

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

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Institute of Education

Introduction

Seminar 6 took the form of a workshop with invited contributors representing policy makers, education and training providers, employers and researchers from each of the four countries of the UK. The aim was to pull together thinking from the earlier seminars and to start to draw conclusions, framed against the key research question: *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?* These notes record the main points arising from the discussions.

Main features of current FE and skills policy in the four UK countries

England

There has been a major expansion in post-16 participation since the raising of the age of participation. Provision in FE has been largely reactive to developments in schools and universities, with the result that much of this provision has focused on tackling social exclusion. England has operated an essentially marketised system since 1992. Within this, FE appears relatively marginalised in terms of public perception but has consistently played an important role. The sector has remained highly resilient in the face of frequent destabilising changes in policy and funding reductions that have particularly affected adult participation.

Area Based Reviews have led to a reduction in the overall number of FE colleges (even though, unlike in other parts of the UK, colleges had the option of deciding against mergers) and the emergence of major regional colleges in some parts of the country. This could provide a basis for developing a more collaborative system at regional and local level. Most recently, vocational education appears to have become more important in terms of policy development, with a strong emphasis on promoting Apprenticeships and the development of the new T Level qualification.

Scotland

The Scottish policy framework for FE and skills puts much less emphasis on a market-based approach than in England. *Developing the Young Workforce* (DYW) sets Scotland's youth employment strategy in an economic context and adopts a much longer timescale (seven years) than has typically been allowed in England. Scotland is promoting greater partnership working between schools, colleges and employers.

The number of colleges in Scotland has been reduced to 27 in 13 regions, of which 10 have a single regional college. The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) is responsible for funding all colleges and universities, although this has not so far resulted in any moves towards a more co-ordinated approach across the two sectors. All colleges have to agree annual outcome agreements with the SFC, which set performance targets. Skills Development Scotland is responsible for the Apprenticeship programme: currently the majority is at Level 3 and Graduate Apprenticeships are still at an early stage. Independent training providers play the main role in the delivery of Apprenticeships.



Scotland currently faces a number of challenges. The direct contribution of colleges to vocational education and training is relatively limited: only 17 per cent of college graduates progress directly to employment, while some two-thirds go on to further study; and only 8 per cent of Modern Apprenticeship starts have been delivered through direct contracts with colleges. There is a need to develop stronger and more effective links between employers and the vocational and education training system. There is also a shortage of higher level vocational qualifications: HNCs and HNDs have increasingly become full-time qualifications, from which many students progress to degree studies.

Wales

There are only about 220,000 learners in the Welsh system at any one time. Since 2008, the number of FE Colleges has reduced from 23 to 12. These are grouped into three separate regions for planning purposes, which is more effective than working through 22 separate local authorities. Another significant contextual feature is that some 95% of employers in Wales are SMEs. The social and political history of the country has an important influence and this often results in an agreed perception of the need for political solutions. The *Wellbeing of Future Generations Act* (2015) specifies the principles that should underlie all policy developments. It emphasises, for example, that education and training has more than just an economic purpose and should be seen as a 'public good'.

Partnership working is very strongly established in Wales. Colleges Wales acts in a way that promotes a highly integrated college sector. The Hazelkorn Review (2015) made a bold proposal that all post-16 education and training should be co-ordinated by a single body, although this is still under consultation and no final decisions have yet been taken.

Many of the problems facing vocational education and training in Wales derive from the decline of traditional industries in the country. Wales has relatively high poverty indices compared with other parts of the UK. The Apprenticeship Levy has created expectations among employers which colleges do not feel able to meet. Brexit, and potential loss of EU funding, is a major issue.

Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland has a population of around 1.5 million and in 2016/17 the number of enrolments in further education was just under 130,000, of which some 20 per cent were on full-time courses. The province has tended for the most part to follow policies adopted in England, typically about two years later. Mergers have reduced the number of colleges to six, each covering a distinct region. Colleges have a relatively low level of HE provision (around 8 per cent) compared with England.

The Northern Ireland system can be viewed as a relatively compact and contained model. Colleges are playing an increasingly important role as 'anchor' institutions within their regional communities. They are seeking to work with employers to promote an integrated problem-solving approach to skills development, so that colleges come to be seen as the first port of call when employers are looking to meet emerging skills needs. There is an increasing emphasis on digital-led growth and an inclusive approach to learning, which contrasts markedly with most students' experience in the divided schools system.

FE has to compete with schools for post-16 students and is often seen as a second choice or last resort option. Although Northern Ireland tends to follow policies adopted in England, arguably in economic and social terms it has more in common with other parts of the UK. The country's traditional industrial base has largely been eroded and it is now developing mainly as a service-based economy. As with other parts of the UK, Brexit will present major challenges. The absence of a formal Government means that there is a reliance on pragmatic leadership at present.

How far is there a basis for policy learning across the four countries of the UK?

An accelerated period of policy divergence across the UK in terms of post-16 education and training policies is now starting to be reversed, with indications of some managed convergence. Effective 'policy learning' (as distinct from policy borrowing) first requires the identification of common problems and challenges facing the different countries. It needs to recognise and understand the influence of national contexts and the resulting policy development should actively involve all the main partners. The focus should be on developing good practice by tackling common problems and sharing knowledge and experiences at different levels, rather than simply seeking to transfer 'excellent' practice.

An initial attempt to compare policy development in the four countries on two dimensions (private/competitive vs public/collaborative and centralised/state-led vs decentralised/ local-led) suggests that England has gone through several different phases since the early 1980s, whereas the other countries have remained relatively more stable, consistently adopting a more collaborative approach. The conditions for policy learning are most obvious between Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. However, England appears to have moved tentatively towards a greater emphasis on collaboration following the Area Based Reviews initiative, which suggests there could now be greater scope for policy learning across the UK as a whole.

In conclusion, there is some evidence of convergence around a collaborative system, albeit that the English system remains more competitive at present. However the four UK countries face a number of common challenges, especially at regional level. These include identifying and meeting future skills needs, promoting social inclusion, facilitating progression and responding to regional economic and social priorities. Policy learning

should not therefore be seen as something that can only happen at national level, but should be encouraged at regional and local levels where appropriate. One way of promoting policy learning could be through the creation of a cross-UK FE and Skills Network.

Issues discussion

The workshop chose three questions to focus on. This note summarises points discussed on each of the questions in turn.

Question 1: How are the systems addressing the 'fourth industrial revolution'?

In England, this is being addressed at national level through the Government's recently published *Industrial Strategy*. It is also being tackled more locally, for example in London via the Mayor's skills strategy and measures to improve digital capacity.

In Scotland, the Government has given a relatively strong policy lead, for example in *Developing the Young Workforce* and the imminent *Learner Journey Review*. Regional outcome agreements are intended to focus on how colleges will meet skill needs in their regions. There is a strategic focus on seeking to understand future skills needs (for example digital capability) and developing a system that is sufficiently flexible to meet these, including the softer skills expected by employers.

In Wales, the main focus is at the level of regional skills partnerships. In particular there needs to be a much greater number of Apprenticeships at Levels 4, 5 and 6. The Welsh Government has also recently announced a review of the impact of artificial intelligence on skills.

There is currently no explicit industrial strategy in Northern Ireland, although a lot of funding is following STEM subjects and the promotion of digital skills. The country is seeking to promote inward investment by digitalised companies by offering training to support them.

The system needs to be able to cope with accelerated change in skills demands, both at the institutional level and for individuals. Arguably, general and technical education will move closer together to meet future skills needs. The delivery of all forms of services will be revolutionised and this includes the delivery of education and training, where there is likely to be a much greater role for digital delivery. Organisations in all sectors will become more closely networked. All of these developments point towards a greater need for collaboration and partnership working and this includes the delivery of education and training, where there is likely to be a much greater role for digital delivery.

The systems need to strike a balance between meeting current and future skill needs at national, regional and local levels. Generic and transferable skills are likely to become more important. Employers and providers will need to collaborate, including by sharing up-to-date and future-proof resources. There will be a premium on effective staff development and on promoting flexible and agile modes of learning. This could lead to the greater recognition of the 'dual professional', with skills both in a vocational specialism and in teaching. It could also result in more devolved decision-making to enable a more agile and responsive system. All industries will need people with skills in the STEM subjects, so these should be seen more as a set of generic skills rather than a separate industry sector.

The focus in all four countries on academic programmes does not align well with the likely requirements of the fourth industrial revolution. The focus should be on developing generic and transferable skills. A successful strategy must seek to harness the possibilities of new technological developments. It will be important to build networks with organisations at the cutting edge of new technology in order to share knowledge and understanding and allow for greater risk taking. These developments will give rise to new specific technical skills and Universities and colleges are starting to look at joint curriculum development, including through the involvement of employers.

Question 2: How is the status of vocational education being raised in the systems?

In England, the status of vocational education derives primarily from perceptions of its quality and its proximity to the world of work. The fourth industrial revolution is likely to promote these types of perception. Some larger companies are now recruiting people on higher level Apprenticeships rather than graduates, which could have the effect of raising the relative status of vocational education.

In Scotland, the understanding of what is meant by vocational education is less clear. A majority of students in Scotland's Colleges do not progress directly into employment, but instead progress to courses in tertiary education.

Parity of esteem is a major issue in Wales. The Welsh Baccalaureate means that all students study a set of core skills, but this is controversial, as some people see it as a distraction hindering students from achieving best results at A Level.

Northern Ireland is in a similar position to Wales. The absence of a formal Government is currently preventing action to address the issue.

It would be helpful to change school performance tables, so that these put more emphasis on progression rather than just achievement. Better information about vocational courses could also be promoted through effective careers education, information, advice and guidance, since prospective students and their parents often do not understand the progression routes available through vocational courses.

More needs to be done to tackle the issue of `congestion' in Higher Education. There is increasing evidence of graduate underemployment. Rather than promoting a degree as a desirable objective in itself, the emphasis should be on embarking on a suitable pathway for entry to different careers, through higher or vocational education. Scotland has examples of successfully combining study in FE and HE.

There is still a strong sense of `academic snobbery' about certain types of qualification in many quarters. However, where there is evidence that a vocational qualification offers valuable work experience and can lead directly to a job with a potential career path, this is likely to have a positive effect on its perception. It is unclear at this stage whether the new T Level qualification in England can achieve this, or whether it will lead to the creation of a general qualification that has relatively low esteem.

Question 3: How are employers (including SMEs) engaged in policy and delivery of the systems?

In England, in terms of employer involvement the system is dominated by larger employers. The focus, in both Apprenticeships and the new T Levels, is very much at the level of the individual qualification and therefore very specific in terms of skills development. There are instances of colleges renting out `incubator' spaces to help develop a network of small employers, for example in the digital sector in London.

Scotland has set up employer-led Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Boards covering different sectors. Employers are also involved in five-yearly reviews of HNCs/ HNDs. Colleges and HE are expected to involve employers in curriculum design on all vocational programmes and courses.

In Wales, there is a definite sense of active employer engagement. Meeting targets for Apprenticeships will require support from major employers.

The position in Northern Ireland varies across regions and sectors, although there are plenty of examples of employer interest and engagement. Colleges looking to establish and develop specialisms in particular sectors will seek to build relationships with niche employers in these sectors.

There is scope to engage employers more actively at national, regional, local and sectoral levels in all countries. Employers often play the part of passive customers of the FE and skills system, rather than partners actively involved in developing provision, although as we have seen earlier their involvement is being built into the design of the new T Levels and Apprenticeship standards in England. HE and FE should collaborate with employers in `skills eco-systems', both to reach solutions to shared problems and to generate new opportunities. Regional governments could play an important role in promoting these arrangements. However, colleges are funded to deliver qualifications and not directly to engage with employers. These qualifications may not always cover the skills that employers are looking for.

There is concern about the demands being placed on employers to provide work placements for different qualifications, particularly with the introduction of the new T Level qualification. There is also a danger that the relatively few active employers (usually the major companies in a

sector) will dominate employer input and that their views may not be representative of employers as a whole. Colleges could offer employers free skills needs analyses and use the results of these as a basis for developing new courses.

Next steps

The seminar series appeared to have been valued by policy makers, researchers and practitioners so there was a desire to keep a dialogue going in some form to aid policy learning across the four countries of the UK.

The planned outcomes from the project will be a short and accessible summary report with recommendations, aimed primarily at policy makers and practitioners; and a set of more detailed analytical articles in a special edition of the *Journal for Education and Work*, aimed more at an academic and research audience and expected to be published next year.

A proposal to set up a UK-wide virtual network could fill something of a vacuum in this field, certainly in terms of bringing together different partners to examine different issues and challenges over time.

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