

HIGHER STILL IN EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

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SYNOPSIS

This paper compares Higher Still with post-16 reform policies currently pursued in other European countries. These reforms all respond to similar problems and pressures, many of which reflect common educational, social and economic trends, and they pursue similar objectives but with differences of emphasis. Compared with other reforms Higher Still focuses more on 'middle-attaining' students, is less labour-market-oriented and is less concerned to increase flexibility than to address problems of an already flexible system. Along with reforms in Norway and Sweden, Higher Still pursues a 'unified system' which unifies tracks; other strategies link tracks or enhance their distinctiveness. Higher Still is also distinctive for its emphasis on 'system architecture' (certification and pathways) as the main focus of reform, for its omission of work-based learning, and for pursuing an individualist rather than collectivist model of unified system. The paper concludes by discussing the lessons which may be drawn from such comparisons.

INTRODUCTION

In 1999 Higher Still will introduce a 'unified curriculum and assessment system' for post-compulsory education below higher education level in Scotland (Scottish Office, 1994). This system will replace nearly all provision in the fifth and sixth years of secondary school, and most non-advanced college provision, including for adults, except Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs). It will incorporate all academic and vocational courses in a single framework of 40-hour units, usually grouped into 160-hour courses, available at five levels. Common principles of curriculum design, assessment and certification will apply throughout the system. The unified system introduced by Higher Still may be further extended by the Scottish post-16 qualifications framework which is currently under discussion and which was endorsed by the Garrick Report (NCIHE, 1997).

Higher Still was the government's response to the Howie Report on *Upper Secondary Education in Scotland* (SOED, 1992). Although the government rejected the report's main recommendation, for a two-track system beyond 15 years, it accepted its diagnosis of the current weaknesses of the system, and it incorporated many of its key principles. The Howie Report argued that Scottish education should judge its performance by European standards, and not only by the standards prevailing elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Originally scheduled for implementation in 1997, Higher Still has been postponed twice, and it is too early to say whether it will raise the performance of Scottish education to the highest European standards. However it is possible to compare its strategy of a unified system with reform strategies being pursued elsewhere in Europe. In this paper I compare Higher Still with reforms of post-compulsory education and training in seven other European countries.

I draw on two linked research projects. The *Unified Learning Project* is comparing Scottish and English/Welsh approaches to unifying academic and vocational learning, and has generated the main conceptual framework on which this paper is based. The *Post-16 Strategies Project*, which compares reform programmes in eight European countries to improve parity of esteem for initial vocational education, is the main empirical source for the paper. These projects are funded by the ESRC's *The Learning Society* programme and by the European Union's LEONARDO programme respectively.

The following sections of the paper respectively describe the reform programmes, analyse their objectives and the problems and pressures to which they respond, and compare their strategies for reform. In the final section I consider the types of lessons which may be learnt from comparisons of policy strategies.

THE REFORM PROGRAMMES

The reform programmes in the seven other countries covered by the LEONARDO study are summarised briefly below.

Austria: In Austria there are four main tracks through upper-secondary education: academic schools, higher vocational colleges, intermediate vocational colleges and the dual system (apprenticeship which combines learning in the workplace with learning in a vocational school). Current reforms focus on the last two of these. The curriculum is being broadened, updated, and extended to new occupational fields. New qualifications arrangements will give all vocational students, including those in the dual system, the opportunity to qualify for higher education. *Fachhochschulen* (vocational HE institutions) were introduced in the early 1990s and these are gradually being expanded to provide a progression route for vocational students. There are concurrent reforms in the traditional universities.

England: The Dearing Review of 16-19 Qualifications proposed reforms to clarify the purposes, reduce the overlap and enhance the distinctiveness of each of the three 'pathways' (academic, applied and vocational). It also proposed a number of measures to link or bridge the pathways. These included common nomenclature, levels and quality assurance procedures for the three pathways, overarching diplomas, a re-structuring of courses into smaller units or groups of units to promote mixing and transfer between pathways, the promotion of key (core) skills across all three pathways, and the merger of the main bodies regulating the different pathways. The Labour government has expressed broad support for the Dearing recommendations but at the time of writing is consulting on the next steps.

Finland: In Finland upper-secondary education is provided in two types of school, general and vocational. In 1992 experimental reforms were started in 16 local networks of schools. Each network comprises both types of schools and collaborates in joint scheduling and the cooperative provision of programmes. Students are encouraged to select a proportion of their programmes from other schools in the network, thus bridging the academic/vocational divide.

France: In 1985 France introduced the *Baccalauréat Professionnel*, a Vocational Bac alongside the existing General and Technological Bacs, with substantial common content. The Bac Prof is designed primarily for students who have embarked on lower-level (CAP/BEP) vocational courses at 15, and thus extends the progression opportunities in vocational education. It also confers entitlement to higher education, although a majority of its graduates enter the labour market. In the 1990s the other Bacs have been reformed, to promote flexibility, to cater for the greater diversity of students and to reduce the hierarchy among them.

Germany: In contrast to the other countries, there are no national reform programmes with similar objectives in Germany. The LEONARDO project has focused on bottom-up, process-oriented reforms to the dual system, and in particular on the Black Pump project in Brandenburg which has reformed the curriculum and pedagogy in order to integrate general and vocational

education. The Black Pump project has sought to develop closer collaborative links between vocational schools and enterprises participating in the dual system, and to qualify young people for higher education as well as for employment.

Norway: The Norwegian Reform-94 brought general and vocational upper-secondary schools together in new combined (or comprehensive) schools. It increased the general education component of vocational courses. It rationalised first-year courses, and remedied the shortage of places on second- and third-year courses. It made the pathways through the system more flexible, by broadening the second-year options available to students completing a given first-year course, and likewise in the third year. It introduced a '2+' model for vocational courses, which allowed students after two years of school-based study to choose between a further year of training or two years of training combined with productive work. It developed new pathways from vocational education to higher education.

Sweden: In Sweden, where an earlier reform had established integrated upper-secondary schools, reforms in 1994 replaced the previous structure of general and vocational programmes, of varying length, with a system based on 16 national three-year programmes. Two programmes (natural and social sciences) focus on university entry; the other 14 are more vocationally oriented but also give access, at least in principle, to higher education. At least 15% of study time on the 14 more vocationally oriented programmes is provided in the workplace. There is substantial common content, and all programmes include the same eight core courses or modules; the system is intended to facilitate transfer between programmes or from an 'individual' (self-chosen) programme to a national one. All young people up to 20 years have an entitlement to education within the system. The reform has also decentralised education and increased the autonomy of localities and of institutions.

Fuller accounts are presented in Lasonen (1996) and in Lasonen and Young (forthcoming). Manning (1996) reports on a parallel study of reforms which introduce 'dual qualifications' for higher education as well as employment.

Any comparison of these reforms must take account of their different timing. The English reforms are at the least advanced stage, with the government still consulting over the measures required to achieve its aims. The Scottish reforms have yet to be implemented. The first students are graduating from the new Norwegian and Swedish programmes in 1997, and the German and Austrian reforms are still at a relatively early stage. Only the French and Finnish reforms are old enough to be evaluated on the basis of several cohorts of graduates. It is possible to compare the strategies pursued by the different reforms, but it is too early to compare their effectiveness.

COMMON PROBLEMS AND PRESSURES

Despite the diversity of these reform programmes, they respond to common problems and pressures, many of which reflect educational, social and economic trends that are global in character.

Many of the educational problems addressed by the reforms are associated with expansion and academic drift. The growth in participation in post-compulsory education and training is a universal or near-universal phenomenon. It has been reinforced, if not wholly determined, by credentialist pressures, that is by the competitive scramble for the positional advantage conferred by higher levels of education (Robinson and Manacorda, 1997). These pressures have contributed to

academic drift, that is an increasing demand for the higher-status 'academic' programmes which confer most positional advantage (Wolf, 1993; Pair, forthcoming). In most countries the demand for vocational programmes, especially those which do not lead to higher education, has declined in relative and sometimes in absolute terms. Expansion and academic drift have exposed or exacerbated existing weaknesses of post-compulsory education and training. The 'new' participants in education represent a wide range of needs and abilities, and many are not well catered for by existing provision. Many vocational programmes suffer from low status and outdated curricula. Links between vocational schools and enterprises are often poor. Expansion has exposed the absence of progression pathways: young people expect to continue for longer in education, but programmes which have traditionally prepared for direct entry to the labour market may provide few opportunities for further study. 'Dead-ends' have become more visible. Expansion has increased the complexity as well as the scale of post-compulsory education and training systems; they must meet a wider and more complex set of demands and expectations, and coherence, flexibility and responsiveness become increasingly important.

Social and economic trends have created further new pressures on education and training. As society becomes more 'individualised', students expect a wider choice of courses and the opportunity to negotiate flexible pathways through education (Roberts *et al.*, 1994). The political changes of recent decades have resulted in a stronger 'consumer' orientation to public services such as education and an expectation of choice (Paterson, 1997b). Economic changes have created a demand both for higher levels of attainment and for new kinds of skills, especially generic and overarching competences, and for their wide distribution across the population (EC, 1996; Young *et al.*, forthcoming). Growing inequalities and the increased risk of social and economic exclusion have created new problems in respect of low-achieving students who may be marginalised by the expansion of education itself (Rees *et al.*, 1996, Paterson, 1997a).

These trends and pressures are mediated by the specific history and institutions of each country, and the specific problems to which they give rise may vary across countries; but they reflect global trends and are broadly similar across Europe. They raise two related problems for post-compulsory education and training systems: how to differentiate provision for students with different aspirations, abilities, needs and circumstances; and how to organise the relationship of general (or academic) study to vocational study.

All the reform programmes described above address some or all of these problems. They also have common or overlapping objectives. These include:

- To raise levels of attainment
- To enhance opportunities for lower-attaining and less advantaged students
- To increase the attractiveness of these opportunities, and to promote parity of esteem
- To improve progression opportunities, including pathways from vocational programmes to higher education
- To modernise the curriculum and to promote 'general' skills and knowledge including key or core skills
- To promote social equality
- To decentralise the system and to increase its flexibility and responsiveness
- To rationalise the system and to make it more transparent.

These objectives are similar to the stated nine aims of Higher Still (Scottish Office, 1994, pp. 9–10):

- Higher standards of attainment
- Recognised qualifications for all
- An even gradient of progression
- Expansion and rationalisation of existing provision
- Breadth of attainment
- Competence in core skills
- Consolidation of earlier reforms
- Making the system simpler and more efficient
- Unification of curriculum and assessment arrangements.

Some of the problems addressed by Higher Still, such as the ‘uneven gradient of progression’ identified by the Howie Report, are specific to Scottish education. But for the most part Higher Still responds to much the same problems and pressures as the other European reforms, and it pursues similar objectives. Like the other reforms it addresses problems associated with expansion and academic drift, notably the unsuitability of existing provision for the new ‘stayers’ in education and the low status of vocational provision. However there are differences of emphasis.

First, compared to most other European systems, post-compulsory education in Scotland is already flexible. Indeed Higher Still responds to the problems of flexibility — for example, problems of coherence in the choice of courses and modules, and the lack of clearly signposted pathways — more than it responds to the need for flexibility.

Second, many of the European reforms focus primarily on provision for low attaining and disadvantaged students, and address concerns about social and economic exclusion. Higher Still offers ‘opportunity for all’ but the main driving force behind the reform was the need to improve provision and progression opportunities for middle-attaining students. This difference in emphasis may reflect Scotland’s lower participation in full-time education beyond 16 and the strong association of participation with prior attainment: only a minority of low attainers enter the courses which Higher Still will replace (Paterson and Raffe, 1995). More low attainers in Scotland enter work-based opportunities, such as Skillseekers, which usually lead to SVQs and are not covered by Higher Still.

Third, economic and labour-market influences on Higher Still have been noticeably weaker than in most other European reforms. The economic demands on Scottish education at this level have been highly generalised, and expressed in terms of higher attainments (to meet competitiveness ‘targets’) and core skills. Compared to most other European reforms Higher Still has not attached much priority to developing wide-ranging links between schools or colleges and enterprises. Conversely Higher Still appears to be (even) more ‘education-led’ than most other reforms, and higher education may have even more influence on its development.

STRATEGIC APPROACH

Allowing for these differences of emphasis the objectives of Higher Still are broadly similar to those of other European reforms of post-16 education. The way in which it seeks to achieve these objectives is more distinctive. Below I examine, in turn, the broad strategy pursued by Higher Still, the dimensions of change it seeks to influence, its scope, and its concept of unified system.

Broad strategy of reform: tracking, linkages or unified system

Among the European reforms we may distinguish three broad strategies for addressing the problems described above, especially the problem of differentiation

in education and the relationship between general and vocational learning. All three strategies start from the fact that general and vocational learning are organised, in most countries, in two or more tracks.

Tracking: Track-based strategies seek to maintain the separateness and distinctiveness of the tracks, and in particular of the vocational track. They aim to make vocational education stronger and more attractive to students by developing a distinctive ethos and values, so that it can be judged by these values and not by those of the general or academic track.

Linkages: The second strategy emphasises the tracks' similarities rather than their differences. It gives the tracks the same formal status, builds links between them, develops common features, and encourages their mutual enrichment. It aims to make vocational education more attractive by building it up as an alternative to the general or academic track, of equivalent status.

Unified system: The third strategy abolishes the formal distinction between vocational and general education based on tracks, by combining them within the same system and developing a curriculum which integrates the two.

I have described these as discrete strategies, but they can also be represented along a continuum of 'unification' ranging from strong tracking to a fully unified system. Of the reforms studied, those in Germany and Austria exemplify tracking strategies, those in England, Finland and France exemplify linkages strategies, and those in Norway, Scotland and Sweden exemplify unified system strategies. However there are no 'pure' examples: most national reform programmes combine elements of different strategies.

A country's choice of strategy may partly reflect its political and educational culture and the objectives — explicit or implicit — of the reform. The unified system strategies of Norway and Sweden have explicit egalitarian goals which reflect the political cultures of these countries. Higher Still's unified system strategy responds to the strong views among Scottish educationists that students in comprehensive schools should not be streamed or tracked (Howieson *et al.*, 1997). However pragmatic considerations are at least as influential on the choice of strategy: a country chooses the strategy which is most likely to succeed in the context of its own institutions and circumstances. Important factors in this choice include the existing nature of the education and training system (especially the relationships among tracks), the size and degree of centralisation of this system, the extent to which the social and economic context support a strong vocational track, and the school- or work-based character of this track. Elsewhere I have identified pragmatic reasons for Scotland's adoption of a unified system: these include the existing flexibility of the system and the overlap of its academic and full-time vocational tracks (most school students combine academic Highers and vocational modules), the influence of higher education and the labour market in encouraging academic drift and in failing to support a strong vocational track, and the lack of a strong tradition of full-time technical education (Raffe, 1995).

Dimensions of system change

A second way to distinguish Higher Still's strategy is in terms of the dimensions of the education system along which it promotes change.

I have represented each strategy in terms of the type of education system which it wishes to establish and/or consolidate. However there are several different dimensions along which an education system may change; a reform programme may focus on some dimensions but not on others, or it may pursue different strategies in respect of different dimensions. This is illustrated by Figure 1, which

lists eleven dimensions of system change, grouped into four areas: content and process, system architecture, delivery, and government and regulation. For each dimension, Figure 1 summarises the characteristic features of a tracked, linked and unified system respectively. The corresponding strategy promotes these features. For example, with respect to the ‘curriculum’ dimension, the curriculum content varies across tracks in a tracked system, whereas in a linked system curricular features such as core skills or general courses are common to all tracks; the Dearing Review’s proposal that all three tracks in England should offer key skills is typical of a linkages strategy. In a unified system the curriculum integrates academic and vocational learning, and is either common for all students or varies in relation to individual student needs.

Figure 1. A matrix of unification: types of system and their dimensions

CONTENT AND PROCESS	Tracked system	Linked system	Unified system
<i>Purpose and ethos</i>	Distinctive purposes and ethos associated with each track	Purposes and ethos overlap across tracks	Multiple purposes and pluralist ethos
<i>Curriculum</i>	Different content (subjects, areas of study)	Some common elements (e.g. core skills, general courses) across tracks	Curriculum reflects student needs and integrates academic and vocational learning
<i>Teaching/learning processes</i>	Different learning processes in different tracks	Different learning processes but some common features	Variation based on student needs and not tied to specific programmes
<i>Assessment</i>	Different assessment methodologies and grading systems	Different methodologies but with level and grade equivalences	Common framework of methodologies including a common grading system
SYSTEM ARCHITECTURE			
<i>Certification</i>	Different certification for each track	Certification frameworks link tracks, e.g. overarching diplomas, equivalences	A single system of certification
<i>Course structure and pathways</i>	Different course structures and insulated progression pathways	Course structures allow transfer and combinations	Flexible entry points, credit accumulation, and single progression ladder
<i>Progression to higher education</i>	Progression to HE not possible from some tracks	Different types of admission from different tracks	All tracks give admission to HE
DELIVERY			
<i>Local institutions</i>	Different institutions for different tracks	Variable/overlapping relation of track to institution	One type of institution, or choice of institution not constrained by type of programme
<i>Modes of participation</i>	Tracks based on separate modes (academic/full-time, vocational/part-time)	Tracks partly based on mode	Single system covers different modes
<i>Staff</i>	Different staff for each track, with non-transferable qualifications	Variable/some overlap of staff	Socialisation, qualifications and conditions are consistent for all staff
GOVERNMENT AND REGULATION	Different structures for different tracks	Mixed/variable organisational structure	Single administrative and regulatory system

Source: adapted from Raffé *et al.* (1997) and Arnman *et al.* (1997)

A more detailed discussion of the dimensions, and of their application to current reforms in Scotland and England, is provided in Raffe *et al.* (1997). Arnman *et al.* (1997) apply the dimensions to Scotland and Sweden. Figure 2 summarises the conclusions of these analyses in respect of Scotland; for reasons of space and complexity I do not present the detailed analyses of other countries here. In Figure 2, (S) and S represent the Scottish post-compulsory system before and after Higher Still respectively: the further they are placed to the right, the closer the system to a fully unified system in respect of the dimension concerned. Like the dimensions themselves, this analysis should be seen as tentative. However it points to further ways in which the Higher Still strategy may be distinguished from some of those pursued elsewhere in Europe.

Figure 2. The Scottish system, before and after Higher Still

CONTENT AND PROCESS	Tracked system	Linked system	Unified system
<i>Purpose and ethos</i>		(S)-----	->S
<i>Curriculum</i>		(S)-----	->S
<i>Teaching/learning processes</i>		(S)-----	->S
<i>Assessment</i>	(S)-----	-----	->S
SYSTEM ARCHITECTURE			
<i>Certification</i>		(S)-----	----->S
<i>Course structure and pathways</i>			(S)---->S
<i>Progression to higher education</i>		(S)----	->S
DELIVERY			
<i>Local institutions</i>		S	
<i>Modes of participation</i>	S		
<i>Staff</i>	S		
GOVERNMENT AND REGULATION			
		(S)-----	----->S

Higher Still's primary focus is on 'system architecture': that is, on the structure of certification and courses and on the pathways that connect them. These are the dimensions on which the new system will be closest to a fully unified system. Indeed Higher Still can be understood as primarily an attempt to bring certification arrangements into line with the existing flexibility of course structure and pathways, especially within schools. The reform of system architecture is prominent in other countries' strategies, including those of Austria, England, France, Norway and Sweden, but many of these give greater priority to reforms of content and process as well. The Scottish approach starts with the packaging and then proceeds to the contents. The reform of content and process has been a secondary focus of Higher Still; however the eventual changes to the curriculum

and pedagogy are likely to be greater than was first envisaged, and this is represented by substantial movement along the corresponding dimensions in Figure 2. However, of the European reforms studied by the LEONARDO project, the one which gives greatest priority to changes in content and process is the experimental German reform which attempts to integrate general and vocational curricula, and which does so *within* the vocational track in the context of a tracking strategy.

Higher Still does not pursue unification along any of the three dimensions of delivery, including local institutions. Higher Still will be introduced to the existing structure of schools and FE colleges and will not directly change the division of labour between them (although this is expected to change as an indirect result of Higher Still, for example through increased collaboration to deliver a broader curriculum). This is in contrast to the unified systems being introduced in Norway, where a unified upper-secondary school is being established by the current reforms, and in Sweden where it already exists.

Scope of the reform

A third criterion for distinguishing strategies is their scope. Earlier I pointed out that there were no 'pure' examples of strategies: most national reform programmes combined elements of different strategies. This is true, not only in respect of dimensions, but also in respect of different tracks. If a system has three or more tracks, its strategy for the relationship between tracks 1 and 2 may differ from its strategy for the relationship between tracks 2 and 3. Higher Still unifies academic and vocational learning within the school/college-based sector, but it does not cover work-based provision such as SVQs. It is intended that Higher Still will be linked to work-based provision by such measures as a qualifications framework, common curricular elements such as core skills, arrangements for progression and articulation, and group awards which combine contributions from both sources: but these are all examples of a linkages strategy rather than a unified system. The Scottish national reform programme thus combines a unified system strategy in respect of academic and vocational school/college-based provision, with a linkages strategy in respect of the relation of this to work-based provision. In this respect it will differ from Norway and Sweden, both of which will include work-based provision within a unified system, although in Sweden this provision is numerically insignificant.

Concept of unified system: individualist or collectivist

A fourth way to distinguish Higher Still from other European reforms, and especially from the other unified system strategies of Norway and Sweden, is by its concept of unified system. The comparisons reveal at least two interpretations or emphases within the concept of unified system, both consistent with the description in the right-hand column of Figure 1. An 'individualist' interpretation emphasises opportunity, flexibility and choice: a unified system is one which provides each individual with the opportunities most suited to his or her individual aspirations, abilities, needs and circumstances. A 'collectivist' interpretation emphasises prescription and uniformity of treatment and outcome: a unified system is one in which all students share a common basic knowledge and skills when they leave school. (The terms 'individualist' and 'collectivist', in this context, are my own.) These two interpretations have been the subject of debates within countries, as well as a point of comparison between countries. In Sweden the debates have followed conventional political divisions, with the right (liberals) favouring a more individualist approach and the left (social democrats) a collectivist approach. In Scotland the individualist approach may reflect the 'new cultural climate' of 'individualisation' in respect of education and other public

services, which draws on political ideas from both left and right (Paterson, 1997b: 315).

The two interpretations may be illustrated by comparing the Scottish and Swedish reforms. Although the Swedish reforms increased the flexibility of the education system and expanded the scope for student choice, their model of unified system is much closer to a collectivist interpretation whereas the Higher Still model is closer to an individualist interpretation. There are at least three aspects of this. First, subject choice is more restricted in the Swedish system. Most Swedish students take a three-year national programme which offers relatively little choice and includes eight compulsory core subjects which are common to all programmes. About one in ten students start programmes that are individually negotiated, rather than national programmes, but these are primarily a temporary expedient for students who eventually transfer to a national programme. In Scotland many students will choose elective programmes of courses and units, and the main constraint on choice will be the availability of courses in the school or college and the anticipated requirements of universities and employers. Students taking Scottish Group Awards (SGAs), the nearest equivalent of the Swedish national programmes, will have more constraints on their choice of subjects, but many SGAs will offer substantial choice, they will only commit students for a year at a time, and taking an SGA will be optional. It is likely that only a minority of school students will take them, at least in the early years of Higher Still.

Second, the Scottish model will have (in principle) flexible entry points. Courses and units will be offered at five levels, and students will enter the system at the level which corresponds to their previous level of attainment in the subject. The Swedish model, by contrast, does not differentiate provision according to prior attainment. In particular, the eight core subjects are designed to be taught at the same standard across all programmes and for all students. There have been problems of motivation and of high failure rates on core courses among students following the more vocationally oriented programmes.

Third, the Scottish model will have flexible exit points. How long a student remains in the system, and the level(s) at which s/he leaves it, will be flexible. As in the present Scottish system, there is no concept of graduation from upper-secondary education, or of a given standard to be achieved by all students. Conversely, there is no concept of drop-out, except in relation to people who leave a course in the middle of a year. The flexibility of outcomes in Scottish secondary education underpins recent debates about S6 and the roles of Higher and Advanced Higher as qualifications for university. It contrasts with the Swedish model where all programmes are of three years' duration and notionally of an equivalent standard, especially in respect of the eight core courses.

CONCLUSION: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE COMPARISON?

There are at least four types of lessons from the comparison of Higher Still with other European reforms. The first is self-awareness. It is a cliché of comparative research that the study of other countries gives us a better understanding of our own. Self-awareness is particularly important for a wide-ranging reform such as Higher Still, where those who plan and implement the different elements of the reform need to share an understanding of its aims and strategy (Fullan, 1991). The comparison with other European reforms draws attention to important features of the Higher Still strategy: for example, that it is a unifying strategy in contrast to tracking and linkages strategies elsewhere, that it focuses primarily on system architecture and secondarily on the content and processes of education as its main dimensions of change, that it does not cover the work-based route, and that it pursues an individualist concept of a unified system in contrast to the more collectivist concepts of Norway and Sweden.

Second, the comparison draws our attention to things that Higher Still does not do. For example, it does not introduce a comprehensive upper-secondary school (or tertiary college), nor does it change the other dimensions of 'delivery' such as staffing arrangements or mode of learning. In this respect it contrasts, not only with the unified systems of Norway and Sweden, but also with the British policies for comprehensive secondary education in the 1960s. The 1960s comprehensive reforms had similar objectives to Higher Still but a very different strategy for change: they focused on 'delivery', and specifically on institutional reform, and substantially ignored the dimensions of content and process and of system architecture. This was their weakness in the eyes of many critics (Reynolds *et al.*, 1987); it remains to be seen whether Higher Still is making the opposite mistake by failing to address the institutional underpinning of its reforms of certification and curriculum.

The comments of partners in the LEONARDO project draw attention to other 'gaps' in the Higher Still strategy. Several were puzzled by the flexibility of outcomes permitted by Higher Still: that is, by the absence of core or minimum requirements in the curriculum. However the greatest number of comments concerned Higher Still's omission of work-based learning and, relatedly, the relatively weak labour-market influence on the reform. Work-based youth training is quantitatively more important in Scotland than in most other countries in the project, but it remains outside Higher Still. The current strategy for linking work-based provision with the mainly full-time provision covered by Higher Still is a linkages strategy, not a unified system. There is a danger, not only that work-based learning will be marginalised within its ghetto of Skillseekers and SVQs, but also that Higher Still will itself be impoverished because its integration of academic and vocational learning does not draw on the rich traditions of work-based provision. Work-based learning has been central in current European thinking about vocational education (Ashton, 1993; EC, 1996); other Europeans may be sceptical of Higher Still's claim to be bridging the academic/vocational divide if work-based provision and links with enterprises play such a minor role within it.

Third, the comparisons provide a better understanding of cross-national trends. Comparative research is as valuable for what it reveals about similarities as for what it reveals about differences (Kohn, 1987). One of the most important lessons from the European comparisons is that despite the diversity of post-16 reform programmes they pursue similar objectives and respond to similar problems and pressures. The comparisons provide a useful antidote to the assumption of British exceptionalism which pervades many debates about post-compulsory education and training. This is the view, most strongly held in England but also common in Scotland, that education, society and economy in Britain have deep-rooted weaknesses and problems quite distinct from those of other countries. It is reflected, among other things, in the belief that the low status of vocational education at the upper-secondary stage is peculiar to Britain and that other European countries have somehow managed to solve the problem. As our study shows, the problems of (lack of) parity of esteem and academic drift are common to all countries, even if they take specific (and sometimes more acute) forms in Britain. We cannot hope to solve these problems if we incorrectly diagnose them as the products of specifically British educational or social arrangements.

All the countries studied are struggling to cope with the effects of educational expansion and especially of academic drift. Their strategies vary in terms of their starting points, the dimensions of change and how far they seek to move. Nevertheless all the countries except for Germany and Austria are trying to move either from a tracked system to a linked one, or from a linked system to a unified one — in other words from left to right along the dimensions shown in Figure 1.

This raises the question of whether there is an underlying logic leading towards unification in post-compulsory education systems — and, if so, of whether countries with strong dual systems are alone able to withstand this logic. In countries affected by the logic of unification we might expect policy change to be evolutionary, with linkage strategies progressively leading to unified system strategies. This has certainly been the experience of Scotland: the 1983 Action Plan prefigured Higher Still, and is similar in many ways to the current Finnish reforms. The notion of evolutionary ‘steps and stages’ towards a unified system has also been advocated in England (Richardson *et al.*, 1995). However, until we can observe national strategies over a much longer period of time we cannot say whether, or how far, all countries will move towards a unified system.

Finally, comparisons with other reforms pursuing similar objectives may provide more specific policy lessons. Scotland is most likely to learn these lessons from Norway and Sweden, the other countries implementing unified systems. Norway’s 2+ model may provide lessons on how to incorporate apprenticeships or other work-based training within a unified system; so may Sweden’s current intention to develop new kinds of apprenticeship within the framework of the reform. Sweden may also provide lessons on how to accommodate an entire cohort, including the lowest attainers who will tend to leave education before entering Higher Still. Both systems may offer more subtle lessons, for example on how institutions become informally differentiated within a unified system, and how it affects the relationships of power and control within institutions and between institutions and education authorities.

There may also be direct policy lessons from countries not introducing unified systems. The French *Baccalauréat Professionnel*, for example, may teach how to deliver qualifications which have a strong appeal to employers but also prepare for higher education in a predominantly school-based system. The German reforms may show how to integrate general and vocational education at the level of curriculum processes as distinct from course structure and certificates. Finally, there may even be lessons from south of the Border. Compared with England, policy change in Scotland has been consensual and evolutionary, and it has progressed further, but it may have done so at the cost of a lack of vision and a failure to challenge the sources of conservatism within the system (Howieson *et al.*, 1997).

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