

Chapter 6: Reactions and Early Developments

Not unnaturally, members of the Howie Committee were fairly critical of the *Higher Still* proposals, since they had probably rejected many of the SOED "solutions" during their own deliberations.

Howie himself commented that, although *Higher Still* had taken care of some of the weaknesses in the existing system, he was disappointed that the Scottish Office had not proposed something more adventurous. The "*very nice package*," as he called it, would be just as divisive as the Howie proposals had been accused of being. After all, one purpose of assessment and certification was to be divisive, by sorting people out according to their attainments. Skillstart courses would never have the same status as Advanced Highers, and it was nonsense to pretend otherwise. He did not think many pupils would, in fact, bypass Higher in S5 and so the problem of the 2-term dash would remain. It was also likely that universities, because of the financial pressures they faced, would continue to admit students on the basis of their S5 attainments. He dismissed the prospect of many students entering the second year of honours courses with a clutch of Advanced Highers: second-year entry was unpopular with students and rare even for those who had gained good CSYS or "A" Level awards. Besides, universities could not afford to lose this income, and there might even be pressure on universities to admit more students from S5. He did admit, however, that insisting on strict bifurcation into SCOTBAC and SCOTCERT tracks had been a mistake, and he now favoured a more modular approach and allowing pupils to take some subjects at a lower level than others.

Other criticisms were levelled at the fact that Higher and Advanced Higher candidates would not have to demonstrate competence in the five core skills. There were serious doubts about the ability of a school of 600 or fewer pupils to accommodate the numerous course options inherent in the new system. Some claimed that there would be pressure to stream pupils at an early age. Schools in disadvantaged areas would certainly not be able to offer Advanced Highers and might face closure if pupils were lured away from these schools to magnet schools which could offer such courses. Preliminary investigations carried out in Strathclyde suggested that the 5-Higher structure could be kept going only if schools reduced the number of subjects which they offered at Higher.

Robert Nimmo, who had been a member of the Howie Committee and was also Vice-Chairman of the SEB, was quite happy with the *Higher Still* proposals. He described them as "*a multi-track system within a single motorway, with a main track flanked by fast and slow lanes.*" He liked the flexibility offered by the modular framework and, as far as he was concerned, "*a set of different inclines and gradients is undoubtedly preferable to a series of different hurdles.*" He also liked the evolutionary approach which built on current and recent developments.

There were others who praised the report. For example, the President of the Scottish Conservative Teachers Association said that "*the skilful cocktail-shaking*" of the Secretary of State and his Education Minister had justified the long delay following the publication of the Howie Report; an Assistant Director of SCOTVEC described *Higher Still* as "*the culmination and drawing together of all the major reports and initiatives — Brunton, Munn, Dunning and the Action Plan*"; and the Times Educational Supplement Scotland (TESS) editorial spoke of how

Howie and *Higher Still* had arrived at fundamentally different proposals from the same analysis: "*Howie went for grand construction Ministers have preferred to amend rather than rebuild the system Highers and National Certificate modules are cleverly linked without a Howie-style rail network. Only the autonomy reserved for general Scottish Vocational Qualifications is incongruous. This owes everything to pressure from industry and England (with its similar new vocational qualifications) and nothing to commonsense.*"

Further Education lecturers, however, complained that *Higher Still* had tried to skate over the difficulties which they would face, particularly in the re-introduction of external assessment which had been abandoned when the Action Plan had been introduced in the early 1980s. The nearest they now came to external assessment was the externally moderated integrative project for GSVQs. They also voiced uncertainty about how elements of HNC courses would appear in the Advanced Higher and how appropriate Highers would be if used as components of the National Certificate Level 3. These changes would be more than the "*slight modification*" of programmes mentioned in *Higher Still*.

Some of the bigger education authorities also spoke out against the proposals. They expressed concern about the timescale, lack of detail about course construction (especially for the fast track), the introduction of Level F into the 5-14 programme, the dangers of early specialisation, the considerable amount of work to be carried out on internal assessment and moderation, and the currency which the Higher and the Advanced Higher would have with universities and employers. However great the benefits might be that would be derived from the unified curriculum and assessment system, the timing was bad, since the education system was already struggling to cope with the 5-14 programme, devolved management to schools, staff appraisal and the approaching reorganisation of local government on 1 April 1996.

Teachers generally were relieved to some extent that Howie's proposals had been killed off, but they were very cynical about government assurances that the proposals would not involve them in a great deal of extra work. The teachers' unions were not slow to point out that their members were not going to be conned again by the kinds of assurances which the Government had given when Standard Grade was introduced. The SSTA were concerned about the unrealistic timescale, the fast-tracking proposals, the bypassing of Higher, the threat to the curricular breadth of the curriculum in S5-S6, and the inability of schools to provide a full range of courses.

The EIS also attacked the tightness of the timescale. The reorganisation of the curriculum into 40-hour modules was a huge task and not an extension of existing courses. How could it be done quickly enough for pupils to start the new courses in August 1997? This restructuring was bound to have an adverse effect on the teaching given to existing pupils in both primary and secondary schools, especially since no extra resources were to be made available to schools. The EIS also objected to fast-tracking and even wondered if the Advanced Higher was a tentative move towards eventually replacing the Scottish system with English "A" Levels. There was also concern that the Government had a hidden agenda in proposing fast-tracking, namely, the re-introduction of selection for secondary schools; for it was maintained that pupils destined for the fast-track Standard Grade in S2/S3 would have to set off on this track much earlier. The possibility of pupils being able to take five Highers was also questioned in the light of the increased time allocation from 120 to 160 hours per subject. The biggest stumbling block for the

EIS, however, was the fact that Ministers had so far failed to respond to its existing complaints about teachers' excessive workloads. They therefore announced at the end of March 1994 that they would ballot their members about extending their existing boycott of new initiatives to include *Higher Still*.

Ian Lang, the Secretary of State, responded to this threat by expressing surprise at the line the EIS was adopting, especially since he had taken action on all its objections to the Howie Report and produced a scheme which was very close to what the EIS had proposed. He refused to meet EIS representatives himself but invited them to a series of meetings for teachers, parents and employers at which officials would explain the proposals in more detail. He added that the implementation date was still three years off, and class teachers would not be involved during the first eighteen months during which the ground would be prepared at national level. He reminded people that on 8 March the Government had pledged £2 million for the Development Programme in 1994-95 and had promised substantial sums in later years.

At the same time, the opportunity was taken to answer some of the criticisms. The reforms would merely recast existing courses into a more formal structure, and most of this development work would be carried out at national level over the first eighteen months. Criticism of the fast track was unjustified. The proposals were an attempt to meet an existing situation where some pupils were ready to sit Standard Grade before S4 rather than an encouragement to schools to establish that sort of fast stream. This provision already existed. The only difference was that schools would be able to take this decision on their own without seeking approval from the SEB. Existing 5-14 guidelines would not require amendment, as Level F was no more than "*a level beyond Level E*". The Department was confident that it would be possible for pupils to take five Higher courses despite the increase from 120 to 160 hours for each subject. The 800 hours which would be required for five Highers should be comfortably accommodated within the 1000 or so hours which made up a school session, while still leaving time for non-examinable studies. Besides, the increase in time allocation would not mean an increase in syllabus content.

When speaking to the Annual Conference of the Association for Science Education in early April 1994, the Senior Chief Inspector of Schools had said, "*I hope we are heading down a road where we teach 120 hours' content but take 160 hours to do it.*" He went on to assure the conference that the "*substantial and systematic*" Development Programme would not affect classroom teachers very significantly in the early stages. The Department's view was that, if the greater time allocation enabled even half of the 18,000 candidates who gained only D awards in Higher Grade examinations to raise these to C passes, the change would have been worthwhile.

Despite the threatened boycott, therefore, Ministers indicated at the end of April 1994 that the Higher Still Development Programme would go ahead, and they were confident that teachers would volunteer to get involved in the Task Groups and development work.