CHAPTER 5

Institutional responses to a flexible unified system

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THE HIGHER STILL REFORM IS INTRODUCING a flexible unified system of post-16 education in Scotland. The new system will cover nearly all general and vocational education after the end of compulsory school, with the exception of higher education (HE) and Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) which are designed primarily for workplace training. It will bring different curricula (general and vocational), different institutions, different levels of study and provision for different age groups into a single framework with common design rules for the curriculum, assessment and certification. The reform began in 1999 and is being phased in over a five year period. In this chapter we examine the early progress of the reform in Further Education (FE) colleges, the main public providers of vocational education in Scotland. We start by describing the existing Scottish system and the current reforms; we then introduce our conceptual framework, based on the concepts of unification and flexibility; and we then present some findings of a survey of FE colleges on the progress and impact of the reform.

5.1 The Scottish system

Most young people in Scotland attend comprehensive secondary schools from the age of 12. Full-time education is compulsory to age 16, when young people may stay on, usually at the same school, for one or two years of upper-secondary education. In 1999 just over a quarter (28%) of school leavers left at 16, a quarter (25%) left after one year of upper-secondary school and nearly half (47%) left after two years (Scottish Executive, 2001). Many of those who left at 16 or 17 entered Skillseeker programmes of work-based training leading to occupational SVQs. A small but growing minority of early school leavers continued full-time education at an FE college.

Even before the reform, the curriculum of upper-secondary education in Scotland could be described as flexible. The volume, level, content and duration of study varied from student to student. Unlike most other European countries, Scotland has not required students to complete a specified programme of study in order to ‘graduate’ from upper-secondary education. Before 1999, the upper-secondary school curriculum was based on 120-hour single-subject courses: Highers, the main qualifications for university entry, and Certificate of Sixth Year Studies (CSYS) courses which were available in the second post-compulsory year for those who had passed at Higher in the relevant subject. Students took up to five courses in a year and filled the gaps with 40-hour National Certificate (NC) modules. The modules covered a range of general and vocational subjects, specified in terms of learning outcomes and internally assessed (that is, assessed by school or college staff). They varied in difficulty but most were less demanding than Highers.

FE colleges offer general as well as vocational courses although, unlike English colleges, they do not usually offer academic courses to young people in competition with secondary schools. The 46 colleges vary widely, but they all subscribe to a mission which emphasises access and social inclusion. They provide a wide range of courses, at all levels, available through full-time or part-time study or by open or distance learning, to students of all ages. Nearly two thirds of students are aged 21 or older. Before Higher Still was introduced NC modules were an important part of college provision. Other college programmes led to SVQs, Highers, Higher National Certificates and Diplomas (HNC/Ds: higher education programmes below degree level with a vocational emphasis) or other vocational and professional qualifications; some programmes did not lead to formal qualifications. Most college programmes were modular or unit-based and most assessment was internal (carried out by college staff).

5.2 The Higher Still reform

In the early 1990s the Scottish system was seen to be failing (SOED, 1992). A growing proportion of 16 year olds with average- and below-average attainments were staying on at school, where they had to choose between modules, often offered in an arbitrary range of subjects depending on school staffing and resources, and Highers which offered a high risk of failure. Many students mixed Highers and modules and had to cope with their different pedagogies and assessment regimes. Modules had low status and often offered limited opportunities for progression; consequently there was pressure to take Highers even for students who had little chance of success. Able students took programmes of Highers which lacked breadth and depth compared to other European qualifications. Employers complained that young workers lacked ‘core skills’ – formally defined as communication, numeracy, information technology, problem solving and working with others. There were criticisms that standards were too low, that the burden of assessment was excessive and that the system lacked transparency. These weaknesses primarily related to young people and they affected schools more than colleges.

In sum, although the existing system provided considerably flexibility of curriculum and pathways – in the sense that there were few formal restrictions on curriculum choice and students could mix, or move between, the different types of provision – this flexibility was restricted in practice by differences in philosophy, pedagogy and assessment, by obstacles to progression and by the unequal status of different qualifications. The Higher Still reform aimed to rationalise this system and to provide a genuinely seamless and flexible system of pathways. It was announced in 1994 in a document entitled Higher Still: Opportunity for All (Scottish Office, 1994). As the existing system of courses and modules covered colleges as well as schools, the reform included colleges even if the main problems it addressed were those of schools (Howieson, Raffe, Spours & Young, 1997).

The architecture of the new unified system is based on 40-hour units, which may be combined into 160-hour courses; courses and units may be grouped into 640- or 800-hour Scottish Group Awards (SGAs). Units, courses and SGAs correspond to modules, courses and group awards in the old system. Each unit, course or SGA is separately certificated. Students can take free-standing units which are not part of courses, or courses which do not contribute to SGAs. Each unit is internally assessed, often using ‘NABs’ (standard assessments held in a National Assessment Bank). Each course comprises three units, and the remaining 40 of the 160 hours are