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Differing national models of short cycle, work-related higher education provision in Scotland and England

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The publication of Research Bulletins allows us to disseminate the results of our research activity to practitioners, policy makers, parents, academics and anyone else who has an interest in the key role that qualifications play in economic growth and social inclusion in Scotland.

The paper summarises the findings of the first stage of a comparative study of Higher National Certificates/Diplomas (HNC/HNDs) in Scotland and Foundation Degrees in England that is being undertaken jointly by the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning (CRL) based at Glasgow Caledonian University and the Open University.

There are four stages to this study:

Stage 1

The first stage of this study, and which this paper reports on, explored the emergence of differing policy agendas and frameworks in the two countries.

Stage 2

The second stage is exploring the different types of provision which have emerged in both countries and the roles of different types of stakeholders in shaping this provision.

Stage 3

The third stage will examine and explore the consequences of these models for the experiences of the learners undertaking these forms of learning.

Stage 4

The final stage of the study reports on the outcomes for learners and businesses.

The main purpose of this paper is to examine some of the main policy drivers which have led to these differences, and the consequences for the differences in provision which are now emerging.

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Introduction

Scotland and England now have systems of short cycle, work-related higher education that differ from each other in important respects. ‘Short cycle, work-related higher education’ refers to higher education provision that has a particular emphasis on preparing people for the world of work, is focused on intermediate level skills and occupations rather than the higher professional level occupations, and is shorter in duration than the traditional undergraduate degree. In Scotland, Higher National Certificates and Diplomas (HNC/HNDs) continue to provide the main framework for work of this kind, while in England there has been a decisive move away from HNC/HND provision towards Foundation Degrees (FDs). This brief paper will examine some of the main policy drivers that have led to these differences, and the consequences for the differences in provision which are now emerging.

A comparison of this kind must take into account the very different histories of vocationally-oriented higher education provision in the two countries, and the continuing impact these different traditions are having on provision. In Scotland, the role of further education colleges (FECs) as providers of HNC/HNDs within a national framework developed by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), has been strengthened during the period since the late 1980s (Gallacher, 2006). Associated with this, these colleges are major providers of higher education in Scotland, with around 26% of all undergraduate level students studying in these colleges rather than in higher education institutions (HEIs). Most of these students are taking HNC/HNDs, or a more limited programme of HN Units, rather than degrees. HEIs have no role in validating these qualifications, and have become increasingly peripheral as providers of HNC/HNDs. The recent history of this type of provision has been one of evolution and development of qualifications which have generally been perceived as being successful and appropriate for their role (Scottish Office, 1999).

By contrast, FDs in England represent a new, and in many ways radical departure in the period since 2000. They emerge from a context in which the role of FECs in providing this type of higher education qualification has been much more limited than in Scotland. HEIs have had a much more important role, both as providers of courses and as validating institutions (Parry, 2005). FDs emerged in a context of growing dissatisfaction with the existing provision, and a perceived need to introduce a new qualification that would be more fit for purpose. However, while FDs are in many respects a new and distinctly different form of provision, they continue to provide a key role for the HEIs, both as providers and validating institutions.

There are also differences in the types of national framework that exist. While the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) now provides a Benchmark which offers a framework for the development and implementation of FDs, and Foundation Degree Forward (*fdf*) provides a national framework of support, this does not correspond to the national role of SQA in the development and validation of HNC/HNDs in Scotland. The history of development in England is therefore different to that in Scotland, both with respect to context, and in the extent of

change — with the development and implementation of a radically new structure and the emergence of many new courses.

The establishment of Foundation Degrees in England

Policy drivers leading to emergence of Foundation Degrees in England

The emergence of FDs in England has been associated with a growing concern about a perceived skills deficit at the intermediate (associate professional and technical) level in national policy. This has led to an emphasis on the skills agenda and a consequent desire to remedy perceived deficiencies in existing provision (DfEE, 2000; Blunkett, 2001; DfES, 2005).

While the Dearing Report (1997) had advocated a ‘special mission’ for FE colleges in developing ‘directly funded sub-degree education’, this proposal was not taken up or acted upon by the government or the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). HEIs continued to be major providers of sub-degree higher education (HE), and most of the funding flowed through them. However, growth in these types of courses was slower than growth in degrees. Higher National registrations peaked in the mid 1990s and then declined. Existing sub-degree provision was perceived to be of low status, and hence less attractive to students than degree provision. In this context, there were doubts about the capacity of existing sub-degree provision to deliver the expansion that was perceived to be necessary. There was also a lack of support from employers for Higher Nationals (HNs), which were considered to have lost their employer roots, and the perceived failure to develop new awards in growth areas such as Information Technology (IT), Media, Design, and Hospitality. In addition, there were perceived problems with progression and quality.

All of these perceived problems led to calls for change and the suggestion that new forms of provision were required. In this context, the proposals for FDs emerged. The original proposals for an ‘associate’ degree, equivalent to two years full-time study, were made in the Robertson Report (Robertson, 1994). However, these proposals were not supported by the Dearing Committee (NCIHE, 1997), and it was only in 2000 that the then Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett, launched the idea of Foundation Degrees (DfEE, 2000). This was presented as part of a wider strategy to bring education and employment closer together. In this respect, FDs were presented as a means of achieving the following objectives:

- ◆ Meet a long-standing skills deficit at intermediate level and enable UK industry to compete more effectively with other countries.
- ◆ Fill specific skill gaps.
- ◆ Meet employers’ needs for students with ‘the right blend of skills’.
- ◆ Contribute to meeting the government’s 50% participation target for the 18–30 population, and help widen participation.
- ◆ Develop a work-based route into higher education (HE), with greater flexibility, and opportunities for those who want to enter HE later in life.

- ◆ Ensure that graduates were better prepared for their working lives.
- ◆ Improve progression in some areas to honours degrees.
- ◆ Give a stimulus to lifelong learning, through clearly defined credit and transfer schemes (DfEE, 2000).

FDs were also presented by David Blunkett as the upper end of ‘a new vocational ladder’ spanning secondary and post-secondary education (Blunkett, 2001).

The framework for provision of Foundation Degrees

Establishing Foundation Degrees

Following the outcome of the consultation by the DfEE in 2000, the government announced support for the piloting of 20 prototype Foundation Degrees from September 2001. HEFCE then published a prospectus that set out a framework describing the core features of a Foundation Degree, and inviting innovative proposals to deliver the qualification in the HE and FE sectors. It was not expected that there would be only one model for an FD (HEFCE, 2000). The core features can be summarised as:

- ◆ employer involvement
- ◆ the development of skills and knowledge: technical and work specific skills; rigorous and broad-based academic learning; Key Skills in communication, team working etc; generic skills (eg reasoning) recorded by transcript, underpinned by a personal development plan
- ◆ application of skills in the workplace
- ◆ credit accumulation and planning
- ◆ progression within work and/or to an honours degree

It was highly desirable that employers took an active role, and employer bodies were expected to be involved in the design and on-going review of new programmes, eg through the National Training Organisations (NTOs). It was also desirable that programmes integrated work and study (and not just through work experience). It was confirmed that the new FDs would attract a minimum of 240 credits and enable progression to a higher level. Guaranteed arrangements for progression had to be in place by potential bidders. While a consortium-based approach was encouraged by bidders (colleges, universities, employers), the prospective programmes had to be led by the degree-validating body, ie a university with existing degree-awarding powers. In this way, universities continued to have a central role in the development of this new qualification.

Initial funding for the development of Foundation Degrees, made available by HEFCE in November 2000, was set at £5,200,000 for 2,123 additional student numbers (ASNs) in 20 prototype schemes. Further additional funding was later provided by HEFCE for another 9,065 Foundation Degree places from 2001–02, and further programmes to be developed (up to 40). Additional development funding was also provided by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to help support promotion and advertising campaigns.

A review by the HEFCE Foundation Degree Support Team (HEFCE, 2002) indicated that a range of different programmes had been set up in the pilot year. These reflected local factors and market demand, and also the extent of engagement with existing employer support or regional employer-education links, which varied between institutions and disciplines.

A spectrum in provision was evident, ranging from bespoke courses that met a specific local demand, to what could be seen as almost ‘re-badged HNDs’ and led to the development of a taxonomy with five main types of FD:

- ◆ Meeting a niche employment need.
- ◆ Meeting essential employee needs — where students’ study is directly related to their employment.
- ◆ Helping to deliver sustainable regional collaboration.
- ◆ Adapters — making use of existing sub-degree programmes.
- ◆ Re-badgers — re-naming from HNDs.

According to the review amongst all of the FDs at that time, there were more of the last two types, adapters and re-badgers (HEFCE, 2002).

Variations in the extent of interest from employers in driving demand, in the student experience, in employer engagement, and in approaches to implementation, were noted in the review report. Institutions were working with a variety of local partners, including Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and NTOs/emerging sector skills councils (SSCs).

Developing and expanding Foundation Degree provision

Since the initial launch of FDs in 2000, the policy and implementation framework for FDs has been developed in a number of ways. The 2003 HE White Paper outlined support for an expansion in FDs to embed them more effectively in the HE sector, and to encourage them to be more widely accepted and valued. It therefore proposed that:

- ◆ FDs should become the standard two-year HE qualification
- ◆ HNDs and HNCs should be incorporated into the Foundation Degree framework — some 20,000 HND places were expected to be replaced with Foundation Degrees by 2006
- ◆ FDs should have a central role in the continued expansion of HE to meet the 50% participation target, with the bulk of the growth being in these qualifications
- ◆ coverage of FDs should be extended to other key employment sectors, and responsibilities given to the new sector skills councils to develop FD frameworks with universities and colleges
- ◆ a review of their funding should be undertaken by HEFCE, to ensure that the costs of delivery were adequately reflected
- ◆ greater recognition of the FD as a qualification in its own right was needed

(with ‘FDA’ and ‘FDS’ to be used by graduates after their names)

- ◆ a new national validation service should be set up to give more choice to colleges without degree-awarding powers, and also a national centre for expertise and development
- ◆ further promotion and awareness raising was needed, especially with private sector employers (DfES, 2003a)

A new prospectus (planning document) was issued by the DfES later in 2003 setting out in more detail the government’s case for future expansion, progress to date, and suggested next steps (DfES, 2003b). This gave responsibility to the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA) and the emerging SSCs to establish demand for Foundation Degrees in various sectors; to ensure that where FDs were developed they met identified needs; and to raise awareness among employers about FDs and their benefits. The document also announced the setting up of a new organisation, Foundation Degree Forward (*fdf*), to take the lead in supporting and promoting FDs, and to work with the various bodies (SSCs, QAA etc). Finally, it established a new FD Taskforce to advise ministers on future strategy to implement the plans set out in the 2003 White Paper, and to report on progress in 2004.

In the meantime, the QAA was undertaking a programme of reviews of FDs. Associated with these reviews, a Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark (FDQB) was developed, and within it the ‘defining characteristics’ of Foundation Degrees were elaborated (QAA, 2004). This builds on and refines the core features outlined in the initial HEFCE prospectus. These defining characteristics can be summarised as:

- ◆ Employer involvement: it is important that employers are fully involved in the design and regular review of programmes, and where possible in delivery and assessment, and the monitoring of students, particularly in the workplace.
- ◆ Accessibility: FDs are intended to increase access to, and widen participation in, HE; opportunities to ‘earn and learn’ through work-based learning and the role of FE colleges can be valuable in these respects.
- ◆ Articulation and progression: FDs are designed to make a valuable contribution to lifelong learning by providing access routes for people with other qualifications, eg apprenticeships, and opportunities for progression to other higher education and professional qualifications. Arrangements for the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) and progression to honours degrees should be included in the development of FDs.
- ◆ Flexibility: flexibility is central to many aspects of FDs; this includes full-time, part-time, distance, work-based and web-based learning opportunities, and flexible progression routes.
- ◆ Partnership: partnerships between employers, HEIs, FECs and SSCs are vital in providing programmes that are relevant, valid, and responsive to the needs of learners and employers.

The FDs should also be underpinned by work-based learning (WBL) (QAA, 2004). This Benchmark has now established clear guidelines within which institutions work in developing FDs.

The Foundation Degree Taskforce recommended in the 2003 HE White Paper was established, with Professor Leslie Wagner as Chair. The Taskforce reported in 2004 that FDs had made a successful start, and provided a number of recommendations designed to ‘embed FDs permanently in the landscape of higher education qualifications’ (DfES, 2004, p8). A number of these are discussed in the following sections.

Issues in the implementation of Foundation Degrees

Employer engagement/partnerships

The 2004 FD Taskforce Report states that ‘...the involvement of employers in their [FDs’] design and delivery is a defining characteristic’ (DfES, 2004, p3), and earlier policy documents by the DfES and HEFCE also emphasise employer involvement as a distinctive aspect of FDs. The Taskforce Report recommends that public employers and central government act as exemplars in developing these links (DfES, 2004).

At present, it is difficult to get a clear picture of the nature of employer involvement in FDs. This is in part due to the variety of different kinds of partnership or collaboration activity that have been established (QAA, 2005). Examples of close working between HE and FE staff and employers have been reported through the case studies produced by Foundation Degree Forward and publicised in the *fdf* journal. These highlight the different roles some employers have taken in the design of courses and assessment processes, and through supporting students in the workplace. There is a need for further research in this area to establish the extent and nature of the involvement of employers in these new courses.

The SSCs and the SSDA have played an important role in some sectors, becoming the main vehicle for improving employer-HE partnerships and developing Foundation Degree Frameworks. The Foundation Degree Taskforce recommended that SSCs should take a prominent role with employers, and particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), in stimulating demand for FDs (DfES, 2004). The DfES also proposed, in the 2003 Prospectus, the development of FD Sector Frameworks. These aim to establish demand for FDs by identifying skills gaps/shortages, promote FDs within their sector, and ensure that the FD meets the needs of employers. They have also advised course designers on incorporating the relevant National Occupational Standards (NOS) into awards. Several SSCs have helped in developing specific links between institutions and employers to meet an identified demand (eg in the Aeronautics Industry, Media and IT).

A signal of the importance of the SSC role can be seen in a recent initiative in some sectors to ‘kite mark’ a set of FD courses that meet the approval of the SSC. Another way of ensuring FDs are more firmly established within sectors has been

through the move to embed Foundation Degrees into a new Higher Apprenticeship — see the Science, Engineering, Manufacturing Technologies Alliance (SEMTA). The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) is funding a three-year progression pathways project (due to report in 2006) to encourage links between apprenticeships and FDs in a number of sectors.

Quality and validation

The need to safeguard standards of the new qualification had been recognised as an issue in developing policy for FDs. The initial response to this issue was that only those institutions with existing degree-awarding powers could award FDs. This established the central role of universities, including the Open University (OU) validation service, in the development of FDs. It has also meant the QAA has a key role in monitoring and maintaining quality within FDs. A significant number of FD reviews have now been completed by the QAA under its FDQB, (QAA, 2005).

The FD Taskforce saw some advantages in allowing only institutions with degree-awarding powers to award FDs. It was felt this helped to safeguard standards, sent out a strong signal on the link between honours degrees and Foundation Degrees, and helped raise the status of intermediate qualifications. However, there was also concern that, on balance, this may be rather too restrictive, and makes it difficult to develop a national Foundation Degree award. As a result, the Taskforce Report in 2004 recommended allowing one of the established Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) accredited bodies to award part-time Foundation Degrees in specific vocational areas on a pilot basis, and the 2004 HE Act allowed a loosening up of degree-awarding powers to organisations other than universities, which would help to facilitate this.

There have been several moves to develop national validation and awarding schemes in addition to individual universities awarding FDs. In 2005, agreement was reached for the Universities Vocational Awarding Council (UVAC) to offer a validation service through a consortium of universities and colleges, and to help facilitate credit accumulation and transfer arrangements (especially from FDs to honours degrees at different institutions). Foundation Degree Forward also helps to ‘broker’ accreditation for FDs at colleges, and gives support to partnerships in this.

The impact of these quality assurance systems will be an important issue to investigate in considering the development of FDs.

Funding

Funding for FDs is provided through HEFCE. Weightings are given to FD student enrolments to help with additional support and partnership arrangements, or if bridging courses have to be undertaken before progressing to honours degrees. Additional funds have been given to some colleges and universities for start-up and development costs. The FD Taskforce recommended that these weightings and development costs should be increased to reflect the additional resource costs of FD provision (DfES, 2004).

The government's 2003 HE White Paper indicated that substantial sums (£32,000,000) were pledged for the development of the Foundation Degree up to 2006. This was to include funding for SSDA/SSCs, sectoral frameworks, HEIs and FECs, and individual employers, as well as funds for advertising and promotion. An Additional Foundation Degree (AFD) Places exercise by HEFCE invited further bids from colleges and universities to run from 2004, with funding for up to 50,000 places by 2006. In March 2005, HEFCE invited bids for an additional 30,000 full-time equivalents (FTEs) for academic years 2006–07 and 2007–08. FDs have in this way been given a major role in the expansion of HE (HEFCE, 2005).

The arrangements advocated in the 2003 HE White Paper suggested that most of this funding should go initially to the lead HEI, and then be transferred to the partner FECs. The rationale for this approach was outlined in the 2003 HE White Paper. The role of the FECs in meeting local and regional skills needs was recognised, and it was suggested that this should grow. However, direct funding to colleges was recommended only to support niche provision, or where no HE partner was available. However, the White paper went on to suggest that:

‘...it will be important that any expanded provision is of the quality that we expect from higher education. We believe that structured partnerships between colleges and universities — franchise or consortium arrangements with colleges funded through HEIs — will be the primary vehicles to meet these aims and will best deliver benefits for learners.’ (DfES, 2003a, p62)

In implementing these arrangements, HEFCE has enabled colleges with more than 100 directly-funded FTEs to apply for further direct funding:

‘We believe that establishing a ‘critical mass’ of higher education provision is the best way to protect the student experience, access to HE resources, and staff scholarship and updating in FECs. Colleges with fewer than 100 FTE directly-funded HEFCE higher education students may submit proposals in collaboration with other providers.’ (HEFCE, 2005, p4, para24)

The issue of indirect funding and partnership arrangements therefore continues to be a central, and at times problematic, issue in the development of FDs (NIACE, 2003), and the FD Taskforce recognises that this often complicates the funding arrangements, and recommended that HEFCE should consider increasing the number of FD places directly funded in the FE colleges. One of the remits of *fdf* is to support colleges in their indirect funding partnerships.

Employers contribute to the funding of FDs by paying the fees of employees enrolled on part-time courses, and also employer bursaries. Employers also make a contribution through the time and resources they devote to the development of the awards, and through work placement support and assessment. Whilst employers are viewed as key partners in FDs in this way, they do not receive any of the HEFCE funding, an issue that has been raised by some employers and the Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE), as employers are often inputting considerable resources.

The majority of Foundation Degree students are automatically eligible for support under the government's HE Student Support arrangements.

Current position

In 2004–05, there were estimated to be some 38,000 students enrolled on over 800 FD courses in over 100 HE and FE institutions in England. In June 2006, the *fdf* website recorded over 2700 programmes (but some might not have enrolled any students). Official Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) student data, covering only publicly funded HEIs, shows just over 20,000 students enrolled in total in 2004–05, and 13,000 entrants in 2004–05. This is an increase of 62% over the previous year's figure. There is an unknown number of students (but likely to be considerable, given the 38,000 estimate) enrolled at FECs and not covered by the HESA data.

The FD programmes now cover most disciplines and involve many major public and private employer organisations, though there is a certain amount of clustering: almost half of the total programmes are in three areas — Business, Education and Computing — and a third of 2003–04 HEI students were in Education. As expected, they are attracting a wide range of student groups with a range of entry qualifications, but relatively few with traditional A-level qualifications (Connor & Little, 2005).

The government is committed to increasing places available for the FD programme as 'a key vehicle for expansion of HE' (DFES, 2005, p 37, Part 2). It also wants to improve progression via work-based routes by creating a new family of apprenticeships, from Foundation Apprenticeships to Foundation Degrees. The Taskforce concluded in 2004 that, with continued funding and development, but also greater promotion, it was likely that 50,000 FTE FD students would be studying by 2005–06 (DfES, 2004).

The continuing role of HNCs and HNDs in Scotland

Recent developments with respect to short cycle, work-related higher education in Scotland have been very different from the English experience. As indicated above, HNC/HNDs have been developed mainly in FE colleges, within a framework provided by SQA (previously SCOTVEC). Funding has gone directly to the colleges for this provision. There has been no involvement of HEIs as validating institutions or in assuring quality, and they are only involved on a very limited basis as providers of these qualifications.

In this context, HN programmes have continued to enjoy a relatively high level of support from government, and there has been no pressure from that quarter to replace them with any alternative provision. There has, instead, been a process of evolutionary change.

An evolving national framework

Significant initiatives that enabled colleges to have an increasing role in developing HN provision began to emerge in the late 1980s. In 1985, a new national body was established with responsibility for vocational education and training in Scotland — the Scottish Vocational Education and Training Council (SCOTVEC). In 1987, SCOTVEC carried out a consultation on the future of Advanced Courses. It proposed that Higher National Qualifications should be unitised, and become Outcome-based and internally assessed.

The Advanced Courses Development Programme (ACDP), which was set up after the consultation, gave further education colleges and higher education institutions the opportunity to become directly involved in extending the range of provision. One aim was to strengthen these qualifications by making them more responsive to the market — to direct users (particularly candidates and potential candidates) and end-users (employers and admissions personnel). Direct Scottish Office control over provision was removed, and a national system of validation for new qualifications was introduced under SCOTVEC.

This validation required the production of evidence that:

- ◆ there was a need for the qualification
- ◆ there was industry support
- ◆ it would enhance the national catalogue of qualifications
- ◆ the proposing college(s) had the capability to deliver it

The change from the old to the new system of Higher National Qualifications was carried out between 1990 and 1993, and from that time the number of students entering for HNCs and HNDs rose and continued to rise throughout the 1990s (see below).

The effects of the ACDP were accelerated by two developments in the early 1990s — the SCOTVEC Quality Development Programme and the incorporation of further education colleges.

The impact of SCOTVEC's Quality Development Programme

From 1991, after consultation with its centres and other stakeholders, SCOTVEC instituted a framework of quality assurance principles, elements, and criteria which remains the basis of the quality assurance operated in the National Qualifications system today. There were six 'elements' or quality assurance functions covering:

- ◆ general approval to deliver SCOTVEC qualifications
- ◆ approval to offer specific qualifications
- ◆ validation of new Units
- ◆ validation of new qualifications (Group Awards)

- ◆ internal verification of assessment
- ◆ external verification of assessment

The framework allowed centres to bid to take responsibility for different combinations of these functions. If they could show that they were capable of carrying out the functions they had selected, a contract would be established allowing them to take on these responsibilities, subject to periodic audit. This proved to be a popular move with colleges in particular. When SCOTVEC and the SEB (Scottish Examinations Board) were merged to form the SQA in 1997, the new body maintained the principles, elements, and criteria as the basis of its quality assurance process, although it made some changes to reflect its role and the range of qualifications for which it is responsible.

In the context of Higher National Qualifications, the key elements related to validation. One combination of elements allowed colleges to construct new HNC and HND programmes out of existing Higher National Units, while another allowed them to develop the Units as well. Both of these options were popular, with smaller colleges tending to favour the former.

The devolved approach to quality assurance has probably helped to maintain strong links between Scottish colleges and the national awarding body when colleges became independent and began to redefine their roles and relationship. This has continued to provide the basis on which higher education provision has developed in Scotland's FE colleges.

The impact of the incorporation of further education colleges — 1992 to the present

The introduction of this new approach to quality assurance coincided with the passing of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992, which turned further education colleges into independent bodies and severed the formal link between local authorities and the college sector. There was then a period of competition between further education colleges, in which colleges used their new powers to identify actual and potential markets, and to introduce new Higher National Units and qualifications to satisfy these, leading to a significant expansion of advanced provision.

As a result of these developments, there was a steady growth in higher education level provision in the Scottish FE colleges during the 1990s, with an increase from just over 33,000 students in 1990–91 to almost 72,500 in 2000–01. Almost all of these students were on HN courses (see table 1 below). However, it should be noted that not all of these students were on HNC/HND programmes. A number of students (around 11%) were studying for HN Units, but not completing an HNC/HND. It can also be noted that an important element in this growth was the development of full-time courses, most of which were HNDs.

Since 2000–01, there has been a decline in the numbers of HE level students in FE colleges. This is partly due to the redesignation of some colleges as HEIs which resulted in a decrease of almost 9,000 students between 2000–01 and 2001–02.

This trend has continued, particularly among students studying for part-time HNCs.

Table 1: Undergraduate level students enrolled on HE level courses in FE colleges

	1985–86	1990–91	1995–96	2000–01	2003–04
F/T	6,996	9,431	25,328	31,293	26,943
P/T	23,029	23,722	35,390	41,168	28,668
Total	30,025	33,153	60,718	72,461	55,611

Sources: Scottish Office 1998a and SFEFC Infact Database, 2005

The increase during the 1990s included both the creation of tailored variants of existing qualifications in traditional areas like Engineering, Construction and Administration; and developments in new areas like Social and Health Care, Sports and Fitness courses, and IT Systems and Software. There were also novel developments which were less clearly vocational, such as those which provide routes from non-advanced access programmes into HNC/Ds in Social Sciences, and from there to degrees. The impact of these developments can be seen in table 2, which provides data on the top ten HNCs and HNDs. By 2000 there were around 1,000 HNC and HND titles, and policy makers saw these programmes as making a valuable contribution to the skills agenda (Scottish Office, 1998).

Table 2: Top 10 HNC and HND programmes on the basis of entries — 2004

HNCs		HNDs	
Computing	1,552	Business Administration	794
Social Care	1,517	Beauty Therapy	712
Child Care and Education	1,396	Accounting	598
Administration and Information Management	1,239	Computing: Software Development	549
Business Administration	1,122	Administration and Information Management	546
Accounting	829	Computing: Technical Support	532
Health Care	805	Social Sciences	507
Social Sciences	741	Sports Coaching with Sports Development	415
Social Care (incorporating SVQ at level 3)	338	Engineering: Mechanical	364
Engineering: Mechanical	332	Fitness Health and Exercise	281

Source: SQA, 2004

These colleges were also seen as being very successful in widening access to education, and promoting the social inclusion agenda which continued to be a key

element in Scottish lifelong learning policies, alongside the skills and economic development agendas (Raab & Davidson, 1999; Raab & Small, 2003). HN provision was also recognised as having made a valuable contribution to increasing participation rates in Scotland to more than 50%.

As a result of all of these developments, the colleges and the provision within them continued to be positively perceived by those responsible for government policy. This can be seen in the comment in the Scottish Green Paper on lifelong learning, which stated that ‘FE colleges play a pivotal role in Scotland’s educational system’ (Scottish Office 1998).

HN Modernisation Project

The HN Modernisation Project is now shaping the current framework for provision of HNs in Scotland. This was initiated in the 1990s, but because of the Higher Still programme (focused on provision in schools) within SQA, it only became fully operational in 2003. There is now a five-year programme to review all HNs by 2008. Three key objectives have been identified for this project:

- ◆ Rationalisation — to reduce duplication and inefficiency, and reduce the number of Units and Group Awards by 50%.
- ◆ Improvement of quality and consistency to ensure that all HNs are of similar quality — the newly introduced Graded Units provide an integrated and graded assessment of knowledge and skills.
- ◆ Reduction of assessment burden.

An additional aim of this project is to strengthen links with National Occupational Standards. However, there was no political drive to reshape these qualifications of the kind which drove change in England.

This programme is being managed by SQA and involves a high level of contribution by FE college staff. It is advised by the HN Key Partners Group which has membership from colleges, HEIs, the Association of Scottish Colleges (ASC), the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), Scottish Executive, Scottish Further Education Unit (SFEU) and other stakeholders.

Types of Group Award

HNC/HNDs now fall into one of three categories:

- ◆ Consortium developments: HNC/HNDs with large uptakes. SQA manages the review of these qualifications in partnership with the delivering centres.
- ◆ Specialist/Collaborative developments: specialist HNC/HNDs which are offered by a small number of centres who have agreed to take forward revision on a collaborative basis. The small group of centres manages the review process supported by the SQA HN Partnership Team, and SQA validates and credit rates all Units.

- ◆ Specialist/Single Centre developments: frameworks considered to be unique to local niche markets. The centre manages the review process supported by the SQA HN Partnership Team, and SQA validates and credit rates all Units.

Review and development process

SQA has developed procedures and support mechanisms at a national level as part of this HN Modernisation Project:

- ◆ Qualification Design Teams (QDTs) — Group Awards are now developed by a QDT. For consortium developments, this includes a Convenor, an SQA official, up to five experienced practitioners and other key stakeholder representatives, ie employers, sector skills councils and HEIs.
- ◆ Staff Development and Support — workshops have been provided for college staff involved.
- ◆ Guidance Documents — design principles have been prepared and made available to all staff involved. An HN Toolkit has also been circulated to all colleges.

Issues in the implementation of HNC/HNDs

Validation and quality assurance

The validation of HNs takes place under the auspices of SQA. This involves the validation of HN Units and of Group Awards based on them. Group Awards may be validated by centres that have devolved powers to do so. SQA provides guidance on the procedures for validation. However, since all SQA awards are now being credit rated within the Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework (SCQF), a key part of validation is to confirm the proposed allocation of SCQF levels and credit points to each Unit. Until the process of devolving this to centres is fully worked out, SQA will validate all new or revised HN Unit specifications. This situation is very different from that for Foundation Degrees in England. HEIs have no explicit role in the Scottish validation process, although HE staff may be members of a validation panel. Validation panels are, however, required to include an employer representative.

Quality assurance for HNs depends in part on the SQA procedures for validation and assessment procedures. The colleges are also inspected on a regular basis by Her Majesties Inspectors (HMIs). In contrast to the arrangements for FDs, QAA has no involvement with the regular review of HNC/HNDs.

Employer involvement and work-based or work-related learning

The processes for involving employers in HN programmes and including work-based or work-related learning (WRL) are rather different from those specified for Foundation Degrees. Teams developing HNCs and HNDs are required to conduct market research among employers, and also among potential candidates, to ensure that there is demand for the qualification. The specification for panel membership emphasises the role of employer interests (SQA uses the term ‘industrialists’) in

the process. There must be at least four members on a panel, and at least one of them must be an industrialist. The Chair may be an industrialist, and where the panels have more than four members, the guidance is towards maintaining a balance between educationalists and industrialists.

The guide gives no indication of the kind of individuals who might or might not be deemed to be 'industrialists', other than to state that they 'are selected because of their subject expertise and knowledge of related employment sectors' (SQA, 2003, p11) and are expected to represent the views of prospective employers.

The market research that supports the case for validation is expected to be examined at the validation, and the industrialist(s) on the panel is given the role of determining whether 'the proposed qualification meets the short, medium, and longer term education and training needs of employers in the targeted sectors' and whether 'successful candidates are likely to obtain employment in those sectors at an appropriate level' (SQA, 2003, p11).

SQA has also commissioned research into employers' attitudes towards qualifications and skills. This research indicates that around 80% of employers report that their expectations regarding skills are met by those employees with HNCs or HNDs (Gasteen and Houston, 2005).

There is no explicit requirement to include work-based learning within HN programmes. However, different forms of work-based or work-related learning do appear in a number of programmes. Some will include work-based learning in situations where those in employment are undertaking them on a part-time basis, and project work may involve a significant element of work-based learning. In others, there will be work-related learning in the colleges. For example, a number of colleges will have well established restaurants or hairdressing salons, and practical work there will be an integral part of the HN programme. In others, work placements may be arranged.

Progression issues

Wide ranges of qualifications are accepted for entry to HNs, including academic qualifications such as Highers and General Scottish Vocational Qualifications (GSVQs). However, there is also increased interest in developing routes from more vocational awards such as Modern Apprenticeships, although progress here still appears to be limited. One of the objectives of SCQF is to help stimulate development of this kind, although it would appear that progress towards achieving this objective is still relatively limited (Gallacher et al, 2005).

A related issue is the one of progression from HNs. Candidates who complete HNs use these qualifications in a number of ways. Some are already in employment, and the HN is a means of improving qualifications. Some proceed from college to employment after completing their HNs. However, it is clear that a large number progress to further study or training after completing their HN qualifications. Table 3 provides some data for students completing full-time HNs. However, note that it does not include data for those completing part-time HN qualifications.

Table 3: First destination of full-time HNC and HND students by level of qualification obtained 2000–01 (percentages)

	Permanent home employment		Study/training		Unemployed	
	HNC	HND	HNC	HND	HNC	HND
	31	31	56	56	5	6

Source: Scottish Executive 2004

Systematic data about progression is still very limited. However, there is evidence that many students who complete HN qualifications now proceed to degrees. The extent to which this happens clearly varies between HN awards in different subject areas. Some evidence of the extent of transfer of students through these links is available from data published by the former Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) — see table 4. In 1999–2000, SHEFC reported that 3,703 entrants to Scottish HEIs had HNC/HNDs as their highest qualification at entry (SHEFC, 2002). Given that the figures published by the Scottish Further Education Funding Council (SFEFC) indicate that about 13,000 students completed full-time HN programmes, and that about half of these students were on HNC programmes, many of whom would progress to HND programmes, a figure of 3,703 entrants to degree programmes could well be a fairly large proportion of all students completing full-time HNC/HND programmes who are not progressing to another HN programme.

Table 4: Students entering HEIs in Scotland for whom HNC/HND or similar was highest qualification on entry: 1999–2000

	Number of entrants with HNC/HND as highest qualification	Percentage of all entrants
Ancient universities	303	3%
1960s universities	568	8%
Post '92 universities	2,665	25%
Art/music colleges	167	13%
Total	3,703	13%

Source: SHEFC, 2002

From table 4 it can be noted that, although the four ‘ancient universities’ admitted more than 10,000 students, only 303 entered on the basis of an HNC or HND. The outcome is that, while FE colleges have had considerable success in widening access, the progression routes available to students after study in FE colleges are still limited, and the main opportunities exist in the post-92 sector (Gallacher, 2006). This issue of the links with degrees raises important questions both regarding the progression opportunities available to students, and the implications for the design of programmes that may be both vocational qualifications, and transitional awards.

As with FDs, the issue of progression, either to employment or further study, is an important one for HNs.

Funding

Funding for HN programmes is provided directly to the colleges by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC). The SFC was established in October 2005 by merging the Scottish Further Education Funding Council (SFEFC) and the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC). This policy of direct funding to colleges from a single source is another respect in which the situation is quite unlike that in England, and provides colleges with an element of clarity and control regarding their funding streams. However, there is a continuing concern expressed by representatives of the FE colleges that the unit of resource for HNC/HNDs in colleges is lower than that provided for degrees in HEIs. The new SFC, which is responsible for funding all teaching and learning in Scotland's colleges and HEIs, will undertake a review of its funding methodologies. The impact of this for funding of HNC/HNDs will emerge over the next few years.

Conclusions and implications for the comparative study

Scotland and England have very different systems of short cycle, work-related higher education. These reflect differences in the history of provision in each country, and recent policy developments. A number of key issues emerge when the differing approaches towards development and implementation are considered.

- ◆ **The roles of colleges, universities and national agencies.** These differ considerably between the two systems. In Scotland, there is a national system of HN qualifications, provided by the FE colleges, which has been developed and is now being renewed within a national framework established by SQA. While colleges often work in consortia to develop HNs, these consortia do not have a major impact on the funding or delivery of these programmes. HEIs have very little involvement in this provision. In England, while a national Benchmark to guide the development of FDs has been established by QAA, and support is provided by *fdf*, the framework is quite different to that provided by SQA in Scotland. The English regional frameworks have also been strengthened, but are supportive rather than regulatory. HEIs continue to have a key role in the validation and delivery of these programmes, and funding flows through them in many cases. Consortia involving both universities and colleges continue to have a key role in the development and implementation of these programmes. A variety of college/university relationships and types of programmes are emerging.
- ◆ **Involvement of employers, SSCs and professional bodies.** The importance of involvement of employers, SSCs, and appropriate professional bodies in designing and reviewing these programmes is recognised as being of key importance in both systems, and mechanisms are in place to ensure this involvement. In Scotland, national guidelines and procedures are in place. In England the QAA Benchmark emphasises the importance of employer involvement. However, the ways in which it is implemented will depend more

on regional and local responses. The nature and extent of these forms of involvement, and their impact on the programmes, requires more systematic investigation.

- ◆ **The nature and extent of work-related learning.** While the vocational nature of both HNs and FDs, and their role in developing occupationally relevant skills, has been emphasised, it is in the FDs that the importance of work-based learning has been emphasised more strongly. Work-based learning is an essential element of the FD. In HNs, the emphasis on work experience as an integral part of the programmes is less strong, and there is more emphasis on securing the vocational nature of these programmes through the design process. However, it is also clear that many HNs do include work experience and work-based or work-related learning as a central part of the programme.
- ◆ **The student experience.** The impact of these different approaches to programme design and implementation on the students' experiences requires further investigation.
- ◆ **Validation and quality assurance.** There are considerable differences in the approaches towards validation and quality assurance in England and Scotland. In England, HEIs have a key role in validation and establishing the quality assurance frameworks. QAA has a key role in monitoring the quality of provision, and has already produced a number of reports (QAA 2004; QAA 2005). Some measures are now in hand to widen the range of bodies that can validate FDs. In Scotland, colleges develop HNs in co-operation with SQA, and the validation arrangements are under the auspices of SQA. Quality assurance depends both on SQA procedures, and the role of the HMIs. These different approaches can potentially have very different consequences for the institutions (and particularly the FE colleges) involved, and for the development of the programmes.
- ◆ **Entry routes and progression.** For HNs and FDs there is considerable interest in providing qualifications which are not just vocationally relevant, but provide flexible entry routes and progression routes for candidates who often do not have traditional academic qualifications. While there is considerable evidence of the success of HNs in providing flexible entry routes in Scotland (Gallacher, 2006), there is a lack of robust evidence regarding progression routes, and it would appear that links to vocational qualifications such as Modern Apprenticeships are still limited. There is also evidence of the success of FDs in providing opportunities for students who do not have traditional academic qualifications (QAA, 2005). However, given that FDs are still relatively new, patterns of progression are only now being established, and there is a lack of systematic data regarding these issues.
- ◆ **Funding.** The direct funding of colleges to provide HNs by the SFC, and the more complex funding systems for FDs, which often involve relationships between FE colleges and HEIs, has been outlined above. The implications of these arrangements for the institutions involved require further investigation. There are also issues regarding the costs associated with providing programmes of this kind, and the extent to which they are adequately covered by existing funding systems. In this respect, the establishment of the joint Funding Council in Scotland raises interesting issues. There are also issues regarding the role of employers, and the extent to which they should either

receive support to reflect their contribution to these programmes, or themselves be contributors to meeting the costs.

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Glossary of Terms

Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)
Additional Foundation Degree (AFD)
Additional Student Numbers (ASNs)
Advanced Courses Development Programme (ACDP)
Association of Scottish Colleges (ASC)
Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE)
Department for Education and Employment (DfEE)
Department for Education and Skills (DfES)
Foundation Degrees (FDs)
Foundation Degree Associate (FDA)
Foundation Degree Forward (*fdf*)
Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark (FDQB)
Full Time Equivalent (FTEs)
Further Education (FE)
Further Education Colleges (FECs)
General Scottish Vocational Qualifications (GSVQs)
Her Majesties Inspectors (HMIs)
Higher Education (HE)
Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)
Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)
Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)
Higher Nationals (HNs)
Higher National Certificates and Diplomas (HNC/HNDs)
Information Technology (IT)
Learning and Skills Council (LSC)
National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE)
National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE)
National Occupational Standards (NOS)
National Training Organisations (NTOs)
Open University (OU)
Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA)
Qualification Design Teams (QDTs)

Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)
Regional Development Agencies (RDAs)
Sector skills councils (SSCs)
Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA)
Science, Engineering, Manufacturing Technologies Alliance (SEMTA)
Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework (SCQF)
Scottish Examinations Board (SEB)
Scottish Funding Council (SFC)
Scottish Further Education Funding Council (SFEFC)
Scottish Further Education Unit (SFEU)
Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC)
Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)
Scottish Vocational Education and Training Council (SCOTVEC)
Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)
Universities Vocational Awarding Council (UVAC)
Work-based learning (WBL)
Work-related learning (WRL)