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Curriculum Development in Further Education

Graham Connelly

> If they hadn't learnt much from him, he had been able to go home in the evening with the knowledge that he had gained something from them ... (*Wilt on High*, by Tom Sharpe, 1984).

Wilt muses that in twenty years' teaching Liberal Studies in a technical college, he has been unable to get anyone to tell him clearly what he is supposed to be doing. His dilemma typifies the identity crisis of further education during the 1960s and 1970s expansion and highlights the precarious position of non-vocational subjects in the curriculum of technical and commercial courses. Following the adoption of a modular, outcome-based approach to the further education (FE) curriculum in the 1980s and a raft of reports on lifelong learning during the 1990s, college lecturers in post-devolution Scotland find themselves as key players in a deliberate government strategy to widen access to post-school education and thus meet the changing economic and social demands of the new millennium. This chapter explores the genesis of these changes, and analyses current issues impinging on curricular provision.

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENTS POST-1945

In the immediate post-war years, theory evening classes for craft apprentices and office workers were conducted mainly in school classrooms under the auspices of local authorities. In the mid-1950s, the FE college building programme expanded amid concerns that workers were not equipped with skills required by industry. Employers were encouraged to release young apprentices and trainees on a day per week basis or for longer blocks of study. The new colleges had better practical facilities and students were prepared for external examinations of the English-based City and Guilds of London Institute (CGLI) and Royal Society of Arts (RSA), and the Scottish Council for Commercial Education (SCCE). The syllabuses were strongly vocational, emphasising expertise in practical skills. (See S. L. Hunter, *The Scottish Educational System*, ch. 10, Pergamon, 1971.)

_The Brunton Committee (*From School to Further Education,* SED, 1963) examined the effect of FE expansion on secondary school provision. The committee's members were asked to recommend ways of better coordinating the last year of compulsory schooling with FE programmes. Two concerns were identified: avoiding students having to 'waste time on work with which they are already familiar'; and integrating general education within vocational courses, 'aimed at all round development of the individual.' The aim was to complement vocational education with teaching in literacy, numeracy and 'general studies', in a way that was relevant and not detached from the student's life experience. The language of Brunton now seems at best quaint, at worst stereotypical and uninformed. For example, FE students were said to be, 'not interested in academic learning and [to] prefer physical activity to thinking'; teachers were advised to keep in mind the 'verbal limitations' of their students. Vocational courses were in familiar occupational areas, such as building, agriculture and fishing, but also included 'girls' occupations', mainly retail and office work. The authors seemed content to leave the curriculum in vocational areas to the awarding bodies, like CGLI, but they did attempt to describe the general studies curriculum. All students, they argued, should be helped to become more proficient in written and oral English, to develop the capacity to understand instructions, convey information, and make notes and other types of records. They should also know about 'industrial relations, personal finance and budgeting, personal relations in an adult world, and about the local community and the facilities and opportunities it affords for the development of personal interests and for service' (ibid., p.32). Committee members acknowledged resistance from employers to general studies in the curriculum, particularly if the subjects seemed to have no immediate utility in the workplace. The report concluded, somewhat liberally, that teachers should identify their own and students' interests and, thus, 'it would be fruitless to prescribe a detailed syllabus in general studies.'

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_In 1962 the Scottish Association for National Certificates and Diplomas began to administer post-school technical education and the Scottish Council for Commercial, Administrative and Professional Education was established in 1966. These bodies reviewed National Certificate courses and standardised entrance qualifications. The Industrial Training Boards also influenced the curriculum of vocational courses, their work funded by a levy on firms. (See I. Robertson: *Recurrent Education and the Work of the Industrial Training Boards*, ARE Occasional Paper 3, 1979.)
_The Scottish Technical Education Council (SCOTEC) and the Scottish Business Education Council (SCOTBEC), formed in 1975, together provided a broader range of vocational certificates and diplomas. (These organisations merged in 1985 to form the Scottish Vocational Education Council (SCOTVEC), which subsequently merged with the former Scottish Examination Board (SEB) to form the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). See chapter X 'The Scottish Qualifications Authority'.) The decade of the 1970s was a time of growing youth unemployment and the government responded with a series of short-term, and largely unsuccessful, initiatives, such as the Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP) and Work Introduction Courses (WICs). It was also a time of change in assumptions about employment, an acceptance that adults would no longer remain in a single occupation for life and a growing awareness that students should learn transferable skills. (See A. C. Ryrie, *Changing Student Needs in Further Education Colleges*, SCRE, 1984.)
_FE, created to provide qualifications for specific jobs and particular industries, now found it had little to offer students requiring a more general preparation for eventual work, assuming the economy improved, or, pessimistically, long-term unemployment. There were structural problems in the system too. SCOTEC and SCOTBEC had different entrance requirements for courses, different programme lengths and different standards for their qualifications. Finally, the uneasy relationship with general studies remained unresolved. The examination bodies seemed content to leave teaching in art, physical education, music and English to colleges but students and employers continued to question the value of these unexamined elements of the curriculum. There was considerable variation in practice between colleges and in many cases the standard of provision was poor and under-resourced. College lecturers of general and aesthetic subjects in particular felt isolated from their secondary school colleagues and had limited access to in-service training.

THE MODULAR CURRICULUM

In 1979 the Scottish Education Department began an extensive consultation exercise culminating in the publication of the 1983 report, *16–18s in Scotland: An Action Plan*, which radically changed the nature of FE provision in Scotland (SED, 1983). What had been initially concerned with the first two years of post-compulsory education in Scotland and the preparation for life of 16–18 year olds, paved the way for a radical revision of further and higher education for young people and adults of all ages. The Action Plan's authors concluded that 'there should be no abandonment of broadly-based education, and where specialisation is necessary it should be sought through appropriate emphases' (ibid., p. 9). They envisaged a broad curriculum, emphasising personal and social development, with strong vocational influences supporting the application of theory and skills and helping to maintain student motivation. Flexibility became a byword and students were to be offered choice in putting together programmes of study, incentives to achieve and increased freedom to move between programmes and institutions.
_The consultation indicated a major problem in FE concerning the independent construction of courses largely based on occupational disciplines like engineering. This meant there were separate syllabuses for fundamental subjects like science and mathematics in different vocational programmes. Apart from being wasteful, it was difficult for students to move between courses and colleges, and between part-time and full-time education. The solution adopted was a framework based on a curricular component with standard design characteristics. This 'modular' curriculum was to be based on forty–hour blocks of course time and modules would be available at different levels of attainment to facilitate progression, with students entering at the level appropriate to their existing attainment or experience. Modules would be taken as free-standing units of study, combined to form unique programmes for individual students, or grouped to make up vocationally-recognised awards. Finally, module 'descriptors' would contain statements describing student outcomes and these would form the criteria against which performance should be assessed. This process of 'criterion referenced' assessment was advocated because attainment could be reported 'not in relation to the better or poorer performance of others, but in relation to success in achieving what the course was intended to provide' (SED, 1983, p. 40). The assessment process was to be applied internally by teaching staff, subject to external monitoring.
_SCOTVEC assumed responsibility for developing a National Certificate programme, based on modules and in 1989 extended the modular principles to Higher National Certificate (HNC) and Higher National Diploma (HND) courses. An important influence on modular curriculum development was the work of the newly established

Curriculum Advice and Support Team (CAST) in producing teaching packages and running workshops for lecturers. This centralised activity was designed to reduce duplication of effort and was arguably highly influential in speedily moving the FE curriculum – in general studies and communication at least – from a fairly permissive position to one characterised by a high degree of prescription.

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_When HM Inspectors conducted a review of the National Certificate, they concluded that the unified modular system had been a major achievement: 'the National Certificate can be used to provide a delivery system which offers flexibility and choice in content and in mode and pace of learning' (*Six years On: Teaching, Learning and Assessment in National Certificate Programmes in Scottish Further Education Colleges*, SOED, 1991, p. 54). They found the planning of learning and teaching had improved and teaching had become more student-centred. Most students appeared to enjoy their college experiences and this satisfaction was attributed to a combination of increased choice, more active learning and units of study with clear, short-term targets.
_Nevertheless, this initial review identified problems. The move to internal assessment presented several professional and organisational difficulties. Designing assessments and interpreting standards had become major activities for lecturers and assessment began to overshadow the learning process. HMI advocated 'approaches which integrate the assessment of a number of learning outcomes or which embed assessment in learning and teaching, so as to counter over-use of a "teach-test" approach to module delivery' (ibid., pp. 55–6). They also noted a need for more effective internal moderation to ensure consistency of standards between staff and within colleges, and staff development in assessment for new and part-time staff. Teachers and students had apparently adopted the culture of modules with enthusiasm, but the inspectors called for more 'coherent integrated programmes', an aspect of curriculum planning they felt had been neglected.
  In the mid 1990s schools and colleges began offering packages of National Certificate modules in vocationally relevant areas, including an emphasis on core skills such as communication and information technology. These Scottish Group Awards are offered at three levels where qualifications at the first, general, level are known as National Certificate Group Awards, while the more vocationally specific levels 2 and 3 are given the title of General Scottish Vocational Qualifications. Of the 3,021 students gaining Scottish Group Awards in 2001 (including, for example, 479 in Engineering and one in Shipbuilding) virtually all (98%) were presented by FE colleges. However, student success rates in these awards have been poor compared to other qualifications. For example, only 33% of candidates presented in 2001 gained a level 1 award and 43% were successful in the higher levels (compared with a 79% mean success rate in HNC and 75% in Highers). Scottish Groups Awards were under review in mid-2002.

INFLUENCES ON THE CURRICULUM

Before modularisation, vocational elements of the curriculum were prescribed in syllabuses of awarding bodies, in consultation with trades unions, employers, professional bodies and confederations of industrial and commercial interests. Teaching was left to college lecturers, qualified in their subject or trade, who might have gained a teaching qualification by part-time secondment. After 1985 several factors together influenced both the view of the curriculum and course design in further education, of which one important factor was undoubtedly the influence of SCOTVEC. In post-devolution Scotland, whilst the school sector has maintained a very clear separate identity within the UK in relation to curriculum and staff development, FE has had to adjust to both Scottish and UK initiatives. This duality of outlook is exemplified on the one hand by the uniqueness of Higher Still and the Scottish Qualifications Framework, and on the other by the dependence of Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) on standards developed by UK-wide National Training Organisations (NTOs).

Occupational competence and vocational qualifications

The Conservative government initiated an ambitious Standards Programme in 1987 to establish levels of achievement on youth and adult training programmes in the UK. A massive development programme to specify statements of occupational competence began. The rationale for this complex exercise was twofold. Firstly, changes in workplaces meant that an increasing proportion of workers could expect to change jobs in their working lives and therefore needed skills, transferable between different jobs, even in quite different industries. Secondly, if common definitions of competence in skills could be agreed, then it might be possible to facilitate credit transfer between qualifications and encourage recognition of competence in different occupational sectors.
_The process by which statements of competence were written involved analysing job functions of experienced employees, a cumbersome task typically undertaken by consultants. This work was overseen by UK-wide

committees, known as 'lead bodies', representing significant occupational groups. The then Employment Department advised lead bodies to express standards of competence in 'unit' form – influenced by the Scottish experience of modules – ideally describing a separate role or function within an occupation, to encourage credit transfer. The tasks of monitoring the quality of unit writing, avoiding duplication and standardising statements of competence in broad skills, were given by the government to SCOTVEC and the London-based National Council for Vocational Qualifications (later to become the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority). The bodies cooperated to approve units of occupational competence, identical throughout the UK. Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs), and their counterparts in the rest of the UK, National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), made up of lead body units which assess students or employees against standards of performance recognised by employers, were introduced in 1989. SVQs are awarded at five levels, corresponding to an increasing degree of autonomy in the employment context. Units at Level 1 describe competence requiring a minimal degree of independent work, skills typically needed by operatives, while Level 4 units describe the competences of professionals in work generally associated with degree-level entry qualifications. An example of an SVQ at Level 3 (where candidates perform complex tasks and may have responsibility for others) is *On Licensed Premises Supervision*, which has six mandatory units, including 'Create Effective Working Relationships', with three performance criteria, including 'Gain the trust and support of colleagues and team members'.

_Around 50% of SVQs are provided by colleges, with work-related competences assessed through placements or in simulated work environments. In *Opportunities for Everyone: A Strategic Framework for Scottish Further Education* (1999) the Scottish Executive determined that funding for FE colleges should be targeted towards social and economic priorities, including 'narrowing the gap in unemployment' and 'improved demand for high quality in-work training.' Nevertheless the Parliament's Lifelong Learning Committee in March 2002 criticised the local enterprise company (LEC)-funded Skillseekers programme for being overly concerned with meeting LEC training targets and recommended a more flexible approach to meeting employers' skill requirements and individuals' personal development needs. Researchers Cloonan and Canning (2000) found it impossible to ascertain accurate completion rates for SVQs because of the poor quality of the data available. Their case study research supported a view of SVQs as problematic when used in association with government training schemes. Better completion rates are achieved where candidates are in full-time employment or where the employer commitment is high, as in the Modern Apprenticeship programme, widely regarded as successful.

The interface between further and higher education

The Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) was set up in 1988, in response to the 1987 White Paper*, Higher Education: Meeting the challenge*, which invited higher education institutions to attract more adult students. SWAP set out to improve participation by older students and those lacking qualifications, to target traditionally under-represented groups in higher education and encourage collaboration between further and higher education. The Scottish Council for Research in Education (Munn et al., 1993) studied the work of SWAP and found access courses were succeeding in opening up higher education to people who might otherwise have missed out, but had limited success in attracting students from traditionally under-represented groups. For example, Connelly and Chakrabarti (1999) studied the uptake of places on access courses in Scottish FE colleges and while they noted general acceptance of the principle of positive action by colleges, they found little evidence of strategies likely to prove effective. Nevertheless the success of strategies for broadening participation in higher education in Scotland is very dependent on the FE sector, due to the high proportion of students doing higher education in colleges, and due to collaboration arrangements with universities (see Chapter X 'Education Provision: An Overview').

_FE has a key role in the Executive's flagship Social Justice policy because of the importance of individual achievement and community development in combating disadvantage. Colleges, because of their location in the heart of communities, because of their close links with community education, enterprise bodies and voluntary agencies, and because of their highly developed student support systems, have arguably been successful in challenging cultural beliefs about the possibility of embarking on a college education. However, two particular problems require to be tackled. One problem relates to continuing barriers to participation, such as the difficulties faced by adults with dependants, the persistent inability to attract students from very low income backgrounds and the complexities of the different programme options. The other is the problem of 'reluctant' students, such as those compelled to accept FE as an alternative to unemployment under the New Deal programme (see Gallacher et al., 2000 for a fuller discussion).

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_ The appeal of FE lies in the omnipresence of colleges within communities and in a nurturing role which encourages adults, often juggling study with complex private lives, to believe in their capacity for personal achievement. But what brings students to colleges in the first place? In a study of 700 new entrants to 10 Scottish FE colleges, Connelly and Halliday (2001), found that the single most important factor influencing students' decisions to study at their local college was an 'employment reason'. However, despite this instrumental motivation, the research suggests that while the broad area of study is important to students, they are less interested in the precise details of the competencies they are supposed to be acquiring than in the general thrust of their learning. For many students, the value of FE is measured in terms of satisfying social relationships, good teaching and developing confidence, rather than in the detail of the curriculum.

ISSUES IMPINGING ON CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Modes of learning

The expansion of FE during the 1990s resulted in a more varied student population requiring more varied approaches to teaching and learning. FE's ability to respond to these varied needs has arguably been hampered by the restrictions of a highly-prescribed, outcome-based curriculum. Also FE, compared with HE, has faced significant disadvantages in resource terms: it typically offered more modest library provision, came late (2001) to the broadband communication infrastructure (JANET) and, crucially, several colleges were in severe financial difficulties. However, across the sector a range of developments, heavily based on information and communications technology, began to impact on teaching methods. These developments happened at three levels. Firstly, colleges developed approaches to address the access needs of adult students, including establishing satellite campuses in neighbouring towns, forming teaching partnerships with community education, and establishing flexible learning units where students can work independently using text-based and on-line materials with tutorial support as required. Secondly, in the changed political climate post-1997, there was a return to encouraging collaborative activities between colleges, for example in sharing distance-learning materials and in supporting local broadband networks. Thirdly, the sector became involved in government or agency-driven developments, such as the problematic Individual Learning Accounts, the Scottish University for Industry (SUfi) and the University of the Highlands and Islands Millennium Institute (UHI). Despite FE's reputation for responding quickly to changing demands, the sector has been criticised for lagging behind universities in developing new methods of learning and teaching (see Pieda report, *Demand and Supply in Further Education in Scotland*, SFEFC, 2002), and the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee of the Parliament in the spring of 2002 called on the Executive to develop a more strategic approach to e-learning across both FE and HE.

Staff development and curriculum development

The changing demands on FE has produced challenges in the area of teaching staff training, particularly in supporting part-time lecturers, and in developing skills in pedagogies and the use of ICT. While less than 4% of permanent lecturers are classified as 'unqualified' in that they do not hold the minimum entrance requirements for a teaching qualification in further education (TQFE), over 12% of temporary staff, who make up more than half of the total head count of FE teachers (SFEFC, 2002), are unqualified. Only 56% of the head count holds a recognised teaching qualification, though 80% of permanent lecturers are teacher trained. Teacher training is not a requirement of employment in FE but SFEFC has set an exacting target of having 90% of FE lecturers teacher trainied and the shortfall led the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee (ibid.) to describe FE, along with HE, as retaining 'too much of an amateur status'.
_Prior to 1998, the TQFE was provided exclusively by the Scottish School of Further Education (SSFE) specifically set up for this purpose in 1968 at the former Jordanhill College. The SSFE in its prime was a large semi-autonomous unit within Jordanhill providing a broad range of services, including conferences, in-service training, research and consultancy, but in the period leading up to and since the ending of its monopoly status it became a very small department within the University of Strathclyde's Faculty of Education, with a rather low profile within Scottish FE. The TQFE, jointly approved by the Executive and the General Teaching Council for Scotland, is now also offered by the universities of Dundee and Stirling, with both institutions using a range of new technologies to support the teacher training of lecturers in colleges around Scotland. However, the resource restraints on universities in the early 2000s constitute a serious barrier to expansion and innovation of CPD provision in support of FE. Colleges, however, have been active in responding to their own local CPD needs: one interesting example

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being the MA in Professional Development run within the UHI network and validated by both the Open University and the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILT); another is the provision of credit within TQFE programmes for SQA Professional Development Awards (PDA) gained by lecturers for assessed CPD in their own workplaces.

_Another significant provider of CPD is The Scottish Further Education Unit (SFEU) which was set up in 1991, initially to support management training for senior FE staff in advance of 'incorporation' of colleges in 1993. The SFEU was formed by re-focusing the activities of the former Curriculum Advice and Support Team (CAST) in the SSFE to support the new modular curriculum. The SFEU is an independent agency, funded partly by government and income from commercial activities. It operates from a base in Stirling, providing staff training, consultancy and conferences, supporting specialist interest groups and originating publications and curriculum materials in vocational further and higher education. The SFEU collaborates with the University of Stirling in offering postgraduate courses in tertiary education management and it hosts an impressive web site, which also acts as a portal to other web-based resources. It has been unquestionably influential in developing both the breadth and quality of FE provision but its physical relocation severed the link between the initial pedagogical education of lecturers and development of the FE curriculum which had been a cornerstone of the SSFE.

Support for students

The success story of further education is the development of a system that is generally regarded as being student-friendly and supportive, offering a broad range of opportunities and encouraging individual progression. A negative effect is confusion about the plethora of courses, programmes and schemes, and their appropriateness for individual students given their aspirations and the local employment situation. The need for newly-incorporated colleges to market their courses aggressively in the mid-1990s produced a degree of tension between guidance advisers and teaching departments anxious to fill course places. Colleges became adept at providing pre-entry advice and on-course support, but successive HMI inspections have highlighted variations in the quality of provision between colleges and indicated the need for colleges to become more sophisticated in their guidance and student support provisions.

> Inappropriate pre-entry guidance, restricted choice within programmes, and poor opportunities for student progression from outreach to mainstream programmes meant that the needs of some students were not being met adequately. There was also a need in some cases to establish more effective links with employers, ensure early identification of the learning support needs of students and provide ongoing guidance in less reactive ways. (*Meeting Learner Needs in Scottish Further Education Colleges*, HMIE, 2001, p.1)

The Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee has recommended that the idiosyncratic infrastructure of adult guidance provision should be simplified and if this happens colleges will arguably become even more important providers of information and guidance about initial and continuing opportunities. Nevertheless, it is unreasonable to expect colleges to be completely impartial in providing guidance about course opportunities. In this regard, the success of the new Careers Scotland agency in driving a national strategic approach to all-age guidance (see Chapter x) and of significant partners, including FE and HE institutions and LECs, in achieving effective local collaboration, will determine whether school leavers and adults can expect to receive high quality advice and progression guidance in future. Some recommendations for the way forward for colleges are contained in a consultation report on guidance in Scottish FE (General Teaching Council for Scotland, 2002). The report's authors advocate, for example, that all learners should have access to timetabled guidance integral to their courses, that colleges should expand partnerships and work more closely with specialist support agencies, that there should be clear allocation of staff time for guidance and support duties, revision of the funding methodology by SFEFC to recognise the key role of student guidance, clarification of the guidance role of lecturers, and provision of continuing staff training in guidance skills.

THE FE CURRICULUM IN THE FUTURE

The modern FE college in Scotland has been given a pivotal role by the Executive in supporting lifelong learning and in driving the ideals of social justice through widening access to post-school education. The revolution in the curriculum which began with Action Plan has made FE courses at the start of the new millennium more structured, varied, and vocationally oriented. However, the developments have also left the sector, as ever, somewhat uncertain

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of its identity. Some colleges will aim to emphasise the higher education aspect of their provision, though it seems unlikely that they will be permitted to follow Bell College's example by moving entirely into the higher education sector. The impact of new technology will inevitably produce different kinds of relationships between colleges and their students, though the changes are likely to progress slowly. Wilt's successors are more likely to be on temporary or part-time contracts, and teaching students with a broader range of personal and learning needs, with significant implications for staff development. A major challenge for curriculum development lies in understanding the important distinctions between vocational and personal motivations for studying and attending college. The qualification system may change at the margins but its broader influence will not diminish. However, loosening of the constraints of a target-driven approach to matching students to courses, a greater emphasis on the strengths of the community college, and reinforcement of the importance of good teaching might be good ways forward.

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