

CONSULTATION, CONSULTATION, CONSULTATION: POLICY MAKING IN ACTION PLAN, HIGHER STILL AND BEYOND

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Introduction

This paper examines three phases in educational policy-making in Scotland over the past 25 years, running from central direction to local accountability as the key feature.

Phase 1 is characterised by the existence of a small cadre of policy-makers located within the Scottish Education Department but concentrated in the Inspectorate¹ and acting relatively independently of the political structure. Educational Authority managers are involved in the discussion of issues and practitioners are involved in development work. There is a high level of consensus.

Phase 2 is characterised by massive involvement of practitioners in workshops and seminars, but the level of consensus and involvement in policy discussions is disputed. HMI still lead developments for the Executive, but political involvement is also significant although hidden. Education Authorities have an important role alongside other stakeholder bodies.

Phase 3 is the post-devolution model in which cross-party committees attempt to achieve consensus on large-scale policy issues, but the real drivers are Ministers in the coalition government. HMI have become an agency and the Executive role is adapting to the new political environment. Policy-making is associated with government pledges and requires the involvement of a wide community of accountable bodies, especially Education Authorities.

Each of these phases culminates in the publication of a policy document setting out the principles for major and extensive curriculum reform – *Action Plan* for learners 16+, *Higher Still* for learners 14+ and *A Curriculum for Excellence* for learners 3-18. Each of these policy documents is based on a significant consultation process and each is the basis for complex, system-wide change.

Phase 1: Action Plan

In January 1983, the Scottish Education Department (SED) published *16-18s in Scotland: An Action Plan*. In format it was a very modest document, the title simply indicated the intended scope of the paper, and tone of the whole paper was very matter of fact.

Action Plan had been in development since the mid 1970s and was the result of work, mainly undertaken by Scottish HMI, to provide appropriate provision for 16-18 year olds at a time when youth unemployment was growing, and the need to develop a workforce with new

¹ HMI, now HMIE (Education), have always had a distinctive role, and probably status, in Scotland from that in England. There are no local inspectors and although they are now an agency, their role is not that of OFSTED. In the 1960s and 70s they were effectively the body which led curriculum reform.

technological and transferable skills was becoming more apparent. In its introduction, *Action Plan* makes it clear that Scotland will be meeting government policy in its own way, through the new Standard Grade courses for 14-16s and through the *Action Plan* itself.

The consultative process which led to *Action Plan* appears to have been quite wide in scope and varied in approach with serious efforts being made to get comments from educational, commercial, industrial and training interests. Although the Secretary of State had been involved in this, the document contains no foreword or other political endorsement. *Action Plan* was firmly led by HMI - an important internal report from a Schools/Further Education Study Group, chaired by a senior HMI; a discussion document prepared by the Inspectorate Committee on Education 16-19; and a series of regional conferences organised by SED on the theme "16-19: Educational Needs after School". There had been consultation exercise in 1979, which is given a clear reference in *Action Plan*. Some of the anecdotal evidence also emphasises the valuable input made by Education Authority officers (who were of course responsible for colleges as well as schools at that time).

Action Plan noted that the proposals in the paper were not worked out in detail. The paper was intended to set out the educational principles upon which action should be taken, to state who should be taking action on these and what action they should be taking. The introduction ended with the gnomic statement: "This paper is ... not prescriptive, but neither is it simply part of a further consultative process." Within three years development groups lead by HMI had modularised the entire post-16 vocational curriculum and developed a range of new general modules for use in schools and colleges. All of this was recorded on one, cumulative certificate to replace the qualifications offered by SCOTEC, SCOTBEC and CGLI. More importantly, perhaps, it brought the ideas of progression, articulation and credit accumulation and transfer to the fore and started a policy process which would lead to *Higher Still*, the formation of the Scottish Qualifications Authority and the development of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework.

Action Plan implementation was not without its critics, but was largely accepted for its benefits in introducing a measure of flexibility to the curriculum. The numbers of candidates registered for National Certificate modules more than doubled in the first five years of the system and the number of modules they were taking rose even more dramatically. These advantages were so immediately apparent that within five years work had started on the unitisation of HNCs and HNDs, following consultation, but driven by the demands of the college sector.

Higher Still

Higher Still: Opportunity for All was published by the Scottish Office in March 1994, following the rejection of the report of the Howie Committee in 1992. That Committee had been established to review upper secondary education in Scotland at a time when staying on rates were continuing to grow and it was agreed that there was a lack of provision for many of these students. The Howie Committee was initially intended to make proposals for the 16-18 group in schools but inevitably extended its work to 14-16s and to further education provision. It proposed bringing together the systems run by the Scottish Examinations Board (SEB) and the Scottish Vocational Education Council (Scotvec), in a twin-track system which would require Standard Grades (designed for 14-16 year-olds) to be moved back a year to allow students to start on programmes leading to a Scotbac or a Scotcert award. The 300

respondents to the report firmly rejected these proposals which they saw as unwarranted and divisive.

Higher Still was a slim booklet, but in 12 out of a total of 24 pages it set out the blueprint for radical changes to provision for learners 14+ in schools and colleges. It was a high profile document, required to remedy Howie's failure and make recommendation which would affect the future of the century-old Highers, the University entrance qualification. It contained a foreword by the Secretary of State and it had been through a process of clearance in London as well as Edinburgh in which the original HMI proposals were significantly altered at Ministerial level. Proposals for a 5-level structure based on group awards were rejected in favour of maintaining Highers as the main qualifications currency (foreshadowing the Tomlinson proposals and the government response to these).

In planning for the Higher Still Development Programme, there was a conscious concern to try to learn from the development and introduction of Standard Grades. For example, cascading, the means of dissemination for Standard Grade, was felt not to have worked and therefore it was decided that staff development should be delivered directly by the programme. A number of school closure days were proposed, but this was rejected at a senior level in the Executive, forcing the programme back into a cascade model. One consequence, revealed by the certification crisis of 2000, was that most teachers did not understand the new certification system and had not prepared pupils for it.

In its endeavours to involve and support practitioners, the Higher Still Development Programme produced draft and final documentation and consultation papers literally on an industrial scale and held huge numbers of seminars where debate could take place. Consultations were held in the course of the Development Programme on most aspects of the emerging system, including post-16 curriculum principles, core skills and group awards. However, it was hard for participants to see the full picture, particularly when they were actively engaged in specific development activities.

Higher Still was written on the basis that Howie's analysis of the issues and those features which were continued from the existing systems – especially unitisation, core skills and the GSVQ were supported and needed no further debate. However, both the Howie and *Higher Still* proposals required respondents not only to understand the implications of specific principles but also the interrelationships of the effects of implementing the principles. One result was that, as the Higher Still Development Programme proceeded, practitioners in particular were faced by changes which were unforeseen and unwelcome, causing support to ebb and leading to a feeling that there had been insufficient consultation on the principles. For many, the line of continuity from Howie was not clear. Howie had reported after an open and influenceable process and Howie had been rejected; but after that it appeared that the policy makers had gone into cabal and developed something which required a further debate which was not being held.

It was also intended that in each subject area, specialist groups should simply bring together SEB courses and Scotvec modules. This allowed the programme to have a very short timescale initially. However, in most subjects the changes were not simple and in a number of areas, subject groups set up unplanned and unintended syllabus reviews under the aegis of the programme – a repetition of one of the problems of the Standard Grade Development Programme. Many of the resulting arrangements created new issues for assessment and

certification and the programme found it hard to maintain uniformity in the face of strong subject pressure. The result was that – as with Standard Grade - implementation had to be delayed and the assessment arrangements devised by the subject groups had to be slimmed down after initial implementation.

All of these issues came to the fore in the wake of failure of SQA's certification arrangements in 2000. As a result there was yet more national consultation - not only by the Executive, but also through surveys by bodies such as the teacher unions, the Scottish Parent Teacher Council and the Scottish Further Education Unit. These tended to show that, while there were strong pockets of opposition to certain aspects of the reform, such as unitisation, there was no wide-spread opposition to the new system.

Among other measures taken to re-establish confidence in the system, a National Qualifications Steering Group (NQSG) was established, with members drawn from key stakeholder organisations and this group undertook a fundamental enquiry into the new system. This did not support the claim that *Higher Still* had been insufficiently consulted on, but did support the concerns about the assessment load. As a result a complete review of the new National Courses was put in train.

A Curriculum for Excellence

One of the aims of Scottish parliamentarians has been to create processes which would be distinct from the Westminster system and one area where this seemed possible was in the role of the Parliamentary Committees. In 2001, the Committee responsible for lifelong learning set up a major inquiry which attracted much interest in the education and training community and beyond. Stakeholders showed an eagerness to participate challenging the idea – current at the time - that the Higher Still Development Programme had left stakeholders suffering from “consultation fatigue”: 120 groups and individuals sent in evidence and 58 organisations offered oral evidence. The Committee produced a well received report in 2002, which Ministers used as a basis for a policy paper a year later.

In 2002 the Education Committee launched an Inquiry into the Purposes of Scottish Education. This ran parallel to a Ministerial initiative - the National Debate on Education which, was reported to have generated a wide-ranging reaction including more than 1,500 responses (including over 400 from school pupils) and the involvement of over 20,000 people in at least 800 events. The Committee's Inquiry received between 50 and 60 submissions, commissioned 10 focus groups and took oral evidence on three occasions. It also had access to the submissions to the National Debate. The Inquiry reported in terms similar to the report on the National Debate – there had been very mixed messages calling, for example, for both stability and reform. The policy document which emerged in 2003, *Educating for Excellence: Choice and Opportunity*, was the response to the National Debate and made no formal reference to or acknowledgement of the report on the Inquiry.

In November 2004, Scottish Executive published a handsome folder containing two complementary documents under the heading *A Curriculum for Excellence*. It contained the recommendations of a Curriculum Review Group established twelve months earlier and the Ministerial Response to the Group's proposals. The scope of these papers is “for the first time ever, a single curriculum 3-18, supported by a simple and effective structure of assessment and qualifications.” These documents might be seen as a culmination of the process of post-devolution policy-making.

The overtly political status of the Curriculum Review is notable. Whereas *Action Plan* appeared to be apolitical and *Higher Still* had only a formal letter of endorsement, the Curriculum Review proposals on the other hand contain a lengthy supportive introduction jointly signed by the Minister for Education and Young People and his deputy (representing the two parties of the coalition government) as well as being accompanied by the separate “Ministerial Response”.

The root of policy-making is a Labour-Liberal Democrat Partnership Agreement (2003) which sets the Executive’s fifteen “High Level Commitments” and twenty-six points of “Supporting Activity”. Curricular reform comes under a commitment to provide “more flexible learning and development opportunities so that pupils’ experience is matched to their individual needs.” In particular, for 14-18 year-olds – “assessment methods that support learning and teaching” and “courses to allow 14-16 year-olds to develop vocational skills ... and undertake courses in further education colleges as part of a school-based curriculum”.

The Curriculum Review report does not refer to this agreement, but it does contain quotations from or references to: the Dewar-Alexander document on Social Justice: *A Scotland where everyone matters* (1999), and the National Debate on Education – which it describes as “the most extensive consultation ever of the people of Scotland on the state of school education”. No mention is made of the parliamentary Inquiry into the Purposes of Education.

More importantly, perhaps, it refers to legislation. The *Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000* created a new basis for all educational policy making in Scotland, by defining the responsibilities of Ministers and increasing the accountability of Education Authorities. This was done through the development of statutory national priorities for education, defined in a statutory order a year later. The intention here is to create a framework for reporting within which local flexibility and experimentation can be applied. In effect the sequence of publication might make it seem that the Curriculum Review offers post hoc justification for these priorities.

Summary and conclusions

In terms of policy learning, it can appear that the pace and extent of change in the structure and roles of key organisations in the education and training community is such as to make it unlikely that policy memory can be maintained and worthwhile lessons extracted from the experience of different phases of policy making. In the period covered by this paper, the devolution process has resulted in significant changes at a political level and corresponding adaptations in the roles of the Scottish Executive and most of the important NGOs. At the same time, Scotland is a small country and there has been a lot of continuity in the people involved, the views expressed and the issues addressed.

Action Plan was developed in a pre-devolution Scotland where, in education at least, Scottish politicians of both parties appear often to have been distracted by their work in Westminster to the point that the SED could take a lead role in policy-making. Indeed it was the claim of some senior civil servants that they were able to maintain a steady course for Scottish education with only minor diversions as the party in power changed. Only occasionally, it appears, were changes made at a political level to the plans drawn up by civil servants.

The Higher Still Development Programme started in the last years of a Conservative Government which had been driving change in education in Scotland, continued under new Labour and was completed under the devolved coalition administration. The original proposals were significantly altered at a Ministerial level, but once the programme was in train there appears to have been little political interference in its progress under the leadership of HMI. Nonetheless it seems likely that as the power balance changed after devolution and Ministers took more interest in policy-making, the role of the inspectorate would be challenged. In the end, it was the SQA certification crisis which turned HMI into an agency at arm's length from government, and although they have again established an influence in policy making, they do not have the leadership and policy memory roles which they had in the last century.

The role of education authority officers in curriculum reform is also an important theme in this paper. At the time of Action Plan they held considerable power over both schools and colleges, but in the years between Action Plan and *Higher Still*, that power was steadily eroded as they were required to devolve more and more responsibility to schools and colleges become independent. This period also saw the removal of the regions, the re-establishment of smaller education authorities and a move towards more local planning, which gave these officers more responsibility, if not more power. Some of the new senior officers came from areas other than education (eg where education was absorbed into a larger directorate), but many were the same people who had been involved in Action Plan and *Higher Still*. Then came the Act covering standards in schools, which placed even wider responsibilities on the authorities – not just to provide education for young people, but to ensure that they thrived – and instituted an inspection regime to ensure that they were meeting these obligations. All of this must give education authorities a revived and growing interest in policy-making at a national level.

The Executive's role seems less clear. They have managed a move from a centralised to a very devolved process of turning principles into practice. The key words in policy papers in the 1980s and 90s were “access”, “opportunity” and “for all”: today it appears to be “excellence” and behind this is the principle that this is best achieved by a combination of local flexibility and strong accountability.² The issue for the Executive must be how to maintain national balance and fairness across the resulting diversified system.

Arguably this message can be seen in the medium of the policy documents which are the focus of this paper. *Action Plan*, modest in presentation and title and with no apparent political input, is actually revolutionary in its ideas and its effect. *Higher Still*, intended to maintain continuity in a blended system, actually brought about significant change. And *A Curriculum for Excellence*, which sounds radical, actually follows and builds on (confirms?) revolutionary changes brought about through Ministerial leadership, through important legislation followed by a massive consultation exercise.

Higher Still consultations invited stakeholders to engage with quite technical questions and detailed policy issues. This may not have been a reasonable expectation, and we have seen how some stakeholders later felt that they had not been consulted on key aspects of the system, when these were in fact implicit in the matters they had responded to. This feeling of

² Howie and Higher Still were concerned with raising achievement as well as increasing access and creating opportunity through flexible provision within a unified system.

exclusion or loss of control, may explain why, at the same time that it was said that the education community was suffering from “consultation fatigue”, many organisations and individuals became involved in the Lifelong Learning Inquiry and the National Debate.

These high level diversified consultations require less in the way of technical discussion and appear in some ways to be more simple than *Higher Still*. However the principles identified by the National Debate and the National Priorities must have consequences for the system which are every bit as complex and tension-generating as those brought about by *Higher Still*. The key difference in the new process is that devolved accountability leaves some of the tensions to be dealt with locally – and of course the consequences of this approach are hard to predict. What is not clear is how far this change is grounded in policy learning, a creative response to changing circumstances, or a serious attempt to combine experience and innovation.

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