

THE USE OF NEW NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS IN S3 AND S4 IN 2002–03

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the use of New National Qualifications (NNQs) in S3 and S4 in 2002–03, using data from a survey of all Scottish secondary schools and case studies of four schools. Most local authority schools, and a half of independent and special schools, had made some use of NNQs in S3 and S4, mainly to replace Standard Grade but in some cases to certificate other subjects such as religious and moral education. The use of NNQs was only weakly associated with school characteristics such as size or average S4 attainment. In a majority of schools no more than one Standard Grade subject in ten had been replaced, but a few mainstream local authority schools, and several independent and special schools, had replaced much more than this. Replacement was most common in home economics, science, mathematics and French, and at Foundation and to a lesser extent General levels. NNQs were not being used to vocationalise the S3 and S4 curriculum. School staff said they used them because they offered provision at a more appropriate level, better progression opportunities and pacing of study, and better content. However some staff expressed concerns about the implications of the mixed economy that appeared to be emerging, and the absence of national or local strategy at the time of the study inhibited progress. Decisions about replacing Standard Grade tended to be taken in a decentralised and ad hoc way. Schools' future plans were uncertain but there was little evidence of an imminent wholesale migration to NNQs in S3 and S4. We discuss the implications for current policy debates.

INTRODUCTION

One of the main challenges facing Scottish secondary schools over the past half century has been to cater for the diverse needs of young people in the final years of compulsory schooling (Paterson, 2003). The Munn and Dunning Reports of 1977 established the principle of a common curriculum based on eight modes of learning, leading to 'assessment for all' at 16 (SED, 1977a; 1977b). These principles were embodied in a Curriculum Framework, first published in 1983, and in the Standard Grade programmes phased in from 1984. Alternative approaches, for example, to develop a distinct curriculum for less academic students around the 'vocational impulse', were not pursued (SED, 1963); and when the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) was introduced to Scotland in 1984 it was 'domesticated' and used to enhance, rather than to challenge, the emerging philosophy of a general, common, process-based curriculum embodied in Standard Grade (Bell, *et al.*, 1989). TVEI was, however, instrumental in introducing National Certificate (NC) modules, originally intended for 16-plus learning, into the 14-16 curriculum (Croxford, *et al.*, 1991).

Standard Grade has been established in S3 and S4 for well over a decade, and in the eyes of many teachers and students it has served its purpose well. Nevertheless, it is facing a number of challenges. First, the curriculum itself is under challenge. The Standard Grade curriculum in some subject areas is seen as inappropriate and out of date, and following the National Debate the Scottish Executive has declared its intention to reduce curricular content and to put more emphasis on generic and soft skills (Scottish Executive, 2003a). Second, Standard Grade is under challenge from the emerging agenda of curriculum flexibility. Schools, it is argued, should have the flexibility to develop programmes that respond to local needs, and students

should have more scope to choose subjects — including vocational options — that engage their interest. Circular 3/2001 outlined conditions under which the current guidelines could be relaxed (Scottish Executive, 2001), and the National Debate revealed a demand for more curricular choice (Munn, 2002a; 2002b). Third, there are proposals to relax the links between age and stage and to offer greater flexibility in the organisation and pacing of learning and in progression pathways; these pressures are not easily accommodated by a two-year, process-based programme such as Standard Grade. Fourth, as participation beyond 16 has grown, the role of qualifications at 16 has shifted from that of high-stakes terminal certification to one of orientation within the education system (Raffe, 2002); the Executive has made a commitment to reduce the total assessment burden and, if possible, restrict it to the point of leaving school (Scottish Executive, 2003a).

A further, if indirect challenge is provided by Higher Still, which has introduced a very different curriculum model to the post-16 curriculum. In contrast to the stage-based Standard Grade, the NNQs introduced by Higher Still aspire to provide a 'climbing frame' which offers multiple access points to its framework of units and courses at seven levels, and flexible opportunities for vertical and lateral progression within this framework (Raffe, 2003; Hodgson, *et al.*, 2003). While the NNQ framework is designed to articulate with Standard Grade it represents a very different model of progression through the curriculum, in some ways closer to the 5-14 model with its notion of progression through levels within curriculum areas. In the same way that 16-plus NC modules found a constituency in the 14–16 curriculum in the 1980s, so have NNQs been used in some schools to replace certain subjects at Standard Grade. They have also been used as flexible building blocks in many school- and local authority-led plans to enhance or restructure the 14–16 curriculum (LTS, 2003). Potentially, therefore, NNQs may play an important part in the future of the S3 and S4 curriculum. However, to understand this potential role we first need to take stock of the current position. This paper summarises findings from the current ESRC research project on *Introducing a Unified System* (IUS) on the use of New National Qualifications (NNQs) in S3 and S4.

PROJECT AND METHODS

The main aim of the IUS project is to analyse the model of a 'unified system' of post-16 education and training introduced by Higher Still. It also aims to analyse the policy process of developing and implementing a unified system, to examine the role of schools and colleges in shaping the reform and to explore boundary issues in the unified system, including the role of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework.

The research methods used in the project include analyses of Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) data on enrolments in the first three years of Higher Still, surveys of schools and colleges in 2000–01 and in 2002–03, case studies in four schools and two colleges in 2001–02 and in 2002–03 and interviews with key informants. This paper uses data collected in the second survey of schools, conducted in 2002–03, and in both rounds of interviews in the case study schools. It also draws, at least indirectly, on the interview data.

The survey took place in the autumn of 2002, with questionnaires despatched in November and responses received by January 2003. It covered all secondary schools in Scotland, including mainstream (ie. not special) local authority schools, independent schools and special schools. Questionnaires were addressed to the headteacher, with a request that they be completed by the member of senior management with responsibility for Higher Still, with other staff providing information as necessary. Of 563 schools in the initial sample 350 responded, a response rate of 62 per cent. At least 22 of the non-respondents did not participate because they offered no NNQ (Higher Still) provision. Response rates varied across the three categories of schools:

63 per cent of local authority schools, 50 per cent of independent schools and 64 per cent of special schools.

The case study schools were selected on the basis of several themes of interest to the research: above average use of NNQs overall; use of NNQs in S3 and S4; a high level of Advanced Higher provision and/or plans for such provision; previous use of NC modules and/or GSVQs; and well developed college links. The four schools differed in their average student attainment and socio-economic status, size and location. Between six and eight members of staff were interviewed in each school: the headteacher; the Higher Still co-ordinator; a guidance teacher; a principal teacher and/or teacher in each of at least two subject areas. The subject areas covered were English, maths, business education, computing, biology, home economics and modern studies.

There are two main limitations of our data. First, they describe the situation as at 2002–03. There have been further developments since then (for example, more local authorities have developed strategies for restructuring the secondary curriculum) although their immediate impact at school level may have been modest. Second, the main focus of our research has been on the emergence of a unified system at 16-plus. As we suggest in our conclusion, this provides a useful context for appraising developments at 14–16, but it also means that our data-collection on S3 and S4 has been relatively limited and not set in the context of other 14–16 developments, such as the curriculum flexibility agenda or the weakening of age/stage restrictions. At most, we offer a broad-brush overview of the position in 2002–03.

REPLACEMENT OF STANDARD GRADES BY NNQs: THE NATIONAL POSITION IN 2002-03

Schools were asked the approximate proportion of their Standard Grade subjects which had been replaced by NNQs. Their responses are shown in Table 1. Very few mainstream local authority (LA) schools reported that no Standard Grade subjects had been affected; two thirds reported a modest level of replacement, affecting between one and ten per cent of Standard Grade subjects. The pattern in both independent and special schools was more polarised. About a half of these schools reported no impact of NNQs on Standard Grades; but a larger proportion than of mainstream local authority schools reported more than ten per cent of Standard Grades affected. A third of the 75 special schools in the sample did not respond to this question, possibly because they did not have significant Standard Grade provision to replace.

Table 1: Approximately what proportion of your Standard Grade subjects have been wholly or partially replaced by Higher Still provision ie. New National Qualifications (NNQs)? (Percentage of schools within each category)

	LA mainstream	Independent	Special
None	16	52	46
1–10%	68	19	12
11–25%	10	11	4
26–50%	3	7	10
76–100%	4	11	28
Total	100	100	100
<i>n</i>	(246)	(27)	(50)

The response '51–75%' was inadvertently omitted from the questionnaire. It seems likely that schools used one of the adjacent categories instead. The distribution of responses in Table 1 suggests that the omission did not affect many schools, at least within the largest category of (mainstream local authority) schools. It did not result in significant non-response to the question: apart from the special schools noted above, only two schools (both local authority schools) left this question blank.

We grouped the local authority schools into three bands based on their average levels of S4 attainment in 1999. Schools in the lower- and middle-attaining bands were somewhat more likely to report replacement of Standard Grade, but the relationship was weak (Table 2). In each attainment band a clear majority of schools reported a positive but low level of replacement, between one and ten per cent of subjects. Further analyses show that larger schools, denominational schools and schools serving relatively working-class student groups were more likely than other schools to replace Standard Grades, but in each case the relationship was weak. Nor was there a strong local authority effect. Schools which had replaced at least one subject were found in all but one of the local authorities in Scotland; conversely, most local authorities included at least one school that had made no change.

Table 2: Proportion of Standard Grade subjects wholly or partially replaced by NNQs, by level of S4 attainment (percentage of schools within each attainment band: mainstream local authority schools only)

	Level of S4 attainment			
	low	medium	high	all schools
None	12	10	20	16
1–10%	67	73	66	68
11–25%	13	12	9	10
26–50%	5	3	0	3
76–100%	3	3	6	4
Total	100	101	101	100
<i>n</i>	(75)	(77)	(71)	(246)

Note: data on S4 attainment are not available for 23 schools.

Table 3: Standard Grade subjects replaced (number of schools)

	LA mainstream	Independent	Special
Home Economics	91	3	8
Science	74	2	8
Maths	50	3	17
French	45	2	0
Music	28	6	1
Biology	27	3	0
Craft and Design	27	0	1
Chemistry	26	4	2
Physics	26	3	0
Computing Studies	23	5	5
English	21	4	14
Art and Design	16	5	5
History	15	3	2
<i>n</i>	(207)	(13)	(27)

Note. Only subjects mentioned by at least 20 schools (across all three sectors) are included.

Among the survey schools, the subjects affected varied across the sectors. More than one in three mainstream local authority schools in the sample – and nearly a half of those which reported any replacement – had replaced Standard Grade home economics, and almost as many had replaced science. Mathematics and French were the next most commonly mentioned subjects. In special schools, by contrast, English and mathematics were the subjects most affected. The number of independent schools is too small for a clear trend to be apparent, but it may be significant that creative and aesthetic subjects (music, and art and design) were frequently replaced, along with computing studies. Among local authority schools, music and art and design were particularly likely to be replaced in schools which replaced a larger proportion of subjects in total.

*Table 4: Standard Grade levels replaced
(percentage of schools which reported any subject replaced)*

	LA mainstream	Independent	Special
Replaced 1 or more subject at:			
Foundation	90	39	82
General	73	77	70
Credit	48	77	11
Replaced 3 or more subjects at:			
Foundation	40	15	48
General	21	39	22
Credit	13	54	0
<i>n</i>	(207)	(13)	(27)

Table 4 shows the Standard Grade levels which had been replaced. The top half of the table shows the percentage of schools which had replaced at least one subject at Foundation, General and Credit respectively, among schools which reported any replacement at all. Thus, of mainstream local authority schools which reported any replacement, most (90 per cent) said that at least one subject had been replaced at Foundation, about three quarters (73 per cent) said that at least one subject had been replaced at General and about a half (48 per cent) said that at least one subject had been replaced at Credit. The bottom part of the table shows the percentage of schools who had replaced at least three subjects at the stated level. Among local authority schools the replacement of Standard Grades was thus skewed towards the lower levels: Foundation was replaced more often than General which was replaced more often than Credit. Among special schools we see the same pattern but even more pronounced. Among independent schools, by contrast, Credit and General were more frequently replaced than Foundation.

*Table 5: Standard Grade levels replaced, by percentage of all subjects replaced
(percentages: LA mainstream schools only)*

	1–10%	more than 10%
Replaced 1 or more subject at:		
Foundation	92	83
General	72	78
Credit	47	59
Replaced 3 or more subjects at:		
Foundation	33	66
General	12	59
Credit	6	42
<i>n</i>	(166)	(41)

Table 5 presents the same information for local authority schools, broken down by the number of subjects which had been wholly or partially replaced (as reported in Table 1). The skew towards the lower Standard Grade levels is much less evident for the schools which reported that more than 10 per cent of all subjects had been replaced by NNQs. Approaching one half of these schools (42 per cent) had replaced three or more subjects at Credit, compared with only six per cent of schools which reported lower levels of replacement overall. This may be connected with the finding, noted above, that these schools were more likely to have replaced music and art and design. Table 5 is based on a cross-sectional comparison; to the extent that it represents varying levels of 'progress' towards the replacement of Standard Grades, it suggests that as NNQs advance in S3 and S4 they increasingly cover the whole range of Standard Grade levels.

Schools were asked if they were offering other NNQs in S3/S4, in addition to using them to replace Standard Grades. Nearly half (47 per cent) of local authority schools, 30 per cent of independent schools and 65 per cent of special schools said that they were, in most cases naming just one or two subjects. Religious, moral and philosophical studies was the subject most commonly mentioned. Some schools mentioned work experience but most other subjects mentioned in this context were subjects that were potentially available at Standard Grade, including mathematics, computing, craft and design, and English and communication (some schools may have judged that English and communication was different from English). When asked about the levels of these NNQs the local authority schools mainly mentioned Intermediate 1, Access 3 and Intermediate 2, in that order. Special schools mainly referred to Access 3 and Access 2, and independent schools mainly referred to Intermediate 2. Taken in conjunction with the data on the replacement of Standard Grades, our evidence suggests that NNQs have not been used to any significant extent to 'vocationalise' the curriculum of S3 and S4.

THE POSITION IN THE CASE STUDY SCHOOLS

The replacement of Standard Grades by NNQs in the case study schools mirrored to some extent the pattern of usage among local authority schools reported above. Replacement was highest in the two schools which served relatively working-class student groups and had lower levels of average student attainment. The use of NNQs in S3 and S4 in the case study schools did not appear to be directly related to school size or denominational status although such a relationship (albeit a weak one) is evident in the survey data. The subjects and levels of Standard Grade replaced in the case study schools were broadly in line with the national picture. The case studies endorsed the survey findings that NNQs were used mainly to replace particular subjects for particular groups of students.

The use of NNQs in School A was limited to two subject areas, science and maths, and focused entirely on less academic students. Thus Foundation science had been replaced by Access 3/Intermediate 1 in biology, chemistry and physics and Intermediate 1/Intermediate 2 maths was used instead of Foundation/General maths for those likely to struggle to achieve this level. The school's limited use of NNQs may partly be explained by its high average student attainment at Standard Grade and its decision to give priority to Advanced Higher for development and for the allocation of resources. Nevertheless, the headteacher wanted to move over entirely to NNQs, identifying a number of advantages over Standard Grades including more flexible progression and better pacing; but he recognised that there was resistance among staff to this, partly because Standard Grades appeared to work well for the school.

In contrast, School B was making widespread use of NNQs in S3/S4 and by the second round of interviews, they were being used in 14 subject areas. The main subject areas *not* using NNQs in S3 and S4 were English and the social subjects

(history, geography and modern studies). The widest range of NNQ provision was at Access 3 but there was also provision at Intermediate 1 and 2. The extensive use of NNQs in School B was closely related to the nature of the school roll and the low average attainments of students in the school. NNQs were seen as better able to meet the needs of the less academic and less motivated students than were Standard Grades with their requirement for sustained effort and attendance. But despite the enthusiasm in School B for the use of NNQs in the lower school and the personal preference of the headteacher for a wholesale move away from Standard Grade, it had no plans to replace Standard Grades entirely. Decisions about replacement were made on the basis of the quality and suitability of individual Standard Grades for their students. Some concern was also expressed that the school should not go it alone in moving totally away from Standard Grade in advance of changes nationally or at least at the local authority level.

School C was making limited use of NNQs in S3 and S4, mainly to take advantage of the possibilities of constructing more flexible progression routes, especially for high attaining students. In maths, Standard Grade Credit had been replaced by Intermediate 2 to enable students to start their Higher earlier, mid way through S4. (In this regard, the SQA's withdrawal of the winter diet had caused problems.) Intermediate 2 was being offered in modern studies in S3 for some high-attaining students with the aim of allowing them to take the Higher in S4 or to take it over two years. However, modern studies had not abandoned Standard Grade; the intention was to offer either Standard Grade or Intermediate 2 on a year-by-year basis depending on the students in question. In addition, the modern studies department was using free-standing NNQ units to supplement the Standard Grade where it was offered. Intermediate 1 catering and Intermediate 1/2 Gaelic were also running. School C had high average student attainment and at the time of the interviews did not perceive a need for Access level provision in S3/4. It had, however, identified several younger students for whom this might be appropriate when they entered S3. The use of NNQs in S3/4 was beginning to make staff think about the implications of a more flexible system: for example, that while it might be appropriate to replace Standard Grades in a certain subjects for certain students, this had implications for students' overall programme of study and for school systems and procedures that had also to be considered.

School D had a phased approach to the use of NNQs in S3 and S4. Access 3 and Intermediate 1 in French, German, maths, practical craft skills and health and food technology were running by the time of the second round of interviews and the school planned to extend its use to the social subjects and science in the following year (2003-04). With the exception of maths, NNQ provision was aimed mainly at students identified as likely to struggle with Foundation or General level Standard Grade and at those with behavioural problems or poor attendance. Staff thought that the students concerned were responding positively to the short-term targets of NNQs and the possibility of frequent achievement compared with Standard Grades. The unitised structure of NNQs meant also that it was easier for staff to accommodate students' poor attendance or exclusion from school. As in schools A and B, the head's own view was that the school should plan to phase out Standard Grades over a five-year period but he noted that this was not shared by all staff and that there was a strong lobby in the school to retain Standard Grades, especially for Credit level students (the school had average student attainment). Other staff, while not opposing the replacement of Standard Grades in principle, did not think that the school should do so in the absence of a national policy on Standard Grade replacement.

REASONS FOR CHANGE

Survey respondents were offered four possible reasons for replacing Standard Grade provision with NNQs, and asked to tick yes or no for each (Table 6). Over ninety

per cent of schools in each category agreed that the opportunity to offer provision at a more appropriate level was a reason for replacing Standard Grades. A majority also agreed that they had done so in order to improve progression opportunities for students, to offer more even progression between stages and to provide more relevant or up-to-date content. Local authority schools which had replaced more than ten per cent of subjects were particularly likely to say they had done so in order to offer provision at a more appropriate level (100 per cent) or to improve progression opportunities (94 per cent; table not shown).

Table 6: If you have replaced some/all Standard Grade provision with NNQs, what are your main reasons for doing so? (percentages)

	LA mainstream	Independent	Special
more relevant/up to date content	73	80	53
to offer provision at a more appropriate level	91	91	95
to improve progression opportunities for students	82	91	89
to offer students a more even progression between stages from S2 onwards	72	91	84
<i>n</i>	(169–192)	(10–11)	(18–21)

Note. Respondents could tick yes or no for each item; missing responses for each item are excluded from the 100% base. The base *n* consequently varies across the four items, and the range of *n*'s for each group of schools is reported in the table.

Our case studies allowed us to explore schools' reasons for using NNQs in S3 and S4 in greater detail. Some of these reasons have been described in the summary presented above. In some cases NNQs were perceived to offer better content and better progression opportunities, for example, Access and Intermediate 1 in chemistry, physics or biology offered the opportunity of progression into Intermediate 1 or 2 in a discrete science in S5 in contrast with Standard Grade science. NNQs also provided the opportunity to construct flexible progression routes from S3 onwards; for example, Intermediate 2 mathematics could be offered in S3 allowing students to start on a Higher course in S4. A major advantage of NNQs for staff was that they allowed better pacing than a two-year Standard Grade. This was particularly valuable for low attainers who were more motivated by the short-term goals and rewards of NNQs, but it could also benefit high attainers by providing a steeper gradient of demand. The structure of NNQs, with certification for individual units, also provided a strategy for dealing with students who were poor attenders or who had been excluded and would consequently be unlikely to achieve at Standard Grade.

The schools' replacement of Standard Grades had not been directed by local authority policy. The main way in which the local authorities had influenced schools' decisions was that a lack of local authority policy resulted in at least two of the four case study schools being more cautious about the extent of replacement than they might otherwise have been.

ISSUES RAISED BY NNQS IN S3 AND S4

Some school staff expressed anxiety about the possible disadvantages of NNQs in S3 and S4. The emerging mixed economy of Standard Grades and NNQs might create problems. Students might be disadvantaged if they held qualifications other

than those offered more generally in schools, even within the same local authority. It might be difficult to integrate students coming into the school from elsewhere, including from other schools in the same authority. Students within the same school had to deal with two different curriculum and assessment structures in their school day. This threatened to recreate precisely the kinds of incoherent learning experiences, formerly associated with combinations of SCE and Scotvec provision, which Higher Still had been introduced to remove. Some staff also pointed to the danger that students would give priority to studying for their NNQs rather than their Standard Grades, as only the former were examined in S3. It was also recognised that breaking down the age/stage arrangements, for example by using NNQs to accelerate the progress of some students, could lead to major logistical problems if it involved a significant proportion of students.

As we have seen the possibility of improved progression was a key reason for replacing Standard Grades with NNQs. As students who had taken NNQs in S3 and S4 were beginning to move into S5, schools were having to confront the consequent need to make appropriate provision available to turn this possibility into reality. But the need for a wider range of provision in S5, especially at Intermediate level, could create timetabling and resource difficulties. One of the case study schools was unable to provide the appropriate course at Intermediate 2 to students who had taken Intermediate 1 instead of Standard Grade, even though they had done so largely because of the greater potential for progression. As they gained experience schools were also coming to recognise that they might need to offer the opportunity of horizontal progression after S4 to students who were not ready or able to progress vertically. They were beginning to confront the challenge of making horizontal progression a meaningful experience.

Heads were concerned to keep control of the introduction of NNQs in S3 and S4. Change was occurring at a department level on an *ad hoc* basis in response to particular needs. Although heads supported this approach, they were also concerned to keep control of this 'creeping replacement' of Standard Grade and to give prominence to whole-school issues. However departments could also be the source of resistance to change. The heads in three of the four case study schools wanted to move across to NNQs within four or five years, but had experienced considerable resistance from some subject departments.

FUTURE PLANS

Both our survey data and our case study data suggest that in most schools the initiative in using NNQs in S3 and S4 had been mainly at the departmental level, as staff identified groups of students for whom NNQs would be more appropriate and/or identified deficiencies in particular Standard Grades. Departments then made the case for replacement to senior management. None of the case study schools was planning to replace Standard Grades totally despite the personal preference of three of the headteachers. This decentralised approach to the replacement of Standard Grades may explain why our survey respondents found it difficult to answer questions about their plans for NNQs in S3 and S4 over the next three years (Table 7); many respondents left several of the items blank. The absence of local and national strategies was a further obstacle to planning at the school level. The data in Table 7 also reflect the difficulty of capturing the range of strategies in a single set of survey questions; the options summarised in the table may be combined in a variety of ways. (This may explain why the level of current progress indicated in Table 7 is rather less than that suggested in Table 1, above.)

With this qualification, we can draw three main conclusions from Table 7.

First, very few schools planned to replace Standard Grade totally by NNQs. Only one local authority school had already done so; a further two schools expected to do so and only 12 per cent of schools (28 schools) thought that they might 'possibly'

do so within the next three years. Interestingly, higher proportions of independent and special schools planned the total replacement of Standard Grade, albeit based on a smaller total number of schools.

Second, most schools indicated that it was at least possible that they would engage in one or more of the partial replacement strategies described in the table: replacing Standard Grades in certain subjects only, at certain levels only or for particular groups of students. This is consistent with our judgement that decisions would continue to be taken at departmental level (although of course it could also be consistent with a clearer strategy for coordinating these decisions).

Third, most schools (except independent schools) expected to use NNQs to offer national certification for students for whom Standard Grade was inappropriate, although fewer schools planned to use it to replace previous National Certificate provision.

Table 7: What are your plans for the use of NNQs in S3/S4 in the next three years? (Percentages)

	Yes, already have	Yes, expect to	Possibly	No	Not answered	<i>n</i> (=100%)
Total replacement of all SG provision:						
LA mainstream	0.4	0.8	12	73	15	(248)
Independent	0	15	26	37	22	(27)
Special	7	9	13	21	49	(75)
Replacement of SGs in certain subjects only:						
LA mainstream	16	27	38	12	8	(248)
Independent	19	19	33	15	15	(27)
Special	7	8	11	16	59	(75)
Replacement of SGs at certain levels only:						
LA mainstream	12	21	41	18	9	(248)
Independent	19	19	33	15	15	(27)
Special	7	8	11	16	59	(75)
Replacement of SGs for particular groups of students:						
LA mainstream	17	23	37	15	9	(248)
Independent	4	4	22	44	26	(27)
Special	16	8	1	17	57	(75)
Offer national certification for students for whom SG is inappropriate:						
LA mainstream	24	31	28	9	9	(248)
Independent	0	4	11	56	30	(27)
Special	45	5	3	3	44	(75)
Replacement of previous National Certificate provision:						
LA mainstream	15	6	21	35	23	(248)
Independent	4	0	11	59	26	(27)
Special	21	5	3	17	53	(75)

Note. Respondents were asked to respond separately to each of the six items shown in the left hand column.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

By 2002–03 most local authority mainstream schools, and a half of independent and special schools, had made some use of NNQs in S3 and S4, mainly to replace Standard Grade but in some cases to certificate other subjects such as religious and moral education. Within the maintained sector there was no strong relation between the use of NNQs and the school characteristics which we measured, but schools with lower-attaining and more working-class student bodies were slightly more likely to use NNQs to replace Standard Grades. The typical level of replacement was small, with no more than one subject in ten affected, but a few local authority schools and several independent and special schools had replaced much more than this. In mainstream local authority schools the subjects most affected were home economics, science, mathematics and French, but in the independent schools and the more heavily involved local authority schools music and art and design were also frequently replaced. These schools were also relatively likely to replace Standard Grade at Credit level; the general pattern was for Foundation and to a lesser extent General to be most affected. Reasons for replacement included the availability of provision at a more appropriate level, improved progression opportunities and pacing of study, and better content. However some staff expressed concerns about the implications of the emerging mixed economy of NNQs and Standard Grades. The delivery of a more flexible curriculum of NNQs in S3 and S4, and the need to fulfil the promise of enhanced progression opportunities in S5, raised questions of logistics and resources. Decisions about replacing Standard Grade tended to be taken in a decentralised and *ad hoc* way, and the absence (at the time of the survey) of a clear local or national strategy inhibited progress and future planning. There was no consensus among school staff about the need for change. Schools found it hard to answer questions about their future plans but we find little evidence of an imminent wholesale migration to NNQs in S3 and S4.

We have characterised the model introduced by Higher Still as an access and progression ‘climbing frame’, which offers multiple entry points for students of all abilities and backgrounds, and flexible opportunities for vertical and horizontal progression (Hodgson, *et al.*, 2003). This feature of Higher Still is widely recognised by participants in the system; in earlier analyses we have found that the aims of Higher Still which command greatest recognition and widest support from educationists are those relating to attainment, access and progression (Tinklin, *et al.*, 2001). Higher Still’s climbing frame contrasts with recent Curriculum 2000 reforms in England, which placed much less emphasis on progression, and it provides inspiration if not a model for 14–19 reform south of the Border (FNWG, 2003). However, if in England the notion of the climbing frame can be used to link the 14–16 and 16-plus stages of education, it is hardly surprising that in Scotland the progression principles embodied in NNQs have been extended down the age range to 14–16 provision. And the Higher Still model seems in harmony with current developments in Scottish educational policy, with the emphasis on curriculum flexibility and choice in S3 and S4, on loosening the bonds between age and stage and on allowing more scope for school-level decision-making (Scottish Executive, 2001, 2003a, 2003b; LTS, 2003).

It is not surprising, then, that some schools have exploited the flexibility afforded by NNQs to provide access points at more appropriate levels, to improve the pacing of study and offer better progression opportunities, and to introduce more relevant and up-to-date curricula. Indeed, in some respects it is surprising that we do not find more evidence of progress, and especially of progress that is coordinated at school or local authority level. Possibly our data-collection, in 2002–03, took place before a more coordinated style of development had time to emerge. Nevertheless, we conclude this paper with three more cautionary observations drawn from this analysis in the context of our broader programme of study of Higher Still and related developments.

First, the climbing-frame model exemplified by NNQs looks impressive on paper but it has not yet been fully tested and evaluated in practice. So far, NNQs appear to have been more successful in respect of access than of progression. They have provided more flexible and accessible entry points, especially for the middle- and lower-attainers who were poorly provided for in the previous system. However they may have been less successful in facilitating progression. Our evidence on this is incomplete and we are continuing to analyse our data on progression through the climbing frame. However our work to date has identified a number of issues: the disappointing success rates of students following the more flexible progression routes; the continued emphasis on vertical rather than horizontal progression; different patterns of progression in school and in FE; logistical issues in delivering the new framework of provision; problems of continuity in the curriculum of many subjects; and problems of continuity in the learning experience, for example of subjects delivered in multilevel classes (Tinklin, *et al.*, 2003). For present purposes our point is simply this: if progression is the main reason for introducing NNQs in S3 and S4, it would be wise first to see how well NNQs have enhanced progression opportunities at 16-plus, and to make sure that the issues raised above can be addressed. Future policy for NNQs in S3 and S4 should be informed by the actual experience of NNQs and not simply on the aspirations implied in the 'climbing frame' metaphor.

Second, our respondents identify potential disadvantages of the 'mixed economy' that is emerging in S3 and S4. Higher Still aimed to introduce a unified curriculum and assessment system, and many of the problems which it sought to redress arose from the mixed economy of Scotvec and SCE provision in S5 and beyond. It would be ironical if it were to introduce a similarly incoherent mixture into S3 and S4.

The third issue concerns the control and coordination of developments. Asked about their policies for Higher Still in general, local authority schools named the policies and priorities of central and local government, together with the nature of their upper-school roll, as the factors which most influenced their decisions. (Local authority advisers were seen as less influential.) Nevertheless, developments in S3 and S4 tended, at least in 2002–03, to be the product of *ad hoc* departmental initiatives with relatively little coordination or strategic input at local or national level. Even at school level strategies were largely reactive, to let departments make the case for changes for specific subjects and students. This picture may become less true as more local authorities develop policies for NNQs in the context of curriculum flexibility (LTS, 2003). Nevertheless the policies that are emerging tend to reflect a strong desire to allow schools and, within schools, departments considerable discretion to identify local needs. In itself this is commendable but a policy for local flexibility needs to be pursued within a framework which ensures coherence and consistency. It is not certain that the emerging mixed economy offers such a framework. Our earlier analyses of Higher Still's process of change led us to conclude that a unified system could not be left to steer itself or be steered by the disaggregated decisions of participants; it needed a mechanism for building consensus around a direction of change and for leading the system in that direction (Howieson *et al.*, 2002). This conclusion applies equally to the curriculum of S3 and S4.

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