

**Reforming designs: education and  
training in Scotland and Higher  
Still**

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# DECLARATION

I declare that I have composed this thesis.

The Commentary is my own work.

Much of the research on which this thesis is based was conducted within research teams and therefore the papers are co-authored. This reflects established practice in the Centre for Educational Sociology where the research was based. I am, however, the main author of all of the papers included in this PhD and have the agreement of my colleagues in submitting this work and claiming ownership of it.

The work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Many thanks to Jenny Ozga, Director of CES and my PhD supervisor, for her advice and support and especially for her encouragement to think more broadly about my research. My colleagues at CES, past and present, have provided a stimulating and supportive research environment – long may that continue. In particular, I wish to thank David Raffe whose thorough, analytical and questioning approach taught me much about research; also Linda Croxford, whose friendship I value as much as her statistical expertise which she has always been so ready and willing to share. Finally Carolyn Newton for her efforts over the years in transforming my raw scripts into attractively laid-out reports.

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is concerned with the organisation of education and training systems and the extent to which their design may challenge or reinforce social inequalities. In modern societies, people's life chances are inextricably linked to the education they are able to access and the knowledge and skills (typically manifested through formal qualifications) they acquire, thus how countries organise their education and training systems is of fundamental importance in determining the opportunities available to its citizens and to their life chances. The specific focus of the thesis is on the design and organisation of post compulsory education and training systems - a stage that represents a particular challenge for policy-makers - and within that, on how systems might conceptualise academic and vocational learning in more productive ways.

Education systems are not context-free structures: the design of a nation's education and training system provides a window onto its traditions, its social values and economic stance, and its current preoccupations and ambitions for itself. Thus the thesis uses the example of the Higher Still reform of post compulsory education and training in Scotland (from 1999 onwards) to reflect more generally on education and social inequalities in Scotland and to ask how we should understand the way in which Scotland has approached reform of its education and training provision. It seeks to explicate the reasons for the adoption of the Higher Still reform strategy, to identify the factors that determined its specific design and development and to reflect on how the particular reform strategy embodied by Higher Still relates to certain aspects of the Scottish context and its policy processes. The thesis then examines the institutional response to Higher Still and its impact on the opportunities available to young people. It locates the Higher Still example within the broader field of education policy, considering what the experience of the Higher Still reform reveals about the possibilities of re-designing an education and training system in ways which promote social equality and the scope for manoeuvre that policy-makers, in a specific national context, have in relation to system reform.

# COMMENTARY

## The submitted papers: context, methods and authorship

Each of the submitted, referred papers includes a discussion of methodology which I do not repeat in this section. My intention is rather to situate the papers in the context of the research studies from which they arise, to comment briefly on the methodology and general approach adopted, to highlight several key aspects in respect of my methodological approach and to make clear my contribution to the research and to the papers.

The submitted papers arise from three research studies. Papers 1, 2, 3 and 4 derive from the Unified Learning Project (ULP) funded by the ESRC from 1996 to 1998. Papers 5, 6 and 7 are products of the Introduction of a Unified System project (IUS) which was conducted in 2000-03 and also ESRC funded. Paper 8 is based on a Scottish School Leavers' Survey Special Study commissioned by the Scottish Executive in 2003-04.

### Papers 1-4: The Unified Learning Project

The ULP research was a joint project of CES and the Post -16 Education Centre at the Institute of Education. I was responsible for the conduct of the research in Scotland. The aim of the Unified Learning Project was to compare developments in post-16 education and training in Scotland and in England and Wales, in particular, to compare the different approaches to unifying academic and vocational learning ('unification'). Both research teams were also members of a wider European Commission funded study of strategies to promote parity of esteem between academic and vocational learning (Lasonen 1996) and this project complemented the ULP study.

The ULP sought to clarify the concept(s) of unification, to identify implications for the design of education/training systems, and to improve understanding of the process of unification. As Paper 4 explains, the research had to be re-designed because of changes that occurred between the writing of the proposal and the funding and start of the research, in particular, the major shift in the policy context in England and Wales resulting from the publication of the Dearing Review and its proposals for a national framework for academic and vocational qualifications. This

meant that instead of conducting case studies of initiatives at local level as originally planned, the project was re-designed to include thematic studies to compare particular issues in the unification process as they were manifested within each national policy environment. (The themes were: the merger of regulatory and awarding bodies; group awards and over-arching certification; core/key skills and work-based learning). Conceptual development and analysis of the policy process of developing a unified system were on-going concerns of the research.

The methodology gave considerable weight to analysis of documentation and observation of aspects of the policy process through attendance at events, for example, those organised by the Higher Still Development Programme to consult on and discuss the reform proposals. The other key element of the research was in – depth interviews with policy-makers and key participants in policy debates and in the development and implementation of policy. Paper 6 gives details of the interviews carried out in Scotland (pp.93-94); there were 48 altogether. Discussions within the research team were central to the process of conceptual development, a process enhanced by the more formal deliberations at the seminars organised by the project. All these elements fed into the production of the four submitted papers from the ULP study albeit to different degrees, for example Paper 3 ‘The Higher Still Policy Process’ makes more direct use of interview and observation data.

As I note in Paper 4, the two research teams participated as equal partners in the project and authorship of papers was rotated as a way to reflect this equal contribution across the project as a whole. In relation to the four ULP papers I have included in this thesis, I am the lead author. I note that I do not claim main authorship of the descriptive section of Paper 1 on the history of developments in England (pp.20-25), the first draft of which was written by Ken Spours and Michael Young.

### **Papers 5, 6 and 7: Introduction of a Unified System**

I was co-applicant to the ESRC on the Introduction of a Unified System (IUS) project and responsible for the management of all research activities. The project built on the ULP research but focused on Scotland and was conducted by a research team at CES. The IUS study extended the ULP research into the implementation phase and followed the Higher Still reform process through to local and institutional level.



Specifically, the IUS project set out to: examine the model of a unified system that was emerging in Scotland; investigate the Higher Still policy process; consider the role of schools and colleges in shaping the reform; and explore the issues that arise in defining the boundaries of a unified system, and in articulating the system with sectors outside this boundary. To achieve these aims it was necessary to adopt a mixed method approach that would provide the necessary range of data, that is to provide information on: curricular provision and pathways; patterns of take-up; factors influencing provision; perceptions of the Higher Still, the policy process and on the conflicts, reinterpretations and re-workings which arise in the course of a reform. Other critical issues informing the choice of methodology were the need to record changes over time and to collect data at both institutional and national levels. These considerations led to the adoption of the following methodology:

- surveys of all secondary schools and FE colleges in Scotland, carried out in 2000-01 and repeated in 2002-03;
- analysis of student level Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) data on presentations and awards during the first three years of Higher Still linked with contextual data on schools and students;
- case studies of four schools and two colleges; selection was informed by analysis of the surveys and of relevant official statistics. Each institution was visited in 2001-02 and again in 2002-03 to observe changes as implementation progressed. The same members of staff were interviewed (6-8 in each institution) on both occasions and a range of documentary evidence reviewed;
- interviews with key informants including policy-makers and representatives of key stakeholders.

The first of the submitted papers arising from the IUS research - 'Institutional Responses to a Flexible Unified System: The case of Scottish Colleges of Further Education' (Paper 5) - uses data from the first survey of FE colleges in 2000-01 as well as drawing on the parallel survey of secondary schools. The second survey of schools, conducted in 2002-03, and both rounds of interviews in the case study schools were the data sources for Paper 6 'The use of New National Qualifications in S3 and S4 in 2002-03'; this paper also refers to some of the findings from the analysis of SQA data. As in the ULP research, authorship of papers produced as part of the IUS research was rotated as a way to reflect the contribution of the three team members across the project as a whole; I am the main author of the submitted papers.

Paper 7 'Finally Included? The Evolution of Curricular Access for Students with Learning Difficulties' uses data from the IUS project (principally the schools and college surveys and the institutional case studies) but was written on a different basis. It has its origins in an ESRC proposal that I wrote which aimed to investigate further the positive findings of the IUS research in respect of inclusion. In preparing the proposal I undertook a literature review of the topic, analysed relevant Scottish Executive and FES data and held a seminar with key actors in special education in Scotland. All these activities fed into the writing of Paper 7. Alison Cross wrote the first draft of the section on definitions on p.62.

### **Paper 8: Scottish School Leavers' Survey Special Study**

Paper 8 on the outcomes of low attaining young people is based on secondary analysis of data from the Scottish School Leavers' Survey (SSLS). It uses statistical modelling to assess how their low levels of attainment at 16 impacted on their outcomes at age 18-19 and subsequently at the age of 22-23. I was the lead researcher on the initial study commissioned by the Scottish Executive for which Cristina Iannelli carried out the analysis. I subsequently re-specified and re-analysed the statistical models for the paper of which I am the main author.

The paper extends a previous SSLS study I led into the destinations of early leavers which followed young people up to the age of 18-19 (Howieson *et al* 2000). It capitalises on the addition in 1999 to the SSLS of a new survey sweep at the age of 22-23 that extended the possibilities for longitudinal analysis. A longitudinal approach is invaluable in studying young people's transitions since it enables analysis of their movement in and out of education, employment and unemployment, and can capture the sequential ordering of events and influences in their lives. Large scale quantitative surveys such as SSLS which combine destination information with data on family background, school context, attitudes and attainment mean that it is possible to analyse inequalities in relation to social class, gender and ethnicity (as well as other sources of differentiation) and to consider these in a wider context. I believe that such an approach is vital in the study of inequalities as while young people's transitions may be increasingly individualised, at least in the sense of offering more scope for differentiated pathways, the influences of social class, gender, and ethnicity remain strong and quantitative

longitudinal studies can demonstrate the way in which these factors continue to structure young people's life chances.

### **Overview of methodology**

The submitted papers exemplify the range of methodologies that I have been able to deploy in my research ranging from advanced quantitative analysis through elite interviews to detailed institutional case studies. I have also, as appropriate, utilised comparative and longitudinal methods. I have long worked across the so-called qualitative/quantitative divide recognising the contribution of each approach. The particular strengths of each approach are well rehearsed and there is also a growing literature on the purposes and strategies of mixing methods (see for example the special edition on mixed methods research of the *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 2005 and the work of the Real Life Methods node of the ESRC National Centre for Methods). I concur with the view of mixed method research expressed by Brannen: that this strategy is not about a tool kit approach or a technical fix but rather is to be adopted to serve particular theoretical, methodological and practical purposes (Brannen, 2005).

A mixed method approach is frequently accompanied by a strategy that operates at a number of levels (although this is not essential) and I see this as invaluable in the study of education policy. Ball has termed this the 'policy trajectory' approach which he views as a productive means by which to capture the dynamics of policy across and between levels and which 'provides a mechanism for linking and tracing the discursive origins and possibilities of policy, as well as the intentions embedded in, and responses to, the effects of policy' (Ball 2006, p.51). The mixed method and multiple-level approach that I have adopted means that I have been able not only to trace the Higher Still reform from its inception through to its implementation but also to investigate its effect at the level of the system, its interpretation and implementation at the level of the school and college and its impact at the student level on presentations and attainment.

A further broad point that I want to make concerns the 'home international' methodology employed in Papers 1–4 and its contribution to comparative methodology and to education research. As Paper 4 points out, home international comparisons may yield more transferable lessons for policy, may make theoretical

and methodological contributions and can offer a particular purchase on some of the core issues in education such as the study of inequalities and how education and training systems deal with the differentiation of students with varying needs, abilities or aspirations. The ULP research from which these four submitted papers derive, envisaged that a comparative element would support conceptual development and, as Paper 2 demonstrates, the systematic comparisons of differences and similarities between the UK systems did prove to be a productive way to generate analytical concepts and frameworks. The comparison led, in particular, to the development of the idea of unification as multi-dimensional and enabled the dynamic nature of the policy and reform process to be recognised and analysed.

Home international and international comparative research approaches are not mutually exclusive. I refer elsewhere in the Commentary to the valuable insights into the Scottish model of a unified system and also to the particular preoccupations of both the Scottish and English reform strategies that were gained through involvement in the cross-national Leonardo Post-16 Strategies project. I suggest therefore that there is value in linking a more intensive home international methodology with a more extensive international comparative approach.

As well as demonstrating the potential of the home international methodology, the papers also offer some insights into their use in practice. For example, while international comparative research usually begins with a period of mutual learning this may be perceived as less critical when adopting a home international approach. However, a process of mutual learning is as important, indeed I argue, perhaps more important, in the home international comparison because the similarity of the institutional structures and terminology in the UK systems can make it easier to overlook essential differences or to (wrongly) assume commonalities. In the ULP study, mutual learning was organised around the production of a working paper (later published as Paper 1) which, in the event, occupied much of the first eight months of the project, an indication of the extent of task.

To conclude, as Phillips notes, home international studies are in their infancy but in the age of devolution and the likely development of differentiated policy such comparisons of education policy in the UK are imperative (Phillips 2003).

## The submitted papers

- Paper 8      Howieson, C. and Iannelli, C. (2007) The Effects of Low Attainment on Young People's Outcomes at age 22-23. *British Educational Research Journal*
- Paper 7      Howieson, C. and Closs, A. (2006) Finally Included? The Evolution of Curricular Access for Students with Learning Difficulties, *Scottish Educational Review*, 38(1), May 2006.
- Paper 6      Howieson, C. Raffe,D., and Tinklin,T. (2004) The Use of New National Qualifications in S3 and S4 in 2002-03, *Scottish Educational Review*, 36(2), Nov 2004.
- Paper 5      Howieson, C. Raffe, D. and Tinklin, T. (2001) Institutional Responses to a Flexible Unified System: The Case of Scottish Colleges of Further Education, in Nijhof et al (eds) **Conditions for Flexible Vocational Education and Training**, Amsterdam: Kluwer, pp.67-84.
- Paper 4      Raffe, D., Howieson, C., Spours,K. and Young, M (1999) 'Issues in a 'home international' comparison of policy strategies: the experience of the Unified Learning Project', in F.Coffield (ed) **Why's the Beer always Stronger up North? Studies of lifelong learning in Europe**, ESRC Learning Society Series 2, Policy Press.
- Paper 3      Raffe, D., and Howieson, C. (1998) The Higher Still Policy Process, *Scottish Affairs*, 24, Summer 1998, pp.90-108.
- Paper 2      Raffe, D., Howieson, C., Spours, K., and Young, M. (1998) 'The Unification of Post-Compulsory Education: Towards a Conceptual Framework', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 46(2), June, pp.169-187.
- Paper 1      Howieson, C., Raffe, D., Spours, K., and Young, M. (1997) Unifying Academic and Vocational Learning: The State of the Debate in England and Scotland, *Journal of Education and Work*, 10(1), pp.5-35.

## **Synopsis of the submitted papers**

### **Paper 1: Unifying Academic and Vocational Learning: the State of the Debate in England and Scotland**

The paper illustrates the use of 'home international' comparisons as a way of analysing and understanding education systems. At the time of writing in 1996/97, policies for post compulsory education in both Scotland and England sought to unify academic and vocational learning but through very different strategies. The paper aimed to map the policy debates about unification in England and Scotland since the 1970s, comparing the different, and changing, contexts for the policy debates in the two countries in order to gain insight into the development of the different reform strategies.

The different contexts for the policy debates in Scotland and England were considered; these relate to: administration and government; the policy culture; economic factors; institutions; curriculum and qualifications. The paper identified a number of points of difference and explored their implications for the reform process in each country.

Five distinct phases of debate and developments in Scotland and England from the late 1970s onwards were discussed. Among the issues identified in Scotland was the importance of the Action Plan/National Certificate (1983) in moving Scotland in a unified direction, marking a sharp divergence from developments in England and laying the basis for further divergence. The paper considered the overwhelming rejection of the Howie Committee proposals (1993) for a two-track system in Scotland, relating this opposition to particular features of the Scottish context. The final phase in Scotland considered was the introduction of a 'unified curriculum and assessment system' through the Higher Still reform of post compulsory education. The paper outlined the main features and also considered the process of reform.

The paper detailed the main phases of the debate in England and identified a number of key issues: the focus on qualifications; the English tradition of 'bottom up' local and institutionally based initiatives; the focus on the use of qualification frameworks as a way to at least partially unify; the politically determined debate in England compared with Scotland and, in particular, the government resistance to the reform of A levels.

The comparison of the debates in Scotland and England revealed common pressures to change the system and illuminated how these varied over the period. By the early 90s, for example, the external pressures for change had shifted from rescuing young people from unemployment to enhancing their skills and economic competitiveness thereby emphasising the economic functions of education rather than its role in promoting equality. In both countries the debates took place within a context of educational expansion requiring post-compulsory education and training systems to respond to a wider and more varied set of demands and client groups.

A number of features common to the debate in both countries were identified, principally the focus on qualifications as the main driver of reform rather than curriculum processes; a relative neglect of the work-based route; and an absence of debate about institutional reform which contrasted sharply with the comprehensive reforms of the 1960s. But the comparison also demonstrated that the debates in the two countries followed different courses and that the concept of 'unification' acquired different meanings with different practical implications. Unification in Scotland, for example, was more strongly associated with flexibility and choice with less attention to curricular principles. While much of the emphasis of the English debate was on unifying academic and vocational curricula, in Scotland attention focused on unifying or linking levels within a curricular area. In Higher Still, therefore, many issues in the development process concerned the vertical connections between levels.

The paper pointed out that the debate was more politicised and radical in England than in Scotland and remained at the level of critique and broad strategy. In contrast, Scotland had a more fully developed concept of a unified system, was at a much more advanced stage of reform, partly explained by its more evolutionary, consensual and consultative tradition of policy development. Nevertheless, the comparison with England highlighted the danger that reform in Scotland might fail to challenge the assumptions and practices of a highly conservative teaching profession.

## **Paper 2: The Unification of Post-Compulsory Education: Towards a Conceptual Framework**

This paper sought to clarify the concept of 'unification', to develop a conceptual framework and apply it to the analysis of education and training systems, reform strategies and the dynamics of system change.

The different approaches of countries to bringing academic and vocational learning closer together were outlined. The paper argued that while the term 'unification' is being used to describe such developments, it lacks clarity and overlaps with other concepts such as 'bridging the academic/vocational divide'; 'parity of esteem' and 'opportunity for all'. The paper suggested, however, that the diverse strands of unification were sufficiently interwoven to justify using 'unification' as an organising concept but there was a need to clarify the concept and develop it in a way which recognised its internal diversity. This conceptual development was the central aim of the paper. A conceptual framework encompassing the different meanings of unification could, the paper suggested, have value as an analytical tool in a context where common economic, social and educational trends challenge the assumptions of tracked systems of post-compulsory education and training and where countries are developing different reform strategies to abolish tracking or at least reduce its most divisive features.

The paper analysed types of education and training systems, suggesting that they could be located on a continuum ranging from fully tracked to fully unified; this continuum can be represented in terms of three points along it: tracked, linked and unified. A critical aspect of the argument developed in the paper is the idea that systems can vary in respect of the different dimensions, thus be tracked on some dimensions and linked or unified on others. Eleven system dimensions were identified; these can be grouped into the areas of content and process; system architecture; delivery; and government and regulation (see fig 1, p.174 in Paper 3). The types of systems and their dimensions form the basis of the conceptual framework

This conceptual framework was then used to analyse and map the then current Scottish and English education and training systems. Applying the conceptual framework to the examples of Scotland and England generated useful insights into the concept of unification. It demonstrated, for example, the value of the idea of



dimensionality and also identified other aspects of system variation that required further conceptual development including diversity or commonality.

Applying the conceptual framework to analyse reform strategies and models for change, the paper identified certain broad policy objectives for post compulsory education and training common to many countries and distinguished three broad reform strategies (related to the three system types). The paper noted that most countries were pursuing unifying strategies but that they tended to focus on different dimensions of unification and vary in their position on the continuum. The Scottish and English reform strategies (Higher Still and Dearing Review respectively) were analysed using the conceptual framework, illustrating the variation across unifying strategies.

The final level analysed in the paper was system change: the conceptual framework was used to analyse the broader dynamics of change underlying the reform strategies. The paper argued that while the then current cross-national trend was towards unification, movement to a fully unified system was not inevitable and concluded by sketching out possible future scenarios.

### **Paper 3: The Higher Still Policy Process**

This paper reviewed the Higher Still policy process over the four years since the publication of 'Opportunity for All' in 1994 that set out the government's reform plans. Among other issues, it considered the way in which the policy process may be affected by the content of the policy.

The paper outlined the background to 'Opportunity for All' and the key features of the Higher Still reform. In brief, Higher Still brought together most school and FE college- based provision beyond 16 into a single system governed by common curriculum, assessment and certification principles. It incorporated most existing academic provision of the SEB and the more vocational SCOTVEC provision.

The Scottish Office presented Higher Still as a stage in an evolutionary process; a rationalisation of existing provision and a consolidation of earlier reforms. But the paper noted that in practice, it required a huge amount of design and development work to produce a framework for curriculum, assessment and certification that was

versatile enough to cover all subjects, at all levels and institutions in the unified system. The paper described the complex and shifting arrangements that were established to make policy and to develop and work up proposals on various aspects of the reform and how the procedures and personnel changed as the Higher Still Development Programme progressed. Higher Still, the paper argued, owed less to political leadership and more to that of professionals (including the Inspectorate) and civil servants.

The analysis of the Higher Still policy process in the paper drew on the conceptual framework of unification (see Paper 2) and also on the literature on the education policy process; in Scotland, the role of central control and the nature of the policy-making community is a recurrent theme in the literature. In particular, the paper drew on the work of McPherson and Raab in its analysis of Higher Still (McPherson and Raab 1988).

The paper considered three broad questions about the Higher Still policy process: the extent of centralisation; how different interests were represented within it; and whether there was an explicit statement of values and goals around which consensus had been reached. Relating to the last point, the paper explored the idea of whether a consensus may be functional or dysfunctional to the process of establishing a unified system.

Higher Still, it was suggested, is an example of the trend noted by McPherson and Raab of a move away from policy-making based on value consensus and the explicit statements of values and goals. The paper argued that a number of factors prevented the authors of Higher Still from making its underlying vision explicit and from constructing a consensus around it. These factors included both political constraints – the need for Scottish policy to appear not to differ from the government's education policy in England – and practical difficulties such as local government reorganisation and cuts in LA finances. Instead Higher Still was presented in a low-key way as a technical solution to agreed problems. The paper pointed out that this failure of the political process to develop a clear vision of a unified system and to build a consensus around it led to later difficulties. It resulted in an 'ideological vacuum' especially in respect of an agreed philosophy of the curriculum and of flexibility and choice: the lack of such agreed principles meant there was no basis on which to arbitrate among the conflicts and different positions that inevitably arose in a major policy development.

Key actors responded to earlier drafts of the paper at ULP consultation seminars; they concurred with the argument that Higher Still lacked an explicit and public vision (and the reasons suggested for this) but views differed on whether it was also necessary to have an explicit strategy with clear statements of principles and priorities.

The paper concluded that the policy process for developing a unified system has distinctive features that are not necessarily shared with other kinds of policy.

#### **Paper 4: Issues in a 'home international' comparison of policy strategies: the experience of the Unified Learning Project**

This paper was written for inclusion in one of the books published as part of the ESRC's Learning Society Programme under which the ULP study was funded. While it outlined some of the key conclusions of the ULP research, much of the paper was devoted to a reflection on the research process, in particular, on the experience of undertaking comparative research.

The paper discussed the purposes of the comparative basis of the ULP research, outlining main reasons for this approach, in particular, the potential of comparison to support conceptual development. It was envisaged that placing the different systems of Scotland, England and Wales side by side would allow the identification of the different dimensions of variation for inclusion in the conceptual framework the project aimed to develop. A related purpose was to support policy development in each nation, not so much in the form of policy borrowing but more by policy learning through identification of general issues and lessons.

The research was essentially a 'home international' comparison; this it has been argued, can make a particular contribution to education research. This research was complemented by an eight country European study that the research team was involved in and which helped to alert them to certain issues that tend to be taken for granted by researchers in Britain.

The paper described the conceptual framework developed by the project as a tool with which to analyse education and training systems, reform strategies and the dynamics of system change. It outlined how the project used the framework to map

the English and Scottish education and training systems and to analyse policy strategies in each country.

In relation to methodology, the paper reflected on the process of developing the conceptual framework and the nature of the collaborative comparative research process. It noted the importance of 'mutual learning' – an essential part of the project's comparative methodology. The ULP study also highlighted the need for the research teams concerned in such comparative work to recognise and acknowledge the theoretical perspectives, perceptions and values they themselves bring to the project and their particular location within their own systems.

Other methodological issues discussed in the paper relate to the fact that the project was researching policy strategies that were in the process of development and also at different stages of development in each country. As the paper outlined, this had a number of consequences, for example, it made it more challenging to frame questions that were applicable in the different and changing policy environments of Scotland and England. It also meant the project was dependent on the research team's ability to gain access to key informants and establish relations of trust with them in the challenging context of the policy development process which is inherently conflictual.

Supporting policy development was one of the purposes of the comparison but the paper noted that while the work of the ULP study had been received favourably by policy-makers and others, they were less interested in the directly comparative aspect of the project than in the elements more specific to their own country. This may be explained by the fact that England and Scotland were at different stages of the policy process but it does provide a lesson for comparative research: while valuable lessons for policy and practice can be generated by the comparative method, these may need to be mediated by the researchers.

### **Paper 5: Institutional Responses to a Flexible Unified System: The Case of Scottish Colleges of Further Education**

The paper considered the early implementation of the Higher Still reform in the further education sector, comparing the response there with that in schools. In doing so it generated insights into the issue of combining academic and vocational

learning in a single system spanning different sectors. It also took forward the argument made in Paper 3 that the content of a policy for developing a unified system has distinctive features that are not necessarily shared with other kinds of policy.

As a paper aimed at an international readership, it began with an overview of the Scottish system and the particular role played by the further education sector which differs from most other European countries (including England). It set out some of the weaknesses of the then existing education and training system, before describing the Higher Still reforms and highlighting some implications of the new unified system for FE colleges. In principle, Higher Still offers FE the possibility of formal parity of esteem for their provision since vocational and academic provision became part of the same structure, subject to the same certification arrangements. The reform, however, also had various impacts (not necessarily favourable) on colleges' previous practice arising from some of its design rules such as more formalised arrangements for unit assessments and the requirement for external assessment in courses.

A key aspect of the unified system in Scotland that the paper highlighted is that compared to unified systems elsewhere (eg Sweden and Norway) Higher Still is a *flexible* unified system. The paper related the Higher Still flexible model to existing concepts of flexibility identifying four aspects: individual flexibility; curricular flexibility; flexibility of delivery; and flexibility of student pathways. The character of Higher Still is defined especially by its promotion of the flexibility of student pathways. This has a number of important implications for the volume of assessment; the pervasiveness of common design rules and hence offers greater scope for conflict between sectors and interests in education. Emphasis on the flexibility of student pathways may also act to limit flexibility in the delivery of provision.

The comparison of the responses of colleges and schools to questions about the aims of Higher Still, the specific changes it introduced and its general orientation demonstrated differences between the sectors. Both sectors strongly supported the aims of Higher Still albeit with differing emphasis but they differed in their response to the specific changes it introduced and most colleges thought that Higher Still had responded more to the needs of schools than of colleges. The paper argued that such findings demonstrate that while the *aims* of a flexible unified system can

easily attract general support – there is little scope for conflict over a system which, by its nature, allows for all purposes to be achieved – the means of creating this system – the need for common design rules – are more constraining than in other types of systems and therefore, give rise to conflict.

The paper detailed the implementation of Higher Still provision in colleges which was less extensive than had been anticipated. A central reason noted was the decision to introduce Higher Still in phases with a focus on developing the provision more commonly offered in schools than in FE. Certain design features of Higher Still also contributed to the limited implementation in colleges such as the design rules of group awards that they were perceived as reducing flexibility, as inappropriate for traditional vocational students and at odds with FE students' typical progression patterns into HE.

In relation to the issue of flexibility, the paper concluded that in its second year of implementation, the impact of the reform was modest and mainly concerned more flexible entry points due to the increased opportunity for students to start at an appropriate level. The availability of the two lower levels of the Higher Still framework had had a positive impact on colleges' ability to tailor provision to meet the needs of students with learning difficulties and disadvantaged students, and to offer them better opportunities for accreditation and progression.

The paper's analysis demonstrated that flexibility is multi-dimensional and that different types of flexibility may be in tension. The most constraining aspect of the Higher Still design for colleges was the nature, volume and timing of assessment. While the paper accepted that a flexible unified system is, by its nature, associated with a high level of assessment, it also suggested that the volume of assessment was greater than necessary because of the specific policy context which emphasised 'standards' and lacked trust in qualifications, especially if internally assessed. It pointed out that unless a flexible unified system is founded on a high level of trust and confidence in qualifications, it is likely to be weighed down by an excessive burden of assessment.

## **Paper 6: The Use of New National Qualifications in S3 and S4 in 2002-03**

The paper illustrates how the character of Higher Still as a flexible open system allowed schools to utilise the New National Qualifications (NNQs) in ways that had not been originally envisaged. It examined schools' adoption of NNQs in the compulsory stage of education although they had been designed as qualifications for the post compulsory stage. It considered these developments in the wider context of Higher Still and the nature of its change process.

The discussion of NNQs is set in the context of previous efforts to cater for the diverse needs of young people in the final years of compulsory education. The paper noted that the Standard Grade programme introduced from the mid 1980s was itself facing a number of challenges while the introduction of Higher Still had introduced a different curriculum model to the post-16 curriculum (a climbing frame of levels vs stage based).

The paper reported on the survey of schools which had collected information on schools' use of NNQs in S3/ S4. By 2002-03, the third year of Higher Still implementation, most local-authority mainstream schools, and a half of independent and special schools, had made some use of NNQs in the lower school, mainly to replace Standard Grade. 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.

A number of reasons were identified to explain schools' use of NNQs in S3/ S4: the availability of provision at a more appropriate level, better progression opportunities and pacing of study, and more relevant and up-to-date curricula content. It is notable that schools were not using NNQs to vocationalise the S3/S4 curriculum

As the paper revealed, decisions about using NNQs tended to occur in a decentralised and relatively ad hoc way within schools with decisions being typically made at departmental level on the basis of staff's estimation of the needs of particular groups of students. Head teachers were concerned to keep control of this 'creeping replacement' of SG. Schools' responses did not indicate a wholesale move over to NNQs in S3/4: staff were concerned about the development of a 'mixed

economy' of qualifications in the absence of a national or local strategy about provision in S3/4.

The paper argued that the findings endorse the IUS characterisation of the model of Higher Still as an access and progression 'climbing frame'. In this case, it is unsurprising that the Higher Still progression principles had been extended down the age range. However, schools that had offered NNQs in S3/4 were only beginning to confront the logistical and resource implications resulting from the enhanced progression opportunities.

In conclusion, the paper offered several observations in the broader context of Higher Still and unified systems. Firstly, that while the climbing frame model of Higher Still is impressive in principle, it had not yet been fully tested in practice. It noted that other findings from the IUS research indicated that Higher Still had (to date) been more successful in respect of access than of progression at the 16 plus stage. It was suggested, therefore, that since the key reason for adopting NNQs in S3/4 was to improve progression, then it might be prudent to take account of NNQs' success in S5 and S6 in this respect.

A second observation related to unintended consequences: some of the weaknesses of the post compulsory system that the Higher Still sought to address arose from the incoherent mixture of provision. The paper suggested that adoption of NNQs in S3/4 runs the risk of reproducing the same incoherent mixed economy of qualifications in the lower school.

The final observation concerned the issue of the control and coordination of developments. The paper pointed out that decisions about provision in S3/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. While the paper acknowledged that this might change as more local authorities developed policies for NNQs in the context of curriculum flexibility but the policies that had so far emerged allowed schools and departments considerable discretion to identify local needs. But such policies for local flexibility, the paper argued, need to be pursued within a framework which ensures coherence and consistency and that a unified system cannot be left to steer itself or be steered by the disaggregated decisions of participants.



## **Paper 7: Finally Included? The Evolution of Curricular Access for Students with Learning Difficulties**

This paper was prompted by the emerging findings of IUS research about the positive contribution of Higher Still to the educational inclusion of students with learning difficulties. It relates directly to the key question of this PhD about the development of strategies to improve the opportunities and outcomes of lower attaining and disadvantaged students. In this case, it focused on a particular category of disadvantaged students: those with substantial generic learning difficulties.

Higher Still was considered in relation to the key curricular reforms of the past 30 years in Scotland - the 5-14 curricular guidelines, the Standard Grade reform and the Action Plan - and their contribution to the inclusion of students with learning difficulties. It argued that while these earlier reforms, especially the Action Plan, had made some progress towards inclusion, most students with learning difficulties remained excluded, partially or wholly, from the national curriculum and national certification. The paper suggested that Higher Still represents a radical change in the educational opportunities available to students with learning difficulties in extending access to the mainstream curriculum and especially to national certification. It also argued that the way in which inclusion and special needs issues permeated the Higher Still Development Programme was quite different from process of the earlier reforms.

The development of Higher Still as an inclusive system was discussed in the context of the tradition in Scotland of a 'leadership class' which influences and steers the policy process. While logically, the inclusion of students with learning difficulties is implicit in the model of Higher Still as a unified system with multiple purposes and a pluralist ethos, the open flexible Higher Still model does not prescribe any particular provision institutions offer. This means that, in practice, the inclusiveness (or otherwise) of Higher Still is dependent on the decisions of each institution. The paper examined the institutional response drawing on evidence from the IUS research.

The paper reported on the strong support expressed by staff in special schools for Higher Still: that the reform met outstanding needs of the special school sector and

their students is reflected in the speed with which they introduced NNQs, even before national support materials became available.

The comparison made in the paper of the use of NNQs in S4 by mainstream schools and by special schools illustrates the way in which institutions were able to use the flexible Higher Still model to meet their particular needs. As the paper noted, those special schools offering Standard Grades replaced more of this provision than did mainstream schools.

The surveys of schools and colleges revealed that staff thought that Higher Still had helped to create a more inclusive curriculum; their response was more positive in the second survey, probably reflecting the greater availability of provision across all Higher Still levels as the phased implementation proceeded. A similar message came through from the case study interviews.

The paper also drew attention to the wider, symbolic, value of access to the national curricular framework and national certification by students with learning difficulties. It was perceived that this raised the status of provision for students with learning difficulties in the eyes of both (potential) students and staff.

In its conclusions, the paper assessed the role of Higher Still in promoting opportunities for students with learning difficulties as 'so far, so good' but went on to raise a number of issues to be explored. These included the issue of progression and the extent to which the Higher Still reform offers students with learning difficulties meaningful progression opportunities into subsequent education, training and employment

### **Paper 8: Effects of Low Attainment on Young people's Outcomes at age 22-23**

This paper exemplifies a central concern of my research, that of the relationship between social class, educational attainment, young people's life chances and the reproduction of social inequalities. It concerns a cohort of students who left school in the early 1990s and frames the other submitted papers which deal with the development of strategies to improve (among other things) the opportunities and

outcomes of lower attaining and disadvantaged students at both the compulsory and post compulsory stages.

The intention of the paper was to consider the outcomes of low attaining students by the age of 22-23. Specifically, it aimed to examine: whether low attainment has negative labour market consequences in the longer-term; whether social origin continues to influence outcomes in later stages; the relationship between gender and low attainment and their combined impact on outcomes; and whether remaining in school beyond the compulsory stage is a positive strategy for those with low attainment from the compulsory stage.

The paper reviewed previous research on the impact of low attainment on individuals' outcomes including unemployment, social exclusion; and lower status jobs and earnings. It explored the issue of low attainment and gender in a context of official and public concern about the apparent low attainment of boys and young men. In doing so, the paper highlighted the complexity of the issue and the need to consider the interaction of class with gender and how this is manifested in terms of attainment. The paper reviewed the wider debates about attainment and class and the role of schooling in reproducing social inequalities. The profile of low attaining students presented in the paper illustrates the relationship between low attainment and intergenerational disadvantage. A higher proportion of students with low levels of attainment came from single parent households; their parent(s) generally had low levels of education; there was a prevalence of high levels of parental unemployment while those parent(s) in employment tended to be employed in relatively low occupational status positions.

The persistence of the relationship between low attainment and social disadvantage and its continued long-term effects is well demonstrated by the paper. It showed, for example, that low-attainers not only had had lower levels of economic activity but also had poorer outcomes in the labour market. The persistence of the effect of low attainment is clear: low S4 attainment had both a direct effect on outcomes at 22-23 and also an indirect one through its negative impact on young people's position at 18-19. The paper challenges arguments about 'individualisation', demonstrating that social class of origin continues to structure young people's life chances. The findings provide an antidote to the prevailing policy and popular preoccupations with low attaining young men and the apparent 'success' of girls. The paper showed that while a higher proportion of young men than young women

fall into the low attainment group, low attainment had a more severe impact on young women; they are a group particularly at risk and one that is in danger of being overlooked in current policy and practice. The analyses also demonstrated that staying at school beyond compulsory stage had a number of positive effects for those with low prior attainment but the paper was also able to show that the low attaining young people who continued at school were more likely to come from more advantaged backgrounds than the others who left school as early as possible – another illustration of the impact of social class.

The paper observed that since the early 1990s, when the young people the article is concerned with were in school, a succession of government initiatives and programmes has sought to raise attainment and promote social equality and inclusion. Their impact, however, has been variable and patchy. The strategy taken in England has differed from that in Scotland. Reform in England has focused on differentiated provision in an 'education market' in contrast with the Scottish approach of less formal differentiation within a more homogeneous and inclusive system. The paper concluded by posing the question: which approach is likely to be the more successful in addressing low attainment and combating its long-term effects?

## Discussion

### Introduction

This thesis has provided me with the opportunity to review a substantial collection of papers I have published over the past decade and in doing so I have been able to consider the underlying principles and concerns that have driven my research, not just over the last 10 years, but throughout my academic career. Working as a contract researcher, my opportunities to engage in explicit consideration of key principles informing my research and to sustain a coherent research agenda over different projects have been constrained; producing this thesis has therefore been an extremely productive exercise for me, enabling me to take a critical overview of my work, to make connections and to draw different threads together. My research output encompasses much more than can be presented and summarised here as I am making a selection that meets the regulations of a PhD by Publication that submitted papers should both be in the public domain and in peer reviewed publications; this ruled out the inclusion of research working papers and commissioned reports.

The fundamental issue that has preoccupied me and driven my research enquiry is the relationship between education and social inequalities and I have sought to illuminate this through a consideration of how the design and organisation of an education and training system may reinforce or challenge such inequalities. My concern reflects the key role that education plays in modern societies, functioning as a crucial intervening link between social origins and life chances, not simply through its impact on labour market outcomes and further learning but on a range of other outcomes such as health and well being and engagement with civic society (Shavit and Blossfeld 1993, Bynner, Ferri and Shepherd 1997, Sweet 2000, Bynner *et al* 2002, Schuller *et al* 2004).

At one level, the design of an education and training (ET) system may appear a technical exercise but examining a country's system (and its reform efforts) quickly leads onto wider questions about that society: why it conceptualises education and training in the way it does, the reasons it adopts certain reform strategies and how its political processes operate. In this Commentary, I use the case of the Higher Still reform of post compulsory education and training in Scotland to consider more generally the issue of education and social inequalities in Scotland and ask how

should we understand the way in which Scotland has approached reform of its education and training provision? Why was the particular reform strategy embodied by Higher Still adopted in Scotland and how does this relate to Scottish society and politics and Scotland's conception of itself? What does the Higher Still example reveal about the possibilities of re-designing a system and policy-makers' scope for manoeuvre in a specific national context? What were the factors that determined the specific design and development of Higher Still and what light does this shed on certain aspects of the Scottish context? In turn, what effect did the particular design of Higher Still have on its implementation and eventual outcomes<sup>1</sup>?

Scottish education is commonly perceived as egalitarian in character; Bryce and Humes, for example, suggest that its comprehensive secondary system can be viewed as embodying the principles of social unity, democracy and equality (Bryce and Humes 2003). In discussing the strengths of Scottish schooling, the recent OECD report notes: 'By European standards, Scotland has a long history of education 'for the people'... Throughout the twentieth-century, Scotland turned to its school system to create a more prosperous and equitable nation, and has repeatedly reviewed and reformed its institutional arrangements to achieve this goal.' (OECD 2007a, pp.28-29). Nevertheless, as I outline later in the Commentary, an examination of the development of Scottish education in the 20th century points to a continuing tension between egalitarian and meritocratic ideals and I suggest that this tension is evident in the Higher Still reform.

## **Education and training systems**

In modern societies, people's life chances are inextricably linked to the education they are able to access and the knowledge and skills (typically manifested through formal qualifications) they acquire. This is illustrated in Paper 8 which demonstrates the persistence of the relationship between low attainment and social disadvantage and its continued, long-term negative effects on young people's life chances. The paper also highlights the interaction of class and gender and its impact on attainment and subsequent outcomes; gender is not, however, a focus of this thesis

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<sup>1</sup> In the Commentary I use the following terminology – the title of document that introduced Higher Still was 'Higher Still, Opportunity For All' and I refer to this as 'Opportunity For All'. I use the term Higher Still to mean the reform process; and the term New National Qualifications (NNQs) refers to the qualifications introduced by the Higher Still reform.

(but see Smyth 2005; Smyth 2007; Iannelli and Smyth 2008 on gender, social class and education and labour market outcomes and variation across different systems). How countries organise their education and training systems is of fundamental importance in determining the opportunities available to their citizens and to their later outcomes. Education systems are not context-free structures, rather the examination of how a nation organises its education and training system provides a window onto its traditions, its social and economic values, and its current preoccupations and ambitions for itself. It is notable that while countries are increasingly subject to common economic and social pressures in a global economy, they continue to organise their education and training systems in different ways, for example, in respect of curricula; qualifications; institutions; the extent and nature of selection; access and progression opportunities; and regulatory and governance arrangements (albeit with varying degrees of difference). Decisions about such aspects are located in the historical traditions of the country and also reveal much about the country it aspires to become. In Scotland, as I discuss later, education occupies a particular place in the national consciousness, it has been used to support the assertion of a distinct Scottish identity (from that of England) and has been and continues to be linked to the notions of a democratic and socially just society.

The design and organisation of an ET system and the nature of its political culture and its policy-making processes are thus inextricably bound together. Education is a central concern of policy-makers, viewed as a key strategy for the promotion of economic growth and prosperity. As global economic pressures have curtailed countries' control of economic policy, education systems and reform strategies policies have assumed even greater political significance (Brown et al 2001). How do policy-makers in different political systems engage with the task of the re-design and reform of ET systems and what scope do they have for intervention and control? Hofman, Hofman and Gray (drawing on the work of Rowan and Miskal), suggest that there is a risk of over-estimating the space for manoeuvre, that different 'polities' restrict the possibilities albeit in different ways as illustrated by the examples of the USA and France (Hofman, Hofman and Gray 2008). In the Scottish context, while there has been greater autonomy in this policy area than other aspects of state directed activity since Union with England (Paterson 2000a), education policy has been variously directed, shaped or sometimes circumscribed by UK policies and influences as well as by broader global policy developments. Nevertheless, the 'playing out' of such external ideas, influences and policies, are in turn, mediated or translated by the specific cultural and institutional setting of

policy-making in Scotland, a process that has been characterised in terms of the interaction of the externally arising 'travelling policy' with the 'embedded policy' of the local context (Jones and Alexiadou 2001).

A further feature of design and organisation of ET systems, it may be argued, is the particular challenge that the post compulsory stage poses to policy-makers. This stage may be said to be inherently more complex than the compulsory phase: at the earlier stage the key purposes are easier to define and gain consensus on, the client group more homogeneous and there is less institutional variation. In the post compulsory stage, the purposes of education and training are much more varied, and frequently contested; learners have a wide range of goals and aspirations for their future which require a wider range of qualifications, institutions and learning environments. It is a more obviously 'high stakes' stage where the choices individuals make (or the system requires them to make) determine to a considerable extent their subsequent learning and career trajectories. These issues are intensified in a context of increased participation in post compulsory education and training that Scotland, in common with other European countries, has experienced since the 1980s. Policy-makers are faced with the task of designing a system to meet the diverse purposes of a varied client group in a way that will co-ordinate the provision of a range of learning providers in a context where political and administrative responsibility may be shared among different government departments and policy teams. (See Paper 2 for an overview of the challenges facing policy-makers in organising post compulsory ET.)

The challenge for policy-makers is considerable: how to develop education and training systems which meet the perceived imperative to deliver high quality outcomes to underpin economic growth but that also can accommodate a heterogeneous client group. As education policies and reforms become increasingly driven by economic goals, this carries the risk of further widening existing inequalities in education which, as I discuss in the next section, are deep-rooted and persistent.

### **Education and social inequalities**

The relationship between social class and educational outcomes has been explored extensively by sociologists who have sought to analyse the mechanisms and



processes through which social class affects educational performance and educational performance reflects social class. I give a brief overview of some of the main perspectives in Paper 8, acknowledging the significance of cultural, social and economic capitals in enabling positive outcomes from schooling for those in possession of such resources. Pupils from higher social classes have more economic and cultural support (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) and it is this type of capital that schools draw on and reward, for example, in respect of linguistic development and particular linguistic structures, control styles, and attitudes and values. All of this facilitates middle class children's adjustment to school and promotes their academic success (Bernstein 1975). A related perspective (eg Haller and Portes 1973; Sewell and Hauser 1980) points to the way in which social class influences children's educational aspirations which in turn affects their educational attainment. Thus pupils from more advantaged backgrounds not only have greater opportunities to develop the cognitive skills prized by the school system, but they are more likely to be encouraged by parents to aspire to high educational achievement. Such parental encouragement relates to parents' assessment and recognition of the importance of educational qualifications in maintaining social class position and social advantage (eg Gambetta 1987, Breen and Goldthorpe 1997). This echoes Bourdieu's and Boltanski's (1978) analysis of the strategy of reproduction by which members of classes consciously or unconsciously maintain or improve their position in the structure of class relations. It can be argued that one of the reasons that comprehensive education in Scotland has maintained broad support from across the social spectrum<sup>2</sup> is that while the reform has benefited working class students, it has done so without displacing middle class ones, i.e. while social class inequalities in attainment in Standard Grades examinations at the end of compulsory education have declined, overall levels of attainment have risen (Paterson 2003; Croxford *et al* 2006). The classed nature of the education system itself can be seen as playing an important role in the reproduction of social inequalities through both its formal structures and informal operation which combine to produce a system that has no real connection with the lives of many children from less advantaged backgrounds and which is not conducive to their success (Whitty, 1985; Brown, 1987; Lee, 1989; Muller and Shavit, 1998; McCulloch, 1998; Plummer, 2000; Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2001; O'Brien, 2003). As I conclude in Paper 1, schooling tends to penalise the underprivileged and favours the privileged.

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<sup>2</sup> Brown A, McCrone D, Paterson L, Surridge P and Jeffrey C (1999)

In the context of my interest in the design of ET systems, and the specific case of the Higher Still reform, the way in which different systems organise academic and vocational education and how this impacts on social inequalities is especially pertinent. In Paper 2, I note the significance of tracking and the extent of variation across systems in the extent to which their institutions, curricula, certification, student pathways and other organisational features are differentiated, what is often referred to as 'tracking' (pp.172- 174). In a tracked system, each track is distinct from the other, for example, in respect of purpose and ethos, content, learning processes, assessment, certification, course structures, progression pathways and institutional basis (see Paper 2, Fig 1, p.174). The variation across systems can be understood in terms of a continuum from fully tracked systems through to unified systems with no separate tracks.

Increasingly the 'tracking' approach of organising academic and vocational provision in separate programmes, often in different institutions, is seen as contributing to the reproduction of social inequalities and as impeding educational and occupational opportunity. Green (1990) refers to Bourdon's argument that in societies structured by class and other inequalities, the greater the variety of routes through the education system, the greater the likelihood that differential class expectation engendered from outside the education system will structure students' choices (even in a situation of apparent equality of access). Consequently educational opportunities will be structured along class, race and gender lines. Similarly, Duru-Bellat observes that in many countries it is apparent that each time children of comparable attainment have to choose a particular branch or type of education, those from working class backgrounds are less ambitious in their decision or are more likely to accept the often cautious recommendations of their teachers (Duru-Bellat 2004). Moreover, as Teese argues, the greater the extent of differentiation of programmes in the upper secondary stage, the greater the pressure backwards on the compulsory years of schooling in terms of academic and social positioning (Teese 2007a). Shavit and Muller (2000) outline the findings of a body of research that demonstrates the way in which vocational tracks are dominated by students from lower socio-economic backgrounds although their disproportionate placement in these tracks does not fully reflect their learning abilities. This reduces their chances of going to university and of subsequently attaining high status occupations. They report on a number of studies that support the view that vocational tracks inhibit further educational attainment, through, for example, the (lower) level of resources allocated to them; the nature and quality of

teaching; the signalling (if not stigmatising) effect that dampens students' view of their abilities and reduces their aspirations for the future. Moreover, tracking is also perceived as contributing to the reproduction of social inequalities through the different processes of socialisation within each track. These arguments about the role of tracking in social inequalities are challenged by commentators who adopt a human capital perspective, asserting that the acquisition of skills via vocational education enhances students' prospects and opportunities for employment and reasonable pay. However, the work of Muller and Shavit demonstrates that, at least in respect of individuals' early careers, the effect of tracking is partly dependent on the institutional and national context<sup>3</sup>. Their work supports the view that in the British context, tracking contributes to social inequalities and inter-generational social reproduction.

There is thus a powerful body of evidence on the role of education in reproducing social inequalities. This can lead, as Green suggests, to a pervasive pessimism about changing education; to assumptions that the persistent inequalities which characterise schooling are inevitable, and that schools are bound by the economic requirements and structural inequalities of the societies around them (Green 1990). Nevertheless, in his work on the rise of mass education in different countries, Green argues that schooling can vary significantly from society to society even when these societies share similar economic structures. Furthermore, he asserts that while the functions of schools are shaped by external social factors, schools can themselves be agents of social change (Green 1990 pp.viii-ix). The results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) offer some grounds for a more optimistic perspective on the capacity of ET systems to at least ameliorate social inequalities in education (see Duru-Bellat 2004 for an overview of PISA and other international surveys). The results of PISA 2006, for example, demonstrate that while in some countries there were large socio-economic disparities in achievement, in other countries students performed well irrespective of their socio-economic background. The survey report concluded that in terms of equity, the international comparative perspective of PISA is more encouraging [than national evidence] with the evidence from some countries demonstrating that high average quality and only a moderate

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<sup>3</sup> The dimensions that they distinguish are: the degree to which vocational education is general and diffuse or focused and occupationally specific; the degree of stratification of the education system in question; and the extent of the link of the vocational education to employers. Additionally they identify the importance of whether the system of vocational education and work organisation is classified as a 'qualification spaces' or an 'organisation spaces' type.

impact of socio-economic background on learning outcomes can go together (OECD 2007b).

Certainly the 1960s saw the emergence of the view that education systems could be designed in such a way as to address social inequalities and improve individuals' life chances; the pressure for the end of selection in the UK and the introduction of comprehensive education from 1965 embodied this perspective. The experience of comprehensive education in Scotland and the subsequent reform of the curriculum and national examination system in the compulsory stage over the 1980s (the Standard grade reform) demonstrate that systems can be reformed to improve the educational opportunities and outcomes of students from lower socio-economic background. The comprehensive reform was quickly and fully implemented in Scotland (in contrast with England (Phillips 2003)) and led to a reduction in social class segregation although some between-school inequality remained related to schools' historical origins and status (McPherson and Willms 1987). Comprehensive reorganisation demonstrated the possibility of change, as McPherson observed, it gave 'a particular boost to the attainment of female pupils and working class pupils, and this showed that the large social class differences in attainment that remained were not wholly intractable.' (McPherson 1992, p.94). In their classic work on policy-making in Scotland, McPherson and Raab concluded that '... the reorganisation of the school system, initiated in the 1960s and completed in the 1970s, thereafter delivered education on a more equitable basis' which indicated that 'the aspirations of social democracy in the 1950s and 1960s were not wholly unrealistic' (McPherson and Raab 1988 p.498). The recent OECD Review of quality and equity in Scottish education judged that comprehensive schooling in Scotland had 'paid dividends' in terms of limiting social inequality while at the same time achieving higher overall levels of attainment (OECD 2007a p.34). The ending of selection and creation of comprehensive schools helped set in train further reform to expand access to national certification to the whole age group through a common academic core based on a broad set of subject areas or 'modes': this was the Standard grade reform of the last two years of compulsory education. Research on its impact revealed that it contributed to a reduction in social class differences in attainment at the end of compulsory education although inequalities at the highest level of the SG examinations were largely unchanged (Gamoran 1996; Croxford et al 2006).

The reforms in Scotland show that ET systems can be re-structured to reduce social inequalities; nevertheless, inequalities persisted, especially at the post-compulsory

stage where levels of inequality in attainment at age 18 remained stable over the 1980s and into the late 1990s (Raffe *et al* 2006). This and increased levels of staying on after compulsory education is part of the backdrop to the Higher Still reform. Higher Still aimed to deliver 'opportunity for all' by providing a common 'unified' framework that was assumed to offer more inclusive and accessible provision and outcomes across the age group. A shaping assumption of the programme was that such a framework would be beneficial to learners from more disadvantaged backgrounds and who were not well served by the qualification system then on offer in the post compulsory stage.

The conclusion of the Introduction of a Unified System (IUS) research<sup>4</sup> was that Higher Still had provided 'opportunity for all' in enabling learners with different prior attainment to access the national curriculum and national certification at levels appropriate to their starting point<sup>5</sup> (Raffe, Howieson and Tinklin 2007). This included middle- and low-attaining 16 year olds staying on at school as well as students with special needs of a cognitive nature as I demonstrate in Paper 7. But it is also clear from the IUS study and my later research (Howieson 2005) that improved opportunities for access have not translated into improved attainment for mid and low attainers despite the logic of the Higher Still framework. The IUS research revealed that students with middle and low Standard Grade (SG) attainment had poorer average pass rates in New National Qualifications (NNQs) than those with high SG attainment (Raffe, Howieson and Tinklin 2005). This finding is at odds with the design of the Higher Still framework: in principle, the steps up from SG Credit to Higher, from SG General to Intermediate 2 and from SG Foundation to Intermediate 1 each represent the same level of difficulty for the students concerned who thus should have an equally good chance of success in their NNQs. But this is not the case and the extent of problem is even more sharply revealed in my subsequent research that focused on students' pass rates in New National Qualifications in subjects they had previously taken at Standard Grade (Howieson 2005). Figure 1 is taken from this research and shows the substantial variation in the success rates of students who were presented for NNQs in S5 at the level of study appropriate to their prior attainment at Standard grade (SG) in S4. Although the step up for each is notionally the same, students with a SG Credit

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<sup>4</sup> The ESRC funded study from which three of the submitted papers arise and on which I was co-applicant and manager.

<sup>5</sup> As indicated by analysis of SQA data on students' volume of study and survey and interview data from schools.

award in a subject had better pass rates at Higher than had students with a SG General award at Intermediate 2. In turn, these students who progressed from a General award at SG to an Intermediate 2 were more successful than their peers who moved from SG Foundation to Intermediate 1 provision. The new system introduced by the Higher Still reform is not succeeding in providing mid and especially lower attaining students with reasonable prospects of success in their studies in S5 (and S6) and this is one of the concerns that underpins my examination of the reform.

### **The Scottish context**

The importance of context has been referred to earlier and in considering the specific case of Higher Still and the wider issue of the relationship between education and social inequality, it is necessary to situate this in the Scottish context and the so-called Scottish 'tradition' in education. It can be argued that in Scotland the particular way in which concepts of equality, democracy and merit have evolved and co-exist has created ambiguities and tensions for education policy and help explain why reform in Scotland can be often be read as radical and at the same time conservative (Paterson 1996, Humes and Bryce 2003). This is true of the Higher Still reform, for example, radical in its scope and inclusiveness, yet conservative in its implicit acceptance of the pre-eminence of the senior academic curriculum and of the existing institutional arrangements. The various and often conflicting aspects of the 'Scottish tradition' inform the analyses of the Higher Still reform strategy in the submitted papers.

There is a celebratory view of Scottish education, epitomised in the figure of the 'lad of pairts', the young man [sic] from a humble background who, through access to an open education system is able to advance himself and rise in society (Davie 1964). This 'Scottish tradition' in education is perceived as being characterised by egalitarian and democratic values and a commitment to the collective public provision of educational opportunities to all, irrespective of social class. The relatively short and flexible secondary education pathway<sup>6</sup> to higher education in Scotland constitutes an important element in this: it is asserted that this feature has contributed to the higher participation in post compulsory education of young

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<sup>6</sup> The Scottish system offers a 5<sup>th</sup> year exit point (ie a one year post-compulsory exit point) and supports flexible combinations and incremental year-on-year decision – making: students continuing at school do not have to commit to a two year course (as in England).

people from working class backgrounds (Gray, McPherson and Raffe 1983; McPherson 1992). It might be noted that the development of such a route into higher education sheds light on an aspect of Scottish society that has had a profound impact on its culture and structures - that is the high levels of poverty and social disadvantage that have marked Scottish society (Paterson 1983).

The view of Scottish education as egalitarian and open is a powerful shaping belief and one which has been intimately related to a sense of national identity and purpose in Scotland, often to assert, implicitly or explicitly, Scotland's distinctiveness from England. It is notable that Ian Lang, the Conservative Secretary of State for Scotland in his foreword to *Higher Still: Opportunity For All* stated 'In Scotland, education rightly enjoys a special status. It is a key part of our national identity.' (Scottish Office 1994 p.i). The extent to which the various aspects of the Scottish tradition are accurate, fully defined and consistent is contested (Gray, McPherson and Raffe 1983; McPherson and Raab 1988; Humes 2003; Paterson 1996) and James Scotland's comment that: 'The truth of the matter is, of course, that much of Scotland's pride in her educational tradition is unreasoning and unreasonable' (Scotland 1969 p.257) while written to counter the hitherto largely uncritical accounts of Scottish education, does capture a certain aspect of a popular projection of Scottish education. The Scottish tradition is also malleable, different interpretations are possible and it is evident that an appeal to the Scottish tradition in education has been used to frame and legitimise different policies and practice, for example, both sides of the debate about comprehensive re-organisation appealed to the Scottish tradition (Gray, McPherson and Raffe 1983).

But it is essential to appreciate the power of such accounts of Scottish education. Gray, McPherson and Raffe referred to the 'Scottish myth' of education, not to repudiate the 'Scottish tradition' but using 'myth' in its anthropological meaning to explain its role in Scottish society: 'We do not mean by 'myth' things that are thought to be true are false.....we use the term 'myth' to refer to a story that people tell about themselves, and for two purposes. The purposes are, first, to explain the world, and second, to celebrate identity and to express values' (Gray, McPherson and Raffe 1983, p.39). As Humes and Bryce suggest, this myth has an important function in social and political consciousness (Humes and Bryce 2003) and so in Scotland, inequalities in education sit uncomfortably alongside a belief in Scottish education as open and egalitarian and of Scotland as a society committed to social

justice.<sup>7</sup> Alexiadou and Ozga in their comparison of New Labour's policy on educational governance in the education systems of Scotland and of England, pointed out that policy-makers in Scotland still drew on this shaping myth of the central role of education in promoting an egalitarian society with a discernible effect on the ways in which policy was made and on the policies themselves (Alexiadou and Ozga, 2002).

Social inequalities in education are incompatible with the democratic, egalitarian version of the Scottish tradition but commentators have highlighted the extent to which Scottish education has, in reality, been marked by continued debate over its basic values and principles. The Scottish tradition can also be seen as one in which two conflicting ideals of education have struggled to gain dominance: a more socially 'open' ideal that values the provision of opportunities for all and a closed ideal which favours selection and the sponsorship of elites and a focus on individual competitive achievement (Gray, McPherson and Raffe 1983; McPherson 1992, HM Paterson 1983, Humes and Bryce 2003, Paterson 2003). Its egalitarian and democratic values are qualified and shaped by a strong meritocratic streak: the belief that while education should be available to all, the individual should have the capacity to benefit from it albeit not defined in relation to social background or birth but in respect of his/her intellectual ability<sup>8</sup>. Critically, the education to which the individual must have the ability to profit from has been defined in a specific and exclusive way to mean one that is academic and intellectual and provided in mainstream schools. Educational democracy is thus about access to the mainstream academic curriculum; the Scottish universities with their celebration of a liberal, humanist education have been a potent influence in this respect (eg McPherson 1983, Paterson H.M 1983, Paterson L. 2003, Bryce and Humes 2003). The influence of the university sector has marked Scottish secondary education in other respects, for example, through the idea of the 'accessible university' i.e. that university education should be equally accessible to all social classes in all areas of the country helped to

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<sup>7</sup> One the early policy development after devolution was the creation of a social justice strategy in which education figured as one of the five priorities for action. In his foreword the then First Minister, Donald Dewar, invoked the Scottish tradition, writing '...together we can build on the commitment to social justice which lies at the heart of political and civic life in Scotland.' (SE 1999, p.x).

<sup>8</sup> This helps to explain the support for and leading role that Scotland played in the development of intelligence testing up to the 1960s because it was seen as a more rigorous and therefore fairer way to identify those with the innate ability to profit from an academic education. The Professor of Zoology at Glasgow University commented in 1932 'the lad o pairts is the boy who started with a big supply of biological capital' quoted in MacPherson 1983).



create a need not only for common standards across Scotland but also a means of communicating these standards: this helps to explain the Scottish emphasis on formal certification, centrally controlled. (These preceding points about the university sector in Scotland also serve as further examples of the duality of Scottish education: socially open but with an exclusive curriculum and a tendency to centralism.)

This overwhelming focus and respect for academic education and its selective function was not fundamentally altered by the major reforms of Scottish education in recent decades. Gray, McPherson and Raffe (1983) highlighted the continuation after comprehensive re-organisation of an academic curriculum and a preoccupation with formal certification. The Standard Grade reform (which extended national certification to the full cohort of students at the end of compulsory education) essentially rationalised the existing academic subject-based curriculum and while it did attempt to broaden what should be learned, to include eg problem solving, oral skills, the extent of this was relatively limited and subject to continual pressure for reduction (Bryce and Humes 2003). These same factors have been critical in shaping the post – compulsory stage, for example, they help to explain the continued lack of the development of a fully vocational track and neglect of work based education and training, and were a source of influence and conflict in Higher Still reform as evidenced in the selected papers and discussed further below.

The Scottish tradition in education is also perceived, to varying degrees, as exhibiting a conservative approach, a reluctance to experiment and as one which locates the teacher rather than the learner at the heart of the system (eg Scotland 1969, Smout 1986, MacPherson 1993, Paterson 2000b, Humes and Bryce 2003). James Scotland in his history of Scottish education set out six dicta that he felt summarised Scottish attitudes to education, including the following: ‘that experiment is to be attempted only with the greatest of caution’ and ‘that the most important person in the school, no matter what the theorists say, is not the pupil but the inadequately rewarded teacher’ (Scotland 1969 p.275). While there have been widespread changes since he wrote this, many would still recognise aspects of his statements about Scottish education (Humes and Bryce 2003, Raffe 2004).

The consensual nature of the Scottish system can also be seen as reinforcing the conservative aspects (see Paper 1). The consensual approach to policy-making and

development in Scotland is often presented as one of its distinctive and positive features, important, for example, in enabling major initiatives to be taken forward. Certainly all the recent key reforms of secondary education: comprehensive re-organisation, the introduction of Standard Grade, the 5-14 programme and Higher Still have each been constructed by consensus (Paterson 2000b, Humes and Bryce 2003). Thus it is possible to take a benign view of the consensual nature of the Scottish system; this was one that I frequently encountered from English based academics, policy-makers and officers in the course of the Unified Learning Project, usually expressed in the context of unfavourable comparisons with the more conflictual policy process and fragmented English system. But, as outlined in Paper 1, it is necessary to recognise the other, more negative aspect of the Scottish consensus: a tendency to complacency and a failure to question or challenge existing practice in a fundamental way (see also Humes and Bryce (2003); Paterson 1998). The consensual and partnership approach of the Scottish policy discourse has been accepting of existing institutional structures and there has been little support for addressing perceived cultural biases in the curriculum (Paterson 2003).

These complex and sometimes contradictory features of the Scottish context that I have outlined combine to set the parameters for education reform in Scotland, defining not only what is possible but also what is acceptable. They imply the need for policy-makers to pursue policies that promote equality but at the same time also imply that such policies should not undermine notions of merit and academic excellence. Of course, the nature and characteristics of the policy-makers themselves and the policy-making process are integral to any analysis of reform in Scotland: these are themes which figures in a number of the submitted papers, most directly in Paper 3 'The Higher Still Policy Process'. I note there that the issue of central control, the nature and cohesiveness of the policy community, and the consensual nature of policy development are recurring themes in studies of educational policy-making in Scotland. In this respect the analyses of Humes (1986) and of McPherson and Raab (1988) have been most influential. Humes characterises the policy process in Scottish education as being influenced and steered by a small and cohesive 'leadership class' that employed a rhetoric of democratic participation but which has largely acted in pursuit of its own interests. McPherson and Raab refer to 'a policy community': individuals inside and outside government, centralised in nature and composed of members who have demonstrated the necessary qualities of deference and trust. This policy community, they assert, determined the educational agenda based on consensus among its members who shared an

'assumptive world'. Nevertheless, they also suggested (as discussed in Paper 3) that the consensus came under pressure over time as the policy issues became more varied as education provision expanded and became increasingly complex: 'The task, rather, was to accommodate the changes and discontinuities of principle that were a growing feature of the educational policy world' (McPherson and Raab 1988, p.495).

The typical entry route into the policy community was by what McPherson dubbed the 'Kirriemuir career' (McPherson 1983) to denote its closed, self-perpetuating nature and common beliefs and experience. Kirriemuir is a small town in the north east of Scotland, an area served from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards by 'omnibus' secondary schools which catered for a wide social mix of children from the town and surrounding countryside although internally organised on a selective basis. The career trajectory that McPherson noted was for academically able pupils to go from these omnibus schools to university and then into teaching, progressing subsequently into the inspectorate, education authorities, the colleges or the universities. Thus the leadership class was a geographically and socially unrepresentative grouping (largely excluding as it did the industrialised and poorer West of Scotland which accounted for the bulk of the Scottish population), atypical of, and remote from, the pupils and indeed many of the teachers over whom it presided. It was a group that nevertheless viewed Scottish education as egalitarian because of members' experience of social mixing in their own school days, a belief which underpinned their approach to policy as Alexiadou and Ozga (2002) found in their research.

A further feature of the Scottish context has been the very substantial freedom from political control and direction in education policy-making enjoyed by civil servants prior to Devolution and the extent to which educational professionals have developed and driven policy: '...the initiative in policy-making lay mainly within the policy community of officials and educationalists' and that while Ministers were prominent at times of heightened political controversy over education, they did not successfully counter the 'administrative primacy' in the central government of Scottish education (McPherson and Raab 1988, p.173). The experience of Michael Forsyth, one of the most zealous reforming Secretaries of State for Scotland in recent times and determined to implement Thatcherite education policy in Scotland, demonstrates the limitations of politicians in the face of the power of the entrenched elite (Humes 1995). Scottish Office Ministers have not only had to contend with

administrative civil servants but also with Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIe) whose role in education policy in Scotland has been pivotal, 'a small but powerful group' able to command authority through their specialist educational expertise, their relative permanency - not only in comparison with Ministers but also with administrative civil servants - and their sponsorship of the policy community through appointments to various committees and quangos.

What are the implications of such a policy community or leadership class for the reform of education? Paper 7 on the inclusion of students with learning difficulties suggests that it can be benign but several of the other submitted papers, especially, Paper 3, demonstrate the far-reaching implications of the particular characteristics of the Scottish policy-making community and policy process on the design, development and implementation of Higher Still. It is also apparent that the criticism of Higher Still in the 'exams crisis' of 2000 when many candidates received incomplete or inaccurate examination results indicated as much a general dissatisfaction with the governance of Scottish education as with the specifics of the reform itself. A key question is what difference Devolution has made to the policy community and process and what are the consequent implications for education reform? Certainly a strong theme in the arguments for Devolution and the creation of a Scottish Parliament was that it would mean more openness, democracy and accountability in education policy-making (Paterson 2000). Higher Still is interesting in that it straddles Devolution - created under the aegis of the old policy community or leadership class but after 1999 was subject to the new arrangements. This was vividly demonstrated after the examination crisis in 2000 when the Parliamentary Committees of the newly established Holyrood Parliament held civil servants and other officers to account publicly for the problems experienced with the examination results, and HMIe were shorn of their role in policy-making.

The Scottish tradition is still influential, for example, in writing on policy-making and policy learning in Scotland from the 1980s into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Tuck and Hart concluded that 'Scottish policy-makers have been more concerned with establishing systems which respond to the traditions and expectations of the nation as [sic] with learning from other jurisdictions' (Hart and Tuck 2007, p.105).

## Unification

In 1993 Young reflected that although academic/vocational divisions have been a basic structural feature of education systems in industrial societies, they had only recently become an issue for public policy debate and research, especially in relation to the late secondary/post compulsory phase (Young 1993a). From the late 1980s the relationship between academic and vocational learning and the desirability of bringing them closer together - what can be termed 'unification' - became a common feature of debates about the design and organisation of post compulsory education and training systems across Europe and beyond (Papers 1 and 2). In Britain the publication of the British Baccalaureate (Finegold et al 1990), advocating a unified system of post compulsory education and training, generated considerable interest and other organisations advanced similar proposals in this period (Royal Society 1991; NCE 1993). The changing relationship of vocational to general education was a major theme of the OECD activity on Vocational and Technical Education (OECD 1994, 1998) and in the latter half of the 1990s several European Commission funded projects were organised around the issue of parity of esteem for vocational and academic learning with the common theme of bringing academic and vocational learning closer together (Manning 1997; Lasonen 1996; Lasonen and Young 1998; Strenstom and Lasonen 2000).

The interest in and pressures towards unification are discussed in the submitted papers (see for example Paper 2, pp.170-171) and I will summarise them only briefly here. The pressures encompass educational, economic and social equality aspects. Economic trends were seen as creating a need for new types of knowledge and skills that not only transcend the traditional divisions of academic/vocational but also require a high level of general education on the part of all workers. A key driver from an educational perspective was the increased levels of participation in post compulsory education that placed new demands on education and training systems in terms of numbers, the more varied composition of the student body and consequently their more varied needs. Thus ET systems faced increased demands relating both to scale and to functional complexity. In relation to social inequalities, as discussed earlier in this Commentary, the academic/vocational divide was seen as reinforcing unjust social divisions and this can be argued to be especially pertinent in the Scottish and English contexts where educational divisions have been embedded in a deeply divided class structure (Young 1993b). The democratic or social equality imperative for unification has been a theme in debates and

developments in other countries such as Sweden, New Zealand and Australia and most notably in South Africa. Ensor, for example, writing about the South African National Qualification Framework quotes thus from the 1995 White Paper on Education and Training: '... the Ministry is committed to an integrated approach to education and training...An integrated approach implies a view of learning which rejects a rigid division between 'academic' and 'applied', 'theory' and 'practice', 'knowledge' and 'skills', 'head' and 'hand' Such divisions have characterised the organisation of curricula and the distribution of educational opportunity in many countries of the world, including South Africa. They have grown out of, and helped to reproduce, very old occupational and social class distinctions. In South Africa such distinctions in curriculum and career choice have also been closely associated in the past with the ethnic structure of economic opportunity and power.' (Department of Education, 1995 quoted in Ensor 2003).

While there were common pressures across Europe (and elsewhere) to reform post compulsory education and training systems, the policy response and reform strategy differed across countries. It is possible to distinguish three broad types of strategy: those that sought to develop and enhance the vocational track; a second which aimed to develop linkages between the different tracks; and a third type which rejects the allocation of students and curricula into separate tracks and advocates bringing them together in a unified system (Paper 2). In both Scotland and England, much of the debate about unification has centred on qualifications, consequently the idea of a unified system has tended to be seen primarily in terms of a unified *qualifications* system to the relative neglect of other aspects such as curricula, pedagogy and institutions. This is most apparent when one compares debates and approaches in other European countries which indicate that unification needs to be seen as a broad process (Lasonen 1996, 1998). The development of the conceptual framework to analyse education and training systems and reform strategies (the subject of Paper 2) was particularly helpful in revealing the multi-dimensional nature of unification. Applying it to Scotland highlighted the particular focus of the Scottish debates and reform efforts and these, as I discuss below, had important consequences for the Higher Still reform.

## **The Higher Still Reform**

Scotland adopted the third of the unification strategies noted in the preceding section: a unified systems approach via the Higher Still reform (Scottish Office, 1994). The Higher Still reform is described in the submitted papers (see Paper 1, pp.17-18 and Paper 5 pp.68- 69) but it may be helpful to sketch out its key features here to provide the background to the rest of the Commentary.

Following the publication in 1994 of the document entitled 'Higher Still: Opportunity for All', Higher Still was introduced from 1999 onwards to provide a 'unified curriculum and assessment system' covering 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' Scottish Certificate of Education (SCE) qualifications (Higher and CSYS) and 'vocational' National Certificate (NC) modules with New National Qualifications (NNQs) available at seven levels. The design rules for NNQs were a hybrid of the former SCE and NC models. The system comprised a three-level structure of units, courses and group awards which not only brought academic and vocational provision into the same certification system but also reconciled, in principle, the different structures of school provision, based mainly on courses, and college provision, based mainly on units and group awards. Thus 40-hour internally assessed National Units could be taken as separate units or combined into 160-hour National Courses with the requirement of an additional (graded) external assessment. Programmes of courses and units which met specified criteria, including core skills, could be taken as Scottish Group Awards (SGAs), but these were optional.

Higher Still promised 'opportunity for all', and especially for 16 year olds with middle or low levels of attainment from compulsory education who stayed on at school, by enabling them to enter the system at the new levels below Higher and to progress vertically or horizontally thereafter. Under the old system these students often chose Highers, in 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).

Higher Still can be characterised as an 'open' or 'flexible' unified system since it provides a framework from which providers can select options rather than prescribing particular provision that they must offer or specifying particular

requirements that students must follow in their programmes. This contrasts with the grouped unified systems that have been implemented in Norway and Sweden which set out certain curricula content and rules of combination that must be followed (Howieson, Raffe, Spours and Young 1998; Lasonen and Young 1998). It offers a progression framework – a ‘climbing frame’- with flexible entry and exit points and a flexible choice of progression routes within the system. The openness and flexibility of the Higher Still model of a unified system had significant implications for its development and implementation as I discuss later.

In terms of its development and implementation, Higher Still was a centrally developed and centrally managed reform (see Paper 3). The adoption of this model is partly explained by the very tight timetable that was originally set for Higher Still and the desire of the Scottish Office to avoid a repetition of the protracted development and implementation process that had marred the Standard grade reforms<sup>9</sup>. It also, as argued in paper 3, stems from the nature of Higher Still as a unified system: ‘We have noted that policy researchers have challenged the conventional view of policy-making as a top-down process, led from the centre....However, the policy process to introduce a unified system may conform more closely to the conventional view. Higher Still not only introduces change on a system-wide scale; it also seeks to unify the system. It reforms structures and relationships at the level of the system, rather than (say) at the level of an individual institution.... It establishes common frameworks for curriculum, assessment and certification that must apply consistently across the whole system. This would seem to require central coordination, if not control.’ (p.98, Paper 3). The paper goes on to suggest that the need for central coordination is intensified where the particular reform is most concerned with the assessment and certification dimensions of unification rather than other dimensions such as pedagogy which may be less amenable to central control. For the first two years after the publication of *Opportunity for All*, a small development group set up by the SO was responsible for developing policy and producing policy documents. This group was composed of two HMIs and two members of staff from each of the Scottish Consultative Committee on the Curriculum (SCCC), the Scottish Examinations Board (SEB) and the Scottish Vocational Education Council (SCOTVEC). Subsequently a development programme was established in 1994 and this was led by the Higher

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<sup>9</sup> The Munn and Dunning Committees made their recommendations in 1977 but it was not until 1983, that the SO, after widespread consultation, made the decision to proceed with the reform and the SG courses were phased in over 1984 -1991.



Still Development Unit (HSDU), a central unit located in SCCC but which reported directly to the administration and Inspectorate in the Education Department at the SO. The HSDU produced a series of documents and papers on different aspects of the reform which formed the basis of an extensive consultation process across Scotland (see Papers 1 and 3 for more detail). The development programme and HSDU were formally under the direction of a central group (initially the Strategy Group and then the Implementation Group) involving the main stakeholders in the reform but the programme was characterised by an array of committees and working groups that were established for varying lengths of time with varying remits that, in effect, took over much of the decision-making.

In the next sections I go on to consider the development and implementation of the Higher Still in the light of the questions posed in the introduction to this Commentary. Broadly, these questions concern firstly, the way in which Scotland has approached reform of its post-compulsory system - why was the particular reform strategy of Higher Still adopted and how does this relate to and reflect aspects of Scottish society and politics? Secondly, what does the experience of Higher Still reveal about the possibilities of re-designing a system and the scope that policy-makers have for doing so? A third set of questions centres on the Higher Still model itself: on the one hand what factors shaped its specific design and development process and, on the other, what effect did its particular design have on its implementation and success in meeting its aims?

### **The development of Higher Still in the Scottish context**

The Higher Still policy and strategy that emerged in Scotland was radical in that it represented one of the most systematic and far-reaching approaches to the reform of post compulsory education and training in the world at that time<sup>10</sup>. It was at the cutting edge of innovations in post 16 education and training and as such attracted international attention (Lasonen 1996). Its scope contrasted sharply with the more limited reform proposals in England where government resistance to the reform of A levels circumscribed the nature and extent of reform strategies (Paper 1). But it was also an evolutionary development which built on elements of the Scottish tradition and whose origins and features can be traced back through earlier reforms.

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<sup>10</sup> The main exclusion was Scottish Vocational Qualifications since training policy was formulated on a British-wide basis (see Howieson 1999).

The Higher Still reform is commonly seen as continuation of the reforms set in motion by comprehensive re-organisation and was certainly viewed as such by its key developers (Tuck 1997). In practical terms, as Paper 1 makes clear, the more modular and flexible curriculum structure of courses and qualifications that had been developed in Scotland in the previous decades made it easier than in England to move towards a unified system and provided the building blocks for Higher Still.

In tracing the genesis of Higher Still, several preceding reforms or proposed reforms are central. One is The Action Plan which introduced the National Certificate (NC) modular system in 1983 (SED 1983) and was critical to the later development of Higher Still in several respects (Paper 1; Hart and Tuck 2007). Action Plan essentially created a unified system for vocational education and, importantly, one that was explicitly based on a broad educational philosophy which rejected any narrow view of vocational education and training (Howieson 1993). Although introduced primarily to reform and rationalise non-advanced vocational provision in further education colleges, the Action Plan was extensively adopted in schools which, as highlighted in Paper 1 had important consequences for the way in which the Scottish system developed. It enabled schools to maintain their position as the main providers of post 16 full-time education and gave them experience in the delivery of (pre) vocational education; it increased curricular flexibility; and inhibited the development of a clear tracking system in Scotland.

A second policy to note in the genesis of Higher Still is the Standard Grade reform which introduced the principle of structuring provision at (three) different levels as a way to enable all students to access to the full range of academic provision, an approach that was extended in Higher Still.

A third reform, in this case, a proposed reform, that requires comment is the Howie Committee report. The Howie Committee was appointed in 1990 by the Scottish Office to review the aims and purposes of the fifth and sixth year of secondary education and reported in 1992 (SO 1992; see also Paper 1). While there was consensus on Howie's critique of the then current system, the public response to the Committee's recommendation of a twin track system – one academic, one vocational - was overwhelmingly negative. Tracking was condemned as divisive and elitist, as conflicting with the comprehensive principle, for the weakness and lack of esteem of the suggested lower track and for the inflexibility of movement between tracks. Commenting on the prevailing view that the vocational track was bound to have

lower status, Paterson pointed to the traditional Scottish preference for academic education: 'You could not legislate away centuries of a highly academic education system in which academic ability was venerated' (Paterson 2003, p.70). He later reflected that: 'Given the history of the previous seventy years, it was never likely that such ideas [twin tracks] would be acceptable: if fifth and sixth years had to be reformed because of the achievements of comprehensive education, then it was always bound to be in the direction of making academic education available more widely' (Paterson 2003, p.151). The Howie proposals were further criticised for undermining the flexibility and incremental nature of the Scottish system, which as noted earlier, were regarded as contributing to the higher participation in post compulsory education of young people from working class backgrounds than was the case in England (MacPherson 1992). The reactions to the Howie Committee proposals thus revealed strong hostility to radical proposals that 'went against the grain' of Scottish traditions and developments. Moreover, at a practical level, the way in which courses and qualifications had developed over the 1980s meant that structurally, the Scottish system was less able to support the development of well defined tracks and thus a tracked approach did not appear to be a feasible option (Paper 1).

### **Policy-making: processes, possibilities and limitations**

The acceptance of Howie's critique of the system opened the way to reform but the rejection of the Howie proposals passed the initiative back to the Scottish Office and, more specifically, to the Inspectorate (Papers 1 and 3). The perception was that after the hostile reaction to the Howie Committee proposals there was a period of public silence and then Higher Still emerged with no consultation: 'the Howie report was suddenly transmogrified into HS' (Harrison<sup>11</sup> 1997), developed in 'a closed box in the Scottish Office' (Burdon<sup>12</sup> 1998), and was 'the work of a group of mandarins in the SO' (Sangster<sup>13</sup> 2000). The policy process that the introduction of Higher Still represents can be (and was) perceived as a supreme example of the 'leadership class' in action and criticised as such (Humes 1999, Paterson 2000c). But this is not the whole picture and Higher Still can also be read as the leadership class under pressure in a number of respects. The senior examinations officer quoted above suggested that the difficult political climate of the time partly explained the closely

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<sup>11</sup> Chief Executive of the Scottish Consultative Committee on the Curriculum

<sup>12</sup> Senior examination body officer

<sup>13</sup> Higher Still Development Officer 1996-1999

guarded development of the Higher Still proposals. The approach can be understood in relation to the political constraints under which civil servants in the SO were working, in particular the need to appear not to diverge too markedly from the education policies in England being pursued by a Conservative government which was firmly opposed to similar proposals for unification being advanced in England (Paper 3). Writing later, Ron Tuck<sup>14</sup>, who as Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI) had been one of the key drafters of Higher Still, described the political intervention and its impact '... it [the Higher Still draft] had been through a process of clearance in London as well as Edinburgh in which the original HMI proposals were significantly altered at ministerial level. Proposals for a 5-level structure based on group awards were rejected in favour of maintaining Highers as the main qualifications currency' (Hart and Tuck 2005, p.3).

A theme that several of the submitted papers explore is the extent to which the Scottish Office played down the 'vision' of Higher Still and the various consequences of this for the reform (Papers 1 and 3). Higher Still was, from the outset, presented by the SO as a minimal change, a rationalisation of existing provision and a consolidation of earlier reforms. It should be acknowledged that some of those involved perceived it in this light and appear to have genuinely under-estimated what the Higher Still reform would entail<sup>15</sup>. But the underplaying of the vision also indicates the relative weakness of the leadership class and illustrates how various circumstances can combine to restrict policy-makers' potential for manoeuvre. The particular political position at the time, as described above, with a Conservative government pursuing a different reform strategy in England limited not only what could be done in Scotland but also how it could be presented in public. Moreover, the Conservative government was deeply unpopular in Scotland and the SO's relationship at this time with the teaching unions and education professionals was poor in the wake of the antagonism created by the Secretary of State Michael Forsyth's efforts to impose Thatcherite policies in Scotland. As Ron Tuck pointed out 'until last year the whole of the Higher Still programme was being developed and implemented by a Government seen as

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<sup>14</sup> After his central role in the drafting of Opportunity For All, Ron Tuck was the HCMI with the lead responsibility for Higher Still; he was subsequently appointed Chief Executive of newly created Scottish Qualifications Authority in 1997, the body with responsibility for the New National Qualifications introduced under Higher Still.

<sup>15</sup> For example, some thought that because Highers had already been revised and also because the Catalogue of National Certificate modules was subject to constant revision, this meant that the development work required to create the New National Qualifications from this existing provision would be limited

hostile by many of those responsible for implementing the programme - particularly Local Authorities and teachers' (Tuck 1998). The civil servants and HMIs in the SO had a difficult line to tread between the Conservative Government at Westminster and their key constituencies in Scotland.

The SO had additional reasons to present Higher Still as a minimal change despite warnings from the teaching unions and local authorities (among others) about the extent of change required and consequent implications for staff development, workload and resourcing (see Paterson 2000c for a detailed account). Higher Still was introduced at a difficult time (Paper 3); the unpropitious timing of Higher Still was summed up thus by the then Chief Executive of the Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum ' It would have been difficult to have picked a worse time for Higher Still with local authority re-organisation, the financial constraints of the local authorities, the stripping out of the middle layers of advice and support<sup>16</sup>, and the restrictions on in-service and teachers getting out of school and schools feeling the pressure on resources and publicly feeling undervalued' (Harrison 1997).

In 1996 the nine large regional authorities were broken up into 29 smaller authorities (the three small island authorities were largely unchanged) most of which were too small and too preoccupied then to play a central role in the development of Higher Still. The impact of the re-organisation of local government on how the SO presented and conducted the Higher Still reform has to be understood in the Scottish context where, in contrast to England, LAs had generally retained their key strategic and management role with schools and had continued to function as players in national educational developments (Green 1999, Paterson 2003). The re-organisation of local authorities was compounded by the cuts in LA finances, in February 1996, for example, the Times Educational Supplement Scotland (TESS) carried an article with the headline 'Council squeeze hits curricular reforms' which reported the negative impact of budgetary cuts on councils' ability and willingness to implement Higher Still. The difficult resource environment of Higher Still came through strongly in the meetings I attended where staff spoke of declining budgets, of posts not being filled and of imminent redundancies. In these circumstances, the SO could not admit to the extensive change that Higher Still

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<sup>16</sup> A specific consequence of the reorganisation and financial constraints was the loss of the LA Advisorate and the re-focusing of the role of those remaining on quality assurance and generic support but the Advisorate were a group that had been crucial to the successful implementation of earlier reforms such as Standard Grade (Ross 2001).

potentially represented, including the amount of course development and staff training required, when it was not in a position to provide schools and colleges with significant additional funding. The difficult political and financial climate of the time imposed clear limitations on policy-makers' scope to promote and develop the Higher Still reform and helps to explain the low key presentation and approach adopted.

The playing down of the vision of Higher Still can be seen as an illustration of the wider changes to the nature of policy-making in Scotland which were reinforced by the particular nature of the Higher Still reform. I observed earlier in the Commentary that the consensual nature of policy-making in Scottish education was subject to growing pressure as the scope and complexity of education policy increased. McPherson and Raab argue that in such a scenario where policy-making becomes less based on value-consensus and on the explicit and public resolution of conflicting priorities that not only is consensus harder to achieve but that the content of certain policies makes it possible, and even necessary for values and priorities to remain implicit. They use the example of modularisation under the Action Plan to illustrate their point: 'the attractions of modularisation were...that it obviated the need for an explicit and public resolution of conflicting priorities. Modules were to make all things possible.' (McPherson and Raab quoted in Paper 3, p.97). As Paper 3 suggests, the flexible modular Higher Still which offers 'Opportunity for All' exemplifies the McPherson and Raab thesis. The Higher Still model as an open or flexible model of a unified system gives choice to providers and users rather than prescribing provision so that there is less need to make values and priorities explicit as would be required in a closed model of a unified system with stronger prescription of the content, volume and levels of study (see Howieson, Raffe, Spours and Young 1998 for a discussion of closed and open models). Nevertheless, the Higher Still model also means that consensus on values and priorities is likely to be difficult to achieve since the reform is system-wide in its application, and can less easily exempt or vary its treatment in respect of particular groups and interests. I suggest that the Higher Still model both necessitated and enabled the adoption of a policy-making strategy in which principles, values and priorities were left implicit or underdeveloped.

## **The parameters of the reform**

A profound consequence of the Scottish Office's failure to articulate publicly a clear vision for the reform and its continued low-key presentation of Higher Still was the absence of debate in the Higher Still development and consultation processes on wider questions of principle and purpose - what Humes and Bryce refer to a 'philosophical vacuum at the heart of Higher Still' and 'a lack of any attempt at serious epistemological debate about the nature and structures of knowledge appropriate to the upper secondary school' (Humes and Bryce 1999, p.111). The absence of discussion of matters such as the curriculum philosophy in a system which aimed to combine the academic and vocational or debate about the role of vocationalism; the nature of assessment; principles of breadth and coherence and of flexibility and choice resulted in a range of problems (as noted in the papers 1 and 3) Ultimately, I argue, the lack of consideration of such fundamental aspects contributed to the limited success of Higher Still in providing better opportunities and outcomes for low and mid attaining students.

The issue of the 'philosophical vacuum' was raised early in the development programme, for example, in an editorial in July 1995 the TESS took the occasion of the publication of a book on liberal education and vocational preparation by Richard Pring (1995) to question whether fundamental principles were being addressed in Higher Still: 'In creating the Higher Still programmes, the most intellectually demanding task is to combine liberal education and vocational preparation ' and recommended the book if 'within the groups beaver away on course structures such deep arguments are being pursued' but concluded that 'in the more likely scenario basic issues are being subordinated to decisions on administrative details' (TESS 1995). Similar concerns were also being raised by the teaching unions, some subject associations and at local authority level. There was also acknowledgement of the lack of debate about fundamentals among some of senior staff interviewed as part of the ULP research: 'HS has driven ahead without discussion in the meetings of basic principles such as the nature of the academic and vocational divide' (Denis Gunning<sup>17</sup>). The issue was to surface later in the submissions made to the two Parliamentary Inquiries into the examination crisis in 2000 that, for a time, threatened the future of the reform (Raffe, Howieson and Tinklin 2002). The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities' (COSLA) for example, contended that 'HMI may argue that there was extensive consultation, but history is

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<sup>17</sup> Assistant Director Scotvec and subsequently Director of Development at SQA

likely to show too much attention with the mechanics, the process and the apparently workable compromises between the practices in school and further education, and between SCOTVEC and the SEB. There was insufficient discussion regarding the philosophy.’ (COSLA 2000, p.4, para 17). The Association of Directors of Education (ADES) was vehement in its submission: ‘It is strongly held that the philosophical underpinning of the Higher Still Programme never received the iterative examination that was recognised as being necessary at the formative stage of the programme’s development in 1996. The failure to undertake such an examination created many of the core conditions which have led to a number of the major difficulties...’ (ADES 2000, p.3, para 3.3).

The COSLA submission makes reference to the extensive consultation on Higher Still which was then the largest consultation ever undertaken in Scottish education policy-making (Papers 1 and 3). But this did not provide the basis for any wider consideration and questioning of the reform for several reasons: firstly the prescribed scope of the consultation and secondly, the inability of participants to engage fully with the system-wide nature of the Higher Still reform. Paper 3 concludes that ‘The desire to consult appeared genuine, *within the limits of its focus on technical issues*’ (emphasis added, Paper 3, p.99). This echoes Paterson’s contention of a shift in the focus of official education policy-making in the 1990s to planning and responding to the minutiae of educational expansion and a corresponding decline in attention given to wider philosophical matters of purpose (Paterson 2003). In the Higher Still consultation process there was no consideration of such issues as the principles of unitisation or the nature of assessment. In the plethora of documentation produced by the development programme, no consultation paper on unitisation or assessment was issued; the paper that was published on assessment was for ‘information only’ (HSDU 1996) but both were areas of dissent and were to be at the heart of the 2000 examination crisis and the ensuing acrimonious debate about the Higher Still reform.

A second serious limitation of the consultation process relates to the nature of the Higher Still reform as a unified system: in a consultation on a unified system participants require an understanding of the whole system if they are to make an informed response. But most lacked this broader scope and so had difficulty responding fully to proposals that affected other (and different) settings than their own. They also had difficulty putting forward alternative proposals which had to apply to other subjects, institutions and students than those about which they were



knowledgeable. Writing about this later Tuck noted: 'A further challenge lay in explaining the detailed proposals to a wide range of interested parties most of whom had difficulties with Higher Still's system-wide perspective, because their experience or interest lay primarily in one part of the system' (Tuck 1999 p.703). Thus there is a real sense in which the process of developing a unified system runs the risk of disenfranchising participants. Hart and Tuck highlight the challenge faced by policy-makers arising from the comprehensive nature of Higher Still to ensure that those involved in development and implementation fully appreciated the consequences of policy decisions in one area on another, referring to the 'horizontal complexity as opposed to the vertical complexity of turning policy into practice' (Hart and Tuck 2007, p.119). In the Higher Still Development Programme this was compounded by the control and circulation of information that led to the creation of what might be termed 'an information elite'.

Moreover, there was an assumption amongst policy-makers that there was no need to consult on aspects such as unitisation, later acknowledged as mistaken (Hart and Tuck 2007). It was assumed from stakeholders' submissions to the Howie Committee - focused as they were on opposition to its proposals for a twin-track system - that other aspects of its proposals such as combining national examinations with internal assessment, of unitising the curriculum and of introducing core skills 'were generally supported and needed no further debate' (Hart and Tuck 2007, p.116). Other assumptions played their part in explaining why certain principal features of Higher Still were not subject to wider debate or consultation. There was a belief among the policy-makers in the SO driving Higher Still that the modular or unitised approach of the Action Plan had been so successful that it had made the need for further discussion of modularisation/unitisation redundant (Hart<sup>18</sup> 2008). Following the Action Plan in 1983 the SO had been exploring the extension of unitisation and had commissioned work on the unitisation of various subjects including Higher English; by the time of Higher Still, unitisation was an accepted element of the reform strategy of the SO. It might be argued that these assumptions exemplify the (misplaced) self confidence of the leadership class and their operation as a relatively closed and unaccountable group.

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<sup>18</sup> Head of Qualifications Strategy SQA 1997-2003

## **The lack of vision: some consequences for the reform**

### *The continued domination of the Higher*

The absence of a vision for Higher Still and the lack of debate about its philosophy and principles had a number of consequences for the reform. One that is especially pertinent to my thesis is the way in which it reinforced the dominant focus on the traditional Higher level of the framework, undermining Higher Still's potential to provide more effectively for low and mid attaining students. Given the value placed on academic education in Scotland described earlier, the high status position the Higher had long occupied in Scottish education ('the holy of the holies'<sup>19</sup>) and the way in which senior academic programmes in schools generally tend to dominate perspectives and monopolise prestige (Teese 2007a), it is hardly surprising that the Higher level would dominate public perceptions of the reform and run the risk of leading the activities of the development programme. In this scenario, a strong and continuing articulation of the underlying principles of Higher Still was required if the prevailing focus on the Higher was to be overcome or at least tempered.

Some senior staff in the national bodies recognised the preoccupation with the Higher as undermining the potential of the new Higher Still framework to make a difference in the areas of greatest need, that is in providing appropriate and coherent provision for the low and mid attaining students in the upper school: '... a major deficiency is that the [development] programme hasn't focused enough on the new aspects, Intermediate 1 and 2 and Access ... the areas that have never had coherent provision before but all the attention is given to Highers' (Gunning<sup>20</sup> 1997). The concentration on the Higher level had a direct practical impact on how much was developed at the other levels as demonstrated by the focus of the publications emerging from the HSDU. Perhaps most crucially, however, it shaped the nature of what was produced: 'much of the design of the programme has been driven by the Higher. A lot of design work has gone on at Higher level and then it has been a case of working backwards from that ... Intermediate 1 and 2 are sandwiched between Standard Grade and Higher and reflect bits of both .... Intermediate 1 and 2 are not radical in the way they ought to be' (Gunning 1997). Another officer describing the activities of the writing groups responsible for developing the new units and courses explained that 'the problem was that the writing groups started at the Higher level ... then ran out of time and had to rush through the lower levels (Hart

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<sup>19</sup> Brunton quoted in Gray, McPherson and Raffe 1983 p.53

2008). The lack of discussion of the philosophy of the new system and its presentation as a realignment of existing provision meant that no vision of the kind of curriculum that Higher Still was aiming to offer was available to the writing groups. Instead, they tended to start at the Higher level (and therefore with an academic focus) with the danger that this would then be 'watered down' for the other levels.

This domination of the development programme by the traditional Higher level subjects and the consequent academic focus was compounded by decisions about the implementation programme forced on the Scottish Office. Despite its continued presentation of Higher Still as a rationalisation of existing provision, as Paper 3 points out, in practice it required a huge amount of design and development work to produce a framework for curriculum, assessment and certification that was versatile enough to cover all subjects, at all levels and institutions in the unified system. The scale of the task combined with the political and financial circumstances described above led to the implementation of Higher Still being twice postponed. The second delay was precipitated by a threatened boycott of the reform by the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), the largest of the teachers' unions, over workload issues. The deal which resolved this involved not only a delay of a year but also an agreement to implement Higher Still on a phased basis. Critically, it was decided that priority in the phasing process would be given to Phase 1 Highers which replaced existing SCE Highers (largely academic) over the Phase 2 Highers which were in new, typically vocational subjects and also over provision at the other levels of the Higher Still Framework. The agreement to phase in Higher Still is another indication of the limits to the central control of the reform by the SO, this had not been its plan, it had intended 'to introduce it all as a 'big bang' rather than to phase things in ... doing Highers first was not a planned decision, if we had planned it we would have started with Intermediate level' (Tuck 2000). Thus we see the SO being forced into a re-scheduling of Higher Still on an unplanned basis, a change that reinforced the problems of balance and focus already apparent in the reform process.

As well as the effect on the school sector, the preoccupation with the Higher level of the framework (and all that this implied) was a critical factor in explaining some of the difficulties FE colleges experienced and one which contributed to the more limited implementation of NNQs in the FE than had originally been envisaged (Paper 5). Paper 5 highlights the way in which colleges' implementation of the

reform was seriously affected by the focus of the development programme on traditional subjects at Higher and the consequent lack of courses and materials in large areas of the FE curriculum, forcing colleges to scale back their implementation plans. Also, in this situation, HMIE was forced to relax its pressure on colleges to quickly replace most of their non-advanced provision with NNQs.

### *Flexibility*

As I noted in my discussion of the Scottish context, the Scottish education system has placed considerable importance on enabling students to make choices and gain certification on a relatively short-term and incremental basis. The principle of flexibility was a feature of the debate in Scotland about unification and was carried forward into Higher Still. The concept, however, has generally been treated as unproblematic and the Scottish Office did not promote or encourage an examination of the principle of flexibility in Higher Still but as Paper 5 demonstrates, it is a multi-dimensional concept and this is especially relevant in designing a unified system. The paper distinguishes four aspects of flexibility: individual flexibility; curricular flexibility; flexibility of delivery; and flexibility of pathways. In the case of Higher Still, it encouraged curricular flexibility (weak prescription of the content, volume, level and duration of study) but the essence of its character as a flexible unified system is defined by the flexibility of student pathways. It aimed to achieve this by providing flexible entry points to cater for students of different abilities, flexible exit points, flexible opportunities for movement within the system, and flexible opportunities for re-entry. Paper 5 considers the issues that the Higher Still model of flexibility gave rise to, including the high level of assessment that it requires (this was to become the most contentious aspects of the reform) and the conflict with other aspects of flexibility such as the flexibility of delivery that were important especially to the college sector. I do not repeat the discussion here, the point that I want to make is that the difficulties created for Higher Still might have been avoided or at least ameliorated if the Scottish Office had promoted discussion and debate about the underpinning principles and features of the Higher Still reform, including the concept of flexibility.

## **The implications of the Higher Still model of a unified system**

I have already highlighted a number of implications of the Higher Still model for the policy and implementation process and eventual outcomes of the reform. In this section I want to discuss more specifically certain features of the Higher Still version of a unified system. Firstly the effect of the openness and flexibility of the Higher Still model of a unified system, features which build on aspects of the pre-existing structures and preferences of the Scottish system which I described earlier. Secondly the way in which its design was centred on the qualifications and assessment dimension of unification.

### *Openness and flexibility*

One consequence of this open model of a unified system that Higher Still embodies is that it gives considerable power to institutions, to end-users and, in some respects to students. Institutions have the scope to decide which of the Higher Still levels, courses and units they will offer and how they will package these opportunities to students; students in turn are not formally required to take specific provision while end-users can exert influence over the system by virtue of the currency they place on particular levels, types and combinations of provision. The scope that the Higher Still model accords to institutions can be empowering, as illustrated by the manner in which colleges used elements of the framework to tailor their provision to meet the needs of particular groups such as students with learning difficulties, community outreach programmes and pre-access programmes (Paper 5) and how schools extended NNQs down to the lower school stage (Paper 6).

While all policies are shaped and changed in the process of implementation or the 'context of practice' where an educational reform is re-cast by those putting it into practice and whose interpretations, objectives and values may differ from the discourses of the policy texts (Bowe, Ball and Gold 1992, Fullan 1991, Taylor *et al* 1997; Ball 2006), an open model of reform such as Higher Still is especially dependent on the understandings and priorities of those implementing it. Indeed, the shaping role of providers is inherent to its design, and as such limits the power of policy-makers to influence and control the outcomes of the reform. For example, one of the stated aims of Higher Still was that 'Students should always have available a course at the appropriate level in their chosen subject' (SO 1994, p.9). But while the Higher Still framework was designed to offer a range of provision at different levels to suit different student abilities and interests, what was available in

practice depended on each institution's decisions about the curricular areas and the levels to which they decided to allocate their resources. This was recognised by policy-makers, Ron Tuck, one of the prime movers of the reform, who noted that 'Opportunity for All will only be a reality if centres make the expanded menu available' (Tuck 1997). Thus the realisation of this aim lay in the hands of schools and colleges. What the IUS research found, unsurprisingly in a system dominated by the Highers and in a context of tight resources, was that the case study schools gave priority to the provision and delivery of courses at Higher level even when they recognised the need for more provision at the lower levels of the framework. The limited range of provision at levels below Higher, and especially at Intermediate 1, was also suggested by my research on progression and pass rates in NNQs (Howieson 2005). In addition it resonates with the OECD's observation of the priorities of Scottish education schools, that '... it is not necessarily the case that schools staff the most demanding classes with the best teachers, and the way in which resources are allocated across the whole programme of school may tend to favour the needs of students who also enjoy the greatest out-of-school support' (OECD 2007a, p.90).

Motivation is one of a number of factors that contribute to students' chances of success and it is reasonable to argue that their motivation is influenced by whether or not they are able to take the subjects they want to but it appears that some students, especially those with SG Foundation awards who continue at school, may not have an extensive choice of provision. The extent of choice available to students was an issue identified in the OECD report on Quality and Equity of Schooling in Scotland which questioned whether NNQs range widely enough over the fields of academic and applied learning, and, whether, at the point of delivery, there is broad and effective choice (OECD 2007a, p.44)

Paper 7 sheds further light on the implications of an open model of reform for its development and outcomes and questions of control. It demonstrates how schools moved beyond the original scope of Higher Still by their decisions to offer NNQs in the lower school in response to the needs of some of their S3 and S4 students. By the third year of the implementation of Higher Still most local authority schools had taken advantage of the open model to make some use of NNQs in S3 and S4 thus extending the coverage of Higher Still beyond the age range for which it was originally designed. But the paper also illustrates how the freedom afforded to institutions under Higher Still had unintended consequences for the wider system.

Among the weaknesses of the previous system that the Higher Still reform sought to address was the incoherent mix of provision in the upper school but the adoption by schools of NNQs in S3 and S4 alongside Standard Grade was in danger of reproducing the same incoherent mixed economy of qualifications, only this time in the lower school. The paper highlights the danger of the disaggregated decisions of institutions steering the unified system and suggests there may be a need to balance the flexibility offered to institutions by an open model of reform with strategic co-ordination by policy-makers at national and local level.

#### *Qualifications and assessment*

As I pointed out earlier, the unification debate in Scotland (and England) centred on qualifications and therefore also on assessment. Reform in Scotland of post – compulsory education and training was conceived of in terms of a unified *qualifications* system to the relative neglect of other aspects such as curricula, pedagogy and institutions. This preoccupation is manifest in the design of Higher Still which is concerned with the system of qualifications and the curriculum structure or curriculum architecture rather than being a reform of the curriculum or aiming to change pedagogy. This concentration on qualifications when coupled with the desire for a flexible system means that the design of Higher Still is based on modular or unit-based principles. Consequently certification occurs at the level of the unit rather than the level of the course or programme and each unit and course is separately assessed and separately certificated: unfortunately this results in a large total volume of assessment.

The assessment regime of Higher Still was one of the most contentious aspects of the reform (Papers 3 and 5); one issue was its perceived negative impact on teaching and learning in both schools and colleges. Higher Still's unified assessment arrangements required colleges to introduce external assessment and, for schools, meant an increase in the amount of internal assessment, and this was resisted on both sides (ADES/ASC/HMI 2001). Both sectors were concerned by the volume of assessment required and the impact of this on teaching and learning approaches, for example, teachers pointed out the narrowing effect in their teaching and a greater tendency to use whole class approaches. The ADES response to the Education, Culture and Sports Committee Inquiry into the SQA specifically noted school staff's concern about the 'loss of learning and teaching time to assessment activity' and an 'increase in workload due to the demands of internal assessment (ADES 2000, p.2 para 3.2). Colleges identified the adverse effect on their ability to vary the timing,

pace or location of study. Thus while Higher Still did not set out to change pedagogy, it nevertheless did have an impact. Overall, the assessment regime that the Higher Still design introduced was perceived as rigid and burdensome (Raffe, Howieson and Tinklin 2007).

Over this discussion section I have developed an argument that has moved from consideration of education and training systems and social inequalities, through reform strategies and policy-making issues to reflections on the distinctive features of the Scottish context, concluding with an examination of the example of the Higher Still reform, its associated policy process, and its specific features and their implications. In the next section I move on to offer some broad observations on the question of the reform of education and training systems.

## **Reflections**

One of the questions posed at the beginning of this discussion section was ‘what does the Higher Still example reveal about the possibilities of re-designing a system and policy-makers’ scope for manoeuvre in a specific national context?’. In this final section, with this question in mind, I draw on the research presented in this collection of papers and this Commentary to develop some observations on the issues raised by that question.

### *Unification and social inequalities*

As I have observed, the re-design of post-compulsory education and training in Scotland by means of the Higher Still reform was limited in its success, especially in relation to reducing social inequalities in attainment. I have suggested that, from its inception, the various political and practical constraints on policy-makers undermined the ability of the Higher Still reform to enact the system-wide change to which it aspired. Decisions about the development programme, in part reflecting the traditional priorities of the Scottish system, further compromised the likelihood of it achieving its aims. The particular model of Higher Still (an open unified system) which gave schools and colleges, the former dominated by academic programmes and preoccupied with progression to HE, substantial power to determine the implementation of Higher Still on the ground is another part of the explanation for its relative failure to deliver its aims. It is therefore possible to identify a range of reasons for the limited success of the Higher Still reform in practice. This makes it impossible, I suggest, to reach a definitive conclusion about



the efficacy of the *principle* of a unified systems approach to the re-design of education and training.

Moreover, one has to take account of the particular strategy of Higher Still. As I pointed out earlier, the unification debate in Scotland (and England) centred on qualifications and assessment rather than aiming to change the curriculum or pedagogical approaches. But as I described in the previous section, Higher Still *did* affect pedagogy and did so in a way that was generally perceived as negative. The Scottish experience suggests that in developing a unified qualifications system care must be taken to avoid certification and its associated assessment becoming the dominating and defining feature of the reform process.

I also suggest that the Scottish experience of unification as exemplified by Higher Still raises the issue of whether a reform of the qualifications structure is sufficient to improve the outcomes of low and middle attaining students. The OECD report on 'Education and Equity in OECD Countries contends that 'the curriculum and the nature of the teaching/learning interface ....are the core of any serious attempt to address the issues of equity, access and participation (OECD 1997, p.80). In the process of producing this Commentary I have become more aware of the limitations of the Scottish focus on qualifications if the system is to address social inequalities in educational outcomes. As the OECD review of schooling in Scotland suggests 'to explain why students from different social backgrounds achieve unequally well requires investigating other factors, [than resources] notably curriculum, the teaching context and instructional processes' (OECD 2007a, p.69). In the next subsection, I therefore turn to curricular issues (including pedagogy as an integral element of curriculum delivery), and in particular, to the thorny issue of academic and vocational learning.

#### *Academic and vocational learning*

The relationship between academic and vocational learning is central to the unification debate and, especially through the mechanism of tracking, contributes to the reproduction of social inequalities in education. I observed earlier in this Commentary that among the pressures for unification were perceived needs for new types of knowledge and skills that go beyond the distinctions traditionally made between the academic/theoretical and the vocational/practical. I consider, however, that Higher Still did not engage with this fundamental issue. While the Higher Still reform brought academic and vocational provision into a common framework it

was not concerned to re-appraise the nature of the curriculum and move beyond traditional ways of thinking about academic and vocational learning. It is not my intention here to enter into a detailed discussion of the issue but rather to raise the point and highlight the views of a number of commentators which seem to me to offer a basis for constructive debate.

Young, for example, suggests that rather than focussing on overcoming divisions between the academic/theoretical and the vocational/practical it may be more productive to develop new relationships between them. He puts forward the idea of a new type of 'connective' curriculum that extends the learning goals from schools and colleges to a broader educational role that links learning in schools to learning in society as a whole (Young 1993, 1999). Pring makes a similar point, observing that much of the debate about academic and vocational learning and analysis of educational failure is based on an impoverished discourse that is constrained by traditional ways of thinking about the aims and values of academic and vocational learning. He sees the need to develop a more vocationally oriented idea of liberal education which respects knowledge gained through traditional subjects and disciplines but which also embraces practical knowledge and capability and makes learning personally and socially relevant (Pring 1995, 2007). In a similar vein, one of the precepts that the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training sets out for the curriculum is that it should value practical modes of intelligent engagement with the world and with other people, incorporating this into curriculum thinking for *all* learners (emphasis added, Nuffield 2008, p.10). In all of these visions of a redefined curriculum, change to pedagogical practice is an essential feature. The notion that such a curriculum should be developed for *all* learners seems to me to be particularly relevant in relation to the issues of social inequalities in education. As Young et al point out what has been damaging about the current academic/vocational divide in post compulsory education is 'separating groups of learners according to whether they are deemed capable of theoretical or practical learning and to distinguishing types of qualifications which stress either theoretical or practical learning'. (Young *et al* 1997 p.532). Rather, as Brown and Lauder propose, education needs to be organised on the premise that *all* rather than the few are capable of significant practical and academic achievements, of creative thought and skills and responsibility (Brown and Lauder 1992).

In this context, the lack to date of any substantive discussion of the relationship between academic and vocational learning in a Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) is

disappointing and a cause for concern. CfE, unlike Higher Still, *is* a curricular reform aiming to create a single coherent curriculum covering the 3-18 age range and to engender pedagogical change: it aims to broaden the methods, contexts and outcomes of learning. It seeks to offer students a wider range of experiences and to 'achieve a suitable blend of what has traditionally seen as 'academic' and 'vocational' (Scottish Executive 2004a, p.10). But it appears that a 'suitable blend' is perceived as vocational provision being available in parallel to academic provision in the form of separate courses and qualifications (SE 2004b) and as providing a 'valuable alternative to academic learning' (SG 2007a, p.5) rather than as an opportunity to consider what is meant by academic and vocational and whether a different way of conceptualising and organising the curriculum is appropriate. Although a CfE is pursuing a model of active engagement with practitioners and others, there has been little, if any, promotion of debate about the relationship between academic and vocational learning, of the different purposes of vocational learning or the consequences of greater curricular diversity on the perennial issue of parity of esteem for academic and vocational learning: this has uncomfortable echoes of the deficiencies in the Higher Still programme. This absence is noted in the OECD Review which poses the question whether it will be possible to achieve one of the major objectives of a CfE - a single coherent curriculum for all young people - when the development work on vocational provision is proceeding independently from other aspects of CfE (OECD 2007a, p.130).

The Australian experience of VET is pertinent. In Victoria, for example, vocational education and training (VET) programmes are offered as part of the upper secondary education and can contribute to HE entry requirements (Teese and Polesel 2003). They have proved popular and have good outcomes in terms of employment and study destinations. Nevertheless, Teese and Polesel point out that while the VET programmes attract a range of students, the great expansion in numbers of young people taking vocational studies in their senior certificate has not deviated from the high concentration of weaker learners in the programmes which are socially skewed in their intakes. Thus while vocational studies offer students a space within the curriculum relatively free from university influence, a 'liberated space' (p.207), 'the space created in the curriculum for vocational learning has also become a source of social segregation' (p.208). Unless the CfE programme gives greater attention to the question of academic and vocational learning as part of the main reform process, *the curricular* differentiation being promoted by a CfE runs the risk of maintaining, if not increasing, social inequalities in education. The need for

nationally promoted debate is all the more pressing since the CfE gives schools and local authorities the responsibility for devising provision within a broadly defined framework. This means that as in *Higher Still*, institutions have substantial freedom to decide the provision they will offer. The lesson of *Higher Still* is that such freedom can mean that the overall aims of a reform are not achieved and that autonomy needs to be balanced by a clearly articulated national strategy.

#### *Context and structural barriers*

While this thesis has concentrated on aspects that can be described as internal to the education and training system it is essential to acknowledge the other factors that need to be addressed if the effects of social inequalities in education are to be ameliorated. These are the contextual constraints and factors that impinge on students, their families and schools and act to perpetuate inequalities. A number of commentators have pointed out how the domination of school effectiveness research in the last few decades has marginalised the question of the context (Teese and Lamb 2007b; Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan (1996); Harris and Ranson (2005); Thrupp and Lupton 2005; Reay 2006). Thrupp and Lupton, for example, declare 'By treating all schools as the same and thus capable of achieving the same, they render unimportant, perhaps even invisible, the social and economic inequalities that really prevent some students from doing as well as others. As a result they help to perpetuate unequal schooling and unequal outcomes' (Thrupp and Lupton 2006, p.312). Reay argues that the prevailing focus on within-school processes has often been at the expense of understanding the influence of wider economic and social context on schooling and seeks to restore social class as a central issue within education research. (Reay 2006). The lack of attention to context has gone hand in hand with the Conservative and subsequent New Labour focus on individual 'responsibilisation' (Ozga 1999). This is an area where it is possible to discern a different policy discourse in Scotland, both in respect of education and also social welfare more generally.

In Scotland there is clear recognition of the impact of contextual factors on students' educational outcomes as demonstrated in the Social Justice Strategy (SE 1999) and in the Closing the Opportunity Gap social inclusion policy (SE 2004c) which locates educational aims within an overall strategy to combat poverty, poor housing, poor health, and unemployment. This recognition of the role of structural barriers in limiting access to education is also evident in the Scottish Government's most recent document on poverty, inequalities and deprivation (SG 2008). In general, the

Scottish approach to social welfare can be seen as more collectivist and affording greater recognition to the need to address deprivation, to stronger and more socially oriented policies for inclusion and for a social partnership approach (Raffe 2004). It is notable that the current SNP Government Economic Strategy sets the dual goal of achieving both economic growth and reducing poverty and income inequality; furthermore it includes an explicit 'solidarity' or redistribution target of reducing the disparities between richest and poorest not just improving opportunities for the disadvantaged (SG 2007b, section B5).

Part of the explanation for this may lie in the higher levels of poverty that Scotland has experienced and which has profoundly marked Scottish society. H.M Paterson observed: 'Scottish culture has been dominated for many centuries by poverty ...the massive determination of this material fact has permanently marked the culture, the social structure and the psyche of Scotland' (Paterson 1983, p.197). Comparing Scottish and English policy approaches to social inclusion in the late 1990s, Ozga discerned significant differences noting that the policy texts in Scotland made a direct link between social exclusion and poverty (with no suggestion of 'uncivic' behaviour as in the English texts) and that 'The texts suggest that that there has been a failure to deliver opportunity, rather than a failure of individual responsibility, and that the key issues are structural' (Ozga 2003, p.11). Others have expressed a similar viewpoint (eg Alexiadou 2002; Lohde 2005).

Nevertheless, a fundamental question remains: is there the political will and the public support in Scotland for a radical refashioning of education and training? Teese maintains that while rich nations have invested heavily in education, 'they have not dismantled the structural barriers which block greater equity in access and outcome' (Teese 2007a, p.1). He further remarks that 'National and comparative international studies show a consistent pattern across rich nations in which macro-economic pressures towards educational growth are countered by hierarchical institutional arrangements, the institutionalisation of conservative academic values, the socio-spatial structures which control the distribution of financial, cultural and pedagogical resources 'on the ground', and family strategies which target both institutional and geographical hierarchies to secure competitive advantages through education' (p.2).

How far do existing patterns and hierarchies set limits to redistributive policies in Scotland? Here I return to the questions I posed in my earlier discussion of the

Scottish context and the conflicting aspects of the Scottish tradition: the co-existence of egalitarian democratic values and a socially open ideal of education alongside a more closed view with the sponsorship of elites and a focus on individual competitive achievement; the veneration of an academic curriculum and academic values; the consensual and conservative approach to education and to educational policy-making; and the relatively closed and socially unrepresentative policy-making community or leadership class, which itself had profited from the existing system. As I remarked previously, the complex and sometimes contradictory features of the Scottish context set the parameters for education reform in Scotland, defining not only what is possible but also what is acceptable. How can an education and training system address social inequalities within a context that, on the one hand, recognises structural barriers but, on the other, has a conservative and traditional orientation? Earlier I also posed the question of the likely impact of Devolution on the policy community and process and its implications for education reform. Devolution represents a fundamental change to the Scottish context and in the final section I consider what it may mean for education policy-making: in this new context will such contradictions become more apparent and increase the likelihood that they will be addressed?

### *The impact of Devolution*

#### Policy-making in the context of Devolution

A central theme in the argument for devolution was that it would promote democratic renewal and the engagement of civic society. Writing in 1997, pre-Devolution, Paterson suggests that if a Scottish parliament were to be established then the policy process would become more democratic and that the pressure towards democracy would challenge the various social elites that have constituted the deeply conservative policy community in Scotland (Paterson 1997). Moreover, he argues that education would inevitably be at the centre of the concerns of a new parliament, reflecting a long-standing belief that a Scottish parliament could make better policy for education than has an unreformed Union<sup>21</sup> (Paterson 2000a, p.1).

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<sup>21</sup> In the Scottish election Survey of 1997, two-thirds expected education to get better with a parliament and these expectations were the strongest predictors of voting in favour of Devolution and stronger than holding a Scottish as opposed to a British national identity or of sex, age and class (Paterson 1998, Political Quarterly)

In considering the impact of Devolution, it is important to recognise that Devolution does not represent a distinct break with the past rather it builds on the considerable degree of existing administrative devolution, especially in respect of education (Raffe, Brannen, *et al* 1999; Ozga 2005). A second point to bear in mind is that until 2007 the party political alliance between the UK Labour government and the Labour-Liberal coalition governments in Scotland was arguably a limiting factor on change. The ESRC Devolution Programme concluded that 'Only patchily has Labour itself pioneered new policies, notably on teachers' pay, in economic development.... Seen in the round there appears to be only a muted sense of pursuing a policy agenda that is distinctively Scottish. This is in part a question of leadership. McConnell's<sup>22</sup> Scottish Executive has been cautious, concerned not to provoke dispute with the Labour government in Westminster' (Devolution 2006a, p.3). The document goes on to make the point that the critical time will be when different political parties control the different administrations 'when different policy priorities can no longer be finessed through behind-the-scenes discussions within the Labour Party' (Devolution 2006, p.4). This is what Parry refers to as one of the 'sleeper issues' of recent UK governance (Parry 2008). That time has now arrived with the election of a minority SNP administration in May 2007. The impact in terms of education is relatively muted so far: the main SNP education priorities concern early years and student finance; in relation to secondary education, it has given its support to the Curriculum for Excellence reform, a policy initiated by the previous administration.

Nevertheless, the very existence of the parliament radically alters the context within which change in education, as in other policy areas, is enacted (Adams and Schmuecker 2005; Ozga 2005). Devolution has been associated with greater effort to generate public debate and to promote widespread public consultation as part of an intention to move to a more open and participative form of government than at Westminster (Brown 2000); this has been related to 'the continued social democratic tradition in Scotland' (Keating 2001, p.1). The ESRC's Devolution Programme concluded that 'The emphasis in the devolution debates on civic participation has invigorated civil society' (Devolution 2006b, p.3).

In relation to education, the National Debate on Education initiated by the Scottish Executive in 2002 (SE 2002) about the future of school education in Scotland could

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<sup>22</sup> First Minister of Scotland 2001-2007

be seen as an attempt to move out from traditional sources and to promote dialogue within a new and more open style of participative democracy (Humes and Bryce 2003, Munn *et al* 2004). Munn *et al* point out that it was an unusual type of consultation in that it posed basic questions about what schools of the future should be like rather than seeking responses to a specific policy proposal (p.434). They state that 'The National Debate...might be seen as representative of the 'new politics' in deliberately attempting to engage those unaccustomed to responding to consultations and using a variety of mechanisms to promote their participation. This included...a determined effort via children's charities to engage disaffected young people and their families' (Munn *et al* 2004, p.436). Other interpretations are possible, however, Raffe questions whether the National Debate on Education would have happened if there had been a real chance that it would challenge either the 'assumptive worlds' or the current role of the established policy community (Raffe 2005 p.62). In discussing continuities in policy-making since Devolution he judges that the education policy community in Scotland has 'continued to be powerful since political devolution, especially when the devolved administration has used them to augment their own meagre policy-making capacity' (Raffe 2005, p.60). Humes sees a greater impact of Devolution, contending that Devolution has intensified the existing tendency to fragmentation of a single policy community and created a wider set of policy communities and social networks (Humes 2003). There is undoubtedly a need for research on policy-making and the policy community similar to that conducted by McPherson and Raab and by Humes in the 1980s.

#### Administrative primacy and accountability in policy- making

In my earlier discussion of Scottish policy-making, I referred to the 'administrative primacy' in the central government of Scottish education where politicians had to rely on, and were managed, by the administrative civil servants and HMIE. Pre-devolution, ministers in Scotland had a wide range of responsibilities, had to divide their time between Edinburgh and London and could not easily take a leading role in many areas of education and training policy. Devolution changed this, creating a wider range of Departments headed by ministers based full-time in Scotland. The impact of this is evident, for example, in the creation in 2002 of a national careers service in Scotland. Technically this was possible before devolution since it did not require devolved powers but only happened afterwards due in no small measure to the increase in ministerial capacity. The exercise required considerable political will and commitment and was largely driven through by the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Howieson and Semple 2006).



The Committee structures of the Scottish Parliament can be seen as constituting a further challenge to the 'administrative primacy'. The Scottish Committees have significantly greater power than the separate Standing and Select Committees of the Westminster Parliament; one of their key activities is the conduct of Inquiries (SO 1998). Once again opinion is divided on their impact, the ESRC Devolution programme considered that the Scottish Parliament Committees have failed to emerge as the cross-party policy-making bodies that were envisaged at the launch of devolution and that this has contributed to the muted policy agenda referred to earlier in this section (Devolution 2006a, p.3). Allan, on the other hand, asserts that: 'the Inquiry genre has provided a new productive space for policy-making which disrupts the usual forms of closure' (Allan 2003, p.1). There is more agreement in respect of the accountability function of the Committees. Allan declares 'Perhaps most importantly ... the Inquiry format has provided a new space in which the politicians could hold their Scottish Executive officials to account' and, referring to the Education, Culture and Sports Committee Inquiry into special needs, she judged that 'they did so tenaciously, by requiring accountability in terms of action and responsibility rather than retrospective transparency' (p.1). A similar picture is evident in respect of the two Parliamentary Committee Inquiries into the so-called 'exams crisis' in 2000 that I outlined previously<sup>23</sup>. A specific outcome of the Committee Inquiries was the radical change to the role of HMIe which lost its policy-making powers and became an Executive Agency. Paterson is positive in his estimation of the value of these two Inquiries (Paterson 2000c). He suggests that, at their best, they provided an unprecedented level of public questioning of civil servants: 'never before have people of the seniority of the head of the inspectorate or the civil service head of the Education Department been subjected to such sustained interrogation in public' (Paterson 2000c, p.154). While he expresses doubt about the capacity of Parliamentary Inquiries to consider very broad issues of philosophy, purpose or culture, he thinks they have a strong role in creating a culture of openness in Scottish public affairs and in promoting accountability.

### Change and continuity

Policy-making in Scotland pre-devolution was a complex blend of what Raffe refers to as autonomous and reactive (Raffe 1998). Devolution changes the balance between autonomous and reactive policy-making although the exact nature of the

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<sup>23</sup> The Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee focused on the governance of the SQA while the Education, Culture and Sports Committee was concerned more broadly with Higher Still and the role of the Scottish Executive and its relationship with SQA

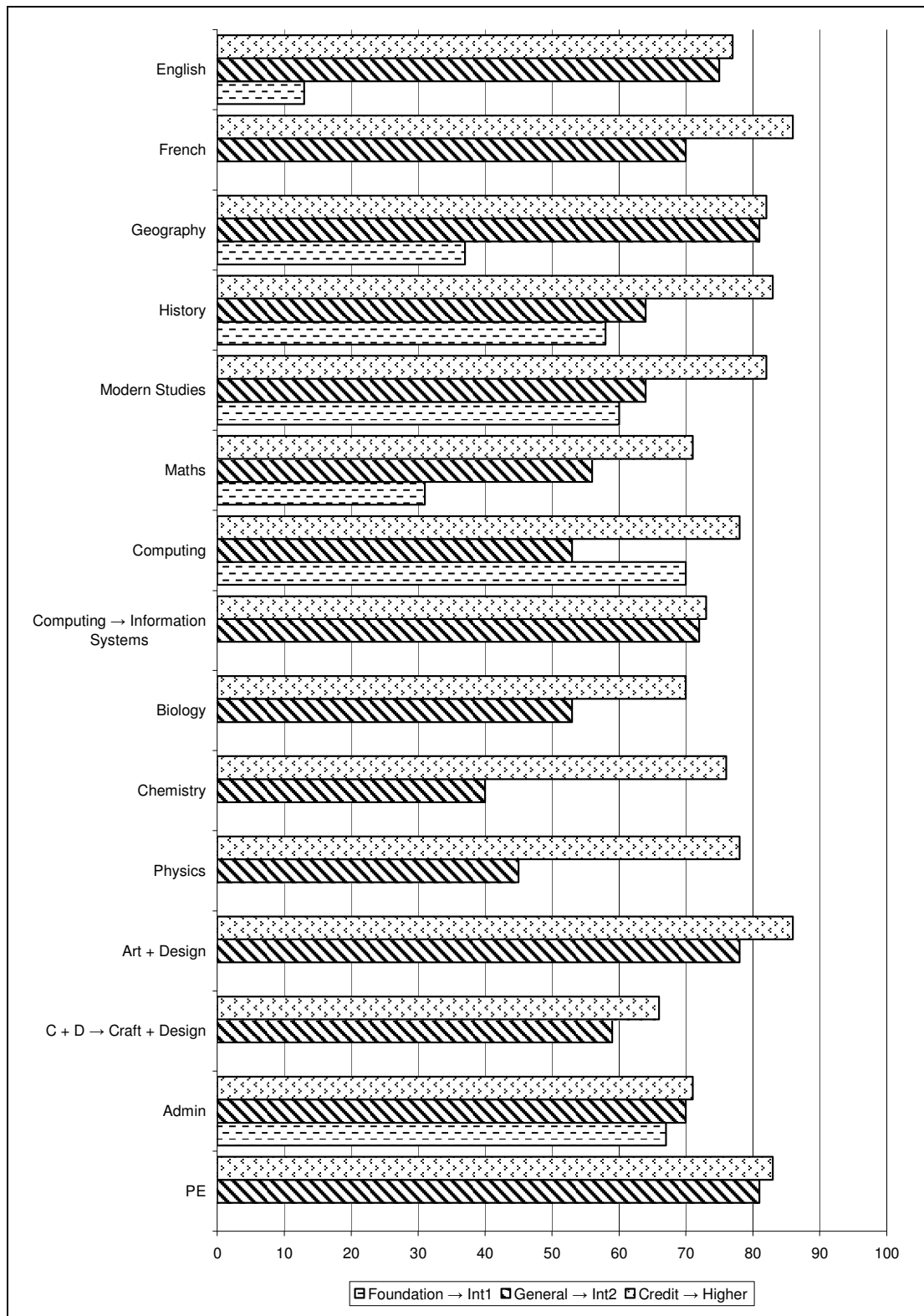
change is not yet clear, partly because until very recently the same political parties were in power at Holyrood and Westminster.

Certainly the policy community in Scotland has 'played the Scottish card' to its advantage on many occasions, using it to construct consensus and garner support for an issue that might otherwise have proved contentious. The Action Plan is often referred to as an example of this: the Scottish Office was able to gain support for its plans on the basis that if Scotland did not initiate its own reforms then the UK Manpower Service Commission would impose a reform that would be inimical to the Scottish education and training system (Howieson 1989). Policy-makers in Scotland have been able to emphasise the distinctiveness of the Scottish education and training system to their own political advantage or to preserve their own power or discretion. This was especially easy during the years of Conservative governments that lacked legitimacy and support in Scotland. Devolution and a Scottish Parliament alter this dynamic but in ways that are not yet clear.

Will Devolution lead Scotland to be more outward looking and less concerned to judge itself, including its education and training system, in relation to England? Clearly, the SNP government is seeking to re-position Scotland in a wider European context and especially in relation to other countries of a similar size which are economically prosperous and which share the same social justice values: what it refers to as northern Europe's 'arc of prosperity' (SG 2008a). The implications of this for education and training have yet to become apparent.

Nonetheless, in this changed political context, certain continuities in Scottish education are evident. This is apparent in, for example, the recent CfE Consultation document on the next generation of national qualifications in Scotland. It once again demonstrates the preoccupation with the Higher that has been a feature of the system, in the words of this document: 'Highers, in particular, will remain the 'gold standard' of the Scottish education system' (SG 2008b 2.1.i). The example of Higher Still has illustrated the way in which different aspects of the Scottish context influenced and constrained a major education reform programme. I suggest this experience offer lessons for a CfE and other education reforms.

**Figure 1:** S5 students 2002-03: comparison of pass rates at Higher, Intermediate 2 and Intermediate 1 by the appropriate level of SG attainment (%) (Howieson 2005)



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