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<td>Dwivedi, Deeptanshu; Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway, Chemical Engineering Strandberg, Jens; Aker Solutions, Halvorsen, Ivar; SINTEF, Applied Cybernetics Preisig, Heinz; Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway, Department of Chemical Engineering Skogestad, Sigurd; Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway, Chemical Engineering Dept.</td>
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Experimental verification on active vapor split
control for dividing-wall columns

Deeptanshu Dwivedi,† Jens P. Strandberg,†,§ Ivar J. Halvorsen,‡ Heinz A.
Preisig,† and Sigurd Skogestad*,†

Department of Chemical Engineering, Norwegian University of Science and Technology,
Trondheim, and Applied Cybernetics, SINTEF, Trondheim

E-mail: skoge@ntnu.no

Abstract

Dividing-wall distillation columns offer large energy savings, typically up to 40 % over
conventional column sequences. However, the energy required for a separation depends on
using an optimal vapor split. Hence, the energy saving potential may be lost if the column is
operated away from its nominal point, for example, due to feed composition changes. This
work demonstrates that the vapor split can be effectively used as a control degree of freedom
for example, for temperature control in the prefractionator section. Together with an adjustable
liquid split, the vapor split allows for optimal operation.

Keywords: Thermally-coupled columns, Dividing-wall columns, Petlyuk column, Kaibel column
Figure 1: Dividing-wall columns with prefractionator section to the left of the dividing wall and “main” column section to the right.

(a) Petlyuk column for three products

(b) Kaibel column for four products
(a) Three-product Petlyuk column: Boilup (V/F) vs Vapor Split Ratio ($R_V$)
Data: Equimolar feed of methanol, ethanol and propanol with zero vapor fraction
Purities (mol %): 97.6 % (D), 97.3 % (S); 99.6 % (B)
Stages: 40 in prefractionator and 80 in main column (including top and bottom sections)

(b) Four-product Kaibel column: Boilup (V/F) vs Vapor Split Ratio ($R_V$)
Data: Equimolar feed of methanol, ethanol, propanol and n-butanol with 50 % vapor fraction
Purities (mol %): 98.9 % (D); 98.0 % (S1); 98.0 % (S2); 99.8 % (B)
Stages: 40 in prefractionator and 100 in main column

Figure 2: Effect of vapor split ratio ($R_V$) on boilup (V/F) for fixed purity specifications in dividing-wall columns. ($R_V$ $\equiv$ fraction of vapor boilup that is sent to prefractionator from the main column)
Introduction

Dividing-wall distillation columns such as Petlyuk arrangements and the Kaibel column, shown in Figure 1 offer large capital and energy saving potentials compared to conventional schemes.\textsuperscript{1-3} Their control and operations, however, remains a challenge. For three-product separation, the energy savings can be up to 30\% using a standard dividing-wall (Petlyuk) column with a single side stream. The Kaibel column with two side streams (Figure 3) can give up to 30\% energy savings for four-product separation. However, the energy saving potential can be lost if the column is operated away from the optimum vapor split ratio (see Figure 2). Thus, the flexibility in operation of such systems at minimum energy over a large range of feed conditions or product specifications, can be restricted by the absence of an active vapor split during operation.

Dividing-wall column have been successfully implemented industrially BASF.\textsuperscript{4} In the academic community, several works have been reported on start-up and operation of three-product Petlyuk columns (\textsuperscript{5-7}). However, all earlier works exclude the use of vapor split as a degree of freedom. Agrawal and Fidkowski\textsuperscript{8} suggested as an alternative to use a vapor side draw from. Halvorsen and Skogestad\textsuperscript{9} showed that the feed vapor fraction affects the optimum operation of Petlyuk columns. Therefore, another alternative is to use the feed enthalpy as a degree of freedom, where the vapor fraction or degree of sub-cooling in the feed is varied to achieve optimum operation.

To motivate the need for active vapor split in dividing-wall columns, we first consider some simulation results. Halvorsen and Skogestad\textsuperscript{9} studied steady state optimal operation of three product Petlyuk column. They reported that there may be a narrow operating window with respect to various degrees of freedom for operation of such system at minimum energy. The control system should carefully designed to operate within this range to ensure operation at minimum energy. Further, this operating window may change in presence of various disturbances such as feed com-
position and feed vapor fraction.

We confirm these results with a simulation study on a three-product Petlyuk column separating equimolar saturated liquid feed of methanol, ethanol and propanol. The Wilson model is used for the vapor-liquid equilibria and we assume constant molar overflow. For the given purity specifications, the boilup is minimum (V/F=1.33) for a vapor split ratio (R_V) of 0.37. In Figure 2a, we plot the minimum boilup (V/F) required as the vapor split ratio is fixed at values different from its optimum value of 0.37. By “minimum”, we mean that the liquid split (R_L) has been adjusted so that the boilup is minimized for each R_V.

Next we consider an example of the four-product Kaibel column separating equimolar feed of methanol, ethanol, propanol and n-butanol with 50 % vapor fraction. Again the Wilson model is used for the vapor-liquid equilibria and we assume constant molar overflow. The boilup (V/F) as a function of the vapor split is shown in Figure 2b. The boilup is minimum for an optimum vapor split ratio of 0.52 and again increases in both directions. Recently Ghardadn et al.\textsuperscript{10} have reported a detailed study on the need of active vapor split for four-product Kaibel columns. In summary, the simulation results in Figure 2 shows that the energy usage (boil-up, V/F) is sensitive to the value of R_V, and this motivates the need for introducing the vapor split (R_V) as a degree of freedom during operation.

In this work we demonstrate the use of direct active manipulation of the vapor split using an experimental four-product Kaibel arrangement (Figure 3). The experimental column consists of separate sections, but it is thermodynamically equivalent to a single-shell dividing-wall implementation (Figure 1b).

**Experimental Setup**

Figure 3a shows a schematic of our experimental column which is thermodynamically equivalent to the dividing-wall arrangement proposed by Kaibel\textsuperscript{2} for separation of a feed into four products (D, S1, S2 and B) of desired purity. The column subsections are numbered for easy reference;
Figure 3: (a) Schematic of four-product Kaibel column with adjustable vapor split ratio (R_V)
(b) Picture of the experimental column
(c) Location of temperature sensors.
Figure 4: (a) Schematic and (b) picture of the two vapor split valves\textsuperscript{11}
Sections 1 and 2 constitute the prefractionator while section 3 to 7 constitute the main column.

In Figure 3b, we show a picture of the experimental column. The height of the column is 8 meters and it operates under atmospheric pressure. The column subsections are packed with 6-mm glass Raschig rings. The column sections have packed sections with temperature probes and their locations are shown in Figure 3c.

The reboiler is of the kettle type and its power is controlled by voltage to the heater elements through a thyristor. The water-cooled condenser is mounted on top of the column. The condensed vapor flows back to the column due to gravity; a part is take out as top product and the rest forms the liquid reflux. The control setup is implemented in Lab View™ on a standard PC.

The liquid reflux split valve RL1 and the valves for the products, D, S1 and S2; RL2, RL3 and RL4, respectively are all swinging funnels. These are controlled by externally placed solenoids. Since these are ON/OFF valves, a continuous output of the PI controller is implemented using pulse width modulation.

**Vapor Split Valves**

The two vapor split valves are made in stainless steel and are operated by externally placed electrical motors using rack and pinion assembly. Figure 4a shows a schematic of the valves. There are two such valves, one below section 2 and one below section 6 (denoted V1 and V2 in Figure 3a), but they should be operated such that one of them is always fully open. The vapor flow rate through the valve is manipulated by opening and closing a cap that sits on a steel valve seat. There is a liquid downcomer which is needed to allow the liquid to flow against the pressure drop over the valve. The downcomer is designed to ensure that the vapor passes only through the clearance between the cap at the seat.

The circular pinion of each valve is powered by a step motor. The full span of the valve is divided into 150 small steps. In the current setting, the free cross section in the valve is somewhat too large, which results in very small required movements. As will be shown in the section below, the valve can affect the flows only in the first 10 steps. Whilst the performance of the valve could be
significant improvement, having such a poor resolution provides an excellent case for demonstrating
the effect of feedback, which we document below.

**Experiment**

**Vapor Split valve behavior**

The first experiment was designed to test the behavior of the vapor split valves. This was done
under total reflux conditions (no feed or products) and with constant liquid split ($R_{L1}$) using only
two chemical components, namely methanol and ethanol. After charging the reboiler, the heating
was started with a fixed duty of 1.9 kW.

After reaching steady state operation, step changes were made to vapor valve V1 while valve
V2 was fully open. The results are shown in Figure 5, where we show the effect of these changes
on one prefractionator temperature ($T_2 \equiv TP5$) and one main column temperature ($T_5 \equiv TM7$).
Any change in the vapor flow rate resulting from changes by the vapor split valve should lead to
changes in these two temperatures. The output of the liquid split valve is manually fixed during
this run.

When we close valve V1 from 15 steps to 10 steps at around 3 minutes, temperature $T_2$ starts
decreasing gradually while $T_5$ starts increasing. This indicates, as expected, that less vapor is being
sent to the prefractionator, while more vapor is being directed to section 6. At around 7 minutes,
V1 is further closed by 5 steps. This gives a more noticeable change in the vapor flows and is
clearly indicated by about 1 K drop in $T_2$ and about 0.6 K temperature increase in $T_5$. This change
is reversed when valve V1 is opened from 5 steps to 15 at about 13 minutes. A series of changes
between 10 steps to 15 steps shows insignificant changes in the two temperatures. At around 33
minutes, V1 is closed from 8 steps to 3 steps. This leads to sharp changes in temperatures $T_2$ and
$T_5$. At 37 minutes, the valve V1 is opened from 3 steps to 50 steps. Since the vapor dynamics
are very fast, the initial response on the temperatures is very quick, but the steady-state is restored
more slowly.
Figure 5: Experimental Run: Effect of changing the prefractionator vapor split valve, V1 with valve V2 fully open on prefractionator (T₂) and main column (T₂) temperatures.
We can conclude from this experiment that only the first 10 steps of the 150 steps are really effective, so the resolution is poor and the valve opening is too large. Nevertheless, we will see that the valve is acceptable for control purposes.

**Closed loop experiments: Total Reflux**

![Diagram showing split range logic (SRC) used for the vapor split controller]

Figure 6: Split range logic (SRC) used for the vapor split controller

To study the suitability of the valve for feedback control, we performed a set of experiments under total reflux conditions using only two components, namely methanol and ethanol, with a fixed duty of 1.9 kW.

To minimize pressure drop, one of the valves should always be open. To ensure this, the valves are controlled using a split range logic as shown in Figure 6. For a controller output of 0, valve V1 is closed and valve V2 is fully open, while for a controller output of 0.5, both valves are fully open. Notice that we assume that 10 steps corresponds to a fully open valve.

The vapor split valves are used to control the temperature difference between the prefractionator and the main column, $\Delta T = T_2 - T_5$ as shown in Figure 7. The proportional-integral (PI)
Figure 7: Control Structure used for total reflux experiments where vapor split ($R_V$) is used to control temperature difference between sections 2 and 5 ($T_S = T_2 - T_5$; $T_2 \equiv TP5$ and $T_5 \equiv TM8$ in Figure 3c).
controller is tuned using the SIMC rules\textsuperscript{12} with the tuning parameter selected to be $\tau_c = 2$ minutes.

![Graphs showing temperature and output over time]

Figure 8: Closed-loop experimental run 1: total reflux conditions.

Figure 8 shows a series of setpoint changes for $\Delta T$. We plot the controlled variable ($\Delta T$) and the controller output ($R_V$ in the range 0 to 1), which through the split range logic changes the valves (V1 and V2). The figure also shows the two individual temperatures ($T_2$ and $T_5$), the two valve opening step values (V1 and V2) and the values for the liquid split ratio ($R_L$) and reboiler duty ($Q$).

Note that at any time at least one of the valves V1 or V2 is fully open.

For first 20 minutes the setpoint is unchanged at 0 K and the temperatures are steady. At 23 minutes, the setpoint for $\Delta T$ is increased to 4 K, which requires increase in the vapor flow to the prefractionator. This setpoint is reached in about 7 minutes without any overshoots. This is followed by a series of setpoint changes which can be tracked as well. At about 100 minutes, a disturbance is introduced by increasing the reboiler duty by 0.2 kW. This is shown by an increased
difference in temperature by about 0.6 K. But the controller can bring the controlled variable back to the setpoint of 0 K. In summary, we see from Figure 8 that the vapor split valves are fully acceptable for closed-loop operation.

![Figure 8: Vapor Split Valves Acceptable](image)

**Figure 8: Vapor Split Valves Acceptable**

Figure 9 shows another experiment under more difficult conditions. With a large setpoint change for ΔT of +5 K at about 3 minutes, the output of the controller saturates and the setpoint cannot be reached. The reason is probably that the valve V2 is nearly fully closed. However, when the setpoint is reduced, it can be reached. During last 30 minutes of the run, we also give disturbances by changing the output of the liquid split valve between 0.4 to 0.46. These disturbances can also be handled by the vapor split valve.

Based on these experiments, we conclude that even with rough manipulation of the vapor flow, yields good temperature control when implemented in an appropriate feedback loop.

**Figure 9: Closed loop experimental run 2: total reflux conditions**

![Figure 9: Closed loop experimental run 2: total reflux conditions](image)
Figure 10: 4-point temperature control structure for continuous operation of Kaibel column using active vapor split ($R_V$) for control of prefractionator temperature ($R_{L1}$ is kept constant, but could have been used for control for example, of a temperature in top section of prefractionator).
Closed loop results: 4 Product Kaibel Column

Figure 11: Closed-loop experimental run: Continuous operation of Kaibel column using 4-point temperature control with active vapor split ($R_V$).

Strandberg and Skogestad\textsuperscript{13} found in a simulation study that a 4-point temperature control scheme with one temperature controlled in the prefractionator can stabilize the column and as well as prevent “drift” of the composition profiles during operation. Correspondingly, in our previous experimental work,\textsuperscript{14} we used the liquid split ($R_{L1}$) to control a temperature in prefractionator (with a constant vapor split $R_V$).

Here, we show that the temperature in prefractionator can be controlled equally well using the vapor split $R_V$ (with a constant liquid split, $R_{L1}$). Figure 10 shows the control structure where a sensitive temperature in prefractionator section 2 ($T_2$) is controlled using the vapor split valve. In
addition, one temperature in each of sections 3, 5 and 7 are controlled by the distillate split valve ($R_{L2}$), upper side product split valve ($R_{L3}$) and lower side product split valve ($R_{L4}$), respectively. The details of the loop pairing is given in Table 1. The additional degree of freedom, i.e., the liquid split is not used in this stabilizing layer and is available for optimizing objective such as to reduce energy consumption for a required purity specification.

### Table 1: Four-point temperature regulatory control structure for Kaibel column $^{a,b,c,d}$

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<th>Manipulated Variable</th>
<th>Controlled Variable</th>
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<tr>
<td>Loop 1</td>
<td>Vapor split valve ($R_V$)</td>
<td>temperature in section 2 ($T_2$)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Loop 2</td>
<td>Distillate split valve ($R_{L2}$)</td>
<td>temperature in section 3 ($T_3$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loop 3</td>
<td>Upper side product split valve ($R_{L3}$)</td>
<td>temperature in section 5 ($T_5$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loop 4</td>
<td>Lower side product split valve ($R_{L4}$)</td>
<td>temperature in section 7 ($T_7$)</td>
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$a$ The ratio $R_{L1}$ is fixed and is not used in the control structure.

$b$ Controlled variables are temperatures as shown in figures Figure 3c: $T_2 = T_{P5}$, $T_3 = T_{M3}$, $T_5 = T_{M8}$ and $T_7 = T_{M14}$.

$c$ Definitions of swinging funnel ratios:

\[
R_{L1} = \frac{L_1}{V_2}, \quad R_{L2} = \frac{L_3}{L_3 + D}, \quad R_{L3} = \frac{L_5}{L_5 + S_1}, \quad R_{L4} = \frac{L_6}{L_6 + S_2}
\]

where, $L_1$, $L_3$, $L_5$ and $L_6$ are liquid flows in sections 1, 3, 5 and 6, respectively. $S_1$ and $S_2$ are side product flow rates (see Figure 3).

$d$ $R_V = \frac{V_V}{V_2} = \frac{V_2}{V_2 + V_6}$

where, $V_2$, $V_6$ and $V_7$ are vapor flows in sections 2, 6 and 7, respectively (see Figure 3).

An experimental run is shown in Figure 11. At about 8 minutes, the setpoint for the temperature $T_2$ controlled by the vapor split valve (Loop 1) is changed from $90^0C$ to $92^0C$. This setpoint change can be handled well and the temperature settles in less that 5 minutes. The other temperature loops show some deviation due to interactions, however, all the temperatures are brought back to their setpoints in about 20 minutes.

There is a large scope for improving the vapor split valve and suggesting alternative designs. Nevertheless, even with our prototype valve with poor resolution, experimental results show that the vapor split can be manipulated effectively in feedback mode to achieve more energy efficient operation of dividing-wall columns.
Discussion

Feedback implementation of vapor split

We here argue in favor of feedback control using vapor split valves to set “optimum vapor split” between prefractionator and the main column in dividing-wall columns. There are two advantages of using the vapor split valve for using vapor split valve in feedback loop. First, the vapor split valve is a very fast handle since the vapor dynamics are much faster than the liquid. Further, there is no need to precisely measure the vapor split, the feedback action can “drive” the vapor split to its optimum value by tracking some controlled-variable like a composition or a temperature (Figure 10).

The additional degree of freedom, i.e., the more precise liquid split can be used for optimizing objective such as to reduce energy consumption for a required purity specification.

Conclusions

The experimental results show that the vapor split can be used as a degree of freedom during operation of integrated columns, such as, Petlyuk, Kaibel and dividing-wall columns. In particular, it is useful for closed-loop temperature or composition control, where deficiencies and inaccuracy in the vapor valves are corrected for by use of the feedback.

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