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To know ourselves? Research, data and policy-making in the Scottish education system

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This paper considers the role of independent research in helping an education and training system 'know itself', illustrating this through the experience of the Centre for Educational Sociology (CES) of which David was a member and director. It highlights the tensions in the research-policy relationship arising from the different 'normative worlds' of researchers and policy makers, and their priorities at each stage of the policy cycle. It shows how such tensions have been evident in the research-policy relationship in Scotland pre- and post-devolution and points out the importance of the plural provision of research support and funding. The paper argues the need for system-wide, longitudinal data to enable a country to 'know' its education and training system and analyse the impact of government policies and wider societal change. It points out that Scotland no longer collects such data and so cannot interrogate and understand its education and training system. The failure of policy makers to learn from the experience of their own country's past is noted; the paper concludes by reaffirming the need for research to challenge policy and policy-makers, especially in a system such as Scotland with a tendency to complacency.

Keywords: policy process; policy learning; research and policy; system wide data; education and training policy

Introduction

> One cannot know an education system that does not want to know itself, and an
> education system that does not want to know itself cannot be fully effective.
> (Gray, McPherson, and Raffe 1983, 332)

This paper considers the role of independent research in helping an education and training

system to 'know itself'. It does so through a focus on the Centre for Educational Sociology

(CES) which David joined as a young researcher in 1975, and of which he later became

director. The paper reflects on the CES experience as a long-standing research centre in

Scotland both in terms of its work and its relationship with policy-makers, drawing on

David's and other CES members' writing about research and policy. In doing so we want to

celebrate David not only as a researcher but also his sometimes overlooked contribution as

director of CES: this was not only through his intellectual leadership but also his efforts in

keeping a largely self-funded research centre operational and productive for so many years.

We also pay tribute to Andrew McPherson who established CES and was its first director and

subsequently co-director with David until his retirement in 1994.

CES has been an observer, analyst and critical commentator on developments in

Scottish education and training and has played an important role in holding the public policy

process to account by providing independent evidence on the actual and potential

contribution of policy. Writing in 1997 to mark the 25th anniversary of the establishment of

CES, David stated:

> The most important achievement of the CES, I believe, has been to maintain a source of
> openness and self-questioning in the sometimes closed and complacent world of Scottish
> education. (Raffe 1997, 1)

As two long-serving members of CES and colleagues of David we approach the task of

writing this paper with mixed feelings. On the one hand we are writing it to acknowledge the

work of CES, but we are also writing with a sense of frustration about the erosion of the research capacity in Scotland and the decreasing ability to investigate the education and training system. Currently the sort of data and resources that David and others at CES were able to draw on for much of the last 40 years is no longer available for the research community and others to use.

In the paper we discuss:

- the philosophy of CES;

- the different worlds of researchers and policy makers;

- the research-policy relationship in Scotland pre- and post - devolution, drawing mainly on the experience of CES;

- the importance of system wide data in enabling a system to 'know itself ' using the example of the Scottish School Leavers Surveys;

- the value of policy learning from a country's own past experience;

- the need for an independent research capacity.

Centre for Educational Sociology: interrogating the official account

CES was founded by Andrew McPherson in 1973 in the Department of Sociology at the University of Edinburgh. The location of CES in the Sociology Department is critical to understanding its stance and approach to research: it has built on but extended the tradition of 'political arithmetic' to pursue what Lauder et al term a 'policy-oriented sociology' (Lauder, Brown, and Halsey 2004). While much of David's research and that of the Centre has been quantitative, it has never pursued the dispassionate 'counting' approach to the world for which political arithmetic has previously often been criticised. David was interested in understanding what counts and why and in developing analytical and conceptual tools with which to understand complex issues and situations. From an early stage CES embraced a

mixed-methods approach linking quantitative and qualitative methods; in fact on joining CES in 1986, the first project that one of us (Howieson) worked on with David, was a mixed-methods study of the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) (Bell et al. 1988).

Part of the political arithmetic tradition is the idea of holding governments to account and this view of research as part of the process of political accountability in a democratic society was articulated very early in the life of CES. Initially this was in a paper to the British Educational Research Association annual conference in 1978 (McPherson, Raab, and Raffe 1978) and subsequently elaborated in 1983 (Gray, McPherson, Raffe and Raab 1983). They discussed the notion of 'an accountable democracy' in which governments must explain and justify their actions and argued that, as in social science, such narratives need to be tested and open to criticism to enable the citizen to evaluate them. They believed that social science has a critical role to play in this process and this belief essentially defined the nature and purpose of research at CES. Reflecting now on our first years of working at CES, we can see in hindsight how this view of research informed and shaped us as researchers. Celebrating the 25th anniversary of CES, David said:

> The CES has never had a party line on educational policy issues. However, its work has been imbued by a philosophy of the role of research…In a democratic society research provides a means by which the public can call the government to account. (Raffe 1997, 2)

The worlds of research and policy

The relationship between research and government is frequently an uneasy one, even if the official rhetoric is one of a commitment to evidence informed policy.

David suggested that part of the explanation for tensions is that research and policy inhabit different 'normative worlds' (Bell and Raffe 1991, Raffe 2002) with different views of research and its objectives, timetables, priorities and control, especially of its

dissemination. For researchers the criteria of good research are validity and originality. In the normative world of policy the criteria of good research are helpfulness and concern for its consequences. Humes makes a similar argument, suggesting the disenchantment of educational researchers and policymakers arises from their different expectations of, and priorities for, research (Humes 2013).

Overlapping with the idea of different normative worlds is the issue of the policy cycle and the consequent impact on government attitude to research, especially on the extent to which it is prepared to accept scepticism (Bell and Raffe 1991, Raffe 2002, Spours and Raffe 2007). In the first phase of the policy cycle when an issue is perceived as requiring policy change but the outlines of the new policy have not yet emerged, wide-ranging critical research is more likely to be accepted. But in the next phase with the crystallisation of the policy and its early implementation, research which calls into question the wisdom of the policy or the assumptions on which it was based is not welcomed. The extent to which policy makers in Scotland have at times demonstrated a more collaborative approach to research has arguably been only temporary, part of a cyclical process linked to the different policy-making phases or contexts (Raffe and Spours 2007) and we discuss this further below.

In terms of the purposes of and paradigms of research, David argued that policy makers on the whole assume a 'what works' model of research (Raffe 2003). This model is implicit in the so-called evidence-based approach to policy as witnessed in the most recent Scottish Government Research Strategy for Education where the notion of 'what works' figures prominently; its priorities for action include '*effective commissioning and dissemination of evidence on 'what works''* (Scottish Government 2017, 3). Humes and Bryce suggest that this emphasis on research-informed policy, while appearing to give a central role for research may be its biggest threat because it is associated with this narrow 'what works' view (Humes and Bryce, 2001). A 'what works' approach, especially when

based on a single project, is unlikely to contribute to the development of theory, knowledge and methods in the field (Raffe 1996). It does not allow the scope or the funding to address the longer-term fundamental questions that create a body of knowledge on which to draw to try and answer short-term and often unpredictable policy questions. The CES research on the impact of educational reform, for example, has been able to influence public policy debates and the design of policy responses because of the strength of the knowledge base it was able to create through a long-term programme of work (University of Edinburgh 2014).

Is a productive and successful relationship possible between researchers and policy makers given their different perspectives? David argued that such a relationship is a necessity since *'Research and government are mutually dependent and need to engage with each other'* (Raffe 2002, 3). To do so successfully requires each side to acknowledge this dependence and recognise and respect that their priorities differ. On the one side, policy makers need research to justify if not inform their actions, but they need to recognise that scepticism is intrinsic and a legitimate feature of good research. On the other side, researchers have an obligation to try and work with government and need to recognise that the policy process is not rational, quite often requires messy compromise and, on occasion, it may be necessary and legitimate for government to take certain decisions irrespective of research evidence (Raffe 2002).

In the following section we consider the research-policy relationship in Scotland drawing mainly on the experiences of CES as a long-standing research centre.

The research-policy relationship

The CES experience of interacting with policy makers over a forty year period bears witness to a fluctuating and sometimes difficult relationship although we should also acknowledge that, even at their worst, there were generally some individuals in government who were not

hostile (Gray, McPherson, and Raffe 1983; Raffe 1997, 2002) [1].

The importance of plural institutional provision

The control of research is perhaps the most contentious aspect of the relationship between research and policy/government and this has been the source of the most serious disputes between CES and policy makers.

The first example dates back to the early years of CES but has continuing relevance. In 1975, the Centre was seeking additional government funding to extend its existing national surveys and create a collaborative research programme which would make the resulting datasets available to others to analyse. The intention of collaborative research was an attempt to make research more democratic and to open up access to the knowledge generated by research: this implied a growing constituency for informed educational debate outside the Scottish Education Department (SED) (McPherson 1984, Humes 2013). For some within government, this raised issues about control of the research and its possible ramifications. It was feared that the official narratives about Scottish education and justification for educational policy might become less persuasive if others outside of the policy community had easy access to research evidence and were able to construct counter narratives.

The way in which this conflict was resolved and CES's research plans secured remains relevant. The key was the attitude of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), it not only awarded CES a substantial grant for the collaborative research programme, but also offered 'official' support which made it more difficult for the Scottish Education Department

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1. Before devolution in 1999, education in Scotland was administered by a department (variously named) of the Scottish Office. Training was a UK responsibility. Since 1999, both education and training have been the responsibility of the devolved government (called the Scottish Executive until 2007 and since then the Scottish Government) and falls under two departments or directorates: the Lifelong Learning Directorate and the Schools Directorate.

to sustain its opposition. In writing about this episode, Andrew McPherson drew attention to the importance of 'plural institutional provision' for the independence of research and how the Education Research Board (ERB) of the SSRC was prepared to take a '*bold decision*' and '*operate outside the limits of established power*' (McPherson 1984, 118). Could the same be said today of the ESRC and its Grants Assessment Panels?

What of the future? The European Union has been a source of plural provision, but EU support will no longer be available to UK based researchers after Brexit. Even if the home governments make good on promises to compensate for the loss of EU funding, this would further diminish the range of funding sources. But it is not only an issue of alternative sources of funding but also of moral, political and intellectual support for independent minded research that might not be to the liking of government. Humes, for example, poses the question how 'plural institutional provision' might be assured in any future independent Scotland when the outside pressure that assisted CES might not be available (Humes 2013).

The legitimacy of sceptical research

In the later 1970s and early 1980s, the Scottish Office departments responsible for education and training had relatively open attitudes to CES research, facilitating and providing funding for the Scottish School Leavers' Survey (SSLS) and commissioning research on issues of concern. However, with the advent of the Thatcher government and the 'New Public management' in the later 1980s and early 1990s, the relationship between researchers and policy makers deteriorated in the context of a government which wanted to restrict the role of the state and which distinguished between its own interests and those of the public. Conviction politicians such as Michael Forsyth[2] did not recognise the legitimacy of a

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2. Under Secretary of State for Scotland with responsibility for education 1987-90; Secretary of State for Scotland 1990-92.

sceptical research community. As David reflected:

> The government wanted research for its own purposes, but it no longer felt it had a duty
> to support research by those who might criticise its policies. Some of the Centre's work -
> on comprehensive education, youth training, school performance and access to higher
> education - did not confirm its political prejudices. (Raffe 1997, 3)

As government sought 'evidence' to confirm that its policies were working, CES found itself increasingly in conflict with government. These conflicts reached a climax in 1990 when the Scottish Office made the decision to withdraw its funding for CES to conduct the Scottish School Leavers Survey. This was, at least in part, a political decision. The survey was redesigned by the Scottish Office as a smaller and cheaper operation and data collection was contracted out to London survey agency which lacked expertise in Scottish education but could do the job more cheaply.

This was clearly a major crisis for CES and meant a loss of staff and their expertise, but it was also detrimental more generally to the research capacity and the research community in Scotland since the quality of the data available to analyse key aspects of education, training and young people's transitions deteriorated (Croxford 2006).

Subsequently, as the deficiencies of the survey became obvious, it was revised with an improved and expanded design. CES, largely through David's efforts, was able to gain funding from the Scottish government and other sources such as the ESRC, to conduct a number of studies using SSLS data as we outline later.

Continuing themes in the research –policy relationship post devolution

Our discussion of the research-policy relationship in Scotland has so far largely dealt with the position before devolution in 1999. In the years preceding this, there was much debate about the likely impact of devolution on the nature of policy-making in Scotland and in this section we consider this issue, in particular, what the impact of devolution has been on the research-

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policy relationship, the attitude of policy-makers to the role of research and how it might contribute to policy and practice.

There was considerable optimism that devolution and the creation of a Scottish Parliament would help to establish a more open and inclusive style of politics and policy-making in which independent research would have a recognised role to play (Paterson 1998). There were some grounds for optimism, the Scottish Executive, Parliament and public agencies all expressed their desire to build stronger and more strategic links with research as part of their increased emphasis on evidence-informed policy and practice. The Scottish Parliament's Inquiry into Lifelong Learning in 2001, for example, involved researchers as advisers and provided opportunities for researchers to submit evidence and influence the debate; the Scottish Executive built the Inquiry into its own policy-making processes and timetables. While acknowledging such positive signs, David cautioned against being over optimistic about the policy-research relationship in Scotland:

> Nevertheless, there are also reasons, if not for doubting that paradise is just around the corner, at least for postponing our welcome. (Raffe 2002, 7)

He suggested that the greatest reason for caution, if not pessimism, was because Scotland was still in the first phase of the policy cycle (the context of influence identified by Bowe, Ball, and Gold 1992) where, as pointed out earlier, commitment to openness is likely to be strong since administrations are less committed to particular policy directions and have less to lose (Raffe 2002, Raffe and Spours 2007). As policies move into the context of policy text production and the context of practice, the administrations may become less open to ideas which challenge the wisdom of the chosen policies. David posed the question whether the more constructive relations between policy and research would be maintained in later stages of the policy cycle (Raffe 2002). We would argue that, overall, this has not been the case.

The impact of the stage of policy cycle on how research is perceived is evident in one of the CES's major confrontations with a politician after devolution. This concerned Sam Galbraith, the first Education Minister in the newly devolved Scottish Executive. Galbraith had previously shown great interest in the contribution of research and had engaged positively with the research community, but he reacted very negatively to CES research on the government policy on target setting in Scottish schools. This target setting policy was politically charged and faced opposition from the teaching unions among others. The CES research demonstrated the inadequacy of free-meal entitlement (FME) as a measure of the socio-economic characteristics of Scottish schools (Croxford 2000). This was a sensitive finding since FME was the measure on which the policy on target-setting was based. The research was perceived by the Minister as undermining an important government policy and the reaction was to attack the research and the researcher publicly.

Another example which undermines earlier optimism about the research-policy relationship post devolution and demonstrates the impact of the policy cycle is a study of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) by researchers from Stirling University (Priestley and Minty 2012). CfE is the major reform of the 3–18 curriculum in Scotland introduced on a phased basis since 2004 which aims to bring about 'transformational change' in Scottish education. CfE has its origins in the National Debate on Education in 2002 when policy makers actively sought contributions about the future direction of Scottish education from a wide-range of organisations, groups and individuals (Munn et al. 2004). However, as the resultant policy (CfE) has been implemented and various problems emerged (Scott 2015, Reform Scotland 2016), policy makers have become far less open and are not well disposed to any research on this crucial policy that could be construed as negative. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the research by Priestley and Minty on CfE in the Highland Region of Scotland was poorly received by the Scottish Government. The research findings were mixed, but some press reports

sensationalised them and government reaction was to dismiss the whole study as out of date - which it was not - and unrepresentative of the country as a whole although its findings were in fact in line with other small scale projects elsewhere in Scotland (Humes 2013).

It is striking that despite the importance of CfE, the Scottish Government has not commissioned any large scale research on the reform. It did ask the OECD to conduct a review of 'the direction of the Curriculum for Excellence' (OECD 2015, 26), but the review only covered part of CfE, excluding the Senior Phase (15–18 year olds) which is arguably the most problematic stage of CfE (Scott 2015, Reform Scotland 2016, Howieson et al.2017). Moreover, an external review of this kind has considerable limitations as David pointed out about an earlier OECD study (Raffe 2008). The 2015 OECD Review team itself emphasised that it was:

> not an evaluation of CfE itself, and indeed the evidence is not available for such an evaluation. (OECD 2015, 14)

The OECD Review noted the lack of any large scale research or evaluation projects by either the universities or independent agencies and recommended a national evaluation of the implementation of CfE in schools and communities (OECD 2015, 18–19). To date such an evaluation has not been commissioned. The recent Research Strategy for Scottish Education discusses 'the implications' (Scottish Government 2017, 6) of the Review's recommendations, including generating readily understood data and helping practitioners to produce and use evidence and data, but no comprehensive evaluation of CfE is mentioned.

Knowing ourselves: the need for system wide data

If an education system is to 'know itself', it needs certain data and, at present, Scotland (in contrast with England) lacks system-wide, individual-level data on young people's experiences at school and their transition to post-school education, training and the labour

market. It simply does not have the necessary data for researchers and others to examine the impact of education policies and reforms and to hold the government to account. David summed the position thus:

> Scotland has destination surveys of school, college and university leavers, inspectorate reports and occasional evaluation studies; but these are all limited in their coverage of the cohort and in the data they record, especially on the backgrounds of young people. They suffer from limitations of data quality and completeness and, crucially, they do not provide system-wide evidence based on longitudinal data collected over a longitudinal span greater than a year or so. For a country which aims to encourage progression through the 3–18 curriculum, to encourage 'positive **sustained** destinations' (my emphasis), to promote 'flexible learner journeys', to improve pathways between school and employment, and to promote equity and social justice in all of these things, this absence of systematic evidence on policy processes and impacts is unfortunate. (Raffe 2015, 107)

Previously, the situation in Scotland was very different: for around 30 years the Scottish School Leavers' Survey (SSLS)[3] provided invaluable system-wide, longitudinal data on young people's experiences and transitions. It was designed, administered and analysed by CES from the mid-1970s until 1992 when, as already noted, the Scottish Office made the decision to contract out the design and administration of the survey. Researchers at CES, however, continued to analyse the data. In the next sub-section we describe the SSLS and outline some of the research it enabled to illustrate the value of such data in contributing to self-knowledge about a country's education and training system.

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3. The survey design varied over the years: those based on cohorts were called the 'Scottish Young People's Survey' while the 'Scottish School Leavers Survey' refers to those based on a school leaver design. For simplicity in this paper we refer to all the surveys as the Scottish School Leavers Survey' (SSLS). The SSLS provided the model for the Youth Cohort Survey in England and Wales.

The contribution of the Scottish School Leavers Survey to knowledge about the education and training system in Scotland

The SSLS series provided a rich source of information about changes in young people's schooling, experiences, attitudes and transitions to education, training and the labour market during a major period of social and educational change. Their coverage was wide-ranging, including about each young person's circumstances, including their family background - parental social class and education and family structure – as well as contextual data about schools, local authorities and travel-to-work areas. The scope of the surveys made them invaluable for analysing inequalities in the effects of social and economic change and enabled researchers at CES to analyse a wide range of issues, including:

- Inequalities in curriculum, attainment and career opportunities by gender, social class, area deprivation and school characteristics.

- The effects of policy changes, including comprehensive reorganisation, parental choice, new curriculum and examinations, the expansion of higher education, and youth training schemes.

- The effects of labour market changes on opportunities and career decisions, including inequalities by gender, social class and examination attainment.

- Comparative analysis of trends in educational outcomes and youth transitions in England, Wales and Scotland and issues of policy convergence and divergence.

For example, a ground-breaking study of the effects of the early stages of comprehensive reorganisation in Scotland by McPherson and Willms (1987, 1989) analysed three cohorts of school leavers, and demonstrated that 'Comprehensive schooling is better and fairer': social segregation was reduced, attainment increased – especially among working class students and girls (McPherson and Willms 1987, 1989). Subsequently, the researchers were able to use

later SSLS cohorts to analyse the effects of parental choice of school in increasing social segregation (Willms 1996). SSLS data was used to study young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) and showed, among other findings, that despite policy and public concern about disaffected young men, it was young women who remained NEET for longer (Croxford and Raffe 2000). One of the most valuable aspects of the SSLS was its longitudinal nature and a number of studies capitalised on this such as one that traced the transitions of young people from the end of compulsory schooling up to the age of 22–23 and illustrated the continued impact of low attainment on outcomes, especially for young women (Howieson and Iannelli 2007). Other studies focused social class inequalities in entry to higher education (Tinklin 2000).

The value of the SSLS was clearly demonstrated in the major ESRC funded project *'Education and Youth Transitions in England, Wales and Scotland 1984–2002'*. This project constructed a time series from the Scottish School Leavers Survey and the England and Wales Youth Cohort Study (YCS) to analyse and compare trends in educational outcomes and youth transitions in England, Wales and Scotland during the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, and assess the extent of divergence or convergence and local/regional variation. It explored the issue of education policy convergence and divergence within Great Britain and assessed the extent to which young people had different outcomes and transitions as a result of different institutions and policies in each country. The output from this project was very substantial indeed (see Croxford et al. 2006, and Raffe et al. 2006 for an overview).

A 'data desert'

In 2005 the Scottish Executive decided to discontinue its funding of the SSLS. This decision was disastrous: surveys such as the SSLS are an enterprise that the research community by itself cannot easily sustain. Although funding from a variety of sources can be sought for

particular analysis of survey data, the design and administration of a long-term nationally representative survey is another matter and requires government support. This is necessary in terms both of the provision of sustained funding, but also in relation to the authority needed to be able to collect regular national samples for the survey and access relevant administrative data.

The decision not to continue funding the SSLS was partly related to an increasing problem with response rates. However, the review that the Executive itself commissioned recommended a re-designed survey that explicitly addressed the issue of non-response (Howieson, Croxford, and Howat 2008). The re-establishment of a national survey of young people in Scotland was also recommended by the OECD Review of Quality and Equity of Schooling in Scotland (OECD 2007). Both sets of recommendations were ignored.

Statisticians at the Scottish Government and its agencies attempt to monitor education and training outcomes using crude indicators derived from administrative data, but without the depth that could be achieved with individual-level data of the SSLS.

CES has made use of administrative data for research purposes, for example, UCAS and HESA data on applicants and entrants to higher education to analyse inequalities in transitions to higher education and to investigate more subtle forms of inequalities arising from the differentiation of HE institutions. But we were only too aware of the considerable limitations of these administrative data sources (Croxford and Raffe 2011a, Croxford and Raffe 2011b, Raffe and Croxford 2014); deficiencies well recognised by other researchers (Gorard et al. 2007; Gorard et al. 2017)

David's last academic work was as co-editor and author of the book '*Everyone's future: lessons from fifty years of Scottish comprehensive schooling'* which reviewed evidence on the past fifty years of comprehensive schooling in Scotland to draw lessons for the future (Murphy et al. 2015). Along with our colleague Danny Murphy, we were also co-

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editors and authors and the process of writing the book brought home all too vividly the

consequences of the loss of the SSLS. Time and again we realised that we could not update

certain analyses because of lack of data after 2005. We could not, for example, analyse the

impact of *Curriculum for Excellence*- the flagship reform of Scottish education- on social and

other inequalities on young people's opportunities, attainment and progression. We had, at

best, to make do by pulling together inadequate published statistics to give some sort of

approximation. This was a deeply frustrating experience. David wrote:

> It has been possible to draw these 'lessons' because of the presence – at least during the
> middle years of the post-1965 period - of regular, system-wide longitudinal data, and of
> an independent research capacity to use these data. It has been harder to assess the
> lessons of more recent reforms, and not only because they are more recent. Thirty years
> ago Scotland's survey data and its policy-related research made it the envy of policy
> analysts elsewhere in the UK. Now the position is reversed: England, and in many
> respects Northern Ireland and Wales, have superior data of which they have made good
> use. (Raffe 2015, 107)

The most recent example of the lack of suitable data concerns the performance of Catholic

secondary schools in Scotland, a sensitive topic as might be imagined. A report by the

Institute for Public Policy Research concluded that Catholic secondary schools did no better

than non-denominational schools in terms of pupil attainment (Shield and Gunson 2017), a

finding that has caused considerable controversy. The Scottish Government data on which

the study is based has drawn particular criticism as '*not fit for purpose*' (Paterson 2017).

Professor Paterson went on to write:

> Catholic schools have been unfairly traduced this week, which is bad enough but it is
> only a microcosm of a much bigger problem. In the data desert which now curses
> Scottish education, no worthwhile policy question about pupil attainment can be
> answered … Scottish governments of various political colours have recently abandoned
> good quality surveys as a way of informing educational policy-making in public debate.

> Scotland was a pioneer last century of survey research in education. It is about time that we rediscovered that great tradition. (Paterson 2017)

There is, however, no indication that the Scottish Government has plans to revive this tradition. Its Research Strategy for Scottish Education is limited to school education and focuses on better access to and use of existing datasets (Scottish Government 2017). It contains a somewhat vague statement that they will '*explore work'* in relation to the '*development of a longitudinal approach to student achievement*' (Scottish Government 2017, 12) which is hardly comparable to a longitudinal survey of a nationally-representative sample of young people.

Learning from ourselves

David's thinking and writing about policy making and his distinction between 'policy borrowing' and 'policy learning' has been highlighted by several contributors to this special issue of the journal. We want to draw attention to one aspect that is especially pertinent to our theme of the need for an education and training system to 'know itself', that is, learning from its own history. David argued that a policy learning approach should combine cross national learning with a capacity and willingness to learn from the past (Raffe 2011). As he noted, examples of learning from one's past are rare: government structures discourage institutional memory, and the culture of innovation makes policy-makers unwilling to recognise continuities with the past. Policy makers in Scotland, as elsewhere, are more interested in learning from the experience of other countries, and especially those perceived to represent 'best practice' than in knowing itself and learning from its own past.

Policy-makers' disregard of past experience and its lessons was a source of frustration to David. The only time in thirty years of working with him that one of us had to suggest that he 'tone down' his comments was in respect of his submission to the Commission for

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Developing Scotland's Young Workforce in 2013. The forthright nature of his original comments reflected the extent of his frustration with the lack of attention to past experience and apparent 'policy amnesia'. In his revised submission he wrote of the longstanding nature of the issues discussed in the Commission's report and suggested:

> Before proceeding with any further reform it would be essential to review the history of recent policies in this area to find out what has and has not worked and what the experience of these policies can tell us about the causes of the problems and about possible strategies for tackling them. Otherwise this report could simply continue the chronic tendency for policy to go round and round in circles. (Raffe 2013, 1–2)

Learning from the past is not the same as remembering in a nostalgic way with the danger of 'regressive sentimentality (Higham and Yeomans 2007, 57). Their argument is extremely relevant in the Scottish context where a nostalgic celebration of the 'Scottish tradition' in education as egalitarian and democratic and open to all, irrespective of social class, still serves as 'a powerful shaping myth' (McPherson, and Raab 1998) in social and political consciousness (Humes, and Bryce 2003; Arnot, and Ozga 2010). As Higham and Yeomans suggest, real learning from the past is a different process: it is demanding, requiring attention to changing contexts and the need to rigorously interrogate policy memories to ensure they are accurate, comprehensive and distinguished from policy myths.

Concluding comments

We started this paper by highlighting the need for an education and training system to 'know itself' and we conclude by suggesting it is especially necessary in Scotland in view of its policy-making culture based on consensus and partnership. This consensual style of policy making is frequently presented as one of its distinctive and positive aspects, often contrasted (favourably) with the more conflictual policy process of the English education system (Howieson et al. 1997, Humes and Bryce 2003, Raffe and Spours 2007). But while the

Scottish approach can be valuable, it can too easily become self-congratulatory and the Scottish consensus can lead to complacency, a failure to question or challenge existing practice and a tendency to mistake consensus for evidence (Humes 2003, Raffe 2008).

In such a system, research has a key role to play in challenging any such complacency and in interrogating and testing the consensus, based on independent analysis of evidence. As David wrote:

> The experience of the CES points to the need, in a small and enclosed system with a tendency for complacency and self-congratulation, for a research capacity which is at the same time involved in the system but able to offer a critical and reasonably independent commentary and analysis on that system and for consistent and reliable data on which such analysis can be based. (Raffe 2003, 803)

As we have argued, Scotland currently lacks such consistent and reliable data and we suggest that developing a new national longitudinal data source (possibly a national survey) would enable researchers in Scotland and elsewhere to take forward David's legacy. The academic community and other bodies and interest groups in civic society in Scotland (such as those active in the National Debate on Education) need to come together to convince the Scottish Government of the need and value of such a resource.

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