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POST-16 CURRICULUM AND QUALIFICATIONS REFORM IN ENGLAND AND SCOTLAND: LESSONS FROM HOME INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS

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ABSTRACT

In this article we compare *Curriculum 2000* and *Higher Still*, recent reforms of post-16 education in England (and also Wales and Northern Ireland) and Scotland respectively. We draw on current and earlier research on the unification of academic and vocational learning in England, Scotland and other European countries in order to suggest areas for mutual learning to inform future curriculum and qualifications reform north and south of the Border. The article describes the two reforms and relates them to the different institutional and policy contexts of England and Scotland. We then identify common features of the two reforms. Both *Curriculum 2000* and *Higher Still* are unifying reforms, based on modularity; both aim to raise levels of participation, attainment and progression; both desire to promote key/core skills and to raise the status of vocational education. Both have been criticised for lacking a clear vision, for implementation problems and for complexity; both have encountered exams crises. However we also highlight differences between the two reforms. For example, *Curriculum 2000* has focused exclusively on advanced level and on 16-19s while *Higher Still* introduces a progression framework covering all levels up to higher education and all ages beyond 16 (and possibly 14). We point to five areas for potential mutual learning - the conduct of the policy process, progression, assessment, vocational education and key/core skills. We conclude by speculating on the possibility of convergence or divergence of the English and Scottish upper secondary education systems as both continue to evolve and to consider new phases of reform.

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'HOME INTERNATIONAL' COMPARISONS

This paper compares *Higher Still* and *Curriculum 2000*, recent reforms of post-16 education in Scotland and England (and also Wales and Northern Ireland) respectively. It draws on current research projects which have been following these reforms, and on earlier research on policy developments in England, Scotland and other European countries.

A comparison of these two reforms demonstrates the value of 'home international' comparisons of the UK's education systems. Such comparisons:

- allow researchers to analyse particular differences among the UK systems that are of interest to researchers and policy analysts;
- are a source of policy learning;
- may contribute to theoretical debates in comparative analysis, especially about the role of the state, the ambiguity of societal boundaries and the interdependence of systems;
- provide information on system differences that is of practical value to students, parents, teachers, employers, policy makers, etc; and
- may be relatively easy to conduct (Raffe *et al.* 1999).

All of these arguments for 'home international' comparisons potentially apply to a comparison of *Higher Still* and *Curriculum 2000*, but the first two provide the main motivation for this paper.

With respect to the first argument, the two reforms represent contrasting strategies for the 'unification' of post-compulsory education and training systems, that is, for the reduction of differences between tracks and the bringing together of academic and vocational learning. *Curriculum 2000's* 'linkages' approach seeks to reduce differences between tracks and to develop links between them; *Higher Still's* 'unified system' seeks to abolish tracks altogether. The distinction we make between these two strategies derives from a conceptual framework developed in our earlier research (Raffe *et al.* 1998, Spours *et al.* 2000). The framework also distinguishes several dimensions of education systems – curriculum, certification, institutions, and so on – in terms of which unification, or progress towards unification, can be measured. When compared in terms of these dimensions the two reforms appear more similar and contrast with other European reforms. Both reforms focus on certification, on mechanisms for governance and regulation and (especially *Higher Still*) on the unification of assessment and of student pathways; both pay less attention to pedagogy, to institutional change and to the work-based route. *Higher Still* can be characterised as a flexible or open model of a unified system, in contrast with the 'grouped' or programme-

based approaches of some continental models (Howieson *et al*. 1998); *Curriculum 2000* lies somewhere between the two. Comparing the two reforms may reveal, not only the effects of their different strategies but also the future for unification approaches in both countries.

With respect to the second argument, 'home international' comparisons are less affected by differences in national contexts than are comparisons with overseas countries and they more easily generate lessons for policy. Although the specific models of *Higher Still* or *Curriculum 2000* are probably not transferable between the UK systems, in this paper we identify more general lessons from their experience. These lessons may inform the future reform processes in both countries, including the Tomlinson Working Group's task to develop proposals for a unified qualifications framework in England.

The next two sections of this paper describe *Curriculum 2000* and *Higher Still* respectively. We then identify their main similarities and differences and, in the final section, we summarise the main conclusions and practical lessons from the comparison.

CURRICULUM 2000

The period from the late 1970s to early 2003 has seen almost constant curriculum and qualifications reform in England as both Conservative and Labour Governments have introduced changes to the education and training system to respond to social, economic and political pressures. The overall movement has been one of system expansion in order to accommodate rising levels of post-16 participation. Throughout the period, the underlying developments and debates have essentially been about whether this expansion was to be based on a more divided system or a more unified one. Historical analysis suggests that the English curriculum and qualifications system is moving in a unified direction, but that the current linkages approach remains a compromise between track-based and unified strategies (Hodgson and Spours 2003).

In this section we use data from the IoE/Nuffield Research Project 'Broadening the Advanced Level Curriculum' (1999-2003) to examine the background to and rationale for the *Curriculum 2000* reforms and to describe the changes that these have made to the advanced level curriculum in England in their first two years of implementation.

In the decade prior to the introduction of the new modular advanced level qualifications, known as *Curriculum 2000* (see below) in September 2000, all secondary school learners in England would be expected to follow the National Curriculum until the statutory school-leaving age of 16 and would then take examinations in a range of eight to ten General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) subjects, normally including mathematics, English, a modern foreign language and science.

Those who gained five or more GCSEs at the higher grades (A*-C) and wanted to remain in full-time post-compulsory education would have the choice of following a two-year programme comprising A Levels (usually three subjects of their choice) or of taking a broad vocational programme of study leading to qualifications such as Advanced General National Vocational Qualifications (AGNVQs) or BTEC National Diplomas. Both types of

programmes potentially allowed for progression to higher education or to the workplace, although the range of courses open to those taking the latter was more limited. Learners with a lower attainment profile (below 5 GCSEs at Grades A*-C) and wanting to continue in full-time education might be allowed to take a broad vocational qualification, but would be unlikely to be able to take a full A Level programme. They might also opt to take a mixed programme of study comprising Intermediate Level GNVQs and GCSE re-sits in the hope of progressing to advanced level study at 17.

The type of learning and assessment that were associated with academic and vocational qualifications was very different. Partly for this reason, very few learners took a combination of academic and vocational awards at advanced level and there was relatively little movement across academic and vocational pathways. Mixed programmes were also rare because it was difficult to combine large qualifications blocks, such as A Levels and GNVQs. Prior to the *Curriculum 2000* reforms, therefore, the post-compulsory education system in England could be characterised as a tracked system.

In this qualifications context, learners in most areas were able to choose whether to remain in a school sixth form or to move to a different type of institution – a sixth form college or a general further education college – to pursue full-time post-compulsory education. Sixth form colleges cater largely for 16-19 year olds and usually offer the widest choice of advanced level subjects, although their vocational offer is often limited. General further education colleges normally offer a very wide range of vocational courses but a more limited number of A Levels. School sixth forms offer both types of courses, but tend to offer fewer vocational courses. Because of these features, the English post-compulsory education system could be described as a 'competitive mixed economy'.

The *Curriculum 2000* reforms had four major underlying aims – broadening study at advanced level; introducing greater consistency of standards between and within different types of qualifications; rationalising the number of subject specifications at advanced level; and improving alignment between general and general vocational qualifications in order to encourage mixing of study and more movement between qualification tracks. These aims might be seen as part of a move towards a more unified post-16 curriculum and qualifications system.

The main aspects of the *Curriculum 2000* reforms are summarised below.

- *The AS and A2* – all A Levels were split into two three-unit blocks – Advanced Subsidiary (AS) and A2. Under these arrangements learners are able to achieve a three-unit AS in the first year of study and to attain a full A Level through completing an A2 in the second year. The AS is set at a lower level than the A2, with the main aim being to encourage learners to take up a broader range of subjects in the first year of study (eg four or five compared to the two or three under the old A Level system). A further aim is to provide a more gradual gradient of progression between GCSE and A Level with the opportunity of gaining a qualification after one year of study.
- *Advanced Vocational Certificates of Education (AVCEs)* – alongside these changes to A Levels, Advanced GNVQs were reformed to align them more closely with the new style

AS and A Levels; to make them more manageable to deliver and to encourage greater consistency of standard within and between general and general vocational qualifications at advanced level. AVCEs were designed into six-unit or three-unit blocks identical in size to A and AS Levels with a common A Level A-E grading scheme and contained a mixture of external and portfolio assessment. All six units in AVCEs, however, are at A Level standard unlike the two level AS/A2 qualification. In addition, learners can take a 12-unit double award AVCE equivalent to two A Levels, as under the old GNVQ system. Key skills, which formed an integral part of the old GNVQ, however, were detached from AVCEs so that they could be certificated separately (see below).

- *Key Skills* – a new Key Skills Qualification was introduced in September 2000 to recognise achievement in the three key skills of Communication, Application of Number and Information Technology. The so-called Wider Key Skills – Problem Solving, Improving Own Learning and Performance and Working With Others – did not form part of this qualification on the grounds that they could not be externally assessed and, instead, they were developed as separate units of achievement. Opportunities for assessing all six key skills were 'signposted' in the new AVCE and AS/A Level qualification specifications. While there was no compulsion for learners to take the new Key Skills Qualification, this was encouraged in all official publicity about the reforms and various incentives were offered, particularly to colleges.
- *Advanced Extension Awards (World Class Tests)* – in addition the QCA was also asked by Ministers to design specifications for Advanced Extension Awards (AEAs) to replace S Level papers and various university admissions tests and to be benchmarked against international standards.
- *An overarching certificate at advanced level* – finally, the Qualifying for Success consultation paper (DfEE/DENI/WO 1997) suggested that there should be work towards the development of 'an overarching certificate' in the longer term.

Throughout their first two years of implementation, the *Curriculum 2000* reforms as a whole have evolved, in part, as the result of school and college responses and in part as the result of two important but unscheduled reviews by David Hargreaves (Chief Executive of QCA) (Hargeaves 2001a, 2001b) and Mike Tomlinson (previous Chief Inspector of Ofsted) (Tomlinson 2002a, 2002b).

The gains and limitations of Curriculum 2000 in its first two years

Accessibility, participation and achievement at advanced level

Data from the IoE/Nuffield Research Project (Hodgson and Spours 2003) and the most recent UCAS/QCA survey (QCA 2002a) suggest that there is no conclusive evidence yet about increased participation in advanced level study as a result of the *Curriculum 2000* reforms. There is, however, stronger evidence that learners have been able to achieve higher grades in the AS/A2 than with the legacy A Levels (JCGQ 2002) because they have had the opportunity to retake modules to improve overall grade achievement.

On the other hand, the AVCE and the Key Skills Qualification have neither been effective in making the advanced level curriculum more accessible nor in raising levels of attainment. Because the AVCE, unlike the AS/A2, was designed at Level 3 throughout, many learners have found it difficult and in 2002, pass rates and grade achievement in AVCEs were considerably lower than those in A Levels (JCGQ 2002). The Key Skills Qualification was also difficult to attain because of its design and assessment regime. Moreover, it was perceived as having little exchange or use value. It was thus broadly rejected by learners and teachers and was unable to play a constructive role in increasing accessibility, participation or achievement at advanced level.

The overall picture of *Curriculum 2000* from an accessibility, participation and achievement perspective, thus far, is therefore very mixed. The one clear success has been the creation of a level between GCSE and the full A Level – the AS – combined with a modular approach to study and assessment, with the opportunity to retake modules to improve personal performance.

Limited broadening of the advanced level curriculum

Although broadening the advanced level curriculum was a major aim of *Curriculum 2000*, there was no government requirement for learners to broaden their study programmes. In the event, during the first two years of the reforms, a slight majority of 16-19 year olds on advanced level programmes took four subjects (excluding General Studies) in their first year of study, with most choosing complementary rather than contrasting subjects. A minority of learners was actively seeking certification of key skills or mixing AS and AVCE qualifications and very few learners were taking the new broadening AS qualifications, such as Critical Thinking. At the same time, some forms of broadening had actually declined. There was a significant fall in the number of 16-19 year olds on advanced level programmes taking General Studies and many of the schools and colleges in our research sites complained of the decline in learner take-up of extra-curricular activities (Hodgson and Spours 2003).

Moreover, breadth in terms of the whole learning experience was compromised under *Curriculum 2000*. The IOE/ Nuffield research suggests that teaching and learning in the new AS was often considered by both learners and teachers to be rushed and superficial. Many teachers resented the fact that they were not able to build in the types of skills, exemplification and underpinning knowledge for which they had found space when teaching the old A Levels. Teachers of AVCE remarked that there was a loss of emphasis on the vocational and work-related aspects of the new qualifications in comparison with previous awards. The Key Skills Qualification, which was intended to act as a broadening device for all advanced level learners, proved so cumbersome that it not only failed to achieve this goal, but also undermined other forms of broadening such as General Studies and extra-curricular activities. However, the take-up of this one extra subject should not be under-estimated since it has broken a long-standing pattern of learners taking three or fewer subjects at advanced level (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Advanced Level Programmes Before and After *Curriculum 2000*

Features of breadth	Old advanced level curriculum	Curriculum 2000
Volume of study	Low in comparison with European competitors	Nearer to European competitors
Number of subjects	Between 2 and 3	Between 3 and 4
Spread of subjects	Minority contrasting mostly complimentary	Minority contrasting mostly complimentary
Mixing academic and vocational study	Small minority	Significant minority
Key skills	Primarily offered to students on vocational programmes	Offered to about half of all advanced level learners
General studies	Most common form of breadth and involving a significant minority of institutions	Second most popular form of breadth and involving a significant minority of institutions
Enrichment	Very important in a minority of institutions	Sharply declining role in most institutions
Learning styles and assessment	Diverse with a combination of linear and modular syllabuses and internal and external assessment across a range of awards	More standardised with modular delivery and more external assessment across all awards

The AVCE parity of esteem and vocational relevance

The AVCE was introduced to improve the status of full-time vocational qualifications so that more learners would be attracted into full-time advanced level post-16 education.

Our overall assessment to date is that the AVCE is succeeding in fulfilling its goal of achieving some sort of parity of esteem with the AS/A2, principally because the 6-unit award is being taken by a wider group of learners than the old Advanced GNVQ. However, this recognition has come at a price. The policy decision to make the first version of the AVCE less accessible than the AS/A2 qualification has already been judged to have been a mistake because it has made the award difficult to achieve (QCA 2002b). Moreover, the emphasis of the AVCE on knowledge and theory rather than on practical learning and achievement has reduced its vocational relevance.

The reform process – the problems of policy incrementalism and voluntarism

The strengths and weaknesses of any reform can be judged not only on its outcomes related to its aims, but also on the way that the reform is introduced, because of the impact that this process has on its public image. In the case of *Curriculum 2000*, this has proved to be a very important issue and in our view, the way that the reforms were conceived and introduced led to many of the design faults as well as to implementation problems.

The designs of the new *Curriculum 2000* qualifications blocks were never seriously discussed with education professionals whose experience of delivery might have eliminated some of the most obvious mistakes. In fact, the period of the *Qualifying for Success* consultation process

(Autumn 1997-Spring 1998) was followed by a protracted period of silence of almost two years while Ministers and the officials from the DfEE, QCA and awarding bodies discussed the designs of the new qualifications.

From the practitioner point of view, during this period there was uncertainty about whether any reform would take place and a reluctance to spend time planning for changes that were unclear and might not even happen (Hodgson and Spours 2003). Thus a large amount of time was lost which could have been productively used for curriculum planning and informing parents, learners, higher education providers and employers about the future reforms. Many key stakeholders felt they had been kept in the dark and had not had sufficient time to prepare for change or to play their proper role in the reform process.

The advanced level curriculum in England, Wales and Northern Ireland has traditionally been voluntarist, qualifications-focused and market-driven with no common requirements for all learners. *Curriculum 2000* continued this tradition. Learners are able to choose which qualifications (and combinations of qualifications) they take; schools and colleges have a free choice about what advanced level qualifications and programmes they offer and higher education institutions and employers have freedom in what they demand for particular courses and occupations.

This has resulted in an institutionally varied response to the *Curriculum 2000* reforms based largely upon curriculum tradition, learner intake and funding incentives. These differences mean that while full-time advanced level learners are experiencing some common changes as a result of the reforms (eg studying more subjects and having more time-tabled time), the effects so far both on institutions and on learner programmes have been variable.

HIGHER STILL

Compared with England, the Scottish system has a clearer division of functions between the school and college sectors and a history of school-college collaboration in many areas. There is less diversity *within* each sector, especially among schools. Learners attend secondary school for up to six years from 12 to 18; in third and fourth year (S3 and S4) they typically take Standard grade courses in seven or eight subjects. Each Standard grade subject is assessed at three levels – Credit, General and Foundation – and many learners attempt adjacent levels. In principle a Credit pass is expected for progression to Higher in S5. There is no general threshold for entry to advanced study in S5, which is determined on a subject-by-subject basis. About 70 per cent of 16 year-olds stay on at school, usually the same school they have attended since age of 12, and most continue with a 'general' curriculum. A much smaller proportion enters FE college, usually to take a vocational or pre-vocational programme. Colleges tend not to compete with schools in offering full-time academic programmes, such as Highers, for 16-18 year olds. Colleges' Highers provision tends to be designed for adults or for school students who use college courses to supplement school provision.

Half of the age group enters full-time Higher Education (HE) by the age of 21 and HE has a powerful influence on post-16 education. Young people can qualify for HE after only one post-compulsory year, and this 'S5 exit point' has provided symbolic justification for the four-year Honours degree. In practice, most school leavers who enter degree courses do so from S6; S5 leavers who enter HE are more likely to take HNCs or HNDs.

Before *Higher Still*, the S5 curriculum was dominated by Highers, subject-based qualifications typically covered in one year, and National Certificate (NC) modules (40-hour modules in general or vocational subjects introduced by the 16-plus Action Plan in 1984). Learners with good Standard grades typically took five Highers in S5, and could use these as the basis for applications to university, although most stayed on to S6 where they would re-sit Highers, take new ones and/or study for the Certificate of Sixth Year Studies (CSYS), a post-Higher subject-based qualification designed to promote independent learning and prepare learners for university study. Those with weaker Standard grades took a mixture of Highers and modules in S5 and, if they stayed on, in S6. Most full-time FE programmes for young people were based on modules.

This system was perceived to have certain strengths. Its flexible course structure, with short courses or modules, year-on-year decision-making and an S5 exit point, was perceived to encourage participation and to prevent rigid divisions between academic and vocational learning. However, the system was also seen to have several weaknesses (SOED 1992). There was an 'uneven gradient of learning' across the stages of secondary school – too shallow in S1 and S2, too steep in S5 at least for those attempting Highers. The one-year Higher provided insufficient depth to prepare for HE, and the 'two-term dash' created pressure for learners and restricted methods of teaching and learning. Middle and lower attainers who stayed on at 16 were not well catered for. Modules were the easier option for learners who were unlikely to succeed at Highers, but modules had low status so learners chose Highers 'inappropriately' with consequent high failure rates. The modular curriculum was criticised for lack of coherence, and modules and Highers were poorly articulated. There were inadequate opportunities for progression between modules and Highers in many subjects. Methods of teaching, learning and assessment were very different for modules and for Highers, creating an incoherent learning experience and underlining the low status of modules. Related to these other problems, the vocational pathway was weak.

The *Higher Still* framework

The Government's solution to these problems, first announced in *Higher Still: Opportunity for All* (Scottish Office 1994), was a unified system of post-16 education in schools and colleges. At the heart of its strategy was the need to improve opportunities for access and progression. *Higher Still* would replace existing Highers and modules with a unified progression framework based on a series of levels up to Higher and CSYS, with common principles of curriculum and assessment. In the old system less-qualified 16 year-olds had to choose between high-status Highers and modules which were more attainable but which lacked status and offered restricted opportunities for subsequent progression. In the new system they would be able to take courses similar in principle and design to Highers and part

of the same system, but at a lower level. The model was a 'climbing frame', a progression framework with flexible entry and exits points which would allow all learners to remain in the mainstream of provision regardless of level of study or academic or vocational orientation.

A Development Programme was launched, with major consultation rounds in 1995, 1996 and 1997. Implementation was twice delayed, and eventually began in 1999, phased over five years. Despite this, there were subsequent criticisms of inadequate consultation and rushed implementation (Raffe *et al*. 2002).

The new National Qualifications introduced by *Higher Still* cover most post-16 academic and vocational learning in schools and colleges, below the level of higher education. The main qualifications not covered are Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs). The basic architecture comprises 40-hour National Units and 160-hour National Courses, available at seven levels: Access 1 – 3, Intermediate 1 – 2, Higher and Advanced Higher (Figure 2). A National Course comprises three National Units plus a further 40 hours' worth of induction, remediation, integration and assessment. Units are internally assessed, on a pass/fail basis. To pass a National Course a candidate must pass all three units as well as an external assessment which is graded. (Courses are not available for the three Access levels, but Access units may be grouped into 120-hour National Clusters, comprising three units with no external assessment.) Learners may study for individual units, or programmes of units, whether or not these are potentially part of National Courses. Courses and units can be combined into a Scottish Group Award (SGA), achievable within one year's full-time study.

The new framework was designed to be built incrementally from the previous system. It blends elements of the former 'vocational' provision (unit-based and internally assessed) and 'academic' provision (course-based and externally assessed). The top five *Higher Still* levels correspond to old levels (CSYS, Higher and the three levels of Standard grade). However, *Higher Still* is a unified system; it has a single set of design rules for curriculum, assessment and certification, and courses and units are available in 'academic' and 'vocational' subjects. The new system offers all learners access to mainstream certification and the possibility of progression; it also enables learners who are unlikely to succeed at Higher to continue (if they wish) academic subjects at Intermediate 1 or 2, rather than being forced into vocational or pre-vocational alternatives. Conversely, better-qualified learners can take vocational as well as academic subjects for Highers, which are available in such subjects as Care, Mechatronics, Professional Patisserie and Selling Scheduled Air Travel, as well as more traditional school subjects. The only formal distinction between subjects is between those whose external assessment is diet-based (examinations) and project-based respectively. In other respects the curriculum of many subjects remains relatively untouched by the reform, although it increased the theoretical component of some 'vocational' subjects and the practical dimension of some 'academic' subjects. The most controversial example was English, which became (for a time) English and Communication. The five core skills of communication, numeracy, information technology, problem-solving and working with others were embedded in the content and assessment of learning where appropriate.

Figure 2. Design rules of the old and new systems in Scotland: a summary

	Old system		Higher Still (National Qualifications)
Units of curriculum and certification	*SCE:*	COURSES (notionally 120 hours)	UNITS (40 hours) *which may be grouped into* COURSES (160 hours, 3 units plus additional credit for external assessment etc) *or* CLUSTERS (3 units); *Units and Courses/Clusters may be grouped into* SCOTTISH GROUP AWARDS (SGAs) (12-20 credits)
	NC:	MODULES (notionally 40 hours) *which may be grouped into* GROUP AWARDS (GSVQs: 12-18 modules) *or* OTHER PROGRAMMES (eg college-devised)	
Levels	*SCE:*	2 LEVELS (Higher and CSYS)	5 LEVELS (Access, Intermediate 1, Intermediate 2, Higher, Advanced Higher)
	NC:	NO GENERAL FRAMEWORK OF LEVELS: covers all levels up to and including Higher	
Subjects	*SCE:*	MAINLY 'ACADEMIC'	ACADEMIC AND VOCATIONAL
	NC:	VOCATIONAL AND GENERAL	
Core skills	*SCE:*	NOT REQUIRED	EMBEDDED across the curriculum where appropriate
	NC:	REQUIRED FOR GSVQs (Group awards)	REQUIRED FOR SGAs
Assessment	*SCE:*	MAINLY EXTERNAL (examinations)	*Units:* INTERNAL (using NABs)
	NC:	INTERNAL	*Clusters:* INTERNAL (for constituent units) *Courses/SGAs:* INTERNAL (for constituent units) AND EXTERNAL (examination or project)

Source: Raffe *et al.* (2002)

Implementation and progress

The first new courses and units were introduced in the 1999-2000 session, starting with existing Highers where the extent of change was smallest. Schools were quicker than expected to offer courses at Intermediate level, reflecting the need for mainstream provision for middle- and lower-attaining 16 year-olds. So far, the impact on the range of subjects in S5 and S6 has been modest; the main changes have been the availability of 'academic' subjects at levels below Higher and of new Highers in subjects such as psychology and philosophy. There has been relatively little broadening of the school curriculum to include further vocational subjects, but now that the new system has become established and routinised, some schools are turning their attention to the more radical opportunities that it may provide for expanding the curriculum. Take-up of Scottish Group Awards (SGAs) in schools has been low. Schools have no tradition of group awards and feel that SGAs neither add value nor have external currency (especially with HE). An SGA requires attainment in all five core skills, and this makes it a hard award for schools to deliver.

National Qualifications have been used in S3 and S4, not only to replace NC modules but also to replace Standard grade. So far this has been mainly *ad hoc*, for particular subjects and/or levels; for example some subject departments judge that Intermediate 2 provides better progression to Higher than Credit Standard grade, and others have chosen Access 3 in preference to Foundation. However, some schools and even some local authorities are contemplating a more wholesale change from Standard grade to new NQs. Proposals to replace Standard grade, whether at department, school or authority level, are often linked with plans for more flexible phasing of school careers and for breaking the link between stage and age.

Implementation was slower in FE than in schools, but by the fourth year of *Higher Still* a majority of colleges had replaced most of their non-advanced provision with new NQs. However progress was uneven: a significant minority of colleges (about a third) reported that more than 60 per cent of their non-advanced provision remained 'substantially unchanged' by *Higher Still* (IUS survey data). Colleges initially found it difficult to reconcile the assessment demands of NQs with the practicalities of part-time delivery, and there has been a slow take-up in programmes tailored for employers (Howieson *et al.* 2003). Some new NQs are seen as 'too academic'. Despite their tradition of group awards, colleges have been slow to offer SGAs, deterred by such design features as the specifications of volume and level, complexity and the requirement for external assessment. In many colleges, programmes remain largely based on units rather than courses (as SGAs would be). Even when programmes have been changed they have often been 'adapted' by replacing individual units, rather than being replaced wholesale. The main exception is that colleges have extended their provision of National Courses, especially Highers, by adding 'new' subjects such as psychology, with school students among their clients.

Higher Still's biggest crisis came in August 2000 with the publication of the results of its first diet of examinations. Along with other SQA results many of these results were incorrect or delayed. The subsequent parliamentary inquiries placed the blame on the SQA's management rather than the design of Higher Still (Scottish Parliament 2000a, 2000b), but the crisis

nevertheless interrupted the momentum of the reform. It allowed dissatisfactions with the reform to surface, and especially with the volume of assessment and the model which combined the external and internal assessment of former 'academic' and vocational' traditions (Raffe *et al*. 2002). Following the exams crisis, measures were taken to simplify assessment and to reduce its volume, mainly through a series of subject reviews. More radical proposals, which would have allowed National Courses to be achieved on the basis of either internal or external assessment, but not requiring both, were rejected following consultation in 2001/02. It was felt that further changes to assessment arrangements could be destabilising and that the new system should be allowed more time to bed in.

It is too soon to evaluate success or failure, but our research to date (eg Howieson *et al*. 2003, Tinklin *et al*. 2001, 2003) suggests that:

- the unified system is securely established within initial education but in FE, and especially for adults, new NQs have added to the menu of available qualifications rather than replaced them with a unified system;
- there is a general perception that opportunities for 'middle and lower attainers' have improved;
- national statistics have not yet shown a general increase in participation or attainment that might be attributed to *Higher Still;*
- 'Cinderella' areas (vocational subjects in schools, special needs) feel they have more recognition (this does not mean that full 'parity of esteem' has been achieved);
- *Higher Still*'s 'climbing frame' model enhances *access* but its effects on *progression* are less certain, and the attainment of some of those who follow the new progression routes has been disappointing;
- however, the system has evolutionary potential; it is stimulating 'bottom-up' developments which may transform the progression map over time and it is encouraging learners as well as providers to become more 'progression-minded'.

ENGLAND AND SCOTLAND COMPARED

Contextual factors

Before making any comparisons between the *Curriculum 2000* reforms in England and the *Higher Still* reforms in Scotland, it is important to consider a number of contextual factors which provide distinctive backgrounds for the respective reform processes.

The first is that the *Higher Still* reform process started much earlier than *Curriculum 2000* and, while both are still evolving, it is now clear that the latter is seen more as an interim reform than as an end-point (Working Group on 14-19 Reform 2003). This means that English debates, mainly surrounding the future of A Levels, remain highly politicised as Ministers ponder the next stage of development, while in Scotland the strategic direction has been set and differences are articulated mainly around issues of implementation.

The second factor is that Scotland has traditionally had a broader post-16 curriculum than England allied to a four-year university degree system. This has meant that the focus on broadening advanced level programmes of study which lay at the heart of the *Curriculum 2000* reforms, was much less of an issue for Scotland. In this sense, *Curriculum 2000* was potentially more confrontational because it was trying to break a long-standing pattern of A Level provision. *Higher Still* could be seen as a more incremental reform going with the grain of Scottish tradition.

Finally, institutional arrangements north and south of the Border differ. In Scotland, most 16 year olds remain within the school system and many progress to four-year university degree programmes. Colleges cater for a minority of 16 year olds who continue in education and mainly offer vocational programmes. England, on the other hand, has much more mixed institutional arrangements with large numbers of 16-19 year olds studying in sixth form colleges and general further education colleges as well as in school sixth forms. All three types of institutions offer both general and vocational provision, although in differing proportions. It could be argued that the resulting institutional competition in England initially drove the *Curriculum 2000* reforms as schools and colleges strove to offer broader programmes of study. In Scotland institutional competition is weaker, the roles of schools and colleges are more complementary and *Higher Still* has stimulated increased collaboration between them. However institutional responses to a unified system have been more sharply polarised between schools and colleges.

Common features of the two reforms

Higher Still and *Curriculum 2000* have many features in common. Both aim to raise attainment and to promote participation, to offer a better gradient of learning, to establish parity of esteem for vocational and academic learning, to encourage breadth, and to introduce core/key skills for learners on all kinds of programmes. Both can be seen as 'unifying' measures, which aim to reduce the distinctions between different types of qualifications and to develop more coherent structures of provision beyond 16. Both reforms use certification and curriculum design as the principle instrument of reform and eschew other possible instruments of unification such as the restructuring of upper-secondary institutions. Both were constrained by political decisions to maintain key features of the academic upper-secondary qualification system (Highers and A Levels respectively); partly as a result, both reforms have been criticised for lacking an underpinning curriculum vision. In both cases the reforms were introduced by new qualifications bodies created from the merger of separate organisations for academic and vocational qualifications. Both reforms focus on academic and 'general vocational' provision and largely exclude the occupational or work-based pathway represented by N/SVQs. This contrasts with unifying reforms in other countries, such as the Netherlands and Norway. *Higher Still* and *Curriculum 2000* involve an increase in modularity, through a curriculum structure based on units within courses, annual certification rounds and year-on-year learner decision-making. The introduction of the AS, at a similar level to the Higher, brings the English system closer to the Scottish; conversely the

Advanced Higher, with a clearer status than the CSYS it replaced, gives the Scottish system a qualification that is potentially much closer to the English A Level.

In both cases, the new structures have been criticised for excessive complexity. Both reforms were introduced amid criticisms that the process had been rushed and that those who had to deliver them had not been sufficiently consulted. And finally, *Higher Still* and *Curriculum 2000* both encountered 'exams crises' and problems with the volume, organisation and purposes of assessment. In both cases, the crises threatened public confidence in the reforms.

Differences

But there are also differences between the two reforms. In the first place, they represent different strategies for unification. *Higher Still* introduced a unified curriculum and qualifications system, which abolishes formal differences between qualification tracks or types of learning and establishes design rules for curriculum, assessment and certification that apply across the whole system. *Curriculum 2000,* on the other hand, reflects what we term a linkages approach which brings qualifications tracks closer together but preserves many of the differences between them. *Higher Still* aimed to combine the different traditions within its unified system: for example, to marry 'vocational' provision based on competence, units grouped into programmes and criterion-referenced internal assessment, with 'academic' provision based on propositional knowledge, elective courses and graded external assessment. *Curriculum 2000* followed a more one-sided approach, which aimed to make general vocational qualifications more respectable by making them more like the academic A Level. At the same time, it preserved a clear distinction between the type of learning certified by an A Level and that certified by the AVCE. Many of the complexities of Higher Still result from its radicalism: from its attempt to impose the hybrid model produced from the marriage of two traditions in a uniform manner across the whole system. By contrast, many of the complexities of the *Curriculum 2000* reforms reflect the lack of radicalism of a linkages approach which feared to challenge the status of the A Level thus basing all other standards on it. This led to the complex 'semi-hooked' approach of the AS and A2 and a mis-alignment of the AVCE with the AS/A2. As a result, although the exams crises threatened public confidence in both reforms, in Scotland they encouraged a conservative reaction – to ease up on the pace or scope of change – while in England they have so far had a radicalising effect, and by 2003 proposals for unified frameworks and baccalaureates were clearly on the agenda (Working Group on 14-19 Reform 2003).

A second critical difference between the reforms is that *Higher Still* is essentially a climbing-frame model that aims to promote access and progression for all learners. Its most important innovation is the introduction of new levels of learning that are below Higher but part of the same progression framework. *Curriculum 2000* aimed only to reform advanced level provision. Its most important innovation is the AS, roughly equivalent to Higher, and levels below AS remained unchanged. This contrast reflects the different aims which drove the two reforms. In Scotland, there was a desire to cater for post-16 learners across the attainment range. In England the focus was more limited, with the primary aim being to broaden A Level programmes of study and to raise the status of the Advanced GNVQ. *Curriculum 2000* aimed

to increase participation at advanced level, while *Higher Still* aimed to discourage it when intermediate study was more appropriate. A related difference is the age span covered by each reform. *Curriculum 2000* focused on 16-19 year olds; Higher Still provided for all ages beyond 16, with a growing take-up among 14-16 year olds as well.

Third, *Higher Still* is part of a looser but system-wide Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) (Raffe 2003). Since its launch in 2001, the SCQF has become the main focus of the policy discourse of unification in Scotland; this is likely to accelerate the 'normalisation' of *Higher Still* and to inhibit further radical developments within its specific context. The *Curriculum 2000* qualifications, while part of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in England, are not currently credit-rated, although this approach has been raised as part of the discussions within the Tomlinson Working Group on 14-19 Reform. While the DfES has finally (in July 2003) committed itself to developing a credit framework for England, this will only cover learning for adults.

A fourth difference has been the approach to core/key skills. In *Higher Still* all five core skills (Communication, Numeracy, IT, Working with Others and Problem-solving) have been embedded in units and courses and are listed separately, along with those inferred from Standard Grades, in the Scottish Qualifications Certificate. Individual core skills units are available but the preference is for integrated or embedded delivery where possible. In England, however, a distinction has been made between the so-called 'main key skills' (Communication, Application of Number and IT) which have been certificated through a single qualification, and the three so-called wider key skills (Improving Own Learning and Performance, Working with Others and Problem-solving), which are certificated through single unit-based awards. What this has meant is that in Scotland core skills have maintained their low profile in schools, both for learners and teachers, while colleges – which already took core skills much more seriously – have used *Higher Still* to develop their core skill provision and to explore the best balance of discrete and integrated delivery. By contrast, in England the assessment of key skills has been given such an emphasis that the result has been their separation from the curriculum and widespread rejection by learners and teachers on the grounds that they are too burdensome to achieve.

MUTUAL LESSONS FROM AN ANGLO-SCOTTISH COMPARISON

There are at least two approaches to 'lesson-drawing' from an Anglo-Scottish comparison. In the first, the lessons are mainly in one direction. If the general trend is for post-compulsory education systems to become progressively more unified – to move from tracked to linked to unified systems – then, at this point, Scotland represents a more 'advanced' stage of development than England. From this perspective there is, therefore, more scope for England to learn from the Scottish experience than *vice versa*. However, this linear view that Scotland is more advanced than England and that all lessons are one-way is too simple. The other perspective is that the differences between *Curriculum 2000* and *Higher Still* reflect alternative strategies for unification, resulting from differences in the education systems and

in the contexts of reform, as well as different political strategies. Looked at in this way, it could be argued that both countries may learn from the comparison, not least by analysing some of the common themes and issues which have arisen in rather different circumstances. Furthermore, the extent of mutual learning could depend on how both systems develop in the future. If, for example, the English system moves decisively towards a unified and inclusive baccalaureate system, rather than remaining at a linkages stage, the process of mutual learning could increase. At this point in the reform processes arising from *Curriculum 2000* and *Higher Still*, we identify at least five areas where mutual learning could be explored.

The policy process

Earlier in this paper we have commented on the political processes in England and Scotland, with the former being more politicised, mainly due to the continuous debate about the A Level 'Gold Standard'. Both Highers and A levels have a totemic status within their respective education systems, and in both countries the political reluctance to challenge this status has been a major constraint on reform. However by the early 1990s there was widespread agreement that Highers needed reforming. This has never been the case to the same extent for A levels in England where, despite *Curriculum 2000* and the exams crisis, there is still a strongly polarised debate about whether to retain or abolish A Levels (eg Hodgson, Spours and Smithers 2003, Tahir 2003)).

The more politicised debate about curriculum and qualifications reform in the English system may also be exacerbated by its size. The smaller Scottish system is characterised by a greater sense of collective collegiality and the ability to involve all key players in the reform process which, in a less politically charged atmosphere, can clearly aid the consensus-building required for reform. However this Scottish advantage is to some extent counterbalanced by the greater difficulty in achieving effective participation and preserving a consensus during the process of designing a unified system that has more stringent design rules to be applied across the system (Raffe *et al.* 2002). There is a clear lesson here for England, where the problems of achieving consensus will become even more challenging as it moves towards a stronger model of unification.

With regard to both reform processes, leadership could be seen to have been weak. In neither case were the principles and rationale for the reforms articulated clearly enough, despite the fact that *Curriculum 2000* and *Higher Still* were complex reforms that depended on school, college and higher education acceptance of their aims and logic. In addition, in the English case, education professionals were not actively involved in debates about the design of the new qualifications because political decisions had already been made by the new Labour Administration in 1997 (Hodgson and Spours 2003).

Thus both reforms raise questions about strategies for incremental policy change. In particular, to what extent should such change start with a clear vision of the end-point and of how to reach it, rather than a reliance on developing incrementally and determining each new step in the light of earlier steps? *Curriculum 2000* was initially an example of the latter approach. *Higher Still*, on the other hand, did have a longer-term strategy, but this was not

well articulated, and the implementation sequence (starting with a part of the system which on its own did not need to be altered) obscured the rationale for the reform. Consequently attention focused on specific issues of system design (a frequent source of conflict) rather than on the underlying aims and strategy (a potential source of consensus). What both *Curriculum 2000* and *Higher Still* demonstrate is the need for a clear and explicit strategic vision based on professional consensus, together with a strong involvement by the education profession and wider stakeholders at all stages of the reform process.

Progression within a unified system

One of the major advantages that a unified curriculum and qualifications system offers is the possibility of both vertical and horizontal progression between and within levels of learning and attainment. *Higher Still*, as a unitised multi-level qualifications framework, exemplifies a climbing-frame model of a unified system designed around flexible progression opportunities. *Curriculum 2000*, on the other hand, is much more constrained being limited to advanced level only and with poor articulation to levels above, below and across advanced level provision. As such, it can be seen as an 'island of reform' (Hodgson and Spours 1999).

Despite its more explicit progression focus, however, the Scottish experience suggests that the simple creation of a unified climbing frame does not automatically ensure progression for all learners. Our research, to date, has highlighted at least three issues. The first relates to the practical difficulties of designing a climbing frame to meet the needs of diverse learners (eg how far apart should the bars of the frame be?). The second relates to its implementation (eg how to deliver the range of opportunities required by a climbing frame curriculum; the challenge of 'multi-level teaching'). The third issue concerns the use of the climbing frame by different groups of learners (eg how to improve the success rates of learners who follow the more flexible progression paths that it offers?).

It is important to consider the extent to which a climbing-frame approach is consistent with group awards and, in particular, with the type of baccalaureate awards being proposed for England. The attempt to create a progression sequence of diplomas can learn from the experience of SGAs in Scotland. This demonstrated, for example, the need to match the level of each diploma (and the differences between levels) to the diverse needs of learners. The failure of SGAs in Scotland partly reflects specific problems in their design and the lack of external demand, but it also reflects conflicts of purpose. If a baccalaureate is to be more than a retrospective accounting device – that is if it is to express principles for the curriculum and learning experience – then it is likely to prioritise coherent programmes of learning over progression possibilities. It must, therefore, set a limit on the flexibility offered by the climbing-frame approach, for example by setting a limit to the multi-level nature of learner programmes. The Tomlinson Working Group has set itself the goal of developing a 14-19 system with 'an appropriate balance of "climbing-frame" and baccalaureate-type approaches' (Working Group on 14-19 Reform 2003, p.8). It remains to be seen how far these two approaches can be combined.

Assessment

Both Curriculum 2000 and Higher Still aimed to develop more flexible curricular pathways through modules and shorter curriculum planning horizons, but both found it hard to manage the consequent increase in assessment. In Scotland, the tension between curricular flexibility and manageable assessment loads was exacerbated by the desire to give units as well as courses currency within the system. This meant that each unit of learning had assessment attached and there were additional assessment requirements at the end of each course. In England, the assessment overload was further exacerbated by anxieties about standards that led to high levels of external assessment and problems of assessment validity, particularly in vocational qualifications. Both countries have experienced exams crises, but while the Scottish crisis concerned mainly internal assessment, the English exams crises concerned mainly external examinations. What both reforms suggest is that the problem is related to the total volume of assessment rather than to its form; although the problem may be aggravated by uncertainty about the purposes of assessment and by a tendency for subject interests to propose excessive assessment burdens. At this stage in the respective reform processes, both systems are having to consider how to reduce the total burden of assessment and the strategies available to them to do this. Arguably, an open modular system, such as Higher Still or a quasi-modular system such as *Curriculum 2000*, may find this more difficult to achieve than the proposed baccalaureate approach being considered by the Tomlinson Working Group.

Vocational education

An issue for all unifying reforms is whether they are able to promote parity of esteem for vocational and academic subjects or whether they will always be subject to 'academic drift'. 'Linkages' approaches such as *Curriculum 2000* are criticised for undermining the distinctiveness of vocational education but failing to remove the formal differences that underpin its lower status. Arguably this happened in the case of AVCEs, although these also faced additional problems related to level of difficulty, as described above. Does a unified system approach such as Higher Still, which abolishes all formal distinctions between vocational and academic study, further undermine vocational distinctiveness or does it provide a firmer base on which to develop rich vocationally specialised provision and experiences which do not suffer from constrained progression opportunities? Our evidence suggests that in Scotland at least some teachers of vocational and practical school subjects such as home economics, and some FE staff, believe that their subjects have gained higher status. However, the relative status of subjects is still mainly determined by the attitudes of higher education. Where subjects have gained higher status the gains are less than many staff had hoped for and some question whether this partial move towards parity of esteem has been worth the cost. Moreover, the climbing frame allows students to continue 'academic' subjects beyond 16 at levels below Higher, so it may reduce rather than encourage the take-up of vocational subjects. And we have yet to receive evidence on the most important test of 'parity': on whether vocational subjects can attract more students with high levels of attainment or from higher status backgrounds.

Core/key skills

The 'high profile' assessment-focused approach to key skills in England jeopardised the teaching and learning experience and not only proved to be unmanageable but also failed to convince employers or universities of the value of the Key Skills Qualification. The relatively 'low profile' approach to core skills in Scotland appears not to have undermined the learning experience but it is uncertain to what extent the 'embedding' strategy has actually led to the development of core skills in Scottish school students. There is a problem of understanding and ownership of core skills and certification based on embedding may lack credibility. There is discussion of a move from embedding towards 'signposting' opportunities for core skill development. In many colleges, on the other hand, *Higher Still* has encouraged core skill provision and has, moreover, enabled colleges to think creatively about the best mixture of delivery methods (embedded, integrated or discrete). Arguably, the comparison provides two lessons for future reform processes in both countries. The first is to focus on the development of core/key skills rather than on their assessment. This will mean finding appropriate vehicles through new learning experiences and existing subjects to promote and recognise their achievement as an integral part of coherent learner programmes. The second lesson is to concentrate efforts on students and providers who already recognise the need for core/key skills (as do most staff in Scottish colleges), rather than to rely on external levers such as funding and regulation to coerce institutions into giving them priority.

Conclusion

A comparison of *Curriculum 2000* and *Higher Still* provides a good example of the potential benefits of 'home international' comparisons, listed at the beginning of this paper, and especially of their potential for policy learning.

Our research suggests that there are different possibilities regarding the future course of policy in both countries and the relationship between them. The international trend towards more unified upper secondary education systems does not necessarily signal an automatic convergence between different national education and training systems. Since movement towards more unified education systems is dominated by the national contexts, then divergence is also a possibility.

We have shown that England and Scotland have different educational traditions and institutions and their reforms have different aims and priorities, even though both could be seen as approaches to unification. England and Scotland could be interpreted as diverging, as England explores a baccalaureate model, while Scotland consolidates its climbing-frame approach to unification. However, other issues explored in this paper leave open the possibility of some sort of convergence between the upper secondary curriculum and qualifications systems north and south of the border. If indeed England is about to embark on a new phase of unified reform which will try to balance and combine baccalaureate and climbing frame approaches, then there may not be marked divergence with Scotland. Furthermore, we have pointed to the common problems both national reforms face with

regards to vocational education, core/key skills and assessment. Having to find ways of addressing these issues in the coming period, may also lead to a degree of convergence.

We do not want, therefore, to prejudge the outcome of these processes. However, given the current stages of development in each country and the common problems they face, it is important to encourage further dialogue and mutual policy learning.

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