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

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**ABSTRACT**

*In this article we compare Curriculum 2000 and Higher Still, recent reforms of post-16 education in England and Scotland respectively. We draw on current and earlier research on the unification of academic and vocational learning in England, Scotland and other European countries in order to suggest areas for mutual learning to inform future curriculum and qualifications reform north and south of the Border. We highlight five of these - the conduct of the policy process, issues of progression, assessment, approaches to vocational education and key/core skills. In our conclusion we speculate on the possibility of either convergence or divergence of the English and Scottish upper secondary education systems as both evolve.*

## 'HOME INTERNATIONAL' COMPARISONS

This paper compares *Curriculum 2000* and *Higher Still*, recent reforms of post-16 education in England and Scotland respectively. Curriculum 2000 also affects Wales and Northern Ireland, but we focus specifically on England and Scotland since the data on which the article is based are drawn primarily from two research projects which focus on these two countries. "Broadening the Advanced Level Curriculum" funded by the Nuffield Foundation and undertaken by the Institute of Education, University of London (IOE) examined the reform process in England from 1999-2003. "The Introduction of a Unified System of Post-Compulsory Education in Scotland", funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and undertaken by the University of Edinburgh, examined the introduction of *Higher Still*, also from 1999-2003 . We recognise that Wales, in particular, has taken a new approach to *Curriculum 2000* with the piloting of a Welsh Baccalaureate, but this does not fall within the scope of this paper.

Comparing these reforms in England and Scotland demonstrates the value of 'home international' comparisons of the UK's education systems. Such comparisons:

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

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

With respect to the first argument, the two reforms represent contrasting strategies for the 'unification' of post-compulsory education and training systems, that is, for the reduction of differences between the pathways or 'tracks' that lead to 'academic and 'vocational' qualifications respectively and the bringing together of academic and vocational learning. *Curriculum 2000's* 'linkages' strategy seeks to reduce differences between tracks and to develop links between them; *Higher Still's* 'unified system' strategy seeks to abolish tracks altogether. The distinction between these two strategies derives from a conceptual framework developed in our earlier research (Raffe *et al.* 1998, Spours *et al.* 2000). This research also identifies a third, 'tracking' strategy, which maintains separate and distinctive academic and vocational tracks. The three strategies represent a continuum from tracking to linkages to a unified system. Unification is a cross-national trend. Other countries have sought (for example) to develop integrated curricula, to introduce common curricular components across different tracks, to construct flexible pathways with more opportunities for moving between tracks, to develop common frameworks for assessment and certification, and to promote 'parity of esteem' for academic and vocational learning. These reforms can similarly be mapped in terms of the three strategies, or variants of these (Lasonen and Young 1998, Stenstrom and Lasonen 2000, Raffe 2003).

Our conceptual framework also distinguishes several dimensions of education systems – curriculum, certification, institutions, and so on – in terms of which unification, or progress towards unification, can be measured. When compared in terms of these dimensions, the

English and Scottish reforms appear more similar to one another and contrast with other European reforms of post-16 education. Both reforms focus on certification, on mechanisms for governance and regulation and (especially *Higher Still*) on the unification of assessment and of student pathways; compared with other European reforms *Higher Still* and *Curriculum 2000* both pay less attention to pedagogy, to institutional change and to the work-based route. *Higher Still* can be characterised as a flexible or open model of a unified system, with flexible entry and exit points and weak prescription of the content and mode of study. This contrasts with the 'grouped' or programme-based approaches of some continental models (Howieson *et al.* 1998). *Curriculum 2000* lies somewhere between the flexible and grouped models. Comparing the two reforms may reveal not only the effects of their different strategies, but also the future for unification approaches in both countries.

The second argument for 'home international' comparisons is that they are a source of policy learning. They are less affected by differences in national contexts than are comparisons with countries outside the UK, and they more easily generate lessons for policy. Although the specific models of *Curriculum 2000* and *Higher Still* are not directly transferable between the UK systems, in this paper we identify some general lessons from their experience which may be the basis for mutual learning. These lessons may inform the future reform processes in both countries, including the Tomlinson Working Group's task to develop proposals for a unified qualifications framework in England (Working Group on 14-19 Reform 2003).

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

## CURRICULUM 2000

The period from the late 1970s to early 2003 has seen almost constant curriculum and qualifications reform in England as both Conservative and Labour Governments have introduced changes to the education and training system to respond to social, economic and political pressures. The overall movement has been one of system expansion in order to accommodate rising levels of post-16 participation. Throughout the period, the underlying developments and debates have essentially been about whether this expansion was to be based on a more divided system or on a more unified one. Historical analysis suggests that the English curriculum and qualifications system is moving in a unified direction, but that the current linkages approach remains a compromise between track-based and unified strategies (Raffe *et al.* 1998, Hodgson and Spours 1999, 2003).

In this section we briefly describe the post-compulsory education system in England. We then use data from the IoE/Nuffield Research Project 'Broadening the Advanced Level Curriculum' (1999-2003) to examine the background to and rationale for the *Curriculum 2000* reforms, which were introduced in September 2000, and to describe the changes that these have made to the advanced level curriculum in England in their first two years of implementation (a full description of this project and its main findings and implications can be found in Hodgson and Spours (2003)).

In the decade prior to *Curriculum 2000,* learners in English state secondary schools would be expected to follow the National Curriculum until the statutory school-leaving age of 16 and would then take examinations in a range of eight to ten General Certificate of Secondary

Education (GCSE) subjects, normally including mathematics, English, a modern foreign language and science. (See Table 1 for a glossary of acronyms.)

[Table 1 about here]

Those who gained five or more GCSEs at the higher grades (A*-C) and wanted to remain in full-time post-compulsory education would have the choice of following a two-year programme comprising A Levels (usually three subjects of their choice) or of taking a broad vocational programme of study leading to qualifications such as Advanced General National Vocational Qualifications (AGNVQs) or BTEC National Diplomas. Both types of programmes potentially allowed for progression to higher education (HE) or to the workplace, although the range of HE courses open to those taking broad vocational programmes was more limited. Learners with a lower attainment profile (below 5 GCSEs at Grades A*-C) and wanting to continue in full-time education might be allowed to take a broad vocational qualification, but would be unlikely to be able to take a full A Level programme. They might also opt to take a mixed programme of study comprising Intermediate Level GNVQs and GCSE re-sits in the hope of progressing to advanced level study at 17.

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

Then, as now, learners in most areas of the country who want to stay on in full-time education are able to choose whether to remain in a school sixth form or to move to a different type of institution - a sixth form college or a general further education college – to pursue full-time post-compulsory education. Sixth form colleges cater largely for 16-19 year olds and usually offer the widest choice of advanced level subjects, although their vocational offer is often limited. General further education colleges normally provide a very wide range of vocational courses but a more restricted number of academic courses. School sixth forms offer both types of courses, but tend to offer fewer vocational qualifications. In many parts of England these three types of institutions compete for learners. Given this variety of institutional arrangements and programme offer, the organisation of the English post-compulsory education system could be described as a ‘competitive mixed economy’.

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

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

*The AS and A2* - all A Levels were split into two 'semi-hooked' three-unit blocks - Advanced Subsidiary (AS) and A2. Under these arrangements learners are able to achieve a three-unit AS in the first year of study, and to have this separately accredited if they want to, or to attain a full A Level through completing the A2 component in the second year. The overall A Level grade is calculated by adding together the marks for the AS and A2. The AS is set at a lower level than the A2, with the main aim being to encourage learners to take up a broader range of subjects in the first year of study (e.g. four or five compared to the two or three under the old A Level system). A further aim is to provide a more gradual gradient of progression between GCSE and A Level with the opportunity of gaining a qualification after one year of study.

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

*Key Skills* - a new Key Skills Qualification was introduced in September 2000 to recognise achievement in Communication, Application of Number and Information Technology. The so-called Wider Key Skills – Problem Solving, Improving Own Learning and Performance and Working With Others – did not form part of this qualification on the grounds that they could not be externally assessed. Instead, they were developed as separate units of achievement. Opportunities for assessing all six key skills were 'signposted' in the new AVCE and AS/A Level qualifications specifications. While there was no compulsion for learners to take the new Key Skills Qualification, this was encouraged in all official publicity about the reforms and various incentives were offered, particularly to colleges.

- *Advanced Extension Awards (AEAs)* – the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) was also asked by Ministers to design specifications for a qualification to replace S Level papers and various university admissions tests and to be benchmarked against international standards.

*An overarching certificate at advanced level* - finally, the *Qualifying for Success* consultation paper (DfEE/DENI/WO 1997) suggested that there should be work towards the development of 'an overarching certificate' in the longer term.

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

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

*Accessibility, participation and achievement at advanced level*

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

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

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

*Limited broadening of the advanced level curriculum*

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

Moreover, breadth in terms of the whole learning experience was compromised under *Curriculum 2000*. The IOE/ Nuffield research suggests that teaching and learning in the new AS was often considered by both learners and teachers to be rushed and superficial. Many teachers resented the fact that they were not able to build in the types of skills, exemplification and underpinning knowledge for which they had found space when teaching the old A Levels. Teachers of AVCE remarked that there was a loss of emphasis on the vocational and work-related aspects of the new qualifications in comparison with previous awards. The Key Skills Qualification, which was intended to act as a broadening device for all advanced level learners,

proved so cumbersome that it not only failed to achieve this goal, but also undermined other forms of broadening such as General Studies and extra-curricular activities. However, the widespread take-up of at least one extra subject at advanced level should not be under-estimated since it has broken a long-standing pattern of learners taking three or fewer subjects (see Table2).

[Table 2 about here]

*The AVCE - parity of esteem and vocational relevance*

The AVCE was introduced to improve the status of full-time vocational qualifications so that more learners would be attracted into full-time advanced level post-16 education. Our overall assessment to date is that the AVCE is partially succeeding in fulfilling its goal of achieving parity of esteem with the AS/A2, principally because the 6-unit award is being taken as part of advanced level study programmes by a wider group of learners than the old Advanced GNVQ. However, the numbers of learners taking AVCEs as their main programme of study has not increased significantly under *Curriculum 2000*. The policy decision to make the first version of the AVCE less accessible than the AS/A2 qualification has already been judged to have been a mistake because it has made the award difficult to achieve (QCA 2002b). Moreover, the emphasis of the AVCE on knowledge and theory rather than on practical learning and achievement has reduced its vocational relevance.

*The reform process – the problems of policy incrementalism and voluntarism*

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

The designs of the new *Curriculum 2000* qualifications blocks were never discussed widely or in depth with education professionals whose experience of delivery might have eliminated some of the most obvious mistakes. In fact, the period of the *Qualifying for Success* consultation process (Autumn 1997-Spring 1998) was followed by a protracted silence of almost two years while Ministers and the officials from the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), QCA and the awarding bodies discussed the designs of the new qualifications.

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

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

tradition, learner intake and funding incentives. These differences mean that while full-time advanced level learners are experiencing some common changes as a result of the reforms (e.g. studying more subjects and having more time-tabled time), the effects so far both on institutions and on learner programmes have been variable.

**HIGHER STILL**

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

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

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

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

modules and Highers were poorly articulated. There were inadequate opportunities for progression between modules and Highers in many subjects. Methods of teaching, learning and assessment were very different for modules and for Highers, creating an incoherent learning experience and underlining the low status of modules. Related to these other problems, the vocational pathway was weak.

**The *Higher Still* framework**

The Government's solution to these problems, first announced in *Higher Still: Opportunity for All* (Scottish Office 1994), was a unified system of post-16 education in schools and colleges. At the heart of its strategy was the need to improve opportunities for access and progression. *Higher Still* would replace existing Highers and modules with a unified progression framework based on a series of levels up to Higher and CSYS, with common principles of curriculum and assessment. In the old system less-qualified 16 year-olds had to choose between high-status Highers and modules which were more attainable but which lacked status and offered restricted opportunities for subsequent progression. In the new system they would be able to take courses similar in design to Highers, and part of the same system, but at a lower level. The model was a 'climbing frame', a progression framework with flexible entry and exit points which would allow all learners to remain in the mainstream of provision regardless of level of study or academic or vocational orientation.

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

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

[Table 3 about here]

The new framework was designed to be built incrementally from the previous system (Table 3). It blends elements of the former 'vocational' provision (unit-based and internally assessed) and 'academic' provision (course-based and externally assessed). The top five *Higher Still* levels correspond to old levels - CSYS, Higher and the three levels of Standard grade. However, *Higher Still* is a unified system; it has a single set of design rules for curriculum, assessment and certification, and courses and units are available in 'academic' and 'vocational' subjects. The new system offers all learners access to mainstream certification and the possibility of progression; it also enables learners who are unlikely to succeed at Higher to continue (if they wish) academic subjects at Intermediate 1 or 2, rather than being forced into vocational or pre-vocational alternatives. Conversely, better-qualified learners can take vocational as well as

academic subjects for Highers, which are available in such subjects as Care, Mechatronics, Professional Patisserie and Selling Scheduled Air Travel as well as more traditional school subjects. The only formal distinction between subjects is between those whose external assessment is diet-based (that is, based on an annual 'diet' of examinations) and project-based respectively. In other respects, the curriculum of many subjects remains relatively untouched by the reform, although it increased the theoretical component of some 'vocational' subjects and the practical dimension of some 'academic' subjects. The most controversial example was English, which became (for a time) English and Communication. The five core skills of communication, numeracy, information technology, problem-solving and working with others were embedded in the content and assessment of learning where appropriate.

**Implementation and progress**

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

National Qualifications have been used in S3 and S4, not only to replace NC modules but also to replace Standard grade (Howieson *et al*. 2003a). So far this has been mainly *ad hoc*, for particular subjects and/or levels; for example some subject departments judge that Intermediate 2 provides better progression to Higher than Credit Standard grade, and others have chosen Access 3 in preference to Foundation. However, some schools and even some local authorities are contemplating a more wholesale change from Standard grade to new NQs. Proposals to replace Standard grade, whether at department, school or authority level, are often linked with plans for more flexible phasing of school careers and for breaking the link between stage and age.

Implementation was slower in FE than in schools. By 2003 only about half of colleges had fully implemented new NQs, and the scale of implementation varied widely across the other half. Colleges initially found it difficult to reconcile the assessment demands of NQs with the practicalities of part-time delivery, and there has been a slow take-up in programmes tailored for employers (Howieson *et al.* 2003b). Some new NQs are seen as 'too academic'. Despite their tradition of group awards, colleges have been slow to offer SGAs, deterred by such design features as the specifications of volume and level, complexity and the requirement for external assessment. In many colleges, programmes remain largely based on units rather than courses (as SGAs would be). Even when programmes have been changed they have often been 'adapted' by replacing individual units, rather than being replaced wholesale. The main exception is that colleges have extended their provision of National Courses, especially Highers, by adding 'new' subjects such as psychology, with school students among their clients.

*Higher Still's* biggest crisis came in August 2000 with the publication of the results of its first diet of examinations. Along with other Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) results many of these results were incorrect or delayed. The subsequent parliamentary inquiries placed the blame on the SQA's management rather than the design of *Higher Still* (Scottish Parliament 2000a, 2000b), but the crisis nevertheless interrupted the momentum of the reform. It allowed dissatisfactions with the reform to surface, and especially with the volume of assessment and the model which combined the external and internal assessment of former 'academic' and vocational' traditions (Raffe *et al.* 2002). Following the exams crisis, measures were taken to simplify assessment and to reduce its volume, mainly through a series of subject reviews. More radical proposals, which would have allowed National Courses to be achieved on the basis of either internal or external assessment, but not requiring both, were rejected following consultation in 2001/02. It was felt that further changes to assessment arrangements could be destabilising and that the new system should be allowed more time to bed in.

The full impact of Higher Still will only be observed over a number of years. Our study of the first four years of implementation (Raffe *et al.* 2004) suggests that:

- new NQs are securely established within upper-secondary education, and have been seen as a means of enhancing the 14-16 curriculum and increasing its flexibility;
- implementation in FE has been less complete and has mainly been based on programmes of internally-assessed units rather than externally-assessed courses as in schools; new NQs have added to the menu of available qualifications rather than replaced them with a unified system;
- new NQs have underpinned a significant increase in school-college collaboration;
- *Higher Still*'s 'climbing frame' model has provided 'middle and lower attainers' with more opportunities to study at an appropriate level, and these opportunities are perceived to be of higher quality and standing;
- the 'climbing frame' enhances *access* but its effects on *progression* are less certain, and the attainment of some of those who follow the new progression routes has been disappointing;
- special needs provision has improved and has greater recognition as part of the unified system;
- the impact on take-up of vocational subjects, and on 'parity of esteem', has so far been modest;
- the system has evolutionary potential; it is stimulating 'bottom-up' developments which may transform the progression map over time and it is encouraging learners as well as providers to become more 'progression-minded'.

## ENGLAND AND SCOTLAND COMPARED

### Contextual factors

Before comparing the *Curriculum 2000* reforms in England and the *Higher Still* reforms in Scotland, we revisit our earlier analysis to consider differences in the contexts of the two reforms.

First, the *Higher Still* reform process started much earlier than *Curriculum 2000* and, while both

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

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

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

**Common features of the two reforms**

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

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

**Differences**

But there are also differences between the two reforms. In the first place, they represent different strategies for unification. *Higher Still* introduced a unified curriculum and qualifications system, which abolishes formal differences between qualification tracks or types of learning and establishes design rules for curriculum, assessment and certification that apply across the whole system. *Curriculum 2000,* on the other hand, reflects a linkages approach which uses various linking devices to bring the tracks closer together while preserving many of the differences between them. *Higher Still* aimed to blend the academic and vocational traditions within its unified system. Its design rules marry the former 'academic' provision based on propositional knowledge, elective courses and graded external assessment with 'vocational' provision based on competence, units grouped into programmes and criterion-referenced internal assessment. *Curriculum 2000* followed a more one-sided approach, which aimed to make broad vocational qualifications more respectable by making them more like the academic A Level. At the same time, it preserved a clear distinction between the type of learning certified by an A Level and that certified by the AVCE.

Many of the complexities of *Higher Still* result from its radicalism: from its attempt to impose the hybrid model produced from the marriage of two traditions in a uniform manner across the whole system. By contrast, many of the complexities of the *Curriculum 2000* reforms reflect the lack of radicalism of a linkages approach to qualifications reform which did not challenge the status of the A Level, and based all other qualifications standards on it. This led to two of the major problems with the reforms described earlier - the complex 'semi-hooked' relationship between the AS and A2 and the mis-alignment of the AVCE with the AS/A2. As a result, although both countries' exams crises threatened public confidence in the reforms, in Scotland they encouraged a conservative reaction – to ease up on the pace or scope of change – while in England they have so far had a radicalising effect, and by 2003 proposals for unified system of diplomas were clearly on the agenda (Working Group on 14-19 Reform 2003).

A second critical difference between the reforms is that *Higher Still* is essentially a 'climbing-frame' model that aims to promote access and progression for all learners. Its most important innovation is the introduction of new levels of learning that are below advanced level (that is, below the Higher) but part of the same progression framework. *Curriculum 2000* aimed only to reform advanced level provision while qualifications below this level remained unchanged. This contrast reflects the different aims which drove the two reforms. In Scotland, there was a desire to cater for post-16 learners across the attainment range. In England the focus was more limited, with the primary aim being to broaden A Level programmes of study and to raise the status of the Advanced GNVQ. *Curriculum 2000* intended to increase participation at advanced level, while *Higher Still* aimed to discourage it when intermediate study was more appropriate. A related difference is the age span covered by each reform. *Curriculum 2000* focused on 16-19 year olds; Higher Still provided for all ages beyond 16, with a growing take-up among 14-16 year olds as well.

Third, *Higher Still* is part of a looser but system-wide Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) (Raffe 2003b). Since its launch in 2001, the SCQF has become the main

focus of the policy discourse of unification in Scotland. Further moves to promote unification are likely to focus on the SCQF, and the new NQs introduced by *Higher Still* are increasingly seen as an established qualification block alongside the others within the wider Framework, rather than a main source of radical change. The *Curriculum 2000* qualifications, while part of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in England, are not currently credit-rated, although this approach has been raised by the Tomlinson Working Group on 14-19 Reform (2004). The DfES has finally (in July 2003) committed itself to developing a credit framework for England, but this at present only covers learning for adults (DfES/DTI/HM Treasury and DWP 2003).

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

## MUTUAL LESSONS FROM AN ANGLO-SCOTTISH COMPARISON

There are at least two approaches to 'lesson-drawing' from an Anglo-Scottish comparison. In the first, the lessons are mainly in one direction. If the general trend is for post-compulsory education systems to become progressively more unified – to move from tracked to linked to unified systems – then Scotland currently represents a more 'advanced' stage of development than England. From this perspective there is, therefore, more scope for England to learn from the Scottish experience than *vice versa*. However, this linear view that Scotland is more advanced than England and that all lessons are one-way is too simple. The other perspective is that the differences between *Curriculum 2000* and *Higher Still* reflect alternative strategies for unification, resulting from differences in the education systems and in the contexts of reform, as well as from different political strategies. Looked at in this way, it could be argued that both countries may learn from the comparison, not least by analysing some of the common themes and issues which have arisen in rather different circumstances. Furthermore, the extent of mutual learning could depend on how both systems develop in the future. If, for example, the English system moves decisively towards a unified and inclusive diploma system, rather than remaining at a linkages stage, the process of mutual learning could take on a new impetus. At this point in the reform processes arising from *Curriculum 2000* and *Higher Still*, we identify five areas where mutual learning might be explored.

### The policy process

Earlier in this paper we have commented on the political processes in England and Scotland,

with the former being more politicised, mainly due to the continuous debate about the A Level 'Gold Standard'. Both A Levels and Highers have a totemic status within their respective education systems, and in both countries the political reluctance to challenge this status has been a major constraint on reform. However, by the early 1990s there was widespread agreement that Highers needed reforming. This has never been the case to the same extent for A Levels in England where, despite *Curriculum 2000* and the exams crisis, there is still a strongly polarised debate about whether to retain or abolish A Levels (e.g. Hodgson, Spours and Smithers 2003, Tahir 2003, Ryan 2004).

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

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

Thus both reforms raise questions about strategies for incremental policy change. In particular, to what extent should such change start with a clear vision of the end-point and of how to reach it, rather than a reliance on developing incrementally and determining each new step in the light of earlier steps? *Curriculum 2000* was initially an example of the latter approach. *Higher Still*, on the other hand, did have a longer-term strategy, but this was not well articulated, and the implementation sequence (starting with a part of the system which on its own did not need to be altered) obscured the rationale for the reform. Consequently, attention focused on specific issues of system design (a frequent source of conflict) rather than on the underlying aims and strategy (a potential source of consensus). What both *Curriculum 2000* and *Higher Still* demonstrate is the need for a clear and explicit strategic vision based on professional consensus, together with a strong involvement by the education profession and wider stakeholders at all stages of the reform process from design to implementation and evaluation.

**Progression within a unified system**

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

Despite its more explicit progression focus, however, the Scottish experience suggests that the simple creation of a unified climbing frame does not automatically ensure attainment and progression for all learners (Tinklin *et al.* 2003). Our research to date, has highlighted at least three issues. The first relates to the practical difficulties of designing a climbing frame to meet the needs of diverse learners (e.g. how far apart should the bars of the frame be?). The second relates to its implementation (e.g. how to deliver the range of opportunities required by a climbing frame curriculum and the challenge of 'multi-level teaching' potentially associated with it). The third issue concerns the use of the climbing frame by different groups of learners (e.g. how to improve the success rates of learners who follow the more flexible progression paths that it offers?).

It is important to consider the extent to which a climbing-frame approach can be consistent with group awards and, in particular, with the type of diploma awards being proposed for England. Those seeking to create a progression sequence of diplomas in England can learn from the experience of SGAs in Scotland. This demonstrated, for example, the need to match the level of each diploma (and the differences between levels) to the diverse needs of learners. The failure of SGAs in Scotland partly reflects specific problems in their design and the lack of external demand, but it also reflects conflicts of purpose. If a diploma is to be more than a retrospective accounting device – that is if it is to express principles for the curriculum and learning experience – then it is likely to prioritise coherent programmes of learning over progression possibilities. It is likely, therefore, to constrain the flexibility offered by the climbing-frame approach, for example by setting a limit to the multi-level nature of learner programmes. The Tomlinson Working Group has set itself the goal of developing a 14-19 system with *"*an appropriate balance of "climbing-frame" and baccalaureate-type approaches*"* (Working Group on 14-19 Reform 2003, p.8). The Working Group's Interim Report (2004) recognises this issue and suggests that its proposed designs do combine both approaches.

**Assessment**

Both *Curriculum 2000* and *Higher Still* aimed to develop more flexible curricular pathways through a modular approach with shorter curriculum planning horizons, but both found it hard to manage the consequent increase in assessment. In Scotland, the tension between curricular flexibility and manageable assessment loads was exacerbated by the desire to give units as well as courses currency within the system. This meant that each unit of learning had assessment attached and there were additional assessment requirements at the end of each course. In England, the assessment overload associated with modularisation was further exacerbated by anxieties about standards. This led to high levels of external assessment and problems of assessment validity, particularly in vocational qualifications. Both countries have experienced exams crises, but while the Scottish crisis was mainly related to internal assessment, the English crisis concerned mainly external examinations. What both reforms suggest is that the problem of assessment concerns its total volume rather than its form. At this stage in the respective reform processes, both systems are having to consider how to reduce the total burden of assessment and the strategies available to them to do this. Arguably, an open modular system, such as *Higher Still,* or a quasi-modular system, such as *Curriculum 2000*, may find this more difficult to achieve than the proposed diploma approach being considered by the Tomlinson Working Group which does not rely so heavily on unit-based assessment

**Vocational education and parity of esteem**

An issue for all unifying reforms is whether they are able to promote parity of esteem for vocational and academic subjects or whether they will always be subject to 'academic drift' (Wolf 1993, Ecclestone 2002). This latter term refers to two related developments. First, there has been the historical tendency for learners increasingly to demand access to academic programmes (OECD 1998). Second, there has been a tendency for vocational qualifications to imitate academic ones in order to raise their status (Green, Wolf and Leney 1999). The linkages approach of *Curriculum 2000* was a good example of academic drift of the second type. It has been criticised for undermining the distinctiveness of vocational education while failing to remove the formal differences between qualifications tracks that underpin vocational education's lower status.

Does a unified system approach such as *Higher Still*, which abolishes all formal distinctions between vocational and academic study, further undermine vocational distinctiveness, or does it provide a firmer base for parity if esteem? Our evidence suggests that in Scotland some teachers of vocational and practical school subjects, such as home economics, and some FE staff believe that their subjects have gained higher status as a result of *Higher Still*. However, the relative status of subjects is still mainly determined by the attitudes of higher education. Where subjects have gained higher status, the gains are less than many staff had hoped for and some question whether this partial move towards parity of esteem has been worth the cost. Moreover, the climbing frame allows students to continue 'academic' subjects beyond 16 at levels below Higher, so it may reduce as well as encourage the take-up of vocational subjects. So far the net increase in take-up of vocational subjects has been small – of the order of two per cent of the S5 curriculum – and there has been little change in the relative tendency for vocational subjects to attract less qualified students.

**Core/key skills**

The high-profile assessment-dominated approach to key skills in England led to a poor quality teaching and learning experience for advanced level students, proved unmanageable and also failed to convince employers or universities of the value of the Key Skills Qualification (Hodgson and Spours 2003). The relatively low-profile approach to core skills in Scotland appears not to have undermined the learning experience, but it is uncertain to what extent the strategy of 'embedding' core skills within other subjects has actually led to the development of core skills in Scottish school students. It has perpetuated the lack of understanding and ownership of core skills. Moreover, certification based on embedding may lack credibility. Currently, therefore, educationists in Scotland are discussing a move away from embedding and towards 'signposting' opportunities for core skill development (the difference being that opportunities that are signposted are not automatically assumed to be taken up). In many colleges, on the other hand, *Higher Still* has encouraged the development of core skill provision and has, in addition, enabled colleges to think creatively about the best balance of embedded and discrete delivery methods.

Arguably, the comparison provides two lessons for future reform processes in both countries. The first is to focus on the development of core/key skills rather than on their assessment. This will mean finding appropriate ways of promoting and recognising core/skill achievement as an integral part of coherent learner programmes. The second lesson is to concentrate efforts on learners and providers who already recognise the need for core/key skills (as do most staff in Scottish colleges), rather than to rely on external levers such as funding and regulation to

coerce providers into giving them priority in the face of learner opposition (as was the case under Curriculum 2000).

## CONCLUSION

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

Our research suggests that there are different possibilities regarding the future course of policy in both countries and the relationship between them. The international trend towards a more unified upper secondary education does not necessarily signal an automatic convergence between different national education and training systems. Since movement towards more unified education systems is dominated by national contexts, then divergence is also a possibility (Green, Wolf and Leney 1999, Raffe 2003a). We have shown that England and Scotland have different educational traditions and institutions and their reforms have somewhat different aims and priorities, even though both could be seen as approaches to unification. At this stage, England and Scotland could be interpreted as diverging, as England explores a diploma model for pursuing the goal of unification, while Scotland consolidates its climbing-frame approach. However, if England succeeds in its aim to combine baccalaureate and climbing frame approaches, and if Scotland develops effective and viable national group awards in place of the failed SGAs, then there may not be marked divergence in terms of upper secondary curriculum and qualifications.

However important differences remain in the wider organisational contexts of both systems, and these may provide the key to future divergence or convergence. On the one hand, if the Tomlinson reforms in England are to be effective there will need to be changes in the wider context of institutions, funding and regulation. We refer, in particular, to the climate of institutional competition and top-down performance measures of England's more marketised and politicised education and training system. Reforms in these areas could remove one of the main sources of English distinctiveness, and thus promote convergence with Scotland. On the other hand, Scotland's own institutional and funding arrangements are increasingly being organised around three sectors: schools, work-based provision and further/higher education respectively. This tripartite division contrasts with the age-based 'learning and skills' sector in England, and may be a source of divergence.

More extensive reform south of the Border could also fuel a willingness to address common problems. We have pointed to the problems that both national reforms face with regards to the reform process, learner progression, vocational education, core/key skills and assessment. Having to find ways of addressing these issues in the coming period, may also lead to a degree of cross-border discussion and convergence. We do not want, therefore, to prejudge the outcome of the two reform processes. In either case, given the current stages of development in each country and the common problems both face, it is important to encourage further dialogue and mutual policy learning.

**Table 1. Abbreviations**

AEA – Advanced Extension Award
AGNVQ – Advanced General National Vocational Qualification
AS – Advanced Subsidiary
AVCE – Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education
BTEC – Business and Technology Education Council (hence BTEC National Diploma)
CSYS – Certificate of Sixth Year Studies
DENI – Department of Education for Northern Ireland
DfEE – Department for Education and Employment (now known as Department for Education and Skills)
FE – Further Education
GCSE – General Certificate of Secondary Education
GNVQ – General National Vocational Qualification
GSVQ – General Scottish Vocational Qualification
HE – Higher Education
HNC – Higher National Certificate
HND – Higher National Diploma
IOE – Institute of Education, University of London
JCGQ – Joint Council for General Qualifications
NAB – National Assessment Bank
NC – National Certificate
NQ – National Qualification
NQF – National Qualifications Framework
NVQ – National Vocational Qualification
OFSTED – Office for Standards in Education
QCA – Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
S1, S2 ... S6 – First, second, ... sixth year (of secondary school) in Scotland
SCE – Scottish Certificate of Education
SCQF – Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
SGA – Scottish Group Award
SO - Scottish Office
SOED – Scottish Office Education Department
SQA – Scottish Qualifications Authority
SVQ – Scottish Vocational Qualification
UCAS – Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
WO – Welsh Office

**Table 2. Advanced Level Programmes Before and After *Curriculum 2000***

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

**Table 3. Design rules of the old and new systems in Scotland: a summary**

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

Source: Raffe et al. (2002).

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