

Chapter 2: Reactions to Howie

In announcing the publication of the Howie Report to the House of Commons, Ian Lang, the Secretary of State, described it as thoughtful and challenging and said that the aim should be to draw on the best traditions in Scottish education while comparing these with the best in Europe and beyond. He refused to be drawn on whether or not the Government thought that the recommendations should be implemented. Interested parties would be given until the end of 1992 to submit their responses, and a decision would be reached by the spring of 1993.

Despite the fact that Professor Howie had for some time before publication been using various conferences and interviews with the media to hint at the broad framework of the Report and even to leak some detail of the recommendations, the scale and radical nature of the proposals still took people by surprise, and it was some time before the concentrated detail began to sink in. As the year progressed, however, the volume of criticism increased, while Professor Howie continued a spirited defence of the Report.

In all, well over 300 responses were received by the Scottish Office Education Department (SOED). Almost every response agreed that the *status quo* was not an option; the two-term dash to Higher was unsatisfactory; and Sixth Year was not sufficiently challenging for most pupils. Few argued with the Committee's analysis of the problems, although some felt that the Report had exaggerated the defects in the Scottish system and made misleading comparisons with other countries. Little exception, too, could be taken to the aims set out by Howie, since they were broadly the same as those stated for S3-S4 in the Munn Report 15 years earlier, or to Howie's definition of what characterised a good upper secondary education system. Aims are usually broad enough to secure general agreement. It was the detail of the proposed solutions which attracted very strong criticisms. A profusion of pejorative adjectives was directed against the Report: divisive, impractical, naïve, cavalier, misleading, complex, rigid, inflexible, ineffective, counter-productive, time-consuming, costly, and based on fragmentary and hearsay evidence. The Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) led the charge by claiming that, if adopted, the proposals would lead to the return of selection and streaming by ability since pupils could not be suddenly "*parachuted*" into a fast track in S3; and, by the end of 1992, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), the SEB, SCOTVEC, the Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum (SCCC), the General Teaching Council (GTC), the Scottish Universities Council on Entrance (SUCE), the Scottish Higher Education Funding Authority, further education colleges, the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES), the teachers' unions and other leading educationists, parents' associations, industry and commerce, the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC), and most of the political parties had all rejected the Howie package.

The main criticisms centred on the proposals to move the Standard Grade examinations from S4 to S3 and to force pupils into separate routes from S4 onwards. The colleges of education were concerned that the ten years of hard work which had gone into the introduction of Standard Grade would be wasted, with catastrophic effects on teacher morale. The proposals would have serious implications for teacher training in that teachers and college lecturers would have to be brought together for at least part of their courses. To most educationists, it seemed incredible that any committee could recommend simplistically that courses and examinations which had been carefully designed for pupils of a certain level of maturity should be brought forward a year. Credit Level, for example, was already very demanding and, if brought back to S3, would be placed out of reach of many of the pupils for whom SCOTBAC was apparently designed. If

Standard Grade courses were to start in S2, all pupils would have to choose their Standard Grade subjects after only six months of secondary schooling. The final stages of the Standard Grade Development Programme would not be reached until 1993, and yet Howie was proposing that Standard Grade should be radically altered before there had even been an evaluation of the courses and examinations. Besides, had the Committee forgotten the many years of development and piloting that had been spent on ensuring that Standard Grade was just right for S3/S4 pupils, and the massive workload that this had imposed on teachers, igniting the horrendous teachers' dispute in 1984? Rewriting Standard Grade syllabuses and reorganising the curriculum for S1-S3 would almost certainly mean a revision also of the 5-14 Guidelines which had been published less than a year before the Howie Report. Delay in implementing the proposed upper school reforms would be inevitable if the whole school system was not to be in turmoil at the same time.

Only three bodies favoured the proposal to move Standard Grade examinations into S3, two of them in a half-hearted way. The universities were attracted to the idea but recognised that they were not in a position to comment on the practicability of such a proposal. The Headteachers' Association of Scotland (HAS) supported Howie on the grounds that something had to be done, although they did have doubts over whether S2-S3 pupils would be mature enough to grasp the abstract skills required for Standard Grade. The only body which strongly favoured the proposals was the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Association Education Policy Committee. It urged Ministers to ignore the complaints of the educational establishment on the grounds that it was resisting change for its own ends. The 3-year upper secondary course was a desirable goal, and it could be achieved if the assessment of Standard Grade moved to S3 and became wholly internal.

In its submission, the Scottish Examination Board suggested that Standard Grade awards could remain in S4 if the system was founded entirely on internal assessment, instead of being based on a mixture of internal and external assessment. Such an arrangement would remove a hurdle which held back abler pupils because they concentrated on the requirements of the fourth year examination instead of pressing on as far and as fast as they could towards Higher Grade. It would also remove the criticism that, under Howie's proposals, there would be no proper leaving certificate for those who left school at the end of S4. For S5 and S6, the Board proposed a unified scheme based on a modal curriculum. There should be a core and options structure with modular packages at four levels. Pupils would undertake 160 hours of study in each of six modes, or 320 hours in subject areas where they were carrying their studies to a more advanced level.

SCOTVEC accepted the group award proposal and supported criterion-referenced assessment, but it objected to the rigid boundaries between SCOTBAC and SCOTCERT and to the apparent lack of parity between academic and vocational routes, particularly as evidenced in the different assessment systems and in the form of certification. SCOTVEC proposed a framework for the upper secondary school in which there would be awards at three levels, drawing on the best features of the National Certificate and the SCE examinations.

The HAS accepted the proposal to transfer Standard Grade examinations to S3, but also wished all courses in S4-S6 to be modularised, with full integration of courses, including Higher Grade and GSVQs (**Note 3**). All pupils would study a common core of subjects in S4.

In all, over 100 respondents put forward alternative proposals, but most concentrated on specific

issues viewed from their own particular perspective, and few dealt with the consequences of the various ramifications that their suggestions would create. For example, after highlighting what they regarded as the injustice of the twin-track proposal, many respondents advocated a single-track system. However, most of them failed to grapple with the implications of such a proposal, particularly the need to reconcile the different approaches of the SEB and SCOTVEC to curriculum design, assessment and moderation.

In proposing the separate tracks for SCOTCERT and SCOTBAC, the Howie Committee had ignored several lessons from the history of education in Scotland. In the post-World War II years, the segregation of pupils into separate certificate and non-certificate courses had proved a powerful disincentive to staying on beyond the statutory leaving age. Hardly anyone was convinced that the vocationally-oriented SCOTCERT would be held in the same esteem as SCOTBAC; and so, under parental pressure, more pupils were likely to be "given a chance" in SCOTBAC courses than were fit to tackle them. Inevitably, as pupils began to find the courses too demanding, waste-disposal chutes taking them from SCOTBAC to SCOTCERT would be more in evidence than bridges taking them in the opposite direction. This had happened 100 years earlier when large numbers were presented for Lower Grade and failed miserably, instead of aiming at the Merit Certificate which was more suited to their abilities but was less highly regarded; between the World Wars and in the period immediately after World War II, very few pupils transferred from Intermediate or Junior Secondary Schools to the selective High Schools or Senior Secondaries, but there was considerable wastage of fairly able pupils who began courses in the selective schools and failed to make the grade; in the 1970s, after the raising of the school leaving age, it happened yet again when too many pupils began "O" Grade courses which were beyond them; and it was happening yet again in the 1990s with too many pupils aiming at Higher Grade which was unsuited to their abilities and aptitudes.

The Committee itself seemed to contradict its claim to be seeking parity of esteem between the tracks in the way it approached the structure of the courses and assessment procedures: modularisation was good enough for SCOTCERT but might "*trivialise*" SCOTBAC; and, while teachers could be trusted to assess internally almost everything leading to SCOTCERT, only a terminal examination assessed externally was acceptable for SCOTBAC. Critics maintained that the different methods proposed for the two qualifications would serve to reinforce the divide between the two tracks. In fact, the general conclusion was that the Committee had been so blinded by its desire to establish a prestigious SCOTBAC award scheme that it was prepared to distort the rest of the school system to achieve that. In particular, Howie's scheme for the Scottish Upper School Awards had made no provision at all for pupils with special educational needs, a growing number of whom were already aiming at Skillstart I and Skillstart 2 which had been specially designed for them, or even for Level 1 of the newly introduced GSVQs (**Note 4**). Did Howie envisage a third track for them? Little thought, too, had been given to the effect the proposals would have on the prospects of people returning to education in later life. Although it was now fairly commonplace to find adults in school classes, a three-year school course would be a powerful disincentive to adults. The only feasible adult route, therefore, would be through SCOTCERT, no matter how intelligent the adults were.

There were several other historical lessons which the Committee had ignored. It had reverted to the kind of "top down" approach which had characterised almost all examination proposals prior to the introduction of Standard Grade. Premature selection in the past had put difficulties in the way of late developers, thus reducing the number of those who entered further or higher

education. Group Awards, which were introduced at the turn of the century to limit the numbers aiming at Higher Grade, certainly succeeded in that aim; however, Group Awards also discouraged able pupils from staying on at school because they feared they would leave without any qualifications if they failed to make the grade in the two-year course — a fear which was well placed when one considers the large number of failures among those who did take the course. There was further proof of the negative effect of Group Awards in the decade following their abolition in 1950 when the number of Higher candidates virtually doubled. Howie thought that being able to use better performance in one subject to compensate for poorer performance in another would solve that problem; but that dispensation existed under the previous Group Award scheme and yet saved relatively few candidates. Howie claimed that he was not proposing an “*all or nothing*” Group Award system since the Record of Achievement would show what the pupil had achieved. Critics maintained, however, that the lack of a credible S5 exit point would be a disincentive to staying on at school and that partial achievement would be branded as failure. Individuals with particular talents and weaknesses would be disadvantaged: for example, the gifted linguist who was not mathematically inclined and the brilliant scientist who was not very literate would both have difficulty in achieving a sufficiently good Group Award to gain entrance to university and, in extreme cases, might leave school with no award at all. One of the main lessons of the 1960s and 1970s was that pupils were more likely to persevere and succeed in courses which they themselves had chosen than in courses which were imposed on them. Howie’s response to that was that pupils were inclined to give up too quickly on subjects which they found difficult or did not like.

Notwithstanding all this, the concept of Group Awards found a fair amount of favour among those who responded to the Report, although not in the strictly prescribed form that Howie proposed. Similarly, although the common core was not much opposed in principle, most respondents thought that the core proposed by Howie was too wide so that it limited freedom of choice, particularly since he wished the core to be studied right up to S6. Critics maintained that the core should contain only the minimum required to be an effective citizen and employee.

The general theme which ran through the responses was that, while everyone accepted that change was necessary, the approach should be an evolutionary one based on a gradual development from existing course provision rather than on a total upheaval of the whole secondary school which was organised from the top downwards and dominated by the academic needs of the relatively small number of pupils aiming at university entrance. At the same time, even the universities were generally unhappy with the proposals, partly because they feared that the introduction of SCOTBAC would endanger the 4-year honours degree and partly because they suspected that many of the able pupils who at that time entered university at the end of S5 would, as a result of the devaluation of the S5 qualification, choose to enter employment from S5 rather than proceed to higher education a year later.

"It's no big deal that we do better than England," said Howie in an interview given to the Times Educational Supplement Scotland (TESS) on 13 March 1992. *"They do worse than almost anyone."* But the Report’s selective use of statistics made the Scottish position appear much poorer than it actually was. For example, in attempting to play down the fact that Scottish staying-on rates were higher than those in England and Wales, the Committee stated that the lead was narrowed to a considerable extent if the numbers in further education were included. The argument was spoiled, however, by comparing the Scottish statistics with those for the whole of the UK which, of course, included Scotland, and by belittling the fact that a much larger

proportion of Scottish pupils remained at school. It was clear, said Howie's critics, that the existence of a leaving qualification only a year after the statutory leaving date encouraged pupils to continue at school, whereas in England and Wales the two-year gap between GCSE and "A" Level proved a disincentive and partly explained why so many left English and Welsh schools and attended FE colleges instead.

Howie was criticised for comparing the strengths of the German, French and Danish systems with the weaknesses of the Scottish system, and for ignoring the social and economic differences between those countries and Scotland. Also, why had the Committee concentrated only on those countries and not on the USA, Russia or Japan? In opting for the Danish system, why had it ignored the fact that the Danish upper school extended from 16 to 19, not 15 to 18? Its use of statistics, too, was highly suspect. The Report praised the large numbers in full-time education in European countries but made light of their much higher wastage rates. Instead of looking at Scottish trends over a fairly long period and recognising the huge rise in staying-on rates and the considerable improvement in school leavers' qualifications, the Committee had limited itself almost entirely to a series of snapshots taken shortly before the Report was published. The measure of success which the Scottish Education Department had used since the Second World War, namely the possession of at least three Highers by school **leavers**, was abruptly set aside as insignificant and the new measure became the percentage of pupils who gained 3, 4 or 5 Highers **in Fifth Year**. The Committee seemed to dismiss as of little value Highers gained in S6. No mention was made of the fact that there were more than three times as many leavers with three Highers as there had been before the introduction of "O" Grade, or even that the number with this qualification had increased by 22.5% in the previous five years.

The sections of the Report which dealt with SCOTVEC's National Certificate modules betrayed a lack of understanding of what had been happening in schools. It looked as if the Committee believed that the ultimate stage in developments had been reached in schools, whereas schools were still experimenting with this relatively new type of qualification. Some critics claimed that this was due to the fact that the Committee had visited only twelve secondary schools. The Report spoke critically of the number of modules that were begun by school pupils but not completed; but it failed to state that, in the early days, many schools registered pupils for modules on which they never embarked, the pupils having transferred to other courses or left school without starting them. Nor was it valid to compare the average number of modules taken by school pupils with the average number taken by those in FE. Modules provided the total curriculum of FE students; schools used them for a variety of reasons, not least of these being a desire to broaden the curriculum within an overcrowded timetable. Besides, as SCOTVEC pointed out in its submission, steps had already been taken to meet Howie's own criticism of the modules as mere "*stocking fillers*" which contained little, if any, general education. Following its success in developing Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs), which were group awards that paralleled the National Vocational Qualifications south of the border and provided work-based qualifications for specific areas of employment, SCOTVEC had in 1991 begun to develop General Scottish Vocational Qualification Group Awards (GSVQs) which, though vocationally oriented, would be more appropriate for school pupils. It was also cooperating with the Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum in developing other group awards (called "Clusters") which required pupils to take fewer modules; and it was working with a number of education authorities in designing programmes of modules to suit the needs of schools. All of these group awards were designed to provide a more coherent curriculum for pupils who were not academically inclined.

Howie did acknowledge the existence of these group awards but said they were still at a developmental stage and, as they appeared to have the same aims as SCOTCERT and also seemed to be broadly compatible with it in design features, they should be subsumed in SCOTCERT so as not to confuse people with too many parallel qualifications.

Howie claimed that his scheme of awards was simple, but some respondents doubted if most users would understand it. Research carried out by the SEB following the introduction of Standard Grade had shown that, despite two intensive publicity campaigns, most employers still did not understand that system of awards several years after it was in operation; and, according to the Director of the Scottish Chambers of Commerce, the system of National Certificate modules was a complete mystery to them. By and large, employers were not interested in the informative profile of achievement which showed how each pupil had performed in different elements of each subject. They were interested only in an overall mark! Was it likely that Howie's elaborate scheme would fare any better? The new terms would be confusing, and the valuable cachet which had attached to the Highers for so long would be lost.

The Committee was also accused of placing undue emphasis on the reliability of national testing in primary schools. These tests had not been rigorously piloted because of the boycott by teachers, parents and most education authorities. Supporters of the six-year comprehensive school feared that the combined effect of the Howie proposals and National Testing in the Primary School (see Appendix 1) would lead to the return of selection and streaming, and the general feeling was that the all-through comprehensive school could not long survive the segregation of pupils into SCOTBAC and SCOTCERT tracks, which they claimed would actually accentuate the academic/vocational divide. The Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum (SCCC), in a strongly worded rejection of Howie, criticised the differentiated pathways as being out of step with educational thinking in Western Europe and the USA. *"The Council wishes to disagree strongly with any proposals premised upon the notion that there are two distinct kinds of education, that there are two distinct levels of achievement, or that there are two distinct sets of purposes for education, let alone two distinct sets of young person."* There was a general demand running through virtually every response that all pupils should follow one track, albeit differentiated, leading to one certificate.

Although there had been many large secondary schools in the 1970s, there were now very few with over 1,000 pupils. Even as things were, small secondary schools had difficulty in providing a wide range of courses. Critics claimed that the discrepancy between what large and small schools could offer would become much more pronounced if the two-track system was introduced, and this could have a serious effect on both urban and rural communities. In the towns, schools in disadvantaged areas, which were already losing many pupils through the effects of the Parents' Charter, would become even more disadvantaged as more and more parents removed their offspring to magnet schools which could offer much greater subject choice. Similarly, those rural authorities, which at considerable cost maintained small junior high schools in order to keep young people within their own communities, would have this policy undermined as parents ignored distance and opted to send their children to schools in larger communities. In both cases, Government policy of financially rewarding popular schools would result in the creation of "BAC" schools which would attract abler pupils and better resources.

The Howie Report positively skated over the matter of resources, even suggesting that there

might be areas in which savings could be made. Under criticism of Howie's failure to produce proper costings based on timetable models, two members of the Committee stated at conferences in mid-June 1992 that the Government had forced it to cut short its deliberations so that the Report could be published before the General Election which was due in April/May 1992. In reply, a spokesperson for the SOED said that the Report was entirely the work of the Committee. Both of these statements were true. When the Committee arrived for what proved to be their last meeting, they did not know that it was to be the last meeting. The final report therefore had to be produced in a hurry, but it was all the work of the Committee. Was the forthcoming General Election the real or only reason for cutting short their deliberations? Yes and no. Although the Government effectively withdrew the Report from the political arena by announcing that no decision would be taken on its findings until after the consultation period, which would take it far beyond the Election, the fact that the Committee had already overshot its target date for publication (the end of 1991) and was unlikely to finish its deliberations before the Election would almost certainly have given rise to accusations that the Government was deliberately holding back the Report for political reasons. It is also true that the Inspectorate had for a few years been researching other approaches which might prove more practicable than Howie's solution.

In the absence of detail in the Report, Strathclyde Region undertook a timetabling exercise which seemed to show that it would require a school of at least 1500 pupils (i.e. one with an intake of 300 pupils in S1) to implement Howie. Very few schools in Scotland were of that size. The average size of school was nearer 400, and Howie's proposals would require an increase in staffing of between 12% and 25%, depending on how many more pupils were encouraged to stay on at school. This would result in an increase in the national staffing bill of around £40 million. According to those who carried out this exercise, the only alternative was to extend into S3 the S1/S2 common course, in which all pupils followed exactly the same curriculum, to limit the number of courses on offer in S4-S6, and to direct pupils into courses where places existed. The general consensus was that the amount of saving that could be achieved through co-operation between schools and colleges was limited. Consortia (**Note 5**) had not succeeded to any great extent in the past even in urban areas where colleges were relatively close to schools; and colleges feared that, with the introduction of devolved management to schools, headteachers would be reluctant to pass pupils to FE for fear of having their own budgets curtailed.

The SCCC also produced an estimate of likely staffing costs based on four model schools. On the assumption that school rolls would increase by around 10%, they estimated that Howie's proposals would require between 12% and 25% more staff, and there would be resource implications of over £18 million. The SCCC expressed concern about whether a Howie curriculum could be provided by schools with fewer than 700 pupils, of which there were many in Scotland. The SCCC looked at staffing problems also from another angle. Since very few Scottish teachers had any experience of teaching CSYS classes, it was questionable whether many could cope with the demands of SCOTBAC presentations without an enormous in-service programme, which would take time.

Finally, the Committee came in for a certain degree of criticism over the way in which it based its grand scheme on assertions and hopes. As one educationist put it: *"Arguments are not evidence."* On paper, the proposals might seem attractive. What they lacked was a clear understanding of the practical difficulties they would pose for schools and colleges. The EIS, indeed, described the Report as *"a classic case of rationalisation, of searching for evidence to*

support pre-determined conclusions.”

Long before the end of the consultation period, therefore, it was clear that, as they stood, the Howie proposals were "*dead in the water*". They had, however, achieved one very important thing. They had stimulated an intensive debate which confirmed that virtually everyone agreed that the *status quo* was not an option, though this had not been obvious in many of the submissions that the Committee had received at the start of its deliberations. Though the main conclusions of the Report had been generally rejected, the analysis and aims were still valid and had provided a focus for evaluating it and producing alternative proposals. As had happened with Standard Grade, it would now fall to the SOED to carry out its own in-depth investigation and produce as soon as possible a practical blueprint which would not be too costly, would not turn the whole of secondary education upside down, and would not prove too great a burden for a teaching profession which was already complaining about an unacceptable workload imposed on it during a decade of intense educational change.

Note 3: See Chapter 4 for more details of these General Scottish Vocational Qualifications.

Note 4: See Chapter 4 for details of these courses which had been introduced in England and Wales.

Note 5: In 1983, because their schools were finding it difficult to spare staff to teach classes in subjects which were chosen by only a small number of pupils, both Strathclyde and Lothian Regions set up consortia of neighbouring schools and colleges. Instead of all of the schools offering all of the subjects, minority subjects were distributed amongst the schools and pupils had to travel from their own school to another if they wished to study one of these subjects.