

National Qualifications: a short history

This report was produced by James McVittie in October 2008.

During the preparations for a recent consultation on qualification design at SCQF levels 4–5, many of the issues that came up had been considered, discussed, and even consulted on in the past. Given the changes that are afoot, and developments that are being discussed, now seems to be the right moment to document this history. This brief paper summarises the reviews over the last 30 years of the national school qualifications in Scotland, and identifies issues that have been raised in successive reforms and the extent to which they have been resolved.

1 Reports and development programmes

1.1 Munn and Dunning (1977)

The Munn and Dunning reports were commissioned to address weaknesses in the provision of courses and qualifications to meet the needs of the full ability range, and to ensure appropriate progression to Higher Grade. Concerns included the fact that a substantial minority of school leavers held no nationally-recognised certificate recording their achievements in school, and that the Ordinary Grade examination was insufficiently challenging for the most able students. Moreover, these students were then expected to complete the much more demanding Higher course in only two terms — the notorious ‘two-term dash’. Both reports were published in 1977.

The Munn Committee reported on the curriculum and recommended:

- ◆ a restructuring of the curriculum in S3 and S4 to meet the needs of students of all abilities
- ◆ the introduction of approaches to learning and teaching that reflected students’ needs and circumstances
- ◆ the development of new courses which crossed traditional subject boundaries

The Dunning Committee reported on assessment and recommended that:

- ◆ all students should have the opportunity to take courses leading to the Scottish Certificate of Education
- ◆ external examinations and internal assessment by teachers should both contribute to awards
- ◆ all students should be assessed in a way that enabled them to demonstrate positive achievement

After a long period of consultation and development, Standard Grade was introduced from 1984. In this qualification, students are assessed against performance standards for three levels of award: Credit, General and Foundation. This means that the qualification is based on the achievements of the individual, measured against stated standards, rather than on how his or her achievements compare with those of other candidates.

In most subjects, examination papers are differentiated, with one set leading to qualifications at Credit level (grades 1 and 2), another to General level (grades 3 and 4), and another to Foundation level (grades 5 and 6). Students usually take examinations covering two adjacent levels as a kind of ‘safety net’.

Students have to provide evidence of achievement in all basic aspects or ‘elements’ of a subject before an overall grade can be awarded. In English, for example, students face separate assessments for Reading, Writing and Talking.

The student's certificate shows the grade attained in each element as well as the overall award for the course. An overall course grade is only awarded if there is an assessment for every element.

In most courses, the separate elements are abilities such as Knowledge and Understanding, Problem Solving or other higher order abilities, and Practical Skills. These elements are awarded in a variety of ways.

In Science, for example, students have to demonstrate attainment in practical skills, and these skills are assessed internally by the class teacher on the basis of work done in the course. The assessment in these practical skills counts towards the final qualification, but it is weighted against the other elements, which are assessed in an external examination.

In English, Writing is assessed on the basis both of a folio of work, completed in S3 and S4 and submitted to SQA for marking, and of a written examination. Knowledge and Understanding is mostly assessed together with Problem Solving (or similar) through one, externally assessed, exam paper, but is given separate marks and grades.

1.2 'Teaching and Learning in the Senior Stages of the Scottish Secondary School' (1983)

Even as preparations for the implementation of the Munn and Dunning reports were in full swing for S3 and S4, this HMI report concluded that the post-fourth year examination structure did not cater well for the increasing number of students continuing in school.

1.3 '16–18s in Scotland: An Action Plan' (1983)

The Scottish Education Department published its Action Plan for non-advanced vocational education in 1983. It recognised that many students in S5 struggled to cope with the demands of the Higher courses, that their educational experience was not balanced, and that they had little prospect of achieving usable qualifications.

It was for these students that the Action Plan offered the modular courses which were a feature of provision until the Higher Still programme was implemented. The modules were certificated by the Scottish Vocational Education Council (SCOTVEC). Internal assessment of students' work was verified by external assessors appointed by the awarding body. In some cases, schools grouped modules or other short courses together to form full, two-year courses. There was also scope for schools to offer short courses which did not lead to certification.

The years following the publication of the Action Plan also saw the development, under SCOTVEC, of new competence-based vocational qualifications covering all occupations.

1.4 The Howie Report (1992)

In 1990, the Secretary of State for Scotland established a committee, chaired by Professor John Howie of St Andrews University, to review the aims and purposes of courses and certification in the fifth and sixth years of secondary school education in Scotland.

The committee reported in 1992 that the educational and social context in which existing courses were placed was undergoing significant and rapid change. The size and nature of the population in S5 and S6 had been greatly affected by a number of factors, including the boost that Standard Grade had given to motivation and expectations; uncertainties in the employment market; the needs of employers for a highly-skilled workforce in a rapidly-evolving industrial and commercial world; and the expanding areas of further and higher education.

The report concluded that ‘when measured against the characteristics which a high quality secondary education should display, our system is seriously wanting in many respects.’ Those characteristics were that the system should:

- ◆ provide both breadth and depth
- ◆ offer to all students the prospect of attaining recognised qualifications that were based on demanding standards of achievement and are well understood and accepted across the UK and beyond
- ◆ articulate both with pre-16 education and post-school education and training
- ◆ bridge the academic/vocational divide
- ◆ encourage access, retention and return; provide education as efficiently as possible
- ◆ take account of the European dimension

1.5 The Higher Still programme — *Opportunity for All* (1994)

Howie’s analysis of the problems facing secondary education in Scotland was widely accepted, but his proposed solution for those problems was rejected. Reform was instead delivered through the Higher Still programme, which aimed to provide ‘opportunity for all’ through a unified curriculum and assessment system. The programme also sought to bring academic and vocational courses into a single unified system rather than the linked but separate system of ‘ladders and bridges’ envisaged by Howie.

- ◆ The programme replaced ‘academic’ courses (hitherto certificated by the Scottish Examination Board) and ‘vocational’ National Certificate modules (previously certificated by SCOTVEC) with new National Qualifications at Access, Intermediate, Higher and Advanced Higher levels.
- ◆ The design rules for the assessment and certification combined aspects of the systems they replaced.

- ◆ The aim was for a flexible qualifications system, with Units being able to stand alone as a certificated qualification or to be combined in National Courses of 160 hours duration.
- ◆ Unit assessment is internal and on a pass-fail basis. For each Unit, students are required to demonstrate that they have reached a minimum competence. To gain the full Course award, students must achieve both the component Units and pass an external assessment. The graded external assessment determines the course grade.
- ◆ The nomenclature for the grades differs from that used in the Standard Grade and 5–14 programmes.
- ◆ The system was designed to promote progression from Standard Grade, not least for students who have attained awards at General and Foundation levels, and to offer progression pathways within the system, for example from Standard Grade General via Intermediate 2 to Higher.
- ◆ The programme was designed to meet the needs of all post-16 students, in schools and colleges, that is, students who had taken Standard Grades in S4. In practice, many schools have been using the Access and Intermediate courses to replace Standard Grade courses in one or more subjects in S3 and S4.

1.6 Review of the Implementation of New National Qualifications (2001)

The recommendations of this review, accepted by the Minister for Education in June 2001, were that steps should be taken to:

- ◆ revise assessment arrangements on a course-by-course basis, with a view to reducing the complexity, variety and total volume of assessment — cutting the amount of assessment to one hour per Unit
- ◆ advise and exemplify on assessment to establish the type and volume required
- ◆ ensure a common understanding of standards
- ◆ clarify the purpose of National Assessment Banks

The implementation of these recommendations was to be overseen by a Task Group. The Task Group took these recommendations as a positive step in reducing the overall burden of assessment. They also recommended a number of further options, which would require changes to the design principles of the new National Qualifications. These options were that:

- ◆ Candidates could achieve a Course award in the external examination. Unit certification should be optional, with the result that there would be a reduction in internal assessment for those candidates who did not wish Unit certification.
- ◆ Candidates who could demonstrate that they had achieved the full range of Unit Outcomes could opt for an ungraded Course award, while those who wished to achieve a graded award could opt for an external assessment. This, it was argued, would lead to a reduction in external and related internal assessment (for example, production of evidence for appeals).

These options were the subject of consultation in 2001. Both were rejected.

The Task Group also recommended that:

- ◆ steps should be taken to increase awareness of Core Skills
- ◆ students' extra-curricular interests should be recognised

2 Main themes in the development programmes

2.1 Opportunity for all

The rationale for inclusive provision is based on the well-being and self-esteem of the individual, on social cohesion, and on the needs of the economy, and is a recurring theme of all the development programmes listed in the first section of this paper. Writing in 1977, Dunning was ‘not happy about the narrow aims, inappropriate emphasis and frustrated ambitions’ which arose when increasing numbers of students were being presented for Courses and examinations that were not designed to meet their needs.

Raffe *et al* (2005) found that the Higher Still ‘climbing frame’ fulfilled the programme’s promise of opportunity for all by improving access and opportunities for students at all levels of prior attainment. A major success of Higher Still was that it enabled the inclusion in mainstream curriculum and qualifications of students with learning difficulties (Howieson and Closs, 2005).

Learners progressing from middle and low Standard Grade attainments were able to take more courses at more appropriate levels. The new NQ levels (Access 1 to 3 and Intermediate 1 and 2) had a higher standing than the modules they replaced, and they provided a more worthwhile learning experience.

On the down side, the same research identified some limitations of the programme. ‘Opportunity for all’ did not translate into improved attainment for all — middle and lower attaining 16 year-olds were studying at more ‘appropriate’ levels, but they continued to have ‘relatively low’ success rates. And although the programme brought formal parity of esteem to vocational and academic education, it had limited impact on students’ subject choices.

Two papers published in 2006 questioned whether the goal of ‘Opportunity for all’ was being achieved. These were the HMIE report, *Missing Out: A report on children at risk of missing out on educational opportunities*, and the Scottish Executive publication, *More Choices, More Chances: A Strategy to Reduce the Proportion of Young People not in Education, Employment or Training in Scotland*.

The HMIE report identified the 20% lowest attaining students nationally through their performance in SQA courses. The proportion of low-attaining students is higher in more deprived areas of Scotland. For example, twice the expected proportion of students who left school with no qualifications were to be found in the 15% most deprived areas of the country. It was estimated (Scottish Executive 2006a, Appendix) that some 35,000 young people were not in education, training or employment.

Analysis of students’ tariff scores indicated that the average attainment of the highest-performing students in S4 was gradually rising, in terms of SQA qualifications, whilst the figures for the lowest-attaining 20% of students had

remained fairly constant. To put it another way, the attainment gap was widening. *Missing Out* pointed out, however, that tariff scores do not take account of students' successes in NQ Units or in other award systems such as Right Track, the Prince's Trust Excel or Duke of Edinburgh Awards.

Nevertheless, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that an achievement gap is already evident in the later years of primary and the early years of secondary schooling and that the gap has widened further by the end of compulsory education. Studies for the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) show that the gaps between high and low achieving students in Scotland are not as great as in some OECD countries and that the proportion of under-achieving students is quite low. The issue in Scotland is not about the gap between high and low achievers, but the gap between rich and poor. The conclusion of the OECD report, *Quality and Equity of Schooling in Scotland* (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2007) is that 'who you are matters a great deal more in Scotland than what school you attend, and "who you are" is defined largely in terms of socio-economic status.'

The OECD report says that low achievement and lack of motivation undermine the meaningfulness of compulsory schooling. They also pose a challenge to the system of differentiated levels of Standard Grade that Dunning had created to ensure a more satisfactory experience for all students. 'Adjusting the cognitive levels at which studies are examined does not in itself create strong incentives for learner engagement. It may remove barriers, but it does not necessarily lift interest or give young people an experience of success or raise self-esteem to help with further study or employment.' Adjusting the cognitive levels of qualifications may prove less successful than broadening the range of studies and the types of learning undertaken.

2.2 Progression

Progression and continuity have long been important principles of curriculum design. Teachers have always thought it essential that what is taught and learned at one level should articulate well with the next level. For Howie, an important characteristic of the post-16 school curriculum was that it should 'articulate both with pre-16 education and with post-school education and training.' Continuity and progression were seen as key aspects of ensuring high retention rates, strong motivation, and good levels of performance. Abrupt shifts and injunctions to 'forget everything' were discouraging and de-motivating.

The Higher Still programme also sought to ensure good progression from Standard Grade courses to Intermediate and Higher levels, and between the seven levels of the new National Qualifications. In their paper, *The Introduction of a Unified System of Post-compulsory Education in Scotland*, Raffe, Howieson and Tinklin reported that these efforts to build a 'progressive climbing frame' had been less straightforward than anticipated.

Their research identified a number of issues:

- ◆ **Issues of design:** providing a manageable gradient of difficulty to cater for the diverse population using the system and to articulate with external requirements such as university entrance; catering for students following different progression pathways within the unified system; and covering subjects with different epistemologies and learning sequences.
- ◆ **Issues of logistics and resources:** constraints related to the availability of materials and resources, the preparedness of staff, the demands of multi-level teaching, the lack of collaboration between schools.
- ◆ **Issues to do with staff views of learners' capabilities:** teachers in schools might feel that there was a limit to the number of levels through which students could progress before reaching a plateau.
- ◆ **Issues about the nature and purpose of horizontal progression.**

Progression is one of the design principles of a Curriculum for Excellence. The HMIE guide, *Ensuring Effective Transitions* (2006), recognises its importance and the contribution that effective transitions at all levels can make to the progressive development of the four capacities of a Curriculum for Excellence. The guide invites teachers to focus on children's learning and on cross-sector partnerships to ensure joint approaches to curriculum planning, learning and teaching, and assessment.

The OECD report, on the other hand, concludes that the examinations at S4 constitute a 'significant barrier' to progression because the system effectively ranks all learners and influences decisions on whether the individual should continue at school or leave. The report says that this barrier inhibits progression, and that this affects weaker learners most. The examinations in S4 check their progression, even though opportunities have been created for them in the Higher Still programme.

2.3 Core Skills

The responsibility that schools have to equip young people with high levels of literacy and numeracy and ICT was re-stated in the Scottish Government's document, *Skills for Scotland, a Lifelong Skills Strategy* (2007). The document points out that, without these skills, 'the development of other skills is compromised.'

The strategy is built on the view that learners should have the opportunity to build up a strong foundation of a wide range of 'overlapping clusters of skills', including personal and learning skills that enable individuals to become effective lifelong learners; literacy and numeracy; the five Core Skills of communication, numeracy, problem solving, information technology and working with others; employability skills that prepare individuals for employment rather than for a specific vocation; essential skills that include all of the above; vocational skills that are specific to a particular occupation or sector; and softer skills such as effective time-management, planning and organising, the ability to think critically and creatively and to carry out tasks independently.

The Skills Strategy emphasises the importance of ensuring that learning is geared towards helping individuals to utilise their skills at all levels — ‘from foundation-level to PhD’ — not only their subject-based knowledge and understanding, but also the practical application skills, generic cognitive skills, communication skills and autonomy, accountability and the ability to work with others.

The Howie report noted ‘a general consensus in industry, education and government that certain Core Skills are very important for the future economic and social well-being of the country’. It recommended that all students in upper secondary education should have the opportunity to develop their skills in communication, personal and inter-personal skills, problem-solving, numeracy, information technology and modern languages.

In the event, the study of a modern language was not included in the list of Core Skills embraced by the Higher Still programme, and personal and inter-personal skills were replaced by working with others. The programme saw the Core Skills as a means of integrating academic and vocational learning for all students. They were ‘embedded’ in Standard Grade and National Courses in traditional subjects where appropriate, but discrete Core Skills were also available. Raffe *et al* (2005) reported that

‘colleges already took Core Skills seriously and took advantage of the flexible new National Qualifications which allowed different modes of delivery ranging from the discrete to the wholly embedded. Hardly any schools offered discrete Core Skills Units. Certificates described each student’s Core Skills profile, but when Core Skills were embedded this profile was merely inferred from the subjects that had been passed.’

The research concluded that this had led to confusion among students and teachers, a lack of credibility for the profile and a lack of ownership and understanding of Core Skills or of the need to acquire them.

The significant contribution already made by Core Skills had previously been recognised in a review by Roy Canning (2006) on the delivery of Core Skills in the workplace. Features identified, both positive and negative, were that: the majority of providers were using individual learning plans; there was little evidence of progression within the Core Skills levels; those providers who offered progression from Intermediate 1 to Intermediate 2 qualifications generally used diagnostic assessment tools to place candidates on the appropriate level; instructors often conflated teaching with assessment; the most effective way to deliver Core Skills was to make them context-specific to the occupation and thus directly relevant to the learner; the perception of respondents was that candidates’ Core Skills profiles were achieved through discrete ‘taught’ Units and not, as in many cases, achieved through the skills being embedded in National Qualifications.

The review suggests that the ‘best practice’ examples of the teaching and assessment of Core Skills were found in organisations that offered discrete Workplace Core Skill Units linked to an ‘employability’ agenda. It recommends

that the use of ‘naturally-occurring’ evidence should be encouraged and that External Verifiers need to support assessors in the use of continuous assessment practices for Core Skills that are based upon existing naturally occurring evidence.

2.4 Vocational education

Howie noted in 1992 that vocational education enjoyed relatively low esteem in schools, and pointed out that the lack of a coherent programme of vocational courses was both a cause and a symptom of this low esteem. His report advocated increased provision of such courses, including some for the most able students. It was also necessary to consider how vocational and academic education could be made more convergent in terms of educational philosophy and practice. The removal of unnecessary differences would help to promote parity of esteem.

In their study of the impact of the Higher Still programme, Raffe *et al* concluded that it had removed formal distinctions between academic and vocational learning by bringing them into the same curriculum and qualifications framework, but ‘it did not achieve parity of esteem.’ This, they observe, would have been unrealistic given the importance of educational selection, especially selection for higher education.

Subjects that succeeded in raising their status, Home Economics for example, did so by becoming more theoretical and gaining recognition for university entrance. S5 students with good Higher Grade attainments still took fewer vocational courses than their low-attaining fellow students. On average there was a very slight increase in the uptake of vocational courses by S5 students, but this did not apply to the lowest attaining students, among whom there was a slight increase in the uptake of ‘academic’ subjects because these were now available at Intermediate level (Tinklin *et al*, 2005). Where new National Qualifications were brought into the third and fourth years, it was mainly in ‘academic’ subjects (Howieson *et al*, 2004).

Schools that introduced vocational courses for 14–16 year olds in response to the government’s Circular 3/2001 on Curriculum Flexibility were more likely to use qualifications other than new NQs, for example Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs).

The Scottish Executive made a commitment in 2004 to deliver a new programme of qualifications in learning about skills for work by 2007. It announced that Skills for Work (SfW) courses were going to be introduced to help young people to develop skills and knowledge in a broad vocational area, Core Skills, an understanding of the workplace, positive attitudes to learning, and employability skills. The courses are intended to provide progression pathways to further learning, training or employment for students of all abilities.

Beginning in 2005, SQA has introduced and then expanded a range of Skills for Work courses designed to bring real benefits to the young people involved: an understanding of the work place and of their responsibilities; problem solving; how to be adaptable and have a positive attitude to change; how to evaluate their own progress, strengths and weaknesses; and the confidence to set goals, reflect

and learn from experience. The delivery of the courses is flexible in that they can be taken in college, in school, in the work place or in a combination of these. Assessment involves a range of different tasks, including practical assignments, short tests and keeping personal records.

In its *Skills Strategy (2007)*, the Scottish Government restated its commitment to ensuring that vocational skills and qualifications have parity of esteem with academic skills and qualifications. In particular, it undertakes to provide increased opportunities by expanding school-college and other partnerships, to promote vocational education through the Curriculum for Excellence, and to explore ways of promoting and recognising the wider achievements of learners.

After the first phase of the pilot, SQA reported that 32 local authorities had signed up for the next phase, and that candidates were positive too (SQA 2006). The HMIE report (HMIE 2007) looked at a wide range of issues, from the impact on learners and learning and teaching approaches to partner and management arrangements and quality assurance. It concluded that the pilot phase of Skills for Work courses demonstrated many strengths.

The OECD report takes the view that Skills for Work courses have been introduced at the margins of, or at a tangent to, the mainstream curriculum. There is, the authors say, a risk that the approaches to learning promoted by Skills for Work courses may not impact on teaching and course throughout the curriculum. Vocational courses should be implemented in the context of a wider commitment to improving standards of attainment through a flexible and strategic use of the curriculum.

The final evaluation of the pilot concluded (Spielhofer & Walker, 2008, Scottish Government 2008):

‘The evaluation has shown that the Skills for Work pilot has been successful in achieving most of its objectives. Schools, colleges and providers are committed to the value of Skills for Work courses and see them as having raised the status of vocational learning in schools; providers have developed and tested out different approaches to delivering courses and overcome various obstacles and challenges; schools and colleges are increasingly recognising the need to work more closely together and have started to implement strategies to strengthen their partnerships; colleges and schools are positive about the impact of courses on students’ attitudes and skills relevant to employment, their motivation to learn, and their ability to work with and relate to adults; finally, more than four-fifths of students had passed their courses by the end of the second year of the pilot.’

The OECD report recommends that Scotland should take a broader and bolder approach to vocational education than it has so far done. Vocational studies should involve a mix of courses that emphasise applied and collaborative learning, problem-solving, sharing of learning tasks, overt meaning and purpose, formative and competency-based assessment, and real-world orientation:

‘Vocational studies are intended to form the whole person, and to be motivational and constructive of broad capacities. Their economic rationale is also important and should be explicit.’

Scotland’s approach to the provision of vocational education and training to young people in schools can be viewed as the single most important vehicle for creating incentives and raising achievement.

2.5 Timing and phasing of qualifications

The problem of the ‘two-term dash’ to Higher Grade in fifth year had long been recognised. It pre-dated the Munn and Dunning reforms and was identified by Howie as ‘perhaps the most fundamental theme of all — the uneven gradient of difficulty throughout school education.’ Many of the problems faced by schools derived from attempting to do too much, too quickly, from an inappropriate starting point.

The OECD report (2007) similarly concluded that, on the evidence of attainment of Scottish students in S5 and S6, progression and attainment are ‘significantly constrained’ by the uneven quality of the learning experience in the earlier, compulsory years of secondary schooling. Howie’s solution, which was not accepted, was to accelerate the pace of learning in the earlier years, complete Standard Grade by the end of third year, and thus create the conditions for two and three year courses from S4 to S5/6.

Concerns about the gradient of difficulty were also raised by HMIE during the 1990s and beyond, not least in its reports on provision in the first and second years in secondary schools. When their progress was compared against what they had achieved in primary schools, many students were reported either to be ‘marking time’ or even regressing. The Scottish Education Department furthered the debate in 1999 by encouraging schools to address issues of age and stage in the curriculum and assessment.

The introduction of the Higher Still programme in 2000 created an opportunity for students to bridge the gap between Standard Grade and Higher. It offered Intermediate qualifications to be taken in the fifth year before progressing to Higher in the sixth year. Raffe *et al* conclude that the programme succeeded in improving access and allowed middle and low achievers at Standard Grade to take more courses at more appropriate levels. Increased opportunity was not, however, reflected in increased attainment.

In 2004, the Minister of Education announced Curriculum for Excellence, which intends to address the long-standing problem of a lack of focus and motivation for many young people in the early part of their secondary schooling. Curriculum for Excellence defines purposes and is the basis for establishing much clearer outcomes for this stage of schooling. It also addressed issues of progression and articulation between early and later secondary stages. This new curriculum will be introduced in 2009.

Faced with the combined pressure of under-achievement in first and second years, and the lack of time in fifth year, a growing number of schools have taken advantage of the Scottish Education Department Circular 3/2001 (*Guidance on Flexibility in the Curriculum*) to introduce Standard Grade courses into second and third years and to enter students for Standard Grade examinations at the end of their third year. The intention was twofold, to improve the pace and challenge of learning in the early years and to create more time for the approach to Highers in fifth and sixth years.

In 2005, the Scottish Executive issued guidance on the steps to be taken by any school that was considering early presentation for national examinations. In essence, the advice was that any such decision should be based on the needs of the individual student and not on a cohort or year group. This advice was confirmed in a statement by the Cabinet Secretary in September 2007.

2.6 The burden of assessment and its impact on learning

HMI reports available to the Howie Committee in 1991 revealed that there were already concerns that a three-year diet of examinations from S4–S6 led to considerable pressure on students. This theme was picked up in the Scottish Government’s ‘Great Debate’ in 2002, when the majority of respondents agreed that Scottish students faced too many examinations or tests.

The pressure came not only from the annual diet of examinations but also from the ‘prelim’ examinations and other tests set within schools to prepare students for ‘the real thing’ and to obtain evidence for SQA examination appeals. The assessment burden for S4 students may also be increased by the Standard Grade ‘safety net’, which allows them to take examinations covering two adjacent levels in each subject.

It is also argued by some teachers that the assessment burden has been further increased by Higher Still’s introduction of Unit assessments and re-assessments. These pressures are not confined to the stages covered by qualifications and certification. Concern has also been voiced about the use of National Tests (Assessments) and Standardised Tests in primary schools and in the first two years of secondary school.

Schools, local authorities and HMIE make use of statistical information on performance in examinations for evaluative purposes. This practice is generally accepted as part of the culture of self-evaluation and school improvement, but the conversion of this information into so-called ‘league tables’ is widely perceived as adding to the adverse effect of the exam-driven approach to assessment.

Within a few years of the introduction of Higher Still, schools began to engage with the *Assessment is for Learning* programme (*AifL*) and to adopt a range of practices associated with formative assessment and its impact on learning. While the programme is in no way dismissive of summative and evaluative assessment, teachers’ engagement with *AifL* has caused them to be more aware of the possible

tensions between formative assessment and the summative assessment associated with qualifications and certification.

The OECD report recommends that rolling consultation be undertaken with teachers from a wide cross-section of schools about their classroom experience in delivering courses, the quality of course design, and learning Outcomes for students. It says that not enough is known about the way Courses (for qualification) are taught, and how demanding they are for teachers in terms of time and expertise. This recommendation seems to consider the qualifications or Courses for senior secondary school as part of the curriculum rather than arrangements defining form and content of the examinations.

2.7 Modularisation/unitisation

The Munn and Dunning developments of the 1980s introduced certificated short courses to the third and fourth years of secondary schools. These Courses were intended to support balance and breadth in the curriculum. Candidates' attainment was assessed internally by their teachers. The then Scottish Examination Board (SEB) moderated these assessments to ensure that national standards were being maintained.

At the same time, students continuing in full-time post-16 education, as well as adults returning to education, were able to opt to study for National Certificate modules or SEB short courses as an alternative or complement to Higher courses. In some cases, modules were grouped together to form programmes leading to a Group Award, and equivalences were established, for example with a C pass at Higher.

The issue of modularisation or unitisation of the curriculum was rehearsed by the Howie Committee in the early 1990s. Modularisation was then a prevalent trend in post-school vocational education across the United Kingdom, and was being adopted in higher education as a means of promoting flexible access and credit accumulation and transfer. Modularisation was seen to offer ease of access by students to individual components of courses; flexible accumulation of qualifications over a number of years; ease of updating in response to technological and social change; the identification and provision of common elements in different courses; and the motivation and clarity of purpose that can be engendered by short-term targets.

On the other hand, it was recognised that modularisation can lead to fragmentation and trivialisation of learning. It can also contribute to over-assessment and assessment-driven learning, and necessitates an emphasis on internal assessment which, though welcome in certain circumstances, ought to be one element in a balance of assessment modes.

In the event, the Howie Committee concluded that it should found the development of new vocational programmes in schools on the framework of existing National Certificate modules, but that there was no compelling reason to introduce a framework of 40- or 80-hour modules to the academic pathway.

The Higher Still programme introduced a flexible qualifications system consisting of Units that can stand alone as a certificated qualification or be combined into Courses, just like all other SQA provision (except Standard Grade — the Elements of a course at Standard Grade are not certificated separately).

2.8 Flexibility

One of the aims of the Higher Still programme was to produce a flexible qualifications system in which Units could be free-standing and internally assessed or combined into full courses in which the overall grade is determined in an external examination. Soon after the introduction of Higher Still, schools were given greater freedom and flexibility by the Scottish Executive Circular 3/2001. Some moved Standard Grades into S2 and S3 or introduced the new National Courses and Units, in some or all subjects, into the middle school. Some schools also turned to alternative providers of Courses and qualifications on the grounds that SQA provision did not always allow them to respond appropriately to the needs of their students and to local circumstances.

The research by Raffe *et al* shows that the greater flexibility has improved access to Courses, but it has not led to improved attainment for the lower-attaining group.

The OECD report comments that, being modular, National Courses offer flexibility since they can be combined in different ways and taken as Units or Courses. The graduated cognitive level of subjects and the modular construction are said to offer significant advantages over more traditional systems of course design.

The report also suggests that problems of equity and quality are more likely to be resolved if more management responsibility is devolved to schools. This development needed to be accompanied by a more flexible institutional framework of curriculum, examinations and qualifications: ‘Without greater flexibility in arrangements relating to curriculum, examinations and qualifications, more autonomy for councils and schools will not go far.’

2.9 Internal assessment

The Dunning report recommended that all students should have the opportunity to study for the Scottish Certificate of Education, that both examinations and internal assessment should play a part in determining qualifications and that all students should be assessed in a way that enabled them to demonstrate positive achievement.

Standard Grade Courses initially promoted a combination of internal and external assessment, with the Element that was assessed internally and moderated externally contributing to the student’s overall qualification. The 1990s saw a lessening in the use of internal assessment in some subjects, a development brought about by concerns about teachers’ workload, about plagiarism and disadvantage and grade-inflation.

In Mathematics, the concern was one of volume of content: space and time had to be created for the teaching of Statistics, and the Investigative Element was removed to allow for this. In the Sciences, an adjustment was made to the weighting given to the internally-assessed Practical Skills Element so that it now counts for 20%, and not 33%, of the overall qualification.

Howie considered the case for criterion-referenced assessment strong, and said that it was best to combine the strengths of internal assessment, supported by verification and a national bank of assessment materials, and external assessment. The balance of the assessment modes should be decided on the intrinsic merits rather than on the curricular structure. In the event, the Howie recommendations were not adopted.

The Higher Still programme ushered in National Courses. In most of these, assessment and certification were based on internally assessed Units, which might be subject to external verification, and on external examination. Performance in the Units was ungraded, and the overall qualification was determined by performance in the external examination. In some National Courses, the ungraded qualification is based on internal assessment, subject to external verification.

All the development programmes covered by this paper have made the case for a combination of internal and external assessment. They have also called for the rigorous application of quality assurance systems in each school to ensure that assessment methods are used consistently within individual departments and across the school or centre.

2.10 Group Awards

The Howie report identified what it saw as a number of advantages of Group Awards. These were: breadth of study; coherence in the student's experience; control over the balance of assessments and learning activities across subjects; an ethos in which students are encouraged to respect the qualities of different subjects; a more rational and efficient use of staff; clearer guidance and structure for the curriculums in schools; closer matching of theoretical studies with vocational studies; the possibility of including synthesising components.

Disadvantages were also identified, principally that the Group Award might penalise students with particular strengths, interests or weaknesses, and that the concept ran counter to recent practice in Scotland's schools.

The Higher Still programme included proposals for the introduction of Group Awards, but they were largely ignored by schools. There were several reasons for the failure of the Group Award to take hold. Schools themselves were under considerable pressure in implementing other aspects of the programme; the influence of the subject-based curriculum was still very strong, and students continued to choose the subjects in which their prospects of certification were brighter; the rules governing Group Awards seemed rather complicated; schools encouraged students to choose their subjects first and then explore which Group Awards might accompany their chosen curriculum; the fact that the same

combination of subjects could lead to more than one Group Award did little for the credibility of the system; and higher education seemed to display little enthusiasm for the awards.

At present, Group Awards are more commonly associated with FE colleges, and SQA is currently extending its portfolio of National Qualification Group Awards. These are vocational qualifications made up of National Units designed to prepare people for employment, for career development or for progression to further study. NQ Group Awards are available across a range of subjects, from Computing and IT to Construction, and from Sport and Leisure to Travel and Tourism, as well as Care, Engineering, and Hairdressing and Beauty. There are two types of NQ Group Awards: National Certificates and National Progression Awards. They are at SCQF levels 2–6 and are delivered in colleges or through partnerships between colleges, schools and employers.

2.11 Grading

At Standard Grade, all learners are assessed in a way that is designed to enable the individual to demonstrate positive achievement, measured against stated standards. Learners have to provide evidence of achievement in all aspects or ‘elements’ of a subject before an overall grade can be awarded.

The Dunning report recommended that the replacement qualification for the O Grade should be assessed by a combination of examinations and internal assessment by teachers. Standard Grades Elements are assessed in a variety of ways. In the majority of Elements students have to demonstrate practical or performance skills, and these are usually assessed by the class teacher. Other Elements are assessed by examination or on the basis of folio work submitted to SQA for external assessment. In most subjects, learners sit an exam at two adjacent levels, although that was not the original intention.

Each element is graded using a set of Grade Related Criteria. Both the element grades and the overall grade are reported on the learner’s certificate. Learners are awarded an overall grade based on the individual Element grades. Standard Grade attainment is graded at one of seven grades: grades 1 and 2 (Credit); grades 3 and 4 (General); grades 5 and 6 (Foundation) and grade 7 (course completed).

Most National Courses are graded from A to D. The Course is made up of 120 hours of internally-assessed Units, plus an externally-assessed and graded Course assessment (40 hours is allocated to prepare for this). To gain a National Course award, candidates are required to achieve passes in the Units of the Course and to demonstrate attainment in the Course assessment in line with the Course Grade Descriptions.

Some National Courses (Access courses in a wide range of subject areas, the Skills for Work courses and the new course in Personal Development) are not graded.

Skills for Work Courses at SCQF levels 4–6 are made up of 160 hours of internally-assessed Units (usually four Units). There is no external assessment, and the Course is awarded pass/fail on completion of all of the Units.

Access Courses (including Skills for Work Courses at this level) are made up of 120 hours of internally assessed Units (usually three Units) plus an additional 40 hours for induction, support, consolidation and integration. There is no external assessment, and the Course is awarded pass/fail on completion of all of the Units.

The new Personal Development course is offered at SCQF levels 2–6. There is no external assessment, and the Course will be awarded pass/fail on completion of the Units.

In all National Courses, graded and ungraded, learners are assessed in a way that is designed to enable the individual to demonstrate positive achievement, measured against stated standards. Each Unit is assessed by the teacher on a pass/fail basis. In Graded Courses, the Course assessment is usually assessed externally, and is graded A–D. Often this is an examination, but projects, practical tasks or assignments can be used instead of, or alongside, an examination. This varies from subject to subject.

In Skills for Work and other Courses without grading, achievement is assessed at key points throughout the Course, and learners are actively involved in both the learning and assessment processes. The assessment involves a variety of approaches including gathering folios of evidence, personal records, activity checklists and short tests.

Access Courses recommend that learners should be aware of assessment criteria and instruments. The intention is that on-going assessment will take place, informing and supporting candidates. Holistic approaches to assessment are encouraged. A variety of approaches to assessment may be appropriate. The structure of the assessment system offers guidance on the allocation of time to different components of the programme, but it is flexible and the decision of the teacher or lecturer will also be influenced by the needs, abilities and interests of the group.

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