

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

Seminar 4, 1st February 2018, Glasgow City College



Institute of Education

Introduction

Seminar 4 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 Scotland. These notes record the main points arising from plenary discussions and UK-wide panel sessions. Four presentations and a briefing paper acted as stimuli for the discussions:

- The changing roles of colleges in Scottish society and the economy – Professor Jim Gallacher
- The Scottish Government perspective – Hugh McAloon, Deputy Director Fair Work and Skills, Scottish Executive
- Skills Development Scotland (SDS): policy and practice – Katie Hutton, Director of National Training Programmes, SDS
- Colleges and outcome agreements – Seamus Spencer, Scottish Funding Council (SFC)
- The practitioner’s perspective - Paul Little, Principal, City of Glasgow College

The briefing paper and PowerPoint presentation slides used to accompany these presentations are available through the following link:

<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-centres/centres/centre-for-post14-education-and-work/projects/fe-skills-four-countries-uk>

Main features of the skills system in Scotland

The development of a skilled workforce is seen as an integral element of economic policy in Scotland. Scotland's Economic Strategy focuses on the two mutually supportive goals of increasing competitiveness and tackling inequality. The Scottish Government’s approach to delivering this is underpinned by four priorities for sustainable growth “the four `i’s”:

- Investing in people and *infrastructure* in a sustainable way
- Fostering a culture of *innovation* and research and development
- Promoting *inclusive* growth and creating opportunity through a fair and inclusive jobs market and regional cohesion
- Promoting Scotland on the *international* stage to boost trade and investment.

Scotland does not recognise the term Further Education as it is used in England. Instead, “Scotland’s Colleges”, are treated as a distinct tertiary sector which is expected to play a major role in supporting the country’s economic strategy.



Colleges are regulated through three non-departmental public bodies. Skills Development Scotland (SDS) is responsible for the national training programme (including apprenticeships), framework and standards development, careers guidance and industry engagement. The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) has responsibility for allocating the annual funding for colleges and universities (currently some £1.6 bn) and, since 2012-13, has done so by negotiating “outcome agreements” with colleges and universities that link to national strategic priorities. The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) develops recognised qualifications as part of a system that is inclusive and accessible to all and provides pathways to further learning.

Thematic summary of points raised in discussion

Oversight of Scotland’s Colleges

A rationalisation of Scotland’s Colleges took place following the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013. This reduced the number of colleges from 43 to 26. They cover 13 regions, most of which now have just one college, although there are three larger multi-college regions. The outcome agreements negotiated with each college are intended to reflect the Government’s strategic policy objectives (compared with the previous mechanistic approach to budget allocations). Current strategic priorities include high quality and efficient learning, access for people from the widest range of backgrounds and promoting a developed workforce.

SFC has adopted three-year funding agreements revised annually to align with the college strategic planning cycle. It has also introduced standardised indicators of performance across colleges. Outcomes are now expressed consistently across the sector, so that national aggregate figures can readily be calculated. The model does not promote a market-driven approach as in England.

In terms of monitoring and inspection, Scotland is moving towards a greater emphasis on self assessment and support for improvement from inspectors. This is seen as representing a more responsive and dynamic approach. Colleges themselves favour the ‘light touch’ inspection and quality assurance regime and, in this respect, outcome agreements were welcomed initially. However, the system is seen as becoming more and more onerous, as new elements tend to be added to the outcome agreements each year without a corresponding reduction in existing requirements.

Distinguishing features of Scotland's Colleges

The changes in Scotland's Colleges over the past decade have made them unrecognisable from the incorporated institutions that existed previously. Government Ministers now frequently refer to the country's "world class" colleges, whereas previously this term was only applied to universities. Colleges have increasingly broadened their offer to encompass elements of higher education - HE students now account for some 20% of all college students (compared with just 7% in England). However, there has been a net reduction in funding and student numbers in colleges (down 38% in the last decade), in contrast to increases in the university sector. This has led to the college sector becoming more policy-driven and at times a more difficult relationship with the Government. At the same time colleges are expected and continue to make a major contribution to Scotland's economy and are considered good value for money.

College engagement with employers

Colleges see employer engagement as important, but the proportion of students progressing directly into work has been decreasing steadily and now stands at just 17% of those leaving full-time courses, with a majority proceeding to some form of further study. The more practical colleges can be in recognising the circumstances affecting employers, the more the resulting programmes are likely to meet employer needs and expectations. Employers are less receptive when they feel they are being forced to fit into a rigid qualification framework. Although larger employers are often willing to engage with providers in the development of training programmes, SMEs typically do not have the resources to do so. A new pilot Flexible Workforce Development fund in Scotland (funded through the apprenticeship levy), although offering only modest grants, offers a possible means of supporting college engagement with SMEs.

Glasgow City College's City Learning 4.0 model was cited as an approach that resonates with industry. It is presented as an open and adaptive approach to 21st century learning. The college sees its challenge as preparing for "generation alpha" with a move increasingly towards personalised learning. The college hopes to reach a position where it can make a guarantee of a successful outcome to 100% of its students. It is working closely with employers to develop its programmes and aims to introduce more that lead to 'terminal' qualifications, rather than those that provide a pathway into HE.

Apprenticeships

Scotland is diverging from England in its approach to the apprenticeship levy. In direct response to the views of employers, all funds raised through the levy will be invested in skills, training and workforce development to meet the needs of employers, the workforce, young people and Scotland's economy, not just apprenticeships as in England. The employer response on apprenticeships often reflects a desire to adapt the framework and tailor accreditation more to the specific requirements of a particular sector. Scotland-based employers eligible to pay the UK Apprenticeship Levy can access up to a maximum of £10,000 of college provision through a £10m pilot Flexible Workforce Development fund, designed to address skills gaps and contribute to increased productivity.

The framework for Apprenticeships has remained relatively stable in Scotland compared with other parts of the UK (the term Modern Apprenticeship is still used), but employers, particularly those operating in more than one country, have expressed concerns over the divergence between Apprenticeship models in different parts of the UK. This reflects a worry about the extent to which Apprenticeships will in future be 'portable' across national boundaries. Colleges play a major role in the delivery of Apprenticeships, although some are more effective than others in terms of engaging with employers and their flexibility to meet employer expectations and requirements. Foundation Apprenticeships, which include an element of work experience but can be offered alongside academic qualifications for 16-18 year olds, are unique to Scotland. The fact that they are recognised by universities as the equivalent of Highers helps with parity of esteem.

Tackling inequality

During the most recent recession, the Scottish Government focused heavily on tackling youth unemployment. This led to a significant reduction in the rate from 23% to 10%. The focus has now shifted to addressing the needs of the most disadvantaged groups across the workforce as a whole and to tackling some of the more deep-rooted inequalities, such as gender imbalance in the take-up of STEM subjects. Colleges are seen as playing a much bigger role than universities in promoting inclusivity and in schools, there is a strong emphasis on 'learning to learn', which is intended to ensure that all young people are adaptable to future labour market requirements.

Comparisons with England, Wales and Northern Ireland

Scotland has maintained and strengthened a systematic approach to addressing skills needs and utilisation, as distinct from the market-driven approach adopted in England. Skills policy is seen as an integral component of much broader economic policy and strategy development. It operates under the auspices of established national bodies (SDS, SQA and SFC) that work in partnership. Policymakers in Scotland have closer and more direct links to providers than is the case in England, because of the smaller scale of the system. There also appears to have been a more consistent political commitment to follow through and build on policy developments over an extended period of time, rather than frequent changes of tack. The Scottish approach to young people's learning in schools also contrasts with that of the English Government. In England the main emphasis is on academic rigour and there is little focus on employability skills. Nor is the 'learning to learn' emphasis in Scotland's schools reflected in the current approach in England. FE in England still sees itself as a distinct sector, whereas the SFC in Scotland covers both FE and HE. Colleges in England see school sixth forms and independent training providers, rather than HE, as their main competitors. Delivery of HE programmes in English colleges is relatively marginal, with the vast majority of provision at Level 3 or below. This has implications for the status of colleges.

Northern Ireland (NI) is grappling with similar problems to those being tackled in Scotland, but for the past year has lacked the political leadership to provide a strong sense of direction and purpose in policy setting. Like Scotland, NI is moving towards closer employer involvement in policy development and has promoted a collaborative (rather than competitive) institutional environment, with an emphasis on regionalisation and meeting employer needs. However, colleges in NI are seen as the second choice option for most students, which adversely affects their status and self-confidence. The school system in NI is very different, reflecting the religious divide in the country.

Recent policy development in Wales, as in Scotland, has put greater emphasis on consultation, listening to the views of providers and taking account of research findings and has distanced itself from the strong market-led approach adopted in England. Colleges in Wales have ambitions to expand their provision of tertiary programmes. The Hazelkorn Review is proposing a new regulatory body to take responsibility for all post-16 provision (including school sixth-forms), which will be potentially very controversial and take them beyond the tertiary approach followed in Scotland.