

## Chapter 1: The Howie Report

The Howie Committee's report *Upper Secondary Education in Scotland* was published on 5th March 1992. In reaching its conclusions, the Committee sifted through written submissions (**Note 1**) from 120 organisations and 24 individuals; visited twelve secondary schools, four further education colleges and two higher education institutions; studied six specially commissioned papers, several Inspectorate and research papers and a mass of recent statistical information supplied by the SOED and the SEB; and visited France, West Germany and Denmark.

Although most of the submissions favoured the retention of the Highers, opposed radical change and appealed rather for an evolutionary approach, the Committee came to the conclusion that Scotland had to be shaken out of its complacency, and so it put forward proposals which went far beyond the remit given to it by the Secretary of State, which was to recommend changes only for the courses and examinations in S5 and S6. However, it justified its radical and far-reaching proposals by the following indictment of existing arrangements:

*"While the Scottish system prides itself on curricular breadth, this is not reflected in actual student attainments. Substantial numbers of S5/6 pupils obtain only one or two Highers or none at all. Many thousands leave school without marketable qualifications. Even the more able pupils display less breadth of attainment than their European counterparts. There are few opportunities for study in depth. The Higher courses are too rushed and represent too steep an incline of difficulty when superimposed on Standard Grade. Many students do not develop effective learning and study skills and are ill-prepared for higher education. Coherent programmes of vocational education are not generally available in S5 and S6. Vocational education still suffers from a lack of esteem and there is an unnecessary academic-vocational divide. Overall, the arrangements are excessively flexible, leading to arbitrary choices preventing coherent course planning and causing an inefficient use of resources. We conclude that, when measured against the characteristics which high quality upper school secondary education should display, our system is seriously wanting in many respects..... The Higher Grade has had an unbroken and distinguished history since its introduction in 1888, but the changes which have occurred around it have thrown into relief a number of its features which need to be examined."*

Recent research was quoted to show that the two-term Higher gave students inadequate training for what they were to face in higher education (**Note 2**). The limited time available between the taking of Standard Grade in S4 and the Higher Grade in S5 (mid-August to the beginning of the following April, with possibly 2-3 weeks in the previous June) meant that *"teaching must perforce focus narrowly on the examinations and success must in some cases depend on the repetition of material memorised but not necessarily well understood."* Teachers had to spoon-feed candidates to ensure that they passed. Moreover, the Higher Grade was inappropriate for the growing number of pupils who remained at school beyond the statutory leaving age and, as Professor Howie said in one of his many speaking engagements prior to the publication of the report, *"It is hard to resist the conclusion that the experience for fifth year pupils at the bottom of the pile is an experience of failure, humiliation and frustration. It says a great deal for their determination and for the ambitions of their parents that they come at all."*

The Committee produced masses of statistical arguments to bolster its case. In 1990, for

example, 34.2% of the pupils who remained at school after Christmas in S5 failed to pass in a single Higher, and a further 17.9% passed in only one. At the other end of the scale, only 34% achieved three or more passes, although 85% were presented for three or more. The Committee also expressed concern that so many successful S5 candidates did not have a "*broad and balanced range*" of subjects, e.g no science or modern language in their group of passes. The Sixth Year was used by most pupils to improve upon their Higher qualifications rather than for advanced studies. Of the 29% who proceeded to S6, only some 34% took CSYS courses, and the overwhelming majority of these took only one course. In other words, only one in ten pupils in an age cohort had any experience of study in depth.

The Committee was equally critical of performance in SCOTVEC National Certificate modules, partly because the average number of modules taken by school pupils was so much lower than the number taken by FE candidates (2.8 per school-registered student as against 6.9 for those in FE), and partly because so many school pupils were withdrawn after being registered. Although 72% of those who completed the modules achieved all the learning outcomes, the Committee pointed out that the success rate amounted to only 52% of original module enrolments when the "withdrawn" candidates were included. There was also criticism of the lack of coherence in the use of National Certificate modules, which Howie himself disparagingly called "*SCOTVEC's lucky dip box.*"

Having decided that the *status quo* was not an option, the Committee examined the systems of several other countries, particularly those of France, Germany and Denmark. They rejected the English "A" Level model on the grounds that it offered depth but not breadth; the International Baccalauréat offered both breadth and depth but was thought to be attainable by only a small proportion of Scottish pupils in S5-S6. All three European systems which they examined were regarded by the Howie Committee as much more successful than the Scottish system; but, in the end, the system which appealed most to them and on which they built their new model was the Danish one in which 30% of an age cohort began a 3-year course in the Gymnasium at age 16. Realising that the courses which they envisaged would also require three years, the Committee was forced to go beyond its remit to an examination of the whole of secondary education.

Having rejected the option of adding a seventh year to the secondary school, which would have meant most pupils staying on at school until they were 19 (as happens in Denmark and in other European countries), they were left with only the option of reforming the existing S1-S6 arrangements. To ensure that pupils had sufficient time to prepare for the Scottish Upper Secondary Award (SUSA), as the new qualifications would be called, they recommended that the pace of learning should be speeded up in the upper primary and lower secondary stages. Since more pupils than expected were achieving Levels D and E in P7 in the National Tests in P7 (see Appendix 1), it was claimed that pupils were marking time in S1-2. In the circumstances, the Committee felt that the Standard Grade programme could easily start earlier and be completed by the end of S3. They therefore recommended that Standard Grade should no longer be regarded as a leaving certificate marking the end of statutory education but should instead become the upper end of the 5-14 programme. The assessments should take place in S2-S3, with tests that were marked internally but moderated externally.

From S4 onwards, "*instead of a haphazard conglomeration of subjects and modules*" which were presently taken by pupils, "*clear educational pathways*" should be developed which would give everyone "*the opportunity to undertake a coherent programme of study which matches his or her*

*interests and aspirations, is capable of successful completion given appropriate effort, and leads to a range of desired destinations in terms of employment or progression to further or higher education."* Two main routes, differentiated by educational emphasis, were recommended, the one leading to the Scottish Certificate (SCOTCERT), the other to the Scottish Baccalaureate (SCOTBAC). Both pathways would build on existing arrangements, using SCOTVEC's National Certificate modules as the basis of more vocationally-oriented courses, while existing Higher and CSYS arrangements would be retained for those who were more academically oriented. Both pathways would share important characteristics, including elements of general and vocational education, a framework of core skills, and a certain degree of choice to cater for individual interests. In both cases, certification would be based on a system of group awards *"to ensure breadth and coherence of study and of overall attainment, and to encourage student perseverance."*

A Record of Achievement would be built up to provide a profile of the student's performance in the various components of both SCOTCERT and SCOTBAC, but the final award would be made only if the whole curriculum package was completed satisfactorily. Credits would be available for achievements already recorded, so that the proposed arrangements would provide bridges to enable students to cross from one pathway to the other. This would be relatively easy for those transferring from SCOTBAC to SCOTCERT. Movement in the other direction would be more difficult and might involve an additional year of study. It was more likely, however, that students who had done well on a SCOTCERT course would use a *"ladder"* into a Higher National Certificate (HNC) or Higher National Diploma (HND) course. Transfer from one SCOTCERT course to another should be relatively easy, but transfer from one SCOTBAC line to the other might involve an additional year of study if the change was not made early in the course. Those who decided to leave school before completing a course would have the Record of Achievement on which they could build if they decided to return to education or training in later life.

SCOTCERT would have a strong vocational emphasis and would be designed for the majority of S4 pupils, perhaps 60-70% of them. Pupils could leave school at the end of S4 with a SCOTCERT Part One qualification after successfully completing sixteen 40-hour modules during a one-year course, or with a SCOTCERT Part Two after completing 32 modules over two years, some of which would be equivalent to Standard Grade Credit level, others to Higher Grade level. Pupils who completed additional more demanding modules would receive a merit award. There would be ten variants based on broad occupational sectors which combined vocational and general education, and two which concentrated solely on general education. These twelve awards would be:

Agriculture	Hairdressing & Beauty Therapy	Communication & Information Technology
Construction	Leisure, Recreation and Tourism	Art & Design
Engineering	Caring	Science & Mathematics
Catering	Business & Administration	Arts & Social Studies

In SCOTCERT, there would be compulsory coverage of the core skills of communication, numeracy, problem-solving, personal and inter-personal skills, information technology, and modern languages. Assessment would be largely internal, as in the SCOTVEC National Certificate modules; but, additionally, a bank of external assessments would be established for certain modules. The aim of the courses would be to prepare students, including mature adults as well as school pupils, for entry to employment or to more advanced courses in further or higher

education. Since SCOTVEC National Certificate qualifications already articulated well with the Higher National Certificate and Diploma and could be used within the Access Programme to prepare students for degree courses, the Committee proposed that the framework of National Certificate modules should be used as the basis of new vocational education programmes in schools. An additional feature, however, would be the use of integrative modules to show that students could use the various skills and knowledge which they had acquired at various stages of the course. These integrative modules might be devised internally but assessed externally, or they might take the form of "*externally devised projects with well-defined assessment criteria*", which would be marked internally, with a sample of work from every centre reviewed by external assessors.

As far as academic courses were concerned, however, modularisation of the curricula was not acceptable. The Committee accepted that modularisation motivated students by providing short-term targets and was valuable because of the flexibility it promoted in terms of access to courses, transfer between courses, accumulation of qualifications over a number of years, and ease of updating courses. However, it rejected the use of modules in SCOTBAC courses because that might lead to "*fragmentation and trivialisation of learning*" and to assessment-driven learning through over-assessment. In the Committee's opinion, modularisation would necessitate too great an emphasis on internal assessment. Furthermore, since SCOTBAC would be based on existing Higher Grade and CSYS syllabuses, there was no point in disintegrating these into modules and then asking teachers to reintegrate them.

The Committee also criticised the "*dash and drift*" of existing post-Standard Grade courses. The increase in gradient of difficulty between Standard Grade and Higher was at present too great, especially when this hurdle had to be negotiated in two terms; and this two-term dash to Higher was often followed by a Sixth Year in which pupils drifted through undemanding courses, especially if they had already gained unconditional offers from universities. The Committee maintained that the standard of Higher Grade was not as high as that of the French Baccalauréat, the German Abitur, the Danish Studentereksamen or English "A" Levels, and yet the average number of Higher passes achieved by Scottish fifth year pupils was less than two. The Committee concluded that to increase the course to two years would still give insufficient time to provide a genuinely broad and coherent programme in which students could study subjects in depth to a sufficiently high standard and at a reasonably measured pace; and so, to ensure that SCOTBAC was really challenging, they recommended a three-year programme of study.

Within the SCOTBAC programme, there would be two "*lines*" and a number of academic and vocational variants. "*Lines of study [would] refer to the systematic grouping of subjects with a set menu rather than the offering of an undifferentiated cafeteria-like provision.*" One line would be science-oriented, the other arts-oriented. Common to both lines would be a substantial core (perhaps two-thirds of available teaching time) consisting of English, a modern language, mathematics, science, social subjects, music or history of art, and information technology, although the weighting of particular subjects might not be the same in both lines. There would be a range of optional subjects, but these would be limited to some extent by the requirements of a coherent group award. "*The Committee's view is that subject proliferation has occurred to an excessive extent in Scottish arrangements and that this proliferation does little to benefit the students or the system. Rather, it disperses resources and development effort over an increasingly large number of small uptake areas.*"

There was no reason why there should not be academic and vocational variants of SCOTBAC, provided both variants were held in equal esteem. This could be achieved if both contained substantial elements of common general education, were assessed in the same way on a common system, and used the same method of calculating the student's overall score or grade point average.

Initially, substantial use would be made of existing Higher and CSYS courses, but changes could gradually be made in the future to improve standards or update content. The Committee was confident that major subjects, which would be studied through all three years of the course, *"would be taught to a level well above Higher and in some cases at or beyond CSYS."*

The SCOTBAC award would be given only to those who successfully completed the full three-year programme of studies on a given line. Students would not have to pass every single assessment to gain an award; within limits, better performance in some subjects might be allowed to compensate for poorer performance in others. Certification would be based on a points system. Over the three years of study, a profile of performance would be built up in each subject, and the points accumulated at each stage would lead to an overall banding of performance on an A - D scale. There would be external examinations in the final year, and also at the point where a pupil ceased to study any subject at an earlier stage. The intention was that SCOTBAC courses would be delivered almost exclusively *"as an integrated whole to a stable class group"*, which might in the early years of its existence comprise some 25% of the age cohort and, in due course, increase to between 35% and 40%.

Assessment for both SCOTCERT and SCOTBAC should be criterion-referenced, as was already the case in the 5-14 programme, in Standard Grade and in the National Certificate modules; and certification for the Scottish Upper Secondary Award should become part of a progressive system which followed on from the 5-14 programme and Standard Grade. This could be achieved by extending the concept of 5-14 levels and adding four new levels F, G, H and I:

Extended Level Scale	5-14 levels	Standard Grade Levels	SCOTCERT Levels	SCOTBAC Levels
A	A			
B	B			
C	C			
D	D			
E	E	Foundation		
F		General	F	F
G		Credit	G	G
H			H	H
I				I

As can be seen from the diagram, it was assumed that Level E of the existing 5-14 programme would be *"broadly equivalent to Standard Grade Foundation level; Level F would be taken to be broadly equivalent to Standard Grade General level; and Level G would be broadly equivalent to Standard Grade Credit level; ..... Level H [would be] broadly equivalent in demand to the existing Higher Grade and Level I broadly equivalent in demand to the existing CSYS."* SCOTCERT would extend over the three levels F, G and H; SCOTBAC would overlap with these three levels but would also have Level I as its top award.

No costings were produced for the proposals, as it was not part of the Committee's remit to investigate resource implications. It was likely that additional resources would be required, especially if the proposals encouraged many more pupils to stay on at school. However, these would be one-off increases (e.g. for the piloting of courses and staff training) and they could be offset, to some extent, by more economic use of staffing, by greater use of educational technology and flexible teaching approaches, and by replacing 16-18 training programmes with the much more coherent scheme envisaged for SCOTCERT.

In summing up the proposals, Professor Howie said that they would create "*a new, stable, unified system of academic and vocational education*" which would meet the needs of the next century. Pupils, parents, employers, colleges and universities would all benefit. The alternative would be "*a prolongation of piecemeal reform, experimentation and short-lived vocational training programmes.*" He expected that the first SCOTBAC candidates would not enter higher education before the year 2001.

---

**Note 1:** Early in its deliberations, the Committee issued fourteen key questions to which it invited interested parties to respond:

1. What should be the principal aims of S5 and S6 courses? What should pupils derive in terms of knowledge, skills, attitudes?
2. What are the virtues of the present arrangements? What are the arguments for retaining them in whole or in part?
3. Does the Scottish system impose on pupils the transition to higher education or professional training at too early an age?
4. What would be the implications of a two-year S5/S6 curriculum with an S6 end-point?
5. What broad pattern of an S5/S6 curriculum could comprehend the whole pupil population and how should such a curriculum be assessed? Is it desirable or necessary to continue the principles of progression and differentiation which underlie the 5-14 and Standard Grade programmes?
6. A number of main forms of curriculum and associated certification can be envisaged for S5 and S6, such as: a merger of Higher and CSYS; a modular programme with on-going and terminal certification; a two-year Higher with some kind of S5 exit point.  
What advantages and disadvantages seem inherent in each of the above?  
What alternative models can be envisaged?  
Should levels of attainment be related to stages of schooling?
7. How can the best pedagogic practice be reconciled with user demands for rigorous assessment? What role is there for internal assessment?
8. Should school education be a general or specific preparation for higher education and

other outlets for S5 and S6 pupils? Should courses emphasise very specific content or more general intellectual skills?

9. What role is there in S5 and S6 for courses which:
  - develop core skills (such as communication, problem-solving, and so on), including compulsory elements;
  - lead to a group certificate;
  - are not certified?
10. Should S5/S6 curricula be constructed in terms of subjects or modes? Should subjects appear at differentiated levels? Should discrete course packages be designed into the provision?
11. Should the curriculum embrace a spectrum of provision from 'academic' to 'vocational' courses? What should be the relative emphasis? Should pupils be able to opt for a predominantly academic, predominantly vocational or mixed provision? Should provision be targeted at differentiated groups of pupils?
12. What should be the relationship between S5 and S6 school courses and SCOTVEC's National Certificate (and perhaps advanced course) provision?
13. How should S5 and S6 provision relate to England's system of A-levels and AS-levels and to other European qualifications?
14. Should pupils pursue the S5/S6 curriculum exclusively in school or should movement to (say) further education be possible with curricular continuity?

**Note 2:** Higher Grade had originally been designed as a five-year course, but this concept had been undermined by the introduction of "O" Grade in 1962. Although Higher Grade candidates were intended to bypass "O" Grade, very few did and so there grew up the notion that Higher was a two-term course following "O" Grade rather than a five-year course incorporating "O" Grade *en passant*. The introduction of Standard Grade Credit Level finally killed off any thought of a five-year course.