

Chapter 9: Serious Consultation on Higher Still Developments

One problem which had to be resolved quickly before subject documents could be contemplated was how to accommodate the content of existing 120-hour SCE courses and the 40-hour modular system of SCOTVEC within the proposed 160 hour per annum structure. To avoid having to re-write all of the SCOTVEC modules to convert three modules into four (lasting 160 hours in all), and also to make it clear that no new content was to be introduced into existing courses, it was decided that 40 hours would be set aside for additional study time. Care would have to be taken to prevent schools from basing their timetables on 120, rather than 160 hours..

Linked with this problem was the claim of certain critics that pupils' timetables could not accommodate five Highers, each lasting 160 hours, and still leave sufficient time for non-examinable areas of the curriculum such as Personal and Social Education, Religious and Moral Education and PE. The Department's attitude to this was that the 160 hours were not mandatory and the system had to be sufficiently flexible to ensure that a 5-Higher curriculum was possible in S5. However, even allowing for the continuation of the normal activities in which schools became involved after the SCE examinations (e.g. school plays, sports days, work experience, careers conventions, pupil conferences, exchange schemes, community service, outdoor education and enterprise programmes), it should still be possible for some time after the examination period to be devoted towards the 40-hours of flexible time that was built into the 160 hours. Indeed, the Strategy Group hoped that some way might be found of acknowledging the contribution that post-examination activities could make to the wider aims of Higher Still.

The Strategy Group had developed proposals that would ensure that both the 5-Higher curriculum and the 160 hours were accommodated. However, it fell to the SEB, as the statutory body responsible for the examinations, to undertake any consultation on this matter. On 21 February 1995, therefore, the SOED conveyed the request of the Secretary of State to the SEB that it should consult interested bodies on options for changing the examination diet arrangements so as to make more effective use of student time in S5 and S6. Following this request, the Board issued in April 1995 a paper entitled *"Higher Still: Optimising the use of learning and teaching time in S5/6 — consultation on examination timetabling in and after 1998."*

At that time, the examinations for Standard Grade and post-Standard Grade ran concurrently over a 5-week period. The plan was to keep these two sets apart so that the period over which either set was involved in examinations would be greatly reduced and a full 38 weeks would be available between the end of the Standard Grade examinations in S4 and the Higher Still examinations in S5. Two options were put forward. Under the first of these, Standard Grade examinations would run for three weeks from late April to mid-May, and Higher Still examinations for three weeks from mid-May to the end of the first week in June. Option 2 had the same overall pattern but would start three weeks later, Standard Grade using the last three weeks in May, and the Higher Still examinations the first three weeks in June. No clear consensus emerged from the responses to this consultation.

Besides inviting views on the matter raised by the Strategy Group, the Board used the same paper to return to the expensive and time-consuming issue of pupils sitting Standard Grade papers at two levels. Two proposals were offered: the first suggested the packaging together of papers which combined Foundation/General and General/Credit, the other the awarding of *"near-miss"* awards of Grade 3 on the Credit paper and Grade 5 on the General paper. The combined

papers suggestion did not attract support from a clear enough majority of respondents to justify going ahead with the proposal, and there was no consensus on the second proposal. The Board's Examination Committee minutes note, however, that interested parties might have been better disposed to the latter proposal if it had been made clear that failure to gain a Grade 2 or Grade 4 would not automatically lead to a Grade 3 or Grade 5. Despite these setbacks, the Board agreed to continue to seek ways of reducing the 6-week examination diet by overlapping Standard Grade and Higher Still examinations.

The Development Unit met its first substantial target when, in the last week of August 1995, Nisbet Gallacher, HM Senior Chief Inspector and Chairman of the Strategy Group, launched the publication of a set of detailed proposals. The main volume, a four-inch thick folder entitled "*Draft Frameworks*," contained "*The Framework of Units, Courses and National Certificates*" and the "*Draft Frameworks*" of twenty-eight Subject Specialist Groups. Every college and school offering secondary education received three copies of this folder, and permission was given to produce further photocopies, if required. The package was also available on CD-Rom and on the Assist network of the Scottish Council for Educational Technology. This ensured that the managers in every establishment had at least one copy of the total package and every subject department had the draft framework for its own subject. Other copies were made available to education authority staffs. A list of consultation questions was appended to the main document and to each of the subject framework papers.

"The Framework of Units, Courses and National Certificates" was aimed at managers in schools, colleges and education authorities and provided an overview of the proposed Higher Still system, together with general information about the framework of units and courses, the overall structure of group awards under the National Certificate, a general description of proposed assessment arrangements and the likely pattern of provision in schools and colleges. Schools should not assume that they would be able to offer any given subject at all levels. To show how the proposals could be structured in different formats to meet the various needs of students, the following definitions were presented:

A **unit** would be of 40, 80 (or occasionally 20) hours recommended study time and would be certificated on the basis of internal assessment. Each unit would have four or five outcomes, together with a set of associated performance criteria. To cut down on the assessment workload, there would be no grading of units.

A **component unit** could be used as a constituent of a course, or on a free-standing basis.

Additional units would not be used as constituents of a course, but they might form part of a National Certificate.

A **course** would comprise units totalling 120 hours of recommended study time plus another 40 hours which would be used for induction, extending the range of learning and teaching approaches, remediation, consolidation, integration and preparation for external assessment. The 40 hours did not have to be taken as a block of time but could be spread throughout the course, as appropriate. To gain a course award, a student would have to pass all of the internally-assessed component units as well as a course assessment which would be wholly or largely external. So that no pressure would result from the timing of assessments, it would not be necessary for students to complete all of the internal assessments before the external course assessment, but both sets would require to be completed before an award could be made. Course awards would

be graded.

Students would be free to choose either a free-standing programme of courses and units or a programme of specified combinations of courses and/or units leading to a National Certificate group award.

National Certificates were recommended as a means of guiding a student's curriculum choice and helping to ensure breadth and progression. All National Certificates would share certain design rules in respect of their size and level of demand, would have value and purpose at all levels, and would show in a straightforward way what students had achieved. To gain a group award, students would have to pass either two or three course assessments or an integrative assessment, all of which would be externally assessed, and there would also be wide sampling of the constituent units. Awards at Levels 1 and 2 would each involve 640 hours of study, while a total of 800 hours would be required for Level 3.

There was no detailed information about individual National Certificates. The task of producing specifications for each of the areas in which National Certificates were to be developed had been given to separate Steering Groups which had now been established. Initially, it was likely that there would be National Certificates at Levels 2 and 3 in each of the following:

Business	Design	Leisure and Recreation
Business and Information *	Engineering	Performing Arts
Care	Hospitality	Science
Communication and Media	Humanities *	Science and Technology *
Construction	Information Technology	Technology and Design *
Consumer Services *	Land and Environment	Travel and Tourism
Creative Arts *		

The six marked with an asterisk were more broadly-based than the others and would probably be of particular relevance for schools. Studies which had been carried out in schools suggested that these awards could be designed in such a way that schools could offer all six. Resources and existing expertise in the school might dictate whether group awards corresponding to current Skillstart, GSVQ Level 1 and GSVQ Level 2 could also be offered.

All of the subject specialist frameworks followed a common pattern. The introduction to each began with a rationale which justified the existence of the subject in the curriculum. This was followed by an outline of the specifications for the different levels and an explanation of how these were designed to meet the needs of learners in schools and colleges. There was also an indication of progression routes, which showed how students could gain access to each course, what they would have to do to secure a pass and the sort of thing they might move on to afterwards. Finally, there was a list of the sources from which the new proposals had been derived (whether SEB or SCOTVEC or both) and a note of existing materials which had been deliberately left out of the framework.

Presentation centres would submit estimates of student performance and, where a candidate failed to live up to expectations in the external examination in a given subject, the current SEB procedure of automatically upgrading the candidate's award would be adopted, provided the centre's estimates for that subject were consistent overall with the actual results. Appeals after the issue of results would also be allowed.

Several ways of saving valuable teaching time would be introduced. It was hoped that the computer facility of comparing internal and external assessments would lead to a significant reduction in the amount of moderation and verification that would be required; likewise, by basing estimates on the evidence gathered in making unit assessments, centres would have no need to set time-consuming "prelim exams"; and the overall length of the examination diet would be reduced by ensuring that no external examination lasted for more than 3 hours. Also, to encourage abler pupils to bypass course assessments at the end of the first year of a two-year course without fear of gaining nothing at the end of the course, the current appeals procedure would be extended to allow a student who failed an Advanced Higher assessment to be given a Higher award on the basis of his/her having passed the three component units of the course at the lower level.

Four other consultation documents were published in the autumn of 1995. One of these, *"Implementation Studies in Schools,"* summarised the findings of various case studies which were carried out in the first three months of 1995 in a representative sample of schools across Scotland to discover the effects that the Higher Still proposals were likely to have on such things as staffing, accommodation, resources and timetabling. At that stage in the Development Programme, very little in the way of detailed proposals had been published, but the consultants and the case study schools were made privy to the thinking contained in *"Principles for the Post-16 Curriculum"* and *"Core Skills"* which were to be published in April 1995. They were asked to assume that the proposals in those documents would be implemented, that staffing standards would remain unchanged, and that progression from the choices available to their pupils at Standard Grade should be treated as a priority.

The initial reaction of the sample schools had been that, in order to improve progression, they would need to provide additional or alternative courses in S5 and S6, especially at levels below Higher; but, in the end, both large and small schools agreed that, on the basis of the information which was then available, they could deliver a reasonable Higher Still curriculum with their existing staffing complements, resources and accommodation (with the possible exception of Guidance); nor would they require to make significant changes to their timetables, provided the changes in course design were as minimal as had been promised. A probable exception was the provision of courses at Foundation level. While they welcomed the introduction of these, most of the sample schools doubted whether there would be sufficient pupils to create viable classes. Again depending on course designs, they thought that teachers could cope with two adjacent levels within the same classroom, but not three. They were very concerned, however, about the timescale for implementation. The consultants were reminded that pupils entering S3 in the autumn of 1995 would be the first Higher Still cohort and they had already made course choices which would affect what they might wish to take in S5. Besides, with so little detailed information available and so many other demands on staff time, they could not see how their staffs could be adequately prepared for the changes, particularly in respect of the new assessment procedures and the amount of support which Guidance staff would have to give pupils in helping them make sensible choices. Both of these tasks would also demand more staff time, and teachers to cover for colleagues on courses would be required if the programmes of current pupils were not to be disrupted. The schools favoured in principle the introduction of core skills, but they hoped that these could be embedded in the courses rather than be set up as free-standing units. They were also concerned about how the skills would be assessed and certificated, especially certain worthwhile activities relating to personal development; and they feared that access to information technology might be a problem. Likewise, while welcoming the

introduction of National Certificate group awards, they said they would support these only if pupils were given credit for passing the component courses and units, instead of facing the prospect of gaining no award if they failed one of the elements. It was clear from the piloting of GSVQs that managing and monitoring group awards could be difficult because of the complexity of involving several subject departments, and not every school would have the resources to offer them. In fact, only a few of the sample schools indicated that they were likely to offer, initially at least, a significant range of vocationally-specific courses. They wished to be free to decide for themselves the range of subjects they would offer, and it seemed likely that they would stick to their existing pattern of course choice, using mainly 160-hour courses (or "clusters" of units) rather than free-standing 40-hour units. Studies had shown that it was possible for pupils to take five 160-hour courses whether the timetable was based on a 25, 30, 33, 40 or 45 period week. None of the schools thought that pupils would be willing to commit themselves in advance to a two-year Advanced Higher commencing in S5, although that attitude might change in time. Finally, the schools were highly critical of the confusion caused by the use of the terms "Credit," "General," "Foundation" and "National Certificate" in the Higher Still Programme. This issue was dealt with in another document, entitled "*Nomenclature*," also issued in August 1995.

As stated in Chapter 5, the Department had thought that the use of familiar terms such as "Credit", "General," etc. in *Higher Still* would make it easier for pupils, teachers, parents and employers to understand the relationship between the various levels of the Higher Still arrangements and also indicate how students were likely to progress from Standard Grade to Higher Still courses and units. There had, however, been a tendency to associate (almost identify) the terms with existing usages. For example, "*Higher Still*" had suggested that some students might receive an award equivalent to a Higher National Certificate by grouping together certain passes at the proposed Advanced Higher level. However, this new type of HNC would have been of a different sort from the HNC which employers had known and held in high regard for many years. It had therefore been decided that the term Higher National Certificate should not be used in the Higher Still arrangements. Instead, Advanced Highers would be recognised, along with Highers, for the National Certificate Level 3 group award, although there was the possibility that Advanced Highers might qualify for credit transfers against cognate components of HNCs.

Likewise, it had become clear that the use of the same nomenclature for Standard Grade and Higher Still was depriving students of the feeling that they were, in fact, making progress. This was particularly true at the Foundation level of Higher Still which included many units which were below the level of Standard Grade Foundation Level. The terms "*Access*" and "*Entry*" were floated but more or less rejected in the document, the former because the term was already used with reference to programmes in schools and colleges which offered access to higher education, the latter because it was not particularly convincing or attractive. Overall, the Strategy Group felt that the term "*Intermediate*" offered the best way forward because it suggested a stepping stone towards the three Highers (or the equivalent SVQ Level 3), which the Advisory Scottish Council for Education and Training Targets (ASCETT) had postulated as the goal to be achieved by 70% of young people by the year 2000. If this term was accepted, Foundation, General and Credit might be renamed Lower Intermediate, Intermediate and Advanced Intermediate.

"*Higher Still*" had limited the use of the term "*National Certificate*" to the group awards called Scottish Vocational Certificates (SVCs) and General Scottish Vocational Certificates (GSVQs), but these terms had the double disadvantage of still being commonly associated purely with vocational education and the individual SCOTVEC modules on which they were originally

based. A possible alternative term for the group award was "*Scottish Certificate*", although some employers, particularly those south of the border, might not hold it in as high regard as a "*National Certificate*."

Finally, the document offered four options: keeping the original "*Higher Still*" nomenclature for both Courses/Units and Group Awards; changing both, so that the terms "Lower Intermediate" "Intermediate" and "Advanced Intermediate" would be used in the former, and the terms Scottish Higher Certificate, Scottish Advanced Intermediate Certificate, Scottish Intermediate Certificate and Scottish Lower Intermediate Certificate would become the four levels of the latter; and changing the nomenclature of the one or the other, but not both.

In reading Scottish Office consultation documents, one often cannot avoid thinking that the civil servants have thought the matter through from all angles and only a minor miracle will move them from the decisions they have already reached on the major issues. Not so with the "*Nomenclature*" document. The authors seemed to be surprised that the logic of their original decision had not been accepted and were genuinely at a loss what to do.

Yet another consultation document issued in August 1995 was "*Guidance Arrangements*" which laid out a job description for guidance staff under the Higher Still Programme and asked for views on how staff could best be prepared for their tasks. The formal Guidance structure in secondary schools had been in existence for almost quarter of a century and already provided a valuable contribution to the personal development of individual pupils. The Higher Still concept of "*student entitlement*," however, would place many more demands on Guidance staff. In current circumstances, most of Guidance staff time would normally be spent on helping pupils with their personal and social problems, and their involvement in curricular matters would mostly be concentrated on specific periods of the year (e.g. transfer from primary to secondary, helping S2 pupils choose the subjects to be taken in S3-S4 Standard Grade courses, and deciding on Highers courses at the end of S4), while the curricular progress of pupils at other times would largely be supervised by subject teachers.

Under *Higher Still*, the personal counselling aspect would be no less demanding, but the curricular involvement would change out of all recognition. By and large, school Guidance staff had had to be knowledgeable mainly about SEB courses and required only a limited knowledge of SCOTVEC modules, while Guidance Tutors in colleges concentrated mainly on SCOTVEC provision. Now both sets of Guidance staff would have to be equally knowledgeable about the unified academic/vocational structure so that *Higher Still* lived up to its aim of providing opportunity for all. Not only that; because all courses would be modularised, students would require ongoing monitoring of their progress after every unit if they were to receive adequate guidance for the next stage of their studies. Guidance staff would have to keep accurate records of pupil achievements, negotiate with subject departments to secure the best possible course of study to fit the needs, ability and aspirations of each individual student, and also ensure that courses had sufficient balance and breadth. It would also fall to the Guidance staff to monitor core skill achievements. They would not only have to know about careers requirements and about the currency which the new qualifications would have for entry to training schemes, employment and further/higher education, but also see to it that the students themselves knew what the courses involved and where they were leading. Guidance staff clearly could not carry all the necessary up-to-date information in their heads: a national database would have to be established, and staff would not only have to familiarise themselves with this information technology but also train students to use it effectively. Much more time would have to be

devoted to helping individual students take upon themselves as much responsibility as possible for their own learning and decision-making through self-evaluation, the building up of their own CV profile through a regular review of their progress, and the setting of realistic targets.

To back up these aims, the Scottish Minister responsible for education announced a £750,000 package, spread over three years, to improve careers guidance in schools and to help teachers keep abreast of Higher Still developments.

There was also another consultation document entitled "*Provision for Students with Special Educational Needs*", but unfortunately I have not been able to locate a copy.

No deadline for responses was stated in the various documents, although it had previously been intimated that the consultation period would close at the end of October 1995. However, because of the Secretary of State's decision to postpone the introduction of Higher Still by a year, it was possible to extend this deadline to 12 December to accommodate what was described as the most comprehensive consultation exercise ever undertaken in connection with a curriculum and assessment initiative in Scotland. Between September and December 1995, over 200 seminars were organised across the country to brief 8,500 staff who were preparing to respond to the various documents. The seminars were organised and supported by education authorities and the Scottish Further Education Unit, as well as by teachers organisations. The presentations were made by HMIs and Higher Still Development Unit staff. To encourage the widest possible response, those who could not attend the seminars were asked to submit their views in writing to the Unit.