

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

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Institute of Education

## Introduction

Seminar 5 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 Wales. 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.

- *Skills, Higher Education and Lifelong Learning 2018-2021* – Huw Morris, Director of Higher Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, Welsh Government
- *Apprenticeships in Wales: policy, practice and portability* - Sam Huckle, Further Education and Apprenticeships Division, Department for Education and Skills, Welsh Government
- *Policy and practice with apprenticeships: an employer perspective* - Huw Mathias, Training Delivery Manager, Tata Steel
- *Gower College Swansea: responding to priorities in the region* - Mark Jones, Principal, Gower College
- *FE in Wales: opportunities and challenges* - Rachel Bowen, Director of Policy and Development, CollegesWales.

The 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 current FE and skills policy in Wales

The underlying aim of policy in this area is to improve the well-being of future generations. This is embedded in the national strategy document *Prosperity for All* (September 2017). Skills is one of the five priority areas identified as having the potential to make the greatest contribution to long-term prosperity and well-being. The “well-being” goals can be seen as a radical new development and they are gradually filtering down through the culture of Welsh Government. They set out the kind of society Welsh people aspire to in the future.



Wales continues to have relatively high rates of unemployment and economic inactivity, as well as lower productivity, compared with England. Policies since devolution have sought to tackle these issues. The statutory age for leaving compulsory full-time education has remained at 16 and there are no plans at present to change this. The number of young people in the NEET category has reduced from its previous high level and this is seen as a major success.

Future policy is building on the Welsh Government's response to the Hazelkorn Report (*Towards 2030: A framework for building a world-class post-compulsory education system for Wales*). The report recognises the increased complexity of the post-compulsory education and training system and the risk of unhelpful competition between different providers (FE, HE, work-based learning and adult and community learning). The report's recommendations envisage a more integrated tertiary sector, although the thorny issue as to whether school sixth forms will be included in the framework is still to be settled.

## Thematic summary of points raised in discussion

### Oversight of Welsh Colleges

Colleges in Wales have a direct relationship with the Welsh Government, from which they receive the majority of their funding. Each year they receive a 'priorities' letter from the Government, setting out a wide range of priorities they are expected to deliver. Colleges are also required to set regional and local priorities. There is continuing pressure to make better use of the Government funding available and to become less reliant on direct state funding.

CollegesWales represents the interests of the 12 FE colleges in Wales. It is similar in some respects to the Association of Colleges in England, although a lot smaller in scale, which allows it to develop closer links with individual colleges and policymakers.

College governing bodies appear to have been much more open to change (notably mergers) than their counterparts in England, who often came across as very protective of their own colleges during the Area-Based Review process. Many college governors in Wales are also on the boards of other institutions and, therefore, able to see the bigger picture and to judge what is in the best interests of learners. The Welsh Government has sought to encourage and incentivise mergers where appropriate, but has been unwilling to force them through.

### Distinguishing features of Welsh Colleges

Rationalisation and mergers have reduced the number of FE Colleges in Wales to 12. Some colleges are heavily involved in the delivery of A Levels and the number of apprentices has risen fourfold (from 300 to 1,200) in the last two years. There are significant differences in post-16 provision in different areas of the country, depending on whether schools have sixth forms. This has a major impact on college enrolments. Competition with school sixth forms is a major issue. FE is concerned not to be seen as a 'Cinderella service' by comparison with sixth forms and universities. However, there is also evidence of collaboration between institutions, including delivery by some FE colleges of 14-16 vocational provision for school students.

The size of the main Government grant to colleges has reduced in recent years, so colleges have to raise more funding from other sources. The grant is made on an annual basis, which inhibits colleges' ability to develop firm longer-term plans.

### Social Partnership

Implementation of Welsh Government objectives is based on a social partnership model, involving trade union and employer representatives. This approach is strongly embedded in Wales and has had the support of all the political parties that have been in government since devolution. Senior people in the main organisations tend to know each other well, which helps promote a sense of cohesion. In the FE and skills area, three Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs) have been established covering the whole of the country to promote partnership working. RSPs comprise representatives of employers (large and small), providers and the Welsh Government. They produce regional skills plans identifying priorities, drawn from a set of (currently) seven national priorities. In future it is intended that Government funding will only be available to support frameworks endorsed by the RSPs.

### Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships in Wales focus on meeting employer needs. All apprentices must have employed status. They are regarded as critical to jobs and growth in the economy. They also represent good value in terms of returns on public investment.

There are concerns that the balance of Apprenticeship provision does not fully reflect current needs and priorities. For many years apprenticeships in Wales followed a very traditional model. The Government is seeking to encourage more apprenticeships in areas of emerging skill shortages (particularly engineering, construction and ICT), a more even gender split, greater provision for young people and a higher proportion of opportunities at Level 3 and above to meet projected skill needs and help promote

economic growth. The capacity to provide sufficient apprenticeships is affected by the fact that some 95 per cent of all employers in Wales are SMEs.

There are differences in the apprenticeship frameworks between England and Wales. Employers are questioning why there cannot be common standards across the UK. They believe there is too much autonomous decision-making in colleges, leading to a lack of consistency. Companies can at times exercise leverage over decisions when they are funding high numbers of apprentices, but this is not always the case. The introduction of the apprenticeship levy has made employers more demanding that provision should meet their expectations. Employers have also realised that they will not recover the investment they make through the apprenticeship levy if they only offer apprenticeships to young people. There is a marked difference between the funding available to employers to support an apprenticeship in England compared with Wales (£27k and £9k over three years respectively).

### Tackling inequality

This theme did not feature as strongly as in previous seminars, although it was clear that the Welsh Government remains very keen to tackle disadvantage. Wales includes some of the areas in the UK with the highest proportions of people who have no qualifications. Some 45 per cent of young people currently do not achieve the Level 2 threshold by the age of 16. Over 60 per cent of 16-19-year-old learners study at FE colleges, the majority on full-time courses. Of these, fewer than 30 per cent are on courses at Level 3 and above and this proportion will need to increase significantly to meet future skill requirements. However, students have low-drop out and high success rates, and colleges are on track to exceed the target for the proportions studying on courses taught in Welsh language.

### Comparisons with England, Scotland and Northern Ireland

The main differences in the Welsh approach, compared with that in England, are that the underlying goals are presented very differently (with an emphasis on well-being and sustainability); there seems to be more planning, at national, regional and individual college level; a stronger emphasis on social partnership; much closer relationships between policy-makers and education providers; and greater political continuity. However, there are also clear similarities between the two countries, such as

concerns over apprenticeships, competition between colleges and school sixth forms, uncertainties about the impact of Brexit, and the dual emphasis on the goals of tackling social exclusion and supporting economic growth.

The emphasis on an employer- and demand-led approach to apprenticeships in England contrasts with the essentially supply-side approach in other parts of the UK. The closure of the UKCES has removed a means of promoting common standards across qualifications throughout the UK and therefore threatens the 'portability' of apprenticeships between countries. This is more of an issue for Wales and Northern Ireland than for Scotland, which has its own strong and established qualifications framework.

Wales also differs from England in that it does not have a critical mass of employers in most sectors to support effective Sector Skills Councils. The new Welsh Apprenticeship Advisory Board is seen as a means of giving employers a stronger voice.

Like Wales, Scotland has moved towards a more regionalised college framework, with colleges expected to be responsive to local needs. This raises similar issues in securing an effective employer input which does not just allow employers to dictate decisions.

There is growing interest in the reskilling of older workers in Scotland. The latest letter of guidance to colleges states that the Scottish Government is no longer prioritising young people. Graduate apprenticeships in Scotland are delivered mainly through universities and at present colleges have only limited involvement. Although Scotland has a joint funding council covering both FE and HE, the two sectors still operate largely in parallel and there are few signs of a real tertiary sector emerging.

Northern Ireland faces similar challenges to those affecting Wales. Draft policies have been developed to address these issues, but the suspension of the devolved Government means these are yet to be formally adopted. There are concerns as to whether employers are best placed to define quality standards when future skill needs are likely to be very different in many sectors to those currently required. There are also similar issues in Northern Ireland about the capacity of the system to address the needs of SMEs.

Northern Ireland is experiencing the tensions of having dual policy goals (tackling social inclusion and developing high skills). However, it does not have the same level of political continuity as Wales. There is also strong competition between schools and colleges over the recruitment of 16-19 year-old students for both technical and vocational programmes and academic courses. The six large regional colleges in Northern Ireland have to maintain a balance between seeking to meet employer needs while at the same time providing broad-based learning for young people that will safeguard their career interests.