pupils: there have been 800 events across Scotland, with more than 20,000 people taking part; employers, parents' groups, local authorities, groups from many faiths, children's organisations, young people with experience of the care system and homelessness, prisoners and equality groups. In publishing an initial report on the findings (Jamieson Official Report 9.10.2002 col14482), the Minister drew attention to the parallel inquiry into the role and importance of education being conducted through the Education Culture and Sport Committee.

It is not unexpected, therefore, that the Education Culture and Sport Committee (ECSC) has spent most of its meetings on education dedicated to this parallel inquiry. It has heard evidence from a wide range of educational players (including students) and has taken advice from experts on the nature, role and purpose of education in the first years of the 21st century. It is apparent from their discussions that there are vocal supporters of education as a force for social justice, as a human right and for education being valued as an end in itself. There is evidence of education being seen as the key factor in the development potential it provides for happy, motivated self-disciplined initiative-taking caring children and adults.

However, there have been debates at the ECSC which suggest that education, whilst providing for all those aspects of social and human development, is also fundamentally concerned with the acquisition of skills and competencies, measured through league tables and test scores. It is the force behind efficient forms of teaching and learning and school effectiveness, all of which can be measured against certain targets. '(W)e have ended up with the notion that education should be principally, if not exclusively, about the economic well-being of society. That notion has been expressed, in one way or another by representatives of different parties ... Nobody will put it in a crude way and say an educational policy has no validity unless it can be transferred into the economic or industrial sphere ... I am glad to say this philosophy is challenged in the ECSC initial consultation paper which asks us to talk about citizenship and identity' (Farrell, ECSC 18.6.2002 col. 3540). It is interesting that the industrial, economic and vocational approach to education, although mentioned by the ECSC, is more clearly delineated in the discussions of the other Committee with responsibility for education, that of the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee (ELLLC). Perhaps this is because in that committee, debate about education is just one aspect of the remit; the others being connected with enterprise issues.

This duality can be seen most clearly in the deliberations of the ELLLC (1.5.2002)

when the Budget Process 2003-4 was considered. Following the Scottish Executive strategy document, 'A Smart, Successful Scotland' and its measurement framework (with shorter-term operating targets as well as economic indicators and a means of measuring economic impact in the mid-longer term) (ELLLC 1.5.2002 col 2556) Robert Crawford, Chief Executive of Scottish Enterprise (SE), reported being able to 'do more with less'. With a budget of £91.5m of which £16m is for Careers Scotland, and £75.5m is for SE, he noted the successful realignment of Careers Scotland into SE; and the possibility of reinvesting money in operational activities and creating projects such as intermediate technology institutes – these being fundamentally important to Scotland's long-term competitiveness (col. 2557). With 8,200 adults participating in work-based training and development (of whom 2,600 are from disadvantaged areas), the role of lifelong learning appears central to the enhancement of both human and economic capital.

However, Miss Annabel Goldie (Con) noted that even with this upbeat message, the budget of enterprise and lifelong learning 'is dropping by 1% in terms of the Executive's budget as a whole' and asked whether there were contingency funds available (Goldie ELLLC 1.5.2002 col2558-9). Tavish Scott (LD) asked of the work to realign successfully Careers Scotland (Scott ELLLC 1.5.2002 col. 2560) and developments for the Scottish university for industry (col. 2561). Marilyn Livingstone (Lab) questioned the SE emphasis on targets, which are said to drive agendas, hinder successful development of partnerships and rely over heavily on national rather than local considerations – these being crucial, especially for Careers Scotland (Livingstone, ELLLC 1.5.2002 col. 2562).

Perhaps the most worrying aspect of the submission from SE was drawn to the committee's attention by the Convenor. Mr Neil noted (Neil, ELLLC 1.5.2002 col2574) that the £16m pa budget for Careers Scotland for each of three years is actually a freezing of the amount available; that £42.5m is budgeted for 'business competitiveness and innovation' with no indication of where that money will be spent, nor 'is there any indication of the spend, targets or baseline'. Perhaps these were timely deliberations by the committee: as an agency of the Executive, with an annual budget of £400m, with – amongst many other things - control over Careers Scotland and the development of partnerships for the interface between education and training through lifelong learning, SE is an agency that supports 'persons learning in SE before moving back into the private sector in Singapore' (Crawford ELLLC 1.5.2002 col2566).

In fact, as time moves on and the character of the Parliament is more clearly distinguished, it becomes evident that the two Committees see the roles and purposes of education quite differently. At almost four years into the new Parliament, it may be appropriate to note that the ELLLC's 'take' on education has become enterprise-led: there is a vision of education performing a rather mercurial function for human capital development and thereby for the economy of Scotland. 'There are two fundamental issues in respect of lifelong learning, firstly, there are two markets – the learner and the economy. Second, there are concerns about the extent to which we try to plan the system and the extent to which it is demand led' (Alexander ELLLC 1.5.2002 col. 2580).

In her presentation to the ELLLC, the then Minister for Enterprise Transport and Lifelong Learning, Wendy Alexander, noted that 'since devolution, there has been a modest rise in spending on enterprise and lifelong learning...we have had to constrain the budgets of the enterprise networks in order to provide growth for further and higher education – about 70% budget goes to the funding councils for FE and HE and to the Student Awards Agency. Our intention was to put 40,000 extra students through FE – compared with fewer than 3,000 extra through HE – so that 95% of the increase would be in further education (and 80% of those students are

part time). Astonishingly, there have been about 50,000 entrants in the past year, which also reflects what has happened with individual learning accounts. A large part of that increase is the result not of HNC or HNDs but of people doing the European computer driving licence (Alexander, ELLLC 1.5.2002 col2578-9).

However, she went on to note, because, in Scotland, there are two departments dealing with education, the nuances of the budget lines and overlaps may be less clear than in a system, such as in England, where education is under one department. This means that education spend applies to the whole education budget. 'It also means that colleges, universities and schools benefit. We must be careful that the alignment of portfolios and departments in Scotland does not get in the way of ensuring that all parts of education are awarded appropriately' (Alexander, ELLLC 1.5.2002 col2585).

'In driving a growth agenda, what we do in the enterprise and lifelong learning sphere is critically important, but education in schools is also critically important ... I am wholeheartedly in support of a growth agenda. We must be alert to how we put growth at the top of the political agenda in Scotland, because that has not been the character of governance in Scotland for much of the past decade ... spending £50m on three technology institutes is likely to be immeasurably more important in driving growth than £50m spent on one itinerant investor that does not keep the promises it made when it arrived' (Alexander, ELLLC 1.5.2002 col. 2594).

So, as we come to the end of this first Scottish Parliament for 300 years, it is evident that there is a distinction being drawn between these almost competing versions of the roles and purposes of education. Whether such distinctions resonate with views held by the people of Scotland, may well become apparent in their responses to the national debate. First indications summarised in the Debate on Education (Official Report 9.10.2002 col 14481-14496) provide little evidence of a society at one with itself, although that society is generally in support of education as a force for producing rounded, informed citizens, as a social good and as a force for social justice.

The Minister for Education and Young People, noted that concerns were expressed about the fast rate of changes being required by those with responsibility for education; about the levels of resources to meet the challenges of these changes; the importance of addressing class sizes; the increasingly important attention to discipline; the worries about the amount of assessment, grading and sorting of children during their school careers; and the need to maintain and enhance the well-documented and well-received 'broad and balanced' curriculum of Scottish schools (Jamieson, Official Report: 9.10.2002, col 14483).

The parallel inquiry of the ECSC into the Purposes of Education, has heard evidence from experts and many key players concerning such issues. The importance of the 'broad and balanced' curriculum frequently takes pride of place in these discussions. What should or should not be incorporated into the curriculum, of course, is exceedingly important. Students reporting to the inquiry, noted: knowledge of subjects is not enough: knowledge of society must also be provided. Vocational skills within each subject, such as public speaking or personal skills, help pupils with their academic skills. 'Successful schemes such as paired reading can help to promote the sense of duty and social responsibility that all senior pupils should have' (Berrill (St Modan's High School), ECSC 18.6.2002 col. 3517). 'We are all agreed on the importance of practical and social skills, but it is important that they are incorporated into subjects universities might not accept the subjects that are taught in the practical class, such as social and vocational skills, as proper subjects and a divide would be created.' (Weatherston, ECSC 18.6.2002 col. 3523).

'Schools must also take into account that job security no longer exists. They have a responsibility to provide all students with transferable skills, such as the ability to

work with others, adaptability, problem-solving and communication skills. However, they should also teach young people values such as truth, honesty, respect, tolerance and compassion ... provide an opportunity to play an active role not only in their school and community but in their national and globally' (Grant (Alva Academy), ECSC, 18.6.2002 col. 3518).

The importance of national and global perspectives as well as community involvement in education and in comprehensive schooling, in particular, were issues raised by many during the parallel inquiry. 'It is very important to have a communal education, as it increases people's tolerance of others ... Splitting people into classes based on ability creates a barrier in society. You cannot communicate or react to people whom you have no experience of' (Banks (Alva Academy), ECSC, 18.6.2002 col. 3520).

Politicians were gently criticised by some of the students making presentations at the ECSC: As a student said: 'One of the main things that needs to happen is that all those who are involved in making decisions on education – a fair few have been teachers – need to get back to the classroom and see what is happening, because they have been away for too long. Things change everyday; no two days at school are exactly the same. The people who make the decisions should get back into the classroom and see what is going on' (Chalmers (Dunblane High School), ECSC, 18.6.2002 col. 3521).

Whereas the students' views reflected an interest in learning – and the wider the possibilities, the better – the views of certain 'experts' indicated their worries about a more restricted, more outcomes-oriented curriculum, one more focused upon 'standards'. As Professor Joe Farrell noted, 'I am concerned about literacy standards ... I seriously wonder whether the skills we teach in schools and, in consequence, in the universities, are doing the job that they should be doing ... we live in an age of globalisation and growing European integration in which learning language will be increasingly important' (Farrell, ECSC, 18.6.2002 col. 3533). He went on to note that the level of language, knowledge and skills demanded by universities in the UK is far lower than that demanded by higher education institutions in other European countries, such as Norway, Italy, Spain or Germany.

The quest for the 'right sort of skills' pervaded much of the discussion at the ECSC as it debated the role of education within its parallel inquiry: '(there is) increasing engagement in study skills, thinking skills, problem-solving techniques.. in more Scottish schools. The extent to which the school curriculum addresses these fundamental skills and techniques' (Smith, ECSC 18.6.2002 col3568).

'The distinction that is made between skills and knowledge in most curriculums throughout the world is false, because skills are a practical form of knowledge. Skills are a form of know-how' (Peters, ECSC 18.6.2002 col3542). Professor Peters added, 'We need new skills for living in a knowledge or information society. Knowledge management is increasingly required. The question is how the individual, organisation or group begins to acquire the skills to manage the ever-increasing amounts or packages of information that come to us' (Peters, ECSC 18.6.2002 col. 3542).

The June 2002 debate in the ECSC indicated, generally, that there is apparent confusion in the policy-making community about the purposes and roles of education. Professor Farrell noted that 'teachers have been the principal casualties of that confusion, as they have lost the precise role in society they once had.' Mike Baughan from Learning and Teaching Scotland noted, 'Teachers must be engaged in the debate about the purposes of education. They must have the time and space to talk through initiatives. If a local authority simply says, 'This is the way it is going to be' ... that is not likely to be a way to get the message home. If teachers feel that an initiative has real benefits for youngsters ... if they can be persuaded professionally ... if they can be persuaded that they have a degree of control over

it, if they are given time to talk and think, there is hope for a measure of success' (Baughan, ECSC 18.6.2002 col. 3563).

Professor Farrell elaborated, 'We should be willing to listen to teachers, rather than to teachers' representatives – whether official or otherwise – when further reforms are introduced. That was not the case in the past, particularly when the examination system was reformed' (Farrell, ECSC 18.6.2002 col. 3543). He added, that 'teaching in the university sector is also confused: universities no longer know precisely what they are supposed to be doing.' Are they institutions in which young people are to be educated in skills or knowledge or are they research institutes?

At a time when over 50% of the population access university education (Farrell ECSC 18.6.2002 col. 3546) and as society depends increasingly on knowledge, so we have to expect more people to remain in education longer (Caldwell, ECSC 18.6.2002 col. 3567) are universities intended to be involved in education? 'The only discussion now held is about research. Obviously, research has always been important, but it is now financially important, as a large part of the universities' income comes through the research assessment exercise, that rather bizarre legacy of the Thatcher years. The RAE has become an end in itself and is widely derided' (Farrell, ECSC 18.6.2002 col. 3545). 'Should we give equal value to someone who wishes to research the history of painting in Siena in the early renaissance and to someone doing research in naval engineering, which can be more easily and more identifiably transferred into something that will enhance the economic prosperity of the country? That is the question that has to be faced, but I do not think anyone has so far been willing to discuss it' (Farrell, ECSC 18.6.2002 col. 3546).

Whether the focus of attention is on school education, further or higher education, or on lifelong learning, it is clear that there is a genuine confusion about what is happening through the policy, structures and processes of teaching and learning.

'The strongest message from the debate is that people do not want more and more initiatives ... but I intend to challenge everyone to aim for excellence and to deliver it. I will drive forward the agenda of continuous improvement in education ... stability must not mean stagnation ... I want teachers, parents and other educational professionals to work with us to create the stable framework that people want and to find ways of increasing flexibility in organising learning and teaching' (Jamieson, Official Record 9.10.2002 col. 14486).

The problem for the Committees tasked to reflect upon and debate substantive areas of education is: how does Scotland respond to that politician's message? As Wendy Alexander noted in her final appearance as Minister for Enterprise before the ELLLC (1.5.2002) 'There are two answers ... the politician's answer ... (and) ... the real answer' (Alexander ELLLC 1.5.2002 col. 2583). Similarly, there are two answers as to how education will operate in the future, and for what purposes: the vision being expanded by the ELLLC and that, in the main, being supported by the ECSC – although both may come to be inseparable from 'the politicians' answer'.