

THE HOWIE COMMITTEE ON POST-COMPULSORY SCHOOLING

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Introduction

There have been several moves since 1945 to reform the structure of the Higher grade examination, all concerned primarily with the suitability of the Higher as a preparation for higher education, and all abortive. By the time this article is published, proposals for a further attempt will have been submitted to the Secretary of State for Scotland by a committee chaired by John Howie, Regius Professor of Mathematics at the University of St Andrews. The article examines the origin and substance of the arguments for reform, the support they have received, and their implications for wider features of Scottish education and governance. Several of these features are themselves the subject of policy change at United Kingdom level, specifically policies for the funding and government of higher education and for the education and training of 16-19 year olds.⁽¹⁾ Thus Howie and its outcomes also provide an instance of the ways in which a distinctively Scottish policy and its related practices and assumptions are negotiated in the context of Scotland's relationship with the United Kingdom.

Education has long been central to this relationship, and the Higher central to education. As a one-year qualification, the Higher has symbolised Scottish distinctiveness and, as a five-subject course, it has symbolised breadth. But Howie is the first sustained public scrutiny of the Higher since its inception over a century ago. Though there have been changes in content and form, principally in the move to a group certificate in 1902 and back to a subject-based award in 1951, the essential structure of the Higher has remained the same. Its philosophy and purposes have been taken largely for granted, and gaps between purposes and practice have passed unremarked. In recent decades, for example, the majority of Highers pupils have not fulfilled the traditional prescription of five Highers courses taken in fifth year.⁽²⁾

On the other hand, there has evolved within the one-year and five-subject structure a rich array of alternative options that goes far beyond the original conception of the Higher. Paradoxically, this has meant that the Higher in the past thirty years has become even more central to Scottish educational provision. Until the 1960s, Highers courses were intended primarily as a preparation for university, and they directly affected only a small minority of the young, albeit with backwash effects on the schooling of the majority. Today, however, over half of young Scots continues voluntarily in education

after 16 years and a quarter enters higher education. By the end of the century these proportions are projected to rise respectively to two thirds and four-out-of-ten.⁽³⁾ The Higher is still the principal qualification in the post-compulsory stage: four out of ten young Scots now attempt Highers. With this lengthening of school life, and with the bedding down of comprehensive schooling in the 12-16 stage, more is at issue in the 16-18 stage, both for pupils individually and as matters of policy. Indeed, Howie itself has said that it is looking for solutions that "comprehend the whole pupil population".⁽⁴⁾

If the centrality of the Higher has increased, so, too, have the pressures for change. But the scope for reform that is sensitive to Scottish practices and values is also widening, as the policy priority of education and training rises, as Europe, too, becomes a reference point alongside England and Wales, and as the rigidities of the GCE A level system become apparent to virtually all informed opinion other than Ministers themselves.

Origins and Remit

The rationale for a committee may be understood in the context of a number of issues: a long-frustrated wish within the SED to improve the Higher as a preparation for higher education; changes in the late 1980s in the projected demography and funding of higher education which gave a new edge to this wish; the longer term expansion of post-compulsory schooling which brought to the Higher a clientele for which it was not originally conceived; the Standard grade reform at 14-16 years; and continued change in policies for the vocational education and training of the young.

The interest of the SED in the reform of the Higher can be traced back at least to the 1940s when the Scottish Advisory Council on Education had argued for a two-year post-16 course, and SED officials had mooted the introduction of a post-Higher Scholarship (S) grade. The Department wanted to improve the chances of Scottish candidates in open scholarship examinations at Oxford and Cambridge. In effect these examinations provided the ultimate standard by which senior officials of the Department judged the quality of Scottish schooling. The S grade proposal made little progress. But, in the late 1950s, the Department tried again asking a university principal, also from the University of St Andrews, to chair a committee on the introduction of a post-Higher A level. One obstacle was that any reform that displaced the one-year Higher as the highest level of school qualification threatened the viability of schools that lacked large sixth years. These included rural schools, comprehensive schools and schools in working-class areas. It is not surprising, therefore, that the return in 1964 for a Labour government committed to comprehensive reorganisation scotched what by then had become a developed proposal for a post-Higher A grade examination that would have given exemption from first-year university classes. What eventually emerged in 1968 was the Certificate of Sixth Year Studies (CSYS). This was a post-Higher certificate but, in order to protect the one-year Higher

and schools that could not mount viable sixth-year courses, the government urged that the CSYS should not be used to select for entry to higher education or the professions. With high student demand for scarce places, however, this exhortation was never fully respected.⁽⁵⁾

In the late 1970s the SED began a further review of post-compulsory schooling, partly to deal with the business that was left unfinished with the compromise of the CSYS, but also to address new problems that were emerging in the fifth year. Increasing numbers of pupils who were regarded as "less academic" were now entering fifth year, some because they were too young to leave school in the summer of fourth year, some because of declining labour-market opportunities for fourth-year school leavers, and some because they had a prospect of gaining one or two Highers, if not in fifth year, then by the end of their sixth year.⁽⁶⁾

However, that review, too, was overtaken by events. In 1981 the Manpower Services Commission and the Department of Employment launched A New Training Initiative. The initiative could have resulted in a takeover by non-educationists from south of the Border of a substantial part of Scottish provision for 16-18 year olds. The Scottish reply was the Action Plan, published early in 1983, which led to the modularisation of all non-advanced further education through the National Certificate awarded by the Scottish Vocational Education Council (Scotvec).⁽⁷⁾

The Plan preserved the integrity of Scottish Office control of provision for 16-18 year olds, but at the cost of postponing any reform of post-compulsory school certification. One reason for this postponement was the organisational effort that the Action Plan required. Another was that an effective and comprehensive reform would have required the support of the universities, and it would have been difficult to secure this in the short time available if the reform had entailed major changes in the Higher. Though hurt by the 1981 cuts in their finance, it had not yet struck the universities that their accustomed financial security might not last, and, with buoyant demand for their courses, they were cautious in recognising new qualifications for the purposes of university entry. Without recognition a new qualification would struggle for status and for pupils.

The 1980s, however, saw some erosion in the capacity of the universities to resist such changes. The cuts of 1981 were sustained through the mid-1980s, and institutions of higher education (HEIs) in the public sector increased their share of new entrants. Allied to expectations of a continuing fall in the absolute numbers of school leavers qualifying for higher education, this weakened universities' confidence in the buoyancy of their future numbers. In the late 1980s government policy for the expansion of places in higher education became more positive. But increased student numbers remained a concern for the universities because it emerged that expansion would be accompanied by reduced staff:student ratios, and because an increasing

proportion of university income was to be derived from student fees. Individual universities became more willing to accommodate non-traditional routes to admission.

A decline in university influence over the standing of pre-tertiary qualifications was not the only effect of the changing demographic and financial prospects of the 1980s. Questions also were raised about the future of the four-year honours degree. The extra year is held to be justified on three main grounds. First, some would argue that the content and level of the four-year degree is higher. Second, it is claimed that the first two years of the degree course are more general than the first two years of the three-year honours degree in England. Third, the Higher is only a one-year course.

It was the third argument, in particular, that was questioned. Another reason why the SED did not press for a two-year Higher in the early 1980s was that a substantial minority of direct school-leaver entrants to higher education entered from fifth year, especially higher-education entrants from schools in the west of Scotland. During the 1980s, however, the supply of places in colleges and universities did not keep pace with the rising supply of qualified school leavers. As a result, the universities in particular raised their going entry rates. The effect was that pupils whose fifth-year Highers would have been good enough to secure them entry to higher education from fifth year in the 1970s were obliged in the 1980s to return for a sixth year to upgrade their qualifications. The proportion of direct school-leaver entrants to higher education from fifth year fell from two-in-five of all direct school-leaver entry in 1980 to one-in-five in 1988.⁽⁸⁾

The question therefore arose: if a majority of Scottish entrants to higher education have done two post-compulsory years at school, what is the case for the four-year honours degree? Here, some proposed, was an opportunity to finance a further expansion of higher education by reforming the Higher so as to transfer part of the work of higher education to the schools. Costs were lower there, and places empty, because of demographic decline. What seemed to give this argument greater weight was the performance in Scottish universities of students with GCE A level qualifications, most of whom came from England. For a variety of reasons, such students have always tended to do better than students holding SCE qualifications.⁽⁹⁾ If, and it was a big if, SCE and GCE qualified entrants were alike in other respects, then this difference in higher-education performance might indicate that the Higher was defective as a preparation for higher education. What possibly made this argument more palatable within Scotland was that the numbers of students coming north of the Border had increased in the 1980s, again as a result of the cuts in university finance and places operating across the UK. Thus there was also a nationalist argument for a reform that would equip Scots better to compete in a tighter market, in Scotland and elsewhere.

Howie was given a narrow remit, but appears to have adopted a broad

agenda, and therein lies both the puzzle and the promise. The remit is narrow because it is restricted to schooling, and is as follows:

to review the aims and purposes of courses and of assessment and certification in the fifth and sixth years of secondary school education in Scotland; to consider what structure of courses and what forms of assessment best satisfy these aims and purposes taking account of the needs of pupils of varying ability and background, the demands of employment and the requirements of and developments in higher and further education; and to recommend necessary changes.⁽¹⁰⁾

The remit does not allow the committee to make recommendations for non-school provision for 16-18 year olds, but it can accommodate the long-standing SED concern with the Higher as a preparation for higher education. Indeed, for months before the committee was formally constituted, the task it was to address was widely discussed by the Minister and others in the policy world, not in terms of the reform of provision for 16-18 year olds, but in terms of the two-year Higher. This allowed cynics to argue that the driving concern was not so much the reform of the one-year Higher as the reduction of the four-year honours degree to three years.⁽¹¹⁾

Howie himself is reported as rejecting this interpretation and appears to have cast the committee's work in a broader framework.⁽¹²⁾ One indication of this is the committee's decision to invite responses to a set of fourteen 'key' questions concerning provision for a full pupil population. The questions were circulated immediately after the committee's first meeting and before it was likely to have formed a view of the task it confronted. This lends weight to the view that the questions reflect the School Inspectorate's plans for the next stage of reform under the Action Plan. This is the promise, the promise of a comprehensive review of provision for the 16-18 stage with increasing latitude for solutions that reflect Scottish values and practices. The puzzle is that such an agenda was not reflected in a remit to Howie that encompassed the whole of the 16-18 stage, and not simply secondary schooling. However, there are functional and territorial tensions here. A broader remit would have given other government departments a significant interest in the committee's work. As it is, the monopoly interest lies with the SOED. But it is an open question whether the problem and its solutions are solely educational, if only because the labour market is such an influence on young persons' decisions after 16 years.

Educational Arguments

I come now to the educational arguments for and against the present system of post-compulsory school certification. The arguments against the system divide broadly into those concerning the traditional functions of the Higher as a preparation for higher education, and those that question the

suitability of such a Higher for the increasing numbers of "less academic" pupils now remaining at school after 16 years. There is also a second, and partly overlapping, debate over the place of vocational education in the curriculum for 16 to 18 year olds.

In respect of the traditional functions of the Higher, a first criticism is that the one-year Higher course is, in effect, a "two-term rush" from Standard grade in fourth year. This, it is claimed, obliges schools to teach topics selectively, superficially, and didactically, leaving little or no time for pupils to work independently, or to pace and consolidate their own learning. Further and consequential disadvantages are that pupils may fail Highers courses at the end of fifth year and leave school; or that they may return to school for what is claimed to be the educationally unsatisfactory experience of repeating fifth-year courses in which they have achieved a low grade; or that they may succeed, but only on the basis of a patchy knowledge that has chanced to meet examiners' requirements, and of a rote or mechanical approach that would serve them poorly in subsequent study.

This criticism can then be extended to the consequences for curriculum and for the CSYS.

The curricular argument is that the standard at which the Higher is examined is too high given the range of pupils that now prepares for it and the structural impediments to an adequate preparation. Because the five-subject Highers course is too difficult for the majority of pupils, the argument runs, the framework for the curriculum is distorted both in fifth and sixth years. In the past twenty years, most fifth-year pupils have taken five-subject courses, but the courses have consisted of combinations of Highers and O grade subjects up to five, and the combinations may not always have been internally coherent. Moreover, the O grade cannot continue to play a "sticking plaster" role that merely patches up the gaps between Highers courses. The O grade is being replaced by the Standard grade, a two-year course with substantial amounts of internal assessment that would not sit comfortably in a one-year location in fifth year. Instead, schools have turned increasingly to National Certificate modules to complete pupils' timetables in courses comprising only one, two or three fifth-year Highers, and pupils taking four or five Highers in fifth year may also take one or two modules.

But, it is argued, National Certificate modules are not based on the same educational principles as the O grade, Standard grade or Higher. Modules are forty-hour courses. They are designed to produce competences that are defined in terms of performance criteria, and they are assessed on a criterion-referenced basis: that is, the assessment is not concerned to distinguish the performance and potential of one individual from another, but only to testify that a certain competence has been shown. Awards are not graded; assessment is internal; and there is no formal limit to the number of attempts a pupil or student may make to fulfil the performance criteria. By contrast, Highers

courses are based on knowledge and potential rather than demonstrated competences, are largely externally assessed, and are graded so as to distinguish fourteen levels of performance. Universities have traditionally selected among their Scottish applicants on the basis of Highers attainment and have been reluctant to give similar qualifying status to Scotvec modular courses. But public-sector HEIs in Scotland have recognised Scotvec modules for entry purposes. This divergence has threatened to complicate further an already complicated situation in fifth year where a new and distinctive curricular approach now sits alongside the traditional approach.

The difficulty of the Higher, it is argued, also poses a problem in sixth year. In the past two decades, the proportion of post-compulsory pupils remaining to sixth year has fluctuated around half. For those who enter sixth year, there are greater possibilities overall of curricular coherence. This is because a majority of sixth-year pupils attempts five Highers or more during the course of post-compulsory schooling, and three quarters of sixth-year pupils attempt at least one Higher in sixth year that they did not take in fifth year. However, almost half of sixth-year pupils repeat in sixth year at least one Higher subject attempted in fifth year. Both in fifth and sixth years, therefore, considerations of curricular coherence compete with the exigencies of obtaining qualifications in courses that are too difficult to complete successfully in one year if taken in numbers sufficient to provide for breadth and variety.

The CSYS too has been affected by the structure of Highers courses and by its own uncertain status as a qualification. Courses for the CSYS were intended to consolidate success in fifth-year Highers by giving pupils greater responsibility for their own learning, a broader experience of methods of study and a deeper knowledge of particular subject areas. But schools complain that many pupils stop working in the second term of their sixth year if they receive unconditional offers of places in higher education based on fifth-year Highers results. In practice the universities in particular have attached increasing weight to performance in CSYS courses when making offers. Nevertheless, the Higher has remained the principal qualification for entry to higher education. Even though Highers course can now be taken concurrently in the sixth year with a CSYS course in the same subject, it tends to be sixth-year pupils who have done well in their fifth-year Highers who take the CSYS. Thus any benefits of the CSYS philosophy have been confined to a relatively small proportion of pupils – in the late 1980s to around one-in-eight of the age group, or around one-in-four of the population that attempted Highers.⁽¹³⁾

A two-year Higher, it is argued, would solve the problem of the two-term rush, would provide for curricular coherence, and would allow the best practice of the CSYS to be made available to all in post-compulsory schooling. Pupils could make a more measured progress towards a standard of attainment at least as high as that of the present Higher. Content and methods would be less subject to the vagaries of examination pressure. Pupil motivation would be

sustained over the full two years of the course, and standards of attainment would rise.

These benefits, however, would be more likely to accrue to the more able pupils within the post-compulsory school population, as Professor Howie is reported as recognising:

(T)here's a large slab who are most certainly not higher education bound and for whom Highers really are not appropriate. The saddest statistics are the pupils who sat two Highers and failed and were trying again. They were a pretty dispirited bunch.⁽¹⁴⁾

It seems unlikely that this problem could be solved to Professor Howie's satisfaction solely by the improvements in teaching that a two-year course might make possible.

In addition to an extension of the Highers course, therefore, some further change or changes would be required. There are various possibilities. Highers courses and examinations could be made easier. No-one in Scotland has advocated such a reduction in difficulty, though it may, paradoxically, be necessary if a two-year course is not to erode qualification rates among school leavers. This is because the sixth year currently allows pupils to remedy fifth-year failure in the terminal school examination during the course of their schooling (see also below in this section). Alternatively, as the Director of the Scottish Examination Board has argued, a two-year Higher might be provided at more than one level of difficulty, along the lines of the Standard grade (credit/general/foundation) or of the Higher when it was a group award (Higher/Lower).⁽¹⁵⁾ A more radical solution would be to restrict entry to Highers courses in some way and to create a separate, and academically less demanding, curricular track for non-Highers pupils in post-compulsory schooling. Such a track would almost certainly have a large vocational component. The government currently plans to complement the English GCE A level in this way, but a two-track solution has not so far found favour in Scotland.⁽¹⁶⁾

I turn now to arguments against a two-year Higher. A first consideration is that it would remove the opportunity currently available in fifth year to achieve qualifications in the principal terminal school examination. The case for retaining this option is not solely educational. It is also about rights. Why should pupils who are capable of qualifying in fifth year for entry to higher education, or to a job requiring high qualifications, be obliged against their wishes to remain at school for a further year, especially if their wishes are considered and well informed?

The educational argument for the retention of the fifth-year option is made, broadly, on two overlapping grounds: first, that it is a key element in a

highly individualised system of provision; and, second, that it promotes a high rate of participation in post-compulsory education.

The individualisation argument concedes, as logically it must, that the most traditional conception of the Highers course – a five-subject Highers course taken mainly or entirely in fifth year – is too demanding for a majority of Highers pupils. But it is appropriate for some. Furthermore, the one-plus-one year structure of the Higher, it is claimed, allows the contents, pacing and difficulty of Highers courses to be finely adjusted to the range of interests and abilities in an expanding post-compulsory school population. In this respect it is in line with developments more generally in post-compulsory provision where the relationship between age and stage is already weaker than in compulsory schooling, and is likely to become weaker still.

An indication of numbers would help to illustrate the individualisation argument, first of all in relation to the traditional role of the Higher. A little over half of the age group currently continues voluntarily with its schooling. One-in-ten of the age group sits five or more Highers in fifth year and just under a quarter sits four or more. Around one-in-eight passes four or more Highers in fifth year and just under one-in-five passes three or more. Three Highers awards are widely regarded as a minimum requirement for entry to higher education from school (though some school leavers qualify and enter on the basis only of two Highers). Thus, if there is a “two-term dash” (and some would argue that it is open to the better organised school to start pupils on Highers courses well before the summer of their fourth year), it is not obviously to the disadvantage of the most able one-fifth of the school population. Moreover, those pupils who choose to enter higher education from fifth year, a steady three percent of the age group in the 1980s,⁽¹⁷⁾ fare no worse in higher education than other Scottish-educated entrants.

Nor, it is argued, does the one-year framework self-evidently restrict the curriculum of the most able one-fifth of pupils. This is illustrated by the Highers that were being taken in the spring of fifth year in 1988 by pupils who were taking four or more Highers courses in that year. Virtually all took English, three quarters took mathematics, three quarters took a science subject, six-out-of-ten took at least one subject in the area of social and environmental studies, and three out of ten took at least one language.⁽¹⁸⁾ The national guidelines for the curriculum of fifth and sixth years do not require the comprehensive coverage of curriculum areas that is specified in the guidelines up to fourth year.⁽¹⁹⁾ But figures such as these, it is argued, do not suggest a narrow or inflexible curriculum, or a curriculum that could not respond to a case for increased coverage in particular areas such as languages or technological studies.

It is not enough for the individualisation argument to assert in this way that the criticisms of the one-year Higher have little force in relation to the highest attaining quintile (one fifth) of the age group. It must show in addition

that the same structure is appropriate to the next quintile of the age group that also takes Highers at present, and appropriate also for the envisaged expansion of the post-compulsory school population that would bring a further, third, quintile into post-compulsory schooling by the year 2000, making about 60 percent of the age group altogether. Here the arguments about individualisation and participation are closely related.

The heart of the argument is that the individualisation that is possible within the one-plus-one year structure has helped to promote high levels of participation, and will continue to do so. The argument runs that, paradoxically, the very feature for which Professor Howie criticises the Higher – that it is not suitable for less able pupils – has been created by the success of the Higher in encouraging such pupils to stay on at school.

Again, numbers can help here. Twenty-five years ago, in 1965, 18 percent of school leavers passed one or more Higher.⁽²⁰⁾ The “sad statistics” of that era – the pupils who in Professor Howie’s words had “sat two Highers and failed and were trying again”, were therefore located at or around the eighteenth percentile point in the distribution of attainment. But pupils at the eighteenth percentile point today attain three or more Highers passes in their fifth year and thereby qualify for entry to higher education. These can hardly be called sad statistics. The participation argument asserts that it was the individualised character of the one-year Higher that made possible the rise in participation and the rise in attainment since 1965 that has so boosted the performance of pupils at or around the eighteenth percentile (it does not, and does not need to, assert that the one-year Higher was the only reason for the rise). Had a two-year Higher been introduced 25 years ago, it is claimed, participation rates would have stagnated in much the same way as they stagnated in England and Wales under the GCE A level system. Projecting the argument forwards, today’s “sad statistics”, the pupils who study but pass no Highers in fifth year, are currently at or around the thirty-third percentile of attainment. On current SOED projections, pupils at the thirty-third percentile of attainment in the year 2000 will be passing three or more Highers by the time they leave school. The point is not that these projections will necessarily be fulfilled but, rather, that, in a system that is steadily expanding its rates of participation, there will always be a “ragged edge” of pupils at the borderlines of success. “Less able” pupils are a shifting target, as they have been throughout twentieth century debates on school examination reform. Reforms that assume the target is fixed, the argument runs, are either destined to be overtaken by events (as the SCE O grade quickly was in the 1960s), or else to become self-fulfilling prophecies that suppress the expansion of participation.

In what ways does the one-plus-one structure of the Higher promote participation?⁽²¹⁾ It does this, first, it is claimed, by offering final certification after only one post-compulsory year. A two-year course would impose on pupils and their families greater costs of maintenance and of income foregone. Second, the risk involved in any pupil’s judgements of the costs and benefits of

staying on is reduced by the graduated and incremental nature of the certification available within a one-plus-one structure. Pupils can adjust the level of difficulty of their overall course and can adjust their future plans in the light of concrete evidence on progress. In this respect, it is a strength and not a weakness of the Highers course that pupils are allowed to vary the number of Highers they start in fifth year and also to drop or postpone fifth-year Highers presentations in the light of their performance in the school's fifth-year internal preliminary examinations. Then, third, the public examination at the end of fifth year is a valuable "reality test". As a public examination, it must be prepared for in a way that simulations or "mocks" can never match. After it pupils know how they have fared in a public examination, what goals are now appropriate in the light of this relatively concrete evidence, and what further they must do to attain such goals: that is, whether or not to return to school and what levels and types of course to take. In a two-year system, analogous decisions can be taken only after schooling has finished (unless, that is, the pupil returns for a third year in the sixth form). But in a one-plus-one system, pupils have a realistic chance of improving their performance in the terminal school examination during their final, sixth year of school. This is what the majority of sixth-year pupils do. But the second-chance option in the sixth year does not displace other options, either for pupils who wish to repeat one or more of their fifth-year Highers or for those who take sixth-year courses mainly to extend or deepen their studies.

Overall, therefore, the argument for the current system is that it is one which rewards success rather than punishes failure. By comparison with the GCE A level system, for example, there is a greater number of attainable levels of success towards which pupils can progress incrementally and in the light of "real" feedback on their attainments and potential. It offers a second chance within the period of compulsory schooling both to improve qualifications and to change curricular tracks. Hence it encourages pupils to enter post-compulsory schooling, even though they may be uncertain of their capabilities and plans, and even though their attainment at sixteen years does not fully guarantee success in the two following years. In this sense, Professor Howie's "sad statistics", when tracked over time, are an indicator of the success of the system overall.

In addition to the boost that it gives to participation, three further features are claimed for the one-year system. First, the level, content and type of courses it offers are highly differentiated, but the system is not streamed or tracked. Second, the divide between academic and vocational courses is less acute, in two respects: there is scope to combine academic and vocational subjects within the same framework; and the major transition to non-advanced further education is at the end of fifth year, and for pupils among whom a majority have had some experience of Highers work. A corollary of these features is, third, that there is a much longer "tail" of academic attainment in Scotland than there is under a two-year system such as the GCE A level. For the purposes of entry to higher education, the three Highers

minimum in Scotland is commonly equated with a two A level minimum in England and Wales. Around 14 percent of the age group currently leaves school with only one or two Highers passes, compared with only 3 percent of 18 year olds in school or further education in England and Wales who achieve only one GCE A level. Many such leavers with Highers will enter higher education indirectly *via* further education by the age of 21. The longer tail also means that there is a strong qualifications base for continuing education and training among school-leaver entrants to the labour market: in the late 1980s, around one-in-five of them had Highers qualifications.

The argument for the one-year system is not that changes may not be required but, rather, that there are important features that should be preserved in any reform. The first feature is choice, partly as a good in its own right, and partly because the type of all-or-nothing choice that a two-year system would impose prematurely at 16 years would damage participation rates. Without choice, pupil motivation would suffer, with adverse consequences for subsequent performance. The argument is not that it is undesirable to take courses over two years – this is perfectly possible within a one-plus-one system – but that the one-year course option should be maintained. The second requirement of any change, it is argued, is that it should continue to provide, after only one post-compulsory year, credible certification that is functionally equivalent to that available after two. The third requirement is that choice must build on the incipiently "modular" nature of post-compulsory provision that has already developed within the Highers framework. It is through modularity that pupils are offered a range of levels, contents and sequences of courses which allows them to build incrementally towards success, measuring their plans and progress against the reality of their public attainments, but not at the cost of risking irreversible and uncompensated failure. Hence a fourth requirement is for the preservation of a second-chance option within the mainstream of formal schooling. This implies, fifth, that the system of education and training for 16-18 year olds be mainly education led.

Discussion

Several aspects of the committee and its work merit comment.

Since 1945, the reform of the public-examination system in Scotland has usually proceeded by means of some sort of advisory committee (an exception is the introduction of National Certificate modules under the Action Plan – see above.) Nevertheless, the decision to proceed by committee contrasts with the confrontational style of much of the Government's recent educational programme in Scotland, notably for school boards, self-governing schools and national testing. It seems that there was no Ministerial sponsor for examination reform, and that spare Ministerial energies were largely absorbed by their legislative programme. A further factor was that Highers were thought, probably rightly, to command widespread, if silent, support, and

there were few letters in MPs' postbags on the subject. In any event, the decision was that any revision of the Higher should be played long and low, with a relatively leisurely timetable. Also, it may be more than an accident of timing that the final decision to proceed was made when Ian Lang, and not Michael Forsyth, was junior Minister with responsibility for education.

In administrative terms, the nearest precedent to Howie is the Dunning committee which recommended in 1977 the introduction of what was to become the Standard grade. The Munn committee, which reported in the same year on the curriculum for the third and fourth years of secondary school, was a committee of the national curriculum advisory body now called the Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum (SCCC). The introduction of the SCE O grade in 1962 had been prepared by a committee of the SED, but this had been chaired by the then Senior Chief Inspector. Howie, like Dunning, is likewise a committee of the Department in that it answers directly to the Secretary of State, who may or may not choose to publish its advice. Both Howie and Dunning, however, were chaired by "outsiders".⁽²²⁾

As a member of the Dunning committee, Professor Howie had seen at first hand how such a committee was expected to work, and he had already shown himself able to help the Department gain wider acceptance for one of its reforms.⁽²³⁾ But, with the exception of its chairman and one or two of its 17 other members, the appointees to the Howie committee were little known in the Scottish educational world at the time of their appointment, and several were virtually unknown. The membership comprised: four from public-sector HEIs; three (including the chairman) from the universities; five school teachers; two from the education-authority directorate; two from professional bodies; and one each from the Scottish Consumer Council, the Scottish Community Education Council and the diplomatic service. There was no private-sector employer and no member from industry. Whilst members were appointed as individuals and not as representatives of bodies, it is notable that the two education officials came from the two largest education authorities and that one of the teacher appointees was a prominent figure in the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS). This would help to give the committee's eventual recommendations greater credibility. It also gave the membership a conciliatory complexion that contrasts with appointments made by Mr Lang's predecessor who had refused, for example, to accept EIS nominees to the SCCC. Also attending the committee's meetings were an SOED Assistant Secretary and a Deputy Senior Chief Inspector of Schools.

It has not been possible to examine all of the written evidence submitted to Howie, but analysis of submissions from some 25 bodies suggests,⁽²⁴⁾ and Professor Howie is himself reported as confirming,⁽²⁵⁾ that there is a widespread consensus on the key issues. In particular, there is virtually unanimous support for a system that retains a fifth-year exit point, and a substantial majority wants the certification available at the end of sixth year also to be available at the end of fifth year. Many submissions stress the

importance of the one-plus-one structure to the higher levels of participation that Scotland enjoys. The other major point of agreement amongst submissions is that a reformed system should endeavour in some way to combine vocational and academic elements within a single system of assessment, and not in the type of two-track solution that government policy envisaged for England and Wales. Many suggest that this could best be achieved through modularisation of the remaining (school) parts of non-advanced post-compulsory education, though such modules would not necessarily follow Scotvec National Certificate modules in their time allocations or in their use of criterion-referenced internal assessment.

The committee's response to this evidence will be known only when its report is published. By contrast with the chairman of earlier national committees, however, Professor Howie has been unusually open about the development of his committee's thinking. This has been indicated in press interviews, in public addresses, and in private meetings with influential groups that have gone unreported in the press. The more open style may reflect the man, or it may reflect a decision to begin early on the work of coaxing the national consensus away from the one-year Higher.⁽²⁶⁾ However, the widespread support for a credible fifth-year exit point suggests that this will not be easy. The issue of participation rates was entirely overlooked in the list of 14 questions originally circulated by the committee and may only subsequently have dawned on its originators. What is more, moves towards fee-funding for HEIs mean that all institutions now have a direct financial interest in ensuring that nothing be done to damage rising rates of participation.

The committee, therefore, has found itself in something of an impasse: how can it recommend a two-year solution on any grounds, however good in themselves, if it appears to be at the cost of higher participation? Perhaps this lies behind Professor Howie's repeated warnings that "what Scotland needs are more radical solutions than Scotland wants".⁽²⁷⁾ It may also explain why the committee in the early summer of 1991 was contemplating a yet more radical proposal than a two-year Higher. A report in *Scotland on Sunday* (authenticated independently by two well placed sources) said that the committee was considering, not a one- or a two-, but a three-year course leading to the terminal school qualification. This would involve a "Scottish Certificate" taken in fifth year and a "Scottish Baccalaureate" taken at the end of sixth year. But it would also mean radical changes in the Standard grade as well, moving it back into third year, at least for a majority of pupils.⁽²⁸⁾ This in turn could entail some form of selection or tracking at the end of S1. The three-year proposal, however, is probably more significant as a measure of the impasse at which the committee felt it had arrived – torn between the weight of departmental expectation on the one hand and the weight of outside evidence on the other – than as a pointer to the likely direction of change.

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2. Gray, J M., McPherson, A F and Raffe, D (1983) *Reconstructions of Secondary Education: Theory, Myth and Practice since the War*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, chapters 3-6.
3. SOED personal communication. Unpublished SOED projections of the higher-education participation rate for young people in the year 2000 were announced by the Secretary of State for Scotland in June 1991. See "Funding plea on Universities", *Scotsman*, 12 June 1991.
4. Question 5 of "Fifth and Sixth Year Courses: Key Questions" circulated by the SOED in July 1990. The context of the question implies that the quoted phrase refers to a broader range of pupils than that currently in post-compulsory schooling, and perhaps even to an entire age-group; but this is not explicitly stated.
5. For an account of the recent history of policy for certification see Andrew McPherson and Charles D Raab (1988) *Governing Education: A Sociology of Policy since 1945*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press; and McPherson, A F and Neave, G (1976) *The Scottish Sixth*, Slough, National Foundation for Educational Research.
6. See Andrew McPherson (1984) 'Post-compulsory schooling: the fifth year' and 'Post-compulsory schooling: the sixth year' in David Raffe (ed) *Fourteen to Eighteen: The Changing Pattern of Schooling in Scotland*, Aberdeen, Aberdeen University Press.
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8. Based on Chris Robertson (1990a) *Trends in the percentages of Scottish school leavers entering higher education 1962-1986*, Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh, Centre for Educational Sociology; Chris Robertson (1990b) *Routes to higher education in Scotland*, Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh, Centre for Educational Sociology; and on an unpublished analysis by Lindsay Paterson of the 1989 Scottish Young People's Survey.
9. For a review, see Wall, D, Macaulay, C, Tait, H, Entwistle, D and Entwistle, N (1991) *The Transition from School to Higher Education in Scotland*, Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh, Centre for Research on Learning and Instruction.
10. Scottish Information Office (1990) "Committee on fifth and sixth year examinations to be established", 27 March/0500/90.
11. "On the future of Scottish Highers, Mr Forsyth said that SED officials had been looking at what he called the guddle of the sixth year in Scottish schools. One option under consideration was a two-year Higher, something to which the minister said he was sympathetic. However, he stressed that no decisions had been taken" ("Staff numbers next target in Forsyth schools shake-up". *Scotsman*, 2 June 1989). The *Times Scottish Education Supplement* of 9 June 1989 carried a similar report under the headline: "Forsyth: The revolution will gather momentum". Meanwhile the chairman of the Scottish Examination Board, Farquhar Macintosh, had been advocating a two-year Higher in articles in the press ("Two reasons for a revamped Higher", *Times Education Supplement (Scotland)*, 8 July 1988; "High time for shake-up in examinations blend", *Scotsman*, 18 February 1989; and "Why Higher standards may fail us", *Scotsman*, 11 April 1989). Then, in October 1989, he linked the issue of the two-year Higher to the issue of the length of degree courses ("University challenge", *Times Scottish Education Supplement*, 6 October 1989). In this he received timely support from another member of the Examination Board, Cameron Harrison, whom the Secretary of State subsequently appointed Chief Executive of the Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum (see "Change being mooted in higher centenary year", *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 10 October 1989). Three months later, Mr Forsyth's successor, Mr Lang, was reported as supporting a two-year Higher formulation: "Ian Lang is attracted to the idea of postponing the Higher examination until sixth year, although the government's promised initiative is still some way off. The minister ... said that pupils 'have a year of intense pressure followed by an easier year less linked to career progress'. Mr Lang was sceptical of the supposed threat to the four-year university degree course inherent in postponing Highers" (see "Lang promises action on 6th-year Higher", *Times Scottish Education Supplement*, 12 January 1990).
12. "Howie on the way forward", *Times Scottish Education Supplement*, 5 October 1990; "No hidden agenda for A-levels, teachers told", *Glasgow Herald*, 6 October 1990.
13. Unpublished analyses by Lindsay Paterson of the Scottish Young People's Survey.
14. "Trying to steer a difficult course", *Scotsman*, 13 March 1991.
15. "Highers not to be replaced by two-year courses", *Scotsman*, 1 October 1990; "SEB's 'interesting and creative ideas'", *Times Scottish Education Supplement*, 5 October 1990.
16. *Education and Training for the 21st Century*, volume 1, London, HMSO, Cm1536, chapter 4; *Access and Opportunity*, Edinburgh, HMSO, Cm1530.
17. Unpublished analyses by Lindsay Paterson of the Scottish Young People's Survey. For statistics on Highers presentations and passes see also Robertson 1990 a and b, *op cit*; Scottish Examination Board *Report for 1990*, Dalkeith 1991, Table 18b; and Croxford, L, Howieson, C, and Raffe, D (1991) *Young People's Experience of National Certificate Modules*, University of Edinburgh, Centre for Educational Sociology, chapter 5.
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19. Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum (SCCC) (1989) *Curriculum Design for the Secondary Stages: Guidelines for Headteachers*, First Revised Edition, Edinburgh, SCCC.
20. Scottish Education Department (1986) "School leavers' qualifications", *Statistical Bulletin 10/E2/1986*, Table 1(b).
21. The arguments in the remainder of this section are developed in more detail in Andrew McPherson, David Raffe and Chris Robertson (1990) *Highers and Higher Education*, Edinburgh, Association of University Teachers (Scotland); Andrew McPherson and David Raffe "Highers and the vocational route", *Times Scottish Education Supplement*, 16 November 1990; Finegold, D, Keep, E, Milliband, D, Raffe, D, Spours, K, and Young, M (1990) *A British 'Baccalaureat'*, Education and Training Paper 1, London, Institute for Public Policy Research; and Lindsay Paterson (1990) "Submission to the Howie Committee", Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh, Centre for Educational Sociology.
22. Scottish Education Department (1977) *Assessment for All: Report of the Committee to Review Assessment in the Third and Fourth Years of Secondary Education in Scotland*, Edinburgh, HMSO (the Dunning Report); and Scottish Education Department (1977) *The Structure of the Curriculum in the Third and Fourth Years of the Scottish Secondary School*, Edinburgh, HMSO (the Munn Report).

23. In this case in its negotiations with the Scottish Universities Council on Entrance (SUCE) over a reformed Mathematics syllabus at O grade.
24. These include: The Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, The Association of Lecturers in Colleges of Education in Scotland, The Association of Lecturers in Scottish Central Institutions, The Association of University Teachers (Scotland), The Church of Scotland, The Committee of Principals and Directors of the Scottish Central Institutions, The Confederation of British Industry (Scotland), The Conference of Scottish Centrally Funded Colleges, The Conservative Party (as reported in the *Scotsman*, 21 November 1990), The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, The Educational Institute of Scotland, The General Teaching Council, The Headteachers' Association of Scotland, Lothian Regional Council, The Professional Association of Teachers in Scotland, The Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum, The Scottish Chambers of Commerce (as reported in the *Scotsman*, 21 November 1990), The Scottish Council Development and Industry, The Scottish Examination Board, The Scottish Secondary Teachers' Association, The Scottish Universities Council on Entrance, The Scottish Vocational Education Council, Strathclyde Regional Council, The University of Edinburgh, and The University of Glasgow.
25. "System of Highers may face overhaul", *Scotsman*, 27 December 1990.
26. Arguably this work began earlier, in a series of articles and pronouncements by Farquhar Macintosh, then chairman of the Scottish Examination Board. See footnote 11.
27. "Highers to be scrapped", *Scotland on Sunday*, 23 June 1991. See also "System of Highers may face overhaul", *Scotsman*, 27 December 1990; "Trying to steer a difficult course", *Scotsman*, 13 March 1991.
28. "Highers to be scrapped", *Scotland on Sunday*, 23 June 1991.