

The History Curriculum in Scotland's Schools : A Decade of Change and Development 1987-1997

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In 1987 the publication of a new system of national examinations, Standard Grade, ushered in a decade of unprecedented change and development across the curriculum in Scottish primary and secondary schools. In the following year, pupils in the third year of secondary education [S3] began working towards the first Standard Grade examinations which they would sit in May 1990. In that same year of 1990, the curriculum and examinations arrangements for senior pupils in S5 and S6 were set out by the Scottish Examinations Board. These were the Revised Higher Grade and Revised Certificate of Sixth Year Studies. These arrangements came into effect for fifth year pupils in 1991 and sixth year pupils in 1992 and affected all subject disciplines across the curriculum including History. In 1993, the Scottish Office Education Department published National Guidelines for Environmental Studies which suggested the ways in which subjects such as History would figure in the learning experience of Scottish children in the 5 to 14 age range ie the primary years and the first two years of secondary. By 1995 the need to provide more coherent provision for the wider range of learners staying on in our schools after the age of 16 had been identified. This resulted in the publication of the Higher Still framework documentation. This initiative necessitated a further revision of the curriculum and assessment arrangements for learners in S5 and S6. These Higher Still proposals were put to the teaching profession for consultation in autumn 1995 and were intended to be implemented in August 1997. In the period 1987 to 1997 therefore, the entire Scottish school curriculum for the 5-18 had been subject to radical revision and change. The end of that decade of change seems a good point to reflect upon these developments in curriculum and assessment and to attempt to gauge the extent to which they have changed the nature of learning and teaching in Scottish classrooms. This essay has two aims. Firstly it seeks to describe the way in which these initiatives have affected the teaching of History in Scotland with particular regard to national syllabi and assessment for certification in the years S3 to S6. The second aim is to try to measure the extent to which these developments have been successful in bringing about their desired outcomes.

History syllabi and national certification in Scotland prior to 1987

The past decade has witnessed considerable innovation and experimentation in the History curriculum in Scotland. The nature and significance of these recent innovations is best appreciated by reference to the prior system of national assessment and certification in History in Scotland.

During the 1970s and 1980s most Scottish children of secondary school age attended state comprehensive secondaries which catered for the 12-16 age range and for that section of the cohort which stayed on at school from 16 to 18. In the first two years of secondary schooling (S1 and S2), most pupils experienced History as a separate subject, though in a small minority of schools History was incorporated within an integrated Social Subjects approach along with Geography and Modern Studies (a subject combining aspects of politics, constitutional studies, civics and recent modern history). Programmes of study were devised by Principal Teachers of History and

their colleagues and varied from school to school. At the end of S2 most pupils opted to continue to study one Social Subject with approximately 35 % choosing History over the period 1970 to 1990.

Responsibility for national arrangements for syllabi and assessment in History at this time lay wholly with the Scottish Examination Board, based at Dalkeith near Edinburgh. In S3 and S4 pupils followed the Scottish Certificate of Education (SCE) Ordinary Grade History syllabus which culminated in a national written examination at the end of S4. Ordinary Grade History, introduced in 1960, was originally designed for the top 30 % of the age cohort at a time when pupils were selected on academic grounds for entrance to 'senior' secondaries or grammar schools. Pupils who did well in S4 usually progressed in S5 to the Higher Grade which was the traditional passport to higher education at the tertiary level. In S6 a small number of pupils, who frequently expected to study History at university, opted to study the Certificate of Sixth Year Studies.

The emphasis in the SCE Ordinary, Higher and CSYS examinations was upon testing recall and understanding of historical knowledge. The traditional Ordinary and Higher syllabi were assessed by examinations which required the candidate to respond to questions in essay form. CSYS was assessed by written essay based examinations and by a 4000 word dissertation on a subject of the candidate's choosing, researched and prepared in the candidate's own time. In the early 1970s a revised alternative Ordinary and Highersyllabus were offered as an option. These Alternative examinations introduced primary source material but this was largely used as a stimulus to the candidates' response, rather than as an object of study in itself. The Alternative Ordinary examinations also included an opportunity for pupils to demonstrate their ability to write imaginatively and with empathy in the role of a historical character. Success in these examinations however still almost wholly depended on memorising and mastering the historical content of the syllabus.

It was a common practice for school History departments to pre-test their S4 pupils in a mock preliminary examination midway through S4. Pupils who did poorly in this school based examination were frequently not presented for the final national examination. Others were entered for the Ordinary examination and failed to gain a pass grade. These pupils therefore received no credit at all for the work done in History during their secondary years and left school with no certification to show for their attainment in the subject. To remedy this, in some parts of Scotland weaker pupils were identified in S2 and S3 and then entered for an Northern English Examination Board syllabus called the Certificate of School Education (CSE) which was designed for the less academic child. These pupils followed the CSE syllabus during S3 and S4 and received a certificate on the strength of coursework and project work completed throughout these two years. While it met the needs of many S3 and S4, the image of CSE suffered by comparison with the more academic Ordinary Grade.

Changes to History syllabi and national certification since 1987

In May 1988 arrangements for new national examinations in all subjects including History came into effect. The first pupils to sit these examinations did so in summer 1990. The older Ordinary Grade examinations were discontinued in 1992. There were

several important innovatory features to Standard Grade. Pupils who selected to study History could do so, and would be examined, at three levels, Credit, General or Foundation. This ensured that all pupils would receive credit in the form of national certification for their level of attainment in the subject. Pupil attainment would be assessed in respect of three assessable elements; Knowledge and Understanding, Evaluating and Investigating. Conceptual understanding rather than factual mastery was to be the key principle in testing pupil familiarity with syllabus content. KU and EV were to be tested in a national written examination. For the first time in Scotland, pupils were required in a national examination to demonstrate the ability to exercise some aspects of the Historian's Craft such as evaluating primary source material. The third element of Investigating was to be assessed by means of a written investigation by the pupils of a theme or issue negotiated by the pupil in discussion with his/her teacher. In the Investigation, pupils were required to plan, research and present an investigation into their topic. In an important departure from established custom, Investigations were graded internally by the classroom History teachers in each school rather than externally through the national mechanisms of the Scottish Examinations Board. The criteria for assessment placed significant emphasis upon the process of investigation rather than simply upon the evidence of the finished product.

In order to build upon the skills, expertise and conceptual understandings gained by pupils at Standard Grade by the end of S4, it was necessary to revise the syllabi and assessment of Higher and CSYS History in S5 and S6. Revised arrangements for History in S5 and S6 were published in 1990 and took effect for pupils in 1991. As in Standard Grade, the new Higher arrangements contained stated assessment objectives relating to Knowledge and Understanding, Evaluating and Investigating. As in Standard Grade, KU and EV were assessed by a national written examination. There were as before two examination papers and the first remained based on the writing of essays in response to a historical question or problem. In the second paper candidates were required to demonstrate that they had developed their skills of comprehending, interpreting and evaluating source material and that they were able to contextualise and analyse sources. Investigating at Higher Grade was assessed by a new device called the Extended Essay. Pupils were required to select, research and organise the study of a topic question of their own choice from within their field of study. Pupils were then required to present their findings by writing them up under examination conditions with reference only to a previously prepared 200 word plan. The Extended essay was intended to counter the criticisms of some teachers who claimed that some candidates failed to perform to their best ability in the existing external examination structure. The Extended Essay gave all candidates an opportunity to show their best standard of work by tackling a topic which was of their own choosing and which they had previously researched. Although teachers were involved in the preparatory stages of the Extended Essay, the final product was assessed externally.

The CSYS syllabus arrangements and national examinations had always had an emphasis upon the evaluation of source material and upon the pupil's individual research. They were therefore not altered in any fundamental way during the process of revision in 1989-1990.

A number of principles of curriculum design informed the work of the various working parties which steered the above changes into practice during the period 1984 to 1990. There was to be a clear rationale arguing for the place of history as an

important component in the curriculum experienced by each age group. Each course was to have a clear set of stated aims and objectives. There was to be a clear indication of the ways in which the pupil's knowledge and understanding, skills and conceptual understanding were to be progressively and continuously developed from Standard Grade to Higher Grade and beyond to CSYS. There was to be clear articulation between the courses allowing for progression in the pupil experience.

The Revised Higher and CSYS syllabi were however designed only for the more academic pupils in S5 and S6. By the late 1980s it was becoming clear that increasing numbers of school pupils were staying on at school for education in S5 and S6. In very many cases these were pupils who had enjoyed History at a lower level in their schooling but who were not suited for the academic menu on offer to them in Higher and CSYS. The number of weaker candidates in Higher classes increased, with such pupils often dropping out of the course before completion or achieving disappointing grades. In order to provide an appropriate learning experience for these pupils, an increasing number of schools turned to an alternative form of learning and certification.

These were Scottish Vocational and Educational Council [SCOTVEC] National Certificate modules. In the mid-1980s SCOTVEC had been established to address concerns about the quality of technical and vocational education and training on offer to Scots of school leaving age. In comparison to the year long Higher, National Certificate courses were short, being predicated on 40 hours of learning, and they were very clearly focussed on precise learning objectives and instruments of assessment. Mastery of a module brought relatively quick reward in terms of certification and allowed the learner to progress to the next, progressively more challenging level of module. Initially NC modules were only available in disciplines which had a direct vocational relevance. By the late 1980s however, the success of National Certificate modules had encouraged SCOTVEC to provide suites of modules in disciplines such as History. In 1990 the People in the Past NC modules were published. These prescribed exact methods of learning and assessment but deliberately allowed classroom teachers some degree of flexibility in deciding the specific historical content which pupils could study. The History modules allowed pupils to study in the contexts of local, Scottish, British, European and Global History. School History departments were now able to use these modules in order to ensure adequate provision for all levels of ability in their upper school classes. Weaker candidates for the Revised Higher Grade exam could study elements of the Higher Syllabus in portions whilst being simultaneously registered for a NC module. After each 40 hours of study the pupil could succeed in achieving an National Certificate in recognition of his/her attainment. Such weaker candidates might finally take the Higher Grade examination but would already have gained something tangible from following the course, regardless of their performance in the final examination.

Thus by the early 1990s there had developed two separate, and to some extent competing, systems of educational certification for learners in the post-16 age group. The factors which led to this situation were diverse. Throughout the 1980s, Conservative administrations sought to promote more utilitarian, more 'job-relevant' forms of training which were less 'academic' and which carried certification that was more readily understood by commercial and industrial employers. Wider social and economic factors also made their impact upon school life. Traditionally the preserve

of the academic elite, the fifth and sixth years of secondary were rapidly filling up with pupils of a kind which had once left school at 16 for employment or further education in vocational colleges. Rising expectations and rising unemployment in the marketplace combined to encourage more pupils in this age range to stay on at school. Senior managers in Scottish secondary schools were also very quick to realise that these 'new' clients in S5 and S6 were poorly served by the academic Higher Grade. To meet the needs of all the pupils in S5 and S6, Scottish secondaries found themselves operating *de facto* in a dual system of assessment and certification.

This anomalous situation required action and was addressed by the Government commissioned Howie Report in 1995. This led to the Higher Still proposals which seek to provide one national system of assessment and certification which is coherent and responsive to the needs of all post-16 learners. Progression and access are key elements in the thinking underlying the principles of the Higher Still development. It is therefore possible for a pupil to begin her or her post-16 study in History following one or more of the short introductory modules and proceed to study at the Higher or Advanced Higher Grade. As part of the Higher Still reforms, and in anticipation of the future unitary nature of post-16 certification in Scottish schools, the separate bureaucracies of the Scottish Examinations Board and the Scottish Vocational and Educational Council were combined on May 1st 1997 into a single body, the Scottish Qualifications Agency.

Whilst outside the immediate scope of this paper, it should also be noted that these fundamental changes to the later stages of Scottish school education were mirrored by equally significant curricular developments in primary and early secondary education. A series of curriculum policy statements and guidelines emerged from the SCCC and SED in the early 1990s which addressed the 5 to 14 age range. National guidelines for History were published in 1993 with Understanding People in the Past identified as an important aspect of the Environmental Studies component of the curriculum.

The impact of these changes on learning & teaching

How effective have these changes to curriculum and assessment been in bringing about desired changes in the nature of learning and teaching in our classrooms? What impact have these changes had upon learning and teaching in History? And what evidence do we have upon which to base judgement of these issues?

In 1992 the Scottish Office Education Department published a report by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools entitled Effective Learning and Teaching in Scottish Secondary Schools. This was a summary of good practice in secondary History departments as observed by the HMI following more than 150 school inspections between 1983 and 1991. It thus contains evidence of how the introduction of Standard Grade was beginning to affect classroom methodology. The report came too early however to offer any insight into the likely impact of Revised Higher Grade and SCOTVEC modules. In Summer 1994 the Scottish Office Education Department hosted a series of regional conferences upon the theme of Effective Learning & Teaching in History which were attended by over 200 History teachers and which were chaired by the present writer. These conferences provided a rare opportunity to listen to History practitioners and glean evidence of the way in which their practice was developing in response to the changed requirements of the new syllabi. Thirdly,

in 1996 the present writer undertook a small scale survey of attitudes towards curriculum change held by History teachers in the eastern Central Belt of Scotland. The following general comments are based on the above sources of information.

In general it is possible to argue that Standard Grade in particular presented Scottish History teachers with a series of challenges if they were to bring their professional practice into line with the requirements of the course. For many teachers and departments a steep learning curve had to be negotiated. However the benefits were felt when Revised Higher came on stream several sessions later as far fewer teachers reported the kinds of trauma and stress brought about by the experience of Standard Grade.

The 1992 HMI Report pointed to a number of significant and desirable developments which had been spurred on by the introduction of the wider assessment demands of Standard Grade. The onset of Standard Grade led to departments taking much greater care with course design and planning in S3/4 than had been the case with the old, familiar Ordinary Grade system. This good practice in planning quickly spread to S1 and S2 as History teachers realised that they had to adapt their courses for younger pupils in order to prepare them for Standard Grade. In many schools, time for the Social Subjects such as History was reduced as the curriculum became ever crowded, a fact which helped to concentrate teachers' minds with respect to course planning. HMI found that many teachers were planning a progressive experience from S1 onwards to ensure that pupils developed confidence in the 'tested' skills of Evaluating and Investigating. In many departments there was an increased emphasis upon investigative work and on the evaluation of primary and secondary source material throughout the S1 and S2 stages. There was an increased variety of teaching approach in many successful History departments by the mid 1990s with a balance of individual work, group learning and whole class teaching. The ability to evaluate effectively presupposes that the pupil has effective skills of reasoning and argument. A significant number of History departments quickly appreciated that the assessment element of Evaluating at Standard Grade meant that their pupils would need more opportunities to talk about History and discuss key issues and concepts in class. The importance of the Investigation in Standard Grade and the subsequent importance of the Extended Essay in Higher Grade History meant that teachers had to plan how best to systematically prepare their pupils for these pieces of extended writing. Many History departments have now evolved coherent strategies for developing their pupils' skills in this area, sometimes taking account of expertise available in the school in the English Language and Special Educational Needs Departments. Other benefits flowed from the Investigation. The assessment rubric for the Historical Investigation required that pupils study an issue or topic which was linked to the Scottish element of the course. In most cases this has meant the investigation of a social or economic topic such as housing, transport or industry in the local or regional context. This has spurred many History department to acquire collections of locally based primary source material in order to create a suitable mini-archive for their pupils. Some school History departments have become much more involved in issues relating to the conservation of local heritage. The Investigation has also encouraged a greater interest amongst History teachers in fieldwork techniques and in using the local environment as a resource for learning and teaching. Standard Grade has also encouraged a more sophisticated approach to assessment. It is now far less common for History teachers

in Scotland to employ methods of assessment which compare pupil performance against each other. There has been a major shift towards assessment methods which involve grading to pre-determined criteria as per Standard Grade practice. Since the introduction of Standard Grade with its separate Levels of attainment, History departments have been more willing to experiment with differentiation strategies in order to ensure that pupils are engaged in historical work which more closely matches their ability and needs. The HMI also found that the emphasis upon Evaluating at Standard Grade had a beneficial effect upon pupils' critical thinking skills in the most effective History departments. In one example, "Standard Grade pupils had an outstanding grasp of issues connected with the use of primary sources, such as the uses of different types of source, their reliability and how to weigh one source against another. Oral and source work was very encouraging. In contrast to 'O'Grade, pupils were able and willing to discuss ideas and hypotheses"².

The experience of Revised Higher History has also led to a number of perceived benefits. Teachers and pupils have voiced positive comments about the Extended Essay in particular. This has been seen to be successful in giving pupils an opportunity to prepare and research a favoured topic and write it up in less hectic circumstances. Candidates have also enjoyed the confidence boost which comes from thoroughly preparing a favoured topic for the Extended Essay write-up in March and knowing that that topic may re-appear as an exam question in May, thus providing a 'double benefit'. Evaluating at Higher Grade is tested by an exam paper based on six or seven primary and secondary sources. Teachers have increasingly felt that they been able to prepare pupils satisfactorily for this exam, a feeling confirmed by the Principal Examiner's recent observation that candidates were becoming increasingly confident with this assessable element.

These are positive indicators that the changes to curriculum and assessment have had some degree of desirable effect upon the History classroom. However, the last decade of change has also brought difficulties and pressures. Many History teachers in Scotland have argued throughout the period 1987-1997 that the content demands of the new courses have remained too great. Some departments have found it very difficult to judge their course planning in order to cover the course content satisfactorily. Some have continued to devote too much time to the Historical Investigation with a consequent shortage of time available for completing the three selected content units. Standard Grade was partially revised in 1993 to take account of these teacher concerns. Revised Higher History, the all-important examination for entrance to college and university, has remained a "two term dash" for many teachers and pupils. This is a situation which the Higher Still proposals seek to address by unitising the course so that the slower pupil can complete the course over two sessions. At Higher however, the lack of time available for the course has inhibited many departments from developing a wider range of teaching strategies, preferring to stay loyal to familiar time-tested examination directed teaching techniques. The issues of 'innovation fatigue' and 'workload pressure' have been much discussed in schools and in the Scottish educational press. The new curricula and syllabi have undoubtedly placed ever greater demands upon classroom practitioners. In 1996 the Scottish Examinations Board, aware of workload pressures, initiated a process of consultation

² Effective Learning & Teaching in Scottish Secondary Schools, p. 41.

with the teaching profession in the four Social Subjects of History, Geography, Modern Studies and Contemporary Social Studies. The SEB sought to establish if the skill of Investigating could be assessed within an examination context. In April 1997 they announced that the current method of assessment, which involved internal assessment which many teachers found onerous, would be discontinued. In future, Investigating will be assessed within an external exam context and marked by volunteer, paid markers as is the case with other national examinations. The workload issue, along with concerns about the timescale and resourcing costs, has also been a factor in the recent decision by the new Labour Government to postpone the introduction of the Higher Still reforms to August 1999. After a decade of rapid and unprecedented change, it may be that History teaching in Scotland is about to enter a period of consolidation.

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