

Postscript 2008

In 1998 and 1999, the SQA continued operations as they had been under the SEB and SCOTVEC and all went well. The first year of examinations under Higher Still arrangements in 2000 was a complete disaster. Some of the data was missing and, because there were insufficient markers, many bundles of scripts lay unmarked until appeals went out to markers who had already finished their original allocations, asking them to undertake additional marking. The result was that some SQA results were late in being issued and very many students' results were wrongly graded. This was particularly critical where missing data affected scripts at the pass-fail boundary. Normally the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) receives early intimation of the results to give it time to have the admissions process complete before the candidates receive their results. In 2000, UCAS had not even received the results on the day on which candidates' results were due to be released.

Only those who were at the centre of things at that time really know what went wrong. My own research contract was cancelled and the publication of what I had already produced was put on hold. I have therefore no inside information but, for what it is worth, here is my own conjecture of what probably went wrong — based on previous experience of the system and comments from practising teachers. To my mind, probably a combination of circumstances was responsible, rather than one particular cause.

The biggest factor, I think, was the loss of almost the entire SEB Directorate through early retirement at the time when the SQA was formed. The new senior staff were drawn almost entirely from the further education sector and they had no experience of the complexities of dealing with external examinations. Nor had they much sympathy with external assessment. Since it dealt with so many practical courses, SCOTVEC had realised very early in its existence that it could not cope with the huge increase in the number of entries if it used the same system as applied in the schools, namely, the use of visiting examiners. SCOTVEC had therefore adopted a system under which its own task was limited to checking the ability of centres to monitor the quality of their own assessments and then to pass to these approved centres the entire responsibility for making the final assessments. That system worked acceptably for most FE courses since the assessment of the students' performance was placed in the hands of those who were best placed to judge the level of work of which individual students were capable — a better method for these types of course than reliance on one-off external examinations

Such a system, however, was unacceptable to the school and university sectors, particularly where competitive entry was involved for university courses. Since the inception of the Highers, these sectors had relied on awards based on final external examinations, with only minimal use of internal assessment.

With neither the FE side nor the schools/university side willing to forego its favoured option, the decision was taken to combine the two systems, on the grounds that to have awards based on two different systems would have resulted in the one being regarded as inferior to the other. The effect of this decision was that the proposals which had appeared so simple in the initial *Higher Still* document now became very complicated indeed, and I wonder if the new Directorate, let alone the consensus that

welcomed *Higher Still*, fully appreciated this. Teachers and lecturers were overwhelmed by mountains of paperwork, not to mention the effect that over-assessment had on the learning process.

That led to the second factor — the inability of the human resources in the SQA to cope with the flood of data that had to be processed and to chase up all the missing data from schools and colleges. From what I can gather, on this occasion, it was not the computer hardware that was the cause of the failure but the system set in place for processing the data.

Even before the introduction of *Higher Still*, the logistics of checking each stage in the examination operations were enormous — selecting and training markers, collecting the papers from centres in a wide range of subjects, breaking them up into bundles to be sent out to the individual markers so that the scripts from each centre were marked by more than one marker, gathering in the marked scripts again and combining them with others for the same centre, checking the reliability of the work of all the markers and even their ability to add the marks correctly, checking to see if there were any rogue questions which had “thrown” very large numbers of candidates, standardising the marks to ensure that standards were maintained, setting pass marks, processing the data and producing the actual certificates before arranging for thousands of them to be sent out so that they would reach all candidates on the same day. The complexity of the old system had to be seen to be believed.

But *Higher Still* had added a further dimension to the courses. Before candidates could be considered for an award based on the external examination, they had to pass three NABs (tests from the National Assessment Bank marked internally, using given marking schemes), and all of this data had to be gathered from centres and entered into the SQA computer by SQA staff, since by no means all the returns from centres were submitted electronically. The SQA blamed some centres for not submitting all the data, but it did not have a system in place for acknowledging receipt of the data as it came in.

Under previous SEB procedures, candidates were enrolled in the system in S4, and in subsequent years forms containing the existing data were issued to candidates to update — a very simple task. In preparation for the 2000 examination, that system was abandoned and blank forms were issued for completion. But, with far more Courses than ever — more subjects and more levels, not to mention the unit tests, all with their four-digit codes — it is hardly surprising that mistakes were made.

Not for the first time, a good idea was spoiled by experts looking to improve on a basic idea in order to make it more impressive or to placate a powerful lobby. To quote just two fairly recent previous examples of this — those in charge should have remembered what happened to the first attempts to produce pupil profiles to supplement examination results. The Scottish Council for Research in Education took over a simple, basic idea and made it so comprehensive and complicated that school staff gave it up as unachievable. The same sort of thing happened when Standard Grade was introduced and, a year or two later, the McClelland Committee had to simplify the procedures to make them workable. The Howie Report also fell into the same trap — trying to dot all the “i”s and stroke all the “t”s — so that their final proposal was far too detailed and complicated.

A general message to educational planners emerges from this. Perfection is unattainable. If you wish new ideas to work, keep them practicable! Those planning yet another revision of the system at present, please take note.

Some of the explanations of the third factor — failures of communication and scrutiny, both internal and external — emerged from the parliamentary inquiries in the latter part of 2000; but the root causes may never emerge even when the internal files of the SQA and SOED become public in 2030 or 2050, since many of the crucial discussions would have been informal and not minuted — answers to such questions as, How far up or down the chain of command was the decision taken to assume that “It will be all right on the night”? Were the Directors working as a team providing support for one another, or were they adopting the attitude that problems in another part of the organisation had nothing to do with them? Did the staff who were handling the data coming from the centres conceal from their line manager that they were not coping with the workload, and, if so, was this because of fear engendered by tension within a struggling organisation? When did the line manager pass on this concern to the Chief Executive? If the Chief Executive knew, did he sit on the information hoping that the problem would go away? Why was an Operations Department set up in which no one had professional data-processing qualifications? Given that virtually all the examination data was available at SQA, why was the decision not taken to issue the results of the external examinations as soon as they were checked? Why did the data have to be held back till every last Unit result – in almost every case, a Pass – was retrieved from centres and fed into the system? Why did the SQA not use the normal concordance procedures to identify, and deal with, the many discrepancies between school estimates and the results which were eventually published? When were the SQA Chairman and Board, the Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED) and the Minister told there was a problem? They could not have been completely in the dark because for several months there had been rumblings in schools about data going missing. Did they follow up these rumours with penetrating questions to get at the truth?

There was the inevitable demand that heads should roll and, in addition to the Chief Executive, who had previously been heavily involved in the Higher Still Development Programme, the chosen victim was the Director responsible for Assessment and Quality Assurance who had had the additional task of Director of Operations landed on his plate as recently as the spring of 2000 when things were already going badly wrong. These removals were taken to absolve all others within the SQA from their collective responsibility for the fiasco. The Minister was later conveniently replaced in a Scottish Executive reshuffle, and the new Minister ordered the Chairman and Board to resign before the end of the year.

To the SQA’s credit, they saw to it that the mistakes of 2000 were not repeated in 2001, and the reputation of Scotland’s national examinations was soon restored to its previous revered position. But that does not mean that all is well. There remain concerns about the amount of assessment to which candidates are subjected. In addition to the externally-set SQA examinations, candidates must pass three internally assessed units called NABs; otherwise they will not receive an award even though they pass the external examination. The Howie report rejected the modularisation of the curriculum on the grounds that it would lead to “*over-assessment and assessment-*

driven learning.” Not only did *Higher Still* fail to avoid that trap; it has actually increased assessment, and one has to wonder why these unit tests are still there. Initially, one of the main reasons for using modules was to make it possible for candidates to acquire credits which could be carried forward and used as building blocks for a final qualification. That reason is no longer valid. As things stand, the NABs are not building blocks; they are hurdles which must be cleared before the candidate can reach the finishing line.

To have national tests available would appear, on the surface, to be likely to improve the ability of centres to make assessments according to national standards, but many doubt their usefulness. There is a big difference between informal formative class tests designed to help the learning process by identifying weaknesses and the NABs which are formal summative tests that provide only pass/fail results. NABs could be a useful tool used at the discretion of the teacher to provide struggling candidates with intermediate targets or motivational aids. But other pupils could cope perfectly well without these compulsory hurdles.

Some teachers also maintain that passing the NABs makes candidates over-confident about their ability to pass the final external examination. Since the SQA will only in very rare circumstances accept the NABs as evidence for appeals, schools still require their candidates to sit their own internally-set prelim examinations to help them predict their likely performance in the external examinations. And because of the SQA’s enforcement of stricter rules for making appeals, some schools actually have two sets of prelims, one set usually in January to decide whether or not to present candidates, the other as close to the examinations as possible to provide the best possible evidence for making appeals. One has to wonder whether all of this assessment is worthwhile when so much teaching time is lost.

Some maintain that a system based entirely on internal assessment (moderated externally) could have provided the best answer for both academic and vocational courses. After all, this is what happens in the awarding of degrees at universities; so why should higher education refuse to accept it for schools? The universities and professions, however, would not have been the only opponents of such a solution. The teaching profession would have opposed taking on this responsibility, mainly on the grounds that schools would find it difficult to resist pressure from individual parents to award their children passes, and also because teachers feared that they would be sued when children failed. Therefore, since a system based entirely on internal assessment would not be regarded as acceptable for academic courses and since final external examinations are not well suited to vocational courses, why not deal with them separately in the way that is most appropriate for each?

Which takes us back to the Howie Report. Its undoing was the proposal to separate courses into two tracks which was widely criticised as divisive. In his response to *Higher Still*, Howie claimed that one purpose of assessment and certification is actually to be divisive, by sorting people out according to their attainments, and that it is nonsense to pretend that Skillstart courses could ever have the same status as Advanced Highers. This is true, to some extent; but the claim reveals a rather superior attitude towards the different types of skills and qualifications that are required in society, and also towards the value that is placed on them. The mechanic who fixes our cars may not have the ability to be a surgeon, but we could not do

without him. The qualifications which he requires to be a good mechanic are just as important as those of the surgeon, and they deserve to be just as highly valued. In fact, the garage owner would undoubtedly prefer the mechanic's skills to those of a surgeon. Unfortunately, it was probably this elitist attitude towards qualifications that led to the rejection of Howie and to the unachievable desire to produce a scheme where all qualifications would have equal status. Should we not rather accept that all qualifications are of equal value in their own context?

I concluded my opposition to a merger between the SEB and SCOTVEC back in 1990 by saying, "*Certainly, more must be done to raise the status of non-academic courses; but it is people's attitudes towards vocational education which need to be changed, rather than the bodies which provide for the different forms of certification.*" Substitute the word "*structures*" for "*bodies*" and that statement still holds good today.

It may be therefore that, instead of the elaborate solutions produced by Howie and the detailed version that emerged from the Higher Still Development Programme, all that was required was a rationalising of existing SEB and SCOTVEC arrangements, all certificated by the SQA. And, instead of forcing all courses into the same assessment mould so that they can be labelled from Level 1 to Level 7 according to their perceived worth or value, could they not have continued, more or less as before, using appropriate types of assessment, with generic names that would have meaning for their potential users, whether universities, colleges or employers? That would have produced the evolution that was asked for and promised rather than the revolution which emerged. Could it also be that the mass of data that the SQA has to deal with may be responsible, at least in part, for its rigid adherence to rules of presentation, leading to the concern that it may be going the way of so many large corporations by losing the human touch which has always been a major strength of Scottish national examinations?

But critics will say, "Such a simple scheme will not work. What about credit transfers based on comparisons between qualifications?" To which I would reply, "The total architecture of a building should not be dictated by such minutiae as the colour of the bricks. Nor should the external appearance be of such paramount importance that a building is created which is not conducive to good working conditions inside it." The fact that success in Highers and Advanced Highers is gauged by performance in an external examination and success at university level is judged by internal assessment, externally moderated, does not appear to prevent Advanced Higher and first year university examinations from both being equated as Level 7. So, why should it be necessary to insist that all qualifications below that Level should conform to the same mode of assessment? The whole structure is, after all, very artificial and has been created for the convenience of those who administer entrance qualifications rather than for the benefit of education. And it becomes even more artificial when acceptance into a course of study depends on the accumulation of a certain number of points — a system which assumes that assessment is an exact science in which a grading in one subject is assumed to be "worth" exactly the same as that grade in another; which assumes that there is a marked difference between, say, an "A" and a "B" in the same subject, when there may be only one mark between them and that difference may have been caused by the subjective marking of different questions within the same paper. The tail is undoubtedly wagging the dog, and one wonders

where it will all end as more and more countries develop more and more qualifications which have to be fitted into one huge global scheme. Examinations should be the servant of education, not a mechanistic juggernaut that casts its shadow over everything.

There was one other major casualty following the debacle of 2000 — the Schools Inspectorate. Since the inception of the Highers more than a century before, the Inspectorate had been the driving force behind virtually every major development in Scottish secondary education. Their involvement in Higher Still developments was probably greater than at any previous time, and it therefore became a prime target for blame when everything went pear-shaped. An enquiry by the Education Committee of the Scottish Executive concluded that *“So many sectors of the Scottish educational community voiced their concern to the Committee that there was a conflict in the role of the Inspectorate as controllers of the Higher Still Development and evaluators of its success that it is essential that their role is redefined.”* The blame culture was in full swing and, before the end of 2000, the Inspectorate was stripped of its policy-making functions and condemned to the fast-moving treadmill of churning out reports on education establishments, basing judgements on the quality of teaching on a few short visits to classrooms. In some quarters this demotion was welcomed almost with glee as it appeared to those who had been inspected that the Inspectorate was being given a taste of its own medicine.

In the cold light of day, however, one wonders if this was a good decision. It assumed that the Higher Still chaos had been caused by the preliminary work rather than by the operational failures immediately before the examinations. One fact should be evident from this volume: no one could fault the thoroughness of the preparatory work for Higher Still carried out by the Scottish Education Department, fronted by the Inspectorate. In my opinion, no other body could have taken the programme forward any better. Nor must it be forgotten that its favoured solution — group awards — had been rejected by the Secretary of State so that it had to go back to the drawing board and provide a completely new solution at very short notice; and it had to be one that did not completely alienate teachers and lecturers who were complaining loudly about the workload they already faced.

We should not underestimate the influential role of the Inspectorate at least since the end of World War II in promoting so many policies that no one would now challenge. Time and time again, Scotland has been years ahead of England in promoting new policies to deal with new circumstances. Efforts to bridge the gap between academic and vocational education has been one of these. Sometimes the Inspectorate had to overcome the natural human reaction within the profession of resisting change; more often than not it had to moderate the impatience of politicians pushing for changes that were too radical, thus protecting Scottish education from violent swings in one political direction or the other. Probably its greatest achievement had been the skilful way in which it always ensured that UK Government initiatives were modified to produce a satisfactory Scottish version. At least when the Inspectorate was driving policy forward it was basing its proposals on what it had encountered in Scottish schools. No other body has the same broad perspective of Scottish education to inform and moderate policy making today.

Nor must we forget that it was the Inspectorate that pushed for the greater involvement of the teaching profession both in curricular and examination developments and in the setting up of the General Teaching Council through which the profession now regulates itself. Yes, it can appear secretive at times, but it is not easy to act as mediator between politicians and the teaching profession.

At a time when such a sea change in the educational thinking of teachers is required for the introduction of *Curriculum for Excellence*, I find it encouraging that the new inspection model, recently announced, is moving away from the rigid, mechanistic approach to inspection that has been common in recent years, when the number of reports produced seems to have been more important than the added value they produced for education in our schools. It would appear that the Inspectorate is to return to the type of role which it played in the 1960s. Then, too, radical changes in teaching and learning were required, and the role of HMIs was transformed from critics of what schools were doing to fellow searchers for a new way forward, sitting down with teachers to discuss new ideas and serving on numerous working parties with teachers at all levels. There is even more need for that sort of approach today, since the local authority advisory service is to all intents and purposes non-existent, at least in the proactive sense of collaborative working with those in the classrooms.

At the present time, there is some anxiety in the profession about the *Curriculum for Excellence* proposals and the speed with which these are being pushed through. While it is encouraging to note that nothing is happening in the same secrecy as surrounded the development of Higher Still and that the Inspectorate is trying to engage with teachers in sharing good practice, published documents so far have been at the level of aims with which few would disagree. But, as was the case with Higher Still, the success of the proposals will depend, not on the general aims, but on the detailed objectives, outcomes and experiences of syllabuses. The shift to a greater emphasis on how pupils are taught is to be welcomed; but it is the syllabus and the detailed end product that will dictate what happens in the classroom. And, since it appears that the whole new scheme is to be accompanied by a huge reorganisation of the secondary school and a new examination structure, it is understandable that teachers will want to know what the end product is to be, and particularly what the requirements of the new examinations are to be. Only then can teachers decide what they will teach and how they will teach it. The lesson of history is that, whatever the idealists may say, the content and approach of the external examinations undoubtedly affect what happens in the classroom. It is therefore imperative that the planners get these right. The planners may know the end product at which they are aiming, but no clear picture has reached teachers so far.

It is certainly true that, unless deadlines are set, things tend to drift along. However, *Curriculum for Excellence* is such an important development that it cannot be rushed. It is a chicken and egg situation. Teachers must be won over to the new approaches through intensive staff development before they will be willing to adopt the proposals, let alone make a success of them. But, even before that, there must be in place at least exemplars of the kind of examination papers that are envisaged, otherwise the staff development will be carried out in a vacuum. Teachers cannot be criticised for “*teaching to the examinations*” when so much hangs on the examination success of their pupils. What will make the transition even more difficult for teachers is the fact

that, while they are trying to internalise the new philosophy, they will still have to help their present pupils reach the present targets.

It is understandable that politicians would wish such an important development to happen in their watch, but rushing it could be a disaster, and they should rather hope to be remembered for having had the vision to lay the sound foundations for a really momentous development.

In the case of Higher Still, although great use was made of consultants, teachers claimed that there was little or no consultation with them. But that is only partially true. Numerous documents were issued for consultation, but only after plans had been formulated. It was at the formative stage that the input from practising teachers was sadly lacking, and that was due largely to the decision of teachers to boycott the Development Programme in protest against their increasing workload. So, although the boycott was an effective weapon in the dispute, teachers and the education system have had to live with the consequences. Should the threat of such a bitter dispute ever arise again (heaven forbid!), teachers' organisations may wish to consider the difference between industrial action which will have an immediate effect and that which may have lasting damage; likewise, politicians may think twice about provoking such a crisis in order to make a short-term gain.

Faced with the boycott, the Inspectorate and the politicians kept maintaining that, for the first eighteen months at least, the development load would not fall upon teachers. They achieved that; but, just as Ian Lang protested when the Department landed the Higher Still proposals on his desk as one mighty package, so the teachers were in shock when the Development Unit landed the final packages on their desks, and it was really too late to make big changes to them. They were virtually *fait accompli*; but the Inspectorate cannot be blamed for that. People are always very wise in hindsight, but surely it was rather late in the day for the Association of Directors of Education to claim at the Parliamentary enquiry in 2000 that there had been no discussion of whether it was possible to unify the academic and vocational qualifications. The consensus after Howie was that the two systems had to be brought together into a single track.

In conclusion, I hope that, whatever emerges from the consultations over the new educational and examination structures of the secondary school, much more regard will be paid to the advice of those who have to implement the decisions than has been the case in recent years. Such a process takes time.