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The 'unification' of post-16 education

by Cathy Howieson and David Raffe

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Most industrialised countries are facing the need to reform their post-compulsory education and training systems and bring academic and vocational learning closer together. Countries have adopted different policies and strategies to do this. This Briefing reports on the Unified Learning Project which explored issues in bringing together or 'unifying' academic and vocational learning and compared policy approaches in Scotland, England and Wales. It also contrasted British developments with those in other European countries.

Systems vary in the extent to which they organise academic and vocational learning in separate and distinct tracks or bring them together within a unified set of arrangements.

Most European countries are 'unifying' post-compulsory education and training, but they are pursuing different strategies for unification. England and Wales are pursuing a 'linkages' strategy which maintains different tracks but develops links between them; Scotland is combining tracks within a unified system.

Current strategies in Britain share certain common characteristics compared with other countries in Europe. They focus on certain dimensions of system change, such as certification and governance, rather than other dimensions such as curriculum, pedagogy and institutional change. Work-based learning is more marginal to unification strategies in Britain than elsewhere in Europe.

The particular unification strategy that a country adopts influences the nature of the change process; this is evident in the development of Higher Still and in the conflicts over its direction.

Unification is an incremental process that moves through a number of stages at different speeds.

The move to unify academic and vocational learning

In Scotland Higher Still will bring academic and vocational post-16 courses into a unified system, starting this year, and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) will link this system with occupational qualifications and with higher education. In England and Wales several current and proposed reforms aim to bring academic and vocational learning closer together: these reforms include a common framework of levels and quality assurance for different post-16 qualifications, the development of key skills in all programmes of study; smaller blocks of study for A levels and GNVQs, to encourage mixing and transfer; and proposed diplomas to ‘over-arch’ academic and vocational awards. On each side of the Border the government departments responsible for education and training have been merged, as have academic and vocational qualifications bodies.

Other countries in Europe are also developing closer links between academic (or general) and vocational learning. Norway has introduced integrated upper-secondary schools; Finland has promoted shared provision between general and vocational schools to encourage the mutual enrichment of general and vocational learning; Germany is experimenting with reforms to promote general education within the dual system; Austria, France and several other countries have extended their vocational pathways and encouraged transfer between tracks, for example through ‘dual qualifications’ which lead either to employment or higher education.

These are examples of a process which we term the ‘unification’ of post-compulsory education and training systems. There are common pressures for unification: the expansion of post-16 education and training systems, and the problems created by this expansion; the increasing complexity of demands and client groups that systems have to satisfy; and the demand for new types of skills and knowledge that do not fit into traditional academic and vocational categories. The arbitrary divisions between the academic and vocational need to be replaced by more flexible post-16 education and training planned coherently as a system. However, strategies for unification vary across countries.

This Briefing reports on the Unified Learning Project (ULP) which compared developments in post-compulsory education and training in Scotland with those in England and Wales in relation to unification. The study was conducted jointly by the CES and the Post-16 Education Centre of the University of London. The study aimed to clarify the concept of unification; to compare the process of unification in Scotland and in England and Wales; and to consider the implications for policy development and implementation. The ULP was

complemented by a European Union funded project on strategies to promote parity of esteem of post-16 academic and vocational learning in eight European countries.

Understanding post 16 education and training systems

The project developed a conceptual framework with which to analyse and understand different education and training systems and the processes of change and reform in them. It has three main elements:

1. Types of system and types of strategy

Post 16 education and training systems can be classified into three broad types: tracked; linked; and unified. In a *tracked* system vocational and general education are organised in separate and distinctive tracks. A *linked* system has different tracks but emphasises their similarities and equivalence, with common structures and elements, and opportunities to mix or transfer between the tracks. A *unified* system does not use tracks to organise provision but brings all provision within a single system. The three types represent points on a continuum with tracked systems at one end and unified systems at the other.

Different strategies for unification correspond to the three types of system. Germany is an example of a tracked system, and its ‘tracking’ strategy is based on the maintenance of distinctive and separate tracks: most unifying reforms in Germany consist of curricular and pedagogical reforms to integrate general and vocational learning *within* tracks, typically within the dual system. Most other countries are pursuing strategies to unify academic and vocational *across* tracks, either bringing their tracks closer together or combining them. That is, they are moving in the direction of a linked system (a ‘linkages’ strategy) or a unified system. New Zealand, Norway and Sweden are examples of countries which have introduced unified systems.

2. Dimensions of unification

We identified 11 different dimensions of unification (Table 1). There are no pure examples of any of the three types of systems because countries vary across the different dimensions of unification. On each dimension systems vary in the extent to which arrangements are separate and distinctive in each track, or unified. Similarly, strategies for unification vary in the dimension which they emphasise.

Table 1. Dimensions of unification

• Purpose and ethos	• Progression to HE
• Curriculum	• Local institutions
• Teaching/learning processes	• Modes of participation
• Assessment	• Staff
• Certification	• Government & regulation

3. *Different concepts of unified systems*

Unified systems also vary in the extent to which they are 'open' systems with flexible entry and exit points and an unrestricted choice of subjects or are 'grouped' systems based on common requirements designed to ensure common learning experiences and outcomes for all students.

Unification in Scotland, England & Wales

Early in the 1990s England and Wales had largely tracked systems and Scotland a linked system, but each varied across the different dimensions. All three countries have since moved towards a more linked or unified system and in this they resemble most other countries in Europe. England and Wales are following linkages strategies. Government decisions following the Dearing Review and the DfEE consultation document *Qualifying for Success* retain three post-16 tracks or pathways but involve a number of small steps to increase the links between them. Most elements of the Government's policies for England also apply to Wales, but unification there is moving at a faster pace and is beginning to diverge from England (for example, with faster progress towards a post-16 Credit Framework).

Scotland is pursuing a unified system strategy but within limits. Higher Still unifies certain dimensions (eg certification and assessment) but not others (eg institutions or modes of delivery). It only covers two of the three post-compulsory tracks – the work-based route remains largely outside it. Scotland is pursuing a unified system only for its school and college-based provision; through the SCQF it is pursuing a linkages strategy to link work-based qualifications with other post-16 provision.

British features of unification

The strategies for unification in England, Wales and Scotland are different, but they share common 'British' features compared with other countries in Europe. British unifying reforms focus on the two dimensions of certification (qualifications drive the reform process) and government and regulation (exemplified by the creation of QCA and SQA). European strategies put more emphasis on other dimensions such as institutions, curriculum and pedagogy. For example, the integrated upper-secondary school (the local institution dimension) is the basis of the unified systems of Norway and Sweden. Pedagogy and the content of learning are central to unifying reforms in countries such as Finland, France and Germany whereas in Britain they are left more to individual institutions.

The work-based route is more marginal to the unification strategies in Britain than in a number of other European countries. This may be largely

explained by the particular characteristics of the work based route in Britain: its institutional complexity; limited state regulation; and the particular features of the National/Scottish Vocational Qualifications (N/SVQs) that set them apart from qualifications in the full-time sector.

The British strategies also pursue a more open model of unification than other European countries. In particular the unified system that Higher Still will introduce will make the already open Scottish system even more open and flexible. This contrasts with the unified system of, for example, Sweden where more of the curriculum is common or prescribed and the level and volume of attainment for students is set out.

The policy process

The particular unification strategy that a country adopts determines the nature of the subsequent policy process. The policy process to introduce a unified system, for example, has distinctive features compared with the process necessary for the introduction of a linkages strategy. Crucially, a unified system strategy must be system-wide in its application. It requires the prior specification of common principles for curriculum, assessment and certification which must apply across the system: in all kinds of subjects, at all levels, for different types of learners, and in different types of institutions. This is a major political task. It has at least three implications. First, it means that however consultative the process of developing a unified system it must be a more centralised process than other kinds of reform. Second, it is much harder to reach a compromise among the interest groups – different subject interests, school and FE interests, HE, employers, and so on – because in a unified system the same rules must apply across the board, without the sort of exemptions or variations possible in a linked system. Third, given the political difficulty of introducing a unified system policy-makers may be tempted, when the reform is first proposed, to minimise the change it means and to present it as a modest, incremental reform. But this may make it harder to gain understanding and consequently support for the reform when the difficult political decisions have to be faced later. The troubles which have faced the Higher Still reform may be partly explained by these factors.

An incremental approach

It is evident that unification is not a one-off change but is an incremental process that moves through a number of steps and stages on the different dimensions at varying speeds. In Scotland, Higher Still was explicitly presented as a step in an evolutionary process of policy reform. The plans for reform in England following the 'Qualifying For Success' consultation are also

incremental in nature, based on a number of small steps over several stages.

Issues for policy

- Does the incremental approach to unification risk 'strategy drift' and a possible failure to challenge the assumptions and practices of the existing system? Do policy-makers need to spell out the values, goals and 'vision' of a unification strategy at the beginning or can they too develop incrementally?
- Open models of unification have particular implications for the outcome of the reform process. In an open system, institutions have an especially important role in deciding what to offer and how to package it for different types of students. Equally 'end-users' such as universities or employers have considerable influence on what providers decide to offer and what students decide to take up. In the context of Higher Still, there is a danger of a further increase in the influence of universities and further 'academic drift'.
- The particular unification strategy that a country follows has significant implications for the nature of the subsequent policy process; this needs to be considered at the beginning of any reform.
- European comparisons highlight the British focus on certain dimensions of unification. Scotland may be pursuing a unified strategy with Higher Still but there are limits to its scope. Other aspects of unification such as pedagogy, institutions and modes of delivery could be profitably considered. In particular, British unification strategies need to give more consideration to work based training which is currently marginal to the unification strategies here.

Further reading

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Further information

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About this study

The ULP was funded by the ESRC (L1232411039) from 1996 to 1998 as part of its Learning Society Programme. It involved: over 85 interviews with policy-makers, key providers and users; observation of elements of the policy process; and a series of consultation seminars. The project produced 11 Working Papers and several other publications drawing on the study. For a full list of ULP publications, contact Carolyn Newton (contact details below).

Related CES Briefings

No 1: "The Participation of 16-19 Year Olds in Education and Training: Recent Trends" by Paula Surridge and David Raffe.

No 10: "School-to-Work Transitions in Ireland and Scotland, 1979-1991" by Emer Smyth and Paula Surridge.

Other CES *Briefings* cover the curriculum, parental choice, guidance, Youth Credits, youth transitions and new possibilities of official statistics.

For a full list and/or copies of CES *Briefings* contact: Carolyn Newton, CES, 7 Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh EH8 9LW (Tel: +131 650 4193; Fax: +131 668 3263; email: ces@ed.ac.uk).