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The Aberdeen MEd, Past, Present, Future

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John Nisbet wrote a number or articles on the ‘Aberdeen MEd’ and two, the first from Volume 6, 1969 and the second from New Series Number 5, 1997 caught my eye.

In the first article John gives a history of the MEd from its first award in 1921 to two students and its name the Ed.B. to 1969 when 98 students (with 40% of applicants refused entry and University caps on numbers) enrolled. The MEd was in two parts a diploma and a degree stage. The curriculum is noted as covering a large amount of psychology, statistics and even biology! Graduates by in large moved on to jobs as lecturers, university and college of education researchers, and psychologists. This is very much the early days for educational research as an important are for the classroom teacher and a vastly different MEd to that of today.

In the second MEd article in 1997 John says farewell to the qualification at the University of Aberdeen. The challenging course run in evenings and weekends, with ‘finals’ sat and a dissertation to be completed, awarded to over 600 graduates many of whom had become the great and the good of Scottish Education, was discontinued by the institution for financial reasons.

This article is a fascinating history of the creation of the University Department of Education in 1890 and it continuous struggle for survival. As usual John was political but not overtly controversial commenting on the possible decline in interest in an ‘academic, research-based’ degree and a move towards, ‘practically-oriented’ courses, and the then forthcoming merger with Northern College. I had no idea of the hard work that went into keeping such a valuable qualification alive for so long.

Claire Molloy
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The Aberdeen M.Ed.—Past, Present, Future

On the wall opposite the students' notice-board in the University Department of Education, hangs the framed diploma awarded in 1921 to one of the first two students to qualify for the award of the post-graduate degree in Education. Until 1965, the degree was called Ed.B.: the introduction in that year of the new B.Ed. made a change necessary to distinguish the new and the old degrees, and it became M.Ed. The 1921 diploma is on rich parchment, in Latin, outlining the course studied and signed personally by the Principal, the Dean of Arts and the Secretary, and bearing the University seal in heavy wax. All graduates received such a document in these less crowded times: the M.Ed graduate today receives a much smaller printed card written in plain English. Yet the course of study today is similar in general pattern to the course described on the 1921 diploma, and one may reasonably claim that those who gained the degree in the 1920's, 30's and 40's hold a qualification which is recognisably the same as that awarded in the 50's and today. (Anticipating the cynical rejoinder, we should perhaps emphasise that it is the *form* of the degree and not the lectures which have remained relatively unchanged in fifty years!) It is a tribute to those who originally designed the course that so few changes in structure have proved necessary over this long period. Are we likely to be able to say the same about the M.Ed. in the next fifty years? Will the present form of the B.Ed. survive as effectively?

In the years preceding the First World War, there was a keen debate on what kind of degree in Education should be offered. One faction supported a first degree, in the form of an M.A. with Honours in Education; others argued that it should be a postgraduate qualification. Had it not been for the 1914-18 War, we might have had a B.Ed.-style course in 1915. But in 1919, Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen instituted the postgraduate course; and in England, London University was the first to follow this example, introducing a two-year postgraduate course in Education in 1923.

Though the degree has been in existence now for nearly 50 years, the graduates still represent a somewhat select band—only 166 in all. The course was slow to attract students: in the first twenty years, only sixteen persons qualified, and the 1940's added only another 12. In the 1950's, numbers increased sharply, and by 1959 there were over 100 graduates. The average is now 10 per year, and the last four years have produced more graduates than the first thirty years of the degree.

The Aberdeen M.Ed., as many will know, is taken in two stages, a first or Diploma stage and a final Degree stage. Numbers at the Diploma stage also have multiplied four-fold in the past ten years. In 1955-59, the average intake of students was 25 per year, and all applicants were admitted. This session, the class numbers 98, after 40 per cent of applicants had been refused admission. (The reason why so many have to be turned away is the restriction imposed by the University Grants Committee, that there should be no further expansion of postgraduate numbers, other than in science-based courses, until 1972). From next session, applicants for admission will begin to include the new B.Ed. graduates; and since each year there will be more M.A. and B.Sc. graduates, we can anticipate a steady increase in demand.

Demand is not just a matter of the number of applicants for a course. There is also the demand for the products. What appointments do M.Ed. graduates hold? The Aberdeen Department of Education has an almost complete record of the subsequent careers of all its 166 graduates, of whom 139 are still in full-time employment. Forty are teachers in schools or further education colleges. We hope that a proportion of our graduates will contniue to work in schools, for there is an important place in schools for those who have extended their study of theoretical and experimental aspects of education beyond the minimum required for a teaching qualification.

The largest single category of employment of M.Ed.s is as lecturers or research workers in universities or colleges of education: 19 hold university posts, and 27 are in colleges of education —33 per cent of the total. Those in educational research appointments are all in England, where opportunities are more plentiful. A substantial number of research projects have been set up in England recently—since 1965, for example, the Schools Council has started 61 projects, involving an expenditure of £2,094,000—and there is a grave shortage of adequately trained research workers. All except five of the M.Ed. graduates in university posts have left Scotland. Those holding college of education posts are also widely dispersed, though 16 of the 29 college lecturers are still in Scotland. The continuing growth in student numbers and the introduction of B.Ed. courses in colleges, has

increased the demand for staff who hold the M.Ed. The degree appears to be a useful qualification particularly in England where psychology is commonly taught by the staff of the Education Department: few English courses give the combined education-psychology qualification.

Thirty-five, or a quarter of all the M.Ed.s, hold posts as psychologists, principally in child guidance but also in the Services and in industry. Just over half of these are in Scotland, the remainder in England. Here too there is a severe shortage. The recent Summerfield Report (Psychologists in Education Services, 1968) which reviewed the supply and recruitment of educational psychologists in England and Wales, reported that there were 343 educational psychologists in local authority posts, 88 unfilled posts, and an estimated 620 further psychologists needed if the clinics were to be brought up to the desired standard (paragraphs 2.14 and 2.17 and Table 2B2).

A small proportion of M.Ed.s—consistently about 1 in 9 over the years—enter educational administration. At present 17 of our 139 are in such posts, all except 2 at present in Scotland, though a number have gained experience in administration in England before returning North.

The one remaining M.Ed., to make up the total of 139, is a minister. In addition, one is a full-time student; nine are married women not in employment; four have retired; eleven have died. We have lost track of only two, one of whom was last heard of in Australia. (Australian papers please copy!)

This account of numbers of students and distribution of occupations indicates a healthy state of the degree. Already, however, it is clear that we are entering a period when pressures for change are likely to be more and more in evidence.

A number of changes have already been accepted and introduced. The content of the course has recently been extensively revised. At the Diploma Stage, the Education course covers four main areas: social background of education, educational research and development, current educational problems, and educational theory. The last of these is taught entirely in tutorial instead of by lecture as previously. At the Degree Stage in Education, there are three main components: educational theory, comparative education and experimental education. We plan next year to finish the educational theory course at mid-session, changing over to a reading course, with a range of options, for small group discussion as the basis of an extended essay which will be part of the final assessment. The final examinations in Education are reduced to three, and Statistics (an agony to some students) has been transferred from finals to a separate qualifying examination at the end of the second term.

In Psychology, three courses are required at both Diploma and Degree Stages, developmental and physiological psychology, cognitive processes, and social psychology and personality theory. In addition, a laboratory class is required at the Diploma Stage; and in the Degree Stage, there is a special subject, chosen by the student and involving a supervised course of reading, which constitutes the fourth paper in the Psychology section of the final examinations. The requirement of a research thesis in addition to these courses remains as before.

A revision of regulations now permits the admission of non-graduates to the M.Ed., though, with the present pressure of numbers no more than two or three are likely to be admitted in any one year. There is clearly a need for the development of research in areas of education where the basic qualification is not a university degree: in physical education, art, domestic science and certain branches of technical education, not to forget primary, infant and nursery education. Applicants will have to give evidence of some special competence; but at least we hope that this may be the beginning of an important growing point.

There are also other pressures for change, which are being resisted at present. First there are the pressures for a shortening of the course. In England, University Departments of Education offer one-year courses for teachers, usually leading to the award of a Diploma. These tend to be more specialised: for example the current list of 85 such courses offered by English universities includes Diplomas in Educational Guidance, Curricular Studies, School Counselling, Educational Technology, Adolescent Development, and so on. Is this a provision which we should make in Scotland, in place of or in addition to the more general and much longer M.Ed. course? The value of a postgraduate qualification depends—even more than a first degree—on its standing in the community. It is no kindness to potential students to make a course shorter or easier, if as a result the qualification they gain is of little value. At present, the Scottish M.Ed. is recognised as a professional qualification in psychology, provided that psychology constitutes at least half of the course. The control of recognition rests with the professional association, the British Psychological Society. It is no secret that the Scottish M.Ed. is viewed with misgivings by the Society, which does not recognise the Manchester

M.Ed. and has withdrawn recognition of the Belfast B.Ed., which was modelled on the Scottish pattern. No recognition would be given to these short courses; and it is perhaps questionable if the teaching profession would be prepared to recognise them as of value.

A rather different request is put forward by B.Ed. students, especially those who plan to do Advanced classes in Education or Psychology (or both)—that, if they go on to study for the M.Ed., their course should be shortened by exemption from part or all of the Diploma Stage. A similar request might be made by students who have taken an M.A. degree with Honours in Psychology (who receive no exemption at present) and the question will also arise with students who graduate B.A. in Stirling with Education as a major subject. Conscious of the scrutiny of the professional psychologists, we must tread warily in the matter of exemptions. An essential element in the argument is the question of content: exemptions can reasonably be granted only where the content of the M.Ed. course has already been covered. We resist the suggestion that B.Ed. Advanced courses and M.Ed. courses should be brought into line: neither degree would benefit. Exemptions are seldom granted at present: even Diplomas in Education from English universities do not earn exemption from our Psychology Diploma course, and our own undergraduate course in Education does not qualify for exemption either. The question will be discussed fully with the B.Ed. students, but their case appears weaker than that of the Stirling B.A. with Education, and no stronger than that of the Aberdeen M.A. Perhaps one element of confusion is that the similarity of the titles, B.Ed. and M.Ed., suggests that they are, or should be, end-on courses, one leading to the other. But the Scottish B.Ed. is essentially a general degree, in which Education as a subject has a smaller part than it has even in an English B.Ed. Establishing regulations and guiding principles in the relation of B.Ed. and M.Ed. promises to be a difficult and controversial problem.

Another possible direction of change in the M.Ed. degree is the introduction of a greater degree of specialisation in the course. If numbers of students (and of staff) were sufficient, this might be done by offering a range of options. (Glasgow, for example, has an arrangement of this kind). A more rational arrangement would be for each of the Scottish universities which offer the degree to develop one or two different areas of specialism. This is a form of development which the University Grants Committee is inclined to favour. It assumes that a student will be prepared to travel to study at the centre which offers the specialism he wants, and it has obvious attractions in economic use of specialised staff and equipment. However, it is not an attractive solution for a regional university like Aberdeen, which, one would hope, would continue to offer a general course to all teachers in its region.

Postgraduate courses like the M.Ed. are taken by mature men and women, most of whom have heavy financial responsibilities. A realistic view of the future must take account of the fact that a principal factor in the recruitment to any postgraduate course is the financial provision for the student. Today's generation of students take for granted the automatic award of a grant to any student admitted to study for a first degree, and are sometimes incredulous when told that no one is under any obligation to give them a grant for a second degree, or even to pay university fees. The majority of our final stage students still finance themselves. The Scottish Education Department has greatly helped recruitment to the final stage by extending the undergraduate Student's Allowance for one year to selected students who are specially recommended. ("Special" recommendation is no mere formality: normally it requires the gaining of a merit certificate at the Diploma Stage.) This still represents much less than half the starting salary of a graduate teacher, and therefore involves a considerable financial sacrifice for the student. Certainly the Ordinary graduate who gains a good M.Ed. degree moves to an Honours degree scale; and others gain from improved promotion prospects. New provision for secondment of teachers on full salary may see a change in the nature of recruitment to the final stage course, a change in which the financing body would begin to play a large part in the selection of teachers for the course.

If the future pattern of development requires us to be more closely associated with other educational authorities and institutions, we should welcome the change. For too long, university departments of education have been on the fringe of the Scottish educational system. In the past, holders of the Scottish postgraduate degree in education have held senior positions in many fields of education throughout Britain and abroad. If we can provide for the next fifteen years as well as our predecessors planned the first fifty years of the degree, we shall have reason to be content.

John Nisbet.