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UPPER-SECONDARY EDUCATION
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INTRODUCTION
There are several paradoxes at the heart of Scottish upper-secondary education. Other countries admire its alleged breadth and high standards, the high proportion of school leavers it sends on to university, and its pioneering modular system of vocational education; but within Scotland it is seen to be failing and in need of reform. It is embarking on a reform introduced by a Conservative government with the support of industry and the political right; but this reform will extend comprehensive education and is inspiring left-wing reformers south of the Border. The reform is one of the most radical and far-reaching attempted in any country at this level of education; but it has been moulded by vested interests, embodies an evolutionary strategy of change, and may yet fail to challenge the deep-rooted conservatism of Scottish secondary education.

The reform, Higher Still, will introduce a unified system of upper-secondary education in 1999. It is too soon in 1997 to predict its success or its impact on Scottish education. Yet it is no longer possible to write about upper-secondary education in Scotland without giving Higher Still a central place. In this chapter I first describe the system of the mid 1990s, many of whose key features will persist after 1999, and the students who enter it. I then outline the weaknesses of this system, the debates which led to the publication of Higher Still in 1994, and the main features of the system which it will introduce. Finally, I discuss Higher Still in relation to other possible reform strategies, and suggest why a unified system was adopted. In the process I hope to explain the paradoxes listed above.

UPPER-SECONDARY EDUCATION: THE EMERGENCE OF A STAGE
Most secondaries have an ‘upper school’, but the term ‘upper-secondary education’ was not used much before the Howie committee adopted it in 1992. Until recently the fifth and sixth years of secondary school (S5 and S6) did not comprise a very substantial or distinct stage of Scottish education. Only a minority of students stayed on, and most of these left after a year. In many
schools voluntary stayers were outnumbered by ‘winter leavers’, students who had to stay on for the first term of S5 because they were too young to leave after S4. Many S5 students took S4 courses. Most students who stayed on continued at the same school; Scotland has no equivalent of the Sixth Form College or Tertiary College.

However, S5 and S6 are becoming a more distinct stage of Scottish education. More students stay on voluntarily at school, and they stay there longer. There is a clearer break with S4, and few S5 students continue with S4 courses. Higher Still will place all S5 and S6 courses within a single framework, and emphasise the break with the compulsory school years. But while the boundary between compulsory and upper-secondary schooling gets stronger, in the longer term this will be balanced by an increasingly flexible boundary between upper-secondary schooling and cognate provision in further, higher and continuing education.

STUDENTS IN UPPER-SECONDARY EDUCATION

About three-quarters of Scottish sixteen-year-olds stay on voluntarily in full-time education beyond the end of S4. The vast majority of these—70 per cent of the year group in 1995–6—stay on at school, and the remaining 5 per cent enter full-time further education (FE) (Scottish Office 1996:6; Lynn 1996:25). Winter leavers account for a further 10 per cent or so of the year group. School staying-on rates have been rising since the 1970s, more continuously than in England, where periods of rapid expansion have alternated with periods of stability.

Most young people stay on at school for instrumental reasons, to get qualifications for higher education or a job. More young people are staying on because the incentives to do so have become stronger: there are more places in higher education to aim for and employers are demanding higher credentials. Conversely, the decline in the youth labour market and the continued risk of unemployment has reduced the incentive to leave school at sixteen. Other factors have contributed to rising staying-on rates. More young people are from middle-class homes and have better-educated parents, factors traditionally associated with higher educational aspirations and with staying on. Rising Standard Grade attainments in S4 have encouraged more people to stay on to S5 to build on their success. Young people’s main reasons for staying on are instrumental, but a growing proportion say that they stay on also because they enjoy school life, or wish to study particular courses or subjects (Paterson and Raffe 1995).

Staying-on rates to S6 (at seventeen years) have risen even faster, proportionately, than staying on to S5. Between 1985 and 1995 the proportion of each year group staying on voluntarily to S5 rose from 46 to 70 per cent, while the proportion staying on to S6 rose from 21 to 43 per cent (Scottish Office 1996:6). In the mid 1980s only a minority of voluntary stayers to S5 subsequently continued into S6; by the mid 1990s a majority stayed on to S6 and upper-secondary schooling is increasingly a two-year stage. This largely reflects the influence of higher education. It is possible to enter higher education from S5,
and about 5 per cent of each age group do so, but most young people need two post-compulsory years to gain the qualifications for admission to higher education.

Most students with good Standard Grade attainment stay on as a matter of course, while those with poor attainments tend to see little point in continuing at school. This is changing slowly, and staying-on rates have risen fastest among the least qualified. As more young people stay on, S5 students are becoming more heterogeneous. However, in one important respect they are becoming more homogeneous: a growing proportion has aimed to enter further or higher education, and at least up to the mid 1990s a growing proportion has succeeded in doing so. Despite the expansion of the upper-secondary school, it is not the terminal stage of education for most students (Surridge and Raffe 1995).

**UPPER-SECONDARY COURSES AND QUALIFICATIONS IN THE MID 1990s**

The distinctive features of courses in S5 and S6 are flexibility (most courses are short or modular and permit year-on-year decision-making) and the absence of tracks. The main components of the S5 curriculum are ‘academic’ Highers and ‘vocational’ National Certificate (NC) modules; but instead of being channelled into one or other of these most students take both, in varying proportions.

The Higher is the principal upper-secondary course, and the main qualification for higher education. It is a subject-based course, traditionally taken over one year, although it is often offered over two years to students with modest attainments in the subject at Standard Grade. A high-attaining student with six or seven Standard Grades at Credit level is likely to study five Highers in S5. Since three Highers are the notional minimum requirement for university entrance, the equivalent of two A levels in the rest of the United Kingdom, this student could qualify for university after only one post-compulsory year. However, even able students find the step up from Standard Grade to Higher a difficult one, and most students take fewer than five Highers in S5, often only one or two, and they use NC modules to fill the gaps.

The National Certificate is a national system of modules, each of a notional forty hours’ duration, available in schools, colleges and other centres. It was introduced in 1984, when it replaced nearly all non-advanced vocational courses in Scotland. The Action Plan which introduced it (Scottish Education Department 1983) was a wide-ranging reform. It rationalised provision within a single modular framework, updated the curriculum and promoted more progressive approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. It was primarily intended as a reform of FE, but the NC modules, which covered most of the general curriculum as well as occupationally specific fields, proved unexpectedly successful in schools. Most S5 and S6 students take at least one module, and NC students in schools outnumber NC students in FE colleges. Modules are variously used in schools to provide short programmes for winter leavers, as an alternative to
Highers for lower-attaining students, in conjunction with Highers (as a bridge or safety-net), to extend the Highers curriculum (adding vocational enhancements and interest courses or filling small gaps in the timetable), or to deliver areas of the curriculum where Highers certification was unavailable or inappropriate (Weir and Kydd 1991; Croxford et al. 1991). Modules also fill the gap left by the phasing-out of O Grades since the late 1980s. Previously many S5 students had resat S4 O Grades, or attempted new O Grade subjects, often alongside Highers (McPherson 1984); Standard Grade courses are less suited for S5 study and students are more likely to take modules instead. Despite the wide take-up of modules in schools, few S5 or S6 students study programmes composed mainly of NC modules. The role of modules is largely secondary to that of Highers, and they tend to be seen as second-class (Croxford et al. 1991). Their value as credentials is uncertain, and the difference in status between Highers and modules is reinforced by differences in curriculum design, pedagogy and assessment.

Students who stay on to S6 take varying combinations of Highers (either new subjects or subjects started in S5 and taken over two years), NC modules and courses leading to the Certificate of Sixth Year Studies (CSYS). The CSYS is a post-Higher course, designed to promote independent study and to help students prepare for university. However, it is not normally recognised as a university entrance qualification and for this reason has had a somewhat problematic status.

Most upper-secondary students take English and mathematics, taken by 77 per cent and 71 per cent respectively of S5 and S6 students in 1993. The next most popular subjects were business subjects (29 per cent of students), biology (27 per cent), art and design (24 per cent), chemistry and physics (each 23 per cent) and computing subjects (21 per cent) (Scottish Office 1995:4). These figures do not include subjects such as physical education and guidance which are part of the timetable of most students, but not usually certificated.

Despite the flexibility of upper-secondary courses, students do not usually pick and mix at random. Most schools impose curricular guidelines, for instance requiring English and mathematics, or structure the option columns to promote a coherent spread of subjects. NC modules are sometimes delivered in coherent clusters of three, and several local authorities have devised larger group awards. In 1992 General Scottish Vocational Qualifications (GSVQs), broad-based programmes of 12 or 18 NC modules, were introduced on a pilot basis. Like many other innovations in Scottish education, GSVQs responded to an English agenda (to be comparable to GNVQs) and are less appropriate for Scottish circumstances. In the absence of English-style tracks they do not have a large constituency within schools (Murray 1996). The kinds of students who take GNVQs in England attempt one or two Highers along with NC modules in Scotland; they are unlikely to sacrifice the currency of the Higher for a new award of uncertain status.
THE CASE FOR CHANGE

Towards the end of the 1980s upper-secondary-school courses came under increasing criticism. It was claimed that they lacked breadth and especially depth, and that the Higher represented a lower standard of attainment than the A level or its continental equivalents. Students were over-assessed, and the short Higher course—the ‘two-term dash’—encouraged a teacher-centred pedagogy which left students ill prepared for more independent study in higher education. The system was failing to meet the needs of the more heterogeneous S5 population, especially middle-attaining students for whom Highers were too difficult but NC modules lacked coherence or status (Raffe 1997).

Many critics argued that Highers courses should be extended to two years. However, this was opposed by many Scottish educationists, who argued that a two-year Higher would reduce flexibility and access, and discourage participation since students staying on would have to commit themselves for two years. They also feared that it would imperil the four-year Scottish honours degree, which was symbolically linked to the fifth-year exit point from school. In 1990 the government appointed a committee under Professor John Howie to review courses and assessment in S5 and S6. Many people perceived that it had been appointed to introduce a two-year Higher, and much of the evidence submitted to the committee was conservative in tone, arguing that key features of the present system—including the flexibility of courses, the incremental course structure and the S5 exit point—should be preserved (McPherson 1992).

The committee’s report was more radical (Scottish Office Education Department 1992). It endorsed the criticisms of the system that had been expressed and added some of its own—notably that there was an ‘uneven gradient of attainment’ which was too shallow in S1 and S2 and much too steep in S5, when many students found Highers difficult even after a Credit pass at Standard Grade in S4. The report argued that the S5 curriculum lacked coherence and that failure rates were too high, especially among middle-ability students taking one or two Highers. It proposed to advance Standard Grade to S3 and to introduce a twin-track system from S4 onwards. About 35–40 per cent of each cohort would follow a three-year programme, modelled on the academic track of Danish upper-secondary education; the others would follow a one- or two-year modular programme based on GSVQs.

The Howie Report punctured the complacency which had suffocated Scottish educational debate. It encouraged Scots to judge their system by European standards rather than through comparisons with England. Howie’s diagnosis of the weaknesses of the current Scottish system was widely accepted, and Scotland is now almost unique among European education systems in having a consensus on the need to reform its leading qualification. There is no Scottish equivalent of the A-level lobby which has stifled change in England. However, the public consultations following the Howie Report revealed another point of consensus: that whatever the merits of Howie’s diagnosis, his proposed remedy, the
introduction of tracking into Scottish secondary schools, was unacceptable. Howie’s twin-track system was almost universally rejected as divisive, impractical and in conflict with the Scottish comprehensive tradition (Howieson et al. 1997).

**HIGHER STILL**

The government took note of these reactions, and in March 1994 published *Higher Still: Opportunity for All* (Scottish Office 1994). This took Howie’s diagnosis as its starting point but rejected his remedy. Instead it announced that a ‘unified curriculum and assessment system’ would be introduced, to cover all academic and vocational education beyond S4 and below the level of higher education. Scheduled for implementation in 1999, the system will embrace most FE and much adult provision as well as the upper-secondary school. The main exception is work-based provision, which will continue to be covered by Scottish Vocational Qualifications.

The main building blocks of the new system will be 160-hour courses. Each course is composed of three 40-hour units (or a 40-hour unit and an 80-hour unit) plus a further 40 hours ‘for induction, extending the range of learning and teaching approaches, remediation, consolidation, integration and preparation for external assessment’ (Higher Still Development Unit 1995). Units may also be studied and certificated separately. All courses and units, whether academic or vocational, follow consistent principles of curriculum design, assessment and certification. Units and courses will be available at five levels: Access, Intermediate 1, Intermediate 2, Higher and Advanced Higher. A student with a Credit pass at Standard Grade would normally progress to a Higher course in that subject in S5 (as at present); a student with a General pass would be likely to take that subject at Intermediate 2 level; and so on. Students may take a mixture of subjects at different levels, and may progress horizontally or vertically within the system. For example, S6 students who have passed Highers in S5 may choose to continue the same subjects at Advanced Higher or to take new subjects at Higher (or at a lower level if their prior attainment in the subject makes this advisable), or a mixture of the two.

The key to the Higher Still strategy is the single ladder of progression and attainment. Most education systems deal with the diversity of students by providing different ladders for students to climb, and allocating students to the ladder most suited to their climbing ability. This is what the Howie committee proposed for Scotland, with its twin-track model. Higher Still follows a different approach. It reorganises existing provision to form a single ladder, but allows students to start climbing at the rung on the ladder which corresponds to their prior level of attainment, and to climb at the speed which suits them. At the heart of this strategy is the introduction of rungs below Higher. A middle-attaining student with a General pass at Standard Grade, who in the past had to choose between a Higher which was too difficult or modules which lacked status, can
now join the ladder at Intermediate 2 (the level below Higher) and remain in the educational mainstream, climbing to Higher and beyond in subsequent years. Hence the subtitle of Higher Still: Opportunity for All. However, the principle of the single ladder will be subverted if the system becomes a race: that is, if selectors in higher education or elsewhere only count attainments reached by a given age or stage such as the end of S6 (Raffe 1995).

The aims of Higher Still include the ‘expansion and rationalisation of existing provision’ and the ‘consolidation of earlier reforms’. Most of the new units and courses are based on pre-existing provision. For example, most of the new Highers courses are developed from pre-existing Highers or from clusters of NC modules. Many courses below Higher level are based on NC modules. Some Advanced Higher courses are based on CSYS. Nevertheless, many courses and units have to be significantly modified in order to fit the new curriculum structure and to match the new principles of course design, assessment and certification. Some courses are being further revised in order to update the curriculum, to promote the integration of academic and vocational learning or to ‘embed’ core skills. Schools are being encouraged to treat Higher Still as an incremental process; initially they may offer only the courses and units which correspond to their current S5 provision, but as they become more familiar with the system they may feel able to offer the wider opportunities promised by Higher Still. Some of these wider opportunities may require collaboration among schools or between schools and colleges, and Higher Still could potentially transform the existing division of functions between schools and colleges.

Among the opportunities which many schools may only introduce after a few years are Scottish Group Awards. Based partly on GSVQs, each SGA defines a given level and breadth of attainment, including core skills, in a coherent subject grouping, and provides a basis for progression. ‘Broadly based’ SGAs are planned in five subject areas: arts and humanities, business and society, consumer studies, science and mathematics, and technological studies. ‘Specialist’ SGAs are planned in a large number of more vocationally specific fields; these are likely to be delivered mainly in FE (Higher Still Development Unit 1996). However, the specification of SGAs, including the distinction between broadly based and specialist SGAs, is currently under review. The future role and status of broad-based SGAs are a matter of speculation, and will depend among other things on the extent to which higher education recognises SGAs rather than their constituent courses as entrance qualifications.

Like other innovations in Scottish education, Higher Still is centrally led, with the Inspectorate playing an important role, and consultative. Two major consultation rounds in 1995 and 1996 gave educationists the opportunity to comment on proposals for courses and units as well as on more general issues such as assessment, certification, core skills and guidance. The Higher Still development has been billed as the largest consultation exercise in the history of Scottish education. The wide scope of the reform—introducing a unified system—makes a large-scale consultation both necessary and difficult. It makes it
necessary because it aims to develop common principles and procedures throughout the diverse subjects, institutions and contexts of post-compulsory education in Scotland; this diversity must be represented in the consultation, so that all practitioners can raise issues which affect their specific situations. It makes it difficult because many practitioners cannot easily gain a perspective on the whole system of which their own practice forms a part. Consequently, although the consultation has been genuine, the role of consultees has been largely passive, responding to proposals rather than initiating them. The main outlines of the reform have not been changed by the consultation process. The reform process has just entered a new phase: in April 1997 the Scottish Examination Board and the Scottish Vocational Education Council, which used to award academic and vocational qualifications respectively, merged to form the Scottish Qualifications Authority, responsible for the new unified qualifications system.

The consultation has revealed wide support for the general aims of Higher Still, tinged with a degree of scepticism about the practicalities, including the timescale for reform, and anxieties over levels of resources and the effects on teacher workloads. Secondary education is suffering from innovation fatigue, an ageing workforce and a chronic and deteriorating shortage of resources. These are not the ideal conditions in which to implement a radical and visionary reform.

DISCUSSION: REFORM STRATEGIES FOR UPPER-SECONDARY EDUCATION

In Scotland as in other countries upper-secondary education faces the problems of expansion, both quantitative and qualitative. It must respond to new economic and social demands, and it must cater for students with a wider range of needs and abilities than the small and relatively homogeneous elite which it served a few decades ago. At the same time, it must respond to the rising aspirations of young people, who not only demand more education but are increasingly reluctant to pursue qualifications whose currency or status is lower than those of the academic mainstream. In nearly all countries, educational expansion is being fuelled by credentialism and by the drift into higher-status, academic courses (Pair forthcoming). In Scotland this has been reflected in the large number of students taking Highers and the failure of NC modules to establish a convincing alternative.

Countries have followed three main strategies in response to these pressures (Raffe 1993, 1996). Some, notably the German-speaking countries, have tried to resist the drift into academic courses by enhancing the status of their vocational tracks; this strategy emphasises the differences between the tracks so that vocational courses are not judged by the values of the academic track.

Most European countries, including England and Wales, are pursuing a second strategy, which retains tracks but seeks to develop closer links between them. Instead of emphasising the differences between tracks, this strategy emphasises
the similarities. This may be done in various ways: by defining common levels of attainment across tracks, by introducing over-arching diplomas based on qualifications from either track, by introducing curricular elements such as core skills common to all tracks, or by facilitating transfer and mobility between tracks. The Dearing Report, on 16–19 qualifications in the United Kingdom except Scotland, exemplifies many of these approaches (Dearing 1996).

The third strategy is to develop a unified system, which avoids allocating students to groups but differentiates according to individual needs and abilities within a single framework of provision. Scotland is pursuing this strategy.

The first and second of these strategies presuppose the existence of clearly defined tracks in the first place. In Scotland there have been different courses (Highers and NC modules) but not different tracks, as most school students have combined the two. If the Scottish system was to be rationalised the choice was therefore between reintroducing tracking, as proposed by Howie, and a unified system.

Scotland has chosen a unified system. There are at least three possible reasons for this choice. The first is in order to realise a vision of the society of the future and of the role of education within it (Finegold et al. 1990; Young 1993). In this vision education transcends the division between academic and vocational learning with its arbitrary barriers to learning and progression; it serves the economy of the future, which requires new kinds of skills and knowledge and high levels of education for all the workforce; and it ends the social divisiveness of educational selection. However, Higher Still is not visionary, even by the standards of government documents. It presents the reform as a response to problems in the current system, as identified by Howie and others. Higher Still was informed by the more visionary ideas of unification, but these were not its main driving force.

The second reason is pragmatic. A unified system goes with the grain of Scottish upper-secondary education. The flexibility in the existing system and the absence of clear tracks make it easier to construct a unified system and relatively difficult to establish viable tracks. Scotland lacks a strong tradition of full-time vocational or technical education, and an attempt to develop a separate vocational track would founder on the strong pressures for academic drift within the system and on the preference of young people, employers and universities for academic rather than vocational qualifications. Had Howie’s twin-track system been implemented, the upper track would have been massively over-subscribed, and the lower track would have had difficulty in establishing an identity (Raffe 1993).

The third reason is political. The Howie debate revealed a strong consensus in favour of a flexible course structure—not least among university interests, which associated it with the political argument for a four-year degree. The comprehensive school is more securely established, and has a stronger political base, than south of the Border; Howie-style tracking threatened the ethos, and perhaps also the institution, of the comprehensive school. The unified system
also appeals to industry and to right-wing interests, because it raises the status of vocational education and its model of flexibility allows education to be responsive to employer demands (Howieson et al. 1997).

These factors influenced not only the choice of a unified system as the strategy for Scotland, but also the model of unified system which is being implemented. Higher Still emphasises flexibility and rationalisation; it eschews institutional reform such as the introduction of a Tertiary College; it leaves work-based provision untouched; its approach to curricular reform is cautious; and it will have relatively little impact on the university-bound student or on the academic ethos of Scottish education.

Hence the paradoxes with which I began. A reform which others perceive to be visionary and radical is presented within Scotland as an incremental change in keeping with educational and political conservatism. But all reforms, however radical, build on what already exists; reforms which do this consciously may be more likely to keep sight of their original aims (Fullan 1991). Higher Still has the potential to transform upper-secondary education in Scotland.

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