Commission on School Reform

Comments on Education Scotland

Introduction

The Commission welcomes the opportunity to offer its thoughts on Education Scotland. The focus in this short paper is on the future. The Commission has on a number of previous occasions offered its views on the performance of Education Scotland to date. These can be summarised as follows:

- By combining developmental and inspectorial functions, the Scottish Government built into the constitution of Education Scotland an irreconcilable conflict of interest. This has been noted by numerous commentators but has not been recognised by the government. As the role of Education Scotland is now about to change, it is imperative that this issue is addressed in some way.
- In its developmental role, Education Scotland has contributed substantially to the seriously flawed implementation of *Curriculum for Excellence*, mainly through the production of excessive quantities of over-complex guidance. This was remarked on in OECD’s 2015 report.
- Like its three predecessor curriculum agencies, Education Scotland has struggled to understand that schools and teachers are its customers and to respond to their needs. Instead it has acted as the agent of government. As a result, it lacks credibility with the profession, parents and the general public.
- The organisation has been weakly led and has suffered from low morale according to surveys of staff opinion. Whilst parts of the organisation have done work that is considered by teachers to be useful and of high quality, the perception of the agency as a whole is not positive.

In short, this is an organisation facing major challenges. The Commission wishes the incoming Chief Inspector well in reforming the agency to fulfil the role envisaged for it under the government’s reform proposals.

Looking to the future

As indicated above, the Commission considers it vitally important that the government clarify both the role of inspection and the remit of Education Scotland under its proposed new arrangements. Unless this is done, it is difficult to see the agency being much more effective in the future than it has been in the past.

1  *The role of inspection*

Her Majesty’s Inspectorate is one of the oldest institutions in the Scottish education system. It has traditionally been highly regarded for its impartiality and expertise. There are some signs, however, that its independence has been compromised, not least by being combined in a single agency with other functions that are clearly linked
to the government’s policy agenda. There is no clear definition of the role of the inspectorate and it is not evident that serious thought has been given to its place in the new arrangements now being proposed by government. The time is clearly right for a review of the role of inspection.

When it was set up in the mid-nineteenth century the purpose of the schools inspectorate was clear. It existed to inspect the work of individual schools and ensure that they provided an effective education. This process gave reassurance to parents and government alike. There was no suggestion that an inspection visit fulfilled any direct improvement function.

Over the years the inspectorate has been used for a growing number of purposes. These include:

- Inspection of individual schools
- Inspection of a variety of other kinds of institution and organisation, including independent schools, colleges, pre-school establishments and local education authorities
- Inspection of aspects of education across a range of schools and/or other institutions
- Periodic reviews of quality and improvement across the system as a whole
- Inputs into policy development
- Advice to ministers
- Ad hoc tasks such as acting as Attainment Advisors

Of these, the first is probably seen by the public as the main purpose. However, it can be fulfilled only if inspection is sufficiently frequent and consistent. A report older than, say, three years is effectively useless. Indeed, in a small school, the arrival of a new headteacher can lead to fundamental change – for better or worse – in well under a year. The current number of inspections per year means that schools are currently on a cycle in excess of twenty years. From the point of view of providing information to parents, this is totally worthless. Although Education Scotland has indicated an intention of increasing the number of inspections, the frequency will still fall far short of what would be required to ensure that there is a genuinely current inspection report available for every school and early years establishment. A possibility might be to give priority to inspecting schools where there have been major changes or where there is reason to worry that standards may be unsatisfactory. (Incidentally, the Commission applauds the decision of Education Scotland to remove outdated reports from its main website so long as historic reports are made available on request to those with an interest.)

It should be recognised that inspection of individual schools is not an indispensable part of a highly performing education system. It is not a feature of education in Finland, a country that performs well in PISA and is highly regarded by the Scottish government.

There are other options that Scotland could consider. For example, schools could be required to identify aspects of their work for a quality assurance review at stated intervals (say, every two years). The review could be conducted by HMIe, or possibly by other authorised organisations, and reports could be produced jointly by the school and the reviewers.
Such an approach would be likely to be of greater assistance in promoting improvement than the current system of very infrequent inspections. However, the Commission accepts that individual school inspections of a traditional kind may be necessary for public reassurance, particularly at a time of significant change.

Finally, the Commission hopes that the amount of resource devoted to thematic inspections is increased. These are the main way in which the inspectorate is able to report on progress in the system as a whole. Such reports evaluate the effect of policy as opposed to the manner in which policy is implemented in individual schools. Reports of this kind, of course, require the inspectorate to be genuinely independent. If the government is not prepared to separate inspection from the other functions of Education Scotland, it needs to give serious attention to publicly credible means by which the independence of the inspectorate can be guaranteed within the organisation.

The development function

The major developmental function of Education Scotland in recent years has been the writing of guidance of various kinds to support the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence. In this task it has had only limited success. The sheer volume and variable quality of the advice has contributed significantly to teacher workload, the sense of confusion that has surrounded Curriculum for Excellence and damaging local authority misinterpretations such as the decision to limit the number of subjects in S4.

The Commission recognises, however, that part of the blame for this should attach not to Education Scotland but to the overall strategic management of the development programme. It considers that effective strategic management of a complex system requires very limited but genuinely strategic guidance from the centre and a high level of operational discretion in schools. The government is now commendably trying to realise the second point. It is important that it should also seek to achieve the first. Limiting the strategic guidance to the essentials of Curriculum for Excellence, the principles of broader national policies such as GIRFEC and the four priorities of the National Improvement Framework would be a major step forward.

In these circumstances, the Commission queries the need for a significant development function within Education Scotland. While the organisation should retain a limited capacity for short-term development work, the Commission would prefer to see development work related to the limited range of national requirements more clearly identified with government and carried out within the Learning Directorate.

The improvement function

The current consultation on the forthcoming Education Bill and other recent government papers such as Next Steps correctly laid emphasis on the need to ensure that schools have ready access to the support they require. The consultation paper also states in very clear terms that the provision of support should be led by schools’ own perception of their needs. This is very welcome.
The government’s chosen vehicle for improving the quality of support to schools is a network of Regional Improvement Collaboratives (RICs). The Commission, in common with many other respondents to the consultation, was not impressed by the very centralist version of collaboratives originally put forward. However, the revised design that has emerged from discussions between the government and CoSLA is a significant improvement. Although there is clearly more work to be done, the Commission now believes that the collaboratives could make a positive contribution. It remains concerned, however, about the apparent neglect of non-public sector sources of support that are already extensively used by schools and local authorities.

The existing collaboratives, particularly the Northern Alliance, which is the longest established, rely almost entirely on the resources of the constituent authorities to provide the required support. There is a link to Education Scotland but it does not seem that its staff have played a substantial role in the collaborative’s activities. The Commission suspects that this is the pattern that is likely to emerge across the country.

There is, however, a contribution that could be made by the inspectorate. The expertise of inspectors and the knowledge of existing good practice (and problems) to which they have access through the inspection process, could be of considerable use to the RICs. In other words, when appropriate inspectors would be able to provide advice to collaboratives but not direct to schools.

Such an approach could also help to resolve a potential difficulty in the government’s approach. The government appears to believe that the inspectorate can combine inspectorial and direct support functions. The Commission does not believe this is possible. So long as the inspection of individual schools continues and inspectors are involved in passing judgment of teachers’ work, they will not also be regarded as welcome sources of advice outwith the inspection context. The RICs can provide a mechanism through which inspectors’ expertise can be made available in a supportive manner that will be seen as appropriate by the profession.

**Conclusion**

Education Scotland has many problems. It has not established itself as a credible source of support for schools in the eyes of the profession. Far reaching change is required urgently.

The Commission’s preference would be for the re-establishment of an independent inspectorate with a clearly defined remit and a reappraisal of the remaining functions of the residual curriculum agency. If this is not done, the Commission considers that the suggestions made in this paper would have the capacity to bring about significant improvement within the new framework that the government wishes to create.

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