

# **EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE**

Tuesday 12 February 2002  
(*Afternoon*)

Session 1

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## EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE 6<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2002, Session 1

### CONVENER

\*Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab)

### DEPUTY CONVENER

\*Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)

### COMMITTEE MEMBERS

\*Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab)  
\*Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)  
\*Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP)  
Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
\*Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP)

\*attended

### WITNESSES

David Eaglesham (Scottish Secondary Teachers Association)  
Alex Easton (Headteachers Association of Scotland)  
Sandy Fowler (Educational Institute of Scotland)  
Tom Kelly (Association of Scottish Colleges)  
Kenryck Lloyd-Jones (National Union of Students Scotland)  
Rami Okasha (National Union of Students Scotland)  
Dr Jane Polglase (Association of Scottish Colleges)

### CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Martin Verity

### SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Susan Duffy

### ASSISTANT CLERK

Ian Cowan

### LOCATION

Committee Room 2



## Scottish Parliament

### Education, Culture and Sport Committee

*Tuesday 12 February 2002*

*(Afternoon)*

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:04*]

### Items in Private

**The Convener (Karen Gillon):** I seek the committee's agreement to take in private further consideration of our draft report on the Scottish Borders inquiry and our final report on the Education (Disability Strategies and Pupils' Records) (Scotland) Bill. Are members all agreed?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

**The Convener:** I also ask the committee's permission to move agenda item 2, which is our consideration of the draft report on the Scottish Borders inquiry, to the end of the agenda. That will allow us to hear our witnesses on the Scottish Qualifications Authority Bill and to take the two items in private together.

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

## Scottish Qualifications Authority Bill: Stage 1

**The Convener:** We now move to agenda item 3, which is our consideration of evidence on the general principles of the Scottish Qualifications Authority Bill. Our first witnesses are Tom Kelly, chief executive of the Association of Scottish Colleges, and Jane Polglase, policy manager of the ASC. I thank the witnesses for coming. We have received your written statement. Do you have any comments to add before we move to questions?

**Tom Kelly (Association of Scottish Colleges):** I will not repeat what we said in our submission. Instead, I make two points about the wider context. Although we think that the SQA is still recovering from what happened in 2000, we are fixing our gaze on where we want to be when that process is complete. We want to create not only the Scottish credit and qualifications framework but a year-round, first-class system of certification and awards that will provide a truly world-leading service. From that point of view, it is vital that we overcome some of the difficulties concerning the SQA's engagement as a service organisation with the presenting centres. Those centres are not simply customers, but part of the process of the authority's work. I am happy to answer the committee's questions.

**Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP):** I find it interesting that you have immediately highlighted the aim to provide a world-class service. No one would object to that. However, is not the objective to ensure that the SQA provides a Scottish-class service? In other words, it needs to deliver the services that it has to deliver in Scotland efficiently, effectively and with the confidence of its stakeholders.

**Tom Kelly:** Absolutely. We do not foresee a complete recovery for another couple of years. What was achieved last year involved a prodigious effort not just by the SQA but by all the centres to put right the many things that had gone wrong. We are still in that process of recovery.

I have two points to make in response to your comment about having a Scottish-class service. The colleges provide a service principally for lifelong learners who live and intend to work in Scotland. From that point of view, we are dealing with the Scottish market. Equally, we want all Scottish vocational and academic qualifications to have wider recognition. Scots have a deserved reputation for travelling far and wide to pursue their careers and we want the certification and awards to continue to make that possible.

We have always been concerned that the SQA is attempting to do a job that was previously

carried out by two separate organisations. That is a major undertaking. Although the business of schools and lifelong learning overlap in areas such as national qualifications, some quite distinct activities belong to colleges, training providers and employers. As a result, the focus is different and the SQA has not fully met that major challenge.

**Michael Russell:** Two further points arise from what you have said, the first of which relates to the two markets—to put it crudely, the colleges market and the schools market—that the SQA serves. You have already addressed that question by saying that the markets overlap in some places. However, in its inquiry into the SQA, the committee concluded that many of the problems that arose two years ago came about because of the organisation's inability to develop a single culture as a result of merging two different organisations serving different markets. How does the bill help to overcome that and what other steps are necessary? When you have answered that, I will ask you a further question about your detailed submission.

**Tom Kelly:** We have one significant criticism of the arrangements. That is the concern about whether a single advisory council is the right supporting advisory and consultative structure for the whole of the SQA. We have established, by agreement with the SQA, a strategic forum for further education and a technical user group. We are trying to sort out strategic issues about where we go with the development of qualifications and awards. We are also trying to sort out the detailed and difficult issues about processing and the system. We have those processes in place and we do not want to lose them. Moreover, we do not want to lose the directness of consultation between the SQA and the presenting centres.

The SQA can ask the advisory council to help when, as sometimes happens, consultations produce inconclusive answers or disagreement between different parties. The advisory council has a role in taking stock in those situations and in trying to achieve a consensus. However, the council is not a substitute for direct relationships between the SQA and the presenting centres, such as colleges, in dealing with the quality of service and the range of what is to be offered.

**Michael Russell:** So you are looking for a more customer-focused organisation than the one that exists.

This is my final question arising from your submission. In paragraph 7, you refer to the involvement of the Scottish Executive. You ask that the powers of involvement should be held in reserve. Although I have an open mind on the bill and how it develops, there is a question mark in my mind about whether it was not the direct relationship between the Executive and the SQA

that allowed the authority to be put back on track at a time of great difficulty. Reverting to the type of non-departmental public body that has been suggested may allow the difficulty to continue to exist, so a hybrid form of non-departmental public body is required. The provision for Executive involvement to some extent answers my concern on that point. Why do you have reservations about that provision?

**Dr Jane Polglase (Association of Scottish Colleges):** In our submission, we say that there should be a hybrid. We propose that the Executive's powers should be held in reserve. The powers would be available if needed and the Executive could react quickly, but there would be less confusion, as there would be no suggestion that there was more than one hand on the tiller.

**Mr Frank McAveety (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab):** Michael Russell has covered the question that I was going to ask about the advisory council. You have said that it will take some time for the SQA to achieve what is recognised in Scotland and worldwide as the gold standard. The benchmark as far as the committee is concerned is whether the system is delivering for youngsters. What still needs to be put in place? What issues does the bill not include that would assist in getting to the gold standard more quickly than the couple of years that has been suggested?

**Tom Kelly:** We are trying to shape a much better business relationship between the further education sector and the SQA. Broader issues are being considered, such as the updating and development of awards. A lot of that work has been put on hold while so much effort has gone into recovery from the crisis. An awful lot of work must be done to make the Scottish credit and qualifications framework a reality. That work is technical. When people talk about levelling units for Scottish vocational qualifications, that may sound like something that can just be left to be done, but it is not; it requires a lot of effort and work.

We want the right balance to be struck between having a reliable certification service, which we have not had for the past two years, and achieving forward development of the kind that has always been part and parcel of, in particular, vocational awards. The SQA is having to adjust to changes in the marketplace and in employer requirements. Although it can rightly be characterised as an organisation that works on the one hand with colleges and on the other hand with schools, we should not lose sight of the employer dimension.

We would like to get others engaged in the process. In that context, over the next couple of years we would like to get to a service-level agreement for certification so that colleges know how quickly and when they will get certificates on

completion of awards. The other area of business is the development of the framework of qualifications and awards that SQA offers to certificate.

**Mr McAveety:** Will we still require the effort over the period in personnel and resource terms to remedy what emerged in the past or do you see that effort being scaled down?

14:15

**Tom Kelly:** We are through the worst. There was a good run of certification by the SQA last autumn. Many of the awful problems in the process have been ironed out, but we want to stay on top of that.

The other concern is resources. We do not know the full financial position at the moment, but we believe that the SQA had to have a substantial amount of deficit funding for the past year. That cannot be phased out quickly. It will take some time to go from a situation where so much has gone into the recovery to normal business. To be blunt, we are looking to the Scottish Executive to underwrite the SQA for some years yet.

**Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP):** You indicate in your written submission that you are comfortable with the advisory council monitoring and advising the SQA on issues of qualification and assessment of standards, but caution that, because of the potential for conflicts of interest, the council should not be expected to advise more broadly than that remit. You go on to say:

"A body independent of the SQA and the Executive is required for this function."

Will you expand on that? What conflicts of interest might arise? Which body are you talking about? Is it one that already exists or is it one that you would intend to set up for that purpose?

**Tom Kelly:** I can understand why you have picked up the issue in that way. Perhaps I can outline what we envisaged as the advisory council's role. There is a wide range of views on the role of internal assessment in relation to national qualifications, for example. It seems reasonable to us that there should be a properly constituted body from which the SQA can draw advice on what has emerged from the consultations.

Our concern is that that relationship does not get in the way of the direct relationship that the SQA must continue to have with the representative bodies of presenting centres. We are the SQA's partners in the business in a way that some of the other interests are not. If the SQA and the presenting centres do not work well together, the business falls. We want to be clear about who is to

be on the advisory council and in what capacity; we need to be clear about the relationship between the SQA and representative bodies, such as the ASC for the further education colleges, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities for the education authorities—in effect, the schools—and those who represent the training providers.

**Irene McGugan:** So we need a clearer delineation of who is doing what—

**Tom Kelly:** And in what capacity.

**Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD):** One of the submissions talks about the drawbacks of the old way in which the board was constituted—it was full of stakeholders and representatives of different groups. Are you more comfortable with the board as it will be constituted under the proposed arrangements?

**Dr Polglase:** We support the changes in the board but feel that the maximum size of nine will not allow it to be as effective as it needs to be. We are thinking of the practicalities. Board members have other responsibilities—for example, chairing major committees such as the qualifications committee, which is a time-consuming task for the person who is doing it. If we multiply that across the board, we are not sure that a membership of nine gives the flexibility to cover all the responsibilities that board members must take on.

**Ian Jenkins:** Would you welcome the kind of people who are currently on the board—those with business experience, for example?

**Tom Kelly:** Yes. We think that there should be a proper, non-executive board with collective responsibility. We do not want the confusion of identity and role that went with the old board, which was very large and which included people who had apparently been appointed in a representative capacity. We fully accept that board members are directors of the SQA.

As Jane Polglase said, we are concerned that there may be too few members, partly because the SQA board must engage with the outside world. There is a heavy responsibility to improve communication, which will be quite a burden on non-executive, part-time directors.

**Ian Jenkins:** Do you think that the FE sector should have a place on the advisory council? Are you worried that the council would not represent your views?

**Tom Kelly:** We would be happy to take part. As I said, the council's job should be clear—we would make separate, direct representations to the SQA.

**The Convener:** As there are no other questions, I thank the witnesses for their evidence.

The next witnesses are from the National Union of Students. Kenryck Lloyd-Jones is the Scottish

affairs officer and Rami Okasha is the deputy president of the NUS.

**Rami Okasha (National Union of Students Scotland):** I thank the committee for inviting the NUS to give evidence. NUS Scotland represents students in the majority of universities and colleges in Scotland. We are keen on a progressive, open and fair qualifications system. Obviously, we have a primary interest in the qualifications system in Scotland, but we see it in its widest context through concepts such as the Scottish credit and qualifications framework.

Our main concerns with the SQA's problems were the students studying for SQA-accredited qualifications in colleges and students in schools attempting to use SQA qualifications as a means of accessing tertiary education. We had those two groups in mind when the issues came to light a year ago.

We were pleased to be involved in the ministerial review. Its approach was positive in many ways. We note other approaches to the structure of the SQA that the review explored, which are laid out in the policy memorandum. We think that some of those are not desirable and that the retention of the existing structure, albeit with some modifications, would probably be good.

We were pleased to read the bill. Broadly speaking, the proposed structure is positive. The advisory council must have a wide remit and a wide range of interests must be represented. We hope that members will share our view that there should be some student representation on the advisory council, as there was on the ministerial review group.

**Michael Russell:** I asked our previous witnesses about the SQA's two customer bases—it has an FE customer base and a school customer base. Many of the organisation's problems have resulted from the failure to bring the two cultures together. Does the bill succeed in doing so? Do you have any suggestions to aid that task?

**Rami Okasha:** The success of bringing those cultures together will not necessarily lie in the bill itself, but in how the bill is implemented and how the advisory council is established. It is crucial that the whole spectrum of interests—including those of teachers and students—is represented on the advisory council so that advice to the SQA comes from a broad perspective.

**Michael Russell:** On the involvement of the student base through the advisory council, what role do you see your organisation and others having? What perspective would you bring?

**Rami Okasha:** Like many organisations, NUS Scotland is always happy to provide the

perspective of current and potential students in higher and further education. We would be more than happy to assist in any way.

**Mr McAveety:** How much contact did students have with the NUS on issues relating to the SQA before 2000, during 2000 and subsequent to the 2001 diet?

**Kenryck Lloyd-Jones (National Union of Students Scotland):** After the problems that the SQA experienced, the level of student contact with the NUS skyrocketed, as did the prominence of the issue. It must be remembered that there were changes prior to the problems—two organisations came together. It is difficult to give a direct comparison, but the problems meant that, for a short period, we were inundated by calls from students.

**Mr McAveety:** Aside from the diet in 2000, are there continuing issues? One such issue appears to be connected to FE students, as opposed to those who came through schools.

**Rami Okasha:** Confidence in the system is still to be restored. As was said earlier, it is important to clarify the relationship between the delivery of qualifications and the delivery of teaching. Not all students in FE colleges who are studying for SQA qualifications are aware of which responsibilities are the SQA's and which are the teachers'. The committee should recommend that the SQA provide information—perhaps in a leaflet—that is aimed at students and that explains the SQA's responsibilities. That would go some way towards restoring confidence.

**Mr McAveety:** So the situation has calmed down considerably.

**Kenryck Lloyd-Jones:** It has calmed down, but that does not mean that confidence has returned to the level that existed prior to 2000.

**Mr McAveety:** I have not seen the full details of the advisory council's role. Do you want student representation on the advisory council or would you be happy with a mechanism for consultation?

**Rami Okasha:** A formalised procedure for dialogue would be beneficial for the SQA and students.

**The Convener:** I thank the witnesses for their evidence.

The next witnesses are representatives of the teaching unions. Dr Tony Axon is a research officer with the Association of University Teachers, Sandy Fowler is the president of the Educational Institute of Scotland, David Eaglesham is the general secretary of the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association and Alex Easton is the convener of the education committee of the Headteachers Association of Scotland. Members



have the various written submissions. I ask them to address their questions to a specific teaching union so that we can get its perspective.

**Mr McAveety:** May I declare an interest?

**The Convener:** Your interests are noted in the register of members' interests.

**Mr McAveety:** I will ask the head teacher.

**Alex Easton (Headteachers Association of Scotland):** I will delegate the question. That is a habit.

**Mr McAveety:** My question is for David Eaglesham. In 2001, you and I took part in a television debate on the SQA. During that evening, you talked about re-establishing confidence among staff. Do you feel that the 2001 diet did that? What lessons must be learned from the work that was undertaken in 2001?

**David Eaglesham (Scottish Secondary Teachers Association):** The best that we can say about the 2001 diet is that it stopped the rot. The events in 2000 were seen as being discrete in time, but to say that the SQA's reputation was restored in 2001 would be going too far. The SQA is on the right track; there is no indication that it will not be trusted in future to get matters right. During the 2001 diet, many problems arose because the SQA did not listen—that was a problem with the previous diet—and we felt at times that there was a danger that things might go wrong. Mercifully, thanks to the efforts of all involved, things did not go wrong.

As Tom Kelly said, it will be some time before the SQA's world-class reputation is restored in Scotland, although I believe that it remains outside Scotland. Within our jurisdiction, people are not as convinced about the SQA as they were; it will take time for that to change.

**Michael Russell:** I will target my questions on the teaching unions and head teachers collectively. I will pursue with you the questions that I asked about the two customer bases. During the year after the disaster through to the success of last year's exam diet, there were signs of tension between the two customer bases and a feeling that one or the other was not getting a proper service. How can the two bases be reconciled in a single organisation? If they cannot, what should happen?

**Alex Easton:** What you describe is accurate. I believe that there were tensions. The option A versus option B debate has historically encapsulated those tensions. My organisation would say, "A plague on both your houses." We hope that we can evolve from where we are. Similarly, the introduction of a winter diet was perceived as coming from the FE sector, although the reality is that, in the first dribble, the school

sector has been using it.

Given that the reduced board concentrates on governance and management, the advisory council is all-important. We would give it broad functions beyond procedures. We would have it involved in, for example, assessment standards and qualification standards. However, if we are to have one council, it must validly represent all sectors—that is the way ahead.

14:30

**Sandy Fowler (Educational Institute of Scotland):** The problems of bringing together the two cultures as well as the disparate buildings are managerial and operational. That is part of the SQA's problem, which it was addressing in the period that led up to the 2001 diet and which it continues to address now.

From the schools' perspective, the introduction into the schools sector of what I think were referred to as account managers was a tremendous step forward in ensuring that schools have direct contact with the SQA, as those managers could answer questions directly. The continuation of that kind of system in the schools sector will be extremely welcome and should be commended.

The problem of the advisory council is not within the competence of the bill. It is for further consultation and discussion. There are big question marks over how the advisory council will function, who the stakeholders will be and how it will operate. That is for the committee as well as for us to consider further.

**David Eaglesham:** If we were starting again from the Education (Scotland) Act 1996, we would not be doing what we are doing just now. The two interests are divergent and competing and there is a problem in putting them together. The last thing that we should do at this point is try to split them up, because dividing one's troops in the face of the enemy is not the best strategy.

I would not be surprised if the committee returned to the issue and reviewed how things are going at some later stage. As Alex Easton said, tensions have been evident in what has happened. That is not, we suspect, because of one sector or the other; it is just that the sectors serve different client groups. In theory, a point must come at which that cannot be sustained within the one organisation.

The direction that is being taken at the moment is correct. We should not consider a major structural change at this point.

**Michael Russell:** I have a question for David Eaglesham and Sandy Fowler on the attitudes of their members. Everybody realised that the effort

that was made between the disaster and the successful diet was superhuman, particularly the efforts of your members and those who work in the SQA. It is unlikely that that could be repeated exactly. How far does the bill go in creating new confidence in the SQA among your members, particularly on the direct relationship with the Government? Some have argued that floating the SQA off yet again will create the potential for further disaster and that the close relationship with the Government—the almost-agency status—under which the SQA operated in the year of difficulty was one of the key factors of success. I have an open mind on that.

**Sandy Fowler:** The one thing that would lead to a lack of confidence would be a change in the status of the SQA at this stage. A degree of continuity is required in the SQA's organisation and in the membership of the board. That will provide confidence and credibility in the system, so I would be concerned about changing the status of the SQA. However, I take your point. On the one hand, the SQA needs to be politically independent, so there is a problem with its having agency status. On the other hand, we should be careful not to say that all the SQA's problems went away in the 2001 diet. The Executive and the committee need to keep a close eye on how the SQA performs, both in the 2002 diet and in subsequent diets. That can be done through co-option to the board and through the advice that the advisory council provides directly to the Executive, as well as to the SQA.

**David Eaglesham:** As Sandy Fowler said, the twin prongs of the advisory council and the link that has been proposed between the Executive and the SQA provide a satisfactory mechanism. I do not believe that individual teachers will be greatly concerned about that approach, although they will hold a watching brief on the SQA to see how things go. Teachers will feel that they have the opportunity to contribute and that this time, unlike before, there will be a conduit for their views straight into the heart of the organisation, where those views will be listened to. That is their main concern.

There is plenty of flexibility for the stakeholders who are represented here to express their concerns, either through the advisory council or by making representations to the Executive. The committee also has the power to conduct investigations; that offers stakeholders another avenue outwith those structures. There is confidence that a reasonably robust mechanism exists for making progress in the short term. It may not be satisfactory in the long term, but it should be satisfactory in the short and medium term.

**Alex Easton:** The Headteachers Association of Scotland argued powerfully for the retention of the

SQA's existing status, to avoid disruption, but we also argued for strong monitoring and scrutiny. We are pleased to note the rigorous annual plan that has been mentioned, which will be a good scrutiny mechanism. We also welcome the provision that has been made for ministerial representatives to attend meetings of the board. We endorse those measures.

**Ian Jenkins:** I asked previous witnesses about the make-up of the board. In your written submission, you discuss the notion of co-option, and you have mentioned that again in passing today. How do you envisage co-option working? What sort of people would you want to be co-opted on to the board?

**The Convener:** To whom is your question addressed?

**Ian Jenkins:** It is directed straight at Sandy Fowler.

**Michael Russell:** This is like a game show.

**Sandy Fowler:** Ian Jenkins's question relates to the board. The bill allows for the board to have between seven and nine members. In fact, nine appointments have been made. It is important that there should be co-option on to the board. Although the SQA's problems were managerial and organisational, the purpose of the SQA is to provide a credible certification system. We are concerned that that system should be credible and of a high standard—in Scottish and in world terms. We regard the qualifications committee as the most important committee in the SQA. If we want to ensure a credible qualifications system, it is crucial that we have the ability to co-opt members on to the SQA board and, therefore, on to the qualifications committee, where they can provide educational expertise.

**Mr McAveety:** Should there be a representative of the minister on the board?

**Sandy Fowler:** As a co-opted member?

**Mr McAveety:** The submissions that we have received contain different views on that. No one has rushed to embrace the principle of co-option. People have tended to be sceptical about it, to welcome it in exceptional circumstances or to advocate observer status for co-opted members. As trade unions and members of staff, do you have strong views on the matter?

**David Eaglesham:** It would not matter significantly whether the minister was represented formally on the board or through the kind of mechanism that has been suggested. During the 2000 diet, it became clear that it was hard to get people to listen when problems were pointed out. The most effective conduit was the Scottish Executive: it was possible to go to people there and to get the message through by another route.

It is vital that that facility is retained so that the message can get through if the need arises. I hope that such a serious situation will not arise again, but the conduit should exist in the event that there is a need for it. My organisation is not greatly concerned whether we proceed on one basis or another, as long as the channel is available and it is clear that the relationship exists and that the SQA is not totally free-standing.

**Alex Easton:** We argue that there is a place for proactive participation by the Executive, however the body is described and regardless of whether the Executive is represented on the board. The Executive should engage in overtly hands-on monitoring to ensure security and credibility.

**The Convener:** Gentlemen, thank you very much for your evidence.

**Michael Russell:** What further evidence does the committee intend to take at stage 1?

**The Convener:** We have asked for evidence from the chief executive and the chairman of the SQA, the Minister for Education and Young People and the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland. That evidence will be taken on 26 February and will complete our stage 1 consideration. If members feel it appropriate, we can ask the SQA witnesses to give us an update on progress on the 2002 diet when they are here on 26 February.

**Michael Russell:** That is an excellent idea.

**The Convener:** The clerks will take a note of that and factor it into the agenda.

## Petition

### Technology Teachers Association (PE233)

**The Convener:** The next item on the agenda is consideration of progress on petition PE233 from the Technology Teachers Association. Members have in front of them a response from the Executive on the petition.

**Irene McGugan:** I was a little disappointed by the response. First, it has taken a long time to come to us. During that time, thousands more pupils have been denied technological studies. I understand that the course is now off the curriculum in most west of Scotland schools and that the number of teachers is decreasing and the infrastructure is declining as time goes on.

On more specific matters, the Executive claims that, of 6,000 questionnaires that were sent out, only one response was received, which was from Scottish Engineering. That is strange, because when the committee expressed an interest in asking business its views on the future of technological studies, what needs to be taught and what skills youngsters should have, we received quite a number of letters. We received responses from Scottish Enterprise, COSLA, the Construction Industry Training Board and the UK Offshore Operators Association. I find it strange that those organisations responded to the committee but did not respond to the Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum, as it was at the time, when it asked similar questions.

If the Executive is committed to taking the issue seriously, given that we have had a science strategy, would not it be appropriate to have a document on technological studies? I understood that a short-term working group was to be established. A short-lived task force on the use of knowledge and technology is mentioned in "Created in Scotland—The Way Forward for Scottish Manufacturing in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century". I understand that the Deputy Minister for Education and Young People, Nicol Stephen, was involved in producing that document, yet there is no mention of it in the Executive's response. The response falls some way short of adequately addressing the petitioners' concerns. The petition raises additional points that we may wish to put to the Minister for Education and Young People.

**Ian Jenkins:** I have talked before about the competing claims of subjects and courses in the curriculum. We need to be aware that some of the elements that make technological studies important are also taught in other courses, so pupils who do not take technological studies are not necessarily denied all the elements of that course. I worry when people judge a course only

by the number of people who take it and assume that there is a failure of provision or a problem with the course itself, when in fact the choices that pupils and schools make do not necessarily exclude technological studies. There is a balance to be struck between technological studies and the competing demands of other courses.

**The Convener:** There are two obvious ways for us to proceed. The first is to invite the Minister for Education and Young People to the committee. The second is to write to the minister outlining the issues that Irene McGugan has raised. That is probably the more useful suggestion at this stage. We will try to get a response from the minister as soon as possible. We will circulate that response to members and then we can decide how we will proceed.

**Irene McGugan:** Would it be appropriate for the petitioners to have an input into how we go forward, because they will have a view on the Executive response and the extent to which it meets their—

**The Convener:** I am reluctant at this stage to begin that kind of process on a petition. The committee has a number of on-going petitions to consider and it is important that we continue to have ownership of them. To engage in a continued dialogue with petitioners may not move the issue forward. When we get the response from the minister, we will consider it. We may wish to go back to the petitioners at that point. Members have raised a number of valuable points that need to be clarified. Is it agreed that we should write to the minister?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

**The Convener:** That concludes the public part of this meeting. We move into private session for consideration of the reports on the Education (Disability Strategies and Pupils' Records) (Scotland) Bill and on our Scottish Borders inquiry.

14:47

*Meeting continued in private until 16:34.*

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**Friday 22 February 2002**

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