

Chapter 10: The Second Development Programme Plan

In October 1995, KPMG won a £45,000 contract from the SOED to compare the costs of educating 16-19 year olds in schools and FE colleges. The research was scheduled to be completed by the end of December. I was not able to locate the results of this research which would have an obvious bearing on where Higher Still courses could be delivered most economically.

In November 1995, the SEB mounted a "*Higher Still Benchmark Exhibition*" which was designed to help Development Officers draft assessment arrangements by relating existing standards to those required of pupils taking the new courses. Development Officers drawn from schools might not have up-to-date experience, or any experience at all, of SCOTVEC standards, and there might well be similar gaps in the knowledge of SCE standards among those drawn from FE. The exhibition gathered together from across Scotland a whole range of non-question paper evidence used by the SEB in assessing SCE performance — folios, examples of practical work (such as cakes, puppets and other artefacts), field work reports and videos used in assessing PE. One of the main concerns about the Higher Still Programme was whether it would be able to maintain the standards of existing qualifications. As the SEB stated, it would not be enough to claim that standards were not falling. Therefore, to ensure that the new scheme was clearly seen to maintain standards, the new courses and units should be benchmarked against existing performance at the different levels of Standard Grade, Higher Grade and CSYS. The Board was also anxious that new courses should not have levels of demand which were artificially manipulated to create harder or easier subjects. If a new Higher were to be created which was, say, a full grade easier than existing Highers, it would be in danger of not being accorded parity of esteem. Equally, distorting a subject to make it more intellectually demanding could destroy its appropriateness for the average student.

By the end of 1995, ominous political signs were beginning to appear. In November, the guidelines, which the EIS AGM had instructed its Education Committee to draw up for limiting co-operation in new curriculum developments, were rejected by the EIS National Executive Council as not being tough enough, and stringent new guidelines were prepared for the next meeting at the end of January. In December, even the more moderate Scottish Secondary Teachers Association began to threaten to withdraw co-operation from the Higher Still Programme. Possibly more worrying were noises coming from the thirty-two new unitary local authorities which were to replace regional and islands councils in April 1996. All of them were being forced to make some of the biggest cuts ever in their budgets. Over the country as a whole, it was estimated that cuts in educational spending alone would amount to £78 million, and the local authorities could see no reason why they should subsidise the Higher Still Programme, which they regarded as seriously under-funded, when they themselves were already having to abandon some of their own important local educational initiatives. Parents, too, were caught up in the mood of anger, so much so that a protest march which the EIS had organised in Edinburgh against educational cuts attracted 40,000 people, when only around 5,000 had been expected.

In January 1996, the Development Unit published a booklet entitled "*Responding to Consultation: Principles for the Post-16 Curriculum and Core Skills*" which contained a summary of the responses received to the consultative documents that had been issued in April

1995. The main criticisms of the initial “*Core Skills*” document centred on the need for further development work, particularly in relation to the value and place of core skills in the curriculum, how they were to be defined and fitted into the framework, and how attainment in them could be certificated. This January document offered an outline of the action that was proposed and promised to deal with the criticisms in a more detailed paper in May 1996.

Up to the publication of the framework documents in August 1995, the Programme had adhered to the timetable which had been set before the Strategy Group at its first meeting on 30 August 1994. At that time, however, it had been hoped that the framework documents could be revised and published in January 1996, that all course documents could be issued for consultation by the end of February 1996 and that, following four months of consultation, the final course documents and module descriptors required for implementation in 1997-98 could be published between June and September 1996. That aim was beginning to prove over-ambitious.

The Second Development Programme Plan was published, as promised in January 1996. It reviewed the progress made over the first year and set milestones up to December 1996. However, the issue of the revised set of framework documents was now timed for May 1996, and it would be May before the first phase course documents and module descriptors could go out for consultation. This meant that the seminars for Principal Teachers and Heads of Sections in FE, which were originally planned for March 1996, would now be held in the period June to September.

During the period of consultation (August to December 1995), the Development Officers were given training to prepare them for the writing of course and unit documents and, for the six weeks prior to the 12 December deadline, pilot writing was undertaken in all subject areas. During the rest of December, the Development Officers turned to the collation of the responses to the framework consultation process and to the preparation of reports on each of the subject frameworks, together with a summary report on general issues. This had to be completed in time for the Strategy Group's 12th meeting on 15 January 1996.

The findings were published in three forms in March 1996. The Development Unit's Newsletter Number 5 stated there had been some 1,500 collated responses (often with as many as 30 individual submissions included within them) to what it described as “*the most comprehensive consultation ever undertaken in connection with a curriculum and assessment initiative in Scotland.*” The Newsletter provided a short summary of reactions to all of the August 1995 consultation papers, together with a rough indication of how some the concerns would be responded to. It was as informative as might be expected of a popular news-sheet and probably performed a good public relations function.

The more official looking 8-page booklet entitled “*Consultation: Answering the questions you asked*”, issued in March 1996, attempted to give more detailed information about how the concerns would be met; but unfortunately it reverted to the more bland, almost patronising, tone which had characterised some of the earlier documents, and it might even have undone what had been achieved by the third, very comprehensive publication called “*Information and support for senior managers in schools*”. Issued in a good-quality ringbinder, this document gave not only a very full and frank account of general concerns which had been raised but also contained

detailed comments on each of the subject framework documents. Besides assuring teachers that there was no intention of imposing uniform provision or expecting common implementation across all schools, it stated emphatically that the Higher Still Programme was based on a strategy “*which starts with broad proposals and extensive consultation in order for further details to be shaped in the light of responses. These subsequent detailed proposals then become the subject of further consultation.*” Senior staff in secondary schools were now expected to organise responses to the next set of consultative documents, which would be issued in May 1996, and also to develop an implementation strategy that would suit their own schools. The pack also contained a set of OHP transparencies, with detailed notes, to help headteachers make presentations to their own staffs, to the school board and to parents generally.

Everyone had welcomed the opportunity to make comments, and the seminars were widely praised as helping to provide clarification and to dispel some of the confusion and misunderstandings. Almost all responses prefaced their criticisms with a statement of continuing support for the principles of *Higher Still*, although a small number of independent schools were unhappy with the proposals as a whole, fearing that they would dilute standards as far as the most able pupils were concerned. The “*Answering the questions you asked*” document tried to reassure them that able pupils would not be neglected. It was essential that all pupils, including the most able, should be challenged by appropriate courses, and the universities were already involved in discussions regarding credit transfer and progression.

The consultation process revealed that there was virtual unanimity in rejecting the existing nomenclature. The most serious concerns related to workload, staffing and other resources, and timescale, even allowing for the one-year postponement.

There were three main and inter-related aspects of the workload fears — preparation of new materials, multi-level classes, and assessment — all of which pointed, as far as teachers were concerned, to the need for increased staffing and a large injection of resource materials. The Development Unit conceded that current procedures for internal assessment and verification, taken along with external assessment, were not sustainable across all units and courses. Many responses had expressed concern that standards could be affected through assessment being fragmented and mechanistic, and there was strong support for a simplified, integrated, holistic approach to internal assessment. There were also concerns about the relationship between internal and external assessment, about the managing and gathering of evidence based on unit work for making appeals in a graded system, about the assessment of practical skills, and regarding what flexibility there would be in both the form and the timing of the external assessment. Many teachers already felt that the assessment (as opposed to the verification) of SCOTVEC modules lacked the rigour of SEB procedures, and they were keen that there should be a national item bank to help them carry out the internal assessment of units. They could not see themselves finding time to prepare suitable materials without interfering with the teaching time devoted to their existing pupils, and they were concerned that, without nationally standardised materials, the quality of internal assessment could not be guaranteed. They stressed that lessons had to be learned from the Standard Grade experience, when the need for staff development and better provision of centrally produced teaching materials was recognised rather late in the day following the damaging teachers’ strikes.

The Development Unit responded by assuring critics that appropriate support materials (including materials specifically commissioned from publishers) and assessment materials would be produced centrally well in advance of the implementation of Higher Still. The assessment workload for Higher Grade courses was unlikely to be any greater than it already was, while that for modules would probably decrease. The aim was to develop an assessment system which combined the best elements of internal and external procedures already practised by the SEB and SCOTVEC. Neither of the two systems could remain unchanged since that would certainly result in assessment overload. Exemplars and a bank of assessment materials were promised, and teachers could use them as they wished, knowing that they met national standards.

It was generally accepted that the new proposals would be helpful to part-time students and adult returners, since they would be able to build towards courses and awards in their own time and take the external assessment when they were ready. The new Scottish Qualifications Authority would probably develop rules regarding the maximum timescale allowed for completing a course. If there were insufficient numbers to form viable classes, open and distance learning materials might be required to provide the necessary flexibility.

In addition to producing the various consultation documents, HM Inspectors and staff from the Development Unit were also already heavily involved in addressing various seminars and conferences. At one of these, a course held for Subject Advisers in March 1996, an assurance was given that in recent years much had been learned about training large numbers of teachers, and this was being applied to the Higher Still Programme. For example, 3,000 headteachers had been trained to help School Boards understand the Programme; and, in preparation for the introduction of staff appraisal, 20,000 appraisers and 50,000 appraisees had been trained in the past four years. Between September and December 1995, the Development Team had conducted over 200 seminars for 8,500 staff to prepare them for responding to the consultation papers. Most importantly, a plan had been formulated to ensure that all Principal Teachers and class teachers would have received the necessary training by 1998.

The published documents and the Development Unit tried to make light of the fears that teachers had of dealing with multi-level classes by stating that these already existed in smaller schools, in practical classes and in minority subjects where the small number of pupils made it impossible to have viable classes at separate levels. They also kept pointing out that roughly a third of the pupils who were taught in Higher Grade classes failed to gain a single pass, and the aim was to provide courses that would make things easier for teachers than the present practice of using randomly selected modules or the current group awards such as GSVQs and School Group Awards. However, teachers continued to stress that, if classes were to consist of pupils aiming at even just two different levels, these could operate successfully only with reduced class sizes, using appropriate and flexible support materials which would allow for differentiation.

On Guidance, the idea of "*pupil entitlement to support*" was regarded by the teaching profession as laudable but almost certainly time-consuming; and some surprise was expressed that no mention had been made of the responsibility which pupils themselves had to carry out their side of the bargain. Part-time students and adult returners would require just as much guidance as school pupils.

There was widespread pleasure, particularly in establishments which catered specifically for pupils with special educational needs, that the Development Programme, unlike so many previous developments, had recognised the range and complexity of the problems faced by these young people. Many teachers reserved their position, however, on the practicalities of delivering the proposals until they were fleshed out in more detail. For example, how specific would the Map of Achievement be? And how could the danger be avoided of placing more barriers in the way of these pupils through what was demanded in the way of core skills and group awards? There was also concern that the term "*Foundation*" would damn their achievements as worthless, and care would have to be taken that a "*ghetto*" group was not created at this level, as had happened in the past for pupils following "*modified*" courses or courses for the retarded. One alarming point which emerged from the consultation was the fact that, although it had been assumed that about 50% of mainstream schools would make provision for pupils at this level, very few schools said they were likely to have such classes because numbers would not make them viable. This was in stark contrast to the keenness of schools to make provision for very able pupils to take Advanced Highers, even though numbers were small. Pupils with special educational needs who had been integrated into mainstream schools could therefore be seriously disadvantaged.

Inevitably, every one of the twenty-eight subject frameworks attracted some criticism, but only relatively minor changes were necessary in twenty-seven of them. The one exception was "English and Communication" which required to be rewritten because of major concerns that were widely held. Most responses claimed that undue prominence had been given to vocational purposes through unitising SEB courses and aggregating SCOTVEC modules into courses. Many schools responded that there was too great an emphasis on communication, while the role of literature had been marginalised. FE responses, on the other hand, tended to suggest that the proposals were school-led and did not address FE needs in terms of "*servicing*" provision. The removal of set texts was almost universally welcomed, as was the proposal to introduce a compulsory Scottish literature element. However, some questioned whether this would be fair to non-native students, while others wondered what "*Scottish*" literature meant. Was it literature written in Scotland or by a Scot, even though it was written in English; or did it have to be written in Scots? There was no consensus on whether Talk and Listening should be included, but there was widespread concern about how these could be rigorously assessed. Overall, however, the greatest dissatisfaction was over the lack of sufficient detail to help teachers and lecturers make informed judgements in a subject as multi-faceted and complex as English.

When the revised document was issued in May 1996, it still retained the title "*English and Communication*" but it contained a fuller rationale which tackled head-on the unfortunate polarisation which the earlier document had produced on the relative importance of literature and communication. It was not a case of these two competing with each other. A study of literature in all its various forms was not only crucial in stimulating the imagination but was also a powerful means of developing the use of language. The new document therefore placed greater stress on literature. At the same time, it insisted that communication in all its forms was an essential ingredient in everyone's education, whether for employment, for higher education or for use in society generally. There would be two 40-hour units in which the study of literature and language was compulsory, and a 20-hour unit specialising in the one or the other. Despite reservations expressed by teachers over the feasibility of assessing oral skills at the higher levels,

and also over the workload that would be involved, the English Specialist Group stuck to its decision to make oral proficiency an assessable element. However, oral work would now become part of one of the 20-hour units rather than a discrete element, and it could be assessed through group discussion or critical listening in literature or language classes. The only other major change was that the preparation of a report would become part of the course work rather than an external examination at Higher Level.

So many publications were now being issued that it would be impossible for me to discuss them all, particularly as many of them related to individual subjects. However, there were two others issued in May 1996 that were of more general interest: “*assessment*” and “*core skills: further consultation*” (Note 27).

The responses to the initial Core Skills document had made it clear that a great deal of thought would have to go into clarifying the nature, aims, teaching and assessment of these skills if they were to take place naturally and not distort the rest of the curriculum. This was a relatively short, but much more substantial document than the previous one. The thinking had been firmed up considerably, although it was admitted that much still had to be done before ambition could become reality. It produced a convincing argument for the certification of core skills and reaffirmed a clear commitment to their inclusion in the Higher Still Programme because of their importance to the life of everyone, whether in employment, further studies, or social and leisure activities. Acknowledging the importance of what used to be called life skills or process skills was far from new; in fact, virtually every educational report in the past had paid lip-service to them. What was new was the determination to promote their development actively throughout the curriculum, to describe nationally agreed standards which all could recognise and, possibly most important of all, to back up the rhetoric with a clear commitment to give students visible credit for developing these skills by including on the certificate to be issued by the proposed Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) a profile of their attainment in each. Efforts in the past had been limited to such tinkering as the deduction of one or two marks for poor spelling or writing in subject examinations. This may have had a marginal effect on the final mark in a minority of cases but, since the process was secret, it did nothing to convince candidates of the importance of basic skills and gave users of the certificate no information about the candidate’s level of attainment in these. It is even questionable if the deduction of marks for English spelling could be justified in an examination which was designed to test a subject other than English.

The five core skills listed originally in “*Higher Still*” (see Chapter 5) were now reduced to four by combining “*problem solving*” and “*personal and inter-personal skills*” under the single heading “*personal effectiveness and problem solving*”. The three others remained the same: “*communication, numeracy and information technology*”.

Work carried out in analysing and identifying the nature of these skills and abilities had shown that they were inter-related but, to eliminate duplication and to ensure progression, it was necessary to define them separately. The booklet offered a suggested core skill framework, together with a fairly detailed description of what each of the skills might involve, samples of the criteria that might be applied to gauge the level of attainment in different tasks and situations, and an illustration of how the graded profile might appear on the SQA certificate. [Surprisingly, although “*numeracy*” included the ability to handle numbers, “*communication*” did not mention

the ability to spell correctly or write grammatical English!] The plan was to incorporate the skills within Higher Still units and courses so that by successfully completing the courses, or even through previous attainment in Standard Grade, school candidates at least could have them automatically certificated within their profile. This would happen, however, only where the skills formed a natural part of the subject matter and their assessment was integral to the assessment arrangements as a whole. In a clear attempt to assuage the fears of teachers regarding workload, the document emphasised that the SQA would devise a means of achieving this automatically without involving any administrative work on the part of the teachers. This arrangement might not work for some non-school candidates, such as adult returners whose previous educational attainment did not include Standard Grade awards or students who were following a restricted programme or those undertaking certain group awards. Existing approaches to the certification of core skills through dedicated units would continue to be available for that type of student, although they would have to be amended to be consistent with the Higher Still core skills framework.

The “*assessment*” document made it clear that it dealt only with units and courses; a further consultation paper dealing with Scottish Group Awards would be issued in September 1996. Concern over the workload that assessment procedures would place upon teachers had all along been one of the main causes of resistance to the detailed Higher Still proposals. This document did little to remove these fears, although it did perform a useful function by gathering together the various strands of existing policy. It was largely a general, sometimes repetitive dissertation which here and there betrayed the fact that some issues were still at the proposal/intention stage. Much of it was devoted to a description of the different forms and purposes of assessment, the respective strengths and weaknesses of internal and external assessment, and the wisdom of combining these to get the best of both worlds. The internally assessed units would ensure that students had grasped all the key learning outcomes in the course, while the externally assessed course would draw the skills and knowledge of the component units together and force students to use the content of the units in an integrative way. The paper rehearsed the various means of ensuring validity, reliability and credibility, and the importance of flexibility and manageability in not allowing assessment to control or distort the learning process.

The paper confirmed certain important decisions already taken: there would be a unified system of assessment and certification across academic and vocational education; all assessment would be criterion-based; attainment in units would be assessed, not on an outcome-by-outcome or criterion-by-criterion basis, but holistically, which would be simpler to administer and less time-consuming than the current assessment of modules; where it was difficult to match evidence of attainment directly to performance criteria, a “*threshold of attainment*” would be established to define what would constitute a successful standard; a national item bank would be available so that teachers could, if they wished, be relieved of the burden of devising their own internal tests and national standards would be easier to achieve; candidates could be re-assessed in any part of a unit in which they had been unsuccessful; a pass or fail system would be applied to units, while course assessments would provide grades within the various levels; evidence from units assessment could be used in appeals against unexpectedly poor performance in course assessment; the handling of free-standing additional units (i.e. those which were not components of courses) would continue largely unchanged from existing SCOTVEC practice; external course assessment would not necessarily take the form of written question papers but, as in

current SEB practice, would use the most suitable and natural means.

On the matter of quality assurance, schools and colleges would automatically become approved centres for offering Higher Still qualifications. Private trainers and employers who wished to offer specific units would have to seek special approval. The validation of all Higher Still qualifications would become the sole responsibility of the proposed SQA; the quality control of external assessment (i.e. the setting of question papers, marking, checking and processing of scripts, security, etc) would reflect current SEB practice; moderation would be conducted on an annual targeted sample of centres' units, the targets being decided on the basis of the past moderation record of centres, on how well their internal unit assessments agreed with the external course assessments, and how closely their estimates of how candidates would perform in the external course assessment agreed with their actual performance. One or two illustrations of how assessment might apply to individual subjects appeared towards the end of the paper, but not in sufficient detail to satisfy those who were still concerned about the assessment load. Details of how the procedures would affect individual subjects would have to wait until the course and unit documents were published later in the year.

And so the process continued — consultation papers, the collation of responses, revision of proposals to meet objections and misunderstandings, new consultation papers, etc, etc. — carried out at different levels and carefully monitored by the Development Unit Executive Group as it moved forward with more and more detail. It was indeed a massive exercise, carried out in meticulous detail, and it thoroughly deserved the claim that it was “*the most comprehensive consultation ever undertaken in connection with a curriculum and assessment initiative in Scotland*” (newsletter No.5). I have been able to give only a flavour of what actually happened in the earlier stages. The complete story deserves a more detailed investigation so that the findings are available to guide any major reorganisation that is planned in future.

Interestingly, a paradox ran through the whole exercise. On the one hand, teachers were complaining that they were not being kept well enough informed about what was happening and that what they were receiving lacked detail to help them prepare for the new courses; on the other, they were suffering from fatigue under the piles of consultation documents that were produced.

Note 27: I have not made a mistake in quoting these titles with lower case letters throughout. For some inexplicable reason, no publications from the Development Unit made use of upper case letters in titles — not particularly helpful when teachers were expected to teach the standard conventions to pupils.