

## EDUCATION IN THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT PARLIAMENTARY REPORT NUMBER 3

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One year into its new life and the Parliament has had its first major education crisis. In August 2000 the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), the public body charged with awarding and overseeing the system of accreditation of public examinations, was 'a disaster', (Russell: Education Culture and Sport Committee 6.9.2000 col. 1318) 'is a shambles' (Stone: EC&S Committee 6.9.2000 col. 1315) is a 'serious failure', (McLeish: Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee 4.10.2000 col. 1214) 'is a devastating problem for Scottish education' (Gillon: EC&S Committee 6.9.2000 col. 1323). The events, a 'shambolic situation', a 'fiasco', (Fergus Ewing: E&LLLC 6.9.2000 col. 966 and 29.9.2000 col. 1150) have skewed all public discussion so that both committees concerned with education, as well as the debates in the parliament itself, focused — but not exclusively — upon Examinations Results.

### EXAMINATIONS RESULTS: THE SCALE AND NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

At the first Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee (E&LLLC) meeting (6.9.2000) and the first Education Culture and Sport Committee (EC&S) meeting (6.9.2000) on Exam Results (as all debates came to be called) there was clarification of the various responsibilities of these Committees. Mr John Swinney, Convenor of E&LLL noted that 'SQA as an agency formally falls under the remit of the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning ... and the Committee has oversight of the SQA as an agency ... SQA and its governance is a responsibility of the Minister of Lifelong Learning and is within the province of this committee.' (Swinney, E&LLL Committee: 6.9.2000 col964) In addition, as Allan Wilson and George Lyon both noted, the importance of the examinations system for the business community's confidence in the results and the process as a whole, should be part of an E&LLLC inquiry. (col. 965) The latter drew attention to the need to consider the accountability of SQA to ministers and also the history of SQA to see whether the coming together of SEB and SCOTVEC was one of the causal problems now facing SQA. (col. 965)

However, it was also noted that the majority of the issues related to SQA refer to schools and are therefore under the aegis of the Education Committee. Its Convenor, Mrs Mary Mulligan, proposed that her Committee hold an inquiry in what went wrong. She noted, 'It is obvious that we are very unhappy with the failure of the SQA to award certificates timeously and correctly to students who sat exams, and it is only appropriate for committee members to voice their sorrow for those students, families and teachers who were affected by the situation. However, I am clear that sympathy is not enough and that we must provide answers to the questions that everyone has been asking. Those questions will revolve around why, following the diligence of the schools and students, the results were not collected, the data were not processed and the certificates were not awarded on time or correctly.' (Mulligan, EC&S Committee: 6.9.2000 col. 1311)

Not only would the Education Culture and Sport Committee reflect upon these considerations, but it would also want to know 'when the difficulties were first identified and who saw, or should have seen, the problems arising' (col 1312) She added, 'the Committee may also want to identify who or what was responsible for the situation that is in front of us.' (col. 1312)

Nicola Sturgeon (SNP) reaffirmed the tremendous responsibility of the Committee

to conduct a 'wide-ranging, rigorous and forensic inquiry into what went wrong' (col. 1313) not least because of the new diet of exams commencing and in light of the new exam system. Indeed, she favoured a thorough review of the policy and implementation of the Higher Still exam so that the 'extent to which possible flaws in that policy have impacted on the problems of the past few weeks' (col. 1314) Whilst supporting an inquiry, especially the inclusion of Higher Still, Brian Monteith (Con) noted that the Committee's inquiry, in looking at the Executive's role, would be different to that of the Executive itself. Helpfully, Ian Jenkins (LD) suggested the inquiry should consider the separation of administrative errors from the collapse of the data handling. (col. 1320)

Also helpfully, Gillon (Lab) asked that certain questions be addressed: On what basis did ministers decide to move on Higher Still in one go? On whose advice was that decision made? On what information were ministers acting? How has that decision impacted on the crisis that we now face? What trials of the computer system were undertaken? Why were markers paid lower rates this year? Were they underqualified? If so, why did that situation arise? Did exam papers go missing? Was the crisis due to operational failure, or were policy makers to blame? (col. 1324)

#### ORIGINS AND CAUSES

So began the long haul into the unknown: what went wrong and why? Evidence, written and oral for the EC&SC, to address policy and practice, came from the educational, bureaucratic and political communities and followed over the months. For the E&LLLC the evidence focused upon governance issues and also formed the basis of meetings over the subsequent two months.

First to give evidence to EC&SC was 'the team' from the Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED) led by John Elvidge who, reflecting upon the merger of SEB with SCOTVEC, did not think the cultural differences between these two organisations were the root of the problem. (EC&SC:27.9.2000 col. 1411)

Although pressurised by Ian Jenkins (LD) on the impact of the additional work resulting from Higher Still, he reminded the members that 'the whole foundation is built on the strong belief that existed in Scotland in the early 1990s, when the system was being designed, that integration of academic and vocational education was the one guiding principle that should shape our work.' (EC&SC 29.9.2000 col. 1412) SCHMI Douglas Osler and Eleanor Emberson, head of the division dealing with policy on Higher Still, also supported the view that the troubles at SQA were the result of many factors, not necessarily connected to the implementation of Higher Still. Indeed, the philosophy behind the political dimension to Higher Still, especially the timing of its implementation, was noted by Douglas Osler when he said that 'there was a clear view that the previous system was not meeting the needs of all young people... 25,000 or so young people who will have intermediate certificates will have something that no previous generation had.' (EC&SC 29.9.2000 col. 1413)

Whilst the Committee recognised that Higher Still has been seen as a significant advance in Scottish education in terms of social inclusion and recognising the worth of young people for whom the higher was not appropriate (Kelly: EC&SC 4.10.2000 col. 1544) the Committee also heard from Mr Elvidge that there were problems with the registration of candidates for entry for examinations, with the IT communications systems between centres and the SQA, with the employment of the correct number of markers and with the physical handling of pieces of paper, examination scripts etc. All four sets of factors were instrumental in the 'crisis' at SQA.

Subsequent discussion focused upon these four areas; additionally, John Kelly (NASUWT) drew attention to the 'reluctance to accept the professional judgement of teachers and a reluctance on the part of Her Majesty's inspectors of schools and, possibly, the Higher Still development unit to give ministers messages that they

might not have wanted to hear. (Kelly: EC&SC 4.10.2000 col. 1540) This was an aspect of the problem noted by Henry McLeish in his evidence to the E&LLLC (McLeish: E&LLLC 4.10.2000 col. 1222) when he said he supported an examinations authority not corrupted or influenced by government. 'What we have just now is simply not working.'

In an exploration of how the 'damage' occurred, the EC&SC of 4.10.2000 added to these negative effects of a political culture in the SQA and HMI - 'there seemed to be a political determination that it must go ahead; perhaps it became the educational millennium dome' (Eaglesham: EC&SC 4.10.2000 col. 1543) - and noted that such cultures also exist in schools: 'We heard that HMI was perhaps not carrying messages back to ministers, although it should have been' (Stone: EC&SC 4.10.2000 col. 1542) 'The views of HMI did not reflect the reality that most of us found in schools'. (Nicol (EIS): EC&SC 4.10.2000 col. 1542 and Eaglesham col. 1545) There was also a belief that the speed at which the Higher Still was introduced, along with the top-down bureaucracy created 'undue haste' in implementation of the Higher Still programme. (Eaglesham (SSTA): EC&SC 4.10.2000 col 1541). Indeed, as John Kelly argued, there may be a need to change to role of the HMI which at present is both a generator of policy (Higher Still) and the policeman of policy - 'which cannot be right'. (Kelly: EC&SC 4.10.2000 col. 1542)

From this, Nicola Sturgeon noted the dilemma faced by the minister: on one hand advice from HMI and on the other information from teachers through their teaching unions. That conflicting advice might have had an impact, but the minister changed and Brian Wilson moved on and Helen Liddell came to be in charge. Then she too moved on and Sam Galbraith (and Henry McLeish) became involved.

#### PROBLEMS WITH INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY (1)

In addition to the political dimension, members also drew attention to the huge increase in data and the IT systems which were introduced to address the increase. Brian Monteith noted that the committee was aware of the data processing problems alongwith those of assessment, marking and the recruitment of markers and asked David Eaglesham (SSTA) whether he felt his warnings had been listened to. (EC&SC 4.10.2000 col. 1547) It transpired through lengthy discussion that the quantity of internal assessment, the data thereby produced, the introduction of intermediate 1 and intermediate 2, the increased numbers taking examinations, the greater number of markers (at a low rate of pay), a truncated exam diet all resulted in a pressure on a system which was not firmly in place. Further, concerns expressed by teachers seemed to be excluded: Nicola Sturgeon asked 'Were concerns of teachers being accepted at face value? Was there a vigorous discussion? Yet as John Kelly (NASUWT) said, is it any wonder there were problems and inability to hear when 'the system has number 7 a B pass for a SEB higher, a fail in a new higher and course completed in standard grade'. (Kelly: EC&SC 4.10.2000 col. 1563)

Pat Cairns (Headteachers Association of Scotland) noted that the silence was also felt on the day resulted were expected. 'We all felt completely foolish, because there had been no communication to schools that we would not receive the information.' (Cairns: EC&SC 4.10.2000 col. 1572) Ian Jenkins (LD) wondered whether these silences, and problems, might be attributable to the complexity of the information, to the certification process, the software - the IT. In his submission to the committee, Mr David Elliot (former Director of Awards at SQA) noted that the operations unit were primarily ex-SEB people who had the task of working in SQA with more than a million national certificate modules, Scottish vocational qualifications, higher national certificates, higher national diplomas, as well as all the examinations that had existed before and the Higher Still examinations. (Elliot EC&SC 4.10.2000 col. 1581)

He noted that the users, the operations unit, had to tell IT what they wanted. 'We used industry-standard techniques in developing the software. Some people were allocated the role of senior business user. Those people had to tell IT what data processes they wished to be supported by IT. IT then had to provide the software. The development was very much user-driven.' (Elliot: EC&SC 4.10.2000 col. 1582) 'When I took over the responsibility for the IT project in April last year, it was already running a little late ... instead of planning the whole system before starting to write the software, we would write the software to enable us to register candidates and then move onto results software. The sense of alarm was not transmitted to me (until) March. I thought the operations unit were not coping with its full range of responsibilities, neither the SCOTVEC software nor the exam board software could support Higher Still ... we had to produce new software.' (Elliot: EC&SC 4.10.2000 cols. 1584-5) He added, 'the organisation did pretty well within the allocated timescale. In 1997 not only did we not have any software, we did not have an organisation. We had to create SQA first and then plan the processing. We had so much to do, we did not have time to get it all right.' (Elliot: EC&SC 4.10.2000 col. 1589)

#### LINES OF ACCOUNTABILITY AND MINISTERIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Whilst all Parliamentary bodies did discuss IT, the E&LLLC, having a slightly different mandate, initially outlined its concern about the lines of communication, accountability and responsibility between the Scottish Executive and SQA. Mike Foulis and Alistair Aitken (Scottish Executive ELLLC Department) attempted to tease out these issues and noted that SQA is under an obligation to give information to the Scottish Executive; any relationship tends to be built up over time: 'the art of sponsorship is in getting the body to believe that it wants to do what you want it to do.' (Foulis: E&LLLC 20.9.2000 col. 1083) It was also noted that very rarely, in fact only once in recent past, would a minister be advised to use the power of direction (section 9 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1996) to direct the action of a body such as SQA, a body (the board) the minister 'sponsored' or had governance over. Indeed, in later questioning, it became apparent that should a minister 'direct', the SQA could have asked for a judicial review of that 'direction'. Because of that possibility, Mr Foulis noted that, 'Being generally cautious, we tend to advise our ministers to be safe and to stay within the likely ambit of the powers... ministers must construct their actions in order to remain properly *inter vires*.' (Foulis: E&LLLC 20.9.2000 col. 1106)

The role of the two ministers became a crucial concern for the E&LLLC when members asked whether this power of direction would, or could, have been used by either the Minister of E&LLLC or the Minister of EC&S. Deftly, Mr Foulis answered that 'depending on the problem, we would direct the advice either to Mr McLeish and copy it to all relevant ministers or to both Mr McLeish and Mr Galbraith. However, that amounts to the same thing in the end. A minister would not take action unless he knew that he had the support of his colleagues.' (Foulis: E&LLLC 20.9.2000 col. 1095)

In attempting to delineate these issues further, the Deputy Convenor (Annabel Goldie, Con) asked whether it was a correct interpretation that 'on governance and the minister's responsibility under the act, the mechanism for transmission of information (between the minister and SQA) is somewhat inadequate ... it seems to be difficult for you to discharge your obligations to the minister if you are genuinely unaware of circumstances lurking underneath the stratum with which you deal.' (Goldie: E&LLLC 20.9.2000 col. 1098). To this Mike Foulis replied: 'if we had asked the SQA whether it had the right systems in place and was doing everything that an organisation should do to ensure that it was well managed, the answer that we would receive was that it was doing all those splendid things that we wanted it to do.' (Foulis: E&LLLC 20.9.2000 col. 1098)

However, Elaine Murray (Lab) drew attention to less than splendid things which had been in the notes of meetings between SEED and SQA held in November 1999 when one member of the Executive had asked whether she could tell Ministers regarding the errors in the Standard Grade exam appeals which had affected 750 pupils in 260 schools. She wondered whether, last year, there had been problems with the computer system and certification and who had been responsible for asking the SQA if the situation was under control. 'If the SQA told members of the Executive that matters were in hand and gave an assurance that it was coping, would that be an end to the matter? Is there no mechanism to allow the Executive to check whether the SQA's information is accurate?' (Murray: E&LLLC 20.9.2000 col. 1101)

Confirming that there would be no reason to suppose there was a problem, and that the minister met SQA only once (on 6 March) to discuss the implementation of the IT system, for on-line learning and assessment (part of a £10m on-line assessment bank), Mr Foulis said that the data expert sent in by the Executive had not appeared unhappy with the IT system in place at SQA.

However, by the next E&LLLC on 26 September, not only was the issue of IT centre-stage, but so too was the question of whether advice from civil servants to ministers could be passed to committees. Fergus Ewing drew attention to Mr Galbraith's comment in Parliament: 'What we will not release is internal advice given to ministers, as that would not be appropriate'. (Official Report: 20.9.2000 vol. 8 col. 442) Mr Ewing stated that it would be appropriate for the E&LLLC to ask for such information.

#### STRUCTURE OF SQA: COMMUNICATION ISSUES

Mr David Miller (Chairman of SQA) was asked about the efficacy of the communication between the minister and SQA (with a Board of 20 persons and a huge superstructure of committees) and about the IT systems. He noted that one meeting per annum between the minister and Chairman and Chief Executive of SQA was about right, although he suggested an assessor from SEED might also be present. (E&LLLC 26.9.2000 col. 1113) This was supported by Mr Brian Minto, Director of Finance at SQA. (col. 1132) Mr Miller noted that when SEB and SCOTVEC were wound up, those involved in the new body were instrumental in the kind of organisation SQA would become. Of immediate concern was the possibility of one building, but this was not seen as feasible: 'The cultures were different. SCOTVEC operated in a competitive field ... it had a sharper external edge than SEB, which served a fixed and known population of stakeholders. 'We have an office in Glasgow, which has a value, staff live in Largs and the west coast. The Dalkeith building - with people coming to it from Dunbar and over Soutra - has a debt attached to it, and no real alternative-use value. If we sold it we would have to repay a debt of around £700,000 to the City of Edinburgh Council. The option of housing the two bodies together was not realistic financially ... we did not have the funds to buy and create a new office.' (Miller: E&LLLC 26.9.2000 col. 1132)

Having decided to maintain two sites, the SQA established a single structure (encouraging a comrades-in-adversity syndrome, which didn't happen (col. 1132)) complex IT systems and video conferencing. Communication within SQA as well as between SQA and SEED became the focus of intense questioning. Mr Ron Tuck (former Chief Executive SQA) noted that at the beginning of the year certain challenges or risks were delineated: a significant programme of Higher Still implementation; the production of more than twice as many question papers as were normally produced; the national assessment bank; responding to what teachers were saying about unit assessments in schools; and delivering a large software programme. (E&LLLC 26.9.200 col. 1134)

#### STRUCTURE OF SQA: RECURRING IT AND SOFTWARE CONCERNS

Yet it appeared that the SQA, even as recently as late June 2000, thought there were no inherent problems with the software, although the Scottish School Boards Association says (in September's 'Grapevine') that it alerted the SQA in March and April to the problems of the electronic transfer of data between schools and the SQA. Elaine Murray asked what happened at SQA after these problems were intimated to which Mr Murray reaffirmed the view of the former SQA awards director, David Elliot, that the situation was all right. (E&LLLC 26.9.2000 col. 1116) 'We were assured that 90% of the results would be okay ... the SQA is a can-do organisation, everybody now had their heads up and ... committed to producing the level of results of which we had been advised.' Dr Elaine Murray later pressed Mr Tuck for clarification of the data management issues: Are you saying that the problem was not related to the issues on which the Scottish Executive offered help in March 2000, or the electronic transfer of data between schools and the SQA, to which the SSBA, according to its publication, alerted the SQA and the minister in March and April 1999? Are you saying that something else went wrong?' (E&LLLC 26.9.2000 col 1137) To which Mr Tuck responded 'We have to accept that, in the first year of a new IT system, we get little bugs.' (col. 1138)

Such issues were also discussed at the EC&SC when Ron Tuck noted 'I do not think we had concerns about the IT unit. It was well led and had a very capable manager and good staff.' Mr David Elliot agreed, 'I can confirm that the IT unit was well managed ... (T)he operations and IT units were responsible for not only the examination system, but for processing all vocational qualifications ... There was a great deal to be achieved in a short time. That is why I was concerned about whether the software would be ready in time. Without the software nobody would have got their exam results this year. The legacy computer systems were not an option, because they could not support Higher Still. It gradually dawned on me over time that there were problems in operations.' (Elliot: EC&SC 27.9.2000 col. 1453) 'The centres were having difficulties, which meant that the data were coming into the SQA somewhat later than normal ... for very good curricular reasons, Higher Still was different and unit results could come in right up to the end of June. That was not a flaw in the system but another matter that made the management of the examination in its first year a bit more difficult.' (Elliot: EC&SC 27.9.2000 col. 1456)

Mike Russell (SNP) pressed Mr Elliot and asked whether the system could record whether data had been received (as it had been able to in previous years). The reply indicated that due to the pressure of work, until June, there was no pursuit of centres not submitting data. (EC&SC 27.9.2000 col. 1457) Further, Mr Tuck noted that at the Board meeting of 22 June, there seemed not to be a problem with missing data. But on 25 June it became clear that the problem was not of outstanding data but missing data. (EC&SC 27.9.2000 col. 1459) 'We could not understand why data had gone missing...the strategy we followed - of trying to retrieve the missing data - was essentially feasible, it just did not succeed.' (col. 1460-1) Yet, as Fergus Ewing noted, Mr Miller's first warnings to ministers were on 25 July 2000. (E&LLLC 26.9.2000 col. 1140)

The role of IT in the implementation of Higher Still and to the FE sector, became a crucial and recurring theme in all discussions about the problems at SQA. Nicola Sturgeon (SNP) seemed to have some disbelief that SQA did not know what data and how much of it was missing - 'you did not seem to know with any consistency what the figures were'. (EC&SC 27.9.2000 col. 1461) Similarly, in the E&LLLC disbelief was indicated when Mr Tuck noted that on Wednesday 9 August he 'went public' to the press and only afterwards realised the 'problems were far worse than I had understood them to be... it would have to be said that somebody at some level within operations must have understood that the problems were far worse than senior

management had been led to believe. (Tuck: E&LLLC 26.9.2000 col. 1138)

Had the public also known of the haphazard nature of the software, there would have been further disquiet. Tom Kelly (Association of Scottish Colleges) said that the prior to January 2000 colleges and SQA could not interchange data; the awards processing system (APS) was introduced on 1.1.2000, in an environment not ready for implementation yet introduced because of the year 2000 software problems, and from that point 'we had to operate in an improvisatory mode.' (E&LLLC: 29.9.2000 col. 1155) Whilst usually, he explained, problems could be cleared up through discussion between ASC and SQA, this year 'the emperor has no clothes, but everyone was so involved in making it appear as if the emperor had clothes they forgot to offer the observation that it would not work'. (E&LLLC: 29.9.2000 col. 1164) There was, he said, a failure to consider things such as the introduction of the APS in a wider context, beyond that of the SQA itself. Indeed, he thought it unwise that the SQA had funded the whole system.

Most telling was the subsequent comment of Mr Tuck that there may have been a need to reform the IT system (involving the seven companies that supply software to the centres) so that it could cope with the sophisticated nature of the information it had to handle - candidate, subject, centre, mark; reaggregated only at the end of the process - but that would have entailed telling the Government that the implementation of Higher Still was not doable. (col. 1136)

#### THE IMPACT ON FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION

The problems for FE colleges were different, as Mr McLeish, then Minister for Enterprise and Life Long Learning, noted. He praised FE colleges for ensuring that no erroneous data went out to their students. The SVQs on the college side stand quite separate from the school-based qualifications. The former are overseen by an accreditation committee within SQA; a similar structure or role could be developed to oversee the school-based qualifications: 'To use a popular soundbite, we could create an examinations tsar, whose job would be to ensure that the quality control assurance systems covering managing systems, data systems...would be properly focused.' (McLeish: E&LLLC 4.10.2000 col. 1215) He went on to note that there may need to be changes in the responsibilities held by the SQA so that it no longer both accredited and awarded qualifications.

The issues of governance were addressed in detail by Professor Stringer of COSHEP. The impact of the SQA problems on Higher Education Institutions concerns not just this year, but students accessing HE in 2001 and beyond. With the thought that problems emanated from data management (concerning incomplete data as well as inaccurate data) and the IT systems, Professor Stringer argued that moving SQA to within the civil service would not necessarily produce a more secure qualifications future. Instead she suggested that through the current governance form, the non-departmental public body structure (NDPB) there should be procedures to ensure accountability and transparency in decision-making. In this way, management arrangements would be seen to work properly – something that did not happen in this case. (E&LLLC: 29.9.2000 col. 1171) In a climate where there has been a drop of 15% in applications to Scottish HEIs from England, it becomes important to address all problems of the SQA situation and learn the appropriate lessons.

In her submission to the EC&SC (on 23 October 2000) Professor Stringer reaffirmed her organisation's commitment to ensure the matter is examined and that whatever caused the problems does not happen again.

In the E&LLLC of 4 October, the Minister for Children and Education, Mr Sam Galbraith was asked to explain why private consultants, Deloitte and Touche were to be given access to information about the SQA affair, notably information from civil servants to ministers, that was not available to Committees. He noted

that whilst all freedom of information systems, in Ireland, New Zealand, Canada and Australia legislate for confidential advice, he would try and see what could be done to help 'fair and open government' without undermining the system of government. (Galbraith: E&LLLC 4.10.2000 col. 1192-3) During questioning by members of the committee who were becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the information they were receiving, he repeated his conviction that 'we should consider the matter very carefully before we undermine the public interest'.. which is served by confidential advice to ministers. (E&LLLC 4.10.2000 col. 1194) However, by the end of October, and a fairly tortuous debate (E&LLLC: 25.10.2000), the E&LLLC had agreed that only the two convenors would see the advice civil servants had offered to the two ministers.

#### THE PROCESS OF INQUIRY

Subsequent questioning involved possibilities for establishing improved communication systems between the SEED and SQA. Mr Galbraith noted that 'independent bodies - SQA being a non-departmental public body - must make their own decisions, rather than constantly looking to the Scottish Executive to check whether we approve of those decisions'. Nevertheless, he added, the relationship between SQA and ministers will have to change. (col. 1197-8) Annabel Goldie (Con) conveyed that she was 'unclear about how the public can have confidence in such assertions and assurances if, at the end of the day, the minister feels that he has a hands-off role and that he should keep his distance.' (Goldie: E&LLLC 4.10.2000 col. 1198) Allan Wilson (Lab) explored the relationship between the minister and SQA: 'You are accountable to Parliament for the performance of the SQA, but the SQA is not under your direct control. Is that a sustainable position - given that we are considering future governance?' (Wilson: E&LLLC 4.10.2000 col. 1201) In response, Mr Galbraith suggested that the various functions of the SQA, including quality assurance and the handling and processing functions, might be separated, perhaps with QA resting with a Commissioner.

In addition, Mr Galbraith agreed with Cathy Peattie (Lab) that the Board of the SQA is unwieldy, lacks clarity, is unaccountable, out of touch and does not listen to people. Its minutes are never accurate because they do not record everything discussed and that there is no real flow of information between the ad hoc groups and the liaison groups. (E&LLLC 4.10.2000 col. 1206) However, to balance that situation, Mr Galbraith noted that the SQA did make much of its own income - perhaps to the detriment of its other activities. It also had little experience of risk management and one could say that the implementation of Higher Still plus the installation of a brand new IT system was 'clearly, a high risk project' (Lyon: E&LLLC 4.10.2000 col. 1210) 'The risk analysis was flawed, because the organisation did not state what its objectives were.' (Lyon: E&LLLC 4.10.2000 col. 1222) This was supported by Henry McLeish who said, 'The SQA has fallen down in three ways. First it deals with a sensitive matter on which there is a crunch day once a year, and the risk management issues had not been dealt with effectively. Second, within any organisation, there is the issue of leadership. It is difficult for us, but it is about performance targets and outputs. Thirdly, there is the issue of management information and data processing.' (McLeish: E&LLLC 4.10.2000 col. 1219) The committee therefore heard calls for improved and slimmed down management systems and structures with clarity in duties, accountability and systems for risk management: these, it was argued, are important for the future 'we all have invested in'. (Lyon: E&LLLC 4.10.2000 col. 1223)

Despite the debacle, Henry Mcleish assured the committee that no young Scot will be disadvantaged, indeed the number of Scots in universities in Scotland will be higher; this because the universities and colleges have not been penalised

financially and because they have been recompensed if they have had to take any extraordinary steps. (McLeish: E&LLLC 4.10.2000 col. 1221) This issue was addressed by the EC&SC at its meeting on 23 October. At that time the members heard from representatives of UCAS that there has been a 7.8% increase (on 1999 figures) in Scotland-domiciled students finding places in HE in Scotland - this far exceeds the expected 1-2% increase. 'The number who have found places in higher education in the UK has increased by 7.2%, which compares with the overall 2% rise in the number of students finding places in higher education.' (McClaran (UCAS): EC&SC 23.10.2000 col. 1710) Mr McClaran added, '(T)his year, we have had the highest number of admissions into full-time HE since the previous high point in 1997.' Paul McClure (UCAS) gave particular figures: 18,816 took either highs or sixth year studies. Of those, 13,351 were placed in their first choice institution, 1,084 were placed in their second choice institution, 1,015 were placed in the UCAS clearing system and 3,366 were not placed. There had been 18,400 individual result amendments. In fact, questioning revealed that there had been 13 separate releases of amended data from SQA and that amended results were still being entered on 13 September. 'The randomness of the changes caused uncertainty. We were not dealing simply with the correction of results - there were missing results and results that were amended more than once.' (McClaran: EC&SC 23.10.2000 col. 1717)

When questioned about UCAS reflections upon the examinations systems, and its problems, in Scotland, Ian Jenkins (LD) drew attention to the submission of UCAS which suggested that 'the examining and certification process is so complicated that perhaps it was introduced too early'. (Jenkins: EC&SC 23.10.2000 col. 1711) Mr McClaran noted that UCAS Scottish office convened the subject panels and considered many of the aspects of the Higher Still curriculum. UCAS, he felt, has had an entirely constructive experience of working with the SQA and he is delighted that a points-score system has been achieved, which embraces the new Scottish qualifications.

However, he noted that there were concerns about the complexities of reporting data and rumours of delays. These had led UCAS to seek assurances from SQA that the deadline of 5 and 6 August for the release of results would be met. On 3 July SQA gave those assurances. When UCAS contacted SQA on 4 August, still expecting delivery on 5 and 6 August, a 'problem in its systems' was noted; nevertheless UCAS expected 100% correct data, slightly late. Even a week late would have been acceptable, and brought Scotland's results into line with the A levels. (McClure: EC&SC 23.10.2000 col. 1715) Johann Lamont pressed on the point of timing and clarified that UCAS had to contact SQA on 8 August to ask for information about the results it was expecting.

Similarly, through questioning at the EC&SC on 23.10.2000, David Caldwell (COSHEP) and members from the Higher Still development unit (HSDU) noted their amazement when 'things went wrong in August'. Caldwell agreed that even on Sunday 13 August, when a joint SQA-COSHEP statement was issued, communications from SQA (from the then chief executive of the SQA) indicated that missing data would be forthcoming. 'The SQA officers told us that they believed that it was very probable that the only problem was missing data, but that until they had carried out a series of validation checks over four days, they could not guarantee that.' (Caldwell (COSHEP): EC&SC 23.10.2000 col. 1724)

#### THE ROLE OF HMI

Mary Pirrie (HSDU) spoke of her organisations close contacts with SQA, through day-to-day work, subject group meetings and discussions about internal assessment procedures and data handling. 'The feedback always suggested that they seemed

reasonable and manageable ... Data handling on yes or no questions is not usually considered complex. The feeling seemed to be that SQA could handle the data for internal assessment ... We had to assume that they were balancing all the demands of the system.’ (Pirrie (HSDU): EC&SC 23.20.2000 col. 1739) However, counter to these assurances, Pirrie said the the HSDU did also receive information from ‘school managers that they were experiencing difficulties in registering pupils (November 1999) and that they were unsure about the information on prelims (beginning 2000). In March, at a meeting with local education authority representatives, SQA, HMI and HSDU, data handling was discussed. She noted that meetings with ‘stakeholders’ were frequent; communication between local authorities and SQA often went via the HSDU. But as she also said, ‘The Higher Still development unit is a temporary unit. Our job ends in June 2001 ... It would not have been proper for us to hold anybody to account - it is beyond our competence to do that ... We could only inform SQA and be reassured when we saw evidence that it was picking on a number of the problems.’ (Pirrie: EC&SC 23.10.2000 col. 1740)

The idea of an exams tsar or an independent quality control body, was noted in committees and, according to Anthony McClaran (UCAS), ‘might be worth consideration’. In offering advice on the development of quality control mechanisms, Mr McClaran noted ‘(A)ny quality control body might include professionals who were involved in the day-to-day work and a board that consists of stakeholders in the system. (McClaran: EC&SC 23.10.2000 col. 1713) ‘We have gained a huge amount of experience in administering large-scale systems such as this and in examining the interface between school and college qualifications and entry to higher education.’ (col. 1719)

In further meetings, Mr Keir Bloomer President of the Association of the Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES), drew attention to both Higher Still and quality issues when he forcefully delineated the problems as he saw them: ‘ADES is in no doubt that the difficulties that are being experienced and that brought the system close to collapse this year derive from the implementation of Higher Still. ... (T)he overload in demand for data .. lead(ing) to a large number of errors in the handling of data, huge demands for the checking and re-checking of error-strewn data, and, ultimately, to failures to incorporate particular internal assessment elements into certification ... (also) ... poor management of the marking process. Some markers were appointed late and were poorly briefed. There were inadequacies in relation to moderation and a failure to perform the usual processes of concordance ... Their origins lie in the over-complexity of the programme ... many of the data are required to generate certification information that is itself not needed, not wanted, not understood and intrinsically worthless.’ (Bloomer (ADES): EC&SC 25.10.2000 col. 1752)

‘We went on to elaborate on the specific concerns’, with five ministers, he later added, ‘including the loss of learning and teaching time caused by the amount of assessment; the increased work load, some of which we considered unproductive; doubts about the reliability and validity of internal assessment; the inadequacy of grade descriptors; relationships between internal and external assessment not being properly thought out and the possible loss of focus on excellence as a result of all that.’ (Bloomer: EC&SC 25.10.2000 col. 1757) He added, ‘Our perception is that that main form of accountability of SQA over the past few years has been purely political and that it has been placed under pressure to deliver programmes in a particular timescale ... The SQA has a major job to do in rebuilding the confidence of those with whom it has to work. A significant part will be working with greater transparency and responsiveness, not merely to the central apparatus of the Scottish Executive but more broadly to all those who have a stake in the system.’ (Bloomer: EC&SC 25.10.2000 col. 1770)

Such transparency, along with accountability, is obviously an inherent part of any new quality assurance system. Both Bloomer and Danny McCafferty (COSLA) commented upon these issues. It remains to be seen whether the Higher Still system is embedded within the Executive, with problems of over-centralisation, or from a tsar or intermediary body. It has become apparent, however, that the role of the HMI as both being involved in policy formulation as well as implementation and inspection can no longer be justified. The dual role quite clearly compromises the quality assurance functions, that being the central purpose of its existence. (Bloomer: EC&SC 25.10.2000 col. 1774) Bloomer noted, the Scottish examinations system will, with some difficulty, survive a single year but will not readily survive a second year of the same kind of failures. A minimalist approach to change will not do.

McCafferty and colleague Gordon Jeyes (COSLA) suggested that the role of the HMI, in giving advice (on policy) to schools as well as inspecting and monitoring that advice, produced problems. 'When schools talk about policy, they are thinking about something as detailed and fundamental as guidance to staff on the way in which they work. These policies are heavily influenced by HMI reports and advice. For that reason, schools associate them with HMI policy. When Douglas Osler says that ministers make policy, he is using the word 'policy' in a different sense.' (Jeyes (COSLA): EC&SC 25.20.2000 col. 1777)

Sam Galbraith firmly refuted the view that HMI make policy. In answer to the proposition of Cathy Peattie (Lab) that the perception is that the HMI make policy, he noted that it is 'false perception ... When HMI inspect schools, it assesses them according to their ethos, their performance, their resources, their management structures and their teaching. HMI is not interested in the content of courses; it is interested in the outcome .... I advise the committee to approach this issue (of the role of the HMI) with great caution.' (Galbraith: EC&SC 30.10.2000 col. 1804) Mike Russell, who was brave enough to move forward on HMIs, noted 'Higher Still is a whole policy - including everything from the ministerial statements that set it in motion in 1994 to the detailed arrangements for how individual subjects are assessed. On 9 October, Mr Osler made an artificial distinction between national policy, for which you are responsible, and the detailed implementation of policy.' (Russell: EC&SC 30.10.2000 col. 1804) Mr Russell went on to note that, in hearing evidence from the widest education and policy community, it had become apparent that various criticisms - by teachers, unions and others - of the implementation of Higher Still were brushed aside by the HMI.

As Mr Jeyes of COSLA noted earlier: 'People tend to be more lenient about something they and their colleagues have been involved in designing. They are predisposed to supporting it, to making it work and to smoothing its implementation .... The head of an exam body should, if anything, be policy neutral. (Jeyes: EC&SC 25.20.2000 col. 1779) Mr Jeyes added that there is a need to introduce a system of independent regulators who having met the stakeholders would be in a position to intervene in a way which the HMI, the Executive and the SQA directors were unable to (although they raised the issues).

#### A WAY FORWARD

However, in recognising that the problems may not be just technical, for one year and brought about by mismanagement of information, one may argue that perhaps David Raffe is correct when he says that the process of creating Higher Still from the Howie Committee's report, and of generating an intense technical debate (rather than policy support) owes its existence to the commitment to democratic centralism; it is about having committees guarding the notion of consensus. (Jeyes: EC&SC 25.20.2000 col. 1783) In the new political settlement, with the Scottish Executive in place, perhaps this is the moment to recognise that democracy, accountability and

transparency require de-centralised structures. Perhaps we can unmask the other side of the taken-for-granted Scottish educational consensus and delineate the rather undemocratic and destabilising configurations of centralism.