

THE HIGHER STILL POLICY PROCESS

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HIGHER STILL AND ITS CONTEXT

In 1994 the document **Higher Still: Opportunity for All** outlined the government's plans for a 'unified system' of post-16 education and set in motion one of the most wide-ranging programmes of reform that Scottish education has ever seen (Scottish Office 1994). The reform is due to be implemented in 1999, having twice been postponed. In this article we review the policy process over the four years after **Opportunity for All** was published. We also consider the interaction between the process and content of policy: what distinctive features does the policy process assume if the policy in question is one to develop a unified system?

Higher Still is the government's response to the Howie Report on upper secondary education in Scotland, which argued that existing provision failed to meet the needs either of university-bound students or of the middle- and lower-attaining students who were staying on in increasing numbers beyond 16 (SOED 1992). The committee's proposed solution was a twin-track system: 35-40% of 15 year olds would enter a three-year academic course and the rest would take more vocationally oriented programmes for one or two years. In the public consultation that followed the publication of the Howie Report, its diagnosis of current problems was widely accepted but its proposal for twin-tracking was almost universally rejected.

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Higher Still addresses the problems diagnosed by Howie, but it offers a different solution. Instead of twin tracks it introduces a 'unified curriculum and assessment system' to replace most existing provision at 16-plus, including Highers, Certificate of Sixth Year Studies (CSYS) courses and National Certificate (NC) modules. It brings most school- and college-based education beyond 16, below the level of higher education, into a single system governed by common principles of curriculum, assessment and certification. The main building blocks of the new system are 40- or 80-hour units and 160-hour courses; each course will typically comprise three units plus additional time for induction, extension, integration and preparation for external examination. Specified combinations of units or courses will lead to Scottish Group Awards (SGAs), typically based on a single year's full-time study, but these are not compulsory. Units will be internally assessed (pass/fail) with an additional external assessment for courses (graded A,B,C). Higher Still will cover five levels, of which the top two levels (Advanced Higher and Higher) correspond to CSYS and Higher in the existing system. However they will cover a broader range of subjects, including vocational subjects formerly available as NC modules.

Much of the Higher Still curriculum is based on existing CSYS, Higher and NC provision, and the document **Opportunity for All** presented the reform as a stage in an evolutionary process. It described nine aims of Higher Still including the 'rationalisation of existing provision' and the 'consolidation of earlier reforms' (Scottish Office 1994, pp.9-10). Nevertheless the reform required design and development work on a huge scale. A framework for curriculum, assessment and certification had to be designed, sufficiently versatile to cover all the subjects, levels and institutions in the unified system. This framework also had to take account of such matters as core skills, special needs and guidance. Existing courses had to be adapted, and often radically revised, to fit the new framework, and the many gaps in existing provision had to be filled. Local authorities, schools and colleges had to be given the resources and the training to implement the reforms. The stakeholders in the new system had to be informed and consulted about its development.

After the publication of **Opportunity for All**, the Scottish Office Education Department (as it then was) set up a Development Officers Group comprising two schools inspectors (HMIs) and two members of staff from each of the Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum (SCCC), the Scottish Examinations Board (SEB) and the Scottish Vocational Education Council (SCOTVEC). For the next two years this group was responsible for developing policy, and it produced policy papers for the Strategy Group which was set up to direct the Higher Still Development Programme launched

in summer 1994. The Strategy Group was chaired by the current Senior Chief Inspector of Schools and included members from many of the stakeholders in the reform: schools featured strongly in the Group with a smaller number of members from further and higher education. Other members came from the key national bodies (SEB, SCOTVEC, the SCCC, the Scottish Office, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and the Scottish Parent Teacher Council) and from the local authority and adult education sectors. The Strategy Group was supported by three task groups, on curriculum and assessment, staff development, and information and publicity. Towards the end of 1994 the Higher Still Development Unit (HSDU) was set up to support the programme. It was led by a Chief Development Officer supported by several Development Officers, mostly seconded from other sectors of the education system. Staff of the HSDU prepared papers and briefings for the Strategy Group and usually attended its meetings and those of its task groups.

In a series of documents published from early 1995, the HSDU outlined the principles on which the reform was to be based and presented progressively more detailed versions of the proposals. These included specifications of Higher Still courses and units in each subject, and implementation studies to assess the feasibility of the plans. These documents formed the basis for 'the most comprehensive consultation ever undertaken in connection with a curriculum and assessment initiative in Scotland' (HSDU 1995). The first consultation round began in September 1995 and further consultations took place in 1996 and 1997. In 1997 the Strategy Group and its task groups were disbanded, except for the information and publicity group. It was replaced by an Implementation Group, whose members come from the same sectors as were covered by the Strategy Group, but with more members from the local authority sector, reflecting the different stage of the reform. It is supported by sector groups representing schools, further and higher education and employment and training interests.

The plans for Higher Still were launched at a time of transition in Scottish educational policy-making. **Opportunity for All** was published in 1994. Lord James Douglas-Hamilton, appointed education minister in 1992, was attempting to improve relationships with teachers and education authorities, after a period of conflict under his predecessor Michael Forsyth (Humes 1995). Nevertheless a legacy of mistrust and hostility remained. The local authorities were about to be reorganised; this distracted them from national policy developments in the short term, and left most of them too small to play a significant strategic role thereafter. The management of schools was in the process of being devolved. Further Education (FE) colleges had been incorporated and removed from local authority control in 1993, accelerating a transformation in their management, role and ethos.

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Compared to other education policies of the Major government, Higher Still owed less to political leadership than to that of professionals (including the Inspectorate) and the civil service. Nevertheless it had to fit in with wider UK policy, particularly in respect of training policy and vocational qualifications (Raffe forthcoming). Training policy was not devolved to Scotland until 1994, and Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) had to keep in line with National Vocational Qualifications elsewhere in the UK. SVQs are the main qualifications awarded on work-based programmes including the Skillseekers (youth training) programmes for 16 and 17 year old school leavers. Because SVQs were tied to NVQs it was difficult to include them with other Scottish qualifications in a unified qualifications system. They were therefore excluded from the main provisions of Higher Still. Another consequence of the UK policy dimension was the proposal that specified programmes of Higher Still courses and units should lead to Scottish Group Awards. SGAs were introduced to replace General SVQs, one-year programmes of NC modules offered in colleges and a few schools. GSVQs had been introduced in 1992 as a Scottish equivalent to the General NVQs then being introduced in England and Wales, although it is doubtful whether Scotland needed such a qualification and their actual role in the system was very different from that of GNVQs (Murray 1996). SGAs were first proposed primarily to retain this superficial similarity with GNVQs south of the Border.

The Scottish Office assumed control of training policy in 1994, although it was not until 1995 that education and training responsibilities were brought together in the Scottish Office Education and Industry Department, and only in 1996 were they fully reflected in the reorganisation of responsibilities within the Department. In 1997 the SEB and SCOTVEC merged to form the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). These organisational changes helped to bring together academic and vocational learning, like Higher Still itself, but they were as much its consequences as its causes.

DATA SOURCES

Between 1996 and 1998 we conducted about 48 interviews with persons involved in Higher Still developments. They were conducted as part of the ESRC-funded Unified Learning Project (ULP), which has compared developments in post-16 education and training in Scotland with those in England and Wales. They covered a wide range of topics concerning the strategy of Higher Still and the issues that arose in its implementation. A number of interviews focused on particular themes which the project had identified for detailed scrutiny, including the merger of qualifications awarding bodies, the role of SGAs, core skills and the work-based route. The

interviews thus covered a wider range of topics than the policy process per se, although in practice issues concerning the content of policy tended to be inseparable from issues concerning its process.

Our choices of interviewees were partly dictated by the selected themes. We conducted eight interviews with members of the Scottish Office (including the Inspectorate), eight with staff of the Higher Still Development Unit and eleven with staff of other central agencies such as the Scottish Qualifications Authority and its predecessor bodies. The other interviews were with representatives of schools (four), colleges (seven), universities (two) and industry (eight - including employer organisations and the local enterprise network). These figures refer to interviews rather than interviewees: some people were re-interviewed at different stages of the process, and some interviews were with more than one person. Many of our interviewees represented several different interests; some had been seconded or had changed jobs; and several had a remit to represent particular constituencies within their own organisation. The interviews thus represented a more diverse range of interests than the above list may suggest. Nevertheless they reflect a somewhat 'top-down' perspective on policy, largely because we wanted to talk to people who were close to the locus of decision-making at that time, and who were most aware of the current issues that were raised. Some stakeholders (notably local authorities and unions) were not covered in our interviews, but were represented in the meetings and seminars on which we have also drawn for this article (see below).

All the interviews were conducted face to face, except for one telephone interview. The length of interviews ranged from one to over three hours; most were around two and a half hours long. The interviews were semi-structured; we followed a loose framework of questions which varied according to the background of the interviewee and the particular themes under investigation. We did not tape-record the interviews but we made detailed notes which we wrote up subsequently. All interviews were conducted according to Chatham House rules (in other words, details of them may not be used in public in ways that would identify the interviewees).

The interviews are the main source for this paper. We also draw upon analyses of documents and our own observation of parts of the policy process, including several Higher Still consultation seminars and other seminars and meetings convened to discuss aspects of the reform proposals. We presented an earlier draft of this paper at one of the ULP's own consultation seminars with participants in the policy process, and it has been substantially revised in the light of the feedback we received. Finally, we draw on insights gained through our comparisons with policy developments

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elsewhere in Europe as well as in England and Wales, although the paper focuses on Scotland alone.

We hardly need point out that our analysis is provisional, and that it covers only a limited part of the process. The ideal study of the Higher Still policy process would adopt a 'trajectory approach' (Ball 1997), and follow the policy initiative through all stages of development and implementation and at all levels of the process. Such a study would cover the period at least from the late 1980s to the mid 2000s; we hope to conduct it some day, but not yet.

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF UNIFICATION

Our analysis has two main conceptual and theoretical starting points. The first is a conceptual framework of the 'unification' of academic and vocational learning in post-compulsory education and training systems, which we have developed in the course of the ULP and a parallel comparative European study (Raffe et al 1997). The conceptual framework is based on a distinction among three types of system (and the three corresponding policy strategies): 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, various forms of linked systems in between, and unified systems at the other end. However this continuum can apply to different dimensions of unification such as curriculum, assessment, certification and institutions. A system may have a varying profile across dimensions, for example by being tracked on some dimensions and linked on others.

Using this framework we identify four features of the Higher Still policy strategy which are relevant to the following analysis (Raffe 1997):

- ¥ it aims to develop a unified system of post-compulsory education;
- ¥ it is qualifications-led. In the language of our conceptual framework it uses the dimension of certification as the main driver of change, although it also aims to encourage change on other dimensions of unification, notably those (such as curriculum and assessment) which refer to the content and process of education;
- ¥ it embraces all age groups from 16 upwards, but excludes SVQs and most work-based provision;

- ¥ its model of unified system emphasises flexibility, diversity and choice, in contrast with other models (for example, Baccalaureate models or Swedish upper-secondary education since 1994) which put more emphasis on commonality and prescription. Below we refer to Higher Still as a 'flexible' model.

THEMES FROM THE 'POLICY' LITERATURE

Our second conceptual and theoretical starting point consists of themes from the academic literature on the education policy process.

One theme is the relation between 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' policy processes. Research on policy-making and educational change has repeatedly shown how policy development continues through the various stages of policy implementation (Hjern and Hull 1982, Sabatier 1986, Raab 1994). The distinction between development and implementation is fluid, and there are 'bottom-up' as well as 'top-down' influences in any policy process. To a central policy-maker it can seem that policy initiatives run out of control, since their aims and strategies are re-defined by those who develop and implement them and in response to the practical issues that they raise (Fullan 1991). The Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) is a well-documented example; introduced in order to promote the vocational relevance of education for 14-18 year-olds, in practice it was shaped as much by the 'bottom-up' actions of the schools which implemented it as by 'top-down' policy decisions (Bell et al 1989, Paterson 1997).

Paradoxically, while recent analyses of the policy change process question the extent to which control can be retained centrally, analyses of the content of recent policies question the extent to which they have devolved real power to producers and consumers. Several commentators have analysed policy developments which claim to devolve decision-making and extend choice within education (Hartley 1994, Fairley and Paterson 1995, Humes 1997, Jonathan 1997). Many argue that these 'decentralising' policies do not in fact reduce central control over education, but merely change the mode of control to what Ball (1997) has called 'steering at a distance'. The state maintains control over the outcomes of the system, for example through specifying curricular outcomes and certification criteria, while leaving greater discretion to both producers and consumers over how these outcomes are to be achieved.

The role of central control, and the nature and cohesiveness of the policy community, are recurring themes of studies of educational policy-making in

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Scotland. Two such studies have been particularly influential. Humes (1986) describes a small and cohesive 'leadership class', unrepresentative of the community it governs but conscious of its interests as a class, which operates in concert to protect these interests and to advance its own educational agenda. However, the study which offers greatest analytical purchase on Higher Still is McPherson and Raab (1988)'s detailed portrait of the Scottish educational policy community in the post-war period. They argue that the 'centralised' character of policy-making during this period was based on the consensus among the members of this community - its shared 'assumptive world'. Yet this consensus could not be taken for granted. The centre - in particular the Scottish Office - had to work to sustain its leading role in policy; the consensus had to be constructed and managed, and 'always at the cost of some limitation on the range of policies that can be pursued' (p.481).

However the consensus has waned:

to be a member of the policy community after 1975 was not, we surmise, to embrace a corporate purpose and identity. The task, rather, was to accommodate the changes and discontinuities of principle that were a growing feature of the educational policy world.
(McPherson and Raab 1988, p.495).

Raab (1992) notes that the wider range of issues that needed to be addressed by policy, and the wider membership of the policy community, have contributed to the weakening of the consensus among the policy community:

Perhaps managerialism and vocationalism might form the basis for ideological reconstruction, and, as a corollary, for the principle by which trustworthy persons are selected to play roles, and games, in the policy network.
(p.84)

McPherson and Raab use the Action Plan (SED 1983), which replaced vocational courses with NC modules in the mid 1980s, to illustrate this decline of consensus among the policy community. They quote Donald Mack's (1984) observation that 'the Action Plan was launched, not because there was agreement throughout education on what should be done, but because there was no agreement'. The modularisation which it introduced 'obviated the need for an explicit and public resolution of conflicting priorities. Modules were to make all things possible' (McPherson and Raab 1988, p.496). Later they suggest that 'the spread of certification had reduced the functional importance of the ideological unity of the policy community' - in a comprehensive system, with universal certification, moral judgements

were left implicit (p.498). The issue, therefore, is not just whether value-consensus within the policy community has declined: it is also whether a consensus on explicit values is less important than it used to be as a basis for effective policy-making. Indeed, it may now be dysfunctional: as Raab (1992) speculates, 'a clear affirmation of values might ... impede working arrangements'.

This brief review of the policy literature raises three sets of questions in respect of the Higher Still policy process:

- How centralised is this process?
- How have the different interests been represented within it?
- Is it based on explicit values, goals and priorities, and is there consensus around these? Are value-consensus, and an explicit statement of values, functional or dysfunctional for the process of establishing a unified system?

We address these questions in the following three sections of the paper.

CENTRALISATION

We have noted that policy researchers have challenged the conventional view of policy-making as a top-down process, led from the centre, and distinct from implementation and delivery. However, the policy process to introduce a unified system may conform more closely to the conventional view. Higher Still not only introduces change on a system-wide scale; it also seeks to unify the system. It reforms structures and relationships at the level of the system, rather than (say) at the level of an individual institution. In contrast to TVEI, which encouraged experimentation and diversity across schools and colleges, it establishes common frameworks for curriculum, assessment and certification which must apply consistently across the whole system. This would seem to require central coordination if not control.

At least up to 1997 the development of Higher Still was a 'managed process' controlled from the centre. The Inspectorate played a leading strategic role, which it followed through by working closely with Development Officers. The development process was led by the Higher Still Development Unit, which reported directly to the Scottish Office although it was formally located in the Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum. Other possible models for the development, such as a joint committee of SEB and SCOTVEC (the bodies which awarded academic and vocational

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qualifications respectively), were considered but rejected. Teachers and local authorities played a minor role in the first three years of the process.

This centralised model is consistent with our theoretical discussion (above), but there were also more specific reasons for it. Implementation was initially planned for 1997, only three years from the publication of **Opportunity for All**, and the tight timescale made a decentralised model less practical. There were vivid memories of the long drawn-out development of Standard Grade courses for 14-16 year olds, which were first proposed in 1977 but not fully implemented until the early 1990s; the Scottish Office was determined not to repeat the experience. Nor could it be sure that teachers and local authorities would cooperate in a decentralised process, given the recent climate of mistrust and antagonism and the continuing concerns about teachers' workload and innovation fatigue. The imminent reorganisation of local authorities reduced their capacity to support the development. All these factors predisposed Higher Still towards a centralised model of development. The Scottish Office may also have wanted to retain a capacity to 'steer at a distance', to offset the control which institutions, students and end-users would exercise within Higher Still's flexible model of unified system. We do not know if this was a conscious consideration but it would also explain why the SQA was set up under relatively tight government control, at least compared with SCOTVEC.

Our interviewees expressed a variety of views on this centralised model of development. Most considered it necessary and appropriate in the circumstances, but some felt that it had resulted in an over-engineered model with too many complexities that might have been avoided had development occurred closer to practice. Some of the interviews we conducted, and some comments we heard at Higher Still consultation seminars, appeared to reflect a lack of ownership of Higher Still among those who would have to implement it. This may have been a consequence of its centralised model of development.

The consultation was an exercise in democratic centralism. The desire to consult appeared genuine, within the limits of its focus on 'technical' issues (see below). Policies were changed in response to the consultation. We heard criticisms that the consultation responses were summarised and reported selectively, and that the consultation was used to justify decisions that had already been taken. These criticisms may have been justified in some cases but we do not think they invalidate the consultation as a whole. The more serious limitation was that most participants found it difficult to react to proposals which affected wider and more diverse settings than their own. To design a unified system requires knowledge of the whole system. Participants

could react to proposals by saying how they would affect their own part of the system; it was harder for most of them to put forward alternative proposals since these must apply to subjects, levels of study, institutions and types of students with which they were unfamiliar. (College representatives may have been slightly better placed in this respect: senior college staff have to be reasonably well informed about schools, but not vice versa.) This may help to explain the lack of ownership and the sense of distance from the Higher Still process that we observed in many participants. The control and circulation of information seemed to drive much of the consultation process. Most of the criticisms that we heard concerned the availability of information.

The experience of Higher Still supports our contention that policy-making for a unified system may need to be relatively top-down and centralised, but with two qualifications. First, this may vary with what we have called the dimensions of unification. A qualifications-led reform such as Higher Still may need to be centralised; but a reform which pursued similar aims in respect of other dimensions of change, such as methods of teaching and learning, or the institutions in which courses are offered, might not. Higher Still itself may set in train further changes along these other dimensions which would be much less amenable to central control.

The second qualification is that centralisation may vary across the stages of the process. Following Bowe et al (1992), we distinguish four contexts of the policy process: influence, policy text production, implementation and use (the last two are our subdivisions of Bowe et al's context of practice). Bowe et al call these contexts, rather than stages, to make the point that they overlap and do not necessarily form a linear sequence, but in the policy process for a unified system the contexts may more nearly correspond to stages.

Most of the period covered by this paper corresponds to the second of these contexts, policy text production, where the process is (we have argued) necessarily centralised. But local authorities and institutions may play a larger role in the next context, of implementation; and in the final context, of use, control may be further devolved to students and end-users of the system. At the time of writing (early 1998) the process is in transition from the context of policy text production to that of implementation. Responsibilities are passing from the HSDU to the SQA, and local authorities are much more involved in the process than in the first half of 1997. There was a drive in the second half of 1997 to bring the local authorities on board, and some participants have remarked at the speed of their response. It remains to be seen how smoothly this decentralisation will proceed, and how it may vary across local authorities depending on their capacity and willingness to develop and support local implementation strategies.

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THE BALANCE OF INTERESTS

We have suggested that the role of local authorities, institutions, students and end-users in the policy process will increase over time. However, if there is to be continuity of purpose and strategy across the different stages of the process, those who may have power later in the process must also be involved in its earlier stages, including that of policy text production described here. To what extent has this happened?

One of the main issues has been the balance between school and FE college interests. At the consultation seminars we attended it was evident that schools and colleges perceived themselves to have different interests on a range of issues. For example colleges were used to delivering 40-hour units and year-long programmes leading to 'group awards', but were less used to grouping units into courses; schools were more familiar with courses than with units or (especially) group awards. Colleges tended to be wary of external assessment methods such as examinations; schools were concerned about the effects of increasing internal (school-based) assessment. Many of the problems which Higher Still set out to solve were problems of schools more than of FE; they were identified by the Howie committee whose original remit was school education. There was consequently a feeling in FE that it was being caught up in a reform process driven by a school-related agenda. Some interviewees felt that colleges' collective interests had been less well represented in the policy process. Colleges were too diverse to speak with a clear collective voice. They had only recently become independent of local authority control, and they were still learning about the methods as well as the value of collective action. Their role in the consultation may also have been inhibited by their own responsiveness culture: they are more used to responding to change than to influencing it.

Whatever the reason, most interviewees from the FE world felt that the development process had been school-dominated, at least to begin with, and that the 'evolutionary' process promised in **Opportunity for All** took current school practice rather than FE practice as its starting point. It was generally felt that the balance between schools and FE had improved over time, and that FE would have fewer difficulties implementing the new system. Higher Still offered parity to colleges in return for accommodating some features of school practice, and at least tacitly this seemed to be a bargain worth making. Indeed it was suggested that because schools were less flexible it was necessary to give priority to making sure that the new unified system could work in the school context. Some people regretted that the process had not directly confronted aspects of school organisation, such as the strength of

subject departments, which might subvert the aims of Higher Still in the longer term.

Another set of issues concerns the representation of 'end-users' of Higher Still such as universities and employers. Higher education was a relative latecomer to the Higher Still policy process. Its relative lack of input into the process was exposed in the spring of 1997, when concerns about the future of the school sixth year received public attention. These concerns focused on the use that universities might make of Higher or Advanced Higher as entrance qualifications, and on the resulting incentives for well-qualified students to study in sixth year. Such concerns might have been allayed or avoided had higher education played a larger role in the policy process. It was inhibited from playing a more active role by uncertainty as to the conclusions of the Dearing and Garrick Committees, which were reviewing the future of higher education in the UK and Scotland respectively, and which did not report until July 1997. In addition, the interests of higher education are not uniform; several interviewees distinguished between 'selectors' and 'recruiters' when discussing the interests of higher education.

Although higher education has played a relatively small role in the development process, many people perceive it to have had too much influence. A possible explanation for this paradox is that much of the strategic planning of Higher Still has tried to anticipate the future influence of higher education as an end-user. Higher Still's flexible model of a unified system gives considerable power to end-users, whose selection decisions will determine the relative value of different subjects and qualifications, and thereby influence the future decisions of students. In a Baccalaureate model, where more of the curriculum is centrally prescribed, end-users have less influence (Howieson et al 1998).

Higher Still meets some of the demands of employers' organisations. For example, in aiming to promote the 'core skills' of communication, numeracy, information technology, problem solving and working with others, it responded to the arguments of bodies such as the CBI. But employment interests have played a relatively small role in the development of Higher Still, by contrast with similar policy initiatives in other European countries (Raffe 1997). The Higher Still policy process appears to have exemplified and perpetuated a policy division between training and education: employers and local enterprise companies have substantial influence over workplace training, but at the price of a much smaller influence on education provided in schools and colleges. Higher Still is firmly on the education side of this divide, and the absence of a strong voice for employment interests has helped to keep it there. The same division has been maintained in areas more closely

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controlled by the government. Developments in work-based training such as Modern Apprenticeships and the New Deal have taken place in substantial isolation from Higher Still, partly as a result of their UK rather than Scottish origins.

The division between training and education policy is partly a consequence of timing. **Opportunity for All** was published before training policy had been devolved to Scotland, and the development programme was set up before the Scottish Office was reorganised to integrate policy-making for education and training. Training and education policy may come closer to each other as Higher Still develops further, and this rapprochement may be encouraged by the Scottish Qualifications Framework which is planned to link Higher Still, SVQs and higher education qualifications within a national credit framework. If training and education policy remain separate, both sides of the divide are potential losers. On one side, vocational training and the work-based route risk being marginalised; on the other side, Higher Still loses the opportunity for enriching its vocational content that closer contact with employment and with work-based provision might have brought. As a strategy for unification, it is incomplete.

VALUE-CONSENSUS AND THE EXPLICIT STATEMENT OF VALUES

McPherson and Raab (1988) suggest that policy-making has become less based on value-consensus and on the 'explicit and public resolution of conflicting priorities'. This is due, in part, to the broader composition of the policy community, and the wider 'issue-scope' which it covers, which make consensus much harder to achieve. They also suggest that the content of recent policies makes it possible, and perhaps even necessary, for values and priorities to remain implicit. Such policies include those involving modularisation, comprehensive education and universal certification.

A priori, Higher Still appears to be an example of this trend. It encompasses a wide range of subjects, institutions, modes of learning and educational purposes; its policy community and 'issue-scope' are therefore very broad, making consensus difficult to achieve. It is certification-led, and as such requires less explicit statements of values and priorities than reforms based on other dimensions of unification such as curriculum content or local institutions. And because Higher Still's model of a unified system is a flexible one it does not need to make its values and priorities explicit, since providers and users can make their own choices. In McPherson and Raab's words, 'modules were to make all things possible'; the modular Higher Still offers

'Opportunities for All' and provides a framework which gives students, providers and end-users considerable latitude to make of it what they will. Its flexible model of unified system enables it to incorporate diverse value positions: it can appeal both to the 'left' (as an extension of the comprehensive principle) and to the 'right' (as a market-led reform promoting vocational relevance and responsiveness).

Opportunity for All presented the reform as a technical solution to agreed problems. One of us commented at the time: 'As government documents go, it is clear, cogent and commendably brief, but it is also low key. It does not read as a visionary document. ...' (Raffe 1994). This low-key approach reflected the political background. The post-Howie consensus was essentially a negative consensus, which rejected both the status quo and Howie's two-track alternative. There was significant support for a unified system, but the concept of unified system was not well articulated and there was no consensus around any specific model. As in earlier reform processes, notably the Action Plan which introduced NC modules (SED 1983), it was left to the government to lead by proposing a vision as well as a model for reform. However, two powerful factors prevented the authors of **Opportunity for All** from making its underlying vision too explicit. First, an explicit statement of the strategy and vision of Higher Still would draw attention to the differences between the Conservative government's policies north and south of the Border. This would embarrass the government and might cause it to abandon or modify its commitment to Higher Still itself. Some of the more 'visionary' passages of **Opportunity for All** were excised from earlier drafts for political reasons. The document was drafted amid unusual secrecy: some of the agencies most closely affected received only a few hours' notice of its publication. After publication, the official line was that Higher Still pursued the government's UK-wide policy objectives through measures which took account of Scottish circumstances. This is familiar Scottish Office rhetoric, but it had the effect of minimising the strategic significance of Higher Still and the distinctiveness of its vision.

The second constraint was the need to retain the support of a teaching profession that was complaining of innovation fatigue and excessive workload, and which had become disaffected from the government during Michael Forsyth's period as minister. The government consequently played down the scale and significance of the reforms and stressed their evolutionary nature. However, its attempts to reassure teachers sometimes back-fired. The suggestion at some consultation seminars that the first year of implementation would be a 'toe-in-the-water' for schools alienated school managers who believed that it would require total immersion.

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It is hard for us to judge the extent to which the authors of **Opportunity for All** did in fact share a clear vision of its values and strategy. As with all such documents, the clarity and content of its underlying vision doubtless varied among the different people who contributed to it. The important point is that the factors which prevented them from making this vision explicit also prevented them from constructing a consensus behind this vision, including among those who would have responsibility for putting it into effect.

Has this mattered? Up to a point, the presentation of Higher Still as primarily a technical reform has been borne out by subsequent events. Indeed the process appears to have been driven by a kind of technological determinism. A unified system is far more difficult to design and construct than either a tracked system or a linked system, because its design principles must apply universally. As a result seemingly small decisions can have unexpected and larger implications as they reverberate through the system - the flapping of the butterfly's wing which causes the storm on the other side of the planet. For instance, the decision to introduce group awards (SGAs), primarily to accommodate GSVQs in colleges, has had endless ramifications as their design principles have been extended to new contexts, new subject areas and new levels of study. The complexities and interdependencies of the system mean that the solution to one problem creates a new problem further down the line, and so on. Many of the problems encountered in the process have been technical in this sense, and the Higher Still Development Programme has an impressive record of achievement in finding technical solutions to technical problems.

However Higher Still is not simply a technical matter. Several of our interviewees commented that problems arose because the strategy was not thought through sufficiently at the beginning, and agreement was not reached on fundamental principles. Where this happened it was not so much the planning process that failed as the political process in the broadest sense of the term: the failure to develop a clear vision of a unified system and to construct a consensus around it.

Two aspects of this ideological vacuum have caused most problems. The first is the lack of a clear and agreed philosophy of the curriculum, to cover such issues as breadth and coherence, the role of vocationalism, and the place of competence vis-à-vis knowledge and understanding. Humes (1997, p.27) has lamented the 'progressive side-lining of any serious epistemological debate about the nature and structure of knowledge appropriate to the upper secondary school' in Higher Still. One consequence has been the protracted debate over the design and rationale of broad SGAs. Group awards recommend particular curricular combinations and thus incorporate explicit

judgements of value and priority; they are therefore an exception to McPherson and Raab's suggestion that in a flexible modular system such judgements can be postponed or left implicit. Proposals for relatively broad SGAs have proved most controversial. Some people have argued that young people, especially at the levels below Highers, need programmes with a clear curricular or occupational focus as a basis for coherence and progression to employment or further study; others advocate a less prescriptive approach, possibly including open SGAs which specify the level and quantity of attainment but not its content. The problem is not that there have been conflicts, which are to be expected in any large policy development, but that there has been no agreed set of curriculum principles by which to arbitrate among the different positions. Another consequence (or perhaps a cause) of the lack of an agreed curriculum philosophy has been the continued power of subject departments in schools, and the apparent vulnerability of cross-curricular developments such as core skills. Had core skills been part of a robust curriculum philosophy the process of writing them into course documents might have started earlier.

The second aspect of the ideological vacuum is even more wide-reaching. In defence of the Higher Still policy process, it might be argued that there is a clear curriculum philosophy underlying the reform, but that it is not always evident because it is part of a broader philosophy which emphasises flexibility, choice and individual differentiation. In this philosophy concepts such as coherence, breadth, vocationalism and so on have a different relevance for each learner, and so no general set of values or priorities is appropriate. However, if this is so, Higher Still's philosophy of flexibility is even more in need of a clear expression, and of public understanding and support, than is its philosophy of the curriculum. Its model of a unified system emphasises flexibility and choice, but this model and its rationale are not well understood, let alone agreed, by those who must implement it. Arguments over open and broad SGAs, mentioned above, have been difficult to resolve without agreed principles of flexibility and choice. Many of the other controversies which have touched Higher Still concern aspects of its flexible model. These include controversies over flexible pacing (to allow able students to take Standard Grades a year early) and over the flexible boundary between Higher Still and higher education (reflected in the debates about the Advanced Higher and the sixth year, mentioned above). Of course the problem is not just the lack of an agreed philosophy of flexibility; it is also that flexibility conflicts with institutional self-interest and with rigidities of funding, pacing and organisation. But can Higher Still expect to solve these conflicts if it is not clear about the model of flexibility it wishes to achieve?

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In our discussions with participants over an earlier draft of this article, our comments on the vision underlying the reform have proved most controversial. There is general agreement that Higher Still lacked an explicit and public vision, and agreement with our analysis of the reasons for this. There is less agreement over whether Higher Still's flexible model should be seen in positive terms, as a leading (if poorly articulated) principle driving the reform, or in negative terms as a means of avoiding difficult political choices. (These two views are not exclusive.) But the greatest area of disagreement concerns the extent to which an explicit strategy, with clear principles and priorities stated clearly in advance, is necessary for the development of a unified system, or whether policy developments on such a scale must adopt an incremental approach to defining their aims, principles and priorities, as well as to the choice of methods by which to pursue them.

CONCLUSION

Our main aim in this article is not to award marks for successes or failures in the Higher Still policy process, but rather to identify ways in which this process is affected by the content of the policy. Our main conclusion is that the policy process to develop a unified system has distinctive features, and faces characteristic problems and issues, which are not necessarily shared by other kinds of policy. In its process as well as its content, Higher Still is breaking new ground.

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