1) I write in a personal capacity informed by my professional and wider experience (teacher 23 years including head teacher 13 years, social researcher 8 years separately, and additionally within teaching posts). I offer the following views on the Committee’s questions.

2) For a public service improvement is not a quality which is delivered. It arises from the construction of organisational knowledge at the interface of client need and service provisioning. It has to relate to purpose and absorb the variety of client demand – real demand which has been studied, not that which has been imputed in an audit silo. It constitutes the process of adjustment which arises in consequence of genuine organisational learning. Functional elements beyond the frontline are necessary. They must see themselves as serving the frontline role as their core purpose. Their role must be to enhance the generation of organisational knowledge, which then generates functions, understanding and wherewithal to enable the frontline to function optimally. When this works well then improvement arises, which may be the continuation of an optimal state for periods, with appropriate informed adjustment. When this does not work well then these bodies can disrupt the frontline function, establishing a counter purpose – theirs. The notion of improvement has implications of hectoring, ‘change for changes sake’ or ‘nothing is ever good enough’. For this reason I prefer to use the notions of optimisation and enhancement.

3) Inspection never delivers accountability. Nor is accountability a quality which is delivered, for the same reasons as “delivering improvement” above. Accountability is a process of generating informed accounts to assist the optimisation of organisational function. It is a reciprocal process operating between the organisation and its communities of interest – clients and other interests – society, funders etc., and between different parts of an organisation and the constituent roles and functions. It is a mechanism whose purpose is to engender enhanced functioning. All organisations (and sub-units) must have the capacity and capability to ‘give an account’ of themselves, in regard of purpose pertaining to function, and for that account to withstand evidential engagement. When that process is working well it informs organisational optimisation and enhancement. Accountability is part of the generation of organisational knowledge. This is particularly important at a time of change, whether deriving from changes in organisational purpose, wider context or client need, which are all linked. Inspection does not function in this way, because it cannot. It concerns specifications judgmentalism, which pertains to the imposition of idealisations constructed in an audit silo. Therefore it has nothing to do with accountability. It serves the function of compliance and control. It is a different concept, articulating a different purpose. There is a welter of inspection applied by various bodies in Scottish education but there is scarcely any accountability.

4) Management operating on systems thinking principles generates organisational knowledge. When one aspect is focused on, perhaps across a number of constituent organisations for a service, then that may be considered research. This may codified as advice and guidance, and be enacted as training and professional development. Such processes may be practitioner led, and should certainly entail professional involvement in a mutual role. That is all that is needed, combined with
the regulation of professionalism (including adjudicating rare lapses) and professional update of individuals. Scottish education already has such an independent regulator in the General Teaching Council for Scotland. The role of Education Scotland should be something different.

5) As part of this submission I enclose the following publication of mine which encapsulates the rationale of a single merged agency for school enhancement:

http://content.yudu.com/Library/A1rftx/HolyroodmagazineIssu/resources/90.htm

The school inspections consultation was a lost opportunity (Holyrood 28 February 2011). The notion of inspection is utterly outmoded for the changes underway in society. Education has to match these. They derive from deep changes in values, technologies, and interaction with knowledge.

Inspection only works if there is something to inspect against. Since it needs a template or specification it is inherently constraining and restricting. We need to move beyond inspection, but not accountability. Unfortunately the two terms have become intertwined, but they are very different.

External review needs to engage in terms of what an institution is setting out to do. We need to focus on purposes, what we are seeking to achieve, not crawl up the notches of imposed measures and indicators. An all at once inspection is overwhelming and becomes a burden, second guessing ‘what they are looking for’. Without fixed specifications there is nothing to inspect. But there is everything to discuss, review, develop, implement, communicate, moderate, disseminate, enhance, build and learn.

The great insight of those working from a systems perspective is that 95% of the variability of performance is in the system, not the individual. The most effective way to bring about improvement is to work on the system. Thereby it is necessary to understand performance as a system.

We have a new agency merging quality and curriculum, announced after the inspections review. The new agency must not be an inspectorate. It should be the centre of a network of moderated engagement. The task is to learn about learning. There now needs to be a genuine debate on accountability, quality enhancement and the role of the new agency.

NIALL MACKINNON

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