**ESRC Research Project on *The Introduction of a Unified System***

# Working Paper 6

# PATTERNS OF PRESENTATIONS AND ACHIEVEMENTS IN THE FIRST YEAR OF HIGHER STILL

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

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## INTRODUCTION

The Higher Still Reforms of post-16 education in Scotland were designed to replace all upper secondary school and non-advanced provision in further education (FE) colleges. Based on seven levels of study, they are founded on principles of inclusiveness and flexibility and aim to improve opportunities for access and progression. The levels (Access 1, 2 and 3, Intermediate 1, Intermediate 2, Higher and Advanced Higher) are designed to cater for all students, from students with severe learning difficulties to intending university entrants. To aid progression and promote parity of esteem, the levels share common design principles, based on units, courses and group awards, common assessment and certification arrangements, common principles of curriculum design and cross-cutting elements such as core skills. In addition, Higher Still aims to incorporate academic and vocational study in a single design framework, promoting parity of esteem between the two. Students can enter and exit at any point, and volume, level, content and duration of study are unrestricted. In practice, of course, pathways are shaped and determined by what is offered by institutions, by the way in which options are packaged and by the requirements of end-users such as employers and higher education institutions. The Higher Still reforms are described further in Working Papers 2 and 3 (Raffe *et al*, 2001; Howieson *et al*, 2001).

The IUS research project aims to analyse the model of a 'unified system' of post-16 education and training introduced by the Higher Still Reforms. It also aims to analyse the policy process of developing and implementing a unified system, and to examine the role of institutions (schools and colleges) in shaping the reform. The project builds on earlier research which studied the development phases of Higher Still and compared them with developments elsewhere in Britain and in other European countries (Raffe *et al*, 1998; Spours *et al*, 2000). The research methods include analyses of Scottish Qualifications Authority

(SQA) data on enrolments in the first three years of Higher Still, surveys of schools and colleges, case studies in four schools and two colleges and interviews with key informants. This paper presents the findings from the first stage analysis of SQA data, examining patterns of uptake and achievements in the first year of Higher Still. In due course, data from the second and third years will also be analysed, allowing an investigation of progression and trends over time.

The new qualifications were phased in alongside existing provision over a number of years, beginning with Highers and some Access and Intermediate-level units and courses in the first year (1999-2000). Advanced Higher units were available, but not full courses. This partial coverage means that it is too soon to draw firm conclusions from the analysis, particularly on the uptake of levels below Higher and on the impact on S6. However, the findings offer a baseline and a possible indication of emerging trends and issues, which will be explored further through analysis of subsequent years' data.

The Higher Still Reforms are designed to promote accessibility, progression and parity of esteem. Analysis of SQA data allows an investigation of whether, in fact, inequalities and status differentials are persisting or whether indeed new ones are emerging within this theoretically open and flexible system. Specifically, the paper addresses the following questions.

- What are the patterns of presentation in the first year of Higher Still? To what extent are students mixing levels? Which students are taking which levels?
- Is Higher Still, by providing opportunities for study at appropriate levels for all students, increasing levels of attainment, especially among students with lower prior attainment?
- Has Higher Still improved parity of esteem between academic and vocational subjects?
- Since the lower levels of Higher Still equate to Standard Grade, how are schools using the new qualifications with students in S3 and S4?
- How are special schools using Higher Still?
- Do schools vary in their use of Higher Still? What factors affect variation? What are the differences between schools and FE colleges?

## Data

Data were provided by the SQA on students attempting National Qualifications in academic year 1999-2000 in schools and FE colleges. All students who attempted at least one unit were included in the dataset. For each student, data were provided on presentations, attainment, gender, age, date of birth, study centre and, where available, prior attainment.

For school students, school stage was calculated from date of birth and year of Standard Grade records. Table 1a shows that it was possible to classify over 96% of the cohort in this way. Table 1b shows the numbers of FE students by age group.

**Table 1a School students attempting National Qualifications in 1999-2000**

| Stage | No of students |
|---|---|
| S3 or S4 | 77,349 |
| S5 | 44,556 |
| S6 | 27,048 |
| unclassified | 5,513 |
| **Total** | **154,466** |

**Table 1b FE students attempting National Qualifications in 1999-2000**

| Age group | No of students |
|---|---|
| <15 | 251 |
| 15-17 | 24,613 |
| 18-20 | 30,468 |
| 21+ | 74,774 |
| unclassified | 30 |
| **Total** | **130,136** |

Data on school characteristics were added to the school students' dataset, including type of school (independent, local authority, special), size, average S4 attainment and average socio-economic status of parents (derived from the Scottish School Leavers Survey). Of the school students, 1% were attending special schools (1,599 students).

## Categorisations Used

### Prior attainment

S5, S6 and FE students are categorised by their average Standard Grade attainment. Those students for whom data on prior attainment were available and who had passed five or more Standard Grades were grouped into Credit, General or Foundation levels, based on average performance at Standard Grade.

### Full-time FE

Those FE students presenting 12 or more units/external assessments were classified as full-time students. Analyses below refer to full-time FE students only.

## Patterns of Presentation in the First Year of Higher Still

In order to assess whether average volume of study for National Qualifications varied by level of prior attainment, a volume measure was calculated in which each unit and each external assessment presented counted as one. Thus a student attempting one course (three units plus an external assessment) would have a volume measure of four and a student attempting five separate units, would have a volume measure of five. The volume measure included old Highers (counting as 4), unlevelled units (former National Certificate (NC)

modules, one unit) and, for school students, Certificate of Sixth Year Studies (CSYS, counting as 4). Clusters at Access level counted as three.

## S5 students and full-time FE students aged 15-17

To provide a comparison between school and FE, S5 students were compared with full-time FE students aged 15-17 for whom prior attainment was available (i.e. 78%) (Tables 2a, b and c). Credit level students in schools tended to be taking about 20 units, mostly full courses at Higher level (i.e. the traditional five Highers). There was little variation in volume within this group. General level students in schools had a lower average volume (about 17) and Foundation students lower still (just under 12). For these latter two groups there was much more variation, with some students taking very few units and some taking over 20. FE students tended to be taking a similar average volume (about 16), across levels of prior attainment.

Table 2b shows that school students were less likely to be taking full courses, the lower their average prior attainment and that FE students were generally quite unlikely to be taking full courses. From the project's questionnaire survey of schools and colleges we know that colleges were more likely to have adapted existing NC programmes, using new National Qualification units to replace parts of programmes, than to have replaced whole programmes with the new qualifications. These findings reflect this. Only 4% of full-time FE students were taking Scottish Group Awards (SGAs) (mostly at Intermediate 2 level) and 5% were taking NC group awards (unlevelled) (not shown in tables).

**Table 2a Average volume by average Standard Grade attainment**

| Average SG attainment | **Local authority 'mainstream' school S5 students** (N=40195) | **Independent school S5 students** (N=2373) | **FE students, 15-17 years old, full time** (N=5883) |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Credit* | 19.69 | 19.71 | 15.89 |
| **General** | 16.88 | 17.12 | 16.69 |
| **Foundation** | 11.75 | -* | 16.72 |

* N = 4

**Table 2b Percentage of presentations that were full courses**

| Average SG attainment | **Local authority 'mainstream' school S5 students** (N=40195) | **Independent school S5 students** (N=2373) | **FE students, 15-17 years old, full time** (N=5883) |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Credit* | 91 | 96 | 25 |
| **General** | 60 | 82 | 6.5 |
| **Foundation** | 18 | -* | 2.3 |

* N = 4

**Table 2c Mixing of levels: percentage of presentations at different levels by prior attainment (S5 students and FT FE students aged 15-17 only)**

| Average SG attainment | | % Higher | % Int 2 | % Int 1 | % Access | % unlevelled | N |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | LA | 90 | 6 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 12192 |
| **Credit** | Indep | 97 | 2 | <1 | <1 | 1 | 1856 |
| | FE | 46 | 24 | 7 | 1 | 23 | 200 |
| | LA | 47 | 33 | 12 | 1 | 7 | 23098 |
| **General** | Indep | 73 | 23 | 2 | <1 | 2 | 517 |
| | FE | 26 | 31 | 10 | 1 | 31 | 4099 |
| **Foundation** | LA | 5 | 31 | 42 | 3 | 18 | 4905 |
| | FE | 15 | 32 | 13 | 3 | 37 | 1584 |

Aggregate figures in table 2c suggest that there was more mixing of levels in FE than in schools. In order to establish whether this is indeed the case, future analyses will have to take account of individual measures of mixing as well as aggregate figures. However, in the meantime these aggregate figures suggest that Credit level students in FE were more likely to be studying at Intermediate 2 and unlevelled as well as Higher level; studying at Intermediate 2 indicates lateral progression, since Credit level equates to Intermediate 2. General level students in schools tended to take Higher and Intermediate 2 levels; General level students at independent schools were more likely to be taking Higher courses than local authority school students. Foundation level students in schools were most likely to be studying Intermediate 1 in schools, with some Intermediate 2 and unlevelled; FE students with average Foundation grades were much less likely than similar school students to study at Intermediate 1, the next 'vertical' progression step. For all levels of SG attainment FE students were most likely to take unlevelled National Qualifications, which would usually consist of former NC units. It should be re-iterated here that not all levels were fully available at this stage, in particular, the Intermediate levels were only partially implemented. For this reason, subsequent years' data will provide a more complete picture of mixing of levels by prior attainment.

## S6 students

Average volume tended to be lower for students in S6 than in S5 (Table 3). As in S5, LA students (but not independent school students) with higher prior attainment were more likely to be studying full courses. Credit level students were taking a mixture of Highers and CSYS. A higher proportion of General level students' study was at Higher level in S6 than in S5, suggesting a slower build-up to Highers, re-takes or a greater spread over two years. It should be noted that, as this was the first year of Higher Still, none of the S6 students had taken National Qualifications in S5. We will be able to study the impact of National Qualifications on progression from S5 to S6 when we have data for years 2 and 3. As in S5, General level students were more likely to be taking Highers in independent schools than in local authority schools. Most of the independent schools who responded to our survey stated that they were offering a mixture of SQA, A and AS level qualifications. Some independent school students would also have been taking A levels which are not represented in our dataset, alongside SQA qualifications, so average volume for this group is likely to be an under-representation. (Independent school students who took no SQA qualifications are not included in our data).

**Table 3 Presentations in S6: average volume, percentage of presentations that were courses and percentage of presentations at different levels by prior attainment**

| | | Total volume | % of presentns that were courses | % Higher | % CSYS/ Adv Higher | % Int 2 | % Int 1 | % Access | % unlev-elled | N |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Credit** | LA | 13.1 | 86 | 59 | 28 | 6 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 9407 |
| | Ind | 11.8 | 88 | 55 | 38 | 3 | 1 | <1 | 3 | 1488 |
| **General** | LA | 12.5 | 66 | 69 | 4 | 16 | 6 | 1 | 5 | 13549 |
| | Ind | 13.4 | 87 | 83 | 7 | 7 | <1 | <1 | 2 | 367 |
| **Foundn** | LA | 7.6 | 23 | 25 | <1 | 37 | 24 | 3 | 12 | 1182 |

## FE students aged 18 and over

Full-time FE students aged 18 and over had a similar average volume to those aged 15-17 (about 16 units) (Table 4a). As for younger students, average volume was not particularly related to prior Standard Grade attainment. Information on Standard Grade attainment was only available for very small numbers of students aged 21 or over and is therefore not used in the tables below. Again, the aggregate figures suggest that there was more mixing of levels in FE than in schools for students of all ages and that levels were not particularly related to prior attainment at Standard Grade.

**Table 4a Presentations in FE, full-time students aged 18+: average volume by prior attainment**

| | **18-20 years** (N=3654) | **21+ years** (N=6180) |
|---|---|---|
| **Credit** | 15.49 | |
| **General** | 16.18 | 16.66 |
| **Foundation** | 16.03 | |

**Table 4b Percentage of presentations at different levels: full-time FE students aged over 18 by prior attainment**

| Age | Prior attainment | % Higher | % Int 2 | % Int 1 | % Access | % unlevelled |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **18-20 years (N= 3654)** | Credit | 40 | 26 | 6 | <1 | 27 |
| | General | 35 | 28 | 8 | 1 | 29 |
| | Foundation | 23 | 31 | 12 | 2 | 31 |
| **21+ years (N=6180)** | n/a | 27 | 34 | 12 | 1 | 26 |

# Gradients Of Attainment

One of the aims of Higher Still was that students should have more opportunities to study at levels appropriate to their abilities. It is reasonable to expect therefore that, as students study at levels more suited to their abilities, their pass rates at those levels will improve. Higher Still aimed in particular to encourage students with lower prior attainment to study at more appropriate levels, so we might expect to see a particular increase in attainment of these students and a flattening of the gradient of attainment across students with different levels of

prior attainment. However, Figure 1 shows that, in the first year, pass rates were related to prior attainment, with those with better Standard Grades tending to do better at National Qualifications in 1999-2000. Pass rates for units that were not part of courses were generally better in FE (Foundation-Credit: 61%-80%) than in schools (43%-69%) and the pass rate for courses was generally better in schools (43%-89%; FE: 35%-51% Foundation and General only), although numbers taking courses were fairly low in FE overall. Similar patterns were evident for older FE students. A likely reason why pass-rates for units were higher in FE than in schools is that 'free-standing' units often form part of FE programmes; there is therefore more incentive for FE students to pass them than for school students taking extra units that are not part of courses. Pass rates for Credit level school students taking courses was particularly high at 89%. Independent school students had similar pass rates to local authority school students, except for Credit students who did even better at their courses, passing 94%.

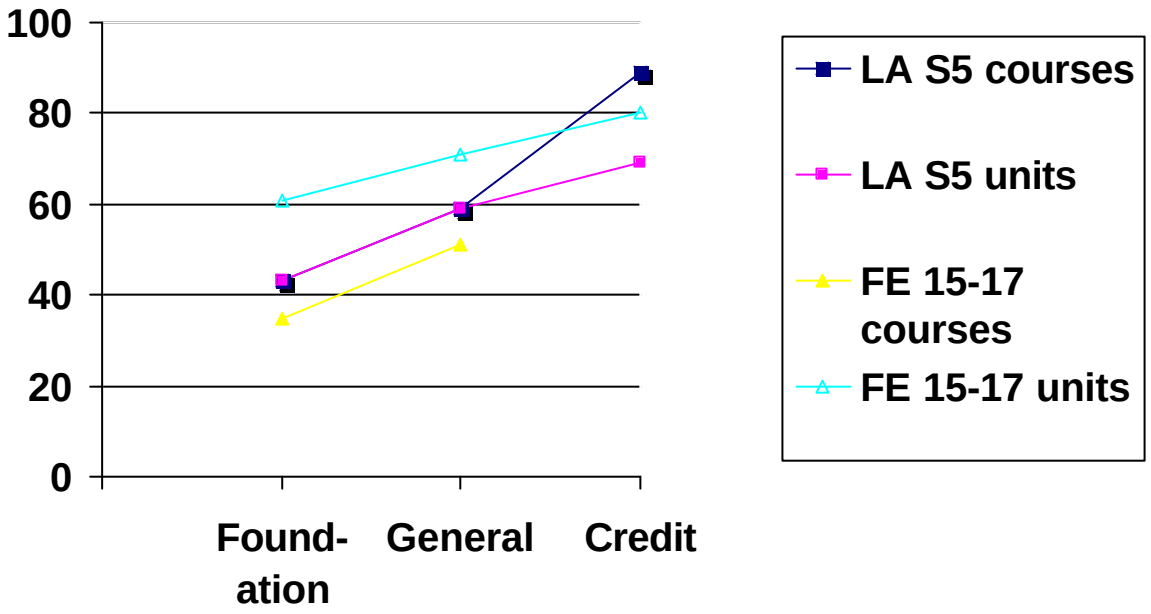


**Figure 1** Pass rates for courses and units that are not part of courses by prior attainment, FT FE aged 15-17 and S5 students at local authority schools

Thus, despite the wider range of opportunities provided by Higher Still, students with lower Standard Grade attainments performed less well at their chosen National Qualification levels than students with higher Standard Grade attainments: there was still a gradient of National Qualifications attainment across Standard Grade levels. There are at least two possible explanations for this. The first is that young people were continuing to take S5 courses or units at too high a level relative to their Standard Grade attainments – and we must remember that our data cover only the first year of Higher Still when relatively few Intermediate courses and units were yet available. The second explanation is that the progression 'steps' were too high, at least for these young people. For example, even if young people with (say) General passes at Standard Grade were now taking Intermediate 2 courses rather than Higher, they were still finding the step up from General (notionally equivalent to Intermediate 1) to Intermediate 2 too demanding.

One way to test these two explanations is to examine pass rates among students taking an equivalent number of steps up the National Qualifications ladder. Table 5 shows the pass rates in courses and units respectively for students in different stages and institutions. Tables 5a to 5d, which describe S5 students, are the most relevant because for these students the step from Standard Grade to National Qualifications represents a single year of study: for all of the S6 students and for many of the FE students this may have taken more than one year. If the progression steps were all of equal height we might expect to find the same pass rate in the cells of the diagonal from top left to bottom right of each table. That is, the respective steps up from Credit to Higher, from General to Intermediate 2 and from Foundation to Intermediate 1 would all be equally demanding, and this would be reflected in similar pass rates. However, in Tables 5a and 5c the pass rates for courses among S5 students show no such equality: Credit students are much more likely to succeed at Higher than are Foundation students at Intermediate 1, with the step from General to Intermediate 2 somewhere in between.

**Table 5 Pass Rates**

**Table 5a S5 LA schools, courses only**

| | Higher | Int 2 | Int 1 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Credit | .88 | .94 | .89 |
| General | .51 | .67 | .80 |
| Foundation | .21 | .40 | .49 |

**Table 5b S5 LA schools, units* only**

| | Higher | Int 2 | Int 1 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Credit | .45 | .75 | .85 |
| General | .41 | .61 | .75 |
| Foundation | .41 | .39 | .50 |

**Table 5c S5 Indt. schools, courses only**

| | Higher | Int 2 | Int 1 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Credit | .93 | .97 | -* |
| General | .52 | .70 | - |
| Foundation | - | - | - |

*Ns too small

**Table 5d S5 Indt. schools, units* only**

| | Higher | Int 2 | Int 1 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Credit | .36 | .75 | .98** |
| General | .37 | .55 | .96** |
| Foundation | - | - | - |

** N<100

**Table 5e FE FT 15-17, courses only**

| | Higher | Int 2 | Int 1 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Credit | .72** | - | - |
| General | .40 | .59 | - |
| Foundation | - | .37** | - |

**Table 5f FE FT 15-17, units* only**

| | Higher | Int 2 | Int 1 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Credit | .82 | .86 | .84 |
| General | .67 | .73 | .75 |
| Foundation | .58 | .63 | .67 |

**Table 5g FE FT 18-20, courses only**

| | Higher | Int 2 | Int 1 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Credit | - | - | - |
| General | .45 | .60 | - |
| Foundation | - | - | - |

**Table 5h FE FT 18-20, units* only**

| | Higher | Int 2 | Int 1 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Credit | .86 | .89 | .91 |
| General | .73 | .78 | .78 |
| Foundation | .58 | .64 | .67 |

**Table 5i S6 LA schools, courses only**

| | Higher | Int 2 | Int 1 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Credit | .90 | .89 | .94 |
| General | .57 | .68 | .83 |
| Foundation | .15 | .42 | .58 |

**Table 5j S6 LA schools, units* only**

| | Higher | Int 2 | Int 1 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Credit | .41 | .65 | .84 |
| General | .33 | .60 | .79 |
| Foundation | .41 | .54 | .73 |

* In all tables, 'units' refers to units that are not part of courses.

Even allowing for the problems of aggregation – our data show attainments on average rather than by subject – this provides strong evidence that the gradient of National Qualifications attainment across Standard Grade levels is not merely a result of students attempting National Qualifications at too high a level. On the evidence of Table 5, even when lower-attaining young people progressed at the 'right' level the steps were still too high. These data do not tell us how or why this was the case. One view, expressed by some teachers in our case study schools, is that the young people concerned had reached their 'natural' level. Another is that National Qualifications were not being delivered in a way to get the best from them. Analyses of future cohorts, when schools have had more experience of providing National Qualifications, may cast light on this. However the table also suggests that the structure of the curriculum and the way it is assessed may also be part of the story. Among school S5 students, pass rates in stand-alone units were not highest among those with the highest Standard Grade attainment (Tables 5b, 5d). Of course, as we have already pointed out, students had varying incentives to achieve stand-alone units, and overall attainment levels were lower than for courses. But among FE students, who may had more incentive to pass their units, unit pass rates varied less along the diagonal of Table 5f than the variation in course pass rates in S5, seen in Table 5a. The progression steps were less unequal. And there was a general tendency for FE pass rates to be less determined by prior attainment – although we need to take account of variations in the length of time between Standard Grade and taking National Qualifications.

## The Academic-Vocational Divide

One of the aims of Higher Still is to promote parity of esteem between academic and vocational subjects. In order to find out whether this was happening, an analysis was undertaken looking at courses taken by school students. For this analysis, courses were grouped into three categories: academic, vocational and 'other' (Table 6). Academic subjects included those that are seen as traditional school subjects plus some newer subjects, such as psychology, which are not obviously vocationally-oriented. Vocational subjects had a more obvious link with an occupational field. Any classification of academic and vocational subjects is arbitrary; to the extent that we have misrepresented the distinction in the analyses the effect is likely to be to under-estimate the relationship between prior attainment and taking academic/vocational subjects.

**Table 6 Categorisation of subjects**

| Academic | | Vocational | | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| English | Geology | Administration | Hospitality | Physical Education |
| Maths | Classical Studies | Accountancy and Finance | Travel & Tourism | Religious and Moral |
| Biology | Greek | Business Management | Secretarial | Art and Design |
| Chemistry | Gaelic | Computing | Care | Drama |
| Physics | Psychology | Craft & Design | Engineering | Music |
| Geography | Sociology | Graphic Communication | Craft Skills Management Info. Systems | Personal and Social Education |
| History | Philosophy | Woodwork | | |
| Modern Languages | Media Studies | Technology | | |
| Modern Studies | | Info. Systems | | |
| Human Biology | | Home Economics | | |
| Economics | | | | |
| Latin | | | | |
| Biotechnology | | | | |

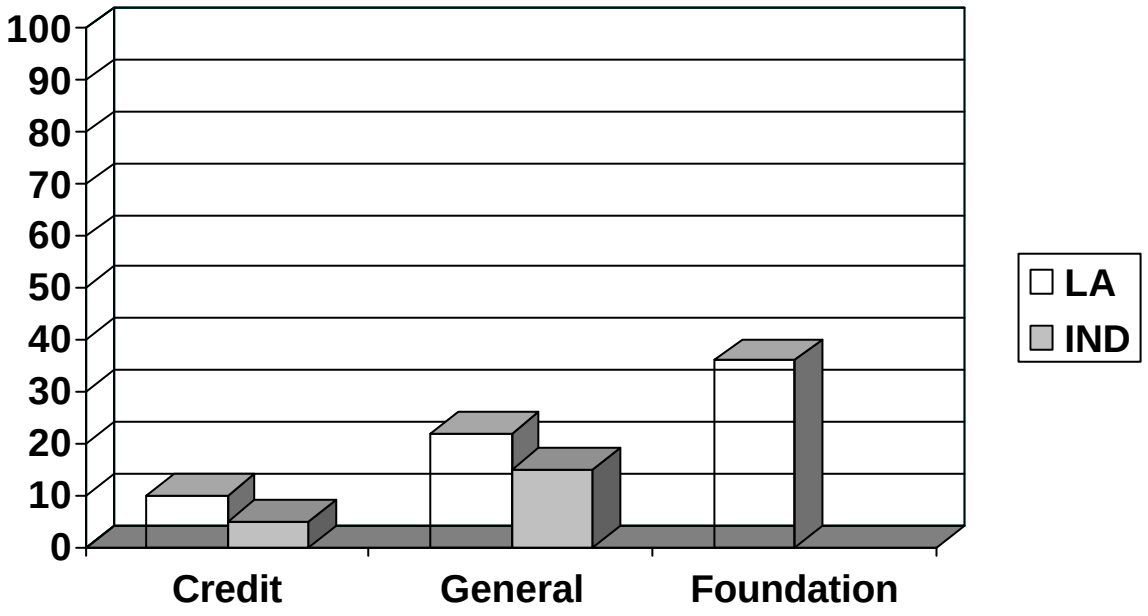


**Figure 2** Percentage of courses that were vocational by prior attainment (S5 school students only)

The chart in Figure 2 shows evidence of a continuing academic-vocational divide, with lower attaining students more likely to be taking vocational subjects and students at local authority schools more likely to be taking vocational subjects than those at independent schools. Over 2700 different units (that were not being taken as part of courses) were being taken by students in FE, making it difficult to categorise their study into academic and vocational. However, 150 units accounted for about half of all presentations (47.9%). These could be classified into computer-related, mathematical, care-related (including nursing and childcare),

counselling, engineering-related, health and beauty, sciences, modern languages, food-related and administration, suggesting a balance towards vocational subjects, as one would expect.

## Use of Higher Still in S3 and S4

Higher Still was not originally designed for use in S3 and S4, but since the levels overlap with Standard Grade, it is interesting to explore the extent and nature of use of Higher Still in S3 and S4. (Equivalencies are generally seen as: Credit = Intermediate 2, General = Intermediate 1, Foundation = Access 3). Our dataset includes only those students who attempted at least one National Qualification unit in 1999-2000, and therefore does not cover all S3/S4 students, although with 77,000 S3/S4 students it probably includes most S4 students and a significant minority of S3 students. Most of these students were doing one or two National Qualifications units, rather than full courses. Seventy percent were doing unlevelled units, 43% Access 3 and 20% Intermediate 1. The majority of the unlevelled units were in religious or social subjects, such as world of values, issues of belief, living in a plural society or moral issues in technology. Access 3 units tended to be work experience. The Intermediate 1 subjects were very mixed.

These findings suggest very limited use of Higher Still in S3/S4 in this first year. The only aspect which is really new are the Intermediate 1 units and one would anticipate that this type of use will increase as more of these units and courses become available in subsequent years. About one-third of the schools responding to our survey indicated, in the second year of Higher Still, that they were using new National Qualifications instead of Standard Grade for some of their S3/S4 pupils, and a similar number were using them to replace NC modules (Tinklin *et al*, 2002). Since then at least one school has completely converted to new National Qualifications in S3/S4 and there are suggestions that provision in S3/S4 is diversifying across the country. This is an unintended consequence of Higher Still which could have negative effects on access and progression at these stages for students wishing to transfer between schools.

## Use of Higher Still in Special Schools

Higher Still is designed to include students of all ability levels within a national system of qualifications, providing recognition for previously uncertificated learning. Our survey suggested an enthusiastic response from the special school sector in year 2 and the SQA data suggest that special schools had already embraced Higher Still in the first year of implementation. On average special school students were taking 5 units in S3/S4, 6 in S5 and 5 in S6. There was a wide variation in the number of units being taken by individual students. Units were largely at Access levels 2 and 3 (Table 7), with about one-fifth unlevelled. The analysis is not repeated for S6 since there were only 122 students. Table 7 appears to hint at the possibility of progression, with more students in S5 than S3/S4 studying at Access 3 and Intermediate 1 levels. Of course, these students had not themselves progressed within Higher Still as these data cover only the first year of implementation. In theory, progression is possible between all levels of Higher Still. However, Access level does not include external assessments and this may present an additional barrier to students progressing from Access 3 to Intermediate 1. A thorough analysis of progression will be possible using this and subsequent years' data.

**Table 7 Percentage of presentations at different levels in special schools**

| | S3/S4 (N=1253) | S5 (N=224) |
|---|---|---|
| Access 1 | < 1 | < 1 |
| Access 2 | 47 | 27 |
| Access 3 | 23 | 33 |
| Intermediate 1 | 7 | 14 |
| Intermediate 2 | 2 | 7 |
| Higher | < 1 | 3 |
| Unlevelled | 20 | 15 |

## Institutional Variation

The analyses reported above distinguish between local authority schools, independent schools and FE colleges. In addition, to explore further whether schools varied in their use of Higher Still, we repeated the analyses reported in this paper to distinguish categories of schools defined by:

- average school attainment level, based on Standard Grade performance (low, medium and high, local authority schools only);
- approach to implementation (rapid implementers, innovators, steady implementers; grouping derived from the first schools' survey, see Working Paper 4 for more information: Tinklin *et al* (2002));
- size of S5 roll (small <=94, medium 95-198, large 199+).

The findings did not vary greatly between schools with different average attainment levels nor between those with different approaches to implementation. School size affected volume of study for General students, with volume being slightly greater at medium and large schools (volume, local authority schools only: small 16.5, medium 17.9, large 18.5). It is likely that this is because larger schools have greater capacity to offer more units, courses and levels appropriate to these students.

As is evident from the findings reported above, the greatest differences lay between independent and local authority schools, with students generally doing less vocational study and General level students taking more Highers at independent schools. Indeed our survey indicated less enthusiasm from the independent sector for any of the aims related to bringing academic and vocational study together in a unified system.

With regard to differences between schools and FE colleges, the most striking difference is that provision and outcomes were less strongly related to prior attainment in FE than in schools. There was more mixing of levels for all students, pass rates for units were generally better and there was more uniformity in pass rates across levels in FE. This suggests that while schools seemed constrained by students' prior performance and were using the levels of Higher Still primarily for vertical progression, FE colleges were being more flexible in their use of Higher Still, selecting units from different levels as appropriate to amend or adapt existing programmes and using the levels of Higher Still more like a 'climbing frame', allowing lateral as well as vertical progression. This is partly because FE offers a broader range of 'new' subjects post-16, whereas progression in schools is more likely to be in

subjects that students have already studied. It also reflects, however, the different nature of the two types of institution. FE colleges serve a diverse student population from 15 years upwards and are more concerned with flexibility of delivery, meeting market demands and providing vocational study, including work-based provision, while schools are concerned with the more standardised general education of children from 12-18, focusing on the attainment of Standard Grades at 16 and (now) the new National Qualifications thereafter.

## Conclusions

Given that Higher Still was only partially implemented in the year on which this analysis was based, it is clearly too soon to draw firm conclusions in answer to many of the questions posed by the paper. The analysis has provided a base-line on which analysis of subsequent years' data will be built and has clarified the questions that still need to be addressed. A key question for this future analysis will be the extent to which Higher Still raises the attainment of low and middle attainers by providing opportunities for them to study at more appropriate levels. The gradient of attainment evident in the first year was somewhat disturbing and it is to be hoped that this will at least become shallower as more Intermediate level courses and units become available. Analysis of subsequent years' data will also enable us to examine progression issues in some detail. Among the issues of interest will be the extent to which low and middle attainers progress through the levels; whether schools continue to focus on vertical progression and FE continues to promote the notion of a 'climbing frame'; and the extent to which Intermediate 2 is used to enable General level students to progress to Higher in S6.

One unexpected consequence of the Higher Still reforms is the apparent growing diversity of provision in S3 and S4, with some schools completely replacing their Standard Grades with Higher Still and others using it only minimally. The SQA data showed fairly limited use in S3 and S4 in the first year, while our case studies and survey data suggested growing diversity in the second year. It will be interesting to track these changes in the 2nd and 3rd years of implementation. Depending on the extent of diversity, this development could act against the aims of Higher Still, reducing access and progression possibilities for students moving between schools.

Special schools seem to have embraced Higher Still right from the beginning and it will be interesting to see how their use of it develops in subsequent years. Of particular interest will be progression between Access and Intermediate levels, given the extra 'hurdle' of external assessment introduced at Intermediate level.

There was no evidence in the first year that Higher Still had achieved parity of esteem between academic and vocational subjects within schools. Vocational subjects were still the preserve of low attainers. This will be examined further in future analysis. Increasing the number of high attaining students taking vocational subjects and generally closing the gap between high and low attainers in this respect would indicate increasing parity in subsequent years.

The first year's data suggested that Higher Still had not solved the problem of S6 being taken less seriously by high attaining students. We will be able to monitor whether this changes, as more Advanced Highers come on stream in subsequent years. However, real changes in this

situation will only come about when higher education institutions include Advanced Highers in their entrance requirements.

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