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Scotland's high road to lifelong learning: a foreigner's observations on the Scottish Parliament enterprise and lifelong learning committee's final report on lifelong learning

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Abstract

The final report on lifelong learning of the Scottish Parliament's enterprise and lifelong learning committee is distinctive in being one of the few national lifelong learning policies of such breadth which apparently express a deep and long term national commitment to lifelong learning. The committee's core proposal to make a standard basic entitlement to lifelong learning available to every citizen may have its greatest effect in increasing the demand for post compulsory education from under represented groups, since as the committee observes, one of the challenges in redressing the relatively low participation of under represented groups is to increase their aspiration to study at the highest level. However, the committee qualifies its recommendation that part-time learners be entitled to the same fee and loan arrangements as full-time learners, thus undermining one of the main points of a lifelong learning policy to encourage a seamless transition between if not integration of study and family, work and civic engagement. The breadth and ambition of the committee's proposals is also its main challenge, and the development of priorities and measures to assess progress will be crucial to the policy's success.

Introduction

Lifelong learning has been promoted by international bodies such as UNESCO (Delors, 1996), the OECD (1996), the European Commission (1996) and the Council of Europe (2001) but with the exception of Ireland (Department of Education and Science, 2000) not many jurisdictions have adopted a comprehensive policy on lifelong learning. Scotland has been an early and active exception. The Scottish Office (1998) issued a paper on lifelong learning in 1988 and one of the early acts of the Scottish Executive following the Scottish Parliament elections in May 1999 was to form an enterprise and lifelong learning department from the pre-devolution Scottish Office education and industry department (Scottish Executive, 2002b). The Scottish Parliament's enterprise and lifelong learning committee launched an inquiry into lifelong learning in July 2001, issued an interim report in March 2002 (Scottish Parliament, 2002a), and its final report in October 2002 (Scottish Parliament, 2002b) has won the support of the Scottish Executive (2002a), although at the time of writing the Executive still had to deliver its final response.

The enterprise and lifelong learning committee's report therefore seems to express a deep and long term national commitment to lifelong learning. For these reasons alone the report will attract the attention of fellow Council of Europe, European Union and OECD members and other jurisdictions with interests in lifelong learning. The report also makes some novel proposals on issues that concern the large number of countries that have no policy on lifelong learning and so will interest them as well.

Coverage: overcoming structural restrictions

The committee seeks to examine as one higher education, further education, vocational training and community/voluntary education (para 21). However, 'lifelong' was used by Beveridge to refer to provision 'from the cradle to the grave' (Halimi, 2001:34) and 'lifelong learning' is normally understood to include at least school education (Osborne & Edwards, 2003). The committee acknowledged the volume of evidence that sought a definition of lifelong learning that included nursery, pre-school and school education but said that its Parliamentary remit did not allow it to consider these elements of provision (para 5). In this the committee fails one of the main tests of a lifelong learning policy, a test that it applies severally to others.

The committee makes numerous recommendations for the integration of education and work and for the integration of vocational, further and higher education (paras 124, 289, 306, 333, 336, 341, 344, 358, 377 and 391). All these recommendations cross structural boundaries, many cross conceptual boundaries and arguably some make category mistakes. Nonetheless, for good policy reasons the committee expects institutions and agencies to think beyond their current remit to integrate the worlds of work, education and training (para 6) and operate lifelong learning as a single system (para 24). The Scottish Parliament could have set a useful example by giving its inquiry a remit to consider all of lifelong learning rather than restricting it to post compulsory education.

Entitlement

The committee's fundamental proposition and its ultimate aim is to make a standard basic entitlement to lifelong learning available to every citizen (para 28) which it hopes will help drive progress towards a single, cohesive lifelong learning system (para 26), give the individual access to a range of lifelong learning opportunities, irrespective of sector, and more control over their learning (para 28), and which would contribute to the committee's goals of economic development, social justice and active citizenship (para 23). The committee bases its learning entitlement on the Scottish credit and qualifications framework (para 116) which is recognised internationally as a model of systemic coherence and conceptual clarity.

The committee is right to emphasise demand aspects of inequitable participation in post-compulsory education –

134. We welcome the additional 5% allocated by the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council for this purpose [funding a premium for higher education institutions and colleges for each learner from the 10% most deprived postcode areas] in Scotland. However it may be that this supply-side mechanism is not sufficient to address the demand-side aspects of this issue. If the attitudes and perceptions which stop able young people from applying to universities are formed whilst they are of school age, it is essential that higher education institutions actively seek able young people from an early age, and that appropriate support is in place to allow those young people to achieve their full potential.

The greatest benefit in establishing an entitlement to lifelong learning may be in increasing the demand for post compulsory education from under represented groups. The committee is also right to emphasise the importance of informal and community based learning (para 139) and the workplace as a catalyst for learning (para 216) and for introducing members of under-represented groups into formal post compulsory education.

However, like almost every other paper concerned with reducing inequitable participation in post compulsory education, the enterprise and lifelong learning committee uses metaphors of establishing pathways (paths?), building bridges, removing barriers and widening access to post compulsory education. It is as if post compulsory education were a fort: to enter one has to find a path through a forest, build a bridge over a moat, lift a portcullis and widen access through the gateway. But as Field (2001) recently reported in this journal some adults have a deeply ambivalent and negative attitude to learning. According to this analysis the committee's report is another instance of an elite imposing its paradigm of organised learning on unwilling participants (much as the middle classes imposed compulsory primary and then secondary education on an unwilling working class in the 19th century).

I am tempted to propose an alternative metaphor about taking horses to the water. More constructively, Field (2001:107) locates orientations towards learning within wider clusters of values and individuals' transitions between social milieus. This suggests that rather than consider learning as enhancing (para 4), empowering (para 9), meeting the needs and aspirations (para 136) or stimulating (para 223) individuals, a more fruitful approach may be to construct education as a shared activity of social groups.

Discrimination against part time students

An Australasian observer is struck by many leading OECD jurisdictions' formal and informal discrimination against part time students in higher education. In North America, the UK and much of continental Europe the dominant paradigm in higher education is still of a student studying full time in residence directly after leaving secondary education. The curriculum is still dominated by large, full-year subjects that are hard to manage by part time students; learning-teaching is largely face-to-face with few classes timetabled in the early morning, twilight, evening and on weekends; and extra curricular activities assume that students are on campus for much of their time.

Governments' fee charging and student financing policies discriminate against part time students, often making fee waivers and discounts and student loans conditional upon full time study. This seems particularly incongruous in a lifelong learning policy whose main point is to encourage seamless transition between if not integration of study and family, work and civic engagement (Osborne & Edwards, 2003). It is hard to see how this can be achieved except by making part time study a norm, and accordingly the committee recommends that part-time learners be entitled to the same (or pro-rata) fee arrangements as full-time learners and that they be subject to the same arrangements for repayment, where appropriate (para 103). However, the committee immediately qualifies this recommendation with a pilot study (para 104) and by observing potential drawbacks (para 106).

It is true that many current part time students are paid well enough to afford fees or are sponsored by their employers and so state-funded entitlements to part-time adult learning could support dead-weight, as the committee expresses it (para 106). But the same could be said of state-funded entitlements to full-time learning by young students. There seems remarkable consistency between (first world) jurisdictions, over time and notwithstanding various policy changes including not charging fees: broadly, people with the highest 25% socio-economic status are over represented in higher education by about twice, while people with the lowest 25% socio-economic status are under represented by about half. Most current full time higher education students are therefore able to pay fees and will continue to participate in higher education if they are subject to reasonable fees, waivers and loans.

As the committee observes (para 101), a lifelong learning policy surely seeks to attract into further study people with family commitments, those in low skilled and therefore low paid jobs and those who are under-employed, all of whom could study only part time and none of whom are well placed to pay fees. While targeted fee exemptions and assistance may remove financial barriers for some students, the overall impression is of discouraging part time study.

The longstanding and widespread practice in the US, and the response in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia from the 1990s has been to charge all students fees. Eligibility for partial fee waivers and loans is determined by students' personal financial circumstances and depending on their circumstances, by those of their parents or partners. In these jurisdictions students' fees status is not affected by study load (full time/part time) nor by study mode (internal/external). The system is neutral even for provider type (higher/further education) and provider ownership (public/private) in Aotearoa New Zealand, for US federal government student grants and loans and for many US State governments' student financial assistance.

Comprehensive fee-charging and loan regimes has not changed the composition of higher education students in the US, Aotearoa New Zealand nor Australia. But the neutral financial treatment of part time and external students has made them much better accepted and more common in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australian universities, and part time and external enrolments are growing strongly in US 4-year higher education institutions, although admittedly not so much in the elite colleges and universities.

The enterprise and lifelong learning committee is correct in being careful in proposing financial commitments that it can't assess let alone meet. However, I would have started with the neutral treatment by study load and mode and adjusted student financing arrangements to fit the available resources. The committee has preferred to start with the status quo which favours full time students and seek to accommodate part time students within the resources that may be available. This is surely a safer, but a weaker commitment to lifelong learning.

Reverse articulation

Since Golding (1993, 1995) first drew attention to it Australia has been aware that more students transfer from higher education to vocational education and training than the assumed normal progression 'up' the educational ladder from VET to higher education. Thus in its sixth issues paper for its comprehensive review of higher education policy, on 'Varieties of learning: the interface between higher education and vocational education and training' the Department of Education, Science and Training (2002:7) reports that in 2001 a total of 15,316 students transferred from vocational education and training to higher education. In contrast at least 83,900 Australian students, over five and a half times as many, transferred from higher education to vocational education and training in 2001. Some 'reverse articulators' are students who fail to complete a higher education qualification and are attempting a less demanding qualification instead. But all of the 83,900 students reported above as reverse articulators had a degree or postgraduate diploma as their highest prior qualification. They are presumed to study in vocational education and training to add vocational skills to their general education.

Transfer rates between vocational education and training and higher education institutions can mean different things in different contexts. A low rate of transfer from vocational education and training to higher education can indicate that the sectors are well differentiated, that most prospective students commence in the appropriate sector and that therefore there is little need for students to transfer between sectors. Or it could mean that there are daunting formal and informal barriers to transferring between the sectors and that students are trapped in the sector

which they first join. Conversely, a high rate of transfer between tertiary sectors can indicate that they are poorly differentiated, that students find it difficult to identify the sector appropriate for them and that many need to taste and test and chop and change until they find the sector appropriate for them. Or it could mean that students can readily transfer between sectors as their needs change and that there is a realistic opportunity for students from low socio-economic status backgrounds to progress from vocational education and training where they tend to be proportionately represented to higher education where they are heavily under represented.

It appears that there is high socio-economic differentiation in Scotland between further education and higher education, and even within higher education between the ancient and older universities and the newer universities. This suggests that articulation is important to Scotland and this is indeed the finding of a recent report to the Scottish Executive (Osborne *et al*, 2002). In view of the importance of articulation in Scotland and of Golding's unexpected finding of reverse articulation in Australia, I would investigate the possibility of a similar phenomenon in Scotland. This would complement the enterprise and lifelong learning committee's useful observations on routes, pathways accreditation and assessment to higher education (paras 378-393).

The capitalist demon

The committee noted that several witnesses to its inquiry were concerned that its initial definition of lifelong learning emphasised excessively the economic aspect of lifelong learning. This is a common complaint of left-liberal commentators about national education policies in Australia and probably elsewhere, but no less incongruous for that. First, good Marxist orthodoxy says that education, like other cultural activities, is part of the social superstructure largely determined by the economic sub structure. While we may hope that education revolutionises the economic and class structure, this hardly seems likely by ignoring or denying education's economic role. Far better to acknowledge education's important role in feeding the capitalist enterprise and seek to reform if not revolutionise from within.

Secondly, students from lower socio economic status backgrounds as much as those from privileged backgrounds overwhelmingly participate in tertiary education for its economic benefit. Arguably students from lower socio economic status backgrounds participate in higher education at lower rates at least partly because the considerable economic benefit of higher education is less apparent to those without the cultural capital to recognise it. Disguising the economic role and benefit of higher education simply exacerbates its under-representation of people from low socio economic status backgrounds. Thirdly, work is a major part of adult life. Lifelong learning couldn't achieve its goal of extending learning throughout peoples' lives unless it engaged substantially with work.

Wisely in my view, the enterprise and lifelong learning committee makes the symbolic concession of broadening its definition of lifelong learning but argues that lifelong learning should contribute to economic development by supplying and maintaining the skills of a highly skilled work force (para 23) and it has an extensive discussion of work and learning which considers cultural change (paras 181-190), growing businesses (paras 191-200), lifelong learning for sole proprietors and other small business owners (paras 201-203), closing the skills gap (paras 204-209 and paras 282-289), developing employers' capacity for training (paras 210-215), developing lifelong learning through the workplace (paras 216-220), the role of trade unions (paras 221-227), job rotation (paras 228-230), work based learning for young people (paras 238-242) and work based training programs (paras 250-281).

Business learning accounts

While many of the committee's concerns are familiar to an Australian reader, their instance and remedy are specific to each jurisdiction's circumstances. However, some ideas seem to have potential for application to Australia and perhaps to other jurisdictions. One such idea is individual learning accounts, which has attracted several Australian Labor Party policy makers (Baldwin, 1997:80; Latham, 1998; Tanner, 1999:168; Macklin, 2002) notwithstanding their being discredited soon after their introduction in the UK. Most of the UK's problems with individual learning accounts seems to have stemmed from loose verification of account holders' identity and a lack of quality control of providers (NAO, 2002:33), both of which may be readily avoided should they be introduced in Australia.

The enterprise and lifelong learning committee's proposal for business learning accounts (paras 350-354) is novel and has considerable attraction for Australia and possibly other countries. Business learning accounts were apparently first proposed by the Federation of Small Businesses (2001: para 3.1) to the Scottish Executive. Unfortunately the committee offers scant information on what it contemplates in its final report, and only a few additional skerricks in its interim report on the lifelong learning inquiry (Scottish Parliament, 2002b: paras 109-112). Business learning accounts would be modelled on individual learning accounts (2002a: para 111). They would primarily support micro and small businesses (2002b: para 352). Presumably each eligible business would be entitled to a determined level of learning support, which might be taken in the form of consultancies, on the job training or support for employees in formal programs.

Recently Australia has considered the challenge of increasing business' involvement and investment in research and development and innovation generally (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999, 2001). The challenge is particularly great for small to medium sized enterprises for financial, structural and attitudinal reasons. And yet small to medium sized enterprises employ most people and create most new jobs. Their health seems vital to the health of the economy and employment overall. Australia has tried to encourage investment in research and development with increased tax incentives, but with mixed results. A business innovation account for micro and small enterprises is another idea worth developing and testing.

Priorities

In addition to its role in skill and business development the enterprise and lifelong learning committee argues that lifelong learning should redress the inequitable under representation of various groups in tertiary education (para 72) and also maintain and enhance high quality lifelong learning across all sectors (para 86). But the committee is strangely silent on the place in lifelong learning of Scotland's ancient universities, and in particular of its two universities of the highest international rank.

One of the committee's aims is 'To ensure that the allocation of resources within the lifelong learning system is purposefully directed towards equality of opportunity and that it promotes parity of esteem across the full range of learning opportunities (para 73) which would argue for a parity of resources across the full range of post compulsory providers (paras 334, 357), but it is curious that the committee should not say so explicitly. The committee says that its position on the levels of teaching funding in higher education was set out in 2001 in its report on the SHEFC review of teaching funding (para 334) however that report was mainly about the method for determining funding relativities between disciplines, and while it was sympathetic to the post-1992 universities especially in its recommendations on research funding, it did not address explicitly whether and how much increased funding should be

allocated to maintain the eminence of Scotland's highest achieving institutions (Scottish Parliament, 2001).

Australia with four times Scotland's population finds that it cannot support tertiary education that achieves the three goals of contributing to economic development, supporting social justice and having one or two institutions ranked in the top 100 in the world. If Sir Richard Sykes (2002) is right in saying that Imperial College at least needs to charge extra fees to maintain its quality, which two-thirds of British vice chancellors have reluctantly conceded is also necessary for their universities (Thomson, 2002) it is at least possible that Scotland's most distinguished universities face a similar dilemma. Is a decision not to charge fees a de facto decision that for the next generation Scotland will aspire to maintain universities of the highest international standard, but not to have any universities in the top international rank?

Circumstances are different in Scotland, of course: its ancient universities have built their traditions over almost four times the age of Australia's oldest universities; Scotland's universities are supported by all of the UK and not Scotland alone; and Scotland is much closer to and is integrating with the vast cultural, educational and economic wealth of continental Europe. So Scotland may be able to afford to support two universities in the top international rank as well as its other lifelong learning priorities, but if this is one of the country's goals it will need to be pursued deliberately.

I would prefer to have a plan for my nation's top universities and to have their relation with the rest of tertiary education stated explicitly. It is also necessary to establish priorities between goals, in funding if in nothing else. Again, the enterprise and lifelong learning committee seems to have overlooked priorities entirely.

Measuring success and comparing performance

The enterprise and lifelong learning committee makes some sound general observations on measuring success, but no specific proposal on how this might be done (paras 423-437). This is unfortunate since performance indicators is another way of stating priorities and stimulating action.

Scotland is fortunate in having in Ireland a near neighbour which is of comparable size and is also first world and Anglophone, and which embarked on the experiment of development through education only two or three decades earlier. Circumstances are importantly different in Ireland. Nonetheless, Ireland is a useful comparator and perhaps also a potential collaborator in Scotland's implementation of lifelong learning. The committee refers briefly and generally to 'the Irish model' (para 60) and recommends the development of international benchmarks against which Scotland's lifelong learning performance can be measured (para 431) but otherwise does not take advantage of the rich resources of research, policy and experience in lifelong learning available internationally, and particularly offered by its partners in the European Union (Davis, 2001; Halimi & Hristoskova, 2001), in the OECD and also by UNESCO (Kearney, 2001).

Conclusion: the high road little travelled

Scotland has recovered its nationhood while the notion of lifelong learning is ascendant. Building on a long egalitarian commitment to learning and support for higher learning, it has been natural for the Scottish Parliament to use lifelong learning as a principle to organise a range of proposals that might otherwise have been pursued separately if at all. Parliament's enterprise and lifelong learning committee's final report on lifelong learning considers a broad range of issues and proposes a correspondingly wide-ranging strategies. The Scottish

Executive also supports lifelong learning and has said that it will consider the committee's proposals seriously, although of course it would be surprising if it could adopt and implement all of such an ambitious program now.

Scotland is already well known internationally for its credit and qualifications framework and will no doubt soon be known for its lifelong learning policy. If the policy is implemented with any vestige of the vision that informs it Scotland will soon be a model for other jurisdictions that seek development through learning. However, the very ambition of the enterprise and lifelong learning committee's proposals is also its main challenge, and the committee has not provided any help with priorities or even measures to assess progress. The resolution of those matters will be crucial to the policy's success.

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