

# Policy learning across the four countries of the UK: The case of FE and skills

Seminar 3, 14<sup>th</sup> December 2017, Belfast Metropolitan College



Institute of Education

## Introduction

Seminar 3 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 Northern Ireland (NI). These notes record the main points arising from plenary discussions and panel sessions; with the latter involving perspectives from all four countries of the UK.

Five presentations 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>]:

- An overview of the NI FE and skills system [Beverley Harris, Department of Education, NI]
- How do policy and strategy translate into practice at college level? [Paula Philpott, South East Regional College]
- FE Model of Excellence for Students with Severe and Complex Learning Difficulties [Alison Anderson, Belfast Metropolitan College]
- Meeting Employer Needs in Emerging Digital Technologies [Ian McCormick, Belfast Metropolitan College]
- IT Services Curriculum Overview [Phil Allen, Belfast Metropolitan College]

## Main features of the 14-19 system in Northern Ireland

Policy responsibility for 14-19 learning is shared in NI between the Department of Education (DENI) and the Department for the Economy (DfE). DENI is responsible for the school sector, including the statutory curriculum and assessment arrangements. DfE is responsible for the policy, strategic development and financing of the statutory further education sector.

While the Departments set policy, curriculum knowledge resides in the colleges. There are six FE Colleges in NI, spread across 40 campuses and this is treated very much as a single sector. The colleges provide courses ranging from Entry Level to Level 4. The role of FE is seen as addressing skills gaps and helping people to acquire the skills they need to secure employment. In particular, the FE sector is regarded as critical to providing skills for emerging digital technology and creative industries. The sector supports both the economic growth and the social inclusion agendas at the strategic policy level. There is a current cross-departmental



project between the two departments on 14-19 policy, which is looking at qualifications, the parity between academic and professional qualifications, pathways and progression in 14-19 learning and essential skills. One third of young people in NI go abroad to study, so the system has to recognise this.

## Thematic summary of points raised in discussion

### Project-based learning

NI colleges are putting an increased emphasis on the development of Project-Based Learning (PBL). This is active learning to tackle real and complex challenges. It is collaborative, student-centred, cross-disciplinary and incorporates self-evaluation. Provision frequently involves the use of multi-disciplinary projects and digitally-enabled communication (including in some cases with partners in other countries).

First impressions are that this style of learning can be a challenge for young people coming directly from a school environment. However, it has proved successful, particularly in developing communication skills.

PBL has implications for college staff who need to develop or extend professional, technical, pedagogical and collaborative skills. A range of different continuing professional development (CPD) options is being introduced to develop these. Occupational standards are used as the basis not just for qualifications but also for CPD.

Colleges have worked closely with Awarding Bodies from an early stage to ensure that PBL is designed in ways that meet their requirements. NI colleges have also established a wide range of international collaborative arrangements, many of which support PBL.

### Hubs and specialisation

The NI college sector is developing a series of 'Hubs', with one college identified as the lead or 'anchor' in each different occupational area. The aim is to develop curriculum excellence, linked directly to employer requirements. This will then lead to

the same curriculum being followed across all colleges through collaborative arrangements. The reforms are expected to take five years to complete. They will cover Apprenticeships and Traineeships as well as mainstream FE provision.

In discussion, the idea of Hubs and specialisation was seen as attractive. It could provide a means of seeking to redress the relatively low status of colleges when compared with academic education providers in all parts of the UK by projecting FE and the college sector on the basis of centres of excellence (as is often the case in HE).

### FE college relationships with employers

Employers are increasingly looking for employees who can take risks and show initiative, as well as having relevant experience and qualifications. It was argued that it will be important to develop students' skills in critical thinking, since many jobs will become automated as a result of rapid technological change. Employees will also need to enhance their skills while in employment. Colleges are looking to develop 'the whole student' – one with a mix of relevant professional, technical and entrepreneurial skills, together with the attitudes and attributes expected in the sector concerned.

All NI colleges place a strong emphasis on establishing close partnerships with employers in their areas. There is a real focus on the dual professionalism of tutors and lecturers in FE, with college staff encouraged to spend time with employers in their sector to develop their skills and keep abreast of latest techniques and emerging skill requirements. Projects run by colleges also enable students to develop direct links with employers.

DfE supports the promotion of employer engagement in the sector by posting any new developments on its website as soon as it hears about them. The Department works through colleges and employers to address any skills gaps identified by employers.

In discussion, questions were raised as to whether having a common curriculum in each sector across the country can be consistent with meeting the local needs of employers. It was also questioned how accurately employers can anticipate future skill needs in their sector and how else these can be anticipated and built into qualifications and curriculum development.

## Comparisons with England, Wales and Scotland

The seminar inclined to the view that NI sensibly treats FE as a single system, with an emphasis on developing and sharing curriculum excellence and pedagogical innovation. By comparison, England is seen as operating a competitive, marketised system. Nor has there been anything like the same focus on pedagogy in England as appears to be the case in NI. There is evidence of individual innovative projects in particular departments or colleges, but these are isolated cases rather than part of any system-wide development similar to the emphasis on PBL in NI. In England the focus is mainly on examinations, with no widely available equivalent of PBL.

As in NI, there is also now a strong regional dimension to Scotland's Colleges. This is reflected in 'regional outcome agreements' between the funder and colleges to reflect differing needs in different parts of the country. Glasgow College was cited as providing an example where provision is being developing that moves away from traditional subject-based approaches by setting up 'industry academies'.

There appear to be increasing commonalities between Wales and NI in terms of IT provision. There have also been some developments in Wales similar to PBL, although there is a greater sense of autonomy in colleges. A lot of changes are taking place and lecturers no longer feel in control of the curriculum, so PBL initiatives should be seen as the exception rather than the norm.

Standards are being set through national occupational standards bodies in Scotland, Wales and NI and these are intended to reflect both current and future employer needs. England has in effect opted out of this approach. Colleges in England face a much more competitive environment than those in other parts of the UK. However, English colleges can be seen as having greater flexibility to respond to international developments and opportunities.

Although there is still an extensive 'bottom end' to the labour market (those in low skill, low pay and low productivity jobs), provision of adult skills training seems to have faded from view in policy terms in all parts of the UK. It is largely invisible in terms of policy rhetoric and has effectively been squeezed out by the current emphasis on tackling social inclusion, developing higher level technical skills and developing younger learners. However, the Scottish Government's most recent guidance to the Scottish

Funding Council has indicated a move away from prioritising young people and a need to provide ‘access to opportunities for part-time learners, learners over the age of 24 and those returning to learning for up-skilling and re-skilling’.

### Conclusions from the seminar

FE in all parts of the UK has become closely associated with tackling social inclusion. It is important to understand whether schools are being expected to help meet that agenda to the same extent, as this will have major implications, for example in terms of expectations and priorities.

If Government decides to manage FE as a system, it may prove slower to adapt and change, less flexible and less entrepreneurial than one where institutions have greater autonomy. However, it will promote more active collaboration because colleges do not see themselves as competing with each other, with greater opportunities for knowledge sharing and more equity for learners in different localities. English colleges are arguably better geared up to react to the latest policy change or directive than to employer requirements and developments such as digitalisation.

It is important to keep in mind the environment in which colleges operate, which is affected both by national policy and by the presence and approach of other institutions operating in or adjacent to the FE sector. These clearly vary in different parts of the UK and this shapes how colleges react to local, national and international developments. FE provision is part of a wider system and is inevitably partly defined by the other elements of the system – in other words, developments in the school system, private training provision and/or HE have implications for FE - and can work with or against the sector.

FE colleges in all parts of the UK have responsibilities for meeting emerging employer skill needs, helping to tackle social exclusion and supporting progression to HE. It is important in policy development terms to try to understand how best colleges can reconcile these three potentially conflicting drivers.

One of the aims of the project is to move beyond simply concepts of convergence and divergence between the four countries of the UK and to focus on where lessons may be learnt for policy and practice. NI appears to be developing an exciting open and entrepreneurial model for vocational education and institutional collaboration that has much to offer FE colleges in England, Scotland and Wales.