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The Action Plan, Scotland and the making of the modern educational world: the first quarter century

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This paper argues for greater historical awareness in educational policy debates, not only to understand how we got to where we are today, but also because history provides lessons for current policy and practice. The 16-plus Action Plan, first published in 1983, illustrates these arguments. The Action Plan was the first in a series of reforms which created a model of education characterised by frameworks which cross, and aim to transform, institutional, curricular and pedagogical boundaries. This model also crosses international boundaries and it is becoming a global phenomenon, with Scotland playing a leading role in its diffusion. The paper concludes by drawing present-day lessons from the experience of the Action Plan and subsequent reforms. These are summarised in three general propositions: that a unified framework does not in itself remove inequalities of power and esteem within education; that institutions matter; and that flexibility is not a simple panacea for educational problems.

INTRODUCTION

The year 2008 marked the 25th anniversary of an important event in Scottish educational history: the publication by the Scottish Education Department of *16-18s in Scotland: An Action Plan* (SED 1983). As far as I am aware, there has been no celebration or public recognition of this anniversary, a fact which reflects a sad lack of historical awareness in Scottish educational debates. In this paper I argue that the anniversary deserved to be recognised by policy-makers and practitioners as well as by researchers. My more general theme is the need to study our history, in order to make sense of our current situation and in order to draw lessons for policy and practice.

The paper is in three main parts. I first briefly describe the Action Plan itself and the context in which it was introduced. In the second part I discuss its significance, with reference to the 2008 SERA Conference theme of crossing borders and transforming boundaries. My title alludes to Herman's (2002) book, *The Scottish Enlightenment: the Scots' invention of the modern world*, but I might equally have called this paper 'The Action Plan and frameworks which cross boundaries'. For in the modern educational world for which the Action Plan prepared the way curriculum, qualification and credit frameworks aim to straddle, and thereby to transform, institutional boundaries within countries as well as international boundaries between them. And the Action Plan crossed boundaries

in the further sense that Scotland has played a prominent role in making this modern world truly global. The third part of the paper argues that the experience of the Action Plan and the reforms that followed provide lessons that continue to be relevant to policy today.

THE ACTION PLAN AND ITS CONTEXT

The Action Plan was published in January 1983, a time of high youth unemployment and low participation in post-compulsory education. Early in 1983 nearly a third (32%) of the previous year's school leavers were unemployed or on schemes for the unemployed, more than were in full-time further and higher education combined (25%) (Croxford *et al.* 1991: 53). The largest proportion, 38%, was in full-time employment, but this had fallen sharply from 64% among school leavers four years earlier. School staying-on rates and college entrance rates were rising, but not fast enough to absorb the huge numbers of young unemployed. In 1979 the SED published a Consultative Document on *16-18s in Scotland: the First Two Years of Post-Compulsory Education* (SED 1979), which invited views on how to raise participation rates, improve the quality of provision and help young people to find employment. The responses agreed that reform was needed but not on how to achieve it (SED 1983: 2). However, the Manpower Services Commission, a British-wide agency, had its own ideas. It was preparing to convert its youth unemployment programmes into the Youth Training Scheme (YTS), which would start later in 1983; and it was about to launch the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) for full-time education in England and Wales in 1983. The SED initially rejected TVEI for Scotland but accepted it a year later, when it realised it had no other means of accessing the funding. YTS and TVEI threatened a partial takeover of Scottish education and training by the centralising British MSC. The Action Plan was the SED's, or more precisely the Inspectorate's, bid to retain control of Scottish education and to reassert its legitimacy as the interpreter and defender of the Scottish interest (Raffe 1985).

The Action Plan's immediate focus was on vocational provision for 16-18 year-olds in colleges, but it argued for the integration of education and training and advocated a 'broad-based general education' for all 16-18 learners. It expressed concerns about current post-16 education and training, some of which sound familiar 25 years later: low post-16 participation, the fragmentation and lack of coherence of existing provision, the inappropriate content and pedagogy of many current courses, the need for more generic learning and the need for more responsive, flexible and learner-centred opportunities to meet the increasingly diverse needs of learners.

The Action Plan replaced existing non-advanced, post-compulsory courses with a national system of modules designed around a norm of 40 learning hours. These came to be known as SCOTVEC or National Certificate modules. Each module was defined primarily in terms of learning outcomes and associated assessment criteria; the module descriptors suggested appropriate learning and teaching approaches and contexts of learning, but lecturers and teachers had substantial discretion in how to 'flesh out' each module. Modules were internally assessed with a simple pass/fail outcome. Designed to ensure that vocational

programmes should develop broader skills, the initial catalogue of modules included provision for communication, mathematics, languages and personal and social development, as well as some provision for young people with learning difficulties. Many of these modules allowed investigations into areas of social and academic interest and could therefore be used in the context of traditional school subjects. Later modules which explicitly covered these subjects were added to meet demands from both school students and adult learners. The Action Plan suggested that the modules might provide an applied alternative for those for whom the struggle to pass a few Highers in S5 led to an 'arid educational experience' (p. 29). It also proposed that opportunities be extended and rationalised by coordinating local provision across consortia of schools and colleges.

The system was implemented swiftly. Working groups were established to write modules and some 700 were available for use in colleges and schools in August 1984, with almost full implementation by the following year. (This timetable - of 18 months from policy document to implementation - contrasts with the seven-year time lag between the publication of the Munn and Dunning Reports and the introduction of the first Standard Grade courses.) The modules replaced most non-advanced provision in colleges and proved unexpectedly popular in schools, partly because they were widely used for TVEI. Most TVEI students were aged 14 to 16, so modules were made available in S3 and S4 alongside the new Standard Grades, as well as in S5 and S6 alongside Highers. They also became popular with adults, as they provided national recognition for small units of learning. As Hart & Tuck (2007: 107) comment, the initiative 'started as the *16-18 Action Plan*, but quickly became referred to as *the 16-plus Action Plan* and then simply *Action Plan*.... The move to an outcomes-based qualifications system which was at the heart of Action Plan seemed logically ... to rule out distinctions based on the age of the learner or the place of learning - an innovation in policy terms.'

And the nature of that innovation is the theme of this presentation. The Action Plan received limited attention at the time it was published. A low-key, typescript document, it was largely ignored by the media, partly because its main focus was the college sector and vocational learning and it reformed neither Highers nor higher education. Significantly, much of the media attention focused, not on the introduction of vocational modules but on the plan to pool some Highers provision within consortia of schools. However, with hindsight we can see that the Action Plan was a critical moment in educational history: it introduced, or anticipated, the concept of a curriculum and qualifications framework which straddles institutional boundaries and thereby transforms them.

FRAMEWORKS WHICH CROSS BOUNDARIES

The new modules were intended to be generic, 'institutionally versatile' (Raffe 1988) and portable between schools and colleges. The Action Plan argued that a modular curriculum permitted greater flexibility, movement and choice for the individual learner; it was 'unconstrained by modes of attendance, ie full-time or part-time, and the kind of institution attended; and it offer[ed] clear possibilities of credit-transfer within and between institutions' (SED 1983: 46). We can see how

the modules crossed sectoral boundaries by observing their take-up among the cohort of young people who completed S4 in 1986. By the age of 19 nearly six in ten - 59% - had taken modules: 36% had done so at school, 14% on a full-time college programme, 17% on a Youth Training Scheme and 10% while in full-time employment (Croxford *et al.* 1991). The Action Plan not only crossed sectoral boundaries; it also challenged institutional boundaries within sectors, especially among colleges. Generic, portable modules were no longer owned by specific colleges or departments, but centrally determined and opened up to the market.

But the process did not stop with the Action Plan. SCOTVEC's Advanced Courses Development Programme, launched in 1989, extended modularisation - or unitisation in the now preferred terminology - to Higher National Certificates and Diplomas. This in turn set the scene for the Scottish Credit Accumulation and Transfer scheme or SCOTCAT, a unified credit framework for higher education launched in 1991. Another innovation, the introduction from 1990 of Scottish Vocational Qualifications, fits more loosely into this sequence of reforms. SVQs had features in common with Action Plan modules - they were unitised, outcomes-based, criterion-referenced awards designed for flexible delivery - but they embodied a narrower concept of competence, they were modelled on the National Vocational Qualifications introduced in England and they were imposed by the London government against Scottish opposition, including from SCOTVEC.

The next reform in the sequence had been prefigured by the Action Plan, which stated: 'It will also be for consideration, but at a later stage when experience of the proposals made here has been gained, whether there should be an extension of this process to include in one certificate all forms of academic and vocational awards for the 16-18 age group.' (SED 1983: 46) And this became the policy eleven years later when Higher Still was published. New National Qualifications, introduced from 1999, built on the Action Plan to introduce a unified curriculum and qualifications framework for 16-plus learners that combined features of modules with features of the existing academic courses.

A further landmark in the development of unified frameworks was the launch in 2001 of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, designed to embrace National Qualifications, the SCOTCAT framework, SVQs and ultimately all qualifications and assessed learning in Scotland. And the process continues with further changes to the frameworks within the SCQF, including the proposed reform of qualifications at SCQF levels 4 and 5, the subject of recent consultation (Scottish Government 2008). This reform aims to tidy up the mixed economy of Standard Grades and Intermediates in S3 and S4, much as Higher Still tidied up the mixed economy of Highers and modules in S5 and S6.

From this series of reforms has emerged a model of educational provision characterised by unified frameworks - curriculum, qualifications and credit frameworks - which cross boundaries and try to transform them. The boundaries they cross are institutional in the broad sense of the term; they include boundaries between individual institutions, between school and college sectors and between academic and vocational learning, boundaries of age and stage and (if less completely in the Scottish case) boundaries between institution-

based and work-based learning. And they aspire to cross boundaries between formal, non-formal and informal learning in what Young (1998: 172) has termed a process of 'de-differentiation away from specialist educational institutions', which 'encourage[s] learning and knowledge production in a much wider range of sites not normally associated with either learning or knowledge production'.

Three key concepts underlying this model are unification, learning outcomes and flexibility. Unification refers to the aspiration to plan the content, delivery and recognition of learning in a coordinated way, so that institutional, curricular, pedagogical and other differences become aspects of diversity to be celebrated and exploited and not divisions and barriers that obstruct learning or progression through the system (Spours *et al.* 2000; Raffe 2003; Coles 2006). Frameworks are one means of pursuing unification, and they do so by defining relationships and equivalences among diverse types of learning as the basis for coordinating them. This in turn requires a neutral language that can be applied to all types of learning. Learning outcomes, it is claimed, provide the basis of this language because they offer a common reference point independent of context: they enable curricula and qualifications to be specified without referring to 'inputs' such as the institution, mode or duration of learning (Jessup 1990; CEDEFOP 2008). A learning outcomes approach is claimed to promote transparency, transferability, coherence and a learner focus. And unified frameworks are designed to provide flexibility: that is, to offer pathways which allow flexible access, transfer and progression, to permit learner choice and to be responsive to individual and local needs with respect to the content, methods, place and pace of learning (Nijhof & Streumer 1994).

All three concepts - unification, learning outcomes and flexibility - are contested and open to different interpretations. The new educational model draws on a variety of wider discourses, ranging from lifelong learning to public-sector management (Howieson 1992; Lasonen & Young 1998; EC 2000; Green 2002; Allais 2003; Philips 2003; Raffe 2003; Young 2005, 2007). The rationales for the new model are similarly varied. They refer to:

- a shift in focus from providers to learners and other 'users' of education;
- access, inclusion and equality;
- the principle of comprehensive education, extended to the post-compulsory phase;
- parity of esteem for vocational and academic learning;
- new skill demands and new types of skill, sometimes associated with 'post-Fordist' developments in the workplace;
- responsiveness to market demands and individual and local needs;
- the need to coordinate post-compulsory and lifelong learning systems that are increasing in scale, diversity and complexity; and
- the new public management, with its emphasis on multiple providers, choice and performance.

As a result the model is 'loose' in the sense that it can be made operational in different ways. It is loose for a further reason. The rationales listed above primarily concern access and progression on the one hand, and the efficient and coordinated delivery of learning on the other. Even when they invoke curricular

concepts such as academic and vocational learning they treat these primarily as social constructs - embedded in different institutions, pathways and forms of recognition - rather than different types of knowledge. In other words, the boundaries which the new educational model aims to transform are primarily institutional and not epistemological. Nevertheless, in practice it has to cross epistemological boundaries in order to transform institutional ones, and this is probably their most contested feature. Critics argue that no framework can embrace all types of knowledge with widely varying requirements for the specification, process, assessment and recognition of learning (Oates 2004; Allais 2007; Young 2007). The response to this problem is to interpret the model loosely, for example to adopt a broad concept of learning outcomes that does not assume a particular type of learning and knowledge, and to accept that pragmatic decisions are always involved in its application. This means that the construction of a unified framework is a political process as well as a technical one, a point I return to later.

In addition to institutional and epistemological boundaries, the model also crosses national borders. Just as the learning outcomes approach makes it possible to describe learning independently of its institutional context, so can it describe learning in terms that are independent of any national context. The model enables educational arrangements to be flexible across international as well as institutional boundaries, for example, by facilitating educational exchanges or progression pathways across national borders. The new model, it is claimed, supports cross-national transparency, transfer and mobility, among students and among workers (EC 2005).

And this is why international organisations are promoting the new model and establishing meta-frameworks which straddle international boundaries. A qualifications framework and credit system for European higher education have been developed through the Bologna process, and a credit system for vocational learning and a European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for all types of learning are being promoted through the European Commission's 2010 Programme. The Commission is encouraging countries to develop national frameworks which can speak to the EQF; it is promoting common principles for quality assurance and for the recognition of prior learning; and most fundamentally, it is encouraging all countries to move to a learning outcomes approach (CEDEFOP 2008). The process extends beyond Europe. International organisations such as the OECD (2007) and World Bank are promoting qualifications frameworks and most European countries and a wide variety of countries elsewhere in the world are developing them or committed to doing so (Coles 2006; Bjornavold & Coles 2007/08; Lythe 2008). The new educational model anticipated by the Action Plan is now an international phenomenon. And like other international discourses, it has acquired its own momentum. Countries are stampeding to introduce national qualifications frameworks despite the limited evidence of their impact and the fears of some commentators that their benefits may not justify the costs and disruption involved in introducing them (Grootings 2007; McGrath 2007; Young 2007). These fears particularly concern poorer countries, but they also touch countries with highly developed education and training systems such as Germany, whose traditions conflict with core principles of the new model such

as the comparability of vocational and academic learning and the separation of learning outcomes from inputs (Bohlinger 2007/08; Hanf & Rein 2007/08).

Scotland, by contrast, is among the leaders; Scotland and Ireland are the first two countries to self-certify for the European higher education qualifications framework and Scotland is the first country to consult on a referencing of its national framework to the EQF. In 2005 the UK Presidency of the EU hosted a conference in Glasgow which showcased the SCQF and discussed the recently published proposals for the EQF. Its title - *Qualifications Frameworks in Europe: Learning across Boundaries* - referred to the ability of the new model to cross boundaries. But it also alluded to a second type of international boundary-crossing: the role of policy learning and policy borrowing between countries in spreading the model.

As the Glasgow conference illustrated, the Action Plan and the reforms that followed established Scotland as a significant participant in international discourses of lifelong learning. The Action Plan itself attracted interest from other European countries, especially those which saw its modular approach as a means to increase flexibility (Pilz 1999). It attracted even more interest among Commonwealth countries such as New Zealand where it influenced the development of the world's first comprehensive qualifications framework (Philips 1998). And it attracted interest elsewhere in the UK, where it influenced some aspects of the development and assessment of NVQs although it probably had more influence on critics of NVQs who favoured a broader concept of outcomes and a more unified approach (Raggatt & Williams 1999).

The model of lifelong learning that is emerging in Europe and elsewhere has been described (and sometimes resented) as an anglophone creation. It is beyond the scope of this paper to trace the specifically Scottish influence, but we may note that Scotland has been well represented in cross-national research and development, Scottish policy-makers have played influential roles on key committees and working groups such as the Bologna Follow-up Group and the European Commission's technical working groups on credit and the EQF, Scottish expatriates have run organisations ranging from the European Training Foundation to the Victorian Regulation and Qualifications Authority, and Scottish consultants have advised education and training authorities in Europe and around the world. The modern educational world is the product of international movements, but Scotland has played a disproportionate role in its creation.

LESSONS FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF UNIFIED FRAMEWORKS

The Scottish contribution goes one step further. As a pioneer in the development of unified frameworks, Scotland has also accumulated more experience than most other countries of their strengths and their limitations, and of the practical issues that they may raise. This experience provides lessons for policy and practice today.

Governments, in Scotland and elsewhere, tend to be poor at learning from history. The frequent restructuring of policy-making institutions, and the mobility of people who staff them, make it hard to accumulate policy memory. The speed and complexity of policy changes and the need to work out their practical details in the process of implementation discourage deliberate attempts to learn from

past experience. And the emphasis on innovation, and the rhetoric of novelty and radical change, make policy-makers unwilling or unable to recognise continuities and parallels with what has gone before (Hart & Tuck 2007; Higham & Yeomans 2007). Policy-makers like to believe they are in uncharted territory. Yet many of the problems and challenges identified in the Action Plan are similar to those of today; and the lessons from the Action Plan and the reforms that have followed continue to be relevant.

Below I give examples of these lessons. I present them in broad and schematic terms; there is more detail than I have time for here. I focus on post-compulsory learning and (primarily) on research by colleagues and myself. This is not to claim any kind of monopoly but rather to select the issues where I am best placed to draw lessons. I draw three sets of lessons, which primarily concern unification, learning outcomes and flexibility respectively.

First, *a unified framework does not in itself remove inequalities of power and esteem within education*. I noted earlier that constructing unified frameworks was a political as well as a technical process. Far from replacing existing structures of power and influence, the design and implementation of Scottish frameworks has been shaped by these structures. Higher Still, for example, respected existing academic hierarchies through its design (reflected in the title Higher Still) and in its implementation (which gave priority to school and academic subjects). The SCQF was a voluntary, partnership-based initiative, in which higher education played a leading role, which worked within existing power relationships (Raffe 2007). The experience of other countries suggests that had the SCQF posed a stronger challenge to entrenched interests it would have had much more difficulty in becoming established (Philips 1998, Allais 2003). And the process of constructing a unified framework may cause powers within education systems to become more centralised. As the Higher Still Development Programme revealed, a unified framework cannot easily be developed from the 'bottom-up' because only central authorities have the entire system within their purview. Top-down drivers of change, such as performance management and qualifications arrangements, remain critical (Raffe *et al.* 2002). The initiatives which created the 'modern world' described above were all qualifications-driven. Curriculum-driven reforms, such as TVEI, largely had impact to the extent that they were embedded in qualifications reforms such as SCOTVEC modules.

Moreover, a unified framework cannot change the status of education as a positional good; nor can it easily change the relative positional value of different types of learning. The main reason why vocational and academic learning do not have parity of esteem is because they differ in their positional value: academic learning brings higher returns in terms of labour-market outcomes or entry to higher education. Successive Scottish reforms have shown that attempts to achieve parity of esteem fail if they do not change the relative positional values of vocational and academic learning, and these values are determined primarily by the decisions of 'end-users' such as employers and higher education (Croxford *et al.* 1991; Raffe *et al.* 2007).

This set of lessons has several implications for current policy. One is the need to have realistic aims. In the early days of the SCQF some rather naïve expectations were expressed: it was compared with the invention of penicillin

and putting a man on the moon (Gallacher *et al.* 2005). In practice, the most successful qualifications frameworks are those with the lowest ambitions to transform education (Allais 2007). Another implication is that the government should abandon its commitment to parity of esteem - or, rather, it should replace this commitment with a commitment to ensure that vocational learning is of high quality and offers clear and predictable pathways to good jobs or higher education. This is not just a matter of semantics. A focus on 'parity of esteem' encourages the false diagnosis that the problem is primarily one of culture and attitudes, and it encourages false remedies based on this diagnosis. And a further implication is that while policies may encourage bottom-up innovation this cannot become the main driver of change. *Curriculum for Excellence* rightly seeks to stimulate local and school-based innovation but it needs to recognise the limitations of bottom-up change and the influence of 'top-down' drivers such as qualifications. Claims that CFE is a curriculum-led reform may obscure the fact that it is inescapably a qualifications-driven (and inspection-driven) reform at least where secondary education is concerned. The issue is not whether curriculum or qualifications should drive CFE, but whether and how the qualifications that drive it can be designed to promote curricular goals.

A second set of lessons can be summarised in the phrase: *institutions matter*. A learning outcomes approach does not make 'inputs' such as the institution, mode or duration of learning less important; indeed, they become even more important because some of the conditions of an outcomes approach, such as mutual trust, require institutional underpinning (Young 2002; Coles & Oates 2004). The 'institutional logics' of the settings in which learning takes place shape access, attainment, progression and the learning experience itself (Croxford *et al.* 1991). These institutional logics cut across and contradict the intrinsic logics of a flexible, unified education system, and create barriers to progression within and between sectors and modes of learning; no education system can be truly seamless. Our research on Higher Still suggested that progression and attainment were influenced by a logic of vertical differentiation in schools and a logic of horizontal differentiation in colleges (Raffe *et al.* 2007). Miller *et al.* (2008) have shown how the same prescribed curriculum may be enacted in different ways in different institutions. And work-based provision has an institutional logic that differs from either schools or colleges, which may explain why it has proved difficult to include it within unified frameworks.

The implication is that a unified framework needs to be loosely specified; it should not have rigid, detailed criteria for the specification of curricular content or assessment. It needs to be loose enough to accommodate different institutional logics as well as different epistemologies as discussed earlier. The relative success of the SCQF is partly attributable to its 'loose' design compared with frameworks in other countries (Young 2005; Allais 2007). Conversely, the attempt to impose a relatively 'tight' assessment regime across different sectors of education led to the 'exams debacle' of 2000 (Raffe *et al.* 2002). And research on NVQs and SVQs has demonstrated that a narrow interpretation of learning outcomes can lead to a 'spiral of specification' in a vain attempt to achieve objective and context-free assessment criteria (Wolf 1995). Our study of Higher Still concluded that a 'unified system or framework is not the same as a

uniform one: it is better understood as a principle for co-ordinating diversity, and the key issue in designing such a system is to identify the design features which must be standardised and those where diversity is encouraged' (Raffe *et al.* 2007: 505).

The conclusion that 'institutions matter' has implications for the future of comprehensive education. There is a tendency in some policy debates to assume that the values of comprehensive education can be achieved through a unified curriculum and qualifications framework regardless of the ragbag of institutions called on to deliver it. Experience suggests otherwise. As the recent OECD Review confirmed, the comprehensive school is one of the strengths of Scottish education, and its strength rests on the clarity of its institutional mission and the consistency of standards and provision across institutions. This clarity and consistency are potentially threatened by greater local autonomy, by the encouragement for school-based innovation and by the emerging variation in patterns of school-college partnership. Desirable as these things may be, we must be careful that they do not unintentionally undermine the core strengths of comprehensive education.

The third set of lessons concerns flexibility. Experience since the Action Plan has repeatedly demonstrated that *flexibility is not the simple panacea it is often expected to be*. After the Action Plan the post-compulsory curriculum mainly comprised elective academic courses and modules, and many commentators (myself included) claimed that this flexible framework, with opportunities for choice and incremental decision-making, achieved higher post-16 participation than elsewhere in the UK. However, more detailed research shows that this claim was unfounded. Not only was participation rather lower than elsewhere in the UK, but the post-compulsory stage was associated with a widening of social inequalities (Raffe *et al.* 2001, 2006). The more unified but flexible 'climbing frame' of National Qualifications that replaced this framework proved difficult to design, implement and deliver; it promoted access but its impacts on attainment and progression were less certain (Raffe *et al.* 2007). And the experience of constructing this climbing frame showed that different types of flexibility may conflict with each other: the aim of constructing flexible pathways required a degree of standardisation of unit design and assessment that made flexible delivery much harder to achieve (Howieson *et al.* 2002). None of this means that flexibility is worthless, but the experience suggests that flexibility may be more valuable for adult learners than for young people, and it may affect access more than attainment and progression. Above all, flexibility should be balanced against other objectives: it cannot be the main principle of educational provision.

This is additionally important because of a further lesson: flexible curriculum and qualifications systems may discourage the development of a clear purpose and vision of change. McPherson & Raab (1988, p.496) noted that the Action Plan arose out of a lack of agreement about the way forward, and linked it with the apparent decline in consensus among the policy community. A shared purpose and priorities were no longer necessary because '[m]odules were to make all things possible'. Higher Still in turn came to be criticised for lacking 'vision' and a 'coherent educational philosophy' (Humes & Bryce 1998: 111; Paterson 2000: 88; Raffe *et al.* 2002). In one sense this is unfair: unification and

flexibility were the vision of Higher Still, although critics argued that a reform to link academic and vocational learning needed a clearer epistemological and curricular rationale for doing so (Canning 2003). An emphasis on flexibility and choice can focus attention on the structure of the curriculum rather than its content or underpinning values. It also means that educational authorities relinquish control over content and values, and the influence of end-users becomes stronger. Curricular choices are influenced by the anticipated demands of universities or employers rather than by educational considerations of coherence or value.

Once again, there are clear implications for CFE. The tensions between flexibility and the expression of a clear 'vision' suggests that there is a continuing need to articulate and share the vision of CFE, especially in the senior phase where arrangements are most flexible. Throughout the development of CFE there has been a tension between flexibility - especially with respect to age and stage - and the more holistic requirements of the new curriculum. Choice and flexibility may be a part of the CFE vision, but they must be kept in balance with the other parts of that vision.

And it is partly for this reason that the OECD Review's proposal for a Unified Graduation Certificate, rejected by the government, should be reconsidered. This would be a multi-level Baccalaureate-type award for all 15-18 learners whether at school, college or the workplace. Such an award could define and sustain a vision and purpose for the senior phase of CFE. It could build on existing flexibility: it could cover different institutions and modes of learning and use the building blocks of the SCQF. But it would avoid the fragmentation and incoherence of the current - too flexible - arrangements. It could underpin the place of vocational learning, and it could provide a better balance between local innovation and the need for national consistency, and between the influence of end-users and the need for breadth and coherence.

CONCLUSION

The Action Plan was a significant event in educational history because it started a sequence of reforms which led to the development of an important feature of the modern educational world: unified frameworks which cross institutional boundaries and attempt to transform them. And this model has crossed international boundaries in the dual sense, that it aims to straddle and transform these boundaries, and that it has spread throughout the world. Much as the Scottish Enlightenment and the ideas it set in train have been credited with the invention of the modern world, so have the Action Plan and the reforms which followed contributed to the creation of the modern educational world of unified frameworks.

The anniversary of the Action Plan therefore deserves to be recognised. We need to be aware of our history in order to understand how we got to where we are now. And we need to study this history in order to provide lessons for the present day. The experience of the Action Plan and the reforms which followed has the capacity to speak to us over another boundary: the boundary of time.

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