EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE

Wednesday 25 October 2000
(*Morning*)

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CONTENTS

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EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE
32nd Meeting 2000, Session 1

CONVENER

*Mrs Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
*Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
*Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
*Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)
Fiona McLeod (West of Scotland) (SNP)
Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP)
*Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP)

*attended

WITNESSES

Keir Bloomer (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland)
Jack Greig (Former Head of Operations Unit, Scottish Qualifications Authority)
David Henderson (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)
Gordon Jeyes (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)
Danny McCafferty (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)
Victoria MacDuff (St Modan's High School)
Michael O'Neill (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland)

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED:

Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Martin Verity

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

David McLaren

ASSISTANT CLERK

Ian Cowan

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Education, Culture and Sport Committee

Wednesday 25 October 2000

(*Morning*)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting in private at 09:44*]

10:10

Meeting continued in public.

The Convener (Mrs Mary Mulligan): Good morning, everybody. I welcome the members of the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland who have joined us and I ask them to give us a few moments to deal with some formal business. Does the committee agree to start our meeting on Monday in private, so that we can produce the agenda?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: I welcome Irene McGugan to the committee again.

School Exams

The Convener: Good morning to all our witnesses; we are pleased to have you here. We have now had an opportunity to examine a paper from ADES and we will follow the usual process. I will give the witnesses a few minutes to introduce themselves and to add to their written statement. We are especially pleased to see Victoria MacDuff, and we will be interested to hear her comments. Then I will open up questioning to committee members. Will Mr Bloomer introduce the rest of his team?

Keir Bloomer (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland): ADES is delighted to have the opportunity to present oral evidence. Our team consists of Michael O'Neill, the previous president of ADES and the director of education in North Lanarkshire, and me, the current president of ADES and the director of education in Clackmannanshire. We have been fortunate to be able to bring with us Victoria MacDuff, a sixth-year student at St Modan's High School in Stirling. Victoria will amplify two points that relate to our evidence, if you will allow her a few minutes to do so at the end of my opening statement.

The Convener: Absolutely.

Keir Bloomer: Thank you very much.

ADES strongly endorses what it takes to be the principles underlying the higher still programme. Essentially, they are the need to make available an increased range of courses that are appropriate to the needs of all pupils in the upper stages of secondary school and, of course, in other sectors of education; and the move towards the development of a coherent qualifications framework. We do not wish those principles to be compromised by changes that must now be made to restore the credibility of Scotland's education system.

ADES is in no doubt that the difficulties that are being experienced and that brought the system close to collapse this year—as the committee knows—derive from the implementation of higher still. Two aspects of that implementation are mentioned in our evidence and I will highlight them briefly. The first and perhaps more important aspect is the overload in demand for data, which produced an unacceptable work load in schools, and no doubt also in the further education sector, thereby detracting from the process of learning and teaching. The overload led to a large number of errors in the handling of data, huge demands for the checking and re-checking of error-strewn data, and, ultimately, to failures to incorporate in particular internal assessment elements into certification. As a result, there was a large number of errors in certification and a raft of delays.

Investigation of that dimension of the difficulties has unearthed another difficulty, relating to the poor management of the marking process. Some markers were appointed late and were poorly briefed. There were inadequacies in relation to moderation and a failure to perform the usual processes of concordance. However, it is important to stress that ADES is not aware of deficiencies in the marking.

It is also important to emphasise that the difficulties are not purely matters of administrative shortcoming. Their origins lie in the over-complexity of the programme. We want to draw attention to the fact that, without wishing in any way to excuse the Scottish Qualifications Authority for its part in all these problems, it did not design the higher still programme. The more deep-seated flaws in the programme are not really the responsibility of the SQA, which was merely the vehicle for implementation.

The over-complexity results in excessive demands for data. It is important to stress that many of the data are required to generate certification information that is itself not needed, not wanted, not understood and intrinsically worthless. Victoria MacDuff will amplify that point in a moment or two.

10:15

Some of the difficulties are rooted in underlying philosophical problems that were not resolved in the early stages of the programme. Although there was a great deal of consultation on subject-by-subject and technical aspects of higher still, there was never proper consultation on the underlying philosophy of the programme. There remain difficulties in reconciling school and further education objectives in the programme. In particular, the respective roles of external examination and internal assessment have never been fully clarified or reconciled. Although that is not a short-term problem, it will have to be tackled in the relatively near future if the programme is to proceed as we would like it to.

Immediate steps must be taken to ensure that the examination system functions properly next year. Those steps are itemised on pages 8 and 9 of our evidence. We want to abandon the need for unit registration in the case of pupils doing whole courses, for example. We want to ensure that the standardisation and concordance procedures are reintroduced and we think that a longer marking period is needed. We also think that there is a need for medium-term change to address the underlying issues that I have mentioned. That would involve reducing complexity and carrying out a cost-benefit analysis. There is no point in producing a Rolls-Royce model of assessment if the price that one pays for it is interference with the process of learning and teaching. A clarification of philosophy is also required.

Only if all the problems that I have described are addressed can we ensure that the credibility of the system is adequately restored and that we do not fail future cohorts of learners in the way in which those who went through the examination system this year were failed.

The Convener: Thank you. We noted the section in your submission headed "The Way Forward" and welcome your recommendations. We will come back to those in questions. Victoria MacDuff would like to add something to what has been said.

Victoria MacDuff (St Modan's High School): I am head girl of St Modan's High School, Stirling, and I chair Stirling Council's students forum. As a fifth-year pupil in the academic year 1999-2000, I experienced several problems, such as the late arrival of materials and constant changing of courses. This year I am doing higher modern studies and things have not improved. Some of the internal assessments were removed on Friday last week, and the materials for advanced higher Italian and French arrived last week. The course started in June, so, as members can imagine, that has caused problems. I feel that I am suffering a substantial increase in work load, because I am

having to catch up. On top of that, there are internal assessments to be completed.

Today I would like to highlight the core skills profile. Although my grades were five As, I am disappointed by my core skills profile because I received recognition in only three of the five category areas: numeracy, problem solving and communication. My awards in even those areas do not seem to reflect my abilities. I studied three languages to higher level and gained A grades in all three, but the SQA decided that I was worthy of only an intermediate 2 award in oral communication. That seems ridiculous. I feel that my achievements in those subjects have been devalued by the ill-thought-out system.

In addition, I displayed skills in planning and organising and reviewing and evaluating. I would like to know what courses those components were built into, but nobody can tell me. My certificate did not even acknowledge two of the key areas. My information technology skills did not appear at all, even though I sat a one-and-a-half-hour computing exam for accounting and finance, and I gained no award for working with others, despite my extracurricular activities.

My school decided not to phase in core skills, because it was given until 2003 to do so, but somehow I received some recognition for an element in which we took no part. It is ridiculous that a computer system has been allowed to determine such a personal profile. Core skills cannot be measured accurately on the basis of examination results alone, and without detailed knowledge of the candidate as an individual. I should have received no recognition for core skills, rather than some, which is inaccurate.

I hope that no employer ever asks me about my core skills profile. In particular, I hope that I am not discriminated against in applying for university because I have not put my core skills on my Universities and Colleges Admissions Service form. I hope that it is not the case that some candidates, because of the subjects that they took or because their schools decided to participate in core skills, receive a university place, while I do not because I do not have the grades in core skills. I would like my certificate to be recalled and the core skills element removed. It has tainted my certificate and my achievements. The system was introduced prematurely and it is inaccurate, and frankly, pupils and teachers do not understand it.

The Convener: Thank you; that was clear. Pupils and teachers are not the only ones who have been left with misunderstandings; we have found it difficult to come to grips with the issue as well, and your own experience has added to the realisation of how difficult the process has been.

I am concerned that you said that there are still

difficulties this year. As you will know, the committee has already had Bill Morton, the current chief executive of the SQA, as a witness. We have agreed to recall him, because we are concerned that, as you said, this year's courses are also suffering difficulties, and we are not yet reassured that the situation has been sorted out to the extent that we will not have a similar problem during this year, and at the end of the year when certificates are issued. Members will wish to pursue with Bill Morton the issues that you have raised this morning, so thank you.

I am sure that there will be questions from the committee on what you have said, but we will move on to some of the other issues that are contained within the report.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): Before we start our line of questioning, I would like to return to something that Keir Bloomer said about who was responsible for the flaws in the design. Could you elaborate on that, Keir, because it would be helpful for us. Who do you think is responsible?

Keir Bloomer: I would be happy to do that. Michael O'Neill may wish to contribute as well. The design arose, as you know, out of the political discussions following the Howie report, and the programme was initiated during the period in which Michael Forsyth was the Secretary of State for Scotland. The detailed design passed to the higher still development unit, and throughout the period in which the development was going on, a lot of the stakeholders within the system were extremely concerned about aspects of the development and delays in the implementation; much the same things that Victoria MacDuff spoke about in relation to this year.

When the SQA was handed the task of implementation it took over a vehicle that already existed, which essentially had been designed by the higher still development unit, and in which significant flaws already had become apparent. You might argue that in the circumstances the SQA should have indicated that it could not implement the design within the time scale that it was being asked to meet—that is a different question—but as far as design was concerned, the responsibility lies elsewhere.

Michael O'Neill (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland): The committee may wish to reflect on the way in which national curriculum changes take place in Scotland. I was part of a team that helped to introduce standard grade. The model for standard grade was the then nine regional councils' education authorities working closely with the Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum to produce the programme. In the early days of higher still the model was different in that, for reasons unknown to me, there was no role for the SCCC, despite it

being the main advisory body to the Government on the curriculum.

The task of taking forward, devising and implementing the programme was left with the higher still development unit. I represented ADES on the higher still implementation group from about 1996 onwards. It was clear to me—I have consistently and persistently made this point on record—that it was difficult to make alterations to the model because it was not clear who was in charge. Under the previous system, the partnership with local authorities made that fairly clear. Unfortunately, it was not until about 18 months ago that local authorities were asked to nominate a couple of representatives to sit on a management group to help manage the implementation of higher still. By that point—as Keir Bloomer mentioned and as is stated in our 1997 paper—the inherent flaws in the model were already built into the system. The system was devised to deliver and implement the existing structure; it was very difficult to alter the structure at that point. We are still seeking to alter the structure.

There are lessons to be learned about the way in which we, as a nation, introduce major curriculum change. We can draw comparisons between the standard grade development and the higher still development.

The Convener: You mentioned the paper that you submitted to the minister in 1997. Your submission also refers to that paper and goes on to say that the problems that you raised at that time were not addressed. Could you expand on that point? Which problems were not addressed?

Keir Bloomer: The paper that you refer to, convener, was sent to the minister at the very beginning of 1997. In other words, it is almost four years since we first raised those concerns.

The Convener: Could you clarify which minister you are referring to? There have been several.

Keir Bloomer: It would have been Raymond Robertson at the beginning of 1997.

The concerns are summarised on page 3 of our submission, which paraphrases the points that we made in the 1997 paper. I would be happy to provide a copy of the 1997 paper for the committee, but our submission covers the main areas.

We commented on the absence of a development plan and of a coherent and consistent underpinning philosophy. As I mentioned in my introductory remarks, that problem has not been resolved. At that time, we commented on the secondment of quality staff from schools, often for long periods, which caused discontinuity and damage to pupils in the

classroom. That remains a feature of the development programme. We spoke about the centralised nature of the development programme compared with the experience of standard grade development. Michael O'Neill enlarged on that point a moment ago. We had grave concerns about the availability of suitable classroom materials to support the revised courses. That remained a feature throughout the process and, as Victoria MacDuff has said, continues to the present.

The most important part of the 1997 paper was the section called "Assessment recording and reporting". We talked about our concern that the assessment model was driven by the Scottish Vocational Education Council with

"an increased emphasis on internal assessment leading to possible dilution of standards and increase in workload."

We went on to elaborate on the specific concerns, including the loss of learning and teaching time caused by the amount of assessment; the increase in work load, some of which we considered unproductive; doubts about the reliability and validity of internal assessment; the inadequacy of grade descriptors; relationships between internal and external assessment not being properly thought out and the possible loss of focus on excellence as a result of all that. None of those concerns was fully addressed in the way that we would have wished by the time that the programme came to be implemented.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): Are you saying that you did not get a constructive response from the minister and that he did not want to take on board the concerns that you had identified?

Keir Bloomer: I cannot say that I recall what the written response of the minister was, since I was not president at the time. More important than that is that we did not get a proper response with regard to what the higher still development unit did next. The consequences of that lack of response are evident to us now. Michael O'Neill could probably answer your question better.

10:30

Michael O'Neill: We had meetings with about five ministers, who were concerned and quite rightly allowed for delays in the programme. Ministers listened to us and wanted to delay the process. However, the point is not about delay, although that helped with the delivery of materials that Victoria MacDuff mentioned. Issues such as the design of the programme, which were not to do with the minister, were not tackled, as opposed to the professional and technical issues. In particular, the clash of cultures between SCOTVEC and the Scottish Education Board in

terms of how assessment would be carried out lies at the root of many of the problems that schools experienced.

The association's view is that we ended up with the worst of both worlds. The previous system—which involved the SEB and the higher—was held up as the gold standard in Scotland and abroad. It used external examination to moderate and validate centres that retained their own evidence. The centres used that evidence to present candidates, drew a line to indicate who would pass and who would fail and made a judgment that was used for appeals. The SCOTVEC model did not use external examination but relied on the achievement of learning outcomes over a period. Evidence was retained and validated and moderated at the centre.

With higher still, we ended up with those systems put together and with nothing removed. We have expressed consistently our opinion that, at the point of devising the new assessments for the new programme, decisions should have been taken as to which way we wished to go. That was not done and we ended up with an overload of assessment, data and administration, which could not be coped with and will not be coped with this year either.

Johann Lamont: You make a clear statement that you are in favour of the general principles that underlie higher still, but your submission goes on to identify such a number of problems with it that we can hardly take your endorsement as ringing. You state that there was no philosophical debate and identify the difficulty arising from trying to reconcile the systems. Do you think that the systems can be reconciled? Is it possible to reconcile the differing demands placed on an examination system designed to meet the needs of youngsters in academic courses in schools and also the needs of youngsters in other courses and of people in the further education sector? Is it unreasonable to expect those to be reconciled?

Keir Bloomer: It is because of the fact that our paper goes on to point to many difficulties that I thought that it would be worth while to indicate in my introduction what I mean by support for the principles that underlie higher still. I mentioned two points, if you recall.

The first is not a problem in relation to the point that you raised; it is the need to make available an increased range of courses. In the late 1990s we were in the same situation as we were in the early 1970s. There is a strong sensation of déjà vu about this situation.

In the early 1970s, as a result of the raising of the school leaving age, we had a cohort in secondary 4 for whom suitable courses were not available. In a sense, we have raised the leaving

age again—not by compulsion this time, but in other ways. Therefore, in the fifth year—and, increasingly, in the sixth year—there is a large number of pupils for whom the traditional higher course does not cater. That means that there is a need for other courses at other levels to be made available. That need has been fulfilled through the programme. We support unquestionably that aspect of the programme. We do not think that it has proved, in principle, to be particularly problematic.

The second thing that I took to be a principle underpinning the programme, and which we support, is the development of a coherent national qualifications framework. That is more tied up with the difficulty to which you refer. Frankly, that framework has not yet emerged in a form that any of us would regard as entirely satisfactory. It is much complicated by the difficulty of reconciling the separate objectives of internal assessment and external examination. That is why we felt that there was a need at the outset for general consultation, which did not take place. We feel that there is a need for that discussion to take place now so that the problems can be ironed out.

Johann Lamont: Do you take the view that an increased emphasis on internal assessment can lead to a dilution of standards?

Keir Bloomer: It might be helpful if Michael O'Neill commented as well. It is necessary to be clear about what the objectives of the separate elements of the assessment programme are. The aim of internal assessments tends to be to demonstrate simple competence in what has been covered by a particular unit, whereas the external examination is designed to serve the traditional need for examination at a certain stage of the school career, which has to do with entry into higher or further education or into other opportunities. Those are different objectives, which need to be reconciled.

The situation has been tackled differently in different subject areas. There are subject areas in which there is said to be headroom, which means that there is a degree of differentiation in internal assessments, which allows a grading that is more in line with what will happen at the end of the course. Subject areas without headroom do not have that. That is reflected in the pattern of appeals that appears subsequently to have taken place. There are problems, but they are not uniformly distributed across all the subjects in the canon.

Michael O'Neill: In a previous life, I spent 15 years teaching the programme in a secondary school. The difficulty now relates not to the level of assessment, but to the need to record assessments formally, to transfer the assessment data and to deal with assessments in a different

way. Schools, and I am sure FE colleges, have always used—recorded and kept—internal assessment for diagnostic, formative and summative purposes. Schools have always used prelims. There have always been unit assessments. In the previous system, an appeal was based on the school's evidence and the system worked well. The difference now, and the issue for us, is the rigidity of the system—the need to approach assessment in a certain way and within certain time scales—and the significant volume of paperwork involved in recording and transmitting the data to the SQA. The question is whether it is necessary.

There are different issues. One of them relates to the fact that although assessments have always been conducted and used for the same purposes, now they are much more formalised and are being recorded, delivered and transferred. Why? For what purpose? If such an approach is not required, the data should not be transmitted. Our view is still that it would simplify the system if the assessment data for internal units were retained in the school and not transmitted to the SQA, which has enough to cope with. The school would use the data at the end of the period to appeal if required.

One can anticipate that in future—this year aside—there will be fewer appeals than before, because, as Keir Bloomer pointed out, we have a more coherent framework in which young people can attempt a level of course that equates to their ability. In the previous system, there was only higher, which many youngsters sat even though it was not appropriate for them. There were therefore a great many appeals. Now that there is the option of access courses, intermediate 1, intermediate 2, higher and advanced higher, it is hoped that schools with a good track record will be able to give youngsters an appropriate course to follow.

Johann Lamont: You have said that the over-complex certificate should be abandoned. What should the certificate reflect?

Victoria MacDuff: When I opened my certificate on results day, I thought that it was very complicated. It was difficult to distinguish between the grades from this year and those from previous years. The writing was small type, although bold type was used. I have brought a copy of my certificate. It is not at all clear, as it has many pages and units.

People did not understand the certificate. Many people phoned the results helpline because they did not understand the format of their certificate— they were unclear about what had been included and what had been missed out. In the aftermath of results day, the format of the certificate caused a lot of administrative chaos.

Johann Lamont: But what should the certificate include to reflect the broad needs of youngsters doing courses, as opposed to just those of youngsters for whom highers are a stepping-stone into higher education? What is the minimum amount of information that certificates should include?

Keir Bloomer: The unit information that is contained is unnecessary where there is course information. The core skills information is not yet in a form that adds anything useful to the information about the pupil's performance. Those are the areas in which there could be simplification.

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I will return to a point that was raised earlier. You have referred several times to the importance of the development of higher still in what went wrong. The implication of your submission is that you spotted the difficulties and alerted the appropriate authorities to them beforehand. In section 3, you say that

"Most relevantly … a number of concerns were articulated",

and that

"Problems were anticipated in the management of the increased volume of assessment. Resource issues were flagged up in relation to the storing and dissemination of information."

That reads as if you saw this crisis coming. Did you write to the SQA or inform anyone that that would be a problem for the SQA?

Keir Bloomer: When the letter to which you refer was written, I am not sure whether the SQA even existed. The letter was directed to the minister. I do not think that our expression of concern was unique. Many other stakeholders in the system at various stages expressed concern about how the programme was going, the lack of readiness of aspects of it and its over-complexity. Our concerns were merely part of a fairly steady stream of similar kinds of material that were directed to the minister and then to the SQA.

Mr Macintosh: I am interested because when we have examined many of the concerns that were raised, it has turned out that they were about assessment in the classroom and the difficulties that teachers have faced. What has emerged so far is that very little attention was paid to the SQA's inability to handle higher still until problems occurred in June, July and August. We are considering the SQA's handling of this matter.

Your submission implies that you knew that there would be a breakdown in the system of handling data, but we have not found anyone who predicted that. Did you say in a letter that the SQA would not be able to handle this assessment?

Michael O'Neill: I will answer, as someone who was in the higher still development unit. As Keir

Bloomer pointed out, this debate has gone on for several years and the SQA did not exist in its early stages. We have to remember that the SQA's job is to deliver rather than to devise the examination system. If our debate is about the nature of the exam system and about how the assessment was devised, it is true to say that at various points in the process the association made clear that the assessment model that was being developed was potentially too complex, weighty and hard to deliver, whoever was asked to deliver it.

10:45

Mr Macintosh: Were you not referring to teachers? That is the implication of the evidence that we have seen so far. If you were not referring to teachers but to the assessment body, I would be interested to see the letters in which you made that point.

Michael O'Neill: There are two separate aspects to that. One aspect, to which you referred, is well documented: the concern that was expressed by many people—not just ADES—was that the formalised model of internal assessment, and all that went with it, put additional burdens on teachers and took them away from teaching. The model that involved a sequential period of assessment—a linear assessment or progress through modules, which was the SCOTVEC approach and which did not necessarily fit the system comfortably—was also a change for classroom teachers. There are plenty of examples of comments that were made about the assessment that was devised and how it was going to put a burden on the learning and teaching process that was not helpful and that did not add anything to that process.

Equally, I am certain that, at various points, we commented that the assessment model itself generated data that were not required. You should step back from the assessment issue and reflect on it—as we have done and as Keir Bloomer said—by overlaying the situation on top of the fact that the exam system that was devised years ago coped with a small number of young people sitting O-grades and highers, which was not as simple as the system for O-levels or standard grades. When we added standard grades to the exam system, which brought in every youngster up to the age of 16 at three levels and which had internal elements on certain core skills, an additional level of data administration was created that had to be coped with at a national level. Leaving aside any question about the merits of the higher still programme, that programme added seven levels of qualification on to that data administration, each of which contained a significant amount of further assessment.

I have not quantified the system—although I am

sure that that would be possible—but it is much bigger than the system with which we commenced 15 years ago, given the additional amount of assessment data and information that it contains. The SQA had to take on an additional 25 per cent of agency staff to try to cope with the sheer volume of extra information. As Keir Bloomer said, we questioned the volume of information about assessment that was being transmitted and its value. There has also been a debate about the core skills information and individual unit information.

Keir Bloomer: We raised concerns about the management information system and about information technology at the time, but those concerns focused on the difficulties experienced by schools more than on our anticipation that the SQA would experience difficulties in those areas. We also drew attention to our belief that insufficient attention had been paid to the practical implications of recording, reporting and conveying information. Although we did not elaborate on that issue, it emerged subsequently as a significant concern.

I suspect that, in early 1997, our focus was much more on difficulties at the school level than on data handling difficulties at the SQA. During the course of last session that became much more of a concern to us, as it became apparent that school information simply was not being properly recorded and that it was being sent back in an inaccurate form over and over again. I cannot say that we predicted that situation early in 1997.

The Convener: We will move on to the situation that arose during the summer months.

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): That situation also ties in with the topic that Kenneth Macintosh touched on.

In paragraph 4.2 of your submission, which deals with internal assessment, you use the phrase

"many of the unanticipated consequences".

I want to try to define exactly what you mean by that phrase.

In the earlier part of your submission, as we have just discussed, you point out that there was a philosophical concern. If there was a concern about the philosophical problems of higher still, you seem to be saying that you were anticipating that problems would flow from those problems. What exactly do you mean by "unanticipated consequences"? Do you mean that, in relation to internal assessment, those consequences were unanticipated by the SQA or by everyone concerned?

Keir Bloomer: The consequences to which we refer at that point in our submission are those for

data management, which emerged out of the internal assessment arrangements. As I just said to your colleague Mr Macintosh, in early 1997 we did not anticipate the extent to which information overload would bring about the breakdown of the system.

Mr Monteith: Mr O'Neill, you said that it seemed to be the worst of both worlds, because putting the SCOTVEC and higher systems together led to an overload, as Mr Bloomer put it. Have you heard anything from the SQA in the months since the shambles that suggests that the burden might be lightened? What you have said this morning suggests that things are no better. There have been announcements from the SQA, but are you reassured in any way?

Michael O'Neill: I am not sure whether I feel reassured at this time. However, I reiterate that the SQA's role is to deliver the system; it is not the SQA's role to make changes, unless it is instructed to do so. We have taken part in negotiations and discussions in a variety of working groups trying to simplify the system for the current year, so that the problems that Victoria MacDuff is currently experiencing do not continue into next year.

I cannot say that I am confident at the moment, because I am not clear about the announcements that will be made by the SQA in future or by this committee and others. However, I am clear about the view that the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland has consistently expressed—that the transfer of the data and information about internal assessment of units completed by young people studying for highers at the moment is unnecessary and wasteful. It creates a level of data that I do not think the SQA or the system can cope with in the current year. If that is not simplified, there could be a repeat performance next year.

Mr Monteith: I would like to pick up on a point from your earlier oral evidence that was not mentioned in your written evidence. You observed that the Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum was not involved in higher still in the same way as it was with the introduction of standard grade, and that the higher still development unit took on that role instead. From your experience of the introduction of standard grade, why do you think that that happened? Why was the SCCC not involved in the same way?

Michael O'Neill: I am not particularly clear about that. I posed the question on the basis that Learning and Teaching Scotland, as it is now called, remains the main advisory body on the curriculum. That is the body that delivered standard grade and has been heavily involved in delivering the five to 14 programme. It is not clear to me why the SCCC, as it was then, was not

charged with delivering higher still, but I am not in a position to comment on why that decision was taken.

Mr Monteith: On the issue—or the non-issue—of results and printouts, paragraph 4.14 of your submission mentions the

"failure . . . to supply schools . . . with the printout of results which they would normally use for checking".

That obviously caused a great deal of difficulty in assisting parents and pupils with results. What early warning signs, if any, were given to head teachers or directors of education that that was going to happen? What assurances were you given up to that point and afterwards, when the printouts had not arrived?

Keir Bloomer: I am not aware of our having been given any prior notice about that. As you know, we were advised comparatively late in the day that a small number of certificates might be slightly delayed. That is as much warning as we got about the difficulties that arose. We have not subsequently had specific reassurances in relation to the matter of information printouts going to schools. That is something that we hope will be handled properly in the next diet of examinations, because, as our submission states, it is extremely difficult for schools to assist pupils in pursuing inquiries at the point of issue of the certificate unless a printout is available.

Mr Monteith: ADES's submission mentions the difficulties with marking and moderation. In today's oral evidence, you said that you were aware of problems with the quality management of the marking, but were not aware of deficiencies in the marking. Have head teachers or teachers notified directors of education of any dissatisfaction with the marking? From the evidence that the committee has received, it appears that head teachers in particular have concerns about the quality of the marking, based on their expectations about not only the performance of some pupils in exams but the outcomes of appeals. Have representations not been made to you, or do you not accept such evidence if it is presented to you?

Keir Bloomer: Mr Monteith raises a couple of relevant points. The appeals process exists to deal with such inquiries, of which there are a fair number every year. One of the problems—I hope that it will not be long-lasting—resulting from the summer's disastrous events has been a querying of the marking, which has never happened before. Examination and assessment are not exact sciences. Without question, there have been some difficulties involving marking and wrong assessment in every year that the examinations have been conducted. We do not maintain that every paper by every candidate has been marked in a manner that is beyond reproach. Whenever

human judgment is central to a task, human fallibility is a factor. However, we have no reason to think that the quality of assessment is lower than the high standard that has traditionally pertained.

Mr Monteith's second point relates to some of the difficulties that arise from the unreconciled aspects in the programme's philosophy. For subjects in which there is—to use the expression—no headroom, there appears to have been greater discordance between what pupils were thought to be achieving with individual units and what they achieved in the final examination. That difference may lie behind some of the dissatisfaction that head teachers have expressed. I do not think that that problem results from the marking; it is deeply built into the flaws in the programme.

Mr Monteith: Is it therefore fair to say that if those philosophical aspects are not reconciled, the level of appeals will be higher than it was before?

Keir Bloomer: That is difficult to say. In principle—for the reasons that Michael O'Neill gave about the availability of different levels of course—the number of appeals should be lower. However, other factors are operating in the opposite direction. One of them is obvious: the events of the summer have created a climate in which it is clearly expedient to appeal. It will take us some time to claw back from that situation and ensure that appeals have a genuine basis in the future. If the underlying problems to which I just referred are not addressed, they will be another source of future appeals. Mr Monteith is right to point up that issue. That problem will increase the number of appeals until it is addressed.

Mr Monteith: Your paper mentions the difficulties with moderation procedures. Were there any early warning signs to directors of education about problems with those procedures? In this committee, we have heard of examples of papers being returned unused. What was the reaction of directors when that was discovered?

Michael O'Neill: I am not sure that I can comment on that exact point, but I can respond to the general point about the awareness of directors of the growing problem in April, May, June and July. In April, I wrote to the SQA on several occasions. At that point, there was the beginning of an awareness—both at school level and local authority level—that the scale of the problem might be greater than anyone had expected. As Victoria MacDuff has pointed out, problems of materials arriving late, which are being experienced now, are problems that arose last year, when teachers made do and used other materials.

Given the previous track record, people

presumed that, by the end of the year, the exam itself would be all right. There was no reason not to presume that. It was only in the late spring and early summer that a number of pieces of evidence began to emerge that gave all directors, I am sure, cause for concern. The late recruitment of markers, the requests to authorities to help to release people, and the phone calls from head teachers and parents all reflected concerns about information being transferred or not transferred.

11:00

In my authority, the colleague who was responsible for transferring data electronically told me that he had done the transfer 10 times, and had been asked to do it again. That gave us cause for concern and we raised those concerns. The SQA gave reassurances that many of the problems were to do with the computer system and that those problems were being sorted. It was not until the middle of July that the balloon went up or the bubble burst—depending on how you want to phrase it—and people realised that the problem was significantly greater than a simple problem with some computer glitches.

I would like to go back to a comment that was made to Keir Bloomer to do with the marking and the schools. A lot of concern was expressed. The committee may want to reflect on the difference between evidence that is being taken now and evidence that was taken a number of weeks or months ago. Some of the concerns that our schools and parents initially raised were to do with inaccurate rather than incorrect data. A lot of youngsters felt let down because of what their certificates showed, but that turned out to be wrong—it was an A, and not a B or a C. Sorting that out involved dealing with lost data, data not properly put into the system and lost internal data. Once that was sorted out, fewer people felt that the grade that they had received was not what it might have been.

As Keir said, the appeals system is there, and always has been there, to deal with such cases. In the early days—the early panic—young people quite rightly felt let down and hurt. Many of the calls that we received from parents were to do with incorrect information that, once corrected, gave young people what they deserved to get. The comments were therefore not about the marking, but about how the marks were transmitted into the system.

Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): I would like to pick up on Brian Monteith's point about moderation, and to talk about the past and the future. With the new system of internal assessment, how do the demands of moderation and validation of the work in schools impact on you? I am thinking about the

demands that are made on schools to release people to do moderation. In evidence that we took from the higher still development unit, we learned that it had originally asked for 15 days of a moderator's time, but then said that it could make do with three or four days. How that could happen I do not quite know.

I worry that, in the longer term, this sort of system will continue, with all the testing that it involves—which I think is getting in the way of more important things—and with all its demands for moderation and validation. With standard grades, for example, is it difficult for people to afford the time for moderation procedures as they stand at the moment? The problem will multiply hugely—absolutely massively—and it seems to me that we will have to consider the value and the amount of time involved. I am sorry. I have been talking too long.

The Convener: That is okay. Ian tells us what he thinks before he lets people answer his questions.

Michael O'Neill: Mr Jenkins has identified a significant problem, which relates back to earlier comments on the nature of the assessment system. Two assessment systems are being merged; I commented about the worst of both worlds. The operation of the examination system has, for years, required little moderation or validation, because the external examination provided that. The exam board operated a system of concordancy.

My predictions, year in, year out, for pupils sitting higher history were accurate—at least I like to think so. If they were not, the exam board would pick that up and refer it to a discordant centre; I would then be visited. People were visited only when there was evidence to show that over a period of time their internal assessments of what pupils could achieve were consistently wrong. That system trusted the professional judgment of teachers, who put forward pupils, estimated grades, said who would pass and who would fail in the days of the old red line, and so on. The SCOTVEC system, with no external examination, required a visit to ensure that the assessment tools teachers were using were accurate. That took more time and manpower. For colleges, as larger organisations, that system was probably easier—much like universities that assess themselves in many ways. Within schools, it was more difficult.

The combination of formal internal assessment and formal external examination means that we now have schools trying to cope with an increased number of moderation visits to the school, validation of whether the course can be delivered, and external examinations. We argue that the system should be lightened in terms of the unit

assessments. That would also take away a problem that authorities experience, which is that the demand for the release of extra staff to participate in those activities means more teachers out of the classroom. We also have severe concerns about the demands of the proposed second diet, which I understand is still going ahead, in terms of taking staff out of schools. A system that will deprive pupils of their teacher so that the teacher can participate in moderation seems to me inherently flawed.

Ian Jenkins: To pick up on what you said about the second diet, in your evidence you mention the possibility of putting things such as the core skills on hold—sorry, I am telling people what to say again. There seems to be a logic about suggesting that we hold on and keep it simple for the moment. Would you comment on that?

The Convener: You can say yes or no, if you wish.

Michael O'Neill: Yes. There is compelling evidence to suggest that the group awards and related core skills in the second diet should be put on the back burner while we sort out the current system, so that pupils in the system do not suffer.

Ian Jenkins: I want to return to validation and reliability. Problems arise if the validation system is not operated properly. I must be careful what I say, but that is why SCOTVEC was sometimes not given as much respect as it might have been. Sometimes a course was validated one year, then the following year someone came along and questioned and changed it. Is there a danger of that problem continuing?

Michael O'Neill: I am not sure that there is a problem there. I suspect that that problem did not arise in the school sector, where schools were validated to provide courses under a local authority umbrella and the local authority had responsibility for quality assurance and for ensuring that staff were qualified to deliver the course. It may have been a problem outwith the school and formal further education sectors, with private providers and trainers, where SCOTVEC wanted to ensure they were able to provide the course. Perhaps, in different years, a provider was not able to be validated for that reason.

Cathy Peattie: Your paper talks about "lack of customer focus." What needs to be done to make the SQA management more accountable to stakeholders?

Keir Bloomer: Our perception is that the main form of accountability of the SQA over the past few years has been purely political and that it has been placed under pressure to deliver programmes in a particular time scale. The questions that have been asked of it have related to that demand more than anything else.

We do not feel that our concerns, and those of many others, received the attention that they should have received during the preceding couple of years. That is what we mean by "lack of customer focus." There are problems now with the working relationship with teachers. In particular, we expect that there could well be problems with the recruitment of markers, as some people perceive that they have been badly treated in the past few months.

The SQA has a major job to do in rebuilding the confidence of those with whom it has to work. A significant part of that will be working with greater transparency and responsiveness, not merely to the central apparatus of the Scottish Executive, but more broadly to all those who have a stake in the system.

Cathy Peattie: You also talk about strengthening the SQA board. Would that facilitate the relationship between the stakeholders and the SQA?

Keir Bloomer: Clearly the board is a mechanism through which stakeholder interests are represented. We think that it is worth considering seriously how the role of the board could be strengthened. The alternatives to doing that, to which our paper also refers, are much more drastic. The board is likely to be keenly apprised of the need to take an active role in monitoring the work of the organisation. It could be argued that it is more keenly aware of that need than it was six months ago. That may help the board to be more responsive than it has been to its constituents.

Cathy Peattie: Does the board need to be restructured? Should there be a change in the way appointments are made so that there is a model that is more representative of stakeholders?

Keir Bloomer: Yes. We have not considered in detail whom we would like to be involved, but we think that it is important that the board should be more representative of the range of stakeholders. We are only one kind of stakeholder. We are partners in the management of the system, but there are others who are more clearly customers than are the local authorities. The full range of stakeholders needs to be represented effectively on the board and to be confident that the board is representing its interests in the management and operation of the SQA.

Cathy Peattie: I want to explore your opinion on the role of an intermediary body or commissioner, who would work between the Executive and the SQA. Would such an arrangement work and be helpful?

Keir Bloomer: We have stated in our submission—this is a firm view of ADES—that we do not think that the reaction of some people, at

least early on in the crisis, that the SQA should be more closely integrated with the Executive, is a wise idea. So many of the problems in the management of change in Scottish education generally, including the management of higher still, have their origins in over-centralisation that further centralisation of control would be a retrograde step. To that extent, an intermediary would be a much more satisfactory outcome from ADES's point of view.

We have suggested that some kind of regulator might be involved in the operation of the SQA. It must be remembered that there is a variety of providers of assessment and certification. We have behaved in the past few years as though there were a compulsory national monopoly. Although in some respects that is the position in practice, it is not the position in law or in theory. It is possible to make use of other providers. We want to be sure that any provider, including the SQA, meets acceptable standards. An intermediary who had the function of guaranteeing that could play a valuable role.

Mr Macintosh: I want to return to moderation, which Ian Jenkins asked about. In your written evidence, you say:

"The volume of assessment has led to concerns about consistency in the approach to reassessment."

Is reassessment moderated in the same way as unit assessments? Is that where the problem lies, and how widespread is the problem with reassessment? Did the problem apply throughout schools, or is it a matter of a couple of anecdotal stories?

11:15

Michael O'Neill: Reassessment is not a problem as far as moderation is concerned; the problem is one of wasting time. Reassessment concerns teachers greatly because of the requirement under the current system to ensure that a young person who is completing a higher course has passed its three internal units. Teachers are naturally extremely reluctant for young people to sit the assessment unless they are sure that they will pass. A lot of time is therefore wasted on teaching the bit of assessment concerned, giving it as a piece of homework, doing a practice in class and then doing the assessment. That was the old SCOTVEC style for units.

The fact that the assessments are, in themselves, of a basic minimum competency wastes much valuable time that could be better spent on teaching the youngsters and taking them to a much higher level. Our concern, and that of staff, has been over how many times to reassess before deciding to move on. Much time has been wasted debating that.

The view that we are expressing is not about moderation. In most cases, although this has recently been relaxed, staff are effectively using national material to conduct the moderation. The material that is being used is therefore guaranteed as appropriate, and there are guidelines as to the criteria for assessment. The difficulty centres on the debate on whether it is good use of teaching time to have two or three goes at an assessment at a minimum level so that it is done and can be recorded four or five times on a piece of paper— the data are then transmitted to the SQA and put on a certificate, which, at the end of the day, no one understands.

The debate is about simplifying internal assessment so that schools carry on doing the assessments—no one is suggesting that they do not. Simplification would allow schools to make use of the national assessment bank and the prelims: they can be retained and used—as has happened in the past—for the purpose of appeal, or to benefit individual kids who want to do individual units as opposed to following a whole course. The current process of recording and transmitting assessment and reassessment and of attempting to record that on certificates does not help anyone.

Mr Macintosh: The point about the lack of consistency relates to the use of teaching time, not to standards—is that correct?

Michael O'Neill: Yes.

Mr Macintosh: You made a number of points about standards, validation and moderation. The SQA was not able to answer our questions on this fully; are you able to take a position on whether the exams were moderated and validated this year to the usual standard? Do you have any evidence that they were not? Are there serious questions about the quality controls that were put in place over all the exams?

Keir Bloomer: We know that certain quality control mechanisms were not in place. The standardisation procedures were not carried out. We have concerns about that.

Our major concern, which is reflected in Mr Macintosh's line of questioning and also in points that were put to us earlier by Ian Jenkins and Brian Monteith, is about the right scale of assessment activities in the overall process. Our feeling is that, as an aspect of the system, assessment is hugely overemphasised.

Mr Macintosh: Yes, you have made that point.

Keir Bloomer: I know, but it is relevant to what you are asking now. We feel that that concern should be appropriately addressed by giving greater emphasis to the importance of the external

examination component and refocusing—not entirely, but partly—the internal assessment on its diagnostic value. That would resolve some of the issues that members have been talking about, especially in combination with the point that Michael O'Neill emphasised a couple of times: there is no point in giving huge emphasis to the transmission of data on individual units when the course itself is likely to be completed successfully.

If that approach were to be taken, and if we could change the focus of internal assessment, some of the concerns on moderation would be reduced, as it would become a less significant component of the whole exercise.

Mr Macintosh: You have made that point a number of times. I am trying to find out whether you think that this year's exams were not up to the standard that we would expect.

Keir Bloomer: We regret the fact that the standardisation and concordance procedures did not take place.

Mr Macintosh: You mention unit registration in your written submission. Paragraph 5.2 says that

"unit registration should be dispensed with."

Do you mean that the sending of data to do with unit assessments should be dispensed with?

Michael O'Neill: Yes. The comment in the written evidence, which we have recently amplified, is that the vast majority of people—the school customers, so to speak—who take part in courses such as highers, according to the SQA's advice and evidence to us, are school pupils and are doing complete courses. The exception to that is a small number of new higher subjects such as travel and tourism and hospitality. We have argued that, for people doing complete courses, the matter of which units make up those courses is not of particular relevance or interest to future employers or to the university system. That information should therefore not be registered.

The internal assessment that indicates that units have been passed on the way to passing a higher should be retained and used in the school, but not sent to the SQA. From my own visits to the SQA, I am aware that that would relieve it of the huge burden of data that it does not really require to receive. It would certainly relieve teachers, and would have absolutely no impact on them other than enabling them not to fill out all the forms and send the data away, but just to keep them in the school. I am sure that the vast majority of teachers would say, "Thank you very much" and that the change would give them more time to concentrate on teaching, without affecting the eventual outcome of the examination.

The Convener: I ask members to try to wind up this section of questions. Jamie Stone has a brief

question.

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): My question concerns housekeeping; I always ask about Her Majesty's inspectorate of schools. You make no reference to HMI in your written submission. Do you have anything to say to us about its past role, possible future role or any changes to its role?

Keir Bloomer: The view of ADES on the role of HMI is very clear—the function of HMI is, at least at national level, to be the main quality assurance mechanism in Scottish education. That function is compromised seriously by involvement in policy formulation. That has been a feature of various developments, particularly over the past decade, and we have seen the consequences of that in relation to a wide range of things.

For instance, the report on modern languages said that developments in which HMI was centrally involved contributed to a situation that it judged to be unsatisfactory. In the report, however, blame was accorded primarily to problems of implementation. I think that that clearly demonstrates how the inspectorate's dual role compromises its quality assurance function, which, I reiterate, is the central purpose of its existence. HSDU was managed, to a significant extent, by the inspectorate, so the problems to which I have just alluded are central to the difficulties with higher still development and its subsequent implementation.

The Convener: Irene McGugan will ask absolutely the very last question.

Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP): In setting out your recommendations, you rightly draw attention to your concern for young people. I am sure that everyone on the committee shares that concern. At what stage, though, would those recommendations need to be implemented to effect any improvement for students next year? We heard of Victoria MacDuff's experience of the late delivery of course materials. Some of the recommendations are fairly significant—they would not be easy to bring about or implement—and I wonder what time scale we are looking at, if the next cohort of students is not to face the difficulties that were faced by Victoria and her colleagues last year.

Keir Bloomer: In our paper and our initial presentation, we separated into two groups the actions that we think should be taken. Some actions require to be taken over a period of time to address what we regard as inherent difficulties in the programme. Those actions will not be taken in time for next year's diet of examinations, or in time for the subsequent diet. They are necessary, but are not part of the programme that we suggest to tackle the immediate problem of simply ensuring

that the examinations operate properly next year.

We have set out in the bullet points on pages 7 and 8 of our submission a range of other, shorter-term measures that we think are necessary to avoid a repetition of this year's events. The time scale for them is extremely short. It was disturbing to hear the points that Victoria MacDuff made at the beginning of the meeting; we are 10 weeks into the current session, and many parts of the mechanism for next year's examinations are already ticking, so it is clear that action is required to address some of those points now. Ideally, that action would have been taken before now. The further into the session we go without clear guidance on the simplification of the immediate arrangements, the greater the risk that we will face a repetition of last year's events. If there is a difference of opinion about how far we need to go to simplify the arrangements, we should err on the side of caution and simplify them more to avoid that repetition.

In our view, the Scottish examinations system will, with some difficulty, survive a single year in which there have been largely administrative failures that led to something approaching chaos. It will not readily survive a second year of the same kind of failures. We must ensure that steps are taken as soon as possible and that there is general confidence that enough has been done to address the immediate problems in the system. A minimalist approach will not have that effect.

The Convener: Thank you for your contribution this morning. The committee is grateful for the points that Victoria MacDuff raised about this year's situation. Next week, we will have the opportunity to raise the issues with the minister and, we hope, with Bill Morton, the chief executive of the SQA. We hear what you are saying about the fact that the situation should have been resolved by now, and that, if it is not, we have a very short time scale in which to ensure that it is sorted out. The committee takes that very seriously. Thank you for answering our questions this morning—particularly Victoria MacDuff.

After one of the quickest changeovers of witnesses that we have had in some time, I welcome members of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. They know exactly how we proceed in such situations. Danny McCafferty has a minute or two in which to introduce his colleagues, before we proceed with questions. We have received your written submission, and if you would like to add anything to that, please feel free to do so.

11:30

Danny McCafferty (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): COSLA's submission covers the political, professional and policy spectrum. I am Danny McCafferty, the education spokesperson for COSLA. Gordon Jeyes is the director of children's services in Stirling Council and David Henderson is the head of policy development. With your indulgence, I would like to make a few opening comments, as I suspect that most of the questions will focus on professional policy.

COSLA wants to focus on the accountability of the SQA. We regard that as a crucial factor in ensuring that this year's disaster can never be repeated and that public confidence, which is vital, is restored. We want to highlight the role of the SQA board. It seems a nonsense that that board meets only four times a year to oversee such an important aspect of Scottish life: education. Where is the debate and scrutiny, when the board meets only four times a year? If the board does not exist to scrutinise, what is its function? Is that a recognition that quangos have a democratic deficit? If so, it is a token recognition that must be taken on board.

The SQA appears to have tried to close down lines of inquiry very quickly, and we would like to know why. What could the SQA have hoped to gain by closing down lines of inquiry when questions were asked? The answer must be nothing. The question is then: what did the SQA have to fear? That says something about the culture in that organisation, and I am sure that Bill Morton has already addressed the culture of fear about what was happening. The inspection and monitoring of agencies such as the SQA is important. Local authorities and organisations in the private sector undergo far more onerous inspection procedures than that which is applied to the SQA. The SQA appears to have had neither democratic accountability nor a business ethos.

We must also highlight the roles and responsibilities of the higher still development unit, HMI and the SQA. That was touched on in one of the final questions to the ADES witnesses. It seems clear, from what we have heard so far, that those roles have become hopelessly confused, enmeshed and entangled in a way that people cannot understand. There is a need to separate policy development from quality assurance. If ever we wanted proof of that, this disaster has provided it.

We hope that the committee will not be constrained in its recommendations, and that the final report will encompass the roles of all those who are involved, including HMI. There has been not only a heavy human cost attached to the SQA fiasco; we ask the committee, in its recommendations, to bear in mind the financial costs to local authorities of having to provide extra staff cover to cope with the backlog of work this

year. More importantly, the committee should address the possibility of councils having to invest more next year, especially in marking. I would not like us to get bogged down by financial issues, but I have already received speculative figures of up to £2 million for increased marking. If that figure is accurate, I assure you that local authorities will need that money.

The Convener: Thank you. You have raised several points that members will want to return to in their questioning. Have you made any representations on finance to the Minister for Children and Education?

Danny McCafferty: Individual local authorities that have made costings have submitted their own bills.

The Convener: You mentioned HMI. I believe that Jamie Stone has some questions about that.

Mr Stone: In your written submission, which I have read and taken on board, you make considerable mention of HMI. Do you wish to add anything to what you say there? Your points are clear and well made.

Gordon Jeyes (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): There is a difficulty in the discussion of policy because of the different meanings that can be attached to that word. In the education service, a school will have a policy for each aspect of how learning and teaching is taken forward. When schools talk about policy, they are thinking about something as detailed and fundamental as guidance to staff on the way in which they work. Those policies are heavily influenced by HMI reports and advice. For that reason, schools associate them with HMI policy. When Douglas Osler says that ministers make policy, he is absolutely correct. However, he is using the word "policy" in a different sense. That causes the debate to become confused.

Earlier, we heard ADES talk about support for the principles of higher still, which are at the level of policy as set by Government ministers: a unified system, parity of esteem, coherence, opportunities and ensuring an appropriate attitude to lifelong learning. None of those principles requires that there should be five core skills and three units. Time and again the debate on higher still was closed down because we were told, "We can't go into that because it is a principle of higher still." The issues that were closed down were not issues of principle, but issues of design.

Too much has been fashion dressed up as policy, particularly at the lifelong learning end of higher still. Lifelong learning is about attitude and access. The notion that we need an exact summary of which learning outcomes someone has achieved at school so that some years hence they can pick up where they left off is utterly fanciful. People should have the opportunity to regroup and to re-enter education; they should be encouraged to do that. However, they will not re-enter education at the exact point where they left it.

This cuts to the heart of what detail is required to ensure parity of esteem between what was traditionally thought of as vocational education and academic education. It is crucial that we establish whether there is a demand for detailed information. Industry and employers have been let down by their spokespersons. We have heard Iain McMillan say that industry must have such detail, but the majority of employers in Scotland have not yet come to terms with standard grade and have completely rejected records of achievement, which sum up well the attributes that Victoria MacDuff described. When employers say that something must be assessed and validated before it is of merit, that is a sign that they have probably spent too much time with educationists. Traditionally, the qualities that the committee saw in Victoria MacDuff would be summed up in a reference or a record of achievement. Records of achievement did not take off, not because schools did not do them well, but because employers did not grant them status.

It is interesting that HMI's education policy, which emphasises detail, is taken as read, as if it were the only way of implementing the strategic policy of parity of esteem and maximum opportunity throughout life.

Mr Stone: Thank you for that. I would like to narrow the focus to HMI. In the previous evidence, the word "compromised" was used. I want you to focus directly on HMI—where it is and where it may go in the future. At the chalkface it is alleged—you will have heard this from the teaching profession, just as I have—that there was a breakdown in communication with HMI about the problems that were becoming apparent. That is just an allegation; I am not saying that it is right or wrong. Would COSLA want to associate itself with that view?

Danny McCafferty: I have received anecdotal evidence from teachers in classrooms that I have visited—and I have no reason to disbelieve their claims—that when inspectors visited schools teachers flagged up on-going concerns to them. Teachers feel that they were ignored.

Gordon Jeyes: We have no reason to doubt that inspectors were passing the message on. "Compromised" is probably too strong a word. I am sure that as the year went on the message came through from the part of HMI responsible to Douglas Osler through Graham Donaldson. I am sure that it was put across and that reassurance was sought.

The "compromise" is more subtle. People tend to be more lenient about something that they and their colleagues have been involved in designing. They are predisposed to supporting it, to making it work and to smoothing its implementation. That goes to the heart of this issue, including—as we say in our evidence—the appointment of Ron Tuck to deliver higher still. The person in charge of our examination body should be appointed to produce an efficient, effective and economic exam system that has credibility with the public, not to pursue a given aim. The head of an exam body should, if anything, be policy neutral in educational terms. When innovation is being introduced, a touch of scepticism would not go amiss. Some scepticism and tighter management would have been useful throughout the past couple of years.

Mr Stone: You seem to be saying that HMI is a wagon that has only three wheels and will not go very far. You have outlined succinctly what is wrong: the fact that HMI is acting as both judge and jury. I would like to get down to the nitty-gritty. What changes would COSLA advocate in the role of HMI? Is legislation needed? How important is it that there should be changes?

Gordon Jeyes: We think that it is very important. HMI has developed quality assurance through performance indicators extremely well, but it has been compromised—that word again—by being too involved in development. COSLA is on record as saying to this committee and others that it would like the functions of quality assurance and policy development to be separate. We heard from ADES about the SCCC being to some extent sidelined under the previous Government, when it was being developed as a non-departmental public body rather than as a public committee. When it moved to Dundee, it was intended to act as a profit centre. That may have something to do with the fact that development work was entrusted not to the SCCC but to the HSDU, which was run by a chief inspector of schools.

Danny McCafferty: The setting up of the Parliament gives us an opportunity, which we should acknowledge, to think about whether what was suitable in the past will be suitable in the future. New partnerships between local authorities, ADES and the Parliament may be a more appropriate way of developing policy. Perhaps HMI's role should be that outlined in the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000—to carry out inspection of authorities.

Cathy Peattie: I would like there to be more accountability. Perhaps we should focus on the SQA board and how it is managed. Do you have a view on how the SQA board could be restructured or strengthened?

David Henderson (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): We have asked for a number of things. COSLA has made proposals on best value in response to a request from the Government. The Government has given a commitment in principle to extending best value across the whole public sector. The SQA, like all non-departmental public bodies, will be affected by that. We have asked for intervention powers and set out how they might work. A range of bodies would be involved: COSLA, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers, Audit Scotland and inspectorates.

As I understand it, primary legislation would be required to change the powers of the board. Board members are not paid. Legislation would be needed to give the board a much stronger role in monitoring what the organisation does. We would favour that. Like ADES, COSLA does not want the SQA to become part of the Executive, although it wants that to happen to other non-departmental public bodies. As Gordon Jeyes said, the strength of the SQA should lie in being seen as independent and reliable. We need to deliver an examination marking system that works and is respected.

Gordon Jeyes: Focusing and strengthening the board is necessary, but it is insufficient because the board, by definition, is part of the SQA. The most straightforward way of improving the credibility of the SQA in the eyes of the public is, as with other monopolies, to appoint an independent regulator. Any other solution would be too radical to get the change that is needed straight away.

Danny McCafferty: The most important way of strengthening the board would be to define its function, because its strength would develop out of its function.

Cathy Peattie: Gordon Jeyes has answered my next question before I have asked it.

Gordon Jeyes: My apologies.

Cathy Peattie: That is okay. I want to ask about powers of intervention. How would you view the introduction of an intermediary body or a commissioner? Do you think that that would be helpful?

11:45

Gordon Jeyes: Given where we are now, it is the most logical option. As Keir Bloomer said, the difficulties are the result of the creation of a monopoly. We must ask whether we knew what we were doing when we chose that course. If this is supposed in part to be a response to the marketplace, where is the market testing? SCOTVEC could have gone on to develop national certificate highers, which could have operated in competition with Scottish certificate of

education highers. Universities and other recognising bodies could then have made judgments accordingly. If having a profile of core skills was regarded as a significant advantage, schools would have ensured that their candidates acquired that advantage.

However, we now have a monopoly and I do not envisage that we will move back to competition very easily or move to the establishment of a franchise. We need to introduce a system of independent regulators, who would meet the stakeholders and have powers to intervene—I think that legislation would be required to give them such powers—in a way in which HMI, the Executive and the SQA directors were unable to, although they raised the issues, so that we were reassured and could move on.

Cathy Peattie: Who should be represented on such a regulating body?

Gordon Jeyes: Since the difficulties in the summer, there has been a series of meetings with the stakeholders, which have been chaired by the Executive and attended by the SQA. Those have been effective meetings of a consultative group that clearly stands on the outside. The directors of education are monitoring appeals and will report to that group and then to the ministers. Such an arrangement could be formalised. However, the SQA's reaction is that it does not want the creation of another group to which it will have to account. We are not fussed if the idea is not pursued, as long as there is somebody to whom the SQA gives effective account. The initial meetings of that group have been very effective.

Mr Macintosh: I take it that the intervention model for local government that is described in the submission will apply here. Is that model intended to clarify the relationship between the SQA and the Scottish Executive or regulator?

David Henderson: Yes. We are developing policy on this front and have made proposals. The best value advisory group, which we expect the Government to set up shortly, will make proposals on intervention. The proposals will deal with intervention across local government, but we would like them to be widened. This relates to the discussion about the nature of the intervention role, which has still to be decided. We suggested that intervention powers should be as they are at present for the minister but that they should be subject to parliamentary scrutiny through affirmative resolution.

Mr Macintosh: This matter has been raised in Parliament, because the power of ministers to intervene seemed to be unclear. Is the proposal for a protocol rather than for legislation to regulate the minister's relationship with the SQA?

David Henderson: In effect, yes.

Mr Macintosh: Where does the regulatory body that you recommend fit into the model?

David Henderson: It would require legislation. We have suggested that there needs to be independent regulation of the SQA. What I was describing separately were proposals that are being developed for local government, which I think read across to this matter. We have not reached the stage of marrying the two ideas, although I think that it would be sensible to do so.

Mr Macintosh: The proposed model is for the relationship between the minister and the SQA, but the regulator would be a separate entity.

David Henderson: Yes.

Ian Jenkins: You have talked about regulation and previously you talked about HMI having a split role of inspection and policy making. If the inspectors are not to generate policy, should there be a forum where policy is debated? From where do you think policy should be driven?

Gordon Jeyes: In fairness to HMI, I should say that it took the lead from standard grade through five to 14 because there was a policy vacuum. I suspect that the balance has shifted over the past few years, as we moved towards the new constitutional settlement and had a more assertive Executive. In addition, ladies and gentlemen, the new element is you. It would have been interesting to have had a debate and the introduction of some common sense, rather than fashion dressed up as policy, during the development of higher still, had it been subject to parliamentary scrutiny. Such scrutiny is a crucial test of future policy development.

HMI moved into that policy vacuum because it was necessary for it do so, but it is no longer necessary. It remains to be seen where the lead body should be. We shall see how Learning and Teaching Scotland, the successor to the Scottish Council for Educational Technology and the SCCC, evolves to give strategic advice to the minister. That advice should be made transparently available to the committee, COSLA and local authorities, so that there is full discussion on the philosophy and on how we resolve the tensions between the lifelong learning strategy and sorting out our most able young people before they go off to university, employment, education and training.

Danny McCafferty: Sometimes it takes a tragedy to bring people together in unity. Many organisations with a single vested interest have appeared before you in this investigation. There has been an extraordinary consensus on finding solutions rather than problems. We should learn from this disaster, take on board the wealth of knowledge that exists in Scotland and consider new mechanisms and a new type of forum in

which people can have ownership of how policy is developed, rather than having it handed down from on high. There is potential, but we have to address our minds to the matter.

Ian Jenkins: At the beginning, you said that the unit structure of higher still sprang fully formed into the public arena and was never really debated. Where did that structure originate?

Gordon Jeyes: As has been said, Howie came up with an excellent analysis of the problems of the fifth-year rush, but the Scottish education community, for a variety of reasons, had difficulties with some of the solutions, which were characterised as twin track. There was detailed consultation and a document, "Higher Still: Opportunity for All", was produced by HMI for the Scottish Office as a solution. We went pretty quickly from that to detailed discussions about the technicalities. Douglas Osler is right to say that there has been more consultation on higher still than there has been on any other development, but it has been at the level of technical details rather than of building proper support.

David Raffe at the centre for educational sociology in Edinburgh did some research on that, to which it is worth drawing the committee's attention, and he will shortly do further research. He suggests that the process was the product of democratic centralism, and that it was all about having committees that guarded the notion of consensus.

I do not regard what happened as a policy failure in a political or strategic sense. It was certainly a failure in implementation—everybody agrees on that, including the chief executive and the former chief executive of the SQA. We would go further and say that it was a design failure; to suggest that what happened this year was just a hiccup, through mismanagement of information, is dangerously misleading. That is a point that we cannot make strongly enough. There is a number of other root causes.

Ian Jenkins: Instead of a two-term dash, we had a two-term obstacle race, with the obstacles being shifted.

Gordon Jeyes: Yes, but the jury is still out on higher still. It has many merits and candidates have gained from it. I speak also as a parent. In keeping the pressure on young people throughout the year, the system can be seen to have raised achievement. There is no reason to doubt Douglas Osler's evidence to this committee of enhanced learning and teaching, although I find it interesting that he makes that observation before he knows the pass rate. We could be raising achievement in learning and pupils could be doing everything right except the value-added feature of passing exams. That brings us again to the culture clash.

Mr Stone: I find your evidence refreshingly blunt. You gave a picture of a vehicle that was misdesigned, although the intention was laudable. Assuming that your account is right, and given the present mechanisms in the Scottish Executive and agencies, how confident are you that the problems will be sorted? Do you think that if we are not careful we will see more of the same next year?

Danny McCafferty: There is potential for more of the same next year. Ministers should be spoken to as soon as possible so that a proactive stance can be taken and people on the ground are listened to. The SQA co-ordinators are already beginning to flag up problems that will arise with getting the show on the road for next year unless we start things moving within weeks, not months. If we start to listen to practitioners, who know what they are doing, and if we trust them, we can start to move forward. If we do not listen or if we procrastinate, what happens will be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Mr Stone: In a perfect world, is there a case for freezing higher still for a year, going back to what was happening before and rethinking?

Gordon Jeyes: That is not necessary. When the difficulties first emerged there was optimism that this would be the high-water mark of compliance and that all of us in central posts would learn a wee bit more humility and how to listen. As the weeks have passed, I am less convinced about that; I see a regrouping around the view that what happened was just a problem with management and information handling and that there is nothing wrong with the design. I have strong doubts about that.

The quality of exams has been mentioned. I have been involved in monitoring appeals and have visited the office in Dalkeith several times. I am confident that the appeals are working; once the appeals are completed we should not doubt the quality of the exams. The safety net was needed more than ever this year, but it would ill behove us to doubt the quality of the exams, the quality of the marking and the excellent performance of many of our young people.

However, I do not think we should say that there is nothing wrong with the design of higher still. I am not saying that we should not go ahead with it, but we should address the argument made by ADES, COSLA, parents and most of the trade unions, that the transmission of the internal assessment data to Dalkeith is unnecessary for candidates who are doing full courses—the traditional higher cohort. That data can be retained in the schools and monitored by the authorities. That would spread the load of responsibility. The school and the principal teacher, with the support of the authority, would be responsible for the evidence. It does not all rest with hard-pressed,

hard-working, well-motivated public servants in Dalkeith, who have been working all hours for many months and are still doing so. They did not want this to happen. In many ways, they have done an excellent job by keeping going.

12:00

Danny McCafferty: From what I have heard, seen and read, there appears to be nothing to indicate that higher still should be held back. However, we should have the courage to hold it back if, on more detailed examination, something emerges to suggest that we should. There is nothing wrong with asking people to slow down. We have for too long been in a culture that says that if we slow down we will miss the train. We should look at the long-term future of education in Scotland and if it is necessary to slow down we should. However, the evidence is not there for that yet.

Gordon Jeyes: It sometimes helps to ground an argument by illustrating it. When I raised the example of the premature reporting of core skills in the case of Victoria MacDuff, I was told by HMI that it was an anomaly. When Victoria sends her certificate to the University of Oxford to support her application, the almost wilful misrepresentation of her capacities in the core skills will not be "an anomaly". That illustrates Councillor McCafferty's point that there is something wrong. I think Willis Pickard summed it up in an article that he wrote quite early on—many of us have felt as though we were saying that the emperor had no clothes, but the reply has been, "Not at all, lifelong learning is a beautiful creature."

Mr Monteith: I do not think that I need to put my questions—Gordon Jeyes and Councillor McCafferty have already answered them more than adequately.

The Convener: I should explain that, even though the questions may seem to indicate that members are beginning to make up their minds, we are still taking evidence and we will not be coming to conclusions until we have heard all the evidence.

We are very grateful to our witnesses for their contribution this morning. Thank you.

I welcome Mr Greig. Thank you for coming to the committee. I know that you could not come on a previous occasion; we are grateful that you contacted us to say that you now could.

Jack Greig (Former Head of Operations Unit, Scottish Qualifications Authority): Thank you for giving me this opportunity to give evidence. I am anxious to put on record some of the problems that I perceived during my tenure as head of operations at the SQA.

I cannot comment on the principles of higher still but I believe that it was certainly possible to design systems for its implementation and processing. One of our main problems was the lack of lead-in time to design systems. We did not have the provision that was afforded to me when standard grade was introduced and I had a test-bed—a task force that was able to test the systems that we were designing to ensure that they were workable in the centres. Changes can be made.

The initial proposal that was made to the senior management team of the SQA for the collection of data for higher still was based on the standard grade model—there was no need to collect the unit information. That proposal was rejected and we were left in a position where we had to collect four times the amount of data than was strictly necessary. Part of my remit was to deliver a single certificate, which would include information about units, courses and everything that candidates had achieved over the past five years. A huge amount of data was floating about.

Mr Macintosh: I want to ask about the awards processing system—the APS. We have not had much opportunity to discuss that. Are you satisfied that there was a need for a brand new system or do you think that the old SEB system was adequate for handling the data?

Jack Greig: The SEB could have implemented higher still. Over the years, the SEB had grown used to implementing changes, such as those to standard grades and highers. The administration of higher still was not dramatically new—it contained internal and external assessment, just as standard grade does. The SEB developed the examination processing system—EPS—in 1995. That was a model that could have been used to process higher still results. However, higher still was not handed to the SEB, but was given to a merged organisation which did not have a computer system that could cope.

Mr Macintosh: Was the operations unit practically involved in setting up the APS, to allow you to use the knowledge that you had gained from setting up the EPS?

Jack Greig: Yes. The APS was set up on the basis of senior users. I cannot remember how many senior users there were, but the operations unit was the main user of the computer system. There were eight modules in the APS and I was the senior user for five of them. I had been the senior user for the implementation of the EPS, so I had some experience of computer systems specification. I am not a computer expert—I do not write computer programs or analyse such systems. However, I have vast experience in designing systems.

Mr Macintosh: Some of the evidence that we

have received suggests that although you were trying to set up a new computer system to handle the data, the data processing and validation were not imposed in the new system. Is that the case?

Jack Greig: I am sorry, could you clarify the question?

Mr Macintosh: There should have been data validation rules for when the centres sent exam scripts to the SEB. Did you help to draw up those validation rules?

Jack Greig: We had a major role to play in implementing the validation rules, which were determined by senior management. For example, the validation rules were set up at the front end to ensure that candidates could not do a particular combination of subjects if that was not allowed. Validation rules were put in place to ensure that people could not do the same unit twice. However, decisions were made to allow units to be taken more than once, which meant that we had to relax many validation rules. That resulted in a large duplication of data. If centres were unsure whether they had sent unit information and sent it again, the system would end up with twice the amount of information. Often, the centres changed the completion date on the second set of data and the system was left holding both.

Mr Macintosh: That has emerged as a key problem. The transfer of data—a process that the SEB had handled well in the past—was not handled well by the SQA. There were several examples of data being transferred from centres to the SQA and being entered twice. However, one would have thought that the SQA had simple validation rules to prevent data from being entered twice and to prevent the replication of data.

Jack Greig: It was the case that identical data should not have been entered twice. However, the APS software was delivered in stages—it was not a completely integrated system. It was being delivered as we were processing data and was not properly tested because there was no time to do so. In an ideal world, one would build in a period of six to eight weeks from the delivery of the software to implementation in order to test the software, but we were getting software on the day on which it was necessary to use it.

I cannot congratulate the staff enough on the amount of time and effort that they put into trying to test the software but, in the end, we could not be sure that the existing validation rules were working.

Mr Macintosh: Obviously, you had to make a decision to relax the validation rules because if the software was not working, you would not get back the right information. Who would take such a decision—someone more junior in the department, someone more senior or you?

Jack Greig: Those decisions would have been made either by a senior member of staff or by me. In most cases, they were made by a senior member of staff.

There was a difference between the SEB data collection system, the SCOTVEC system and the SQA system. The SEB system simply collected the entry data and the candidate data at the same time. For example, information that John Smith was sitting certain examinations was collected at the same time. The new SQA system collected the registration data up front—the candidate's particulars—and then followed that with the entry data.

We had such problems processing the registration data that we could not process the entry data that followed. That happened mainly in the college sector, where colleges that followed old SCOTVEC practices did not ensure that candidates had only one number. They submitted registrations for candidates who had previously registered with the organisation and the system was set up to reject such registrations. The colleges then followed those registrations with entries for candidates that had the wrong number, which brought the system to a halt. I had to lift the validation rule on entries in order to allow more than one registration per candidate to come in, which led to problems at a later date. If one is trying to design a single certificate for a single set of qualifications, the key factor is that each candidate should have only one number.

Mr Macintosh: Another specific problem that has been raised is that, when data containing errors and problems came in, the operations unit tried to correct those problems by trying to re-enter the data. However, the unit did not report back to the centres.

Jack Greig: What the unit reported was that some of the errors that were being produced were system errors. Staff did not want to repeat the punting back of pages and pages of error prints to centres, which had been done under previous regimes, and tried to massage the error prints in order to cut down on the work for centres. Unfortunately, staff underestimated the volume of the problems.

I did not discover many of the problems or that staff had been worrying about and stockpiling them until quite late on—say January or February. The section heads had not made me aware of the number of such queries. It came to light only later on that junior, inexperienced staff, who had been trying to do their best for centres, had been letting the problems pile up. We took steps to try to mitigate that situation.

Mr Macintosh: Either another member or I will come back to that issue in a minute.

How early were managers alerted to that situation? Evidence has been submitted that there were concerns about the number of staff based in the operations unit as early as 1998. Did you have concerns about the number of staff you had to carry out the necessary functions of the unit?

Jack Greig: Yes. The staffing for operations was handed to me by the previous director, Thomas Salvona. Then I was given an opportunity, which I took, to make my own suggestions, which were put to the senior management team for consideration. At that point, Ron Tuck took a unilateral decision to cut almost one third of the staff in operations.

I designed the operations unit so that it would have a fairly sizeable section to deal with the processing of the main examinations—question papers, stationery and so on—and a section to deal with the processing of data, which mirrored the old SEB. There was a third section that was made up of the former SCOTVEC certification services section, which would bring to operations the necessary experience of the SCOTVEC side of things.

Unfortunately, when that plan was proposed, staff from the SCOTVEC certification services section suspected that they would be transferred to Dalkeith. That was not the case, as far as I was concerned, but the rumour factory started up and the staff made representations to Ron Tuck. At that point, despite the advice of Thomas Salvona and David Elliot, Ron Tuck decided to put that knot of staff—one reasonably senior manager, about four from middle management and four others—into a Glasgow unit of the organisation, supposedly to perform the same function. I could not really understand that. Almost all of those staff came from the SCOTVEC certification services section, so when they moved, all their expertise disappeared. That left the operations unit—which was almost totally Dalkeith-based—with SEB experience, but not a lot of former SCOTVEC experience.

12:15

Over the next couple of years, I tried to remedy the situation by importing more staff into the certification services unit, but the damage had been done. Some of the functions that were undertaken by that unit were lost when the staff moved. The manager of the unit was unaware of various things that should have been done, for example chasing up centres for data. The unit had a customer services liaison function, where it looked at a centre's data and said, "You're not getting your data in as quickly as you should be—could you remedy the situation?" It was assumed that the unit was doing that when, in fact, it was not.

Mr Macintosh: When did Ron Tuck make the decision to move the SCOTVEC certification services staff?

Jack Greig: Very early on. The first thing that happened when the SQA was formed was the appointment of senior officials, then the unit heads were put in place. At that point—about April or May 1997—the unit heads put forward their blueprint for the unit. That worked okay for the first two years, during which we operated as two organisations. We were virtually the SEB and SCOTVEC, so we still issued Scottish certificates of education and SCOTVEC certificates. Where it really bit was when we made the transition to a single, integrated system.

Mr Macintosh: But at the time the decision was taken, you and David Elliot, among others, were concerned and made your concerns known to Ron Tuck?

Jack Greig: Yes.

Mr Macintosh: There were continuous concerns about staffing after that, were there not?

Jack Greig: Obviously, when we got into the planning stages for higher still, there was a lack of input from Glasgow in the operations unit. At that point, I asked whether I could get some input from Glasgow-based staff at a reasonably senior level. It took them about six months to approve the appointment of one officer. She was in post for only about a month before she came back to me and said, "This job is massive. I need another four or five staff."

The difficulty we were having at that point was accessing information about higher still. What normally happened in the SEB was that examination officers would go through arrangements for the various subjects with us and tell us how many papers there were and what the assessment arrangements were, so that we could design systems.

We were finding that the qualifications managers did not have the necessary experience to provide that information, so it had to be sought. I said to senior management, "Information is not forthcoming. You are going to have to supplement the staff within operations, so that I can look for it." They accepted that there was a problem, but instead of allowing me to have the staff within the operations unit, they decided to set up a separate group under the only middle manager I had left within operations, Bill Arundel. Bill was a data manager, who was directly responsible for the subsections that looked after the data. After that, although Bill still had input into the APS and was able to provide me with some assistance, he was not under my direct line management. Therefore, a void was created between me and staff at the very junior levels.

Mr Macintosh: How did your relationship with David Elliot and Ron Tuck work? How did you communicate your feelings about, for example, the need for more staff?

Jack Greig: My dealings were directly with David Elliot. I rarely dealt with Ron Tuck other than when he was at the same meeting, such as a project board. My feelings were communicated, either in writing or verbally, to David Elliot. In fact, that goes back to Thomas Salvona's time. As you probably know, David Elliot took over operations midway through the process.

Cathy Peattie: I will stay on the management of the organisation. It must have been difficult for you to see some of the answers that we have had from people such as Ron Tuck.

We get the impression of an organisation that is under a great deal of stress. There does not seem to have been any strategic management in preparation for last year. Can you give us your views on that?

Jack Greig: I do not think that there was a master plan for the whole organisation for the implementation of higher still. It came in as a change and it was left to individual units to develop systems to support their units. The figure has been quoted that, unfortunately, 60 per cent of staff were not in the same posts as they had been prior to the big merger. That presented us with difficulties.

The organisation was set up in 21 units. Although there were close relationships between some units, others tended to work as satellites and there was not a great deal of sideways communication.

Cathy Peattie: Would you agree that there was a communication problem within the organisation?

Jack Greig: Yes.

Cathy Peattie: We have also heard that there was a void in staff development. You are saying that people took on jobs in areas in which they had no experience. Was there opportunity for people to gain experience and training in aspects of work that they were asked to take on?

Jack Greig: I can comment only on operations. We were a working unit used to working flat out in a 12-month cycle to deliver each examination. There was not a lot of slack to provide opportunities for development. We built in some slack to allow those opportunities, but the staff were unwilling to devote the time that was necessary to develop themselves in other areas. They were under so much stress and so overworked that that opportunity did not afford itself.

Cathy Peattie: Do you agree that that is what

happens when people are firefighting?

Jack Greig: Yes.

Cathy Peattie: Do you also agree that management's role was to consider what was ahead and do the strategic planning?

Jack Greig: Senior management lost sight of the core of the business. The operations unit, which is key to the organisation and the delivery of correct results, was not given the place within the organisation that it deserved. The operations unit did not have the number of senior managers or the quality of staff of other units. We were undervalued. The staff did a tremendous job under the circumstances, but they were overworked and undervalued.

Cathy Peattie: The other point coming to us through our inquiry is the reluctance of senior managers to hear of any problems or to react to them. You raised some problems on 17 May and subsequently. What was the response from senior managers when people said, "This is going to be a problem," or, "We are not going to manage to deal with this"?

Jack Greig: Senior management did not have a full grasp of the situation. Ron Tuck felt that the emphasis was on getting the examination under way and that everything else would take care of itself. That was not the case.

The examination is important; the kids sit it, but everything can go wrong after that, when the results are processed. We went into the examination having got the entries that enabled us to get the question papers out to centres. We had to issue a copy of every question paper to every centre. We collected marked scripts back from markers, but we did not have software in place to process those marks. The chief executive was aware of that, but I do not think that he appreciated the full implications of it.

Cathy Peattie: Is the suggestion that there was a blame culture in the organisation accurate?

Jack Greig: I do not understand the accusation that there was a blame culture.

Cathy Peattie: In as much as when people were unable to manage a particular piece of work it was considered to be their fault rather than because of the lack of strategic planning or the lack of staff or the department's preparation in taking on new work.

Jack Greig: Yes, that is a fair point.

Irene McGugan: I noted what you said about staff development and training. Could you expand on the staff's credentials? You said that you are not an expert in programming, but given that your unit was in charge of all data processing and information technology—

Jack Greig: Not IT.

Irene McGugan: Okay. What professional qualifications do you have in this area? How many of your staff had appropriate professional qualifications in data processing, and which posts were they in?

Jack Greig: I have no professional qualifications in data processing. I joined the organisation almost directly from school, so any expertise that I have in exams processing has been gained through experience. Almost 100 per cent of the operations staff had been employed by the SEB and their development had been on the job. I cannot think of anyone who had a qualification in data management or IT.

Irene McGugan: Would you say that that should not have been the case and that people with qualifications should have been recruited?

Jack Greig: When the operations unit was set up within the SQA I sought to import staff with sufficient qualifications, but the human resources process that was in place did not allow that. Staff were matched into posts; there was no opportunity for me to say, "Look, we have staff in these posts who are well-meaning individuals, but they do not have the qualifications to carry these jobs through." That was not part of the HR process. There was no way in which we could import staff with appropriate qualifications into operations, either from within the organisation or without.

Irene McGugan: Was that factor acknowledged in what happened later?

Jack Greig: No. Due weight was not given to that.

Irene McGugan: Given the significant problems that existed at the time, what action did you take to deal with them, and how did you make sure that what you were doing and saying was being transferred up and down the chain of command?

Jack Greig: As you will know, I can comment only on the problems that occurred up to the end of June, because I was no longer in post within operations after then. It was apparent very early in the 1999-2000 exam cycle that there were problems. We were late in getting information out to centres, and centres were having difficulty getting their software, which was provided by commercial firms, in place. As a result, the flow of data, which normally would start in September and October and flow through until January and February, did not start until about January. That gave us a difficulty, in that information was being stockpiled.

We also had difficulty in gaining management information from the system because the software was not developed, although management information systems were built into it. We knew

that we had a lot of data, but we did not know what we did not have, so there were great difficulties. That was made clear at project boards, which we had once a month. We had meetings with David Elliot and other managers every Tuesday, and the situation was made plain to them.

In early spring, there were signs from centres that they did not understand higher still. I asked that we run a process through the computer to try to identify any candidates that we had in the system who, even if they sat their examination and passed it, did not have the entries profile that would allow them to get a result. I do not have figures, because I have not been back to the office since August. I think that something in the region of 64,000 candidates had been entered in the system for higher still courses by schools, but the necessary units were not in the system to allow the candidates to get the higher on their certificate, even if they got an A pass. That was flagged up to senior management. We issued reports to centres in an attempt to redress that. That query was there. It was possible to check the system at every stage to ensure that a candidate's entry and results profile was complete. I cannot understand why, in the latter stages, that process was not repeated.

Irene McGugan: Are you satisfied that you and your department made those concerns and problems known?

Jack Greig: Yes.

The Convener: Before we go on, I remind everyone to switch off mobile phones and pagers, as it can be off-putting if they ring.

12:30

Mr Stone: This is a question that you do not need to answer, but you have been on the edge of disciplinary proceedings in the past—let us put it that way. If you feel inclined to tell us anything about that, we will listen with interest. If you do not want to say anything, we will have no problem with that either.

Jack Greig: I do not understand what you mean by "on the edge of disciplinary proceedings in the past".

Mr Stone: I mean recently, but I do not want to put you on the spot.

Jack Greig: I am quite happy to answer your question. That is what I am here for. When I came back from leave in August, I read in *The Scotsman*—I was not informed in person—that I had been suspended from duty. I could not understand that, because I was not in charge of operations when, as I understand it, all the problems occurred.

When I returned to work I phoned Bill Morton in an attempt to find out what was going on. He did not return my call, so I called again and spoke to Ann Campbell, who said that I had been suspended pending an investigation into whether disciplinary procedures should be implemented. I queried that, pointing out that I had not been involved in the latter stages and therefore had no opportunity to correct any errors. As I explained in my submission, July is the time when errors are identified and everything is tidied up.

That is all I know about the situation with regard to disciplinary procedures. There was certainly no suggestion that I was being disciplined, although it was suggested that there might be a case to answer. However, I have not been back to work since the beginning of August.

Mr Monteith: Did you receive any written communication about your status, other than the fact that you were due to retire in September?

Jack Greig: No.

Mr Monteith: You had no written communication?

Jack Greig: When I phoned Ann Campbell, I was told that a letter had been sent to me to inform me that I was being suspended. I received that letter the following day, postmarked the day of my conversation with Ann Campbell. She told me that it had been sent the previous Friday, but it was actually postmarked after Ann Campbell had spoken to me. I think that my phone call prompted them to issue a letter to me.

Mr Monteith: Was your phone call provoked by reading the article in *The Scotsman*?

Jack Greig: I did not read the article in *The Scotsman* myself. I was in Spain and my brother phoned me to tell me about it.

Mr Monteith: Your written evidence states that you were on sick leave in June. How long were you on sick leave?

Jack Greig: For two weeks.

Mr Monteith: I do not mind if you cannot remember the precise dates, but it might help to give us a picture of the situation. As you have already said, you were no longer on duty in July.

Jack Greig: I do not have details of those dates, but my sick leave was certainly prior to the fixing of the first pass marks, which generally takes place in the middle of June. Before I went off sick, we were still speccing the software that would enable us to fix the pass marks, and it had not been delivered by the time I went off sick. I was off sick with back problems, not stress, surprisingly enough. Although I was signed off for two weeks, I do not know whether the senior management was sure that I was coming back. However, I certainly

had a closed medical certificate.

Mr Monteith: You say that after your return to work in July you had no powers to influence operational matters because Bill Arundel had been brought in to replace you. Given your 32 years' experience, were you surprised that you were not asked to work in tandem with Bill, to shadow him or at least to sit in on committees with him?

Jack Greig: I was astonished. I could not understand why, given my experience of dealing with and solving problems, I was not given that role. In defence, other things needed to be done. The appeals system and the system for reporting results to schools had not been written. It needed someone of my experience to ensure that things were pushed along. What I cannot understand is that I was not involved in any committees or decisions or consulted on any matters.

Mr Monteith: In previous hearings, it has been suggested that your personal circumstances meant that managers above you were perhaps not firm enough or did not press you hard enough. Do you concur with that observation?

Jack Greig: No, not at all. I was as answerable to senior management as anyone else was.

Mr Monteith: How was your relationship with David Elliot in relation to your ability to handle the work, the level of training that was made available to you and the assessment of your handling of the job during higher still?

Jack Greig: David Elliot took over as head of operations, IT and other divisions while I was off sick. My first dealings with him were when I returned. It was obvious that he did not have a good understanding of the operational side of things, but he certainly had enough experience of how the SEB dealt with matters to allow him to cope. When I returned from leave after the summer of 1999, David Elliot had a discussion with me during which he pointed out that there was a view within the organisation that I was perhaps not as corporate as I might be and that I was perhaps not showing the level of commitment that I should have been showing. I found that strange, as I had been off for four months on sick leave. That was the level of discussion and training and development that I had with David Elliot. At no time after I returned from sick leave was I offered any advice, training or support, such as having someone to shadow me.

Mr Monteith: It was not put to you that there was concern about your performance and that you might benefit from additional help or training?

Jack Greig: No.

Mr Monteith: I now want to go back to the meeting on 7 May of the examination diet 2000 group. I understand that at that meeting, you

estimated that more than 1 million estimates and marks had to be processed and that approximately 10,000 forms needed to be processed each day to keep on target for certification. You also say that it was decided at that meeting that it was preferable to issue accurate certificates late than to issue suspicious certificates on time. What was the follow-up to those issues? How realistic was it at that stage to believe that accurate certificates could be issued?

Jack Greig: It was difficult at that early stage to predict how things were going to pan out. The processing is done by subject and course; it is done separately. It is only in July that all the candidates' profiles come together. At that stage, although there was a feeling that we might not be able to cope with all the data, we could not be sure until we got to the later stages of the process in July. The indications were that there was likely to be a problem; otherwise, the issue of delaying results would not have been raised.

Mr Monteith: You have mentioned that you were absent on sick leave for two weeks in June. During the period between your relinquishing your responsibilities in that area and the meeting of 17 May, did you have any further concerns about the build-up in the volume of data that were still to be received for unit assessments?

Jack Greig: As I explained earlier, there were concerns about evidence that some staff were stockpiling queries and that we were not getting through the work at the rate that we should have been. At that point, we recruited additional staff. We had difficulties, as we did not have easy access to additional computers, but we did all that we could to load in as many staff as possible. Staff worked on a two-shift basis, making maximum use of the space and the personal computers that were available. Efforts were made to recover the position.

The big problem in the collection of data—as I said in my introductory remarks—was that the data collection system was flawed. Centres were given the opportunity to indicate when they would submit the data—when they were going to conduct the unit assessments—and in many cases we were told that that would be done by 30 June. The centres were given until 30 June to submit that data or to submit information earlier and correct it. Until 30 June, we could not be sure what data would be outstanding; then we had only July, when the schools were on holiday, in which to recover any deficiencies in the data. It was an accident waiting to happen.

Mr Monteith: The final meeting would have been around 27 June. Your final duty as head of operations was to attend that meeting at Victoria Quay. Were those present at the meeting made aware of the outstanding problems with the volume of data entry?

Jack Greig: My memory was not accurate concerning that meeting. I suspect that the meeting to which I am referring took place earlier, as the agenda included the matter of the examination diet. I was involved in only one meeting at Victoria Quay, and discussions centred on whether pupils would be able to sit the examinations and whether the Scottish Executive could offer any assistance. We were told that the Executive supported the view that, if there was any likelihood of error in the results, their issue should be delayed. That was the substance of the meeting.

Mr Monteith: That offer of assistance would have included the IT suite.

Jack Greig: It would have included the IT suite. Paul—I do not remember his surname—visited the Dalkeith office and met me, David Elliot, Bill Arundel and David Falconer. He offered us every assistance that the Executive could provide if we were in difficulties. Our IT people's answer at that point was that they would be able to deliver the software in time and that I would have sufficient time to test that software. That proved not to be the case.

The Convener: Can you give us any indication of when that meeting took place?

Jack Greig: It must have been round about the time of the first examination. I have no access to any information from the office.

The Convener: Would that have been the end of May or the beginning of June?

Jack Greig: The date will be in my diary in the office, but I have no access to that information.

The Convener: I think that we have heard reference to that meeting before, and we wanted to confirm that.

Jack Greig: I attended no subsequent meetings. Meetings took place fairly regularly between the SQA senior management team and the Scottish Executive, but I was not party to them.

The Convener: As members have no further questions, I thank you, Mr Greig, for your attendance this morning and for answering our questions. I am sure that it was not easy for you, and we are very grateful to you.

Jack Greig: Thank you.

The Convener: That concludes our deliberations this morning. We will meet on Monday in private to begin with, as we have agreed.

Meeting closed at 12:43.

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