

## **HIGHER EDUCATION, SOCIAL CAPITAL AND THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT**

*Lindsay Paterson*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Three debates are coming together at the moment in Scotland. There is the debate about the Scottish parliament, the debate about a mass system of higher education, and the debate about a learning society. The link is in James Coleman's concept of 'social capital'. This paper uses that idea to reflect on the social role of the higher education system in the Scotland which the new parliament might want to create.

Coleman introduced his now well-known concept as an attempt to distinguish a society's capacity for learning and acting from the capacities of individuals or the capacities of the physical infrastructure (Coleman 1988). Social capital, he says, is about relations among people - for example trust, channels of information, norms and sanctions. By contrast, human capital is about the qualities of individuals, most notably their level of education; and physical capital consists of buildings, communications systems and so on.

There are two reasons why social capital has attracted so much academic and political attention. On the one hand, education depends on it. Social capital has been seen as a way of contributing to human capital. People, as individuals, learn more when they can draw on the cultural resources of people round about them (Schuller 1997). They learn from each other directly, they trust that social arrangements are in place to ensure that learning will benefit themselves both culturally and for employment, and they also trust that their own children will grow up enriched by a whole

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community which is intellectually stimulating. Social capital can have these effects most readily where it is embodied in the social structure - most notably, formal educational institutions such as schools and colleges, but also in such pervasive means of learning as broadcasting. In short, a learning society is one with rich resources of social capital which are not just the transient property of ad-hoc networks, but are firmly embedded in organisations that have a commitment to learning.

On the other hand, democracy depends on social capital too. This is true in one very obvious sense, that democracy depends on everyone trusting that everyone else will operate the system constructively. When that trust breaks down - for example, as a reaction to apparently corrupt politics in Paisley last August - the result is cynicism about democracy in general, including, in this context, cynicism about the capacity of a Scottish parliament to renew democracy. But the role of social capital is more profound than that. Citizenship requires knowledge, and requires that people know how to work with others towards common goals. Indeed, understanding the reciprocal obligations which membership of civil society imposes was the original source of ideas on civic culture and then on social capital itself (Almond and Verba 1963; Coleman 1988). Education can contribute to this. It can educate people for citizenship, and thus can consolidate democracy directly (White 1996). By creating a learning society, education can also create the kind of culture in which innovation is encouraged and is widely accepted (Ranson and Stewart 1994); that contributes to democracy indirectly.

Developing social capital has been seen since the late 1980s as a way of renewing democracy in the UK (Hirst 1994; Hutton 1995; Jenkins 1995; Marquand 1988; Marr 1995). Putnam (1993) concluded from his study of Italy that elected regional government there has worked best where there was a pre-existing civic culture, but that it could also promote that culture. So the Scottish parliament might be expected to be interested in social capital as the firm basis on which it could build a renewed democracy.

This paper discusses the implications of these points for higher education and the Scottish parliament under four headings: access, structure of courses, research, and governance. The discussion also takes account of the recent reports of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (1997a,b) - the Garrick and Dearing reports - which will be influential on the future shape of higher education. The purpose of the paper is to stimulate debate, however, not to set out plans or to pretend to have answers to the questions which are raised.

## **ACCESS**

The significance of widening access can be interpreted in many ways - notably, as a matter of equal opportunities, or as a way of drawing on the talents of as many people as are able to contribute. In particular, however, it is a contribution by higher education to the building of social capital.

The extent of the broadening is now remarkable. Not only do we now have some 44% of the age group entering by the age of 21 (National Committee of Enquiry 1997a, table 1) - three times the figure which, as recently as the late-1980s, some commentators believed would create a crisis for higher education (Trow 1988, p.84). We also have almost equal participation by women and men, a revolution since 1961 when women made up just 31% of university entrants (Burnhill and McPherson 1984; Committee on Higher Education 1963, table 19). At least some ethnic groups which suffer from racism in many aspects of their lives are entering at rates in advance of those for white people (Coffield and Vignoles 1997, p.6; Paterson 1997a). One third of entrants are aged over 21 (National Committee of Enquiry 1997a, table 3). And, in a trend which the Dearing and Garrick reports do not make enough of, social-class inequalities in entrance have probably been narrowing (Robertson and Hillman 1997, p.40).

All of this contributes to social capital at least in the sense that more people living in Scotland now have experienced higher education than ever before. Indeed, in 1996, the proportion of adults with a higher education qualification was 27% (ASCETT 1997, p.23). That means over 1 million people. The main source of these people is probably Scottish higher education itself, because 73% of graduates from Scottish higher education stay in Scotland for their first job (SOEID 1996a, table 13), and about the same proportion are still there five years later (Scottish Graduate Careers Partnership 1996, pp.35 and 40). All the literature on social capital would lead us to believe that this expansion has strengthened it: one of the most consistent findings of such research is that the more educated people are, the more they engage in civic activities (Smith 1994). So Scottish higher education has helped to create the conditions for a more vibrant democracy.

The significance of wider access is all the greater, however, because of two particular features of the form it has taken. The growth in the number of part-time post-graduate students both absolutely and as a share of all post-graduates (SOEID 1996b, table 6) has probably contributed directly to building learning societies locally, simply because such students tend to have roots in the towns or cities in which they study, tend to continue to work in these communities while they are studying, and tend to bring to that work

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some of the skills which they acquired through studying (Clark et al 1997, pp.60-67).

That would be true in the rest of the UK too. But the other significant feature of wider access in Scotland has been the role of the further education colleges, providing places for as many as 30% of undergraduates (National Committee of Enquiry 1997a, table 2). Not only are the FE colleges better at attracting working class students than the universities (National Committee of Enquiry 1997a, p.31 and note 32, p.100). They also tend to do so from their immediate communities, and so the learning they impart to their students is a direct contribution to the cultural life of particular places (Clark et al 1997, p.33 and pp.60-85). They have good links with schools (despite incorporation in 1993: see Finlay 1995), and also with the community education services, and so they are complementary to other educational institutions in the community, rather than an attraction outside the community which pulls students away.

Trow may have been correct in believing that mass participation creates a crisis; but it does much more than that, because it allows higher education to pervade society. So the first set of questions which the Scottish parliament will have to address in this context have to do with the role of higher education in creating the social and cultural conditions in which the parliament might flourish. Some of the answers are already partly in place. For example, the Higher Still reforms will start to break down the distinction between academic and vocational routes through the senior years of secondary school, and so should broaden access further, provided that the Advanced Higher does not evolve into a reinvention of that distinction (Raffe 1996). Also likely to be unaffected by the parliament is the system of fees and loans which the government will inaugurate next autumn: reversing that would require more resources than the parliament is likely to have spare. Still, the parliament will probably want to monitor carefully their impact on access, and it could insist that a proportion of the new fee income be devoted to schemes which promote broad access.

But the really difficult questions will be about institutions, something which Garrick and Dearing barely address. If FE colleges are indeed better at widening access than universities, then should they not be encouraged to be more ambitious in expanding their higher education courses than is currently allowed? The fact that the University of the Highlands and Islands is to be based on existing FE colleges is a pointer here: the UHI project would never have been started unless there had been a commitment that the cultural benefits were to be felt throughout the region, and only the FE colleges were in a position to offer that. Is not an analogous point true in, say, Edinburgh?

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Is it sensible for Edinburgh University to try to permeate Edinburgh communities in the ways that the FE colleges already do?

Regardless of which institutions provide the courses, are we wise to continue to invest so much in the expansion of full-time courses for young entrants? Again, this is an opportunity which is neglected by Dearing and Garrick. Despite their protestations, they are still unduly concerned with young, full-time entrants. Professor Tom Schuller has argued frequently that the cultural benefits of part-time courses taken by people throughout their lives are far greater than is usually acknowledged (Schuller 1997). He makes several points in this connection (for example, the greater maturity and judgement of older students), but, for the purpose of the present discussion, what matters is the opportunity for reflective citizenship which embarking on a part-time course offers.

### **COURSES**

The most high-profile recommendation of the Garrick report was on developing a three-year General degree. On the surface of it, this seems an attractive resurrection of what appears to be a Scottish tradition, and - according to the report - would make students' knowledge more attractive to employers. But the report's own assessment of the proposal does not seem to have been underpinned by any relevant research on whether students would want it, by any adequate analysis of the costs, or by any rigorous consideration of the educational rationale.

On student demand, the committee notes that the shift to Honours degrees in the last three decades has come about by student choice. Yet it does not show that these choices can be turned around. Three-year General degrees may or may not be more attractive to employers (and therefore students) than Honours degrees. If they are, then what is the rationale for not having equally widespread General degrees elsewhere in the UK too? On the other hand, if Honours degrees continue to be preferred by employers, then students would be daft not to attempt them.

On costs, the committee seems to have overlooked the point that a drop in the proportion of students taking longer degrees will cause Scottish institutions to contract unless overall participation expands more rapidly than the Report forecasts. What are the implications of that, for research, for overheads and for accommodation - indeed, for breadth itself, in the sense of courses which staff are qualified to offer?

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Most fundamental of all, the Garrick Report merely asserts that the 'breadth' of a General degree is worthwhile, and merely assumes that it is sufficient in itself to give students an intellectually worthwhile experience. The Report contains none of the discussion of breadth that can be found in other official documents - for example, in the Howie Report (SOED 1992) or the Munn Report (SED 1977).

So if students are to have a broader education than at present, then some careful new thinking is needed, and - again - the concept of social capital offers a useful starting point. To begin with, we need to know just how broad the current degrees are. The Garrick Report simply assumes that Honours degrees are narrower than Ordinary or General ones (National Committee of Enquiry 1997a, p.42). But to show that would require much research. For example, a survey in Edinburgh University in 1992 found that many departments defended the four-year Honours degree precisely because it allowed breadth to be combined with depth (Edinburgh University 1993).

No doubt it is true that broader courses would, by themselves, break down some specialisms, if only because sheer chance would ensure that more people had courses in common than they do at present. But we also need to have an intellectual justification of breadth, to avoid courses degenerating into an incoherent assemblage of modules. That was, after all, why Howie rejected the complete modularisation of the senior years of secondary school (SOED 1992, pp.45-46). In the Scottish tradition to which Garrick appeals, breadth was always supported by rigour offered through philosophy. But this was not just any old philosophy. It was the principles of the common sense school, in which the variety of ideas we receive from different educational experiences can be unified by a set of common social principles which unite people to each other. That is the link with social capital: the 'common sense', being shared, allows the disparate specialisms to talk to each other (Davie 1991; Paterson 1993). Thus the artists and the mathematician do not communicate directly through the technical details of their crafts, but through the common epistemological principles of (for example) geometry or colour (Davis and Hersh 1981). In this way, too, the distinction between theoretical knowledge and useful (or vocational) knowledge can be broken down as well.

So the main contribution to social capital which could be made by course designers is through enabling students to find a way of understanding each other. But that will be far more difficult to do than it was in the nineteenth century when the Scottish tradition flourished.

## **RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP**

If social capital depends on intellectually exciting networks permeating society, then good-quality research is vital. Even if the only benefits of that were for staff and current students, that itself would be a contribution to critical debate. But, in fact, research can contribute more than that, because it provides a means by which the society as a whole can engage critically with its own practices.

This is true in two ways. Research can contribute directly to the development and evaluation of public policy. Scottish researchers already carry out a great deal of research on public policy in Scotland, one very basic consequence of which is to stimulate economic activity (McNicoll 1995). This can be expected to grow when much more policy is being devised in Scotland. If the parliament finds new ways of making policy, then academics will find new opportunities. At the moment, most policy research is commissioned by people in power - civil servants acting on behalf of ministers. But the Constitutional Convention has recommended that specialist committees of the parliament should have a role in devising legislation, based on their own independent research. So academics might expect to find opportunities to carry out research that is not simply a tool for evaluating government policy. Well-resourced committees should be able to criticise the Scottish government in a well-informed way. The resulting political tensions will be reflected in tensions among academics, no longer dependent on essentially one source of funding for policy research.

Encouraging this independent academic culture would be helped if all Scottish Office research money was channeled through an independent Scottish Research Council (as is proposed by the AUT). The point is not to interfere with the workings of the UK Research Councils, but, rather, to place Scottish policy research at a greater distance from government. The ways in which such a Council would operate would have to be debated widely, but one possibility for removing the commissioning of research from political interference is that the Council and the Government would agree a broad programme each year, the Government would then transfer resources to the Council to commission it, but the exact terms of the projects (including the selection of tenders) would be the responsibility of the Council independently of Government. If a Scottish Research Council also became the main route through which the parliament's committees commissioned research (again possibly by annual agreement), then academics might feel freer to be critical of all sides. A network of policy researchers would then emerge that might be more open and critical than many academics feel able to be at present,

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dependent as they are on the goodwill of the Scottish Office. That network, in itself, would be an important part of Scotland's social capital

More generally, research can also contribute to social capital in the wider society. The results of social science research, especially, enter the public realm as soon as they are published (and it would be essential that a Scottish Research Council should require that research reports are published). These publications can then be read by a wide public, and, in particular, can inform the work of journalists, teachers, and other educators who can contribute to public understanding of the political process.

This dissemination of debate about research into Scottish society would be helped if the results of the research become part of relevant teaching in higher education. If nearly three quarters of graduates stay in Scotland when they complete their courses, then they become important means by which ideas that are developed in universities find a wide audience. When, moreover, the students originally came from Scotland, a dialogue is opened up between the society and research: researchers can learn from their students as well as teaching them. That is one reason why we should be concerned that the proportion of Scottish students in our institutions remains at least fairly high (say, above 50%), because a university in Scotland which does not educate a sizable group of Scottish students is losing an opportunity to hone its research in regular contact with Scottish society - receiving ideas from Scottish students about how Scots think, and communicating through them with the Scotland in which they then work.

The same is true of part-time post-graduate students, combining work with study: not only should they, too, come into contact with what academics have to say about policy, but they also might, through their own dissertations, contribute to that discussion. Research suggests, moreover, that people who take such degrees are more likely than others to be active in a variety of civic organisations, through which their developing capacity for critical thought can help to build a radically decentralised structure of social capital (Paterson 1997b).

### **ACCOUNTABILITY**

'Accountability' has acquired a narrow meaning in the last decade, usually referring to performance indicators, audit, and so on. The development of these probably has contributed to a greater openness about what higher education does, but it has not obviously made it more democratic, or its governing structures better understood outside its doors. Yet universities and

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colleges have remained leading institutions in an autonomous civil society, retaining or acquiring a capacity to act independently of government that is much greater than that enjoyed by, for example, schools. The autonomy of civil society has been seen by many writers as a measure of the richness of a society's social capital (Marquand 1996; Putnam 1993).

So the issue of how to govern higher education is important in any debate about the character of Scottish democracy. On the one hand, the Scottish parliament will itself want to have a policy on higher education. What that policy might be remains to be seen, because, in advance of the publication of the Dearing and Garrick reports, none of the political parties said much about higher education at the general election. It does seem likely that it would want to expand access, and there will certainly be a strong lobby in Scotland for strengthening the role of the FE colleges in that respect. In that case, it is difficult to see how the parliament would tolerate a continuing split in the funding arrangements for FE and HE, and it would almost certainly want to go at least as far as Garrick recommends, in having two funding councils with many common arrangements and an overlapping membership. But in some important areas of policy we simply do not know how the debate will go, because it has never really taken place before. An example is on breadth and depth. It is easy to point to Scottish traditions of breadth (as Garrick did), but it is also easy to find opposing practices (Paterson 1997c). So it is quite conceivable that the parliament might not want Garrick's three-year general degrees, even though, in an unreformed policy process, it might be uncritically accepted that such degrees are supported by the Scottish consensus.

The point is, then, that a new policy process will bring new policies, and it is absolutely right that Scottish higher education should be subject to these. It is also right that, if social capital requires a renewal of Scottish democracy in all its aspects, then the governance of higher education should be reformed too. How can the institutions be made responsive to the communities in which they are located, including to the Scottish community as a whole? Is it enough merely to have lay representatives on governing bodies who are selected by these bodies themselves? Would not the networks of civil society be strengthened if elected local government had some say in university governance as of right? Elected councils are, after all, one of the few means by which the poor and the otherwise powerless can influence politics, and yet such people will have to put up with whatever higher education system we create (Bogdanor 1994). Their children will be taught by its graduates, their ill-health will be treated by them, their media largely written and produced by them, and (increasingly) their streets will be policed by them. If local government seems to be far from perfect, and to lack the vision required to

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make a constructive contribution to the governance of public bodies, then the fault lies not in their elected character as such, but in the wider quality of Scottish politics. After all, local government has led the project to create a University of the Highlands and Islands. And that brings us back to the points made in earlier sections, that renewing social capital is a pre-requisite as well as a consequence of a wider democratic renewal.

Nevertheless, although it is in the interests of a renewed civil society that higher education should be subject to greater democratic scrutiny from both local and national agencies in Scotland, it is fundamentally important that it remains self-governing. It would be contradictory to the whole tone of the movement towards the parliament if it were to weaken civil society rather than strengthen it. Indeed, the parliament itself will have emerged from the resilience of Scottish civil society in the 1980s and 1990s (Brown et al 1996, chapter 3). It will embed itself as a permanent feature of Scotland only if it never loses touch with these origins. If the analysis offered earlier is correct, then the parliament will have to recognize, not only that higher education can strengthen democracy by creating social capital, but also that truly social capital cannot be created by institutions which are beholden to government for their right to exist as well as their funding. If social capital is about mutual trust, then legislators have to learn to trust civil society too.

Securing autonomy does not mean, however, that universities can just get on with their business, even though constrained by a democratic context. Internal democracy is as much a principle of civil society as is independence from the state. Institutions which do not trust their own staff, and do not give an effective voice to their own students, are no more likely to be sources of social capital than is a society in which the government does not trust the universities. Civil society has to be self-governing if it is to work at all (Almond and Verba 1963; Parry et al 1992; Putnam 1993). So the Scottish parliament which wanted to encourage the development of Scottish civil society might well be concerned about the governing structures of civil-society bodies. It might well propose that, among the performance indicators by which higher education is measured, there should be prominent attention to indicators of internal democracy - for example, levels of participation in internal elections, the relative power enjoyed by committees as against the executive, and the openness with which decisions are taken.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Higher education has a key role to play in developing the social capital which can contribute to a renewal of Scottish democracy. It is, therefore, both a

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partner to the Scottish parliament and a beneficiary of it. Through the students it sends out into Scottish society, higher education can enrich the activities of Scottish communities. Through the critical social skills which these students acquire on their courses, these communities can learn how to challenge public policy constructively. Through the research which universities undertake, they can provide a means by which Scottish democracy understands its own workings and the effects of its actions. And through being, themselves, instances of civil-society institutions, universities and colleges can teach by example.

None of this will happen unless there is a grander project to renew Scottish democracy. That, in turn, requires not only that a parliament is set up, but that Scottish higher education returns to seeing itself as exercising a role of national leadership. If it does that, then it will be immensely enriched, because it will find new resources of social capital in Scotland on which it can draw for intellectual stimulus and public legitimacy.

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