ASSOCIATION OF DIRECTORS OF EDUCATION SCOTLAND (ADES)

RESPONSE TO THE EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE OF THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT ON

DEVELOPING SCOTLAND’S YOUNG WORKFORCE

In advance of the meeting of the Education and Culture Committee on 10 March 2015 at which ADES will present oral evidence, ADES is pleased to make the following written submission, which covers the points raised in the questions posed by the Education and Culture Committee and deals with other aspects of the issues raised by the Commission’s final report and the Scottish Government’s response to it so far.

From the outset, it is important to stress that ADES welcomed the final report of the Wood Commission (Education Working for All!) and is supportive of the work of the National Programme Board and National Advisory Board to progress the recommendations in that report. Indeed, ADES is represented on both these boards.

The final report of the Wood Commission laid down a number of significant challenges for Scottish society. Its 39 recommendations have significant implications for local authorities, schools, colleges and for employers in both the public and the private sectors. There are also major implications for national bodies such as Education Scotland and Skills Development Scotland. If the ambitious success criteria detailed in the report were to be achieved by 2020, Scotland would indeed be a better place in which to live and work and the prospects for young people entering the workforce would be better than at any time in the recent past.

Attainment levels in schools would also be improved, especially for those students for whom traditional “academic” subjects are less appropriate. However, false dichotomies between “academic” and vocational” pathways must be avoided; academic and vocational skills are important for all students, regardless of aptitude. There is absolutely no need for students to be split into separate “academic” and “vocational” streams. However, full implementation of the recommendations in the report would undoubtedly help to address inequalities arising from socio-economic factors.

ADES welcomes the Programme Board’s recognition of the close links between Developing the Young Workforce and Curriculum for Excellence. At the heart of CfE lies a recognition of the importance of developing skills for learning, life and work in all young people. ADES believes that there is strong evidence to show that the Scottish education system has become better in recent years at developing skills for learning and skills for life. However, progress on the skills for work agenda has been at best patchy, notwithstanding some examples of very good practice in individual schools and local authorities.
ADES also acknowledgement that schools and local authorities cannot deliver on this challenging agenda on their own and that only effective partnership working between local authorities, colleges, Skills Development Scotland, Education Scotland and employers will produce the desired results.

ADES welcomes the progress made in developing 5 distinct change themes: Broad General Education, Senior Phase, Colleges, Modern Apprenticeships and Employers. However, it will be extremely important that workstreams 1 and 2 (Broad General Education and Senior Phase) work very closely together, given the fact that one of the key aims of Curriculum for Excellence is to develop a 3-18 curriculum which is coherent, progressive and challenging for all young people.

One of the striking features of the final report by the Commission is that one could probably evidence examples of good practice in relation to most of the 39 recommendations somewhere in Scotland at the present time. The problem is one of consistency; the challenge is to develop a comprehensive system of learning for work. At present, young people living in different parts of the country have very different experiences with regard to, for example, access to high quality work experience, high quality vocational education, effective school/college links and modern apprenticeships. A significant challenge is therefore to share best practice in such a way that access to such entitlement becomes a given, regardless of where one grows up in Scotland.

One particular issue relating to this agenda is the fact that there are very varied employment patterns in different parts of the country. For instance, employment opportunities for young people are very different in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire from those which apply in, for instance, Argyle and Bute or North Ayrshire. Some Council areas have many large employers within their boundaries, while in other areas most employers are SMEs or very small businesses. This means that, while it remains important to aim for consistency of entitlement for all young people across Scotland, a one size fits all approach will not work and all initiatives relating to employment must take into account features of the local labour market. In a similar vein, the varying degree to which further education opportunities are open to young people across the country must be considered when planning school/college links.

The announcement of additional funding for Council’s for 2014/15 and 2015/16 to deliver the developing the young force agenda is welcome. However, this is a 7 year programme and sustained improvement will only be achieved if appropriate funding is also allocated in future financial years.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that teachers and head teachers are broadly supportive of this agenda. However, it will be important that any developments which have an impact on schools are seen as being of assistance to teachers in delivering the CfE agenda and not as an additional bureaucratic burden or “initiative”. Although this programme cannot be delivered by teachers alone, it cannot be delivered without the support of teachers. In order to achieve this support, additional training will be required for teachers in areas such as employability and the labour market.

With regard to the implementation of this agenda in the Senior Phase, some of the best examples are presently seen when schools – often in partnership with colleges – adopt imaginative and flexible approaches to timetabling. In the past, timetabling of S3 – S6 has been seen as a menu from which young people choose courses.
If the particular combination of courses which best suits an individual student is not available, then the student has to opt for often less appropriate alternatives. Some schools are now beginning to look at the Senior Phase in a different way, asking young people what they want to achieve from their S4 – S6 experience and timetabling to try to deliver what the young person wants, partly within school, partly in college and partly with employers. This involves a change of mind-set by schools and it will be important that models of good practice are widely shared to maximise the number of schools adopting such an approach.

The success of this agenda will require a significant cultural shift in Scottish society. For all the talk over the years of achieving parity of esteem for “vocational” and “academic” education, vocational education in its broadest sense has remained something of the poor relation in the eyes of many. It is the view of ADES that all young people are entitled to an education which is tailored to their academic and vocational needs. This means that vocational education should not be seen as something which is only relevant for the “less academic” students. It is only when this is accepted by all stakeholders in Scottish education, including, crucially, parents, who have such a profound influence on the aspirations of their children, that true parity of esteem will be achieved.

Obviously, it is essential that employers also sign up to this agenda. Given the lack of engagement by most employers with education, as detailed in the Commission’s final report, it will be essential to persuade employers, especially small employers, that they both have something to contribute to this agenda and have something to gain from it. For example, many small employers believe they do not have the capacity to offer modern apprenticeships. One reason for this view is that apprentices require to be released to attend college on a regular basis and, understandably, this is seen by many small employers as down time when they gain no advantage from the employment of the apprentice. One way to overcome this barrier would be to deliver the academic aspects of modern apprenticeships in a young person’s final year at school. Shared placements involving schools, colleges and employers also require to be explored. Of course, schools would have to be provided with appropriate materials to enable them to deliver aspects of an apprenticeship, since currently schools have little or no expertise in this area.

In conclusion, ADES is supportive of the work relating to Developing the Young Workforce. ADES will work constructively with all partners to help to ensure successful deliver of this ambitious programme. The Commission has asked some difficult questions of Scottish society and it will be essential that everyone, from the Scottish Government down continues to make this agenda a very high priority in the years to come in order to achieve the success criteria.

ADES
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