

FROM THE EDITOR

Consultation exercises between government and the education profession are always interesting. We have witnessed the ‘consultation’ over *Curriculum and Assessment for the 1990s* under the leadership of Michael Forsyth which resembled more diktat than open debate. More recently, the framing of the consultation exercise, and the questions which are put to the profession, serve to focus on particular aspects of policy and narrow the debate. For example, the government’s recent initiative to promote greater access to higher education, was framed in terms of ‘partnership’ between government and the institutions involved, begging the question of whether a partnership between the parties is conceptually the best way of thinking about promoting access.

The most recent consultation exercise in which I have participated is the one on accreditation of teaching in higher education. School teachers may rightly be amused that it has taken so long for this issue to reach the consultation stage. Teachers undergo a substantial period of training in the theory and practice of education in order to obtain a ‘licence to practice’. For secondary teachers, this pedagogical training is in addition to degree level study in their subject. For teachers in higher education, comparatively little training takes place. In some institutions it amounts to no more than a few days’ induction course and no matter how expert and stimulating the teaching, what can be accomplished in a few days is woefully little. The emphasis has been on subject expertise (normally to doctoral level) rather than expertise on teaching and learning. Indeed, it may be argued that research expertise is more highly valued in universities than teaching is. Is this set to change?

The Dearing Report argued for the setting up of an Institute for Teaching and Learning in order to enhance the status of teaching in universities and to provide accreditation of courses of study which would be provided for all those involved in teaching in higher education. It could become a kind of GTC for higher education.

However, the consultation exercise which is proceeding at the moment limits its questions in the main to instrumental matters: should accreditation become mandatory?; how many levels of membership should be involved?; how might it be funded? Potentially the most interesting question is about a possible role for the proposed institute in research, but the very form in which the question is expressed suggests a dichotomy between ‘development’ and ‘research’. As Noel Entwistle has pointed out in the context of the exercise, fundamental research on what is good teaching and learning is sadly lacking in higher education. We do not know from any robust research base what good teaching is in higher education, although Entwistle and colleagues have for some time been working on the question of what constitutes effective learning.

To enter the debate in terms of what kind of institute is proposed, what role it should play in the accreditation of courses, and how many levels of membership there should be seems to duck the most important issue: how do we recognise and promote good teaching and learning in higher education? Students deserve no less than excellent teaching whether they are paying for their higher education or not. It needs to be adequately theorised before it can be developed. Where is the relevant research?

Lecturers in higher education, as in every other sector of education, also need to be concerned with the objectives of teaching their subject and the assumptions which underlie their courses. At the same time, we need to recognise and value the diversity which characterises higher education. To standardise courses, for example, through a narrow skills and competences framework, would only stifle creativity and inhibit innovation. Any attempt to ‘dumb down’ our higher education system should be resisted.

The profession, as represented by the Association of University Teachers, who provide the vice-chair of the working group undertaking the consultation exercise on the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, are broadly welcoming of the initiative. They should beware, however, the unfortunate acronym likely to be bestowed upon potential Fellows of the proposed institute.

Angela Roger

DAVID ROBERTSON

It was with great sadness that we learned of the death of David G. Robertson in May. He was a real champion of Scottish education. As a teacher, then as Director of Education in Selkirkshire and subsequently Dundee and Tayside, he was dedicated to his work. He made a most important contribution as chair of the Consultative Committee on the Curriculum and joint author of the *10-14 Report* – widely hailed as the best report on Scottish education never implemented - and uniquely welcomed by the profession.

He never truly retired from education, chairing committees and participating in numerous educational endeavours and continuing to write and to teach. He held the chair of the Court of Dundee University from 1993–1998 from which he was eloquent in his defence of the autonomy of Scottish universities. There is great need of people who have the courage of their convictions as David had, and are not reluctant to speak out. He will be sadly missed.