FINALLY INCLUDED? THE EVOLUTION OF CURRICULAR ACCESS FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

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ABSTRACT

The article sets its discussion within the current Scottish context of a drive towards a more equitable society in which previously marginalised individuals and groups should be included. The recent Higher Still (HS) curricular reform is seen as part of this drive. The authors first address the issue of the descriptive ‘labels’ of students. They then turn to the central theme of the article: a critical analysis of how Scottish curricular reforms in the past have failed to offer students with learning difficulties full access to a national curriculum and assessment framework. Although some limited advances were made towards including some students with learning difficulties in other reforms, the authors argue that inclusion in a national curriculum and qualification system for students with very substantial generalised learning difficulties has only been attempted through HS.

The final section of the article outlines how institutions have reacted to the opportunities offered by HS in respect of students with learning difficulties, drawing on the findings of a recent study of the implementation of the new National Qualifications (NQs) system of HS. Staff in schools and colleges were positive about the inclusion of students with learning difficulties in the system. However, the article suggests that it is now time to examine a range of as yet unexplored issues: the impact of Higher Still on the teaching and learning experiences of students with learning difficulties; their progression through and beyond education; and whether the curricular inclusion promoted by HS has influenced other forms of inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Concern about societal inclusion of young people with learning difficulties has been a persistent theme in reports and policy developments throughout the European Community and beyond since the early 1980s (OECD, 1981). Inclusive education is seen as a vital step in the achievement of an inclusive society. One of the foundation documents of the inclusive education movement, the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994:1) notes the societal benefits from inclusive approaches to education: ‘Regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and an education for all’. Scotland promotes the mainstream education of children with learning difficulties (SEED, 2002) as part of its wider drive towards becoming a more inclusive society with a democratically responsive Parliament.

We can locate the Higher Still reform of post compulsory education in Scotland within this movement. The subtitle of the Scottish Office document that announced Higher Still, Opportunity For All, summarises the main impetus for reform and signals the intention to create an inclusive system (Scottish Office, 1994). The Higher Still reform introduced a single curriculum, assessment and certification framework for all students in upper secondary schools and in further education (FE) colleges below the level of higher education. Since its introduction schools have also extended its use to the lower stage of secondary school (Howieson, et al., 2004).

The HS reform represents a radical change in the structure and extent of educational opportunities available to students with learning difficulties. The claim of inclusiveness has been made in the past, benevolently but inaccurately, of other curricular developments, as we describe later. But ‘all’, from the inception of HS was documented quite specifically to mean all (Scottish Office, 1994; HSDU, 1995).
'Higher Still aims to provide opportunities for all and reduce stereotypical thinking about, and labelling of, students with special educational needs... Students with special educational needs will participate at all levels of Higher Still provision' (HSDU, 1995: 3). The extent to which issues of access and special needs or learning difficulties permeated Higher Still was quite different from previous reforms and this was reflected in the mechanisms and processes of the Higher Still Development Programme (Hart, 2005). It might be argued that the Higher Still Development Programme integrated thinking about students with learning difficulties into the process of curriculum development in a way that had not been done before in Scotland. As well as the HS reform being a major change in provision, it can also be seen as representing a different model of curriculum development.

DEFINITIONS AND CONTENTIOUS ISSUES

Our particular focus in this article is on students with ‘learning difficulties’. In using this term we are aware of the contentious nature of such terminology. A variety of disputed ‘labels’ such as ‘disabilities’, ‘handicaps’, ‘impairments’ or ‘special educational needs’ have been attached at various times, through successive national reports and legislation, to the young people who are the subject of this article. Such labels and their implications in education are discussed critically by Sternberg and Grigorenko (2001), Thomas (2002), McKay (2002), Westwood (2003). For the purposes of this article and for ease of discussion we use the term ‘students with learning difficulties’ in the understanding given by SOEID in Circular 4/96 ‘...as a rule of thumb, it should be assumed that children or young persons have a “learning disability” if additional arrangements need to be made to enable them properly to access the curriculum’ (SOEID, 1996). We have particularly concerns about those students with substantial learning difficulties who, without intensive support of various kinds, would experience very significant difficulties right across the spectrum of learning, in and out of educational contexts (Robertson, et al., 1994: 1). We suggest that they have been at even greater curricular disadvantage than students who have more discrete or specific difficulties in aspects of their learning related to their physical or sensory impairments, or communication or social/emotional/behavioural difficulties although they, also, were all defined as having ‘learning difficulties’.

‘Inclusive education’ is another contested concept, both for educational researchers and practitioners. Unresolved debates focus on semantic aspects of the term and on related philosophical, educational and research practices (Wilson, 2000: 297 et seq.; Lindsay, 2003). While we do not aim to engage with such debates in this article, it is relevant to outline some aspects that are pertinent to our interest in the impact of the HS reform on students with learning difficulties.

Types of inclusion and Higher Still

In this article we are concerned with curricular inclusion; this is a ‘type’ of inclusion that has generally received less attention. Indeed, Barton and Landman (1993) have criticised Warnock for substantially ignoring the significance of the curriculum in arguments about integration. The Warnock Report (DES, 1978) identified three, not necessarily discrete, forms of what was then termed ‘integration’ within the developing practice of bringing students with and without learning difficulties together in mainstream schools in the 1970s. These were: ‘locational’, as when special classes or units were located in mainstream schools or in the campus of mainstream schools; ‘social’, when children with learning difficulties received their core education separately but participated together in social and non-academic activities; and ‘functional’ where students with learning difficulties learned in the same class alongside their peers and, less explicitly, within the same curriculum. Warnock identified that it was this last ‘functional’ concept that was ‘uppermost in most people’s minds when they speak of integration’ (DES, 1978: 101). Nearly
thirty years on it is also closest to the widespread current understanding among some ‘pro-inclusion’ educationalists about school-age ‘inclusion’ (Booth 1998). The importance of side-by-side learning is also emphasised in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), and in the Index for Inclusion (Booth and Ainscow, 2002: 3). Clarke, et al. (1999: 158), reporting on their ESRC funded study of inclusion, refer to the trend towards ‘locating students with special needs in ordinary classes in mainstream schools in the UK’. Recent legislation in Scotland, England and Wales advocates a shared learning environment, recommending the ‘mainstreaming’ of school pupils with learning difficulties although still retaining some special separate provision, including some special schools (Disability Rights Commission, 2002a; 2002b; Scottish Executive, 2002).

HS with its single common curricular, assessment and certification framework clearly promotes curricular inclusion but does so within a flexible and multi purpose framework that does not explicitly promote ‘mainstreaming’, although neither does it rule it out. The experience of HS in Scotland provides the opportunity to reflect on the extent to which its approach represents a significant step forward compared with other major curricular initiatives in Scotland; to assess how far a common curriculum framework is successful in practice for all learners; and to consider the extent to which curricular inclusion may relate, or contribute, to other aspects or kinds of inclusion.

A HISTORY OF CURRICULAR DISENFRANCHISEMENT

Since 1975, every child in Scotland has been deemed educable in law, in contrast to the previous position when some children and young people with ‘severe, profound and complex learning difficulties’ had been assessed as ‘ineducable’ or even ‘untrainable’. Since the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 Education Authorities have also been required to provide ‘adequate and efficient’ school and further education for their areas. Nevertheless, before the introduction of HS in 1999, secondary and tertiary age students with learning difficulties had limited access to the age-appropriate mainstream curriculum and even more limited access to national certification throughout their educational careers. At best they struggled to appear on the fringes of developments planned, in reality, for their more conventionally successful peers. Special assessment arrangements could be made for students with physical, sensory or other specific disabilities within the existing national examination system but these arrangements did not specifically facilitate the participation of students with more generic learning difficulties for whom the curriculum, in all its aspects, needed to be ‘stretched’ to accommodate them.

The three major curricular initiatives in Scotland since the 1980s — the introduction of the 5–14 curricular guidelines, Standard Grades (SG) and the National Certificate (NC) — did not deliver an inclusive system although the National Certificate did make significant strides in widening access and may be perceived justifiably as the foundation for HS. The 5–14 curriculum guidelines, initiated during the 1980s, have been widely used beyond the age of 14 (year 9) for students who were perceived as ‘not fitted’ for the national Standard Grade examinations. However, the guidelines and subsequent ‘elaborated curriculum’ for pupils ‘working up to Level A’ (the lowest level of 5–14) are widely seen as inadequate, lacking the appropriate curricular approaches and levels. While level A might be attained by an ‘average’ pupil within her/his second year in Primary School, pupils with very substantial generic learning difficulties might be ‘working up to level A’ throughout their entire primary and secondary school career with no certification to show for their efforts at the end. MacKay and McLarty (1999: 797) comment that ‘the most positive aspect of the ‘elaborated curriculum’ is that it has stimulated many schools to devise something better’.

The introduction of Standard Grades (the Scottish equivalent of GCSEs) in 1986
aimed to provide appropriate courses and certification for all pupils by offering three levels of certification in all areas of the curriculum for S3 and S4 students/years 10 and 11 (Scottish Education Department, 1977a; 1977b). Although the SG reforms had a major impact in reducing the proportion of young people leaving school without national certification, they do not cater adequately for the lower end of the ability range. In 1985–1986, immediately prior to the introduction of SGs, 24% of mainstream secondary pupils did not gain any national qualifications. However, this was still true for 8% of pupils after nearly ten years of SGs, in 1994–1995 (SOEID, 1997). Throughout this period, significant numbers of other pupils typically gained only one or two SGs at Foundation, the lowest levels of the SG awards. The exam data for special schools illustrate the inadequacy of Standard Grade for the vast majority of students in this sector: in 1998 only 6% of students in special schools gained one or more SGs at Foundation level or above (Scottish Executive, 2004).

Following the Warnock Report (DES, 1978) and its prioritisation of 16+ education, Further Education college provision for students with special needs grew quite rapidly, especially for students described as having ‘mild to moderate learning difficulties’. But the growth was irregular in spread and most of the curriculum or programmes used initially by this new population of students were college devised and did not result in national certification. The introduction of the modular National Certificate following the publication of the (16+) Action Plan in 1983 (SED, 1983) offered FE the opportunity to develop nationally certificated modules specifically for students with learning difficulties through the national vocational examination board, SCOTVEC. These modules were also adopted progressively by schools for younger students with learning difficulties, creating a continuing demand for fresh provision in FE. Pre-vocational modular group awards were also developed and widely used in both FE and school sectors (Hitt, 1993). The National Certificate modules and modular group awards did indeed offer some access to a national curriculum and national certification (Hart, 1992; Hitt, 1993), and must be credited as providing building blocks towards HS. However, they were only designed to cover a limited number of subject areas and were not seen as one of SCOTVEC’s mainstream activities (Hart, 2005). Moreover, the NC modules were aimed at students with lesser learning difficulties and, as such, were not appropriate for students with more substantial generic learning difficulties.

The Scottish Qualifications Authority, and previously, SCOTVEC and the Scottish Examinations Board (SEB) were working where they could on developing opportunities for students with learning difficulties but these efforts were diffuse. Most school and college students with learning difficulties were still excluded — partially or sometimes totally — from national curricular developments and certification. The educational experience for most was dependent on the internal curricular efforts of individual institutions and their staff. While some students had an appropriate and well-structured learning experience, this was not necessarily the case for others (MacKay and McLarty, 1999).

HIGHER STILL AND STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

An enabling structure

The Higher Still reform and the new National Qualifications (NQs) it introduced offered students with special needs access to the national curriculum and qualifications system by:

i) making available provision at appropriate levels for all students, including those with learning difficulties, by the creation of new provision and adapting existing provision

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ii) ensuring that the curriculum and assessment procedures were accessible to all students including those with physical, sensory or other specific difficulties. This built on the facilitative arrangements that had already been embarked upon.

In this article, we are more concerned with the first aspect of the HS inclusion strategy — the creation of provision at a range of levels — since our key focus is on students with more substantial generic learning difficulties.

Initially five levels of National Qualification provision were developed with the original Access level quite explicitly planned with students with learning difficulties and students with Social Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD) in mind (Tuck, 1999: 708). A modularised route with less external assessment would ‘motivate learners by providing short-term targets, and reward them for partial success as well as helping teachers identify learning difficulties’ (Tuck, 1999: 709). This initial Access level was progressively developed into three Access levels with provision designed to allow lateral as well as vertical progression. The rationale behind this expansion of Access provision into three levels — Access 1, 2 and 3 — was to ensure that HS’s framework would provide students with more substantial generic learning difficulties access to choice in provision and to national certification, especially at Access 1 and 2. This further development was initiated by the Higher Still Development Programme’s Special Needs Sub-committee which had been sensitised by the previous curricular failures, described above. It is notable that it was anticipated that Access 3 would not only address the learning and certification needs of students with lesser learning difficulties but also of a range of other students — those needing an easier starting point, such as late returners to education or students tackling a subject for the first time, as well as those with other diverse reasons for finding learning difficult, such as disaffected students, including some with SEBD.

HS subject development groups included officers who were subject specialists and also ‘special needs/learning difficulties specialists’ from the commencement of work to ensure curricular inclusion at all levels. Such strategies were totally new in curriculum development and contrasted strongly with previous developments. Consideration of pupils with learning difficulties were ‘tagged on’ to the 5–14 curricular guidelines after the development was effectively complete, and more substantial generic learning difficulties were never addressed in the development of SG.

There is now a wide range of Access provision available at all three levels and SQA has a continuing programme of work to develop more units and awards to meet the needs of students with learning difficulties whom it has identified as not being fully served by existing Access 1 and 2 provision (SQA, 2003).

Why HS developed as an inclusive system

Why did HS develop as an inclusive system? While acknowledging that the claim of inclusion as an agent for positive changes in society is a contested one (Ozga, 1994) we would suggest that the inclusive intent of HS was propelled by the growing momentum towards social inclusion in Scotland that, in itself, was fuelled by a sense of frustration at previous forms of exclusion. Within the education community in Scotland, there were leaders and figures of influence with a very strong commitment to pupils and students with learning difficulties. This was true within the Scottish Office and later the Scottish Parliament, but also within the Inspectorate, Scottish Qualifications Authority and the Higher Still Development Unit and its committees. They, their views, and their activities were known within the relatively small and well-networked community of special education and supportive mainstream provision.

This approach to the development of curricular provision for students with learning difficulties can be understood in the context of a well-established tradition.
in the governance of Scottish education whereby a small and cohesive ‘leadership class’ influences and steers the policy process (Humes, 1986). This approach to educational policy making has been the subject of other comments and criticism (e.g., Paterson, 2000; Raffe, et al., 2002) but in the context of HS it helped to deliver a more inclusive design. During the latter half of the 1990s there was a strong sense of many matters of importance at last ‘coming together’ for students with learning difficulties. The momentum established has subsequently been sustained by SQA and SEED, and actively encouraged by the responses of school practitioners and parents. This continuing commitment has been demonstrated by the continuing review by SQA of its special assessment procedures since 1997, its two reviews of Access provision and its programme to expand substantially the number and range of Access units and to develop Access Group Awards (SQA, 2003).

The inclusion of students with learning difficulties is also implicit in the model of HS itself. HS has been characterised as a ‘unified system’ and as such has multiple purposes and a pluralist ethos. A ‘unified systems’ approach aims to bring the different parts of the education and training system within a single framework, include the full range of client groups and encompass all types of learning (Young, et al., 1997). Thus, logically, a ‘unified system’ approach implies the inclusion of students with learning difficulties.

Nevertheless, HS is an ‘open’ model of unification, i.e., one that provides a framework from which institutions may select options rather than prescribing particular provision that they must offer (Raffe, et al., 1998). Therefore, while we can assert that HS is inclusive in its design, the extent to which it is so in practice depends on institutions’ own decisions about the HS levels, courses and units that they decide to offer and how they package these opportunities to students. To consider institutions’ response in practice, we now draw on evidence from a study of the HS reforms.

THE IMPACT OF HIGHER STILL: SOME EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

The Introduction of a Unified System (IUS) project studied the first three years of the implementation of HS. The project involved: surveys of all secondary schools (including special schools) and colleges in 2000–01 and 2002–03; case studies in four schools and two colleges in 2000–01 and 2002–03; analyses of SQA data on enrolments in the first three years of HS. Students with learning difficulties were not the prime focus of the research but the study was wide ranging and did gather some data relevant to the inclusion of students with learning difficulties on which we now draw.

Special schools’ support for the aims of Higher Still

In the surveys, respondents were asked to assess the importance of the aims of HS to their school or college. The list was based on the aims published in Higher Still: Opportunity For All (Scottish Office, 1994). In general, respondents supported the aims of HS, attaching a high level of importance to all of them (Raffe, Howieson and Tinklin, 2003). Several of the HS aims emerged as more important to special schools than to other schools: ‘to enable courses always to be available at an appropriate level’; ‘to develop our students’ competence in core skills’; and ‘to develop our students’ competence across a broader range of skills’.

When asked to judge how much progress has been made towards achieving the various aims of HS, special schools were more positive than other sectors about progress in respect of ‘enabling courses always to be available to students at an appropriate level’ and towards ‘developing students’ competence in core skills’: three quarters of special schools thought that HS had made ‘a lot’ or ‘some’ progress towards achieving this aim.
Implementation of Higher Still

The surveys clearly demonstrate that special schools’ objectives in implementing HS were particularly related to providing a more worthwhile curriculum for lower attainers and to enabling the recognition of previously uncertificated learning. The latter objective, for example, received a mean score of 4.5 on a five point scale where five equalled ‘very important’.

Higher Still was officially implemented on a phased basis from the academic year 1999–2000 starting with the Higher level. Access provision was part of a later phase of implementation. It is a measure of the value placed on HS by the special school sector (and some mainstream schools) that a large number of schools went ahead and introduced provision at the Access levels before national support materials became available. Students were entered for Access level as early as autumn 1999 and by the second year of HS (2000–01) over 70% of special schools in Scotland were using HS Access level provision to extend their curriculum or to replace uncertificated curriculum content (Raffe, et al., 2002). The bulk of HS provision in the special school was, and continues to be, focused on Access 2 and Access 3 levels (table 1). SQA’s more recent focus on developing Access 1 provision (SQA, 2003) will potentially increase uptake of Access 1 in the relatively small population of young people with very substantial learning difficulties for whom it is appropriate.

As described in an earlier article in SER (Howieson, et al., 2004) schools have used HS provision in S3 and S4 although it was designed as a reform of the post-16 curriculum. Although special schools had much smaller Standard Grade provision than mainstream schools, it is evident that where they did offer SG, the level of replacement was generally more substantial in special schools than in mainstream schools. For example, among schools that had used HS provision to replace SGs, 28% of special schools had replaced over 76% of their SG provision in contrast with 4% of mainstream schools that had done so. Their key reason for doing this was ‘to offer provision at a more appropriate level’. Other results from the surveys show that, in addition to using the new National Qualifications (NQs) of HS to replace Standard Grades, special schools were utilising them widely in the lower secondary stage. 65% responded that they were doing so compared with a figure of 47% in mainstream schools, suggesting that special schools found their prolonged use previously of the 5–14 curricular guidelines unproductive and inappropriate.

Impact of Higher Still

Responses to a number of questions in the surveys of schools and colleges indicate that they thought that HS has helped to create a more inclusive curriculum. Nearly three quarters of special schools thought that HS had given their students more opportunity to take courses at a level appropriate to their starting point. In response to a question which asked respondents to rate the impact of HS on provision for different ‘categories’ of students, special schools perceived that the greatest impact was on students with ‘special needs’ and on S3/S4 students not taking Standard Grade – both categories would clearly include students with learning difficulties (table 1). It is also evident from table 1 that their response was even more positive in the second survey in 2002–03, probably reflecting the greater availability of provision across all the HS levels as the implementation programme proceeded. Mainstream local authority schools also thought that HS had benefited these students but not to the same extent as special schools; the latter still attended by most students with substantial generic learning difficulties.
Table 1: What impact has Higher Still had on the school’s ability to meet the needs of particular students? Has Higher Still helped in relation to...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mainstream 2000/01</th>
<th>Mainstream 2002/03</th>
<th>Special 2000/01</th>
<th>Special 2002/03</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>...S5/S6 students with low attainment at Standard Grade?</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...students with special educational needs?</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>1.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...S3/S4 students not undertaking Standard Grades?</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>1.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...students planning to go on to HE?</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>-.79</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...students planning to go on to FE?</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>1.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...students planning to go into employment?</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N (range across items)</td>
<td>(159–205)</td>
<td>(179–209)</td>
<td>(12–50)</td>
<td>(12–45)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Average score on a five-point scale from +2 (strongly agree) to -2 (strongly disagree). Schools only: respondents to both surveys.

Similarly, in FE, Higher Still was perceived as improving the ability of the sector to respond to students with learning difficulties. In the 2001 survey, when asked about the extent to which HS had impacted on their capacity to meet the needs of different client groups, over half of the colleges responded that HS had increased or strongly increased their capacity to meet the needs of clients with learning difficulties (table 2).

Table 2: The impact of Higher Still on colleges’ capacity to meet the needs of different clients (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Has Higher Still affected your capacity to meet the needs of...</th>
<th>strongly increased/increased %</th>
<th>no change %</th>
<th>strongly decreased/decreased %</th>
<th>don't know %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>...16–18 year olds</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...students over 18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...disadvantaged students</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...New Deal students</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...SWAP students</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...students with learning difficulties</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...employers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(N = 28–37, range across items)

HS aimed to provide students with special needs, including those with learning difficulties, opportunities for progression but while such opportunities might exist on paper, they might mean little in practice. The data from the IUS research
suggests that staff, in particular from special schools, perceive real benefits in terms of progression opportunities (table 3). A similar message came through in the case study interviews in mainstream schools and FE colleges: staff were clear that HS does provide meaningful progression possibilities especially when compared with previous provision that was uncertificated or only locally certificated.

Table 3: To what extent do you think NQs offer students with special educational needs opportunities for meaningful progression in practice?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mainstream</th>
<th>Special</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Within your school</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From school to college</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From school to a vocational opportunity</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N (range across items)</td>
<td>(229–240)</td>
<td>(59–68)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Schools only: respondents in 2002–03. Average score on a five-point scale from 5 (a lot) to 1 (not at all).

The survey and case study data also demonstrate that staff thought that HS levels provision below the level of Higher had higher standing compared with the provision that they replaced, including uncertificated provision. Considering the Access levels, nearly 70% of special schools rated each of the Access levels as having higher standing than the provision they replaced. Responses from the mainstream schools were similarly positive. Staff in FE colleges commented that the availability of national certification for the provision that they had been offering to students with learning difficulties had raised its status in the eyes of (potential) students and also of subject staff, making the latter more inclined to be involved in its delivery: “…previously there was not much provision that students [with LD] could get a decent certificate for… so HS means that students have a certificate the same as everyone else, this is a measure of the quality which is important in terms of social inclusion” (Head of Health Care, FE college).

FINALLY INCLUDED?

In assessing the contribution that the Higher Still reform has made, and is making, to meeting the needs of students with learning difficulties, one can reasonably say ‘finally included’ in relation to the planning and much implementation of the national curriculum and assessment system. The previous sections have described how staff in special and mainstream schools and in colleges considered that students with learning difficulties are now significantly more included within the national curriculum and certification system. The point was also made that the availability of national certification for students with learning difficulties has a symbolic as well as a practical value and that this too is positive.

As we have noted, SQA has maintained its focus on provision for students with learning difficulties. It appears that the way in which special needs/learning difficulties were integral to the Higher Still Development Programme has contributed to a way of thinking within the SQA where attention to students with learning difficulties is now a routine part of its qualifications review and development process. HS, to some extent, anticipates the Standards in Scotland’s Schools, etc Act (2000) that gave all children and young people of school age the right to an education directed to the development of the personality, talents and mental and physical abilities of the child or young person to their fullest potential.
The fact that Scotland takes full account of Access provision in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF, 2001) can be seen as a significant confirmation of the importance of Higher Still to the inclusion of students with learning difficulties. The SCQF is a descriptive framework (i.e., one that maps existing qualifications rather than creating new ones). It therefore proved critical when the SCQF was developed that the Higher Still reform had included provision for students with learning difficulties within the new National Qualifications provision.

While we have concluded that the HS reform was planned to allow all, and has actually allowed many, students across the spectrum of learning difficulties to be ‘finally included’, we suggest that there are some unexplored issues which should be addressed.

To what extent are some students, however small in number, still excluded from the curriculum and from access to national certification? Very importantly, is any such exclusion appropriate educationally and ethically? It is not possible to answer these questions without knowing more about the impact of Higher Still on the teaching and learning experience of students with learning difficulties. However, there has been no systematic evaluation of the impact of Higher Still on students with learning difficulties. We suggested earlier that nationally developed and certificated provision should, overall, contribute to a more well-structured learning experience for more students with learning difficulties but, in certain circumstances, might it unduly limit teachers’ scope to develop an individually appropriate programme for some learners? There is a need for research that examines the ways in which the introduction of formally assessed and certificated provision has impacted on the learners studying at the different Access levels.

Another set of questions concerns progression issues. We noted in the preceding section that staff believed that new National Qualifications offer students with special educational needs meaningful progression opportunities. We are now at the stage where it is possible to examine this in practice. Does gaining new National Qualifications benefit students in terms of subsequent education and training and, in particular, do they improve students’ employment prospects? Previous research in Scotland has shown that students with learning difficulties encounter major problems in making a successful transition into the labour market (Ward and Thomson, 1997). A recent review of Entry level qualification in England suggested that although learners thought that employers would consider the qualifications favourably, employers in fact did not actually seem to value Entry level qualifications (QCA, et al., 2004: 21). Is the same true in Scotland or does the inclusion of Access levels as part of the National Qualifications system and of SCQF make a difference to how they are regarded in the labour market?

It might be argued that curricular inclusion as an approach to promoting a more inclusive education system has tended to be sidelined in the focus on mainstreaming. We would suggest that it is timely to explore how curricular inclusion might function with, or support, other forms of inclusion. What, for example, is the impact of curricular inclusion on the strategy of mainstreaming students with learning difficulties? Does curricular inclusion help teachers who are trying to accommodate students with learning difficulties in mainstream classes, for example, by the development in HS of national resources for the teaching and assessment of NQ units and courses? Could it contribute towards wider inclusion with side-by-side learning of diversely able students? Or might curricular inclusion negate the pressure for other forms of inclusion, at least for some young people? It may be worth exploring the extent to which it matters, and to whom it matters, if some students do not learn alongside their peers if they are studying within the same qualifications framework.
NOTES
1 We use the term ‘Higher Still’ to describe the reform process and ‘new National Qualifications’ to refer to the qualifications it introduced.

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