

## Post-16 Reform in Scotland: putting learners at the centre?

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‘Meeting the needs of the learner is at the heart of all our proposals’, is the claim in the Ministerial Foreword to *Putting Learners at the Centre*<sup>1</sup>, the document in which recent pre-legislative proposals for reforming the post-16 education sector are set out by the Scottish Government. Such a grand claim warrants scepticism. Despite references to consultative arrangements, student partnership agreements to make transparent what students and providers can expect from each other, and consultations with the National Union of Students in Scotland, there are no concrete indicators of how learners will shape institutional decision-making.

There are, however, some aspects of the post-16 education reform proposals which are undoubtedly popular. The retention of the Education Maintenance Allowance with a guaranteed income level of £7k for full time students in higher education is welcome. Also welcome is the commitment to the principle that access to higher education is based on the ability to learn rather than the ability to pay. For adult learners entering higher education this is good news although the announcement was less well received south of the border. ‘Rest of the UK’ (RUK) students will be charged with the University of Edinburgh and the University of St. Andrews raising tuition fees to £36k for a four-year degree, making them the most expensive universities to study at in the UK. If merit applies to the selection of Scottish students the ability to pay will clearly determine who can apply from outside Scotland. The apparent anomaly that students from the European union cannot be charged under the principle that allows variation within, but not between member states, is addressed by the introduction of a ‘management fee’. How much is to be charged has yet to be set and its legality may well be tested.

The main driver for the new proposals is an economic one and the solution is seen in terms of articulating different educational providers: schools, community education, colleges, training provision, universities and work are to be linked in a variety of flexible ways for one main purpose – employability. Not surprisingly mergers or closures of colleges and higher educational institutions are likely to be on the cards and the new proposals will give greater directive powers to the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning to bring these forward.

The language of the document reflects what Biesta (2006) rightly points out is one of the main problems of the discourse of lifelong learning, which he names the ‘learnification’ of economic problems. Acquiring new skills and attitudes is the educational policy solution to recession. Nevertheless, for young adult learners there are a number of options being proposed which may well offer a significant alternative to the dole queue: for 16-17 year olds deemed at risk there will be bespoke ‘activity agreements’ including learning support supplied by community educators; for 16-19

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<sup>1</sup> Scottish Government (2011) *Putting Learners at the Centre: Delivering our Ambitions for Post-16 Education*, Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

year olds (the priority target group) there will be national training programmes or a guaranteed place in post-16 education provision; the creation of 25,000 work-based apprenticeships for each year of the Parliament's term; a talent Scotland graduate programme; interactive websites about the world of work and labour market opportunities, amongst other things. What is not on offer, however, is a broad curriculum beyond the need to find work for a narrow age range.

Adult learners in other forms of adult education do not get a mention in the post-16 proposals. Although reference to the expansion of part-time routes into higher education is stated a mere one sentence suggests little thought has been given to this issue. Despite the pressing need of young people for good jobs, the focus on 16-19 year olds merely extends the concentration of inputs on the 'front end' of education rather than addressing the educational needs of the population across the age spectrum. The recent independent inquiry into lifelong learning in the UK argues convincingly for a more demographically equitable distribution of educational resources<sup>2</sup>. Because Scotland also has an ageing population many people will be disadvantaged as a result.

Widening access of course requires motivating people to learn who are currently demotivated because they have few prospects. However, motivation that is lasting is primarily because of the intrinsic rewards that learning brings rather than because of an extrinsic goal. True 'learner-centredness' means that learners define the purpose and point of learning so that it is meaningful to them – but if this is pre-decided by policy as progression into learning for work then for many people it will have no point or purpose<sup>3</sup>.

The assumption made about progression also undermines the claim of learner-centredness. Progression is depicted as a vertical system of ascending different rungs of an educational ladder into employment whereas it can also be a horizontal process of personal and social development. Individuals returning to learning may simply want to participate in activities in the home and community that they previously felt unable or incompetent at doing. One of the long-term outcomes of horizontal forms of progression may be a movement into formal education and training, but the latter should not be the main yardstick for measuring success.

Motivating people to learn new skills – particularly when their experience of education has been negative - will depend first on nurturing their identity as capable learners. This is a resource intensive process and primarily thrives when education has the breadth and depth to fully relate to people's lives<sup>4</sup>. It requires a 'rounded' education which builds from the strengths and interests of learners and provides an

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<sup>2</sup> Schuller, T. and Watson, D. (2009) *Learning Through Life: Inquiry into the Future For Lifelong Learning*, Leicester:NIACE.

<sup>3</sup> Biesta, G. (2006) 'What's the point of lifelong learning if lifelong learning has no point? On the democratic deficit of policies for lifelong learning. *European Educational Research Journal*, vol 5 (3&4) 169-180.

<sup>4</sup> Crowther, J., MacLachlan, K. and Tett, L. (2010) 'Adult literacy, learning identities and pedagogic practice', *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 29, (6) 651-664.

exciting and challenging stimulus for study. A vision of learning as merely acquiring skills for the job market pales in comparison.

It is an established fact that Scotland has a more highly qualified population than the rest of the UK but simultaneously has lower levels of productivity. There is no simple relationship between skills, qualifications and economic success. As well as labour market 'supply' factors governments have to stimulate 'demand' and provide incentives for employers to invest in new and different skills in a complex labour market. What is required are high quality, worthwhile jobs, that enable people to grow as well as growing the economy. Having one without the other will not resolve the problem.

Ultimately the post-16 reform proposals display a poverty of purpose and vision. Whilst there are pressing economic problems there is also an urgent democratic crisis as financial markets pressurise national governments for political change, which is evident across member states of the EU particularly in Greece and Italy. What is needed is a vision of education which makes a vital contribution to a humane, democratic and socially just society as well as a thriving and sustainable economic life. Skills for work are only part of the equation. Moreover, the claim to be putting 'learners at the centre' of post-16 reform is unconvincing. For example, although the document claims that the Scottish Funding Council has learner centredness as a key theme of its corporate plan a search of its website, using the term as a keyword, reveals nothing. There is little sense of learners being involved in any meaningful way in shaping post-16 education whereas there are numerous references to the needs and interests of employers in the system. Scotland has a rich legacy of an accessible educational system based on an open and wide curriculum<sup>5</sup>. In some respects this has been an influence on the primarily school-focused policy development of a *Curriculum for Excellence*. It's a pity that post-16 reform is so narrowly conceived in comparison.

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<sup>5</sup> Davie, G. (1961) *The Democratic Intellect*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.