From Fragmentation and Division Towards Unification: An Analysis of a Decade of Post-14 Qualifications Reform

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Thesis submitted for the Degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

Institute of Education
University of London

1998

Abstract

This thesis explores the reform of 14+ qualifications in England and Wales over the last decade.[1] I argue that the qualifications system has moved through different phases of development and is emerging, in the late 1990s, as a 'linked system'.

Using a historical approach to periodising qualifications change, I argue that the 14+ qualifications system has moved through six phases of national policy development since the late 1970s - a precursor two-track phase, a prevocational phase, dualist strategy phase, a triple-track phase, a review phase and now a linkages phase.

I go on to argue that these policy phases should also be viewed as constituting three 'overlapping eras' - the New Vocationalism, formally divided systems and unification. The concept of overlapping eras shows how there can be a co-existence of different policy initiatives and debates.

The thesis goes on to argue that the dynamics of change, which move policy between phases and eras, are caused by external factors, internal system factors (reactions to of previous reforms and system weaknesses and the knock-on effect of reforms in other parts of the education and training system) and through the role of ideological interpretation. Using this approach to policy change, I argue that as the education and training

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[1] The thesis focuses mainly on the reform of 16-19 qualifications over the last decade but from the perspective of the 14-19 continuum and of the relationship between academic and vocational qualifications. The emphasis of the research, reflected in my own work over the last decade, is on CPVE, GNVQs, A Levels and proposals for unified certification. In Chapter 2, I look briefly at GCSE and acknowledge its important effects within the education training system.

system expands, internal system factors become more important than external factors as determinants of change.

I conclude the thesis with three arguments: first, that the English qualifications system is currently poised between a flexible multi-track system and a unified system; second, there is a strong momentum building within the education and training system to move further towards unification; and third, there is a debate taking place about the type of unification strategy most appropriate to the English context and which can respond to the growing policy emphasis on lifelong learning.

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Acknowledgments

I would like, first of all, to thank my family - Shirley, Joe, William, Lucy and Katie - for their continued support, not only in relation to this past year in which the thesis was written, but over the years of work on qualifications reform which, so often, took away time which should have been spent together. I have told them it will be different in the future but they are not entirely convinced.

Secondly, I would like to thank Michael with whom I have had a long-standing theoretical partnership. This thesis is about unification and its arguments for change arise as much from his work as they do from mine.

Thirdly, I would like to thank Denis, my supervisor, who, with his vast experience of thesis supervision, made the whole process seem manageable and straightforward.

Fourthly, I would like to thank Ann. Her achievement of her own doctorate; her meticulous approach to writing and her constant support has been an inspiration.

I would also like to thank the Institute of Education for providing me with study leave during the Summer Term of 1998 to complete the writing of the thesis. Finally, I would like to thank Louise for her impressive formatting work.

Introduction

This thesis focuses on the reform of 14+ qualifications in England and Wales during period 1976-1998. The main chapters, however, are concerned with the development of the national qualifications framework since the mid-1980s and this emphasis is reflected in the title of the thesis.

I have structured the thesis around five chapters. Chapters 2 and 3 use personally-authored published work in the form of 'historical case-studies' to illustrate debates taking place during phases of policy development.[2] These historical case-studies are surrounded by contextual analysis and by comparisons with other literatures. Following each of the historical case-studies, I critically reflect upon my past work and assess its impact in terms of the debates being conducted in the chapters. The historical case-studies, containing extracts of previously published work, are highlighted by shaded text so as to be easily distinguished from the surrounding analysis. A small proportion of the published work in Chapter 4 is co-authored and permission to use extracts from this work, or to draw substantially on these texts, has been obtained from these colleagues. Permission to use the work in this way is contained in two letters in the Appendix.

In Chapter 1, *The Periodisation of Post-14 Qualifications Reform: A Historical and Analytical Framework*, I build the components of the historical and analytical framework based on evolution of my own theoretical work over the last decade. I argue that the development of

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[2] The four historical case-studies which contain extracts from previously published work are highlighted in shaded text within Chapters 2 and 3.

14+ qualifications can be interpreted by way of a historical framework based on six phases of policy development and three 'overlapping eras' of reform. The six phases of national policy development, which have emerged since the late 1970s, are:

- phase 1 (mid-1970s to early 1980s): a precursor two-track phase and initial responses to youth unemployment;

- phase 2 (mid to late 1980s): pre-vocational qualifications and the New Vocationalism;

- phase 3 (mid 1980s to 1991): the emergence of a national qualifications system based on a dualist strategy involving the attempted reform of the academic track and the introduction of the NVQ vocational framework;

- phase 4 (1991 to 1994): the creation of a formalised triple-track system based on A Levels, GNVQs and NVQs;

- phase 5 (1995 to 1997): the triple-track system under review;

- phase 6 (1998 -) a possible linkages system.

I then arrange these policy phases into three 'overlapping eras':

- the era of the New Vocationalism (in which I focus on prevocational certification) (1976-91);

- divided national qualifications systems (1986 - present);

- unification (1990 - present).

I argue that the three overlapping eras provide a more sophisticated form of analysis than end-on policy phases because of their capacity to focus on the co-existence of different policy initiatives and debates during each of the policy phases. I use, therefore, the tool of the three overlapping eras to provide the structure for the middle chapters of the thesis. Chapter 2 focuses on the overlap between prevocational certification, the NVQ framework and local unification experiments. Chapter 3 focuses on the overlap of the triple-track

phase of a divided national qualifications framework and early unification 'blueprints'.

I argue that the historical and analytical framework, consisting of policy phases and overlapping eras, is shaped by the relationship between three factors; by policy responses to external factors, reactions to previous reforms and system weaknesses (which I term internal system factors) and the role of ideological interpretation. I then argue that the movement between qualifications phases and eras, resulting from the dynamic inter-relationship of these three factors, is producing a shift from a tracked system to a linked system and, possibly, to a unified qualifications system. Finally, I argue that shifts between these three system types take place along different dimensions of the education and training system including certification, progression pathways and government and organisation. A total of eleven dimensions are identified. Some dimensions may belong to a tracked system while others may be located in a unified system. These different aspects of the historical and theoretical framework are explored throughout the five chapters in differing proportions. Chapters 2 and 3 are more historically-based and Chapters 4 and 5 are more conceptually-based.

Chapter 2, *Fragmentation of 14+ Qualifications and the Problems of Progression,* explores a phase of qualifications policy during the period 1986-1991. It argues that the end of the 1980s gained a reputation for qualifications complexity because of the overlap of three different eras of reform - the final phase of prevocationalism; a dualist strategy based on reforming the academic track and establishing a NVQ national vocational qualifications framework; and by local unified experiments supported by TVEI Extension.

The first published paper of the chapter is the historical case-study *The Politics of Progression: Problems and Strategies in the 14-19 Curriculum* (published originally in 1988 and again in 1991). This analyses issues of qualifications division and fragmentation arising from earlier government initiatives which were responding to youth unemployment together with attempts at the end of the 1980s to

develop an NVQ-based qualifications framework. I argue that this overlap of reform processes led to an unprecedented confusion of qualifications initiatives. It was in this context that my work focused on the need for progression strategies. The critical reflections, which follow the historical case-study, analyse the reasons for my shifting emphasis from a focus on progression strategies, related to prevocational qualifications, to system-wide reform and support for a unified modular framework. This shifting focus at the end of the 1980s, from issues of prevocational qualifications to whole-system modular frameworks, was to lead to my contribution to *A British Baccalaureate* in 1990.

Chapter 3, *A Critique of the Triple-Track System,* analyses of the period following the 1991 White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century.* I argue that the 1991 White Paper had a profoundly negative effect on the qualifications system because of its emphasis on qualifications distinctiveness. This approach attempted to reverse innovations in the late 1980s which had attempted to bridge the academic/vocational divide.

The chapter is based around three historical case-studies containing extracts from previously published work during the period 1992-1995. The second historical case-study of the thesis is *The Reform of Qualifications in a Divided System* (published in 1993). It analysed the projected effects of the 1991 White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century* and argued that the most salient qualifications feature of the 1991 White Paper was the 'retrenchment' of the academic track which provided a rationale for the emergence of GNVQs. The third historical case-study, *The Strengths and Weaknesses of GNVQs: Principles of Design* (published in 1995), analysed the problems of the early model of GNVQs. I argued that the problems of the early GNVQ model were fundamentally concerned with qualifications design issues which arose from both from trying to make GNVQs distinctive from A Levels and from using NVQ assessment methodology in the new award. I went onto argue that while GNVQs had fundamentally flawed design features, it was

important to incorporate 'progressive' aspects of GNVQ practices into a unified qualifications model.

The third part of the chapter consists of data and narrative from a personally-authored paper *Post-Compulsory Education and Training: Statistical Trends* (published in 1995) which charted the performance problems the triple-track qualifications system as they began to emerge in 1994/5. This historical case-study made an early identification of the problems of the plateauing of participation and attainment trends. I argued that, in the light of these performance trends, there would have to be a fundamental review of qualifications policy if National Targets were to be met. Arising from the analysis of participation and attainment trends, this section of the chapter develops the idea of the English education and training system becoming trapped as a 'medium participation system'. The chapter concludes with critical reflections on the statistical analysis of 1994/5 and the impact of this context for the Dearing *Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds*.

Chapter 4, *The Unification of 14+ Qualifications: Towards an Analytical Framework*, explores theories of unification and unified system development. According to the approach of overlapping eras, parts of Chapter 4 could be considered in parallel with parts of Chapter 3. Ideas about unified systems were being developing at the same time as I was conducting a critique of the triple-track qualifications system. The chapter contains an analysis of 21 proposals for unified and overarching certification published during the period 1990-97. I argue that the English unified qualifications 'movement', reflected in the balance of unified proposals, contains two main strands of thinking - a baccalaureate or unified certification approach and a unitised framework approach. The chapter also develops the analytical tools of system types: a tracked, linked and unified system continuum developed through the 'Learning for the Future Project' and the Anglo-Scottish 'Unified Learning Project'. It suggests that the English system is in the process of moving into a linked stage of system development. The chapter concludes by

analysing different types of unified systems - 'open' and 'grouped' models of unification - through international comparative analysis and through recent debates within the English system.

Chapter 5, *Towards a Linked System or a Framework Stage?*, uses all aspects of the historical and analytical framework developed in the previous chapters, to explore the outcomes from the Dearing and *Qualifying for Success* reviews. I argue that the English qualifications system is currently poised between a flexible multi-track system and movement towards a more unified system through a 'framework stage'.

Throughout the five chapters, I analyse the process of policy shifts between phases and eras. I argue that qualifications policy has changed because of a three-fold dynamic: the impact of external factors; the impact of internal system factors (either in the form of reactions to weaknesses of previous policies or the domino-effect of reforms in one part of the system on other parts of the system) and the impact of ideological interpretation. I use the concept of system 'multi-dimensionality' to show how developments in particular dimensions of the system affect developments in other dimensions. I also argue that, as the education and training system expands, there is a decline in the power of external influences and a rise in the power of internal system factors.

I conclude the thesis by analysing the different trends within unification and argue that a more 'open' unified model (rather than a highly-grouped Continental baccalaureate model) is more likely to prevail because it has roots within the English system, is ready to be implemented north of the border through *Higher Still* and is the model most adaptable to the policy agenda of life-long learning.

Methodology

Annex to the Introduction

In this Methodology Annex I explore three related methodological issues in relation to the thesis. First, I consider the historical approach towards qualifications policy which constitutes the core structure of the thesis. Second, I examine the role of case-studies in understanding how I have used previously researched and published work within the earlier chapters. Third, I explore the use of critical reflections on the changing nature of my own role during the period of research.

The approach to education and qualifications policy

The focus of the thesis is policy development with regards to post-14 qualifications. In this methodology annex, I will reflect upon my theoretical approach to education policy and its role within the post-compulsory education and training system. I will then compare and contrast this approach with other approaches to education policy development.

Two complementary historical approaches with regard to qualifications policy

My approach to policy is, first of all, historical in order to provide a means of interpreting patterns of change and of seeing how these have impacted on current developments. The approach broadly conforms to the definition provided by Cohen & Manion (1994) who state that historical research is

"systematic and objective location, evaluation and synthesis of evidence in order to establish facts and draw conclusions about past events" (Cohen & Manion 1994: 45).

This historical and causal approach was the main aim of the periodisation methodology in Chapter 1, which looks at the evolution of qualifications policy and reform over the last two decades.

In the thesis, I have argued for two complementary approaches to periodisation. First, a six-phase approach which is framed by the national policy or strategy dimension and is assumed to be the dominant dimension, because of the role of central government in policy-making. However, I do not assume that national policy is a simple 'transmission belt'. The six-phase periodisation model is based on the notion that national policy or strategy has a dynamic relationship with other system dimensions, but that the relationship between them gives rise to an identifiable pattern of development.

My second approach to periodisation is through the concept of 'overlapping eras' (e.g. three eras of the New Vocationalism/Prevocationalism; Divided National Systems and Unification). This is an attempt to bring into the historical approach more dynamic features and to accommodate what has been referred to as the often contradictory, complex and 'untidy' nature of the education system (Ball & Shilling 1994). In particular, the overlapping eras approach is an attempt to introduce three dynamic elements into the analysis. First, it examines how ideas and initiatives can co-exist within national systems, rather than assuming that in any phase there is a simple correspondence of system features. Second, it is a way of understanding how different phases of policy development represent 'system adaptation' to new conditions, but without changing the fundamental character of a system (e.g. from a fragmented, to a more formally tracked and on to a linked qualifications system). Third, this approach helps to explain how evolving trends can also be interpreted in different ways (e.g.

linkages can be seen as a more flexible approach to tracking and as a stage to unification). The concept of overlapping eras, with its emphasis on 'interpretation' and the role of debates within systems, also provides a way of situating elements of my previously published work within the context of qualifications reform.

Education and training system multi-dimensionality

My approach to policy analysis is not only historical and conjunctural, but also multi-dimensional. I have argued that the policy dimension is affected by other dimensions such as external contexts (e.g. changes in the youth labour market or international competitiveness) and other system dimensions, such as funding and institutional responses.

I go on to argue that both historical and international comparative analyses shows the qualifications dimension to be an important 'system driver' in England (Lasonen 1996, Howieson *et al.* 1997) due to its historical role as a selector. More recently, qualifications have been seen to be an important policy issue in relation to 'educational standards' and in relation to international competitiveness. Moreover, I accept that the qualifications dimension is also assessment-driven (Wolf 1992b) because of the role of A Levels, GCSE, the National Curriculum, NVQs, GNVQs and the predominant role that assessment methods have played (Pring 1995). The thesis, therefore, does not challenge the assertion that the initial post-compulsory education and training system has been qualifications-driven. However, I suggest that, as the education and training system expands, the driving role of certification may decline in relative power in relation to other dimensions (e.g. during the 1990s, funding methodologies have begun to prove to be powerful policy instruments in steering participation).

Comparison with other conceptual approaches to policy

Stuart Ranson, writing on 'Education Policy' (Ranson 1996), argues that the debate about education policy has gravitated around two positions - the 'pluralist' and 'Marxist' analysis of education. He argues that the pluralist approach to education policy is rooted in the era of public administration, assumptions about partnerships and complex poly-centred divisions of power involving interest groups. This approach was dominant in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Marxist approach, on the other hand, has stressed the deeper structural influences on decision-making emanating from the economy, social class and the State and becomes more prominent during the 1980s. Throughout the last two decades, both perspectives have developed hybrids - neo-Marxist and neo-Pluralist approaches. The neo-Marxist approach has been attempting to understand and to explain the role of a strong State steer on education policy in the late 1970s and early 1980s, while accepting that policy can have a relatively autonomous position in relation to fundamental class forces (e.g. Dale 1984). The neo-pluralist approach (e.g. Ball & Shilling 1994), on the other hand, has been trying to understand and to explain the relative chaos and complexity of the education system.

My approach lies at various points between the neo-Marxist and neo-Pluralist positions. On the one hand, my historical policy approach has a strong strand of neo-Marxist analysis by locating qualifications policy in relation to the influence of crisis of the youth labour market, class elitism and the influence of

A Levels. Furthermore, there is an assumption that government policy, reflecting the power of the governmental state, plays a crucial shaping role within the system. However, I have also used strands of neo-pluralist analysis. The methodology I have employed to analyse the dynamics of change between qualifications phases (e.g. responses to external factors and reactions to system weaknesses) stresses the responsive and reactive nature of policy and the

sometimes relatively autonomous effects of system dimensions (e.g. the effects of 'system inconsistencies' located in the different system dimensions) or the effects of state forces pulling in different directions (e.g. the often contradictory roles of the DES and Employment Department during the 1980s). I also allocate power to 'debates', particularly when system features are in various conditions of unstable equilibrium (see Chapter 5). This could be seen to be a feature of both neo-Marxist and neo-pluralist approaches.

I attempt to understand the changing and evolving balance of relations between the steering role of the governmental State and more relatively autonomous factors, such as institutional behaviour and the role of practitioners, through the complementary models of periodisation of the qualifications system. I do this by suggesting that the different phases of qualifications represent different balances of national and local relations. I have argued that, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the post-compulsory education system moved from a *"nationally reactive/locally dynamic system to a nationally proactive/locally reactive system"* (Hodgson & Spours 1997b: 5), and, in doing so, reflected a movement away from the interpretative power exercised by practitioners.

The 'nationally reactive/locally dynamic phase' was exemplified by prevocationalism in general and TVEI Extension in particular which, despite being originally seen as a top-down imposed policy initiative (Dale *et al.* 1990), allowed considerable room for practitioner interpretation and even 'teacher appropriation' (Bowe *et al.* 1992). It is this process and its relationship to qualifications fragmentation which I explored in Historical Case Study No 1: *The Politics of Progression*. The 'nationally proactive/locally reactive phase', on the other hand, emerged in the early 1990s as a result of a combination of whole-system approaches and an ideological shift to the Right in post-compulsory education. This relationship, and its effect on the qualifications system, was the focus of Historical Case Study 2:

Reform of a Divided System and Historical Case Study 3: *The Strengths and Weaknesses of GNVQs.*

An important conclusion drawn from *Reform of a Divided System* was the limits of local reform. I argued that local unification experiments (e.g. the Wessex A Modular Level Project, BTEC Y-models and the Hamlyn Unified Curriculum Project) stood little chance of survival without a reciprocal national policy or, at least, the provision of more 'space' within which to develop. Furthermore, I concluded in *The Strengths and Weaknesses of GNVQs,* that practitioners had little chance of developing creative practices in heavily prescriptive assessment regimes such as those promoted by the Mark I GNVQ model and, therefore, that the best curriculum features of GNVQs could only be realised within a more open and unified national curriculum and qualifications model.

This conclusion is also supported by the Leeds University 14-19 Research Group who sought to draw parallels between TVEI Extension and GNVQs (Yeomans 1996). Despite looking for common features, they concluded that they were, in fact, very different. Moreover, their ESRC research project, *Constructing a New Curriculum: The Rise of General National Vocational Qualifications,* sought to explore the development of GNVQs from a 'social constructionist' perspective, which focuses on how the curriculum is being *"constantly being constructed and reconstructed at different levels and different sites"* (Higham *et al.* 1997: 10). They concluded that, while they found evidence of how teachers had brought their own professional approaches to their GNVQ work, the original assessment model of GNVQs *" was over-regulated and failed to take account of the realities of college, school and classroom life"* (Higham *et al.* 1997: 10). In other words, the top-down and 'controlling' nature of GNVQs, which was contrasted to the more 'open' BTEC National model, restricted space for local action and reinterpretation.

My historical approach which looks at the balance of national/local relations, can also help to understand current government policy.

Here the evidence is mixed. There are still signs of continued strong top-down steers in terms of external assessment approaches associated with the 'standards' agenda. On the other hand, approaches to qualifications structure (alignment of 6- and 3-unit blocks) and the deployment of key skills is more open and this may have created more space for institutional interpretation. New Labour is also very keen to ensure that qualifications innovation does not move too far ahead of more conservative constituencies and would prefer that the whole process be slowly evolving and carefully constructed (DfEE 1998b). This may herald a new era of top-down/bottom up system co-ordination.

The role of the 'historical case-studies' within the thesis

A second set of methodological reflections concerns the role of the four historical case studies within the thesis. I maintain that the four instances using previously published work conform to accepted use of the terms 'historical' and 'case-study'. They are 'historical' insofar as they are located in the past and can form the focus of critical reflection. They also constitute a form of evidence by virtue of adopting the essential characteristics of a case-study which seeks to *"probe deeply and analyse intensely multifarious phenomena"* (Cohen & Manion 1994: 106)[3].. Robson (1993), argues that case-studies can be carried out on a group, an institution, on an innovation and on many other things. Furthermore, he argues that case-studies should constitute a 'case' which warrants such an investigation.

Within this thesis, the four historical case-studies are instances of previously published analysis. In each of the four historical case-studies I have sought to analyse the complex phenomenon of a

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[3] Cohen and Manion (1994) define case-studies as being 'strong in reality', showing attention to detail and complexity, constituting a step in action and possibly being publicly accessible.

phase of qualifications by analysing a 'vertical slice' of different dimensions of the education and training system and of the complex interaction of factors which have arisen in each of the three overlapping eras. In each case-study I have established a 'case' which is central to the core argument of the thesis (e.g. concerns about qualifications fragmentation in the late 1980s; qualifications division and track-based developments in the early 1990s and the problem of system performance in the mid-1990s). Furthermore, I have attempted to contextualise each historical case-study by a comparison between my perspectives and other literatures. Finally, by a process of critical and historical reflection, I have attempted to evaluate the contribution of my previously published work to the debates taking place at the time.

In the first instance, the reasons for taking a historical case-study approach were essentially pragmatic - I wanted to use some of my previously published work within the thesis to support its historical analysis. However, as I constructed each case-study I had to choose which of the published extracts constituted the most useful way of illustrating the complexity of developments at the time. I also had to situate this work in a wider analysis of complementary literatures which I had not undertaken at the time of the original analysis. I began, therefore, to understand more fully the contribution which my previously published work had made to the educational debate. In effect, I was engaging in a form of 'triangulation' which tries to explain the *"richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint"* (Cohen & Manion 1994: 233).

Finally, I began to understand more fully the limitations of the historical case-study accounts; how they were rooted in a particular set of assumptions and how these become challenged both by other perspectives and by the passage of time. In other words, I have become much more appreciative and more critical of my own past work.

Reflections on my different research, development and policy roles throughout the period of research

Another issue which arose out of the historical case-study approach was reflections on my own role as a researcher, developer, policy analyst and political actor over the last decade. During this period I have occupied several different positions: first, as a development officer at the Post-16 Education Centre (1987-90); second, as a theoretical critic of the triple-track system (1990-1994); and third, as an academic involved in both education policy analysis and as 'adviser' in the policy process.

The role of developer-researcher (1987-90)

During the period 1987-1990, I wrote various versions of the Politics of Progression, following intensive consultancy and development work prior to writing the published version in 1991. During this period I had two roles. My first role was as a curriculum adviser and development officer working with institutions and practitioners and funded by London Region TVEI, though based at the Institute of Education. This was essentially a continuation of my previous role as a curriculum adviser with ILEA between 1985 and 1987. The second role was as an 'academic'. In this reflective role, I started to publish Post-16 Education Centre Papers and then chapters in books. This dual role is best understood through the perspective of 'practitioner-researcher' (Robson 1993), 'reflective professional' (Schon 1983) or perhaps, more accurately, the notion of 'developer-researcher' (Hodgson 1997).

There were a number of strengths in this dual role. I was able to engage directly with problems as they existed in practice and to see these from a 'bottom-up' perspective. As I explained in Chapter 2, I was critical of academics who, during the 1980s, made distant critiques of the education and training system without experiencing close forms of engagement with system problems. A second advantage was having some time to reflect and to be able to use a

'vertical slice' analysis which looked at a range of problems across the system as they affected progression opportunities and progression strategies.

At the same time, the strengths of a development-led role also harboured weaknesses. My early progression work reflected a voluntaristic approach. I shared with others during this period the assumptions of TVEI Extension and the possibilities of 'bottom-up' reform. It was only by engaging with the more contextual problems that I began to understand why local progression strategies were not producing the results we had originally hoped they might. This led, by late 1988, to arguments for wider system reform which is articulated towards the end of the first historical case study, *The Politics of Progression.*

The role of unification advocate and system critic (1990-94)

During the period 1990-1994, I essentially took the role of 'system critic', due to the 'political postponement' of unified system proposals by Labour's 1992 General Election defeat. The first part of the period was dominated by being a member of A British Baccalaureate writing team. This was to act as my ideological orientation for the next four years or so. As far as further research work was concerned, my role during this period was determined by these national system issues and, more locally, by the fact I was working in Tower Hamlets as an Inspector for TVEI and 14-19 education. At one and the same time, I wrote critiques of the triple-track qualifications system from the point of view of unification and I was involved in trying to make TVEI make a local contribution to raising levels of participation, attainment and progression. So my conversion to 'system critic' was by no means a complete one. In fact, the work of this period still had a strategic and practical thread; it was aimed at understanding national changes so that their contradictions could be fully understood. It was this form of engagement with local issues which contributed to my more strategic and interventionist perspectives from 1994 onwards. But it was from

this perspective of 'critic' that I wrote the three published pieces, extracts of which constitute the historical case-studies in Chapter 3.

The role of academic and policy strategist (1994-98)

My work from 1994 to the present has been framed by my role as a research officer on the 'Learning for the Future Project' and the ESRC 'Unified Learning Project'. The LFTF Project is most well-known for its arguments for steps and stages of reform of 14-19 qualifications from a divided system to a unified system. For me, it marked a transition from advocating unification blueprints and system criticism to a more strategic perspective of understanding how the process of change might be brought about. This period also coincided with work with the Labour Party on *Aiming Higher* and the compilation and co-editing of a book *Dearing and Beyond*. Since then I have been involved in theoretical work on unification and comparative system analysis, together with advisory work with the DfEE and QCA. This work is reflected in Chapters 4 and 5.

Apart from its policy orientation, historical work on unification has led me to take a more pluralistic perspective than in the early 1990s. I can now appreciate not only the virtues of gradual transformations, but also the fact that other perspectives have enriched and will continue to shape the unification debate. It is for this reason that I have more recently focused on the debates within unification and the role of different perspectives in relation to a changing context; in particular, the growing policy emphasis on lifelong learning, as well as on initial post-compulsory education and training.

Chapter One

The Periodisation of Post-14 Qualifications Reform: An Historical Framework

PART 1: THE IMPORTANCE OF QUALIFICATIONS REFORM

The reform of 16+ qualifications has constituted a major policy focus in education and training in England and Wales throughout the 1980s (Lasonen 1996, Howieson et al. 1997).[4] This importance has continued into the 1990s with repeated policy statements about the continued development of a national qualifications framework and the role it can play in promoting parity of esteem between academic and vocational education, in achieving National Targets and in guaranteeing educational standards (DES/ED/WO 1991, DTI 1994, DTI 1995, DfEE 1996a, DfEE 1997a, DfEE 1997b, DfEE 1997c).

Pressures to develop a national qualifications framework can be traced back to the mid-1970s. During the past two decades, the role of qualifications has continued to grow in importance because of a range of factors: new groups of learners staying on in full-time education; international comparisons which have stressed the role of qualifications and skills in international economic competitiveness and the growing emphasis on education standards. Later in this chapter these factors will be placed within a historical framework.

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[4] . National policy on qualifications to date has been conceived within the boundaries of 14-16 and 16-19. However, from the point of view of debates about qualifications, since the late 1980s and TVEI Extension, there has been a broad acceptance within the education profession and research community of the 14-19 continuum. Furthermore, there is growing support for this perspective due to the increasing importance of the issue of progression. This thesis, in order to encompass both policy developments and debates, is written from a 14-19 perspective.

The thesis, in a formal sense, covers policy developments in England and Wales. Throughout the thesis, however, I have shortened this to refer to England only. Where Welsh debates or policies differ, e.g. in the case of proposals for a Welsh Baccalaureate, I indicate this in the text.

In this next section I outline briefly the types of changes which have taken place in 14-19 qualifications since the mid-1970s and the underlying influences. The first factor which impacted on the education and training system was the onset of economic crisis in the mid-1970s and the beginning of what was to be a dramatic rise in youth unemployment in the early 1980s. The decline of the youth labour market created demand for initiatives to provide a bridge between school and work for school leavers. The result was a number of different schemes including the Work Experience Programme, the Job Creation Programme and Community Industry Scheme. In 1977, the MSC undertook an urgent review of these arrangements and the Holland Working Party Report (Holland 1977) ushered in the Youth Opportunities Programme (Chitty 1991).

The development of work-based and college-based initiatives during the late 1970s and early 1980s, in turn, created pressure for the development of a curriculum framework to encompass these disparate initiatives. This became known as 'vocational preparation' (FEU 1979, FEU 1981a, 1981b). The manifestation of a new curriculum approach came two years later in the form of a new 17+ examination - the Certificate of Prevocational Education (CPVE). CPVE was designed principally to respond to the increased participation of low achievers in full-time initial post-compulsory education.

Qualifications issues, which had grown out of the initial expansion of participation in post-16 education and training in the late 1970s, became more prominent still during the 1980s. International comparison of economic performance, school achievement and skill levels (IMS 1984, Prais & Wagner 1985) highlighted problems of low participation and qualifications rates compared to other advanced industrial countries. In response to these 'external pressures' and also in reaction to the *ad hoc* nature of the work-based initiatives of the late 1970s, the government began to create a more coherent

qualifications system (Richardson 1991). This approach included the establishment of NCVQ and the NVQ vocational qualifications framework, the introduction of GCSEs, the creation of the National Curriculum and the attempted reforms of A Levels. In contrast to the policy emphasis of the early 1980s with its focus on youth unemployment, these could been seen as 'whole system' initiatives.

By the early 1990s, the government sought to introduce a national qualifications framework based on A Levels, GNVQs and NVQs (DES/ED/WO 1991). It was the first attempt at creating a national framework covering different types of qualifications. By the mid-1990s however, this model of the national qualifications framework came under scrutiny due to three factors. First, problems of the inefficiency of qualifications within the framework reflected in low successful completion rates (Audit Commission/OFSTED 1993). Second, the realisation that the national qualifications framework had developed unforeseen rigidities (Dearing 1996). Moreover, these problems were becoming apparent at the same time as the adoption of revised National Targets which proposed that by the Year 2000, 60 per cent of 21 year olds should have achieved a Level 3 qualification. These three factors triggered a period of review of the triple-track qualifications system in 1995/6 through the Dearing *Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds* (1996), the Capey *Review of GNVQ Assessment* (Capey 1996) and the Beaumont *Review of 100 NVQs/SVQs* (Beaumont 1995).

The process of qualifications reform has continued in the late 1990s with further consultations aimed at both unifying the system and extending participation. I will argue that the reappraisal of the Dearing proposals by the Labour Government through the consultation process *Qualifying for Success* (DfEE 1997c) is developing a 'linked' qualifications system. The documents *Building the Framework* (DfEE 1997a) and *Guaranteeing Standards* (DfEE 1997b) are trying to develop unified regulatory and qualifications awarding bodies. The *Kennedy Report* (Kennedy 1997) and Green Paper *The Learning Age* (DfEE 1998a), on the other hand, are

attempting to outline an agenda of reform beyond the 16-19 age group. While building on the reform agendas of the previous government, these reform processes are marking out new territory.

While qualifications have played an important role in shaping the education and training system, especially for 16-19 year olds, it would be mistaken to see them as being the absolutely dominant influence throughout all of the period under consideration. Many important policy initiatives did not, in the first instance, directly involve qualifications issues. These include the Youth Training Scheme, the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI), local management of schools and school opting out, college incorporation, the introduction of league tables, the Modern Apprenticeship Scheme and, more recently, the effects of funding reform.

Closer analysis shows, however, that even when qualifications issues are not at the top of a particular policy agenda they, nevertheless, play an important role. This often comes in the form of a later response to the effects of these initiatives or as the result of reflections on their weaknesses e.g. the Modern Apprenticeships Scheme, and its emphasis on qualifying to NVQ Level 3, can be seen as an example of a reaction to the lack of qualifications outcomes in Youth Training (Spours 1995a).

In this opening part of the chapter, I have argued that qualifications reform has played an important shaping role in the education and training system and that qualifications policy has evolved over the past two decades in response to rising levels of participation and international comparisons and by reactions to perceived weaknesses of previous policy decisions. In Part 2, I will develop the first of four conceptual tools of the thesis - a historical periodisation of the qualifications reform process - to help in understanding these changes.

PART 2: TOWARDS A PERIODISATION OF QUALIFICATIONS REFORM

In Part 2 I will argue that the development of qualifications over the last two decades can be understood by way of historical periodisation. First, I will explain, how through my theoretical and policy work in the early 1990s, I arrived at a six-phase approach to qualifications policy development for the period 1977-1998 (see Figure 2). Second, I will argue that while historical periodisation of qualifications, based on policy phases, is useful way to understand different government policy priorities in their wider context, this approach is not able to adequately deal with overlapping or co-existing policy developments or the existence of debates representing different policy tendencies. I go on, therefore, to argue for an approach to qualifications periodisation based on 'overlapping eras' of reform (see Figure 3).

Looking back on the period between the end of the 1970s and the mid-1990s, it is clear that 14+ qualifications have gone through different phases of development as more qualifications have been created, others have been replaced and attempts have been made to place them into a national framework of types and levels. One way in which the continued development of the national qualifications framework can be understood is by way of historical periodisation.

The changes in qualifications have been caused primarily by policy developments, that is to say, decisions by governments to change qualifications arrangements in various ways.[5] However, these policy developments have been affected by the complex inter-relationship of several factors including:

- changes in the labour market and changes in patterns of participation;

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[5] Reflections on the nature of policy development in education and training is explored further in the Methodology Annex.

- perceptions about the role of qualifications in economic competitiveness;

- the nature of existing qualifications and how they are perceived to meet new situations;

- ideological shifts by successive Conservative governments or the election of new governments;

- shifts in policy focus either towards or away from qualifications;

- reflections on how the qualifications system is evolving and what its next stage of development might be.

I will argue that all of these factors have played a role at some point during the last two decades in the evolution of the national qualifications framework. A model of periodisation should be able to locate, therefore, not only different phases of development but should also help in the understanding of factors at work, their relative importance and how they have brought about change.

The youth labour market and periodisation

Historically the most fundamental factor which has affected the education and training system and, in turn, the qualifications system in England and Wales, is the changing labour market. There is a widespread consensus amongst analysts that the mid-1970s marked a critical turning point (Roberts 1984, Roberts, Dench & Richardson 1990, Roberts & Chadwick 1991, Raffe 1992a). The period between 1976 and 1980 saw the start of what turned out to be a rapid and irreversible decline of the youth labour market. It was a period which also saw a questioning of the role of liberal and general education in relation to the economy (Salter & Tapper 1985) and the beginning of what has been termed the 'New Vocationalism' (Dale 1985). These changes set in motion during the 1980s a *"restructuring of post-compulsory education a whole"* (Tomes 1988: 196).

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Policy periods of the 1980s

Another factor, which has been the subject of previous attempts at periodisation, was policy developments throughout the 1980s. By the end of that decade, sufficient time had elapsed for analysts to be able to make sense of changes since the mid-1970s. The first published attempt was by Finegold and Soskice (1988) which focused specifically on Conservative education and training policy. They identified three phases of policy development during the period 1979-87:

- *phase 1: preparation* in the period 1979-81 with the dismantling of industrial training boards (ITBs) and collapse of apprenticeships;

- *phase 2: the New Training Initiative (NTI)*, the focus on 14-18 and youth effects of youth unemployment;

- *phase 3: expanding the focus* to adults and development of the National Curriculum.

A further attempt at policy periodisation was made by Richardson (1991) who saw the period from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s in terms of the phases in building a national system of vocational education and training. The period from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s is seen as a one of *ad-hoc* initiatives followed by the search for national coherence in the period 1986 -1991. The Richardson and Finegold/Soskice analyses, despite differences of time-scale, share similar assumptions. The period up until 1981 is seen as reactive and without a clear policy framework. The period from NTI in 1981 until 1986 and the creation of NCVQ saw attempts to create a series of national initiatives though still overwhelmingly reactive to the problem of youth unemployment. The period from 1986 onwards, on the other hand, is seen as representing a 'gear change' towards creating more national coherence (Richardson 1991).

Participation periodisation

By the early 1990s, significant rises in full-time participation rates were being recorded which were greater and more consistent than the earlier rises at the end of the 1970s (Gray & Sime 1990, Gray *et al.* 1993, Spours 1995a, Spours 1995b). Rising full-time participation could not be linked directly to youth unemployment which was in decline towards the end of the 1980s (Gray *et al.* 1993). The focus of explanation shifted to other changes which had taken place during this period, notably the introduction of GCSE (Ashford *et al.* 1993). The rises in post-16 full-time participation and their relationship with qualifications prompted further reflections on the role that changes in participation were having on the education and training system as a whole (Raffe 1992a) and on the qualifications system in particular (Spours 1995a, 1995b). Evidence was emerging that the internal dynamics of the education and training system (in the form of previous innovations), as well as the external labour market, were affecting the performance of the education system, which, in turn, could affect qualifications policy.

By the mid-1990s it became possible to periodise patterns of participation (Spours 1995a). Full-time participation, measured by staying-on rates at 16, appeared to be settling into a wave-like pattern of rises and peaks.

- *Phase 1: the mid-1970s to 1981* was marked by a steady decline of the youth labour market and initial rises in full-time staying on at 16.

- *Phase 2: 1981-1987* saw the continued decline of the youth labour market and the rise of YTS. This period, however, could itself be divided into two parts: the years 1981-84 and a rapid collapse of the youth labour market and the years 1984-6 when this decline appeared to level out.

- *Phase 3: 1987-1994* were years of rapid rises in full-time participation at 16, the annual rise averaging about 4 per cent. During this phase, staying-on rates rose most rapidly during the

year 1990/91 (7 per cent) which suggests that the economic recession did have a limited effect on participation rates in this period.

- *Phase 4: 1994/5* revealed the first signs of a peaking trend in 16+ staying-on rates (Spours 1995b) and by 1996 this had spread to staying-on rates at 17+ and 18+ (DfEE 1997d).

Following the focus on participation trends, attention began to shift more specifically to the role of qualifications and achievement. In the context of the development of National Education and Training Targets, there was a growing emphasis on qualifications levels and the issue of progression routes (NACETT 1994, Payne 1995a, 1995b, Green & Ainley 1995, Spours 1995a) and problems of student course completion (Audit Commission/OFSTED 1993).

The development of qualifications periodisation

My own research at this time was concerned, not only with developments in participation and qualifications rates, but, with the effects of the 1991 White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century* on the national qualifications framework. In a paper, *The Reform of Qualifications Within a Divided System* (Spours 1993), I argued that there appeared to be three phases of qualifications development:

- phase 1 which was confined to the early 1980s and associated with the 'New Vocationalism' and pre-vocational initiatives;

- phase 2 which saw the attempts to establish a national system of vocational qualifications (NVQs) and to diversify the academic track through GCSEs and modular initiatives;

- phase 3 which witnessed the reversal of the trends of Phase 2 due to changes in assessment policies and the introduction of new certification in the form of GNVQs.

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During the next two years, my approach to the periodisation of qualifications gradually became more detailed. As time progresses, so it is possible to identify new and emerging phases as the period under review expands (in this case from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s). This tends to lead to time-based models becoming more complex.

By 1996, it became clear that the Dearing *Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds* was trying to bring about some sort of 'adjustment' to the triple-track qualifications system established in 1991 to make the qualifications system more accommodating of a wider range of learners. The Capey *Review of GNVQ Assessment* and the Beaumont Review of 100 NVQs/SVQs also took place during 1995/6. Taken together, these reviews could be interpreted as constituting a 'review phase' of the national qualifications framework.

The election of a Labour Government in May 1997 led to further developments. The *Qualifying for Success* consultation process (DfEE 1997c) kept policy very much within the Dearing strategy of creating 'linkages' between the qualifications tracks. On the other hand, there was emerging evidence of a new political agenda of social and educational inclusion which is bringing debates about the participation and achievement of both younger and older learners much closer together than had previously been the case (Hodgson 1998 forthcoming).

These developments resulted in a periodisation of qualifications based on six phases (Howieson *et al.* 1997):

- phase 1 (mid-1970s to early 1980s): a precursor two-track phase with initial responses to youth unemployment;

- phase 2 (mid to late 1980s): pre-vocational qualifications and the New Vocationalism;

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- phase 3 (mid 1980s to 1991): the emergence of a national qualifications system based on a dualist strategy involving the attempted reform of the academic track and the introduction of the NVQ vocational framework;

- phase 4 (1991 to 1994): the creation of a formalised triple-track system based on A Levels, GNVQs and NVQs;

- phase 5 (1995 to 1997): the triple-track system under review;

- phase 6 (1998 -) a possible linkages system.

In 1997, the ESRC *Unified Learning Project* (ULP) which focused on Anglo-Scottish comparisons, developed a way of analysing education and training systems based on system types and system dimensions. Education and training systems could be seen to tracked, linked or unified.[6] Each type of system comprises different dimensions (see Figure 1). A total of eleven dimensions were identified including purpose and ethos, curriculum, teaching and learning processes, assessment, certification, course structure and pathways, local institutions, modes of participation staff and government and regulation (Raffe *et al.* 1997). Some dimensions might be tracked while others might be linked or unified. Qualifications, expressed in several of the dimensions, were seen as a fundamental aspect of system architecture in both England and Scotland, but they were by no means the only dynamic dimension of change (Howieson *et al.* 1997). Hence the decision to include such factors as funding and government and regulation.

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[6] Definitions of tracked, linked and unified systems are provided in Chapter 4.

Figure 1: A multi-dimensional model of tracked, linked and unified systems

	TRACKED SYSTEM	LINKED SYSTEM	UNIFIED SYSTEM
CONTENT AND PROCESS **Purpose and ethos**			
Curriculum			
Teaching/learning processes			
Assessment			
SYSTEM ARCHITECTURE **Certification**			
Course structure and pathways			
DELIVERY **Local institutions**			
Modes of participation			
Staff			
GOVERNMENT AND REGULATION			

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To arrive at more comprehensive periodisation model, I merged the six qualifications phases with a selection of the ULP dimensions to produce a two-dimensional matrix (see Figure 2). I adapted the ULP dimensions to assist with qualifications periodisation by reducing these from eleven to seven - context, policy aims, certification and course structure, curriculum content and assessment, institutions and funding, government and regulation and debates. These were selected on the grounds that they constitute a range of factors that have, over the period in question, most affected the development of a national qualifications framework or have come to reflect its changing character.

This matrix now offers the possibility of exploring the dynamics of qualifications reform by linking developments in qualifications (e.g. certification and curriculum) to the wider context (e.g. participation and labour markets), to broad policy aims (e.g. social and educational inclusion), to changes in funding methodologies, to changes in government and regulation and to the influence of 'debates'.

Figure 2: Six phases of qualifications policy development

	Phase 1: (1976-1982) Precursor phase responding to youth unemployment	Phase 2: (1983-1990) Pre-vocational phase of the New Vocationalism	Phase 3: (1986-91) Dual national strategy of academic and NVQs	Phase 4: (1991-95) Triple-track national framework: A levels, GNVQs & NVQs	Phase 5: (1995-98) System review - Capey, Beaumont, Dearing & QfS	Phase 6: 1998 - Linkages phase
context - labour market, participation & comparative	initial rise in youth unemployment and first rise in FT participation	rapid rise in youth unemployment, YTS schemes but levelling out of FT participation	international comparisons and significant rises in FT participation	further rises in FT participation and effects of 1990/1 recession	Slow-down in participation growth 16-19	Effects of social polarisation and exclusion
main policy aims (FT and work-based route)	easing transition between school and work	developing new training programmes, courses & curricular - YTS, CPVE, TVEI	new national systems and co-ordinating initiatives - NCVQ, NC, GCSE, TECs	response to participation rises - GNVQs, triple track system, marketisation, funding reform, MAs & NTETs	system adjustment, qualifications reviews, MAs and focus on retention, & achievement	focus on system flexibility, social inclusion measures and school standards
certification & course structure	work-based initiatives - YOPs/WEEPs, local and limited new certification	extensive introduction of pre-vocational certification and frameworks	NVQ framework, NC, GCSE but rejection of reform of A Levels	GNVQs, A Level cores and assessment changes, growth of modular restricted syllabuses	new GNVQ model	new GNVQ model key skills AS 3 unit blocks overarching certification

Figure 2: Six phases of qualifications policy development (cont...)

curriculum content & assessment	local pre-vocational initiatives	growth of process-based learning in national prevocational initiatives	course-work assessment, TVEI process-based learning, isolated modularisation	GNVQ process-based learning	external assessment in GNVQs	key skills, modularisation, credit, mixed study
institutions & funding	no significant institutional changes	growth of mixed system of providers	attempts at LEA co-ordination, LMS, formation of TECs	opting out, league tables, market competition, FEFC	search for funding convergence	FE funding review, HE funding review, institutional co-operation?
government & regulation	creation of MSC	ED & DES competition rise of MSC role	decline of MSC, attempts at ED/DES co-ordination, NCVQ formation, NCC formation	NCC/SEAC to SCAA, formation of FEFC & FAS	DfE/ED to DfEE initial mergers of ABs	SCAA/NCVQ to QCA three merged ABs and rationalisation of NVQ bodies
debates	role of liberal education, schooling and class, school to work transitions	critiques of vocationalism, arguments about occupational standards, prevocational frameworks	international comparisons, progression problems progressive vocationalism, modular systems, start of unification discussion	approaches to unification, critiques of GNVQs & NVQs, ad marketisation, value added & accountability	effects of Dearing, Capey and Beaumont reviews, unification, continued critiques of NVQs, standards	linkages or unification, inclusion, flexibility, extending the system, life-long learning

PART 3: THE DYNAMICS OF THE SIX PHASES OF POLICY DEVELOPMENT

In this part of the chapter I discuss the main factors at work within each of the phases of qualifications reform outlined in Figure 2. While each phase has different sets of factors at work, a more general dynamic can be identified. I will argue that qualifications policy is propelled between phases due to the interaction of three factors:

- responses by policy-makers to *external factors,* such as changes in the youth labour market, patterns of education participation, or the effects of international comparisons of education and training systems (e.g. by introducing new qualifications or rationalising existing qualifications);

- reactions to *internal system factors* (e.g. to weaknesses of the previous phase of qualifications reform such as the proliferation of different types of qualifications or the design weaknesses of a particular qualification);

- *ideological/political interpretation* that policy-makers place on the relationship between the external factors and internal system factors (e.g. a decision in 1991 to restrict participation in A Levels and to establish a new alternative vocational qualification - GNVQ).

Each of the phases combines these dynamic factors in different ways - in some phases the external factors are the dominant influence, in others, the reactions to the weaknesses of the previous phase appear to be more influential. In each phase, regardless of the balance of the previous two factors, there is ideological/political interpretation and debate. I will argue that, as the education and training system expands to absorb higher levels of participation, so policy development increasingly focuses on the issue of coherence.

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This means that internal system factors are becoming more important determinants of policy than external factors.

Phase 1: Precursor phase and the initial response to youth unemployment (1976-1982)

From the perspective of the periodisation of qualifications and the role of the three dynamics outlined above, this first phase could be characterised as a 'precursor phase'. It was a phase in which it was assumed that the majority of young people made a transition from school to work. In this context, issues of participation and qualifications were not taken seriously (Tomlinson 1997a). The most important factor in this phase is the 'external context' of rising youth unemployment. This phase did not focus particularly on qualifications as such; the policy response was to develop a range of provision for the growing number of young unemployed. Ideological interpretation came in the form and a criticism of a lack of preparation of many young people for the world of work (Callaghan 1976, DES 1976) and the need for programmes of vocational preparation (Holland 1977).

Phase 2: The New Vocationalism (1983-1991)

An era of the 'New Vocationalism' was opened by the *New Training Initiative* (MSC 1981). The factor promoting change continued to be youth unemployment but the Conservative Government now sought to organise a more co-ordinated response than in the late 1970s. This came through three vocationalising initiatives. The first was the Youth Training Scheme, which grew out of the Youth Opportunities Programme (YOPs) and which aimed to provide one year of work-based training for 16 and 17 year olds. The second, arising out of a *Basis for Choice* (FEU 1979), was the Certificate of Pre-vocational Education (CPVE), which was a one-year course for those staying-on in school or college at 16 but who were undecided about which particular occupation they wished to enter (DES 1982). The third was

the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI), which sought to vocationalise aspects of the secondary curriculum (Gleeson 1987). Overlaying these initiatives, and the first significant discussion about qualifications reform, were proposals for 'vocational preparation' to operate as a 'coherent curriculum framework' to contain and relate a wide range of courses and initiatives and to provide a means of progression (FEU 1979, 1981a, 1981b).

It can be argued that policies connected with 'vocationalism' in the 1980s can be divided into two phases. The first consisted of programmes and curriculum initiatives (e.g. YTS, CPVE and TVEI) aimed at particular groups of young people who were low achievers or who could not directly enter the labour market. By 1984, these national programmes had sparked a debate which later became known as the discussion of the 'New Vocationalism' (Bates *et al.* 1984, Dale 1985). The debate consisted of 'critiques' of its instrumentalism (Holt 1987); that this expansion of education and training represented an ideology of control and of socialisation of young people for the dole (Bates *et al.* 1984) and the 'cooling out' of aspirations (Gleeson 1985); that it was giving rise to a new form of stratification - tertiary tripartism - (Ranson 1984, Green 1986) and that it was training without jobs (Finn 1985, 1987).

The second phase of vocationalism, in the late 1980s, was an attempt to create a national vocational framework and to vocationalise the 14-18 curriculum for all learners. This period saw the continuation of the initiatives of the early 1980s, though 'expanded' in focus. Most notable was the Extension Phase of TVEI. TVEI which, during the period 1984-96, had focused its funding and efforts on low achievers in schools, was now applied to all full-time students 14-18. This expanded focus was to provide a new direction for vocationalism - the movement from being a stratified curriculum for some learners to the prospect of it being a dimension of the curriculum for a much wider group, if not all learners (Gleeson 1989).

The expansion of focus to vocationalise the whole curriculum will be referred to later as 'progressive vocationalism'.

During the early phase of the New Vocationalism, the dynamics of change remained broadly similar to the precursor phase. The external context of youth unemployment continued to be a very dynamic factor. The policy focus was broadly of the same character as the previous phase but in response to its obvious *ad hoc* nature, it became more organised and system-wide in the form of NTI, YTS, CPVE and TVEI. Ideological interpretation, however, became more complex; it combined an argument for opening up education and training opportunities to a wider range of young people with an ideological argument for vocational curriculum and training programmes (MSC 1981, Holland 1986). This, in turn, provoked a widespread 'critique' from the educational community and the concept of the New Vocationalism. The second phase of vocationalism was also related to attempts to create a national qualifications framework.

Phase 3: The emerging national qualifications framework (1986-91)

By the mid-1980s and the beginning of the 'Lawson Boom' the problems of youth unemployment had begun to be contained. More young people were entering training schemes and the economic activity of 16-19 years olds had increased (Spours 1995b). Policy concerns turned to problems of low levels of skill, participation and achievement which had been highlighted by a number of influential international comparative reports (IMS 1984, Coopers and Lybrand Associates 1985). Between 1986 and 1991, policy on the curriculum and qualifications went through a 'gear-shift' with the aim of developing a national system (Richardson 1991).

During this phase, four aspects of national system building can be identified. First, the creation of the National Curriculum from 5-16,

which, at Key Stage 4, was to overlap the area of national qualifications. Second, the formation of NCVQ and the creation of a vocational qualifications framework based on NVQs (NCVQ 1987). Third, the Extension Phase of TVEI intended to cover all full-time learners 14-18 and fourth, increased co-operation by the Department for Education and Science and the Employment Department (DES/ED 1986).

I will argue that the most dynamic factor of the period between 1986 and 1991 was the development of a more co-ordinated national policy focus. This was not a unified approach but it was one which aimed to co-ordinate a divided system by bringing together the *ad hoc* strands of initiatives of the previous phase and to extend them further. The influence of the external context moved from that of youth unemployment to international comparison of skills and achievement. In fact the decade was to end with concerns about the 'demographic timebomb' and the threat of a shortage of youth labour (NEDO 1989).

An assumption which spanned both Phase 2 and Phase 3 was that there was a limit to full-time participation. In 1987, over half of 16 year olds in England left full-time education, in marked contrast to patterns of participation in Continental Europe (Finegold 1993). Even as staying-on rates started to rise in the late 1980s, the continued policy assumption was that most young people would make a rapid transition from school to work. The effect of this assumption on qualifications was a dualist notion of reform (Hodgson & Spours 1997a). Existing vocational qualifications would take on the form of occupationally-specific NVQs and new NVQs would be created for both young people and adults in the world of work. Those who remained in full-time education would benefit from a broader general (academic) curriculum in the form of the National Curriculum at Key Stage 4, from the introduction of GCSEs and, possibly, from reformed A Levels. Broad vocational education, reflected in particular

by BTEC awards, would cease to exist by virtue of the spread of NVQs and their adaptation to the NVQ vocational framework.

This dualism was not, however, reflected in academic debates, since it was not fully understood at the time. Only later, in the early 1990s, with the formation of a formalised triple-track system based on A Levels, GNVQs and NVQs did the differences with the previous phase become more apparent (Spours 1993). Debates during the period 1986 -1991 continued to be informed by critiques of the New Vocationalism (Gleeson 1985, Holt 1987). Added to this were arguments about the problems of proliferation of qualifications and in particular the status and role of CPVE (Spours 1988a). At the same time, the debate took a fundamental turn towards whole-system analysis. In a seminal piece *The Failure of Training in Britain: Analysis and Prescription* (1998), Finegold and Soskice located deep-seated problems of education and training in a series of economic, societal and system factors termed the 'low skills equilibrium'. Elsewhere, developments in the NVQ framework (e.g. unitisation) and in the academic track (the effects of GCSE, considerations of broadening A Levels and the gradual introduction of modular syllabuses) stimulated debates on the possibility of overarching modular frameworks linking academic and vocational courses (Burgess 1993).

Phase 3 of qualifications reform differed markedly from the two previous phases because of the perceived need to build a more co-ordinated national system. The external dynamic changed from youth unemployment to international comparison and therefore had a less pressing material influence. Internal system reactions to the shortcomings of the previous phase (e.g. the lack of a qualifications framework) became much more important in shaping policy, notably in the *Review of Vocational Qualifications* (MSC 1986). The dominant ideological interpretation was divided and dualist but it sparked a response which was not just a critique but also a strategic argument

for change - the beginnings of a movement for unification of the 14+ curriculum.

Phase 4: The triple-track national qualifications framework (1991-95)

The 1991 White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century* (DES/ED/WO 1991) signalled the formalisation of a track-based qualifications system based on A Levels, GNVQs and NVQs. This redrawing of qualifications division took place within a newly-formed national qualifications framework based on distinct qualifications though linked by notional equivalence of levels (Hodgson & Spours 1997a). The 1991 White Paper also laid the basis for the *Further and Higher Education Act* (DES 1992) which removed the higher education binary divide and established the 1992 Universities. It also proposed the formation of the FEFC and ushered in the incorporation of further education colleges.

The period between 1987 and 1991 had seen full-time participation at 16+ rise from 48 percent to 66 per cent of the age group. Participation in A Levels had actually risen from 22 per cent to 34 per cent of the age group. By 1990 the Conservative Government had become concerned that A Level standards were being diluted by this rapid expansion. As a result, they called a halt to the policy of diversification of A Levels, which, following the rejection of the *Higginson Report* (DES 1988a), had proceeded quietly during the period that John McGregor was Secretary of State for Education. Instead, they proposed to reduce drastically the amount of assessed course-work in GCSE and A Levels. Those who could not cope with these new rigours were offered a new broad vocational award and progression route. This was to become known as General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) which was to act as an alternative full-time route to higher education, to further training and to jobs.

The centre-piece of qualifications policy in this phase was GNVQs. The new award was developed to fill a three-fold qualifications vacuum. First, GNVQs provided a means of participation and achievement for those not taking a three-A level programme which was, as a result of assessment changes, to become more difficult. Second, they were a means of responding to the shortcomings of occupationally focused and competence-based NVQs and their inability to cater for full-time students, which, following the rise in full-time participation, constituted the majority of the 16-19 age group (Watson & Wolf 1991). The third role of GNVQs was to fill gaps left by BTEC awards and a range of 'traditional vocational qualifications' which existed in some vocational areas, but not in others. GNVQs, like NVQs, were designed as national qualifications to constitute distinctive tracks within the triple-track national qualifications framework.

Alongside the formation of a divided national qualifications framework, another powerful policy influence was emerging - funding methodologies and institutional competition (Elliott 1996). While its role is not the focus of this thesis, the effects of funding methodology were to be felt within the area of qualifications, as FEFC funding methodology drove down course contact time on full-time courses (Spours & Lucas 1996). By 1997, the Kennedy Report went as far as to state that funding was the most important influence in terms of 'widening participation' (Kennedy 1997).

During this phase, debates in and around the field of qualifications divided largely into two types - arguments for increased coherence and unification of the qualifications system and critiques of vocational qualifications. Following the upsurge of curriculum initiatives in the late 1980s, an increasing number of educational organisations began to call for a more unified qualifications system (Richardson 1991, 1993). The unification debate was to become a strong and ultimately dominant strand of educational thinking by the mid-1990s (Howieson et al. 1997). On the other hand, government policy on vocational qualifications (e.g. NVQs and GNVQs) attracted a steady stream of

criticism across the spectrum of educational opinion (Smithers 1993, Hyland 1994, Senker 1996, Marks 1996). The effects of these debates was to contribute to pressures for the review of qualifications in 1995/6 in the form of the Capey *Review of GNVQ Assessment*, the Beaumont *Review of 100 NVQs/SVQs* and the Dearing *Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds*.

The dynamic of change resulting in Phase 4, the triple-track qualifications phase, involved a reassertion of the external factor of changing patterns of participation as rises in full-time staying-on rates triggered the introduction of GNVQs. Reactions to internal system factors focused both on the proliferation of qualifications and initiatives at the end of the 1980s and on the shortcomings of NVQs to meet the needs of increased numbers of full-time learners. Ideological interpretation came in the form of a formalised track-based approach to the national qualifications framework to preserve A Levels and to promote a broad vocational track with notional equivalence.

Phase 5: Review of the national qualifications framework (1995/6)

By 1995, the triple-track national qualifications framework based on A Levels, GNVQs and NVQs was facing mounting pressure. Low course-completion rates, highlighted by the Audit Commission (1993), had not significantly improved and concern was expressed about the 30 per cent of students who started an A Level, but did not successfully complete. GNVQ courses, on the other hand, had even lower completion rates and below those of the courses which GNVQs were meant to replace (Spours 1995b). There were also significant asymmetries within the national qualifications framework, notably the large size of the 12-unit Advanced GNVQ, which was reducing flexibility and possibly deterring mixing of study (FEU/IOE/Nuffield 1994). Moreover, there was mounting criticism of assessment

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approaches in GNVQs (Smithers 1994a, Smithers 1994b, Hyland 1994, Hodkinson & Mattinson, 1994, Spours 1995c).

In response to these pressures, the Conservative Government decided to undertake three reviews - the Capey *Review of GNVQ Assessment* (1996), the Beaumont *Review of 100 NVQs/SVQs* (1995) and the Dearing *Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds* (1996). These reviews overlapped in many ways and, in particular, in the way in which Dearing drew upon the evidence of the Capey Review. The reviews and the development of Modern Apprenticeships, with its emphasis on work-based qualifications at Level 3, could be seen as a concerted attempt at 'system adjustment' to make the divided national qualifications system more flexible and effective (Spours & Young 1996a). The reviews can also be seen to represent a period of 'consolidation' of the 1991 White Paper signalled by Dearing's intention to *"strengthen, consolidate and improve the framework of 16-19 qualifications"* (Dearing 1996:1). During 1995, a joint ministry, the DfEE, was formed, which provided a more unified governmental influence and which was to contribute to the pressure to unify the regulatory arrangements for 16-19 qualifications (DfEE 1997a, 1997b).

Despite the influence of National Targets on policy in the early 1990s, the dynamics of Phase 5 shifted to more internal system responses. The external factor continued to be international comparison, articulated through revised National Targets. The internal system response perceived a gap between system performance and the these new national targets - a gap which stimulated the series of qualifications reviews in 1995/6. The policy interpretation signalled a slight move away from track-based division towards that of creating qualifications alignment and linkages between qualifications tracks (Spours & Young 1996a).

Phase 6: Qualifications linkages (1998 -)

The election of the Labour Government in May 1997 set in motion two reform processes in the field of 14+ qualifications. The most immediate and most visible was the consultation process on 16-19 qualifications, *Qualifying for Success*. It aimed to build on the Dearing reform process and to create more 'linkages' between academic and vocational qualifications than had been proposed in the Dearing Review. The second strand of reform was a series of proposals to make the national qualifications framework more consistent and inclusive. It is envisaged that many, if not all, vocational qualifications currently lying outside the framework will be brought into Schedule 2 provision of publicly funded qualifications. At the same time as this 'expansion' of the framework, there is a debate about how far it develops features of credit accumulation and transfer. The pressures for this new phase of development of the national qualifications framework come not only from arguments for consistency and rigour of qualifications (DfEE 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, DfEE 1998b), but from debates about widening participation (Kennedy 1997), developing a mass higher education system (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education 1997) and promoting lifelong learning (DfEE 1998a).

The dynamics of development of this phase are not yet clear, but there are signs of a change of gear in relation to the previous phases. The phase still shows signs of 'consolidation' in qualifications set by Dearing, but with an added emphasis on breadth of achievement (DfEE 1998c). There is also an increasing emphasis on the participation of previously marginal groups and adults. The recognition of 'external' factors such as social and educational exclusion have risen up the political agenda since the General Election thus possibly heralding a new era of rising (or widening) participation through programmes such as the New Deal (DfEE 1998c).

The internal system response increasingly highlights the need to create the conditions to provide for breadth in 16-19 qualifications

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and to create a qualifications system capable of promoting lifelong learning (QCA 1998). Debates in this area now seek to encompass both younger learners and adults, rather than keeping them separated and problematising how previously excluded groups can participate within an expanded, yet more consistent, national qualifications framework (Hodgson 1998 forthcoming).

PART 4: THE ROLE OF CONTEXTUAL FACTORS, POLICY DEVELOPMENTS AND DEBATES (1976-1998)

In the previous part of the chapter I have argued that the movement between phases of qualifications reform resulted from the interaction of three influences - the effect of the wider context beyond that of qualifications, internal system responses to perceived weaknesses in the national qualifications framework and the influence of ideological interpretation signalled in both policy documents and wider debates. The relationship between these three interactive factors has been analysed briefly within each of the six phases. In this next section I will look at their respective roles over the period 1976 - 1998, in order to substantiate the argument about the dynamics of change moving from external contextual factors to internal system factors.

External contextual factors

Contextual factors have been accorded particular importance in the English system due to the way in which they have determined the course of 'bottom-up' approaches to reform (Raffe 1984, Raffe *et al.* 1997) and the way in which national qualifications reform has been responsive to changes in labour markets and participation patterns (Hodgson & Spours 1997a). Contextual factors affecting qualifications reform over the last twenty years have broadly fallen into three types; fundamental changes in the youth labour market and the lengthening of transitions of young people from school to work (Roberts 1984); significant rises in levels of full-time participation; and third, international comparisons highlighting the weaknesses of the English system (OECD 1975, 1985, Steedman 1991, Green & Steedman 1993).

These three types of external factors have affected the development of the qualifications system in different ways over the period in question. Labour market effects were fundamental in the early phases (phases 1 and 2) but, arguably, less influential in the latter phases, as the transition from school to work became longer and

more diffuse. The role of participation, on the other hand, has grown more important over the period. The scope of participation has diversified, broadening from problems of low staying-on rates at 16 in the mid-late 1980s (Finegold & Soskice 1988), to issues of retention and progression within the 16-19 age group in the early 1990s (Audit Commission/OFSTED 1993). More recently, the scope of participation policy has widened further to include adults and in particular the 18-25 age group (Labour Party 1996, Kennedy 1997). Issues highlighted by international comparisons have also shifted from the early emphasis on lack of system coherence in the mid-1980s (IMS 1984, OECD 1985), to skill levels in the late 1980s (CBI 1989, Prais 1990) and to attainment and targets in the early 1990s (CBI 1991a, NACETT 1994). In the mid-1990s, attention is shifting to comparisons of post-16 strategies (Lasonen 1996, Lasonen & Young 1998).

The overall effect of the shifts in contextual influences has been to produce a wave-like pattern of 'system expansion' and 'system building/consolidation' phases. These can be seen to correspond broadly with the rising and peaking trends in participation:

- phases 1 and 2 (1976-1986): system expansion in the form of vocational initiatives in response to rising youth unemployment;

- phase 3 (1986-1991): national system building and consolidation (e.g. National Curriculum, NVQ framework, ministerial collaboration);

- phase 4 (1991-1995): system expansion through qualifications development to absorb rising levels of full-time participation (e.g. GNVQs);

- phase 5 (1995/7): system building and consolidation responding to the weaknesses of the 1991-95 period;

- phase 6 (1998 -) system building/consolidation (e.g. 14-19 qualifications) and system expansion at 19+ (e.g. New Deal).

Internal system responses

Over the last two decades, as the national qualifications system has expanded, so it has become gradually less prone to external contextual influences and more affected by internally-generated system factors. However, this has not happened in a linear manner. The declining effect of external factors in promoting system change appear to have taken place through a wave-like pattern of system expansion and consolidation (outlined in the previous paragraph). The periods of external influence have become shorter and more confined in their effects. During the period 1992-5, the effect of participation rises on the system (the development of GNVQs) was arguably less dramatic than the effect of mass youth unemployment on a system which, at the end of the 1970s, had not anticipated the rapid decline of the youth labour market. Internal influences, on the other hand, have become more systemic. There are several aspects of internal system responses including: reactions to perceived weaknesses of existing qualifications; the domino effects of changes in other parts of the system (e.g. the introduction of funding regimes) or changes in national organisations (e.g. the DfEE merger and the QCA merger); the quality and direction of debates (e.g. there is some evidence that they are becoming more 'strategic' and concerned with making policies work, rather than being in the form of academic 'critique').

In terms of system-building, the dividing point was the mid-1980s and the formation of NCVQ, GCSE reforms, the emergence of the National Curriculum and TVEE. From then on, the momentum for change became increasingly generated within the education and training system as it grew, became more complex and as policy makers set more ambitious aims for system coherence. In 1997, under a new government, a more explicit dual process may be taking place in which system consolidation and coherence is also being paralleled by system expansion in the form of policies for lifelong learning and educational inclusion (Kennedy 1997, DfEE 1998a, 1998c). It remains to be seen if the 'widening of participation'

compels the system to become more coherent and flexible or whether, as in the past, 'system expansion' means simply adding new bits which will later force another period of 'consolidation'.

Debates and ideological interpretation

In this section I will analyse the pattern of debates and their relationship to the 'wave-like' development of the phases of the national qualifications framework rather than providing a detailed account of the nature of the academic debates themselves.

It is possible to argue that periods of system expansion have tended to provoke 'critique' because of the emphasis on introducing new forms of division, while periods of attempted consolidation have shown more elements of policy pragmatism and, therefore, may have tended to promote more strategic or policy-oriented debates.

The critique of the 'New Vocationalism' in the early and mid-1980s was pitted against government policy which it alleged, introduced new forms of social control and socialisation for unemployment; promoted new forms of division (e.g. tertiary tripartism) how it represented an instrumental ideology. The critique was often made from the standpoint of those defending 'liberal education' and its values (Holt 1987).

By the late 1980s, there was a perceptible change of tone in the academic debates about vocationalism. They started to become less polemical and more analytical.

- The debate about vocationalism appeared to move from outright hostility (Bates *et al.* 1984), to an observation of its paradoxes (Ranson *et al.* 1986, Gleeson 1989), to an appreciation of its role in promoting a more progressive curriculum (Pring 1985, Spours & Young 1990, Chitty 1991).

- At the same time, attention turned to changing patterns of participation and changing transitions from school to labour

markets (Raffe 1988, Roberts, Dench & Chadwick 1990, Roberts & Chadwick 1991).

- A third strand of debate was critique of fragmentation and the relationship between new initiatives and the wider system (Gleeson 1990, Spours 1991).

- A fourth, and a possibly, defining strand was whole-system analysis in the form of the Finegold and Soskice essay *Failure of Training in Britain* (1988).

- A fifth strand was beginning to emerge by the very end of the 1980s related to qualifications system development - arguments for modularisation and unification. Relatively few academics were involved in this discussion. The intense debate at the end of the 1980s was more policy-oriented than academic in origin, a process carefully plotted by Richardson (1991).

By the early 1990s, another wave of system expansion was precipitated through rising full-time participation. It provided the context for the introduction of GNVQs, the attempt to divide the system into a formal triple-track system and to introduce market forces into post-compulsory education. This attempt at 'divisive' expansion brought another wave of academic criticism. Like the early 1980s, the academic debates had several strands, though this time, they were much more technical and grounded in the policy process:

- a critique of competence-based outcomes approaches to vocational education and training (Callender 1992, Smithers 1993, Hyland 1994, Robinson 1996);

- debates on track-based systems (Finegold *et al.* 1990, Raffe 1993a, Spours 1993);

- international comparison performance levels of education and training systems linked to system factors (Green & Steedman 1993);

- critique of market-based approaches to education and training and accountability through assessment (Hodkinson & Sparkes 1994).

The mid/late 1990s began to see a more strategic debate taking shape around the future of 14+ curriculum and qualifications related to overcoming the academic vocational divide (Robertson 1993, Richardson *et al.* 1995a, Pring 1995, Halsall & Cockett 1996, Hodgson & Spours 1997a) though this had started in the late 1980s.

It is difficult to judge precisely the impact of debates on the policy process. Generally speaking, the more academic critiques appear to have had less of an impact and those more policy or technically grounded appear to have had more effect. During the 1990s, the critique of NVQs and GNVQs appears to have 'hit home' and to have contributed to precipitating the qualifications reviews in 1995/6. The debates on unification have also influenced policy, particularly in relation to the Dearing Review in 1996. Much of policy in England and Wales throughout the 1980s and early 1990s was 'ideologically driven' by successive Conservative Governments (Howieson *et al.* 1997). Debates in the academic community appear to have had more impact during 'pragmatic periods', when government has been prepared to listen to the wider educational community, notably in the mid-1990s.

PART 5: OVERLAPPING ERAS: A COMPLEMENTARY MODEL OF PERIODISATION

The main function of the six-phase matrix model is to classify national qualifications policy development over the period of two decades. It attempts to show how different dimensions of the education and training system contribute to the identity of a particular phase. But this approach to classification has two notable weaknesses; firstly, it is unable to identify 'lines of thinking and development' which span the phases and which can co-exist with each other at any moment; and secondly, its suggests that policy developments are end-on. The policy phase approach in Figure 1, in fact, suggests a coherence to the reform process which may not fully exist in reality. It is possible, therefore, to convert the six-phase national policy periodisation into three longer phases which overlap with each other based on 'eras' of development - the era of New Vocationalism, an era of a divided national qualifications frameworks (which still persists) and an emerging era of unification (see Figure 3). This approach to periodisation shapes the middle chapters of the thesis and is considered briefly here.

The overlapping eras approach to periodisation emphasises the coexistence of both policy and debates. Such a 'co-existence methodology' would reflect some essential features of the English system in the 1980s and 1990s:

- the distinction between national developments and local developments in a system which has been characterised as having strong a 'bottom-up' features e.g. the role of TVEI Extension (Howieson et al. 1997, Hodgson & Spours 1997a);

- the way in which the UK system (and the English system in particular) could be characterised as a 'mixed system' without a dominant mode of participation (Raffe 1992b);

- reflections of the mixed system by divisions of thinking and policy between different parts of the system (e.g. divisions between the

Employment Department and Department of Education and Science over the issue of 'vocationalism');

- the role of debates about policy developments and in particular arguments against track-based qualifications systems and arguments for unification of 14+ qualifications.

Figure 3: Overlapping eras of qualifications development

1977 **1986** **1997**

divided national qualifications framework

	NVQ framework 86-91	triple-track 92-98	linked track 1998-
	dual track strategies consisting of NVQ framework + National Curriculum GCSEs and A Levels	A Levels GNVQs NVQs	Modified AS, GNVQs and NVQs
local integrative 87-91			Weak framework strategies
TVEI Extension local post-16 planning			Strong framework strategies
modularisation unitisation tools prevocational frameworks Y-models		Bac proposals & credit frameworks	Overarching and Single Certification
unification precursors 86-90		critique and strategic blueprints 90-94	staged unification approach 95-

The New Vocationalism

precursor phase 77-83

prevocational phase 83-90

work-based measures (YOP/WEEPS)

vocational programmes & new certification (YTS/TVEI/CPVE)

Chapter 2 **Chapter 3** **Chapter 4**

unification approaches

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The era of the New Vocationalism (1976-91)

The first line of development was the development of the New Vocationalism. In the policy phases this was divided into two phases - a fragmented phase (1983-1986) and an expanded phase (1986-1991). The overlapping eras model suggests a longer time period with more internal phases: a precursor phase, a national programme phase and a local integrative phase:

• the precursor phase (1976-81) was marked by a range of responses to the rapid rise of youth unemployment. This period can be seen to end with the New Training Initiative (1981) which stressed systematic training for all;

• a national programme phase (1981-86) beginning with NTI reflected a systematic attempt to shift 14-19 education and training towards more explicit economic priorities through an increasing role, through YTS and TVEI, for the MSC and the Employment Department;

• a local integrative phase (1986-91) was represented by TVEI Extension, which aimed to provide vocationalised education for the whole 14-19 age range of full-time learners.

In the period 1986-1991, GCSE was launched and later identified as a key factor in stimulating higher staying-on rates at 16. By the end of the decade, modular syllabuses, internal assessment strategies and a growing number of locally-inspired experiments in institutional collaboration and bridging the academic and vocational divide at 16+, were being developed. A decade which had started with widespread criticism of government-led vocational initiatives ended with a stronger sense of the potential of innovation at local level. However, the continuation of previous forms of vocationalism, coupled with the variety of local initiatives created a climate of fragmentation, as well as innovation, lacking any clear sense of the role of 14-19 education as a

whole. This was later seen as a period in which practitioners had to become adept at *"innovating in chaos"* (Spours 1993: 169)

By the end of the 1980s, the different strands of the New Vocationalism could have developed in different directions - towards a track-based system or towards unification (see Figure 3). Some aspects of the New Vocationalism were imprinted on NVQs and GNVQs and contributed to the development of the track-based national qualifications framework, notably the effects of NVQ assessment methodology (Hyland 1994, Taubman 1994, Spours 1995c). I have termed this 'bureaucratic vocationalism' because of the ways in which competence-based outcomes and assessment 'organised' other strands of vocationalism - unitisation, recording of achievement, core skills - within GNVQs.

Other strands of the New Vocationalism, which arose out of educational initiatives for full-time learners (e.g. CPVE and TVEI) contributed to debates in the late 1980s, leading to the first full unification proposals *A British Baccalaureate* (Finegold *et al.* 1990). The most influential elements were modularisation and the idea of a vocationalised curriculum for all learners. This version of vocationalism was not work-based but education-based and embraced 'structure' (e.g. unitisation/modularisation); 'processes' (e.g. active learning processes, recording of achievement and guidance); and, 'content' (unifying academic and vocational learning). This broad or 'progressive' approach to vocationalism was inspired by the idea of overcoming the academic/vocational divide.

Divided national qualifications systems (1986 - present)

The second line of development was the formation of a national qualifications framework. It began with the *Review of Vocational Qualifications* (MSC 1986) and continued throughout the life of the previous Conservative government. This period has not yet ended and

can only be closed when clear evidence emerges that the qualifications system has strongly entered a more unified stage of development.

The era of the national qualifications framework has fallen into two, and now possibly, three phases. First, the 'NVQ phase' which began with the setting up of the Review of National Qualifications in 1986. Second, the 'triple-track phase', initiated by the 1991 White Paper and the attempt to establish a three-track framework inclusive of all qualifications. The third stage is arguably just beginning. This could be termed a 'linkages phase' which grew out of the Dearing *Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds* and which could be developed further by the outcomes of the consultation process in *Qualifying for Success* (DfEE 1997c)

Unification (1990 - present)

The third line of development can be broadly characterised as the attempt to create a unified 14+ system which, arguably, began in 1990 with the publication of *A British Baccalaureate* (Finegold *et al.* 1990). Unlike in Scotland, where a unifying strategy is represented by *Higher Still* (SOED 1994) and will be implemented in 1999, unification in England has been essentially a legacy of opposition, reflected in the debates and policy documents of think-tanks and professional organisations who were often explicitly in opposition to Conservative Government policy.

To understand this particular legacy, it is important to see unification not as a monolithic idea, but as an emerging set of debates and strategies (Howieson *et al.* 1997). In England during the early 1990s two related types of ideas on unification have emerged. The first kind has been based on a 'baccalaureate' concept, which evolved around the idea of an advanced diploma to replace A Levels and existing vocational qualifications (Finegold *et al.* 1990, Royal Society 1991, NCE 1993). The second has been a looser framework based on unitisation and credit, which could contain existing qualifications without necessarily changing

them and which, at the same time, would retain sufficient flexibility to also be applicable to the accreditation needs of adults (APVIC 1991, FEU 1992, AfC *et al.* 1994). These approaches to unification are explored further in Chapter 4.

In 1995, the *Learning for the Future Project* (Richardson *et al.* 1995a) suggested that these two tendencies could be reconciled into a single strategy by a phased approach to unification. The Project Team argued that a first phase of 14-19 reform could focus on flexibility, through developing modular syllabuses and a shift in the balance between internal and external assessment. This was called a 'common framework stage'. Later, the movement to unification could build on this greater flexibility and concentrate on broadening the 14-19 curriculum (Spours & Young 1995). The Labour Party's policy document, *Aiming Higher,* (Labour Party 1996) though lacking detail, reflects such a phased strategy for reforming the 14-19 curriculum based on synthesising baccalaureate and framework approaches. The unification era is still developing and may be propelled by the development agenda of QCA and even by the Labour Government. An analysis of current unification policy and debates is provided in Chapters 4 and 5.

PART 6: THE PERIODISATION FRAMEWORKS AND ISSUES FOR THE THESIS

I use the overlapping eras periodisation as a way of structuring the middle chapters of the thesis (see Figure 3): Chapter 2, *Fragmentation of 14+ Qualifications and Problems of Progression (1986-91);* Chapter 3, A *Critique of the Triple-Track Qualifications System (1991-95)* and Chapter 4, *The Unification of 14+ Qualifications: Towards an Analytical Framework (1990-1997)*

- The analysis of Chapter 2 focuses largely on the era of the New Vocationalism but also takes a diagonal cut through the overlap of the three eras: through the later period of vocationalism (87-91); through the dualist strategies of the NVQ framework 1986-91 and through the 'precursor debates of unification in the late 1980s. I argue that the complexity of qualifications reform in the period 1986-1991 is due to the overlap of these three eras of development.

- The analysis of Chapter 3 is based on a diagonal cut between the formation of a triple-track qualifications system and critiques of these developments from the standpoint of unification.

- The analysis of Chapters 4 and 5 is based on the relationship between the most recent phase of a divided national qualifications framework - termed a 'linked approach' - and unification theory and strategy.

In this chapter I have constructed a historical framework for analysing 14+ qualifications reform based six phases of policy development and three overlapping eras of development. The six national policy phases and overlapping eras provide a means of interpreting changes in national qualifications development and point to a gradual movement

from system fragmentation to formalised system division and to emerging unification.

I have argued that the movement from one policy phase to another has been caused by the inter-relationship of three factors - responses to external factors; reactions to internal system factors and ideological interpretation. I have also argued that the dynamics of change over two decades appear to be moving from external factors to internal system factors.

The overlapping eras periodisation is used to structure the three chapters because of the capacity of this historical tool to encompass the co-existence of policy initiatives and debates. In Chapter 2, I argue that problems of system complexity arose from the co-existence of several different strands of policy and of debate in the late 1980s and that the Conservative Government attempted to impose 'track-based order' on a qualifications system which was both flourishing and chaotic. In Chapter 3, I argue against the strategy of the creation of a formalised triple-track system between 1991-95 from the standpoint of unification and show how the problems of the triple-track qualifications system were rooted in concepts of qualifications 'distinctiveness' and division. In Chapters 4 and 5, I explore the concept of unification and its impact on the current policy process and argue that a divided qualifications system is gradually developing features of unification.

Chapter Two

Fragmentation of 14+ Qualifications and Problems of Progression (1986-1991)

PART 1: A CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Aims of the chapter

In Chapter 2, I apply the historical framework developed in Chapter 1 to a qualifications policy during the 1980s and, in particular, to developments from 1986 to 1991. The chapter analyses the roots of the complexity of qualifications arrangements in the late 1980s by focusing on prevocational certification and its relationship to other aspects of the qualifications system. Particular attention is given to CPVE and problems of progression.[7] CPVE was an early curriculum and qualifications response to rising levels of participation. It became a popular curriculum 'movement' amongst practitioners and was originally seen as a framework for rationalising qualifications. I will argue that CPVE exemplified curriculum and qualifications thinking in the era of the New Vocationalism. The Chapter also contains the first of four 'historical case-studies' in the thesis, based on extracts from *The Politics of Progression*. This is previously published work which is used to dissect the three overlapping eras - prevocationalism, a dualist national strategy and local innovative experiments.

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[7] I do not focus on the development of TVEI Extension because TVEI was not a qualification. Instead, I treat TVEI as an important contextual influence on the qualifications system.

The context of policy responses

In Chapter 1, I have argued that the complexity of qualifications arrangements in the period 1986 - 1991 resulted from the co-existence of 'overlapping eras'. First, the continuation of a prevocational phase (a strand of the era of the New Vocationalism) which had started in earnest in 1983 with the launch of the Certificate of Prevocational Education (CPVE).[8] Second, attempts at a national 'dual strategy' based on the broadening of the academic track (through the development of GCSE and National Curriculum at Key Stage 4) and on the creation of a national vocational framework. Third, a series of local curriculum developments, associated with CPVE and TVEI Extension, which encouraged local curricular innovation.

The problems of this complexity and proliferation of qualifications in the late 1980s are rooted in the nature of the English system of the 1970s. The main features of the education and training system during the 1960s and early 1970s had been an elite academic track and an apprenticeship system restricted primarily to young males. It was one in which the vast majority of the cohort made a swift transition from school to work or, increasingly, from school to unemployment. In retrospect, the education and training system looked singularly ill-equipped to deal with youth unemployment due to the absence of a widespread training infrastructure and culture (Green 1991).

Policy responses of this period have been the subject of discussion and debate with widespread agreement that the years from the mid-

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[8] 'Prevocationalism' can be defined in different, but related ways. First, as an aspect or variant of the 'New Vocationalism' which represents an integration between educational and occupational systems (Moore 1988) and which divides it from established academic disciplines (Ranson 1984, Radnor et al. 1989). Second, as 'progressive' approaches to pedagogy and assessment which could benefit learners across the cohort (FEU 1979, 1981a, 1981b, Macintosh 1986). Thirdly, as a form of certification with core, vocational orientation within broad vocational groups and work experience (Gleeson 1989, Pring 1995).

1970s to the end of the 1980s constituted a period known as the 'New Vocationalism'. This period saw increased government intervention in training, particularly through the MSC, the development of an ideology of vocationalism and the movement of education nearer to the needs of employers (Salter & Tapper 1981, Finn 1987, Holt 1987). Other commentators, while not denying the convergence of education policy and economic needs, pointed to the greater participation of young people in education and training compared with previous decades (Holland 1986).

Another perspective, from a historical analysis of the national qualifications system, saw the response to the crisis of youth unemployment as consisting of a series of *ad hoc* measures (Richardson 1991, 1993, Jessup 1991). These were aimed principally at low achievers and vocationally undecided school-leavers. In the field of qualifications, the answer (after much debate) came in the form of the Certificate of Prevocational Education (CPVE). CPVE was meant to be a framework to contain other qualifications and to be applicable to a wide cohort of students reflecting the spirit of vocational preparation frameworks promoted by the FEU in the late 1970s and early 1980s (FEU 1979, 1981a, 1981b). However, CPVE ended up developing as a low-level course and being delivered by competing awarding bodies who still wanted to offer their own low level vocational qualifications to this age group. Moreover, in the mid-1980s, there were other qualifications and curriculum developments aimed at different age groups and sections of the cohort - the launch of GCSE, the mooted reform of A Levels and the launch of the NVQ vocational framework.

The result, by the end of the 1980s, was a proliferation of qualifications initiatives which I have categorised into three overlapping eras; the playing out of early measures of the New Vocationalism; the building of a national qualifications framework based on the NVQ concept of occupational competence and attempts to reform the academic track; and, attempts to vocationalise the curriculum at a local level through TVEI Extension. This

explosion of complexity was fuelled by a divided governmental response by the DES, MSC, and Employment Department, compounded by market competition between awarding bodies (notably BTEC and CGLI) and aided by locally proactive institutional responses (Hodgson & Spours 1997a).

By the late 1980s, and in response to the growing complexity of reform efforts, two approaches to rationalisation emerged. The dominant policy, pursued by the Conservative Government would turn to centralisation of education policy and to organising qualifications into three distinct tracks. The approach, rooted in the education profession, argued for a common modular system which, in the 1990s, became one of the cornerstones of a unified qualifications strategy. These two approaches, which are discussed in Chapter 3, would set the scene for the period following the 1991 White Paper; a formalised multi-track system and the unification debate.

In this next section, I set out in more detail the participation context which precipitated the policy responses of the 1980s. I also seek to define issues of progression which were to emerge during this period.

Extended transitions, participation, and problems of progression

There is general agreement that youth unemployment, from the mid-1970s onwards, brought about the lengthening of transitions from compulsory schooling to work (Roberts 1984, Finn 1987, Evans & Heinz 1994). Within this overall trend, I explore the relationship between changes in the youth labour market, changes in patterns of participation, pressures for qualifications reform and emerging problems of progression. Extending transitions between school and work and the increased level of participation in post-compulsory education and training throughout the 1980s, provided the context for the emergence of the issue of progression. More young people became involved in education and training and received certification. This, in turn, raised the issue of progression routes. Progression only

became a policy issue in the early 1980s.[9] Previously, the education and training system had been dominated by the selection culture and practices of the academic track; a similar pattern also prevailed in the vocational-technical track. Moreover, the majority of young people at the end of compulsory schooling were expected to make a rapid transition to working life. The main emerging academic debates at the time were about school to work transitions rather than educational progression.

Problems of progression emerged as an education and training system, based on elite academic and technical tracks and compelled to absorb new forms of participation, developed new curriculum approaches and new forms of certification. Problems of progression were associated with the lack of recognition by admissions tutors or employers of achievement in various types of prevocational courses which employed curriculum and assessment designs not used in the higher and previously established courses. Suspicions of admissions tutors were compounded by the fact that the new courses recruited low achievers.

The Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE)

CPVE became the focus of progression issues in the mid-1980s and brought the term 'progression' into educational language and policy. In January 1985, the Joint Board of Pre-Vocational Education launched the Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education.   It was envisaged that 100,000 students would be involved in a one-year examination at 17+ in schools, sixth form colleges and FE colleges.

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[9] Analysis of policy literatures in the late 1970s and early 1980s would suggest that the first reference to 'progression' came in the FEU document *Progressing from Vocational Preparation* (1981b). Prior to this, the term does not occur in this specific educational sense. In the thesis, I use the term 'progression' in a specific sense; as a way of analysing how the qualifications system expanded to take on new forms of participation, how it was used to differentiate between learners and how movement was organised between different levels and types of qualifications. This definition might be more accurately termed 'system progression' because of the role of certification. It differs in focus from 'personal progression' which can be seen to be concerned with the processes of personal decision-making (Hodkinson 1996).

By the early 1990s, CPVE would be replaced by the Diploma in Vocational Education (DVE). By 1992, the DVE itself would be largely absorbed by GNVQ Foundation and Intermediate awards. During its short and troubled existence, CPVE excited debate about its educational aims, its challenges to traditional pedagogy and assessment and, increasingly, its problems of progression (Macintosh 1986).

It is widely acknowledged that the development of CPVE was rooted in the relationship between rising full-time participation, a growing policy emphasis on vocationalising the 14+ curriculum and the perceived need for alternative courses to the academic route in full-time education (Ranson 1984, Macintosh 1986, Radnor *et al.* 1989, Green 1991). The development of CPVE was also seen as the outcome of a struggle between a curriculum based on traditional concepts of knowledge, subjects and terminal assessment and a curriculum based on skills, practical learning, integration and formative assessment (Ranson 1984, Radnor *et al.* 1989).

In the early 1970s, the GCE/CSE boards responded to steadily rising full-time participation rates at 16+ (they had risen from 12 per cent in 1961 to 24 per cent in 1973) with the piloting of the Certificate of Extended Education (CEE). By 1978, the DES set up a committee of inquiry chaired by Professor Koehane which recommended that a CEE be introduced with compulsory tests in maths and English, the offer of vocationally-oriented CEE studies, as well as an individually-selected package of examinations (DES 1979). This partially 'vocationalised' CEE could be seen to represent a compromise between strong parental pressure for academic subjects and government pressure for 'relevant' education (Radnor *et al.* 1989).

At the same time, the Further Education Unit published *A Basis for Choice* (FEU 1979) which suggested that a basic post-16 pre-employment course should consist of core, vocational and job-specific studies. In October 1980, the DES published the Macfarlane Report (DES 1980), which came out in favour of the FEU approach.

In May 1982, and following the FEU design principles, a *17+ A New Qualification* (DES 1982) was published. It was stated that the new qualification would be called the 'Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education'.

The ambiguous character of CPVE

Literatures documenting the development of CPVE and its relationship with the wider qualifications system have located a range of factors to explain its problematical position - the role of external contexts (Raffe 1984); the policy emphasis on vocationalism (Ranson, 1984, Green 1986, Chitty 1991); differences between 'traditional' and CPVE approaches to knowledge (Ranson 1984, Radnor *et al.* 1989); differences of course structure compared to other vocational courses (Spours 1988a); different approaches to assessment (Macintosh 1986) and competition between awarding bodies and national ministries and agencies (Radnor *et al.* 1989).

In order to locate more systematically the relationship between these factors, I have adapted a 'system dimensions approach', outlined in Chapter 1 (Figure 1), to analyse the different system-based problems of CPVE (Figure 4). I suggest that the problems facing CPVE were the result of problems located across different dimensions of the education and training system and not just within CPVE itself.

Figure 4: System problems of CPVE

System dimensions	System problems of CPVE
wider context - labour market, participation and divided routes	low achieving school-leavers pushed out of the youth labour market
main policy aims	to absorb and to accommodate a target group of low-achieving and vocationally undecided students who could not fit into these routes at 16
certification & course structure	ambiguous - both a form of certification and a framework for dual certification a multi-level framework nominally covering NVQ Levels 1 and 2
curriculum content, assessment and learning	prevocational content, integrative learning styles, competence-based formative assessment
institutions and progression	absence of formalised progression routes
government & regulation	competition between awarding bodies and between DES and MSC/ED
academic debates	initially about CPVE, vocationalism and stratification to problems of progression for CPVE students

In the context of rising levels of participation, CPVE was aimed at a particular target group of low achievers who were vocationally undecided.

"The Government has promoted the establishment of a new qualification, the CPVE, for those young people who stay on full time in either schools or colleges for one year after the compulsory period and who are not pursuing CSE or 'O' level (or in due course GCSE) qualifications with a reasonable hope of success, and who do not have a clear vocational aim in view" (DES 1985: para 112).

The Joint Board, which was responsible for administering CPVE, took a different view of the eligible cohort. It stated that there were no formal entry qualifications and CPVE was designed to provide an educational challenge to students of a wide ability range, with varied interests and aptitudes and with varying degrees of vocational commitment (CPVE Joint Board 1985). This reflected, not the Government view of its function, but rather the FEU concept of vocational preparation frameworks outlined in *A Basis for Choice* (FEU 1979) and other FEU publications of the early 1980s (FEU 1981a, 1981b). The result was confusion, representing *"official double-think"* (Green 1991: 185).

Ambiguity about the nature of the student cohort was related to ambiguity about the role of the 17+ qualification. An evaluation of CPVE, three years after its launch, highlighted four different interpretations of the qualification (CPVE Joint Board 1988a):

1. CPVE in competition at 16 for student numbers with other post-16 courses;

2. CPVE as a progression route into YTS, First awards, GCSE and more rarely into National and A Levels;

3. CPVE as a possible certificate within YTS (alternative route);

4. CPVE as a framework in which students can pick and combine academic single subjects and vocational modules.

The evaluation concluded that a competitive view predominated, in which CPVE had became seen as a low-level product in the market with a tendency for it to be associated with a low-achieving intake (Stock & Conway 1992). Interpretations 1 and 2 prevailed, which would hamper progression opportunities. There were, however, local variations of the pattern of implementation where some LEAs and institutions deliberately went about creating a broad-based CPVE by making it a framework for all first-year sixth provision in schools, but these were an exception rather than the rule (Spours 1988b).

The ambiguity of the target cohort, role and purpose of CPVE was compounded by curriculum and assessment design (Macintosh 1986). In the area of assessment, the system of summative profiling failed to establish credibility because of lack of agreement as to the standard required to obtain core competence statements from the 'Bank of Statements' and the degree to which the statements were meant to be hierarchical. CPVE also employed a non-standard structure of vocational modules. This was due to the educational argument which prevailed within the Joint Board that the award had to have high degrees of integration and be the result of personal negotiation. 'Introductory' and 'Exploratory' modules did not have any pre-requisite content and were used, in the main, as vehicles of core skills. Only 'Preparatory' modules had a clear indicative content and a recognisable assessment system. These, however, constituted only a minority of the CPVE model. As a result, modules within CPVE were not used, in a general way, as vehicles for progression, due to their lack of formalised vocational content.

The combined effect of lack of clarity of standards associated with CPVE competence statements and the variability of vocational modules made it difficult for admissions tutors to view CPVE in terms of 'equivalence' with other competing awards. Without similar

features of assessment or course structure, the standard of CPVE would, therefore, be judged by perceptions of its student intake.

The ambiguities of curriculum design were fuelled by competition between CGLI and BTEC. These two awarding bodies played the leading role within the Joint Board while the RSA was a minor and temporary partner. The launch of BTEC First Awards in 1986, which was to affect dramatically the future of CPVE, was the result of an acute mixture of awarding body competition and BTECs negative reaction to curriculum design issues in CPVE. BTEC, in launching BTEC First, in effect committed itself to what Green (1986) refers to as the 'technical stream'; leaving CGLI to pursue prevocationalism and to soldier on with CPVE until the end of the decade.

The dynamic effect of these factors and events would lock CPVE into a 'low numbers, narrow recruitment, low image syndrome'. High levels of registrations would have supported the contention that CPVE was operating as a framework in which other awards or schemes could be undertaken. Low numbers, on the other hand, would tend to support the conclusion that CPVE was becoming ghettoised at the lower end of the market. In 1987, a crucial year for CPVE, registrations peaked at around 35,000 representing just over 10 per cent of 16 year olds in full-time education. This compared with 100,000 taking A Levels, 38,000 for CGLI/RSA awards and 18,500 on BTEC First Diplomas. In the work-based route, there were over 200,000 trainees on YTS and only 7-10,000 CPVE graduates entering employment directly in 1987. By 1989, CPVE registrations had dropped to 25,000. The peaking process confirmed the worst fears for the future of CPVE and undermined teacher confidence. The feeling that the tide had turned was compounded by national policy attention turning to GCSE and the National Curriculum. The decline of CPVE left school and college CPVE teams feeling isolated, whereas, a few years earlier they had felt that they were curriculum pioneers spreading the word of prevocationalism (Radnor *et al.* 1989) Moreover, with fewer CPVE graduates in the system, it became more difficult to persuade admissions tutors responsible for higher courses

to spend time opening up their application and selection procedures. At the very moment when an unprecedented debate about progression opportunities was to begin, CPVE was slowly dying.

From debates on stratification to problems of progression

It is not surprising, therefore, that the development of the 17+ examination crystallised concerns about differentiation and stratification which, in response to the New Vocationalism, had been mounting during the early 1980s. I am going to argue that there were three types of debate about CPVE and its relationship to the wider education and training system during the 1980s - critical, pragmatic and strategic.

First, and in the mid-1980s, a critical discussion, conducted by academics, emerged in relation to the New Vocationalism in terms of stratification of young people. This focused on 'reproduction of class division' linked to social class, gender, race, knowledge, routes and career destinations (Ranson 1984, Moore 1988, Radnor *et al.* 1989, Gleeson 1989). The emergence of CPVE focused a debate which had been going on since the early 1980s. However, by the mid-1980s, the implementation of CPVE had provoked a more practical and pragmatic debate focusing on progression strategies to link CPVE to higher courses (FEU 1987, Spours & Baran 1988). The proponents of the 'pragmatic approach' were practitioners and curriculum developers.[10]

The strengths and weaknesses of this approach are explored in Part 3 of the chapter where I will argue that a more strategic debate emerged by the late 1980s, due to a number of factor - reform

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[10] My interest in progression issues started in 1986 as a Business Education Advisor for ILEA. I became involved in developments around CPVE and worked with other advisory staff to develop LEA-wide progression strategies. In 1987 I came to the Institute of Education and continued with work on progression in a number of LEAs. The year following I began to write about the area. The trajectory had been a one of critical reflection on practical problems rather than a critical analysis of policy initiatives. These issues are discussed briefly in Part 3 of Chapter 2 and more extensively in the Methodology Annex.

attempts in the academic track, the potential implications of the NVQ framework, the realisation that prevocational frameworks could not succeed either as qualifications or as frameworks and the fuelling effects of TVEI Extension. The focus shifted from CPVE progression to the reform of the qualifications system as a whole.

The academic and critical discussion of stratification through the notion of 'tertiary tripartism', was both deterministic, fatalistic and a potentially strategic contribution to future reform strategies. In a seminal paper *Towards a Tertiary Tripartism* (1984), Ranson argued that the introduction of a vocational curriculum and the 17+ examination could be seen as an essential part of the strategy for 'reconstructing the 14-19 curriculum'. He analysed this act of reconstruction through the concept of 'tertiary tripartism'; a process marked by learner differentiation based on three streams in post-16 education and training - 'tertiary modern' (17+ examination, YOP and YTS), 'tertiary technical' (BEC and TEC courses) and 'tertiary grammar' (A Level courses). Using Bernstein's distinction between 'collection' and 'integrated codes', he went onto argue that the 17+ examination used weak integration codes *"which open up thoughts feelings and values for close social control"* (1984: 242). The grammar and technical streams, on the other hand, *"continue to follow collection codes which give access to specialised knowledge, develop strong specific identities and retain areas of privacy in the socialisation process"* (1984: 242). Ranson's approach to tertiary tripartism, focused on the role of knowledge differentiation. Other analysts viewed tertiary tripartism through the lens of career destinations and the relationship between educational structures and economic needs.

Green (1986), in his analysis of the *MSC and the Three-Tier Structure of Further Education,* argued that FE colleges had become the focus of tiering. His classification is slightly different from Ranson's, though he also identifies three (overlapping) tiers but linked to likely occupational destinations; Tier 1 being full-time higher courses - BTEC and academic courses leading to professional,

managerial and higher-grade technician-type jobs; Tier 2 included craft and junior clerical courses offering access to craft level technical and junior office jobs and Tier 3, a disparate range of courses for MSC trainees and included CPVE. Green saw these divisions being reinforced by organisational divisions within FE colleges (e.g. General Studies departments being split along academic and non academic lines) which made concrete hierarchical distinctions in teaching modes and course content.

Radnor *et al.* (1989) also adopted Bernstein's knowledge codes to argue that stratification tied schooling directly into the reproduction of the social and technical relations of production. However, school-based research on the implementation of CPVE, which emphasised the complexities of teacher attitudes to pedagogy and the effects of competition between exam boards, eventually compelled the research team to draw back from sweeping generalisations and to admit that the practical realities of CPVE did not neatly fit with a reproduction thesis.

Approaches to stratification analysis, while having a common focus and broadly common analytical roots, did not agree precisely as to how many strata were involved and the nature of dynamic factors at work. Some pointed to knowledge differences (Ranson 1984) and to career destinations (Green 1986), while others suggested it might be more than one factor at work (Radnor *et al.* 1989). These sociological arguments were both insightful and deterministic - the English system was seen to be historically divided and it was suggested that these divisions would be reproduced in different phases at times of educational expansion. Stratification analysis pointed to real problems of division which, in retrospect, were to defeat CPVE. Furthermore, they also suggested a wider systemic analysis of the complex relationship between contextual, curricular, certification and organisational factors. However, despite the critical nature of their analysis, there was no connection between these academics and practitioners 'on the ground' struggling with CPVE

progression issues. They were not involved in suggesting strategic solutions.

Progression from CPVE and the problem of prevocationalism

I argued that the assertion that CPVE was a form of 'tertiary tripartism' would have to be tested against whether it offered progression to higher level courses. If pathways of progression could be forged, CPVE would not conform to the definition of a tertiary modern stream. Instead, it would begin to behave as a level in a national qualifications system. Moreover, if different levels of qualifications led to different job prospects, progression to a higher level course would mean that CPVE was not about young people being endlessly recycled in employment schemes.

However, tripartism can also be seen as 'learning delays' and not just 'blind alleys'. Some have argued that that the relationship between CPVE and other courses encouraged a delay of progression and the possibility of repetition of learning if CPVE graduates were forced to travel further via BTEC First Diploma (Radnor *et al.* 1989, Green 1991, Spours 1991). To test out a notion of stratification as learning delays meant analysing problems facing CPVE graduates in terms of their relationship with other courses and their admissions tutors. The progression prospects of CPVE depended on 'receivers' recognising the outcomes of CPVE in its own curricular terms (e.g. competence-based profiles). This was to be the focus of local progression strategies between 1986 and 1989.

The alternative approach, and one which could be deduced from the analysis of the critics, was that the curriculum and assessment system of CPVE had to be reformed in the direction of existing qualifications, in terms of the balance between content and process, structure and levelness and the approach to assessment. In the late 1980s, two sets of different strategies would emerge - one would try to strike a balance between the curricular features of the academic, technical and pre-vocational tracks through the idea of a national modular system and unified certification. The other would be to

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transport a hybrid of prevocationalism and NVQ assessment methodology into a formalised track-based system, in the form of GNVQs.

Dual national qualifications strategy - the NVQ Framework and GCSE reform

The analysis of the historical case study *The Politics of Progression* focuses not only on the problems of fragmentation arising from prevocationalism but also on divisive attempts at rationalising the national qualifications framework.

The national vocational qualifications framework

The foundations of the NVQ system had been laid in 1981 with the New Training Initiative (DoE 1981). Jessup (1991) argues that NTI contained a key sentence *"at the heart of this initiative lie standards of a new kind"* (DoE 1981: 6); the significance of which was little understood at the time. Between 1981 and 1986, the influence of the MSC grew within education and training (Ainley & Corney 1990, Hyland 1994). It was its influence which provided the impetus for the establishment of NCVQ and the Occupational Standards Programme (Debling 1991). Gilbert Jessup (1991), a central actor in the formation of the concept of national occupational standards, points to MSC documentation *The New Training Initiative: Implications for Standards, Assessment Procedures and Accreditation* which outlined many of the recommendations made by the Review of Vocational Qualifications (RVQ) in 1986.

The RVQ Working Group was set up in 1985 and reported in 1986. The report's recommendations were placed firmly in the context of the economy and needing better qualified people to promote greater competence of the British workforce and to make British industry more competitive (Cross 1991). The report addressed five concerns:

- producing a greater number of better qualified people;

- reducing the confusion of present provision;

- bridging the academic/vocational divide;

- relating vocational qualifications more directly to competence required at work;

- building on what was good in present practice (Cross 1991: 167/8).

The White Paper *Working Together - Education and Training* (DoE/DES 1986) endorsed the RVQ recommendations and announced the establishment of NCVQ. High priority was given to the implementation of standards of occupational competence and the design of a new NVQ framework. This involved a structure of vocational qualifications (NVQs) at five levels and based on industry-led 'standards'. The reforms introduced a single overarching framework for vocational qualifications and a single structure of liaison between industries and vocational education and training (Wolf 1993).

The problem was that the White Paper did not equitably address all the concerns highlighted in the RVQ report - notably bridging the academic/vocational divide or building on good practice. It chose, instead, to emphasise the concept of a vocational qualifications framework built on the notion of occupational competence. Moreover, the concept of competence adopted - 'the ability to perform in work roles or jobs to the standards required in employment' - was narrower than definitions used by other bodies such as the FEU (Cross 1991, Sutton 1992).

The effect of a competence-based approach to the National Vocational Qualifications framework was to produce more confusion rather than rationalisation. First, the concept of occupational competence divided vocational qualifications from academic qualifications more sharply than had previously been the case. Writing at the end of the 1980s, Cross (1991) laments that NCVQ

and SEAC never sat down together to work out the relationship between NVQs and A Levels. Furthermore, the vocational awarding bodies found that their qualifications did not fit the NVQ criteria. They either had to adapt their qualifications to the national vocational qualifications framework or to continue to offer their 'traditional products'. City and Guilds attempted to accommodate NVQs, whereas BTEC did not. It continued to offer its broad vocational awards to schools, colleges and employers.

The development of division was also aided by political shifts. By the late 1980s, government attention was shifting away from vocationalism and towards centralising the secondary curriculum. It was also a period of the ascendancy of the New Right in educational politics (Chitty 1989). Bridging the academic/vocational divide continued as a rhetorical theme, reflected in speeches by Ministers, such as Kenneth Bakers to FE (Baker 1989), but failed to manifest itself in education policy.

GCSE and the reform of the academic curriculum

During the same period, the Government was pursuing an agenda of broadening the academic track. The NVQ and GCSE missions were the main aspects of what I have termed a dual strategy. In a historical account, Lawton (1993: 67) argues that at this time the Government faced two separate but related problems; *"the inadequacy of A Levels for 'academic' student and the increasing demand of other young people to have a worthwhile curriculum"*. The first step in broadening participation in the academic track came in 1988, with the introduction of the General Certificate of Secondary Education to replace the GCE O level and CSE examinations. The main changes were that all candidates in a school were entered for a common set of exams and graded on a common scale with 'pass' grades ranging from A to G. There were also change in the nature and format of the examinations, many of which contained assessments of course-work as well as final written examinations.

From the outset GCSE was a paradox. On the one hand, it was seen as an anachronism - an idea of the 1960s but born in the 1980s (Murphy 1989). It was also viewed as an unnecessary exam at a time when increasing numbers of young people were staying on (Farley 1986) and as an 'uncommon examination' (Gipps 1986). On the other hand, in the early 1990s, GCSE became appreciated as one of the main contributors to rapidly expanding full-time participation at 16+ in the late 1980s (Ashford *et al.* 1993) and, in retrospect, as possibly one of the most successful education innovations of recent decades (Robinson 1998 forthcoming). Inevitably, the question arose about the relationship between GCSE and A Levels. GCSE methodology could have been reproduced in A Levels had the Higginson Report been accepted. Instead the Report was referred back to SEAC on the grounds that the proposal of five 'lean' A Levels threatened to dilute standards (Lawton 1993).

The qualifications complexities of the late 1980s, therefore, continued to crystallise - prevocational certification which started in 1983 staggered on until 1990; competing awarding bodies offering their own products in competition with government initiatives; an NVQ framework divided more than it rationalised; and a GCSE innovation, which, while attempting to unify CSE and O level, did not articulate with vocational qualifications and succeeded in opening a gap between the new award and A Levels. The scene was set for a complex set of progression problems at the end of the 1980s.

PART 2: HISTORICAL CASE STUDY NO 1: *THE POLITICS OF PROGRESSION: PROBLEMS AND STRATEGIES IN THE 14-19 CURRICULUM* (SPOURS 1991)

Introduction to the historical case-study

The next part of the chapter takes the form of a historical case-study.[11] It consists of extracts from previously published work written originally in 1988 and then up-dated in 1991. The case-study involves a two-dimensional vertical slice of qualifications arrangements in the latter part of the 1980s. First, it dissects the different layers of initiatives and shows the range of factors which gave rise to the proliferation of qualifications. In terms of the historical framework of the thesis, it is a way of analysing the complex conditions of the three overlapping eras. Second, the historical case-study also represents an attempt to link theory and practice and was written from the position of someone located in higher education but who was also involved in working with LEAs to improve the progression prospects of those graduating from CPVE.

Crisis of the curriculum and structure in the late 1980s

At the end of the 1980s we are confronted by two inter-related developments in the 14-19 curriculum. First, the persistence of a confused and divided structure and contradictory initiatives in education and training in England and Wales and, second, the continued interest in issues of progression. These are quite clearly linked - the more complex the structure, the greater the need to create student pathways through them. But the issue is more than one of complexity and confusion of courses and initiatives typical of the post-16 scene in England and Wales. The essential problem is

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[11] The term 'historical case-study' is used because the published work constitutes a focused account of complex relationships spanning different parts of the qualifications system and which can be reflected upon historically. Further explanation of this approach is contained in the Methodology Annex.

concerned with the new forms of division which have arisen as the result of vocationalisation of the curriculum and the 'participation' of new types of students in post-16 education and training in the 1980s. The 'politics of progression' is an attempt to analyse the dynamics of this division in the curriculum and the process of certification in order to evaluate ways in which practitioners have addressed the question.

Our starting point is the fundamental problem of stratification reflected in the ranking of different types of certification into levels of prestige. This involves the stereotyping of the award and therefore the abilities of students involved. The stereotyping attitude can be summed up as 'judging the course rather than the student'. Those involved in academic qualifications are largely regarded as more able than students who are undertaking vocationally-related courses. At the same time, those taking the Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE) have often been deemed as least able to cope with examinations and graded assessment.

The process of stratification is complex and goes beyond the simple academic/vocational divide of mental and manual labour. Full-time courses in post-16 education appear to reflect divisions within the labour market (Raffe 1984, Gleeson 1985). There are advanced academic courses for those who will delay entry to the labour market until the completion of higher education, for example those courses leading to A Levels. There are broader vocational courses for 'technician' and junior managerial functions reflected by a range of Business Technician Education Council (BTEC) First and National Awards. City and Guilds London Institute (CGLI) and Royal Society (RSA), offer more occupationally specific operative and craft related courses at several levels. Finally there is CPVE which has often accommodated the 'undecided student' unprepared for an academic or vocationally specific award.

These problems of stratification adversely affect to one degree or other, all those students who do not attain two or three A Levels. It has had the most significant impact on the bottom 50 per cent of the cohort who find themselves in pre-vocational or basic vocational

provision either at school, college or in a Youth Training Scheme (YTS). The overall effect has been to create barriers to movement between courses and to encourage the repetition of learning which, in turn, depresses participation rates in 16-18 provision such as courses leading to A Levels or BTEC National Diplomas.

The problems of progression are a reflection of a structural crisis which embraces certification, delivery organisations and the curriculum itself, and is one of the main contributors to the low participation, attainment, progression equilibrium which characterises our 14-19 system. The manifestations of this crisis of structure centre upon the relationship between certification, training initiatives and providing institutions in four main areas of 14-19 provision.

- There is a sharp break at 16 presenting problems of discontinuity for all students. In England and Wales there are discontinuities between a general subject based curriculum leading to the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and narrow A-level specialisation, discontinuities involved in the transition between institutions, school to Further Education (FE) or work, and the lack of a systematic development of both knowledge and skills. The greatest problems are experienced by those making a transition to vocational courses or to training schemes at 16. The Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) has aimed to develop continuity for the 14-18 age range but the emergence of the National Curriculum with its emphasis upon a general education subject-based approach has, at least up until now, re-emphasised the break at 16, rather than a longer period of transition.

- The duplication of certification, particularly for those staying on full-time at 16 who do not do A Level courses, is illustrated by the competition between CPVE and BTEC First Awards. The absence of a common foundation framework for one-year provision at 17 plus has encouraged barriers to movement to higher awards such as BTEC National and A Levels, with learning delays. There is

also a high incidence of the repetition of learning where students are directed from pre-vocational to basic vocational courses.

- There is a conflict found in the area of YTS between basic work-based occupational training, as a response to youth unemployment, and gaining qualifications for progression to further study. The work of NCVQ should be evaluated to see if it can resolve this issue.

- The problem of access and attainment for 16- to 18-year olds is due to highly exclusive and specialised A Levels with norm-referenced assessment systems, which result in a high failure rate and therefore narrow patterns of recruitment. There is still a large gap, both in terms of curriculum and progression potential, between the prestigious A Levels and the 'equivalent' vocational awards of BTEC and CGLI which has adversely affected participation rates in vocational qualifications in comparison with our European partners.

This paper focuses upon two of these areas which have been central to changes in education and training in the 1980s. First, it discusses the emergency initiatives in relation to youth unemployment and the ways in which this brought into the full-time education system, those who would previously have found unskilled jobs. Second, it highlights the focus upon work-based training and accreditation and the divisions between this and academic awards. The immediate roots of both of these developments can be found in the New Training Initiative of 1981 and the agenda which it created for the rest of the decade.

At the beginning of the 1990s, as the focus begins to move away from the young trainee to adults and from basic training to the wider problems of attainment 14-19 and academic awards such as A Levels, there are new problems to be confronted. The focus is now less upon skills for unemployment and more upon high skills and knowledge for new technological and work developments. The

spotlight is therefore increasingly turning to the division between academic and vocational courses as Britain has to compare its 14-19 system (and therefore participation and attainment levels) with other European nations. A wide variety of organisations and commentators are critical of the relationship between academic and vocational learning and certification, though there are a variety of solutions being offered (see Baker 1989, DES 1988a, CBI 1989, TUC 1989).

It can be argued that one of the most pressing tasks now is how to forge a pathway to a more unified framework of certification which embraces the dualities academic and vocational, part-time and full-time study, 14-19 and 19 plus. The first step involves an evaluation of both the forces and processes which have promoted and inhibited the development of such a policy in the 1980s if we are to be able to plan coherent and detailed strategies for the 1990s.

The concept of progression in the early and late 1980s

The concept of progression, both as a policy objective and as a set of explicit practices, is a relatively recent innovation and is immediately associated with both the qualifications and client groups of what has been termed the 'New Vocationalism'. Previous to the New Training Initiative (1981), progression had been a series of implicit practices around established qualifications systems and was seen very much in terms of movement within academic and vocational systems of qualifications (largely associated with apprenticeship) which had little connection with one another. The other dominant issue of movement was transition from school to jobs in the labour market. The system could be basically described as stable but divided, in which the bottom 50 per cent simply progressed by 'job hopping'.

The economic crisis of the late 1970s began to erode this situation. The growth of mass youth unemployment in the early 1980s decimated jobs for 16 year-olds and brought a further decline in apprenticeships. The Government responded with the extension of training and post-16 opportunities, in part to keep 16 and 17 year olds off the unemployment register. The quantitative extension of

vocational education and training resulting from these initiatives was designed for those young people who would not necessarily have been able to travel the academic or apprenticeship routes and were most affected by the drop in demand for relatively unqualified labour. Whatever the motive, the creation of YTS and the 17-plus examination CPVE, nevertheless, raised wider and more complex issues of access and movement within public provision than had previously been the case. There was now a need to develop progression routes not only between different types of qualifications, but also from YTS and work-based learning back into full-time provision. It was the sudden inclusion of the bottom 50 per cent in post-16 provision, intensifying a trend which had begun in the mid 1970s, that led to the concept of progression.

But the progression focus has shifted throughout the 1980s in response to different vocationalising initiatives. Since 1985, and in view of its relative success in politically containing unemployment, the Government has been chiefly concerned with reform and modernisation of vocational education and the qualifications system. This has led to the establishment, in 1986, of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ). An important element of the analysis of this paper is to examine the consequences of this extension of state intervention which aims to offer a wider basis of training but through competitive and privatised means of delivery. The task of a 'politics of progression' involves an examination of the ways in which all these factors have affected progression opportunities in recent years: the mixture of intervention and market forces, the roles of the Department of Education and Science (DES) and Training Agency (TA), the relationship between exam boards and between the examining and validating bodies (EVBs) and delivering institutions.

There are two historical questions which must be asked if we are to learn lessons from the 1980s concerned with the relationship between the 'context' and 'content' of educational reform (see Raffe 1984).

a. What kind of impact did the 'contextual' issue of the relationship between the delivery agencies have upon the coherence of provision? To what degree do these problems still persist and continue to provide the operational context for future reform?

b. To what degree did decisions about the 'content' of the curriculum affect the chances of producing a more coherent system? In retrospect, are there mistakes in curriculum design worth avoiding?

Progression as a fragmented perspective in a fragmented system

A unified system requires a unifying perspective. The concept of progression has the potential to provide both an overview and connective thinking because it emerged out of a criticism of division. But even the concept of progression itself is not immune to division.

Reference to progression is increasingly found in post-14 and 16-plus education policy documents. There is, however, a variety of perspectives and a diverse terminology. A range of terms and concepts can be included under its umbrella; and these are access to courses and institutions, continuity of learning, recurrence of education, transition to the labour market, maturation of intellectual work, movement between types of qualifications, movement between different levels within a qualifications system, vertical and horizontal progression associated with the workplace and credit accumulation and certification. The diversity of terms reflects not only the real complexity of the concept but, more practically, the fact that there are different notions of progression in relation to different problems and locations in the 14-19 and 19-plus curriculum. The concept itself appears to reflect the fragmentation of the system it is meant to cohere.

One of the most important differences is whether the term 'progression' is seen in an individualised or a structural way. It can be used to describe personal progress through a complex and confusing system. Or it can be a series of perspectives to examine the policy and practices of a system of certification, its delivering

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institutions and the degree to which these facilitate individual progression. A broader structural analysis can draw upon four inter-locking dimensions:

- movement between different types of qualification;

- movement between levels within a qualifications system;

- transition between different institutions;

- continuity of learning.

As we will see, all of these dimensions are present in all four areas of the progression focus outlined earlier, but in each case one or other of these dimensions predominates. In the analysis of two of the areas - duplication of provision at 16 plus and the movement towards work-based accreditation - I want to refer in particular to problems of progression which make it a concept of the 1980s; the problem of movement between different types of qualifications, first discussed in relationship to Vocational Preparation in the early 1980s (FEU 1981a, 1981b) and movement within a qualifications framework, arising out of the work of NCVQ in the mid-1980s.

Duplication of certification and problems of progression at 17-plus

CPVE is now on the decline, with less than 30,000 registrations out of a year cohort of over 400,000. It has declined most rapidly in FE colleges: the take-up is more stable in schools. This increasingly marginal role in post-16 provision is, however, in an inverse proportion to its educational significance. Due to its aims of providing a framework for the curriculum, accreditation and institutional collaboration, CPVE was, and still is in many ways, the most important post-16 curriculum development of the last decade. There are however other reasons for reflection on the CPVE experience. From 1985 onwards, it has been the most focused rallying point among teachers for the development of progression routes and

practices in local education authorities (LEAs) and institutions and more than any other initiative, it has enabled progression to become part of educational common sense.

However, CPVE has been both victim and cause of the duplication and fragmentation of provision and of the competition between exam boards and institutions. It is no longer a serious contender as a framework for rationalisation of certification. With the stringent efforts to preserve its small share of the market, the Joint Board and CPVE itself have become part of the problem. As we will see, the same phenomenon of duplication of provision appears to be happening with NVQs and AS Levels. So, to go back to our original question: what underlies this fragmenting tendency and how has this been affected by curriculum decision-making? The main attempt to provide an explanation is the notion of 'tertiary tripartism'.

Tertiary tripartism: the system of delivery and content of the curriculum

The phenomenon of stratification and differentiation has been referred to as 'tertiary tripartism' (Ranson 1984, Green 1986, Radnor et al. 1989). The concept has been discussed largely from the viewpoint of social control and the division between types of knowledge or as reflections of the labour market (Raffe 1984, Gleeson 1985). Green, however, takes the discussion of tripartism into an analysis of more detailed issues of curriculum differentiation in FE. I would like to take this analysis further and reflect upon the efforts of the past eight years or so to 'promote progression' in particular from the tier referred to as the 'tertiary modern'. Like Green, I am interested in exploring curriculum differentiation, but specifically in relation to the problems faced by practitioners in opening up movement between courses. Facilitating progression can be seen as a means of challenging stratification which is seen to lock students into pre-existing class and gender divisions (Raffe 1983). Tertiary tripartism is, in fact, a metaphor to describe a complex process of stratification in 16-19 provision; in reality there are more

than three strata of courses and many more barriers. Tripartism analysis has therefore to be developed, to take into account the specific form of barriers to progression, as a strategic guide to practitioners and planners in their attempts to overcome them.

A specific inhibitor of progression is the differences between content of learning, methods of assessment and structure of courses and the ways in which these differences are reinforced by institutional organisation. Moving between pre-vocational, vocational and academic provision is made more difficult by the lack of comparability of not only content (extensively discussed by both Ranson and Green) but above all, patterns of assessment and the structure of course organisation. A well-known example is the suspicion that many admissions tutors have of summative profiles because of the assumption that high grades in GCSE are the most accurate indicator of general ability and that profiling takes place in 'unregulated' conditions. Suspicion is at its highest when students are arriving from a different type of institution.

I would like to explore the respective roles of examining and validating bodies (EVBs), and the ideology of pre-vocationalism and institutional competition in maintaining or challenging this type of division. This dynamic between EVBs and local practitioners involving assumptions about the nature of the curriculum, can be examined in three related areas.

1. The role of validating and examination boards in the reform of the curriculum and accreditation.

2. The ideology of pre-vocationalism, the segmenting of the student population and educational assumptions which have weakened the design-base of CPVE.

3. The relationship between differentiation of certification and local institutional competition in developing stratification and barriers to movement.

The varied focus of this analysis would suggest that the forces for fragmentation are not simply to be found at governmental level but are present in the various delivering agencies, both national and local, and within the practices of teachers themselves.

The role of market-led validation and examination bodies

The most seriously flawed assumptions which have underpinned decision-making about the organisation of 17-plus certification are those concerned with the role of the examination and validating bodies. The DES has assumed that private organisations would voluntarily co-operate to rationalise provision. The competitiveness and entrepreneurism of all the validating bodies have in practice resulted in complete failure to produce a more coherent framework of certification. The idea of a voluntary relationship between competing validating bodies is in marked contrast to the more comprehensive organisation of qualifications in Scotland, where Scotvec is responsible for a whole system of broad and vocational modules in the Scottish National Certificate.

The roots of divisions and stratification should have been apparent from the beginning. At the outset, all the participating bodies, at least in principle, accepted the case for the rationalisation of provision. The way in which the validating bodies went about their 'co-operation' soon showed that this voluntaristic relationship was untenable. The RSA very quickly withdrew from the Joint Board, both on educational and economic grounds, and has since, produced its own range of pre-vocational and vocational qualifications. BTEC introduced the First Award in 1986 which in many respects competes for the same group of students who could be involved in CPVE. As the effects of the competitive relationship between the exam boards became clearer, the FEU, which had been centrally involved in promoting CPVE, criticised the entrepreneurial role of these bodies (FEU 1985).

The basis of the problem was both economic and educational. Those validating bodies which operate as self-financing charities depend upon maximising revenue from examination fees. The basic

logic of economic self-interest has consistently worked to undermine any will to co-operate. But the issues which articulated the economic self-interest were in fact educational.

The concept of 'pre-vocational' at 17-plus and the design base of CPVE

It can be argued that the structural problem of competing interests was, in fact, crystallised by disagreements about the educational ideologies underpinning CPVE. Both in its design and implementation, an area of considerable contention for CPVE, has been the range of students for whom it was intended. It has vacillated between being a curriculum framework for a broader cohort of students within which a range of certification could be taken (as promoted by the CPVE Joint Board itself and the FEU), and being an award for those students who had under-achieved within the school-system pre-16. Despite the aspirations to be a framework, CPVE has never shaken off the image of a low-level course. The reasons for it being regarded predominantly as an award for underachievers is not just to be found in DES policy or in the competition between EVBs and between local institutions. The ghettoisation of CPVE was aided and abetted by the curriculum decisions which underpinned its design base and the educational practices which resulted.

A central contradiction was the concept of 'pre-vocationalism' at 17-plus. Existing critiques of CPVE have emphasised its place within the New Vocationalism, the rejection of the CEE route and its appropriation by FE (Ranson 1984). But the segmentation of the student population was also the result of CPVEs appropriation by FE lecturers, committed to general education, and their counterparts in schools sixth forms, who argued for the need to design a curriculum for the student who was vocationally undecided. The problem was that the notion of 'undecided' became equated with 'low-level'. What emerged, not surprisingly, was that 'pre-vocational' became a type of student, rather than a stage of development that all students go through.

The concept of pre-vocationalism at 17-plus directly informed major curriculum decisions and helped provide the educational space for the creation of a highly vocational BTEC First Diploma. While both awards have many curricular aspects in common, CPVE was seen as lower status not only because of its emphasis upon vocational exploration, but because it adopted a different and, in retrospect, what can be seen as a virtually unregulated approach to assessment and course structure. It had, and still has, a profile system which is predominantly accountable to the student rather than to external standards together with a loosely-structured approach to vocational modules (Spours 1988c). The emphasis upon vocational exploration and core competencies was not always balanced by more structured approaches to grouping vocational modules which might provide for specialisation as well as breadth. The way in which CPVE was to become defined, particularly in school-based schemes, was simply not a broad enough expression of learning intentions nor educational/training needs at 17-plus. Students who were vocationally focused flocked to BTEC First Diploma, whereas CPVE had only a limited appeal to those wanting to take several GCSEs. More than any other award, its image came to depend directly on its progression prospects. These have not been at all bad, but good local progression patterns could not reverse the adverse characterisation of its curricular design and the image of catering for low achievers. These problems began to be addressed in a limited way following the evaluation of CPVE and the review of the core competencies and reorganisation of the vocational modules (CPVE Joint Board 1988a). However, as far as its status in FE colleges is concerned, the evaluation has come too late. CPVE invited rejection from significant groups of students who either did not associate themselves with its aims, or have perceived that it will be rejected by employers or FE admissions tutors.

These curricular decisions in a competitive environment were to prove fatal. The emergence of BTEC First Diploma was the result both of BTEC entrepreneurism and a symptom of the underlying contradictions of the Joint Board relationship and of CPVE itself.

Examining boards with different prevocational and vocational traditions were expected to agree to subsume part of their provision and to persuade their existing clients to accept the arrangement. The problems lay in the fact that there were differing views of what was prevocational and vocational. The outcome of this 'voluntarist' relationship was a curricular compromise, with CPVE looking like a more elaborate City and Guilds 365. At this point BTEC, unable to persuade many Business Studies heads of department in FE to accept the settlement, took fright at the prospect that they might go to other examining boards.

The relationship between a market approach and problems of progression

The dependence of the reform process upon private examining bodies trying to retain their clients and the narrow definition of the student target group, supported by a differentiated curricular design base, has produced what can be termed a 'syndrome of duplication and stratification'. The continuation of competing certification produced a situation in which schools and colleges had the choice of alternative awards constructed along more traditional lines. More able students have continued to be entered for academic or vocationally specific awards. Just as important was the market demand from the students and their parents, knowing that employers still take a relatively traditional view of certification. There are notable exceptions to this picture when innovative individuals and course teams have taken advantage of local circumstances to produce a broader recruitment pattern to CPVE, but rarely has this constituted the dominant trend nor has it significantly altered the popular image of the award.

The process of student differentiation has also been informed by institutional self-interest. The propensity of schools to use CPVE to boost 6th form numbers and for college departments to use BTEC First to 'own' students has been documented in detail in local studies

(see for example Spours and Baran 1988). Some schools have tried to use CPVE as a rationalising framework by offering one year sixth-form provision in the form of CPVE core and vocational studies, together with GCSEs in additional studies. Many schools, however, have simply attempted to hang on to students, justified by the assertion that they need a supportive environment and, in the process, have developed separate prevocational provision for this 'new sixth'. In colleges, on the other hand, the assertion of self-interest is based upon the relative autonomy of heads of department in determining course provision. Many are concerned either to keep up departmental numbers or to have relatively coherent provision to operate. They also want to recruit more able students. There is virtual unanimity that BTEC First, as a vocationally specific grouped award, has been easier to operate departmentally than CPVE, which involves a great deal of cross-institutional co-operation. The prevailing solution has therefore been that General and Continuing Education departments have tended to 'own' CPVE while vocational departments have concentrated upon BTEC First or RSA awards. In many cases during the last two years CPVE in colleges has been relegated into special needs provision.

The impulses for stratification appear, therefore, not only to come from market-oriented exam boards, but also but also as a result of responses from practitioners at a local level and institutional competition. The analysis of exam-board competition must also be supplemented by an explanation of how curriculum ideas underpinning CPVE themselves contributed to stratification by focusing on the assumed needs of a relatively small and highly problematical group of students, rather than building a curriculum framework which has a more than even chance of embracing the majority of students at 17-plus. To achieve this would have involved reducing the educational grounds for the emergence of the BTEC First Award.

NCVQ and progression

The National Council for Vocational Qualification (NCVQ) was established in 1986 with the aims, amongst others, of rationalising and modernising the system of vocational qualifications and also bridging the unhelpful divide between academic and vocational qualifications. In practice, NCVQ has been approving (or 'kitemarking') existing vocational qualifications and attempting to locate them in the four levels - Basic, Standard, Advanced and Higher (NCVQ 1987). It is also now involved with the next phase of including professional qualifications in Level 5.

The effect upon vocational qualifications will be significant. All qualifications will have to satisfy employment-led competence defined by lead-industry bodies. There will also be a movement away from grouped awards towards more modular approaches. Learning will be recognised and accredited in different settings, particularly the workplace. Qualifications will be freed of time constraints which will enable the student to accumulate credit on a personal basis. The intention is that progression will be simplified and unnecessary barriers removed. Access to a level will be based upon accreditation of prior learning (colleges as assessment centres) and easier movement between levels will result from credit accumulation and transfer arrangements.

There are, however, three major problems inhibiting NCVQ from realising these aims. NCVQ (or more precisely the lead industry bodies whose views it articulates) have insisted that work-based competence be the sole basis of vocational qualifications. While this may meet employers' immediate training needs, it contributes nevertheless to a widening gap between vocational and academic qualifications, where the trainee's progression route is very much within vocational qualifications rather than the trainee being able to move between different types of qualifications. It remains to be seen whether NCVQ will adopt a broader and more flexible approach to

the issue of competence in the process of bringing professional awards into the structure of vocational qualifications.

National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) are essentially an attempt to bring employers into the centre of the validation process, but it must be questioned whether the majority of employers are interested in sponsoring trainee progression and meeting individual need. There does not seem to be a real impulse for progression within the framework, as many employers may settle for basic training for most and advancement for a few. There is also the added problem that the NVQ framework currently does not provide the broader skills or knowledge required to meet the requirements of a higher level (Tait 1989). In this sense work-based competence is about 'doing the job', as opposed to 'future banking' and developing the potential for progression. It remains to be seen whether the development of generic units, which can be seen as a movement away from purely an occupationally dominated approach, will open up progression between the levels of the framework, across occupational sectors or across academic and vocational qualifications (NCVQ 1989).

NCVQs preoccupation with outcomes and its apparent indifference to the issues of learning and delivery have also created tensions with educationalists and EVBs. There are currently differences with BTEC, whose validation process is dominated by issues of delivery and in particular a whole course integrated approach (Jackson 1989). There are, of course, other differences with academic examining boards, who themselves are interested in examining outcomes, though they have a very different concept of knowledge. Here lies a real danger of further proliferation in which certain low-level and occupationally-oriented awards will be kitemarked but others, and in particular BTEC awards, could remain outside the system. We could well be faced with having both existing vocational qualifications and NVQs.

The real problem of the NCVQ perspective is that a radical approach to access and modularisation within an occupationally specific framework compromises an approach to progression across

occupational boundaries and across different types of qualifications. It has been argued that as a result, the responsibility for development of the broader framework for modularisation and progression currently lies with LEAs and institutions. (Spours 1989, Brotherton 1989).

Personal and course progression strategies

The problems of duplication of certification at 17-plus and the narrowness of the NCVQ approach to knowledge and skill raise the question of the type of progression strategies to be followed. Should practitioners and curriculum planners develop 'personal' progression or 'course' progression strategies? At present, many progression initiatives, reflected in LEA post-16 or TVEI Extension plans, appear to be moving towards a personalised system of progression, which implicitly accepts that there is a division between certification and mismatches of learning. Personal progression strategies can be seen as a way of helping individuals to find their way through the progression maze (the idea of overcoming confusion of provision), as opposed to changing the curriculum and accreditation structures which contribute to stratification.

The approach to organising progression in academic provision has always been, and still is a local affair, though prevailing benchmarks exist such as five grade Cs or better at GCSE to enter three A Levels (Goacher 1984). In the field of vocational qualifications during the 1980s the EVBs, and in particular the Joint Board and BTEC, have devolved responsibility for decisions on progression to an institutional and LEA level (BTEC 1985, 1986a, 1986b, CPVE Joint Board 1988b). They have provided general guidance, but have not recommended particular progression strategies. This is entirely in keeping with a market-led approach, in which it is left to LEAs and institutions to produce a process of rationalisation of provision and to organise local progression agreements.

Local progression strategies

Local progression strategies have arisen principally in relation to progression from CPVE, though they are now becoming more generalised to include practices such as records of achievement as a means of organising movement between a range of provision. A key development within CPVE progression strategies has been the building of an understanding and dialogue between CPVE and receiving tutors. This relationship revolves around receiving tutors developing new processes for recognising competence in students coming from CPVE or other pre-vocational/vocational provision. The emergence of CPVE has transformed thinking about progression, due to the very weaknesses of its design base and the uncertainties about standards of attainment.

Prior to the development of YTS and vocational preparation provision, progression was based upon a relationship of 'trust and tolerance' of a set of accepted and established practices and parameters in the academic, and to a lesser extent technical/vocational qualifications. Progression was, and still is in many respects, based upon 'equivalence' between course grades. This implicit acceptance of external standards provides the link between 'sending and receiving' tutors. CPVE, however, represents a dramatic change in this kind of thinking. What has replaced equivalence of grades is a struggle to codify competence statements (by profile statements or key criteria with supporting examples) and to provide an environment in which they can be evidenced by a portfolio of work and supporting statements from CPVE tutors.

These local progression agreements have produced mixed results. In some cases, they have significantly improved movement to higher courses such as BTEC National Diploma, though not evenly across all subject or vocational areas (see Spours 1988b). Local progression agreements, however, are very time-consuming and, despite some positive results, there is an imbalance between the amount of effort being put into this process and the prospects for permanent success. The whole process is vulnerable to the attitudes

of the receiving tutor and the institution and how they interpret the quality of CPVE provision or other basic or pre-vocational provision. These attitudes are also shaped by the impact of material and institutional factors such as supply/demand for places, particularly in prestigious courses.

In the first instance, the most positive outcome of personal progression strategies has not been the dramatic improvement of student progression across the board, but its effect upon staff consciousness of progression issues and practices and improvements in institutional collaboration. Local progression strategies can legitimately be judged by the degree to which they create more flexible attitudes towards student achievement by introducing real changes in the interview process and in the recognition of competence by presentation of personal portfolios or any other means. But their limitation and vulnerability lie in the fact that they do not really reform provision, because their main focus has been, by and large, on access and reception procedures. Local progression strategies can in fact be seen to be a symptom of the problem of 14-19 progression, because their central purpose is to 'manage' routes through fragmented and stratified provision, rather than to change the structure of accreditation itself.

Lessons from recent progression initiatives

The most obvious conclusion from evaluation of progression issues in both CPVE and NVQs is the need to rethink and to design a framework which is capable of embracing different types of qualifications. Such a framework will have to promote a balance of vocational breadth and depth, relate vocational and academic learning, encourage the development of a post-16 core and have a clear and common assessment procedure based upon both external recognition and high levels of accountability to the student. The framework, in fact, has to be able to break down the syndrome of division based upon curricular differentiation between content, assessment and structure.

This type of accreditation framework however has to be able to encourage the EVBs and local institutions to forge more collaborative relationships with the aim of raising participation, attainment and progression levels from which they all can benefit economically. The framework should attempt to move the EVBs from cut-throat competition which damages progression across different qualifications, to a form of 'co-operative competition' in which their modules compete within an agreed framework of interlocking accreditation. This can be seen either as a more rational arrangement of the market, or the first step towards the creation of a unitary system of qualifications embracing all certification in the 14-19 field. But a move towards a more unitary system will require high levels of government intervention, the total reform of the EVBs and a more unified concept of the academic and vocational curriculum. This is part of a future rather than current political agenda and, in educational terms, has only just begun to be explored at the end of the 1980s.

In the meantime, LEAs and institutions are trying to organise progression routes, learning pathways and to open up new thinking about recognising competence as a basis for access. The criteria by which we judge progression strategies, however, is not simply whether they improve personal prospects at a local level, but whether they involve making curriculum decisions about both content and structure which affect the direction of certification. The lesson of curricular reform in the 1980s is that we have to correct the imbalance between innovation in learning processes and the poverty and crisis of accreditation structures.

The CBI has published its report *Towards a Skills Revolution* (CBI 1989), which calls for the doubling of participation and attainment in A-level and NVQ Level 3 awards over the next five years. The magnitude of these targets demands that we reflect upon the 1980s and locate the factors which have depressed progression opportunities. But realising the targets will require tackling head-on 'the low participation, low attainment, progression equilibrium' and will

require more than a curricular approach. It demands a comprehensive strategy embracing post-16 reorganisation, reforming A Levels within a broader accreditation framework, new financial arrangements for post-16 full-time study, broader routes of progression and a new form of 'dual system' with increased opportunities to gain a broad range of qualification. These changes go far beyond the kind of strategies currently being considered to facilitate progression. An agenda for the 1990s calls for an approach which does not restrict itself to 'managing' the confusion of routes and opportunities, but instead addresses more firmly the deeper issues which currently support the syndrome of low participation, attainment and progression.

PART 3: THE STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF *THE POLITICS OF PROGRESSION*: REFLECTIONS ON QUALIFICATIONS DEVELOPMENTS IN THE LATE 1980S

In this next section I reflect on three issues arising from the historical case-study: the role of the content and context of reform; theories of stratification and the role of progression and the relationship between national and local reform in competitive climates.

Content and context of reform and the role of qualifications design

A central argument of *The Politics of Progression* was that certain curriculum design principles will tend to fail within particular contexts. Raffe (1984) argued that the wider context of the reform, rather than the content of reform, determines the success of the reform process. While accepting Raffe's assertion about content and context, I have argued that certain curricular design features 'invited' defeat in a hostile and competitive context. At the time, following several years of work with practitioners, I became more convinced that the curricular features which were inhibiting progression from CPVE were the sharp differences of content, assessment and structure between CPVE and the courses which were the intended destinations of CPVE students. It was possible, therefore, either to design qualifications which were more 'resistant' to the negative effects of external context or/and to try to change the external context. Eventually, I recognised that both strategies were needed and these are outlined briefly at the end of the chapter.

Another reflection is about the role of practitioners and institutions in the reform process. I was to learn that it was not only governments which could act in a conservative manner. It was clear that practitioners and institutions had contributed to the process of stratification of CPVE by arranging courses hierarchically. There was also a sharp polarisation between those who were promoting progression and those who were 'protecting' the intake of their

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courses. This conflict of interests was fuelled by the action of awarding bodies who, in a competitive climate, sought to develop new certification to protect their share of the market. It followed that if reforms were to succeed in opening up progression, they had to be national reform which moulded local action, rather than depending on local action alone. The process of reform had, therefore, to be 'top-down' as well as 'bottom-up'. Moreover, there had to be a collaborative, rather than competitive, climate.

These arguments about the effects of context and content and the relationship between local and national initiatives led to a search for more system-wide strategies. The question was how wide? Following the logic of the Finegold and Soskice analysis *Failure of Training in Britain* (1988), a system-wide strategy would have to be all-embracing.[12] The danger of the low-skills equilibrium analysis was having to being too national and comprehensive in policy terms, and, therefore, preventing practical intervention by those involved in educational policy-making. This led me to try to render the 'low-skills equilibrium' analysis into a more specific form; retaining the notion of a syndrome or vicious cycle of factors but identifying factors in closer proximity to the education and training system and in particular to the qualifications system. In the *Politics of Progression* I mentioned, in passing, the problem of a 'low participation, attainment, progression equilibrium'. What I refer to here is the way in which previously low participation and attainment produces a context in which divisive expansion takes place - certain types of student, who have been underachieving previously are seen to require a different curriculum which, in turn, undermines progression and eventually undermines further participation. Organising progression was, therefore, seen as

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[12] The term 'low skills equilibrium' is *"used to connote a self-reinforcing network of societal and state institutions which interact to stifle the demand for improvement in skill levels and include...the organisation of industry, firms and the work process, the industrial relations system, financial markets, the state and political structure, as well as the operation of the ET system* (Finegold & Soskice in Gleeson 1990: 18/19)

the key to breaking the syndrome. The question was the nature of the progression strategies.

Reflections on local progression strategies

In Chapter 1, I argued that it was the problem of prevocational certification, surfacing in the mid-1980s, which first highlighted the issue of progression for educational practitioners. Evidence of this came through a wave of progression discussions and LEA Handbooks in 1986/7.[13] Progression handbooks, developed by LEAs or by colleges to promote progression from CPVE to further courses, were an attempt to 'codify' agreements between CPVE tutors (often in schools but also in General Studies departments of FE colleges) and admissions tutors of both vocational and academic courses (Spours 1988b). The main features of progression handbooks were:

- an expression of admissions criteria in terms which related to the achievements of CPVE graduates, such as key criteria or competencies, rather than in more traditional terms such as examination grades;

- an explicit progression procedure, often consisting of progression information (in the form of Handbooks) for CPVE tutors, an entitlement or advisory interview for CPVE students to help clarify their intentions and a new type of interview procedure involving the presentation of a portfolio;

- an outline of preferred routes and programmes for particular vocational courses, based upon attainment in groups of CPVE exploratory and preparatory modules.

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[13] Most of the documents were developed during 1986-88 (two to three years into CPVE) with the Leicestershire approach being quoted in several instances. Leicestershire started discussions on progression in late 1985 and published its handbook in 1986/7. LEA and college handbooks analysed were from Bedfordshire, Cleveland, Coventry, Derbyshire, Dyfed, Ealing, Enfield, Essex, Haringey, Kingston, ILEA, Leicestershire, Liverpool, Newham Northumberland College of Art and Technology, Suffolk and The Wirral Metropolitan College.

CPVE progression agreements were developed in a significant minority of LEAs. Where they did take place, their main achievement was to put progression issues on the educational agenda at a local level, to create a climate of co-operation between tutors in schools and colleges and to create an explicit procedure for progression. Progression agreements were also a forerunner of other types of agreements around entry to courses at a local level, which in the early 1990s, focused on the role of the NRA (Hodgson 1997).

CPVE progression agreements were a local rather than a national arrangement and, in retrospect, can be seen as part of a wider phenomenon of local innovation which grew in the late-1980s. However, research undertaken at the time suggests that their effects were limited:

- local progression agreements were varied and ranged from minimal local guidance for admissions tutors to quite elaborate procedures (the latter were in a minority of the progression procedures in the comparative study);

- they focused almost exclusively on progression to vocational courses - the assumption was, therefore, that CPVE did not provide a progression route to A Levels;

- in those LEAs or institutions with agreements, evidence suggested that they improved CPVE progression rates both in terms of the numbers applying for further courses and the level of course achieved. However, there was also evidence of considerable unevenness of progression into different vocational areas - local studies suggested that there were significant increases in progression to BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance courses, but not in areas such as National in Engineering, Computing and Science (Spours & Baran 1988).

Local progression agreements did not significantly affect the national reputation of CPVE. The problem was summed up by Mansell (FEU 1987:1):

"The actual progression of students into employment, further education or training is not bad, but the value and status of CPVE in that transition is indeterminate"[14]

Part of the reason for this is that local progression agreements, by their nature, had a limited presence. But, more important, was the fact that local negotiation could not overcome the prejudice of some admissions tutors about the curricular features of CPVE - lack of vocational content, lack of grading and the growing perception that schools were using CPVE for the less able. This perception was also reinforced by General Studies Departments in FE colleges which gradually developing CPVE as a special needs course.

Moreover, LEAs and local practitioners were offered lukewarm support by the vocational awarding bodies. Both RSA and CGLI stated that progression was the responsibility of the local centre, but there were no restrictions on access to RSA and CGLI courses (RSA 1985, CGLI 1985). BTEC was more ambiguous. In a series of circulars, it stressed that access to BTEC National CPVE attainment needed to be the equivalent of BTEC General at credit level and to have requisite vocational preparatory modules. It also called for BTEC gatekeepers to 'recruit with integrity' (BTEC 1985, 1986a, 1986b). There were no progression statements from academic examination boards.

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[14] National studies and local studies of destinations of CPVE students during the period 1985-87 suggest that very few CPVE graduates went onto unemployment, most progressed to NVQ Level 2 (e.g. BTEC First Award) and between 14-24 percent progressed to BTEC National or A Levels. There were north/south variations in progression patterns particularly in relation to unemployment rates. Progression rates were comparable to those of BTEC General Diploma which was replaced by CPVE.

It took the CPVE Joint Board until July 1988 to issue a major statement on progression (CPVE Joint Board 1988b). In this, the Joint Board stressed that it was local needs and opportunities which determined progression routes available to students and that there was a need to develop clear final reporting. The Joint Board went on to argue that CPVE should be seen as a flexible framework to be offered along-side A Level. What is striking, from the viewpoint of those attempting to organise progression from CPVE, was how little attention was paid to the real problem of the status of CPVE as a low-level course.

These responses of the awarding bodies suggested that there would not be a national strategy on the progression from CPVE. Awarding body voluntarism and competition prevented this. RSA and CGLI were keen to see CPVE students enter their courses and BTEC was anxious to protect its own product, BTEC First, and keep FE vocational tutors on its side.

By 1988, the Joint Board had decided that the only future for CPVE was as a whole-institutional framework not as a pre-vocational course. Following a major evaluation of CPVE in 1987, it was recommended that CPVE be projected as a framework for a wider group of students and that CPVE modules be aligned within the NVQ framework of levels (CPVE Joint Board 1988c). The first steps had been taken to creating the idea of a modular framework, but these would not be enough to save CPVE. Right up to its demise in 1990, it was marked by the ambiguity of being both a low-level course and a potential framework. Local progression agreements were also changing. A great deal of effort had been invested in establishing local progression procedures. As the numbers of students entering CPVE declined, so some LEAs broadened their progression agreements to apply to all courses (Spours 1988b).

By the end of the 1980s, the progression debate and the qualifications debate started to shift. Increasingly, the answer was seen as developing a national qualifications framework consisting of modules and levels. This was to be born out of a mixture of

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influences. For me, they were a logical conclusion of the limitations of the CPVE progression effort and the realisation that a more comprehensive national framework was required. For others, inspiration came from the potential of the NVQ framework (Cross 1991) and from observations of what had been happening in Scotland with the development of the Scottish Action Plan (Roebuck 1985).

Towards a common modular system - developments and arguments in the late-1980s

In this section I will outline arguments for a modular qualifications system which developed in the latter part of the 1980s.[15] A more in-depth analysis of modularisation as a tool for qualifications reform is contained in Chapter 4. What I do here is to locate the debates on modularisation in relation to the issues of qualifications and progression arising in the previous section of the chapter.

In the late 1980s, there were three main arguments for modularity. First, in response to increased participation and increased awareness of problems of achievement, support grew for school-based modular developments and modular GCSE syllabuses to provide a greater element of choice in the curriculum and to raise achievement by step-by-step learning (Macintosh 1988, Moon 1988, Warwick 1987). Second, modularity had an economic impulse and was seen as a means by which education could become more responsive to the

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[15] Throughout the thesis I will use the following definitions :

modularity - a generic or umbrella term to describe the totality of modular initiatives;

informal modularisation - school-based modular timetabling

modular developments - related to GCSE and A Level modular syllabus development and to 'informal modularisation'

unitisation - process of breaking down courses into units of assessment

modular qualifications system - national systems based on modules or units

modularisation - the strategy of developing a national modular system and a system tool to reform the relationship between different qualifications.

changing economy by creating customised packages of learning to satisfy the demands of the market (Theodossin 1986) and the changing patterns of employment and technological change (Spours & Young 1990). Third, there was growing interest in the ways in which modularity could be used in the reform of 16+ qualifications. In this area too, arguments for change were also diverse: the idea of a single modular assessment and credit system (Farley 1986, Shackleton 1986); developing a unitised vocational qualifications framework (MSC/DES 1986); comparisons with vocational modular qualifications developments through the *Action Plan* in Scotland (Roebuck 1985, Spours *et al.* 1989); a modular system for progression (Spours *et al.* 1989); A Level-collaborative modular projects linking LEAs and examination boards (Rainbow 1993a) and linking BTEC National Diplomas and modular A Levels (Burgess 1993).

In the late 1980s, modularity was represented by school-based structuring of the curriculum, particular GCSE or A Level syllabuses, unitised vocational awards, locally collaborative experiments linking different qualifications and by an emerging competence-based vocational qualifications framework. Many of these developments were actively encouraged by the Employment Department using TVEI Extension as a vehicle for curriculum change (Gleeson 1989). In contrast to Scotland, where there were proposals for a national vocational modular system (Scottish Education Department 1983), modularity in England could be seen as a fragmented concept in a fragmented system (Spours *et al.* 1989).

Nevertheless, those in favour of qualifications reform persisted with the idea that modularity could be a major tool of reform. I will argue that there were three reasons for this, all of which are born out of the particular conditions of the late 1980s. First, there were strong reactions to the growing complexity of the qualifications system. Within this general argument there were specific concerns related to improved possibilities for achievement and progression, articulated earlier in this section. Second, there was a sense of anticipation and

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then disappointment with the role of NCVQ and the concept of a vocational qualifications framework (Cross 1991). Third, there was a growing interest in developments in Scotland (Raffe 1993). Underpinning all of these was strong local reform movement supported by TVEI Extension.

There were several specific concerns voiced by those reacting to the complexity of the qualifications system. I will argue that these responses came in two waves. The first wave consisted of responses to the complexities of arrangements of the early 1980s. These were articulated by the RVQ in 1986 - notably the existence of gaps and overlap of vocational provision and the lack of arrangements for progression which gave rise to the NVQ framework (Jessup 1991). The second wave came in the late 1980s in response to the limitations of NVQ reforms, to the rejection of the Higginson Report and to local developments around progression and modular experiments[16]. Arguments emerged, not for a vocational qualifications system from 16+ but for the total reform of qualifications from 14+. While reacting to the same complexity which brought about the RVQ, the second wave arguments pointed to an unnecessary GCSE examination at 16+ (Farley 1986); to the need for NCVQ to be radical and to include all types of qualifications within its concept of a national framework (Farley 1986, Cross 1991, Green 1991); to the need for the reform of A Levels despite the rejection of the Higginson Report (Richardson 1993); and to the need for greater connections between academic and vocational qualifications (Rainbow 1993a, Burgess 1993).

Many of those arguing for reform wanted to go beyond the fragmented and partial nature of modular arrangements and to develop a single coherent modular framework'. At the end of the

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[16] Local modular experiments in the late 1980s/early 1990s included the Wessex/BTEC Science Project, the Brent/East Sussex Y Model Project, the Northern Science Modular Scheme, the Helix Project in Haringey which used NVQ concepts of competence, the North Bradford Commonwealth Course which focused on BTEC National and A Level modular relationships and the Islington Unified Curriculum Project.

1980s, those discussing modular frameworks (Farley 1986, Spours *et al.* 1989) hoped that they would:

- encompass different forms of certification both academic and vocational;

- improve opportunities for progression and provide a bridge between one phase of education and training and another;

- create a reciprocal relationship between academic and vocational learning;

- create a framework for local co-operation between providers;

- be supported by a unified examining and validating body;

- be student centred;

- have a capacity to the locally-implemented.

Such a development was seen to require the modularisation of A Levels, moving NVQs away from being competence-based and moving 17+ certification onto a common design (Spours 1988c, Spours & Coates 1989). Modular frameworks being discussed at the end of the 1980s were reactive to the most immediate problems being experienced in the qualifications system - problems of vocational fragmentation, awarding bodies competition and the limited role of local action. At this point, there was no mention of unified certification across the academic/vocational divide - this was to be introduced by proposals for *A British Baccalaureate* in 1990 (Finegold *et al.* 1990)

Polarisation of the policy debate

By the late 1980s, following the rejection of the Higginson Report, an intense debate about the direction of the qualifications system was taking place (Richardson 1993). Conservative education ministers, Kenneth Baker and John MacGregor, continued to raise the issue of A Level reform. However, it was a period when the political Right

was gaining ground in education policy (Chitty 1989, 1991) leading to a polarisation of the policy debate. On the one hand, influential bodies such as HMC and the group of conservative MPs in the 'no turning back group' warned the Government about the risk to A Level standards of further reform. On the other hand, during 1990, those in favour of radical reform such as IPPR, began to win ground within the education profession for the idea of a fully unified system of certification. The idea of creating linkages between academic and vocational qualifications and broadening academic programmes through core skills led to the formation of a NCC/SEAC/NCVQ task group but this failed to produce policy proposals. The gap between A Levels and NVQs was proving too large to be bridged in this way and the task group could not persuade the Government of the ways in which this proposal would raise education participation (Richardson 1993). The scene was set for the 1991 White Paper, which would emphasise the preservation of A Level standards by restricting assessed course-work and by developing broad vocational qualifications as a means of raising attainment and reaching National Targets.

The different directions of vocationalism

Throughout the early and mid-1980s, the main philosophical approach to the reform of post-compulsory education and training had been 'vocationalism' and a particular form termed the 'New Vocationalism'. This approach, equated with low level training schemes and qualifications, had been subjected to widespread criticism for its narrowness, its social control and its form of ritual (Bates *et al.* 1984, Dale 1985, Stronach 1989). Moreover, in the mid-1980s, vocationalism in the form of pre-vocationalism (CPVE) and occupationalism (NVQ competencies) had been criticised for its divisiveness and for causing fragmentation of qualifications (Ranson 1984, Green 1986, Spours 1988a).

By the late 1980s, the role of vocationalism was on the wane, in terms of policy influence, as the Conservative Government shifted its

priorities away from youth unemployment to educational standards and greater centralisation of the curriculum (DES 1988b, Chitty 1991). Ironically, during this latter period, educational hostility to vocationalism declined. The involvement of schools in prevocational course led to an appreciation of 'progressivist' approaches to learning and assessment (Pring 1985, Macintosh 1986). Added to this was the development of TVEI Extension, with its application to all students 14-18, and the encouragement of local curriculum development (Gleeson 1989). The interest in modularisation was stimulated, not only by the NVQ framework, but also by the potential of a closer relationship between A Level modular syllabuses and BTEC awards (Whiteside 1992). TVEI encouraged active pedagogies, unitisation/modularisation, course-work assessment and recording of achievement. These could be seen as 'process-based' dimensions of vocationalism which had originated in vocational and pre-vocational qualifications but, in the climate of chaotic innovation of the late 1980s, could be seen to be applicable to all qualifications.

Other, possibly more radical interpretations of vocationalism, also emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s drawing on the work of the American educationalist, John Dewey (Spours & Young 1990, Silver 1990, Chitty 1991, Hyland 1994, Pring 1995). Dewey saw vocational education containing the study of economics, civics and politics. This interpretation of vocational education focused not only on the task, the job and the enterprise but also wider societal issues. In reaction to the growing failure of NVQ competence-based approaches to create a rationalising framework for all qualifications, this definition of vocational education was seen as broad enough to help bridge the academic/vocational divide (Spours & Young 1990, Chitty 1991).

By 1990, the 16-19 qualifications system had reached a watershed which was reflected in the ferment of the policy debate (Richardson 1993). The Government was faced with a stark choice. In the context of rising levels of full-time participation, it would have to either broaden the academic track and to modularise the curriculum along

the lines that had received widespread support in the late 1980s, or create an alternative full-time vocational route. The core skills initiative by NCC, SEAC and NCVQ, which in 1989/90 failed to materialise, represented the last attempt by the Government to provide a link between academic and vocational qualifications, prior to the onset of the effects of the 1991 White Paper.

During 1990, a decision was made to develop GNVQs. These became the focus of a hybrid vocationalism with a curriculum model based on unitisation, NVQ assessment methodology, active learning, core skills and portfolio compilation. The 1991 White Paper, which is discussed extensively in Chapter 3, with its policy of restricting course-work assessment in GCSE and A Levels, reflected a decision not to vocationalise the academic track. The more radical versions of vocationalism, which could be applied across the academic/vocational divide, were channelled instead into the design of unified certification in the form of A British Baccalaureate with its unitised structure, balanced assessment, work-related modules, core skills and processes (Finegold et al. 1990).

The end of the 1980s - complexity, policy ferment and polarisation

Richardson (1991, 1993), in charting the policy debates at the end of the 1980s, pointed to a process of polarisation between conservative solutions which aimed at retaining A Levels and the radical blueprints which pointed the way to a unified system of certification. The Conservative Government had, by 1991, decided to address system complexity by building a national qualifications framework based on a formal triple-track system.

I have argued in this chapter that the period from 1986-1991 produced unprecedented complexity and fragmentation due to the relationship of three trends (or overlapping eras). First, there was the continuation of a trend of prevocationalism from the early 1980s and the problems of stratification highlighted by the 17+ examination, CPVE. Second, there was attempts to develop a national dual

system based on GCSEs/A Levels and NVQs which was only partially successful - GCSEs stimulated educational participation but NVQs could not respond this growth. Third, there was the development of local progression and curriculum strategies, often under the auspices of TVEI Extension, to promote progression, local modular frameworks and institutional process-based approaches to learning and curriculum design.

In the context of this history, the 1991 White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century* could be seen as an attempt to impose a divisive order on 'innovative chaos' by creating a national qualifications system based on distinctive qualifications within broadly defined levels. Chapter 3 analyses the period of the development of the triple-track national qualifications framework and GNVQs from the perspective of unification and how it led to a period of review of all three qualifications tracks in 1995/6.

Chapter Three

A Critique of the Triple Track Qualifications System (1991-1995)

PART 1: THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE 1991 WHITE PAPER
EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Introduction

In Chapters 1 and 2, I have argued that the end of the 1980s saw the overlap of three eras: the final phase of prevocationalism, the dual-track phase of the national qualifications framework and the precursor local experimentation phase of unification. I also argued that the 1991 White Paper could be seen as an attempt to impose 'track-based order' on an education and training system experiencing rapid expansion of full-time participation and the 'innovative chaos' of experimentation in qualifications both nationally and locally (Hodgson & Spours 1997a).

Chapter 3 is a critique of the triple-track qualifications system written from the perspective of unification based on *A British Baccalaureate* (Finegold *et al.* 1990). By 1992 and Labour's defeat in the General Election, I viewed the 1991 White Paper and its implementation process as ushering in a 'dark age', which had halted and even reversed the process of innovation in both academic and vocational qualifications which, under the auspices of TVEI, had flourished in the late 1980s. The focus of my theoretical work during the period 1991-1994 moved from developing a unifying vision to a critique of both government policy and the performance of the education and training system.

This critique, which involves using extracts from my published work of this period, is undertaken in six parts. In Parts 1 and 2, I analyse different perspectives on *Education and Training for the 21st Century* in order to situate my own approach which is represented by a historical case-study *The Reform of Qualifications in a Divided System*. Part 3 contains a contextual analysis of GNVQs, and Part 4 a historical case-study, *The Strengths and Weaknesses of GNVQs: Issues of Design* which focuses on the problems of the early GNVQ

model. Part 5 of the chapter, features another historical case-study *Problems of Performance of the Triple-Track Qualifications System: A Statistical Analysis*, published in 1994/5, which focuses on the emerging problems of participation and qualifications rates of the qualifications system. The chapter concludes with a brief examination of the context which paved the way for the qualifications reviews of 1995/6.

Dimensions of the 1991 White Paper

The 1991 White Paper, *Education and Training for the 21st Century* (DES/ED/WO 1991), marked an important point of development in post-16 qualifications. It sought to reverse the process of innovation in academic qualifications by restricting levels of coursework assessment. The White Paper also aimed to extend the influence of the NVQ approach to vocational qualifications and to introduce 'general NVQs' with the intention of replacing traditional vocational qualifications, such as those offered by BTEC and City and Guilds. Another aim of the White Paper was to develop a national qualifications framework embracing both academic and vocational qualifications and to promote 'parity of esteem' by aligning qualifications in levels supported by proposals for Ordinary and Advanced overarching diplomas. Finally, *Education and Training for the 21st Century* also contained proposals to encourage an education and training market by announcing the formation of 'incorporated' further education colleges and the introduction of youth credits.[17]

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[17] The main aims of the 1991 White Paper were to:

- respond to rising demand for higher skills levels to meet the growing challenge from overseas competitors in world markets;

- establish a national qualifications framework which promotes equal esteem for academic and vocational qualifications and clearer and more accessible pathways between them;

- stimulate more young people to train through the offer of training credits;

- extend the range of services offered by schools and colleges - notably in the provision of full-time vocational courses;

Since 1991, these proposals have been interpreted in three different ways; first, as a reflection of consensus for expansion of the system; second, as a strategy of division; and third, as a step towards unification of the qualifications system. Robertson (1994) argues that the White Paper could be characterised as representing a growing consensus about increased participation and expansion of the education and training system. This consensus was reflected in an 'alliance' of forces including the CBI, Employment Department and education professional associations (Whiteside 1992). The White Paper has also been seen as an attempt to apply the market principle, set in motion by the 1988 Education Reform Act, to post-compulsory education and to the FE sector in particular (Robertson 1996). It has also been seen as constituting a new stage of development and division of the qualifications system which moved from a fragmented dual system into a formalised triple-track system (Hodgson & Spours 1997a). The strategy of division was accompanied by some less divisive proposals. The creation of a national qualifications system, which embraced and aligned different types of qualifications and proposed overarching diplomas, could be interpreted as a way of overcoming the academic/vocational divide (Major 1992, Jessup 1993). This argument about the role of 'linkages' and 'unification' is explored further in Chapters 4 and 5.

I will argue that these four perspectives - consensus on expansion, marketisation, the formation of a triple-track qualifications system and a framework of linkages - are not mutually exclusive perspectives. Taken together, they can be understood as a policy of 'divisive expansion'.

- provide improvements to the careers service to offer better advice and guidance, give colleges more freedom to expand their provision and to respond more flexibly to the demand (DES/ED/WO 1991: 3).

The White Paper as 'consensus' on the expansion of participation

Robertson (1996) argues that the major policy thread running through the 1991 White Paper and the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act (DES 1992) was to "produce in British post-secondary education and higher education an accommodation with general international practice in terms of levels of participation and with best practice in the quality of individual learning achievement" (Robertson 1996: 280). This balance was to be achieved by using market forces as an organising device with which to address long-standing problems.

Robertson goes on to argue that the need to tackle the problem of low participation and to invest in education and training had been recognised by a wide range of researchers and educational organisations (Finegold & Soskice 1988, Smithers & Robinson 1989, CBI 1989, 1992, 1993, Finegold *et al.* 1990, Ball 1991, Royal Society 1993, the National Commission on Education 1993, Social Justice Commission 1994). Similarly, Whiteside (1992), suggests that the alliance supporting reform of the system embraced not only these individuals and groups, but also reached into government and, in particular, the Employment Department, which had promoted vocational reform during the 1980s.

Woolhouse (1993) argued, however, that behind this consensus were two major debates. First, the degree to which the qualifications proposals of the 1991 White Paper would produce a more coherent system; and second, the limitations of market-based reforms. Richardson (1991), while tracking the policy debate between the years 1987-91, remarked that it had been considerably easier to agree on policy goals than on policy measures. He went on to note that behind the growing consensus on the need to expand participation were fundamental disagreements and different poles of thinking. In the area of qualifications reform, Richardson located two fundamental influences in the period around the 1991 White Paper. - the influence of HMC and the think-tanks of the Right on the Conservative Government and the Institute of Public Policy Research on the education profession and on the Labour Party.

HMC and right-wing think-tanks (Stuart Sexton's Education Unit and the Institute for Economic Affairs) both supported the retention of A Levels and had access to Downing Street (Richardson 1991). Within government itself, the influential role of politicians such as Michael Fallon and Tim Eggar has been noted, with the latter particularly involved with the emergence of GNVQs (Sharp 1998 forthcoming). Furthermore, the decision to provide greater access to vocational study for younger pupils strengthened the role of NCVQ in the development of vocational qualifications (Richardson 1991). The interests of these forces converged around the preservation of A Levels and the development of alternative full-time vocational qualifications - GNVQs.

The White Paper as a policy of 'divisive expansion'

The consensus related to the need to increase the outputs of the system, whereas the disagreements were about ideologies and policies. The Conservative Government, following its unexpected 1992 election victory, pursued what I have termed a period of 'divisive expansion' or what Richardson (1991) refers to 'homogeneous differentiation'. Both these terms describe a policy which sought to accommodate rising levels of full-time participation by dividing learners into different qualifications tracks. Divisive expansion was also stimulated by proposals for a post-compulsory education and training market which sought to promote institutional competition. This policy was criticised by key elements of the education profession and employers, which supports Whiteside's assertion about the existence of a broad but informal alliance. Their criticisms included arguments against the White Paper's restrictive assessment proposals, arguments for an integrated diploma system and an inclusive modular credit and accumulation structure (PIN 1991, NATFHE 1991) and arguments for the advanced diplomas to promote breadth rather than just academic and vocational equivalence (RSA 1991).

The White Paper, however, was not unambiguously divisive. It contained some potential themes of unification and the political rhetoric of Conservative politicians referred to breaking down the academic/vocational divide (Major 1992). Nevertheless, between 1992 and 1994, there were signs of a more divisive implementation process

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than originally suggested by the White Paper itself. Proposals for overarching diplomas, which were meant to promote parity of esteem, were never acted upon. Richardson argues that the IPPR proposals for *A British Baccalaureate* (Finegold *et al.* 1990) were sufficiently persuasive that the Government (in particular the officials of the Employment Department) felt the need to include the diploma proposals within the White Paper. Sharp (1998 forthcoming) also suggests that, in the run up to the 1992 General Election, CBI support for the IPPR model had persuaded DES officials to include the overarching diplomas and to press ahead quickly with GNVQs so as not to be outflanked by Labour Party education and training policy.

GNVQs were initially seen as a qualification which would link the academic and vocational tracks. The GNVQ Consultation Paper (NCVQ 1991) contained criteria which gained general support by the education profession.[18] However, the implementation of GNVQs ended up less like BTEC awards and more like occupational NVQs. This was the result of the role of NCVQ in their design (Jessup 1993). The NVQ approach to GNVQs was to become a major source of contention and is the focus of the argument in the Historical Case-Study *The Strengths and Weaknesses of GNVQs: Issues of Design* (Spours 1995).

The process of marketisation also followed an ideological path of implementation both in relation to institutional competition and in relation to youth credits (Hodkinson & Sparkes 1994). Robertson argues that the strands of policy of this period can be best analysed *"when one has stripped away ideological cladding from political statements"* (Robertson 1996: 279). He goes on to argue that, without the ideology, what remained was a commitment to the individual learner and to a more flexible system. The strength of Robertson's argument is that he taps into a growing consensus, which embraced both Conservative and Labour Parties in the 1990s, of meeting the needs of individual learners (McCaig 1997). However, Robertson confuses the nature of the consensus and policy-making in the early 1990s. He argues that

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[18] The main criteria for GNVQs appeared to be progressive - based on outcomes, consisting of units and credit, not time-based, open access to assessment and should assess skills, knowledge and understanding (NCVQ 1991)

professional associations, the National Commission on Education and the Commission on Social Justice influenced the educational consensus. There is little evidence, however, that they actually influenced policy and even less so implementation processes. During this period, policymaking was firmly in the hands of the education Right and implementation in the grip of 'technicist ideologues' both within NCVQ and the FEFC (Spours & Lucas 1996).

The effects of the growing education consensus, to which Robertson refers, in fact came into play with the more 'consolidationist' approach of Gillian Shephard in the final years of the Major administration and with the decisions to implement the qualifications reviews in 1995/6. This growing consensus of education opinion by the mid-1990s was to affect the last phase of the Major administration and the Labour Party. Sir Ron Dearing would provide the process of continuity between the two governments.

The period between 1991 and 1995 can, in retrospect, be seen as a period of formation of the triple-track qualifications system, which emerged as more divided and less linked than the 1991 White Paper initially suggested. The issues I now explore are how the White Paper and its implementation process sought to do three things: first, to respond to rising levels of full-time participation and to raise qualifications outputs; second, to preserve A Levels: and third, to develop a national qualifications framework to link different qualifications.

This analysis is undertaken through three case-studies consisting of extracts from previously published papers written between 1992 and 1995 and supported by both contextual analysis and reflective comments. They focus on the 1991 White Paper and the thesis about divisive expansion (Historical Case-Study No 2); the NCVQ interpretation and implementation of GNVQs (Historical Case-study No 3); and, the problems of participation and attainment performance which began to emerge by 1994/5 (Historical Case-Study No 4).

PART 2: HISTORICAL CASE STUDY NO 2: *THE REFORM OF QUALIFICATIONS WITHIN A DIVIDED SYSTEM* (SPOURS 1993)

About the case-study

Written in early 1992 and published in 1993, the paper *The Reform of Qualifications within a Divided System* was an early attempt to make sense of the qualifications aspects of the 1991 White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century*. It was published along with a number of other chapters, in a book which reflected on the qualifications innovations of the late 1980s and the qualifications proposals (Richardson *et al.* 1993). The paper argued that the most significant qualifications feature of the White Paper was the curtailing of curriculum innovation in the academic track and that the development of GNVQs should be seen in this context. The paper also criticised the weakness of the proposals for overarching diplomas and the attempt to recreate a dual system.[19]

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[19] This reference, in 1992, to a dual system rather than triple-track system, is explained further in the reflective comments following the case-study.

The dual track and the role of external frameworks

The aim of this case-study is to explore how, in England and Wales, the process of reforming qualifications for the 16-19 age group has been undertaken within a divided system. First, it means analysing the Government's strategy of creating an explicit 'dual track' system of academic and vocational qualifications 16-19, including changes in GCSE and A Levels, and the emergence of general national vocational qualifications (GNVQs) within the vocational track. Second, we need to acknowledge and analyse local and national attempts to tackle divisions within the system of qualifications initiated by examining and validating bodies, 16-19 providers and HE institutions.

How can we understand the changes taking place in 16-19 qualifications and their significance? At the outset it is important to appreciate the nature of the Government's own strategy signalled by the White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century* (DES/DE/WO 1991). Here the intention is to establish more formally the existing dual track system of academic and vocational qualifications. The strategy consists of three basic elements: first, the retrenchment of the academic track by restricting the amount of course-work in GCSE and A Levels; second, the construction of a broad vocational track consisting of GNVQs and NVQs, which at Level 3, offer access to higher education; and third, the development of external and overarching diplomas to confer 'parity of esteem' between the separate tracks.

These changes represent a new phase in post-16 qualifications. They are attempts to reform our already deeply fragmented system of qualifications, to modernise it, but at the same time to keep it formally divided. They are also part of a new government emphasis on early specialisation both at 11 and at 14, highlighted in the most recent schools White Paper *Choice and Diversity* (DfE 1992).

Reform of the dual track system: changes in academic qualifications

Academic qualifications have always dominated the post-16 scene in England and Wales and continue to do so. But there have been significant twists and turns of policy in recent years. Up until 1989/90 it looked as if, despite the rejection of the Higginson Report (DES 1988a), there would continue to be a slow but marked change in A Level syllabuses, with the prospect of more modular development, increased components of course-work, the introduction of A Level criteria and an expanded role for core skills. But this process of diversification of the academic track came to an abrupt end with the publication of the White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century* (DES/ED/WO 1991).

Academic qualifications at 16 and 18 appear now to have 'frozen over' with many of the previous changes having been pushed into reverse. This retrenchment of the academic track suggests three future developments: first, the negative impact of limited course-work on student motivation, future pass rates, patterns of participation and curriculum development; second, a narrowing of the concept of core skills and the movement of the focus from A Levels to over-arching Diplomas and GNVQs; and third, the limited impact of AS Levels and their fragile position within a reformed dual track system.

GCSE, A Levels and the issue of course-work

The situation facing the Conservative Government in 1990 was that of a mismatch between GCSE with its extensive course-work components and

A Levels, with its emphasis on terminal examinations. This has been resolved in favour of keeping the current A Level methods of assessment and spreading these to GCSE through the decision to restrict the amount of course-work undertaken at this level.

In the area of core skills, on the other hand, the Government had to confront a stark choice. As the Schools Examination and Assessment Council (SEAC) and NCVQ could not agree on how to integrate core skills into both A Levels and occupationally-focused NVQs, the

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Conservatives either had to create more common ground between A Levels and NVQs or abandon the exercise. The latter course was chosen and there commenced (with the advice of right-wing think tanks) a new phase of government policy to restrict the expansion of the academic track and, instead, to broaden the vocational track.

The policy to restrict course-work to 20/30 per cent in the case of most academic subjects examined at 16 and 18 is the determining feature of the current stage of government policy on qualifications and will have dramatic effects on the whole of post-16 education and training. It is retrenchment in three fundamental respects.

First, it is turning back the clock to an emphasis on assessment by terminal examination, regardless of a broad professional consensus that increased course-work components have helped to improve levels of motivation, resulted in greater levels of student application and increased levels of performance, particularly for those at the margins of the academic track.

Second, the policy of setting papers of different levels of difficulty in English, Maths and a foreign language in GCSE is a reinforcement of the 'early selection' function of our qualifications system and will pre-determine the level of pupils' attainment. Furthermore, it could negatively interact with the syndrome of teachers' low expectations of pupils, prevalent in inner-city areas. This emphasis on early selection is entirely consistent with the more recent emphasis on specialisation highlighted in the 1992 White Paper *Choice and Diversity*.

Finally, it is retrenchment in terms of the pattern of post-16 participation. The most significant effect of the proposed measures is that participation in the academic track post-16 (that is, participation with a prospect of attaining two A-C grades at A Level) will probably not spread beyond the first quartile (top 25 per cent) of the cohort. It could fall below 20 per cent if restrictions in course-work have the anticipated negative effect on participation. At present, about 22 per cent of the cohort achieve two or more good A Levels, a rise from 13 per cent in 1979 (Hughes 1991). However, about 30 per cent of those entering A Level courses end up with nothing at all. More students than ever want to take

A Levels but the Government is caught between wanting to use high failure rates to preserve standards and having to deal with the problems caused by high failure rates - most notably the negative effect on student motivation and therefore, on sustained participation up to 18. For these reasons, A Levels can now be regarded as having reached their saturation point and those who cannot cope should be advised to take up vocational qualifications.

The immediate effect of the Government's 20/30 per cent course-work limit, in the case of most subjects, is to increase the possibility of failure for those around the margins of the cohort taking GCSE and A Levels. As the Wessex Project shows (Rainbow 1993a), most students appear to be able to perform more highly through course-work than in examinations. Course-work tends to offer opportunities for pass grades to those who may have struggled with a high examination component in a subject. The reasons for increased performance through course-work are complex, but it is arguable that two factors stand out. Sheer hard work in course-work can get you higher grades, whereas success at terminal examinations is based more upon the demonstration of a particular range of skills (e.g. being able to write and marshalling facts quickly). Second, locally-validated work is less prone to norm-referencing. That is, there is not the same pressure from exam-boards on external examiners to ensure that the proportions of students gaining certain grades should be broadly the same from year to year. Instead, course-work has to have criteria and if students meet the criteria they achieve the grade.

But this argument for coursework is rejected by education ministers. The attitude of the Government to the academic track and the role of course-work is not based primarily upon technical questions about assessment, but is a reflection of ideological and political considerations. These continue to equate academic qualifications with the selection of an elite and talk of maintaining standards rather than improving them.

Given current post-16 policies, recent rises in post-16 staying-on rates present a dilemma. More students are wanting to take A Levels - a reflection of their increased educational aspirations. The Government evokes the importance of parental choice, yet many parents'

perceptions (and those of many employers) directly undermine the aim of a publicly recognised and enhanced vocational track. Moreover, the Government's approach of pushing those unable to cope with academic track into an 'enhanced vocational stream' is reinforcing the message that vocational is second best.

The role of AS levels: breadth of learning or just more A Level points?

Charting the current progress of AS levels provides another interesting commentary on the effect of more additions to the post-16 system. In 1991, the Government rejected the idea that AS should be an intermediate examination despite lobbying from the Headmaster's Conference (Brooks 1991). Instead, it opted for an examination covering half the breadth of an A Level but studied to the same depth and with the same intellectual demands as A Levels. The official aim of AS levels is to allow for greater breadth of study in the academic track and the Government has openly supported a 2A Level + 2AS combination (Clark 1992). But the system has not moved in this direction and AS development has been much slower than officials hoped. In 1990, there was only one AS level entry for every fourteen at A Level (Nash 1991).

The Universities Central Council for Admissions (UCCA) statistics for 1990 would seem to confirm that AS levels suffer from low credibility due to the continued dominance of A Levels in university selection. AS studies appear to be being used to supplement an A Level diet, not so much in order to add breadth, but in order to show students' capacity to work beyond the three A Level work-load. Meanwhile, competition is increasing to get into the established universities. To have a majority chance (60 per cent plus) of being accepted, a student needs at least three A Levels or better still, between three and four. This appears to be the most significant use of AS. With one extra AS on top of three A Levels, UCCA reports that students increase their chances of acceptance into higher education from 60 to 72 per cent.

The rising pattern of higher education participation is likely to produce a paradoxical effect. The most prestigious universities will demand more A Level points in response to rising demand. The new universities, on

the other hand, under pressure to increase student recruitment, will be more inclined to AS levels as well as low thresholds of entry points across both levels of examination. In this way AS has a future in a divided HE system but not as an equal to A Levels.

Retrenchment of the academic track and the problems of internal change in qualifications

The retrenchment of the academic track will have far-reaching effects on wider post-16 curriculum reform strategies. The period from 1985 to 1990 witnessed noticeable experimentation with the academic track marked by the development of GCSE, the impact of Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) curriculum development projects, a growth of modular A Levels and a slow but marked increase in the course-work component of many A Levels. Two of the case-studies - the Wessex Project on Modular A Levels (Rainbow 1993a) and Linking BTEC and A/AS Levels (Burgess 1993) - can be characterised as imaginative attempts to alter further the internal nature of qualifications by modularisation and promoting common learning processes between the two tracks.

The 'freezing' of the traditional academic track through a reduction in course-work and the increased emphasis on external testing endanger this kind of reform strategy. The promotion of modular developments and the creation of common ground between academic and vocational qualifications are highly dependent upon flexible forms of assessment, carried out locally and validated nationally. These experiments may survive because of continued demand for modular developments but, for the time being, it is difficult to see how they can progress further in the current conditions. Nevertheless, these are significant innovations and remain as signposts for the future direction of reform when political conditions change. The Wessex Project, in particular, with its widespread success in pilot form, shows how the academic track can be amended to produce higher results, improve motivation, broaden choice and build effective bridges with the vocational track. With the closing down of reform opportunities in the academic track, the focus of attention has switched to the prospects for reform of vocational qualifications.

The vocational track: breadth and flexibility?

The reform and broadening of the vocational track in post-16 education and training is the substantive proposal in the qualifications section of *Education and Training for the 21st Century.* It also represents a classic policy U-turn. Since 1986, the Government has been determined to reform vocational qualifications through the work of NCVQ and the development of narrow, occupationally-focused NVQs. In the quest for broader vocational qualifications, this policy is being reversed by a new emphasis on General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) in 16-19 education and training.

General NVQs: alternative track or coherent framework?

GNVQs are designed to appeal to students in full-time education and training by focusing on a broad vocational education. With their emphasis on broad skills, it is hoped that GNVQs will have equal standing with academic qualifications and will provide a more clearly-defined vocational route, not only into higher skilled jobs, but also into higher education.

The concept of GNVQs will receive substantial professional support because, to a large extent, they are based upon tried and tested practices in BTEC awards. But there has been criticism of the narrow pilot base for GNVQs of 90 institutions, the relative secrecy of GNVQ development and the lack of real consultation over their introduction. GNVQs may win support as a concept but their design and implementation may draw less unanimity.

The criteria for judging GNVQs should not be based upon how closely they resemble past awards, but how far they can meet the targets of the future, in particular, the Government's aim of enhancing the vocational route. Can GNVQs achieve parity of esteem with academic qualifications and double the number of vocational students attaining at Level 3? Here once again, we come to the nub of the issue; the relationship of vocational awards to A Levels and the academic track. There appear to be three basic strands of opinion as to the potential of GNVQs. The Government clearly sees them as defining a separate but highly regarded post-16 route. Others involved in their development see GNVQs as an 'evolutionary path', in which the barriers and divisions will be gradually eroded (Jessup 1993). A third position, argued here, is that the real barrier to any of these developments, is A Levels. Their retention will ensure that history repeats itself, with vocational awards falling under the shadow of academic qualifications.

At present it appears that the development of GNVQs is being dictated to by traditional A Level provision and opportunities for reciprocal development are being ignored. A further problem for GNVQs is that the plans to reduce A Level coursework also reduce the potential for reciprocity between the award systems. Less course-work means

less modularity and less modularity means less flexibility to mix study. This, in turn, will affect the aim of running common A Levels-GNVQs units such as those pioneered in Y-model schemes (Burgess 1993).

Further tensions between academic and vocational study are reflected in the complex combination of assessment requirements which have been a major issue of debate (Jessup 1993). Running through the development of GNVQs has been the aim of parity of esteem with the academic track whilst, at the same time, upholding the competence-based approach of NVQs. The result is a compromise based on the external testing of knowledge and understanding and pass/fail assessment of students' core skills demonstrated through the GNVQ units. Despite this, the assessment debate has given rise to some innovations: the external tests will be multiple-choice and will be available for students when they feel ready; the use of the NRA to report GNVQs is a definite advance for the records of achievement movement. However, the overall assessment package still looks too messy and complex for easy employer recognition or for acceptance by HE tutors.

The degree to which GNVQs can be judged to be part of a coherent framework is the degree to which they can inter-relate with A Levels. GNVQs have been designed to provide a limited inter-face with A Levels. Each GNVQ unit is equivalent to one sixth of an A Level qualification and the requirement of twelve units for a GNVQ leaves some room for students to undertake either additional GNVQ units or an A/AS Level. But this is an external interface between academic and vocational, based upon a very limited addition of an academic subject to a vocational programme; A Levels have been deliberately altered so as not to articulate with the vocational. So it is a one-way street of the vocational chasing the academic. It remains to be seen how far institutions will attempt to provide flexibility of study and blur the boundaries between the tracks.

GNVQ Level 2: the end of narrow vocationalism 16-19?

The development of GNVQs marks the beginning of the end of the role of occupationally-focused NVQs as a significant qualification in full-time 16-19 education and training. The 1991 White Paper represents a

reversal of the strategy that has prevailed since the mid-1980s - that
of the narrowing of the vocational track through work-based learning.
Mark Jackson has offered one explanation for this change:

> "...another declared aim of the reforms is to raise the status of
> vocational qualifications and give them parity of esteem with
> academic awards. It was never very clear how this could be
> achieved by gutting occupational qualifications of much of their
> educational content, and the latest twist in the Government's
> reform strategy suggests that it no longer takes the idea
> seriously as far as under-19s are concerned. (Jackson 1992)"

As Jackson and others have pointed out, a change of heart by the
Government as to the importance of work-based learning is not the
reason why NVQs have encountered difficulty in becoming
established in full-time education and training. Rather, the changes
heralded by GNVQs are an acknowledgement of the difficulty of
delivering NVQs in schools and the admission that they did not
constitute a sufficient basis for an alternative vocational track. The
problem is best illustrated by NVQ developments in the BTEC First
Diploma in Business & Finance (BTEC's most popular vocational area).
In a well-publicised critique, Watson and Wolf (1991) stated that BTEC
First Diploma had an unmanageable loading of work-based
competencies and had neglected the role of knowledge and broader
skills. This critique was accepted by John Hillier, Chief Executive of
NCVQ, when he acknowledged that one of the principle reasons for
GNVQs was the difficulty schools and colleges were having
implementing NVQs.

Not only will GNVQs push vocationally-specific NVQs to the margins of
16-19 education, they have also brought an end to the era of post-16
pre-vocational certification. CPVE is to be phased out in September
1993 and replaced by the Diploma of Vocational Education:
Intermediate Level. Like the Diploma at Foundation Level, this award
inherits many of the pedagogic innovations of CPVE, albeit with major

differences being in assessment where there are differentiated and graded outcomes.[20]

These developments suggest that GNVQs are beginning to bring some sort of order to the post-16 vocational field at NVQ Level 2. Both occupationally-focused and undifferentiated prevocational awards are being replaced by a broader and more differentiated assessment framework. This is an advance and could help to establish a firm rung on the vocational ladder. However, the whole enterprise could still be endangered by the main vocational examining and validating bodies competing with each other to market their versions of GNVQs to institutions. Each of the boards has its own pedagogical tradition and despite the GNVQ kitemark, their courses are being marketed under different titles, with different rules. It is a situation in which a dysfunctional proliferation of certification for the system as a whole is rapidly emerging. How far will GNVQs rationalise and give clarity to a qualifications scene which is rapidly getting out of hand?

External frameworks - a peculiarly English solution?

A new feature of the current phase of qualifications development in England and Wales is the use of external frameworks as an addition to mainstream qualifications. The over-arching Ordinary and Advanced Diplomas can be regarded as external frameworks because they offer an alternative to changing the internal nature of qualifications. They are examples of a peculiarly English solution, which attempts to reform

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[20] The attempts by City and Guilds to create the second rung on their vocational ladder with a more rigorous version of CPVE has caused concern that it is neglecting students with special education needs. To ameliorate this problem, CGLI recommend that providing institutions make recourse to either CGLI Record of Achievements, which document credit accumulation within the Diploma, or CGLI Profiles of Achievement, which allow institutions to set up their own banks of profile statements.

The emergence of GNVQ 1 may resolve this problem but there is still a lack of clarity about the role of Foundation Level at 16+. Taken in the context of increasingly cost-conscious FE colleges, many tutors feel that that students with significant learning needs are being abandoned.

the system by adding more layers and increasing complexity, rather than by overhauling its component parts.

Ordinary and Advanced Diplomas - conferring parity of esteem between vocational and academic?

The proposal to develop over-arching Ordinary and Advanced Diplomas, announced in the post-16 White Paper, is a recognition on the part of government that the academic/vocational divide has to be addressed. Both the Ordinary and Advanced Diplomas are due to be introduced in 1994 when GCSE is, for the first time, to be assessed against Key Stage 4 of the National Curriculum. They also coincide with the first award of GNVQs. But how much recognition will the diplomas gain and, as a consequence, how effective will they be in raising the status of vocational qualifications?

The *Ordinary Diploma* has marginally greater credibility than its advanced equivalent because it is trying to recognise combined academic and vocational study through the award of GCSE (a broader framework than specialised A Level study). The main features of the Ordinary Diploma are attainment via GCSEs (four GCSEs including Maths and English) or NVQ/GNVQ level 2 (also including equivalent - National Curriculum level 7 - attainment in maths and English) and it is intended to be a 'stepping stone' to the Advanced Diploma.

However, the Ordinary Diploma has problems of purpose and design. The demand for four GCSEs would seem to offer too little incentive for those successful at academic learning and is certainly not an encouragement to breadth of study. On the other hand, subject-based attainment at National Curriculum Level 7 looks very ambitious for the majority of pupils who will be following vocational courses, even though it may be slightly easier to achieve the core of maths and English within a vocational course rather than via GCSE. This being the case, the Ordinary Diploma may be aimed at encouraging young people to choose vocational alternatives to GCSE both pre and post-16 (FEU 1991).

The *Advanced Diploma* is an attempt to create parity of esteem between the two post-16 tracks whilst retaining the 'gold standard' of A Levels. This tension makes the proposals seem weak and

contradictory. First, restriction of the course-work component of GCSEs and A Levels, aimed at preventing a mass expansion of the academic track, undermines parity of esteem between the tracks. It is implausible to claim that academic and vocational qualifications are equal when the vocational track is being constructed for those identified as 'academic failures' at the age of 14. Second, the proposed Ordinary and Advanced Diplomas attempt to encourage a mix of study by introducing common 'kitemarking' of different qualifications, but they do not provide the compatibility of design and comparability of fundamental elements necessary to realise these aims. Third, the Advanced Diploma will be ungraded and, therefore, deemed not worth more than an E grade at A Level. Finally, there is no accredited 'added value' of additional achievement within the Advanced Diploma. It is, therefore, likely to be judged as a collection of the 'primary' qualifications. It appears to be targeted at either 'weak' A Level students or those embarking on GNVQs and is unlikely to appeal to those who can obtain three good A Levels. Furthermore, neither the Ordinary Diploma nor the Advanced Diploma deploy achievement-led incentives. They are preoccupied with comparability through kitemarking, rather than with the encouragement of high performance as a result of curriculum change. As designed, they make no requirement that courses have modular flexibility; substantial in-course assessment; curriculum breadth or more than one matriculation level for the next stage.

The creation of an over-arching framework will, in effect, introduce a little more breadth into the post-14 system by requiring minimum attainment in the areas of maths and English (and possibly in a modern language at some future date). But this will be achieved in such a way which leaves the student in the academic track largely untouched. The demands for breadth are really being made of students in the second quartile of ability - those who, it may be anticipated, will form the main clientele for GNVQs. As such, a kind of second chance is being offered for this group to attain some kind of parity of achievement with the academic minority in the cohort.

Movement towards a unified approach: opportunity and constraint

The last decade or so has shown that the English system of education and training always provides room for local development by initiatives which add, layer upon layer, to existing arrangements. This approach can perpetuate a divided system by providing room for 'molecular change' without disturbing the basic structure of the qualifications system as a whole.

Currently, there are a range of initiatives which are critical of the narrowness and divisiveness of the qualifications system in England and Wales. The International Baccalaureate (Leggate 1993), reflects efforts to broaden post-16 education by offering an internationally recognised alternative to A Levels. It has had a limited impact in England and Wales and is an addition to the system. The Tech Bac (CGLI 1992) and the over-arching diplomas (DES/DE/WO 1991) seek to broaden study by being both frameworks and qualifications. But they both allow A Levels to remain unchanged. The initiatives described so far can be seen as additional and external; they may broaden learning programmes of individual students but do not directly challenge the qualifications themselves.

The Wessex Project (Rainbow 1993a), the Y-model innovations (Burgess 1993) and the Unified Curriculum Project case-study (Morris 1993) represent a greater challenge. They take as their starting point a criticism of the academic/vocational divide itself and, in doing so, evoke the vision of a unified system outlined by the Institute of Public Policy Research (Finegold *et al.* 1990). They seek not only to create greater breadth and flexibility of learning, but also to break down divisions which perpetuate the dual tracks. The Wessex Project starts with the 'internal' modularisation of A Levels and from this foundation, creates the possibility of reaching out to BTEC provision. The 'Y-model', on the other hand, using modular A Levels, has an aim of creating a unifying learning process which can 'zip' A Levels and BTEC awards together.

The Unified Curriculum Project is different again. It seeks to promote a broader and more unified curriculum through Compact arrangements with HE institutions (Morris 1993). In effect, it seeks to subvert A Levels by challenging their predominant right to act as selectors for HE.

The project's strategy is based on a calculation that many HE institutions are seeking to promote increased access via a future-looking and imaginative curriculum. In addition to being a curriculum reform project, however, the Unified Curriculum Project also offers a local and external curriculum framework for promoting changes in an incremental way. As a first step, the Compact arrangement challenges the selection function of A Levels rather than the internal structure of the award itself.

Despite their diverse strategies, the role of the credit framework within each of these three initiatives is a common challenge which could strike at the heart of the qualifications system. An FE credit accumulation and transfer framework (CAT) would seek to break down different types of qualification into units of credit (FEU 1992). To agree a 'common credit' means agreeing the relative worth of each of the currencies which make up the credit. Used in this way, credits can be seen as a means of conferring real parity of esteem between the tracks.

The calculation of a common credit depends, however, on having strong currencies in the vocational track as well as in the academic. This means that movement towards a unified system depends upon the strengthening of vocational education. In this sense, Jessup may be right when he argues that a well-established outcome-unit-based system in the form of GNVQs will pose a challenge to A Levels in their current form (Jessup 1993). But the English system has always found ways of confounding optimists.

Conclusions - a dual track system overwhelmed by confusion

This is a time of maximum uncertainty and confusion in post-16 education and training. We are still waiting to see the impact of GNVQs; the viability of the Ordinary and Advanced Diplomas seems unclear; examining and validating bodies are marketing different products; and post 16 institutions are becoming locked in competition. Post 16 education and training appears to be in an unprecedented mess.

Despite the confusion, however, vocational education for 16-19+ age group will be numerically strengthened as a result of the proposed

reforms. Increased post-16 participation rates make this a probability. GNVQs are far more attractive and deliverable than narrow NVQs and increased post-16 participation rates will build on this momentum. Furthermore, a more carefully constructed ladder of progression in the vocational track will ensure that more students can progress to qualifications at Level 3. Consequently, more students with vocational qualifications will progress to HE. But, at the same time, progress towards recognition of the vocational will be undermined by continuing academic elitism enshrined in A Levels and by market competition between institutions. So we will make some progress but it will not be enough.

The challenge, therefore, facing those in post-16 education and training in the coming years is two-fold. First, it is to work creatively with the initiatives and frameworks at our disposal to reduce division and increase coherence and progression. The practitioner in England and Wales has had plenty of practice of 'innovating in chaos' and has become very adept at it. But the second challenge is more profound and difficult. It is to forge and develop a more unified concept of qualifications, curriculum and institutional provision so that these goals come to dominate post-16 policy and overcome the current frustrations of political postponement.

Reflections on *The Reform of Qualifications within a Divided System*

The Reform of Qualifications within a Divided System was written in the wake of Labour's defeat in the 1992 General Election. Those of us who, in the previous two years, had argued for a unified qualifications system and had seen these arguments influence Labour policy (Labour Party 1991), now faced at least five years of the *"frustrations of political postponement"*.

Looking back on *The Reform of Qualifications within a Divided System* I can identify both analysis and predictions that would stand the test of time and more conjunctural analysis which was overtaken by events. First, I will evaluate the main arguments.

The central theme of the case-study was that the most important qualifications proposal of the White Paper was the decision to 'retrench' the academic track. Other commentators of the period, for example (Whiteside, Sutton & Everton 1992, Highams, Sharp & Yeomans 1996, Jessup 1993), see the White Paper's most significant proposal as the introduction of GNVQs. In terms of policy innovation their view is correct but not in terms of causal effect. I want to reiterate this argument. Had the Conservative Government decided to allow the further diversification of the academic track in the late 1980s, GNVQs would not have appeared in the form that they did as a 'distinctive' full-time vocational qualification. It is also conceivable that the development of broad vocational qualifications might have been put in the hands of SEAC or even BTEC. A more 'liberal' approach towards the academic track could have converged with a more 'technical vocational' approach in broad vocational qualifications with the emergence of common areas of study, such as business, art & design, science, performing arts and so on.

The second main argument is directed at the weakness of the overarching diplomas and their role as 'external frameworks'. The fact that they did not eventually appear does not constitute a wasted argument. The criticisms of the 1991 White Paper proposals basically stand today as a warning to New Labour and their ambivalent attitude to overarching certification (DfEE 1998b). Any framework which

seeks to overarch and not to reform the internal relationships of the constituent qualifications will inevitably be overshadowed by the dominant academic qualifications. Moreover, if the prime function of overarching diplomas is to promote parity of esteem of vocational qualifications, they may not be taken seriously by those in the academic track. This argument is as relevant today as it was five years ago.

A third reflection is the movement of post-16 policy towards a 'top-down' approach following the 1991 White Paper. This issue is elaborated further in Chapter 4. In the wake of the 1991 White Paper and Labour's defeat, many of the 'unifiers' looked to local curriculum projects to pursue the aim of unification (Morris 1993) or vertical and horizontal networking, again using institutions rather than national systems (Young et al. 1994). Initially, I took this position, hoping that an 'alliance' forged at local level between teachers, LEAs, HE institutions and employer could attempt to circumvent A Levels.[21] Paralleling this was the FEU's concept of credit frameworks which could be seen as a 'pragmatic' path of reform, due to the fact that it did not face qualifications 'head on'. In retrospect, the idea of local unification was naive and ignored one of the most salient features of the 1991 White Paper - the way in which it represented an era of 'top-down' approaches to post-compulsory education (Hodgson & Spours 1997a).

It was only in 1994/5 that the idea of steps and stages of change for unifying the national system once more became seen as a possibility (Richardson et al. 1995a). The approaching Dearing Review and a less distant General Election rekindled interest in national strategies for unification. This was an implicit acknowledgement that local bottom-up reform could only work with reciprocal top-down initiatives.

So far I have argued that the historical case-study was broadly correct in its analysis. However, there was one serious conceptual error. Throughout the historical case-study I referred to a dual-track system rather than a triple-track system. Looking back, I think the

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[21] This 'localist' approach was reflected in developments such as a 'British Baccalaureate for Islington', which argued that local alliances and institutions could build a basis for change.

reason for this was not only a delay in moving my late 1980s analysis (as reflected in Historical Case Study No 1), to the new situation, but a deeper problem which is relevant to the discussion of unification in Chapter 4. I focused on the dualism between academic and vocational qualifications. Moreover, in a period of rising full-time participation, I saw this being played out increasingly within a school-based model for initial post-compulsory education. *A British Baccalaureate* expresses very clearly the exasperation of reformers with the low performance of the work-based route and with YT in particular. We were, in effect, 'writing off' a major section of the education and training system - the area of vocational education and training and the work-based route. In 1998, with the apparent plateauing of full-time participation rates and a renewed national and international interest in apprenticeships (Lasonen & Young 1998), this can be viewed as a serious strategic oversight.

Finally, the historical case-study took a relatively sanguine view of GNVQs prior to their implementation process. By 1995, my analysis had grown much more critical. I began to see GNVQs, not as a progressive qualification, but as an aspect of policy divisiveness. My support remained with traditional vocational qualifications which had more in common with the 'liberalised' or partially vocationalised academic track which had flourished locally in the late 1980s. This aspect of my critique of the 1991 White Paper is elaborated in Parts 3 and 4 of the chapter which explore the debates about GNVQs and contains a historical case-study of the curriculum design of the early GNVQ model (Spours 1995c).

PART 3: DEBATES ABOUT THE EARLY GNVQ MODEL

Introduction

In this part of the chapter I survey a range of debates and their associated literatures about GNVQs to provide a context for the Historical Case-Study No 3, *The Strengths and Weaknesses of GNVQs: Issues of Design* (Spours 1995c). I will argue that there have been four types of discussion and types of research about GNVQs which, when subjected to analysis, support my thesis about the approach to the early GNVQ model and its position within the qualifications framework. First, there has been the debate about GNVQs as competence-based ideology. In analysing this I will focus on the work of Gilbert Jessup (1991, 1993) and some of his critics (Gleeson & Hodkinson 1995, Smithers 1993, Hyland 1994). Second, I review the research from the Leeds University 14-19 Research Group, who have charted the continuous changes in the GNVQ model (Highams, Sharp & Yeomans 1997), which, I will argue, are due primarily to assessment design problems. Third, I look briefly at the reasons why GNVQs, despite their problems, gained a measure of teacher support.

GNVQs and the NVQ outcomes approach

Recent research suggests that the political force behind the development of GNVQs was Tim Eggar, Minister of State at the Department of Employment (1989-90) and Education and Science (1990-92) and the driving force behind the design of GNVQs was Gilbert Jessup, Director of Research at NCVQ (Sharp 1998 forthcoming). In this section, I attempt to summarise the Jessup approach to the design of GNVQs, the implications of which are highlighted in the historical case-study.

Jessup argued that GNVQs would play a very important role in the post-14 qualifications system by providing an alternative full-time qualification to A Levels. He asserted that:

- there was a growing consensus that there should be increases in post-16 full-time participation;

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- A Levels would remain largely unchanged and suitable for only 25 per cent of the cohort;

- the NVQ framework, developed since 1986, provided a distinctive approach based on the concept of competence which could provide both access to qualifications and assessment of 'real-life' situations;

- the NVQ approach could, therefore, promote the mass up-take of training to meet ambitious national training targets;

- because of this GNVQs were designed to incorporate the essential features of NVQs and to replace other full-time vocational qualifications;

- GNVQs were also designed to link academic and vocational qualifications in the context of the 'parity of esteem' aims of the 1991 White Paper;

- the GNVQ approach would be an 'evolutionary' way forward: GNVQs would erode the academic/vocational divide by establishing a strong parallel provision and would provide an outcomes-based model for qualifications which eventually may be copied by A Levels (Jessup 1993).

Jessup's view of the potential of 'outcomes' as a transforming influence on qualifications (Jessup 1991) gained support, particularly with the researchers involved with the FE sector (FEU 1992, Stanton 1995, 1997). However, I will argue that his insistence on using a narrow NVQ competence-based model of outcomes had the effect of making the GNVQ assessment regime too complicated and burdensome which impeded its effective implementation in the early years. Moreover, it frustrated the linked relationship between GNVQs and A Levels which were designed on a different assessment and structural basis (Stock & Conway 1992).

Jessup saw GNVQs as an evolutionary and pragmatic way of changing the qualifications system. His critics, however, saw his role as reflecting an ideological zeal for NVQ methodology which was having a damaging influence on vocational qualifications (Smithers 1993, Hyland 1994, Gleeson & Hodkinson 1995, Sharp 1998

forthcoming). Jessup's critics were broadly correct. Not only did NVQ methodology adversely affect GNVQ completion rates; its difficulties forced repeated retreats from NVQ methodology, first through the *GNVQ Quality Framework* (NCVQ *et al.* 1995) and then through the modifications to assessment recommended by the Capey Review (NCVQ 1996).

Contrary to Jessup's hopes, GNVQs did not, in fact, transform other qualifications, but themselves became the focus of reform with recommendations for more external assessment. This could be seen as A Levels influencing GNVQs, rather than the other way round.

Changes in the GNVQ model since 1992: problems of function and design

In their relatively brief lifespan, GNVQs have gone through three stages of development. They have moved from a Mark 1 model (1992-1994) based on the Jessup competence-based model; to a Mark I model following the Boswell six-point action plan of 1994 which attempted to remove the most extreme forms of NVQ specifications. They are now moving to a Mark III model, based on the findings of Capey and Dearing Reviews, with an emphasis on consistent national standards, external assessment and manageability (Higham, Sharp & Yeomans 1997). It is also possible, following the Dearing Review and *Qualifying for Success* consultation process (DfEE 1997c), to see a Mark IV model being proposed, based on 6- and 3-unit GNVQs, but following the assessment logic of the Mark III model.

It is arguable that the shifts from the GNVQ Mark 1 to the Mark III/IV models have been the result of both design problems and problems of the location of GNVQs as the middle track in the qualifications framework. The movement from the Mark 1 to Mark III models marked a movement away from the NVQ competence assessment model to a more external assessment model. The movement from Mark III to Mark IV models, and the development of 6- and 3-unit Advanced GNVQs, are the result of issues of alignment Advanced GNVQs and A Levels. The proposed smaller 3-unit GNVQ qualifications are meant to facilitate greater mixing of study and, therefore, new combinations of GNVQs with qualifications or units from the other two tracks (QCA 1998). This

can be seen as yet another attempt to create an Advanced GNVQ model which can function as a middle track, but this time with a unit structure and an assessment approach more compatible with A Levels.

GNVQs, learner empowerment and teacher agency

Despite the problems of track location and divisive design, GNVQs succeeded in gathering support in parts of the education profession as well as in government. Teachers were looking for alternative provision to A Levels, both to absorb and to stimulate higher levels of full-time participation (Spours 1997). Practitioners also liked the practical and open forms of learning methods associated with the GNVQ approach of collecting evidence of achievement. They saw this as particularly motivating for students (OFSTED 1994, FEFC Inspectorate 1994). Furthermore, the GNVQ emphasis on core skills and evidence-gathering assessment approaches encouraged students to take control of their own learning and, thereby, to develop learning skills for the future (Oates 1994). GNVQs also gained support because they expanded an alternative route to higher education (Kershaw & Gadd 1994). Finally, GNVQs were a nationally kitemarked qualification which expressed a 'national language' for vocational qualifications to take over from the *"idiosyncratic cultures and regimes of vocational awarding bodies"* (Evans & Cronin 1993: 159).

However, research on GNVQ implementation suggests that these positive features were being continually undermined by the problems of the purposes and design of GNVQs. The Leeds University 14-19 Research Group, exploring the implementation of GNVQs, found that, despite the assertion about the possibility of teachers reinterpreting national initiatives to meet the needs of learners, the experience of GNVQs was essentially seen as a top-down development (Highams, Sharp & Yeomans 1997). Furthermore, their research noted that, despite the good job done by many teachers in making GNVQs work effectively, this *"should not mask the fact that there were also a number of negative attitudes which were strongly and commonly expressed"* (Sharp 1996: 29). These echo the criticisms of Alan

Smithers and others about bureaucracy and paperwork associated with NVQ methodology (Smithers 1993, 1994a, 1994b, 1995, 1997).

Other research, looking at the role of 'teacher agency' in interpreting and implementing the GNVQ curriculum framework, found that *"where there has been evidence of students exercising control over their own learning ... it appeared to owe more to the idiosyncrasies of teacher or student agency than to the curriculum prescriptions of GNVQs"* (Bloomer 1997: 55). These two pieces of research, taken together, suggest that GNVQs, in themselves, did not necessarily encourage an award-wide culture of open learning, but that some teachers managed to implement them creatively.

GNVQs and their position within a track-based system

I will argue that the design and development of the early GNVQ model cannot be understood without appreciating the relationship between GNVQs and the other two qualifications tracks. I made this argument in 1994/5 while reflecting on the original GNVQ model. However, recent research has also pointed to the track-based nature of GNVQs and A Levels and how their divided relationship has resulted in an imbalance of skill development in both A Level and GNVQ students (Haywood 1997). In the following historical case study, I analyse the issue of curriculum and qualifications distinctiveness and how GNVQs came to function as an alternative full-time track with the aim of preserving A Levels by absorbing rising levels of full-time participation.

PART 4: HISTORICAL CASE STUDY NO 3: *THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF GNVQS: ISSUES OF DESIGN* (SPOURS 1995c)

Background to the historical case-study

This section of the chapter consists of a case-study analysis, written as part of the *Learning for the Future Project* (Richardson *et al.* 1995a), which focuses on the development of the early or Mark 1 GNVQ model between 1992 and 1995. It argues that the difficulties facing GNVQs were primarily the result of design problems resulting from its track-based location between A Levels and NVQs. The analysis went on to argue that the redesign of GNVQs should involve taking the most progressive features of GNVQs, which were also the features of 'progressive vocationalism' arising at the end of the 1980s (an argument from Chapter 2), and incorporating these into a more unified qualifications structure.

Introduction

GNVQs were first offered in schools and colleges as pilot schemes in 1992. In 1995, it has become apparent that successful completion rates in GNVQs are low both at Intermediate and at Advanced Level. It has been calculated that they are about 15 to 20 per cent lower than in the full-time vocational qualifications that GNVQs are meant to replace (Spours 1995b). This paper will argue that these low completion rates are the result, not only of problems of implementation, but also of curriculum design.

The view of national agencies such as NCVQ and SCAA and the vocational awarding bodies, supported by the findings of the FEFC and OFSTED inspectorates, is that any problems being experienced by GNVQs are primarily ones of implementation. The present strategy, reflected in the guidelines contained in the *GNVQ Quality Framework* (NCVQ *et al.* 1995), is to improve GNVQs by focusing on implementation and support for quality practices. This paper, while accepting that the current problems of GNVQ performance may be eased with improved implementation by schools and colleges, focuses more on issues of curriculum design.

The background to GNVQs: the influence of other qualifications

The GNVQ curriculum model has its roots in three vocational initiatives of the 1980s. First, and arguably the most influential, has been the NVQ assessment methodology. The second influence was through BTEC Diplomas, which provided the structural model of integrated group awards. The third strand was provided by CPVE with its promotion of active learning strategies and portfolio approaches to recording achievement. I will argue that this curriculum hybrid has been influenced, not only by combining these vocational traditions, but also by developments in the two other qualifications tracks of A Levels and NVQs.

During the period 1987-1991, NVQs did not take root as the mainstream vocational qualification for full-time students. Occupationally-focused NVQs demanded work-based learning environments, which FE colleges could not readily provide. The 'occupationalisation' of

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vocational qualifications might have worked if the numbers of students staying-on full-time post-16 had remained relatively small. However, from 1987, full-time participation at 16+ grew by three to four per cent annually (Spours 1995b).

Reforms in the academic curriculum formed the other main plank of change in the mid-1980s. The development of GCSE was accompanied by a growth in the assessment of course-work and of modular syllabuses. Attainment and participation rates grew both as a result of the GCSE reform, and also as a result of the wider context of changes in student aspirations. (Gray, Jesson & Tranmer 1993). By 1988, the implications of these changes were beginning to be felt at A Level, culminating in the Higginson Report *Advancing A Levels* (DES 1988a). The atmosphere of innovation was reflected elsewhere in the formation of the National Curriculum and also in a series of post-16 initiatives, many of which were supported by TVEI, and which aimed to bridge the academic/vocational divide by modularisation and Y-models. The best known of these experiments was the *Wessex Modular A Level Project* (Rainbow 1993a).

However, by 1990, the youth labour market was declining rapidly from its relative high point in the mid-1980s and the economy was entering a deep recession. In 1990 alone, 16+ full-time participation rates rose by 6 per cent. The Government faced a choice between introducing further reform of the academic track to accommodate increasing numbers of full-time students, or expanding broad vocational education qualifications which could be implemented in schools and colleges. It chose the latter course with the decision to develop a new qualification - General National Vocational Qualifications.

The 1991 White Paper: the birth of GNVQs as a middle track

The White Paper Education and Training for the 21st Century set out an ambitious agenda for the new GNVQs. They were to cover broad vocational areas, offer students opportunities to develop relevant

knowledge and understanding, and to gain an appreciation of how to apply these to work (DES/ED/WO 1991).[22]

In response to the challenge posed by increased levels of participation, GNVQs were seen as a solution that would allow the Government to leave academic qualifications largely unchanged. The introduction of GNVQs was also a response to the failure of NVQs to become established in full-time education and youth training. The introduction and design of the GNVQs, therefore, was closely linked to policies in the other two qualifications tracks.

Firstly, it was intended that A Levels should remain separate from the broad vocational track and that GNVQs would develop their own distinctive curriculum. Secondly, it was assumed that GNVQs, while also providing an alternative route to higher education, would constitute a preparation for vocational specialisation and for NVQs. Thus, the curriculum and assessment model developed for GNVQs owed much to the NVQ model, though somewhat modified to the context of full-time study. Finally, it was recognised that there were positive lessons to be learned from the BTEC and CPVE curriculum traditions. Notably, BTEC had successfully developed, grouped and unitised awards through BTEC National and BTEC First Diplomas and City and Guilds had, in the late 1980s, taken responsibility for CPVE, which had pioneered pre-vocational qualifications.

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[22] The aims of GNVQs outlined in the 1991 White Paper were to:

"offer a broad preparation for employment as well as an accepted route to higher levels of qualifications, including higher education;

require a demonstration of a range of skills and appreciation of knowledge and understanding relevant to the related occupations;

be of equal standing with academic qualifications at the same level;

be clearly related to the occupationally specific-NVQs so that young people [could] progress quickly and effectively from one to another;

be sufficiently distinctive from occupationally-specific NVQs to ensure that there [was] no confusion between the two;

be suitable for use by full-time students in colleges, and if appropriate in schools, who have limited opportunities to demonstrate competence in the workplace" (DES/ED/WO 1991: 19)

The development of GNVQs 1992-95: problems of implementation?

The role of NCVQ and competition between national agencies

In the climate of institutional and inter-agency competition, NCVQ has been keen to counter the growing influence of BTEC. NCVQ could see ways of using NVQ outcomes and assessment methodology to reform full-time vocational qualifications[23]. The emphasis of government departments also varied. The Department for Education emphasised the need for GNVQs to acquire parity with A Levels, the issue of external rigour and the promotion of alternative routes to HE. The Employment Department, on the other hand, was concerned about how vocational GNVQs should be seen as a preparation for NVQ work-based training[24].

In the lead up to the 1991 White Paper, NCVQ took the initiative by making a bid to develop the new general vocational qualification. NCVQ gave assurances that GNVQs would be designed as a qualification compatible with full-time study (in contrast to NVQs) but would be, distinctive from A Levels and GCSEs. NCVQ proposed to establish pilot GNVQs in five areas and to ensure that the whole operation could be conducted at low cost.

GNVQs were formally launched by the Prime Minister at a national conference organised by NCVQ in January 1992. In 1993, a year after the development of GNVQs, the Secretary of State suggested that GNVQs were central to the Government's strategy for 16-19 year olds and could, in the long-term, cater for as much as half the age group; they would stand alongside academic qualifications on their own merits (NCVQ 1993a). There was no mention of the overarching Advanced Diploma, intended in part to confer parity of esteem

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[23] Interview with Gilbert Jessup (Head of Research and Development at NCVQ) in January 1995

[24] Interview with Aiden Petit (Co-ordinator for the FEU in the FEU/IOE/Nuffield study on GNVQs 1993-94), January 1995.

between academic and vocational tracks. GNVQs would have to achieve parity without any such support.

The early days of the GNVQ pilot schemes (1992/3)

In 1992/3, 107 schools and colleges, involving 8,500 students, piloted courses in one or more of five broad vocational areas - Health and Social Care, Leisure and Tourism, Business, Art and Design and Manufacturing. The pilot schemes were evaluated by OFSTED (1992) and by the Employment Department (ED 1993). The main conclusions of these early evaluations supported the principles and design of GNVQs and focused on early teething problems of implementation at institutional level. While both reports highlighted the rushed nature of implementation, there was a subtle difference in emphasis between them, which can be related to the wider policy debate about the direction of GNVQs. OFSTED concentrated on arguments for consistent national standards and the need for GNVQs to be tightened up. The Employment Department, on the other hand, gave more unconditional support for GNVQs and, in line with its concerns about GNVQs not being vocational enough, reported the view of many centres that the 'general' had been emphasised at the expense of the 'vocational'.

The findings of national inspections (1993/5)

In 1993/4, the first five GNVQs became available nationally and new pilot areas were established in Science, Built Environment and Hospitality and Catering. By the end of 1994, large-scale inspections had been carried out by OFSTED and the FEFC Inspectorate and an implementation evaluation study undertaken jointly by the FEU, Nuffield Foundation and the Institute of Education. The main findings of the OFSTED report repeated several themes of the 1992 evaluation of the pilot schemes; that GNVQs were popular, that the standard of work was satisfactory, that students enjoyed the degree of independence they achieved as learners but that centres are finding it difficult to meet coverage requirements and to integrate core skills (OFSTED 1994). Although OFSTED gave GNVQs a 'good bill of health', inspectors had reservations about aspects of the NVQ model of assessment. They argued for a differentiated grading approach with an emphasis on testing and grading criteria. The FEFC Inspectorate took a broadly similar approach to the issues of implementation and reached almost identical conclusions and recommendations.

It is possible to see in these reports an official position beginning to emerge during 1994 as to how GNVQs should be developed. In March of that year, Tim Boswell, Minister of State, made a speech calling for NCVQ to 'get its act together' and outlined a six-point action plan for GNVQs, which included improving the external testing regime and clarifying grading criteria. These action points were endorsed by the two inspection reports and NCVQ received additional funding in order to make improvements. By 1994, the consensus among Ministers, the awarding bodies and the inspectorates was that GNVQs were experiencing teething troubles due to the unfamiliarity of teachers with some of its requirements, compounded by its rushed implementation. Nevertheless, the assumption was the GNVQ project was broadly correct in its purposes and design.

Challenges to the GNVQ model during 1994/5

The emerging orthodoxy on GNVQ development has been challenged in several ways during 1994/5. First, the FEU/Institute of Education/Nuffield (1994) evaluation has indicated that students see

GNVQs as a form of general education and aspire to higher education, which questions the underlying assumption of government policy that GNVQs are operating as a preparation for NVQs and workplace. Second, a range of academics, Professor Alan Smithers in particular, have had an impact on political and educational opinion with their criticisms of GNVQ methodology (Smithers 1994b). Third, there are signs of a crisis in the performance of GNVQs, notably in their poor successful completion rates, which can be linked to problems of design and not just problems of implementation (Spours 1995b).

The Joint FEU/Nuffield/Institute of Education Evaluation Studies (1994 & 1995)

These studies have focused on patterns of implementation and the direction of the development of GNVQs, rather than the quality of teaching and learning. In doing so, they have raised system-wide and design issues not covered by the OFSTED and FEFC inspections. The first Joint Report was published in late 1994, and the second, in June 1995 (FEDA, IOE/Nuffield 1995).

The first report concluded that GNVQs were operating as low-status general education awards, rather than as vocational qualifications. It highlighted the question of whether GNVQs could adequately replace more specialised vocational and technical qualifications, such as BTEC National Diplomas in Engineering or Fashion Design. The report went on to cast doubt as to whether GNVQs could claim parity of esteem with A Levels and, at the same time, be a vocational qualification.

The Report conceptualised GNVQ as a reaction to the inappropriateness of offering NVQs in full-time study at a time when there had been a growth of full-time participation. In this context, GNVQs had not managed to guarantee the perhaps over-ambitious range of objectives laid down in the 1991 White Paper - to offer broad preparation for employment, an accepted route to HE, equal standing with academic qualifications, a clear relation to NVQs and to be suitable for use by full-time students in colleges and schools. The study concluded that the further expansion of GNVQs, in terms of areas of delivery and numbers of students enrolled, would add to the uncertainty about their purpose in 14-19 education.

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The 'Smithers Debate' and is implications

Professor Alan Smithers' criticisms of GNVQs have attracted considerable political and public attention, because his critique can be supported by those on the education Right and by those who support traditional vocational qualifications. His main arguments are that GNVQs have a blurred strategic vision and it is not clear whether they are meant to be equivalent to A Levels or a better way of training technicians; the role of knowledge acquisition is reduced to small elements corresponding to the performance criteria required by the award; embedding of core skills in vocational contexts has caused literacy and numeracy to become marginalised as core skills and assessment is too divergent, time consuming, expensive and bureaucratic, and includes insufficient external testing (Smithers 1994a, 1994b, 1995)

NCVQ responded by publishing a detailed rebuttal, accusing Smithers of confusing NVQs and GNVQs and of not consulting practitioners (NCVQ 1994). His position was also attacked by practitioners who highlighted the positive sides of an NVQ-type specification of outcomes and who went on to attack A Levels (Taubman 1994). The Smithers intervention appears to be polarising opinion about GNVQs between those who defend them from the standpoint of their motivational role and those who attack them from the standpoint of intellectual rigour.

GNVQ Performance - strong recruitment but poor completion rates

GNVQs are reported in the education press to be popular, with over 150,000 students involved during 1994/5 (OFSTED 1994, FEFC 1994). However, press claims that this represents 25 per cent of the age group are misleading. GNVQ participation should be measured against at least two year-cohorts, because the FEU study found only 56 per cent of GNVQ students to be 16 (FEU/IOE/Nuffield 1994). This means that they represent about 13 or 14 per cent of the age cohort in any one year. This is still well below the Government target for GNVQs which was that they should cater for half of those in full-time post-compulsory education. It is not yet clear whether recruitment patterns for 1995/6 will show the growth in GNVQ uptake slowing down,

reflecting the peaking of post-16 full-time participation, or whether GNVQs will continue to grow strongly by replacing existing vocational qualifications and drawing students from A Levels and GCSE resits.

Successful completion rates in GNVQs (after two years at Advanced Level and one year at Intermediate Level) have been low. Recent data from BTEC and from NCVQ suggest that GNVQ successful completion rates are just over 50 per cent, even allowing for students taking an extra term to complete their portfolios (Spours 1995b). While these rates could improve in the future, this performance is much lower than the completion rates of traditional vocational awards, which have averaged between 60 and 70 per cent (Audit Commission/OFSTED 1993).

The current problems of GNVQ performance appear to be associated mainly with the methods of assessment adopted for GNVQs. A recent survey of institutions showed that Advanced GNVQ students felt overwhelmed by the workload of assessed work and tutors are paying more attention to recording than to what is being learned (Tysome 1995).

Different positions on what to do about GNVQs

The differences in analysis of GNVQs appear to be preventing the emergence of a consensus on how GNVQs should develop in the future. Five different, but not mutually exclusive, positions appear to be emerging on GNVQ improvement and reform.

The position of government and national agencies, such as NCVQ, is that the purpose and design are basically right, but that internal assessment, grading criteria and procedures must be tightened up in order to respond to criticisms (OFSTED 1994, FEFC 1994). This is reflected in NCVQ's GNVQ improvement programme (Harrop 1994) and the recent announcement by Mike Heron, Chairman of NCVQ, of the introduction of a new *Quality Framework* for continuous improvement of GNVQs (NCVQ *et al.* 1995). Some critics, including Professor Smithers and SCAA, accept that the improvement programme is necessary, but argue for a more influential role for external testing and

for GNVQs to take on some of the features of the academic track, including more formalised teaching in the areas of maths and English.

Another perspective is that GNVQs and A Levels should be more closely related, so that there can be greater movement between the tracks to reduce drop-out and wastage. This is one aspect under consideration in the Dearing Review (Dearing 1995) and was one of the suggestions of the *Post-16 Education and Training: A Joint Statement* (AfC *et al.* 1994).

BTEC, some employers' organisations and the Employment Department, have argued for GNVQs to be made more vocational. However, there is little agreement as to how this might take place within current arrangements. If GNVQs continue to be seen by students as a lower-status variant of general and applied education, there may be growing pressure for the formation of a 'fourth track', which is more technical and vocational.

I will argue, in the final part of this historical case-study, that these positions are not necessary irreconcilable and could be accommodated, to a degree, in the phased development of an 'expanded curriculum' which combines the strengths of GNVQs and A Levels into a new unified qualifications system. In order to do this, the remaining part of this case-study explores further the curriculum design base of GNVQs and its relationship to the qualifications track system. It finishes by assessing the curriculum strengths and weaknesses of GNVQs and their implications for redesign of the qualification.

The curriculum model of GNVQs: an analysis

The GNVQ curriculum model is characterised by a combination of the following components: assessment outcomes, broad vocational knowledge and generic skills, grading criteria, external testing, the structure of a grouped award, core skills and active learning.

GNVQs and NVQ methodologies

The differences between GNVQs and NVQs have been highlighted by agencies working with post-16 practitioners (FEU 1993).

Figure 5: Differences between GNVQs and NVQs (FEU 1993)

GNVQs	NVQs
vocationally specific and concerned with broad-based vocational education	occupationally specific and concerned with occupational competence
based on statements of achievement developed by NCVQ and awarding bodies and covering skills, knowledge and understanding within a broad vocational area	based on standards developed by industry lead bodies covering functions performed in a specific occupation
qualifications that include core skills	qualifications that do not include core skills
all qualifications at the same level composed of the same number of units and of the same size of unit	qualifications composed of units which may be of different sizes and are not allocated to a level
qualifications do not require work-based assessment, but require externally-set tests	qualifications require work-based assessment, but do not require externally-set tests
qualifications are graded	qualifications are not graded
number of titles restricted	no restriction in the number of titles

There is disagreement as to how far GNVQs differ from NVQs. GNVQs have been characterised as departing from basic NCVQ principles in order to achieve parity of esteem with A Levels (Hyland 1994). Smithers, on the other hand, has argued that GNVQs are not upgraded BTEC courses, but something quite different, because they adopt a more basic NVQ approach to assessment outcomes and the notion of 'coverage' of assessment objectives (Smithers 1993). Gilbert Jessup, a prime architect of GNVQs, agrees with Smithers that NVQs have provided a model for GNVQs (Jessup 1993). However, both arguments are partially correct. As outlined by the FEU, GNVQs had to differ from NVQs to be part of full-time education but, at the same time, NVQ assessment methodology has had a significant influence on the GNVQ assessment model.

The NVQ Outcomes and Assessment Model

Assessment of learning outcomes is at the heart of the GNVQ model and reflects an NVQ model (Oates 1994).

> "One characteristic of GNVQ assessment, which distinguishes it from assessment in most academic qualifications, is that it covers the curriculum outcomes far more comprehensively. All the outcomes, reflected in the units must be achieved... doing well in one component cannot compensate for a poor result in another... and the primary component is the internal assessment which runs throughout a GNVQ" (Jessup 1994:)

The NVQ model of outcomes emphasises both the separation of learning and assessment, in terms of classroom delivery, and a close relationship between individual learning and assessment. This is seen as evidence of the openness of the model, which stresses flexibility of delivery by the local centre (Jessup 1993). With the separation of learning and assessment, awarding bodies do not prescribe learning programmes. Instead, they offer brief guidance on the range of learning activities which may be relevant (CGLI 1993). The main focus in the learning process is on students collecting evidence of their activity, relating this to the specification and submitting this evidence in their portfolio for assessment. Many practitioners have welcomed this

approach because they think it could improve learning and motivate the student.

However, the overall GNVQ approach has been criticised by inspectorates and by researchers for fragmenting understanding, being paper-heavy and bureaucratic (Smithers 1995); schools and colleges have found it difficult to design courses which allow students to cover effectively all the required units (OFSTED 1994); providing feedback to students on progress is not straightforward because there is no obvious mechanism for offering early reports of unit grades (Spours & Hodgson 1996).

The question is whether the problems of clarity, guidance, complexity and bureaucratic paperwork are issues of implementation or design. Evidence increasingly points to the latter because of the relationship between active learning, coverage of criteria and the development of the portfolio. Delivery approaches are regarded, by NCVQ, as a second-order issue and the responsibility of the institution. The effect has been to produce an enormous variability of approaches to GNVQ and confusion about course design and resourcing amongst a wide range of institutions (FEU/IOE/Nuffield 1994, OFSTED 1994).

Knowledge, skill and the concept of coverage

GNVQs are based on broad vocational knowledge, intended as a preparation for occupational training or for progression to applied courses in HE. Vocational knowledge specifications in GNVQs are broader than NVQs, but the underlying curriculum methodology is basically the same. Emphasis is on 'coverage' through meeting performance criteria and range statements in vocational areas. The concept of coverage is directly related to the NVQ notion of competence and the minimum requirement of industry-defined standards. Moreover, the adoption of this approach points to an NCVQ assumption that GNVQs are basically a preparation for NVQs. However, as this paper has indicated, the FEU/Nuffield/IOE evaluation study showed that GNVQs are being used principally as a means of progression to higher education.

So why the central role for coverage? The approach may reflect the desire of NCVQ to apply NVQ methodology to all vocational

qualifications - a process which it had promoted since 1986. But there are also more specific concerns arising from a critique of academic courses, particularly a concern for transparency of achievement without recourse to external exams. The NVQ concept of vocational competence is reflected by the principle of pass/fail rather than by grading. The NCVQ concept of knowledge in GNVQs is, therefore, closely related to its concept of assessment. The NCVQ view is that knowledge and understanding are about knowing what should be done, how (and perhaps where and when) it should be done, why it should be done and what should be done if circumstances change (Jessup 1991). An argument in favour of the GNVQ method relating to outcomes and their assessment is that it provides concrete evidence of breadth of vocational knowledge (Jessup 1993).

This approach to knowledge, however, can have several negative effects. First, there is an emphasis on the instrumental application of knowledge, rather than on theoretical and investigative inquiry. In science, this has led to complaints from HE tutors that GNVQ students are not adequately prepared for science degree courses which demand a 'deep' knowledge base. Second, it has been argued that competency and recorded achievements only reveal people's ability to deal with yesterday's problems, but leave people helpless when faced with tomorrow's problems (Sparkes 1994). Third, within schools and colleges, students have remarked about the degree of curriculum difference between subject science A Levels and GNVQ science which might be deterring mixing of study.[25]

Assessment, grading criteria and testing

GNVQs employ a range of assessment methods - assessment of performance criteria of vocational outcomes on a pass/fail basis; application of grading criteria to the portfolio to determine the overall grade for the award and external tests on mandatory units. It will be argued, that not only does the range of assessment methodologies add to the complexity of GNVQs, but they show how GNVQs have become

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[25] Interview with Bob Mudd (Science Co-ordinator, GLOSCAT), January 1995

'moulded' by conflicting assessment methodologies borrowed from A Levels and NVQs.

NCVQ argues that coverage of all the performance criteria means that the employer or HE tutor knows what a GNVQ student has achieved. However, the vocational units and core skills are not graded and only a third of the work needs to meet the grading criteria. OFSTED concluded that this approach to assessment did little to reflect the quality of learning (OFSTED 1994). Moreover, the pass/fail methodology, combined with the application of grading criteria to a minority of work spread across all the units, means that it is impossible to list differential attainments in each of the units.

The application of broad skills - 'information handling', 'planning skills' and 'evaluation' - provide the basis for grading student work in GNVQs. The application of grading criteria by the student to a proportion of work (one third of evidence in the portfolio) can be seen both as a strength and as a weakness. The strength is that the process adds to the students' understanding of what they have achieved. The weakness is that it relegates the importance of vocational knowledge. The idea that only process-based criteria, and not vocational content, should determine the grade, has baffled many teachers who have been used to taking both skills and knowledge into account in determining grading in GCSEs and in BTEC courses.

The most controversial feature of GNVQ assessment has been external testing. NCVQ has resisted external testing as foreign to the NVQ model while the Government sees external testing as a means of conferring parity of esteem with academic qualifications. The tests have been designed to reflect mastery of coverage in which students have to achieve 70 per cent correct answers on multiple choice or short answers. The tests can also be taken when the student is 'ready'. As such they represent a compromise between NVQ and academic methodologies. However, in doing so, they appear to lack clear purpose. The tests do not utilise valuable skills demanded by academic examinations, such as essay-writing skills and the marshalling of ideas or facts. Moreover, they do not influence the unit grade because of the decision, in line with NVQ methodology, that grasp of knowledge should not be graded. They can be seen to

exemplify the 'hybrid' formation of GNVQs and a bureaucratic compromise, characterised by one NCVQ officer as a form of 'damage limitation'.

Grouped structure and flexibility

GNVQs follow the BTEC tradition of grouped, integrated awards. 'Rules of combination' are applied to each GNVQ after consultation with industry and HE about the combination of knowledge and skill needed as pre-requisites for progression to jobs or to higher courses.

The rule of combination in GNVQs at Advanced Level is based on a minimum of eight mandatory units and four option units. Students can opt to take six additional units or an A Level. This has encouraged only a limited mixing of study between GNVQs and A Levels and, as the joint FEU study shows, it remains a minority practice.

The grouped arrangement is also proving to be too rigid for the development of the award in more specific vocational areas. NCVQ assumed that vocational specialisation would be provided by NVQ units. This has not taken place. Many leading companies rejected NVQs, and FE still looks to existing BTEC National awards for specialisation in the areas of design and engineering. In engineering and art and design, the case has already been put forward for a more extensive and specialist range of units. BTEC has recently announced that it is continuing to offer its National Diplomas in order to cover these requirements (BTEC 1995a).

Core skills and breadth of learning

Core skills are an important part of GNVQs and are, perhaps, the feature that most distinguishes them from NVQs. The approach to core skills is similar to that followed by previous BTEC awards - core skills are 'embedded' in vocational situations, but are separately recorded as core skill units. This is intended to make core skills appear more relevant to the learner and more transparent to the employer than if they were studied as separate subjects. Stand-alone modules of core skills are accepted but not encouraged.

Critics of the embedded approach have argued that if skills are developed mainly in the context of their application the range of skills acquired becomes too narrow, particular types of skill, including mathematical capability, may not be systematically developed and this approach is not adopted in other European systems (Green & Steedman 1993, Smithers 1994a, 1994b, Wolf 1995). As a consequence, core skills have become a point of confusion and the recent FEU implementation study highlighted the vacillation in local centres between embedding and stand-alone strategies (FEU, IOE & Nuffield 1994). The embedded approach was also criticised by the inspectorates as providing few examples of good work (OFSTED 1994).

Active learning and portfolio development

The emphasis on active learning and the creation of portfolios is borrowed directly from CPVE. Recent inspection reports (OFSTED 1994, FEFC 1994) have recognised the evidence-based and collaborative styles of learning are one of the new qualification's strongest features. However, the GNVQ approach to active learning and portfolio development demands a great deal of record-keeping - element log-sheet, activity sheet, grading information sheet, grading record sheet, unit completion record and so on. Teachers have commented on the sheer weight of the system, implying that when they are planning this complex of individual activities, they are not able to concentrate on specific skill and knowledge development. Likewise, when students are busying themselves covering all the criteria and aligning these with specifications for portfolio compilation, they have little time to think or to conceptualise. It is arguable that this form of active learning constitutes a form of curriculum control; fundamental skill development and theoretical understanding appear to be under-valued due to density and weight of recording activity.

Rescuing the progressive features of GNVQ: an agenda for redesign

The curriculum design base of GNVQs has many features found in both traditional vocational qualifications and in some academic syllabuses, such as GCSE and TVEI-influenced A Level experiments.

These include unitisation, active and practical learning, broad skill development and the use of assessment criteria as a form of personal reflection.

However, the ways in which these features have been implemented in GNVQs reflect the contradictory position of GNVQs as a middle track between A Levels and NVQs. Of the two tracks, NVQs have been the most influential, leading to the bureaucratisation of GNVQs through NVQ assessment methodology with its emphasis on exhaustive coverage of performance criteria and the application of narrow grading criteria.

The positive curriculum features of GNVQs have also been weakened by attempts to adapt NVQ methodology to the rationale of A Levels, notably through multiple-choice external testing. Critiques of GNVQs in these early years suggest that the influence of the tracks may shift in the future, more towards the academic rather than away from it.

Under the influence of both NVQs and A Levels, GNVQs are a clear departure from the earlier type of vocationalism that had proved successful in motivating students and teachers, raising attainment and being accepted by employers. Aspects of GCSE, BTEC awards, TVEI and experiments such as the Wessex Modular A Level Project have (or had) the potential to vocationalise the curriculum, rather than to create a separate vocational track. Their main features were internal criterion-referenced assessment, the grading of knowledge and skill, modularisation and the inter-relationship of general and vocational educational content (Hyland 1994).

Unlike GNVQs, which were created as an alternative to the academic track, these curriculum developments were closely related to attempts to reform GCSEs and

A Levels. Some features of GNVQs are nevertheless innovative and represent an advancement on previous awards. These include, for example, the expansion of the national qualifications framework into areas and levels not fully covered by previous vocational awards and students' involvement in assessment and collecting evidence of achievement.

It is arguable, therefore, that the main curricular strengths of GNVQs are inherited from a previous phase of vocationalism and the main weakness of GNVQs is associated with NVQ methodology. With this distinction in mind, the following aspects of GNVQs could be retained:

- syllabuses that specify outcomes - with indicative rather than exhaustive coverage;
- criterion-referenced internal assessment;
- minority external examination for moderation and sampling purposes;
- graded assessment throughout, using assessment criteria;
- unitised structure, encouraging modular delivery;
- stipulations of minimum notional time;
- grouped award but with modular flexibility;
- modules which test 'synoptic grasp' and which could make use of the format of a portfolio.

If, at the same time, the debate about the future of A Levels concluded that what was needed was modularity and more internal assessment, then these GNVQ curriculum features would be placed on a 'path of convergence' with reformed features of GCSEs and A Levels. A common agenda for reform would, therefore, emerge for both tracks. It would be one in which the strengths of GNVQs detached from NVQ methodology could be related to the strengths of A Levels detached from an over-reliance on terminal assessment. Moreover, these curriculum features would offer students the best of both worlds; the rewards of academic rigour and the imaginative pedagogy and assessment offered by the new vocational courses. At present students are offered restrictive versions of one or the other, but such a combination could help a wide range of young people to succeed in broad and balanced programmes of study.

Reflections on *The Strengths and Weaknesses of GNVQs: Issues of Design*

Since 1995, GNVQs have been subjected to a wholesale review of their assessment (Capey 1995) and to proposals for restructuring into 6 and 3 unit blocks (Dearing 1996, DfEE 1998). The Capey *Review of GNVQ Assessment*, carried out during 1995, covered five areas - assessment, the grouping of GNVQ units, core skills, portfolio development and external tests. In September 1996, NCVQ submitted proposals to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment for a revised GNVQ assessment model (NCVQ 1996). The NCVQ document reflects the main emphasis of both the Capey and Dearing Reviews with proposals to simplify assessment procedures and to make GNVQ assessment more standardised and external.

The main aspects of the revised model are:

- a test for most mandatory units;

- a set assignment for each mandatory unit;

- key skills set assignments;

- a portfolio of internally assessed work;

- a grade for each unit (QCA 1997).

The aftermath of the Capey Review reduces, if not removes completely, the effect of NVQ methodology on GNVQs, which opens the way for a potentially closer relationship with the academic track, further supported by a symmetrical unitised structure and common grading between A Levels and Advanced GNVQs (DfEE 1998c). The obvious benefit of more external testing could be a rise in the status of GNVQs in the eyes of both university admissions tutors and employers. However, the shift to more standardised and external assessment could make GNVQs more difficult for some students and could keep successful completion rates depressed at their current levels. This will make it more difficult for GNVQs to lever up attainment rates for those on the margins of advanced level and more difficult for GNVQs to act as a bridge to vocational education and the workplace.

The transition from the Mark I model to the Mark III and Mark IV models can be seen as a strong process of convergence between GNVQs and A Levels based on external assessment. The changes also go some way to answering the critics of GNVQs, who have argued that GNVQs were not sufficiently rigorous (Smithers 1993, Wolf 1995, Green 1995, Labour Party 1996). However, the proposed reforms may have missed the point about the problems of GNVQs. It was not simply that they were not rigorous enough. In fact, they followed the NVQ concept of rigour - the concept of exhaustive coverage - to extremes. The point is that it is impossible to achieve parity of esteem by reforming vocational qualifications without, at the same time, reforming academic qualifications.

The argument of the historical case-study for a more equitable convergence process between academic and vocational qualifications is still very relevant. Genuine convergence, based on higher levels of internal assessment, more modularity, the accumulation of credit and more opportunities for applied learning, would draw on the best features of GNVQs and, at the same time, lead to a more open general education approach to learning and achievement. This argument for strategies to unify the curriculum and qualifications structure is pursued further in Chapter 4.

PART 5: HISTORICAL CASE-STUDY No 4: *PROBLEMS OF PERFORMANCE OF THE TRIPLE-TRACK QUALIFICATIONS SYSTEM: A STATISTICAL ANALYSIS* (SPOURS 1995B)

The context of participation, attainment outputs in the mid-1990s

The aim of this part of the chapter is to review the performance of the triple-track qualifications system in the early-mid 1990s. I will argue that the emerging problems of qualifications performance were one of the factors contributing to the Dearing, Beaumont and Capey reviews of 1995/6, although the scale of the problem was not fully appreciated at the time. In this first section, I will outline the factors which highlighted the importance of post-16 qualifications outputs and I will briefly review some of the wider research on measuring system performance.

International comparison of the performance of the UK education and training system had been a focus of attention since the mid-1980s. The problem of low educational participation, low levels of qualified workers at intermediate skills levels and low levels of attainment outputs were discussed in a series of influential reports and published works (IMS 1984, Coopers & Lybrand 1985, Prais 1987, Finegold & Soskice 1988, CBI 1989, Prais 1990, Cassells 1990, CBI 1991a, Ryan 1992, Steedman, Mason & Wagner 1991).

The Government response was to adopt the CBI suggestion of setting national targets (CBI 1989, 1991), to launch national targets in 1991 and to establish a National Advisory Council for Education and Training Targets in 1993 (NACETT 1994). By 1993/4, the Government was focusing strongly on the theme of economic competitiveness and issued the Competitiveness White Papers (DTI 1994, 1995). During this period the Government published *The Skills Audit* (DfEE/Cabinet Office 1995) which reported on an international comparison of qualifications outputs. It concluded that the basic skills flow was fairly stable; that we were somewhat deficient in Level 2 skills (equivalent to 5 GCSE grades A-C); that we were broadly comparable with other countries at Level 3 (the equivalent of 2 A Levels) except Germany and that we were ahead of most other countries on higher levels skills (degree

level). The report also highlighted the strong growth in full-time participation rates and achievements in qualifications over the past decade.

In 1996, the Institute of Education and the LSE Centre for Economic Performance published a report for the Kennedy Committee which painted a rather different picture (Steedman & Green 1996). It drew heavily on the research which I will describe in detail in the Historical Case-Study No 4. The authors showed that despite recent improvements, post-16 participation levels were still low by comparison with countries like Sweden, France and the USA; that participation growth rates were slowing; that there was evidence of a resurgence of the 'negative pull' of the labour market on education participation; that course non-completion rates were high; that this negatively affected progression rates between qualifications levels and that the system lacked comprehensive data on attainment in vocational qualifications. They went on to argue for more research on how to increase full-time participation beyond what now appeared to be a 70 per cent ceiling; that more work was needed on increasing the quality of participation by promoting progression and that there was a need to obtain a more accurate picture of qualifications gained through work-based learning. Their central thesis was that the initial post-compulsory education and training system in England had, by the mid-1990s, stopped growing. This assertion was based on the research outlined below which I had undertaken during 1994/5.

About the historical case-study

The work contained in this historical case-study was undertaken during 1994/5 as part of the *Learning for the Future Project*.[26] The statistical research sought to provide a picture of trends in participation, attainment and retention for 16-21 year olds during the period 1979 - 1995. I have selected from the *Learning for the Future* paper, statistical data on post-16 participation rates and attainment rates at Advanced Level in both academic and vocational

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[26] The statistical work was published in the LFTF paper *Statistical Trends in Post-Compulsory Education* (Spours 1995b).

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qualifications. This work was submitted as evidence to NACETT, the Dearing *Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds* and the Kennedy Committee on *Widening Participation*.

The main findings were early evidence of the plateauing of full-time post-16 participation rates which had been increasing annually since 1987. The research had three main messages. First, it suggested that the strong upward trend in 16+ staying-on rates which had been taking place since 1987 looked as if it was plateauing. Second, it claimed that modelling of annual growth rates suggested that the 16+ plateauing trend would soon spread to participation rates at 17+ and 18+. Third, it showed a significant correlation between participation growth and attainment growth.

I argued that, in the light of the close correlation between participation growth rates and attainment growth rates, it was unlikely that the achievement of Level 3 would progress beyond 50 per cent of the 16-21 age group, falling short of the revised national target of 60 per cent. I also argued that the education and training system had progressed from a low participation to a medium participation system but could become trapped at that level (Spours 1995a, Hodgson 1997). Finally, I argued that the triple-track system was not working effectively and that it was time for radical reform.

Trends in post-16 participation, attainment and retention 1986-1995

Full-time participation rates 16-18

Full-time post-16 participation has risen rapidly since 1987 and is arguably the most significant recent development in the English education and training system. However, there are sharp reductions in staying-on rates at 17 and 18, which means that for many students, full-time participation beyond 16 is relatively short-lived.

Figure 6: Full-time participation at 16, 17 and 18 (1987-95)
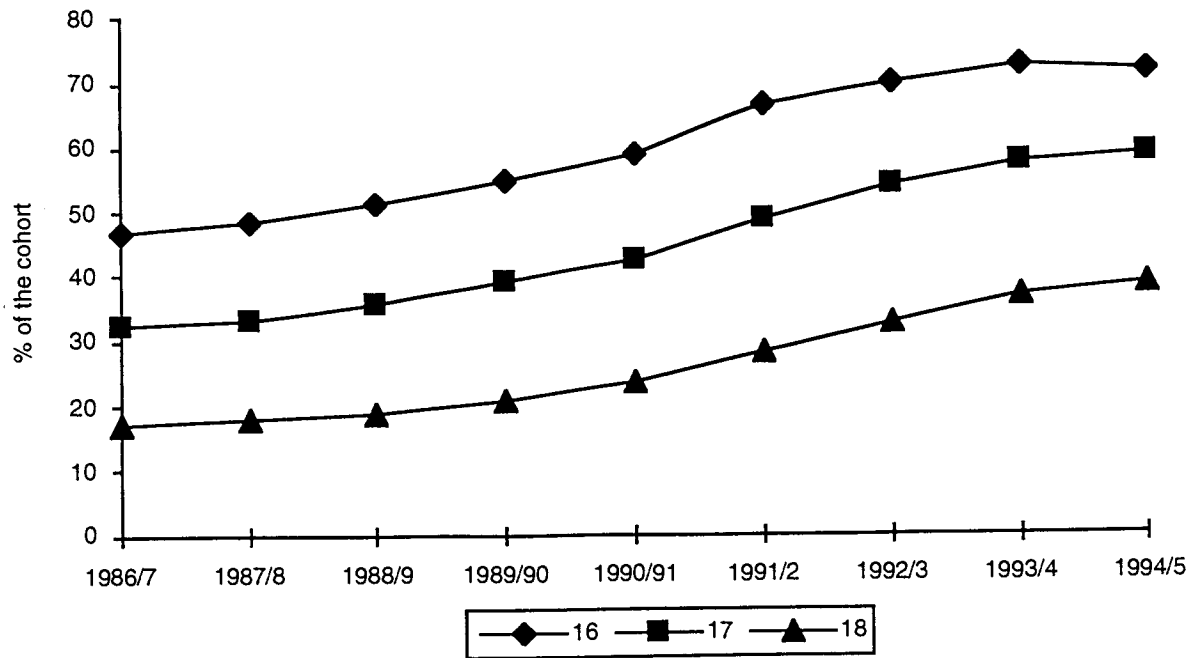
% of the cohort

	86/7	87/8	88/9	89/90	90/91	91/2	92/3	93/4	94/5
FT part' at 16	46.8	48.5	51.5	55	59.3	66.6	69.9	72.4	71.5
FT part' at 17	32.4	33.1	35.5	39.2	42.8	48.9	54	57.3	58.6
FT part' at 18	17.3	17.9	18.7	20.9	23.7	28.3	33	36.8	38.4

Source: DfE (1994) Statistical Bulletin 10/94; DfEE (1995) Press Notice 168/95

The 17+ full-time participation rate can be regarded as a 'bell-weather' figure for the system as a whole because it points to the number of students taking two-year courses and those being able to progress after one year to advanced level provision. 17+ participation rates which are much lower than the 16+ participation rates point to poor successful completion rates in a range of courses and problems of progression, particularly from Level 2 to Level 3. At present, the 17+ participation rate is slowly converging on the 16+ rate at about 1 to 2 per cent per annum. At 18+, participation drops dramatically to only 38 per cent of the cohort. Of the cohort, just over half are in higher education, leaving only 16 per cent of the cohort in non-higher post-16 education.

Growth rates in full-time participation 16-18

Annual growth of full-time post-16 participation, which increased strongly in the late-1980s, now appears to be slowing down. In 1994/5, full-time participation at 16, ceased to grow for the first time in nearly a decade. The average growth rate for the years 1987-93 was just under 4 per cent, but in 1994/5 it fell back by nearly

1 per cent. The rate of growth of full-time participation at 17 and 18 is also slowing but not so dramatically as the 16+ rate.

Figure 7: Growth in full-time participation at 16, 17 & 18 (1987/8-94/5)
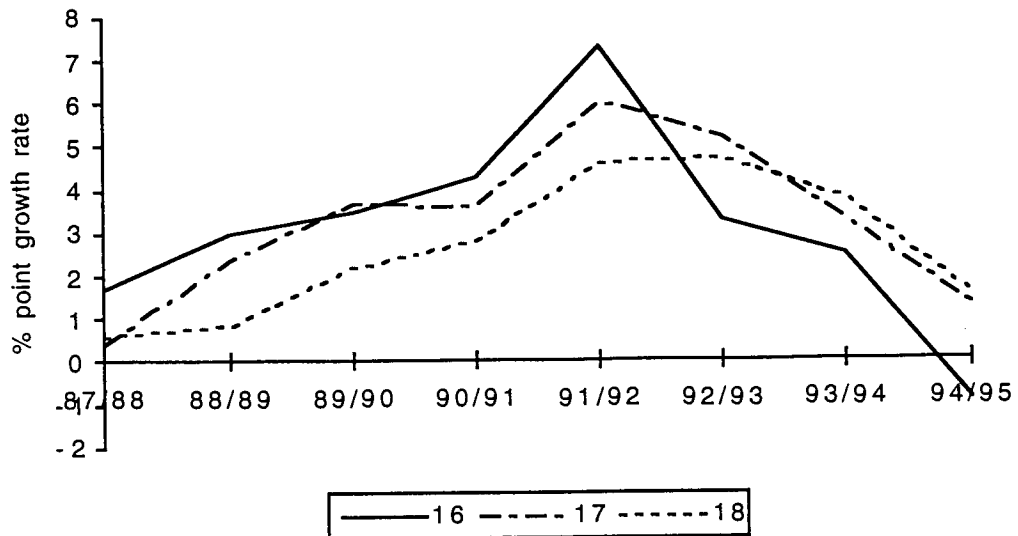
% of the cohort

	88/89	89/90	90/91	91/92	92/93	93/94	94/5
FT participation at 16	3	3.5	4.3	7.3	3.3	2.5	-0.9
FT participation at 17	2.4	3.7	3.6	6	5.2	3.3	1.3
FT participation at 18	0.8	2.2	2.8	4.6	4.7	3.8	1.6

Source: DfE (1994) **Statistical Bulletin 10/94**; DfEE **(1995) Press Notice 168/95**

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There may be three inter-related reasons for the plateauing of 16+ full-time participation. First, above 70 per cent, the remaining section of the cohort is likely to consist of a 'hard to reach' types that is those who, in the past, have tended to opt for Youth Training, work or unemployment without state benefit (Green & Ainley 1995). Second, the decline of the youth labour market has bottomed out and a limited number of new opportunities appear to be opening up for 16 to 17 year olds. Destinations and labour market entry data suggest that the youth labour market increased by about 1 per cent in 1994. 1994 has also seen the beginnings of Modern Apprenticeships, which may be attracting students from full-time education. Finally, there may be the emergence of new 'negative pull factors' which may inhibit further rises in full-time participation. Drop-out rates in FE have been linked to increasing economic hardship for many young people (Lepkowksa 1995).

Figure 7 suggests that full-time participation growth trends at 17 and 18 may follow the same path as at 16 and reach zero growth by 1996/7. In the context of a plateauing trend at 16, the critical factors affecting future participation rates at 17 and 18 will be successful completion of one-year courses.

Attainment in A Levels

A Level attainment has risen steadily over the period 1988-94, but at a slightly lower rate than in GCSEs. GCSE attainment, measured by those obtaining 5 or more A-C grades, has risen by an average of 2.4 per cent annually between 1986/7 and 1993/4 whereas A Level attainment, measured by those obtaining two or more subjects, has improved by an average of 2.1 per cent annually over the same period.

The percentage of A Level students gaining two or more subjects has also steadily improved over the period.[27] By cross-referencing A

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[27] The percentage of all A Level students gaining a Level 3 qualification (measured by attaining two or more subjects) can be calculated by:

a. taking 90 per cent of the combined A Level participation figures at 17 and 18 (this is because it is estimated that only 10% of A Level students only take one subject);

b. dividing the percentage of the cohort achieving two or more A Levels at 18/19 by the combined participation figure.

Level participation and attainment rates - a 'successful completion rate' for A Level students, measured by the proportion of those who start A Levels achieving passes in two or more subjects, can be obtained. This has risen from 74 per cent in 1991/2 to 77 per cent (estimated) in 1994/5.[28]

There are signs, however, that the improvement in A Level attainment rates may also be plateauing. First, increases in the A Level pass rate have slowed to 1 per cent in 1995. Second, and probably more important, participation in A Levels at 17 and 18 has fallen back by 0.5 per cent in 1994/5.[29] If the slow-down of the improvement in the A Level pass rate is combined with the slow-down of growth in A Level participation, it is estimated that the growth of those passing two or more A Levels may not reach more than 0.1 per cent in 1995. This is the same as the estimated growth in GCSE attainment - those passing 5 subjects at grades A-C - in 1995.

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[28] In 1992/3 the Audit Commission found that a total of 70 per cent of A Level students attained two or more A Levels compared to 74.9 per cent through this form of calculation. The difference may be accounted for by the exclusion of attainment in General Studies from the Audit Commission fieldwork.

[29] The growth of 17 year old participation in A Levels is a very good indicator of the growth rate of those passing two or more A Levels (Spours 1995a).

Figure 8: A Level Attainment (1988/9 - 94/5)
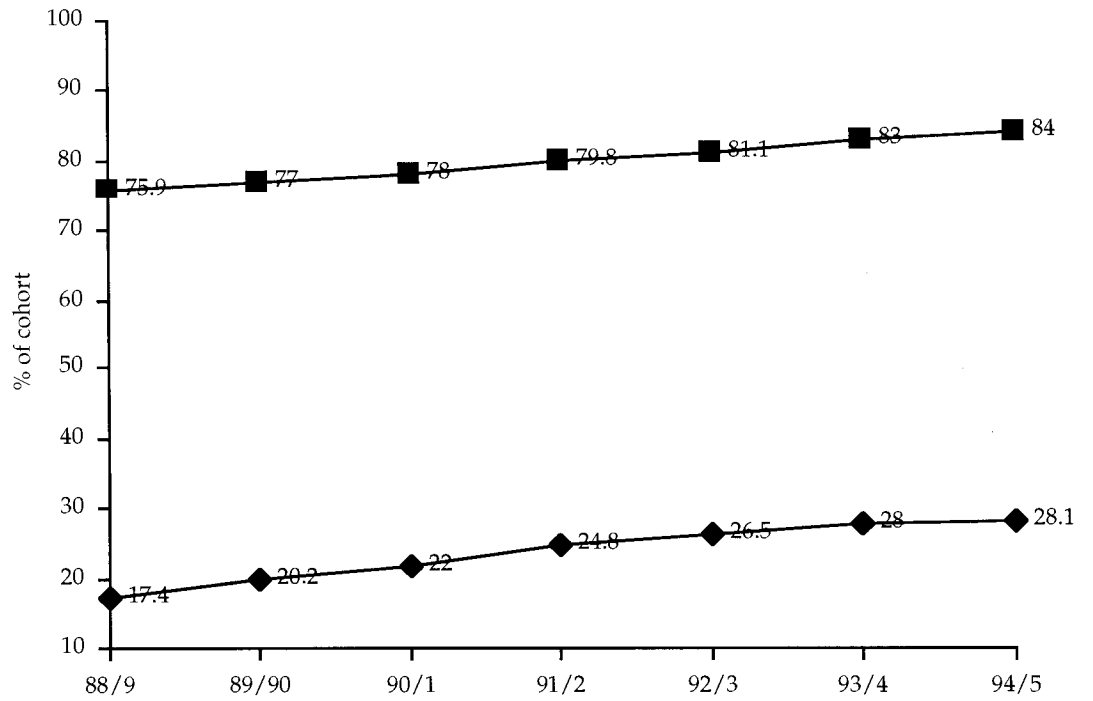
Sources: DES (1991) **Statistical Bulletins 2/91, 15/92,: DfE (1993) 15/93**, & DfE Statistical Service for 1993/4 figure and SCAA Press Office for the 1995 A Level pass rate figure

These figures indicate that the growth of attainment in A Levels, at least in their current form, may have already reached a ceiling. Moreover, in its most recent report on 'Progress Towards National Targets', the National Advisory Council for Education and Training Targets remarked that A Levels make a significant contribution to the current total of Level 3 outputs, but that the growth of achievement in the future will not be the same as in the past (NACETT 1995).

Attainment in advanced vocational courses

In order to achieve revised National Targets at Level 3, a great deal rests, therefore, on the future attainment outputs of both broad and occupationally-specific vocational qualifications. In the absence of attainment information on the cohort as a whole, which is provided by the DfEE for GCSE and A Levels, I have employed a methodology which combines participation rates with successful completion rates.[30]

Attainment rates in broad full-time vocational courses, which can be roughly measured by successful completion rates, have not improved in as steady a manner as their equivalent academic courses.

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[30] The attainment rate for full-time advanced vocational courses has been arrived at by multiplying the 16-18 participation rate for the previous year by the 'successful completion rate' for the year in question. This is because these are two-year courses and attainment outputs are calculated in the following year. The successful completion rates are based on BTEC National and BTEC Advanced GNVQ data for 1993/4 (most recent available) and assume that Advanced GNVQs account for 27 per cent of participation in advanced full-time vocational courses in 1993/4 and 42 per cent of participation in 1994/5 (DfEE 1995). This would derive a combined BTEC National/Advanced GNVQ successful completion rate of approximately 67 per cent in 1993/4 and 63 per cent in 1994/5.

Figure 9: BTEC National and/Advanced GNVQ successful completion rates
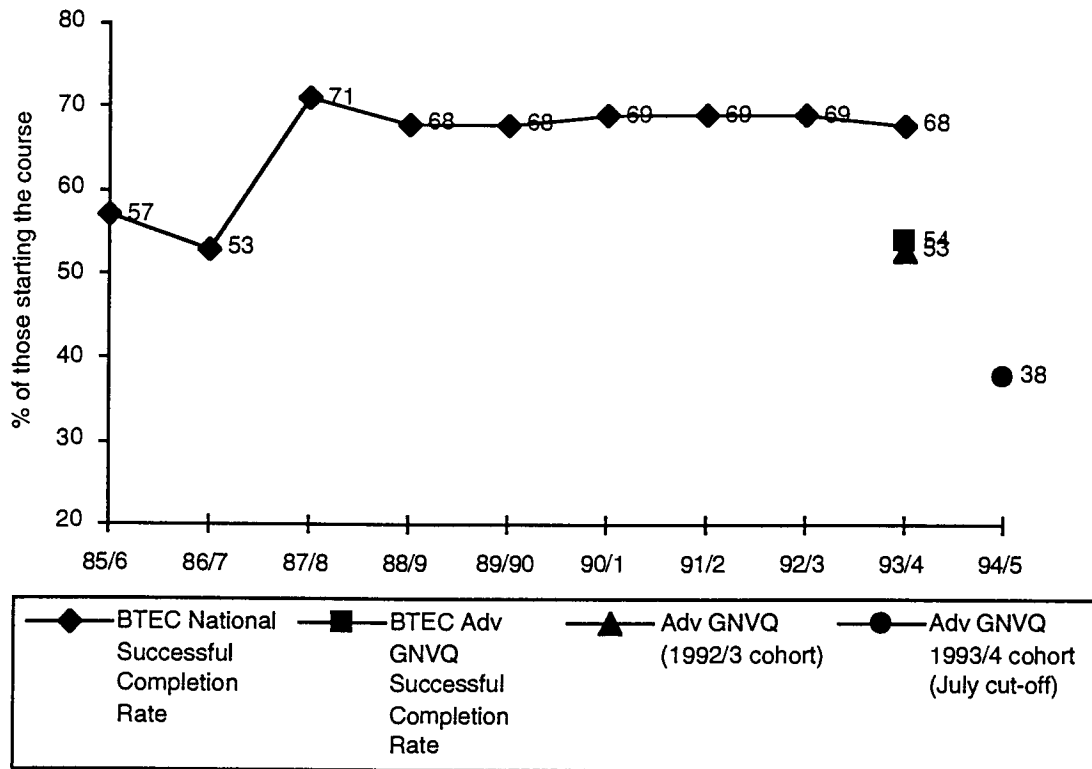
Sources: BTEC (1995b) **Annual Report**; NCVQ (1995) **Further information on GNVQ results**

Figure 9 shows that successful completion rates in Advanced GNVQs are significantly lower than the vocational qualifications they are replacing.

- Advanced vocational attainment, measured by those attaining a BTEC National Diploma or Certificate compared to those who registered in the previous year, has, in recent years, remained fairly constant at around 68 to 69 per cent. This successful completion rate was broadly confirmed by the Audit Commission, though they suggested that in 1992 it was a little higher at 72 per cent. [31]

- BTEC Advanced GNVQ successful completion rates for 1993/4 appear to be much lower at 54/55 per cent though it is expected that more of the 1992/3 students may complete their GNVQ portfolios during the Autumn of 1994/5, therefore, this figure could rise further.[32] However, more recent data analysed by NCVQ shows that for the 1992/3 Advanced GNVQ cohort, a total of 53 per cent have been recorded as gaining a complete award (NCVQ 1995). NCVQ state that it is unlikely that this figure for the 1992/3 cohort will rise any further.

- Data on successful completion rates of the 1993/4 Advanced GNVQ cohort shows a successful completion rate of 38 per cent at the end of two year (NCVQ 1995). It is expected that a large number of students will stay on into the Autumn Term of the following year to complete their portfolios. NCVQ also thinks there may be technical problems on how successful completion is being recorded.

Successful completion rates in Advanced GNVQs might improve as schools and colleges gain more experience in their delivery and if the

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[31] This method of counting might, in the case of BTEC National, slightly underestimate the numbers successfully completing because a small proportion, perhaps 3/5 per cent, may continue into a third year to obtain a full Diploma. The Audit Commission in its fieldwork in 'Unfinished Business' in 1992/3 found a successful completion rate in BTEC National of 72/3 per cent.

[32] The BTEC Advanced GNVQ successful completion rate was calculated by taking the total number of registrations in one year and cross-referencing these with the award of full Advanced GNVQs in the following year.

competence-based recording regime is relaxed (Spours 1995b). Failure to complete the portfolio, upon which the GNVQ overall grade depends, may have been a major factor in reducing successful completion rates, especially after just two years of participation.

Figure 10 shows participation growth in full-time advanced vocational courses since the mid-1980s. Unlike the overall levels of participation, which are showing signs of peaking, participation in vocational courses continues to grow quite strongly, though in 1994/5 there is a suggestion of a slowing trend here too.

Figure 10: Full-time participation in Advanced Level courses at 16 & 17+

3.45	3.45	3.65	4.2	5	6.4	7.6	8.1	5.7
1986/7	1987/8	1988/9	1989/90	1990/1	1991/2	1992/3	1993/4	1994/5

▫ Advanced Vocational ■ Advanced GNVQs
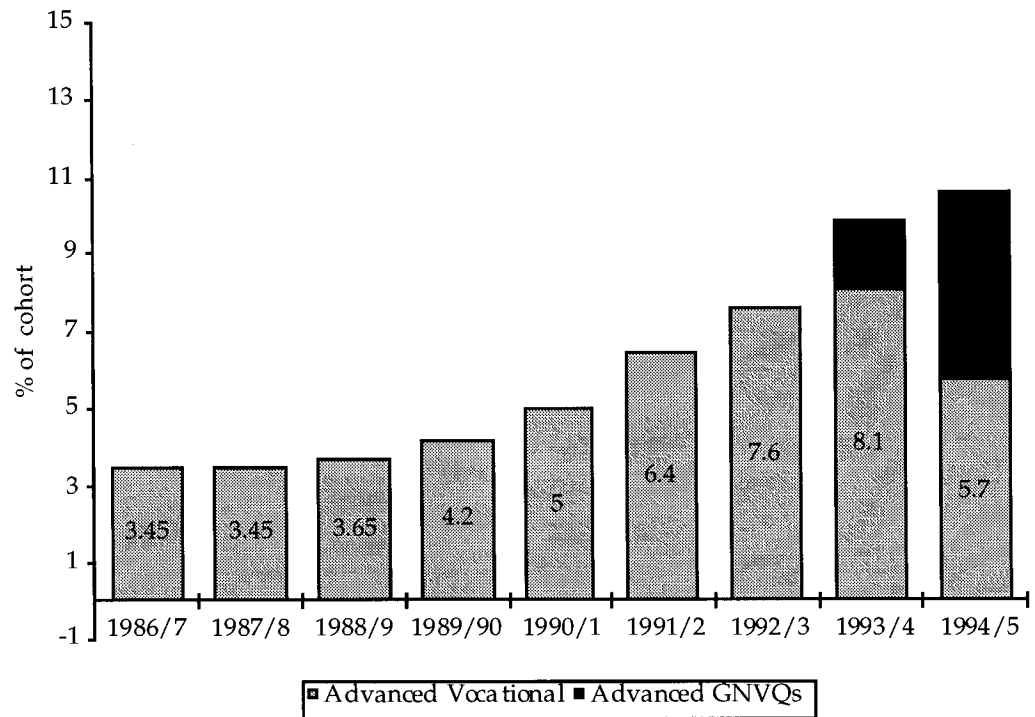
Sources: DfE (1994) **Statistical Bulletin 10/94**;   DfEE (1995) **Press Notice 168/95**

Attainment growth in full-time advanced vocational qualifications

The beginnings of a slow-down in the growth of participation in full-time vocational courses at Level 3, combined with low successful completion rates in Advanced GNVQs, has resulted, therefore, in the possibility of a slow-down of attainment in full-time vocational courses at Level 3. Using the method of combining participation growth and successful completion rates, it can be calculated that from 1993/4 to 1994/5, attainment in advanced vocational courses grew by less than 1 per cent, compared with 3 per cent between the previous years (see Figure 11).

Figure 11: Advanced vocational attainment rates (1987/8-94/5)
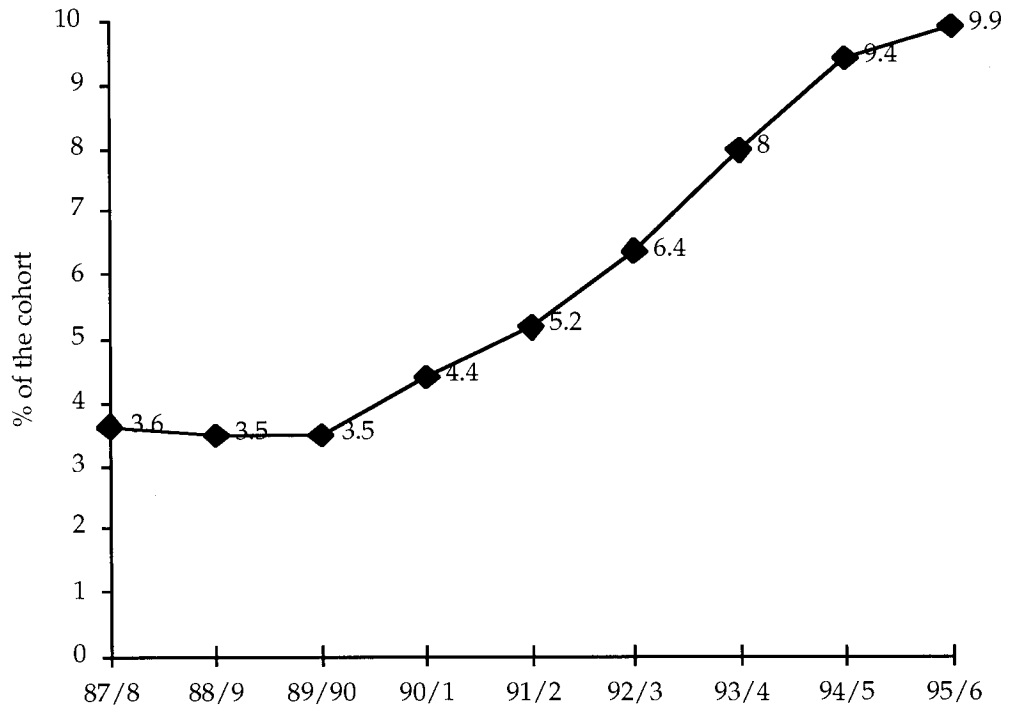
The combined effect of slowing growth rates of full-time participation in advanced vocational courses, together with the impact of low successful completion rates in Advanced GNVQs, suggests that growth in attainment outputs in broad full-time vocational qualifications will slow to 0.5 per cent in 1995/6. Had Advanced GNVQs demonstrated the same successful completion rates as BTEC National, the attainment output would be above 10 per cent, a rise of more than 1 per cent on the previous year, and therefore, still showing a modest growth trend.

Award of Level 3 NVQs and other vocational qualifications for 16-21 year olds

There is no precise information on the award of NVQ level 3 for 16-21 year olds, because NVQ attainment is not recorded by vocational awarding bodies according to age. To obtain a picture of the role of NVQs and their contribution to qualification growth rates requires cross-referencing various types of information on NVQs and work-based training:

- the number of NVQs awarded up until 1994 was 650,253 and during 1994 there was an increase of 180,000 (NACETT 1995);

- 8 per cent of all NVQ awards are at Level 3 (21,636 awards) and this proportion is not changing significantly from year to year (NACETT 1995);

- 16-19 year old receiving work-based training have declined by 6 percentage points since 1990.

If it is assumed that 55 per cent of the Level 3 awards were made to those under 21 years of age, it is estimated that Level 3 NVQs are contributing 2.2 per cent to National Targets.[33] This can be supplemented by a further estimated 3 per cent of the cohort completing other part-time vocational awards through day-release, block release and evening classes. [34] There may be overlap of

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[33] More recent data (DfEE/OFSTED 1998) suggest that the number of NVQs awarded for those under 21 is lower than this figure, about 33 per cent.

[34] This estimate is based on 31,000 total registrations in 16-20 part-time 2-year courses x 60 per cent success rate = 3 per cent of the cohort.

measurement between NVQs and traditional vocational qualifications so a rough estimate of the output of work-based route at Level 3 up to 21 years is between 4-5 per cent. There is little evidence to suggest that the output of vocationally-specific vocational qualifications will significantly increase in coming years unless the Modern Apprenticeship programme is successful in reaching its participation targets and achieves a high successful completion rate.

Trends in attainment growth for 16-21 year olds in all qualifications

Attainment growth, based on DfE data for academic qualifications and modelling of participation and successful completion rates, suggests a strong growth trend up until 1993/4. But modelling, based on more recent participation and attainment data, points to a dramatic change in this situation in 1994/5 which could intensify further in 1995/6.

Figure 12: Summary of attainment growth rates (1987/8-94/5)
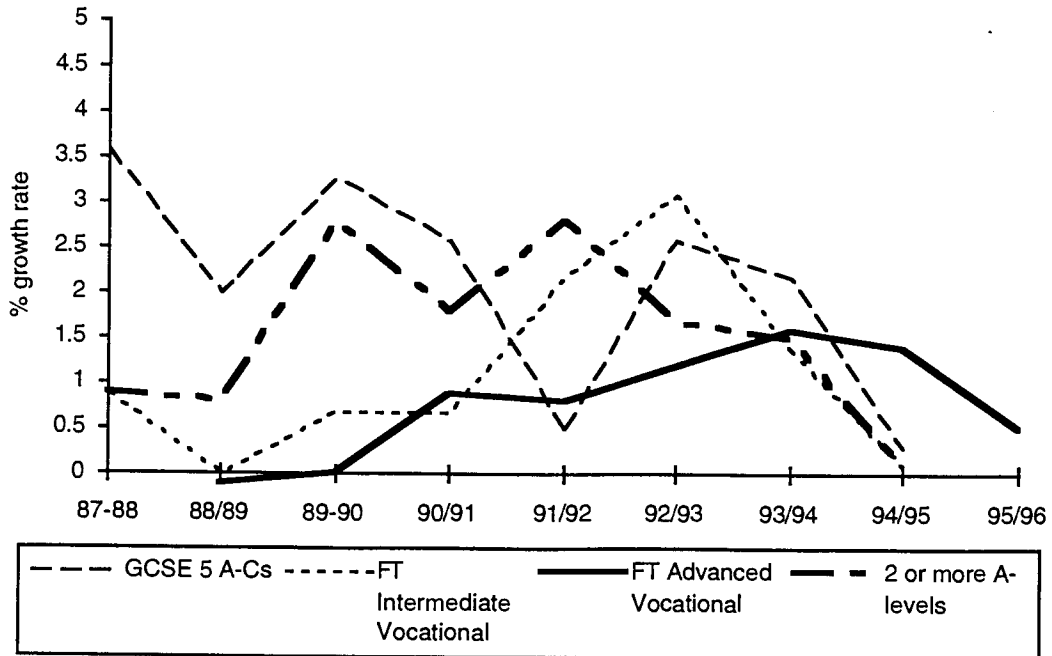
% annual increase of attainment of the whole cohort at 16 and 19

	87-88	88/89	89-90	90/91	91/92	92/93	93/94	94/95
GCSE 5 A-Cs	3.6	2	3.3	2.6	0.5	2.6	2.2	0.1
FT Int Voc'	0.9	0	0.7	0.7	2.2	3.1	1.4	0.1
FT Adv Voc'		-0.1	0	0.9	0.8	1.2	1.6	1.4
2 or more A Levels	0.9	0.8	2.8	1.8	2.8	1.7	1.5	0.1

Sources: **DfE (1994) Statistical Bulletin 10/94; DfEE (1994) Press Notice 186/95** and modelling of participation, pass rates & successful completion rates for 94/5 and 95/6 figures and for Intermediate and Advanced vocational courses

Figure 12 summarises data and modelling undertaken in the previous figures. Overall, it points to a rapid slow-down of the attainment outputs for GCSE and

A Levels in 1994 and possibly zero growth in 1995/6. The modelling also suggests slow-down in attainment growth in intermediate vocational awards caused by the peaking in full-time participation growth, together with low successful completion rates in Intermediate GNVQs. The strongest attainment growth rate still remains with Advanced Vocational courses in 1994/5 but it is calculated that this too will decline in the next two years, due to the combined effect of slowing participation and low successful completion rates.

Comparison of NACETT and Learning for the Future modelling on attainment growth

The NACETT Report *Progress towards National Targets* (1995) bases its information on attainment on the Labour Force Survey (Employment Department 1995). In this section, the NACETT data and the Learning for the Future (LFTF) data are modelled to project progress towards National Targets. Both sets of data are based on 1994/5 figures.

Figure 13: Comparison of attainment growth rates - NACETT and LFTF

NACETT modelling	Learning for the Future modelling
41.5 per cent of young people have achieved Level 3	41.5-42.5 per cent of young people achieved Level 3
25 per cent contributed by academic qualifications and 16.5 per cent by vocational qualifications	28% contributed by academic qualifications and 13.5/14.5 per cent by vocational qualifications
3.2 per cent average annual rate of increase since 1991 (including NVQs)	2.9 per cent average annual rate of increase since 1991 (excluding NVQs)
2.1 per cent rate of increase 1993-1994 (including NVQs)	2.9 per cent rate of increase 1993-1994 (including NVQs)
Data for 1994/5 not yet available from Labour Force Survey	1.5 per cent rate of increase for 1994/5 and excluding NVQs (based on modelling participation and successful completion rates)
3.1 per cent rate of increase required annually to reach up-dated target of 60 per cent by 2000	0.5 per cent rate of increase for 1995 (projected) and excluding NVQs
Future trends encouraging based on GNVQ registrations.	Future trends concerning based on peaking of full-time participation, peaking of A Level attainment and low GNVQ successful completion rates.

Initial conclusions in 1994/5

It is clear that the education and training system in England, in the mid-1990s, is reaching another watershed. During the period 1987-93 we witnessed rapid rises in full-time participation, which appear to have plateaued in 1994/5. While, in retrospect, we can see the slow-down taking place from 1992/3, participation data for 1995/6 will be needed to see whether this is a firm historical trend.

At the same time, a slow-down of growth in attainment is also taking place during 1994/5. There is firm evidence from GCSE results, though less from A Levels. The vocational attainment trend is arrived at through modelling rather than being through the analysis of hard statistical evidence. However, both the data and modelling point to a plateauing of full-time attainment growth between 1995/7. If so, it is possible that Level 3 attainment by 16-21 year olds might not reach 50 per cent by the Year 2000; still ten points lower than the revised National Target.

In the next section of the chapter, the implications of these statistical projections and an up-dated picture of 1996/7 data, are evaluated in terms of the future direction of the education and training system and the implications for qualifications reform.

Reflections on _Problems of performance of the triple-track qualifications system: a statistical analysis_

Predictions in the case-study, based on the relationship between participation rates and successful completion rates, have proved to be largely accurate.

- The plateauing trend of full-time post-16 participation, which first emerged at 16 in 1994, quickly fed through to participation rates at 17 and 18. The 16+ full-time participation rate, which plateaued at 71.5 per cent in 1994 dropped back to 70.3 per cent in 1996. This trend quickly spread to the 17+ participation rate, which plateaued at 58.7 per cent in 1995 and to the 18+ participation rate which reached a peak in 1995 of 39.5 per cent before dropping back to 38.1 per cent in 1996.

- This plateauing trend was also reflected in participation in A Levels. 17+ A Level participation (arguably the most accurate indicator of those completing a two-year programme) dropped from 34.7 to 33.9 per cent between 1994 and 1996. Participation in full-time vocational qualifications at Level 3 fared slightly better; rising from 12.5 in 1994 to 13.8 per cent in 1995, but then increasing by only 0.2 in 1996 to 14 per cent.

- The proportion of those achieving two or more A Levels peaked at 29.4 per cent in 1995/6 and then fell back to 29.1 per cent in 1996/7 (DfEE 1998d). This suggests a combined effect of a falling participation rate together with a pass rate which is only marginally improving.

- The rising trend in full-time vocational participation remains compromised by continued poor completion rates in Advanced GNVQs, which have not climbed above 50 per cent (FEDA 1998).

- Achievement of NVQs at Level 3 and of other vocational qualifications for those under 21 years remains a 'dark horse' due

to the fact that age-related data is difficult to locate and that the overlap between participation in NVQs and other vocational qualifications is difficult to disaggregate in nationally published statistics. Nevertheless, recent data suggest that the award of NVQ Level 3 is rising strongly from 36,000 in 1993/4 to over 100,000 in 1996/7 (DfEE/OFSTED 1998). However, only one third of these awards are made to those under 21 years of age, which amounts to 6 per cent of the age cohort and some of the NVQ figures will include displacement of other vocational qualifications.

If data from the three qualifications tracks are collated, a slowly improving pattern emerges, but it is not nearly sufficient to reach revised national targets. Numerically significant is a marginally declining contribution from A Levels which have been the strongest contributor to date of attainment growth (29 per cent of the cohort). Added to this is a small increase in outputs from broad vocational qualifications (estimated at 10 per cent of the cohort) but these qualifications remained dogged by poor completion rates. There is a significant increase in the award of NVQ 3 qualifications (estimated at 6 per cent of the cohort), but with insufficient volume to make a major difference and there continues to be a relatively static contribution from other vocational qualifications (estimated at 4 per cent of the cohort). Taken together these figures total 49 per cent in all - still 11 points short of the revised national target.

The reasons for the plateauing of participation rates and the slowing of growth in attainment rates have been explored in two recent studies (Green & Ainley 1995, Steedman & Green 1996). They suggest that this is the result of a range of factors, though the authors admit that some of these are not well understood (Steedman & Green 1996).

The most fundamental historical influence on attainment rates is the full-time participation rate. Participation and attainment rates have closely tracked one another during the period 1987-1994. Attainment growth has been lower than participation growth, due to low successful completion rates which have averaged between 60 and 70 percent (Audit Commission/OFSTED 1993, Spours 1995b).

Plateauing participation rates are linked to changes in youth labour markets, financial difficulties of some young people, the fact that an expanded and less well resourced higher education sector may be increasingly unattractive to those sections of the population who are 'first generation' HE entrants and cultural issues in 'hard to get' sections of the cohort (Green & Ainley 1995).

Low completion rates in a range of courses but particularly in GNVQs, may be influenced by a wide range of factors (Sharp 1996a). These factors include low entry qualifications (FEU/IOE/Nuffield. 1994, Payne 1995a); inappropriate course choices (Audit Commission/OFSTED 1993); excessive levels of external assessment (Finegold et al. 1990) or bureaucratic assessment procedures (Spours 1995c): lack of adequate student-centred college services such as tutoring and monitoring of progress (Spours & Hodgson 1996, FEDA 1998,) and the continued pull of the labour market (FEDA 1998).

Another issue is the relatively small size of the occupational/NVQ pathway for 16-21 year olds (Green & Ainley 1995) and the low take-up of NVQs (Robinson 1996). This is due principally to the legacy of YT and its lack of emphasis on qualifications outputs (Spours 1995b) and the lack of awareness of NVQs amongst small companies (Green & Ainley 1995). The development of Modern Apprenticeships may help to address this situation with the emphasis on qualification to Level 3.

Problems of a medium-participation system

The combined effect of a plateauing full-time (and now part-time) participation rates, relatively static attainment rates in full-time courses and modest growth in the qualifications outputs of small work-based route, pose serious problems for the overall performance of the English initial post-compulsory education and training system. Where does it progress from here?

Hodgson (1997) argues that the English system moved from a 'low-participation system/low-achievement system' to a 'medium-participation/low-achievement system' in the late 1980s and early

1990s.[35] The movement from one system to another was due to a range of factors including; changes in the youth labour market and staying on becoming the norm; the expansion of institutional provision, particularly the provision of GNVQs in school sixth forms and more explicit progression pathways, notably vocational routes to higher education.

Hodgson goes on to argue that the movement to a 'high-participation/high-achievement system' will only be brought about by changes to the qualifications system to increase educational participation in both the full-time and the work-based route by supporting greater access, breadth of study, credit accumulation, clear progression routes, changes to the labour market to delay recruitment to 18 rather than 16, a culture of high expectations in providing institutions, improved financial support to 16-21 year olds and unified national regulation (Hodgson 1997: 40-42).

Evans *et al.* (1997), focused exclusively on the work-based route, suggest that there should be a significant expansion of education-led work-based training. This approach argues that there are limits to the levels of full-time participation in the English system and that the work-based route has to be made more educationally effective. Green and Ainley (1995) pursue both full-time and work-based growth options and suggest new work-based training routes, more flexible integrated curriculum frameworks, extended pathways in which learners take three rather than two years to achieve advanced level and improved funding support for both individual learners and institutions.

While differing in emphasis about the balance between full-time and work-based participation for younger learners, all of the above argue for a radical shift in the education and training strategy in which a fundamental role is played by a more achievement and progression-oriented qualifications system with modular and integrated (unified)

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[35] The qualifications aspects of a low participation/low achievement system include a clear break at 16; stress on the academic track; on linear approaches and terminal assessment; subject specialism rather than generic skill and fragmented vocational qualifications. The qualifications aspects of a medium participation/low achievement system include a wider range of qualifications with emphasis on mixing qualifications, greater emphasis on vocational qualifications and clear progression routes, greater emphasis on modularity and formative assessment (Hodgson 1997: 28)

structures. The task facing Sir Ron Dearing in April 1995, when he was asked to review qualifications for 16 to 19 year olds, was to confront the challenge of reforming a triple-track qualifications system which had not evolved in the way that government had intended in 1991.

PART 6: PROBLEMS OF THE TRIPLE-TRACK QUALIFICATIONS SYSTEM - TOWARDS THE PHASE OF REVIEW

In his *Interim Report* in (Dearing 1995a), Sir Ron Dearing outlined the context leading to the *Review of 16-19 Qualifications*. He stated that the central issue in post-16 education and training was the achievement of revised national targets announced in the White Paper *Competitiveness: Forging Ahead* (DTI 1994). He went on to observe that over the last 30 years participation in A Levels had trebled to one third of the age group and that they may be approaching the limit of the market for which they were designed. In view of the Foundation National Target that 60 per cent of young people should achieve Level 3 by the Year 2000, it followed that the main source of expansion should lie in vocational qualifications. If so, there had to be a more rapid take-up of these qualifications and wastage rates had to be reduced in both the academic and vocational tracks.

International comparisons of qualifications and skills outputs, which were the driving force behind national targets, also pointed to the fact that not only did higher proportions of the age group in competitor countries achieve Level 3, they also had a greater breadth of achievement. Sir Ron was, therefore, asked to look at ways of achieving greater breadth without compromising A Level standards and, in particular, the achievement of core skills.

Sir Ron observed in the *Summary of the Interim Report* (Dearing 1995b) that the world of education and training was a 'study in complexity'. Despite action taken by the Government to clarify qualifications routes, over 14,000 qualifications still existed (this estimate had increased to 16,000 by the time of the Full Report). Moreover, he argued that the distinction between academic and vocational qualifications was far from clear cut and that this was confusing to employers.

In Chapter 1, I argued that a three-fold dynamic moved the qualifications system between the six phases of development:

responses to external contextual factors, reactions to system weaknesses and ideological interpretation of both these factors.

Dearing's analysis of the factors leading to the review phase in his *Interim Report* fully supports this hypothesis. He pointed, first of all, to the factor of international competition and the role of revised national targets. Second, he observed that the Government had not fully realised the objectives of the 1991 White Paper and that his remit included 'strengthening the qualifications system'. Third, his interpretation of the course of action necessary was to create clearer distinctions between academic and vocational study while, at the same time, creating linkages between both qualifications tracks. This interpretation is explored in Chapters 4 and 5.

By 1994/5, there was a growing consensus that further reform was needed, but there was disagreement about the extent of the performance problems and the measures needed to tackle them. Dearing's view was that the real problem was wastage rates rather than participation and overall attainment rates. He went on to argue for the retention of A Levels, but with a reformulated AS level so that students could gain credit after one year, for more manageable vocational qualifications and for the introduction of key skills for all students (Dearing 1996). His approach could be characterised, not as unification, but as a 'linkages' approach or a 'flexible multi-tracking approach (Howieson *et al.* 1997).

The perspective of the 'unifiers' overlapped substantially with that of Dearing. However, they argued that the performance crisis was rooted not only in problems of course wastage, but in the plateauing of participation and attainment trends. They also laid part of the blame on the proposals in the 1991 White Paper in relation to A Level assessment and GNVQs assessment methods (Richardson *et al.* 1995a, Spours 1995c, Green & Ainley 1995). From this analysis, and from comparisons with the French and the Nordic systems (Green 1995, Young 1993), they went on to argue for a more flexible and unified qualifications system, for further expansion of the academic track through modularity and breadth, for reform of vocational qualifications towards a more Continental technical approach and for longer durations of study so that more students could reach advanced

level. The big difference with the position in 1990 and the approach of *A British Baccalaureate* was that the unifiers now argued for reform in strategic steps and stages, of which Dearing's report was seen as an important move forward.

In this chapter, I have argued that the 1991 White Paper represented the development of a divided triple-track qualifications system which aimed to make academic and vocational qualifications more distinctive. I have also argued that this approach to division contributed significantly to the problems of performance of the qualifications system in the mid-1990s and that the way to move out of a 'low achievement/medium participation system' was to develop a more unified and flexible qualifications system which aimed to promote participation, achievement and progression. In Chapter 4, I explore the role of unification by analysing different approaches to developing unified qualifications systems which emerged during the period 1990-1997.

Chapter Four

TOWARDS AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK (1990-1997)

PART 1: THE TERMINOLOGY OF UNIFICATION

Introduction

In Chapter 3, I focused on a critique of the triple-track qualifications system, formalised by the 1991 White Paper. The historical framework, outlined in Chapter 1, suggests that policy on qualifications could be analysed by a periodisation based on 'overlapping eras', in which the period of the formalised triple-track system has been paralleled by the 'blueprint' or 'models' stage of unification. This 'early' phase of unification reflects a growing consensus among education professionals in favour of the development of a flexible and unified qualifications system (Howieson *et al.* 1997) and against an artificial academic/vocational divide (Tomlinson 1997b). These ideas, however, remained generalised and not sufficiently developed to become policy. Moreover, the defeat of the Labour Party in the 1992 General Election postponed the opportunity to put unification policy into practice.[36]

This chapter sets out to survey and analyse the arguments for unification of the qualifications system during the period 1990-1997.[37] It will suggest that we are still in the early stages of the unification era, not only from the point of view of government policy, but, just as

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[36] The education profession assumed that the election of the Labour Party in 1992 might lead to a unified qualifications system. In 1991, Jack Straw and Tony Blair authored a document which declared that Labour was committed to "creating a clear unified qualifications structure in England and Wales - the Advanced Certificate of Education and Training (ACET)" (Labour Party 1991: 2).

[37] The proposals for reform arising from the *Qualifying for Success* are considered in Chapter 5.

importantly, from the perspective of the debates about unification itself. In the period since 1990, several different approaches to unification have emerged. In Scotland, unification has reached a stage of implementation with the launch of *Higher Still* in 1999, whereas in England, there is still a debate about strategic direction or the pace of change (Howieson *et al.* 1997).

The concept of unification is analysed in four parts. Part 1 discusses different terminology associated with unification and establishes ways in which these terms will be used within the chapter. Part 2 analyses proposals for unified or overarching certification in England and Wales, published between 1990 and 1997, by government departments, think-tanks, education professional organisations and academics. Part 3 focuses on key 14-19 qualifications debates which illustrate areas of overlap and differences of perspective of the various approaches to unification. The key debates I have chosen to illustrate this relationship are those related to breadth and core skills, vocational specialisation and modularisation/unitisation. Part 4 of the chapter develops aspects of a conceptual framework which are then used in Chapter 5 to analyse current qualifications reform issues.

The chapter contains extracts from previously co-authored work *From the 1991 White Paper to the Dearing Report: A Conceptual and Historical Framework* (Hodgson & Spours 1997a). Part 4 of the chapter draws on a co-authored paper from the ESRC Unified Learning Project *The Unification of Post-Compulsory Education: Towards a Conceptual Framework* (Raffe *et al.* 1998). Permission to include and to draw upon aspects of these two co-authored works has been sought and given. Confirmation of this can be found in two letters contained in the Appendix.

Definitions of unification

In a recently co-authored published paper, it was argued that, despite its popularity in educational discourse, the concept of unification

lacks clarity and visibility (Raffe *et al.* 1998). The first and most obvious reason is the diverse terminology of unification and related concepts; these include 'unification', 'unified system', 'unitary organisation', 'bridging the academic/vocational divide', 'reducing divisions', 'parity of esteem', 'common frameworks', 'opportunity for all' and 'flexibility'. The relatively short lifespan of unification in the post-compulsory education context - it is a phenomenon of the 1990s - is an important reason for the lack of definition. It is only with the benefit of hindsight and reflection that patterns and distinctions become clear.

Moreover, there are different discourses of unification underlying this diverse terminology. Unification may be a vision, a system, a strategy or a process. For some, unification represents a vision of the education system and an end in itself, whereas for others, it represents piecemeal, pragmatic responses to specific problems.

- The term 'unification' has been used by those who have a vision of developing a unified education and training system (Finegold *et al.* 1990, Richardson *et al.* 1995a, Raffe *et al.* 1998). In this context, unification is used as a *generic term* to refer to a vision of a less divided system; to the wider education and training system; to the qualifications system and to the movement towards these goals.

- The term 'unified system' is used to refer to the education and training system as a whole. In the final part of the chapter, I will suggest that the education and training system can be broken down into different dimensions e.g. certification, institutions and government and organisation (see Figure 15).

- These system dimensions have also contributed to the development of different terms e.g. the term 'unitary' has been used in relation to organisations and quite specifically in relation to the unification of awarding bodies (DfEE 1997b).

- Different models of unified systems have also led to different terminology. The term 'common frameworks' (AfC *et al.* 1994)

was used to describe the development of a national qualifications framework based on units and credits which could overarch and link different qualifications.

- The process of change also contributes to this diversity of language. Different types of strategies have been identified; tracked, linked and unified (Raffe *et al.* 1998). The movement from a tracked system to a unified system may proceed through a 'framework stage' to a unified system (Richardson *et al.* 1995b) or the process of change may result in a 'linked system' (Raffe *et al.* 1998).

These different terms refer, therefore, to different discourses, to different models of unification or to different parts of the system. I intend to use the term unification specifically to mean the *development of a unified qualifications system*. Therefore, in this chapter I will develop a theoretical framework which will use these diverse terms in precise and related ways.[38] In the next two parts of the chapter, I explore the different approaches to unified certification and accompanying debates which, during the 1990s, has generated this diversity of terminology.

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[38] *Unification* will be used as an umbrella or generic term.

Unified system will refer to the education and training system as a whole at a unified stage of development.

Unified qualifications system will refer to the certification dimension of the wider education and training system.

Unified qualifications system approach is used to describe the reforms which seek to establish a unified qualifications system.

A unitised framework approach is used to describe reforms which seek to establish a unitised overarching framework.

A framework stage will refer to a stage of development between a tracked system and a unified system.

A linked system will refer to a type of system which can be located between a tracked system and a unified system.

PART 2: APPROACHES TO UNIFIED AND OVERARCHING CERTIFICATION IN ENGLAND & WALES

The movement towards whole-system reform

Over the last fifteen years, a strong relationship has become apparent between the problems of low levels of participation and achievement for 16-19 year olds, the nature of the qualifications system and arguments for the reform of the education and training system in England. It will be argued that for most of this period, actual changes to the qualifications system in this country were largely determined by this relationship rather than by planned local or national reform and that the education reform process in England could be seen as reactive and piecemeal. Much of the local and regional reform that characterised the 1980s was, in fact, only able to take place because of the absence of any clear national strategy (Hodgson & Spours 1997a).

Debates about the nature of reform have mirrored this trend. Throughout the latter half of this century there have been a number of debates about the role, purpose and effects of the qualifications system in this country (Broadfoot 1986, Cathcart & Esland 1990). However, proposals for reform have usually revolved around changes to one aspect of that structure (e.g. 16+ school examinations, Youth Training and work-based training) rather than suggestions for any radical overhaul of the system.

However, towards the end of this period, and certainly by the time of the White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century* (DES/DE/WO 1991), there were more concerted efforts by national government to shape the system in a more proactive and wholesale way. This whole-system approach provided the context for proposals for unification of the English education and training system, (e.g. Finegold *et al.* 1990, Royal Society 1991, National Commission 1993, 1995).

Pressures for unification

During the late 1980s and early 1990s there were multiple pressures for developing a unified education and training system. In previous chapters, it has been argued that the dynamic moving the qualifications system between phases of development is located 'externally' in the wider economic and participation context, and 'internally', in response to consequences of previous policy developments. I go on to argue that the combined effects of both external and internal factors go through a process of ideological interpretation to produce the new response.

External influences for change include changes in the economy and in patterns of participation. It has been argued that current economic trends undermine the economic and social division of labour on which tracked systems are based. In particular, there is the assertion that there is increasing demand in advanced industrial economies for higher levels of skill and new types of knowledge and skill (Reich 1991, Young *et al.* 1997). A second external influence, linked to the first, has been a change of pattern of participation of young people with a rise in their educational and occupational aspirations, increased staying-on and a growing preference for higher status 'academic' programmes (Wolf 1993, Robinson & Manacorda 1997).

Pressures for unification also increasingly come from within the education and training system itself. Post-compulsory education and training systems have grown in functional complexity as well as in scale. They must meet a wider and more complex range of demands which cannot be met by qualifications tracks or discrete sectors which have, in the past, served distinctive purposes and clienteles. Furthermore, the responsiveness by education and training systems to these changes have meant that they have evolved internally. I will argue later in the chapter that the more complex a system becomes so the more the consequences of previous policy decisions begin to exercise more influence on the movement towards unification so that they eventually outweigh external influences. One instance of this has been the effects of decisions to unify one dimension of the

system (e.g. national organisational dimension involving DfEE, QCA and the major awarding bodies) which creates organisations with the capacity to unify other dimensions of the system.

A third pressure arises from educational, ideological and political change. While the previous Conservative Government highlighted the distinctive nature of the qualifications tracks (DES/ED/WO 1991, Dearing 1996), educational opinion was moving rapidly in favour of a more unified approach (Richardson 1993, Wolf 1993). Furthermore, the election of a Labour Government in 1997 has resulted in post-16 qualifications policy which places less emphasis on qualifications distinctiveness and more on their consistency of standard and their alignment (DfEE 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, DfEE 1998b). The significance of this for the unification of the qualifications system is discussed further in Chapter 5.

Proposals for overarching and unified certification within the English system 1990-1997

These multiple pressures for change - responses to external factors, internal reactions to the effects of previous reforms by those outside government (and even inside government)[39] - was to produce two main strands of unification proposals: 'unitised frameworks' approaches and 'unified systems approaches'. The next section summarises the certification aspects of these and other approaches (Figure 14).

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[39] It has been argued that sections of government, notably the Employment Department or their close supporters, were sympathetic to the formation of a more unified system (Whiteside et al. 1992, Richardson 1991).

Figure 14: Unified and overarching certification proposals 1990-1997

PROPOSAL & AIMS	MAIN CERTIFICATION FEATURES	COMMENTARY
A British Baccalaureate: **Ending the Division Between Education and Training** (Finegold *et al.* 1990) Major problem is seen to be system division. Priority, therefore, is to reform A Levels by replacing them with a Baccalaureate which aims to balance vocational capability with academic standards, encourage relationship of theory and practice, allow breadth of study and produce foundation knowledge for democratic society.	Curriculum features centre around an Advanced Diploma awarded at 18+. Structure of the diploma based on three domains(Social & Human Sciences/Natural Science and Technology, Arts, Language and Literature). Each domain contains three types of module - core, specialist and work/community based. Multi-dimensional post -16 core consisting of core skills, core processes and core content.	Prescriptionist (domains and rules of combination of study) with degree of choice. Emphasis implicitly on younger learner in full-time education. A 'blueprint' approach - joint ministry and NQA needed + piloting but no transitional phase. Wider emphasis on role of external context and regulation requirements re: funding, labour markets and organisation.

PROPOSAL & AIMS	MAIN CERTIFICATION FEATURES	COMMENTARY
A Framework for Growth (APVIC 1991) **Towards a Unified Curriculum (APVIC 1993)** Need for flexible and unified 'framework' represented by a diploma, levels and units which aims to recognise all forms of learning, increase participation, inter-link three distinct curriculum routes - vocational, general vocational and academic and have high quality guidance to ensure coherence of study	Advanced Diploma to embrace current qualifications - A Levels and vocational qualifications. Features include: • Five levels - Foundation, Intermediate, Advanced, Higher and Professional • Units of study described in terms of outcomes - knowledge, experience or skills Student programmes to have identifiable core skills, APL and guidance	Emphasis on the process of unitisation and credit reflecting development work of the FEU Voluntarist - assumes role of guidance, no external regulation though mentions possible role for funding methodologies in relation to unit accreditation. FE based, aimed at wider cohort, diploma has pragmatic relationship to existing qualifications; the radical logic lies in the process of unitisation and credit.

PROPOSAL & AIMS	MAIN CERTIFICATION FEATURES	COMMENTARY
Education and Training for the 21st Century (DES/ED/WO 1991)	Ordinary Diploma awarded for those gaining 4 or 5 GCSEs at NC Levels 7-10, equivalent vocational qualifications or a combination.	Overarching certification type (considered as 'bolt-on') aiming to encourage parity of esteem between A Levels, broad vocational qualifications and NVQs.
System of 'Ordinary and Advanced Diplomas' which aim to remove barriers to equal status of academic and vocational routes.	Advanced Diploma awarded for those gaining 2 A Levels at grades C and above, an equivalent combination of A/AS, equivalent vocational qualification or combination.	Can be seen as 'track-based overarching certification' aimed at National Targets.
		Never actually appeared as policy and resurfaced only with the Dearing Review of triple-track system in 1996.

PROPOSAL & AIMS	MAIN CERTIFICATION FEATURES	COMMENTARY
Beyond GCSE (Royal Society 1991) Proposes 'single integrated system 16-19 ' which aims to promote greater participation and achievement, breadth and balance and rationalisation across academic and vocational courses.	Advanced Diploma (two years of study) and Advanced Certificate (one year of study) Curriculum framework consisting of three domains of study. Planned programmes of study with balance across three domains + common features of personal & careers guidance, work and community experience, statement of achievement	Similar to British Bac with single certification, emphasis on domains, types of modules and common features. Linked more to compulsory secondary education with emphasis on GCSE and NC continuity. Analysis and proposals rooted local experiments in 16-19 qualifications system; international comparisons pointing to narrowness of English academic specialisation; refers to the International Bac and British Baccalaureate proposals
Post Compulsory Education: A National Certificate and Diploma Framework: (Rainbow 1993b) Argues for a common framework with bridges and pathways, and opportunities to accumulate credit towards a single group award development and recognition of core skills.	National Diploma (of education and training) achievable in two years though open-ended. Group awards consist of 'framework of units + rules of controls'.	Attempts to fuse three influences - 'Beyond GCSE' (Royal Sorty 1991), FEU's 'A Basis for Credit' credit framework and the experience of the Wessex Modular A Level Project (1987-93). Fusion of Bac approach and credit development work creates basis for the later development of the LFTF two-stage core/specialisation model (Spours & Young 1995).

PROPOSAL & AIMS	MAIN CERTIFICATION FEATURES	COMMENTARY
16-19: Towards a Coherent System (SHA 1992), **14-19 Pathways to Achievement** (SHA 1993) Argues for need to provide the foundation for a system of lifelong learning, single unified system with elements of choice, guarantee breadth and balance and personal development and guidance	Advanced National Diploma, unit based with credit accumulation, pathways consisting of 'subject areas' combine theoretical and practical, core skills for all.	Generalist and school-based (emphasis on progression from KS3) with attempt at flexibility within the Diploma system. Later documents (Dunford 1997) play down the 'Advanced National Diploma' and instead call for a 'meaningful overarching certification'.
Opening Doors (Labour Party 1993) Criticises divided system and low performance. Argues for a unified qualifications structure which absorbs the best practice of existing qualifications	Proposes a General Certificate of Further Education (GCFE) building on the strengths of a modularised GCSE. Idea of technical and general GCFEs with core content and credit accumulation.	Attempts to apply Bac model to both education and training routes. Sees 14-18 being built on a reformed GCSE.

PROPOSAL & AIMS	MAIN CERTIFICATION FEATURES	COMMENTARY
Excellence for All: Fourteen Plus (Liberal Democrats 1993) Analysis includes arguments that A levels are divisive, 14-19 flexible system needed and with a focus on achievement not failure	A single and comprehensive system of courses and assessment for the 14-19 age group. Certification through a National Record of Achievement to record Level, modules and other achievements Based on NC attainment levels from 10-15 Core and option programmes in academic and vocational subjects to replace GCSE, NCVQ and A Level courses	Concept of a NC Key Stage 5 - the only proposal with this. Concern with breadth, balance and equity of curriculum - in this sense rather like NCE and NUT. Very school-based.
Learning to Succeed (National Commission on Education 1993), **Learning to Succeed: The Way Ahead** (National Commission on Education 1995) Argues for a single national framework for learning (National Curriculum 5-18 years) which recognises achievement in 'foundation learning'.	General Education Diploma at Advanced Level and Ordinary Level as 'grouped awards'. GED Advanced Level to consist of an depth study of a major programme + balancing studies in three other programme areas totalling between third and half of programme + Core skills	Bac-like model alongside IPPR and Royal Society though more education based. Concern with breadth, balance and equity of curriculum - in this sense rather like Liberal Democrats and NUT.

PROPOSAL & AIMS	MAIN CERTIFICATION FEATURES	COMMENTARY
The Technological Baccalaureate (City and Guilds 1994) The main aims of Tech Bac are to accredit a student's whole post-16 curriculum, make connections between different aspects of post-16 studies, build on and complement existing qualifications and develop technological literacy, capability and a broad-based understanding of technological change.	Tech Bac is a Level 3 qualification which provides a whole curriculum framework with a technological focus: The framework consists of Specialist Studies (2 A Levels etc) + Technological Studies + Broadening Studies + Management of Learning.	A synthesis of a baccalaureate model and framework model because it uses existing qualifications and their large blocks (12 unit blocks and 6 unit blocks). Emphasis on 'additionality' represents an expanded curriculum (estimated at 4 A Level equivalent).
14-19 Education (HMC 1995) HMC argue that there is a problem of A Level failure rates, the need for unified system leading to national qualifications but to retain A Levels but within more common system and expand GNVQs to develop other routes.	Advanced Diploma or Advanced Certificate of Secondary Education as a common title but indicating different routes (e.g. A/AS, IB, GNVQ, NVQ routes), promoting breadth over time (e.g. different core elements at different times in two years) and gradual modularisation but continued co-existence of modular and linear syllabuses	Framework model but with track-based features e.g. the different routes under a single title (idea of three lanes on a motorway) and emphasis on differentiation within a more common system.

PROPOSAL & AIMS	MAIN CERTIFICATION FEATURES	COMMENTARY
Post-Compulsory Education and Training: A Joint Statement (AfC et al. 1994) Joint statement argues for reform because of distinct pathway and over-specialisation have led to low completion rates and unable to meet the challenge of NTETs.	Single national framework with one popular title to recognise achievement at key levels, graded units and incorporation of key skills	The classical example of a framework approach. Framework has pragmatic role to overarch existing qualifications but potentially more radical role due to emphasis on unitisation. Highly influential with Dearing and DfEE during 1994-1996.
Proposals on 14-19 Education (NAHT 1995) Document supports lifelong learning, high standards stretching young people to achieve their full potential without forcing them into separate pathways	Advanced Diploma representing a 'baccalaureate package' representing an advanced curriculum: common cores + subject areas in depth, modular system, credit accumulation and APL	Cites LFTF reports of 1995 re: bac approach, and core/specialisation approach. Also elaborated analysis of proposed new Intermediate Level.

PROPOSAL & AIMS	MAIN CERTIFICATION FEATURES	COMMENTARY
14-19 Strategy for the Future: The Road to Equality (NUT 1995) Document argues that academic study to remote, GCSE still divided and bewildering array of vocational courses. Need for a comprehensive 14-19 approach with an integrated 14-19 curriculum .	Proposes three levels of diplomas - Access Diploma for those with learning difficulties; Foundation Diploma for breadth of entitlement at KS4 and Advanced Diploma for advanced level achievement. Diplomas consist of modules from core areas + integrated cross-curricular dimensions and skills.	Cites Higginson (1988), IPPR (1990) and National Commission (1993) on specialisation and breadth within a broader, unit-based context Can be characterised as flexible 14-19 bac approach within the IPPR, Royal Society, NCE tradition.
Towards a Single Qualifications System (NEAB 1995) Argues concern about non-completion rates in A Levels, and need for progression 14-19 from common provision to more differentiated provision.	Single post-16 qualifications system embodying both academic and vocational qualifications and overarching certification as proposed by NCE (1993) and HMC (1994) based on total points score. AS to be redesigned as 1 year 'subsidiary' at level between A Level and GCSE + more flexible (3 unit) and modular GNVQs, + free-standing certification in core skills	Longer-term vision more framework-based rather than group based despite reference to NCE 1993. Several of its proposals echoed in 1997 consultation paper *Qualifying for Success* including AS/GNVQ 3-unit block, core skills and assessment fitness for purpose

PROPOSAL & AIMS	MAIN CERTIFICATION FEATURES	COMMENTARY
Education and Training: Implementing a Unified System of Learning (Crombie-White, Pring, Brockington for RSA 1995) Analysis includes changing economic context changing patterns of participation, critique of ET system and a critique of the separation of liberal education and vocational training (Pring 1995)	Unified system of qualifications with a unified common core for 14-19 age group. Modular framework to provide possibility of creative combinations	Focuses on process of learning (what is learned, the relationship between different parts and style of learning) rather than qualifications. Document also has a contextual approach - more an analysis of the components of the system in the mid-1990s than most other proposals.
Post-Compulsory Curriculum and Qualifications: Options for Change (Spours & Young 1995) for the Learning for the Future Project Analysis centres on A Level system rather than A Levels, unified as a 'core/specialisation model' rather than domains model and three stages of reform.	A single title which is unit-based. Units grouped into 3-unit blocks with three types of units: specialist units specific to a particular pathway, core units common to all pathways and drawn from three domains and connective units - representing new forms of learning. Illustrative model represents a 48 unit or 4 A Level equivalent	The core/specialisation model rather than domains-based model. Can be seen as an attempt of the 'British Bac tradition' to try to come address previous omissions - vocational specialisation, unitisation and the issue of the transition from a tracked system to a unified system. Draws on development experience of the CGLI Technological Baccalaureate and the post-1994 Swedish system.

PROPOSAL & AIMS	MAIN CERTIFICATION FEATURES	COMMENTARY
Dearing Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds (SCAA 1996) Argument for a 'distinctive' national award to recognise specified achievement at 16 and 18 linked to National Targets at Intermediate and Advanced Level (cites Joint Statement, 1994)	National Certificate to recognise achievement at Intermediate and Advanced Levels. National Diploma at Advanced Level which is a grouped award, has mandatory requirement in key skills and the three pathways. A Level pathway domains based, GNVQ pathway includes key skills and MFL and NVQ pathway includes key skills + other qualifications.	Both proposals can be seen as voluntarist, and track-based. Most clearly aimed at broadening the academic track but far less clear regarding its function in the vocational tracks. Nevertheless legitimates the idea of an Advanced Diploma in post-16 qualifications.
Aiming Higher (Labour Party 1996) Pre-manifesto document argues for broadening academic studies, upgrading vocational qualifications and reviewing role of NVQs. It goes onto argue for a single framework of qualifications and a 14-19+ conception of the curriculum and qualifications.	Development of Advanced Diploma at Level 3. Single framework seen as first step to a 'unified curriculum' with core studies, specialist studies and work-based/community studies. Two-step approach.	A fusion of British Bac, framework approaches and LFTF core/specialisation model. Within context of being a policy document it leaves room for interpretation. Could be considered to be being implemented in very a weak way by New Labour.

PROPOSAL & AIMS	MAIN CERTIFICATION FEATURES	COMMENTARY
The Welsh Baccalaureate (Jenkins & David 1996a) for The Institute of Welsh Affairs Argues for educating the whole person and need for broad and balanced curriculum, IB as philosophical source and recognises that Scotland has been allowed to follow separate policies to England so why not Wales	The 'Welsh Baccalaureate Diploma' based on a substantial common curriculum for all students: Study organised into core studies (theory of knowledge, global concerns etc) and six groups (which include GNVQ units): Rules of choice promote breadth and internationalist approach.	Broad, full-time, IB type qualification design with substantial core/combination requirements. Little room for specialisation. February 1996 version looks very school-based. However, Addendum in May 1996 recognised need for more attention to be paid to the vocational aspects of 16-19 education. Most recent version allied to 'Credis'
Introducing the National Advanced Diploma (SCAA/NCVQ 1997) Joint Group Argues for a distinctive grouped award to promote both breadth and depth of study. Meant to be demanding and not achievable by majority of students at Advanced Level.	National Advanced Diploma model consists of Main Studies, Additional Studies and Key Skills. It is a four A Level volume.	Demanding IB concept with four A Level volume Studies categories could be developed to cover both full-time and work-based routes.

Analysis of the unified and overarching proposals 1990-1997

Origins

The unified and overarching certification proposals of the early 1990s had their precursors in the 1980s. The idea of 'frameworks' goes back to the late-1970s with proposals, for example in *A Basis for Choice,* for a curriculum framework to overarch different prevocational and vocational training programmes (FEU 1979). During the mid-1980s, these prevocational frameworks became articulated through TVEI Extension 14-18. As far back as the *Review of Vocational Qualifications* (MSC/DES 1986), education commentators were calling for overarching modular frameworks (Farley 1986).

The development of the idea of unified certification began in earnest in 1990 with the publication by IPPR of *A British Baccalaureate* (Finegold *et al.* 1990). I will argue that the publication of *A British Baccalaureate* opened up the era of unification by proposing that the different qualifications tracks, represented by separate and distinct qualifications, could be replaced by a single form of certification (e.g. an Advanced Diploma at 18+ to represent academic and vocational achievement).

At the time of publication, and for several years after, the Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR) approach, outlined in *A British Baccalaureate,* was heralded as a radical and pioneering vision for reform of 14+ qualifications (Royal Society 1991, NCE 1993, Whiteside *et al.* 1992, Richardson *et al.* 1995a, Highams *et al.* 1996). Moreover, the proposals also influenced the Conservative Government to include overarching diplomas in the 1991 White Paper so as not to be seen to move against a prevailing tide of educational opinion in favour of these measures (Richardson 1991).

Three approaches - tracked, framework and unified

An analysis of the 21 proposals between 1990 and 1997 suggests, however, that not all educational opinion in favour of more unified arrangements followed the model outlined by IPPR in 1990. I will suggest that since then three main types of proposals have emerged which align roughly with the tracked, linked and system types. First, there are proposals for 'unified grouped certification' e.g. an Advanced Diploma at 18+ which promotes breadth of achievement and recognises both academic and vocational achievement (Finegold *et al.* 1990, Royal Society 1991, NCE 1993, NUT 1994, NAHT 1995, Jenkins & David 1996a). This has also been termed a 'baccalaureate' approach because of its emphasis on compulsory combinations of study inspired by Continental baccalaureate models. Its indigenous roots lie in the radical reform proposals and local experiments in the academic track during the late 1980s.

The second main type is a 'unitised framework' approach to overarch existing certification. It proposes unitisation as the main instrument of reform (APVIC 1991, AfC *et al.* 1994, Dunford 1997) and its roots lie with NVQ approaches to unitisation and qualifications outcomes (FEU 1992, 1993).

A third type is a 'track-based equivalence model' (e.g. DES/ED/WO 1991). This is exemplified by the 1991 White Paper proposal for an overarching Advanced Diploma which focused on the equivalence of academic and vocational certification but did not add breadth as in the 'baccalaureate approach', or unitise, as in the 'unitised framework approach'. This approach is termed 'track-based' because of its aim of promoting parity of esteem of academic and vocational qualifications whilst, at the same time, preserving A Levels.

Further analysis will suggest, however, that these three categories are 'ideal types'. In reality the proposals themselves are more complex and overlapping. Baccalaureate types promote modularisation/unitisation and, thereby, share curriculum features with framework types. Framework types encourage breadth through

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key skills, though they eschew breadth through domains. Moreover, there are some proposals which fall somewhere between the three typologies. For instance the SCAA/NCVQ 1997 proposal is both breadth and equivalence-based, lying between the 1991 White Paper advanced diploma model and a baccalaureate model. The conceptual relationship between these three types is discussed in the final part of the chapter.

Figure 15: a comparison of features of equivalence frameworks, unitised frameworks and unified grouped awards

	Equivalence frameworks	Unitised frameworks	Unified grouped awards
Origins	National qualifications framework	FE and adult education	schools, colleges and broad-based curriculum
Purposes	formal equivalence of academic & vocational qualifications	flexibility of learning	balancing breadth, depth & flexibility of learning
Certification	overarches existing qualification	overarches existing certification	replaces existing certification
Relationship to qualifications tracks	tracked	linked or unified	unified only
Learner focus	those taking vocational qualifications	adults and marginal groups	mainstream 14-19 learners
Curriculum	existing qualifications - no additionality	little emphasis curriculum content except for key skills - breadth is left to institutions to decide	emphasis on breadth and depth of curriculum content
Assessment	emphasis on external assessment	fitness for purpose principle	fitness for purpose but with emphasis on improved balance between internal and external assessment
Credit	little emphasis on credit other than a smaller A Level to be accredited after one year of study	emphasis on credit-rating existing qualifications	reformed system would be credit-based
Modularisation/u nitisation	hostile to modularisation	unitisation as major tool of reform	based on modular systems - more implicit than in framework approach
Role of external factors	emphasis on external regulation of standards of different qualifications	UCAS points for overarching certification and new interest in funding methodology and credit	argues for regulation of labour market , mandatory approach to HE recognition and supportive funding methodology

Unified grouped certification approaches

Unified certification proposals should, technically-speaking, be referred to as 'unified grouped awards' because they usually consist of the following certification features:[40]

- the use of 'rules of combination' to 'group' modules into coherent patterns of study;

- an emphasis on breadth of study, through domains or areas of study and the inclusion of a core curriculum;

- a tendency towards high volumes of study as a means of providing for both breadth and depth of study and achievement;

- the purpose of replacing both academic and vocational qualifications.

Proposals for unified grouped awards are seen as prescriptive because of this emphasis on an element of compulsion to achieve breadth, depth and volume of study. Within England and Wales, unified grouped award proposals have reflected strong political or

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[40] In this section the terms unified certification, overarching certification, and grouped awards will be defined as follows:

Unified certification can be defined as a single award which replaces existing academic and vocational qualifications. The previously primary qualifications become 'components' of the single or unified certification.

Overarching certification can be defined as certification which is 'laid over' or 'overarches' academic and vocational qualifications to bring about parity of esteem or to encourage mixing of study. It can be regarded as 'additional' certification and the existing (though reformed) qualifications still have primacy.

Grouped awards, on the other hand, describe certification which contains a collection of subjects or areas of study to be achieved through 'rules of combination'. Grouped awards have existed in England and Wales in the form of broad vocational qualifications, such as BTEC awards and GNVQs. Continental-style baccalaureates can also be described as 'grouped awards', hence the term 'unified grouped awards'.

ethical motives commonly associated with centre-left politics (Jenkins & David 1996b). They argue for a common basis for an initial post-compulsory curriculum and the need to develop both general and vocational capacities (e.g. Finegold *et al.* 1990, NCE 1993). Other examples have also promoted an internationalist perspective (Jenkins & David 1996a).

Two variants can be identified within the unified group award approach. The most common are those proposals which emphasise breadth and continuity 14-19 in a range of subjects (e.g. Royal Society 1991, NCE 1993, 1995, NUT 1995, NAHT 1995). Some employ a 'domains' approach, which attempts to balance continuity of study in different areas with a degree of choice. This variant could be categorised as a school/college-based or full-time participation approach with the aim of providing a general curriculum entitlement 14-19. These proposals were generated at a time of strong rises in full-time participation during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

A second variant, and a minority approach, has attempted to accommodate vocational education and training. Two examples of these are hybrid models developed in the period 1995-1997 by the *Learning for the Future Project* and by the Joint SCAA/NCVQ team following the Dearing Review. The *Learning for the Future Project* suggested that a core/specialisation model might be a more suitable model to act as a bridge between full-time learning and work-based learning than a subject domain-based approach. Based on an interpretation of reforms in the Swedish Upper Secondary System (Raffe *et al.* 1998), the core/specialisation model emphasises both breadth and specialisation through a core curriculum on top of which are built specialist lines of study (Spours & Young 1995). Another approach which tried to include vocational qualifications and vocational education is the SCAA/NCVQ advanced diploma model (SCAA/NCVQ 1997). Developed between the Dearing Review and the 1997 General Election, this model never really had a public airing. However, it is an interesting approach, because the advanced diploma model is based on 'areas of study' rather than on subject

domains (e.g. main studies, additional studies and key skills). This approach can more easily contain both academic and vocational subjects. However, it shares with baccalaureate approaches a commitment to high volumes of study.

The strengths of unified grouped award proposals can be seen in their radical vision of a unified qualifications system, which abolishes the academic/vocational divide and their approach to curriculum breadth and depth based on a flexible modular system (Whiteside *et al.* 1992). However, the strengths of the unified or baccalaureate approach have also been its weakness. The radical nature of the calls for a unified system meant that their influence, extensive though it became within the education profession and academic community, did not fundamentally affect the attitudes of the Conservative Government. Calls for a unified approach were seen, therefore, as 'blueprints' for future change requiring a change of government, rather than being rooted in the current system. On another level, however, unified approaches also reflected prevailing trends in the English system. They focused on rising levels of full-time participation, and tended to neglect vocational training and the work-based route.

Unitised framework approaches

Unitised framework approaches constitute the other unified tradition in England and Wales. A unitised framework approach is defined in terms of the use of unitisation to reorganise the relationships between existing qualifications (APVIC 1991, 1993, AfC *et al.* 1994).

The focus of attention differs somewhat from the unified grouped award approach. There is an emphasis on creating a 'single system of certification' which can contain existing qualifications but where qualifications are broken down by creating smaller qualifications and by unitisation. Like the unified certification approach, the framework proposals argue for a 'single title' to represent different types of

achievement, though in policy documents this is of lower priority than the tool of unitisation.

The tools, language and reform strategies, while overlapping with unified approaches, have had a different reform emphasis. The unitised framework reform proposals can be seen as demand-led by institutions and students rather than centrally-led by government; the main instrument is unitisation, with credit accumulation and transfer rather than the rules of combination of unified certification; there is less emphasis on breadth (though there is support for core or key skills) and more emphasis on flexibility of study. Moreover, the tools of unitisation and credit can be applied to adult learners whereas unified group award approaches are associated with the curriculum of younger learners in initial post-compulsory education.

Unitised framework approaches emerged in the early 1990s in response to a range of factors:

- reacting to the context of the rapid expansion of FE in the form of 'bottom-up' unitisation projects in FE colleges (FEU 1992, 1993, 1995a);

- seeing unitisation as both a pragmatic and a potentially radical tool for qualifications reform both inside and outside the national qualifications framework (Stanton 1997);

- building on the outcomes tradition of NCVQ and developing an outcomes-based language to describe all learning (Stanton 1997);

- supporting those outside mainstream initial post-compulsory education and training and focusing on the needs of adults (Wilson 1993).

Because of their demand-led, politically pragmatic and non-age related approaches, unitised frameworks have become the focus of an influential alliance of forces, because they resonate with the voluntarist aspects of the English post-16 system. They embrace more 'moderate' forces; seek to reform qualifications gradually and

can embrace both those working in schools and colleges, who favour more flexible arrangements at institutional level, and those wanting to extend the qualifications framework to adults or to other routes.

Like the unified grouped award approach, the framework approach conceals differences of emphasis and of motive. In fact, this grouping is more diverse than the variants within the unified group award approach. Similarly, two tendencies can be identified. First, 'pragmatic or conservative frameworkers' who support the idea of frameworks as a means of preserving existing qualifications, while creating more flexibility through the greater alignment of aspects of the national qualifications framework. This group could be seen to include 'linkages' proposals from the previous and current governments (DES/ED/WO 1991, Dearing 1996, DfEE 1997c). The second group, which I have described in the previous section, can be characterised as 'radical unitising frameworkers' who emphasise the reforming role of unitisation and credit (FEU 1992, AfC et al. 1994, Stanton 1997, JACG 1997).

The strengths of the unitised framework approach lie in the pragmatism of trying to reform A Levels from within (Higham et al. 1996); addressing the current national qualifications framework with a stress on using technical tools such as unitisation; innovating via bottom-up approaches in college-based projects and promoting access for wider learner groups. The weaknesses of framework approaches are two-fold: first, their ambivalence about reforming existing qualifications without understanding the inhibiting role that these play on reform; and second, their voluntarism which is associated with a demand-led approach. The concentration of attention on the role of unitisation also leads to less attention being given to the content of the 14+ curriculum. Framework approaches, like the unified certification approaches, have also neglected the work-based route. However, the FEU and now FEDA have promoted a debate about 'sizing' NVQ units in order to bring them into a more unitised national qualifications framework (FEU 1993, 1995a)

The dialogue between unitised frameworks and unified systems approaches

By 1995, attempts were made to bring the two reform strategies closer together. The *Learning for the Future Project*, both in its Interim Report and in its specialist working papers, suggested that framework approaches constituted not only a different model of unification from the baccalaureate-based approaches but could also be seen as a transitional stage on the way to a fully unified system (Richardson *et al.* 1995a). By prosecuting this argument, the LFTF Project began to build three types of bridges between unitised frameworks and unified certification approaches. First, it attempted to embrace the strong strand of political pragmatism in framework approaches by stressing the need for evolutionary change into two stages - from a tracked system to a framework stage and from a framework stage to a unified system. Second, the LFTF working paper on the core/specialisation model built into the design of a future Advanced Diploma several framework features, including units and smaller qualifications e.g. the 3-unit AS (Spours & Young 1995). Third, the LFTF Final Report also suggested that there could indeed be different models of unification ranging from the more grouped and prescriptive to the more open and modular (Cramphorn *et al.* 1997).

This attempt by those who had supported unified grouped award approaches to embrace unitised approaches, reflected not only debates in England, but also the development of an open and modular model in Scotland through *Higher Still*. More recently, representatives of educational professional associations who reflect both unitising frameworks and unified grouped award approaches have met in an on-going forum at the London University, Institute of Education and have produced a statement of common principles (AoC *et al.* 1997).

In this section of the chapter I have argued that the 21 unification proposals represent the development of three overlapping models of certification reform - unified and grouped certification, unitised framework approaches and equivalencies track-based approaches. I

have also argued that the first two now constitute mainstream educational thinking and that the proponents of these approaches are also in a process of dialogue. The implications of this will be explored further in Chapter 5 in relation to the current qualifications reform process.

From the analysis of the 21 unification proposals I have chosen three areas of debate for further discussion to illustrate both the similarities and the differences between the different approaches. First, there are sharp differences of attitude towards breadth and core skills. Second, there is a common tendency to neglect the vocational education and training and the work-based route. Third, there are different interpretations of the role of modularisation and unitisation as tools of reform.

PART 3: UNIFICATION: KEY QUALIFICATIONS AND CURRICULUM DEBATES

Trackers, frameworkers and unifiers

An analysis of 21 unification proposals and government White Papers published during the 1990s suggests that the debate in England has crystallised into three basic positions - those who believe in retaining three distinctive qualification tracks (the 'trackers'), those who want to see the development of an overarching qualifications framework (the 'frameworkers') and those who support the development of unified systems (the 'unifiers') (Spours 1996) [41].

This three-fold typology, however, has to recognise that the three groups do overlap and share some common concerns. All, for example, agree that there is a need for reform of the English post-14 education and training system in order to increase participation and raise levels of achievement. There are also some interesting areas of convergence. Some of the unifiers share the trackers' interest in focusing on Continental approaches to vocational education, with a similar perception that there is a problem about the lack of high-level technical demands in many English vocational qualifications (Green & Steedman 1993). Both unifiers and frameworkers see the potential of unitisation and modularity (Hodgson & Spours 1997b).

The key qualifications and curriculum debates of the mid 1990s can be regarded as aspects of the broader debate on tracks, frameworks and qualifications and the form and content of post-compulsory education and training. They are also dimensions of a debate about how to promote improved participation, achievement and higher

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[41] The terms 'tracks' and 'pathways' are often used synonymously. Dearing, for example, uses the term 'pathways' when, in fact, he is referring to what others describe as 'tracks'. The degree of difference between various qualifications defines whether they constitute a track or not. A track can be defined by four dimensions of distinctiveness - purposes, content, assessment and structure. For instance, both A Levels and GNVQs could be described as tracks, because they are meant to serve different purposes and have very little overlap of content and assessment (Hamilton & Coates 1996).

standards. In reality the alignment of these three discernible groups is complex and continues to shift with the evolving debate.

General education, breadth and core skills

The nature of general education in the 14-19 curriculum is central to the overall debate about the purpose of the education and training system in England. As the previous section has argued, it is here that there are still the greatest areas of disagreement both between the trackers, frameworkers and unifiers and also within each of these groups. To accept either that the post-16 education and training system in England should have a general education function, or that general education should be part of every post-16 student's study programme would be something completely new for this country. The acceptance of such a position would also have far-reaching practical implications for the system. It would, for example, affect the future development of A Levels, the broad vocational track and the continuing viability of the distinctively English three-year single subject honours degree.

Equally contentious is the argument over what constitutes 'breadth' post-16. Is it breadth of content, that is the idea of studying a wider number of subjects which cover a greater range of knowledge domains, or is it the inclusion of core knowledge areas such as English and mathematics or the addition of key skills? There are basically three positions on the question of general education and the case for breadth which do not neatly align with the system-type models of tracked, linked and unified systems.

First, many of those who argue for making the tracks 'distinctive' take the view (as did Dearing) that general education post-16 should largely be in the form of academic education for those who want to continue to study school subjects, and for the rest it should be limited to the 'key skills' of communications, numeracy and IT (HMC 1995, Dearing, 1996). 'General education' in any real sense would thus be restricted to the highest achieving 30 per cent of the age group. It could be claimed that all students were being provided with the

opportunity for 'breadth', without any need to disrupt the structure or purpose of existing qualifications.

A second position is to argue for greater breadth of content for all those involved in the academic route - a position taken by the Higginson Report (DES 1988) which argued for five leaner A Levels. This would lead to a qualification not unlike the International Baccalaureate or the German *Abitur.*

A third position on breadth sees the academic track of the future being transformed into more diverse opportunities for general education, in which there would be more subjects to learn and in which there could be a closer link between general education and vocational education (Finegold *et al.* 1990, Royal Society 1991, NCE 1993, 1995). This approach to general education is most closely associated with the unifiers' arguments for a baccalaureate which embraces both general and vocational education and exhibits some of the features of the Swedish upper secondary curriculum (Young 1993).

The issue of core or key skills - usually equated with those skills assessed by GNVQs - is central to this debate. Calls for 'core/key skills for all' is widely supported, however, there are disagreements about the exact approach. Some favour a return to maths and English rather than communications and numeracy (Smithers 1994a, 1994b, Wolf 1992a, Green 1995). There has also been a call by some for further study of a modern foreign language to be seen as one of the core elements of all post-16 programmes (Leney 1995). Others, like the Dearing Report (1996) and the National Commission on Education Report *Learning to Succeed: The Way Ahead* (1995), favour a broader definition of core skills and include among these personal and interpersonal skills such as 'improving own learning and performance' and 'working with others'. This is a dimension of the general education and breadth debate on which there is more general agreement between the 'trackers' and 'unifiers', although the former would take a voluntarist approach to the inclusion of these

skills in learning programmes, whereas the latter would seek to build them into a baccalaureate-style grouped award. The unifiers have argued strongly that core learning in the foundation subjects of English and mathematics would not be enough and have highlighted the need for more conceptual skills for all (Young *et al.* 1993, Crombie-White *et al.* 1995).

Vocational education and training and vocational specialisation

A second key issue in the qualifications debate is the future of vocational education and vocational qualifications. The analysis of the 21 unification proposals suggests that this issue is largely absent in the unified tradition. As argued in the previous section, the case for vocational education and training has been mainly prosecuted by the 'trackers' with arguments for the distinctiveness of vocational education through the distinctiveness of learning in workplaces, vocational progression routes and specialised vocational institutions (Prais 1987, Steedman 1991, Wolf 1993).

There are three major reasons for the neglect of the vocational in unified and framework approaches. First, there has not been a dominant progressive vocational education tradition on which to build a more unified strategy. Vocational qualifications have, for the past decade, been dominated by an NCVQ mission to produce a system founded on competence-based outcomes. This has resulted in the polarisation of debates between supporters and detractors of NVQs. The supporters point to NVQs' access-based approach to assessment, the promotion of job-ready skills and the emphasis on flexibility (Jessup 1991). The critics point to NVQs' lack of underpinning knowledge and the fragmentation of learning (Smithers 1993, 1997), their bureaucracy (Hyland 1994) and the low take-up by employers (Robinson 1996). In the meantime, reforms of GNVQs since the Capey Report have resulted in a gravitation of GNVQs towards A Levels leaving NVQs more isolated than ever for the

younger age group.[42] The result has been a relative vacuum of consensus about the role, purpose and design of vocational qualifications and the absence of an evolving vocational tradition in England. Traditional vocational qualifications have 'hung on' inside the system, often against a tide of indifference or antipathy by the previous government. This can be contrasted to Scotland where, following the *Action Plan* in the mid-1980s, a tradition of broad vocational education, represented by SCOTVEC, was preserved and developed (Howieson *et al.* 1997, Spours *et al.* 1998 forthcoming).

Second, the vision and models of a unified system were developing during the early 1990s at a time of rapidly rising levels of full-time post-16 participation. The work-based route, exemplified by lack of employer commitment to training and Youth Training with a poor record in terms of skills and qualifications outputs, appeared to be a 'lost cause'. It was assumed that if the English system followed the more 'school-based' systems of France and the Nordic countries, then staying-on at school or college until 18 or 19 would be the norm (Young 1993). Moreover, the unifiers argued that the German model, the most celebrated example of work-based training, was not suited to the English system because of low skill demand by UK employers and the lack of a regulated youth labour market (Finegold et al. 1990).

Third, the unifiers and frameworkers consist overwhelming of educationalists involved in full-time education. It is not surprising, therefore, that they have viewed the reform of the system from their perspective. From the unified certification tradition, the neglect of vocational education and training has been noticeable but not total. The unified baccalaureate models were informed by the vocationalising processes of TVEI in the late 1980s including modularisation, process-based learning and the importance of the

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[42] Recent data from QCA (Open Lecture at the Institute of Education, 17 February 1998 given by Alan Bellamy, Head of the Occupational Standards Division of QCA) suggests that only 30 per cent of NVQs are taken by those under 21 years of age.

work-related curriculum for all learners. What was neglected was not vocationalising the curriculum, but the vocational training route. There has also been a constant background debate about the kinds of specialised vocational knowledge and skills required for productive life in the future (Young & Spours 1989, Richardson *et al.* 1995a, Cramphorn *et al.* 1997).

By the mid-1990s, the context informing the debate began to change. Modern Apprenticeships offered the possibility of quality training in the work-based route (Richardson & Gumbley 1995, Unwin 1997). On the other hand, by the mid-1990s, full-time participation rates began to plateau and the prospect of a fully inclusive full-time education system up until 18 began to look more remote than it did when National Targets were first launched. The apprenticeship route began, therefore, to enter the discourse of those arguing for a more unified system (Evans *et al.* 1996, Unwin 1997). The most serious attempt to date to outline a unified vision for the work-based route was elaborated in a report *Working to Learn* (Evans *et al.* 1996). The authors argued for effective work-based education and training based on 'partnership' and 'entitlement' which recognised the value of learning in the workplace but also the limitations the of English voluntarist employer-led approach. A centrepiece would, therefore, be full-time traineeships which would balance on, near and off-the-job training.

At the same time, the qualifications aspects of such an approach were beginning to be explored by the 'Learning for the Future Project' with a suggestion that a unified diploma system might consist of core learning and specialised lines of study rather than of education-based domains (Spours & Young 1995). The idea of adapting unified certification designs to represent and to enhance the Modern Apprenticeship framework has been taken further in a recent LFTF working paper, which proposed that a unified Advanced Diploma might contain a customised blend of general education, broad vocational knowledge, occupational competencies and key skills (Spours 1999 forthcoming). Despite the resurgence of interest in

apprenticeships across different Europe systems (Lasonen & Young 1998) and the promise of modern apprenticeships, recent research also suggests that the development of work-based route in England could be held back by voluntaristic approaches to training and lack of widespread employer demand for high skills (Gospel & Fuller 1998). The unifiers were shortsighted in not placing sufficient emphasis on the role of the work-based route in developing a comprehensive unified system, but perhaps their instincts about the limitations of employment-led training for the younger age group were not so misplaced.

Modularisation[43] and unitisation[44]

Modularisation has been seen by a wide range of educationalists, both in this country and more widely in Europe, as an important tool for improving learning (Raffe 1992c, 1993, 1994, MIN 1993a, 1993b, 1994, Richardson *et al.* 1995b). It has also been accused of producing a fragmented approach to learning, not sufficiently stressing the grasp of the whole subject and leading to students being over-assessed (Raffe 1992c, Howieson 1993). Dearing's cautious approach to modularisation was shaped by these anxieties.

The relationship between modularisation and 14-19 qualifications represents a paradox within the English education and training system. There is widespread enthusiasm for modularisation as a tool, not only to respond to changing patterns of participation, but as a means of developing a more flexible, unified and coherent qualifications system. At the same time, however, the development

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[43] The term 'modularisation' is used here to describe a way of breaking down whole qualifications into smaller units of learning, which may be separately assessed but which are also governed by some form of overall assessment. This term, as here defined, is most often, therefore, used to describe changes to linear A Level syllabuses.

[44] Unitisation is the breaking down of the curriculum into 'units'. In the definition of the FEU, "*A unit is a coherent set of learning outcomes*" (FEU 1995b, p.6)

of, and even the debates on modularisation are fragmented and reflect the major divisions within the qualifications system itself.

I will argue that there have been three overlapping strands of development and debate in relation to modularisation. First, there has been the development of academic modular syllabuses or courses which has been accompanied by a debate about the role of modular syllabuses in raising individual student achievement and consistency of standards in comparison with linear syllabuses. Second, there has been a move to the unitisation of vocational qualifications and adult provision and the emphasis on access and flexibility. Third, there are debates about the ways in which modularisation/unitisation can be used to reform national qualifications systems.

These different approaches are reflected in different terminology. Throughout the thesis, the term 'modularisation' will be used in a generic sense in order to recognise a range of approaches to curriculum delivery and qualifications reform. Within the broad term modularisation, reference will then be made to three different approaches - 'modular qualifications', associated with the academic track, 'unitisation of assessment outcomes', associated with the vocational track, and 'modular qualifications systems', which refers to national qualifications systems based on modular design. This threefold distinction recognises the different roots of the debate about modularisation and, at the same time, provides an analytical framework within which the development of a more coherent relationship between the three approaches can be discussed.

The first development relates to the development of modular syllabuses in GCSE and A Levels. Since the 1991 White Paper (DES/ED/WO 1991), and the restriction of assessed coursework in GCSE and A Level syllabuses, there has been a form of 'controlled modularisation' in the academic track. Following the *Qualifying for Success* consultation, this trend is set to continue with New Labour Ministers allowing only 30 per cent in most cases, for coursework

assessment and introducing of synoptic components for all modular syllabuses (DfEE 1998b). The focus of debate during the 1990s, therefore, has been on the achievement role of modular syllabuses versus the standards and coherence role of linear syllabuses. The controlled version of modular syllabuses could be interpreted as trying to embody the virtues of both.

The unitisation and credit tradition has different roots and debates. In response to multiple pressures - the policy-led restrictions in the academic track; the development and acceptance of the NCVQ outcomes model of curriculum design and to pressures for access from new participants in further education - the Further Education Unit (FEU) developed the concept of a unitised 'credit framework' (FEU 1992). The focus of this development is not so much modular learning, but the use of 'credit' as a form of educational currency (FEU 1993).

Throughout the 1990s, further education colleges have been experimenting with the idea of building a credit framework to embrace and accredit all forms of learning, including those outside the current qualifications structure. Credit frameworks are seen as a way of ensuring that all types of learning gain recognition by being assigned a credit value. They can work horizontally, so that students can access a range of provision and can carry credit to complete a whole qualification in one level, or vertically, where the aim is to encourage access and progression to higher courses. Credit is particularly important for adults and lower attainers who have not traditionally had access to the national qualifications system.

As an 'open system' consisting of units, credits and levels, a credit framework was intended to overarch the existing qualifications system (Tait 1993). Its components could be used by institutions to build their own systems which would eventually fit into a national credit framework. This multi-functional framework has proved to be attractive to practitioners, particularly in further education colleges. At one and the same time, the credit framework was seen as a pragmatic strategy for the present, because, in the early 1990s,

significant national qualifications reform seemed to be off the political agenda (Wilson 1993). It also functioned as a future vision of an open system which, in some senses, went beyond the confines of all qualifications (Robertson 1993).

Modular qualifications systems present a third variant. For example, the system already being developed in Scotland through *Higher Still* (SOED 1994) attempts to relate and integrate academic and vocational qualifications into common and unified qualifications systems. These systems are characterised by modular design, modular assessment and modular delivery. In modular systems, modularisation can be used in either more pragmatic or radical ways. A limited way of using modularisation is to align small qualifications blocks and units of both academic and vocational qualifications so as to create 'linkages' between the different qualifications tracks. In this way, it helps to encourage students to mix academic and vocational learning programmes (Dearing 1996, DfEE 1997c).

Modularisation has been seen as having more unifying purposes by creating a common core of learning across different courses, leading to the creation of "Y-models " (Burgess 1993, Coates & Hamilton 1996). Finally, and at whole system level, modules of learning have been identified as the building blocks of a national and unified qualifications system (Finegold *et al.* 1990, AfC *et al.* 1994, SOED 1994, Richardson *et al.* 1995b).

While there are considerable areas of overlap between the three 'traditions', there are important differences. The unitisation framework approach to reform is intended to be a more market-led approach to reform with learners and institutions being able to combine units quite freely. While there is mention of rule of combination of modules, this approach has not been given any priority in recent policy documents from the 'frameworkers' (AfC *et al.* 1994, Dunford 1997, JACG 1997). The group award - type unifiers, on the other hand, see whole-system modularisation, not only as the offer of individual modules, but also as recognised combinations of

modules (Spours *et al.* 1989). These combinations would not simply be left to the learner to construct but forged through agreement between deliverers, the awarding bodies and end-users such as employers and HE.

This debate also spills over into the role of learning processes. A key issue in the qualifications debate is whether these processes can be built into the design of qualifications. Some argue that the curriculum needs to be seen as separate from qualifications (Stanton 1994) and that it is up to institutions (and possibly funding councils) to promote guidance and self-management. Others argue that a qualifications system of the future should incorporate the processes of management of learning and guidance (Finegold *et al.* 1990, Crombie-White *et al.* 1995, National Commission on Education 1995). A unified qualifications system would tend to see itself as all-inclusive and providing accreditation for a wide range of learning, including a student giving evidence of having reflected on her/his progress (Crombie-White *et al.* 1995, Spours & Young 1995).

These three areas of debate within the field of unification reflect the evolving areas of agreement and differences between framework and unified approaches. Both approaches have claims to radicalism. The frameworkers would claim that theirs is an 'open' system which places institutional decisions and learner decisions at the centre. Moreover, they maintain that this approach is applicable to both younger and adult learners because of its inherent flexibility. So it is potentially radical and inclusive but, at the same time, it is seen as pragmatic. It does not tackle the reform of qualifications 'head on', rather, it tries to change them over time by the internal unitisation of qualifications and unit-based accreditation. The grouped unifiers, while appreciating the positive nature of unitisation, also place an emphasis on curriculum breadth and depth and coherence of study. This is intended to create a new unified qualification (e.g. an advanced diploma) which can be awarded both for full-time and for work-based study and achievement. The frameworkers are by inclination voluntarist and rely on institutional determination, whereas

the unifiers are more inclined to regulation and advocate creating national frameworks within which institutions can act.

What this last section suggests is that the concept of unification, throughout the 1990s, has evolved a diversity of approaches and models which are continuing to develop through dialogue and mutual learning. The dialogue between the two dominant positions has been influenced by several factors. First, there is the idea of a 'framework stage' which allows the evolution of reform and the development of consensus. Second, there is an attempt by the unifiers to incorporate 'framework features' into unified models. Third, both approaches have to negotiate new policy agendas such as Dearing's Advanced Diploma (Dearing 1996), the Kennedy Committee's commitment to credit-based systems (Kennedy 1997) or New Labour's suggestion of the future introduction of overarching certification (DfEE 1997c)[45]. Moreover, the public acknowledgement of different models of unification - both 'open' and more 'grouped' - is likely to produce a further source of dialogue.

In the final part of the chapter, I draw together the different theoretical threads introduced in this chapter - tracks, frameworks and unification systems, grouped and open unification approaches and the role of different system dimensions. Not only are these examined within the English context, comparisons are also made with Scotland and other European education and training systems to cast further light on the analysis.

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[45] The 'frameworkers' represented now by JACG, have since 1994, relied on unitisation as the mean tool of reform. However, following the *Qualifying for Success* consultation and the debate about the future introduction of overarching certification, this approach to reform is having to think about what overarching certification should contain in terms of approaches to broadening, volume and differentiation (PSEC 1998).

PART 4: UNIFICATION: TOWARDS AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

This part of the chapter draws on three recent research projects with which I have been involved during the last five years - the 'Learning for the Future Project' (1993-95), the ESRC 'Unified Learning Project' (1995-1998) and the Leonardo 'Post-16 Strategies Project' (1996-98) which compared strategies of parity of esteem in eight EU countries. These research projects provide a rich weave of national study (LFTF), 'home' international comparison (ULP) and wider international comparison (Leonardo).

Tracked, linked and unified systems

Earlier in the chapter, I argued that analysis of various certification proposals and White Papers on post-compulsory education pointed to three types of systems and strategies. In this section of the chapter, I utilise a conceptual framework developed in Working Paper 2 of the *Unified Learning Project* (Raffe *et al.* 1998).

The term tracked, linked and unified systems will be used to refer to the education and training system as a whole. This describes a continuum of 'unification' among post-compulsory education and training systems: at one end of this continuum are tracked systems, in the middle are linked systems and at the other end are fully unified systems (see Figure 3). However, reform of post-compulsory education and training in England has, in the 1980s and 1990s, been qualifications-driven (Howieson *et al.* 1997). Therefore, particular significance is attached to the defining role of qualifications and certification. The three types of system are:

- a *tracked system* which consists of distinct and separate qualifications tracks which are reinforced by separate or distinctive features in other dimensions (e.g. ethos/purposes, curriculum

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content, teaching and learning processes, assessment and progression structures, institutions, staff and government and regulation);

- a *linked system* which has features linking the qualifications tracks. These features will tend to develop along particular dimensions but not all (e.g. aligned structure of certification, common learning content such as key skills, aligned assessment grading);

- a *unified system* which . is a single system of certification (e.g. a diploma system 14-19) with multiple purposes - flexible progression pathways, a variety of assessment and learning styles according to 'fitness for purpose' and unified delivery organisations and national governmental and regulatory organisations.

System dimensions and system change

The 'Unified Learning Project' identified eleven different dimensions which were grouped into 'content and process', system architecture, delivery and government and regulation (Raffe *et al.* 1998). Comparison between England and Scotland suggested that types of system did not exist in a pure state (that is with all their dimensions located in one of the three system types or columns), but that each dimension of a national system could be located at different points on the tracked, linked and unified continuum.

Figure 16 locates different dimensions of the English and Scottish systems prior to the *Higher Still* and *Dearing/Qualifying for Success* reforms. As we can see, Scotland's dimensions are located mainly in the linked column with one unified feature and England's located mostly in the tracked column with some features of linkages. The English system was characterised as being tracked in the area of certification, content, assessment and teaching and learning styles

but more linked in the area of institutions, national organisation and progression.

	TRACKED SYSTEM	LINKED SYSTEM	UNIFIED SYSTEM
CONTENT AND PROCESS			
Purpose and ethos		E S	
Curriculum	E	S	
Teaching/learning processes	E	S	
Assessment	E S		
SYSTEM ARCHITECTURE			
Certification	E		
		S	
Course structure and pathways	E		S
DELIVERY			
Local institutions		E S	
Modes of participation	E S		
Staff	E S		
GOVERNMENT AND REGULATION		E S	

There is the question of which dimensions have been important 'drivers' of the system and which reinforce the typology. In Chapter 3, I argued that the English system in the early 1990s, had developed a triple-track qualifications system and a marketised approach to institutions. The certification dimension (A Levels, GNVQs and NVQs) structured approaches to content, assessment, teaching and learning, course structure and pathways. I have argued that these were the dominant drivers and that the English system remained qualifications driven. However, the 1991 White Paper also had features which took certain dimensions of the education and training system into the linked column. It espoused equivalencies between academic and vocational qualifications as well as distinctiveness; GNVQs were intended to provide progression to higher education as well as to NVQs and to jobs; marketisation produced schools and colleges with overlapping clientele, particularly in relation to A Levels and GNVQs and there was increasing collaboration between ministries and regulatory organisations prior to merger in the mid-late 1990s. This resulted in different dimensions of the education and training system being located in different system types.

Strategies of reform: tracked, linked and unified

So far the two conceptual tools of system types and system dimensions have helped to clarify the location of different aspects of national systems - in this case, the English and Scottish systems prior to the Dearing Review of *Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds*/the *Qualifying for Success* consultation and *Higher Still* reforms. This exercise has concluded that the English system currently is a mainly tracked system and the Scottish system has more features of linkages. Moreover, the model suggests (see Figure 17) that the English system will become more of a linked system following the current proposed reforms and Scotland will attain many features of unification following *Higher Still*. The English aspects of the proposed reforms will be elaborated further in Chapter 5.

Figure 17: The English and Scottish systems following the current reforms

	TRACKED SYSTEM	LINKED SYSTEM	UNIFIED SYSTEM
CONTENT AND PROCESS			
Purpose and ethics	E<—	—(E) (S)———	——>S
Curriculum	E<—(E)->E	(S)———	——>S
Teaching/learning processes	E<—— (E)	(S)———	——>S
Assessment	(E)—>E (S)—	———	——>S
SYSTEM ARCHITECTURE			
Certification	(E)———	——>E (S)———	———>S
Course structure and pathways	(E)-	——>E	(S)—>S
DELIVERY			
Local institutions		E S	
Modes of participation	E S		
Staff	E S		
GOVERNMENT AND REGULATION			
		(E)——— (S)—	>E ——>S

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The conceptual tools of system types and system dimensions can also be used to illustrate the dynamics of change; that is, which dimensions are 'drivers', and, by virtue of affecting other dimensions, move a system from one phase of development to another. I now wish to look at how this matrix model of systems and dimensions can be used to reflect on current reform strategies in England and Wales with some passing reference to Scotland.

It has been argued that the three systems models - tracked, linked and unified - also distinguish three broad strategies, each of which aims to move towards one of the three types of system or to consolidate already existing features (Lasonen 1996, Young & Raffe 1998). I will take this argument further by building on evidence of the framework and unified proposals analysed earlier in the chapter to suggest that not only are there these three broad types of strategies, but that there are variants within each of these. Moreover, I will argue that an understanding of the variants or hybrids of strategies is vitally important in being able to comprehend the direction of policy in both the English and international contexts.

Track-based systems - English and Continental approaches

Track-based strategies aim to strengthen a tracked system. They promote the distinctiveness of the tracks and emphasises the differences between them. I will argue that in the light of recent international comparative research (OECD 1996, Lasonen & Young 1998), there have been two different approaches to track-based strategies.

The first, which I will term the *English tracked approach*, has the following features (which incorporate aspects of both the Leonardo and OECD research):

- the main purpose of the strategy is to defend the academic track from dilution as a result of increased full-time participation;

- distinctiveness has become focused on the system dimensions of certification, assessment and pedagogy;

- vocational education is underdeveloped and is often seen as the preserve of those unable to enter the academic track;

- there is a low level of employer involvement in vocational education and training;

- general education and vocational education and training are distinct and mutually isolated;

- transition to the workplace is regulated by the labour market or through *ad hoc* government programmes;

- internal markets allow workers to advance;

- credentials are obtained mainly in initial schooling and tertiary education.

The other approach can be termed a *Continental tracked approach* (though it approximates most closely to the French system):

- the main aim of the strategy is to preserve the identity of vocational education and training at a time of 'academic drift' (Wolf 1993);

- distinctiveness is forged along the dimensions of ethos/purpose, institutions and progression routes into the labour market;

- there is a more common approach to content between general and vocational qualifications (Green 1995);

- vocational education is highly developed in the post-compulsory stage and closely linked to the labour market;

- there are effective linkages between education and employment through organised combinations of school and work-based learning with the involvement of industry;

- there is a strong link between qualifications and job skills;

- there are prolonged routes of formal education and training;

- both types of tracks lead to recognised qualifications but are associated with different destinations and there are few links between them.

The English and Continental approaches to tracking are conducted along different dimensions of the education and training system. The English approach is to focus on the distinctiveness of qualifications and to have linked features along the organisational dimensions of delivery organisations (schools and colleges) and national governmental and regulatory organisations. Schools and colleges under pressure of market competition, increasingly overlap in terms of functions and types of student. Moreover, the formation of the current strongest linked features of the English system, the DfEE and QCA, could be seen as a response to co-ordinating both the tracked arrangements and institutional competition (Spours *et al.* 1998 forthcoming).

The Continental tracking approach focuses on the dimensions of ethos, participation and institutional delivery. Its approaches to certification, on the other hand, tend to promote common properties in the dimensions of certification, assessment and pedagogy e.g. the French *Baccalaureate Professionnelle* (Spours *et al.* 1998). This dimension can be categorised as linked rather than tracked.

The English approach, with tracked features in qualifications-related dimensions but linked features in organisational dimensions, produces an essentially unstable situation. The close institutional approximation of GNVQs and A Levels as part of a voluntarist and demand-led policy, results in more students seeking to mix forms of study. This has contributed to pressures for the further alignment of these qualifications. Furthermore, the mergers of ministries, regulators and awarding bodies is now producing a momentum for unification in those areas which have so far remained distinct (Spours *et al.* 1998 forthcoming). The detail of this dynamic will be explored

in Chapter 5 in an analysis of the current qualifications reform process.

A key question is whether the English system could move from a English tracked model to a Continental tracked model rather than moving into a linkages phase? This option has been suggested by those wanting to raise the profile and esteem of vocational education (Prais 1987, Sanderson 1993, Wolf 1993). However, it is deemed as a doubtful solution by unifiers on the grounds of the lack of employer commitment to training, voluntarist approaches by government to the work-based route and the lack of a high-participation technical vocational education tradition (Finegold & Soskice 1988, Finegold *et al.* 1990, Keep & Mayhew 1995). The unifiers have been keen to incorporate some of the Continental tracked system features into a unified model; hence their arguments for labour market regulation in relation to qualifications (Finegold *et al.* 1990), the inclusion of general education as part of apprenticeships (Green & Steedman 1993) and closer links between full-time and work-based learning (Evans *et al.* 1996).

Linked systems or a framework stage?

The second strategy aims to develop a linked system; it retains different tracks but emphasises their similarities. It promotes the formal equivalence and parity of the different tracks and provides for common structures and elements as well as opportunities to mix or transfer between the tracks. Closer analysis of the model of a linked system suggests that it too is an essentially unstable or transitional category.

A linked system can be seen in two ways. First, it can be viewed as a more flexible multi-track system in which the introduction of linked features (e.g. the introduction of new multi-functional qualifications such as GNVQs) are an attempt to adapt the track-based system to new circumstances and to new types of students. The policy intention under the previous government was to secure a linked

system (that is a flexible multi-track system) but to prevent the development of a unified system (Sharp 1998 forthcoming).

In the previous section, I argued that linked systems, which are tracked on some dimensions and linked on others, are pressurised into change by these 'system inconsistencies' (Raffe *et al.* 1998). The focus of linkages approaches, following the 1991 White Paper, was GNVQs which were intended to act as a middle track linking to both A Levels and NVQs.[46] As Chapter 3 argues, GNVQs did not fulfil this linkages role but, instead, have gravitated towards the academic track. In doing so, they are now triggering more linkages dimensions in the form of more common assessment and grading methodologies and greater qualifications alignment (DfEE 1998). It appears, therefore, that attempts to introduce more common or linked features in certain system dimensions produce pressures for more linked or even unified features in other dimensions. This process, however, is not always a planned one; the process of change is often reactive resulting in several years of piecemeal or gradual change.

Linked systems can also be seen as a transitional stage to a unified system by way of a 'framework stage' (Richardson *et al.* 1995a, Labour Party 1996). It has been argued that strategies for a framework stage can either be 'weak' or 'strong' (Spours & Young 1996). Weak framework approaches can be described as a reform strategy in which linked features are dominated by tracked features. First, a weak approach might be signalled by the purposes of the reform being to preserve existing qualifications by making them more flexible, rather than being the first step to their transformation. In this sense, the purposes could be seen as a means of frustrating unification, rather than being a stage towards it. Second, the alignment of the qualifications, which may assist linking, may be superficial and contain significant asymmetries. Examples of this

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[46] A distinction can be made between *linked systems* (which refers to the dimensions of an education and training system) and *linkages approaches* (which refers to the components of a education and training strategy). This distinction is explored further in Chapter 5.

would be preserving large qualifications blocks which reduce flexibility or preserving distinctive assessment strategies in academic and vocational qualifications. A third feature of weak frameworks would relate to the nature of any proposed overarching certification outlined in the QfS consultation document (DfEE 1997c). Overarching certification could seek only to provide a minimal and 'transparent wrapper' around existing qualifications rather than stressing additionality and new combinations of study. In Chapter 5, I will argue that the current proposed reform strategies have many elements of a weak framework approach.

A strong framework approach, on the other hand, describes a situation in which the framework features of the qualifications system begin to transform its track-based features. This can be seen to be taking place at four inter-related levels within the education and training system of which the most significant driver may be overarching certification (PSEC 1997). The four levels are:

- the level of the *national qualifications framework* which expands and includes more qualifications applicable to a wider groups of learners; becomes more aligned through common levels, the formation of symmetrical structures in the form of smaller qualifications blocks and unitisation; and becomes more coherent through common quality assurance procedures supported by a unified regulatory body and unified awarding bodies;

- the level of *overarching certification,* the design of which represents the national qualifications system at its most coherent, promotes additional learning and drives the introduction of other framework features such as 'qualifications building blocks';

- the level of *existing qualifications* which are reformed into 'qualifications building blocks' by adopting features that will fit into future overarching certification and increasingly common features across different types of qualifications (e.g. the development of smaller qualifications blocks, unitisation, assessment and grading and pedagogy);

- the level of *delivering institutions* which use qualifications building blocks, future overarching certification and local collaborative structures, supported by funding methodologies, to develop extended and flexible 'programmes of study' for learners.

The strong framework approach is an attempt to provide linked features in all the important system dimensions by using the radical instruments of unitisation and overarching certification. The strong framework approach is also a blend of grouped and open system strategies. First, it advocates a gradual approach to change which is more likely to be consensual and to balance more centralised and top-down direction with more demand-led and bottom-up reform. Second, it proposes a unified qualifications system to incorporate framework features into unified models e.g. the tools of unitisation and credit and less prescriptive approaches towards a post-16 core curriculum (Spours & Young 1995).

Unified certification: open and grouped approaches

The analysis of the 21 proposals for unified and overarching certification concluded that what was emerging was different models of a unified qualifications system which were either more grouped or more open. This distinction between different models has also been supported by comparative analysis of qualifications developments in England and Scotland.

The Unified Learning Project has developed a way of conceptualising systems not only through the three system types and eleven system dimensions but in relation to the degree to which they are open or grouped (Howieson *et al.* 1998).

Figure 18: Two approaches to unified certification: open and grouped

	Tracked system	Linked system	Unified system
	<-----------------------	-------------------	----------------------->
Open/ ungrouped	track-based elective system	unitised	open/free-choice and framework-type systems
	mixed system (grouping varies between tracks)	voluntary over-arching certification	over-arching group awards
Grouped	track-based grouped system	prescriptive over-arching certification	Baccalaureate (compulsory group award) type systems

In systems with tracked certification, awards may be open (as in the case of A levels, variously called an elective or portfolio arrangement) or grouped (as in the case of general and occupational NVQs). As these examples illustrate, a tracked system may have a mixed pattern of certification, with open awards in one track and grouped awards in another. This arrangement can be termed a 'mixed tracked system'. In England, academic awards tend to be open and vocational awards to be grouped.

Linked certification systems may emphasise linkage either at the level of the unit or at the level of the programme. Open linked systems emphasise linkage at the level of the unit: units from different tracks have common sizes and levels, and there is credit transfer at the level of the unit. Grouped linked systems pursue linkages at the level of the programme, for example through over-arching certificates which define equivalent levels and amounts of attainment and prescribe common elements of study such as core or key skills. Open and grouped linked systems are not mutually exclusive; they represent differences of emphasis on an open-grouped continuum among linked systems.

Unified systems may similarly vary along an open-grouped continuum, but for heuristic purposes it is helpful to think of three types of certification within a unified system. At the open end of the continuum are systems which offer students a *free choice* of courses or units, each of which is separately certificated. At the grouped end of the continuum are systems with a *Baccalaureate* or group award which is compulsory in the sense that no other certificate is available: the courses or units which comprise it are not separately certificated. Between these two poles of the continuum are systems with *over-arching group awards*. Like over-arching certificates in tracked systems, these are voluntary and the component courses and units are separately certificated. Unlike these, however, the components are all drawn from the same system of certification. Baccalaureates

and over-arching group awards may vary in the extent to which there is choice of, or within, the group awards.

The framework in Figure 18 is a conceptual map of possible systems, not a taxonomy of existing systems. This conceptual framework will be used in Chapter 5 to analyse current debates in England about the direction of development of overarching and unified certification.

International comparisons: four approaches to parity of esteem

In the previous section, I have used international comparison to illustrate the arguments about the importance of the variants within each of the three systems and approaches to reform. I would like to take the international comparative analysis further in order to show how the conceptual model of system types and system dimensions can describe not only reform approaches in England and Scotland, but also in other education and training systems.

The Leonardo Project *Strategies for Achieving Parity of Esteem in European Upper Secondary Education* (Lasonen & Young 1998) showed that movement towards unification is taking place in a number of countries though from different starting points and using different strategies (Young & Raffe 1998). Four main strategies were identified - vocational enhancement, mutual enrichment, linkages and unification. These different approaches to the reform of vocational education signalled that all the partner countries were attempting to develop aspects of their post-compulsory systems including the Germans who have developed an internationally respected system of training. The four strategies are described below.

- *Vocational enhancement strategies* are being developed in Germany and Austria, countries with traditionally strong work-based systems (Birke *et al.* 1998). A German local experimental

project, *Schwarze Pumpe,* has been focusing on collaborative approaches to assignment-based learning between the different partners supporting apprenticeships. The Austrians, on the other hand, have focused on national reforms to create new vocational qualifications which extend progression into higher education. Both these approaches can be seen as strategies to broaden education and learning while still retaining the distinctive nature of work-based training in what I have termed the 'Continental tracked approach'.

- *Mutual enrichment* is a term used to describe institutionally-based strategies being pursued in Finland (Virolainen *et al.* 1998). The focus is on collaboration between traditionally divided institutions who have focused either on academic or on vocational learning. The mutual enrichment strategy aims to provide students with an opportunity to develop a wider range of skills, and in particular vocational skills, by taking different types of courses in different institutions. Mutual enrichment is a strategy to build institutional bridges, even though there is still a commitment to retaining both types of school.

- *Linkages strategies* describes a process of creating links between different types of certification. The focus of this approach was England and France. The study made a distinction between 'weak' linkages in England, where linked certification features have been contradicted by distinctiveness in assessment and pedagogy (Spours *et al.* 1998) and 'strong' linkages in France, where the different baccalaureates share a number of common properties (Green 1995). Young and Raffe (1998) argue that weak linkages strategies may aim to maintain separation of the tracks in the face of pressures to bring them together, rather than being an attempt to integrate them.

- *Unified systems strategies* are being developed in Norway, Sweden and Scotland (Raffe, Arnham & Bergdhal 1998). Unification is based on the development of more common certification, on high degrees of general education in all

programmes and on delivery in comprehensive post-16 institutions (Lasonen 1996). The mix of these three features differs in all three countries but their overall balance suggests that each system following their reforms is moving strongly in a unified direction.

As a result of further theoretical reflections on these four strategies in the final Leonardo Report (Lasonen & Young 1998), it has been concluded that they are better understood not as four separate categories but as located on the tracked, linked and unified continuum. In particular, the strategy of mutual enrichment can best be understood as a form of linkages strategy pursued primarily along the dimension of institutional delivery, compared to linkages strategies in England which have focused primarily on the dimension of certification.

Moreover, as I argued earlier in this part of the chapter, there are national variants within each of these categories on the continuum. These variants are explained by the specific dimensions through which tracking, linkages and unification strategies are pursued. For example, the German system is more track-based through modes of participation (full-time and work-based) than through certification. Its aim is to enhance the vocational track. The English system is track-based principally through the dimensions of certification, assessment and pedagogy with the aim of defending the academic track (Young & Raffe 1998).

The Leonardo study also suggests that all eight systems are in the process of change. Young & Raffe 1998) argue that the general direction is towards unification but that each country is making strategic decisions from the perspective of the strengths, weaknesses and characteristics of their own national systems. They also argue that unification may be more realisable in small systems and/or ones with a strong social democratic and comprehensive tradition. Vocational enhancement, which can be seen as a form of tracking, is

a response in those systems which have been predominantly work-based. Linkages is a seen as a response of large systems which have had, or still have, elite academic systems.

Conclusions: a theoretical framework for analysing reform strategies

I will conclude this chapter by making six arguments for the formation of a theoretical framework on unification.

First, the analysis of the 21 English reform proposals and government White Papers in the early-mid 1990s suggests that there are three types of reform strategies proposed during this period - tracked, linked and unified.

Second, the analysis also suggests that the bulk of educational professional opinion has favoured a unified approach, but that this opinion has divided between those who wish to develop a unitised framework to overarch existing qualifications and those who have argued for a unified qualifications system. I have also argued that these two approaches could be seen in terms of more 'open' or more 'grouped' forms of unified certification.

Third, the matrix, consisting of system types and system dimensions (Figures 16, 17 and 18), can be used to describe different types of strategies and their variants. All strategies, both national and international, can be placed on the matrix and the direction of each dimension can be plotted prior to and following particular reforms. The English and Scottish systems following the proposed reforms of the late 1990s, have been plotted in Figure 17. This diagram suggests that the English system will become a linked system and the Scottish system largely a unified one.

Fourth, I have used recent research on the Dearing reforms to suggest that the English system could be becoming a 'linked system' due to the deployment of weak framework strategies. This is

because in a certification-driven system, linkages features in qualifications such as GNVQs have been contradicted by tracked features emphasising distinctiveness.

Fifth, the dynamic of change described in earlier chapters (a response to external factors, reactions to previous policy effects and political interpretation) suggest that internal system factors are now playing a greater role due to 'knock-on' effect of linkages reforms on particular system dimensions. The English system is now being propelled towards a more consistently linked position by the dynamic of political change and the fact that creating linkages in one part of the system (e.g. in the DfEE or QCA) leads to pressures to link or to align other parts. This process is explored further in Chapter 5.

Finally, both the Unified Learning and Leonardo Projects placed this process in an international context

"The trend in most countries is towards unification. Indeed, many of the discourses of unification reviewed appear to share a 'Whig interpretation' of history as a slow but inexorable progress towards a fully unified system. Such an interpretation maybe premature, given that few if any countries have implemented such a system. The current trend may be towards unification, but it may result in most countries converging on some kind of linked system, with a few countries retaining tracked systems and even fewer moving to fully unified systems. Will the process of unification stop at a linked system in most countries, or will it continue with a global move towards a unified system?" (Raffe et al. 1998)

In Chapter 5, I will explore whether the English system, which is still largely tracked, can move strongly in a unified direction following the Qualifying for Success reforms. The key question will be whether the reforms will see the consolidation of a linked system, which will function as a flexible multi-tracked system, or whether they will

constitute a 'framework stage' in the movement to a more fully unified system.

CHAPTER 5: TOWARDS A LINKED SYSTEM OR A FRAMEWORK STAGE?

PART 1: INTRODUCTION

A phase of review (1995-1998)

In Chapter 4, I argued that the process of unification of qualifications in England could be understood by way of a theoretical framework consisting of three types of distinctions: first, a distinction between tracked, linked and unified qualifications systems and strategies; second, the distinction between different dimensions of the education and training systems which move qualifications systems between these three types; and third, a distinction between different types of unified qualifications systems (e.g. grouped and open types).

In this final chapter, I will argue that the qualifications system in England is moving from a tracked system to a linked system. I will also argue that there are signs that the qualifications system could move further to a unified system but that the exact form of unification is still evolving.

The current movement towards a linked system has been supported by a 'phase of review' (1995-1998). During this period, a total of ten reports or consultation documents have been published on qualifications or qualifications related issues:

1. the Dearing Interim Review of 16-19 Qualifications (1995);

2. the Beaumont Review of 100 NVQs/SVQs (1995);

3. the Capey Review of GNVQ Assessment (1996);

4. the Dearing Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds (1996);

5. a consultation document on the formation of QCA Building the Framework (DfEE 1997a);

6. a consultation document on restructuring awarding bodies Guaranteeing Standards (DfEE 1997b);

7. the Kennedy report on widening participation Learning Works (1997);

8. the Dearing Report on Higher Education in a Learning Society (1997);

9. New Labour's consultation document on advanced level qualifications Qualifying for Success (DfEE 1997c);

10. the green paper The Learning Age on lifelong learning (DfEE 1998a).

Altogether, these ten 'events' constitute arguments for more coherence in the qualifications system, for greater system co-ordination between agencies, for more flexible arrangements for learners and for a culture of lifelong learning. They can be seen as a reforming movement which began prior to the election of New Labour and a historical movement away from division and towards forms of system linkages. The key question is whether they are simply a way of adapting a divided system or whether they represent a more fundamental movement towards a more unified system.

In this final chapter I will attempt to do three things. First, I will analyse the recent discussions on qualifications reform based on the Dearing Review and the *Qualifying for Success* consultation process, and I will assess how these relate to the three system types and strategies. Second, I will explore further the concepts of 'linkages', 'linked system' and 'framework stage' which constitute the middle column of the three-systems continuum. In doing so, I will further develop the work of Chapter 4 on open/grouped systems and system multi-dimensionality, in order to cast light on the nature of the

professional consensus for qualifications reform and for unification. In the final section of the chapter, I will look back over the thesis as a whole to assess how the qualifications system has moved from a fragmented divided system, through formalised triple-track division to the beginnings of a linked system. I will finish by arguing that the balance of forces, international, national and local, suggests that the qualifications system will move further in a unified direction in the next five to ten years and that the concept of system unification is also in a process of evolution.

PART 2: DEARING AND QUALIFYING FOR SUCCESS

The aim of this part of the chapter is to analyse the proposals of the Dearing *Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds* and those emerging from the *Qualifying for Success (QfS)* consultation process; to compare the thinking and analysis behind them and to assess their impact in terms of whether they represent the establishment of a linked system, or constitute a framework stage in the movement between a tracked and unified system.

The Dearing Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds

Dearing's proposals represent another step in establishing a national qualifications system in England (Lasonen 1996). The key question is whether they represent a consolidation or adaptation of the proposals in the 1991 White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century* (DES/ED/WO 1991), which formalised the triple-track qualifications system based on A Levels, GNVQs and NVQs, or whether they represented a stage of development on the way to a more unified system (Spours & Young 1996, Young 1997).

In Dearing's Interim Report, a number of problems were highlighted with regards to the qualifications system. These included concerns that the academic/vocational divide was inhibiting learner progress, that there were intolerably high levels of non-completion of courses, that the problems of lack of basic literacy and numeracy existed for all but the highest achievers and that the qualification system was complex and lacked clarity (Dearing 1995a).

The Final Report, published in March 1996, made 198 proposals in all. The proposals constituted a mix of promoting the distinctiveness of qualifications, extending the national qualifications framework, encouraging breadth and creating linkages between qualifications. The 198 proposals can be grouped into the following themes of reform:

- strengthening existing qualifications and creating more consistency of standards by introducing larger A Level subject 'cores' and more external assessment into Advanced GNVQs;

- the maintenance of three distinct pathways - academic, general vocational and work-based vocational - by rationalising subjects and fields between the three qualification tracks so that the distinctive characteristics of each is clearer;

- extending the national qualifications framework by creating more levels: including a new Entry Level and a proposal for an S Level to provide a challenge for 'high flyers';

- the introduction of National Certificates at intermediate and advanced level and a National Diploma at Level 3 to encourage the up-take of key skills and breadth of learning;

- the introduction of a new subsidiary AS Level, to be taken at the end of one year of advanced level study and to be equivalent to half an A Level, to encourage both breadth of study and progression within A Levels;

- creating greater alignment between academic and general vocational qualifications by reorganising A Levels and Advanced GNVQs into six-, and possibly, three-unit groupings;

- the introduction of key skills qualification - possibly in the form of an AS level qualification;

- the revamping of the NRA;

- bringing together SCAA and NCVQ into a single body to oversee the newly-constructed framework and encouraging the merger of the existing academic and vocational examining and validating bodies;

- a re-launch of Youth Training within a new National Traineeship framework, linking it to Modern Apprenticeships and allowing progression between the two (Dearing 1996).

The Dearing proposals were a sophisticated combination of themes of qualifications reform and of system consolidation. First and foremost, the Dearing Review was a political process. The proposals were intended to respond to revised National Targets, to meet professional educational demands for the reform of post-16 education and to introduce more flexibility into the qualifications system established in 1991. At the same time, Ministers and traditionalists had to be convinced that there had not been any fundamental changes, especially to A Levels. Another, but less explicit consideration, related to the possibility of a change of government in 1997. Sir Ron's hope was that the Review proposals would be taken seriously by a new government and would be open enough to be a basis for further reforms.

The Review succeeded in its initial political role of securing a broad consensus for consolidation and reform that spanned both political and educational opinion (Pyke 1996a). One prominent theme in the educational press coverage was the way in which Sir Ron's report was interpreted as opening up the system to a wider range of learners and, at the same time, preserving A Level standards (Pyke 1996b).

At the time of the Dearing Review, I argued that the political dimension of the Dearing proposals was producing an 'unstable consensus' (Spours & Young 1996) and that it lacked the sense of direction found in Labour's Aiming Higher (Young & Spours 1996). First, it was argued that on closer scrutiny, many of the proposals were either unworkable or contradictory. For instance, the proposal to allocate different subjects to qualifications tracks could not practically proceed because most subjects introduced over the last three decades have been academic/vocational hybrids. This point was made clear to Dearing by the three major awarding bodies. In effect, Dearing was attempting to reverse the process by which the production of modern knowledge entered the 16-19 curriculum. Other proposals, while well-intentioned, were seen as weak; the overarching certification proposals which were meant to encourage

the up-take of key skills and to promote broader study were unlikely to succeed so long as they remained voluntary. Furthermore, proposals promoting distinctiveness of qualifications worked against proposals for qualifications linkages (e.g. evidence from the early GNVQ model, cited in Chapter 3, suggested that making qualifications more distinctive might discourage students from mixing academic and vocational study).

The instability of the proposals, arising from their contradictory nature, was accompanied by instability related to the process of change. By trying to pursue a policy of making tracks more distinctive and, at the same time, making proposals for greater flexibility of the tracks, Dearing opened the door to calls for more, not less, commonality between academic and vocational qualifications. If the proposals turned out to be as contradictory as I had argued, then calls for stronger linkages and unification would have become louder still. Conversely, if the linkages strategy showed signs of working then calls would be heard to go further still towards unification.

A third interpretation is that the apparent instability was deliberate and it was intended that the reforms should evolve in the future. Following the Dearing Review, it was argued that the ambiguity of Dearing - balancing consolidation and reform - produced not only an unstable consensus but also a potential open-endedness to the reform process (Spours & Young 1996).

The 'Learning for the Future Project' (Richardson *et al.* 1995b), argued that the process of qualification change is best achieved in steps and stages - moving from a tracked system to a unified system through a 'framework stage'. Subsequently, I argued that the Dearing proposals, which aimed to make academic and vocational qualifications more distinctive while, at the same time, creating greater flexibility for students to mix academic and vocational qualifications, fell short of the concept of a framework stage (Spours & Young 1996, Raffe *et al.* 1998). Dearing's arguments for curriculum distinctiveness; the retention of unreformed A Levels and

the partial and voluntarist nature of his proposals for overarching certification, pointed to a 'strong track/weak framework' model. Dearing's proposals can be seen, therefore, to represent a 'flexible multi-track system' strategy. This is illustrated by the overall location of his proposals on the three systems/dimensions matrix in Figure 17 (Chapter 4) which hover between the tracked and linked systems.

A second set of distinctions which can help to identify the type of strategy Dearing took is the effect of different dimensions of the education and training system. As argued in Chapter 4, the process of reform may change along some dimensions but not others. Recent research suggests that the process of unification is more pronounced in the government regulatory dimension, due to as the DfEE merger and the formation of QCA, than in the dimension of certification (Spours *et al.* 1998 forthcoming). Dearing argued strongly for the merger of NCVQ and SCAA yet, at the same time, he also emphasised the distinctiveness of academic and vocational qualifications. His organisational approach was unificatory but his approach to certification was more track-based.

The implementation process of the Dearing Review was interrupted by the 1997 General Election. During 1996/7, several joint NCVQ/SCAA working groups were established to progress the reform proposals though there were no major public outputs. In June 1997, Labour Ministers announced that there would be a further process of consultation to build on the Dearing reforms and to consider the proposals more closely rather than rushing ahead with implementation. No mention was made of *Aiming Higher*, Labour's policy document on 14-19 qualifications reform, published in 1996 at the same time as the Dearing Report. It had argued strongly for a the gradual formation of a flexible and unified qualifications system (Labour Party 1996)

New Labour and the *Qualifying for Success* consultation process

New Labour's policy for qualifications reform demonstrates significant continuity with the policy of the final phase of the Major administration with a commitment to *"maintaining the momentum of the reforms proposed in Lord Dearing's 16-19 qualifications report and ensuring that changes are introduced on the basis of proper development and preparation"* (DfEE 1998b). I will argue, however, that despite areas of policy continuity there are significant differences in the discourses of the Dearing and *Qualifying for Success* approaches which signify different types of 'linkages strategies'.

The *Qualifying for Success* consultation process took place between October and December 1997. The beginning of the consultation document outlined areas of continuity with the Dearing proposals. These included the establishment of QCA, the introduction of National Traineeships, new approaches to recording of achievement, the establishment of a new Entry Level and the creation of a new National Framework of Qualifications (DfEE 1997c).

The main consultation themes of the document were 'quality and standards', 'flexibility and breadth', 'Key Skills for all' and 'towards an overarching certificate'. QCA reported on the results of the consultation in March 1998. In its advice to government, QCA proposed changes to the national qualifications framework to facilitate the entry of all publicly-funded qualifications; the introduction of 3-unit AS/GNVQ qualification blocks; lifting some of the restrictions on modular syllabuses such as limits on module resits; a review of prescribed limits on the balance between external and internal assessment and the implementation of the three key skills including the piloting of independent assessment for the wider skills. QCA also argued for unitisation and credit in relation to vocational qualifications, citing the Kennedy agenda of widening participation. Furthermore, QCA argued that the principle of overarching certification (OAC) had received widespread professional support and

that the Government should confirm its support for moving to OAC in the longer term (QCA 1998).

Ministers' responses were far more conservative than QCA's advice. The Government accepted the proposals for 6- and 3-unit AS/GNVQ blocks and the idea of qualifications linkages, but took a 'standards' position on other issues including setting limits on module resits, maintaining tight restrictions on internal assessment and also suggesting a two-year duration of study for advanced level courses. With regards to future reform, Ministers did not fully share QCA's enthusiasm for unitisation, credit or overarching certification, or its assertion that the Kennedy flexibility and participation agenda applied to 16-19 year olds. The Government did not block the move towards a more flexible and unified qualifications system, but insisted that it would only make a decision on these issues when QCA had undertaken more development work and had studied the complexity of issues involved (DfEE 1998b).

The gap between QCA's advice and Ministers' responses deserves closer scrutiny because it points to interesting policy dynamics in the current and the forthcoming period. QCA felt that its responsibility was to reflect educational opinion and argument and to offer sound technical advice on how the reform process should be taken forward. In doing so, QCA tried to balance four factors. First, in its response to the QfS consultation process, QCA attempted to articulate professional education opinion which had broadly been in favour of the reform process being bolder and faster than outlined in the original consultation document. Second, QCA tried to balance the demands for a more radical reform process with its understanding of the Government's more limited priorities reflected in its Manifesto commitments to broaden A Levels, up-grade vocational qualifications and introduce key skills within a rigorous framework. Third, QCA openly supported the concept of qualifications flexibility and argued that the 14-19 qualifications reform should also reflect the logic of the Dearing higher education report, the Kennedy report on widening participation and the Fryer report on lifelong learning. This position

was reflected by the strong arguments supporting the concept of 'credit' and unitisation within vocational qualifications. Fourth, QCA appeared to reflect the different tendencies and cultures within QCA itself. Its arguments for unitisation and credit represented some of the priorities of the NCVQ tradition and is evidence that the new organisation may not be as dominated by 'academic culture' as was feared by many in 1997 prior to its formation (Spours *et al.* 1998 forthcoming).

The Government's views on eventual qualifications reform may not be very different from QCA's, but its position has been informed first and foremost by political caution. In the implementation of policy, Ministers feel it is important to reflect not only education professional opinion but wider popular opinion.[47] Moreover, in its efforts to situate itself between reforming and conservative constituencies, New Labour may be fuelling interest group politics in this area of education policy.

New Labour's approach to the reform of advanced level qualifications

New Labour's cautious approach to the reform of 16-19 qualifications can best be understood by considering the following factors. First, it is an area of a low political priority compared with schools policy and the New Deal. The reform of A Levels is considered to be a 'minefield' with little immediate political payback; hence the modest

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47 In interviews during 1997/8 with both civil servants and political advisers one issue was raised repeatedly; the perceived gap between professional education opinion, which wants radical reform of qualifications, and a more conservatively-minded population that has high regard for traditional A Levels. It has been reported that Ministers wish to situate the Government in the centre ground between those arguing for change and those supporting the status quo and to be seen to be responding to demands for change, rather than to be seen to be leading it. It is acknowledged that this is a very different position than that being taken in compulsory education, where New Labour is more assertive about the types of changes required in relation to issues such as literacy skills, failing schools and Action Zones.

reform proposals and a desire to see a slow evolutionary reform process (Hodgson & Spours 1999 forthcoming)[48]. Accordingly, the Government has not only set aside its radical pre-election document *Aiming Higher*, it has also deployed a minimalist interpretation of its General Election Manifesto commitments to broaden A Levels, to upgrade vocational qualifications and to introduce key skills within a rigorous framework. It has sought to resolve the potential contradiction between its 'schools standards' agenda and its 'lifelong learning' agenda by making a distinction between policies for the 16-19 age group and for adult learners (DfEE 1998b). Finally, New Labour aims to use a mixture of regulation in relation to standards (e.g. QCA's powerful remit and the role given to OFSTED) and voluntaristic and 'demand-led' approaches to implementation and delivery. Schools and colleges will be free to choose to offer the new Key Skills qualification and the new AS/GNVQ 3-unit blocks.

Three main interpretations of the QfS reforms have emerged in the months following the response from the Government to the consultation process. An interpretation from the Right is that the reforms represent a 'holding of the line' to preserve A Levels (Smithers 1998). The response from the education professional associations is that the reforms are politically safe, timid, visionless and are unlikely to work.[49] A third interpretation is that they represent a first and modest step towards a more flexible and unified qualifications system (Hodgson, Spours & Young 1998). All three interpretations have some validity. The third approach is shared by most senior civil servants and officials and is the one which most accords with previous Labour Party policy documents (e.g. *Aiming*

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48 These, and other political points, were made during interviews with senior civil servants and political advisers in April and May 1998.

[49] The reaction of the education professional associations to New Labour's A Level reform has been quite hostile: the NAHT has accused the Government of 'chickening out' on breadth (reported in the TES 10 April) and the Joint Association Curriculum Group (JACG) has complained that its proposals will be impossible to timetable (reported in the TES 17 April).

Higher 1996).[50] The relationship between these perspectives can be further explored by an analysis of the similarities and differences between the Dearing Report and the Government response to *Qualifying for Success*.

A comparison of the Dearing Report and *Qualifying for Success*

There has been a general policy assumption that QfS represents a strong line of continuity with the Dearing proposals (DfEE 1997c, DfEE 1998b). Close analysis of both the underlying discourses and the proposals of Dearing and QfS, nevertheless, highlights important similarities and differences.

First, there are areas of policy continuity referred to early in the *Qualifying for Success* consultation document in which New Labour decided to accept proposals from the Dearing Report and not to subject to further discussion. These included the new Entry Level and recording of achievement. Anything to do with advanced level qualifications, on the other hand, was subject to further consultation and review.

Second, there are areas of policy similarity with Dearing but which emerged following the QfS consultation (e.g. a generally sceptical position on the modularisation of A Levels and increasing levels of internal assessment). These can be seen either to reflect an educational conservatism in New Labour or a policy caution in relation to the highly political area of 'A Level standards'. Dearing saw modular syllabuses as an educational "enthusiasm" (Dearing 1996: 93) and advised caution on going any further down the modular road. New Labour have taken a similar view, though for

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50 During April/May 1998, I interviewed senior government advisers, DfEE civil servants and QCA officials. They shared a broadly common interpretation of the QfS reform process; that the 'politics of caution' was the dominant force shaping policy; that the QfS reforms had the potential to succeed and that these reforms should be seen as part of a longer process of change.

reasons more to do with being seen to be defending A Level standards rather than out of any ideological commitment to A Level linear syllabuses.   New Labour currently has a marginally more positive view of modularisation, signalled by support for the idea of certificating individual modules (DfEE 1998b).

Third, there are differences of interpretation on a number of qualifications policy issues.   Figure 19 illustrates these differences,: focusing on Dearing's concerns about qualifications distinctiveness and standards and New Labour's concerns about associating standards with more common procedures.

Figure 19: Dearing and 'Qualifying for Success': a comparison of approaches to distinctiveness and commonality

	Dearing Review	Qualifying for Success
Qualifications consistency	Focus on distinctive A Level standards and GNVQ standards	Common criteria for general and general vocational qualifications (QCA 1998)
National Qualifications Framework	Allocation of different subjects to different tracks to create clarity for end-users	Allocation of different qualifications to different 'families' as a means of inclusion within the National Qualifications Framework
AS Level	At a standard between GCSE and A Level aimed at those not able to make the full A Level standard	At the full A Level standard to encourage broadening for all students
Key Skills	AS in key skills	Key Skills for all with 'stand alone' qualification
GNVQ/A Level alignment	structural alignment and change of name	structural alignment and common grading system
Overarching certification	Two forms of overarching certification - Certificate and Diploma (the latter for some students only)	One form of certification applied to all students at Advanced Level

These differences do not manifest themselves in radically different proposals, but on similar proposals with a different emphasis and logic. New Labour is not attracted to qualifications distinctiveness, but instead has decided to try to align all advanced level qualifications with the A Level standard. Ministers, therefore, have decided not to proceed with the allocation of different subjects to tracks and, instead, are focusing on the development of common criteria across all general and general vocational qualifications (QCA 1998); the association of breadth with the full A Level standard (DfEE 1998b); a common stand-alone key skill qualification, more structural alignment between different qualifications than suggested by Dearing and an indication that there will be a single structure for overarching certification (DfEE 1997c). It is possible to characterise the Dearing approach of distinctiveness and commonality as 'strong tracks/weak frameworks' (Spours & Young 1996) and New Labour's approach through QfS as 'linkages through common standards'.

The fourth area of comparison is concerned with future developments. Dearing did not employ an overtly staged approach to reform, though he did not discount the prospect of the evolutionary development of his proposals. These were meant to make a track-based system more flexible and workable. In *Aiming Higher* (Labour Party 1996), New Labour was explicit about a staged approach to a 'single framework' and saw an important role for a common advanced diploma and unitisation and credit. The Government's current commitment to going further is far less clear. In her response to QCA's advice, Baroness Blackstone (Minister of State) voiced caution:

> *"I shall consider carefully the further advice which the Authority proposes to offer on the implications and feasibility of moving towards a unit-based credit system; and on the implications of introducing overarching certification. It is clear from the consultation that there is growing support for exploring both these developments in greater detail. At the same time, we are under no illusions about the potential difficulties both*

conceptual and practical, to which they could give rise" (DfEE 1998b: 4)

QCA were asked, therefore, to go away and to undertake development work on overarching certification with a particular emphasis on seeking the views of key interest groups.

Interviews with key officials, following the publication of this document, suggested that the Government still envisages that the qualifications system will move in a more unified direction but that this will be done slowly so as not to move too far ahead of popular opinion. Moreover, New Labour wants to ensure that its reforms for the Year 2000 are implemented carefully and that proper research and development work goes into the more radical reforms which are still not tried and tested. Nevertheless, there is no official commitment at this point to move in a more unified direction.

At present, it can be argued that New Labour is committed to creating a linked system. The QfS reforms can be located further along the unification continuum than those proposed by Dearing because a strategy of 'linkages through common standards' is more unifying than Dearing's mix of qualifications distinctiveness and linkages. Furthermore, I will argue that there could be renewed pressure for further reform as a result of debates about the next stage of reform and also as the result of the consequences of the current linkages strategy . The nature of this pressure and its potential impact will be examined in the next part of the chapter by dissecting the concept of 'linkages'.

PART 3: DISSECTING LINKAGES - LINKED SYSTEM OR FRAMEWORK STAGE

In Chapter 4, I argued that the category of a linked system is essentially unstable on the grounds that it is being pulled by the fundamental forces working for division (tracking) or for unification. If linked features are introduced into qualifications systems, they are either contradicted by tracked features (illustrated by the contradictions in the Dearing proposals) or they give rise to further demands for more linkages and, therefore, steer the system in a more unified direction. This, I will argue, will be the likely outcome of the QfS reform process. In this section I want to explore these dynamics more closely with particular reference to the QfS reform process.

Linkages, linked systems and a framework stage

In the previous chapter, I made reference, through international comparison of England and France, to the distinction between weak or strong linkages strategies (Spours *et al.* 1998). In previously published work I argued that the Dearing reforms could be strengthened so as to represent a 'framework stage'.[51] Both of these analyses suggest that the linked system category on the tracked, linked and unified continuum is not a single category but a dual category.

This can be further understood by taking the 'Unified Learning Project' analysis further and establishing new definitions:

- *Linkages* can be used as a generic term to describe the middle category between a tracked system and a unified system - it can refer either to the balance of relations of the system at any

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[51] Analysis of a 'framework stage' is provided in Chapter 13 of *Dearing and Beyond: 14-19 Qualifications, Frameworks and Systems* (Spours & Young 1997)

moment or to a strategy aiming to create more linked relationships.

- *Linked system* will now be referred to as a more flexible version of a track-based system, in which the tracks still dominate and the links are meant to respond to problems such as improving retention rates or promoting breadth. Dearing's proposals, which I termed 'strong tracks/weak frameworks', falls into the linked system category as does the QfS reforms scheduled for the Year 2000/1 though, as I have argued, the latter can be located a little further along the unification continuum. A linked system may be transitional and may be moved by virtue of its own internal contradictions or by external pressures.

- *A framework stage* denotes a transitional stage in two senses. The *Learning for the Future Project* (Richardson *et al.* 1995b) outlined a staged approach to 14+ qualifications reform envisaging movement from a 'tracked system' to a 'unified system' via a 'framework stage'. The framework stage indicates 'system direction' and is seen essentially as transitional in the movement towards a unified system. The term *frameworks* also describes a situation in which tracked features increasingly become dominated by features of the National Qualifications Framework in the form of common quality assurance procedures, structural alignment, common grading and key skills and, eventually, unitisation.

Figure 20: Dissecting the concept of linkages

ULP system and strategy continuum

Tracked system	Linked system	Unified system
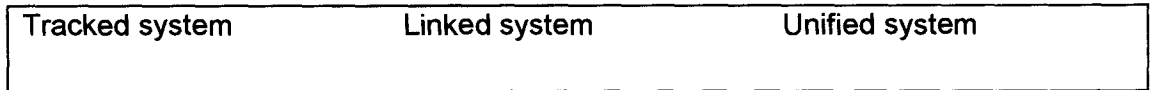
Dualist approach to linkages

Linked system	Framework stage	
Tracked system	Linkages	Unified system
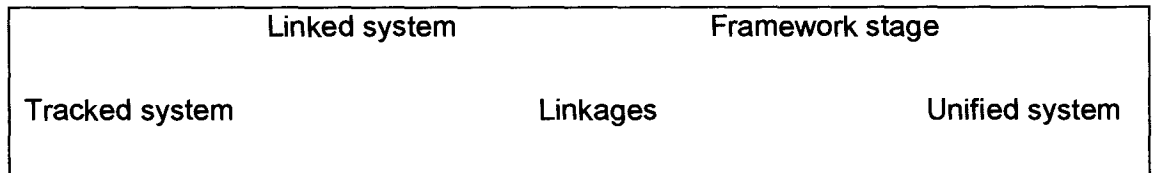
A key issue in the establishment of a framework stage will be the relative strengths of qualifications frameworks. In a recent seminar discussion paper, the Post-16 Education Centre further clarified this issue by making a distinction between 'weak' and 'strong' frameworks (PSEC 1997).

A weak framework approach can be described as reform strategy in which framework features are ultimately dominated by track-based features - by purposes, by qualifications and alignment and building blocks and by the role of overarching certification. First, a weak framework approach might be signalled by the purposes of the reform being to preserve existing qualifications by making them more flexible so as to consolidate a track-based approach. In this sense, its purposes could be seen as a means of frustrating unification rather than being a step towards it. Second, the alignment of the qualifications may be superficial and contain significant asymmetries. Examples of this would be preserving large qualifications blocks, which reduced flexibility, or preserving distinctive assessment in academic and vocational qualifications. A third feature of weak frameworks could relate to the emerging model of overarching certification. It may seek only to provide a minimal and 'transparent wrapper' around existing qualifications, rather than stressing additionality and new combinations of study which are features of more unified approaches.

A strong frameworks approach, on the other hand, describes a situation in which the framework features begin to reform track-based features at several inter-related levels within the qualifications dimension:

- the level of the *national qualifications framework* which expands and includes more qualifications applicable to wider groups of learners; becomes more aligned through common levels, the formation of symmetrical structures in the form of smaller qualifications blocks and unitisation and becomes more coherent

with common quality assurance procedures supported by a unified regulator and unified awarding bodies;

- the level of *existing qualifications* which are reformed into 'building blocks' by adopting features that will fit into future overarching certification and increasingly common features across different types of qualifications (e.g. development of smaller qualifications blocks, unitisation, assessment and grading and pedagogy);

- the level of *overarching certification* which promotes breadth, additional learning, reduces academic and vocational division and provides a focus for the development of framework features such as 'qualifications building blocks';

A strong framework approach, conducted at these four levels within the certification dimension, could also be reinforced by other dimensions of the education and training system (e.g. by a unified regulatory and awarding body system, by common approaches to funding and by more collaborative local delivery partnerships).

Movement from a linked system to a framework stage

A central focus of this thesis is how the qualifications system moves from one qualifications phase to another and within phases of the three overlapping eras. Whether the qualifications system will be consolidated into a linked system or will take on the characteristics of a strong framework stage will depend not only on coherent strategies in relation to different levels of the qualifications dimension, but also on how this relates to the three fundamental change factors which I have identified in the thesis. First, there is the Government's responses to external pressures; second, there is its reactions to the effects of previous reforms and changes in the wider dimensions of the education and training system; and third, there is the factor of political and ideological interpretation.

At this point, I will bring back into play a multi-dimensional analysis to explore the dynamics of these pressures in the coming period which focuses not only on government policy, but also on other actors including mediating agencies and institutions and practitioners.

External pressures

Earlier in the thesis, I highlighted two main external pressures operating during the late 1980s and early 1990s. External to the education and training system was the influence of international economic competition and international comparison of skills and qualifications levels. Arising out of this came the argument that the UK was most deficient in Intermediate Level skills or achievement at Advanced Level (Ryan 1992, Green & Steedman 1993, DfEE & Cabinet Office 1996, Steedman & Green 1997). The focus on deficiencies at advanced level contributed to the revising of national targets and, in turn, provided a context for the Dearing *Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds*. The other major influence was a decade of rises in full-time post-16 participation. This caused 'system expansion' which provided the context for two different strategies for dealing with these changes: the triple-track qualifications system and the strategy of divisive expansion; and the unification blueprints or models which emphasised the need to develop a unified and flexible qualifications system. Both the tracked system strategies and unification ideas have worked off the same premise of international comparative analysis over the last decade.

However, in Chapter 3, I pointed out that the stimulus of rises in full-time participation, had by the mid-1990s, ceased. In this respect, the initial post-compulsory education and training system was at a watershed. Moreover, I argued that we would fail to meet revised national targets by the Year 2000 and that a change of gear was required to support further rises at Level 3. This meant that there would have to be an overt strategy for raising achievement of the middle quartiles towards Level 3, rather than depending upon demand-led factors of the previous decade.

This policy focus on trying to raise achievement at Level 3 and beyond has been challenged by Robinson (1998 forthcoming) who argues not from an international competitiveness perspective, but from the perspective of prevailing patterns of employment and earnings returns on qualifications within the UK. He asserts that growth in employment has been greatest at the lowest levels of the service sector, that there has been too much focus on the graduate labour market and future needs in this area will be satisfied by existing participation levels in HE. He goes on to argue that, in the light of no further significant shift in the balance of participation in full-time and work-based routes, there has to be a change of debate and of priorities. Robinson argues that there is little labour market justification for the policy emphasis on Level 3. There are sufficient Level 3 attainers to supply HE and the alternative apprenticeship route represents a declining share of total employment. He thinks that the Labour Government will get better returns for its investment by focusing on those young people with few or no qualifications, so as to help this group avoid the problems of unemployment and social isolation.

Robinson's arguments challenge the prevailing policy assumptions of the last decade and he could find a receptive audience in New Labour with its policy emphasis on social inclusion and the New Deal. It is possible that the most dominant external pressure in the near future will not be changing patterns of participation or international competitiveness, but the policy of social inclusion related to existing patterns of employment. In terms of education and training systems, this focus could provide a spur for new forms of division rather than unification as the system expands to take in the previously marginalised. A comparison of the relationship between this social inclusion analysis, allied to existing labour market patterns and international competitive analysis, is illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 21: Comparison of the possible effects of social inclusion and international competitiveness analysis

Social inclusion analysis	Competitiveness analysis
national social inclusion focus	international competitiveness focus
concern with lowest 10 per cent of cohort	concern with performance of the middle quartiles
low level jobs focus	skilled jobs focus
work and community programmes	education-based qualifications and progression
basic literacy and numeracy skills	wider key skills
accessible low-level qualifications	Level 3 and increasingly Level 4 qualifications
focus on qualifications distinctiveness and relevance	focus on common learning agendas and progression
seeks to adapt qualifications and programmes to prevailing patterns of employment - empiricist approach	can seek to challenge prevailing patterns and often associated with 'low skills equilibrium' analysis

Figure 21 suggests that the social inclusion dimension could lead to pressures for a divided system, as government tries to respond to those without literacy and vocational skills. Due to the political imperative for social inclusion programmes to have immediate effect, there are pressures on New Labour to tailor policies to existing conditions, rather than trying to create future conditions in the labour market. There is already evidence of this as New Labour focuses on vocational provision at Key Stage 4, and work-based initiatives (e.g. Target 2000 and the four options of the New Deal) with less attention currently being given to subsequent progression implications.

This may, however, be a temporary feature of policy (which also occurred in the early 1980s) when the political priority is to get young people 'off the streets' and into training programmes. As in the 1980s, the Government would soon be faced with how students or trainees, who have been brought into the system, progress through qualifications levels and levels of training. If so, this would add weight to the argument for a more co-ordinated system and, therefore, for increased linkages between provision.

International competitive analysis has, on the other hand, been a driving force for higher quality qualifications outputs and, arguably, for greater unification of the system, due to the focus on combining general education and technical vocational training (Green & Steedman 1993). In terms of recent policy responses in the field of qualifications, New Labour's analysis is still informed by the assumptions of the early-mid 1990s and comparison with European competitors, particularly at Advanced Level (DfEE 1998b). However, as I have argued, this may not be the case in other areas of education and training, where the imperative is to develop new means of educational inclusion. These may have to go more with the grain of low skill jobs and a divided system.

I have suggested that external contextual factors which have been powerful in the past - international competitiveness analysis and rising levels of full-time participation - may not be exercising the same influence in the late 1990s as they did earlier in the decade. Their

influence may be being replaced by policies on social inclusion which may exercise unpredictable effects both for and against the movement towards unification.

Internal system effects 1: policy reactions and domino effects

Throughout the thesis, I have argued that the factors promoting changes of policy have been both external and internal. In the previous section, I have pointed to changes in the external factors. In this section I want to argue that there are two aspects of internal system effects in the current reform process - policy reactions to the effect of previous reforms and the effects of wider dimensions of an expanding education and training system. Moreover, it is clear that the combined effect of these internal system factors is growing as the education and training system expands, becomes more complex and, thereby, requires greater co-ordination.

The first type of internal system effect is the result of reactions to previous policy decisions. In Chapters 2 and 3, I argued the 1991 White Paper and Dearing Reviews were the result of responses to external factors and internal system weaknesses. It is likely that policy over the next five years will be the result not only of explicit political strategy but, increasingly, a response to the initial outcomes of the current proposed reforms. These can be viewed as 'first wave reforms' and include those developments taken forward from the Dearing Review, from *Building the Framework* (DfEE 1997a), *Guaranteeing Standards* (DfEE 1997b) and the immediate responses to *Qualifying for Success*. The main themes, as I have argued in the previous section, are *standards, consistency and linkages between qualifications* resulting from policy deliberations during the period 1995-1997. These 'permissive' reforms will only work if institutions are provided with strong incentives and frameworks on implementation. Incentives include extra funding for timetabling breadth of study, a clear signal from higher education that they will recognise broad patterns of study, a framework of inspection criteria and a clear sense of direction and the understanding that

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overarching certification will ultimately be used to secure breadth of study (Hodgson, Spours & Young 1998). It is possible that these incentives will not be forthcoming in a way that allows the reforms to work. If so, arguments will grow for what I have termed 'second wave' reforms.

Second wave reforms could emerge from the debates and policy decisions in 1998 and beyond; the main themes being - *unification, flexibility and system continuity*. This is a potentially more radical agenda including:

* starting the National Qualifications Framework from 14+ (this could be an issue in the review of the National Curriculum in the Year 2000);

* the development and design of 'overarching certification' to encourage greater parity of esteem and breadth;

* a commitment to developing a fully unitised and credit-based National Qualifications Framework.

It is arguable that the first-wave reforms cannot be realised without the second-wave reforms (e.g. broad study programmes and key skills will only be universally implemented when they are demanded by an agreed model of overarching certification). Moreover, linkages strategies are producing pressure for more unified strategies (e.g. there is growing educational pressure for overarching certification to secure breadth of study and unitisation as the next stage beyond the creation of smaller 3-unit blocks).[52] It appears, therefore, that there is a considerable 'domino effect' building within the qualifications system, as one set of reforms triggers the need for another set of reforms.

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[52] There is evidence of growing educational support for these two reforms - 70 per cent of the respondents to the QfS consultation supported further unitisation and overarching certification (QCA 1998b).

Internal system effects 2: wider dimensions of the education and training system

The second aspect of internal system effects is related to other dimensions of the education and training system. As the system as a whole becomes more co-ordinated, the internal dimensions become more inter-dependent (e.g. the relationship between regulation, funding issues, the role of end-users and progression pathways, schools' and colleges' responses to the reform process and the role of the work-based route). In Chapter 4, I argued that system inconsistency between different dimensions will mean a movement towards more linkages and greater co-ordination. This can be regarded as a 'unification logic'. Below, I outline briefly the co-ordination pressures building in different system dimensions.

- *Regulation*: The development of unified regulatory and awarding bodies in England appears to be having a unifying effect as QCA seeks to create common quality assurance procedures, to develop overarching certification models and to progress the case of unitisation and credit (Spours *et al.* 1998).

Funding and system costs: There appear to be three aspects of funding pressures. First, there is the convergence of the funding methodology applied to schools, colleges and TECs (DfEE 1996b), though not necessarily to funding levels.[53] Furthermore, the FEFC has recently argued for a developing relationship between funding methodology and unitisation (FEFC 1997). A second issue is rising examination costs which may force the Government to undertake a more fundamental review of GCSE than it might wish, as a result of having to fund external examination costs in up to ten subjects per

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[53] Currently, several LEAs are involved in piloting a version of the FEFC funding methodology in school sixth forms. In interviews with DfEE officials (April 1998) concerned with this exercise it has been stressed that Ministers would like to see a more common funding approach, but for reasons of political sensitivity they have no intention of driving down funding levels in school sixth forms the way experienced by FE colleges following Incorporation in 1993. Initial evidence from the Comprehensive Spending Review suggests that any convergence of levels of funding is likely to push FE levels towards those of schools, rather than schools towards the lower FE level.

student in Year 11.[54] A third aspect of funding reform may also take place, in terms of the support given to 16-19 year olds, to stimulate higher levels of participation as a result of the Governments 'Comprehensive Spending Review' up to the Year 2001.[55] Taken overall, these are pressures for creating a level playing field in terms of funding and, therefore, can be seen as having a unification logic.

- *Progression pathways and the role of end-users:* The issue of promoting progression pathways beyond the 14-19 qualifications system may be viewed as a constraining factor on progress towards a unified qualifications system because of the support of higher education institutions and some employers for the A Level route (Robinson 1998 forthcoming). It is for this reason that the Government is very keen to involve these key groups in consultations about models of overarching certification which could be the most serious challenge to date to traditional A Levels. Whether HE continues to be a conservative influence on qualifications will also depend on whether it continues to expand and, therefore, has to open up recruitment procedures.

- *Schools' and colleges' responses to the reform process:* The role of institutions and practitioners in interpreting and implementing the QfS reforms may produce contradictory outcomes with regards to the unification process. Without a framework of incentives to provide broader programmes (e.g. funding, HE recognition and a clear sense of direction of the reform process), schools and colleges may be tempted to offer the old diet of a three A Level programme.[56] If, on the other hand, HE does not continue to

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[54] Interview with a senior QCA official (June 1997).

[55] Press reports have suggested that much of the additional funding earmarked for education in the years 1999-2001 will go to FE colleges and 16-19 year olds (Wintour & Bright 1998).

[56] Initial feedback on institutional responses to the QfS reforms were gathered through the South Gloucestershire Advanced Level Curriculum Project (1998-2001) run by the Post-16 Education Centre, Institute of Education and through various post-QfS conferences held during 1998.

expand, it will not exercise the same positive pull-effect on full-time participation and Level 3 study that it did during the early 1990s (Ball 1991).

- *The role of the work-based route:* The development of Modern Apprenticeships and National Traineeships can be taken as a sign of a more linked approach in the work-based route, because of the emphasis on qualification outputs at Levels 2 and 3, including many cases of GNVQ/NVQ combinations and the take-up of traditional vocational qualifications such as BTEC National. These programmes are leading to a closer relationship between workplaces and colleges than under YT with its exclusive emphasis on NVQs (Gospel & Fuller 1988). At the same time, the difference of mode between full-time learning and work-based learning and arguments for the distinctiveness of vocational education constitute a strong argument for track-based approaches rather than unification. However, as I argued in Chapter 4, there are differences between 'Continental' approaches to the work-based route with its emphasis on theory and practice, and the 'English' approach which has, throughout the 1980s, tended to associate the work-based route for younger learners with the less able. Modern Apprenticeships can be seen to represent a movement towards the 'Continental' approach, though without much of the regulation of the youth labour market which exists in France and Germany.

These dimensions of the education and training system are becoming more closely related as government seeks to maximise resource efficiency across different routes, as students increasingly seek to study both academic and vocational subjects and as regulatory bodies attempt to establish common quality assurance procedures across the National Qualifications Framework. Altogether, these internal system effects constitute a growing force for greater unification of the system. At the same time, however, there are still fundamental countervailing external contextual

influences in the form of a low-skill labour market and HE selection procedures. It may be the case that the balance of external contextual factors in the late 1990s may be acting as more of a constraint than in to the early-mid 1990s, when there was a heavy policy orientation to international comparison (DfEE & Cabinet Office 1995). The balance of forces may lie, therefore, with the dimension of debate and interpretation of the changing context over the next five years.

Features of a 'framework stage' and the issue of interpretation and debates

In 1995, the 'Learning for the Future Project' (Richardson *et al.* 1995b) argued that a divided qualifications system would have to move through a 'framework stage' in order to progress to a unified system. In 1997, the LFTF Project restated this position but argued for a 'unified and inclusive' system (Cramphorn *et al.* 1997). In doing so, the LFTF Project pointed to the existence of four different models of unification:

- a *baccalaureate model* exemplified in proposals by IPPR, the Royal Society and the National Commission on Education and based on a domains concept of breadth;

- a *loose framework model* containing existing qualifications such as the 1991 White Paper overarching diplomas and the Dearing 'Advanced Certificate';

- a *credit-based unitisation model,* proposed by the Joint Statement Group and supported by the FEU/FEDA credit framework proposals and also reflected in Scotland's *Higher Still* proposals, which maximised student choice of units;

- a *core/specialisation model,* proposed in the original LFTF report, in which learners would take a post-16 core curriculum and combine this with specialist lines of study - the core/specialisation

model was seen as less prescriptive than the baccalaureate model, but more coherent than the credit-based unitisation model.

The report went on to argue that a unified strategy would need not only 'steps and stages' but also a balance flexibility of access and breadth and coherence of outcomes.

During the last two years, a widespread professional consensus has coalesced around arguments for both a more flexible and unified system and for a staged reform process.[57] In this final section, I will argue that for the qualifications system to move from an unstable linked system to a unified system requires movement through a framework stage. Furthermore, I will argue that this stage will have to embrace a coherent but 'open' model of unified certification and will have to be supported by reforms in other dimensions of the education and training system.

Amongst educational professional associations, awarding bodies and many educational research organisations and even government quangos, there is strong support for the following reform principles (AoC et al. 1997, Spours 1998).[58]:

- curriculum continuity and movement from a 16-19 to a post-14 concept of qualifications;

- breaking down existing qualifications into smaller blocks and recognising units of achievement to encourage flexibility of study;

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[57] Evidence of this consensus is to be found in an analysis of fifteen responses to the Qualifying for Success consultation document from major education professional associations, national awarding bodies and national research organisations. They show strong support for unified certification, unitisation and a staged reform process (Spours 1998).

[58] The 'Education Alliance' is a forum of the major education professional associations which meets periodically at the Institute of Education and is convened by the Post-16 Education Centre. In October 1997, it published a statement of 15 principles of reform of the post-14 qualifications system (AoC et al. 1997).

- introducing more qualifications levels from 14+ to aid progression;

- creating greater alignment of qualifications building blocks supported by common grading systems;

- the principle of accumulation of achievement (moving from the accumulation of qualifications to the accumulation of units and the establishment of a credit-based system);

- establishing a framework of assessment methods according to the principle of fitness for purpose;

- in inclusive qualifications framework which embraces different levels of ability and different modes of study and is not age-related.

The areas of debate surround the role and function of overarching certification, breadth of study, rules of combination of qualifications blocks and volume of study. In other words, the debate is about 'compulsion'. The radical professional consensus is still voluntarist, because it continues to seek flexibility and choice in a market-dominated system. It also resists what it has experienced as 'ideologically-inspired' top-down government initiatives of the early 1990s, which it still sees being manifested by New Labour. Moreover, in an institutionally competitive climate, many practitioners view participation patterns to be fragile and argue that the reforms should not make recruitment and retention more difficult. The professional consensus is still tilted against baccalaureate-style unified certification which is interpreted as being very demanding for students and difficult for institutions to deliver. It is possible that the balance of the professional consensus might change through steers from government on standards and qualifications coherence, with

some funding incentives to create more contact hours and through debate on overarching certification models.[59]

The concept of a unified system relates, as I indicted in the previous chapter, not only to different models of unified certification but also to other dimensions of the education and training system. A framework stage will have to embrace change and reform at different levels of the system in order to ensure that all these dimensions move in a unified direction. It would, therefore, need to address the following:

- *participation*: developing a more fluid concept of participation which embraces not only full-time and work-based routes but also movement between them, while also considering the factor of part-time work for 16-19 year olds;

- *national qualifications framework*: developing a unitised and credit-based national qualifications framework so as to embrace the achievement of both younger and older learners and to support the concept of lifelong learning;

- *overarching certification*: to develop in the direction of a coherent but relatively open unified model, to promote breadth and depth of study and to embrace different levels from 14+;

- *progression*: developing higher education degrees and a work-based route which build on the changes taking place at the lower levels of the education and training system and which also provides recognition of achievement in the initial post-compulsory phase;

- *local collaborative networks*: schools, colleges and workplaces will need to collaborate to support the emergence of more flexible delivery arrangements and to introduce overarching/unified certification as well as to support extended and flexible 'programmes of study' for learners;

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[59] During late 1998, QCA will be undertaking a study of different models of overarching certification and will report to government in 1999 with their recommendations on how to proceed.

- *funding approaches*: funding regimes will have to adapted to promote more flexible forms of study, an expanded curriculum and increased institutional collaboration;

- *regulation and the labour market*: regulatory regimes will have to develop not only in relation to institutions and qualifications, but also in a way which encourages employers and the youth labour market to develop a training culture.

The idea of a framework stage, can be seen as a threefold development in relation to earlier unification models. First, it is based on a step-by-step movement from a tracked system to a unified system. It is transitional and aims to move beyond the idea of a linked system, which is still seen as fundamentally affected by track-based influences. Second, if the framework stage is to build on the radical professional consensus and to be related to the lifelong learning agenda, it will have to embrace features of open unified systems as well as grouped features. Third, this stage will have to be multi-dimensional, so that the qualifications dimensions are supported by the wider dimensions of the education and training system. This will be particularly important in the light of the conclusions of the previous section which argued that some external factors may be working against the unification process in the late 1990s.

However, the external context may still harbour some surprises in the form of 'home international' comparisons and pressures. While the English reform process looks to be a 'long haul', there is emerging evidence that the devolution movements in Scotland, Wales and, possibly Northern Ireland will bring the example of radical reform much closer to home. In 1999, Scotland will implement *Higher Still*, which is an open and unified qualifications system. In Wales, there is discussion of a *Welsh Baccalaureate* allied to the Welsh FE credit framework *Credis*. It is conceivable that these two countries (which are themselves different from one another) will proceed to unification

much more quickly than England as a result of their different politics and culture and their small size. Movement in these systems will simply increase the educational pressure within the English system for further change.

PART 4: CONCLUSION

This thesis has defined and discussed six phases of post-14 qualifications development which are based on the relationship between national qualifications policy initiatives and wider dimensions of the education and training system, including changes in the youth labour market, patterns of participation, changes in government and regulation and patterns of funding. The phases are as follows:

- *Phase 1: a precursor two track phase (1976 - 1982):* a tracked system based on minority full-time participation and mass early transition from school to work;

- Phase 2: *a prevocational phase (1983 - 1990):* based on the development of pre-vocational qualifications, vocationalising initiatives and low-level work-based programmes (this period has also been termed the 'New Vocationalism');

- *Phase 3: a dual-track national approach phase (1986 - 1991):* which saw the reform of academic qualifications and the establishment of a national vocational qualifications framework based on NVQs;

- *Phase 4: a triple-track national framework phase* (1990 - 1994): based on the national qualifications framework consisting of A Levels, GNVQs and NVQs;

- *Phase 5: a qualifications system review phase (1995 - 1998):* which sees the review of the three qualifications tracks and proposals for a more linked qualifications system;

- *Phase 6 emerging linkages stage (1998 -):* with proposals for creating a more aligned and linked qualifications system and a continuing debate about movement to a more flexible and unified system.

These six phases constitute a movement from a fragmented system, through a phase of formalised division, to the emergence of linked arrangements in the form of the QfS reform.

I have argued that the movement of policy from one phase to another occurs through a dynamic three-fold relationship between government responses to external factors; through internal system effects which result from reactions to previous policies or from the effects of change in other dimensions of the education and training system; and through the role of ideological interpretation and debates. In analysing the movement between policy phases, I concluded since the 1980s, the effect of external factors has declined while the effect of internal system factors has increased. I argued that this has not happened in a linear manner, but appears to have taken place through expansion and consolidation phases linked to shifts in patterns of participation. The largest shifts in participation patterns, which took place in the early 1980s and then in the late 1980s/early 1990s, precipitated developments of prevocational and broad vocational certification. These developments, in turn, triggered consolidation or system organisation phases. Furthermore, I have argued that attempts to take a whole-system approach to policy development has led to greater system co-ordination and, therefore, to an increased inter-dependency between the different dimensions of the education and training system.

The third aspect of the dynamic for change has been that of educational ideology and debates. In Chapter 1, I argued that while the six-phase model illuminated shifts in policy related to other dimensions, it did not adequately explain the role of debates or ideas in relation to policy change. I argued, therefore, for a complementary periodisation model based on the following three 'overlapping eras' which, in varying way, can be mapped onto the six-phase matrix.

- a *New Vocationalism Era (1977 - 1991)* which divided into three phases - precursor, prevocational and local integrative;

- a *Divided National System Era (1986 - 1998)* which divided into three phases - dual track strategy, triple track system and linked system;

- *a Unification Era (late 1980s - 1998)* which so far can be divided into three phases - local precursors, unification models and arguments for a 'framework stage'.

The 'overlapping eras' approach adds an important theoretical and historical tool. First, it eliminates artificial end-on concepts of policy development, which is a weakness of the six-phase matrix, and illustrates how policies and initiatives can co-exist in an increasingly complex system. Second, it provides a framework for understanding debates in the 1990s between those in favour of unification, the arguments for linkages and the policy of retaining a track-based qualifications system. Third, using this form of analysis, it is possible to argue that the qualifications system, in the next five years, will be poised between a linked system and a framework stage. It is this historical logic which informed the title of the thesis - from a fragmented and divided system towards unification.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I have argued that unification analysis and unification strategies have become increasingly sophisticated as the decade has progressed. They have moved from unification blueprints and models to a staged notion of strategy. Moreover, different unified models are emerging, some of which are rooted more in international comparative methods (e.g. baccalaureate-type models) and others, which are more rooted in the English voluntarist system (unitised framework models). Between them lies the equilibrium of the post-compulsory education reform consensus.

I have concluded the thesis with a speculation that the balance of system change will be determined by the relationship between external factors, internal system effects and educational debate. For this reason it will be necessary to keep a very close eye, not only on the English debate which responds to English conditions and constraints, but also on developments in Scotland and Wales as these countries attempt to assert a more independent education reform process.

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Dear Ken

I give my permission for you to use Chapters 1 and 7 of 'Dearing and Beyond: 14-19 Qualifications, Frameworks and Systems' for your thesis, and I am pleased to confirm that you have played a full and active part in the compiling of these chapters.

Yours sincerely

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Dear Ken

I give my permission for you to draw on aspects of the Unified Learning Project Working Paper No. 2 for your thesis, and I am pleased to confirm that you have played a full and active part in the compiling of this paper.

Yours sincerely

David

Professor David Raffe
Director

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