

**Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong  
Learning:  
The Scottish Perspective**

By Jim Gallacher

## Introduction

### Introduction

Historically, there have been differences in policy and provision with respect to lifelong learning in Scotland when compared to other parts of the UK. This has reflected broader differences within the social, political and cultural traditions which have shaped the development of education and lifelong learning. However, developments in the last ten years or so, and in particular since the establishment of a devolved government, have helped to reinforce and strengthen these differences.

### The policy context

There have been two significant phases of policy development in lifelong learning in Scotland in recent years.

The first phase occurred after the UK election of New Labour in 1997, and the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999. Under these devolutionary arrangements, the funding and national governance structures began to increasingly diverge from those found in England. An important characteristic of the policy framework in Scotland, and which to some extent distinguishes it from the rest of the UK, has been the extent to which lifelong learning continued to be a key aspect of the policy agenda, while in England it was increasingly being replaced by a growing emphasis on skills.

This emphasis on lifelong learning can be seen firstly in the decision by the Scottish Parliament's Lifelong Learning Committee to establish an Inquiry into Lifelong Learning. The Inquiry was established in July 2001 and produced its final report in September 2002.<sup>1</sup> The agreed remit was:

“To inquire into the need for a long term, comprehensive strategy for continuing post-compulsory education and training in Scotland which meets the needs and aspirations of individuals and society as a whole....”

(Scottish Parliament, 2002, p.1)

Within this wide remit, lifelong learning was defined in a holistic way, which included further and higher education, vocational training and community/voluntary education.<sup>2</sup> A number of the key themes and recommendations from this report were then taken up by the Scottish Executive and were reflected in its Lifelong Learning Strategy.<sup>3</sup> Within this strategy, while the importance of the development of skills, employability, and a knowledge economy were all strongly emphasised, this was balanced by reference to the pursuit of social inclusion, and the development of the learner. Policy documents placed emphasis on measures which would address issues of inequality in participation. This emphasis on widening participation is of course not at all unique to Scottish policy, and has been a major theme of policy throughout the UK. However, it has continued to be more strongly emphasised in Scottish policy.

Associated with this emphasis on lifelong learning has been a strong emphasis on collaboration. These measures are designed to facilitate the development of a more seamless tertiary education system in which there will be more opportunities for

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<sup>1</sup> Scottish Parliament (2002).

<sup>2</sup> *op cit*, p.5, paragraph 21.

<sup>3</sup> Scottish Executive (2003).

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learners to move between different parts of the system, and in this way widen the range of learning opportunities available.

A second policy phase can be recognised as having been introduced when, following the elections to the Scottish Parliament in 2007, a minority Scottish Nationalist Government was established. This government has placed greater emphasis on skills, associated with their political agenda of establishing sustainable economic growth, which would underpin an independent Scotland. The only policy document in the area of lifelong learning published by this government has been the Skills Strategy.<sup>4</sup> However, the approach emphasised in this policy has again been distinctive. It explicitly distanced itself from the emphasis on the supply of skills found in the Leitch Report,<sup>5</sup> and instead has emphasised the idea of skills utilisation.<sup>6</sup> While placing a new emphasis on skills, this policy phase has also continued to recognise the importance of the wider aspects of lifelong learning. The Ministerial Letter of Guidance to the Scottish Funding Council for 2009–12, while emphasising skills and employability, also explicitly identifies ‘widening access and progression’ and ‘collaboration’ as priorities which should be pursued. Associated with this has been a continued focus on seeking to reduce the numbers of young people who are not in education, employment or training. This was previously referred to as the NEET (not in employment, education or training) group, but is now referred to as ‘more choices, more chances’ in Scotland.

More broadly, lifelong learning is now seen as something which stretches from ‘cradle to grave’, and the focus is no longer on post-compulsory education. Associated with this, the Scottish Government is now advocating a new approach to teaching and learning which has been entitled the ‘Curriculum for Excellence’. This now includes the age range from three to 18, but is also seen as having implications for adults beyond this age group.

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<sup>4</sup> Scottish Government (2007).

<sup>5</sup> Leitch Review of Skills (2006).

<sup>6</sup> Scottish Government (2007).

### The organisational context

The policy context outlined above, with its emphasis on lifelong learning and collaboration as central pillars, has supported the emergence of a number of organisations and initiatives which have helped shape provision and the experiences of learners in Scotland.

The first of these was the creation of the *Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework* (SCQF) in 2001. SCQF was created by four development partners. These consisted of the Scottish Qualification Authority (SQA), which is responsible for all qualifications and awards, both academic and vocational outside of the higher education institutions in Scotland; the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and Universities Scotland, representing the higher education sector; while the fourth partner was the Scottish Executive (now the Scottish Government). More recently, a fifth partner has been added to represent the college and further education sector. Through this representation, all of the main qualifications in Scotland have now been credit rated and included in the SCQF. A considerable volume of work has also been undertaken to include systems for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) within the Framework. The aim has been to create a more flexible lifelong learning system and ensure that people find it easier to gain credit for any learning they have undertaken and move from one part of the education and lifelong learning system to another. Scotland is now recognised as an international leader in having established such a comprehensive credit and qualifications framework. However, it is not yet clear whether this framework is having the hoped for impact in creating more flexibility in the system. It has been described as an *instrument of change* rather than an *agent of change*, and it has been suggested that it must be complemented by other policies which motivate people to use the potential which the framework provides.<sup>7</sup>

The second main collaborative development which has shaped the landscape for lifelong learning in Scotland has been the establishment of a *joint funding council for further and higher education*. The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) for further and higher education was established in 2005. This can be seen as a further attempt to create a more integrated and coherent system of tertiary education in Scotland. The colleges are now known as Scotland's Colleges rather than FE colleges in recognition of the extent of higher education work in most colleges (around 10 per cent on average). Different funding methodologies operate for the colleges and higher education institutions (HEIs), but the funding arrangements for the colleges have enabled them to develop as a robust and confident sector which provides a wide range of lifelong learning opportunities from adult basic education to degree level. The SFC has also actively encouraged articulation arrangements, which link the colleges and the HEIs, and are designed to create enhanced progression opportunities for students from Higher National Certificates and Diplomas (HNC/Ds) in colleges to degrees. The SFC has recognised both widening access and the

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<sup>7</sup> Raffe *et al.* (2008).

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development of skills as key objectives in its corporate plans, and the colleges have been particularly important in widening access to further and higher education.

The third and more recent collaborative development has been the establishment of *Skills Development Scotland (SDS)* in 2008. This can be seen as an expression of the interest of the SNP Government in pursuing its agenda for the development of a sustainable economic base for Scotland. This body was created by bringing together the skills training element of Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Careers Scotland and the Scottish University for Industry. It now has responsibility for a wide range of skills development-related activities. These include modern apprenticeships, information, advice and guidance, literacy and numeracy campaigns, and financial support for part-time learners through Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs). The impact of bringing all of these elements together in one organisation remains to be seen. However, the provision of an all-age information, advice and guidance service, and the provision of financial support through ILAs are important features of provision in Scotland, although they predated the establishment of SDS.

Finally, the importance of Individual Learning Accounts as an initiative to support part-time learners deserves some further comment, given that it is at present unique to Scotland. The ILA scheme was re-introduced in Scotland in 2004 after the difficulties with the earlier UK-wide scheme led to its suspension. The ILA Scotland scheme is now targeted at those on lower incomes, although individuals with incomes up to £22,000 are eligible. There are now two elements. ILA 200 provides a grant of £200 for any approved course. This can cover a very wide range of courses from practical subjects or clearly vocational courses such as horticulture, engineering or photography to more academic subjects such as French or sociology. A more recent development has been the establishment of ILA 500 which is designed to support part-time higher education students. This enables people to claim £500 per year if they are enrolled on a part-time higher education course which leads to at least 40 SCQF credit points. The Open University and a number of campus-based universities, particularly in the post-1992 sector, provide a wide range of part-time courses, and funding of this kind is clearly of considerable value to students on these programmes. The ILA Scotland scheme has been subject to considerable modification and evolution since it was introduced in 2004, and it is now emerging as a very useful means of supporting both part-time higher education students, and a wider range of lifelong learning, particularly since it is a payment which people can receive on an annual basis.

### Some challenges for lifelong learning in Scotland

The policies and measures outlined above indicate that there has been a continuing commitment to supporting lifelong learning, defined in fairly inclusive terms in Scotland. However, despite this, significant challenges remain if learning opportunities are to be equally available to all sections of the community across the life course.

In the first place, *support for community-based learning and learning provided through voluntary organisations can be patchy and unstable*. Local authorities have a responsibility for the provision of community learning and development, and under the Concordat agreement with the Scottish Government they have considerable scope to decide how their resources will be allocated. Scotland's colleges are also active in the provision of community-based learning opportunities. However, at a time of severe economic constraint, there are additional dangers that services of this kind will experience cutbacks. While there is a strong voluntary sector in Scotland, supported through an umbrella body, Learning Link Scotland, securing sustainable funding for this work can be challenging.

Secondly, there is continuing evidence of *inequalities in educational achievements throughout the life course*. Despite the emphasis on a 'cradle to grave' approach, these inequalities begin at school, and there is evidence that while over 50 per cent of young people who live in the more privileged social areas leave school with qualifications which enable them to enter higher education, for those in the least privileged areas the figure is less than 20 per cent, and much lower for some schools in these areas.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, even for those who gain access to higher education there continues to be significant inequalities within this system. Thus, while only eight per cent of the students in the four 'ancient' universities, which continue to be the most prestigious, come from the most socially and economically deprived quintile of the Scottish population, students from this quintile represent 15 per cent of those in the post-1992 universities and 22 per cent of higher education students in the colleges.<sup>9</sup> These inequalities in access to higher education are also associated with wider problems of low levels of achievement for many people. Thus 12 per cent of young people in the 16–19 age group are not in education, employment or training (the 'more choices, more chances' group) and OECD data indicated that Scotland that the lowest percentage of 15–19 year olds in education or training in the OECD.<sup>10</sup> Research into the extent of problems associated with literacy and numeracy in the adult population also shows continuing challenges. More than a third of men and women had literacy abilities at a level likely to impact on their

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<sup>8</sup> Scottish Government (2008).

<sup>9</sup> SFC (2009).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

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employment opportunities and life chances, and in the case of numeracy, more than two thirds of men and women reported these kinds of difficulties.<sup>11</sup>

Another aspect of continuing inequality in educational achievement which persists throughout the life course is that associated with *gender*. There is evidence that girls regularly outperform boys at school, and there are significantly higher numbers of women in both colleges (at FE and HE levels) and in universities.<sup>12</sup> Research has also shown that women are more likely to use community-based centres to enable them to return to study and begin to develop new learning careers.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Parsons and Bynner (2008).

<sup>12</sup> SFC (2009).

<sup>13</sup> Crossan *et al.* (2003).

### Conclusion

The position with regard to lifelong learning in Scotland is complex. There has been a continuing commitment to a relatively holistic concept of lifelong learning which has emphasised both skills and social justice and widening access. However, the current Scottish National Party (SNP)-led Government has placed greater emphasis on skills in its pursuit of a sustainable Scottish economy. There has also been an emphasis on collaboration to establish organisations such as the SCQF and the SFC which will help create a more integrated system of lifelong learning, and facilitate movement of people between different parts of the educational system. ILAs are also an innovative means of providing financial support for learners. However, despite these positive developments, persistent inequalities remain in terms of educational achievements. A major challenge is to use the organisations and frameworks which are in place to greater effect in order to achieve more significant change.

In addressing these challenges some of the recommendations included in the IFLL report are of considerable relevance. Firstly, there is the concept of *entitlement*. This concept has already figured in lifelong learning policy in Scotland. One of the recommendations in the report from the Scottish Parliament's Inquiry into Lifelong Learning was that the idea of an entitlement should be introduced for all learners. This was presented in terms of an entitlement to financial support which would be broadly equivalent to that which undergraduates receive in completing a first degree. However, the significance of this idea was that people would carry this entitlement with them throughout life until it was used up. This can be seen as an attempt to address some of the issues associated with the balance of support for learning throughout the life course, which are identified in the main IFLL report, *Learning Through Life: Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning*.<sup>14</sup> When considering the idea of an entitlement in this sense it must be recognised that the re-introduction of ILAs in Scotland has been a valuable step forward. Furthermore the recent introduction of ILA 500s has begun the process of providing some significant support for students in part-time higher education. Further work is clearly needed in Scotland to strengthen this idea of entitlement, and indeed the recent history of ILAs, since they were re-introduced, has been an evolutionary one. However these developments may provide some opportunities for policy learning for other countries within the UK, with respect to both the introduction of *Learning Accounts*, which is recommended by the IFLL, and the provision of support for part-time learners.

It can also be noted that the idea of entitlements included in the main IFLL report includes an entitlement to achieve certain standards in literacy and numeracy, and it has been suggested above that this continues to be an issue which must be addressed in Scotland.

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<sup>14</sup> Schuller, T. and Watson, D. (2009).

## Conclusion

The main IFLL report also makes recommendations regarding the establishment of a *coherent system of credits*. In this area there is again some opportunity for policy learning which could be beneficial to both Scotland and the rest of the UK. It has been noted above that Scotland now has the very well established SCQF. However, it has also been suggested that more work is required to ensure that this Framework makes the impact in providing greater flexibility and more opportunities for learners. There are perhaps opportunities for policy-makers and practitioners in other parts of the UK to learn from the successful experience in Scotland, but also to work with colleagues in Scotland to ensure that a credit and qualifications framework of this kind is as effective as possible in achieving change.

It has also been noted above that there is a continuing need to ensure that community-based provision is protected and strengthened in Scotland. In this respect, two of the sets of recommendations within the main IFLL report are useful. The first refers to the importance of *local governance* and the need for effective *local strategies* which will encourage local authorities, colleges and voluntary organisations to work together to meet the needs of lifelong learners in the most effective ways. The second is the set of recommendations regarding a *citizens' curriculum* which encourages providers to consider the full range of opportunities which should be available to lifelong learners in the twenty-first century.

The final issue where it can be noted that the main IFLL report makes recommendations that are of considerable relevance in the Scottish context is with regard to *skills utilisation and learning at work*. The report recognises that skills utilisation is already an important part of the policy debate in Scotland, and by referring to the UKCES report, *Ambition 2020*, it again opens up the idea of a wider UK dimension to policy discussions and developments on this issue. However, by referring to the need to consider how more 'expansive' learning environments at work can be created, the report raises important questions about how we can improve opportunities for learning at and through work.

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