

Expert seminar on Scotland

11 December 2008

Summary of Key Points

This note summarises the key points and issues for further consideration by the Inquiry that were raised during the seminar.

1. Economic context and devolution As the recession takes hold, it is possible that tensions will emerge in the area of learning and skills development between the UK government response led by the DWP and the framework set out in the Scottish skills strategy. The DWP agenda will fundamentally shape the contexts which allow people to learn, and reflects the English government line which has positioned vocational learning as the route into work and out of poverty. In Scotland, the social dimension of learning has continued to be stressed as a way of engaging people at a distance from the labour market.
2. Coherence between sectors A range of initiatives including the establishment of a single funding council (the Scottish Funding Council) and the development of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework reflect concern with securing coherence both between FE and HE, and beyond with the schools and community learning sectors. A 'continuum of provision' from 'cradle to grave' is the goal, but different stakeholders have different views about what this will look like. Currently, individual sectors perform well overall, but there is evidence of good and bad practice and institutions both inside and outside the SFC remain insufficiently joined up. The creation of the SCQF is a major achievement, but the challenge of how to make it an effective agent of change still needs to be addressed. The community education sector is experiencing particular funding challenges with the growing focus on economic development evident under the current administration. The particular geographical challenges that exist, particularly in the Highlands and Islands, to providing learning, should also not be overlooked. Partnership and collaborative working are critical.
3. Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs) These have been developed with two strands: ILA 500s to support part time learners in HE, and ILA 200s which are available to anyone with an income below £18,000. The reception of ILA 200s in some quarters, e.g. among Unions, has been mixed because they are difficult to work with when not everyone has access. There is interest in exploring the potential for developing collective ILAs, as a way of dealing with the challenge of gathering together enough people with ILAs to make learning programmes viable.
4. Skills Utilisation This has emerged as a major issue for Scotland, where relatively high and rising levels of qualification have not been matched by increases in national productivity. However, to date only limited progress has been made in determining how to improve utilisation of skills. It demands a shift in emphasis from the current policy focus which stresses using skills as a driver for change, towards making more effective use of the stock of skills in the system. Work carried out in Finland and Australia is being studied to see what lessons can be applied to the Scottish context.

5. Inequalities and aspirations Evidence since the 1980s suggests that, despite rising attainment levels among school leavers, relative inequalities based on social and economic background are maintained. These are revealed in the social segregation within the HE and FE systems, the continuing problem of young people not in education, employment or training, and the high levels of adults with literacy and numeracy difficulties. Gender is also an issue. Women significantly outperform men at all levels within the education system, and levels of male participation in both formal and informal learning are low. These gaps and inequalities are linked to structural factors which play out in limited opportunities and low levels of aspiration. The early years of secondary schooling is a critical, where boys in particular desert learning. Policy efforts to raise individual aspirations will be challenged by the recession.

6. Discourse and language This has been a recurrent theme in the Inquiry's work and emerged again here. Scotland presents an alternative to the dominant UK / English discourse, not only because of the focus on utilisation rather than just the supply side, but also because of the stronger rhetoric around democracy (allowing for discussion of how far this is just rhetoric, with the growing emphasis that is evident on the economic purposes of learning). Reshaping the discourse should be a major aim of the Inquiry.

Inquiry Secretariat
December 2008