

Briefing paper: Scotland

Scottish education is not all that different from English education, though the myth that it was is still potent, and this lingering ideological or cultural difference is a factor to be reckoned with in its own right. The ‘lad o’ pairts’ did have some improved chance of entering a parish (elementary) school from very humble origins and then, thanks to a few extra years of preparatory classes, proceeding directly to university (at 15 or 16). This tradition persisted into the 20th century but was increasingly overlaid by a more stratified system increasingly resembling the English system. Nevertheless, the ‘democratic intellect’ – a term popularized by George Davie’s The Democratic Intellect (1961), which discussed the 19th-century background – has remained a talisman for Scottish public opinion and helped facilitate, e.g., comprehensivization and the persistence of free higher education.

Schooling was compulsory to 14 from 1883 (not until after 1918 in England and Wales). School boards persisted in Scotland until 1918 (1902 in England), and thereafter schooling was led by the Scottish Education Department (SED) and administered through 38 Education Authorities (elected independently and not subject to local government units as in England). The SED worked to stratify secondary schooling in the interwar period by trying to construct a bipartite system – with a separate, partly fee-paying secondary course leading to the Leaving Certificate, and trying to raise the age and standard of transfer to higher education – but many rural areas especially kept common ‘omnibus’ schools which led directly to university and some urban areas provided free secondary schools. A third of the age group was embarking on secondary courses in the 1930s, though only 5% completed them. There were very few independent schools and no differentiated curriculum – Latin and French were equally valued. Girls formed almost half of the secondary cohort. So there was selection but less fee-paying and less of a status hierarchy within the selective sector. (L. Paterson 2011) IQ testing began early, pioneered by the influential Moray House teacher training college. Moray House also pioneered the birth-cohort study with the 1932 Mental Survey administered to all 11 year olds b. 1921 in Lothian. These were then followed up in a subsequent sweep and in a new cohort b. 1936 in 1947, reinterviewed annually to 1963. Ian Deary holds the data for these 1921 and 1936 cohort studies. (Lawn and Deary 2015, Deary et al. 2009)

Scottish secondary education was relatively unaffected by the war and required no analogue of the Butler Act, its Education Authorities having already taken more of a lead in expanding secondary education since 1918, though often in tension with the SED. A report of Scotland’s Advisory Council on Education in 1947 actually recommended widespread implementation of ‘omnibus’ (comprehensive) schools with a common curriculum 12-16 and a common leaving exam at 16. But the SED still fostered bipartism and the resulting picture was mixed. There were ‘grant-aided’ secondaries (equivalent to direct grants), some partly fee-paying Education Authority secondaries (unlike England) – concentrated in Glasgow where a large middle class clung to fee-paying schools – though most of the 200 public-sector schools offering the full secondary course in the postwar decades were free.



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The full secondary course lasted 5 years. In some rural areas it was still delivered through omnibus schools, combining primary and secondary. Elsewhere, it comprised three years of compulsory education in a secondary school, with an optional two-year course leading to the Leaving Certificate (like O-levels, broken up into separate subjects from 1950). The curriculum still remained broad and undifferentiated, a 'liberal' education. The senior two-year course was still socially selective but less so than in England, so there was more working-class representation, even in urban areas. Some schools offered only the compulsory junior course, but increasingly schools offered both, so no transfer was needed at 14. To ease staying-on, an 'Ordinary Grade' exam was introduced in the 4th year in 1962, to lead smoothly to the 'Higher Grade' exams in the 5th year. Nevertheless, the prestige of 'Highers' and their access to university remained very strong; about 10% of the cohort attained Highers in the late 1940s, rising to 15% by 1962 and 30% by the early 1970s. The curriculum at this level remained broad and liberal – 4-6 subjects at Higher Grade, rather than 3 at A-level, though there tended to be the same arts-science divide as early as 13 as in England. Differentiation by subject choice to some extent substituted for differentiation by school. The prevailing view at the time was that the system was both meritocratic and democratic. Social mobility studies show that the Scottish system was more democratic in the 1950s and '60s, in the sense that attainment levels were higher at the lower social levels (though gaps between the social classes didn't narrow much); England caught up later. (Paterson and Iannelli 2007)

On the other hand, Robbins found that despite the myth of the 'democratic intellect' there were no more university students with manual-class fathers in Scotland than in England (24%, i.e. 28% men and 16% women). One reason may have been that medicine remained more important in Scottish HE (21% of all students, vs. 15% in the UK as a whole). Scotland had similar levels of HE participation to England overall, with a two-tier system of universities and 'central institutions', the equivalent of technical colleges or polytechnics.

Scotland also had its own Circular 10/65, i.e. Circular 600, which asked Education Authorities to prepare comprehensivization plans in 1965. But this did go much more smoothly and quickly, because as the SED pointed out 40% of Scottish students were already embarked on the 'senior' course (for Ordinary and Higher Grade exams in the Scottish Certificate of Education; though if you count O-level candidates in secondary moderns, so were 33% of English students). At that point 43% of Scottish secondaries were already comprehensive, both the older 'omnibus' schools and newer comprehensivized secondaries (called 'high schools' or 'academies'). The junior secondaries offering only the three-year course were already transferring large numbers to senior secondaries, in a system much like the Leicestershire 'two-tier' model of middle and senior schools (especially in Fife, Renfrewshire, and increasingly Glasgow). Of 673 secondaries in 1965, 316 were junior, 67 senior, and 290 both. By the mid-1970s, 98% of Scottish students were in fully comprehensive secondaries, mostly now 'all-through' (12-18). Comprehensivization may not have had much effect on social mobility as reasonably high levels were already being attained in the system in the early 1960s (see Gray et al. 1983; Douglas et al. 1968). Some social selection was also still being achieved by means of subject choice. It was famously pointed

out that students still tended to split between arts and sciences as early as the 2nd year of secondary, despite the formal delay of specialization (so that Scotland experienced the ‘swing away from science’ just as England did in the 1960s). (Pont and Butcher 1968; Butcher 1969; McPherson 1967-8, 1969-70).

Gray et al. 1983 is the magnum opus of Scottish educational history (masterminded by Andrew McPherson, the doyen of Scottish educational sociologists – founder of the Centre for Educational Sociology at Edinburgh in 1972, he retired in 1995 due to ill health). It brings together magnificently Scottish leavers’ surveys – conducted in 1963, 1971 and 1973 and then more comprehensively and biennially from 1977 – plus the birth cohort studies of 1936, 1946, 1958, including independent schools. Their own purpose-designed leavers’ survey of 1977 is the most complete. It captures the period of full comprehensivization, when all students were being encouraged to enter for Ordinary Grade SCE (70% did by the late 1970s), and also ROSLA to 16 as in England. Although this process was smoother than in England, administratively, it may have been tougher socially and intellectually, as the drive to a universal secondary exam came much earlier and quicker than in England (where GCSE would have to wait until the late 1980s). The jumps to O Grade for weaker students and then the ‘two-term dash’ to Highers for stronger ones both posed challenges. While 29% of the cohort passed Highers as early as the early 1970s, the proportion dropped in the 1970s, and then didn’t start to rise again until the 1980s, preparing for HE expansion, much as in England (Burnhill et al. 1988).

Thatcherism had less effect on Scottish education than on English. The SED still retained a good deal of independence. After the Munn and Dunning Reports in 1977, recommending reforms both to O Grade and Highers in order to make a truly universal secondary exam a reality and also to ensure optimal progression thereafter, from 1986 it replaced O Grade with Standard Grade exams as a purpose-designed universal leavers’ exam prepared for across the 3rd and 4th years. As with GCSE, this appears to have contributed both to higher overall attainment and more equal attainment within and between schools (Gamoran 1996). There was no ‘Great Debate’ in Scotland about standards. Although legislation permitted schools to opt out of Education Authority control, almost none did (Arnott 2011).

At the end of our period, the Standard Grade was merged into a system of National Qualifications, at lower levels mostly assessed in schools and at higher levels externally, but still with an externally moderated examination at the end, around age 15. They are now followed by Highers and then Advanced Highers, which give access to HE.

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