Working Paper 3

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES TO A FLEXIBLE UNIFIED SYSTEM: THE CASE OF SCOTTISH COLLEGES OF FURTHER EDUCATION

Cathy Howieson, David Raffe, Teresa Tinklin
Centre for Educational Sociology, University of Edinburgh

OVERVIEW

The Higher Still reform is introducing a flexible unified system of post-16 education in Scotland. The new system will cover nearly all general and vocational education after the end of compulsory school, with the exception of higher education (HE) and Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) which are designed primarily for workplace training. It will bring different curricula (general and vocational), different institutions, different levels of study and provision for different age groups into a single framework with common design rules for the curriculum, assessment and certification. The reform began in 1999 and is being phased in over a five year period. In this paper we examine the early progress of the reform in Further Education (FE) colleges, the main public providers of vocational education in Scotland. We start by describing the existing Scottish system and the current reforms; we then introduce our conceptual framework, based on the concepts of unification and flexibility; and we then present some findings of a survey of FE colleges on the progress and impact of the reform.

THE SCOTTISH SYSTEM

Most young people in Scotland attend comprehensive secondary schools from the age of 12. Full-time education is compulsory to age 16, when young people may stay on, usually at the same school, for one or two years of upper-secondary education. In 1999 just over a quarter (28%) of school leavers left at 16, a quarter (25%) left after one year of upper-secondary school and nearly half (47%) left after two years (Scottish Executive, 2001). Many of those who left at 16 or 17 entered Skillseeker programmes of work-based training leading to occupational SVQs. A small but growing minority of early school leavers continued full-time education at an FE college.

Even before the reform, the curriculum of upper-secondary education in Scotland could be described as flexible. The volume, level, content and duration of study varied from student to student. Unlike most other European countries, Scotland has not required students to complete a specified programme of study in order to 'graduate' from upper-secondary education. Before 1999, the upper-secondary school curriculum was based on 120-hour single-subject courses: Highers, the main qualifications for university entry, and Certificate of Sixth Year Studies (CSYS) courses which were available in the second post-compulsory year for those who had passed at Higher in the relevant subject. Students took up to five

courses in a year and filled the gaps with 40-hour National Certificate (NC) modules. The modules covered a range of general and vocational subjects, specified in terms of learning outcomes and internally assessed (that is, assessed by school or college staff). They varied in difficulty but most were less demanding than Highers.

FE colleges offer general as well as vocational courses although, unlike English colleges, they do not usually offer academic courses to young people in competition with secondary schools. The 47 colleges vary widely, but they all subscribe to a mission which emphasises access and social inclusion. They provide a wide range of courses, at all levels, available through full-time or part-time study or by open or distance learning, to students of all ages. Nearly two thirds of students are aged 21 or older. Before Higher Still was introduced NC modules were an important part of college provision. Other college programmes led to SVQs, Highers, Higher National Certificates and Diplomas (HNC/Ds: higher education programmes below degree level with a vocational emphasis) or other vocational and professional qualifications; some programmes did not lead to formal qualifications. Most college programmes were modular or unit-based and most assessment was internal (carried out by college staff).

THE HIGHER STILL REFORM

In the early 1990s the Scottish system was seen to be failing (SOED, 1992). More average- and lower-attaining 16 year olds were staying on at school, where they had to choose between modules, often offered in an arbitrary range of subjects depending on school staffing and resources, and Highers which offered a high risk of failure. Many students mixed Highers and modules and had to cope with their different pedagogies and assessment regimes. Modules had low status and often offered limited opportunities for progression; consequently there was pressure to take Highers even for students who had little chance of success. Able students took programmes of Highers which lacked breadth and depth compared to other European qualifications. Employers complained that young workers lacked 'core skills' – formally defined as communication, numeracy, information technology, problem solving and working with others. There were criticisms that standards were too low, that the burden of assessment was excessive and that the system lacked transparency. These weaknesses primarily related to young people and they affected schools more than colleges. In 1990 a committee was set up to examine the situation; its remit initially covered schools and not colleges.

In sum, although the existing system provided considerably flexibility of curriculum and pathways – in the sense that there were few formal restrictions on curriculum choice and students could mix, or move between, the different types of provision – this flexibility was restricted in practice by differences in philosophy, pedagogy and assessment, by obstacles to progression and by the unequal status of different qualifications. The Higher Still reform aimed to rationalise this system in order to provide a genuinely seamless and flexible system of pathways. It was announced in 1994 in a document entitled *Higher Still: Opportunity for All* (Scottish Office, 1994). As the existing system of courses and modules covered colleges as well as schools, the reform included colleges even if the main problems it addressed were those of schools (Howieson, Raffe, Spours & Young, 1997).

The architecture of the new unified system is based on 40-hour *units*, which may be combined into 160-hour *courses*; courses and units may be grouped into 640- or 800-hour *Scottish Group Awards* (SGAs). Units, courses and SGAs correspond to modules, courses and group awards in the old system. Each unit, course or SGA is separately certificated. Students can take free-standing units which are not part of courses, or courses which do not contribute to SGAs. Each unit is internally assessed, often using 'NABs' (standard assessments held in a National Assessment Bank). Each course comprises three units, and the remaining 40 of the 160 hours are devoted to induction, remediation, integration and preparation for external assessment. To pass a course a student must pass the internal assessments for each unit and an external assessment (typically an examination or project work, judged by an assessor from outside the school or college) which covers the course as a whole. An SGA consists typically of at least two or three courses and additional units to make up to the total of 640 or 800 hours. To achieve an SGA a student must also show a specified level of attainment in the five core skills. These may be achieved by taking free-standing units, by taking Higher Still courses or units in which particular core skills are deemed to be 'embedded', or on the basis of earlier qualifications.

Higher Still units, courses and SGAs are available at five levels: Access, Intermediate 1, Intermediate 2, Higher and Advanced Higher. The five levels are designed to articulate with compulsory school qualifications, and the top two levels, Higher and Advanced Higher, correspond respectively to Higher and CSYS in the old system. A student may study units or courses at different levels at the same time. A student who has achieved high grades in compulsory school is likely to continue at school and take up to five Highers courses in the first post-compulsory year, perhaps followed by a combination of additional Highers and Advanced Highers in the following year. This represents little change from the previous system: the main differences are that courses now have a unit structure and more internal assessment and there are more Highers in vocational subjects, although these tend to be offered by colleges rather by schools. However weaker students, who previously could either attempt Highers courses with a high risk of failure, and/or take modules whose status and value was doubtful, now have a very different set of opportunities. The unified system allows them to continue in 'mainstream' provision by studying for courses similar to Highers but at a lower level – Intermediate 1 or Intermediate 2 – with the possibility of working up to Highers after one or two years.

The unified system has several implications for colleges. It offers formal parity of esteem: vocational and academic courses are part of the same structure and they are covered by the same certification arrangements. There are now more courses at the Higher level available in vocational subjects than in academic subjects. Many of the design rules of the unified system involve a change from former college practice. The new curriculum architecture means that colleges can organise provision in courses, rather than as programmes of units/modules as in much of their previous provision. The arrangements for assessment are different: unit assessments are more formalised than the old module assessments, and if colleges offer courses rather than just units they must introduce external assessment, whereas formerly nearly all college study was assessed internally. If they offer SGAs they must ensure the provision of core skills, especially those not 'embedded' in regular subjects. Finally, the new Access level, which is intended primarily for students with special needs or for those

returning to study after a long break, offers a means for accommodating some of FE's less advantaged students within mainstream provision.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: UNIFICATION AND FLEXIBILITY

Our research addresses two current issues in vocational education: unification and flexibility. Higher Still exemplifies a general trend towards the unification of upper-secondary education which affects most European countries (Raffe, 1997; Young, Howieson, Raffe & Spours, 1997; Lasonen & Young, 1998). Unification is a response to global social and economic trends, and to pressures arising from the expansion and greater functional complexity of post-compulsory education systems and the consequent need to increase the coherence of their constituent parts. In an earlier project we developed a conceptual framework which distinguished three types of post-compulsory education and training systems: a *tracked* system, with separate and distinctive tracks; a *linked* system, with features linking the tracks or common properties which underline their similarity or equivalence; and a *unified* system, which brings all provision into a single framework governed by common design rules (Raffe, Howieson, Spours & Young, 1998). These three types are points along a continuum, with tracked systems at one end, unified systems at the other end, and various forms of linked systems in between. Unification is the trend for tracked systems to become linked systems and for linked systems to become unified systems. In practice, of course, each national system is a mixture of the three types: its position on the continuum between tracked and unified systems may vary across different dimensions of system change. Some of the most important dimensions are described in Figure 1.

So, although many countries are pursuing unification and some are introducing unified systems, their models of unification vary according to the dimensions along which they unify. The critical dimensions of unification in Higher Still include course structure and pathways, assessment and certification. These are governed by common design rules, which specify the structure of units, courses and SGAs, the five levels and the arrangements for assessment and certification described above. The design rules apply to vocational as well as academic subjects, to colleges as well as schools, and to provision for adults as well as provision for young people.

In contrast to other unified systems, such as those introduced in Sweden and Norway, Higher Still is a *flexible* unified system. An earlier analysis distinguished four aspects of flexibility: *individual* flexibility (an outcome of education, which roughly translates as transferability), *curricular* flexibility, flexibility of *delivery* (in the method, pace and place of learning) and flexibility of *pathways* (Raffe, 1994). These aspects of flexibility can be mapped on to Nijhof and Streumer's (1994) systems framework based on the four levels of context, process, input and output: individual flexibility corresponds to the output level, flexibility of curriculum, delivery and pathways correspond to the process level, and the common design rules of a unified system correspond to the input level. The Higher Still model aims to enhance individual flexibility, through its emphasis on core skills. It also encourages curricular flexibility: there is weak prescription of the content, volume, level and duration of study. It is less strongly associated with flexibility of delivery, as we see below. However, its character as a flexible unified system is defined especially by the flexibility of student pathways. It aims to provide 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. The design rules described above are intended to support a seamless, unified system of pathways in which students can access education at any level and progress across and between all parts of the system.

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

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

Source: Raffe, Howieson, Spours & Young (1998)

The combination of unification with flexibility of curriculum and pathways in the Scottish reforms has implications for:

- *Assessment*. The flexibility of the Scottish system is underpinned by its modularity, and especially by modular assessment and certification. Each unit and course is separately assessed and separately certificated; this leads to a large total volume of assessment.

- *The pervasiveness of the common design rules*. If the main building blocks of a unified system are programmes or group awards, its common design rules only have to apply at this relatively aggregate level. But in a flexible unified system these rules must be applied right down to the level of the unit or course, and their effect is more pervasive.

- *Conflict*. These design rules tend to be the subject of conflict between sectors and interests within education: for example, assessment arrangements which meet the needs of academic education in schools may be seen as less appropriate by those providing vocational education in colleges. The more pervasive the design rules, the greater the scope for conflict. Elsewhere we have documented the conflicts that attended the development and introduction of the Scottish unified system (Raffe & Howieson, 1998; Raffe, Howieson & Tinklin, 2001).

- *Flexibility of delivery*. The design rules which are necessary for flexible pathways may themselves restrict flexibility of delivery. For example, uniform assessment arrangements may restrict possible teaching or learning methods or colleges' ability to vary the time, pace or location of study.

- *Steering mechanisms and empowerment*. A flexible system could potentially empower
  - *individual students*, by giving them more (or more suitable) opportunities to choose from;
  - *end-users (HE, employers)*, who can specify their selection criteria more finely in a system with flexible curricula and exit points;
  - *institutions (colleges and schools)*, which have more discretion over the opportunities which they offer and the way in which these are 'packaged' for students;
  - *government or regulatory bodies*, who may use such instruments as funding mechanisms, regulation or inspection to influence or restrict the ways institutions use this discretion.

A flexible unified system is compatible with different possible structures of control or with different 'information' and 'steering' structures (Geerligs, 1999; Nijhof, Kieft & Woerkom, 1999). It could underpin a market-led system in which the demands of students and end-users are paramount, enable institutions to play a larger role in shaping provision, or provide the means of more detailed central control.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND DATA

In the rest of the paper we examine survey findings on the implementation of the flexible unified system in Scottish colleges, in order to address the questions:

1. How much support is there for the reform, and how consensual is this support?

2. Does it increase flexibility?

3. What are the implications of changes in assessment?

4. Who is 'empowered' in a flexible unified system?

We use data from a survey of FE colleges carried out in the winter of 2000-01, the second year of the reform, by the Centre for Educational Sociology (CES) and the Scottish Further

Education Unit (SFEU). Questionnaires were returned by 40 of the 47 colleges. We also draw on a parallel survey carried out by the CES in secondary schools; we have excluded special schools and independent schools from the responses reported below. From public mainstream (not special) schools we achieved 295 responses, a 76% response rate. In both surveys the returns were usually made by the senior member of staff with lead responsibility for Higher Still in the institution, usually drawing on contributions from other staff.

The questionnaire contained structured questions about the institution's implementation of Higher Still, its attitudes to the reform, the impact to date and the problems that it had encountered. It also invited respondents to amplify their answers through more open-ended comments. Below we draw on the responses to both types of questions.

The surveys are part of a larger project which will also conduct case studies in six institutions and analyse detailed data on student enrolments and attainments held by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), which awards all Higher Still qualifications. The surveys will be replicated after two years to show changes during the process of implementation; the case studies and the SQA data will also cover the first four years of the reform. This chapter presents only an initial analysis of college's responses to Higher Still.

COLLEGE VIEWS ON HIGHER STILL

The aims of Higher Still received strong support both from colleges and from schools. The items in Table 1 are based on the official published aims of Higher Still (Scottish Office 1994). We have grouped them according to our themes of flexibility and unification. The first two aims are about raising attainment, and were strongly supported by both colleges and schools. The next three aims refer to flexibility of pathways, and were also supported by both colleges and schools, although schools – with their predominantly academic curriculum – were less interested in giving students access to a range of academic and vocational subjects. The next two aims correspond loosely to our notion of individual flexibility or transferability. Core skills received strong support from colleges but less support from schools. Finally, aims relating to unification received general support, but once again those concerning the relation of academic to vocational education received stronger support from colleges than from schools. In general, we find broad support from both sectors, but support within schools tended to be more focused on aims relating to raising attainment and to the flexibility of pathways. A further set of questions asked about support for the aims of Higher Still across different categories of staff (table not shown). A majority of all staff were considered to be supportive. Support was strongest among senior management and somewhat less strong among teachers and lecturers; it was stronger among school staff than college staff, although this was primarily due to the larger number of college staff considered 'neutral', possibly because they had had less experience of the reform.

Questions about the specific changes introduced by Higher Still received a rather different response (Table 2). There was support – or at least, little opposition – for the general notion of a single curricular framework, and for basing provision on five levels (an important element in the construction of flexible pathways). There was substantial opposition within schools to the emphasis on core skills and to the creation of SGAs. There was least support both in schools and in colleges for the changes to assessment. The volume and organisation of assessment, and the consequences for teaching, learning and staff workload, had been the

most contested feature of the earlier modular reforms in Scotland (Howieson, 1992). Higher Still's unified assessment arrangements required colleges to introduce external assessment and schools to increase their internal assessment, and this was resisted on both sides (ADES/ASC/HMI 2001). Assessment became a source of further controversy after the 'exam results crisis' of August 2000, when the volume and complexity of assessment results proved too much for the SQA's systems, and many candidates received inaccurate, incomplete or late results of the qualifications which they had attempted (Raffe *et al.* 2001).

Table 1. In your view, how important are the following aims of Higher Still to your college/ school?

Aim	% important	
	colleges	schools
Higher attainment:		
To enable all our students to gain marketable qualifications	97	97
To enable all our students to achieve the highest level of attainment of which they are capable	95	99
Flexibility of pathways:		
To offer students a more even progression between different stages	100	98
To enable courses always to be available to students at an appropriate level	95	88
To give our students access to a range of both academic and vocational subjects	81	68
Transferability:		
To develop our students' competence in core skills	90	46
To encourage our students to take a broader curriculum	64	62
Unification:		
To provide a simpler, more efficient system easily understood by students, parents, employers and higher education	90	78
To bring academic and vocational courses into a unified curriculum and assessment system	82	61
To promote parity of esteem of academic and vocational subjects	80	53
n=100%	(39)	(295)

The Table shows the percentage responding in the top two points of a five-point scale from 'very important' to 'not at all important'. Items have been re-ordered. The sub-headings were not shown in the questionnaire.

Table 2. In your view, how much support is there in the college/school for the changes introduced by Higher Still in relation to ... (percentages)

	support	neutral	opposition	n=100%
... a single curricular framework for both academic and vocational subjects				
colleges	68	27	5	(37)
schools	68	29	3	(265)
... provision based on five levels				
colleges	46	49	5	(37)
schools	50	38	12	(258)
... the emphasis on core skills				
colleges	58	35	8	(40)
schools	11	47	43	(251)
... the creation of SGAs				
colleges	38	58	5	(40)
schools	6	43	51	(211)
... assessment				
colleges	28	49	23	(39)
schools	26	24	51	(285)

'Support' and 'opposition' refer respectively to the top and bottom two points of a five-point scale from 'strong support' to 'strong opposition'. 'Neutral' describes the middle point. 'Don't know/difficult to say' responses are excluded.

As further evidence of the conflicts aroused by the reform, three quarters of the colleges (30) considered that the Higher Still framework 'responded more to the needs of schools than colleges'; only two felt that it responded more to the needs of colleges and the other eight felt that it achieved a reasonable balance (table not shown). By contrast, only 12% of schools felt that Higher Still responded more to the needs of schools, compared with 28% who said that it responded more to the needs of colleges; the other schools either felt it achieved a reasonable balance or were not sure.

IMPLEMENTATION

The arrangements for phasing in Higher Still gave priority to Higher courses which replaced existing Highers, referred to as 'phase 1' courses. These tended to be in academic subjects and were offered by schools, but they were also offered in many colleges, mainly to adults or to extend the options for school students. 'Phase 2' Highers in new (typically vocational) subjects, and provision at other levels such as Intermediate 1 and 2, had lower priority. By phasing the reform in this way it was hoped that teachers would become familiar with the new system gradually, starting with the sectors that most resembled the previous system. In any case, materials were slow to become available in some of the Phase 2 courses. As a result, in the first two years Higher Still affected schools more than colleges. In the first year a majority of colleges offered ten or fewer Higher Still courses, mostly in the more academic subjects. Some also offered free-standing units. About two-thirds of FE colleges offered SGAs, but most offered just one or two, as a means of gaining experience of the new system (SFEU/HSDU, 2000). By the second year, when our survey took place, provision had increased, but only modestly. The median college now offered 16 courses and two SGAs, but with a wide variation especially in the number of SGAs. Most of these were provided in the daytime but 18 of the 40 colleges offered Higher Still courses in the evening (usually just two or three courses) and six offered Higher Still courses by open or distance learning. (Two of these offered 19 and 24 courses respectively.) Only in a quarter of colleges were all teaching departments involved: in the median college 70% of departments were involved.

The programmes most likely to be affected by Higher Still included tailored programmes for students with learning difficulties and programmes providing access to higher education for 'less traditional' students. Few tailored programmes for employers had been affected by Higher Still.

Table 3 refers to NC programmes, the largest category of college provision which potentially could be replaced by Higher Still. Only ten colleges had fully replaced as much as a quarter of their NC programmes by Higher Still provision. Rather more colleges had adapted existing programmes by substituting or adding Higher Still courses or units. They thus used Higher Still to extend the menu from which to select units or courses when constructing programmes – as a means of flexibility for colleges if not necessarily for the individual student. Replacement and adaptation were not necessarily alternative strategies: Table 3 shows that most colleges did both. Adaptation may have reflected the early stage of implementation, if colleges were converting programmes to the new system in stages. If this were the case we might expect a significant increase in SGAs in future years. However when asked about their plans for next year only 12 colleges expected a moderate or extensive increase in SGAs, compared with 25 and 27 colleges which expected a moderate or extensive increase in Higher

Still courses and units respectively. The main reason for colleges' reluctance to introduce SGAs were that they required external assessment and that they reduced colleges' flexibility, especially in responding to the needs of employers.

Table 3. Percentage of NC programmes (i) fully replaced by Higher Still and (ii) adapted by substituting or adding Higher Still courses and/or units (number of colleges)

	% fully replaced:	none	1-10%	11-25%	26-50%	51-75%	76-100%	Total
	none	1	1	0	0	1	0	3
	1-10%	1	5	1	2	1	0	10
%	11-25%	1	3	2	1	0	0	7
adapted:	26-50%	1	4	3	1	0	0	9
	51-75%	0	2	1	3	0	0	6
	76-100%	0	0	1	1	0	0	2
	Total	4	15	8	8	2	0	37

Many colleges had links with schools and/or other colleges, and Higher Still had increased these links. For example, 27 colleges offered courses or units to students from schools, and 12 of these reported that these links had been increased. (Many school students who took Highers courses at college took the 'new' subjects such as Psychology or Care which had not been available as Highers in the old system.) Most significantly, from the perspective of flexible pathways, more than half of the colleges (24) reported either new or increased planning activities with schools to improve articulation of provision, taking advantage of the fact that they were both offering provision within the Higher Still framework. Only seven colleges reported new or increased articulation arrangements with higher education institutions, whose provision was not covered by Higher Still.

Table 4. To what extent have the following factors influenced your decisions about Higher Still provision to date, including future provision?

	very strong influence	strong	less strong
Needs or demands of stakeholders:			
Government policies and priorities	8	22	10
The profile of students in the college	13	18	9
The needs of Higher Education institutions	0	8	32
The needs of employers	7	12	21
Local economic trends and conditions	1	10	29
Feedback from students	4	12	24
Resources and practical constraints:			
Existence of appropriate Higher Still provision	26	11	3
Resource issues	12	12	16
Timetabling issues	4	8	31
Single exam diet	4	6	30
Availability of national support materials	17	18	5
Willingness of staff	9	15	16
Readiness of staff	12	18	10
Presence of key individuals in the college	9	14	17
Links with local schools	5	10	23
Programmes offered by other colleges	1	4	35
n=40			

The three columns describe the numbers responding in points 1, 2 and 3-5 of a five-point scale from 'very strong influence' to 'no influence at all'. The sub-headings were not shown in the questionnaire.

Colleges were asked about their objectives in the implementation of Higher Still (table not shown). Their four most important objectives related to the flexibility of pathways: improving student progression to HNC/D level, extending the college's provision at particular levels (thus providing more flexible entry points), improving articulation with local schools and improving student progression to employment. However when colleges were asked which factors had most influenced their implementation decisions, the most important factors were the existence of appropriate Higher Still provision and the availability of national support materials; resource and staffing issues were also influential (Table 4). The early pattern of implementation thus reflected supply constraints more than colleges' responsiveness to changing contexts or to the needs of clients. The first set of factors in Table 4 concern the needs of clients or stakeholders: only the profile of students in the college and government policies and priorities were named as strong or very strong influences by a majority of colleges. The needs of employers, local economic trends and conditions, the needs of higher education institutions, and feedback from students, were less important.

THE IMPACT OF THE REFORM

Respondents were asked to describe the impact of Higher Still on aspects of the flexibility of curriculum and pathways (Table 5) and of the flexibility of delivery (Table 6) in their college. They reported only a modest impact, probably reflecting the early stage of the reform. Colleges which had made more progress towards implementation tended to report more impact.

Table 5. On balance, what impact has Higher Still had on students at your college and on potential students? Has it ...

	yes	no change	not sure	total
... given students more opportunity to work at a level appropriate to them/their starting point?	23	13	4	(40)
... promoted more mixing of academic and vocational subjects?	9	24	7	(40)
... given students a wider range of subjects to choose from?	14	23	3	(40)
... encouraged high achieving students to take vocational subjects?	4	29	7	(40)

Table 6. What impact has Higher Still had on the capacity of the college to meet students' needs? To what extent has Higher Still increased or decreased...

	strongly increased 1	2	3	4	strongly decreased 5	don't know	total
... staff's ability to respond to student needs in the timing of assessments?	0	6	11	15	4	3	(39)
... students' ability to access provision in a flexible way?	0	8	21	5	1	4	(38)
... staff's ability to respond to student needs in their teaching and learning approaches?	0	12	19	9	0	3	(38)

A majority of colleges (23 out of 40) felt that Higher Still had given their students more opportunity to start at an appropriate level (Table 5, first item). Colleges were particularly likely to report this if they had used Higher Still to replace or adapt community outreach programmes, pre-entry access programmes or flexible learning programmes, or to replace tailored programmes for students with learning difficulties. The main reason Higher Still's positive impact arose through the two lowest levels of the framework, Access and Intermediate 1. New units and courses at these levels made it easier for colleges to tailor provision to meet the needs of particular groups, and extended opportunities for accreditation and for progression. The unified system of flexible pathways has thus had some impact on promoting 'opportunity for all'.

However in their open-ended comments colleges identified two more negative issues concerning the Higher Still levels. First, some colleges felt that particular courses or units were too easy or (more commonly) too difficult for the level at which they were nominally set. Usually this seemed to be correctable by fine-tuning, but in some cases it may have reflected a more fundamental issue: that because the unified system was designed to embrace the academic/vocational divide some courses or units were considered to be too 'academic' for traditional vocational students. The second issue concerned progression. The intervals between the five levels of the Higher Still curriculum represent steps in a ladder of educational progression, and in a unified system the steps are of a uniform height. However some students may need to progress up smaller steps than others, and therefore suffer disadvantage. The most important example of this concerned progression to higher education. In principle, an SGA at Higher level leads on to the first year of higher education whether this is for a university degree course or for an HNC/D. However the specification for a Higher SGA corresponds to the traditional entry level for degree courses, whereas most college students who progress to higher education enter HNC/Ds, whose entry requirements are less demanding. The SGA at Higher level represents an unnecessarily high hurdle for them to cross. In principle the flexibility of pathways provides a solution to this, in that colleges can construct programmes whose average level is somewhat lower than the Higher SGA, but this may be at the expense of simplicity or a uniform national currency.

The other three items in Table 5 suggest that Higher Still had had less impact (so far) on curriculum choice and even less impact on students' choices of academic and vocational subjects. Colleges commented that the responses of higher education would be influential on choices in the future. A flexible unified system gives more influence to end-users as they have more scope to specify the particular subjects taken by applicants. So far we have little evidence on how they will use this influence; neither universities nor employers had had a strong direct influence on colleges' implementation of Higher Still (see Table 3 above), but they were recognised as a potential influence which might constrain its impact in the future.

Higher Still's design rules had thus had a positive if modest effect (so far) on the flexibility of student pathways. They had had a less favourable effect on the flexibility of delivery. The most constraining of the design rules, in the view of many college staff, concerned the nature, volume and timing of assessment. Half of the colleges reported a reduction in flexibility in the timing of assessments (Table 6). In particular, the fixed annual examination diet, based on the school calendar, inhibited colleges' ability to provide assessment on demand or to offer open and distance learning or 'roll-on roll-off' provision; this reduced their ability to respond

to the needs of many adult learners. Eight colleges felt that Higher Still had increased students' ability to access provision in a flexible way, and six colleges felt it had reduced it; the latter group gave assessment as the main reason. Slightly more colleges felt that Higher Still had increased the flexibility in teaching and learning approaches than felt it had been reduced.

There was no strong link between the nature or scale of colleges' Higher Still provision and its reported impact on flexibility of delivery as described in Table 6, although colleges offering more courses – whether daytime or evening – were slightly more positive about students' ability to access provision in a flexible way, and the handful of colleges which provided a significant number of SGAs tended to be more positive about all three aspects of flexibility described in Table 6. Cause and effect may run in either direction: those colleges which found Higher Still's design rules least constraining, or which found creative solutions to the constraints they imposed, may have been fastest to implement the reform.

In the first year of Higher Still, few colleges had offered Higher Still courses in the evenings because it was difficult to accommodate the increased assessment requirements within a timetable typically based on one evening a week (SFEU/HSDU, 2000). Even in 2000-01, only 18 of the 40 colleges offered any Higher Still courses (mainly Highers) in the evenings. They used a variety of approaches to make the time go further: self-study packs (eight colleges), making the sessions longer (five colleges), running the course over two evenings (six colleges), extending the year (four colleges) or adding sessions on Saturday (one college). Nearly half of all colleges had introduced or extended dedicated arrangements for assessment or reassessment in order to manage the new demands of Higher Still. More than a third had introduced or extended diagnostic testing for students entering the college, to help to allocate them to the right Higher Still level. And nearly half of all colleges had introduced or extended flexible learning provision for core skills.

Colleges were asked to what extent Higher Still had affected their capacity to meet the needs of different categories of students. For each category but one, a majority of colleges either gave an intermediate response indicating no net change, or responded 'don't know'. The exception consisted of students with learning difficulties: 21 out of 38 colleges said it had increased their capacity to meet the needs of these students. The other groups, in order of the number of colleges reporting a positive effect, were: disadvantaged students (15 colleges); 16-18 year olds (12 colleges); students on special courses providing access for adults to higher education (eight colleges); students over 18 (seven colleges); New Deal students (on programme for unemployed: five colleges); employers (no colleges). In no case did more than three colleges say that Higher Still had reduced their capacity to meet the needs of the group in question.

DISCUSSION

We summarise our preliminary findings in terms of the four research questions introduced earlier in this paper.

1. How much support is there for the reform, and how consensual is this support? There was a high level of support for the aims of Higher Still. This support was broadly consensual in the sense that it was expressed by schools as well as colleges, and it was shared by different staff within institutions, although senior management tended to be the most supportive.

However in two respects it was not consensual: there was much less support for some of the specific changes introduced by the reform than for its general aims; and many colleges felt that the reform responded to the needs of schools more than of colleges. These findings endorse our analysis of a flexible unified system. The *aims* of a flexible unified system can easily attract general support: there is little occasion for conflict over the aims and purposes of a system which, almost by definition, allows all purposes to be achieved. However the *means* of creating this system - the common design rules - are more constraining than in other types of system, and they are the object of conflict.

2. Does the reform increase flexibility? The pace of implementation in colleges was slow and any verdict based on the second year of the reform must be tentative. The overall impact was modest. The main benefit for flexibility was in the ability to provide courses or units at the most appropriate level for incoming students, and especially for disadvantaged students and those with learning difficulties. There were, in other words, more flexible entry points. However a potential problem in designing flexible pathways concerned the progression steps between the five levels of Higher Still: if these steps were set at an appropriate height for some students they would not be appropriate for others. This problem is potentially soluble by taking advantage of the modular nature of Higher Still which makes it possible to fine-tune provision by mixing levels and varying the volume of study.

Colleges endorsed Higher Still's aim to promote parity of esteem for vocational and academic subjects, but there was little evidence of impact on curriculum choice or on the propensity to choose vocational subjects. Elsewhere we have contrasted the 'intrinsic logic' of modularisation with the 'institutional logic' of the context within which it is introduced (Raffe, Croxford & Howieson, 1994). The intrinsic logic of Higher Still provides more opportunities for students to mix academic and vocational subjects and for high achievers to increase their vocational focus. However whether or not they respond to these opportunities will depend on the wider institutional logic – in this case, the relative status of academic and vocational subjects, institutional policies, the power relations within the system, and the preferences of universities and employers in selecting applicants.

A reform which aims to increase some aspects of flexibility, such as flexibility of pathways, may undermine others, such as flexibility of delivery. Some colleges found that the design rules of the unified system, in particular its assessment requirements, could make it harder to offer flexible provision. They were slow to implement Higher Still in areas of flexible delivery such as evening classes and open and distance learning. However, several colleges had devised solutions to problems raised by Higher Still, and colleges also reported aspects of flexibility of delivery which had increased as a result of the reform.

3. What are the implications of changes in assessment? There was a tension between the unified design rules for assessment and flexible delivery. Colleges also feared that the increased emphasis on external assessment might discourage adults and 'less traditional' learners.

Assessment was the most controversial issue in colleges - if not as controversial as in schools. Earlier, we suggested that the burden of assessment in Higher Still reflected its nature as a flexible unified system. However this burden was made heavier by an educational agenda which emphasised 'standards' and a lack of trust in the standards represented by qualifications in general and internally-assessed qualifications such as NC modules in

particular. Trust may be a precondition of a system of flexible educational pathways which does not impose excessive burdens of assessment and certification.

4. Who is 'empowered' in a flexible unified system? Colleges' implementation of the reform was influenced by relatively short-term practical constraints such as the availability of Higher Still provision, the availability of materials, and staffing. It may be too early to determine the extent to which the reform empowered institutions to pursue their distinctive missions and goals. In the view of colleges, the new provision catered more effectively for particular categories of students, such as disadvantaged students and those with learning difficulties, by offering more differentiated entry points at appropriate levels. However this did not necessarily empower students as clients or consumers more than in the previous system. Greater empowerment would entail, at least, more student input into colleges' planning of provision, greater responsiveness to student demand, and/or a wider range of options from which students could choose as consumers. There was little evidence that end-users directly influenced the implementation of the reform – although employers and (more particularly) higher education were seen to have a powerful future influence through their role in determining the market value of different types of provision. Employer influence was relatively slight and the reform had made little impact on tailored provision for employers. However government policies and priorities were also seen to be influential, reminding us that flexibility may work to increase central power rather than devolve it.

WIDER IMPLICATIONS

The experience of Higher Still will have lessons for flexibility of vocational education elsewhere, although at this stage these remain tentative. We provisionally draw five lessons. First, flexibility is multidimensional, and the different types of flexibility may be in tension. We have identified a tension between flexibility of delivery and flexibility of pathways – despite the fact that both are at the same (process) level of Nijhof and Streumer's (1994) framework. Second, the concept of flexibility raises the question: flexibility for whom? More flexible arrangements may redistribute power and control in education, although in the Scottish case it is too early to determine the main beneficiaries. Third, the combination of policies for flexibility with the general trend towards the 'unification' of post-compulsory education and training systems creates specific issues, both for the design of a flexible system and for the process of gaining support for it. Fourth, a system with flexible pathways must be founded on a high level of trust and confidence in the standards achieved across the system, if its flexibility is not to be weighed down by an excessive burden of assessment. Finally, the flexibility inherent in the formal system – its intrinsic logic – may not be reflected in the choices and experiences of students, if these are determined by the stronger constraints of the institutional logic.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

REFERENCES

Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, Association of Scottish Colleges and Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools (ADES/ASC/HMI) (2001) *National Investigation into the Experience of Higher Still Assessment in Schools and Colleges*. Edinburgh: HMI.

Geerligs, J. (1999) *Design of Responsive Vocational Education and Training: A Reconstruction of a Systems Change in Agricultural Education*. Delft: Eburon.

Howieson, C. (1992) *Modular Approaches to Initial Vocational Education and Training: The Scottish Experience. A Report for the PETRA Research Programme 1991-93*. Centre for Educational Sociology, University of Edinburgh.

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), 5-35.

Lasonen, J. and Young, M. (Eds) (1998) *Strategies for Achieving Parity of Esteem in European Upper-Secondary Education*. Institute for Educational Research, University of Jyväskylä.

Nijhof, W. and Streumer, J. (1994) Flexibility in vocational education and training: an introduction. In W. Nijhof and J. Streumer (Eds), *Flexibility in training and vocational education*. Utrecht: Lemma.

Nijhof, W., Kieft, M. and Woerkom, M. van (1999) *Flexibility, transferability and mobility: Mapping the field: Definitions and depositions*. Enschede: University of Twente.

Raffe, D, (1994) The new flexibility in vocational education. In W. Nijhof and J. Streumer (Eds) *Flexibility in training and vocational education*. Utrecht: Lemma.

Raffe, D. (1997) Higher Still in European perspective. *Scottish Educational Review, 29*, (2), 121-133.

Raffe, D. and Howieson, C. (1998) The Higher Still policy process. *Scottish Affairs, 24*, 90-108.

Raffe, D., Croxford, L. and Howieson, C. (1994) The third face of modules: Gendered patterns of participation and progression in Scottish vocational education. *British Journal of Education and Work, 7,* (3), 87-104.

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), 169-187.

Raffe D., Howieson, C. and Tinklin, T. (2001) The Scottish educational crisis of 2000: an analysis of the policy process of unification. *IUS Working Paper 2*. Centre for Educational Sociology, University of Edinburgh.

Scottish Executive (2001) *Scottish School Leavers and their Qualifications*. www.scotland.gov.uk/stats/bulletins/00080-02.asp. Downloaded 5.6.01.

Scottish Further Education Unit and Higher Still Development Unit (SFEU/HSDU) (2000) *Higher Still in Practice Survey Report: The first year of the new National Qualifications in FE*. Stirling: SFEU.

Scottish Office (1994) *Higher Still: Opportunity for All*. Edinburgh.

Scottish Office Education Department (SOED) (1992) *Upper Secondary Education in Scotland (Howie Report)*. Edinburgh: HMSO.

Young, M., Howieson, C., Raffe, D. and Spours, K. (1997) Unifying academic and vocational learning and the idea of a learning society. *Journal of Education Policy, 12*, (6), 527-537.