

Working Paper 11

**THE NORMALISATION OF HIGHER STILL:
FINDINGS FROM SURVEYS OF SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES
IN 2000-01 AND 2002-03**

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INTRODUCTION

This paper summarises the main findings of surveys of Scottish schools and colleges conducted in 2000-01 and 2002-03, to study the progress of the Higher Still reform of post-16 education and the role of institutions in its implementation. The surveys have been conducted as part of the ESRC research project on *The Introduction of a Unified System of Post-Compulsory Education in Scotland*, based in the Centre for Educational Sociology (CES) at Edinburgh University. The project has followed Higher Still through the first four years of implementation, in order to find out:

1. What model of a unified system is emerging in Scotland?
2. What are the main features of the Higher Still policy process?
3. What is the role of schools and colleges in shaping the reform?
4. What issues arise in defining the boundaries of a unified system, and in articulating the system with sectors outside this boundary?

This Working Paper presents a primarily descriptive account of the survey findings, focusing on new data collected in the second survey and on comparisons between the two surveys. Analyses of the first survey have been reported in earlier Working Papers (Howieson, Raffe and Tinklin 2001, Tinklin Howieson and Raffe 2001). A more detailed report of the college survey is published by the Scottish Further Education Unit. The paper concludes by summarising some of the main themes relevant to the project's research questions. Future Working Papers will examine some of these themes in more detail, using SQA data and case studies as well as the surveys. A separate paper presents the survey data on the use of New National Qualifications (NNQs) in S3 and S4 (Howieson *et al.* 2003).

Since 1999 the Higher Still reforms have replaced Scottish Certificate of Education (SCE) courses and National Certificate (NC) modules with NNQs. This new 'unified curriculum and assessment system' accounts for most post-16 provision in schools and a significant

proportion of college provision below the level of higher education. For more detailed accounts of the reform and the circumstances which led to it see Raffe *et al.* (2001) and Howieson *et al.* (2001).

The document which announced Higher Still listed nine aims (Scottish Office 1994):

- Higher standards of attainment
- Recognised qualifications for all
- An even gradient of progression

Expansion and rationalisation of existing provision

- Breadth of attainment

Competence in core skills

- Consolidation of earlier reforms
- Making the system simpler and more efficient
- Unification of curriculum and assessment arrangements

The document's subtitle, *Opportunity for All*, summarises the main impetus for reform. This was to improve opportunities for students at all levels of attainment, including the growing number of middle- and lower-attaining 16 year olds who were staying on in education and facing the choice between SCE Highers, which had status but tended to be too demanding, and NC modules which were more accessible but which lacked status and tended to offer poor progression prospects. Higher Still aimed to do this by providing opportunities at different levels, but all part of the same unified system and with progression between (and within) the levels. We describe this model of unified system as a 'climbing frame': that is, a system which aims to be inclusive and to support progression by providing flexible entry and exit points and flexible opportunities for progression within the system.

Higher Still was scheduled to be implemented over five years from August 1999. That timetable was somewhat interrupted by the exams crisis of August 2000, which affected the results of the first diet of NNQ exams, and by a subsequent review of assessment and subject reviews. Nevertheless some aspects of implementation, notably the introduction of courses at Intermediate 1 and 2, proceeded faster than expected, even if other aspects such as implementation in colleges were slower. This paper, which covers the first four years of Higher Still, describes a relatively advanced stage of implementation but it is far from a final assessment.

We use term 'New National Qualifications' to describe the new provision that was introduced, and the term 'Higher Still' to describe the reform process that introduced it. However, any survey must respect the perceptions and the terminology used by its respondents. Even in 2002-03 many people were more comfortable with the term 'Higher Still' than with 'New National Qualifications'.

METHODOLOGY

Over the period 2000-03 the IUS project has:

- conducted surveys of all secondary schools and colleges in Scotland, in the 2000-01 and 2002-03 sessions;

- analysed Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) data for the first three years of Higher Still;
- conducted case studies of six institutions, in the 2001-02 and 2002-03 sessions;
- interviewed key informants.

This paper presents data from the surveys of schools and colleges. These were conducted using questionnaires (in paper or electronic form) which were sent to all secondary schools and FE colleges in Scotland. Different questionnaires were designed for schools and colleges, but several questions were common to both questionnaires, and other questions were similar but with different response categories to allow for the different situations of schools and colleges. Many of the items from the first survey were repeated in the second, to allow change over time to be studied.

The schools' surveys were conducted with the support of the Association for Directors of Education in Scotland. Many local authorities offered to forward questionnaires to their schools on behalf of the research team; schools in other authorities, and independent schools, received questionnaires directly from Edinburgh University's survey team. While it helped to generate a good response rate this arrangement proved difficult to administer; the second survey was administered by NFO Scotland, who sent questionnaires directly to schools. In both cases a contact and phone number in the CES was provided for respondents who wished to comment or ask questions about the survey. The colleges' surveys were conducted jointly with the Scottish Further Education Unit (SFEU), which conducted annual surveys of the implementation of Higher Still in colleges starting in 1999-2000. The IUS survey was amalgamated with the second and fourth of these surveys. The college questionnaires collected considerably more detail on the provision of new National Qualifications and on how colleges had dealt with specific issues raised by the new system.

The college surveys were despatched in November 2000 and in February 2003 respectively. The first schools' survey was sent out in January 2001; we had planned to despatch the survey in November but several schools asked for a delay while they dealt with the extra appeals arising from the 2000 exams diet. The second schools survey was despatched in November 2002.

Table 1: Response rates

| | Survey 1 (2000-01) | Survey 2 (2002-03) |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Schools | | |
| <i>of which</i> | 70% (of 563) | 63% (of 563) |
| <i>Comprehensive</i> | 76% (of 387) | 63% (of 391) |
| <i>Independent mainstream</i> | 42% (of 62) | 50% (of 54) |
| <i>Special schools</i> | 66% (of 114) | 64% (of 118) |
| Further Education colleges | 85% (of 47) | 74% (of 46) |

Response rates are shown in Table 1. Some of the non-respondents did not participate in the survey as they were not making any Higher Still provision; this accounted for most of the colleges which did not respond to survey 1 and for at least 22 of the schools which did not respond in survey 2. Nevertheless response declined among mainstream local authority (comprehensive) schools, and among colleges, between the two surveys. This may reflect the

declining salience of Higher Still as a current preoccupation of senior managers. Table 2 shows the number of institutions which responded to either or both surveys. The target samples changed slightly between the surveys, due to school openings, closures and mergers, and the change of one college to HE institution status. In the analyses that follow, tables which report on survey 2 only are based on all respondents to survey 2; tables which make comparisons between surveys are based on institutions which responded to both surveys. The individual responding to the survey on behalf of the institution may not, of course, have been the same for both surveys.

Table 2: Pattern of response across the two surveys

| | Comprehensive schools | Independent schools | Special schools | FE colleges |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| Responded to both surveys | 212 | 23 | 59 | 30 |
| Responded in 2000-01 only | 83 | 3 | 16 | 10 |
| Responded in 2002-03 only | 36 | 4 | 16 | 4 |

Questionnaires were addressed to the headteacher or principal, with a request that they be completed by the Higher Still co-ordinator or person with overall responsibility for HS implementation. In many institutions, especially colleges, questionnaires were either filled in collaboratively or different members of staff contributed to different sections of the questionnaire.

The following sections present the survey findings. First, we briefly summarise the stage of implementation of NNQs by the time of the second survey. We then describe institutions' views on the aims of Higher Still, on the institutions' own priorities and policies for its implementation, and on general views on Higher Still. The following section then reports on our respondents' perceptions of Higher Still's progress towards its aims and their perceptions of its impact in a range of areas. We then address specific issues in the implementation of NNQs: institutional collaboration, Scottish Group Awards and core skills. Finally, we identify some issues relevant to the questions addressed by the IUS project.

THE STAGE OF IMPLEMENTATION

By the time of the second survey, in 2002-03, New National Qualifications had replaced most of the pre-existing provision in S5 and S6 (however, many independent schools continued to offer non-SQA provision). This does not mean that Higher Still was implemented precisely as expected: as we see below some features of the original proposals, notably Scottish Group Awards (SGAs), had made less progress than had earlier been hoped. Nor does it mean that the process of change was complete. Schools were continuing to explore the potential of new National Qualifications for enhancing or restructuring their provision. Many schools were also exploring their use in S3 and S4. A large majority of comprehensive schools, and around a half of independent and special schools, had made some use of NNQs to replace Standard Grade in S3 and S4. In most schools this affected no more than one Standard Grade subject in ten, and schools were cautious about committing themselves to a substantial migration to NNQs in S3 and S4 in the near future. The survey findings about S3 and S4 are presented in

detail elsewhere (Howieson, Raffé and Tinklin 2003); this paper will focus on the post-compulsory stages.

Table 3 shows the average number of courses and units at each level which schools reported offering in 2002-03. It distinguished three groups of comprehensive schools, based on their average Standard Grade attainments in 1999. By the fourth year of Higher Still most NNQ provision in schools was in the form of courses rather than separate units. Comprehensive schools offered nearly as many courses at Intermediate 2 (15) as at Higher (17 to 19). There was little correlation between the average Standard Grade attainment in a schools and its Intermediate or Higher level provision. Comprehensive schools appeared to regard Intermediate courses (and especially Intermediate 2) as part of the normal comprehensive school curriculum which all schools should offer, whatever the nature of their school roll. (A parallel analysis relating course provision to the social class composition of schools' intakes produced a very similar pattern.) However schools with higher levels of Standard Grade attainment tended to offer more Advanced Higher courses than other schools. This suggests that students in middle- and lower-attaining schools might be disadvantaged if Advanced Highers became more important than they are at present for higher education entrance. The trend in Table 3 probably reflects the need for minimum numbers to make courses viable (with the implication that increased currency for Advanced Higher would raise demand and consequently supply). It does not appear to reflect the polarisation among schools which some commentators had feared, with schools tending to specialise as either Intermediate or Advanced Higher schools. Table 4 shows a slight positive correlation between the number of Intermediate courses offered by a school and the number of Advanced Highers. This probably reflects, among other things, the size of the school.

Table 3: Average number of courses/clusters and individual units offered in 2002-03, at each level (schools only: respondents in 2002-03)

| | comprehensive schools | | | independent schools | special schools |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|--------------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| | low S4 attainment | medium S4 attainment | high S4 attainment | | |
| <i>Course/clusters</i> | | | | | |
| Access 1 | (0.2) | (0.3) | (0.3) | 0 | 2.8 |
| Access 2 | (0.8) | (0.9) | (0.7) | 0.1 | 5.1 |
| Access 3 | 2.7 | 2.5 | 2.0 | 0.3 | 3.2 |
| Intermediate 1 | 7.8 | 8.2 | 6.0 | 1.1 | 5.3 |
| Intermediate 2 | 14.8 | 14.7 | 14.8 | 4.9 | (3.0) |
| Higher | 16.9 | 17.5 | 18.6 | 15.4 | (1.1) |
| Advanced Higher | 5.1 | 6.9 | 10.3 | 9.2 | (0.4) |
| <i>n</i> | 39-53 | 46-70 | 41-58 | 19-20 | 26-44 |
| <i>Individual units</i> | | | | | |
| Access 1 | (0.1) | (0.2) | (0.1) | 0 | 6.7 |
| Access 2 | (0.6) | (1.1) | (2.4) | 0.2 | 11.3 |
| Access 3 | 1.3 | 3.0 | (0.9) | 0.4 | 7.0 |
| Intermediate 1 | 3.0 | 4.9 | 2.3 | 1.1 | (2.1) |
| Intermediate 2 | 3.3 | 7.3 | 3.3 | 3.0 | (1.0) |
| Higher | (2.5) | 6.0 | 2.4 | 4.2 | (0.3) |
| Advanced Higher | (0.5) | (2.3) | 1.8 | 2.2 | (0.1) |
| <i>n</i> | 31-40 | 42-51 | 36-52 | 18-21 | 25-50 |

Sample n's show the range of base numbers for each item, excluding item non-response. Estimates with a high item non-response are shown in brackets. On the assumption that many missing responses are in lieu of nil responses, these estimates overestimate the true average.

The average independent school offered only one Intermediate 1 course and 5 Intermediate 2 courses - many fewer than comprehensive schools. Given that Intermediate provision was one of the main innovations of Higher Still, this helps to explain the relative detachment of the independent sector from Higher Still seen later in this paper. Special schools' provision of NNQs was concentrated at the Access and Intermediate 1 levels and was more likely to be based on free-standing units.

Table 4: Distribution of schools, by number of Intermediate (1 and 2) courses and number of Advanced Higher courses offered (Comprehensive schools only: respondents in 2002-03)

| | Number of Advanced Higher courses offered by school | | | | |
|--|---|-----|------|-------|-------|
| | 0 | 1-5 | 6-10 | 11-15 | 16-20 |
| No of Int courses offered by school | | | | | |
| 0 | 22 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 1-5 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 6-10 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| 11-15 | 0 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 0 |
| 16-20 | 1 | 10 | 14 | 2 | 3 |
| 21-25 | 0 | 12 | 13 | 10 | 2 |
| 26-30 | 1 | 9 | 19 | 9 | 3 |
| 31-35 | 0 | 4 | 7 | 8 | 0 |
| 36 or more | 0 | 5 | 6 | 3 | 0 |

Each cell of the Table shows the number of schools offering the stated number of Intermediate courses and the stated number of Advanced Higher courses

Table 5: What percentage of non-advanced programmes are substantially unchanged since pre-Higher Still? (Number of colleges, 2002-03 survey)

| | Percentage of part-time provision unchanged | | | | |
|---|---|-------|-------|-------|--------|
| | 0-20 | 21-40 | 41-60 | 61-80 | 81-100 |
| % of full-time provision unchanged | | | | | |
| 0-20 | 16 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| 21-40 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| 41-60 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| 61-80 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| 81-100 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 |

Implementation in FE colleges was less advanced than in schools, but this varied across the sector. Nearly half of colleges (16 out of 34 who responded to the survey) had fully implemented Higher Still, or were close to doing so. That is, these colleges reported that not more than 20 per cent of either their full-time or their part-time provision was unchanged by Higher Still (Table 5). The other colleges represent varying degrees of progress towards implementation, but in a substantial number of colleges a large proportion of part-time or (to a somewhat lesser extent) full-time courses remained substantially unchanged. In interpreting these figures we should bear in mind that colleges where implementation was more advanced may have been more likely to respond to the survey. The average level of implementation among all 46 colleges was probably slightly lower than among the 34 described here. Compared with schools, college provision was much more likely to be based on units rather than courses or clusters.

The colleges which reported higher levels of implementation did not differ systematically in other aspects of implementation such as the number of National Courses or SGAs offered by the college. Nor were their responses to our questions on college policy or attitudes very different from those of the other colleges. However the colleges which reported high levels of implementation included most of the ten colleges which reported offering courses by open learning.

INSTITUTIONAL AIMS AND POLICIES

In this section we examine our respondents' views on the aims of Higher Still, their objectives for its implementation and the factors which influenced their policies.

Respondents were presented with a list of aims of Higher Still, based on those published in *Higher Still: Opportunity for All* (SOED 1994). They were invited to assess the importance of each aim on a five-point scale from 'not at all important' to 'very important'. The points on the scale have been scored from 1 to 5 respectively, and Table 6 shows the average score from each category of institution for each item. In general, our respondents attached a high level of importance to the aims of Higher Still. The first aim, which concerns the achievement of high standards of attainment, attracted the highest possible scores from LA schools and FE colleges, and was almost as highly rated by independent and special schools. Some aims were more important than others. In comprehensive and independent schools the four next most important aims concerned marketable qualifications, progression, the availability of courses at an appropriate level, and making the system simpler, more efficient and more easily understood. Aims relating to core skills or the relation of academic and vocational courses are considered less important, especially by independent schools. Special schools attached most value to core skills and to courses at an appropriate level. The FE sector was the most committed to the full range of aims of Higher Still: it gave an average rating of more than four out of five to all the aims. Further tables (not shown) show that comprehensive schools with high and low levels of Standard Grade attainment did not vary much in terms of their rating of the different aims, although high-attaining schools were less likely to value aim 6 (offering a range of academic and vocational subjects). Middle-attaining schools were most likely to value aims 4 (courses at appropriate level), 7 (parity of esteem) and 8 (unified system).

The same question was included in survey 1, and the responses in Table 6 are very similar to those in the earlier survey. Comprehensive schools in 2002-03 attached slightly more importance to vocational education and core skills, and colleges slightly less, than in the earlier survey. This means that there was some convergence between comprehensive schools and FE colleges, but the changes are small compared with the continuing differences between institutional sectors (table not shown).

We draw four main conclusions from these data. First, the aims of Higher Still were generally supported by senior managers in schools and colleges. Second, the aims that received strongest support from all institutional sectors tended to be those summarised in the subtitle *Opportunity for All*: in other words, the broad aim to establish a 'climbing frame' to support flexible access and progression. Third, support for the different aims varied across sectors, with colleges most likely to support the full range of aims and especially those concerned

with parity of esteem or the relation of academic and vocational learning. Fourth, support for the aims of Higher Still had not changed much between the second and fourth years of the programme.

Table 6: From your perspective, how important are the following aims of Higher Still to your school/college? (Respondents in 2002-03)

| | Comprehensive | Independent | Special | FE |
|--|----------------------|--------------------|----------------|-----------|
| To enable all our students to achieve the highest standard of attainment of which they are capable | 5.0 | 4.9 | 4.9 | 5.0 |
| To enable all our students to gain marketable qualifications | 4.7 | 4.6 | 3.3 | 4.7 |
| To offer our students a more even progression between stages | 4.6 | 4.0 | 4.1 | 4.7 |
| To enable courses always to be available to students at an appropriate level | 4.5 | 3.9 | 4.8 | 4.7 |
| To develop our students' attainment across a broader range of subjects | 3.9 | 3.3 | 4.2 | 4.2 |
| To give our students access to a range of both academic and vocational subjects | 3.9 | 2.2 | 3.6 | 4.5 |
| To promote parity of esteem of academic and vocational subjects | 3.7 | 2.1 | 3.2 | 4.2 |
| To bring academic and vocational courses into a unified curriculum and assessment system | 3.8 | 2.1 | 3.3 | 4.3 |
| To develop our students' competence in core skills | 3.6 | 2.9 | 4.5 | 4.7 |
| To provide a simpler, more efficient system easily understood by students, parents, employers and higher education | 4.2 | 3.9 | 4.1 | 4.5 |
| <i>n</i> | 243-246 | 26-27 | 72-75 | 33-34 |

Mean response on a five-point scale (5=very important, 1=not at all important); n's show the range across the different items, excluding item non-response.

The significance to schools of the 'climbing frame' to support access and progression is also evident from Table 7. This is based on a similar rating exercise, in which respondents rated possible school objectives in implementing Higher Still on a five-point scale. At least five of the objectives concerned making provision more inclusive, either by improving provision across different attainment levels (the first three objectives in the table, plus the penultimate objective) or by improving provision for students with special needs (the fourth objective). These objectives tended to be highly rated across all three sectors, with some differences of emphasis: special schools attached most importance to provision for low attainers, and independent schools attached most importance to provision for middle and high attainers. Independent and comprehensive schools also attached importance to making S6 more worthwhile, and comprehensive and special schools to recognising previously uncertificated provision. Objectives concerning progression were seen as important, but less important than the availability of provision at different levels.

The questions about institutional objectives were also repeated from the earlier survey. The patterns of response are very similar among the institutions which participated in both surveys, especially for comprehensive schools whose sample numbers are larger (table not shown). However, when schools were asked, in survey 2, how their objectives had changed over the last two years, they tended to say they had increased the importance they attached to the objectives concerning provision at different levels (table not shown). In other words they claimed that those objectives which they currently rated as most important had increased in importance, although in fact they had rated these objectives as highly in the earlier survey. This warns us not to attach too much significance to respondents' own perceptions of change: direct comparisons of measures at different time points may be more accurate.

Table 7: What are your school's objectives in implementing Higher Still? Please rate the importance of the following objectives (Schools only: respondents in 2002-03)

| | Comprehensive | Independent | Special |
|--|---------------|-------------|---------|
| Provide a more worthwhile curriculum for low attainers | 4.6 | 3.0 | 4.9 |
| Provide a more worthwhile curriculum for middle attainers | 4.5 | 3.7 | 4.1 |
| Provide a more worthwhile curriculum for high attainers | 4.3 | 3.7 | 3.2 |
| Provide a more worthwhile curriculum for students with special educational needs | 4.2 | 2.4 | 4.9 |
| Make S6 a more worthwhile year | 4.1 | 3.5 | 3.0 |
| Enable the recognition of previously uncertificated learning | 3.7 | 2.6 | 4.5 |
| Increase staying on rates | 3.2 | 2.4 | 2.0 |
| Improve student progression to FE | 3.8 | 2.3 | 3.3 |
| Improve student progression to HE | 3.7 | 2.2 | 3.1 |
| Improve student progression to employment | 3.7 | 2.2 | 3.1 |
| Improve the articulation of our provision with that of local schools | 2.6 | 1.3 | 3.1 |
| Expand the school's provision at particular levels | 4.0 | 3.2 | 4.1 |
| Expand the school's provision in particular subject areas | 3.7 | 2.9 | 3.8 |
| <i>n</i> | 239-245 | 25-26 | 56-73 |

Mean response on a five-point scale (5=very important, 1=not at all important); n's show the range across the different items, excluding item non-response. Data for special schools should be treated with caution, as respondents in special schools were more likely to leave blank items which they possibly considered inapplicable, rather than report these objectives as 'unimportant'.

Respondents were asked to rate the influence of different factors on their Higher Still provision. National and local policy and the nature of the upper-school roll were the most important influences for comprehensive schools (Table 8). The readiness and willingness of staff were also important. Independent and special schools felt less strongly influenced by most of the factors listed, except that independent schools were more strongly influenced by the needs of higher education and special schools were particularly influenced by staffing considerations.

The questions in Table 8 had also been included in the earlier survey. Table 9 presents the net difference in the response to each item from each sector. For example, if respondents gave an

influence a rating of 3.4 in survey 1, and respondents from the same institutions gave it a rating of 3.7 in survey 2, Table 9 will show a difference score of 0.3. Positive scores mean that a factor is rated as more influential in survey 2, negative scores as less influential.

Table 8: To what extent have the following factors influenced the school's decisions about Higher Still provision to date and future provision? (Respondents in 2002-03)

| | Comprehensive | Independent | Special |
|--|------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Government policies and priorities | 4.4 | 3.1 | 3.7 |
| Local authority policies and priorities | 4.4 | 1.6 | 3.6 |
| The nature of the roll in the upper school | 4.4 | 4.0 | 4.0 |
| Needs of HE | 3.4 | 4.3 | 2.0 |
| Needs of employers | 3.2 | 3.1 | 2.1 |
| Feedback from students | 3.6 | 3.0 | 2.7 |
| Resource issues | 3.5 | 2.7 | 3.0 |
| Timetabling issues | 3.7 | 3.1 | 2.8 |
| Availability of national support materials | 3.7 | 2.7 | 3.5 |
| Presence of key individuals in the school | 3.6 | 2.9 | 3.8 |
| Readiness of staff to implement plans | 4.0 | 3.1 | 4.3 |
| Willingness of staff | 4.0 | 3.2 | 4.3 |
| Role of local authority advisers | 2.6 | 1.2 | 2.7 |
| Links with other schools | 2.4 | 1.4 | 2.8 |
| Links with other colleges | 2.6 | 1.5 | 2.5 |
| <i>n (range across items)</i> | <i>(240-245)</i> | <i>(24-26)</i> | <i>(64-73)</i> |

Average scores on a five-point scale from 5 (very strong influence) to 1 (not an influence at all).

Table 9: To what extent have the following factors influenced the school's decisions about Higher Still provision to date and future provision? (Difference in response: respondents to both surveys)

| | Comprehensive | Independent | Special |
|--|------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Government policies and priorities | .0 | .8 | .1 |
| Local authority policies and priorities | .1 | -.3 | .1 |
| The nature of the roll in the upper school | .0 | .3 | .3 |
| Needs of HE | -.3 | -.2 | -.4 |
| Needs of employers | -.4 | -.1 | -.3 |
| Feedback from students | -.1 | .1 | -.0 |
| Resource issues | .2 | .3 | -.3 |
| Timetabling issues | .0 | .5 | -.1 |
| Availability of national support materials | .4 | .8 | -.2 |
| Presence of key individuals in the school | .1 | .5 | -.1 |
| Readiness of staff to implement plans | .3 | 1.1 | .3 |
| Willingness of staff | .3 | 1.0 | .3 |
| Role of local authority advisers | .2 | .0 | -.3 |
| Links with other schools | -.1 | .4 | -.3 |
| Links with other colleges | -.5 | -.2 | -.1 |
| <i>n (range across items)</i> | <i>(200-209)</i> | <i>(19-20)</i> | <i>(43-53)</i> |

Based on a 5-point scale from 5 (very strong influence) to 1 (not an influence at all). The table shows the mean difference between the two survey responses, with a positive score indicating that the factor was a stronger influence in 2002-03 than in 2000-01.

As the implementation of Higher Still proceeded, we might have expected staffing, resources and the availability of materials to become less important constraints or influences on its progress; conversely, we might have expected end-users to become more influential as they gained experience of the new system and had more opportunity to express their views or to exercise the choices that the system made possible. If anything, Table 9 shows the reverse. The availability of support materials and the readiness and willingness of staff became more important influences, especially in independent schools; while the needs of employers and higher education became less important influences. In our case study schools, staffing constraints were becoming more important as subject departments sought to increase provision at different levels of the climbing frame. The impression is given of a system driven more by the internal pressures of the quest to provide an ambitious, coherent and expanding suite of provision, than by the external pressures of user demand. It may also be significant that national and local policies and priorities were considered no less influential in survey 2, despite the belief of some of the former leaders of the reform that the system would increasingly run itself without central direction.

Given that the readiness and willingness of staff were important factors in the implementation of Higher Still, what were the attitudes of staff to the aims of Higher Still and the changes it introduced? We did not survey the opinions of different categories of school and college staff (although we interviewed a range of staff members in the case studies, reported elsewhere). However in the school survey we asked our respondents, typically senior managers with responsibility for Higher Still, to assess the views of staff in their institution (Table 10). These questions were repeated from the earlier survey. In 2002-03, perceived support for Higher Still tended to be highest among senior managers and lowest among 'ordinary' teachers, with heads of department somewhere in between. The same difference had been observed in 2000-01, but the gap had narrowed, especially in comprehensive schools where perceived support for Higher Still over the two years increased most among 'ordinary' teachers followed by heads of department. Perceived support in the independent schools increased among all categories of staff, including senior managers.

Table 10: In your view, how much support is there for the aims of Higher Still among the following groups? (Respondents to both surveys)

| | Comprehensive | | Independent | | Special | |
|------------------------------|---------------|---------|-------------|---------|---------|---------|
| | 2000/01 | 2002/03 | 2000/01 | 2002/03 | 2000/01 | 2002/03 |
| Members of senior management | 1.74 | 1.79 | 1.18 | 1.43 | 1.73 | 1.64 |
| Heads of department | 1.44 | 1.60 | 1.18 | 1.30 | 1.42* | 1.64* |
| Guidance staff | 1.49 | 1.54 | 1.05 | 1.09 | 1.65* | 1.71* |
| Other teachers | 1.18 | 1.41 | .95 | 1.13 | 1.20 | 1.36 |
| <i>n</i> | 201-209 | 207-211 | 22 | 23 | 20-56 | 21-58 |

Average scores on a 5-point scale from 2 (strong support) to -2 (strong opposition). The table excludes those who ticked 'don't know/difficult to say'; where these are a large number this is marked with an asterisk.

The overall levels of support in Table 10 are high; the responses are scaled from -2 (strong opposition) up to +2 (strong support) so average scores in the range of 1.41 to 1.79 (for comprehensive schools) indicate an impressive level of support for the aims of Higher Still. However, questions about specific changes introduced by the reform present a somewhat different picture. This is seen in Table 11 (these questions were included in the college

survey as well as the school survey). In comprehensive schools there was substantial and continuing perceived support for a single curricular framework for academic and vocational subjects, and for provision based on five levels – in other words, for the core principles of the ‘climbing frame’. However there was (on balance) opposition to the changes in assessment, to the emphasis on core skills and to the creation of SGAs. Staff in special schools and FE colleges, by contrast, were perceived to support the changes in assessment and the emphasis on core skills. Attitudes towards assessment had become somewhat more positive – or less negative – between the surveys; attitudes towards SGAs had become somewhat more negative, especially in the FE sector.

Table 11: In your view, how much support is there in your school/college for the changes introduced by Higher Still in relation to ... (Respondents to both surveys)

| | Comprehensive | | Independent | | Special | | FE | |
|---|---------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | 2000/ 01 | 2002/ 03 | 2000/ 01 | 2002/ 03 | 2000/ 01 | 2002/ 03 | 2000/ 01 | 2002/ 03 |
| Single curricular framework for both academic and vocational subjects | .87 | .89 | -.05 | .29 | .93 | .85 | 1.04 | .96 |
| Assessment | -.37 | -.04 | -.68 | -.52 | .61 | .84 | .00 | .57 |
| Emphasis on core skills | -.41 | -.19 | -.24 | -.42 | .91 | .92 | .80 | .97 |
| Creation of SGAs | -.56* | -.62 | -.43* | -.80* | .36* | .56* | .37 | -.23 |
| Provision based on five levels | .54 | .66 | -.18* | -.11 | .82* | .35* | .69 | .48 |
| <i>n</i> | 156- 207 | 182- 211 | 14-22 | 15-23 | 33-56 | 26-50 | 28-30 | 27-30 |

Average scores on a 5-point scale from 2 (strong support) to –2 (strong opposition). The table excludes those who ticked ‘don’t know/difficult to say’; where these are a large number this is marked with an asterisk.

Table 12: Do you think that the Higher Still framework ... (Percentages: respondents to both surveys)

| | Comprehensive | | Independent | | Special | | FE | |
|---|---------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | 2000/ 01 | 2002/ 03 | 2000/ 01 | 2002/ 03 | 2000/ 01 | 2002/ 03 | 2000/ 01 | 2002/ 03 |
| ... responds more to the needs of schools than colleges | 4 | 10 | 0 | 9 | 10 | 18 | 70 | 73 |
| ... responds more to the needs of colleges than schools | 29 | 17 | 55 | 39 | 5 | 2 | 7 | 3 |
| ... is a reasonable balance between the needs of schools and colleges | 37 | 37 | 9 | 26 | 31 | 51 | 23 | 20 |
| mixed response, don't know, others | 30 | 36 | 36 | 26 | 54 | 30 | 0 | 3 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 1100 | 100 | 101 | 100 | 99 |
| <i>n</i> | 208 | 208 | 22 | 23 | 59 | 57 | 30 | 30 |

Higher Still aimed to marry two different models of curriculum and assessment: a ‘vocational’ model associated with former Scotvec provision, and an ‘academic’ model associated with former SEB provision. The tensions between these two models and the

interests associated with them have been a continuing theme throughout the Higher Still development, most conspicuously in the debates over assessment and in the aftermath of the 2000 exams crisis (Raffe, Howieson and Tinklin 2001). They have often been manifested as differences between the school and FE sectors. Respondents were asked whether they felt that the Higher Still framework responded more to the needs of schools or of colleges (Table 12). In both surveys, respondents from comprehensive and (especially) independent schools were more likely to feel that Higher Still responded more to the needs of colleges than that it responded more to the needs of schools. However a large number of schools either felt that there was a reasonable balance or expressed a mixed or uncertain response. The views of school respondents appeared to mellow between the two surveys, with fewer respondents feeling that colleges had had the upper hand in 2002-03 than two years earlier. Among college respondents, by contrast, attitudes were more extreme and more consistent over time. Seven in ten college respondents felt that the needs of schools had been paramount and there was no sign of mellowing between the two surveys. To the extent that these perceptions reflect the 'balance' of Higher Still, they suggest that this swung towards schools between 2000-01 and 2002-03. This might reflect the changes introduced by the subject reviews and the slimming down of assessment; or it might reflect the perception within FE that the Higher Still development process was scaled down once the main school subjects had been catered for but before key areas of FE provision had been covered.

This leads us to the next theme of this paper: the progress made by Higher Still and its impact over the first four years of implementation.

PROGRESS AND IMPACT

Respondents were asked whether they felt more or less positive about the benefits of Higher Still than they had done two years earlier (Table 13). In all sectors those who felt more positive considerably outnumbered those who felt less positive, although a substantial number in each sector replied 'the same'. Special schools and comprehensive schools were the most favourable, with a majority of respondents in each sector reporting that they were either 'a lot more positive' or 'a bit more positive'. A majority of FE respondents were more positive, but a quarter (18 + 6 per cent) felt less positive than two years previously.

Table 13: Compared with two years ago, are you more or less positive about the benefits of the Higher Still reforms to your school? (Percentages: respondents in 2002-03)

| | Comprehensive | Independent | Special | FE |
|---------------------|---------------|-------------|---------|-----|
| A lot more positive | 17 | 4 | 30 | 9 |
| A bit more positive | 42 | 41 | 39 | 44 |
| The same | 32 | 41 | 30 | 24 |
| A bit less positive | 7 | 11 | 0 | 18 |
| A lot less positive | 1 | 4 | 0 | 6 |
| Total | 99 | 101 | 99 | 101 |
| <i>n</i> | 245 | 27 | 69 | 34 |

What were the benefits of Higher Still that encouraged this cautious optimism? Respondents were asked to assess the progress that had been made towards the different aims of Higher

Still, using the same descriptions of these aims as in Table 6 above. Their answers are summarised in Table 14. As in the earlier table, the figures show the average rating of respondents in each category. A scale value of 4 represents ‘a lot’ of progress, 1 represents none.

Table 14: In your view, how much progress has Higher Still made so far towards achieving these aims? (Respondents in 2002-03)

| | Comprehensive | Independent | Special | FE |
|--|----------------------|--------------------|----------------|-----------|
| To enable all our students to achieve the highest standard of attainment of which they are capable | 3.2 | 3.2 | 3.3 | 2.8 |
| To enable all our students to gain marketable qualifications | 3.1 | 3.1 | 2.6 | 2.5 |
| To offer our students a more even progression between stages | 3.1 | 2.7 | 2.9 | 2.7 |
| To enable courses always to be available to students at an appropriate level | 2.9 | 2.7 | 3.1 | 2.7 |
| To develop our students' attainment across a broader range of subjects | 2.6 | 2.3 | 3.0 | 2.3 |
| To give our students access to a range of both academic and vocational subjects | 2.4 | 1.9 | 2.7 | 2.5 |
| To promote parity of esteem of academic and vocational subjects | 2.2 | 1.8 | 2.3 | 2.3 |
| To bring academic and vocational courses into a unified curriculum and assessment system | 2.7 | 2.3 | 2.6 | 2.6 |
| To develop our students' competence in core skills | 2.4 | 2.3 | 3.0 | 2.7 |
| To provide a simpler, more efficient system easily understood by students, parents, employers and higher education | 2.2 | 2.0 | 2.6 | 1.9 |
| Average | 2.7 | 2.5 | 2.8 | 2.5 |
| <i>n</i> | 233-242 | 21-27 | 58-73 | 31-33 |

Average score on a 4-point scale (4=a lot; 3=some; 2=a little; 1=none). ‘Don’t know’ and blank responses are excluded. The number of don’t know and blank responses varies across the items; the n’s shows the range of valid sample responses on which the averages in each column are based.

Perceptions of progress varied across the aims of Higher Still and across the institutional sectors. Comprehensive and independent schools perceived most progress towards the first four aims in the table – those concerned with attainment, marketable qualifications, progression between stages and making courses available at an appropriate level. The last two of these reflect aspects of the ‘climbing frame’ discussed earlier. Respondents in special schools and colleges perceived progress slightly differently, especially with respect to developing core skills where they perceived more progress than mainstream schools. Most sectors reported relatively slow progress towards parity of esteem and towards producing a simpler and more efficient system.

The last item in the table reports the average progress across all the aims of Higher Still. This is at best a crude summary. However it is of some interest that the average progress towards the aims of Higher Still is somewhat closer to ‘some’ than ‘a little’, and that special schools followed by comprehensive schools perceive most progress, and independent schools and FE colleges the least. This corresponds to the different impact of Higher Still on the different sectors as revealed by our research. Among FE colleges, those who see most progress tend to be offering fewer SGAs and to have converted most non-advanced provision to NNQs.

Table 15: In your view, how much progress has Higher Still made so far towards achieving these aims? (Difference between responses in 2000-01 and 2002-03 from respondents to both surveys)

| | Comprehensive | Independent | Special | FE |
|--|---------------|-------------|---------|-------|
| To enable all our students to achieve the highest standard of attainment of which they are capable | .20 | .39 | .23 | .42 |
| To enable all our students to gain marketable qualifications | .37 | .62 | .08 | .52 |
| To offer our students a more even progression between stages | .06 | .35 | .11 | .39 |
| To enable courses always to be available to students at an appropriate level | .19 | .17 | .00 | .38 |
| To develop our students' attainment across a broader range of subjects | .17 | .36 | .22 | .21 |
| To give our students access to a range of both academic and vocational subjects | .03 | .29 | .16 | .21 |
| To promote parity of esteem of academic and vocational subjects | .19 | .29 | -.10 | .58 |
| To bring academic and vocational courses into a unified curriculum and assessment system | -.04 | .29 | -.04 | .39 |
| To develop our students' competence in core skills | .47 | .20 | .06 | .41 |
| To provide a simpler, more efficient system easily understood by students, parents, employers and higher education | .50 | .60 | .26 | .54 |
| Average | .21 | .37 | .10 | .40 |
| <i>n (range, excluding item non-response)</i> | 192-208 | 17-23 | 42-56 | 25-29 |

Table 15 suggests that respondents perceived more progress towards the aims of Higher Still by 2002-03 than by 2000-01, but not much more. Each cell of the table shows the difference between the rating of progress in survey 2 and survey 1, with a positive figure indicating more progress by the time of the later survey. The table shows further progress towards all of the aims of Higher Still; however, the extent of this further progress is typically modest, only a fraction of a single point on the scale. Perhaps surprisingly, all sectors perceive substantially more progress than at the earlier survey towards a simpler and more efficient system; another possible surprise is that comprehensive schools perceive more progress

towards core skills. Except for special schools, all sectors perceive more progress towards helping students to gain marketable qualifications.

Table 14 above showed that in 2002-03 independent schools and FE colleges reported less average progress towards the aims of Higher Still than did comprehensive and special schools. We attributed this to the slower implementation in independent schools and FE colleges. Table 15 shows that these sectors nevertheless reported most additional progress in 2002-03 compared with two years earlier, and special schools the least. This suggests that there has been a catching up process in the sectors whose implementation of Higher Still was initially slower. Among comprehensive schools, those with average S4 attainments report slightly more progress in 2002-03, and report most additional progress over the two years.

Table 16: Have the changes to the curriculum in your school because of Higher Still ... (Percent responding yes to each item: schools only: respondents to both surveys)

| | Comprehensive | | Independent | | Special | |
|--|---------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | 2000/01 | 2002/03 | 2000/01 | 2002/03 | 2000/01 | 2002/03 |
| ...given students more opportunity to mix levels? | 79 (209) | 91 (211) | 57 (23) | 68 (22) | 38 (50) | 57 (54) |
| if yes, have they taken up this opportunity? | 96 (153) | 99 (187) | 92 (13) | 100 (15) | 94 (18) | 88 (25) |
| ...given students more opportunity to take courses at a level appropriate to their starting point? | 93 (206) | 95 (208) | 65 (23) | 59 (22) | 86 (49) | 86 (51) |
| if yes, have they taken up this opportunity? | 96 (175) | 95 (192) | 85 (13) | 92 (13) | 100 (34) | 100 (34) |
| ...enabled more mixing of academic and vocational subjects? | 39 (205) | 54 (209) | 0 (22) | 14 (22) | 24 (45) | 38 (50) |
| if yes, are more academic students taking vocational subjects? | 56 (75) | 68 (111) | - | 67 (3) | 78 (9) | 60 (15) |

Percentages show respondents answering 'yes'; others replied 'no' or 'don't know'. Blank responses to each item are excluded from the 100% base (n), which is reported in brackets below each percentage.

Table 16 explores aspects of Higher Still's flexible 'climbing frame' curriculum in relation to school students. Nearly all comprehensive school respondents felt that Higher Still had given students more opportunity to mix levels and to take courses at a more appropriate level; moreover, they felt that students had taken up this opportunity. This was the view of a majority, if a less overwhelming majority, of respondents in independent and special schools. Respondents were much less likely to perceive that Higher Still enabled more mixing of academic and vocational subjects, or to report that more academic students were taking vocational subjects. However they did at least report a trend towards flexibility, with more opportunities for mixing in 2002-03 than in 2000-01.

Colleges were asked a different set of questions on these aspects of flexibility. About two-thirds of colleges felt that Higher Still had given students more opportunity to work at an appropriate level; the others felt there had been no change or were not sure (Table 17). Interestingly, the number who felt there had been a change was no greater in 2002-03 than two years earlier. Fewer than half the college respondents felt that Higher Still had promoted more mixing of academic and vocational subjects or given students a wider choice of

subjects; and very few thought it had encouraged high achieving students to take vocational subjects. When asked about other dimensions of flexibility, college respondents offered even less favourable verdicts (Table 18). On balance they felt that Higher Still had reduced staff's ability to respond to student needs in the timing of assessments (with only a slight improvement between 2000-01 and 2002-03). They perceived little impact on staff's ability to respond to student needs in their teaching and learning approaches or on students' ability to access provision in a flexible way.

Table 17: On balance, what impact has Higher Still had on students at your college and on potential students? Compared to the pre-Higher Still position, has it ... (colleges only: respondents to both surveys)

| | number of 'yes' responses in 2000/01 | number of 'yes' responses in 2002/03 |
|--|---|---|
| ... given students more opportunity to work at a level appropriate to them/their starting point? | 21 | 20 |
| ... promoted more mixing of academic and vocational subjects? | 9 | 13 |
| ... given students a wider range of subjects to choose from? | 12 | 13 |
| ... encouraged high achieving students to take vocational subjects? | 3 | 2 |

The table shows the number of colleges, out of a total of 30 colleges, who responded 'yes'. The other colleges responded 'no change' or 'not sure' or (one college) left the item blank.

Table 18: Compared to the pre-Higher Still position, to what extent has Higher Still increased or decreased ... (colleges only: respondents to both surveys)

| | mean response in 2001/02 | mean response in 2002/03 |
|--|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| ... staff's ability to respond to student needs in the timing of assessments? | -.59 | -.43 |
| ... staff's ability to respond to student needs in their teaching and learning approaches? | .19 | .04 |
| ... students' ability to access provision in a flexible way? | .00 | .07 |
| <i>n</i> | 26-27 | 28-29 |

Average on a five-point scale from +2 (strongly increased) to -2 (strongly decreased). Respondents ticking 'don't know' or leaving the item blank are excluded.

The inclusiveness of the Higher Still 'climbing frame' is further explored in a series of questions which asked school respondents to rate the impact of Higher Still on provision for different categories of students. Many respondents appeared to answer only in respect of those students who were well represented in their own schools; where there was a large number of non-respondents the relevant figure in Table 19 is marked with an asterisk, and these figures should be treated with caution. Comprehensive schools perceived greatest impact on provision for S5/S6 students with average or low attainment at Standard grade: these students have generally been seen as the main target group for Higher Still. However Higher Still was also perceived to have had a positive net impact on high-attaining students. Special schools perceived greatest impact on students with special needs, on S3/S4 students not taking Standard grade and on students planning to go on to FE or employment (comprehensive schools also reported a positive impact for these students, but not to the same

extent as special schools). Table 19 therefore provides evidence that Higher Still has helped to create a more inclusive pattern of provision. However an equally striking message is that this impact of Higher Still was substantially greater in 2002-03 than in 2000-01. This probably reflects the effect of more provision across a wider range of levels becoming available as implementation proceeded.

Table 19: What impact has Higher Still had on the school's ability to meet the needs of particular students? Has Higher Still helped in relation to ... (schools only: respondents to both surveys)

| | Comprehensive | | Independent | | Special | |
|---|---------------|---------|-------------|---------|---------|---------|
| | 2000/01 | 2002/03 | 2000/01 | 2002/03 | 2000/01 | 2002/03 |
| S5/S6 students with high attainment at Standard Grade? | .23 | .61 | -.35 | .22 | -.75* | -.08* |
| S5/S6 students with average attainment at Standard Grade? | .94 | 1.10 | .57 | .61 | -.46* | .29* |
| S5/S6 students with low attainment at Standard Grade? | .83 | 1.02 | .37 | .43 | .88* | .90* |
| Students with special educational needs? | .16 | .67 | -.36* | .00 | 1.56 | 1.73 |
| S3/S4 students not undertaking Standard Grades? | -.16* | .39 | -1.38* | .07* | 1.33 | 1.75 |
| Students planning to go on to HE? | .10 | .44 | -.17 | .23 | -.79* | .00* |
| Students planning to go on to FE? | .33 | .55 | -.13* | .15 | .85 | 1.10 |
| Students planning to go into employment? | .07 | .39 | -.60 | -.25 | .36* | .97 |
| <i>n</i> | 159-205 | 179-209 | 8-21 | 15-23 | 12-50 | 12-45 |

Average score on a five-point scale from +2 (strongly agree) to -2 (strongly disagree). Respondents who ticked 'don't know' or left the item blank are excluded (an asterisk indicates a high proportion of these respondents for this category of students).

One possible way in which Higher Still met the needs of students with special educational needs was by placing their provision within a unified system that provided opportunities for progression. However, such opportunities might exist on paper but mean little in practice. It is reassuring that schools, and in particular special schools, felt that Higher Still has offered these students opportunities for meaningful progression in practice (Table 20).

Table 20: To what extent do you think NNQs offer students with special educational needs opportunities for meaningful progression in practice? (schools only: respondents in 2002-03)

| | Comprehensive | Independent | Special |
|---|---------------|-------------|---------|
| Within your school | 3.5 | 2.3 | 4.3 |
| From school to college | 3.5 | 2.9 | 3.8 |
| From school to a vocational opportunity | 3.2 | 2.9 | 3.3 |
| <i>n</i> | 229-240 | 17-18 | 59-68 |

Average response on a five-point scale from 5 (a lot) to 1 (not at all).

Table 21 provides another perspective on the 'climbing frame'. Higher Still aimed to reverse the tendency for S5 students to choose Highers, even when they were unlikely to succeed at this level, because the available provision at other levels, especially NC modules, lacked status. Higher Still aimed to raise the standing of levels of provision below Higher by

including it within the same unified system, with the opportunity for progression to Higher. Table 21 suggests that it succeeded in this respect. School respondents were asked to rate the standing of New National Qualifications at each level compared with the provision that they replaced. Many respondents responded 'not sure' in respect of the levels with which they were less familiar. With these responses excluded, Table 21 shows the percentages of respondents who felt that NNQs had higher and lower standing than previous provision. For example, 77 per cent of respondents in comprehensive schools (excluding those who were 'not sure') judged the standing of Intermediate 2 NNQs to be higher than the provision they replaced; only 2 per cent rated it as lower. This pattern of response is typical. For all levels below Higher, a majority of respondents in each category considered the standing of NNQs to be higher than the previous provision. Only a handful felt it was lower. Even with respect to Advanced Higher, nearly half the respondents felt that NNQs were higher in standing than the previous provision (mainly CSYS), and most of the others felt it was the same. The main exception to the general pattern in Table 4 is the Higher itself, which a large majority of respondents considered to have 'the same' standing as the earlier provision. Since the Higher was, in effect, the fixed point around which the new climbing frame was constructed, the fact that its standing is unchanged is consistent with the success of the strategy.

Table 21: Compared with the provision they replaced (including uncertificated provision), how would you rate the standing of NNQs? (Percentage responding 'higher'/percentage responding 'lower': schools only: respondents in 2002-03)

| | Comprehensive | Independent | Special |
|-----------------|----------------------|--------------------|----------------|
| Access 1 | 62/9 | * | 68/11 |
| (n) | (66) | (2) | (47) |
| Access 2 | 70/8 | * | 69/6 |
| (n) | (83) | (2) | (52) |
| Access 3 | 73/6 | * | 68/4 |
| (n) | (167) | (4) | (47) |
| Intermediate 1 | 66/4 | * | 67/0 |
| (n) | (222) | (7) | (24) |
| Intermediate 2 | 77/2 | 55/10 | 80/0 |
| (n) | (225) | (20) | (10) |
| Higher | 17/6 | 0/20 | * |
| (n) | (231) | (20) | (6) |
| Advanced Higher | 43/3 | 40/10 | * |
| (n) | (225) | (20) | (5) |
| <i>Total n</i> | <i>(248)</i> | <i>(27)</i> | <i>(75)</i> |

The two figures show the percentages responding 'higher' and 'lower' respectively. The remainder of the 100% total responded 'same'. Respondents who replied 'not sure', together with a few who left the item blank, are not included in the 100% base n shown in brackets beneath each pair of percentages. Their numbers can be estimated by comparing this n with the total n at the bottom of the table.

Finally, respondents in all sectors felt that the Review of Assessment and the Subject Reviews undertaken following the Review of National Qualifications in 2001 would have a positive effect, especially on difficulties relating to the volume and complexity of assessment (Table 22). They were somewhat less confident (but still positive on average) about the effects on other issues such as the variation in levels of difficulty across subjects.

Table 22: What effect do you think that the recent Review of Assessment and Subject Reviews will have on difficulties relating to the ... (Respondents in 2002-03)

| | Comprehensive | Independent | Special | FE |
|---|---------------|-------------|---------|-------|
| complexity of assessment | .82 | .70 | .53 | 1.06 |
| volume of assessment | .84 | .70 | .51 | 1.00 |
| assessment being suited to the needs of the subject | .71 | .58 | .55 | .87 |
| variation in levels of difficulty across subjects | .42 | .23 | .38 | .55 |
| variations in levels of difficulty within subjects | .51 | .23 | .42 | .73 |
| relation between unit and external assessment | .44 | .37 | .33 | .75 |
| <i>n</i> | 235-245 | 26-27 | 45-51 | 30-32 |

Average scores on a 5-point scale from 2 (positive effect) to -2 (negative effect). Zero represents no change.

INSTITUTIONAL COLLABORATION

Higher Still was introduced to a system where there was already substantial collaboration among schools and between schools and colleges (Table 23). About a half of comprehensive schools had collaborative links which involved their students attending other schools, and slightly more than half had similar links with colleges. A significant minority of comprehensive schools reported joint delivery of provision with other schools (17 per cent) or with colleges (21 per cent). Even larger proportions reported planning activities to improve articulation (21 per cent and 30 per cent respectively). The corresponding figures for independent schools were lower, but there were substantial links between special schools and colleges. Table 23 may slightly underestimate institutional links because blank responses are included with negative responses.

Table 23: Before the introduction of Higher Still, which of the following links did you have with other schools and colleges? (Percentage 'yes': schools only: respondents in 2002-03)

| | Comprehensive | Independent | Special |
|---|---------------|-------------|---------|
| With other schools: | | | |
| joint delivery of provision | 17 | 7 | 5 |
| students from other institutions accessing your provision | 52 | 22 | 12 |
| your students accessing provision at other institution(s) | 50 | 15 | 33 |
| planning activities to improve articulation of provision | 21 | 11 | 12 |
| With colleges: | | | |
| joint delivery of provision | 21 | 4 | 21 |
| students from other institutions accessing your provision | 4 | 4 | 5 |
| your students accessing provision at other institution(s) | 57 | 19 | 61 |
| planning activities to improve articulation of provision | 30 | 4 | 23 |
| <i>n</i> | (248) | (27) | (75) |

Respondents could reply 'yes' or 'no' to each item. Missing responses are included in the 100% base as they may indicate a 'no' response. Missings range from 3% to 11% among comprehensive schools, from 7% to 22% among independent schools and from 11% to 32% among special schools.

Higher Still tended to increase these links, especially between schools and colleges. In answer to a separate question (table not shown), 27 per cent of comprehensive schools and 35 per cent of special schools reported that Higher Still already had, or was expected to have, an effect on their links with other schools; 52 per cent and 53 per cent respectively reported an effect on links with colleges, and 15 per cent and 4 per cent respectively reported an effect on links with higher education. Most of the remainder reported no difference. Independent schools were less likely to report an effect on collaborative links with other schools or colleges.

In most cases this effect involved an increase rather than a decrease in links. Table 24 shows the types of collaborative activities involved. The biggest increases were in comprehensive school students accessing college provision and planning activities to improve articulation between comprehensive schools and colleges.

Table 24: On balance, how have the following links with other schools and colleges been affected? (Percent increased/decreased: schools only: respondents in 2002-03)

| | Comprehensive | Independent | Special |
|---|---------------|-------------|---------|
| With other schools: | | | |
| joint delivery of provision | 6/4 | 4/0 | 8/1 |
| students from other institutions | 15/4 | 0/4 | 7/0 |
| accessing your provision | | | |
| your students accessing provision at other institution(s) | 17/6 | 4/4 | 15/4 |
| planning activities to improve articulation of provision | 8/4 | 4/0 | 12/3 |
| With colleges: | | | |
| joint delivery of provision | 19/4 | 4/0 | 15/1 |
| students from other institutions | 4/1 | 0/0 | 3/0 |
| accessing your provision | | | |
| your students accessing provision at other institution(s) | 38/2 | 15/0 | 21/1 |
| planning activities to improve articulation of provision | 28/2 | 0/0 | 13/1 |
| <i>n</i> | (248) | (27) | (75) |

The two figures show, respectively, the percentage of institutions reporting an increase in the relevant link and the percentage reporting a decrease. The 100% base includes those who left the item blank in addition to those who reported 'no change'

The corresponding question in the college survey asked only about changes since the previous year. Of the 34 colleges, 20 reported an increase in school students accessing college facilities and 21 reported joint planning with schools to improve articulation. Others reported an increase in college staff teaching in schools (ten colleges), an increase in joint planning with other colleges to improve articulation (9 colleges), or an increase in joint delivery of provision with schools (5 colleges) or with other colleges (3 colleges).

SCOTTISH GROUP AWARDS

Few schools offered SGAs in 2002-03 (Table 25). Only 16 out of 248 comprehensive schools offered any SGAs, and those that did offered an average of 6.7 (SGAs at different levels in the same subject are counted separately). The proportion of special schools offering SGAs

was slightly higher: 14 out of 75. A majority of FE colleges (26 out of 34) offered SGAs, but most of these offered only a handful. The average of 6.1 SGAs in FE conceals a skewed distribution: one college offered 37 SGAs and a couple offered more than 10, while most colleges offered fewer than 6.

Table 25: Scottish Group Awards offered by schools and colleges in 2002-03

| | Comprehensive | Independent | Special | FE |
|---|---------------|-------------|---------|-----|
| number of schools/colleges offering any SGAs | 16 | 1 | 14 | 26 |
| average number of SGAs (among schools/colleges offering at least one) | 6.7 | 7.0 | 3.1 | 6.1 |
| number of schools/colleges offering SGAs at: | | | | |
| Access | 4 | 0 | 12 | 4 |
| Intermediate 1 | 4 | 1 | 4 | 13 |
| Intermediate 2 | 7 | 1 | 2 | 24 |
| Higher | 11 | 1 | 1 | 13 |
| Advanced Higher | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| n | 248 | 27 | 75 | 34 |

Blank responses are treated as 'nil' returns.

This level of take-up of SGAs fell far below earlier expectations. In the earlier (2000-01) survey more than a quarter of schools (26 per cent) anticipated offering at least one SGA in three years time: only one in five of these schools was offering an SGA two years later. A further 24 per cent of schools thought they would 'probably', and 16 per cent 'possibly' offer an SGA in three years' time: none of these schools was offering one two years later. In 2002-03 half the colleges (17 out of 33) reported that they were implementing fewer SGAs than planned; none was implementing more than planned.

The reasons for the limited offer of SGAs varied between schools and colleges (Table 26). In colleges the main problems were the lack of demand from employers and higher education, and design problems which meant that SGAs did not meet the needs of their client group or they did not fill the gaps in provision which they were required to fill. In comprehensive schools the most common reasons referred to design problems which made them difficult to deliver, including the requirement for core skills. Schools also felt that SGAs were not valued by employers and higher education, and that they did not add value. However a significant proportion of schools had not totally rejected SGAs, but felt that they needed to gain more experience of NNQ units and courses first. This may explain why as many as a quarter of comprehensive schools and a third of special schools planned to increase their offer of SGAs over the next three years. (None of the independent schools planned an increase.) A quarter of colleges planned an increase for 2003-04. The survey took place before the consultation on SGAs and the surrounding debates, which signalled their likely demise.

Table 26: The following statements have been given by some schools/colleges as the reason(s) that they are offering few or no SGAs [*college questionnaire: the reason(s) for their relatively limited development of SGAs*]. Do any of these reasons apply in your school/college? (Percentage responding 'yes': respondents in 2002-03)

| | Comprehensive | Independent | Special | FE |
|---|---------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Not valued by employers | 56 | 48 | 17 | 71 |
| Not valued by HE | 55 | 70 | 12 | 68 |
| Too complicated in their design | 76 | 63 | 32 | 71 |
| Too restrictive in their design | 44 | 30 | 21 | 77 |
| Too academic in their design | [not asked] | [not asked] | [not asked] | 62 |
| Too demanding a level of difficulty | 13 | 7 | 35 | 71 |
| The lack of relevant SGAs to replace specific NC programmes | [not asked] | [not asked] | [not asked] | 79 |
| Difficulty of tracking students' progress | 69 | 48 | 36 | 18 |
| Requirement to include core skills | 62 | 37 | 23 | 24 |
| The level at which core skills specified | 54 | 26 | 15 | 27 |
| They would not add anything to students' learning | 51 | 63 | 17 | 35 |
| Need to gain more experience of NNQ units and courses first | 59 | 37 | 33 | [not asked] |
| <i>n</i> | 248 | 27 | 75 | 34 |

Respondents could answer yes or no to each item; the figure shows the percentage responding yes, with blank responses included in the 100% base. The number of blank responses varied across items; they typically accounted for around one third of special schools, one fifth of independent schools and fewer than one in ten comprehensive schools.

CORE SKILLS

We have seen that developing core skills was perceived to be the least important aim of Higher Still by comprehensive schools, but one of the most important by special schools and by colleges (Table 6, above). However we also noted that schools attached more importance to core skills in the 2002-03 survey than two years earlier; and that developing core skills was one of the aims towards which where they perceived most progress (Table 15, above). These more positive views are echoed in Table 27, which shows the responses of school respondents to more direct questions about core development in their schools. A majority of comprehensive and special schools felt that HS had stimulated, or would stimulate, core skill development. Only a small minority of respondents gave totally negative answers.

Table 27: Has Higher Still stimulated the development of core skills provision in your school? (Percentages: schools only; respondents in 2002-03)

| | Comprehensive | Independent | Special |
|--|---------------|-------------|---------|
| Core skills already well developed before Higher Still | 14 | 26 | 29 |
| Has stimulated development | 32 | 26 | 47 |
| Not yet stimulated but will | 32 | 7 | 12 |
| Not at all | 15 | 30 | 9 |
| Don't know/not stated | 7 | 11 | 3 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| <i>n</i> | 248 | 27 | 75 |

These data are consistent with slow initial progress but an expectation of more progress later on. Asked why progress had been slow, respondents blamed a range of factors, especially complicated arrangements and the difficulties of assessing core skills (Table 28).

Table 28: The following statements have been given by some schools as the reason(s) that core skill development has been limited. Do any of these reasons apply in your school? (Percentages: schools only; respondents in 2002-03)

| | Comprehensive (all) | Comprehensive (limited CS development) | Independent | Special |
|---|---------------------|--|-------------|---------|
| Not valued by employers | 32 | 43 | 33 | 13 |
| Not valued by HE | 43 | 53 | 48 | 11 |
| Too complicated in their design | 55 | 63 | 48 | 23 |
| Difficulty of identifying students' core skills | 65 | 80 | 41 | 23 |
| Certification too complicated | 66 | 79 | 56 | 28 |
| They would not add anything to students' learning | 32 | 39 | 59 | 15 |
| <i>n</i> | 248 | 117 | 27 | 75 |

Respondents could answer yes or no to each item; the figure shows the percentage responding yes, with blank responses included in the 100% base. These were typically around three in ten of special schools, one fifth to one quarter of independent schools and fewer than one in ten comprehensive schools. 'Limited CS development' refers to schools which responded 'not yet stimulated but will' or 'not at all' in Table 27.

DISCUSSION

In this final section we draw out some of the main themes from our surveys of schools and colleges. They reflect a particular perspective on Higher Still: the institutional perspective, and in particular that of senior managers within institutions. They do not directly report the views of other staff in the institutions, of students, or of other stakeholders in Scottish education. The IUS project has also used other data sources, including case studies of schools

and colleges, analyses of SQA data and interviews with key informants. Future Working Papers will draw on all these sources of data in order to provide a more rounded picture of the introduction of Higher Still and to address our key research questions. The following summary is therefore partial and provisional; nevertheless it identifies a number of themes which we will explore further in relation to our other data sources.

The normalisation of Higher Still. The first survey was conducted in the second year of the implementation of Higher Still. In many levels and subjects NNQs and their supporting materials were still being developed, and schools and colleges were still building up experience in their delivery; moreover, the survey took place in the aftermath of the ‘exams crisis’ of 2000 (and it was delayed to avoid adding to the burdens on schools that resulted from that crisis). By 2002-03, when the second survey was carried out, the portfolio of NNQs was more nearly complete, and schools and colleges had gained more experience in their delivery. The subject and assessment reviews were beginning to take effect and policy attention had turned to fine-tuning the system. By the second survey Higher Still had lost much of its aura of innovation and controversy. It provided the normal curriculum of upper-secondary education; even if it had not taken over FE provision to the extent that was originally envisaged, it replaced most non-advanced provision for around half of colleges and it provided a significant component of provision for many of the others. Higher Still was becoming normalised.

Our surveys provides several indicators of this process of normalisation. Our respondents were becoming more optimistic about the benefits of Higher Still, and they perceived positive if unspectacular progress towards its aims. They reported more positive attitudes among staff in their institutions. Some of these improvements may have been the result of implementation being more complete by 2002-03, and of staff gaining experience and confidence in working with the new system. However, policy changes also helped. Our respondents endorsed the changes that were being introduced following the Review of National Qualifications, especially in reducing the volume and complexity of assessment. Perhaps the most revealing indicator of normalisation is provided by comparing respondents’ evaluations of progress towards the aims of Higher Still in 2000-01 and in 2002-03. The greatest relative progress between these dates – if not the most absolute progress – was towards providing a system that was simpler, more efficient and easier to understand.

Sectoral differences. Higher Still introduced a ‘unified system’ which brought together different kinds of provision in different sectors of education. In many respects the reforms can be understood as an attempt to marry two different traditions of curriculum and assessment: an ‘academic’ tradition based in schools and a ‘vocational’ tradition with its main location in colleges. Higher Still did not, of course, abolish all differences between sectors; and these continuing differences are evident in most of the analyses reported above. Comprehensive schools, independent schools, special schools and FE colleges differed in the importance they attached to the different aims of Higher Still, in their priorities for implementing it, in the factors which influenced their decisions, and in their perceptions of its impact. There is some evidence of convergence between sectors. The tendency for schools to focus on a narrower set of the aims of Higher Still than colleges has attenuated slightly; and the independent schools, who tended to be the most detached from the aims and objectives of Higher Still at the earlier survey, have become more fully committed. Perhaps more importantly, the reforms have encouraged articulation and collaboration between sectors.

Improving progression to FE has been an important objective for comprehensive and special schools, and Higher Still has encouraged a substantial increase in collaboration between schools and colleges. Nevertheless some of the tensions between sectors persist, and these tensions are especially felt by colleges. A large majority of colleges felt that their needs had been subordinated to those of schools in the implementation of Higher Still.

The institutional role. One of the IUS project's objectives is to investigate the ways in which the new 'unified system' has been shaped by the decisions of the schools and colleges which implemented it. Such features of the new system as its slower and less complete implementation in FE, the low take-up of SGAs, the development of collaborative provision and the use of NNQs to replace some Standard Grade courses are the result of decisions of this kind. Many of the factors which drove or constrained implementation were also at the institutional level. Issues of resources, and in particular staffing, were important factors in schools' decisions, and appeared to become more rather than less important as implementation proceeded. However institutions' freedom of manoeuvre was limited. Schools identified the policies and priorities of government and local authorities as important influences on their decisions. They were also influenced by the anticipated reactions of higher education and employers, although these appeared to become less important influences as implementation proceeded. An important null finding of our surveys is that Higher Still did not result in a polarisation of schools related to the nature of their students group. Schools' policies and approaches to NNQs did not vary across schools serving students at different attainment levels to the extent that had been predicted in some earlier speculations.

The climbing frame. Institutions' priorities and decisions reinforced one of the main features of Higher Still – its aspiration to construct an inclusive 'climbing frame' with flexible entry points and flexible opportunities for progression thereafter. For many institutions – and especially comprehensive and special schools – the main priority in implementing Higher Still was to improve provision for students across the range of attainment levels, and also for students with special educational needs. This emphasis on 'opportunity for all' seemed to be the feature of Higher Still which attracted widest support. It is also an area where Higher Still is widely perceived to be successful. Our school respondents felt that Higher Still had helped them to cater for students across all levels of prior attainment, and they felt more positive about this in 2002-03 than two years earlier. It was easier for students to find courses at an appropriate level, and it was easier to mix levels. The new levels of provision introduced by Higher Still had higher standing than the provision that they replaced. Higher Still had also enhanced provision for students with special educational needs. And schools were continuing to explore its potential for further development: as a means of enhancing articulation and collaboration with colleges, and as a means for developing a progression-oriented curriculum in S3 and S4.

However, although the new levels of the climbing frame made it more accessible, other features made it less so. Our earlier analyses of the colleges' responses to survey 1 drew attention to the tension between the increased flexibility of pathways – the availability of opportunities in appropriate subjects at appropriate levels – and what was often a reduction in the flexibility of delivery – the college's ability to offer Higher Still at a time, mode and pace to suit the learner.

Parity of esteem. Finally, progress towards parity of esteem for academic and vocational learning was slow, as reported by our respondents. Higher Still appeared to have done less for

the standing of vocational education than for the standing of the new levels of provision. Schools reported less mixing of academic and vocational study than mixing of levels, although one third of schools did say that more academic students were taking vocational courses. SGAs, which might have provided a boost for vocational education, failed to take off. Core skills, a possible bridge between academic and vocational study, developed slowly, at least in schools, but they appeared to have gained momentum.

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