

Working Paper 1

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS FOR STUDYING THE INTRODUCTION OF A UNIFIED SYSTEM

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INTRODUCTION

The Introducing a Unified System (IUS) project proposal lists four sets of research questions:

1. What model of a unified system is emerging in Scotland? How does it deal with the differentiation of students and of progression pathways, the integration of academic and vocational learning, and lifelong learning? How is this model shaped during the implementation process in its first three years?
2. What are the main features of the Higher Still policy process and how far is it characteristic of all policies for introducing a unified system? How, and to what extent, are initiative and control decentralised during implementation? What are the main conflicts and sources of support and resistance to the reform? To what extent do those who implement Higher Still develop and 'own' a vision of its aims, objectives and strategy, and how does this vision change over time?
3. What is the role of institutions (schools and colleges) in shaping the reform? What factors influence the curriculum offered by institutions and the way it is 'packaged' for students? What promotes or constrains the development of collaborative relationships among institutions, and how does the division of functions between schools and colleges change? How is institutional behaviour shaped by external factors such as the mechanisms for funding, regulation and support?
4. What issues arise in defining the boundaries of a unified system and in articulating the system with sectors outside this boundary, and in particular with work-based provision? To what extent does the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) address these issues? What issues are raised by the development and implementation of the SCQF, and how does it promote 'unification'?

This paper considers the conceptual framework(s) required to answer these question. We first outline the framework developed by the Anglo-Scottish Unified Learning Project (ULP), and consider how far it provides a basis for answering the four Research Questions. We conclude that it provides a good starting point for Questions 2, 3 and 4 (not surprisingly, as this is how the questions were developed) but it is less adequate for Research Question 1, because it focuses on the 'administrative system' of education rather than on the social relations and processes of a unified system in practice. A more adequate framework must cover

differentiation and stratification, the notion of flexibility, and an understanding of the divisions which a unified system seeks to bridge.

THE ULP CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The ULP's conceptual framework is outlined by Raffe *et al.* (1998), and summarised as follows in a chapter which reports on the project's work (Spours *et al.* 2000, pp.73-75).

Our conceptual framework for analysing the unification of academic and vocational learning in post-compulsory education and training systems has three main elements. The first element is the distinction among three types of systems: a tracked system, with separate and distinctive tracks; a linked system, with features linking the tracks or common properties which underline their similarity or equivalence; and a unified system, which does not use tracks to organise provision and accommodates a diversity of provision within a unified set of arrangements. These three types can be seen as points along a continuum of unification, with tracked systems at one end, unified systems at the other end, and various forms of linked systems in between.

Each national system is likely to be a mixture of the three types: its position on the continuum between tracked and unified systems may vary across different dimensions of system change. These dimensions are the second element of our conceptual framework. Figure 1 lists eleven such dimensions, grouped for convenience into four areas. For each dimension, Figure 1 summarises the characteristic features of tracked, linked and unified systems respectively. The dimensions in Figure 1 are those which proved relevant in our comparisons between Scottish and English developments in the late 1990s. Other dimensions of system change may be useful for analysing other periods or other systems. For example, funding is treated as part of the government and regulation dimension in Figure 1, but in the light of its growing policy role it may deserve in future to be considered as a dimension in its own right. Furthermore, at least two important dimensions of system variation cannot be easily represented in terms of our three types of system. These are the 'scope' of a system (for example, whether it includes all learners over 16 or only those up to the age of 18 or 19) and the number of tracks in a system.

The third element of our conceptual framework is the distinction between open and grouped systems. In an open unified system, like the one being introduced in Scotland, there is weak prescription of the content, volume, level, mode and duration of study; the emphasis is on choice and flexible entry and exit points. A grouped system is based on common learning requirements or entitlements for all students, with stronger prescription of the content, volume and level of study. Examples include Baccalaureate models of a unified system or the programme model recently introduced in Sweden. The distinction between open and grouped systems can be applied not only to unified systems (Young *et al.* 1997), but to tracked or linked systems as well (Howieson *et al.* 1998a). England is located between open and grouped system types. It has a relatively open general track consisting of elective A levels, but it has grouped vocational qualifications such as General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs). The extent to which a system is open or grouped is typically related to the role of the national state in the development and governance of that system.

As described above, our framework allows us to analyse different types of system. It may also be used to analyse different policy strategies - respectively track-based, linkages and unified system strategies - each of which seeks to move towards one of the three types of systems or

to consolidate the features of the system that already exist. In the next section [of the chapter] we apply our framework to the systems of post-compulsory education and training in England, Wales and Scotland, to debates about unification within each country, and to their strategies for unification. We also refer, though more briefly, to other countries in Europe.

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

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

APPLYING THE ULP FRAMEWORK TO THE IUS

As the rest of the chapter demonstrated, the ULP conceptual framework was useful for mapping the different reform strategies, for clarifying issues in the design of reforms (for instance, in the approach to core skills or the role of over-arching certificates) and for analysing the process and politics of educational change. The current (IUS) project starts from the analysis of Higher Still as:

- a unified system, but within a wider linked system (the SCQF);

- a reform that has been led along the dimensions of ‘certification’ and ‘governance and regulation’;
- an open or flexible system.

Research Question 2 (above) arises from our hypothesis that the policy process of introducing a unified system is likely to be different (more conflictual, more ‘top-down’) than that in introducing other types of system (see Working Paper 2). Research Question 3 arises from our hypothesis that the ‘open’ model of a unified system gives institutions (schools and colleges) more scope to select which curriculum elements to offer, to package it in particular ways, and to offer guidance to students, and therefore may lead to more institutional differentiation.

(However end-users such as higher education and employment have more power in a open system, which might constrain institutional freedom.) The ULP conceptual framework also leads us to pose Research Question 4, about the boundaries of the unified system, its relation to the wider linked system represented by the SCQF and the place of work-based provision.

THE ‘SOCIAL RELATIONS AND PROCESSES’ OF A UNIFIED SYSTEM

However the ULP conceptual framework seems less adequate for answering our Research Question 1: what kind of a unified system is emerging? True, at the time of writing it seems possible that the unified system may change in terms of the ULP conceptual framework – for example, it move away from unification on the dimension of assessment. However, if this were to happen it would have to occur through central policy-making procedures, not through the process of implementation.

The ULP’s concept of unification was developed primarily to analyse policy strategies or goals, and it may be less suited to analyse the actual outcomes of policy. To refer to another conceptual framework (that adopted by the Centre’s recent Home Internationals Project) the ULP framework describes the *administrative system* of post-compulsory education and training – the institutions, certification and assessment arrangements, curricula as formally prescribed through syllabuses or learning outcomes, governmental and administrative machinery, and other more formal aspects of the ‘system’. We also want to examine the *social relations and processes* of education – patterns of participation and progression, learning processes, outcomes, inequalities and so on, together with the various social and economic influences, incentives and constraints which generate them – which may be just as important to the model of a unified system which actually emerges from Higher Still.

CONCEPTS OF DIFFERENTIATION AND STRATIFICATION

In particular, we need a theoretical/conceptual framework for analysing differentiation and stratification within a system that tries to be unified. Formally, Higher Still gives equal status to different types of learning, pursued in different institutions. In practice, it would be naive to expect informal status differences to disappear as quickly. We anticipate at least three possible axes of differentiation:

Curriculum: Different subjects or areas of the curriculum have always differed in the social valuation. The most obvious difference is between academic and vocational subjects, and an

aim of Higher Still is to establish parity of esteem between them. However, even if Higher Still removes formal status differences, informal differences are likely to persist as a result of cultural traditions, the influence of educational (subject) interest groups and the selection criteria of end-users. Higher subjects may vary in status in relation to their acceptability for higher education. Richard Teese has observed similar effects in the relatively unified upper-secondary systems of Australia (eg Teese 1998). One criterion for the success of Higher Still is the extent to which it encourages more mixing of academic and vocational subjects, and the extent to which it results in a weaker correlation between curriculum choice and the social or educational background of students.

Institutions: Higher Still may reduce differentiation between schools and colleges. For example, it may encourage schools to offer a wider range of vocational options, and to recruit students for whom college is currently the normal option, while colleges may use the opportunity to offer ‘academic’ Highers, for example in the newer social subjects such as psychology and politics. Conversely, differentiation *among* schools may increase if resource constraints mean that schools specialise in the areas of the Higher Still portfolio which they offer. It has been suggested that only a few schools will be able to offer a wide choice at Advanced Higher, while others may offer more vocational subjects at Intermediate and Higher levels. The possible effects on differentiation among FE colleges are harder to predict. The pattern of institutional differentiation is likely to become more complex, however, with various modes of collaboration and articulation of provision.

Level and progression: The level of study (Access 1 to Advanced Higher) is currently the one ‘legitimate’ difference of status and value within Higher Still. Its legitimacy is partly based on the principle that all students continue in the same mainstream certification structure and all students can potentially reach any level, although some may take longer than others to reach it. The extent to which this principle is valid in practice is therefore an important aspect of differentiation in Higher Still. For example, differentiation (and/or stratification - see below) is stronger to the extent that:

- few students take more than one or two steps up the ladder from wherever they start;
- judgements are based on the age or stage by which given levels are reached (for example, if universities discriminate in favour of S5 Highers, or if employers favour qualifications gained in initial rather than continuing education).

Through the analysis of SQA data, and the survey of schools and colleges, the IUS project will explore the nature and extent of differentiation within Higher Still. It will also investigate the related but stronger concept of stratification. Almost by definition, the features of differentiation associated with level and progression represent stratification. With respect to curricular and institutional differentiation, stratification can be measured in terms of:

- the correlation with the educational backgrounds (eg level of Standard grade attainment) or the social backgrounds of students; or
- differences in the esteem or social standing of different curricula or institutions; or
- differences in student destinations.

CONCEPTS OF OPENNESS AND FLEXIBILITY

A second need is for a clearer conceptualisation of an open or flexible unified system. This notion was important for the ULP and it underpins much of the thinking behind the TUS project. However, it needs further clarification and development, particularly with respect to the social relations and processes of education: what does an open or flexible system mean in practice, as distinct from the rhetoric of flexibility, responsiveness, and so on? Three possible reference points are:

- concepts of *risk* and *individualisation*, which have influenced much current work on youth transitions;
- concepts of *educational markets* or the ‘marketisation’ of education and training, which are often linked with notions such as flexibility and responsiveness;
- the concept of *comprehensive education*; Higher Still has been interpreted, not only as a means of extending comprehensive education beyond 16, but more particularly as a version of the comprehensive principle which takes account of the growing expectation of individual choice and diversity of opportunity in public provision.

WHAT IS BEING UNIFIED?

In the ULP we understood ‘unification’ to be about vocational and academic (or general) education, but there are other divisions which a unified system may try to bridge. When one is analysing a strongly tracked system these divisions tend to coincide, so it does not matter too much how they are described. But as systems become more unified, or less strongly tracked, the distinctions become more important. For example, how would we define ‘tracks’ in post-16 education and training in Scotland before Higher Still: in terms of qualifications (former SCE *vs* SCOTVEC), institutions (school *vs* college) or mode of learning (full-time *vs* work-based). These three axes were at least partly independent.

It may be analytically important to distinguish four types of ‘division’ which a unified system may try to bridge. These are respectively based on:

- the content and purpose of study (eg academic *vs* vocational);
- institution and mode of study. The ULP suggested that the gulf between work-based and school/college-based learning was harder to bridge than the gulf between academic and vocational learning *per se* - although we did speculate that this was specific to the UK (the Netherlands and Norway seem to provide counter-examples);
- category of student (in particular adults compared with young people);
- level of education (where, as in Scotland, an aim of unification is to develop progression pathways).

All four ‘divisions’ underlie the various conflicts and dilemmas which have characterised the development and implementation of Higher Still. They are therefore relevant to Research Question 2 (about the policy process). They are also important for Research Question 4 (the boundaries of a unified system), to the extent that the current boundaries of Higher Still are defined (albeit problematically) by level and mode of study, and the SCQF tries to straddle all these divisions.

By thinking of unification in terms of other divisions as well as that between academic and vocational curricula, the project can broaden its comparative frame of reference, to include countries such as the Netherlands and Hungary which are pursuing 'unifying' reforms within vocational education. The four divisions also provide a framework for comparing different unifying measures. For example, the current reforms of A levels and GNVQs in England may appear to be pursuing a weaker ('linkages') form of the Higher Still approach; but they differ in that they are restricted to the Advanced level of provision and are not attempting to reconstruct progression ladders across a wider range of levels.

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