

Policy learning across the four countries of the UK: FE and skills in England

Report of Seminar 2, 27th September 2017, Department for Education, London.



Institute of Education

Introduction

Seminar 2 further explored the key research question for the seminar series (*What can be learnt in terms of new knowledge and practical application from a comparison between FE and skills policy in the four countries of the UK?*) with a focus on current policy and practice in England. The following notes record the main points arising from plenary discussion and the two panel sessions; with the latter involving perspectives from all four countries of the UK. The four presentations that acted as stimuli for the discussions [see <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-centres/centres/centre-for-post14-education-and-work/projects/fe-skills-four-countries-uk>] were:

- An overview of the English FE and skills system [Department for Education]
- A characterisation of and commentary on the English approach to FE and skills [Professor Ken Spours, UCL Institute of Education]
- An employer perspective [Rebecca Plant, QA Ltd]
- A college viewpoint [Lisa O'Loughlin, Principal of Manchester College].

Thematic summary of points raised in discussion

Data

Participants welcomed the way data from different sources had been brought together in the DfE presentation. This provided an important aid towards understanding developments in the system. However, a number of suggestions for further refinement were discussed:

- Being clear about the definition of 'colleges' in different tables, since some appear to include Sixth Form Colleges while others do not.
- Disaggregating the different vocational qualifications which are often amalgamated into a single category in the tables.



- Drawing on material from the Longitudinal Education Outcomes Database, now available in England, to correlate trends in post-16 participation with the date of implementation of the raising of the participation age for young people.
- Using recent destinations data at the end of KS4 to analyse further whether there is any correlation with a decline in the amount of schools' vocational provision.
- Looking at the distribution of Apprenticeships by cost of provision, particularly in relation to the growth in Apprenticeships participation among adults.

Apprenticeships and other vocational provision

There were divergent views about employer commitment to and engagement with apprenticeships, possibly reflecting variable experiences in different sectors. The English approach has rejected the idea of more broadly-based generic apprenticeships (as in Germany and several other European countries) in favour of much more specific provision tailored to the needs of individual occupations. It was suggested that this offers training providers the opportunity to tailor training to meet employer requirements.

In Government policy rhetoric there is now a much stronger emphasis on promoting vocational provision, although it is too early to judge how far this will translate into participation and achievement. The impact of the apprenticeship levy on employers and their attitudes towards the new T Level qualifications will be crucial.

Some participants argued that it may be useful to distinguish the 'primary purpose' of different types of provision (for example the primary purpose of A Levels is to facilitate progression to HE, whereas the primary purpose of the new T Levels is to promote employability). However, 'employability' can be difficult to define precisely and it was recognised that employers are also looking for generic skills from graduates from FE and HE programmes.

Local partnerships and skills eco-systems

FE Colleges should be included as core partners in any local eco-system of FE and skills, alongside local authorities, employers and HE providers, it was suggested. A 'hub and spokes' model has been proposed following a review of provision in the London region, with the largest provider in an area acting as the hub.

School performance tables continue to have a major impact on whether students move into FE after KS4, since schools with sixth forms select on the basis of ability. It would be in the interests of all students if providers accepted collective responsibilities and targets rather than pursuing the individual targets that encourage an essentially competitive system. Very prescriptive funding levers have historically had a significant impact on shaping provision. Some of the current funding rules militate against collaboration between schools and colleges, whereas it would be better to empower local partners to reach decisions reflecting local needs. There are examples suggesting further blurring of the lines between different types of provider, for example universities directly involved in some Level 3 provision on behalf of employers, an area traditionally associated with FE providers. Competition of this type between providers threatens the quality and sustainability of provision.

The local skills ecosystem can at times seem confusing for providers and for employers. Competition between providers most often outweighs attempts to promote collaboration, even when there is a disposition to favour the latter. Defining areas of responsibility for different providers would be a helpful way of promoting collaboration. Much of the recruitment by larger employers focuses on higher level graduates. Local skills ecosystems need to be more widely focused to cover the needs of lower ability students and the skill requirements of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

An important factor to be taken into consideration is that learners cannot always be expected to go along with a direction indicated by the 'system'. For example, learners from particular social backgrounds may only be prepared to study HE courses in a college environment and would not do so at university. It was noticeable how much discussions in the seminar focused on providers rather than learners, perhaps because provider views are taken as representing a proxy for students. Students are typically seen as the customers in the system.

Employer engagement

Large, established employers have shown that they can manage provision effectively outside the FE system. Employers like Rolls Royce, for example, effectively define the standards they require and present these to colleges rather than trying to fit within existing college provision. However, SMEs, which now predominate in most sectors of the economy, often have neither the resources nor the skills and knowledge to achieve this. They may also be unclear about future skill requirements resulting from technological change and may need more support from colleges and independent training providers. There is also a need to safeguard the futures of students/trainees by providing them with transferable qualifications that give them credibility beyond the individual company in which they train.

Colleges would like to be more responsive to employer wishes, for example in developing students' generic skills such as presentational skills, but their capacity to do this is constrained by the requirements of specific qualifications and by limitations on the funding of programmes of study. Some employers have well-developed links with particular universities for recruitment purposes, including work placements as part of degree programmes. It could be helpful for employers and FE colleges to be able to develop a greater number of similar longer-term partnerships.

It is important to promote ongoing relationships between employers and training providers for other reasons too, such as the initial design of new vocational qualifications, in order to be able to influence the continuous development of provision to meet changing requirements. The responsibility for training is, of course, not just down to education and training providers. Larger employers can fulfil a 'skills obligation' to their local communities, for example, by bringing SMEs into the supply chain and working with these suppliers to help meet their skills needs. Group training associations could also be promoted as a means of helping SMEs define and meet their skills needs.

Employers in England, it was suggested, are also less well organised collectively than in many other countries. This makes it difficult to establish what their skills needs are and to encourage them to work together on skills development. It is also unrealistic to consider employers as a single entity, since there are huge variations in terms of size, sector and recruitment requirements. Employers can also be in competition with each other in demand for skills as in other aspects of their work. In terms of policy-making, careful thought is needed about how best to develop and nurture collective sectoral bodies to represent employer interests.

Comparisons across the UK

England

The English 'system' can be characterised as a series of marketplaces. There are differing views as to who the customers are from a provider perspective - employers, students, Government, or OFSTED (acting as a proxy for the eventual customer). FE in England seems to be defined by default (i.e. what it is not (school or university) rather than what it is) and there is a strong supply-side bias, with little prominence given to either student or professional practitioner views. Moreover, FE colleges in England have traditionally had the freedom to lay on provision to meet student demand, which has led to them being more generalist rather than specialist institutions. Adopting a more systemic approach would be likely to reduce this freedom, by defining the college role more precisely.

Scotland

There is a distinctive college sector in Scotland ("Scotland's Colleges"), which is different in some respects to that in England. There has been a growing emphasis in Scotland on social inclusion alongside the vocational aspect of the college role. Most students progress from college to further study, often into HE, not directly into work. While there is involvement in various aspects of the apprenticeship programme, private training providers also have a major role in this respect. Scotland's Colleges continue to seek to develop relations with employers, which take a range of different forms. The Scottish Government has used funding from the apprenticeship levy to establish a Flexible Workforce Development Fund which will be delivered in partnership between employers and the college sector.

Collaboration seems better established in Scotland, particularly between colleges and HEIs (an HNC/D course in a Scottish college often represents the first stage towards a full degree). In Scotland there are now 'regional outcome agreements', agreed between the funding council and the education providers in that region, which form the basis for funding allocations. Competition is viewed as being expensive and not very productive. Although most regions now have just one college, there are three in Glasgow, which have to collaborate in order to agree regional outcomes.

Wales

The number of colleges has been reduced from 23 to 13 in Wales and college principals talk directly as a group with Ministers in Wales. Nevertheless, there are outstanding concerns about both overlaps with provision in schools and differences in funding levels compared to schools, which will need to be resolved. The Welsh system does not in itself directly promote either a collaborative or a competitive approach. However, the Welsh Government is very clear about the priorities for Welsh colleges and this has the effect of defining and constraining their role (for example, there is a strong emphasis on promoting the community agenda, but they have little involvement in Apprenticeship provision). The Hazelkorn Review 'Towards 2030: A framework for building a world-class post-compulsory education system for Wales' is currently prompting quite far-reaching thinking about what a future system should look like.

Northern Ireland

The introduction of an 'Entitlement Framework' in Northern Ireland was designed to encourage collaboration between schools and colleges in post-16 provision. However demographic decline in the 14-19 cohort has had the effect of intensifying competition, including examples of some schools starting up vocational provision, for example in hairdressing.

In conclusion

From discussion at the seminar it appears that there is a greater sense of competition between providers for 16-19 year-olds in England than in the other three UK countries. Arguably, the FE and skills systems are more cohesive in other parts of the UK than in England. A coherent system requires clarity about what different providers are expected to supply in order to meet the needs of students and employers. It should also be noted, however, that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have much smaller populations than England and even than some English regions. This clearly has a significant impact on policy development, since the main protagonists are able to meet face-to-face to take into account one another's perspectives. Moreover, the issues of scale and regional difference that are present in England are not so acute elsewhere in the UK.