THE INTRODUCTION OF A UNIFIED SYSTEM OF POST-COMPULSORY EDUCATION IN SCOTLAND

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ABSTRACT

This paper summarises the findings of a study of the first four years of Higher Still. The reform aimed to provide 'opportunity for all' by introducing a 'unified curriculum and assessment system' of post-16 education. Higher Still's flexible climbing-frame model did indeed extend opportunities, especially for middle- and lower-attaining 16 year olds who stayed on at school and for students with special needs. It encouraged collaboration between schools and colleges and it enhanced the comprehensive principle rather than undermined it. It placed vocational and general education on a formally equal footing, although its short-term impact on subject choices was modest. However, while the climbing-frame model extended access it was less successful in increasing attainment, and the goal of a seamless progression framework proved difficult to realise. Moreover, the system introduced by Higher Still was not fully unified: implementation in the college sector was incomplete and schools and colleges implemented somewhat models of curriculum and assessment. Some of the 'unifying' goals of Higher Still transferred to the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework.

INTRODUCTION

In 2000 a team at the Centre for Educational Sociology, University of Edinburgh, began a long-term project of research on the Higher Still reform of post-compulsory education in Scotland. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the *Introducing a Unified System* (IUS) project was the largest independent study of the reform. Higher Still had aimed to introduce a 'unified curriculum and assessment system' into Scottish education (Scottish Office, 1994: 10); the project asked what kind of system emerged in practice from the reform. It also examined the process of introducing Higher Still, the role of schools and colleges in shaping the reform, and the creation of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF).

This paper, based on our final report to the ESRC, summarises the main conclusions of the research. It pulls together findings published in a series of articles and working papers, and draws on further work in progress.

BACKGROUND

Starting in 1999 Higher Still introduced a 'unified curriculum and assessment system' to cover all types of learning, at all levels up to higher education, and for all ages beyond 16, in Scottish schools and colleges (Scottish Office, 1994). It replaced 'academic' SCE qualifications (Highers and CSYS) and 'vocational' NC modules with New National Qualifications (NNQs), whose design rules for curriculum, assessment and certification were a hybrid of the former SCE and NC models (see Appendix 1 for a glossary of acronyms). The building blocks of the new system were 40-hour National Units which could be taken as separate units or combined into 160-hour National Courses. Each unit was internally assessed; to pass a course a student had to complete three component units and pass an external assessment, whose results were graded. Programmes of courses and units which met specified criteria, including core skills, led to Scottish Group Awards (SGAs), but these were optional.

NNQs were available at seven levels: Access 1 to 3, Intermediate 1 and 2, Higher

and Advanced Higher. The Access and Intermediate levels were new but articulated with the three levels of Standard Grade (courses taken from age 14 to 16); Higher and Advanced Higher corresponded to the former SCE Higher and CSYS respectively. Higher Still promised 'opportunity for all', and especially for 16 year olds with middle or low Standard Grade attainments who stayed on at school, by enabling them to enter the system at the new Intermediate and Access levels and to progress vertically or horizontally thereafter. Under the old system these students often chose Highers, at which their success rates were poor, rather than NC modules which were available at more 'appropriate' levels but lacked status and offered poor progression prospects (SOED, 1992). We have described the NNQ model as a 'climbing frame' - a progression framework with flexible entry and exit points and a flexible choice of progression routes within the system (Hodgson, *et al.*, 2004).

NNQs did not replace Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs), which were designed mainly for workplace learning; nor did they cover higher and professional education. These were included in the SCQF, launched in 2001, which aimed to cover all Scottish qualifications and to provide a 'national language' for describing learning, based on 12 levels and a measure of volume (SCQF, 2003).

Higher Still and the SCQF continued a series of measures which aimed to develop more unified arrangements for post-compulsory education and training provision in Scotland. This series can be traced back to the Action Plan which introduced NC modules in the 1980s (SED, 1983). A similar trend towards 'unification' can be observed in other countries (OECD, 2000; Lasonen and Manning, 2001). It has variously been explained as part of a neo-liberal response to the economic pressures of globalisation, as a means to support the casualties of globalisation and reduce the risks of exclusion, as part of a movement to promote democracy and equality, as the product of international policy discourses and policy borrowing, or as a response to the expansion and growing functional complexity of post-compulsory education systems (IPPR, 1990; Young, 1998; Lasonen and Young, 1998; Allais, 2003; Raffe, 2003). However, there is nothing inevitable about the trend towards unification: a country's education system will only follow this trend if the pressures which promote a more unified system prove stronger than the epistemological, sociological, institutional and political factors which resist it. A move towards a more unified system must overcome the epistemological challenges of linking different types of knowledge and learning (Ensor, 2003). It must confront the pressures towards hierarchy and division arising from the selective function of education and its character as a positional good (Raffe, 1984; Brown, *et al.,* 1997). It must overcome institutional barriers: research on earlier initiatives such as the Action Plan suggested that the 'intrinsic logic' of a unifying reform might be weaker than the divisive 'institutional logic' in which it was embedded (Croxford, *et al.,* 1991; Raffe, *et al.,* 1994). And unifying reforms typically face political resistance. Proposals for a unified framework for 14–19 education in England were rejected, despite wide educational support, reportedly because of political timidity ahead of the 2005 General Election (Working Group on 14–19 Reform, 2004; DfES, 2005). By contrast, unifying reforms are moving ahead in Wales and in the Republic of Ireland (Welsh Assembly Government, 2004; NCCA 2004).

The balance of these pressures promoting and resisting more unified arrangements varies across countries; as a result, national strategies for unification vary widely. From 1996-1998 the ESRC-funded *Unified Learning Project* (ULP) compared the emerging plans for Higher Still with other UK developments (such as Curriculum 2000 and the Welsh Baccalaureate) and with other European developments in post-16 education and training. The ULP developed a conceptual framework to analyse contrasting strategies for unification. In terms of this framework Higher Still was distinctive because:

- it aimed to bring academic and vocational tracks into a unified system, rather than a linked system in which tracks remain separate but are brought closer together;

- it focused on unifying the system architecture (curriculum structure, progression pathways, assessment and certification arrangements) rather than on (say) curricular integration or institutional reform;

- it aimed to introduce a flexible or open model, with minimal prescription of content, volume or level of study (Spours, *et al.,* 2000).

The ULP analysed the developing proposals for Higher Still but it did not observe their implementation. Policies continue to develop during the process of implementation, and they rarely work exactly as the initial blueprints expect them to (Fullan, 1991; Canning, 2003; Hayward, *et al.*, 2004). A flexible unified system potentially gives considerable discretion to schools and colleges to shape the emerging system by selecting what units and courses to offer and deciding how to package them for students (Howieson, *et al.,* 2002). During its development phase Higher Still was criticised, among other things, for lacking a radical vision and for its potential to reinforce 'academic drift' (Humes and Bryce, 1999; Weir, 1999). And even if policy goals are clearly established they must overcome the epistemological, sociological, institutional and political obstacles described above. The IUS project therefore sought to study Higher Still in practice.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the IUS project, as stated in our proposal to the ESRC, were:

- To analyse the process of introducing a unified system of post-compulsory education in Scotland during the first three years of Higher Still; to build on the insights and conceptual framework of the ULP, which analysed strategy and policy development at national level, by following this into the implementation phase and studying processes at institutional and other levels.

- To identify distinctive features of the policy process of introducing a unified system.

- To analyse the role played by schools and colleges in shaping the reform, and to compare this with the role of institutions in shaping reforms of the post-compulsory curriculum in England; and to monitor the changing roles and relationships of schools and colleges.

- To explore issues in the boundaries of a unified system, and the role of a qualifications framework in addressing these issues, by studying the development of the SCQF and comparing it with similar frameworks elsewhere in the UK.

- To engage with and reinforce the learning process of policy development and implementation, by providing an independent analytical perspective on current developments.

METHODS

Our methods included:

- Surveys of all secondary schools in Scotland in 2000–01 and 2002–03, to observe changing institutional policies, practices and perceptions of Higher Still. We extended our original plans to include special schools as well as comprehensive and independent schools. The Association of Directors of

Education in Scotland gave its support and help in administering the survey. The surveys achieved response rates of 70% and 63% respectively.

- Parallel surveys of colleges, conducted jointly with the Scottish Further Education Unit, which achieved response rates of 85% in 2000–01 and 74% in 2002–03.

- A survey of local authorities, in 2000–01.

- Case studies of four schools and two colleges, chosen to represent different social and geographical contexts. We visited each institution in 2001–02 and in 2002–03, on each occasion conducting about 6–8 interviews with senior managers, guidance staff and teachers in selected subjects. A fifth school served as a pilot.

- Analyses of Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) data on all NQ candidates during the first three years of Higher Still.

- Interviews with 17 key informants and stakeholders in Higher Still and the SCQF.

- Participation and observation at consultation seminars, meetings of Higher Still coordinators, and other events.

- Analyses of documentary evidence, including official reports and submissions to the Inquiry into *Lifelong Learning* of the Scottish Parliament's Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee (Scottish Parliament, 2002).

THE CHANGE PROCESS

NNQs were phased in from 1999, starting with existing Highers courses which required least change. The introduction of NNQs did not run smoothly. Implementation had already been staggered in particular subjects to avert a threatened teacher boycott. In August 2000 the first batch of results was affected by the 'exams debacle', when many results were inaccurate or delayed. This provoked a crisis of confidence in Scottish education and revealed widespread discontent with Higher Still, especially its assessment regime, and with the way it was introduced. The title of our first *CES Briefing* reflects the climate: *What happened to the consensus on Higher Still?* (Raffe, *et al.,* 2001). The crisis provoked two inquiries by Scottish Parliamentary Committees, a reorganisation of the policy leadership, the withdrawal of the Inspectorate's policy-making role, and several official reviews of the implementation of NNQs and of their assessment arrangements (Scottish Parliament, 2000a, 2000b; Scottish Executive, 2000, 2001; ADES/ASC/HMI 2001).

Our conceptual framework helped to explain why the exams debacle provoked such a crisis (Raffe, *et al.,* 2002). The introduction of a flexible unified system involved conflict because it imposed common design rules (eg for assessment) across a diverse system. It required a centrally coordinated development process; participants who lacked a system-wide perspective tended to be disenfranchised. Moreover, the leadership failed to articulate and win support for a clear rationale for a unified system which might have provided the basis for resolving conflicts. Consequently the crisis exposed resentment over what was seen as a heavy-handed and arbitrary style of leadership (Paterson, 2000). Our analysis draws attention to the horizontal as well as vertical conflicts: that is, to the conflicting interests of different sectors, subjects and stages in the design of a unified system. And instead of seeing Higher Still simply as a 'top down' imposition, our analysis suggests that it was the weakness of the leadership that prevented it from articulating a clear vision and rationale for the reform.

Despite this crisis our surveys and case studies revealed continued support for the aims of Higher Still, even if — due partly to the failure to spell out the rationale

and strategy — some of the specific measures introduced by Higher Still had less support (Tinklin, *et al.*, 2001a; Howieson, *et al.*, 2002). There was most support for the goal of 'opportunity for all', of extending access and progression for learners of all attainment levels through what we have called the climbing frame. By 2003 the subject and assessment reviews had taken the heat out of the assessment issue, and teachers and lecturers had gained familiarity and confidence in working the new system. Our respondents reported more progress towards the aims of Higher Still and felt more positive about it (Raffe, *et al.*, 2004). Nevertheless, a recurrent theme of our research has been the need for a shared vision and strategic leadership of a unified system. It cannot be left to run itself or to be shaped solely by the disaggregated decisions of students, institutions and end-users.

SCHOOL AND COLLEGE DIFFERENCES: NOT A FULLY UNIFIED SYSTEM?

NNQ design rules were a hybrid of the former SCE and NC models, used mainly in schools and colleges respectively. Schools and colleges tended to have different perspectives on the reform. Colleges supported a broader view of the aims of Higher Still, and they attached more importance to such goals as promoting core skills and raising the status of vocational education (Tinklin, *et al.*, 2001a).

In two respects NNQs did *not* constitute a unified system: their coverage of the college sector was only partial; and schools and colleges differed in the use that they made of them. By 2003 schools had substantially completed the implementation of Higher Still in S5 and S6 (the post-compulsory stages). Implementation in colleges was slower and more variable (Raffe, *et al.*, 2004). Only about half the colleges were close to full implementation, and colleges used NNQs to adapt existing provision rather than replace it. Instead of bringing existing qualifications into a unified system, Higher Still had merely added another set of qualifications to the repertoire. Moreover, schools and colleges used NNQs in different ways. School provision of NNQs was based largely on National Courses, while most full-time college provision consisted of programmes of National Units not grouped into courses. Since only courses were externally assessed this breached the Higher Still principle that all programmes should have a combination of external and internal assessment.

College managers blamed this situation on the inadequate investment in courses in the subjects of most interest to colleges, together with inflexibilities caused by the assessment regime, the preference of some employers for existing qualifications and the 'academic' bias of some NNQs. They felt that schools' interests had had priority. The failure of SGAs was particularly significant. It had been hoped that colleges would use nationally-recognised SGAs to replace their existing college-designed programmes; SGAs were based mainly on National Courses so this would have brought colleges' NNQ provision closer to the model in schools. This did not happen. Most colleges offered a mere handful of SGAs and continued to base full-time provision on college-designed programmes of units. Few schools offered any SGAs at all. The low take-up of SGAs reflected their perceived lack of currency with higher education and employers, the lack of National Course provision in some vocational areas and design problems which made SGAs unsuitable for colleges' main client groups (Raffe, *et al.*, 2004). Some college managers expressed disappointment with Higher Still, and transferred their hopes for it to the SCQF.

In summary, the institutional logics of schools and colleges proved to be very different, and caused them to implement Higher Still to different degrees and in different ways. Colleges had more freedom, but they were also subject to market pressures in a way that was not true of schools. Arguably, the partially unified system that resulted was a reasonable balance between the benefits of unification and the need to accommodate these different institutional logics. In any case, the common currency of the unified system was sufficient to encourage a substantial increase in collaboration between schools and colleges. Of the comprehensive schools who

responded to the survey, 38 per cent reported that more school students were taking courses at college, 28 per cent reported an increase in joint planning with colleges to improve articulation and 19 per cent reported an increase in the joint delivery of courses (Raffe, *et al.,* 2004).

OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL?

The main achievement of Higher Still, in the views of school and college staff, was to extend 'opportunity for all' by providing access to mainstream qualifications at several levels connected by a single progression framework. As a result schools implemented the new Intermediate levels more quickly than expected. Our analyses of SQA data showed that students entering S5 with middle and low Standard Grade attainments attempted more courses at 'appropriate' levels and increased their total volume of SQA-certificated study. The new levels introduced by Higher Still were seen to have higher standing than the provision they replaced and they provided a more worthwhile learning experience. They were part of a common framework, had more rigorous assessment and offered better progression opportunities.

An acknowledged success of Higher Still was the inclusion of students with learning difficulties within the mainstream curriculum and qualifications system (Howieson and Closs, 2005). Staff in special and mainstream schools and in colleges thought that Higher Still had succeeded in giving such students access to the national curriculum at an appropriate level, the opportunity of national certification of their learning and better progression possibilities than had been available previously. Higher Still was perceived to have made a major contribution towards inclusion and social equity.

The new NQ levels enhanced access but some other features of NQs seemed to restrict it. Colleges found that the annual diet of external assessments, the more rigorous arrangements for internal assessment and the increased duration of courses made it hard to offer NNQs, and especially National Courses, through part-time or flexible modes (Howieson, *et al.,* 2002). Colleges found ways to avoid these problems or to minimise their impact, but they remained an issue.

The climbing frame metaphor suggests that if everyone starts at the appropriate level they should all have a similar chance of climbing one bar up the frame. This has not been the case with NNQs. Students with middle and low Standard Grade attainments had lower success rates in NNQs despite taking them at more appropriate levels (Tinklin, *et al.,* 2001b, 2005). Moreover, students who took Intermediate 2 instead of Higher, and progressed to a Higher in the following year, still had a lower success rate at Higher than those who progressed directly from Standard Grade.

Attainment and progression in colleges were less dependent on prior attainment levels than in schools. This may reflect colleges' second-chance ethos, the absence of external assessment from most college programmes, or the weaker grip of the selective function of education on colleges.

PROGRESSION ISSUES

Higher Still encouraged staff and students to become more progression-minded. Nevertheless constructing a progression climbing frame was less straightforward than the metaphor suggests. We identified issues concerning:

- The design of the frame: for example, how far apart should the horizontal bars (the NQ levels) be set in order to provide a manageable gradient of difficulty without excessive repetition, to cater for the diverse students who use the system, and to articulate with external requirements such as university entrance? How can the curriculum be designed to cater for students following different progression routes within the unified system? How can a single framework cover subjects with different epistemologies and learning sequences?

- Logistics and resources. The institutions in our surveys reported that they were increasingly constrained by the availability of materials, resources and (especially) the preparedness and willingness of staff as they sought to provide the increased range of levels and subjects. 'Multi-level' teaching placed heavy demands on teachers. Collaboration between schools was less effective than collaboration with colleges. Open learning could help more able and mature students but it was not seen as the main solution.

- Views of students' capabilities: many school staff felt that students reached a plateau and there was a limit to the number of levels through which they could progress; college staff tended to have a more open view of students' capabilities.

- The nature and purpose of horizontal progression.

Nevertheless, the attractions of the 'climbing frame' encouraged schools to extend it to 14–16 year olds. By 2003 most schools were using NNQs to replace Standard Grades in specific subjects and/or levels, although in most schools only a few subjects were affected (Howieson, *et al.,* 2004). Their reasons included improved content, better progression opportunities and the ability to construct more flexible pathways, for example to allow earlier progression to Highers. However the spread of NNQs in S3 and S4 raised issues for schools and local authorities. It typically required additional resources, especially if the intention was to make the curriculum or the pace of study more flexible (and therefore more differentiated), or to offer progression opportunities which assumed that relevant provision was available in S5. Some schools feared the implications of a 'mixed economy' of Standard Grades and NNQs that might develop if individual schools went their own way, and they looked to local and national government for a lead.

ACADEMIC AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Higher Still removed formal distinctions between academic and vocational learning by bringing them into the same curriculum and qualification system. It did not achieve parity of esteem. This would have been unrealistic given the importance of educational selection, especially selection for higher education, for determining the status of subjects. Subjects that raised their status, such as home economics, typically did so by becoming more theoretical in content and gaining recognition for university entrance. S5 students with high Standard Grade attainments continued to take fewer vocational courses than lower-attaining students. On average S5 students very slightly increased their uptake of 'vocational' subjects, except the lowest-attaining students who took slightly more 'academic' subjects than before as these were now available at levels below Higher (Tinklin, *et al.,* 2005). The NNQs used in S3 and S4 were mainly in 'academic' subjects (Howieson, *et al.,* 2004). Schools which introduced vocational options for 14–16s as part of the government's curriculum flexibility agenda tended to use other qualifications such as part-SVQs.

One approach to integrating academic and vocational learning is to give a central place to generic or core skills. Higher Still aimed to increase competence in the five core skills of communication, numeracy, IT, problem-solving and working with others. They were 'embedded' in conventional subjects where appropriate, but discrete core skills units were also available. Colleges already took core skills seriously, and took advantage of the flexible NNQ model which allowed different modes of delivery ranging from the discrete to the wholly embedded. Hardly any schools offered discrete core skills units. The Scottish Qualifications Certificate included each student's core skills profile, but when core skills were embedded this profile was merely inferred from the subjects that had been passed. This 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 ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS

One of the project's objectives was to analyse the role played by schools and colleges in shaping the reform. Schools and colleges helped to shape the emerging unified system by calling for changes in its design rules, notably the streamlining of assessment that began in 2001. They also shaped it through decisions at the institutional level. Many of the trends described above — the rapid development of Intermediate courses, the demise of SGAs, the use of NNQs for 14–16 year olds and the growth of school-college collaboration — reflect such decisions. This did not, of course, mean that institutions had unlimited discretion in implementing NNQs. They were influenced by a variety of factors including government policies and priorities, the composition of the student cohort, the anticipated needs of end-users and timetabling and resource issues, especially staffing. Many decisions lay at departmental or subject level: headteachers and principals lacked the subject knowledge to challenge heads of departments or sections and impose a strong institutional policy on them.

The role of institutions in shaping the unified system did not result in institutional diversity, especially among comprehensive schools which remained faithful to the comprehensive ethos in implementing NNQs. Most comprehensive schools offered a wide range of courses at Higher, Intermediate 2 and (to a lesser extent) Intermediate 1. It had been feared that schools would become more stratified, with some providing mainly Higher and Advanced Higher courses and others mainly Intermediate courses (Paterson, 2003). This did not happen. Schools which offered more Advanced Highers tended also to offer more Intermediates.

Independent schools, by contrast, had different priorities from comprehensive schools in implementing NNQs. They introduced fewer Intermediate courses and they attached less importance to linking academic and vocational education (Raffe, *et al.,* 2004).

THE BOUNDARIES OF A UNIFIED SYSTEM

Another project objective was to explore issues in the boundaries of a unified system. We designed our project and adopted this objective at a time when Higher Still was still outward looking. The issue was whether the unified system could expand to include other types of learning, in particular work-based provision certificated by SVQs. By the time we completed the project such concerns seemed remote: the issue had become Higher Still's failure to cover its original target sectors. Higher Still's uneven implementation in colleges marginalised it as a lifelong learning policy, and much of the discourse of unification transferred to the SCQF. In terms of our conceptual framework the SCQF is a linked system, with much looser design rules (eg for assessment) than Higher Still's unified system. The SCQF design rules are also looser than other national qualifications frameworks (Young, 2003). The SCQF can therefore more easily accommodate diverse types of learning, and it represents an alternative approach to unification. Instead of trying to include SVQs within the tightly-specified unified system of NNQs, the SCQF provides a larger but looser framework into which NNQs, SVQs and all other qualifications including university degrees can be placed. NNQs have thus become a sub-framework of the SCQF. It may not matter that they have not achieved full coverage within the college sector, if the goals of unification can be achieved by the SCQF.

The SCQF has been successful in accommodating a wide range of qualifications, especially at higher education level (Raffe, 2003). Nevertheless it is still at an early stage of implementation and it is too soon to assess its impact in practice. It has

been led by higher education and the SQA, the 'owners' of the main qualifications within it, and its approach has been based on pragmatism and partnership. It has accepted rather than challenged the social relations and hierarchies on which the use and recognition of qualifications may depend. This pragmatism may be threatened by the need to impose quality criteria which could, for example, lead it to reject qualifications owned by powerful industrial or professional bodies. Similarly, the partnership may be threatened by the conflicting views of stakeholders (especially universities and colleges) of what full implementation of the SCQF means: is this achieved when all qualifications have been placed in the Framework, or only when it is being widely used, for example to support credit transfer?

COMPARISONS

We compared Higher Still with the Curriculum 2000 reform in England, working in collaboration with the London Institute of Education/Nuffield Foundation study of the English reform (Hodgson, *et al.,* 2004). Higher Still and Curriculum 2000 had many features in common, but Higher Still reflected a more systematic approach to the unification of post-16 education. The comparison identified practical lessons for future 'unifying' reforms concerning:

- the policy process (how to minimise the conflicts which are inherent in unifying reforms)

- models of unification (for example, the issues raised by the 'climbing frame' model)

- special needs (the implications of including them in a unified system)

- core or key skills (the role of assessment, and the choice between discrete, embedded or mixed modes of delivery).

Conversely, more recent proposals for the reform of 14–19 education in England raise questions for further developments in Scotland, specifically for attempts to revive SGAs and to improve vocational provision (Working Group on 14–19 Reform 2004; DfES, 2005). The current English proposals aim to include work-based provision within the same framework as other provision and to develop more coherent vocational pathways. Higher Still accomplished neither of these things.

CONCLUSION

Our project asked what kind of a unified system had emerged from Higher Still. The model of a unified system which Higher Still aimed to introduce was an access and progression climbing frame: a framework with flexible entry and exit points and with minimal barriers to progression within the system.

The climbing frame improved access, and in this sense it fulfilled Higher Still's promise of 'opportunity for all'. It improved opportunities for students at all levels of prior attainment, including students with special needs. It enabled students with middle and low Standard Grade attainments to take more courses at more 'appropriate' levels. The new NQ levels had higher standing than the provision they replaced and they provided a more worthwhile learning experience.

Despite their different interests and priorities, schools and colleges were encouraged to collaborate and to offer a more seamless pattern of provision. To a lesser extent, Higher Still also encouraged collaboration among schools. It enhanced the comprehensive principle, and did not undermine it as some had feared. It did not lead to an increased hierarchy among comprehensive schools but it was used by all schools to deliver a more flexible curriculum for a diverse clientele.

However, our research has identified limitations of the reform. In the first place, opportunity for all was not directly reflected in attainment for all. Despite studying

at more 'appropriate' levels, middle and lower attaining 16 year olds continued to have relatively low success rates. Creating a progression framework that worked in practice proved more difficult than the 'climbing frame' metaphor might suggest.

Second, Higher Still did not introduce a fully unified system, because its coverage of the college sector was partial. It added to the range of qualifications rather than brought existing qualifications into a unified system. There was some disappointment with Higher Still in the college sector, and some of the aspirations for a unified system were transferred to the SCQF.

Third, Higher Still gave formal parity of esteem to vocational and academic learning but its impact on students' subject choices was, in its early years, modest.

The full impact of Higher Still will only be seen over a longer period. The new system has provided opportunities for further development as schools and colleges explore its creative potential. Nevertheless it will continue to require strategic leadership and an agreed and explicit vision and strategy.

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APPENDIX 1: GLOSSARY

ADES	Association of Directors of Education in Scotland
CSYS	Certificate of Sixth Year Studies
DfES	Department for Education and Skills (England)
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
IUS	Introducing a Unified System (project)
NC	National Certificate
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (Ireland)
NNQ	New National Qualification
NQ	National Qualification
SCE	Scottish Certificate of Education
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
SFEU	Scottish Further Education Unit
SGA	Scottish Group Award
SQA	Scottish Qualifications Authority
SVQ	Scottish Vocational Qualification
S1, S2 …S6	Secondary 1, 2 …6 (First, second, …sixth year of secondary school)
ULP	Unified Learning Project
WAG	Welsh Assembly Government